



Gabe Topping of Belmont traveled to the Dominican Republic to perform community service, while Becky McDougal of Sharon went to Guadeloupe. (Justine Hunt/ Globe Staff (left)/ Sarah Brezinsky Gilbert for the Boston Globe (right))

Students do good, look good abroad

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But some colleges question motives

By Alison Lobron, Globe Correspondent | June 22, 2006

When Becky McDougal, 17, traveled to Guadeloupe last summer to build homes for impoverished families, most of her inspiration came from the desire to help others, but some of it came in the mail. During her sophomore year, the Sharon High School student had received dozens of ads for exotic summer volunteer programs promising her both a life-changing experience and an edge in the college admissions process.

Over the past decade, community service trips to Third World countries have become a popular summer option for public-spirited students, especially those from affluent families. Some college admissions officers and advisers believe the recent proliferation of such programs, for which students typically spend \$4,000 or more for a month of volunteer work, stems from students' perception that community service looks good on college applications and makes them seem like interesting people.

McDougal does not think college played a big role in her desire to go to Guadeloupe, but says she was aware of the possible advantage a service trip might provide. "You want to think you're a good person and you do [community service] out of goodness of your heart," she said. "But all sorts of people . . . are telling you it will look good on your résumé."

In most service trips, adult counselors lead groups of 10 to 25 students to foreign countries, where the teens assist local agencies with projects such as building homes and ecological conservation. The tuition typically covers room, board, and staffing costs, as well as some sightseeing and entertainment.

Joanne Pinaire, a director of Visions Service Adventures travel, said the work -- which students pay to do -- is less about improving blighted regions as broadening the minds of young Americans.

"The work our participants do is a magnificent byproduct of what we're really doing," Pinaire said. "We don't presume to be a development organization or an NGO [nongovernmental organization] making goals for

communities."

But some participants, and admissions officials, wonder whether a service program designed for the benefit of the student is really service.

Tess Johnson, 16, a junior at Newton North High School, built homes in Alaska last summer because her older sister had taken part in a similar project and loved it. She said she did not take the trip with her applications in mind, but she worried that colleges might assume she wanted to bolster her résumé.

"My perception is, if you do all these trips, the colleges just think you're a spoiled kid," Johnson said.

Some local admissions officers say they do look hard at the reasons for, and results of, a service program. If the student has no record of community service other than one expensive travel experience, a college might view the trip as an empty gesture.

"Everyone seems to perceive that they need to have very exotic or dramatic summer experiences," said Marlyn McGrath Lewis, director of admissions at Harvard College. "But we are very sophisticated in telling the difference between students who are genuinely ambitious and motivated" and those who do things just for their applications.

"The heart of the decision [about acceptance] is really about what a student has done over time, in and outside the classroom," she said.

Jim Stoll is the director of Lifeworks, a student-travel company that four years ago added community service trips to its offerings. He estimates that one-third of his participants are either fulfilling their high school's graduation requirement for service or hoping to spice up their applications.

Stoll said students learn a lot on his trips, whatever initially motivated them. But he said he thinks colleges are more impressed by students who identified a community problem on their own and took steps to change it -- say, by cleaning up litter in a local park -- than students who signed up and paid money for service in an exotic place.

"I think colleges, quite frankly, are more impressed by someone who went out and made cool things happen on his own and didn't come to a prepared experience such as we are, and all the programs are," said Stoll. Still, he added, "They'll be more impressed by us than someone who does Club Med for Teens."

Admissions officers and college advisers agree that they have different expectations of students who have limited financial resources and need to earn money during summer vacations.

"We look at how a student has taken advantage of the opportunities he has," said Lewis.

But students who do have financial resources must reckon with two seemingly contradictory pieces of advice: On the one hand, colleges want to see them doing interesting and meaningful things. On the other hand, colleges do not want them to do the interesting, meaningful things just for the sake of getting into college.

The website of Peterson's, a New Jersey-based company that helps students plan for college and prepare for standardized examinations, cautions teens against participating in summer programs "just to get into college." But on a linked page, the same site urges students to consider a summer service trip with this advice: "Colleges and universities absolutely love students who put out the extra effort to help others in exchange for nothing."

When Gabe Topping traveled to the Dominican Republic the summer before his senior year at Belmont High School, he chose the trip because he liked to perform community service and wanted to see the nation that

had produced many of his favorite baseball players. But Topping, 18, found the experience life-changing, especially the time his group helped a woman evacuate from a home that collapsed the next day in a mudslide.

“We saved her life,” he said.

That experience became the foundation of his main college essay.

“That wasn’t why I did the trip,” said Topping, who will attend the College of Wooster in Ohio this fall. “But I think it helped.” ■

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