

NTU Singapore Introduces Innovative Course Series Integrating Community Service with Academic Learning for Undergraduates

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In a transformative step set to redefine undergraduate education, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore is introducing an innovative course series titled *Care, Serve, Learn*. Scheduled to commence in the upcoming academic year, this new series is integrated within the university's mandatory Interdisciplinary Collaborative Core curriculum. The initiative seeks to fuse academic learning with meaningful community engagement, enabling students to earn academic credits while actively contributing to society's welfare. This pioneering educational model is designed not merely as a service opportunity but as an immersive, reflective learning experience that cultivates vital social-emotional competencies alongside intellectual growth.

The *Care, Serve, Learn* program is conceived as a structured and rigorous academic platform, fostering enhanced social awareness among students through direct interaction with real-world community challenges. By embedding community service in an academic framework, NTU aims to equip students with a repertoire of transferable skills, including active listening, advocacy, and project management—skills critical for leadership and civic participation. This approach echoes a growing global recognition that education must transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries and engage students in complex societal dynamics to prepare them for multifaceted roles in the private, public, and non-profit sectors.

Professor Gan Chee Lip, Associate Provost of Undergraduate Education at NTU, emphasizes the program's holistic vision. He articulates that academic excellence, while essential, must be complemented by character-building and social-emotional learning experiences. Through the course series, NTU endeavors not only to nurture intellectual capacity but also to inspire a lifelong dedication to community service, deepening students' understanding of pressing social issues and empowering them to enact tangible, meaningful change. This philosophy underpinning *Care, Serve, Learn* aligns with contemporary educational theories that advocate for experiential learning paradigms where cognition and affect converge.

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The rollout of *Care, Serve, Learn* will be phased, beginning with the cohort matriculating in August of the new academic year. These students will embark on the program in their second year, thereby ensuring foundational academic acclimatization before engaging intensively in community-oriented projects. This progressive integration reflects an understanding of developmental readiness, acknowledging that immersive civic engagement necessitates certain academic and personal maturities for maximal impact and learning.

At its core, the course series consolidates a spectrum of community engagement activities that NTU undergraduates have historically pursued into a cohesive and academically robust curriculum. Initially, students acquire foundational knowledge pertinent to community service and social work disciplines, emphasizing theoretical frameworks and ethical considerations essential for effective service learning. This foundational phase is critical as it prepares students for the subsequent

application of theory into practice, bridging the gap between conceptual understanding and field engagement.

Subsequent to classroom instruction, students collaborate with a diverse array of partner organizations, including non-governmental organizations, charities, and government agencies, spanning various social sectors. These partnerships enable students to contribute to significant community projects identified as high-impact by the collaborators. The organizations provide tailored training sessions elucidating the unique challenges and nuances intrinsic to their operational sectors, thus enriching students' contextual awareness and preparing them for sensitive and effective interventions.

An exemplary initiative under this umbrella is *Uplift@NTU*, operated in collaboration with Singapore's Ministry of Education. This program entrusts students with tutoring and mentoring roles directed at children and youths from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those from single-parent families. By providing academic support within community settings, students engage deeply with systemic socio-educational disparities and develop practical skills in mentorship and pedagogy. Such programs underscore the transformative potential of service learning in cultivating empathy and social responsibility among emerging professionals.

Crucially, the *Care, Serve, Learn* sequence culminates in a collaborative, solution-driven project phase where student teams of six to eight design and implement interventions aimed at enhancing the efficacy and reach of their community service efforts. This phase emphasizes project management, teamwork, and innovation, requiring students to synthesize their experiential insights with strategic planning to achieve measurable community impact. This reflective praxis fosters critical thinking and iterative learning, hallmark traits of advanced professional practice.

The *Care, Serve, Learn* initiative is not an isolated endeavor but rather an accentuation of NTU's long-standing, vibrant culture of volunteerism. This culture has been cultivated over years through a network of student clubs and academic entities that have consistently championed service as an integral component of university life. The integration of such programs into a credited academic course signals a maturation of these efforts, lending them institutional rigor and ensuring sustained engagement by future cohorts.

A poignant illustration of student-driven volunteerism is found in the story of final-year medical student Chua Tze Hean, who founded *A Good Meal*—a volunteer group dedicated to enriching the lives of elderly individuals through social outings and communal meals. Since its inception in early 2024, the initiative has mobilized around 40 volunteers to conduct over 120 outings, underscoring the multiplier effect of coordinated volunteer efforts. Tze Hean reflects that these engagements have profoundly affected his clinical perspective and reinforced his commitment to geriatric and palliative care, highlighting how service learning can inform professional identity formation.

Similarly, another impactful endeavor is led by Deandra Limandibhrata, a bioengineering final-year student who directs a team within NTU's Welfare Services Club. This team works with deaf children and those with hearing-impaired parents, teaching subjects such as English, Science, and Geography, while also facilitating inclusivity through sign language interpretation at social events. Deandra's narrative reveals the deeper cultural competence and empathy that arise from immersive volunteer work, illustrating how experiential learning enriches communication skills far beyond conventional spoken language frameworks.

The integration of community engagement within an academic credit system represents a progressive calibration of higher education's role in society. By positioning service learning as a multidimensional process involving knowledge acquisition, skill development, and social responsibility, NTU sets a precedent that aligns with global trends in education reform. Such frameworks challenge students to become not only consumers of knowledge but active agents of change, prepared to navigate and resolve the complex social challenges defining the 21st century.

Moreover, the *Care, Serve, Learn* program embodies the educational philosophy that learning through service enhances both cognitive and affective domains, creating holistic developmental outcomes. It promotes reflective practices wherein students critically analyze their community interactions, understand structural inequalities, and recognize their positionality within societal systems. This metacognitive dimension is vital in cultivating socially conscious graduates capable of sustained civic participation and ethical leadership.

Looking ahead, the ripple effects of NTU's initiative may inspire broader adoption of credit-bearing community service models across educational institutions globally. The program's structured approach, integrating interdisciplinary knowledge with social impact projects, represents an effective template for embedding sustainability and social justice into higher education curricula. By nurturing future leaders grounded in empathy and practical experience, *Care, Serve, Learn* illustrates a strategic pathway toward more inclusive, responsive, and engaged educational ecosystems.

In sum, Nanyang Technological University's *Care, Serve, Learn* represents a bold reimagining of undergraduate education—one that systematically aligns academic pursuits with community impact. By fostering a culture where service is both a learning modality and a social imperative, NTU advances the frontiers of experiential education, producing graduates equipped not only with intellectual acumen but also with the compassion and agency necessary to forge positive societal transformation.

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