

PROJECT-BASED SERVICE-LEARNING IN LEGAL EDUCATION AS A MECHANISM FOR ENHANCING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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In the training of future lawyers, alongside a solid theoretical foundation, the development of practical skills such as legal reasoning, critical thinking, advocacy, emotional intelligence, and communication skills is equally important. Modern legal education should not be limited to the transmission of theoretical knowledge; instead, it should prepare students to address real social and legal challenges. One of the most effective approaches to achieving this goal is the project-based method combined with service-learning, which enables students to apply academic knowledge in practice while contributing to community development and civic engagement.

The project method has surged in popularity because it merges theoretical learning with hands-on application. Its core principle is that students must grasp the purpose of studying a subject and how this understanding translates into real-world action. This approach centers on personal and professional growth through motivated individual and collaborative efforts targeting socially significant challenges.

Project-based learning is particularly valuable in legal education because it encourages students to synthesize knowledge, integrate information from related disciplines, develop analytical and communication skills, and cooperate within a team. Through collaborative activities, students learn to define objectives, identify effective means to achieve them, allocate responsibilities, and demonstrate professional competence. Such activities contribute not only to the acquisition of legal knowledge but also to the development of essential soft skills required for future legal professionals.

The project method is actively used in the teaching of legal disciplines at Sumy State University. An illustrative example is the discipline “Local Democracy: Best European Practices,” which aims to develop students’ understanding of European approaches to local democracy and civic participation. During the course, students study Ukrainian and European instruments of local democracy, including petitions, participatory budgeting, public consultations, and elections. Afterward, they work in groups to identify a specific problem in their community and develop a practical project to improve local life through democratic mechanisms.

Implementing student projects usually involves several stages. First, students identify a socially relevant problem and formulate clear and measurable objectives. These problems may concern environmental issues, waste management, infrastructure accessibility, or other local challenges. Second, students determine the activities and instruments needed to achieve the project goals, establish timelines, and distribute responsibilities within the group. Finally, they define the expected outcomes and the methods for evaluating the project’s effectiveness.

Students develop projects over extended periods, ranging from one month to a semester, enabling them to immerse themselves in authentic challenges while applying theoretical insights. This engagement builds critical thinking, ingenuity, teamwork, and communication abilities. Crucially, project-based service-learning inspires students to become active contributors to community life rather than passive recipients of information.

The practical impact of this approach is already evident. For example, during the 2025–2026 academic year, two students submitted petitions to local self-government bodies to address actual problems in their communities. Such initiatives demonstrate that students are capable of transforming academic learning into meaningful civic participation and social action.

The project-based approach confers numerous advantages in legal education. First, it strengthens the link between theory and practice, enabling students to validate and apply legal knowledge in real-world contexts. Second, it boosts motivation to study law, as students recognize the relevance of legal rules and tools. Third, it fosters autonomy and accountability, urging students to

make informed decisions, manage time, and collaborate. Lastly, it cultivates crucial soft skills, including public speaking, teamwork, analytical reasoning, and problem-solving.

Participation in project-based service-learning also contributes to the development of broader life competencies, particularly social, informational, political, and cultural competencies. Students become more aware of their communities' needs and are better prepared for active civic engagement. As a result, legal education becomes more practice-oriented, socially responsible, and student-centered.

Thus, the essence of project-based service-learning is to spark students' interest in pressing societal issues and to illustrate the practical utility of their knowledge through direct involvement in community solutions. Merging academic expertise with experiential learning, this method enriches the professional and personal development of future lawyers and reinforces their civic responsibility.