

Volunteering in College



Dear High School Senior:

It is exciting for me to get the chance to write about doing community service in college because unquestionably the most valuable experience of my four years in college was the volunteer work I participated in. Coming from a sleepy suburb, I felt completely overwhelmed my first week in college by all of the elements of living in a city, including the homeless men and women I suddenly found myself walking past on the way to class, the dining hall, and the gym. I felt intimidated but also bothered that here I was living in a dorm, eating food, attending classes, and reading books all paid for by my parents while there were clearly so many men and women who had so much less. Towards the end of freshman week, I sought out the community service organization for the university and signed on as a weekly volunteer at a nearby homeless shelter. I stuck to that shift for the next four years, and it is no exaggeration to say that I learned more during that weekly volunteer shift than in any of my academic courses. Homeless men and women thanked me for volunteering, but also told me about their lives—where they grew up, how they became homeless, and their fears about the future. This real life experience started me reading about the causes of homelessness and then searching out college courses that could help me learn about possible solutions. Now, four years out of college, I teach a Social Justice course for high school seniors in which my students volunteer weekly at a nearby homeless shelter and in class study the causes, effects, and possible solutions to this issue. Though I never would have guessed it at the time, my volunteer work in college focused my academic study and then pushed me to become a Social Justice educator. I think that many of my current students will continue working with the homeless in college and may even go on to become social workers, direct homeless shelters, or even enter politics in order to address the root causes of homelessness.

But my students are certainly not alone in their commitment to volunteerism. Approximately 85% of all public high schools now offer their students the opportunity to perform community service, and it is estimated that fifteen million teenagers participate in some form of community service each year. If you are one of those fifteen million teenagers, then it is likely you have developed some opinions of your own on the value of your experiences. But why do community service in college? Maria Dominguez, the Deputy Director of Harvard's Community Service Program and supervisor of more than eighty service projects for college students, sees community service as valuable for college students in terms of both their present and future lives. Dominguez notes that, "Just because you're in college doesn't mean you're on time-out from being an active citizen. Community service is one way to break the invisible wall you may feel between your college campus and the surrounding community." Dominguez adds that, "Through community service, students gain a strong understanding of the richness and complexity of people and communities that policy decisions affect, and this understanding will enable them to make thoughtful decisions when they have power." In these ways, Dominguez sees community service as a way for students to contribute to the community of which they are currently a part, while also preparing for positions of even greater influence and authority.

In short, finding a meaningful community service project can greatly impact the quality of both your college and post-college life. As you begin the process of deciding which colleges to apply to, utilize each school's web site to learn more about the community service opportunities available there. In interviews and information sessions with admissions officers, ask about the specific types of community service opportunities available to students and whether the college offers specific courses to accompany these service projects. More and more colleges are beginning to offer classes that directly correspond to volunteer opportunities on campus. Accompanying your community service with academic learning is a powerful combination to truly understand the underlying causes, effects, and solutions of a particular social issue. So take some time out during college to volunteer! Community service represents an incredible opportunity to become an active participant in your surrounding community while simultaneously providing you with the knowledge and experience to effect change wherever you wish your education to take you.