

Developing Your Observation Skills

Learning how to "read" your school/community organization placement and the experiences you have while doing your service learning is extremely important to the effectiveness of your learning experience and contributions to the community.

"Reading" your school/community site means uncovering details about the school or organization to help make sense of that organization. By developing observations skills you will be able to make more sense of the theories learned from class. Often students try to take the theories learned from class and try to directly apply them to the organization, however, it is best to take your observations from the organization and see what you are able to apply to your class. The best service-learning experiences come when you work, critically and objectively observe and then reflect on your experiences. Using all of these stages through out your service-learning experience will increase the amount of information you learn and improve your class and community experience.

How to Observe:

- Increase your patience in order to slow down and watch;
- Pay close attention to your physical surroundings: who, what when, where & how;
- Be aware of people's reactions, emotions, & motivations;
- Ask questions that can be answered through observing;
- Be yourself;
- Observe with an optimistic curiosity; and
- Be ethical.

Sample Observation Questions:

What is the mission of the organization (e.g. the agency's purpose)?

How does the organization fulfill its mission? Does it do what it attests to do?

Who make up the population the organization works with?

What are the characteristics of the client population?

Where is the organization located?

What does the neighborhood look like? Smell like? Sound like?

How does the organization interact with the surrounding community?

What resources are in the community?

What is the proportion of paid staff to volunteers in the organization?

What is the structure of the organization?

How is the organization funded?

How dynamic and innovative is the organization? What evidence do you have to justify this statement?