

METHODOLOGY OR MINDSET? A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT TO SERVICE-LEARNING IN UNIVERSITIES

Oleh Pasko¹ <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6275-5885>

¹*Department of Political Science, Ukrainian Catholic University, Lviv, Ukraine*

Corresponding author: pasko@ucu.edu.ua

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36059/978-966-397-609-9-35>

Keywords: service-learning; institutionalisation; higher education; budgeting; community engagement; Ukraine.

Abstract

Service-learning is widely praised in higher education as a vehicle for civic engagement, community partnership, and socially relevant learning. Yet its institutional status remains unstable. Universities often endorse service-learning rhetorically while failing to embed it in budgets, workload systems, quality assurance, or partnership structures. This paper argues that the persistent ambiguity between service-learning as a methodology and service-learning as a mindset is not merely semantic; it has direct institutional consequences. Drawing on foundational service-learning scholarship and recent literature on institutionalisation, sustainability, community participation, and learning predictors, the paper develops the Service-Learning Institutional Commitment Model (SLICM). The model explains how normative endorsement does not automatically produce sustainable implementation. Instead, service-learning becomes institutionally durable only when a civic mindset is translated into codified pedagogical design and then into budgeted organisational infrastructure. The paper contributes to the literature by identifying a missing causal link between definitional ambiguity and weak institutional commitment. It further argues that this gap is especially consequential in conflict-affected and recovery-oriented systems such as Ukraine's, where universities are increasingly expected to contribute to community resilience, territorial recovery, and civic regeneration. The paper concludes that service-learning should be judged not only by its moral appeal or pedagogical promise, but by the extent to which institutions make it operationally and financially real.

Introduction

Service-learning occupies an unusually attractive position in higher education discourse. It promises to connect academic learning with community needs, civic development, and public purpose. Foundational definitions already frame it as more than volunteering: it is a course-based, credit-bearing educational experience structured around service, reflection, and reciprocal learning (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Furco, 1996). At the same time, later scholarship has shown that service-learning also carries normative assumptions about justice, citizenship, and the role of higher education in society (Butin, 2010; Mitchell, 2008). That dual status has made the concept influential, but also institutionally unstable.

The problem is not that service-learning can be understood both as methodology and as mindset. The problem is that universities often benefit from that ambiguity. They celebrate the language of engagement, responsibility, and public mission, yet avoid the operational consequences of treating service-learning as a real pedagogical modality. As a result, service-learning is frequently praised without being staffed, budgeted, assessed, or normalised. This paper argues that the methodology-versus-mindset distinction matters because it structures institutional commitment.

This argument addresses a genuine gap in the literature. Recent work shows that service-learning remains difficult to implement at scale and that insufficient capacity, funding, and educator attitudes are major barriers to institutional uptake (Álvarez-Vanegas et al., 2024). Other research has moved toward institutional frameworks for embedding service-learning in universities, stressing the importance of leadership, communication, teamwork, and project design (Rodríguez-Zurita et al., 2025). At the same time, systematic review evidence suggests that the community side of service-learning remains weakly conceptualised, insufficiently involved in design and evaluation, and inadequately assessed in terms of real impact (Ruiz-Corbella et al., 2026). Student-level research also shows that outcomes depend on specific pedagogical conditions, particularly collaborative learning, reflective learning, and course satisfaction, which means that implementation quality matters materially rather than symbolically (Zhu et al., 2026). What remains under-theorised, however, is the mechanism linking conceptual framing to resource allocation. This paper addresses that missing link.

From conceptual ambiguity to institutional undercommitment

When service-learning is framed primarily as a mindset, it is easy for institutions to endorse it at very low cost. It can appear in mission statements, strategic plans, accreditation narratives, and donor-facing documents without producing changes in staffing or budgeting. A mindset can be admired without being funded. By contrast, when service-learning is framed as methodology, it becomes harder to evade its implementation requirements. It must then be designed, coordinated, assessed, and resourced.

This distinction matters because methodologies have cost structures. Service-learning requires community partnership development, faculty time, reflection design, student coordination, risk management, and monitoring. It also requires some institutional mechanism that outlasts individual enthusiasm. Foundational work already implied that successful service-learning depends on institutional, faculty, student, and community conditions rather than goodwill alone (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Recent literature reinforces that point. Álvarez-Vanegas et al. (2024) identify funding and educator capacity as structural obstacles to implementation. As Álvarez-Vanegas et al. (2024) conclude, “the three major challenges are insufficient educator capacity, funding, and educator attitudes” (p. 13). They further argue that educators are central to implementation and that, unless they are “trained and incentivized and this is systematized,” service-learning is unlikely to transform higher education environments at scale (p. 13). Rodríguez-Zurita et al. (2025) emphasise that the institutionalisation of service-learning depends on structured organisational conditions rather than isolated instructional effort, identifying “critical success factors and challenges related to leadership, teamwork, project design and execution, and communication.” The study further presents service-learning as a “replicable institutional approach” which supports the argument that sustainable implementation requires coordinated institutional architecture rather than stand-alone course initiatives. Zhu et al. (2026) state that “collaborative learning, reflective learning, and course satisfaction positively predicted students’ achievement in SL” (p. 2). This finding matters conceptually because it shows that student gains in service-learning are linked to specific pedagogical conditions rather than to participation alone. In that sense, service-learning cannot

be treated as a purely symbolic or value-based practice; its effectiveness depends on deliberate pedagogical architecture.

At the same time, weak institutionalisation distorts reciprocity. Ruiz-Corbella et al. (2026) show that much service-learning research still under-specifies the community, limits its active participation, and insufficiently evaluates community impact. This pattern is not accidental. Where institutions do not budget for partnership governance or impact assessment, the community is more likely to become a recipient or setting rather than a co-responsible actor. In that sense, underfunding is not only an administrative problem. It is a reciprocity problem.

The Service-Learning Institutional Commitment Model

To explain this mechanism, this paper proposes the Service-Learning Institutional Commitment Model (SLICM). The model is built around a simple claim: service-learning becomes sustainable only when normative endorsement is translated into pedagogical codification and then into organisational investment.

The first layer is **normative legitimacy**. Here, service-learning is endorsed as part of the university's civic mission, public role, or social responsibility agenda. This layer is necessary because institutions rarely invest in practices they do not consider legitimate. Yet it is insufficient because legitimacy alone does not create implementation capacity.

The second layer is **pedagogical codification**. At this stage, service-learning is defined not merely as “engagement” but as a recognisable educational design. Its core features include curricular integration, reciprocity, structured reflection, collaboration, and assessment (Bingle & Hatcher, 1996; Furco, 1996). This layer matters because it converts abstract values into operational educational requirements.

The third layer is **organisational commitment**. Here, the university accepts that service-learning has an institutional cost structure and allocates visible support accordingly. This includes workload recognition, partnership coordination, operational funding, staff roles, quality assurance procedures, and community impact evaluation. This layer is where institutional sincerity becomes visible.

The fourth layer is **sustainable implementation**. Only when the previous layers align can service-learning plausibly generate

durable student gains, reciprocal community benefit, and continuity beyond grant cycles. Without organisational commitment, service-learning remains either rhetorical or episodic.

The model therefore predicts three distinct implementation states. Where only normative legitimacy exists, service-learning will remain symbolic. Where normative legitimacy and pedagogical codification exist without organisational commitment, service-learning will survive only as a fragile pilot dependent on heroic faculty labour. Where all three antecedent layers are present, service-learning can be normalised as part of ordinary institutional functioning.

Why this matters in recovery-oriented higher education

This argument becomes sharper in conflict-affected settings. In recovery-oriented systems such as Ukraine's, universities are increasingly expected to do more than deliver instruction. They are being asked to contribute to social cohesion, local problem solving, displaced population support, and territorial recovery. In such contexts, the institutional underfunding of service-learning is not neutral. It produces strategic weakness.

If universities want students to work with municipalities, displaced communities, veterans, or recovery actors, service-learning cannot rest on informal enthusiasm alone. Fragile contexts require more structure, not less. Community engagement in wartime and post-war conditions may require safeguarding, coordination, flexible course design, transportation, contingency planning, and sustained communication with partners. If these requirements are treated as external or optional, the result will be symbolic participation, extractive partnerships, or post-project disappearance.

For that reason, the key institutional question is not whether universities believe in service-learning. The real question is whether they are willing to make it administratively and financially real. Recovery governance demands universities that can link knowledge, pedagogy, and territory through stable structures rather than temporary moral energy.

Table 1. Summary of the Service-Learning Institutional Commitment Model (SLICM)

Model component	What it means	Key institutional question	If present	If absent
1. Mindset / normative legitimacy	The university recognises service-learning as part of its civic mission, public role, and social responsibility.	Does the institution see service-learning as aligned with its mission and values?	Service-learning gains rhetorical legitimacy and strategic visibility.	Service-learning remains marginal, optional, or invisible in institutional discourse.
2. Methodology/ pedagogical codification	Service-learning is defined as a structured educational approach with curricular integration, reciprocity, reflection, collaboration, and assessment.	Is service-learning treated as a real pedagogical design rather than a general value statement?	The practice becomes teachable, replicable, and evaluable across courses and programmes.	Service-learning remains vague, inconsistently applied, and easily confused with volunteering or outreach.
3. Institutional commitment/ organisational translation	The university translates the methodology into formal support: workload recognition, staffing, coordination, operational support, QA, and evaluation.	Is the institution willing to allocate resources, roles, and procedures to support implementation?	Service-learning becomes administratively feasible and less dependent on individual enthusiasm.	Service-learning depends on uncompensated faculty effort, fragile pilots, and ad hoc arrangements.
4. Budgeted infrastructure/ material support	Dedicated or embedded resources are allocated for partnership management, student support, logistics, reflection, monitoring, and impact assessment.	Is service-learning budgetarily real, not only normatively endorsed?	The practice can scale, persist, and maintain reciprocity with community partners.	The institution symbolically supports service-learning while materially neglecting it.
5. Sustainable implementation/ durable outcomes	Service-learning becomes a normalised institutional practice with continuity, quality control, and credible outcomes for students and communities.	Can service-learning survive beyond isolated projects, grants, or individual champions?	The university achieves durable student learning, stronger community partnerships, and institutionalisation.	The practice remains episodic, project-bound, and vulnerable to staff turnover or funding gaps.

Conclusion

The literature already shows that service-learning faces implementation barriers, depends on institutional frameworks, struggles with reciprocity, and produces stronger outcomes when pedagogical design is robust (Álvarez-Vanegas et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Zurita et al., 2025; Ruiz-Corbella et al., 2026; Zhu et al., 2026). What has been less clearly articulated is why universities repeatedly endorse service-learning while failing to institutionalise it. This paper argues that the missing explanation lies in conceptual ambiguity.

Service-learning is both a methodology and a mindset. But universities often exploit that duality asymmetrically. They retain the moral legitimacy of the mindset while avoiding the material obligations of the methodology. The contribution of this paper is therefore not simply to restate that the distinction exists, but to model how that distinction structures institutional commitment. The Service-Learning Institutional Commitment Model shows that sustainable implementation depends on a sequence: civic legitimacy, pedagogical codification, and budgeted organisational support. Break that sequence, and service-learning remains fragile. Complete it, and service-learning becomes institutionally credible.

References

- Álvarez-Vanegas, A., Ramani, S. V., & Volante, L. (2024). Service-learning as a niche innovation in higher education for sustainability. *Frontiers in Education*, 9, Article 1291669. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2024.1291669>
- Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (1996). Implementing service learning in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 67(2), 221–239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.1996.11780257>
- Butin, D. W. (2010). *Service-learning in theory and practice: The future of community engagement in higher education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Furco, A. (1996). Service-learning: A balanced approach to experiential education. In B. Taylor & Corporation for National and Community Service (Eds.), *Expanding boundaries: Serving and learning* (pp. 2–6). Corporation for National and Community Service.
- Mitchell, T. D. (2008). Traditional vs. critical service-learning: Engaging the literature to differentiate two models. *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning*, 14(2), 50–65.

- Rodríguez-Zurita, D., Juaneda-Ayensa, E., Jaya-Montalvo, M., Retamales-García, L., & Carrión-Mero, P. (2025). An institutional framework for education for sustainable development through service-learning in universities. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJSHE-07-2024-0452>
- Ruiz-Corbella, M., Celaya, I., Vázquez-Verdera, V., & Naval, C. (2026). The role of community in service-learning projects in Spanish universities: A systematic review (2015-2024). *Revista Española de Pedagogía*, 84(293), 59–74. <https://doi.org/10.9781/rep.2026.408>
- Zhu, X., Tang, Y., Wu, X., Bai, Y., & Shek, D. T. L. (2026). Online service-learning versus face-to-face service-learning: Learning gains in university students and associated predictors. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2026.2621737>