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Engagement Opportunities at the United Way of Greater Lafayette

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Engagement Opportunities at the United Way of Greater Lafayette

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Student Author Bio Sketch

YeChan Lim is a May 2018 graduate with a master's degree in environmental and ecological engineering. During his time at Purdue, he was involved in Purdue Engineering Outreach, Purdue Energy Forum, the Purdue Varsity Glee Club, and the Lafayette Regional Science & Engineering Fair. In September he began his year of service with Green Iowa AmeriCorps as an audit coordinator, providing education and outreach on energy efficiency and performing weatherization of low-income homes in Davenport, Iowa. In this article, YeChan describes his experience working with the United Way of Greater Lafayette and other opportunities for students and community members to get involved.

Introduction

I was first introduced to the United Way of Greater Lafayette through a service-learning class in environmental and ecological engineering, Urban Water Projects (EEE 49500), during the Spring 2018 semester. The class involved collaborating with a local community partner to decrease stormwater runoff in order to improve the health of the Wabash River watershed. This was accomplished through the use of two rain barrels and 800 native plants, diverting 22,000 gallons of stormwater from the Wabash River annually. The design process allowed the team to work extensively with the staff at the United Way of Greater Lafayette and other organizations in the area. This project gave me the opportunity to collaborate with Amy Wood, the director of volunteer engagement, to discuss the impact of this project and other opportunities to get involved with the United Way. It also gave the team a chance to get out of the classroom and work with real stakeholders in a constantly evolving environment. The team went through many iterations of the project, and each setback gave us the opportunity to look at the problem in a different way and come up with a new design solution.

Community Partner Description

The United Way of Greater Lafayette is a nonprofit organization that works to create a positive change within Tippecanoe County, which is evident in their mission statement: "Mobilizing our community to improve lives." The United Way facility acts as a hub for many programs,

including Read to Succeed, Kindergarten Countdown Camp, and Voluntary Income Tax Assistance (VITA), all of which will be discussed in depth in the next section.

Not only does the United Way produce their own programs, but they fundraise and collaborate with local partner agencies to address needs of the local community. In 2017 alone, the United Way raised \$5,250,250 to support many of these programs and partner organizations. All of this work is accomplished with only 18 staff members. Therefore, the United Way relies heavily on volunteers from the local community to provide assistance and leadership for community members who rely on these programs. This demand is even greater during the summer months when a large portion of the volunteers, many of whom are college students, are unavailable due to internships or other time conflicts and vacations.

The United Way of Greater Lafayette got involved in this service-learning opportunity because they wanted to become a leader on community issues in the Greater Lafayette area. Stormwater runoff, especially from large buildings with impervious parking lots like the United Way building, can have detrimental impacts on the local environment. By working together with the team on this issue and installing an educational sign for visitors to see, they are making a positive impact on the community and encouraging others to do the same.

Volunteer Opportunities

While the Urban Water Projects course may be complete, there are plenty of opportunities to get involved. Read to Succeed is a program where community members can volunteer time in a local classroom to help children develop reading skills up to a third grade level. The ability to read at this level is crucial as there is a shift from "learning how to read" to "reading to learn," according to Amy Wood. This unlocks the door for students to learn more effectively and ensure that they are not falling behind. Volunteers have the option to pick out one hour a day per week within the school day to go to a classroom and help students to read. One-on-one attention is a great way to engage students and ensure that they are on-track for future educational success.

During the summer, Kindergarten Countdown Camp is a free program that is designed to prepare incoming kindergarten students with little to no preschool experience. Like the Read to Succeed program, volunteers go one day a week for a two-hour block to assist teachers with various activities. The program helps incoming students to adjust their routines and help them transition to a school day.

This helps to cut down on time that teachers have to spend at the beginning of the school year transitioning students and increases productivity in the classroom.

A final United Way program is the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA), where low-income community members can come in and get help filling out their tax returns for free. Volunteers must first complete IRS certification, but assistance is available through the Krannert School of Management. Once completed, volunteers can assist with tax returns for those making less than \$66,000 per year. Since the inception of the program in 2010, volunteers have prepared more than 6,700 tax returns and saved local residents over \$643,000 in tax fees. Volunteers have the opportunity to learn a valuable skill and assist community members who do not have the technical or financial means to properly fill out a tax return.

Conclusion

The United Way of Greater Lafayette is hard at work serving the local community. However, they cannot accomplish their mission alone. Volunteers are essential for providing access to these programs that improve the

lives of children and low-income families. All of the opportunities listed above and many more are available online in the volunteer portal on the United Way of Greater Lafayette website. You have the ability to go into the portal and search for volunteer opportunities based on your interests and time availability. To find out more, go to <https://www.uwlafayette.org/volunteer-center>.

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