



# Community Service and College Admissions Study

## WHY IT MATTERS

### FULL REPORT 2010

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Getting into college is more competitive than ever. Bloomberg L.P. estimates that there will be almost 1.6 million college applicants this year, with admission rates as low as 7% at some of the top colleges. While parents, counselors, and other experts can offer students advice on what minimum GPA and test scores they need to get into a certain school, there has been no data on the “community service” aspect of a strong application package.

Does a record of stellar volunteerism really matter? Is it better to be committed to one cause or engaged in a variety of causes? What are college admission counselors really looking for when they sit down to study applications?

The DoSomething.org *Community Service and College Admissions Study* provides answers to these elusive questions.

Highlights From Findings:

- Community Service ranked in the top 4 most important factors to consider along with SAT/ACT score, GPA/Class Rank, and other extra-curricular activities.
- 70% of admissions officers surveyed valued consistent local volunteering over a long period rather than a short stint abroad. Commitment to a single cause is also preferred 5 to 1 over scattered involvement with a variety of causes.
- Having a founder role innovating a new idea or project was chosen as the #1 most important marker of good citizenship.
- When reviewing essays, admissions officers’ like to see words like “Commitment” and “Passion” most when applicants describe their community service.

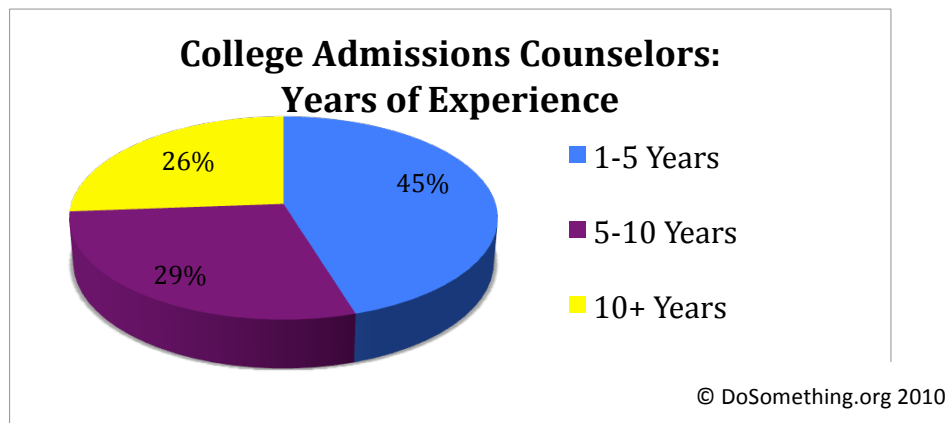
In short, colleges and universities seek students with genuine commitments to community service. Demonstrated high levels of passion and experience with community action are viewed as important indicators of strong character.

## METHODOLOGY

In the Summer of 2010 (from June 28<sup>th</sup> to July 28<sup>th</sup>), DoSomething.org conducted the second Community Service and College Admissions Survey.

### Participants

Admissions officers from 33 of the top 50 colleges and universities listed in *US News & World Report: Best Colleges 2011* participated in this survey. All participants had to be a currently employed admissions officer responding on behalf of his or her college or university. Demographics and work experience vary.



### Format

The Community Service and College Admissions Survey is composed of 21 questions. Four of the questions were demographical (name, college or university, # of years employed there as an admissions officer, email address). This demographic information will not be shared. The remaining 17 questions are a mixture of multiple choice, yes or no, and fill-in-the-blank. We solicited comments where appropriate.

## ABOUT

DoSomething.org is one of the largest organizations in the United States helping teens rock causes they care about. A driving force in creating a culture of volunteerism, DoSomething.org is on track to activate two million young people in 2011. By leveraging the web, television, mobile, and pop culture, DoSomething.org inspires, empowers and celebrates a generation of doers: teenagers who recognize the need to do something, believe in their ability to get it done, and then take action.

All rights to the *Community Service and College Admissions Study* are the property of and reserved by DoSomething.org.

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## THE SURVEY

The following is a comprehensive summary of the *Community Service and College Admissions Study*. Actual questions are presented, along with DoSomething.org's analysis and suggestions.

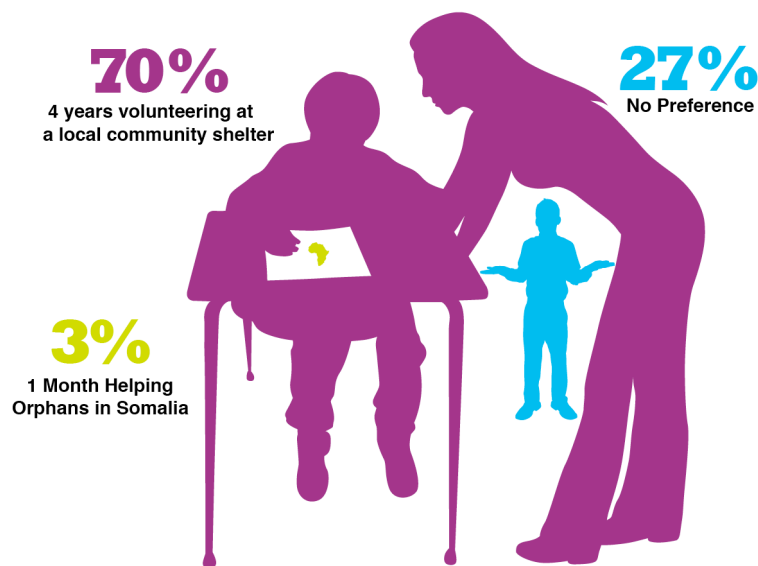
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### A. Type of Service

#### 1. "Which would you value more: one month helping orphans in Somalia or four years volunteering at a local community shelter?"

Of respondents, 70% valued four years volunteering at a local community shelter over one month in Somalia. (In 2008, 100% of respondents valued four years volunteering at a local community shelter over one month in Somalia.) Only 3% valued one month in Somalia over four years at a local shelter and 27% responded no preference. The overwhelming response in favor of a four-year commitment to a local shelter indicates that long-term commitment to a cause or organization is very important. As one admissions officer said, "Longevity and dedication are traits necessary for collegiate success."

#### 4 Years Local vs. 1 Month Abroad

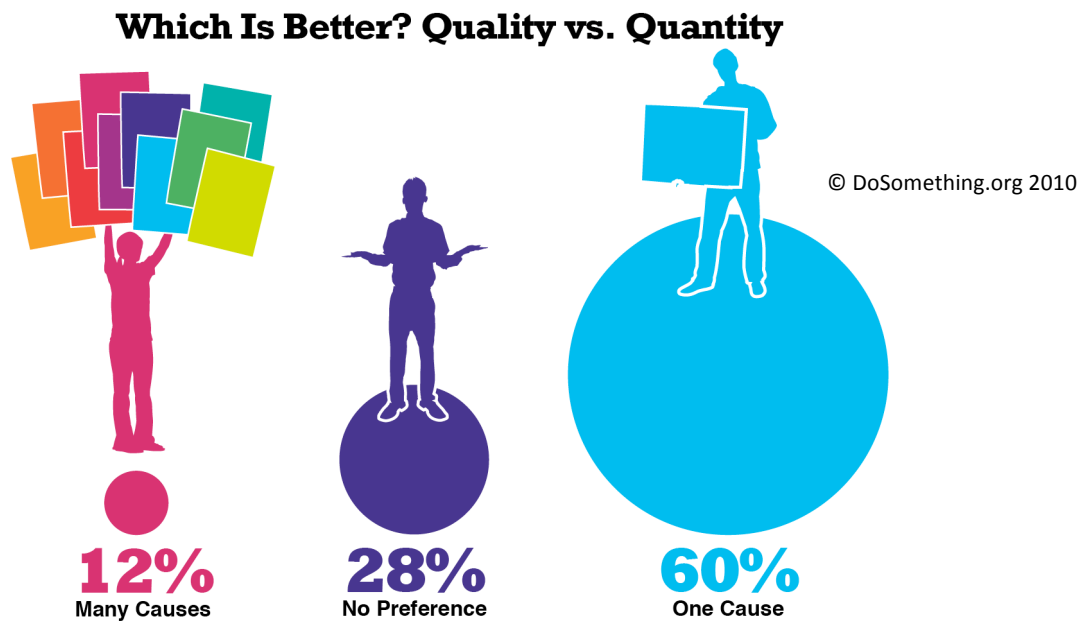


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**Our suggestion: Rock a cause you're genuinely passionate about and stick with it. It's not about how far you travel, but about the depth of your commitment.**

## 2. “Is it better to be consistently involved with one issue or a variety of causes?”

Of respondents, 60% valued working consistently with one issue, 28% percent had no clear preference, and 12% preferred a variety of causes. One admissions officer indicated, “We want to see a level of serious commitment that goes beyond just ‘trying to get into college,’ but this can also be done through working on a variety of issues.”

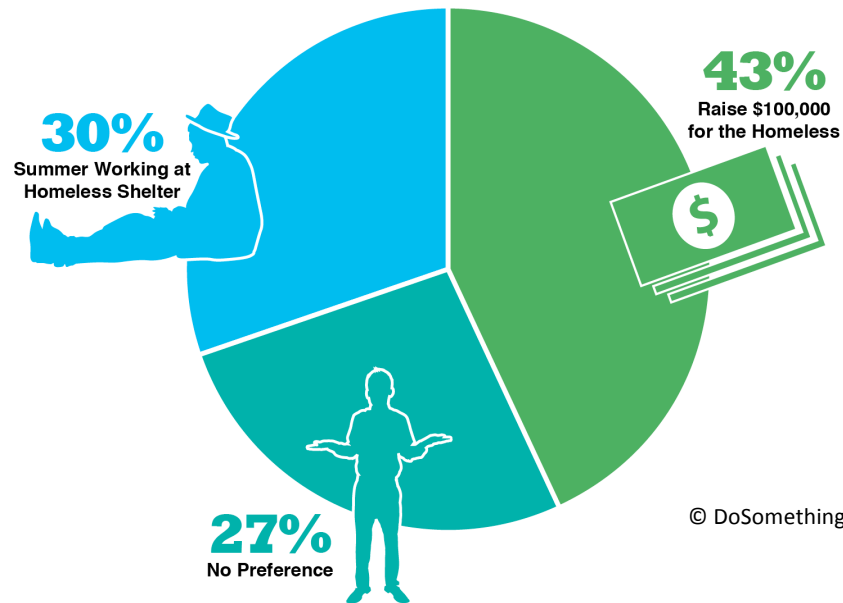


**Our suggestion: True passion and commitment are what matter most. Admissions officers want to get to know who you really are and what you were able to accomplish. They will not be automatically impressed just by a laundry list of causes and activities.**

## 3. “Which would you value raising \$100,000 for the homeless or spending a summer working at a homeless shelter?”

In the 2008 study, 68% of respondents valued spending the summer working at homeless shelter over raising money. This year 43% of respondents, a slight majority, listed raising money for a homeless shelter over spending a summer working there – a clear indicator in the value of fundraising during a recession. One admissions officer noted, “Raising \$100,000 is rare and unique,” and another commented, “What matters is how the student raised the money and what they learned from it.”

## Helping the Homeless: Raising \$100K vs. Summer Volunteer



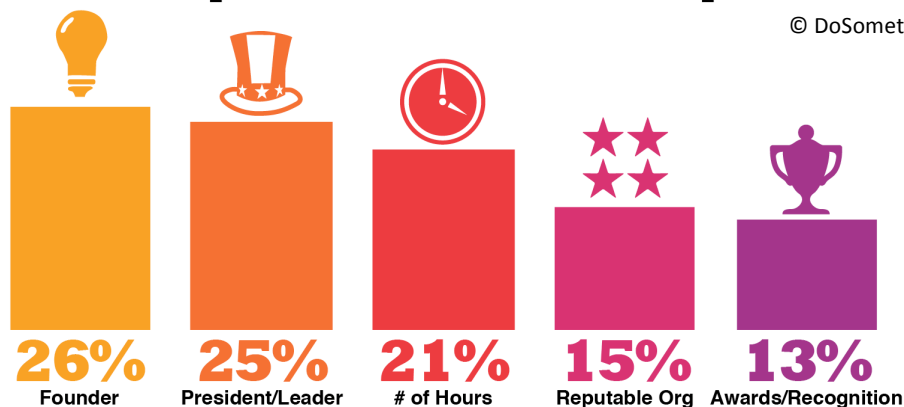
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Our suggestion: The ability to fundraise during a recession is impressive, but don't forget how you raise any large sum of money is also important. Be sure to describe the process you used, the number of people involved, and what you learned from the experience clearly.

### 4. "What are the markers of 'good citizenship' in service that you look for? Please rank the following from most important (1) to least important (5)"

A "founder role innovating a new idea or project" was ranked as the top marker of 'good citizenship' among college admissions officers. "President or other leadership title" garnered the second highest vote total, confirming a strong preference for students with leadership roles. A weighted average of all the rankings is depicted below.

#### Top Markers of Good Citizenship



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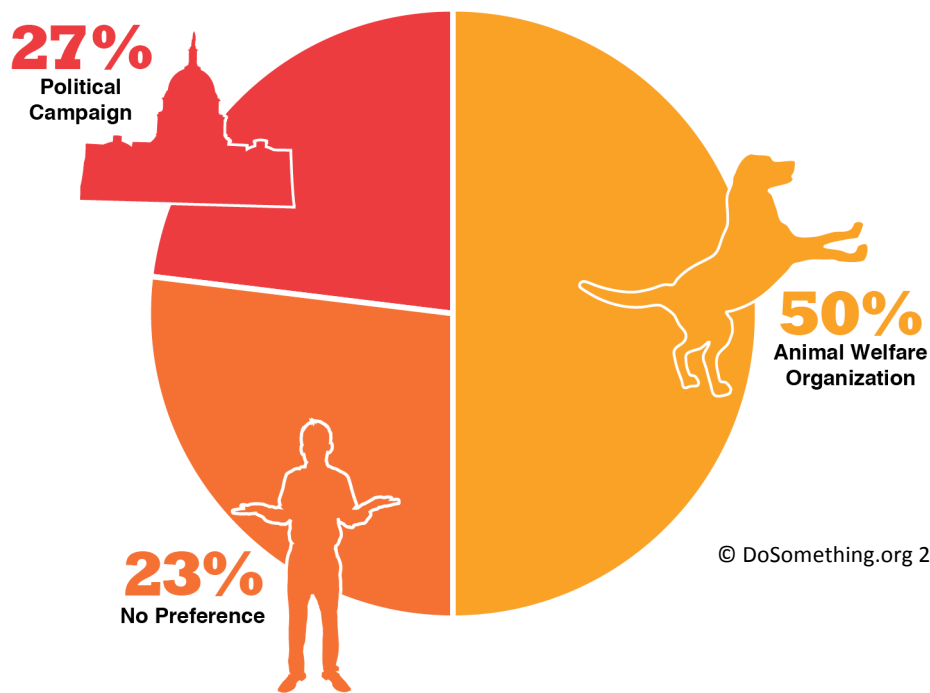
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**Our suggestion: Be a leader! Colleges and universities want to see you can recognize a problem, have confidence in your solution, and then take action.**

**5. “Which would you value more: working on a political campaign or working with an animal welfare organization?”**

Of respondents, 50% valued working with an animal welfare organization over a political campaign. This represents a 14% drop from the 2008 survey, indicating that political work has become a more acceptable form of community service. Of respondents, 27% valued the political campaign over animal welfare; 23% had no preference. One admissions officer responded, “Both are impressive. The context of the engagement would be most helpful in differentiating between the two.”

**Political Campaign vs. Animal Welfare Org**

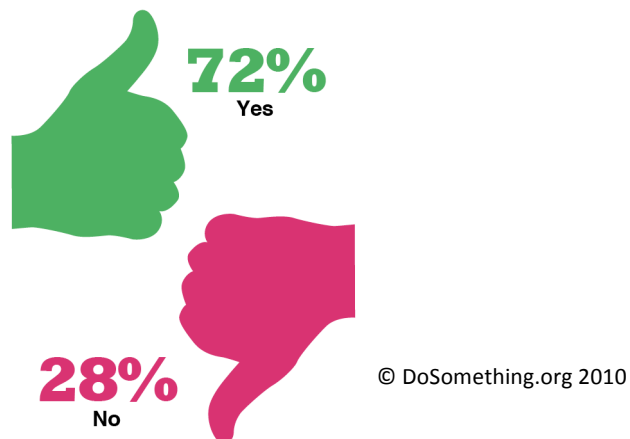


**Our suggestion: If political activism is what you love, then do it! Be sure to describe your passion and explain your contributions.**

## 6. “Do you consider political work (advocacy or campaigning) to be community service?”

Of respondents, 72% considered political work to be a type of community service, but one admissions officer cautioned, “It depends on the political work done. Community organizing seems more like service to me than working on a politician’s campaign.”

### Is Political Work Community Service?



**Our suggestion: If you care deeply about politics, then rock it. Be sure to explain why you care about that advocacy work or candidate, and how your work benefited the overall community.**

## B. Communicating Your Service

### 7. “Can you tell when a student seems insincere about his or her volunteer experience?”

The vast majority of admissions officers felt confident in their ability to determine an applicant’s sincerity. One admissions officer noted, “When the student talks about service in terms of hours, that is usually a red flag.” Another admissions officer said, “We can typically notice the level of a student’s sincerity by the way that he or she describes their experience and the ways in which it has impacted their life.”

**Our suggestion: Don’t just brag about the hours you’ve spent volunteering; make a point to detail what you did and how it mattered. Focus on your overall impact, rather than time logged.**

**8. “Is it possible to have too many community service hours?”**

Of respondents, 33.3% suggested that it is possible to have too many community service hours. “It is the value of the work rather than the time that is most important,” said one admissions officer. However, 66.7% noted it was not possible to have too many hours. One officer noted “Unless it’s affecting your grades or other parts of your life, you should feel free to do as much community service as you’d like.”

**Our suggestion: Rock your cause, but be sure to prioritize and have a good balance between volunteering and everyday life. Always be honest about hours spent and you’ll do just fine.**

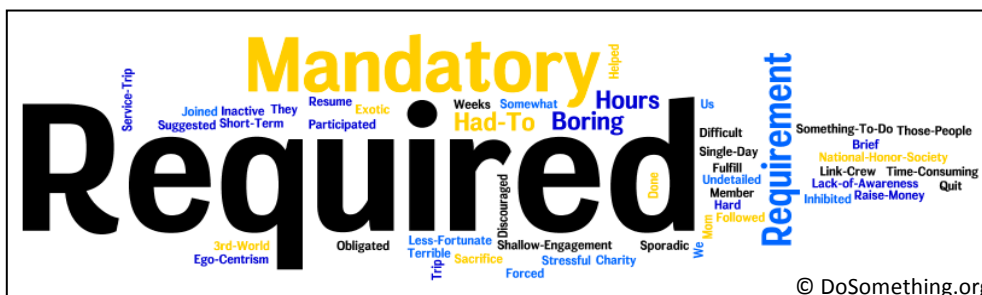
**9. “Please list three words you would like to see and do not like to see when applicants describe their community service.”**

When reviewing an application, admissions officers indicated which terms that they most look for in describing community service; the terms “Leadership,” “Commitment,” and “Passion” stood out among the rest. Various synonyms were also listed, including reflection from the student on how their work has positively influenced them.



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Conversely, the words “Required” and “Mandatory” were viewed as undesirable red flags in student applications. Negative reflections in general were also clearly frowned upon.



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**Our suggestion: Choose words that clearly illustrate your passion and commitment for your cause. Describe your work from the heart. Avoid negative feedback, clichés, and any suggestion that your volunteer efforts might have been the result of an obligation.**

## 10. “How should applicants document their community service (choose as many as applicable)”

Of respondents, 100% said the essay is the preferred way to document community service. Additionally, 63.6% of respondents said they'd like to also see a reference letter that bolsters the applicant's sincere dedication to a cause or organization. Additional materials like videos or photos are not always necessary. 21.2% of respondents said photos should be used to document community service, and only 6.1% said a video should be included with an application.

**Our suggestion: Take the time to write a terrific essay that speaks to your level of commitment and impact. Ask for a reference from someone who can personally vouch for what you've done and skip the photos and video unless requested.**

## 11. “How far back should an applicant cite community service?”

Of respondents, 63.6% said they prefer to see citations of community service beginning with high school. Of respondents, 15.2% said the summer after middle school before high school. While high school is the best timeframe to record all activities, the 18.2% who specified 'other' point out that indication of a longer commitment is still relevant. One admissions officer said, “For as long as necessary to convey the importance of the engagement (to self and community)” where another added that “Long term service in an activity that began prior to HS and continues through HS might be illuminated in a personal statement.”

**Our suggestion: Reference meaningful service. Focus on activities from the most recent 5 years, unless prior experiences were exceptional.**

## C. Understanding the Admissions Officers' Perspective

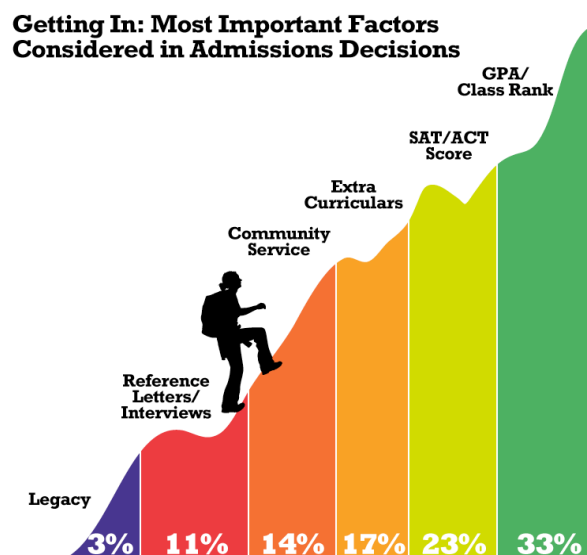
### 12. “Are you aware when a school requires community service? Does that requirement “taint” your perception of the applicant’s commitment?”

Of respondents, 75% stated that a school requiring community service does not “taint” their perception of the applicant’s commitment. Still, one admissions officer noted, “It doesn't necessarily taint the perception because it's not their fault that it was a requirement - but their effort, lessons learned, desire to help, etc., is reflected in how they describe the service.” Another added, “We want to see what depth the student was involved like planning, organizing, or specific duties.”

**Our suggestion: Even if your experience was required, make sure that your level of involvement is clear, focusing on what you learned, impacted, and were most passionate about.**

### 13. “Please rank the following in your admissions decisions, from most important (1) to least important (6):”

Of respondents, 33% ranked GPA/Class Rank #1, and 23% ranked SAT/ACT score #2. Grades and test scores are still the most important criteria for getting into college. However, extra-curricular activities and community service are close behind – with 14% ranking community service as the fourth most important factor. Reference letters/interviews came in 5<sup>th</sup> and legacy/relationship to the school was the least important factor.



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**Our suggestion: Study! Your grades and SAT/ACT scores are the most important elements of your college application and a terrific community service and extracurricular life is what can make your application stand out from the pack.**

**14. “Many colleges & universities reserve a certain number of spots for various special categories (legacy, specific sports, etc.). Does your admissions process reserve a number of “community leaders?”**

Of respondents, 100% of respondents said they do not reserve spots for “community leaders.” Argued one admissions officer, “We try not to use any sort of ‘spot-holding’ or ‘quota’ systems, but use more of a qualitative approach.”

**Our suggestion: Community service won’t guarantee you a spot at a top college, but showcasing your service will help distinguish your application from the pile.**

**15. “Do you consider the possibility that some High School students are not able to allocate time to volunteer, because of the need to work to help support their family?”**

Of respondents, 96.9% said they consider the need to work as an important element to consider. While service is a valuable commitment to community and cause, admissions officers understand that certain family situations preclude students from volunteerism. Said one admissions officer, “We value any extra curricular equally, and can see evidence of good citizenship in many activities (including work to support their family).”

**Our suggestion: If a job, sports team, or family obligation precludes you from being involved in the community, make sure you talk about that commitment. Your application is a chance for the admissions office to get to know you. Tell them what makes you tick.**

**16. “Does being a member of a service organization like the Boy Scouts have more or less weight than an unaffiliated student volunteering?”**

Of respondents, 80% gave no extra weight to organizational affiliations. One admissions officer noted, “It does not matter. We give equal weight to the type of activity. What matters is the level of commitment and leadership.”

**Our suggestion: Working with a “big-name” organization won’t give you an edge. It’s what you do, not who you do it with that matters most.**

**17. Please indicate the awards that you recognize and admire:**

- a) Do Something Award (formerly BR!CK Award)
- b) Prudential Spirit of the Community
- c) Eagle Scout
- d) Gold Award
- e) President's Service Award
- f) Jefferson Award

Of respondents, 100% recognized and admired the Eagle Scout Award and 68.8% recognized the President's Service Award.

**Our suggestion: Never assume that a college admissions officer knows about your award – be sure to explain the selection process and why you were recognized.**

## CONCLUSION

Top colleges and universities are interested in filling their campuses with bright, balanced, and interesting students. While grades and test scores remain the most important factors in the process, it is clear that passion and commitment to something bigger plays a key role in college admissions decisions. Taking the lead to bring about change in a community will help set a student apart from his or her peers, and communicating depth in that experience is also a determining factor for admissions officers. Essays are the perfect place for students to showcase the impact their service has had on both themselves and their individual communities, as well as highlight their motivations and inspirations for getting involved. Demonstrated passion and experience with community action is sure to solidify a candidate's potential to be a successful college student and alumnus at any number of colleges and universities across the country.

The full *Community Service and College Admissions Survey* is published by DoSomething.org.

This report can be downloaded online at [DoSomething.org/Survey](http://DoSomething.org/Survey).

For additional questions, please contact [survey@dosomething.org](mailto:survey@dosomething.org)