

Principles of Ethical and Effective Service



Stanford University's Principles of Ethical and Effective Service guide our work with students, faculty, and community partners to inform program design, implementation, and evaluation, as well as to ensure that our work aligns with our values. Students use the reflection questions related to each principle as a springboard to consider their work with the community. Faculty members who apply for community-engaged learning grants use the document as a guide to consider how course design can promote ethical and effective service. The principles provide context for community partners and assist in developing mutual understanding.

The principles are aspirational and intentionally provocative. Ethical and effective service is an ongoing process—whether we are engaging in public service for the first time or have significant experience.

A few general assumptions regarding the language in this document:

- The principles are not listed in priority order and are all equally valued.
- The principles are not intended to be a perfect typology; there are important interconnections between the principles that merit exploration.
- Although the principles are applicable to all parties involved in a service activity, the language is primarily focused on the student role and experience.
- The term “service initiative” is broadly defined and refers to any activity that falls within the Pathways of Public Service and Civic Engagement: community-engaged learning and research, community organizing and activism, direct service, philanthropy, policy and governance, and social entrepreneurship and corporate social responsibility.
- The term “community partner” refers to any local, national, or global individual or organization that partners with students in their service and learning endeavors.
- While these principles are intended to guide actions, individual context warrants flexibility and adaptability in how they are applied.

Humility

Humility is how we relate to ourselves—to our own goodness and limitations—and involves placing ourselves among others and in the world at large. Humility is not about making oneself small; it requires holding and exercising empathy and power with care and intentionality.

Humility compels us to listen generously, remain curious, keep an open mind, and maintain a learning attitude. It calls us to be mindful of the needs, assets, interests, and expectations of others. It requires mindfulness of our individual and institutional privileges, the complicated power dynamics that extend beyond interpersonal relationships, and the need to center the voices and experiences of individuals and communities that have been historically marginalized.

Questions to Consider

- How will I prepare myself and my team to be humble and respectful in service experiences?
- How does my approach to public service elevate others? How am I centering the voices of others, particularly those whose voices have been historically marginalized?
- What relationship do I have with those being served, and how do interpersonal and institutional positionality make humility challenging?
- What does humility look like in my service context; how will I demonstrate this?



Respect and Inclusion

Respect is about showing regard and consideration for the dignity of others. It begins with self-awareness, recognition of the intrinsic value of others, and treating others how they want to be treated. It often involves an ongoing tension between maintaining our individual efficacy in pursuing a more just and equitable world and attempting to understand values, ideas, and behaviors that conflict with our own. When we disagree with others, respect means being hard on the issues but soft on the people.

In the context of public service, respect manifests as cultural humility and the practice of inclusion. It compels us to recognize differences between people as valued assets, while acknowledging the visible, invisible, and intersecting dimensions of identity, power, and privilege. Inclusion requires us to actively challenge biases, stereotypes, and assumptions—particularly as we work to address forms of oppression and the systemic exclusion of historically disenfranchised individuals and groups and work toward equity.

Questions to Consider

- In what ways can I show regard and consideration for others in this service context? How do those I serve want to be treated?
- When exposed to attitudes, behaviors, and ideas that conflict with my own, how will I manage the tension between accepting others and working toward equity and justice? For example, how will I respond if confronted with a view that I believe is harmful to a historically marginalized group? How will I approach differences in cultural norms when working with communities different from my own?
- In what ways can I practice inclusion, particularly of social identities that have traditionally or historically been marginalized? These identities may include (but are not limited to) gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, citizenship, religion, age, ability, sexual orientation, body type, socioeconomic level, education, geographical background, language, and/or familial structure.
- What differences exist among the people involved in this service experience, and how can I recognize and respect these differences as valuable assets?
- What visible, invisible, and intersectional dimensions of identity, power, privilege, and oppression exist in this public service context? What are my own biases, stereotypes, and assumptions?

Reciprocity

In some ways, the principle of reciprocity rejects the notion of “service.” A reciprocal relationship with partners is characterized by interdependence; consideration of our collective strengths, knowledge, and capacity to influence others; and shared responsibility to work toward mutual benefit and growth.

Reciprocity compels us to collaborate with community partners (or those impacted by our service) in the design, facilitation, and evaluation of our efforts to ensure value and relevance to all involved.

Questions to Consider

- How can I tailor my work to my community partners’ stated needs, assets, and interests?
- What should reciprocity look like between community partners and me?
- What experience and knowledge do my community partners have that will contribute to my learning? How am I being served by this experience?
- What strategies can I use to show appreciation to my community partners for their educational role?
- How will I ensure that my learning does not come at the expense of those I serve or those I serve alongside?

Preparation

Taking time to understand the social, ideological, economic, environmental, and historical contexts of service experiences is essential. Preparation requires researching information about the partner organizations and communities and developing awareness of past injustices and power differentials.

It compels us to be flexible and willing to adapt to changing circumstances that can occur before, during, and after the service experience and to tap the knowledge and expertise of community partners, faculty, and staff before engaging in work in a community.

Questions to Consider

- What knowledge and skills do I need to be effective in engaging with this community and/or social issue?
- What resources are available that might deepen my understanding of the context surrounding my service initiative?
- How has my academic work prepared me for this experience?

Safety and Well-being

Caring for our community starts with taking care of ourselves. This principle compels us to anticipate and take steps to ensure the physical and emotional safety and well-being of all participants. It also involves awareness of and compliance with the safety requirements and liability concerns of community partners and the university.

Questions to Consider

- What are possible safety concerns (physical as well as emotional) in my service initiative?
- What steps have I taken to ensure physical and emotional well-being, as well as to respect the confidentiality and privacy of all participants?
- Have I talked with community stakeholders and my university advisor about safety issues and made plans to mitigate risk?
- How will I be safe when the cultural norms of a given community are different from my own community's?

Accountability

Being accountable is about holding ourselves responsible for our actions and commitments. It is not about attaining all of our goals and objectives to perfection, as much as it is about recognizing, negotiating, and taking ownership of outcomes within our reach and capacity. Accountability sustains trust and respect among individuals working toward shared goals.

We hold ourselves accountable when we fulfill our roles and responsibilities to the best of our abilities and we acknowledge the impact our actions, inaction, and limitations have on others. Accountability compels us to accept our shortcomings with a spirit of humility and commit to redressing our mistakes.

Questions to Consider

- How will I determine my community partners' needs, expectations, and interests and share my own?
- How can I earn and sustain the trust of community partners, those I serve alongside, and people being served?
- How will I establish clear lines of ongoing communication with my community partners?
- How will I hold myself and others accountable for our actions and commitments?
- How could/will my service effort be sustained? Is it appropriate and valuable to mutually establish a formal partnership agreement?

Evaluation

Evaluation involves the iterative and active incorporation of qualitative and quantitative methods to assess the impact of our efforts throughout the service experience. This principle compels us to be aware of and attend to the direct, indirect, and unintended results (positive or negative) of our service. This principle requires us to intentionally and creatively build in opportunities to gather regular feedback from community partners and participants to assess our values, refine our practices, and improve the quality of our work.

Questions to Consider

- How will I and my partners know whether we have been successful?
- What metrics will I use to measure the impact of my efforts?
- What aspects of my impact might be difficult to measure?
- How will I avoid bias in evaluating the efficacy of my service?
- What methods and/or tools will I use to collect input into my evaluation?
- What is the impact of my public service on the communities being served? What is the impact on my own development?

Learning and Reflection

Learning happens through a cycle of preparation, experience, and reflection. It is essential to make time and space for continual introspection as one engages in service in order to encourage learning opportunities with community stakeholders. This principle compels us to intentionally and creatively build in opportunities to reflect; involve community partners when possible; and acknowledge personal shifts in perspective, understanding, and attitudes throughout the service experience.

Questions to Consider

- What am I hoping to learn through this service experience?
- When, where, and how will I incorporate reflection opportunities into my experience?
- How do I make safe and brave spaces for participants to reflect?
- How have my beliefs, values, and knowledge shifted as a result of my participation in the service experience?

About These Principles

Public service and civic engagement within higher education are bound by a dynamic tension between a desire for student learning and a desire to create positive change in our communities. Many faculty, staff, and students establish mutually beneficial relationships with partner organizations that provide rich, and often transformative, learning opportunities for students and contribute to community partners' missions. However, ethical dilemmas abound in service within postsecondary settings. The Principles of Ethical and Effective Service are a tool to examine these dilemmas in order to work toward an appropriate balance, but not full resolution, of the tensions between student learning and community impact.

In 2002, Stanford University's Haas Center for Public Service developed the Principles for Ethical and Effective Service in collaboration with community participants, faculty, students, and staff to raise awareness about the University's responsibility to communities and organizations involved with public service activities at Stanford. They have been collaboratively updated since then, most recently in 2019.

The language of these principles was informed and inspired by the work and ideas of many people, including: William Ury, Stanford's Office of Inclusion and Diversity Education, Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality, the "Grounding Values" of Krista Tippett's On Being Project, Nicolas Bommarito's entry on "Modesty and Humility" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-García's work on cultural humility.

We hope the principles continue to serve Stanford students, faculty, staff, and community engagement professionals elsewhere as a resource for creating and deepening community partnerships that appropriately balance student learning and community impact. We urge readers to consider how they can adapt these principles for their own communities and engage diverse stakeholders in a discussion about the opportunities and challenges inherent in university efforts to engage service participants as both learners and meaningful contributors.