

“Missionary Ideology”

The information in this section comes from the NYLC Advanced Service Learning Participant Manual © 2004. The concept of “Missionary Ideology” comes from the Service Learning Diversity/Equity Project (SLDEP).

Definition: “Missionary Ideology” as defined in the Service Learning Diversity/Equity Project refers to the concept of one group trying to impose their ideas on another group, with little or no consideration of that group’s traditions, beliefs, and needs. It most frequently refers to working cross-culturally: involving groups of different ethnic, cultural, religious, and/or socio-economic backgrounds.

Attitudes/Philosophical Perspectives that Foster Missionary Ideology

An attitude of doing “to” or “for” rather than “with.”

Issues of power, race, and privilege are not discussed before entering a community.

People presume the needs of others without dialogue.

People forget to enter a community that is new to them as a learner, rather than as an expert.

Attitudes/Philosophical Perspectives that Promote Good Practice:

The service comes from an asset-based model as opposed to deficit-based.

Issues of culture, class, race, and power are openly addressed

People understand the greater context for their service.

People ask the question “What do we need to know in order to do effective and needed work in this community?”

When two communities collaborate there is talk about stereotypes, differences, cultural understandings and perceptions with both young people and the adults involved.

Service should be meeting an authentic community need. When you are serving outside your own community, be sure that your help is wanted! Ask what a community agency needs, don’t only offer to do specific tasks. Work in partnership with community agencies—both your students and the agency should be involved in all steps of the service learning. Involving agencies in planning and reflection makes for effective and authentic service.