Scholarship with a Civic Mission
Fall 2004 Gateway Courses
Research Proposal

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As Scholarship with a Civic Mission continues to grow, we’re working to understand the many ways our students develop in our Research Service-Learning courses. With our evaluation plan, we’ll continue to examine student outcomes in terms of the three major dimensions at the heart of our model: intellectual, civic leadership, and ethical inquiry. This year, we’ve asked all Gateway faculty to include a Research Proposal assignment as part of their course. We’ll be scoring samples of these proposals from each class to assess these dimensions at the student level for each Gateway.

Gateway course students should complete a 3-page, graded research proposal linked to their service-learning experience, or some equivalent exercise that demonstrates intellectual, civic leadership, and ethical inquiry skills. The manner in which you administer this exercise is up to you. In our RSL Pedagogy workshop in June, we discussed how some faculty are interested in having students complete this project at the end of the semester, while others may want to use this project as a vehicle or framework for understanding the service experience and course content over the whole semester. Some faculty thought three pages sounded reasonable for their courses; others realized that three pages would not be not sufficient for the complex types of questions their students would be prepared to ask, and developed longer Research Proposal assignments. Also, use our wording as much or as little as you wish. Terms like “data,” or “methods,” for example, are more relevant for some courses than others. It’s up to you to develop an assignment that works for you.

In this guide, I’ll give examples of the kinds of questions Gateway students have developed over the last few semesters, based on working with students as individuals and in a group exercise I used in my PSY 137: Adolescence class. I’ve also attached a few sample Research Proposals from Barbara Jentleson’s Education 100: Foundations of Education course. Barbara was the first faculty member to institute this requirement in the Spring of 2004.

In addition, you might find some of the information in our on-line student handbook to be helpful. The handbook includes the following sections and can be found at:
http://rslduke.mc.duke.edu/handbook.htm

- Planning an RSL Project
- The RSL Partnership
- What’s your research question?
- How will you answer your question?
- Ethics in Research
- Reflecting on your RSL experience
- Sharing your findings
- Resources
The Research Proposal assignment for your Gateway course should cover the following:

- Research Question
- Research Methods
- Proposed Research Process and Outcomes

1. Research Question

Identify a research question linked to your service-learning that would be important and useful to your community partner.

This is a deceptively simple instruction. We know that being able to develop a good research question can take years of training and practice. However, our Gateway students can tackle this task. Here are a few examples:

- What is the impact of teacher gender on the effectiveness of a drama therapy program for adolescent girls?
- What is the pattern of usage, by age and gender, of the athletic and recreational facilities at the John Avery Boys and Girls Club? Are there other options for this population that can be developed?
- How does motivation for school performance vary by gender and age at an afterschool club?
- How does attendance at an afterschool tutoring program relate to student performance on End of Grade tests? What are the mediating variables in this relationship?

Research Service-Learning is uniquely designed to enhance students’ understanding of the research issues that might benefit their community partners. Although the questions listed above could have been developed by students who were not enrolled in an RSL course, RSL students have a better opportunity to know the partner’s potential research needs through their service with that agency and interacting with agency personnel. Many of our students have conversations with their community partners about whether research could further their efforts. Our community partners know that our Gateway students will be thinking about research, largely as a result of the efforts of Jennifer Ahern-Dodson, our Community Partnerships Coordinator. You can emphasize this point when you communicate with your community partners.

2. Proposed Research Methods:

What types of information/data do you need to answer your question?
How would you collect or gather this information/data?
What primary and secondary sources would you need?

We want students in Gateways to have some understanding of what it means to answer a research question with an actual study. We want them to be able to think logically about what they’ll need to learn. The kinds of information your students will need to collect, and the methods they’ll use to collect that information, will vary widely by course and
discipline. The level of sophistication will depend on the academic experience of the students in your course (Have they had a course in research methods? Have they worked in a lab?) and the amount of course time you have devoted to methods instruction. For example, senior Psychology majors in my Adolescence course had all taken a research methods course as part of their major; these were students who used technical language to describe their methods and could even anticipate their analyses. Others used more elementary language to describe their ideas. One group wrote about developing questionnaires, field-testing them to obtain the appropriate psychometric characteristics, and then administering them in a particular way. Most groups wrote about using combinations of interviews, questionnaires, and existing records to find the information they needed. For example, one group designed a study that would include interviews with the principal, teachers, and community organization director; questionnaires administered to afterschool program participants; and a variety of information available from existing records (grades, attendance at school and afterschool program, indications of behavioral difficulties, etc.).

Because RSL is strongly linked to current curricular guidelines, we want our Gateway students to have some knowledge of the role of the research literature in informing their projects. For the Stage 2: Community-Based Research course I taught in the fall of 2003, this was a greater challenge than I expected. Only the most experienced student in the course—a junior—was familiar with her discipline’s literature and had some skills in using that literature to find relevant information. For the rest of the students, I used a variety of methods to convince them that others had written articles and books that could be helpful to them; for example, other researchers had already developed ways to measure academic motivation, others had developed criteria for selecting potential leaders for a conflict resolution training program. We want our Gateway students to draw on their service experience when designing projects, but we also expect that they have a sense for where their project could fit into the literature most relevant to that project.

Most RSL projects require multiple methods and therefore more than one type of data. Because these projects can be so complex, we are want our Gateway students to be able to plan how to answer the question, but we do not expect that they can actually carry out these projects at this level.

3. Proposed Research Process and Outcomes:
How would answering this question be helpful to your community partner? Who might benefit from the results of your research, and how?
How would you need to collaborate with your community partner and/or others to do this research?
What ethical concerns or issues would you need to be attentive to in pursuing this research? Think about protection of human subjects, questions of privacy, fairness, issues about the ownership of information, or documentation, etc.

The process of Research Service-Learning is as important as the research products our students describe in their proposals. We want our students to be thoughtful and informed
when designing these projects and to be aware of the contexts in which these projects would take place. For example, maybe administering a survey would make sense to a group of adults in one setting, but not the same group in another setting. We are also concerned that our Gateway students have a sense for the ethics involved in collecting information for or about a particular group. Is there any type of risk involved in asking particular questions in a certain way? Accessing school or medical records? What issues of confidentiality are involved? How can collaborating with the community partner help ensure an appropriate project?

Our goal is that Gateway courses provide students a beginning in this kind of collaborative problem identification and problem-solving. We require this kind of collaboration for RSL projects to be classified as Stage 2: Community-Based Research or Capstones.

In addition to articulating the research process, our Gateway students should be able to explain the potential outcomes of answering these research questions. For example, what difference does it make if we learn about the role of gender in the effectiveness of a therapy program? Who benefits from this information? How can this study be useful? Some Gateway students want to develop a training program or curriculum based on their findings; others want to develop a website to provide information to a larger audience.