

Building Generous Youths Through Community Service

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Much has been written about how the most recent generation approaches school, social life and work much differently from previous generations. This generation most commonly referred to as the millennial or Generation Y, is very involved in the community through service and volunteering. Almost half of the youths reported that they believe that they can make a difference in their community and seventy-six percent of high school seniors volunteered in the last year (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2004).

Volunteering and community service allows youths the opportunity to experience situations beyond the classroom and the home. Through service experiences, the youths become exposed to a variety of community issues, problems that might have never been considered. These “outside” experiences can have an impact on the child’s perspective of the community and themselves. “When volunteering become a natural part of a child’s life at an early age, it adds an important dimension to the process of growing up and, ultimately shapes the adult that child becomes,” (Search Institute, 34).

Social scientists and researchers contend that community service and volunteering hold value and benefits for youths. However, given what has been learned about the millennial generation, are there certain characteristics of this generation that need to be considered when planning and completing a community service project? What are the necessary components for a project to be beneficial for both the community and the young people?

According to the literature and findings from a qualitative research project, there are six components essential for the success of a community project for the millennial generation. A project must:

- Be age-appropriate
- Be youth driven
- Meet an identified community need
- Partner with a community organization
- Involve service recipients
- Include reflection

Age-Appropriate projects

The various ages and stages of the youths impact the type of project that can be achieved. If a project is too difficult for the youths, it will likely be discouraging and may conjure negative emotions for a subsequent project. Conversely, a project for that is not challenging enough can be discouraging. Some guidelines to consider are:

Elementary-Aged (Ages 6-9)

- Show immediate, tangible results--no matter how small
- Provide structure, direction and focus
- Challenge them without setting them up for failure
- Provide intergenerational opportunities

Younger Adolescents (Ages 10-15)

- One-time or short-term group experiences
- Hands-on
- Provide intergenerational opportunities
- Select project from a list
- Direct service with tangible results

Older Adolescents (Ages 16-18)

- Link direct service with long-term change
- Sustained project over time (20-30 hours)
- Complete in small groups or teams
- Provide a mix of local, regional, and global opportunities
- Allow them to give leadership and learn from mistakes

Be youth driven

Completing a community service project can be a valuable leadership activity. From the beginning stages of the project, the youths need to be the driving force of the project and have ownership. There is a tendency with this achievement-oriented generation for the adults to intervene in situations that may be difficult or filled with challenges. Giving youths ownership may not always lead to success in terms of the outcome of the project. The youths may face many obstacles and challenges in the process, but these are just opportunities to learn from experience. While adults can have great ideas and suggestions, the youths must have ownership for the project. Without buy-in from the youths, it is unlikely that they will be motivated to tackle the tasks required to complete the project. Having the youths take responsibility for the project empowers them. When the adults take a backseat, the youths understand that the adults have confidence in their skills, strengths and abilities.

Meet an identified community need

It is important for the project to serve an identified need that the community or area is facing. Often the youths are insulated from some of the needs of the community and may only consider issues that are visible, such as a littered park. However, they need to be encouraged to seek additional sources other than their personal experience. Some groups to consider would be the local Department of Health and Human Resource office, the local Head Start program, the United Way or other community groups. These groups could also be potential project partners.

Partner with a community organization

Partnerships provide another necessary piece to a community service project—knowledge about the needs and the service recipients. The millennial generation is one that often knows what it wants to accomplish, but unsure of the steps necessary to make it happen (Schneider and Stevenson, 1999, p. 23). The community partner offers necessary guidance and training for the project. Another benefit of the community partner is the appreciation and feedback that they give to the youths. The millennial generation, who engages in instant messaging and frequent cell phone use, expects immediate results and instant feedback. Feeling appreciated for their efforts is important to them. McKinney (2002) argues that the feel good emotion gained from the project assists with developing a “greater sense of belonging and responsibility for community needs” (p. 141).

Involve service recipients

Having a project in which the service recipients are directly involved is a powerful experience for the youths. With exposure to a variety of community members, the youths develop empathy and an understanding that many of the circumstances of the individuals are simply situational, but yet very complex.

Reflection

Reflection is the ability to analyze a service experience to develop an understanding and meaning and to be applied to future experiences. John Dewey often considered the father of service-learning, stated “Critical reflection leads to the synthesis of old and new knowledge, including new ways of understanding and solving problems,” (Eyler and Gyles, 15).

Reflection, therefore, is a key element of a good community service project and gives the project meaning by:

- Connecting service and life
- Challenging youths perceptions and opinions
- Connecting the youths with the needs of the community
- Demonstrating how the youths can make change

A variety of resources is available in print and on the web to assist educators with facilitating reflection activities that are both fun and stimulating. Several suggestions are:

A Practitioner’s Guide to Reflection in Service-learning. Eyler, J & Giles, Dwight & Schmiede. A, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN. 1996.

Reflection: The Key to Service-Learning, National Helpers Network, Inc. 1998.

Reflection Toolkit, Northwest Service Academy, www.northwestserviceacademy.org .2000

The National Service-learning Clearinghouse posts sample reflection activities and lists other resources and references related to service-learning. www.servicelearning.org

Conclusion

When community service projects encompass the six components, it is likely to be a positive learning experience for both the youths and the community. As one young person commented,”

“At Golden Harvest (a community nursing home), we were apprehensive and shy about working with the residents. Through our interpersonal growth, we are more comfortable and confident around the resident. As our service wound down, we realized that we had made a difference and gave hope to people in our community.”

Resources

DeBard, R. (2004). Millennials coming to college. *New Directions for Student Services,* 106, 33-45.

Dionne, E, & Drogosz, K. (2002). The Debate Over National Service. *The Brookings Review,* 20, (4), 23-26.

Eyler, J, Giles, D. & Schmiede, A, (1996). A Practitioner's Guide to Reflection in Service-Learning. Vanderbilt University . Nashville, TN.

McKinney, K. (2002). Engagement in community service among college students: is it affected by significant attachment relationships? Journal of Adolescence, 25, 139-155.

Schneider, B., & Stevenson, D., (2000). The Ambitious Generation. Educational Leadership, 57, (4), 22-26.

Search Institute, (2000). The Asset Builder's Guide to Service-Learning. Minneapolis, MN.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (1999). Service-Learning and Community Service in K-12 Public Schools, NCEs 1999-043, by

Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J., (2003). What Kind of Citizen? Political Choices and Educational Goals, Campus Compact Reader, 5, 1-13.