



Policy Recommendation for Course Section Designation: Community-Engaged Learning

DISCUSSED:

at SENATE COMMITTEE ON ACADEMIC STANDARDS April 23, 2025

at FULL SENATE September 16, 2025

REVISED based on Senate feedback September 22, 2025

I. Background and Purpose

This policy establishes the criteria and procedures for designating a course section as a *Community-Engaged Learning (CEL)* course. The designation is intended to recognize and promote academic courses that integrate meaningful community engagement with instruction and reflection to enrich student learning, foster civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.

RESEARCH BASE: Community Engaged Learning (CEL) has emerged as a significant educational model that integrates academic instruction with active participation in community organizations. Recognized as a high-impact practice (HIP), CEL has been shown to greatly enhance student learning outcomes (Kuh, 2008). Research also indicates that CEL is particularly beneficial for students from historically underserved backgrounds (Finley & McNair, 2013). A core aim of higher education is to support student success, and community engagement plays a vital role in achieving that goal (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). CEL is often discussed alongside other HIPs such as Service Learning (SL), Civic Engagement, Community-Based Learning, and Community Service Learning—all of which emphasize the application of academic concepts in real-world community contexts. CEL has since expanded upon SL by fostering intentional partnerships between faculty, students and community members, emphasizing critical reflection as a key part of experiential learning. Courses that use CEL align academic goals with the needs identified by community partners, prioritizing mutual learning and collaborative problem-solving (Wurr, 2018; Nguyen & Condry, 2023). Reflective practices are central to CEL, allowing students to engage deeply with questions of knowledge, skills, values, and broader social issues relevant to their community involvement (Welch & Plaxton-Moore, 2022). A recent meta-analysis on CEL's impact on student learning outcomes shows a statistically significant impact on "CEL as an impactful pedagogy that contributes to academic success, personal growth, and civic engagement" (Guanlao et al., 2025).

CURRENT: Currently, Kean University does not have a formal designation for Community-Engaged Learning (CEL) courses although many faculty have informally engaged in CEL at a course section level, with a variety of community partners over many years. However, without a clear structure, tracking, assessing, and supporting faculty and student participation in community-engaged activities across the curriculum is difficult. Additionally, the absence of consistent designation and criteria can lead to confusion for faculty seeking to integrate community engagement into their courses, burden of expectations for community partners and for students interested in identifying and enrolling in such experiences.

PROPOSED: A formal Community Engaged Learning (CEL) course designation is proposed. This designation will recognize and elevate courses that intentionally integrate community-based learning experiences that align with Kean’s mission as an anchor institution.

II. Rationale for Designating a Course as a “CEL Section” at Kean

Aligns with Institutional Mission and Core Values

Kean emphasizes public impact, social mobility, inclusivity, and community engagement in its mission and core values. CEL supports the preparation of engaged citizens, civic responsibility, and contributes to the public good.

Strengthens Student Learning and Success

CEL courses give students chances to apply academic content in real-world settings, which can deepen learning, foster critical thinking, and build transferable skills (communication, collaboration, problem-solving). These courses have been shown to increase student engagement, satisfaction, retention, and sense of belonging.

Benefit to Underserved Students

CEL has been shown in the literature to especially help students from underserved or marginalized backgrounds. Offering CEL courses can contribute to equity by giving them rigorous, applied, high-impact educational experiences.

Mutually Beneficial Community Partnerships

CEL courses can create partnerships with local organizations or agencies that work toward community-identified needs. This provides students with meaningful work and simultaneously benefits the community.

Curricular Clarity and Student Choice

Official designation helps students see which courses have a community-engaged component, so they can intentionally choose those if they want that kind of learning. It allows for clarity in the catalog or registration system — marking which courses are CEL helps in advising and student planning.

Faculty Recognition and Support

Designated courses can be visible in institutional reports, promotion or evaluation dossiers, and help faculty obtain support (funding, resources, training) to implement the CEL components well. It can also make it easier for course designers to get recognition for the extra work that CEL often involves (building and maintaining community partnerships, designing reflective assignments, etc.).

Quality Assurance & Rigor

Designation implies that certain standards are met: alignment of community work with course outcomes, structured reflection, assessment of community engagement, reciprocity with community partners, sustained commitment rather than one-off volunteer activities. Having a formal designation means there can be oversight or peer review to ensure those standards are upheld (syllabus review, ongoing assessment).

Tracking, Assessment, and Institutional Reporting

Official designation makes it easier for the university to track how many CEL courses are offered, how many students are involved, and what the outcomes are. That helps in reporting (accreditation, grants, external rankings) and in improving the program over time. It also helps to analyze impact: academic, civic, personal growth of students; community impacts; areas for improvement.

Enhances Campus Reputation and Workforce Readiness

The CEL course designation supports the university's goal of achieving Carnegie Classification for Community Engagement and demonstrates Kean's commitment to engaged, experiential education, helping attract students who value service, civic engagement, and experiential learning. CEL experiences develop the career competencies set forth by NACE.

Creates Pathway for Travel and Logistical Support

Sometimes designated CEL courses may be eligible for extra funding, logistical support or institutional incentives. It may allow for resource allocation for community partner honors, materials, travel, or reflection activities.

III. Core Criteria for CEL Course Designation at Kean

Community-Engaged Learning is a pedagogical approach that combines academic instruction with community-based experiences. It involves students working collaboratively with community organizations to address real-world challenges while reflecting on the experience in the context of course learning objectives.

What CEL courses are **not**:

- Not a one-time volunteer experience or service-learning event
- Not a field trip or guest speaker visit without sustained engagement
- Not a purely theoretical or classroom-based exploration of community issues
- Not a course where students only observe or study an organization
- Not a project that only benefits students or only benefits partners

What CEL courses **are**:

- An integrated component of a course that ensures mutual benefit and reciprocity for both students and external organizations
- A structured opportunity to contribute to the work of a community partner

A course must meet **all** the following criteria to receive the CEL designation:

1. Community Partnership

The course includes sustained collaboration with one or more community partners (e.g., nonprofit organizations, schools, government agencies, businesses) based on mutual benefit. The organization benefits from student engagement, and students gain real-world experience.

2. Integration with Academic Content

The community-engaged component is integral to the academic goals and student learning outcomes of the course. It is not optional or an add-on activity.

3. Student Engagement

Students participate in at least **10 hours** of direct or indirect community-engaged activity during the course.

4. Critical Reflection

The course includes structured opportunities for students to reflect critically on their experiences, connecting their community engagement with course content, broader social issues, and personal and civic development.

5. Assessment

Community-engaged learning activities are evaluated as part of the course grade, and assessment aligns with the course's learning outcomes.

6. Reciprocity and Ethics

Community partnership is characterized by mutual respect, shared goals, and ethical engagement, with attention to community-identified needs.

IV. Application and Approval Process

1. **Proposal Submission.** Instructors seeking the CEL designation for a particular course section must submit a *CEL Course Section Designation Application* to the home department for curriculum approval. The application must include:
 - a. Course Outline
 - b. Detailed course syllabus
 - c. Description of the community-engaged component
 - d. Evidence of community partnership
 - e. Assessment and reflection methods
2. **Preparation, Review, and Approval.** The Department Curriculum Committee will support instructors in developing strong proposals before submission, review applications, and recommend approval or revisions. CEL applicants are encouraged to consult with the Center for Community Engaged Learning and Scholarship (CCELS) before submitting.
3. **Renewal and Reevaluation.** CEL course designations are valid for five years, after which the course must be reevaluated for continued designation.

V. Recognition and Support

Course sections approved for CEL designation will:

- Be tagged in the university's course catalog and registration system
- Be eligible for institutional support and faculty development opportunities
- Receive recognition in annual reappointment packages
- Count toward institutional goals for civic and community engagement
- Be eligible for teaching awards
- Be supported through the Center for Community Engaged Learning and Scholarship (CCELS).

VI. Policy Review

This policy will be reviewed every **five years** by the University Senate in collaboration with the Center for Community Engagement and Scholarship to ensure alignment with institutional priorities and evolving best practices in community-engaged pedagogy.