

Community Service: Helping the Community or Me

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Increasingly, schools are putting a greater emphasis on students doing volunteer work. This has shown itself in the form on mandatory volunteer hours and the high priority colleges place on volunteering when they are scanning through potential applicants. According to a survey of over 3,000 students by the Corporation for National and Community Service, 46 percent of public high schools offered service-learning opportunities for their students in 1999, while 83 percent of high schools organized community service opportunities. However, in 1984, there was only nine percent for service-learning opportunities and 27 percent for community service opportunities throughout public schools (Carroll 3). While volunteer work can be seem as admirable and be beneficial in several different ways, there are still people who think that this new trend is unnecessary and even detrimental for today's young adults. Still, many groups on campuses and in high schools are forming with the sole purpose of assisting young people find volunteering opportunities. An example of this growing trend is the formation of CARE (Community Action and Response Experience), a local student community service organization on the campus of Michigan State University (MSU). Even in this organization, where nearly each of the members volunteered in high school, have opposing opinions about the role that it plays in student's life and its necessity. As this trend grows, it is important to dissect the two

views, in order to ensure that students are getting an adequate and beneficial education in the mainstream school system.

It only takes as much as asking a high school senior about what they need to ensure placement in a college for the upcoming fall semester, in order to cross the topic of community service. While most people accept that a good GPA and a high ACT score is important, there is growing questioning about the necessity and the positive reputation that has been placed on volunteering in the admissions office. Still, high school counselors are putting a high emphasis on students to serve their communities. Some have even went as far as making community service mandatory because of the positive outcomes that they expect from service. All it takes is a glance at any list of tips when applying to colleges and universities, and it is almost guaranteed that it will mention having community service on your application, the extracurricular activity that adds the most weight to an application (Unger 48). This is the very thing that many people are fighting against.

On the surface, community service can seem like a respectable activity. However, some people find that making high school students do community service leads to more harm than benefits. The issue that many of the people that take this position have is that they believe that mandatory volunteerism leads to a culture of hypocrisy. This is because most high school seniors volunteer in order to impress the college, making community service into a self-serving act (Ezarik 2). The National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 – a sample of 12th grade seniors over a set period of time – found that collectively, young adults were less active in the community after high school. Forty- four percent of young adults who volunteered in high school, but only thirty-three percent volunteered eight years later – a 25 percent decline (Planty 2). This same study also found that there was no difference in the likelihood of volunteering

eight years after graduation between students who solely performed mandatory community service and those who did none at all. Both of these groups were less likely to volunteer eight years after high school (27%) than the students who served the community voluntarily or were strongly encouraged to volunteer (43%) (Planty 2). When colleges and universities look at volunteering, they see it as a sign of selflessness, but some people believe that students are simply servicing the community as a way to get into college and meet requirements (Ezarik 2). When asked what she thought about mandatory volunteering, the president of CARE stated, “If they do it just to get credit, they won’t get anything out of it (Student).” Still, despite these facts, high schools are continuing to stress community service because of the benefits that they believe outweigh these numbers.

When students take advantage of their community service experiences, the benefits can be numerous and become life altering. According to Ezarik, a freelance writer from Connecticut, one of the many things that can result from volunteering is the development of new skills (Ezarik 1). Many high school students do not find a job until they have graduated, with no work experience. Volunteering helps to develop these skills so that they can market themselves better in the job market. Some of these skills include teamwork, leadership, organization skills, and communication skills. Volunteering can also help students determine career goals and discover new interests that they may have (Ezarik 2). Community service also exposes students to issues that they may have not have been aware of before their volunteering experience. Most importantly, it gives them the opportunity to help others lead enjoyable lives (Ezarik 2). Then they can see the fruit of their labor, which has the potential to lead students to discovering life long passions for helping people in their community. One study found that forty-two percent of young adults who volunteered in high school volunteered again eight years later; whereas, only

26 percent of those students volunteered that year that did not volunteer in high school (Planty 3). CARE is a great example of this statistic. Most of their members volunteered in high school. Both the president and vice president of CARE validate this by describing their own experience with volunteering in high school with the National Honors Society and the skills that they learned from it. Volunteer service is the gateway to helping students learn essential lessons concerning responsibility to others, lessons that can difficult or impossible to convey in the classroom (MacKay 2).

Schools should continue to advertise and place a high priority on community service, because, regardless of the reasons students volunteer, the truth remains that they are the main group that are volunteering in today's society. According to the survey, an estimated 15.5 million teenagers participated in volunteer activities through a formal organization during 2004, contributing more than 1.3 billion hours of service. That translates into a rate of 55 percent—more than one and a half times the adult rate of 29 percent (Carroll 3). With a society that is relying more on the government, more people are deciding that they do not need to be active in the community. If students were to stop volunteering, a great number of much needed community workers would cease to exist. Although many students do not continue volunteering after high school when they only do mandatory community service, this does not mean that they did not learn valuable skills from their experiences.

It is true that some students will simply volunteer because they are required to. However, I do not believe this is a valid reason to stop students from being introduced to this type of service. Many people are caught on the fact that some students do not volunteer in order to help the community and, as a result, they forget about how it could potentially improve the students' skills. While there are stories that show that students take their volunteering experiences and

expound on them, I have yet to find one that shows how it has made a student worse. People opposed may state that community service will then become just another requirement like chemistry or math. However, while it can be difficult to find daily applications for the material taught in chemistry and gym, it is almost impossible not to be able to see it when the student is actively engaging in it, keeping it from becoming just another course. Regardless if it is made mandatory or not, there will be students who will try to deceive the admission officers when presenting themselves in the application process, leading to the real issue – colleges continuing to place such a high priority on volunteering experiences and determine students' admission based on their findings. In other words, volunteering in high school and college admissions are not necessarily interrelated. When viewed alone, the benefits are much greater than the cons of mandatory high school volunteering. One of the main benefits is that this service often produces future community service leaders.

Despite the students who only volunteer because it is required, there are many others that volunteer and gain priceless knowledge from their experiences. Many of these students go on to perform further services for the community beyond high school. A growing number of students and student organizations are reaching out to help others (Mackay 2). By seeing the effectiveness of their own community service, students can then go on to lead their own community building organizations and become active citizens. CARE illustrates this growing trend their development, and the work that they do throughout the East Lansing community.

Many of CARE's members have joined this group knowing that there will be no reward other than the satisfactory of knowing that they were able to help another person. In order to make sure that they have a group that is focused on community service and not self-service, it is important that CARE stresses its mission and how selflessness can be such a gain for another

person. One way to accomplish this is by expounding on what they have noticed to be a major need for their local community. Although, high school is a place where students should be introduced to volunteering, it is best that volunteers are selfless. A selfless attitude will show through their work in the form of dedication. This produces more effective nonprofit agencies, which in turn, produces a thriving community.

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