

Public Service

Harvard College has never been an ivory tower; even as the distinction of its faculty and the strength of its libraries, laboratories, and research programs has grown through the second half of this century, the College has continued to recognize that its graduates should be servants of society. Many students arrive in Cambridge already having participated in public service activities while in secondary school. At Harvard they are greeted by some two dozen distinct student organizations that run more than 140 programs devoted to some form of public service, with new organizations, and new programs within strong old organizations, established each year.

By far the largest of the student public service organizations is the Phillips Brooks House Association, an umbrella for about 40 term-time committees and 12 additional programs that operate during the summer as part of the Summer Urban Program. Term-time programs include after-school programs for children in Boston and Cambridge; a local shelter for the homeless, run entirely by students; outreach to adults and children in Chinatown and other Boston neighborhoods; Refugee Youth Enrichment programs that support and tutor young people who have recently arrived in America; prisoner education programs; and many others. Many hundreds of students participate in these programs with inspiring dedication. Moreover, students carry much of the leadership, logistical, fundraising, and managerial responsibilities for the programs, and thus gain an extraordinary education in the practical realities of social service while they provide valuable services to their clients and communities.

One of the most interesting aspects of students' public service activities is the way in which students integrate academic and extracurricular interests with their public service work. For example, another PBHA program is ExperiMentors, a group that conducts science experiments in public schools in an effort to intrigue and inspire young people about science education. CityStep is a major program which for the past fifteen years has combined the arts, and dance in particular, with public service. Its volunteers teach dance to Cambridge fifth and sixth graders throughout the year in an effort to build self-esteem, teamwork, and responsibility. Harvard's athletes have formed the Harvard Student Athletic Alliance, a community outreach program that connects student athletes and staff from the Athletic Department with young people in the neighborhoods surrounding the University. Volunteers seek to become role models by conducting sports clinics and providing academic tutoring in host schools.

In the past few years, public service has acquired international dimensions, again through student initiatives. Bhumi was formed three years ago to serve developing communities worldwide. It works with small-scale projects abroad in order to gain a greater understanding of health, education, environment, and related issues facing developing countries. Operation Smile raises awareness of international medical needs in Third World countries. The Harvard Program for International Education encourages local high school students to take an interest in international relations.

Finally, many students volunteer in programs such as HAND, which is a House-based partnership with Cambridge public grammar schools, and a variety of literacy initiatives that respond to the AmericaReads challenge.

While the energy and person-power for all these programs comes from students themselves, Harvard supports and encourages their efforts in a variety of ways. The Harvard Public Service Network provides advice, training, information about fundraising opportunities, a resource library, and other needs. Judith Kidd, Assistant Dean of Harvard College for Public Service and Director of the Phillips Brooks House, oversees these efforts, along with other staff of the Network. Each of Harvard's Houses has a Public Service Tutor who can also support and encourage students' work. Efforts between the Network and the Office of Career Services have this year resulted in much greater publicity and information on opportunities for employment in public service careers. A Standing Committee of the Faculty on Public Service provides a forum where students and faculty can explore relationships between academic and service work. The Committee has also sponsored a series of interesting panels and lectures by influential and provocative public figures, tying student service efforts to the world beyond Harvard.

Many alumni and alumnae have described the service efforts in which they were involved as undergraduates as formative experiences in their careers and private lives. Harvard is committed to encouraging students to put their remarkable energies and imaginations in service of the public good.