

CEL in Practice: Service Learning (CSLI) and Curricular Community Engaged Learning (CCEL) Course Examples

This document is designed to help faculty and campus Community Engagement (SL/CE) practitioners distinguish between Service Learning (CSLI) and Curricular Community Engaged Learning (CCEL) as defined by the CSU Community Engaged Learning (CEL) Taxonomy and captured in the CEL Tool (CELT v2). Both approaches engage students in academically grounded experiences with community partners that contribute to the common good.

The short examples help illustrate different types of community-engaged learning courses and clearly explain why one qualifies as Service Learning (CSLI) and another as CCEL. The longer example—using two versions of the same course—brings these distinctions to life by showing how course design and implementation influence the level of integration across the six essential elements of CEL. The comparison table highlights how a CCEL course may touch on one or more of the six essential elements of the CEL Framework but may not fully integrate them, whereas a CSLI course intentionally incorporates all six.

Together, these examples demonstrate the developmental nature of the Community Engaged Learning spectrum.

SHORT NARRATIVE EXAMPLES

Example of a Service Learning (CSLI) Course: A Public Health course where students spend 20 hours working with a local health clinic to deliver nutrition education workshops. Students apply course concepts related to health behavior change, reflect regularly on the connection between theory and practice, engage in civic learning discussions, and submit a final paper evaluating community outcomes and their own learning. The course includes clearly articulated civic learning outcomes, ongoing faculty guidance, and assessment of both academic and community impact. The partnership is reciprocal, with the clinic co-designing activities to meet community needs.

Example of a Curricular Community-Engaged Learning (CCEL) Course: A Marketing course where students complete a group project to develop a promotional campaign for a nonprofit client. While students engage with a real community partner and apply academic content to a community-identified need, the course does not include explicit civic learning outcomes, sustained critical reflection, or assessment of community impact. The partnership is beneficial but not deeply reciprocal or co-created. This course still qualifies as CCEL due to its community-engaged assignment, but not as CSLI due to the lack of explicit integration of civic and academic learning.

CEL in Practice: Service Learning (CSLI) and Curricular Community Engaged Learning (CCEL) Course Examples

Service Learning vs. CCEL: THEA 350 Course Comparison

[A quick comparison table is provided on page four.](#)

Course Title: THEA 350 – Applied Theater and Social Impact

Department: Theatre Arts

Course Type: Service Learning

Course Description:

This course explores the role of theater as a tool for community dialogue and education, and social change. In this course, students will use theater as a civic practice to engage with two community-based organizations working to support veterans experiencing homelessness and mental health issues. Through a collaborative partnership with the local VA hospital and a residential rehabilitation non-profit program, students will co-create and perform an original theater piece designed to educate, inspire and mobilize community audiences.

Community Engagement Activity:

Students will work in two small groups, one with the Long Beach VA hospital and the other with Century Villages at Cabrillo to devise a short performance rooted in the stories, issues or goals of the partners. Students will share information they learned from each site to co-develop a 45-minute performance that will be performed publicly twice. Once at the Expo Arts Center in Bixby Knolls as part of First Fridays and again at the Villages at Cabrillo. Weekly written reflections will be required as part of the process. Following the performance, students will engage audience members in facilitated post-performance discussion. Students should expect to dedicate 1-2 hours for every hour of class, approximately 3-4 hours/week. This will include meetings with community partners, classmates, site scouting, play development and engaging in weekly reflections.

Academic Features (per CSU CELT):

- **Reciprocal Partnership:** Community partners participate in shaping the script themes and performance goals. Partners provide feedback during rehearsals and participate in evaluating the final performances.
- **Common Good Focus:** The performance addresses a community concern with the goal of raising awareness or inspiring dialogue.
- **Academically Relevant Involvement:** Students apply course content in applied theater, performance theory, and community engagement.
- **Civic Learning and Critical Reflection:** Students examine the role of art in democracy, social movements and public discourse. Course readings and discussions analyze ethical engagement, representation and audience accountability.
- **Assessment:** Grading is based on performance quality and collaboration, depth of reflective writing, engagement with community partners and audience, peer and self-assessment on teamwork and ethical practice.

Why this is Service Learning (CSLI):

- Critical reflection is required and assessed throughout the course.
- The course is designed to simultaneously support student learning and community outcomes
- Civic engagement is a core learning outcome, not just a context for performance.

CEL in Practice: Service Learning (CSLI) and Curricular Community Engaged Learning (CCEL) Course Examples

Course Title: THEA 350 – Applied Public Performance Theater

Department: Theatre Arts

Course Type: Curricular Community Engaged Learning

Course Description:

This course explores the role of theater as a tool for community dialogue and education. Students devise and perform an original public theater piece based on a theme relevant to that community (e.g., housing insecurity, youth mental health, climate justice).

Community Engagement Activity:

Students develop a 45-minute performance based on input from the community partner. The culminating performance takes place at a community venue (e.g., a public park, library, or community center) and is open to the public.

Academic Features (per CSU CEL Tool):

- **Reciprocal Partnership:** Community partners provide information to the class regarding performance goals
- **Common Good Focus:** The performance addresses a community concern with the goal of raising awareness. Students gain some understanding of theater's role in democratic dialogue
- **Academically Relevant Involvement:** Students apply course content in applied theater, performance theory, and community engagement.
- **Assessment:** Grading is based on the devised performance, a group portfolio and group collaboration

Why is this CCEL:

- While the project is community-centered, civic learning goals and critical reflection are not part of the course or experience (e.g., no structured journal or guided personal analysis of civic identity).
- The **primary assessment** is tied to performance quality and group process.
- The course prioritizes academic objectives in applied theater over the dual focus typical of SL (community impact + reflective learning).

CEL in Practice: Service Learning (CSLI) and Curricular Community Engaged Learning (CCEL) Course Examples

Table 1: Service Learning vs CCEL: THEA 350 Course Comparison

Course Type	Service Learning	Curricular Learning Community Engaged Learning
Course Title	THEA 350 – Applied Theater and Social Impact	THEA 350 – Applied Public Performance Theater
Course Attribute	Service Learning (CSLI)	Curricular Community Engaged Learning (CCEL)
Reciprocal Partnerships	Partners co-develop themes, attend rehearsals, and evaluate performance	Partners share background context and performance goals
Student Involvement Benefits the Common Good	Benefit to common good is co-identified, planned and communicated: <i>Educate, inspire, and mobilize on veteran homelessness and mental health</i>	Benefit to the common good is intentional and stated: Raise awareness of a social issue through public performance.
Academically Relevant Community Involvement	Community project is integrated throughout course to support learning in applied theater and civic engagement.	Community project is used as an example or case study to support academic learning outcomes.
Explicit Civic Learning Goals	Civic engagement and personal growth are core learning outcomes	Not explicit. Limited to general understanding of theater's role in society
Critical Reflection Facilitates Learning	Weekly structured reflections + post-performance discussions	None required
Integrated Assessment of Student Learning	Assessment includes partner feedback and engagement, performance quality, reflection, teamwork	Assessment is based on performance quality and group collaboration
Why This Attribute?	Integrates all six essential elements, including community impact with critical reflection, civic learning and integrated assessment.	Focuses on academic skill-building with community context

Note: Both courses contribute meaningfully to student learning and community benefit. However, Service Learning (CSLI) intentionally integrates civic learning, critical reflection, and community impact as core learning outcomes, while CCEL emphasizes academic skill-building within a community context.