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Future Leaders

As I sit on the edge of my seat, bouncing up and down, the words magically appear on the computer screen as I attempt to tackle one of the biggest essays that will influence the next four years of my life: THE COLLEGE ADMISSION ESSAY. Thoughts, stories, and lessons from the past 18 years swirling around 100 miles an hour in my brain. Doubt and questions fill the air. Should I include this? Is this enough detail? Am I going to get in? The question that takes my breath away is, how has my literacy of leadership in a youth-based organization prepared me for my future? To answer that question, I had to dive deeper into the ocean of my mind and examine the experiences and skills I have developed throughout my life.

As a child raised in a middle-class family, I had a belly full of food, a pillow to rest my head on, the latest and greatest clothes, and so much more. Even with financial struggles, my jaw dropped, discovering the number of people, strangers, friends, and extended family who lived on much less. My head was in the clouds and oblivious to the unjust reality of how many need assistance to make it through the month. I never thought that using my privilege to help others was essential. Someone else will help.

On the other hand, my parents had come to understand how essential it was to help others. It seemed like every Saturday, our family would be volunteering at a different nonprofit for another cause. Uggh, I would dread Saturdays, getting up at the butt crack of dawn to stand on my feet all day, tired, exhausted, and my tummy that would be constant grumbling from a day

that felt like an eternity. Days bleed into years of being voluntold to repeat and repeat and repeat those Saturdays. I was a volunteer zombie: eat, sleep, volunteer, repeat and do it all again the following weekend. In a way, it instilled the value of service into me with a gentle hammer. At the time, little did I know that those long Saturdays gave me the concept of serving others, which laid the foundation for where I could start building my literacy.

While I understood the value of serving others, it wasn't until my sophomore year of high school that this understanding would develop into a passion for youth-based organizations. When I received an invitation from a high school-orientated nonprofit called Key Club to attend a week-long service immersion trip called Breakthrough, I gained a new perspective towards the development of my literacy.

As I look down from the airplane, feeling like a giant to a sea of ants, questions fill my mind, what will happen next? Who will I meet? What will I learn? Will it be as life-changing as I expect? Landing in the sunny state of Florida, I walk off the plane with excitement coursing through my veins. So many answers I have eagerly awaited for months about to be revealed. The time had finally come. I found my ride to transport me to get started on a whirlwind of a week. Getting my hands dirty with service, the moment I knew I wasn't going to be the same person, was our first service project with a local afterschool program.



Figure 1: Breakthrough First Project

I looked up, hands sore from wood chip dust on my jacket, as I finished placing the final screw to complete a picnic table. Pride and a sense of accomplishment hit me like an ocean wave. Through the unique task of building a table, I realized the positive impact that it will have on people I will never meet and who most likely will never meet me. It showed how the effect of a unique or straightforward task. The eye-opening experience reminded me of how reading changed the course of Malcolm X's life. In his autobiography, Malcolm X states, "I knew right there in prison that reading had changed the course of my life forever. As I see it today, the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive" (2). Even from our first project at Breakthrough, I was changed; I realized how the value of service to others goes beyond a weekend, and you don't have to meet the people you are serving to be positively impacted. As I continued the week, my love for service continued to grow. I learned about creating practical solutions to people's needs and participated in more thought-provoking projects.

As I sat on the cold, squeaky airport chair, waiting to return to the snowy state of Ohio. I sat in awe, examining the week that had just happened and the spark of service that lit a flame in me. My eyes were open, my hands ready, and my heart full. My mind was ready to go back home and start implementing service projects left and right, but my heart wanted to stay in Florida. In terms of my literacy, Breakthrough was a crucial moment because it allowed me to learn skills and new knowledge towards my leadership in youth-based organizations.

Skills and knowledge were introduced to me during that week through discussions, reading a book called *Toxic Charity*, and serving others in the local community. The most important skills I took away from the week were a deeper understanding of the value of service, empathy for others I will never meet, implementation of service projects, and effective solutions

to community needs. Serving as a leader in youth organizations has given me the opportunity to utilize the knowledge I learned from Breakthrough. I have used the understanding of service and effective solutions to help me determine if using my time for a project will provide an effective solution to the root issue or create dependency among those helped. Empathy helped invest my energy into understanding, even though I didn't grow up in the same circumstances, to put myself in others' shoes while volunteering at future projects.

While I may have learned the skills at Breakthrough, I have been able to implement them in different areas of my life. Kevin Roozen, through various methods, examined how skills and knowledge can be implemented in new contexts: "This practice-oriented analysis also illuminates the work involved in recruiting discursive practice across contexts, the linking and coordinating with combinations of other practices and with new sets of inscriptional tools as well as the reconfiguring across semiotic modes necessary to repurpose practice for use in new activities" (320). In different areas of my life, by using my more profound understanding of service to tackle and research social issues through my academics in my English essays, but ultimately the most significant way I was able to recast the skills I learned was by creating a service project at my high school

After hours of nervousness leaking from my head, I left the small, cramped school store at Hilliard Darby High School with excitement, relief, panic, anxiety all mixing up in my stomach in anticipation of the grand opening of the in-school food pantry. I stood, finding my sense of calm amid dull fluorescence lights flicking as my arms felt sore from stocking heavy can foods into the bright blue plastic bins. The time came to open the in-school food pantry, frankly, running around to ensure everything was in order and presented nicely. As I took the imaginary scissors to cut the red tape, all the emotions that had been mixing, vanished, and I was

left with a sense of pride. Pride in the work I had done, months of follow-up emails, partnership developments, and primary and minor details that all led to the moment that the food pantry was open for students to utilize.



Figure 2: Hillard Darby Food Pantry

Creating the Hillard Darby pantry allowed me to recast my skills that developed from Breakthrough and positively impacted my high school. More specifically, I employed empathy by putting effort into stocking foods to help them in their situations. Even though I wasn't precisely in there, I couldn't try to put myself in my peers' shoes. I brought my more profound understanding of service to discover the root causes behind food insecurity through research and education workshops. With all the work I had put into the food pantry, my leadership has dramatically developed my literacy through creating the food pantry. I partnered with and mobilized various youth-based organizations through food drives, donations, and volunteers, including the National Honors Society, Key Club, and different Darby sports teams. As a result, I got exposed and had greater experience working with youth-based organizations, contributing to my current literacy ability. I got the opportunity to pass down all the skills to the younger generation. Ultimately, my literacy of youth-based organizations is all about—sharing skills and knowledge to build future leaders.

Being a junior in high school, I had time but needed to start finding a successor and pass

down the skills and knowledge when it came to the food pantry. Through different outreach efforts to high school volunteer groups, I came across a volunteer whose leadership, hard work, dependability, and passion for food insecurity made her a clear choice to pass down the responsibility of the pantries. By the beginning of my senior year, I had trained, mentored, and coached her on taking over, so she had a semester of being in charge under her belt to do the same thing when her senior year came around. I ensured the sustainability of the pantry while passing my skills down to future generations.

My literacy in youth-based organizations has instilled in me a deeper understanding of service, gained the skills to develop for issues people face every day, as well as the passion for passing down those experiences. As I come back from the deep dive of my past, the memories, lessons, and skills form meaningful paragraphs completing my college admission essay. As I submitted my admission essay, I knew my literacy had gotten this far, and with time and more experience, it would take me farther than imagined.

Works Cited

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