

As student volunteering rises, admissions experts look for sincere involvement

By Colin Gustafson
Staff Writer

Posted: 12/04/2008 01:00:00 AM EST



Greenwich High School students Amy Hansen and Kelli McCabe work on thank you notes for special forces servicemen in Iraq at the Red Cross offices Monday evening. (David Ames/For Greenwich Time)

Greenwich High School senior Melody Kim organizes school dances to raise money for impoverished children in Darfur. Her classmate, Isabelle Goossens, trains on weekends to become a certified emergency medical technician.

Other students volunteer at soup kitchens, hospitals and seniors centers, while still more set their sights farther afield, rebuilding homes in New Orleans, teaching English in India, or going on service-learning trips in Haiti, Colombia and France.

Students are often encouraged to document these experiences in college applications and admissions essays as a way to put their best foot forward and stand out from their peers. However, while pressure to participate in community service grows stronger for this very

reason, high school guidance counselors and admissions experts still say students should only volunteer if it's for the right reasons.

GHS guidance director Linda Woods said colleges are looking for applicants who will contribute to campus life and want a sign that a student's involvement in service, or other activities, is more than just a passing effort.

"It used to be that when your child goes to college, you look at, 'What can this college do for my child?' " Woods said. "Now, the paradigm has shifted to 'What can you bring to our campus?' "

But as colleges expect more from applicants in this realm, admissions officials are also becoming more savvy in discerning the students with a real devotion to volunteering from those who merely dabble to improve their resume.

"Roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty," said Westport-based educational consultant Richard Avitabile, a former assistant vice president of enrollment at New York University. If you're going to volunteer, "show me that you got meaningfully involved."

Otherwise, it may be best not to bother: If a student isn't truly committed, a college admission official is likely to catch on.

One sign that a student has volunteered for less-than-altruistic reasons is when they showcase how many hours they've devoted to a project. Quantifying their efforts that way, Avitabile said, suggests that a student was merely trying to fulfill a school requirement.

Similarly, college admissions officials get skeptical when they see an applicant who boasts a long list of one-time commitments, from fundraisers and car washes to food drives and bake sales, Avitabile added.

Instead of showing well-roundedness, this type of scattershot volunteer record suggest to Avitabile "that the student has no real connection to what they've been doing," he said.

The same reasoning goes for students who participate in pricey community service trips overseas, said Emilie Hinman, a Greenwich-based consultant with Dunbar Educational Consultants, a firm that offers paid advice to high school students and their parents.

While a six-week stint doing unpaid work in an exotic locale may look good on paper, she said, colleges are rarely impressed unless a student demonstrates that they have followed-up with a meaningful service at home.

For some students, that could mean volunteering at a soup kitchen after returning from a service trip in a hunger-stricken region in Africa. Or raising money to send back to an impoverished community in Central America.

For example, Brunswick School senior Diego Gonzalez-Bunster returned from helping at an orphanage in the Dominican Republic to organize a fundraiser with proceeds donated to the children's home.

"We raised the money and sent it down," Gonzalez-Bunster said, adding that while he often feels pressure to impress colleges with his service work, "I wouldn't do it just for the obligation to get into college."

If a trip abroad translates into a local commitment, terrific, Hinman said. However, if the student is doing a "one-shot deal of this nature, and not following up, then forget it. That's the kind of thing colleges É see right through."

While academic strength always takes precedent, a college essay or recommendation letter about a student's community service work can sometimes tip the scales in the applicant's favor, particularly at smaller institutions.

Unlike larger universities, "small schools only have so many students to fill these very specific roles - the volunteer organizer, the editor of the paper, the lead in the play," she said.

In some cases, an exceptional volunteer record may also boost an applicant's chance of receiving scholarship money, said Lee Melvin, director of undergraduate admissions at the University of Connecticut.

GHS alum Leah Milbauer, for instance, won a Robertson Scholarship in 2007 to attend Duke University, after being recognized for co-founding a charitable group, Art from the Heart, which re-decorates bedrooms of children with cancer.

While most students may not profess as deep a passion for service as Milbauer, some seem to have put its value into broader perspective as they send off their college applications this fall.

Ultimately, community service is not something that's going to make or break your chances with a college, said GHS senior Jay Polansky. "It should be to make yourself better, not to make yourself look better."