Overview of CEL for Students

by Rhianna Nagel, Community Engaged Learning Coordinator, Social Sciences

Community Engaged Learning (CEL) fits under two umbrellas - Community Engaged Scholarship and Experiential Learning. CEL is often divided into two forms: 1) curricular CEL; and 2) co-curricular CEL.

Curricular (for credit) CEL is a “course-based collaboration between students, lecturers and civil society partners for mutual benefit through shared learning”\(^1\). These credit-bearing experiences range from guest lectures delivered by community to an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and provides tangible examples of course content.

Co-curricular (not-for-credit) CEL is a volunteer or paid experience in the community that contributes to the student’s personal and professional development while contributing to a community endeavor. A faculty, staff or volunteer advisor facilitates a critical reflection of the community experience.

CEL can include actively volunteering within an already developed community volunteer program or taking on a volunteer role specifically designed for the student. In both cases students connect that experience with their learning through assignments, discussion and/or guided reflection. Tailored volunteer activities are often project-based whereby students work on a specific need identified by the community, generally with a written report or alternative deliverable presented to community as an outcome of the experience. These experiences can involve direct (person to person) engagement with community or indirect engagement (e.g. gathering and presenting secondary data for a community research question).

Student benefits of CEL include improved ability to understand complexity and ambiguity, greater sense of self, improved social responsibility and citizenship skills, widened opportunities for learning and career through connections with professionals and community members, and improved graduation rates\(^2\).

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Community Engaged Research (CER) is one way in which students are learning in and with community. CER “is a collaborative process between the researcher and community partner that creates and disseminates knowledge and creative expression with the goal of contributing to the discipline and strengthening the well-being of the community”\(^1\). The competencies that develop through CER can be applied in continuing academic pursuits as well as in professional endeavours beyond the academy. For example, Project Managers in NGO’s require research skills to develop, fund and hone their initiatives. Further, Community Engaged Researchers often play a very interesting bridging role between the academic institution and the community. CER requires a great deal of tact, understanding, patience, and skill. These all develop through experience and over time. Working on a CER project with the support of your Instructor, the Social Sciences Community Engaged Learning Coordinator, and Community Partner Mentors can be a great opportunity to build skills and experience in CER. It is important to use these supports to keep your project manageable and mutually beneficial.

Some students in the Social Sciences do CER as part of their course-based projects, while others tailor their interests and desired learning objectives to fit into an Honours thesis or Jamie Cassels Undergraduate Research Award study. Whatever the situation, there are many considerations such as the following: timing and project duration; ethics; relationship with community partner; continuity and sustainability of the research; knowledge mobilization strategy (how you will share what you’ve learned in a mutually beneficial way); etc. Addressing these considerations is a very enriching experience and the Faculty and individual Instructors are available to support you in this process.

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1 United States Department of Health and Human Sciences
2 Virginia Commonwealth University, Office of the Provost – Community Engagement

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Students, faculty, staff, and community (including - but not limited to - NGOs, private sector, Indigenous communities, and government) can connect about CEL in the Social Sciences by contacting:

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