

# COLLEGE PLANNING MINUTES



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## *Service With a Smile* *Finding a Meaningful Service Activity*



'Tis the season for helping others and making resolutions, so if your teenager has not yet found a meaningful service activity, why not urge her to start now? Statistics show that serving the community is a hallmark of today's college-bound students. In 2004, 92% of freshmen entering Notre Dame University had participated in community service, and a 2008 survey of students at four year colleges revealed that 60% of seniors had also done so (National Survey of Student Engagement).

These numbers are encouraging, but service experiences can sometimes be viewed by students as obligatory chores on their long to-do list of college preparatory tasks. While serving others is praiseworthy whatever the motivation, an ideal service activity is enjoyable and contributes to a student's personal development. How do you help your teenager find that kind of activity?

### *Do begin with your child's interests.*

Look for an activity that allows him to help others while also developing his own interests and abilities. So if he is an avid pianist, perhaps he could

volunteer to play at a local church or nursing home or accompany the school chorus.

### *Do think outside the school.*

High school organizations like Key Club are worthwhile service options for students (and may be required for your school's National Honor Society). But organizations beyond the school, like libraries, hospitals, charities, museums, churches, and parks and recreation departments, can provide opportunities for career exploration and talent development.

### *Do let your child choose.*

This seems like an obvious point, but families today are so busy that parents may be tempted to choose an activity for its convenience, like signing a daughter up to help out at the church nursery because she's going to be there Sunday morning anyway. Assisting at the nursery is a great idea for a student who enjoys young children, but may be viewed as disagreeable drudgework by someone who doesn't.

### *Don't focus on racking up hours.*

Parents are sometimes convinced that colleges will be wowed by applicants who have logged a zillion service hours. Toward that end, they sign their child up for a laundry list of random 2- hour commitments. This approach tends to promote a view of community service that is cynical and obligatory, in my view, and is not regarded as highly by colleges as sustained participation in an activity that clearly reflects a student's interests.

I believe that every person, young and old, should find some way to contribute to the larger community, but service is most meaningful when you choose the activities that you genuinely value. I have thoroughly enjoyed the countless hours I have spent over the years volunteering with educational organizations, but I am still steamed about the time I was assigned to make two gallons of pasta salad for a 6 A.M. swim meet that my kids were not even attending! Helping your child become involved in an activity that reflects her interests and values will reap benefits far beyond impressing a college admissions committee.