



Community Service: Why, Where and How Much Should You Do?

A much-heralded and widely endorsed report produced by the Harvard Graduate School of Education a few months ago condemned the current college admissions process for engendering in our high school students an unhealthy preoccupation with racking up long lists of achievements. Both the students themselves and our society as a whole, the report argued, would be better served if our young people were encouraged to value contributions to the common good as much as they value personal achievement.

Many admissions officers seemed receptive to the recommendation, but what if anything will actually change remains to be seen. One reason is that admissions officers have always valued community service and have always cared about the quality of students' activities, not just the number of hours invested in them.

So how important is it for students to do community service, what kind and how much do colleges really want? These are all questions I'm frequently asked, and my answer to all of them is, "It depends."

Let me explain. First and foremost, admissions officers evaluate every applicant's activities in context. That's why they want to know how the students are spending their time outside of school even when they're just doing things like babysitting or bagging groceries. Applicants whose opportunities to do community service are limited by responsibilities like the care of younger relatives or the need for a job to bring in money will never be disadvantaged in the college admissions process.

What if the student has never done community service because his or her free time is consumed instead by training in a sport like tennis or figure skating? Then the situation is a bit fuzzier. If the individual is talented enough to make it to the Olympics, no one is likely to ask why he or she didn't find time for community service. The same may hold true for the expert musician or the student who lands a role in a Broadway show. Still, in most situations, I encourage students to find a little time to give something of themselves to others, perhaps by sharing their special talent. This could entail, for instance, teaching it to children or performing in an assisted living or medical facility even if only on an occasional basis.

In other words, colleges want students who have demonstrated that they are not driven exclusively by self-interest but are, rather, caring, generous people who are likely to give something of themselves to the other members of their college and future communities. How much time they spend doing so is less important than the spirit in which they do it.

But how is an admissions officer to gauge the quality of an activity, much less the spirit in which the student engaged in it, people ask. I tell them it must come out when the student writes about the activity on applications or speaks about it in interviews. Ironically, the toughest aspect of the application process may actually be its most valuable: it requires students to be reflective, to think about their values and worldview and about how the experiences they've had have affected their thinking.

Admissions officers caution students against using the following cliché in their application essays: "When I embarked on X community service project, I hoped to benefit others, but in the end I gained even more from the experience myself." It's not the concept admissions folk object to, but the generality of the statement. The fact that the sentiment is so common speaks volumes about the value of community service for young people, and it is a major reason colleges like to see it on applicants' records— it often makes students more worldly-wise and provides them with opportunities to develop a mature sense of responsibility, acquire leadership skills, and discover their own strengths. Exactly how it did one or more of the above is what students need to explain in some detail when they write their essays.

It follows then that the more of a learning experience a community service endeavor is, the more valuable it will be in terms of college admissions. Spending fewer hours doing some things may be more advantageous than spending more hours doing others.

Students for whom spare time is at a premium should think about ways to maximize the time they do have, perhaps by working independently or leading a group of friends to identify a problem and come up with a way to address it. For instance, when accompanying his mother to her chemotherapy, one young man realized that some of the women in the waiting room couldn't afford wigs to conceal their hair loss, so he had the idea to collect used wigs from women who no longer needed them, have them cleaned, and donate them to an organization that distributed them. Other teens have initiated the cleanup of public spaces in their community, and still others have organized campaigns to raise awareness and/or funds for a cause they care passionately about. This can be as simple as putting up posters and organizing a bake sale or as complex as organizing a Bowl-a-thon.

What about summer community service programs locally and abroad?

Opportunities exist all over the world for American students whose parents are willing to pay, sometimes a substantial amount, for them to participate in service projects during the summer months. College admissions officers are quick to say

that students who can't afford to participate in such programs will never be viewed less favorably than those from families wealthy enough to send them, and these "pay to play" programs are sneered at in some circles, where people say a student ought help the less fortunate closer to home rather than go someplace in Africa or Central America to do it. The truth is, though, it's not always so easy for teens to find meaningful ways to do that close to home, and the service programs abroad can provide eye-opening, thought-provoking, transformative experiences for affluent American teens who approach them with the right frame of mind.

So the takeaway should be that if you don't have several hours every week to participate in an organized community service program, there is still much you can do. Demonstrate initiative by finding a way to benefit others with whatever time you do have. You might want to check out the websites: www.volunteermatch.org and www.dosomething.org to get ideas.