Since equipping students for service to God and others is either an implicit or explicit element of the mission statement of every Christ-centered college and university, academic officers at such institutions should give serious consideration to making service-learning one of their regular pedagogical strategies. This paper presents the philosophical, pedagogical and theological framework upon which a Christian higher education institution could build a shared rationale for a service-learning program. The author discusses a case study of a Christian liberal arts college that is taking steps to develop a campus-wide commitment to service-learning, including the implementation of a pilot program in order to better accomplish their service-oriented mission.

The work provides a number of research-based guidelines to assist faculty members who want to learn how to embed a service-learning component into one of their academic courses. These guidelines are organized by use of a mnemonic device developed by Saint Mary’s College of California to outline five basic components involved in such a process. The letters,
O.P.E.R.A., represent outcomes, partnerships, engagement, reflection, and assessment. The author describes each element in some detail, including examples of practice at a number of colleges and universities, and lists a summary of key points for each one.

Readers will also find a discussion of an eight-step process, based on a review of best practices, by which the case study institution sought to develop an effective service-learning program within its curriculum. First, the researcher helped lead the college community in a discussion of the alignment of service-learning with its mission in order to develop a shared vision for the program. The provost appointed a service-learning advisory team, which worked with the faculty to develop an institutional definition of service-learning, select instructors to participate in a pilot program, determine the most appropriate means by which to train faculty members in service-learning practice, and assist the initial instructors in the process of developing community partnerships.

The writer discusses the implementation of the pilot program in three courses in a single semester and presents the results of the various means of assessment employed at the course and program level. A factor analysis of student survey items provides the basis for a discussion of statistical analyses comparing responses across the three courses and across demographic categories. Although the pilot program did not achieve the specific criteria for success established by the advisory team for the student, faculty, and community partner groups, most participants reported positive impact in many outcome areas. The results confirm the importance of following best practice guidelines in assuring a high quality experience for all participants.

The work concludes with an examination of a number of issues that service-learning practitioners suggest a campus community must consider if it desires to institutionalize service-learning and collaboratively integrate it into both the curriculum and co-curriculum. The author
also provides recommendations based on the results of the case study institution’s pilot program to improve its practice of service-learning as it prepares to expand the use of this strategy into additional courses—recommendations that could also help other colleges strengthen the implementation of their first pilot programs. Finally, the writer presents topics for further research that could contribute to a program’s continuous quality improvement and to the larger body of scholarship on service-learning.