

# Indiana University's Guidelines for Managing Risk in Community Service and Service-Learning

Working with members of the community outside the classroom in student activities or connected to academic courses can be an important part of a college student's education. While such partnerships in service-learning courses, in co-curricular activities, or independently involve some risk, many more benefits can be gained with careful planning, regular communication, and thoughtful reflection.

Indiana University's insurance *does not cover* students going to or from community sites or while volunteering in the community. The best route to minimize risk is to

- provide adequate information about the students' duties
- be thorough in preparation up front
- establish a communication process for possible problems

Fortunately, these steps help make your service-learning program more effective as well.

## ***Informed Consent***

Indiana University *urges all faculty and staff involved* in placing students in community sites to have students sign an informed consent statement indicating they are aware of any risks involved in performing their service projects. The riskier the project, the more formal and in-depth the form needs to be.

"A good informed consent procedure [can decrease the possibility of] a claim alleging that the injured party would not have participated if aware of the dangers. . . . [I]nformed consent procedures must provide clear, sufficient, information about the dangers. Parents of a boy who drowned on a school band trip sued despite having signed a consent form. They claimed that they would not have signed if they had known the hotel had a pool. *Consent must be informed*. It also should be obtained in writing and retained with documentation of the information provided to the signer." (From Tremper, Charles, and Gwynne Kostin. 1997. *No surprises, controlling risk in volunteer programs*. Washington DC: Nonprofit Risk Management Center. Page 45.)

## ***Transportation***

Transportation to the community service site is generally not covered by Indiana University's insurance unless students are in a university vehicle. *Be clear at the outset that the university is not liable for risks involved in students getting to and from their service sites*. It's a good idea to provide some service-learning opportunities within walking distance from campus.

## ***Orientation and Preparation***

The following guidelines are the bedrock of risk management in service-learning programs and should be incorporated into your class discussions before students visit community sites.

A. Everyone knows what is expected of him or her. All have a position description, operate within

those bounds, and are confident that they will be treated with respect and dignity.

- B. Everyone knows how to and is able to perform her or his duties properly and safely. They have been trained and equipped appropriately so that they have the knowledge, skills, and tools to do their jobs.
- C. Everyone knows when and how to report problems or suggest changes. They are expected to recognize potential hazards and are encouraged to propose solutions.

(From Seidman, Anna, and Charles Tremper. 1994. *Legal issues for service-learning programs*. Non-profit Risk Management Center. Page 21.)

### ***Agencies' Liability***

Check with the community-based organizations you partner with to see if they carry insurance to cover volunteers. If they do not, you need to make that clear in the informed consent form students sign before beginning their community service.

### ***Steps for Instructors***

1. Prepare an informed consent form listing the specifics of each student's service. Include number of hours volunteering, projects and duties performed, and projects produced.
2. Discuss in class the risks involved in the service, as well as the benefits and the skills required of students. Orient students to potential situations. (This is easier if the instructor is familiar with the service site and service work.)
3. Talk with the community-based organization about their insurance for volunteers, or contact the service coordinator on your campus for a list of organizations already approved.
4. Set up a line of communication for students to report any difficulties.
5. If desirable, create a contract between the student and the organization listing the community service, the learning objective, and the date of completed projects and time requirements.

If you have questions about managing risk in your community service or service-learning program contact any of the following:

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