

# The Value of Volunteering

Some of the most significant and practical experiences during your college years involve your life outside the classroom. You have many opportunities to grow personally and professionally through volunteering.

## Why Volunteer?

*“Even though I’m doing something small, I’m making a difference.”*

*“The community was appreciative of all of the work, and it was nice to know that they care.”*

*“I helped out the community while having fun and gaining responsibility.”*

*“I feel a sense of accomplishment and pride.”*

*“We learned to work in a team and made new friends.”*

*“I learned to be selfless and help others in need.”*

*Volunteers, Clarion University Service Day*

People are motivated to volunteer for different reasons, but most volunteers have two characteristics in common:

- A willingness to work hard without pay
- A desire to make a difference in society and the world.

When you volunteer, you are providing a service by lending a helping hand to people and organizations. What you may not realize is that volunteering also benefits you as an individual. Some of the personal benefits of volunteering include:

- Make new friends
- Meet others with like values and interests
- Help someone
- Lend support to a cause or issue
- Enrich your education; gain academic credit
- Give back what you have gotten
- Get out of the house; make good use of your leisure time

Some of the career benefits include:

- Explore career options
- Develop skills and gain experience
- Increase self-confidence, poise, and professionalism
- Build a resume
- Make professional contacts

## What Volunteering Should I Do?

There are numerous campus, community, alumni, social, and professional organizations that need volunteers. Ask yourself the following questions to pinpoint an organization or activity that meets your needs:

### What are my interests?

- Are there specific causes, community problems, social activities, or career areas that appeal to you? Determine your preferences; then identify an organization whose mission or purpose match your interests.
- Evaluate how effectively the organization uses its volunteers before you sign on.

### With whom do I want to work?

- Do you want to serve people in need directly (such as facilitating games at a Special Olympics event)? Or would you rather serve behind the scenes (such as creating posters to advertise a Special Olympics event)?
- Do you prefer working alone (such as creating flyers or posters), with one person (such as mentoring or tutoring) or many people (such as leading group activities at a nursing home or serving at a soup kitchen)?
- Do you like working with special populations (such as children, people with disabilities, or the elderly)?

### How much time can I give?

- How many hours per week or month can you commit? How structured or flexible does your volunteer schedule need to be?
- Don’t take on more than you can deliver. Do be responsible; show up on time and follow through with responsibilities. People are counting on you.

### What skills or talents can I contribute?

- Do you want to use the talents and skills you already have? Discuss your strengths with group leaders and ask what opportunities may be available. Don’t expect to start at the top. Attending

one or two meetings won't get you appointed to committee chair. Start out doing little tasks, such as making phone calls or distributing flyers, and soon you will be asked to take on more complex responsibilities.

- Do you want to become better informed or learn new skills? Attend orientation meetings or training classes. Be open to helping in any capacity.

### Skills Developed Through Volunteer Activities

Volunteer activities can have a significant impact on developing the skills required by employers. Here are a few examples:

**Leadership skills.** Every organization needs people who have vision, can create action, and can motivate others through their own commitment and enthusiasm. Community involvement gives you many opportunities to test your leadership abilities, such as planning agendas, managing time and priorities, running meetings, developing goals, leading discussions, making effective decisions, solving problems, and inspiring teamwork.

Your leadership roles provide opportunities to learn how committees work; why it is necessary to have rules, regulations, and procedures; how to get the necessary clearances to implement an event or project; what safety or security steps must be taken; and how to pass knowledge and skills from one individual to another.

**Diversity.** By participating in volunteer activities you can learn to interact with a diversity of people and develop respect for others, from fellow students to alumni to community leaders, and so on. You can begin to recognize your own uniqueness and appreciate the diverse talents, backgrounds, and perspectives of others.

**Social/Interpersonal Skills.** Community projects and functions provide opportunities for you to interact with others and cultivate new friendships while developing important social skills, such as making introductions, participating in small talk, conversing with others, expressing your thoughts, and listening to others. In addition, you can polish professional skills by learning how to dress for different occasions and use basic etiquette.

### Strategic Planning/Goal Setting Skills.

Through involvement in community groups, you can participate in the process of developing group goals (what should be accomplished and why) and mapping out the steps and timeline to achieve them. Planning also includes how to get the necessary resources—such as money, space, equipment, supplies, and people—for a project.

**Organizing Skills.** Activities such as chairing a committee, planning a special event, and launching a special project use organizing skills. These involve developing the tasks to be performed, preparing a timeline, and selecting the right people to handle the responsibilities.

**Teamwork.** Community service helps you to learn about group dynamics and the importance of teamwork and cooperation. Through group work, you have opportunities to partner, collaborate, and compromise to achieve a goal. Teamwork also includes identifying each member's abilities (including your own), determining leading and supporting roles, organizing and delegating tasks, and following up to ensure that responsibilities are done successfully and on time.

**Communication Skills.** All careers require the ability to write and speak clearly. Through community activities you have many opportunities to practice speaking skills (such as presenting before groups, expressing ideas, making suggestions, proposing action, and disagreeing with civility) and writing skills (such as handling correspondence, designing brochures and posters, or writing reports).

### A Final Thought

Sometimes our lifestyles are so busy that it is hard to include one more activity. However, the benefits of volunteering are simply too good to pass up. In addition to improving the lives of others, our own lives are enriched and transformed.

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