

National Service as a Post-Secondary Option

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Abstract. Typical career options for youth include entering the job market, obtaining further education, participation in training programs, and serving in the military. Add national service to the list of possibilities for individuals who want other avenues for doing something meaningful and important.

So you have been guiding your students or clients into jobs, to further education, toward training programs, and into the military. But do you have clients and students who don't exactly fit well into any of these categories at this time in their lives? What are some other options for men and women ages 18-24?

Consider national service as a possibility for individuals who want to contribute to the greater good, can benefit from learning teamwork, want to exhibit leadership skills, and wish to broaden their view of people and the world. Service learning has become very popular in the last several years, with high schools and colleges giving educational credits for service projects. These programs, although important to student growth and development and to the immediate community, have somewhat limited impact in both reach and geography. Though useful from many perspectives, they tend to be short term.

For the past 12 years, a program called Americorps*NCCC (National Civilian Community Corps) has been providing opportunities for young people to make a substantial commitment to our country through a 10-month, full-time volunteer commitment. NCCC's 1,100 annual members perform team-based service in areas such as education, the environment, and disaster relief, while gaining experience and earning an education award that will help pay off educational loans or pay tuition for future education.

The NCCC is a team-based, residential program with volunteers (called members) based at one of four campuses in Sacramento, CA; Denver, CO; Charleston, SC; and Perry Point, MD. From these central locations members work in the local community or go on "spikes" which are extended projects in locations wherever they are needed across the country. In addition to the disaster services they provide, NCCC members wire schools for high-speed Internet, tutor students in reading and math, revamp trails in local and state parks, help build houses for low-income families, and assemble playgrounds in urban areas. More often they are called upon to use their leadership and organizational skills by coordinating other short-term volunteers from businesses, and non-profit, faith-based, and other community organizations.

In just the past year (2006), NCCC members have contributed more than 800,000 hours on 350 disaster relief projects, half the total of national service hours during this year. Most of those hours were devoted to the needed Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts. Those efforts continue. Members worked with the Red Cross and FEMA during early relief efforts and are now working with hundreds of local, community based organizations on recovery efforts.

Here are a few examples of NCCC's accomplishments in support of disaster recovery in the Gulf Coast. NCCC team members:

- Assisted 2,000,000 people
- Leveraged 70,000 volunteers
- Refurbished 3,475 homes
- Completed 8,828 damage assessments
- Supported 758 emergency response centers
- Distributed 2,298 tons of food
- Distributed 2,790 tons of clothing
- Served 1,120,000 meals

So often in a major disaster, hundreds and thousands of people from across the country show up to volunteer, but there is little effort given to identify what volunteers know or can do and how to coordinate their time, skills, and desires. NCCC members were onsite at times coordinating 2,500 volunteers a day by assessing the volunteers' skills and directing them to projects where they would have the most productive impact. Overall, for every NCCC member, an average of 61 other community volunteers were able to provide full-time, critical services to worthy projects. One observer in St. Bernard's Parish in Louisiana called the NCCC team helping there "force multipliers...the glue and consistency" that enabled others to help residents pull their lives back together.

Katrina recovery and rebuilding efforts continue to be critical and NCCC remains on the scene. But NCCC members have been on the scene at 9/11 sites, fires in the western states, floods in the mid-west, and other emergencies such as helping close the achievement gap by tutoring children who need to upgrade their skills in order to graduate from school.

NCCC is a residential program where members learn to work, live, and contribute together for an extended period of time. They meet and interact with individuals from other parts of the country, communicating and cooperating with people who may be different from them. They learn about different parts of the country, different values, and different needs. Further, since it is a full-time program with teams that are flexible, NCCC members are able to respond to whatever need is critical. They learn to deal with and respond to the unexpected and unpredictable.

In addition to the leadership opportunities and experience, NCCC members are eligible to receive an education award to pay costs at qualified institutions of higher education, for educational training, or to repay qualified student loans. The award is \$4,725 for a year of full-time service. Graduates of the program tend to continue their service in a volunteer capacity during their spare time or by employment in service-oriented organizations. They work with a new perspective on people and things – a new sense of the world and their place in it. To learn more about this opportunity go to <http://www.americorps.gov/about/programs/nccc.asp>.

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