

Kansas State University Libraries

## New Prairie Press

---

Center for Engagement and Community  
Development

Engagement Symposium

---

### Overcoming Institutional Barriers to Service Learning

Talia Smith

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

Annie Zou

*University of Nebraska*

Grace Nelson

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

Ali Al-Ghaithi

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

*See next page for additional authors*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/cecd>



Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

---

Smith, Talia; Zou, Annie; Nelson, Grace; and Al-Ghaithi, Ali (2020). "Overcoming Institutional Barriers to Service Learning," *Center for Engagement and Community Development*. <https://newprairiepress.org/cecd/engagement/2020/4>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Center for Engagement and Community Development by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

---

**Presenter Information**

Talia Smith, Annie Zou, Grace Nelson, and Ali Al-Ghaithi

**Overcoming Institutional Barriers to Service Learning: A Case Study of the University of  
Nebraska Omaha's Service Learning Academy**

Ali Al-Ghathi, Grace Nelson, Talia Smith, and Anni Zou  
Service Learning Academy, University of Nebraska Omaha

**Abstract**

Partnerships between universities and community organizations contribute to sustainable community development by creating networks of resources that may not otherwise exist among university faculty, students, and community members. Service learning serves as a vessel for connecting and strengthening these resources; however, barriers within universities limit effective practice. To overcome such barriers, universities can implement institutional structures and programs that facilitate community-engaged learning. A case study of the Service Learning Academy (SLA) at the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO) provides an example of an institution that uses several strategies to deliberately solve challenges in service learning. This paper highlights the strategies employed by the SLA which can be adopted by other universities to address challenges in facilitating community engagement.

*Keywords:* service learning, community development, university coordination, engaged learning practices

## **Overcoming Institutional Barriers to Service Learning: A Case Study of the University of Nebraska Omaha's Service Learning Academy**

A case study of the Service Learning Academy (SLA) at the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO) provides an example of an institution that uses a number of strategies to deliberately solve challenges in service learning. The SLA is located in UNO's Community Engagement Center and has a team of staff, graduate assistants, and student workers. Its location and resources allow the SLA to serve as a central hub for service learning which facilitates relationships between faculty, students, and community partners. With its unique design as a center for campus-wide service learning, UNO's SLA has developed best practices and strategies to ease the facilitation process for university faculty. This creates the opportunity for coordinated programming and opens a door for faculty to embrace engaged learning for students that ties theory to practice. This paper will highlight the strategies employed by the SLA that can be adopted by other universities to address challenges in facilitating community engagement.

### **Barriers to the Development of Service Learning Programs**

Partnerships between universities and community organizations contribute to sustainable community development by creating networks of resources. These resources may not otherwise exist among university faculty, students, and community members, but barriers inherent in the structure—or lack of structure—of many universities often limit effective practice (Hou, 2010, p. 78). According to Bringle and Hatcher (2000), the institutionalization of service learning, or its establishment as an integral component of a university's mission and structure, is an effective way to systematically overcome barriers to service learning. One of the most important resources a university can provide to do this is physical infrastructure, especially in the form of a dedicated office. Having a centralized service learning office, complete with staff and financial resources,

contributes to institutionalization in a number of ways: it signals an institutional commitment to service, provides a space for faculty to obtain technical assistance and professional development, and identifies staff responsibility for planning, promotion, and administration of the program (p. 284). One of the greatest obstacles to the development of a service learning program in a university is a lack of coordination. The formation of physical infrastructure serves as a significant component of improved coordination between all partners.

Such infrastructure also assists in overcoming another structural obstacle: the logistical challenges associated with the provision of service learning courses. Abes, Jackson, and Jones (2002), surveyed both university faculty members who offer service learning courses as well as those who do not. They found that among service learning faculty, “The two strongest potential deterrents to continued use of service-learning...were, ‘service-learning courses are time-intensive and therefore difficult to balance with other professional responsibilities’ (38.9%), and ‘difficulty coordinating the community service component of the course’ (25.4%)” (p. 10). Non-service learning faculty echoed this sentiment, citing that the strongest deterrent to incorporating service learning is that they ‘anticipate having logistical problems coordinating the community service aspect of the course’ (p. 11). The study's results were consistent with those of other surveys; time constraints, coordination challenges, and lack of support are often cited by faculty as deterrents to the use of service learning in their courses (Abes et al., 2002, p. 14; Hou, 2010, p. 78). Thus, the development of a strong and sustainable service learning program necessitates that a university provides logistical support through all phases of a project to alleviate the workload of faculty members and community partners.

The planning and reflection phases of a service learning project raise particular challenges because, along with time and coordination, they also require specific expertise. For

example, a university professor might have a relationship with a community partner but not know how to incorporate the partner's work into their course curriculum. Alternatively, a professor may have an idea for a project that aligns with their curriculum but no connection to a community organization with which to partner or knowledge of how to measure the success and impact of the project. Research indicates that these situations are common: Abes et al. (2002) found that the second- and third-most significant deterrents for faculty members were "do not know how to use service-learning effectively" and "is not relevant to the courses I teach" (p. 11). Knowing this, service learning programs should make an effort not only to provide direct assistance with planning, reflection, and research, but also to train faculty on the process and promote the impact of service learning on the university, students, and community as a whole.

### **Case Study: The UNO Service Learning Academy**

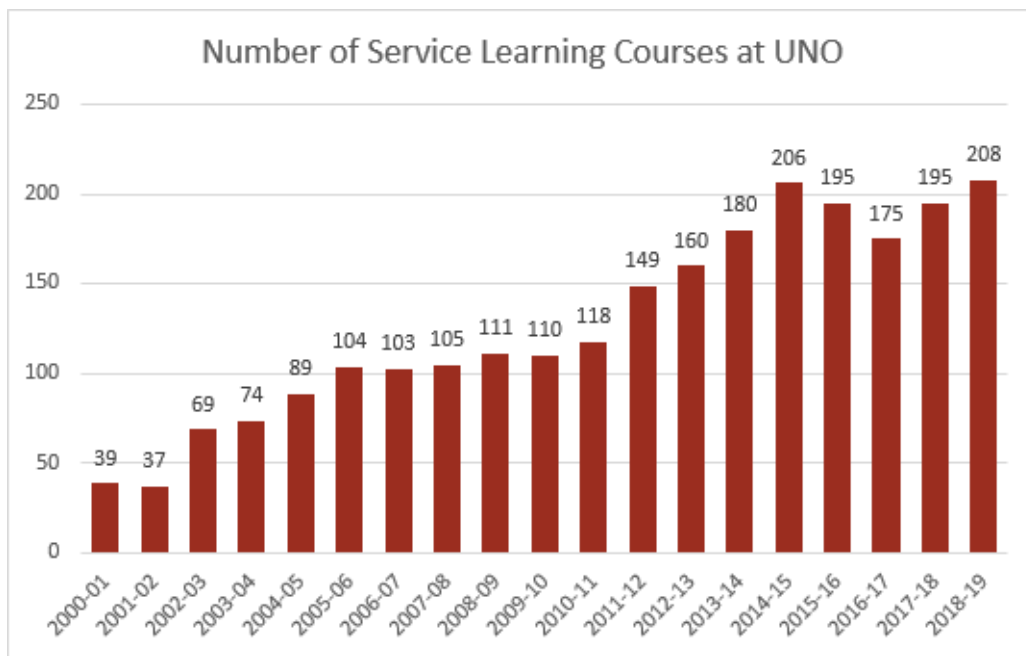
The Service Learning Academy at the University of Nebraska Omaha was formed in 1999 and began by offering eight service learning courses. Over time, the institution has used several strategies to deliberately solve challenges in service learning, and now offers between 150 and 200 service learning courses per year. The SLA has overcome many of the above-cited barriers to service learning through four key strategies: physical resources, facilitation, preparation, and promotion. These strategies allow the SLA to effectively and efficiently work across campus and community to build meaningful service learning projects.

#### ***Physical Resources***

The SLA office is located in UNO's Community Engagement Center, which serves as a center for community collaboration within Omaha. The building houses community agencies and hosts community events and educational seminars to foster engaged learning for students on campus and individuals throughout the community. The space embodies collaboration; creating

space for building connections, practicing creativity, and stretching the mind. The SLA has the exceptional opportunity to exist as an office within this community-oriented space.

Beyond its unique location and designated space for service learning, the SLA office has dedicated staff working to carry out UNO’s mission to “transform and improve the quality of life locally, nationally, and globally” (University of Nebraska Omaha [UNO], 2020a). SLA has a team of five full-time staff members, one Americorps VISTA, one Weitz Fellow, eleven graduate assistants, and five undergraduate assistants. All staff members work to ensure that service learning projects run smoothly and effectively. The dedicated staff at SLA is a key resource in connecting with over 300 community agencies and 75 schools throughout the Omaha Metropolitan area each given year. The SLA employs staff and funds projects through a variety of funding resources: grants, local foundations, individual donors, and federal funds. Two-thirds of the SLA’s funds are from private funders and one-third come from the state of Nebraska. Through the employment of staff and allocated funds for project facilitation, SLA has been able to expand its service learning courses on campus over time (see image below).





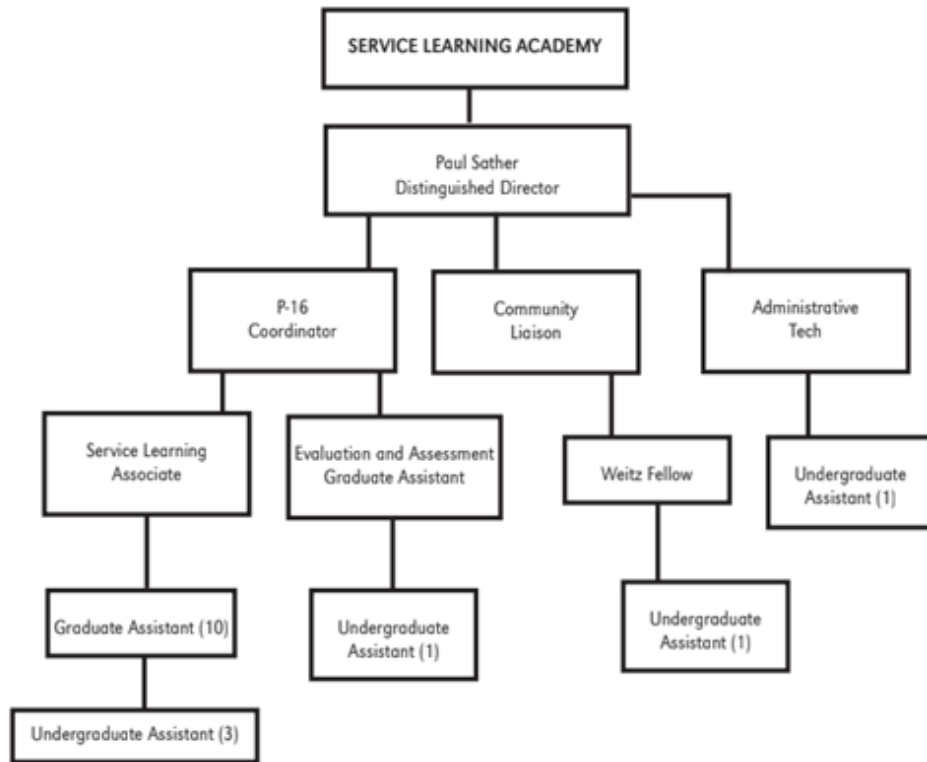
Our location and resources allow the SLA to serve as a central hub for service learning at UNO, facilitating campus and community-wide relationships between faculty, students, and community partners. Resources for the institution continue to increase as community engagement and partnerships grow over time. Partnerships grow through employed SLA engagement strategies that allow SLA staff to engage mindfully and effectually.

### ***Facilitation of Logistics***

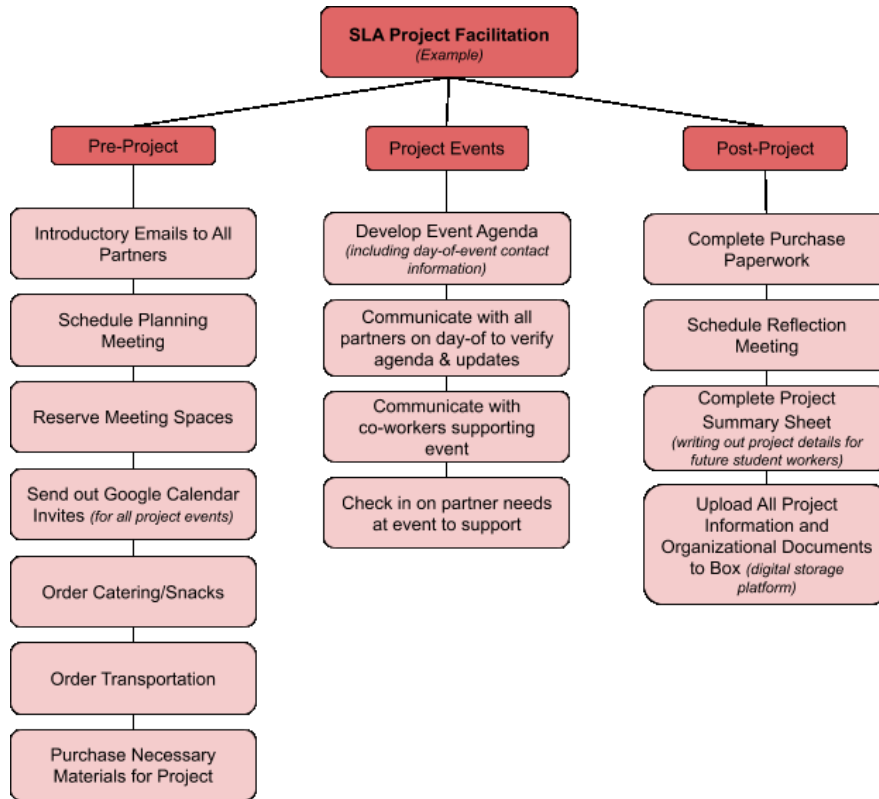
With its unique design as a center for campus-wide service learning, UNO's SLA has developed strategies to ease the facilitation process for university faculty. This creates the opportunity for coordinated programming, opening a door for faculty to embrace engaged learning for students that ties theory to practice. The SLA provides such facilitation through a dedicated staff and designated roles within the office.

Full-time staff in the SLA assist with project development and management for all Traditional (involving a university class and community partner) and P-16 (involving a university class, preschool through 12<sup>th</sup> grade class [P-12], and community partner) Model projects while managing all stages of project planning and implementation. Graduate Assistants are part-time staff who offer support to UNO faculty and students and community partners throughout the project. They provide various modes of logistical support throughout the project: arranging transportation, providing meeting agendas, reserving and preparing meeting spaces, securing catering orders, conducting UNO tours, and facilitating reflection activities. Undergraduate Assistants offer support by assisting in coordinated services. They assist with meeting buses for safety protocol, organizing photo releases, serving food at events, giving campus tours, and taking photos at projects. Each employee has a specific role that caters to the SLA mission and allows the SLA to carry out that mission successfully. The chart below

highlights the structure of staff within the Service Learning Academy at UNO and shows who oversees student workers within the institution.



There are many moving pieces in project coordination, from the brainstorming stage to the completion and project evaluation. Below is an example of what a Graduate Assistant’s duties look like after the brainstorming stage, during active planning stages, and from the beginning to the end of an active project.



***Preparation and Promotion***

With a majority Service Learning Academy staff being student workers, there is a high turnover with student graduations. In order to counter that barrier, SLA has adopted an organized system for passing down information to new staff and designates time at the beginning of each semester to host trainings for student workers. These trainings ensure a thorough understanding of project facilitation and how to properly use and access the SLA, campus, and community resources. The SLA full-time staff diligently work to secure student worker preparedness in this institution, as student workers propel the work forward within the community. Beyond SLA training for best practices in service learning and project facilitation for student workers, the SLA encourages and supports professional development opportunities for student workers and staff as well. The SLA fosters a collaborative learning environment that emboldens its staff to continue growing as individuals and together as a team. Each team member’s individual

strengths and sharing out new ideas and strategies are valued and help to drive the work of service learning forward.

In order to ensure the work of service learning on campus is meaningfully carried out by students and faculty, the SLA full-time staff and graduate assistants are trained to give Service Learning 101 presentations to each service learning course offered throughout each semester at UNO. This training educates students on the purpose of service learning, the asset-based approach of the teaching model, and explicates expectations and safety protocols in student engagement with community partners. The SLA provides these holistic trainings at the beginning of each semester to prepare UNO students to work respectfully with community agencies and partners.

Along with SLA staff and UNO student training, the SLA hosts a one-week seminar every summer in July to create an opportunity for UNO faculty, P-12 school instructors, and community partners to connect and collaborate on developing potential service learning projects. This is an opportunity to network and build community, develop best practices in service learning, and learn about key tools the SLA uses in building successful service learning projects. By attending the training, participants not only learn skills and receive tools to help them develop a service learning project, but also are eligible to receive a small stipend to help get their project off the ground and running.

Increasing involvement in service learning takes promotion. The SLA is committed to sharing its mission across campus and the community through active promotion. The SLA promotes its mission and work through multiple facets: publishing a semester newsletter, distributing flyer advertisements, facilitating open-house hours, and supporting fellow campus and community initiatives through attendance and participation. In order to commendably share

and promote that mission, the SLA exercises a strong commitment to research and program evaluation.

At the beginning and end of each semester, a pre-survey and post-survey are issued to all service learning courses to gather feedback and measure the impact of service learning provided throughout the semester. Additionally, all graduate assistants facilitate reflection meetings with UNO faculty and community partners to reflect on the service learning project and discuss improvements for future semesters. Furthermore, the SLA supports student research initiatives through a data committee, which encourages student workers to develop and engage in research projects that promote UNO's community-oriented mission. This research is used to enhance best practices in the SLA and develop a deeper understanding of the communities that the SLA serves and their identified needs.

The SLA is an institution committed to mindfully serving the community while simultaneously facilitating more engaged learning within it. It is an institution with resources and strategies that ground it in effective best practices. Finally, it is reflective through consistently working to evaluate, research, and improve its strategies. This effective use of resources and commitment to continued growth in itself and unity with the community is what makes the SLA an institution that overcomes barriers to service learning.

### **Impacts of the Service Learning Academy**

The implementation of deliberate strategies to overcome traditional barriers that universities face when attempting to incorporate service learning programs has allowed the Service Learning Academy at UNO to develop and expand its offerings. It has contributed to student learning, skills development, and civic involvement. Despite its small beginnings, the SLA has now grown to play an important role in community building and student development.

***Positive increase of service learning courses and student numbers***

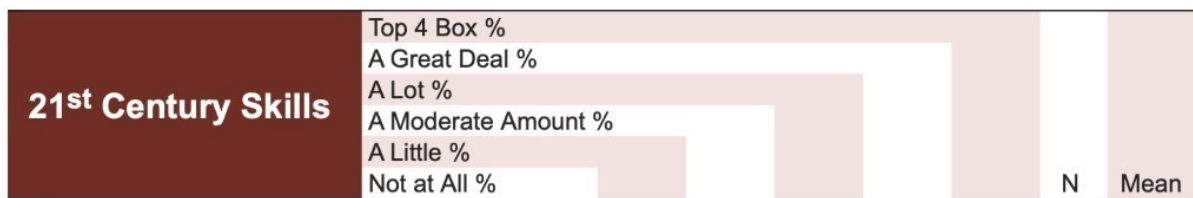
Over time, positive growth has occurred as more and more service learning courses are offered and supported. Since 2012, over 150 service learning courses have been offered each academic year, and in total, from 2000 to 2019, the SLA has supported over 2,000 service learning courses at UNO. Nearly 40,000 UNO students have participated in service learning courses. From 2005 to 2010, on average, 1,500 UNO students completed a service learning course each year. In the last five academic years, that number has increased: on average, 3,356 UNO students completed a service learning course each year (University of Nebraska Omaha [UNO], 2020b).

Additionally, this growth has allowed the SLA to expand service learning courses with the P-16 initiative, which involves projects between not only the university and community partners, but elementary and secondary students as well. Over 30,300 P-12 students from the Omaha metro area have participated in service learning projects since 2010. From 2010 to 2012, an average of 1,857 P-12 students engaged in service learning, and in the last two academic years, the average number of P-12 students was 2,778. This demonstrates growth in the P-16 initiative and the number of P-12 students being reached. During the 2018-19 academic year, the Service Learning Academy supported 87 P-16 initiative service learning projects. Collectively, UNO and P-12 students in these projects engaged in over 52,900 hours of service learning (UNO, 2020b). These experiences help connect learning outcomes with community-identified needs while meeting curriculum and course standards.

***Positive outcomes for students who take service learning courses***

The Service Learning Academy conducts research each year in order to: a) Develop more effective service learning programming, training, and support; b) Provide outreach to school and

nonprofit partners in the Omaha community; and c) Encourage faculty participation and promote scholarship. The results of this research consistently show that service learning courses have a positive impact on student academic engagement. In the 2018-2019 schoolyear, UNO students who were surveyed reported making a special effort to attend class when working on a service learning project. Students also indicated the service learning project helped with their personal development regarding five different skills: public speaking, teamwork, problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, and leadership abilities (UNO, 2020b).

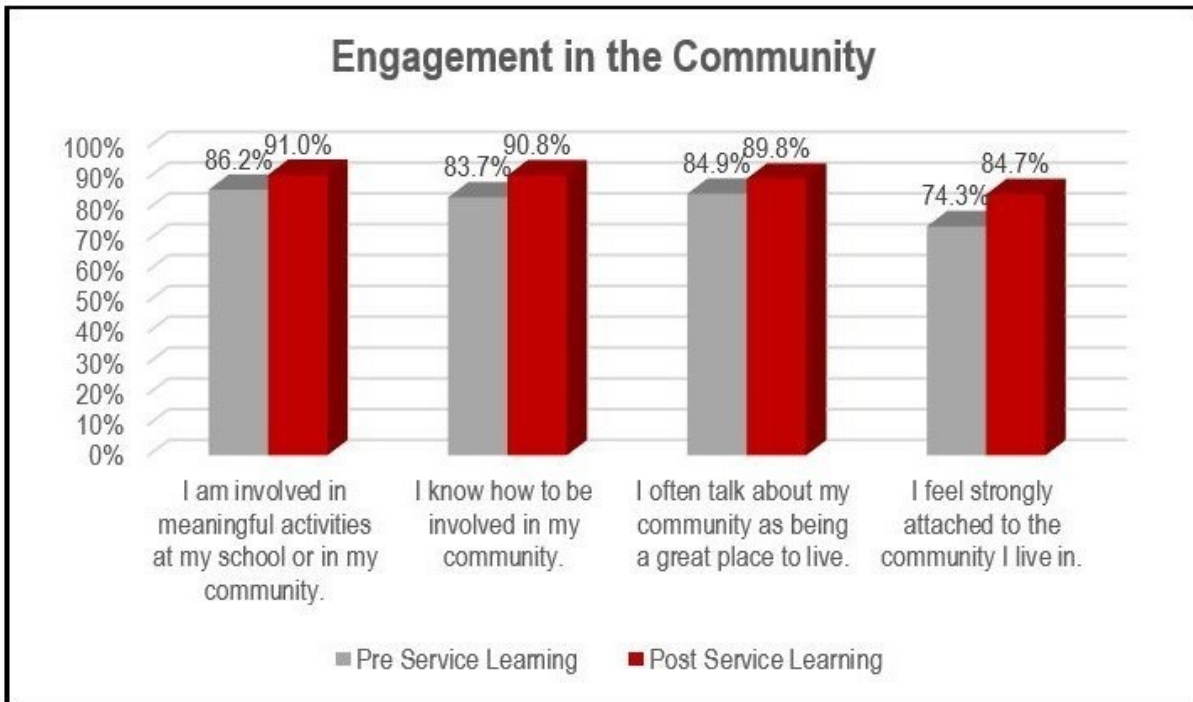


How much did you develop this specific skill during your service learning project?

Public Speaking.	9.1%	19.7%	31.8%	25.5%	13.3%	90.3%	330	3.14
Team Work.	2.4%	7.3%	20.6%	39.4%	29.7%	97%	330	3.87
Problem Solving.	1.2%	7.3%	21.5%	37.6%	31.8%	98.2%	330	3.92
Critical Thinking.	1.2%	8.8%	20%	37.9%	31.5%	98.2%	330	3.90
Leadership.	1.2%	7.9%	23.6%	34.8%	31.8%	98.1%	330	3.89

***Service learning experiences boost civic engagement in students and community***

Research from the 2018-2019 academic year has broken down civic engagement into two categories: knowledge of the community and engagement in the community. UNO students were surveyed to assess these areas before and after their service learning experience. On average, UNO students who completed the survey showed an increase of 10% in their knowledge of and engagement in the community as described by the following statements: a) I feel responsible for my community; b) I am involved in a structured volunteer position(s) in my community; and c) I feel strongly attached to the community I live in (UNO, 2020b).



**Conclusion**

By overcoming many of the barriers to service learning, the University of Nebraska Omaha’s Service Learning Academy has been able to increase its effectiveness and reach throughout the community. Because of its physical resources, central location for project facilitation, training and preparation, and service learning promotion, the SLA can continuously work on multiple projects for multiple years. CultureFest is a project that exemplifies this fact: it is an event that has been held by the SLA and a local middle and high school for 10 years. The event provides an opportunity for the students and the community to learn more about the history, traditions, and entertainment of multiple cultures through food, performance, and presentations by people with multiple cultural backgrounds. Projects like CultureFest require time, resources, and work that would be difficult to coordinate between university faculty and community partners alone. The SLA provides a key piece in the service learning puzzle by serving as an institutionalized hub for these projects.



### References

- Abes, E. M., Jackson, G., & Jones, S. R. (2002). Factors That Motivate and Deter Faculty Use of Service-Learning. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 9, 5–17. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3239521.0009.101>
- Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (2000). Institutionalization of Service Learning in Higher Education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71(3), 273–290. doi: 10.2307/2649291
- Hou, S. (2010). Developing a faculty inventory measuring perceived service-learning benefits and barriers. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 16, 78-89.
- University of Nebraska Omaha. (2020a). *Service Learning Academy*.  
<https://www.unomaha.edu/service-learning-academy/index.php>
- University of Nebraska Omaha. (2020b). *Service Learning Academy*.  
<https://www.unomaha.edu/service-learning-academy/impact/index.php>