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# The Benefits of Volunteerism, if the Service Is Real

By ALINA TUGEND

WHEN I was growing up, I don't remember hearing much about community service. My parents were certainly civic-minded, but they were a lot more concerned about the work I did around the house. Like cleaning bathrooms and weeding the lawn.

Nowadays, some sort of volunteerism is a given in many places. Through schools, churches, synagogues, Girl and [Boy Scouts](#) and countless other organizations, children and teenagers are expected to do something, whether it be fund-raising for charities, working at soup kitchens or assisting at animal shelters.

In the most positive light, such service teaches children and teenagers to look beyond themselves and understand the role they can play in their community and country. In the most negative light, it is one more activity to tick off en route to college.

"There is some cynicism among people that some portion of community service is prompted by students interested more in résumé-building," said Richard G. Niemi, professor of political science at the [University of Rochester](#).

But does it really matter why it's done? Isn't it enough to volunteer, no matter the motive?

Well, yes and no. Studies have shown that generally, community service for whatever reason is a good thing. But how it's done and whether it also involves service learning — that is, lessons that discuss homelessness, say, or hunger in a larger context — make a difference.

Joseph E. Kahne, a professor of education at Mills College, and his colleagues just completed a survey of more than 500 teenagers in the 11th and 12th grades from a diverse set of 19 high schools in California. The researchers followed the students for up to three years after graduation.

The students who were engaged in some sort of community service in high school — whether

mandatory or voluntary — were more likely to volunteer or be involved in some civic activity. Most, but not all, of the volunteer work had classroom learning attached to it.

Participants get much more out of the work they do, Professor Niemi said, if there is a forum to talk about and question the larger issues involved.

Otherwise, he said, students may believe that all problems are solved through individual efforts and government doesn't have a role. "They'll see that the homeless don't have food and that individuals help, but they won't understand the connection between public policy and the homeless," he said.

Professor Kahne also found this to be true in his research, noting that "most service programs do not examine causes of social problems or possible solutions" and, therefore, play down the need for political engagement.

In looking at what volunteering offers, Professor Kahne distinguishes among three types of citizens: "personally responsible" — that is they help people they know and donate blood; participatory citizens, who are active in community projects; and justice-oriented citizens, who examine causes and possible solutions for society's ills.

"We believe that all three dimensions of citizenship are important, but found that most programs do not address all three and generally pay least attention to the last," Professor Kahne said.

In fact, if teenagers — and adults for that matter — are thrust in a volunteer situation they don't understand or feel that they are simply being assigned made-up work, it can actually have a detrimental effect.

James E. Youniss, a research professor of psychology at the Catholic University of America, said an unpublished study of New York students discovered that they were actually turned off to community service when they were told they were going to help people and ended up doing menial jobs that seemed unrelated.

Of course, volunteering may involve mundane or repetitive work, but those participating need to understand the connection between their work and the overall issue, Professor Youniss said.

"It's not that service is bad, but that programs can be bad," he said.

Because of time constraints and concerns about overt political messages, it can be difficult to create programs that offer the insights along with community service, Professor Youniss added.

But that doesn't mean schools and organizations — not to mention parents — should stop encouraging or even requiring children to volunteer. Professor Youniss studied students in one Massachusetts high school that was about to introduce mandatory community service.

He looked at a sample group of teenagers, including those who did no volunteering, those who did so on their own and those required to complete a certain number of hours by their senior year.

The students were asked at the beginning and end of their high school career if they were likely to vote when they became eligible and do some sort of community service. Those who weren't volunteering, or weren't required to, usually said they were unlikely to vote or do community service in the future. Those who volunteered without being required generally said they were likely to vote and would volunteer. But the big switch to being much more inclined to volunteer and vote was apparent among those students who had been assigned service in the community, Professor Youniss said.

"I remember one kid who was a fullback, who waited until his senior year to volunteer," he said. "Then he filled the 40-hour requirement by every Saturday taking a blind man to a gym and walking him through his physical activity." That changed the boy's outlook on his role in the community and helping others, Professor Youniss said.

What about the many programs that offer young people a way to travel and do good deeds, by building schools in Costa Rica or digging wells in Thailand?

That's fine if you want to travel and can afford it. But most people I talked to seemed to feel that volunteering in your own community over a sustained period of time offers a more worthwhile experience. And if you're using travel volunteerism to burnish your college application, beware. It may backfire.

"We're not idiots," said Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. "We know the price of an air-conditioned hotel and a plane. It's an act of affluent tourism masquerading as community service."

A 2008 survey of admissions officers from the top 50 colleges and universities by the organization [DoSomething.org](http://www.do-something.org), found that admissions officers consistently put a higher value on continuous volunteering over several years at a local place than a short-term stint overseas.

Mark Segal, director of Westcoast Connection/360° Student Travel, said he understood why some people might be cynical about spending a fair amount of money to volunteer abroad. But, he said, the teenagers who went on the type of community service programs that his company offered typically did volunteer work at home as well.

Spending two weeks or a month overseas immersed in a project “is a life-changing experience,” Mr. Segal said. “You’re opening the doors for relationships and learning in a way that’s very different than being a traveler.”

In the survey, the admissions officers said they were confident they could discern when a student was being disingenuous about her commitment to community service. One noted that “insincerity seems likely when there is a laundry list of activities with minimal commitment.”

Those surveyed also said they understood some students had to work and didn’t have time for volunteering. My sons do have the luxury of being able to help in the community, and I’m glad to say they seem to want to. It’s the other service I spoke about — the bed-making and trash-emptying — that they, for some reason, seem far less eager to do.

*E-mail: [shortcuts@nytimes.com](mailto:shortcuts@nytimes.com)*