



Credit for Serving

A New Vision for National Service in Higher Education

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Introduction and summary

This past spring, A'licia Williams, 20, a student at Miami Dade College, spent a week working with Breaking Free—an organization that serves survivors of sex trafficking in St. Paul, Minnesota—as part of her college's alternative spring break service program. Even as Williams and her peers were making a difference in the lives of those who survived horrible circumstances, the one-week service experience altered the course of Williams' life as well. After speaking to a trafficking survivor and learning about the woman's efforts to reconnect with her daughter despite the trauma she had endured, Williams made a decision about the future. Reflecting on her service, as well as on her own difficult upbringing—being raised by a mother who dropped out of high school and growing up without a father's presence—Williams, a pre-med student, realized her true passion was to pursue a career as an adolescent psychologist.¹

Williams' experience working with the St. Paul service organization inspired her to become more involved in her community at home in Miami, Florida. Since her spring break experience, Williams has volunteered in the maternity ward at a local hospital and has become an advocate for student service through her work-study job at her college's Institute for Civic Engagement and Democracy, where she works 17 hours a week. Moreover, Williams says that her service experiences are helping prepare her for a career of assisting children and teens overcome challenges similar to the ones she faced as a child.

Today, Williams juggles a part-time job, which contributes to her family's bottom line, with her school and service schedules. She is determined to make the balancing act work. Williams is on track to graduate with an associate's degree in psychology in 2016 and plans to go on to a four-year college after graduation. And she says that service has become both a valuable part of her education and a way to prepare for a career in the social service field.

Learning through service has been shown to have many important and tangible benefits for students, including enhanced leadership skills, increased self-confidence, and improved academic outcomes.² It can also provide students with relevant workforce experience that builds the types of skills employers seek.

Unfortunately, lower-income students, such as Williams, are less likely to participate in service while in college compared to their higher-income peers,³ which means they have limited access to the benefits that accrue from participating in service. More affluent students, meanwhile, may not be attending colleges that have established robust service opportunities, and all students need access to service programs that do not delay their progress toward completing a degree. Williams and other students who participate in service despite these challenges demonstrate a clear appetite for intensive service-learning opportunities on college campuses. But more must be done to help them pursue these opportunities.

Given the importance of service learning, colleges cannot keep treating service as merely an extracurricular add-on. Instead, the Center for American Progress proposes a new vision for service learning in higher education. Under the CAP proposal, colleges and universities would establish service programs that award college credit for service opportunities that directly relate to a student's area of study. A student would spend up to one-quarter of their degree program participating in intensive service opportunities. When paired with some additional academic work, these service experiences would yield sufficient academic credit so that students stay on track to graduate. Importantly, these service programs would be eligible for federal student aid funds, which would make them more affordable for students.

Williams' difficulty finding the time and resources to serve highlights the need for new ways of structuring these programs. She does not receive college credit for her service work at the hospital—nor did she earn credit for the service trip to Minnesota because there was no formal academic component to the program. Taking a week off from work to go to Minnesota meant working extra hours at her part-time job for the next week in order to catch up financially. Since Williams helps support her siblings, mother, and grandmother, she needed to make up the income lost during her service. Furthermore, the trip to St. Paul itself cost several hundred dollars, a sum that Williams struggled to pay despite fundraising to cover a portion of the expense.

Awarding credit for intensive service learning would go a long way toward overcoming the barriers that students such as Williams face. For the low-income and older students who make up an increasing share of today's college attendees, adding sufficient academic rigor in order to make service programs eligible for federal student aid would help them pursue service while worrying less about how to cover increasingly high tuition bills. And students from all income backgrounds would benefit from receiving college credit, so they do not have to choose between service and taking longer to graduate.

This credit-for-service proposal is also a way to bridge the disconnect that exists today between students and their preparation for the workforce. While most students see getting a good job as a key reason for attending college,⁴ the majority of students do not believe college adequately prepares them for employment.⁵ At the same time, employers say that college graduates lack the skills they need for the real world.⁶ National service—community work that addresses the major challenges facing the United States—can mitigate this disconnect by allowing students to gain practical, real-world skills. Supplementary coursework can help students grow academically at the same time. Schools can spread the benefits of service in a smart, accessible, and effective way by implementing programs that pair national service with learning, and the federal government can facilitate this process for community colleges and universities.

This report lays out what it would take for colleges and universities to establish the types of programs discussed above. In particular, it considers how these programs could overcome barriers to service, as well as what they would need to do to become eligible for federal student aid. The report also includes real-life examples of colleges and students participating in the exact type of opportunities this proposal would like to see flourish.

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And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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