

Getting the Most Out of Your Volunteer Experience

A Manual for High School Students

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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter "a".

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Getting the Most Out of Your Volunteer Experience: A Manual for High School Students

Introduction

Do you have to spend a certain amount of time volunteering or doing community service before you can graduate high school? If so, you're not alone. More and more schools are making community service a requirement for graduation.

What are some of the volunteer activities that you can consider doing to earn your community service credit? How can you make sure you have a good volunteer experience? And what will you get out of volunteering, besides your high school diploma?

We interviewed 100 second-year university students who graduated from Ontario high schools in 2003 and had completed their community service requirement. They provided useful information about how they approached their community service and how they found their volunteer placements. This booklet is based on their experience. It explains how you can benefit from volunteering to help others and how you can get the most out of your volunteer experience.

Volunteering: What's In It For You?

Volunteering is fun

Most of the students we talked to had a lot of fun volunteering. They enjoyed the people they worked with, had a chance to do things they liked, and got a sense of satisfaction from their activities:

"...All the kids were pretty funny there, young kids mostly grades 3 to 6, and when you are around, they treat you like you are a celebrity or something... They all know your name. It was just a lot of fun."

[Coached floor hockey]

Volunteering helps you connect with people

Volunteering can provide you with an opportunity to connect with people in a way that you may not have done before. It also gives you a chance to work with people of all ages and from a wide variety of backgrounds. Students who volunteer often form strong relationships with the people they meet and work with through their placements:

"I like the fact that the kids couldn't wait for you to come back. Just that two or three hours a week being there meant the world to them... It just was a huge thing to them. They cried when I left."

[Volunteered at a disabled children's centre]

Volunteering makes you feel appreciated

When you volunteer, people know that you are giving your time without getting any payment in return, and they appreciate that. Many of the young people we interviewed said that the people they worked with appreciated them and that they showed their appreciation:

“They respected us a lot and they made us feel good about volunteering. They didn’t just expect us to work really hard and then get anything for it, I mean, they treated us really well.”

[Volunteered for Habitat for Humanity]

Volunteering makes a difference

One of the most powerful things that people get from volunteering is the knowledge that they have made a difference in someone’s life. Many of the students we interviewed talked about this and were deeply affected by what the positive feeling this gave them:

“...It was really rewarding to see that just a small amount of time from me made such a big difference for other people.”

[Volunteered in a nursing home]

Volunteering lets you learn new skills

You can learn a great deal by volunteering. The young people we interviewed said they learned new skills, such as communications skills, leadership skills, and job-related skills (e.g., customer relations skills):

“I learned a lot from it and it taught me to work with younger age people as well, and I got to gain some leadership skills and also some organizational skills because I had to develop some activities and plan out my hours that I was working.”

[Organized a Sunday school for children at church]

Volunteering makes you aware

As a result of volunteering, you will gain a new sense of appreciation for what you have and a better understanding of what life is like for people who may not have very much:

“...The homeless shelter was really positive in the fact that it really makes you step back and realize what you have and what all these people don’t have.”

[Volunteered at a homeless shelter in downtown Toronto]

Volunteering allows you to explore different careers

Volunteering is an excellent way to explore job and career possibilities. By volunteering for an organization that works in a specific area of interest, you can get a sense of whether you are interested in that area. Several of the students we interviewed said that their community service activities helped them to decide what kind of career they wanted (or didn't want) to pursue:

"...What I want to get into is working with children, so it was a good experience getting to interact with the kids."

[Volunteered in an after-school program for elementary school children]

"I wanted to be a doctor at one point only to realize that was not the vocation for me."

[Volunteered at a hospital]

Volunteering helps you gain job-related skills that can lead to a part-time or summer job

By volunteering, you can gain qualifications and experience and make contacts that can lead directly to training programs or to part-time or summer jobs:

"...it was definitely positive because now I became a coach and I got paid for doing it."

[Coached skating]

"...With my school here at Laurier, I need volunteer hours for my résumé to apply for co-op and if I hadn't done any of that in high school, it would probably have been more difficult for me to get into the co-op program."

[Volunteered at a food and clothing bank]

Getting the Most Out of Your Volunteer Experience

1. Do something you enjoy.

Students who had the most positive experiences chose volunteer activities that allowed them to do things that they enjoyed. Don't just pick the first thing that comes to mind. Think about the kinds of things you'd like to do. Do you like sports? Music? Art? Cooking? Building things? Working with animals? Being outside? If you like sports, you could think about volunteering as a coach. If you like music, why not volunteer to entertain children or seniors? If you like to build things, try Habitat for Humanity.

"I figured that since we had to do volunteer work, I might as well do something that I liked, so sports."

[Coached floor hockey]

Also, give some thought to what kind of people you'd like to work with, for example, children, seniors, the less fortunate, etc.

"It was really good to work with kids that age, in a variety of different activities. It kind of helped me realize that's what I enjoy doing. I like working with kids a lot."

[Volunteered with children at a day camp]

2. Think about what you'd like to get out of volunteering.

Would you like to explore a career? Get some experience working with children? Discover more about your community? Learn something new? The appropriate volunteer placement can help you accomplish these goals.

"I liked working with the kids. Actually, I want to be a teacher now because of it, so it really helped me figure out what I wanted to do."

[Helped with drama productions in an elementary school]

At High School

- Participated on committees such as the yearbook committee, athletic council, prom committee, or student council.
- Organized fundraisers at school (e.g., fashion shows).
- Volunteered as peer mediators and helped to settle arguments and disputes among fellow students.
- Coached and managed sports teams.
- Volunteered as linesmen, referees, or scorekeepers at school sporting events.
- Tutored other students.
- Gave tours of the school.

3. Explore the possibilities.

There are many, many volunteer possibilities.

You can volunteer through your high school; with elementary schools, churches, hospitals, retirement homes, sports teams, and other organizations in your community; or with charitable organizations such as food banks, soup kitchens, and homeless shelters.

Here are some of the volunteer activities that students have done to complete their community service requirement:

At Elementary School

- Helped out in the library.
- Read books to children.
- Helped coach sports teams.
- Helped teachers with photocopying, laminating, and marking assignments.
- Helped children with assignments, grammar exercises, and proofreading.
- Helped out in the school office.
- Helped prepare breakfasts and snacks for nutrition programs.

At or Through a Place of Worship

- Taught Sunday school.
- Planned children's activities.
- Volunteered with youth groups.
- Renovated rooms and buildings.
- Acted as a youth representative for a church.
- Served as an usher for religious services.
- Volunteered at church camps and bible schools.
- Helped organize and staff events such as festivals and Christmas parties.

At Retirement Homes

- Helped serve drinks, snacks, and meals to residents.
- Entertained and spent time talking with residents.
- Helped organize and staff events such as Canada Day and activity days.
- Helped decorate and prepare for special events.

Sports Clubs

- Coached sports teams.
- Led training programs.
- Set up equipment.
- Delivered children to practices and games.
- Accompanied teams on trips.
- Kept score at games, refereed, and judged competitions.

With Children

- Volunteered as a counsellor at a day camp or an overnight camp.
- Volunteered with a youth group.
- Served as a Big Brother or Big Sister.
- Acted as a Cub or Girl Guide leader.
- Taught swimming lessons.
- Volunteered at a day care.
- Volunteered at a horseback-riding program for developmentally challenged children.

In the Community

- Volunteered with organizations such as the Epilepsy Foundation, Canadian Cancer Society, or Heart and Stroke Foundation.
- Volunteered at YMCA or YWCA
- Painted, set up equipment, and helped at building sites for Habitat for Humanity.
- Helped out at community events such as fairs, picnics, and parades.
- Volunteered at museums, science centres, and public libraries.
- Served food, entertained, talked to patients, and organized materials at a local hospital.
- Walked dogs, cleaned cages, and fed animals at the Humane Society, Animal Aid, or veterinary clinics.

With Charitable Organizations

- Sorted, boxed, and packaged food at a food bank.
- Prepared and served meals at soup kitchens.
- Talked to people and served meals at a homeless shelter.
- Canvassed for funds.
- Helped organize and staff fundraising events such as golf tournaments, dance-a-thons, walk-a-thons, and yard sales.

4. Use your network to help you get started.

Everyone has a network of friends, family, teachers, clergy, neighbours, and others who can help them find volunteer placements or make contact with community agencies or organizations. Go and talk to the people in your network. Ask them to help you.

Teachers and guidance counsellors may know of possible volunteer positions that are available within the school and in the community. They may also be able to direct you to volunteer opportunities that meet your specific interests.

“Either our teachers would help set us up with phone numbers or call organizations themselves and say they had students interested in maybe helping out there...The teachers helped out a lot if you wanted them to help out.”

You parents know your interests and experiences and may be able suggest volunteer activities that might be of interest to you. If they work for an organization that uses volunteers, they can tell you whom to contact.

“My mother was a nurse so she suggested it, and then I got into contact with a friend of my mother’s who also worked as a nurse, and she set it up.”

Friends usually have similar interests. Finding out what activities your friends are involved in may give you an idea of the type of volunteer position you might like. Friends may also be able to help you contact the organization.

“I just wanted to find something and one of my friends actually volunteered there at the desk and she put my name in there and they called me.”

Use your **community contacts**. Think of the programs and activities you’ve been involved in. Have you ever gone to camp? Sung in a choir? Played on a sports team? The contacts you’ve already made with these programs and organizations can be used to find a good volunteer placement. For example, camps often need plenty of volunteer help. Coaches usually enjoy having students as assistant coaches or even managers. Some students may even get the chance to coach their own team. In some sports, such as figure skating, you may be expected to coach the younger children as you progress into higher levels.

“I started with the league when it was created. My parents’ family friend kind of started the league so I decided to play in it for a year or two and then when I heard there was a younger age, around my brother’s age, in it, I decided to help out. It was also on my volunteer hours, so I figured why not, and it was a good time and I thought the kids enjoyed it.”

Other sources of information include your local volunteer centre, newspapers, telephone directories, and the Internet. At certain times of the year (for example, Christmas or other major holidays or festivals), many organizations advertise for volunteers. You can also find organizations in the yellow pages of your local phone book.

“[I volunteered with] Canadian Cancer Society through an ad I saw in the paper.”

“The yellow pages, I think that’s how we found it [the organization with which I volunteer], through the yellow pages.”

The Internet can also be useful in helping you find information about volunteer possibilities. You can search for specific organizations, companies, hospitals, animal shelters, and sports teams with which you would like to volunteer. Most communities also have a volunteer centre. Volunteer centres usually have Web sites that list a wide range of volunteer possibilities. Here are some Web sites to get you started:

Volunteer Centres in Ontario:

www.volunteer.ca/volcan/eng/content/vol-centres/province_results.php?p=11

Youth Volunteering in The Greater Toronto Area:

www.volunteertoronto.on.ca/yintro.asp

Charity Village Web page on seeking volunteer opportunities:

www.charityvillage.ca/applicant/volunteer.asp

Ontario School Counsellors’ Association, voluntary sector:

www.osca.ca/volsector.htm

Take the initiative. Once you decide what type of volunteer activity you’d like to do, you’ll have to take some initiative. Make some phone calls. Send some e-mails. Go and visit some organizations with which you think you would like to volunteer. This can be a little intimidating at first, but after the first couple of calls or visits, it gets easier, and you will usually find that the organizations you contact will be eager to help you get started.

“We called around to the different food banks in my area and just asked if they needed any help or if I could volunteer and most of them said yes. They all needed a bit of help, a lot of help actually.”

5. Find out what you'll be doing.

When you contact a group, program, or organization to explore the possibility of volunteering, ask what you'll be doing, what the times and hours of involvement will be, and who you'll be working with.

The best kinds of volunteer placements should allow you to do something you enjoy but should also provide you with the opportunity to learn skills and to make a difference in people's lives. Don't be afraid to ask questions.

Ask about the kinds of activities you will be doing,

and think carefully about how comfortable you will be with these activities. For example, some of the students we interviewed had volunteered in situations in which people were very ill or in great distress.

Many people can have difficulty with these kinds of situations, so if you are thinking of volunteering in this kind of setting, you should think carefully about whether this is something that you can deal with.

"There was a lot of sick people, and you know it's not that much fun to be around to work. I didn't really enjoy being around sick people that much."

[Volunteered at a hospital]

Many volunteer opportunities involve working with children. Children can be difficult to manage. You should think about your ability to deal with children who misbehave.

"...Some of the kids, especially in the recreational classes, weren't really serious about being there, so it was kind of like their parents just made them go, so they were just running around and not really paying attention...It could get frustrating if they weren't serious and they didn't want to be there."

Some volunteer activities can be physically difficult, unpleasant, or boring.

"I can't say I really enjoyed the receipt writing for the Canadian Cancer Society because it was kind of boring writing receipts all the time."

"It was cold when I went canvassing, and I don't like when people go door to door around at my house so I don't like doing it to other people."

Ask about the time commitment involved. Many volunteer settings require you to commit to be at a specific place at specific times for a specific number of hours each week. Some of the students we interviewed found this difficult, because there were other things they had to do or wanted to do that conflicted with their volunteering and because the organizations they volunteered with were not flexible about their time requirements.

“It was a lot of time commitment...Their meetings would be during the day...because they were working their 9 to 5 schedule and I was working my school schedule so...we have a meeting at 10:30 in the morning then I have to miss a class or something.”

“The commitment was a lot if I had something else going on on Thursday night or a project due on Friday or something.”

Ask about where you will be volunteering. Are you willing to travel to get to your volunteer placement, or would you prefer to do something close to your home or school? You should remember that as time goes on, you might become less interested in going to volunteer if you have to take a bus or drive a long distance. Also, if you will be relying on your parents or others to drive you to your placement, you should check with them to see if they will be able to get you there regularly.

6. Do the best job you can.

The more you put into your volunteering, the more you'll get out of it. The people who get the most benefit from volunteering are the ones who really commit themselves to their volunteer activities and who go above and beyond what's required of them. It's this kind of commitment that will result in a glowing letter of reference, new skills, and the feeling that you've really made a difference.

Notes

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