The desire to volunteer is increasing among young people today. This is a trend that shines a positive light on the shape of future society. The Corporation for National & Community Service reports that 55 percent of youth volunteer in one manner or another. This rate is nearly twice the adult volunteering rate of 29 percent. This translates to:

- an estimated 15.5 million youth, ages 12-18, take part in volunteer activities.
- contribution of 1.3 billion hours of community service each year.

A portion of this group volunteers because of affiliation with religious, school or youth organizations. Others volunteer because someone in their family volunteers. And while many students volunteer as a result of school groups, only five percent indicated that they volunteer to meet a school requirement. (https://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/05_1130_LSA_YHA_SI_factsheet.pdf)

Youth community service has seen recent transformation into a new and intriguing model called Service Learning. In service learning, the integration of service to others, academic learning and skill development leads to a multi-faceted process of both teaching and learning. In other words, youth don’t just plant a garden; they learn how and why, and what their efforts mean to the real world.

In these programs, service activities are unique and intentionally linked to a specific learning goal. There is no guideline for “which comes first.” There could be a need in the community that can be met by youth and a learning objective derived from it, or maybe there is an educational need that lends itself to the creation of a community project.

Engagement by youth in both the learning experience and their role in achieving a community goal is critical to a positive service learning program. The ‘Experiential Learning Model,’ which is used in Montana 4-H programs, provides youth a way to be involved in their own learning experience.

This model (page 13) has five steps:
1. DO an activity;
2. SHARE observations, experiences and reactions;
3. PROCESS what happened, and why it’s important;
4. GENERALIZE the “so what?” moment to link experience with real world problems;
5. APPLY what has been learned in a real-world situation, or to change a process.

Service learning focuses experiential education on equal benefits for both youth and the community. With purposeful learning goals and achievable service goals, projects use academic context and
design to accomplish goals. In essence, the service must accentuate learning, and the learning enhance the service.

To develop a Service Learning Project, the following steps apply:

**Project Design:** What are the learning goals? What are the needs for teaching and resources?

**Community Partners:** Build relationships with community members to solve a problem and inspire a common goal. Careful planning and clear communication supports partnerships.

**Teamwork:** Learn to work together effectively as a team. This is an essential life skill, and program design should include a team-building component.

**Tools for Success:** What basic skills and minimum background knowledge is needed for success?

**Purpose:** Create a statement to clearly define the problem and offer a solution. Outcomes should be clear, measurable and agreed upon by the group. Identify each youth’s role and responsibility, and each individual should agree to be held accountable in that role.

**Leadership:** Designate one leader to manage resources and logistics, keep youth on track, and motivate the group.

**Connect the Dots:** Reflection is crucial to service learning programs. Youth learn to connect the concepts and skills learned with the impact on a problem. Reflection tools, like debriefing, public speaking, or replicating the project, can measure this connection.

Applying these steps can help build a sound foundation for a positive service learning experience. Many existing programs which engage youth in volunteer activities have learning components. For example:

- community clean-up day could include lessons about marketing, environmental impacts, or physical fitness;
- reading to children teaches responsibility, patience, and teaching skills;
- helping at a food pantry teaches youth about hunger and poverty in their community.

Service learning has multiple benefits:

- Youth increase academic understanding and get hands-on experience;
- teachers experience reciprocal learning and interactive teaching methods; and
- community partners add human resources to achieve organizational goals, educate youth about community issues, and help prepare youth for civic leadership.

Business owners or organizations looking for volunteers can improve community service outcomes by building learning opportunities into their project. Adding a service learning component to volunteer projects helps keep youth volunteers connected, engaged and loyal to their community. This can result in volunteer retention, positive program outcomes and a community with youth and adults more inclined to serve.

---

Through service learning, youth are encouraged to take an active role in learning and expanding on their natural desire to help. Community gardens can be good examples of service learning in progress. Adults can inform and guide, while letting youth make decisions and get meaning from the experience. A community garden service learning project may include education on one or all of the following:

- soil health and plant growth
- weekly nutrition workshops
- a pizza or meal garden, with discussions on food history
- interaction with community: planting and garden maintenance at assisted living facilities, fairgrounds, community parks and shared gardens
- food safety, canning and preserving
- food preparation and processing after harvest
- harvest lessons and food donations during and at the end of the season
- addressing food shortages and hunger problems