Service-Learning:
A Balanced Approach to Experiential Education
by Andrew Furco

The Service-Learning Struggle

For over a quarter of a century, education researchers and practitioners have struggled to determine how to best characterize service-learning. In 1979, Robert Sigmon defined service-learning as an experiential education approach that is premised on "reciprocal learning" (Sigmon, 1979). He suggested that because learning flows from service activities, both those who provide service and those who receive it "learn" from the experience. In Sigmon's view, service-learning occurs only when both the providers and recipients of service benefit from the activities.

Today, however, the term "service-learning" has been used to characterize a wide array of experiential education endeavors, from volunteer and community service projects to field studies and internship programs. By perusing schools' service program brochures, one realizes that the definitions for service-learning are as varied as the schools in which they operate. While some educators view ?service-learning" as a new term that reveals a rich, innovative, pedagogical approach for more effective teaching, others view it as simply another term for well-established experiential education programs. As Timothy Stanton of the Haas Center for Public Service at Stanford University once asked, "What is service-learning anyway? How do we distinguish service-learning from cooperative education, internship programs, field study and other forms of experiential education?" (Stanton, 1987). The National Society for Experiential Education, which for years has focused on various types of experiential education programs, broadly defines service-learning as "any carefully monitored service experience in which a student has intentional learning goals and reflects actively on what he or she is learning throughout the experience." (National Society for Experiential Education, 1994).

The Corporation for National Service provides a narrower definition that sees service-learning as a method under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service experiences that meet actual community needs, that [are] integrated into the students' academic curriculum or provide structured time for [reflection, and] that enhance what is taught in school by extending student learning beyond the classroom and into the community..." (Corporation for National and Community Service, 1990). The confounding use of the service-learning term may be one reason why research on the impacts of service-learning has been difficult to conduct.

In 1989, Honnet and Poulsen developed the Wingspread Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989, Appendix B). While these guidelines offer a useful set of best practices for service oriented educational programs, they are not solely germane to service-learning and could easily serve as best practices for other types of experiential education programs (e.g., internships or apprenticeships). Similarly, the Association for Service-Learning in Education Reform (ASLER) has compiled a set of common characteristics of service-learning that help program directors determine whether their programs are meeting the overarching service-learning goals (ASLER, 1994

Appendix A). Again, while these characteristics are very useful in helping practitioners develop effective service-learning programs, they do not provide a definitive characterization of service-learning. ASLER characterizes service-learning as method of learning that enables school-based and community-based professionals "to employ a variety of effective teaching strategies that emphasize student centered [sic.] or youth centered [sic.], interactive, experiential education? Service learning places curricular concepts in the context of real-life situations... Service-learning connects young people to the community, placing them in challenging situations ...(ASLER, 1994). One could easily contend that other approaches to experiential education (i.e., internships or field education) purport to do the same. So then, how is service-learning different from other approaches to experiential education?

Developing a Definition
According to Sigmon, "If we are to establish clear goals [for service-learning] and work efficiently to meet them, we need to move toward a precise definition." (Sigmon, 1979). Recently, Sigmon attempted to provide a more precise definition of service-learning through a typology that compares different programs that combine service and learning. This typology broadened his earlier "reciprocal learning" definition to include the notion that "service-learning" occurs when there is a balance between learning goals and service outcomes. Herein lies the key to establishing a universal definition for service-learning (see Figure 1).

In this comparative form, the typology is helpful not only in establishing criteria for distinguishing service-learning from other types of service programs but also in providing a basis for clarifying distinctions among different types of service-oriented experiential education programs (e.g., school volunteer, community service, field education, and internship programs).

FIGURE 1: A SERVICE AND LEARNING TYPOLOGY (Sigmon, 1994)	
Service-LEARNING:	Learning goals primary; service outcomes secondary
SERVICE-learning:	Service outcomes primary; learning goals secondary
service learning:	Service and learning goals completely separate
SERVICE-LEARNING:	Service and learning goals of equal weight and each enhances the other for all participants

**Distinguishing Among Service Programs**
To represent the distinctions among various types of service programs, a pictorial is offered that presents an experiential education continuum upon which various service programs might lie. The pictorial is based on both Sigmon's earlier "reciprocal learning" principles and his most recent typology. Where each service program lies on the continuum is determined by its primary intended beneficiary and its overall balance between service and learning (see Figure 2).

As the pictorial suggests, different types of service programs can be distinguished by their

primary intended purpose and focus. Each program type is defined by the intended beneficiary of the service activity and its degree of emphasis on service and/or learning. Rather than being located at a single point, each program type occupies a range of points on the continuum. Where one type begins and another ends is not as important as the idea that each service program type has unique characteristics that distinguish it from other types. It is that ability to distinguish among these service program types that allows us to move closer toward a universal definition of service-learning. Using the pictorial as a foundation, the following definitions are offered for five types of service programs.

FIGURE 2: DISTINCTION AMONG SERVICE PROGRAMS

Recipient	BENEFICIARY	Provider
Service	FOCUS	Learning
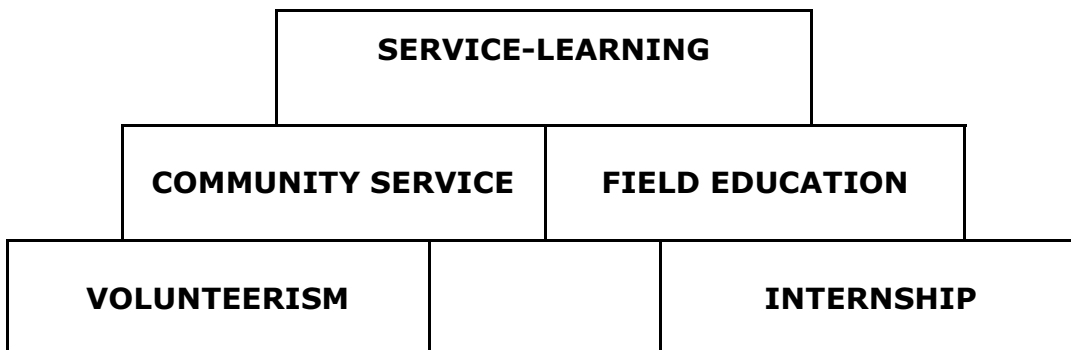
Volunteerism
Volunteerism is the engagement of students in activities where the primary emphasis is on the service being provided and the primary intended beneficiary is clearly the service recipient.

According to James and Pamela Toole, the term volunteerism refers to "people who perform some service or good work of their own free will and without pay" (Toole & Toole, 1992). The inherent altruistic nature of volunteer programs renders them as service focused, designed to benefit the service recipient. A prime example is a school-based program in which student volunteers occasionally or regularly visit the local hospital to sit with Alzheimer patients who need some company. The primary intended beneficiaries of the service are the Alzheimer patients (the service recipients), and the focus of the activity is on providing a service to them. Although the student-volunteers may receive some benefits from the experience (e.g., feeling pleased with themselves) as well as learn something in the process, these outcomes are clearly serendipitous and unintentional. As the hospital visits of the student volunteers become more regular and as the students begin focusing more on learning about Alzheimer's disease, the program moves toward the center of the continuum to become more like community service (or even service-learning).

Community Service

Community service is the engagement of students in activities that primarily focus on the service being provided as well as the benefits the service activities have on the recipients (e.g., providing food to the home- less during the holidays). The students receive some benefits by learning more about how their service makes a difference in the lives of the service recipients.

As with volunteer programs, community service programs imply altruism and charity. However, community service programs involve more structure and student commitment than do volunteer programs. School-based community service programs might include semester-long or year-long activities in which students dedicate themselves to addressing a cause that meets a local community (or global) need. Recycling, hunger awareness, and environmental improvement are all forms of community service causes around which students have formed organizations to formally and actively address the issue. While the students' primary purpose for engaging in the service activity is to advance the cause, their engagement allows them to learn more about the cause and what is needed to be done to ensure the cause is dealt with effectively. As the service activities become more integrated with the academic course work of the students, and as the students begin to engage in formal intellectual discourse around the various issues relevant to the cause, the community service program moves closer to the center of the continuum to become more like service-learning.

On the opposite side of the continuum lie internship programs.

Internships

Internships programs engage students in service activities primarily for the purpose of providing students with hands-on experiences that enhance their learning or under- standing of issues relevant to a particular area of study.

Clearly, in internship programs the students are the primary intended beneficiary and the focus of the service activity is on student learning. Students are placed in internships to acquire skills and knowledge that will enhance their academic learning and/or vocational development. For many students internships are performed in addition to regular course work often after a sequence of courses has been taken. Internships may be paid or unpaid and take place in either for profit or nonprofit organizations. For example, a political science, major might engage in an unpaid summer internship at a city hall to learn more about how local government works. Although the student is providing a service to the city hall office, the student engages in the internship primarily for his/her benefit and primarily for learning (rather than service) purposes. Similarly, a legal studies student may have a paid summer internship that allows that student to learn more about how a law firm operates. The student?s primary motivations for partaking in the program-to learn legal skills and make some money-are clearly intended to benefit himself/herself. As both these students place greater emphasis on the service being provided and the ways in which the service recipients are benefiting, the closer the internship program moves toward the center of the continuum and becomes more like field education (and service-learning).

Field Education
Field Education programs provide students with co-curricular service opportunities that are related, but not fully integrated, with their formal academic studies. Students perform the service as part of a program that is designed primarily to enhance students' understanding of a field of study, while also providing substantial emphasis on the service being provided.

Field education plays an important role in many service oriented professional programs such as Social Welfare, Education, and Public Health. In some of the programs, students may spend up to two years providing a service to a social service agency, a school, or health agency. While strong intentions to benefit the recipients of the service are evident, the focus of field education programs tends to be on maximizing the student's learning of a field of study. For example, students in Education programs may spend up to one year as student teachers to hone their teaching skills and learn more about the teaching process. Because of their long-term commitment to the service field, students do consciously consider how their service benefits those who receive it. However, the program's primary focus is still on the student teachers' learning and their overall benefit.

Service-Learning
Service-learning programs are distinguished from other approaches to experiential education by their intention to equally benefit the provider and the recipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring.

To do this, service-learning programs must have some academic context and be designed in such a way that ensures that both the service enhances the learning and the learning enhances the service. Unlike a field education program in which the service is performed in addition to a student's courses, a service-learning program integrates service into the course(s). For example, a pre-med student in a course on the Physiology of the Aging might apply the theories and skills learned in that course to providing mobility assistance to seniors at the local senior citizen center. While the program is intended to provide a much needed service to the seniors, the program is also intended to help the student better understand how men and women age differently, how the physical aging of the body affects mobility, and how seniors can learn to deal with diminishing range of motion and mobility. In such a program, the focus is both on providing a much-needed service and on student learning. Consequently, the program intentionally benefits both the student who provides the service and the seniors for whom the service is provided. It is this balance that distinguishes service-learning from all other experiential education programs.

Conclusion
While conceptually, this pictorial can assist in bringing us closer to a more precise definition of service-learning, it is obvious that many gray areas still exist. What about the field education program or community service project that is located near the center of the experiential education continuum? How might we distinguish these programs from service-learning? I might argue that no experiential education approach is static; that is,

throughout its life, every experiential education program moves to some degree along the continuum. Thus, at a particular point in time, a community service program may be farther left of center appearing to have greater focus on the service and its benefit to the recipient. At another point in time, the same program might appear to have an equal emphasis on service and learning, providing benefits to both the recipients and providers of the service. It is this mobility within program types that suggests that to fully distinguish service-learning programs from other forms of experiential education approaches, one must first determine a program's intended focus(es) and beneficiary(ies). From there, every service program's continuum range can be gauged to determine where it falls among the myriad of experiential education endeavors.

Source:
Furco, Andrew. "Service-Learning: A Balanced Approach to Experiential Education." Expanding Boundaries: Service and Learning. Washington DC: Corporation for National Service, 1996. 2-6.