

# Community Service Work Increasingly Important for College Applicants

Admissions officers are increasingly placing a larger emphasis on community service work when evaluating college applicants.

By [Miriam Salpeter](#) Nov. 30, 2011 | 3:17 p.m. EST

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While there is much debate about how to build a successful career, many believe getting into a good college or university is the first step. Most Americans believe a college degree is necessary for attaining quality employment. About 7 in 10 US adults (69 percent) strongly agree or agree having a college degree is essential for getting a good job in this country, according to the 2011 study by Gallup and the Lumina Foundation for Education. Similarly, Gallup Daily tracking of unemployment and underemployment in the U.S. finds college-educated Americans do better in the workforce than those without a college degree.

With this data in mind, it's no wonder Americans put so much emphasis on getting into the right college or university. For some families, this journey begins when their children are ready for preschool. Parents recognize building a solid foundation in the early years helps ensure they succeed as adults.

How do students get accepted into the best colleges? The checklist is lengthy, but for decades the top contenders have included SAT scores, AP classes, and perhaps, most important of all—good grades. Extracurricular activities such as sports, involvement in clubs, volunteering/community service, and special focus on arts and sciences also contribute. But how much? Do activities outside of academics really affect the college admissions process? Apparently so.

DoSomething.org, one of the largest U.S. organizations helping teens take action on causes they care about, just released a study tying volunteering to college admissions. Specifically, this year, the survey reports admission officers place a high value on a student's long-term commitment to a cause or organization.

Conducted in partnership with Fastweb.com and sponsored by Chase, the Community Service and College Admissions Survey interviewed admissions officers from 32 of U.S. News & World Reports' top 50 colleges and universities ( <http://www.usnews.com/education> ) to identify the most important elements of a strong application.

This is the third year DoSomething.org has released this survey, and every year Nancy Lublin, CEO of DoSomething.org, notes how surprised she is in the shift of opinions about community service and college admissions. "Consistency is the new trend here," she says. "Students who support one cause over time show commitment and perseverance, both of which are stellar traits for potential co-eds."

This year's survey shows 72 percent of admissions officers prefer that students be consistently involved with one issue over a variety of causes versus last year's reading of 50 percent. In addition, there was a notable increase in the percentage of admissions officers (52 percent) who believe it is possible to have too many community service hours. Last year, 33 percent felt this way.

“Admissions officers want well-rounded applicants who take their studies seriously, are engaged in a cause or two they are passionate about, and are involved in extracurricular activities like the school newspaper,” says James Elbaor, head of special projects at DoSomething.org. “They don’t want someone exclusively focused on community service just like they don’t want someone solely focused on the school newspaper.”

Though community service is of growing importance, it still falls below the old standbys of GPA and SAT scores. This year it ranked number four in importance of factors considered for admission—above reference letters, interviews, and legacy.

Also of note, the survey reports “good citizenship,” a skill developed in service activities, is instrumental in the admissions process (76 percent reported leadership plays a critical role). “It’s no mistake that what makes an amazing college applicant also makes a great job applicant,” Lublin says. “And with organizations like DoSomething.org giving more cred and power to teens, we’re allowing this age group to address what they think is wrong with the world and take steps to fix it. These are characteristics all employers look for when hiring, so I definitely believe teens who participate in social action are on their way to big things.”

The 1.5 million teens in the U.S. applying for college this year should keep in mind it’s not just the doing that matters. Applicants need to take care in how they position their volunteer activities. Some suggestions from the report include:

- Everything you do makes a difference. Whether that means fundraising or hands-on volunteering, the important thing is to show WHY you tackled this issue and HOW you did it.
- If you have a long laundry list of causes, consider dedicating one of your essays to explaining how all those issues actually fit together under one larger theme like “poverty” or “human rights.”
- Get personal and focus on how you changed as a result of your experience(s), rather than just outlining what you did, how many hours, etc.
- Specific language can be more effective: Words like “passion” and “initiative,” should be used instead of “required” and “brief.”

“College counselors can talk about the exact range of test scores and grade averages needed to be considered for each school until they’re blue in the face, but these folks don’t have the expertise when it comes to how social action and volunteering plays into the process,” Lublin says. “This is the only scientific report that shows how community service impacts the college admissions process.”

Teens who are looking for ways to give back on a local and national level may wish to consider joining DoSomething.org. Parents who want their children on the right track for post-college employment should check it out, too. The organization launches their new membership model this week and expects to build an army of doers five-million strong by 2015.

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