

November 24, 2020

TO: Marquell Johnson, Chair
Academic Policies Committee of the University Senate

FROM: College Associate Deans: Margaret Cassidy, Marc Goulet, Debra Jansen,
Jean Pratt, Jill Prushiek

SUBJ: University Service-Learning Requirement for Spring 2021 and Summer 2021

We request that the Academic Policies Committee make a decision regarding the enforcement of the University Service-Learning Requirement for all students graduating in spring 2021 and summer 2021 prior to the end of the fall 2020 semester. Our request focuses on the importance of timely decisions for planning purposes for students, faculty, and advisors.

Considering the COVID-19 situation and uncertainty surrounding it, students need certainty in graduation requirement expectations. This is particularly critical if the requirement will not be waived for students graduating in May 2021 as it has been for the last three terms (spring, summer and fall 2020), with a waiver for winterim 2021 pending University Senate approval. If the requirement will be enforced, relevant students will need specific guidance to determine a viable project and setting, which may not be easily accomplished in the current pandemic environment.

We understand there are virtual service-learning opportunities; however, we are not able to discern how many of the 56 opportunities currently displayed on the Service-Learning website are virtual. Per the service-learning coordinator, there has been a reduction in service-learning opportunities due to COVID-related organizational closures, staff layoffs, and an inability to provide a safe opportunity for on-site students. For opportunities that are face to face, providers have agreed to take the necessary COVID precautions.

At this point in time, there are over 500 students who have applied to graduate in spring 2021 and around 25 for summer 2021 who still need to complete their service-learning requirement. While some may complete the requirement via a course, demand will likely exceed supply.

Along with availability, we need to remember that a service-learning project is an opportunity to serve the community in a significant way, benefit those served, and promote meaningful learning experiences for students. In the current situation, we wonder whether students will have the necessary skills (e.g., build a website, analyze data) to contribute effectively given the translation of needs into a virtual environment? Our service-learning partners should not be in a position of trying to create virtual opportunities to allow our students to meet a graduation requirement—we are to be of service to them.

In addition, faculty who teach designated service-learning courses in spring and summer need time to plan alternative ways to fulfill the service-learning requirement, particularly where service-learning is a significant part of the course grade. As noted above, this may be challenging as there are service-learning community partners for whom virtual experiences are not possible or safe for our students, the organization, or the communities they serve.

Advisors are currently helping students plan for the spring and summer terms. They need to know how best to advise students for these upcoming semesters.

We would support a waiver of the Service-Learning Requirement for all students graduating in the spring 2021 and summer 2021 terms. We do not make this recommendation lightly as we all value this requirement for the personal growth it can provide to students and the positive impact it has on the broader community.

Along with the concerns noted above, there are equity issues to consider. The colleges vary in the number of courses with service-learning as a course attribute, with some colleges having multiple opportunities and others with few. Thus, a question of equity arises where some students will automatically get credit for service-learning by virtue of the courses they take, whether or not a service-learning experience actually takes place in the course. Others will need to seek out virtual service-learning projects, which may be challenging. This could be particularly difficult for nontraditional students who may be juggling multiple responsibilities and for students who are not coming to campus on a regular basis, taking many of their courses online.

An additional factor influencing our recommendation to waive the requirement for the next two terms is the impending change in service-learning personnel. The current staff member overseeing the service-learning program will be leaving their position at the end of the year. We understand the intent is to fill an interim position in time for the person to train with the current staff member. However, an interim person has not yet been identified, and it will take time to learn the elements of a new position. As a result, the maintenance of existing opportunities, ability to work closely with students on arranging projects, and the development of new opportunities may be compromised. This is especially a concern given the potential need for virtual opportunities, at least for the near future.

Whatever decision is made, we believe it is important that the decision be made in a timely manner, and then communicated broadly and clearly. By doing so, students, faculty, and advisors will know what to expect and can plan accordingly.

Thank you for your consideration.