Build Your Skills Score by Volunteering

The following is an excerpt, reprinted with permission, from 10 Things Employers Want You to Learn in College, Revised: The Skills You Need to Succeed by Bill Coplin, copyright © 2012. Published by Ten Speed Press, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group. This piece talks about the value of volunteering as a college student and how it can help a graduate stand out (and thus get the job he wants.)

It might seem harsh to say, but the truth is that nonprofit organizations usually have no choice but to give you experiences before you are really ready for them. For example, a local community center might like to have a monthly newsletter to distribute but does not have the funds to hire a professional. If you have some basic skills in Microsoft Publisher or have taken an introductory public relations course but have no real experience in producing a newsletter, the center might be willing to give you a shot. From someone with no experience, you now have an opportunity to be a newsletter designer, an editor, a writer, and a publisher. If you do a reasonably good job, you could have a product to put in a portfolio when you seek a paying job with a private organization.

One of my students did a study for a local nonprofit on how members of the organization liked the organization’s newsletter. He conducted a phone survey and wrote up the results for this organization. The study was helpful to the organization but even more helpful to the student. He brought a copy of his study to a job interview with a national association in the construction business. One of the major jobs they wanted him to do was conduct yearly surveys on their publications. My student said, “Well, I just happen to have a study I did for an organization in Syracuse on its newsletter, and here it is.” He was hired on the spot and never looked back.

Summer and semester internships are easier to get at nonprofits than businesses for the same reasons that they provide viable sites during the semester—namely, lack of skilled staff. Businesses are likely to have paid internships, except in areas of high student interest like TV stations and law firms. Many nonprofits may not be able to offer a salary or a lump sum stipend, but some do.

Volunteering will teach you the entire Skill Set of chapter 1, Taking Responsibility. You will meet the typical joiners who overcommit to too many volunteer activities and forget to go to meetings. You will see the devastating effect of poorly managed meetings that start late and end later. Many of these volunteer organizations struggle to keep track of money in an accurately and timely way. You will also see how good intentions lead to perks enjoyed by the leaders of the group at the expense of the rank-and-file members or clients. All of these negative lessons can be learned just about anywhere, but they are most abundant in organizations dependent upon volunteers.

But not all nonprofits are so poorly managed, especially those that have a national affiliation. Teach for America, for example, is one of the best-run nonprofits. It has created a recruitment machine that competes with the biggest companies in the country. TFA trains college graduates so they perform as well if not better in the classroom as students with master’s degrees in education. The leaders of many nonprofits use modern business practices and at the same time maintain a deep commitment to the public good. These organizations are likely to have well-developed programs to manage volunteers. You can learn a lot no matter what type of organization you work for—nonprofit, government, or business.

Value Volunteer Activities – Employers Do
Volunteering and working in nonprofit internships can give you critical experience that will enable you to build your Skills Score. For that reason alone, it is valuable to prospective employers. You can grow from someone who has little experience with Excel or Access to one with substantial experience. It is one thing to say to an employer, “I took a course where I learned Excel” and quite another to say “I worked for the Salvation Army creating Excel spreadsheets to generate graphs for a grant proposal.”

Doing good without a credit or monetary payoff is viewed by many employers as valuable for another reason. Such work can mean that you are the type of person who can work for something bigger than yourself. The step from good citizen in the volunteer sector to being a team player within the business world is small.

Most companies want to hire someone who is both competitive and a team player. If you can do both, you are more likely to get the job and more likely to excel on the job. They want to see students who helped their college host applicants, served on the residence hall council, participated in student government, or tutored kids in a community center. They know that fitting such activities into your busy schedule shows good time-management skills and a good heart.

A word of warning is in order, however. Employers become concerned if they see a lot of scattered activities, especially if it comes with a weak GPA. You need to focus on a few do-good activities and still maintain a respectable GPA. Don't become a community service junkie!

**Explore and Network for Careers**

Working as a volunteer for a nonprofit or government agency will expand your contacts for future job exploration. Nonprofits have boards of directors from all over the community. You can meet them at social functions or meetings, and talk to them about your future. Adults love to play Daddy or Mommy to college students, and they frequently have very good advice. If you are sitting next to the right person at a dinner, you can conduct an informational interview before dessert. Contacts make through volunteer activities can build your professional network, which is described in chapter 20.

If you undertake volunteer activities and internships with government and nonprofit organizations during your college years, you may find a career that you want to pursue. You may discover you want to teach, do police work, work as a district attorney, or run a community center. You may learn that you do not want to sit in front of a computer all day or that you do not like the chaos of a small, underfunded organization. Even if you don't go into nonprofit work, you may find the skills you exercise as a volunteer are the type of thing you like to do. If you enjoy performing statistical analysis for a nonprofit in the summer, you may want to think about a position in market research when you graduate. If you enjoy meeting people and explaining the mission of your nonprofit, you might want to explore a sales position after you graduate.

On the other hand, from your experience with a nonprofit, you may decide that you want to work for one when you graduate. More than 20 percent of the American workforce is employed by nonprofit organizations or federal, state, and local governments. Every job you can do in the business world, you can do in the nonprofit and government world. By volunteering during your college years and then taking internships, you can explore the advantages and disadvantages of employment outside of business.
The yearly salary of people working in these positions ranges from the low teens to the high six figures. People who help others or work in public service are not necessarily going to be poor. It depends on their talents and on what they want to do with their lives.

But the truth of the matter is that a person performing the same duties as someone in a for-profit business will receive less money working either for the government or for the nonprofit sector. Accountants working for the government make less than those who work for private firms. But there are other advantages. Government positions sometimes carry lucrative pensions. For example, some teachers in New York State who retire after twenty-five years of service receive close to 100 percent of what they were paid when working. Even where the pensions are not as generous, government workers can retire at fifty, get a pension, and take on a new career. These pensions are likely to become smaller in the future as a result of the pressures to lower government costs, but they will continue to be part of government employment. Nonprofits do not usually have strong pension programs, but they are much more generous about vacations and family-friendly policies.

The bottom line is that the money is not as good as it is in the business sector, but the perks may offset it. Moreover, if you work in a field in which you help others, you can be happy that you are making a difference. A feeling of doing something good for others can be another bonus to a rewarding job.

You should also see volunteer activities as an opportunity to build your career network, as we will discuss in chapter 20. You probably have a better chance of bonding with someone with whom you volunteer than some random social acquaintance or someone in one of your classes. In addition, you will share similar challenges that you can talk about after the experience, which is a powerful source of bonding. Also, some of the professionals who supervise you could also become part of your network, especially if you perform at your best.