Community service: it always means more when it comes from the heart

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It rains very hard outside today. Up the stairs, Alex slowly drags his wet coat as well as his soaked body to his room. He seems to have no more energy. He hangs onto the rail trying to pull himself up. Finally, Alex gets to the door of his dorm room. He has a hard time just trying to open the door. His hands are so shaky that putting the key into the hole becomes a difficult task. In addition, being outside in the rain all day gives Alex a really bad cold. His head is now spinning non-stop and he cannot even see straight. As soon as he gets the door open, Alex walks straight to the bed and lies down. All of that was the result of Alex’s experience with Community Connections.

When he came at the beginning of the year, Alex was given a yellow shirt that had Community Connections written on it. It also had the group that he was in and who his site leader was. When he asked, an orientation advisor replied: “Oh, it’s nothing big. It’s just a community service day required for all entering freshmen.” Alex was very surprised that he was already assigned to a group because he did not remember signing up for anything. He later found out that it is the same case for every other student. They did not have a choice in what they could do for this community service day. They had been assigned where and what they would “volunteer.”

That day finally came. Alex had to wake up at 7:00 on a Saturday morning to go do community service. He met with his group. He was very upset to find out that they would have to work in the rain. Their task was to remove trash from the beach. Even knowing that it would help the environment, Alex did not find that activity appealing at all. He just followed the group and involuntarily picked up the trash in the rain.

Alex’s case is only one of many cases at Roger Williams University in particular and in many other colleges and university in general, where students do not enjoy their service experiences just because they do not have any say about them. Students are usually assigned to an activity without their knowledge. Doesn’t that contradict the meaning of community service? If colleges and universities wish to instill the value of service in students, then students should be allowed to participate in the planning of projects because the nature of community service is voluntary.

Community service itself is a voluntary activity. That already means that it is up to students to choose. It should not be an obligation or an assignment. Let us look at it this way! Being assigned to do community service is like being randomly assigned a major. It sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? Students come to college to pursue a professional degree, to have knowledge about the fields that they want to work in for the rest of their lives. Now, if the school just randomly assigns them a major, students will have to suffer for the rest of their lives with jobs in which they are not interested.

It is the same case for community service. Students will just suffer through the whole experience without learning anything. However, as stated clearly on the “Mission Statement” page of Roger Williams University web site: “the university strives to educate all students to become productive citizens of the social and professional communities in which they will live and build their careers.” The university wants, through community service, to educate its students about the values of service. But forcing them to do what they do not want will not help the university in fulfilling its goal. Therefore, students need to have an opinion on what they want to do as service so that they will enjoy the experience and thus be able to learn from it.

In addition, the voluntary nature of community service can also be confirmed by many documents. The New Students Politics is one of those. It is a journal put together by students from many different colleges and universities at the Wingspread Summit on Student Civic Engagement in Racine, Wisconsin. In this publication, students express their views on community service in institutions of higher learning, based on their observations of service in their own college or university. In the “Analysis” section of the journal, John Saltmarsh and Kerrissa Heffernan of Brown University, analyze their own observations of community service at their institution. Saltmarsh and Heffernan say that because “students make choices about participation… their participation is highly individualized” (5). Once students really have a chance to volunteer, they will
make their choices “based upon personal interests or experience” (Saltmarsh and Heffernan 5). They will choose to volunteer where and in what is meaningful to them. That is what makes this whole experience a “highly individualized” one.

With all that said, students should definitely have input into the process of choosing where and what to do to fulfill their service requirements.

Moreover, if students choose what they like to do for community service, they will actually enjoy the whole experience and therefore they will be able to learn from it. Drawing on my own experience, I can definitely confirm that idea. Back in high school, I, as part of a group of ten students, did a community art project for the National Children’s Hospital in Washington, D.C.. We were supposed to create a mural full of paintings, full of colors, full of life, to bring joy to the poor young patients at the hospital. Since we could not close that part of the hospital off for painting, we had to work fast, but still had to keep up the quality of the artwork. Many days during that week, we all had to stay late but none of us complained. We all had one thing in common. We all love art. This project, therefore, was perfect for us. We all could do what we love, but we could also be engaged in the community. Finally, we were able to finish it by the deadline. However, all of that hard work paid off just by looking at the bright eyes of those little children, some of whom were even in wheelchairs. They looked at the painting carefully from one side to another. Sometimes, one took off and came back with their parents. They wanted to show their parents what they discovered. Together, they pointed, they talked, and they laughed. That was the best reward we could possibly get. Many of our group members cried that day seeing how much joy just a wall full of paintings could bring to these little unlucky patients. Those were not just tears from feeling bad for the unfortunate children, they were also tears of joy for being able to help them overcome their pain—and also tears of pride for being able to give back to the community. Those experiences and tears will stay with us for the rest of our lives.

My experience is not the only example of how much the choice of service could mean to students. John, another student from Roger Williams University, also demonstrates that. The alarm goes off on a Saturday morning. It is just seven o’clock. John has to drag himself out of bed. He has to go to Community Connections today. He does not really look forward to it, simply because he does not even know what he would spend the whole day doing. Even worse, it is raining outside. He slowly walks across campus to the big tent. On the way, he tries to guess what it can be. “Maybe I have to go pick up trash somewhere, or maybe I have to go painting someone’s house,” John is not too excited thinking about that. He finally gets to his group. He is upset knowing that his group will do yard work outside a church. John is not a running-in-the-rain sort of person. Just the idea of having to work outside in the rain for the whole day makes him shiver. Then, they take off. When they get to the church, people there tell the students to go back since they cannot let them work in the rain like that. John’s group has to walk back. John is somewhat relieved since he does not have to work outside today but he quickly becomes annoyed when he remembers that he will have to do this community service, which he does not really like, later to fulfill the graduation requirements.

When his group gets back to the big tent, they find out that they now have to split up to go with other groups. There are a few options for them to choose, either going to one group to a nursing home to sing, or going to pick up trash on the beach, or going to strip down paint from an old fence outside a school. Being very close to his grandparents since he was a kid, John chooses to go to the nursing home because there he knows that he will be able to relate. John gets on the bus. The whole group goes over a few songs that they will sing. John starts to be more enthusiastic. It is like high school again when he was in the choir. They arrive at the nursing home. The group spreads out to sit with the elders. John sits next to a woman. She somehow reminds him of his grandmother. Then they start singing. First, the students sing. Next, the elders join in. They sing with all their hearts. They clap, they laugh, and they all have a good time. The whole time, John is observing. He feels amazing being able to bring laughter to every elder who is there. Suddenly, a tear just slips out of the corner of his eyes. He does not intend to cry. He just thinks of his grandparents, and then the tears somewhat just come. Finally, it is time for them to leave. John hugs the woman sitting next to him, enjoying the whole experience with him. The woman says thank you and gives him a light kiss on the cheek. That means a lot to John. Even when he gets back to campus, he is still smiling because he knows that today he helped make the lives of those elders a tiny bit happier.

We can see how much just a small choice between the three options can change John’s view of community service. Imagine how much more it would have been if John had the opportunity to choose from the beginning.
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Work Cited

"Mission Statement." Roger Williams University. 03 Nov. 2006
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