

Maximizing Your Volunteer Experience

Participating in a volunteer activity can provide you with many benefits. More than just helping you get into professional school and some graduate school programs, or to land a job after graduation, volunteering can equip you with skills, tools and experience you can take with you on your educational or career path. The advice below is to help you begin to think of volunteering as more than a box to check off on your school applications or a line on your resume. Volunteer to further cultivate your interest in a field, develop skills and learn tools related to your future education or career, and demonstrate to the schools you apply to, to employers, and to yourself that you have the ability and the desire to succeed in your chosen field. While this handout is called “Maximizing Your *Volunteer* Experience,” the information here can apply to any and all experience – volunteer experience, paid or unpaid internships, observational experiences, student organization involvement, classroom experience, full or part-time jobs, etc. Make the most of the activities you participate in to get the most out of them.

Why Should I Volunteer?

Beyond the “I-need-it-for-my-application” reason, the obvious response to this question is that it gives you an opportunity to demonstrate your commitment to serving your community and your ability to work with others. Graduate schools and employers want to know that you have interpersonal communication skills and that you can work well with other people. And professional schools especially want to know that you’re the type of person who wants to make a difference and help the community around you. Volunteering experience on your resume can show these traits. But there’s more to it than that.

The decision to enter a career is a very crucial one often involving advanced education, and a significant commitment of time, effort and money. Before you jump into advanced education or a first job, volunteering can give you an opportunity to explore career fields. Maybe you’re worried that you wouldn’t be able to make it as a doctor – a volunteer position can be a great testing ground for uncertain occupational aspirations. Have you always wondered what a lawyer does? – volunteering can let you explore a new career option. Do you know that you need to work on your writing or public speaking skills? – find a volunteer position that will help you acquire those professional skills. While helping others, you will contribute significantly to your preparation for career decision-making or for a graduate or professional school program. Work as a volunteer weekly, for a quarter, or as often as you can to valuably enrich your undergraduate years.

Should I Volunteer in the Same Field I Plan to Study or Work In?

Yes and no. Related and unrelated experiences can both be valuable. Getting experience related to the field you eventually plan to study or work in is a good idea on many levels. It shows the schools or employers you apply with that you’ve explored the field and that you know what you’re getting yourself into; you’ll be less of a “flight risk.” Related experience also gives you the chance to explore the field and make sure it’s the right “fit” for you. Educators and professionals in many fields acknowledge the value of prior experience and may expect this of applicants.

But unrelated experience is also valuable, allowing you to learn about other career fields and about yourself while acquiring transferable skills like communication, writing, listening, teaching, etc. Once you have some exposure to the field you plan to pursue, the type of experience you get matters less than what skills and abilities you get out of it. By getting unrelated experience you’ll be able to demonstrate well-roundedness and cultivate a variety of interests. You might even find another career path you hadn’t considered before.

How Do I “Make the Most” of My Volunteer Experience?

Be inquisitive – Ask questions, and lots of them. Volunteering provides a wonderful opportunity to see the application of the knowledge, techniques and procedures you may have been exposed to in school. Being in an active work setting also exposes you to professionals in the fields. Take advantage of that and ask questions to help you make an “informed” decision about your future. What key issues currently face the profession? How is the field changing? What ethical issues are of concern today? In addition to learning what the typical day is like for these professionals, find out how they put their days together, allow time for the unexpected, keep current in the field, address uncertainties, strike a balance between their personal and professional lives, and all the while derive satisfaction out of the career they’ve chosen.

Have the right attitude – It’s not just about you and what you’re going to get out of volunteering. Give something back, too! Go into the experience wanting to contribute to the organization, as well as wanting to learn about the profession. You might even view the volunteer experience as if you were a consumer or client of the organization. With this attitude you will also learn more about yourself and will become more effective as a volunteer and, ultimately, within your chosen profession.

Take the initiative – Once you have effectively mastered your tasks, demonstrated competence and shown your dependability, tactfully ask to do more. Volunteer for extra assignments, especially those that will increase your skills and knowledge in the field. Work on developing your “people skills” – those qualities that demonstrate your ability to communicate effectively with others. If, for example, your sole responsibility is to shuttle patients to and from doctor’s appointments or to feed the homeless, you will often learn most by showing interest in them and simply listening to their stories. They will appreciate your attention as well!

Challenge yourself – Put yourself in situations where you’ll work with people very different from yourself. Interact with acutely

or terminally ill patients, the very old, dying persons and their families, inner city youth, and other groups who are different in background and culture from you to enhance your cultural sensitivity. Also, don't just do things you know you're good at. Find positions that force you to develop skills or gain exposure to new things. If you know you need practice speaking in public, writing, or using a particular language, volunteer in settings where you can practice and improve those abilities.

Gather a variety of skills – Over time, volunteer in more than one setting to learn and practice more than one important skill. For example, volunteering in an emergency room involves observing, assisting and listening, yet volunteering as a tutor or teachers' aide will develop your interpersonal, teaching and listening skills. Be careful, though. While variety is good, you also need to demonstrate commitment and dedication to your involvements, so don't jump from job to job too much.

Be professional – Volunteer work should be taken seriously. You will be counted on to fill a special need. Be visible by doing your job well; actions speak louder than words. Be enthusiastic, energetic and excellent. Develop and demonstrate "professionalism" – ethics, etiquette, and consideration of others – in your behavior towards co-workers and clients, your communication (written, online and verbal), and in your dress, punctuality and general attitude. These qualities make a positive impression with the staff and may serve you well in the future when seeking letters of reference for professional or graduate school, or assistance in your future job search.

Enjoy yourself! – Take your work seriously, but also have fun! Learn about yourself and the world around you. Get to know the people you work with and make friends (this is part of that "Networking" thing you always hear about!). If your volunteering seems like a chore, ask yourself why. Maybe that particular position – or this career path – is not the right fit for you.

Keep a record – Keep track of your activities – dates, supervisors, observations, the thoughts they stimulate, and your feelings – as you volunteer or observe. Document your experiences as you go, so later you can reflect on and communicate to others the skills and self-knowledge you have gained through the activity. Use the online Career Portfolio tool at <http://career.ucsd.edu/sa/portfolio.shtml> to keep track of your experiences.

Where Can I Find Volunteer Opportunities?

Volunteer opportunities are everywhere – at local clinics, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, schools, community and religious organizations, state and local government agencies, non-profit organizations, campus offices, faculty research projects and research laboratories. Positions range from hotline counselors, hospital and teacher's aides to political campaigners, legal aides and other paraprofessionals. Don't limit your volunteer search to these positions or organizations. Most organizations enthusiastically accept volunteers. Take the initiative – express your interest and offer your time.

Resources for locating volunteer and *other positions* are available through these campus offices:

- **Career Services Center** – Come into the office to see *Directions*, a directory published by the United Way which lists agencies and volunteer opportunities in hundreds of human service organizations throughout San Diego County. Also check out internship postings on the Internship SuperSite (<http://career.ucsd.edu/sa/internsupersite.shtml>), job listings at <http://career.ucsd.edu/sa/jstjobli.shtml>, and the "Getting Experience" sections of each graduate study area of interest web page on the Career Services Center website (<http://career.ucsd.edu/sa/pgsoppage.shtml>) for openings and ideas.
- **Volunteer Connection** – This student organization, located in the Price Center, places students in a wide variety of volunteer positions throughout the San Diego area. Check them out at <http://volunteer.ucsd.edu/>.
- **Academic Enrichment Program** – Located in Student Center B, AEP programs including HMP3 can assist pre-health students in obtaining volunteer positions and professional mentors. See <http://aep.ucsd.edu> for more details.
- **Student Organizations and Clubs** – The Center for Student Involvement in the Price Center offers opportunities to get involved and volunteer on campus and within the San Diego area in student organizations, schools, recreational centers, student-run projects, homeless shelters and many other areas. Visit <http://getinvolved.ucsd.edu> for more information.
- **Search Online** – Find volunteer positions nationwide on www.networkforgood.org and www.volunteermatch.org. Visit www.volunteersandiego.org for local opportunities and www.sannet.gov/volunteer-program for legal, environmental, public safety, community, and other settings in San Diego. Yahoo, Google or other internet searches will also yield many volunteer opportunities in a huge variety of occupational and cultural settings.

If you can't volunteer, ask if you can observe. An organization may not currently need volunteers or may not accept volunteers. If so, ask if you can observe the interactions, projects, procedures or activities of interest to you. This experience builds awareness and knowledge of the profession by just being in that environment. Informational interviews with professionals can also be helpful. The UCSD Alumni Association, in partnership with the Career Services Center, established the Career Access Network to help alumni and students connect throughout the country. CAN is a group of alumni volunteers who are ready to be contacted for career advice, informational interviews and professional networking. See <http://alumni.ucsd.edu/careers/can/> for more details.

Have fun getting involved! For more guidance on getting experience or with any questions about graduate or professional school, stop by the Career Services Center or call 858.534.4939 to set up an appointment with an advisor. Good luck!