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## Service Learning

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## Service Learning

by Ariane Cando

(English 1101)

Dear Dr. Rondeau,

I recently found out that you were considering making service mandatory for all Associate's degrees at College of DuPage, and I strongly support your decision! Not only will this required service help the school cultivate more engaged students and community members, it will offer very meaningful experiences for those volunteering as well. However, the success of having mandatory service is highly dependent on its careful implementation.

During my first year at College of DuPage, I, along with many other students, was hesitant and unconvinced that I would gain anything from a service-learning-focused English course. Nevertheless, I was proven wrong when I began volunteering at Burgess Square Healthcare and Rehab Center. It is a nursing home that cares for seniors, taking them into their facility regardless of their "race, color, national origin, disability, or age in admission, treatment, or participation in its programs, services and activities, or in employment" (Burgess Square).

Whether it was helping them read aloud during Bible study or just swaying to the beat of John Denver's hit songs, I became so close to the residents by doing such simple activities. At times I felt as though my efforts didn't create a big impact in their lives, but the way they greeted me with their light-hearted laughs and gentle smiles told me otherwise. Service has made me appreciate the simplicities and relationships I have always overlooked in life, and I never would have been granted this awareness if not for the service requirement for my class.

Although it would be mandatory, this necessary service could act as an opportunity to form bonds and become involved in activities we otherwise would not put effort into doing. As human beings, we are in constant pursuit of new experiences and personal connection, which is exactly what volunteering offers us. If we are able to help students view service through a more open-minded and positive lens, the influence and the benefits it would have within multiple aspects of their lives would become more evident to them.

Holistically, service is not just a one-sided act of kindness. Revealed by Americans' Changing Lives, the "oldest ongoing nationally representative longitudinal study" of how our health changes over our lifetimes ("Understanding Social Disparities"), those who volunteered "reported higher levels of happiness, life-satisfaction, self-esteem, a sense of control over life, and physical health, as well as lower levels of depression." Likewise, people who reported similar levels of satisfaction in their lives were shown to be more likely to volunteer (Corporation for National and Community Service 6). The relations that we form through volunteering are not benefactor-to-beneficiary types of relationships; they are much more personal, leaving us with feelings of deep connection.

Not only did I interact with numerous patients, I met their families as well. When I volunteered at Burgess to help with a family visitation party for the residents, I remember leaving the nursing home deeply moved at how much love was present in one room. I spent the night serving root beer floats to the residents' family members as they learned Elvis Presley trivia, and the countless stories I heard as I walked around about each of those families left a feeling of warmth in my heart. Knowing that the patients I communicated with every week were continuously surrounded by their loved ones, whether it was physically or in spirit, made me incredibly grateful to be living

happily like them, being with my own friends and family. It was then that I realized that it is my job to give as much happiness as I have received, which I saw was the true value of service.

Many could say that with a mandatory service requirement, we do not benefit from our efforts and that it is a waste of time for our degree programs. Although it is not a required course educationally, it helps immensely in our social lives. Essentially, it teaches us how to stay connected in a world where we are losing our need for human connection. Service can potentially be eye-opening, demonstrating the extent to which we can change other people's lives for the better. Civic engagement is something that, if enhanced deliberately, is able to give us the power to do so. Through this volunteering experience, we are brought one step closer to becoming better versions of ourselves.

Regardless, the way College of DuPage would apply mandatory service into their curriculum is the deciding factor in the enrichment of the students' experiences doing it. I believe a fair and effective way to enforce this is to include it in the school's General Education courses, urging students to take a minimum of one service-learning-focused English class for the completion of their degree. Through COD's website, they can access a list of placement sites where they can volunteer to fulfill this requirement, and these locations encompass a variety of activities, ranging from interacting with kids in tutoring centers to even helping out with big holiday events at Morton Arboretum. This way, people will not be too overwhelmed with the policy's demands, but they will be given the freedom to put their efforts into something that they are passionate about.

Knowing now that I really enjoy spending time with the elderly, I also know that there are some volunteering activities where I just cannot push myself into giving my all. Throughout high school, I had to volunteer at recycling centers as part of mandatory service, and I felt so unmotivated as I tried to find enjoyment and a sense of fulfillment in what I did. From my time sorting paper from plastic, I learned that it is incredibly important to find a placement site that students think they can learn from and enjoy. Finding happiness in these activities is closely related to how invested you can become in what you do. As Maya Angelou states in "The Sweetness of Charity," "It is sad when people who give to the needy feel estranged from the objects of their generosity. They can take little, if any, relish from their acts of charity; therefore, [they] are generous out of duty rather than delight" (191). As students form more personal connections to the service they're doing, they gain awareness and fulfillment that simply can't be taught in a normal classroom setting.

I would like to note that the most essential part of service learning having time allotted to self-reflection. What's the point of doing service if we're not able to see the impact our efforts are creating? My English class assigned weekly journals for us to write about our most recent experiences with volunteering. We had the liberty to write about anything: the good, the bad, and the mundane. These entries were what kept us aware and accountable of what we did, and being able to see our progress throughout this journey, however big or small, was what I found to have been the most meaningful. If the service-learning courses at COD execute a similar system, I believe each student will be able to come out of their class a different person than they were before. These realizations are what stay with us for the rest of our lives and ultimately create the change we want to see in this world, and it would be amazing to see the students of your school grow to be the catalysts for a better community.

I hope you deeply consider the points and suggestions I have mentioned in this letter. I am always willing to discuss new strategies and ideas with you anytime, so feel free to contact me by calling 630-XXX-XXXX. I look forward to hearing from you, and thank you so much for taking the time to read this letter.

Sincerely,

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