

COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING STUDENT HANDBOOK 2024-24



Provided in collaboration with Vassar Student Association Academic Affairs
Committee and Office of Community-engaged Learning
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1. INTRODUCTION

The Office of Community-Engaged Learning (OCEL) aims to build long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships with community organizations based in Poughkeepsie, Dutchess County, and the greater Hudson Valley. By developing and centering partnerships, the OCEL provides students with the opportunity to learn alongside community partner organizations and make real-world connections to enhance their academic experiences. The OCEL connects students, community partners, and faculty community-identified projects to deepen classroom learning, build capacity at community organizations, and empower students to become active change agents in their communities.

Community Engaged Learning (CEL) is a community-based educational opportunity aimed to enhance learning through employing pedagogical strategies of structured critical reflection, dialogic engagement, integration of academic learning goals, and connection to clearly articulated community-desired outcomes and impact. In short, the primary goal of CEL is to incorporate student's application of academic knowledge to articulated learning goals and community-identified projects. Through such an experience, students learn more about social issues, work alongside community partners, combine their off-campus learning with guided reflection under the mentorship of a faculty sponsor, and participate in critical community-engaged learning on-campus workshops.

The OCEL's pedagogical workshops and trainings are grounded in critical community-engaged learning, which centers self-awareness and critical thinking, critical analysis skills of the root causes of social issues, and the supporting the development of students' knowledge, tools, and agency to create a more equitable and just world.

In addition to the experience of community and social justice educational practices, the CEL experience may help you to discover your passion's and explore various career paths. The OCEL has over 50 local community partners across issue areas such as: racial justice, LGBTQAI+ rights, education policy and equity, arts and culture, mental health access and support, environmental justice, prison abolition, voting rights, housing security/justice, public health, legal access, food security, economic justice, and expression. Please visit the OCEL's opportunities page, located at <https://pages.vassar.edu/officeofcommunityengagedlearning/community-engaged-learning-opportunities/> to learn more about our partner organizations.

Students are eligible to receive either 0.5 unit (40 hours of community-based work and 30 hours of academic work) or 1.0 unit of academic credit (80 hours of community-based work and 60 hours of academic work) in the department of their faculty sponsor. All CEL is ungraded (Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory) and can be done during the academic year or in the summer. The OCEL upholds the College's commitment to providing an accessible and inclusive learning environment. Please contact the office if you need any accommodations.

2. HOW TO REGISTER FOR CEL

Throughout your academic journey at Vassar, some of you might take CEL for credit to learn more about your passions outside of your major, and some of you will be required to take the class to fulfill your major requirements. For example, such departments and programs as Education, Urban Studies, and Prison Studies require students to complete CEL as part of electives or intensives requirements. To learn more about the requirements of the specific department, please check the department's website or confirm the major requirements with your advisor or chair of the department.

As the time frame for consideration of taking CEL, as well as the registration process, may vary at different times of the year, below you can find a step-by-step guide on when to start thinking about participating in CEL whether it is the completion for major requirements or the exploration of social justice community engagement and what you need to do to receive CEL credit.

Please note that the registration process for CEL is continuously updated on the Vassar Community-Engaged Learning website; go.vassar.edu/CEL

2.1 Step 1: Learn more about OCEL and their local community partner opportunities

Students can learn more about CEL during any point of the year and discover the opportunities. The OCEL is open to meeting with students year-round to discuss their interests and work of their community partners.

Here is the recommended time frame for the consideration of taking CEL class depending during which period you would like to take the class:

2.1.1 Fall:

- Meet with the OCEL after Spring Break and throughout the summer
- Register for CEL during the Pre-registration period or during the Add Period at the beginning of the Fall semester

2.1.2 Spring:

- Meet with the OCEL after Fall Break and throughout the winter break
- Register for CEL during the Pre-Registration period or during the Add Period at the beginning of the Spring semester

2.1.3 Summer:

- Meet with the OCEL after Spring Break through the summer
- Register for CEL during the Pre-Registration Period through May 15

2.2 Step 2: Set up the appointment

To learn more about CEL, please set up an appointment with the OCEL to discuss your academic and personal interests. It is recommended to review [available CEL opportunities](#) beforehand and also bring your resume to the meeting as it would help to find a better organization with which you will work alongside through the fall or spring semesters or during summer break. During the meeting, you will discuss your CEL interests, identify community partners to work alongside, learn more about the academic component of CEL, and the registration process.

2.3 Step 3: Find a faculty sponsor and connect with your major/pre-major advisor

After your meeting, please reach out to a faculty member with whom you would like to work with on the Academic Work and discuss your academic goals. Students usually reach out to the faculty members with whom they took a class before or whose work is aligned with the goals of community organizations. With the professor, you will discuss the academic work that you will complete throughout the course. Such assignments could include journaling, readings dedicated to the social issues you will be working with, creative presentations, etc. At the same time, you should check in with your academic advisor about your major requirements and how your CEL experience would complement it.

2.4 Step 4: Register for CEL

CEL is a 290 class. In order to register, you will need to know who your faculty sponsor is and have your advisor's approval.

2.4.1 Fall

Register for CEL during the pre-registration period for the fall during the spring semester; or, during the Add Period in the fall semester. CEL has an extended add period a week after the Add deadline.

2.4.2 Spring

Register for CEL during the pre-registration period for the spring during the fall semester; or, during the Add Period in the spring semester. CEL has an extended add period a week after the Add deadline.

2.4.3 Summer

Register for CEL during the pre-registration period for the fall, or until May 15.

3. EXPECTATIONS FROM THE CEL CLASS

To prepare you for the experience within CEL class, you can find the expectations and requirements that you would need to complete throughout your CEL journey.

3.1 Complete the CEL Agreement Form

After filling out the Registrar's form, your next step would be the completion of the CEL Agreement Form. This collaborative tool mirrors best practices of supporting strong partnerships, critical reflection, and a meaningful and high-impact CEL experience. There are three components to this form: Student Information, Community-Based Work, and Academic Work. Students complete the online form with their CEL supervisor and then share the progress of the form with their CEL faculty sponsor. After submitting the form, the OCEL will review it and a final copy will be sent to all.

3.2 Attend the mandatory CEL workshops

There are three mandatory workshops centering social justice education required for all students enrolled in CEL. The initial workshop focuses on identity work, positionality, and best practices for responsible and ethical engagement in your CEL. The second workshop focuses on the root causes of social injustices. The third workshop is a culminating reflection session. Over the summer, the workshops will take place virtually.

3.3 Keep a critical reflection journal

3.4 Regularly meet with your Faculty Sponsor

During the academic year, you should regularly meet with your Faculty Sponsor to discuss your community work with an organization and connect it to your academic experience. Over the summer, we encourage students to stay in email communication with their faculty sponsor.

3.5 Submit your Final Reflection to the OCEL

The OCEL will email you a link to a form to share your mandatory final reflection about your CEL experience. Please note that the Final Reflection is different from the assignment of Faculty Sponsor and must be completed by the student to receive a credit.

3.6 Submit your Final Integrative Assignment to your Faculty Sponsor

As agreed upon in your CEL Agreement form, please submit your final integrative assignment to your faculty sponsor by the date requested. The final assignment can be a research paper, a portfolio of your work, a poster or presentation, etc.

3.7 OCEL Community-Engaged Learning Norms

Here we provide some brief norms and advice on how to get the best experience from your CEL class.

- Be open to learning and lean into discomfort
- Honor the knowledge and listen to the voices in the community
- Be present, engaged and consistent
- Critically reflect on your positionality and how you show up
- Engage with humility (Do what is needed, not what you think needs to be done)

4. CEL WITH ORGANIZATIONS OUTSIDE OF OCEL COMMUNITY PARTNERS

OCEL is primarily focused on building partnerships with local organizations in Poughkeepsie and wider Hudson Valley with expectations that the local community partners will serve as co-educators and co-mentors of our Vassar students to create meaningful experiential opportunities for growth and development. Even though students are strongly encouraged to work with communities local to Vassar, there is always a possibility to work with organizations outside of Vassar during the academic year and during the summer.

However, please note that any internship opportunity does not necessarily equal the opportunity to do CEL class. The primary goal of CEL is to give you a chance to learn about social justice while working with the local communities in the Hudson Valley. To work with an organization outside of the OCEL's local and long-standing community-based partners at any point of the year, you must first complete [this form](#) for summer and [this form](#) for academic year to help OCEL Directors learn more about the organizations with which you want to work and assess its merit for a CEL. After completing the form, please set up a meeting to discuss your options. Even though the outside opportunities (especially during the summer) are varied, the approved opportunities usually include these criteria:

- Address a specific community-identified interest, inquiry, project, or idea;
- Includes working with and learning alongside a non-profit, governmental, or public service community organization that serves as a co-educator
- Enhances classroom learning by making connections between the community-based work and the academic work;
- Centers structured critical reflection.
- Helps students develop tools and knowledge for social change.

If the organization is approved, follow further the steps outlined in the section “How to Register for CEL Guide” of this Handbook.

Please note that the students can be paid for the Community-Engaged Learning Experience only during the summer. During the Spring and Fall semesters, students can receive only an academic credit. The OCEL will support students with accessing transportation to and from their CEL.

5. INFORMATION FOR THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Similarly to the domestic students, international students can register for CEL classes during the academic year and the summer. If you have secured a paid internship for the summer in the USA, you must obtain Curricular Practical Training (CPT) authorization to meet your F-1 visa employment verification requirements. Students can enroll either in a summer CEL (#290) or an Independent Study (#298).

Please note that a CEL internship must be connected to community and social issues, and the work must relate to your major field of study. In order to ensure that your internship meets CEL requirements, you must first submit this form and schedule a meeting with the OCEL. If your opportunity does not fulfill the requirements of CEL, which are mentioned in the section above (“CEL with Organizations Outside of CEL Community Partners”), and you need to receive credit for a summer position as an international student, you can still obtain the documentation for the F1 Visa through Independent Work. You can find the registration form for Independent 298 on the Registrar’s website [here](#).

Please note that CEL Agreement Form is a requirement of the CPT application. To receive CPT authorization, you will need to supply three documents to the Director of the Office of International Services:

5.1 Employment offer letter

5.2 Evidence of OCEL or independent work

5.2.1 OCEL: a copy of the completed CEL Agreement form

5.2.2 Independent Work: an email from your faculty member describing your independent work project

5.3 Evidence of academic credit

5.3.1 OCEL: the office will automatically email this confirmation

5.3.2 Independent Work: a copy of the add form

Note for first year international students: The earliest you can be authorized for CPT is the summer following your freshman year.

6. OTHER OPPORTUNITIES RELATED TO CEL

Even though the CEL 290 classes are primarily focused on student's work with community organizations and academic advisor, OCEL has some opportunities that would help you to learn more about social issues and positively impact local communities within the Hudson Valley.

6.1 Community-Engaged Curriculum (CEC)

CEC, funded by the Mellon Foundation through the Community-Engaged Intensives in the Humanities grant, aims to foster and support the development of courses that cultivate long-lasting, equitable collaborations between our campus and communities of the city of Poughkeepsie, Dutchess County, and the Hudson Valley. Community-Engaged Courses and Intensives are envisioned as innovative, collaborative learning opportunities that complement more traditional courses by extending beyond the classroom. Faculty are invited to develop community engaged curriculum to fit their own areas of teaching, to respond to student interests and project proposals, and to address specific community needs and opportunities. To learn more about the CEC classes, regularly check the CEL emails and AskBanner for new opportunities.

Students also have the possibility to organize and officially register the class on campus. The uniqueness of the student-led course is that the student, not the Vassar member of the faculty, will primarily collaborate with the community organization and develop the curriculum activities. To discuss the creation of the student-led class, schedule an appointment with the Director of the OCEL, Elizabeth Cannon (ecannon@vassar.edu). For more detailed information about the CEC, please visit the OCEL page.

6.2 Community Service Work Study

The CSWS program is a federal program that allows students with a federal work-study allowance in their financial aid award to work at a local not-for-profit organization to provide services that benefit the local community. The OCEL Community-Service Work-Study Program supports students who have a passion for community engagement and social justice and qualify for federal work-study. The Community-Service Work Study Program allows students an opportunity to support community identified projects of the OCEL's partner organizations.

Students are expected to commit to the organization for the full academic year, attend bi-weekly workshops with OCEL Staff, and work 6-8 hours a week at a community partner.

6.3 Leadership and Civic Engagement

Vassar Votes is a non-partisan commitment to empowering Vassar students in the democratic process. Our mission is to ensure that every Vassar student has the resources and knowledge to actively participate in civic life. Dorm Voting Advisors engage voters, increase awareness of voting rights, and support learning about important voting issues.

Students can volunteer as DVAs or apply for Community Service Work Study DVA positions.

To discover how to register to vote at Vassar and other resources for voters, please visit offices. vassar.edu/community-engaged-learning/civic-engagement/.

6.4 Community Fellows

Community Fellows Program is a unique opportunity for students to gain the experience of working with Poughkeepsie and Hudson Valley social justice non-profits and governmental organizations over the summer. Similarly to CEL classes, the Program aims to provide students experience of working with community organizations in various fields to enhance students' academic journey and make real-world connections.

Similarly to CEL class, the Community Fellows can work in the organizations with various focus fields, such as environmental justice education, equity and inclusion, art and media, and others. Even though the organizations for Community Fellows applications vary from year to year, here are some examples of the OCEL long-term partners in Poughkeepsie and Hudson Valley Community from the Program:

- Celebrating the African Spirit - acknowledgment, articulation, research and commemoration of the lives of enslaved Africans in Poughkeepsie
- The Art Effect - development and support of the youth creative voice to shape the better future
- Exodus Transitional Community - supportive services for formerly incarcerated men and women in order to help them reintegrate into their communities thereby achieving social and economic well being
 - Environmental Cooperative - conservation efforts in the Hudson Valley
- DAY ONE Early Learning Community - creation of the best learning opportunities for young children within the State by providence of the early childhood teachers training
- Arlington Partners Against Racism - support District members from marginalized racial groups
- Dutchess Outreach - advocacy and coordination assistance of Dutchess County hunger and relief programs

6.5 Community-Based Research/Participatory Action Research

The OCEL will support faculty interested in Community-Based Research (CBR)/Participatory Action Research (PAR). CBR/PAR seeks to ethically engage with communities, co-create research questions and design, and involve all parties as co-contributors in the research process. Community partners are considered equal partners with critical knowledge on how to address core social issues in our communities. CBR/PAR challenges traditional forms of knowledge production, aims to uplift voices in the community, and promote social change.

6.6 EngagePK

EngagePK is a student-led organization that focuses on increasing engagement of Vassar students with the Poughkeepsie community and supporting community-based organizations. Within Vassar College, EngagePK is supported by OCEL and works directly with OCEL partners. Students interested in checking out and volunteering at Poughkeepsie community events should join the monthly meetings of the EngagePK.

On monthly meetings, students can learn more about upcoming community focused events in Poughkeepsie, commit to direct volunteering to some of them, educate oneself about responsibilities and ethics of community engagement. The commitment to participate in the events is flexible, and students associated with the organization are free to choose volunteering opportunities to which they want to commit.

In addition to connecting students with the Poughkeepsie community, EngagePK also organizes on-campus events with speakers and panelists from the city. Students who are engaged directly with the organization's Executive Board will have the opportunity to organize campus events with local social justice community members and advocates.

To learn more about the EngagePK volunteering and leadership opportunities together with the upcoming events, please check the organization's social media page.

6.7 Vassar Education Collaboration Program

Vassar Education Collaboration is a college initiative that aims to connect students with the Poughkeepsie City School District community. The program is designated to assist students, their parents and teachers from the Poughkeepsie School community to overcome the limited resources facing PCSD.

Through this program, Vassar students encourage high-school students to improve their academic performance, provide necessary resources for doing it, and model high-school graduation and college life. In return, Vassar students receive a direct experience of working with local communities and application of educational and social academic work in practice.

To achieve the goals mentioned above, the Vassar Education Collaboration consists of three programs:

- **Vassar English Language Learners Outreach (VELLOP)** - focused on tutoring elementary and middle school students who study English.
- **Vassar After School Tutoring (VAST)** - focused not only providing tutoring sessions in variety of subjects but also organization and coordination of fun extracurricular activities, such as baking, Preserve walks, etc.
- **Exploring College** - focused on organization of events for middle and high school students to promote the possibilities of domestic colleges. This program encompasses tutoring sessions, preparations for the entrance exams, tours around the dorms and academic buildings, creation of fun activities for the students to learn more about higher education.

To learn more about the programs and the application process, please visit vassar.edu/vassar-education-collaboration.