College Students Strengthen Ties to Communities

Most colleges and universities find that working to maintain a positive relationship with the towns they are located in is good for the school, the town, and the education of the students.

“As educators, we think it’s important to let people know who we are and who our grads are,” says Heather Askew, director of communications for South University.

At South University, this means getting involved in community events whenever possible to cultivate the university’s relationship with the surrounding area and give the student rewarding experiences.

Resumé Builder

Working in the community can be valuable educational experience for students, but it can also look good on their resumes. “At the end of the day, we want students to walk away with things on their resume that are tangible and add value,” says Todd Cellini, president of South University — Savannah, Georgia.

One of the main reasons this is important is that students need to be able to differentiate themselves from other graduates trying to get noticed by employers. “In this kind of market, employability is different than it was a few years ago,” Cellini says about the need to stand out in the crowd.

Build the Community with Graduates

In addition to giving back directly, colleges and universities can serve their communities by providing quality graduates ready to enter the workforce. “Because we are charged to serve the community, we offer education that provides the community with skilled graduates,” Askew says.

To keep up to date, South pays attention to industry trends, and listens to what the community is looking for in a graduate. “The community will tell you what is in demand,” Askew says. “By looking at long-term needs, and aligning ourselves to meet those needs, we can offer a very different kind of community service.”

Getting Involved

“All of us realize that we are in it together,” says Monica Ways director of community engagement and service at Miami University, in Oxford, Ohio. “If we all work together, we work better than when we work separately.”

This attitude has helped get about 80% of Miami University students involved in community service.

For the office of community engagement and service, organizing students can be a challenge, but Ways believes that, at the end of the day, college students want to help in their communities. “I think a lot of young people want to see change,” she says. “They see things that are wrong and they want to make them right.”

One such project is the *Home is where the Heart is* event in February, designed to raise money and awareness for the homeless people living in and around Oxford. Student volunteers will be helping with the fundraising process gearing up for the event, and the event itself will have student volunteers helping with the music, dancing, food service, and a silent auctions.

Through events like *Home is where the Heart is*, Miami University maintains a relationship with the community that is good for the students and for the college town where they live. “[Our goal is] to be a catalyst for mutually beneficial campus and community partnerships,” Ways says.
Volunteering is a Class Thing

Because of the success of programs like this, Miami has also incorporated service into its curriculum. Miami uses a system of service-learning where — as part of their coursework — students are taking what they learn in the classroom and implementing it with the community. “They are learning in the classroom, but they are also learning in the community through service,” Ways says.

In one service-learning class, upper-level public relations students are asked to design and implement a public relations campaign for a local non-profit organization.

In another service-learning class, students in a Spanish course worked with an after-school program that serves primarily Hispanic children to translate works written by first through fifth graders. The course also had the students do recordings of the work in Spanish. This allowed the children’s parents, most of whom only speak Spanish and may not be fully literate, to participate in the student’s school work.

Beyond all of the benefits to the communities, the schools, and to the careers of students, it is important to remember that everyone has a responsibility to try and improve the area where they live.

“As a society we all have our duties in the community,” Cellini says. “[Organized community service] gives our students-in-training an opportunity to be involved in those things.”