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Community Impact Through Volunteering

As a junior in high school, much of my time not spent studying, finds me filling requirements in order to make an impression on colleges. One of these requirements is volunteer hours, which both my high school and the majority of colleges require. When thinking of a topic to study during this once in a lifetime experience, I thought of something that is both important personally and to many other students in the United States, volunteering. During my time in France at the Lycée Delambre, I was determined to find out what factors differentiated service between the two countries, what service meant to students, how students performed acts of service and the connection between a school and their community. As well as if students reap the benefits of these experiences in their classrooms.

In order to discover the different factors in the two countries, I began by consulting my Service Learning Director at my high school, Ms. Cherylynn O'Melia. As the Service Learning Director, her job is to help direct the Youth Acting in the Community club, help students meet their graduation requirement of 45 documented service hours, and direct students to organizations, churches, or anywhere where they can provide service. Ms. O'Melia said that in doing service to one's community, they are, "developing the whole child through ideas such as loving your neighbor, and creating a desire to give back to others." She believes that by embedding service in the curriculum at schools, they learn to "serve out of passion." In a survey that I sent out to the Lycée Delambre, a student said that by their school encouraging students to volunteer their time to help others, they "are allowing them to mature." However, of the students

who answered the question, “does your school encourage you to volunteer?”, 55% said that their school does not.

In the United States, the admission process for college has become much more rigorous, and one of the many factors for this process is the acts of service a student performs. For some schools, students must meet a requirement in order to graduate, whereas other schools simply encourage students to give back to their community in acts of service.

In comparison to the United States, the French are much less encouraged and supportive of students performing community service. Of the many factors, one is the several laws in place. One of these laws prevents children under the age of 18 from working, which also prevents them from volunteering at non-profit organizations. This is surprising in comparison to the United States because many teenagers begin to work once they turn 16 in order to support their families and themselves. Another factor is the hours in which students go to and from school. When students have an off period, they are quick to leave school if they live close by or even just leave for the rest of the day if not. In seeing this, it was evident that students had very little connection to their schools and in turn, no desire to give back to the school. Finally, the location in which students lived in comparison to the school signifies the lack of desire to give back to their community. Many students lived outside of the city of Amiens in smaller villages such as Flesselles. The students would take a long bus ride into Amiens every day in order to go to school. This location barrier shows that students did not feel connected to the community outside of their schools because they did not live in that area and therefore were not giving back to it. In comparison, the public school systems in the United States require that students live nearby their school. Therefore, students are more likely to volunteer because it is their community as well. As

a whole, the French are much less likely to volunteer because there is no source of income. One of the teachers said, “they would rather work for money.” This was disheartening because one of the ideas behind volunteering is to do work without receiving money. In seeing this, it was visible that the French lacked the idea and goal behind service.

If students are giving back to their community, they are doing this at known organizations such as the Red Cross, or in French, La Croix Rouge. I had the privilege of visiting the nearby Red Cross distribution where men and women went to receive food for themselves and their families. This branch of the Red Cross was run by an older woman who had known my host mother since she had first moved to Amiens with her young children. In talking to her, she was able to tell me that she rarely sees help from anyone under the age of 18. Her branch is able to help many families in the nearby apartments that surround the building. Later in my trip, she was so kind as to give my host family and I a tour of the headquarters of the Red Cross in Amiens, where they provide a soup kitchen, a sack of non-perishable, and fresh produce distribution. Every morning and evening, the volunteers and employees of the Red Cross set up breakfast and dinner for around 60 people in need. They provide an assortment of food for women and children of all ages. In the morning from 7 to 8, breakfast is usually a variation of bread along with milk and fruit. In the evenings from 5:30 to 6:30, dinner is a bowl of soup, yogurt or cheese, lots of bread, and beverages. Many of the people who showed up were regulars and the staff knew them by name; however, some were new and unknown to the staff. One thing that really stuck out to me while watching this meal take place was that one of the staff was called “Mamie” which is a French grandmother name. Her service and dedication to this organization were visible through the respect each person had for her. One of the other jobs of

the Red Cross was to give out a sack of food to people in need. Each day, people gather at the Red Cross headquarters and receive a sack of necessary products, such as bread, canned goods, pasta, etc. Recipients must show a certificate that they are in need. The fresh produce was handed out every Tuesday by volunteers. This was one of the few times I heard of people actually volunteering their time. One of the full-time volunteers said that they see anywhere from 2 to 15 people helping on those days. Much of the food that the Red Cross receives are from stores that donate their unsold products. In fact, many countries in Europe have created factories to give food to organizations like the Red Cross. On top of the food distribution, the Red Cross headquarters had a large room that could up to 40 cots. They see about 20 people every night. The impact of the Red Cross on Amiens was visible through the generosity and kindness of the volunteers.

As well as the worldwide known Red Cross, France has another very important non-profit organization, Les Restaurants/Restos du Coeur, otherwise known as the Restaurants of the Heart or Restaurants of Love. It began on September 26, 1985, by French comedian, Michel Gérard Coluche. In France, he was well known for his irreverent attitude towards politics and profanity. Les Restos du Coeur began with his idea to open a single soup kitchen and then to spread to cities across France. From there, the organization began a yearly benefit concert series called “Les Mondes de Enfoirés,” hosted by French celebrities and singers. They sell a CD which can be seen advertised across France because of its substantial impact: one CD is equal to 17 meals. Les Restos du Coeur is benefitted by this concert series as well as private donors, public funds and other non-profit organizations. It is run by volunteers similarly to the Red Cross. In 1998 and 1999, Les Restos du Coeur had a large survey sent out to their thousands of

volunteers which helped them to better run the organization. From there, they began to train all of their volunteers in order to better help the people in need. Today, Les Restos du Coeur has 40,000 volunteers who help 600,000 people daily in 2,500 locations across France, and several other locations in European countries. They have soup kitchens, food packages to take home, give out clothes, and help people find housing.

Many laws were created in order to better benefit non-profits like Les Restos du Coeur and the Red Cross. In 1901, the French parliament passed the Waldeck-Rousseau Act that defined all voluntary associations as non-profit, unincorporated or incorporated if responding to defined criteria such as social or medical. As well as defining fundraising in France and starting a successful non-profit, Coluche was responsible for many laws changed in order to benefit other non-profits. Les Restos du Coeur is a founding member of the Committee of the Charter of Deontology of Social and Humanitarian Organizations which ensures that organizations have financial transparency, use their resources wisely, and properly train their volunteers. In 1988, Coluche helped to pass “loi Coluche” which gave equal tax breaks from big to little donations for the donors. Coluche believed that every gift should be recognized. The European Union created PEAD- Programme Européen d’Aid, which helps to give food to the poor. All of these laws and organizations were created to better help the people in need in France.

In conclusion, students in France are less likely to volunteer in their community. They are not encouraged by their schools and only want to work for money.

I am so grateful to the Alliance Française and their generosity. I will be forever grateful for this once in a lifetime experience.