



SERVICE LEARNING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

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THE VISIONARY STUDENT PANEL: HOW MERCER UNIVERSITY ADVANCES STUDENT INNOVATION AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

ABSTRACT:

Mercer University's Visionary Student Panel (VSP) empowers undergraduates to transform their community engagement ideas into actionable projects through mentorship, reflection, and sustained project development. This session explores the three phases of the nationally recognized VSP program: the Public Pitch, Mini-Grant, and Project Implementation, and will highlight student-led initiatives that connect innovation with community need. Participants will examine the role of mentorship in project development and leave with adaptable strategies for supporting changemakers on their campuses.

THEMATIC FOCUS:

Blockage and Clearance: Physical, infrastructural, financial, or organizational barriers or portals to community engagement.

Floods and Droughts: Too much of one thing, not enough of another. How complimentary partnership can fill the gaps.

Gauging the Waters: Using research and assessment to course correct or gain deeper insight.

BIO:

Lauren Shinholster is the Associate Director of Engaged Learning at Mercer University. Since joining Mercer in 2017, Lauren has worked to connect academics and student life through civic engagement and student mentorship. As a former community educator for the Safe Routes to School program at Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital, Lauren brings a public health and equity perspective to fostering collaborations that strengthen both student learning and community well-being. Lauren was the recipient of the Gulf-South Summit's 2025 Award for Outstanding Practitioner Contributions to Service-Learning in Higher Education.