

COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING

An International Youth Exchange Initiative for Sister Cities Programs

The U.S. is a nation founded upon active citizenship and participation in community life. We have always believed that individuals can and should serve. It is crucial that service toward the common good be combined with reflective learning to assure that service programs of high quality can be created and sustained over time, and to help individuals appreciate how service can be a significant and ongoing part of life. Service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both. Those who serve and those who are served are thus able to develop the informed judgement, imagination and skills that lead to a greater capacity to contribute to the common good.*

With this in mind and through this new initiative, SCI has developed a framework for local program activity which will provide young people and their communities with an opportunity to serve each other and learn from each other -- all within the context of a reciprocal international exchange experience.

COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING asserts that the perceived gap between classroom learning and real life must be bridged. Community service affords a unique opportunity to apply what one has learned to real situations that have a tangible connection to one's life situation. Young people need to connect, not only with their local community, but also with a world community that is often little more than an abstraction or, at best, a stylized celluloid image that bears faint resemblance to reality.

A structured opportunity to actively participate in planning and implementing a community-based service project can reinforce classroom learning, help develop greater self-esteem, allow youth to believe they do have a role in the local and world community, deepen cultural sensitivities and, in spite of the serious nature of the effort, still be fun.

THE PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING

These seven basic principles must be incorporated into all phases of a local program's project. Concept papers must explain how these seven principles will be incorporated into the exchange project IN BOTH COMMUNITIES.

1. MEANINGFUL TASKS. Both communities must jointly decide upon a service activity that has true merit to their peoples. This will require needs assessments, community outreach, matching available skills to needs, etc. It is vital to the success of this endeavor that all who are involved feel their efforts are directed at an issue of substance.
2. YOUTH RESPONSIBILITY. A strong service learning experience requires that others depend on the responsible action of the youth participants. Tasks should be devised in such a way that the young volunteers know, without any doubt, that real people are relying upon them to fulfill their responsibilities.
3. CHALLENGE COGNITIVE AND ETHICAL THINKING. Activities should be devised which will afford the opportunity to learn more about a specific skill or topic. Those same activities should challenge thought processes: why are there homeless people? how well does society (yours or that of your sister city) serve the needs of its elderly? how do my actions impact the local/global community? etc.