

Case Study: When a Volunteer Project Doesn't Go as Planned—But Becomes Even More Valuable

The Challenge

Three rising high school seniors needed an in-depth service project to fulfill the requirements of their honors program. Their original vision was to serve foster children by creating enrichment activities focused on character development and life values.

The idea sounded promising, but after weeks of emails, phone calls, and research, they discovered that logistical and programming requirements made the project difficult to implement. They also explored running activities at a local city mission, but that option presented challenges as well.

By the start of summer, they still needed a meaningful project and were running out of time to complete one before college application season.

Finding a New Opportunity

Their GradPlanHQ mentor suggested looking at a federally funded summer meal program administered by their school district and hosted by community partners, including the public library.

The opportunity immediately stood out:

- It operated during the summer.
- It served children in the local community.
- It would be finished in time to include in college application essays.
- The public library was willing to provide all activity supplies, eliminating the need for fundraising.

With materials covered, the students could focus entirely on creating impact.

Reality Doesn't Match Expectations

Once they began volunteering, things did not go exactly as planned.

The children attending were younger than expected, requiring them to quickly adapt their activities. Time was limited, and on one day the students had to leave just as the children were arriving for lunch. Another day, severe weather kept families away entirely.

Instead of leading activities, they spent part of their time helping library staff clean the children's area and shelve books.

At the end of the week, the experience felt disappointing. The students questioned whether they had accomplished enough to write about in their college applications.

The Reflection That Changed Everything

During a debrief meeting with their GradPlanHQ mentor, the students were challenged to look beyond the original plan and evaluate what they had actually learned from the angle of using design thinking to improve the volunteer experience for future volunteers in their honors program and to help the library recruit volunteers to offer enrichment activities for children coming to the free meal service.

Through reflection, they realized they had done far more than volunteer for a few days.

They had:

- Researched multiple service opportunities.
- Navigated setbacks and changing circumstances.
- Built relationships with community organizations.
- Identified barriers future volunteers might encounter.
- Learned how to adapt when projects don't go according to plan.

Most importantly, they realized they could use their experience to help other students succeed.

Turning Experience Into Lasting Impact

Rather than defining the project by the activities they delivered, they reframed it around the value they created.

The students developed:

A Volunteer Opportunity Guide

They produced a detailed case study for future honors students interested in volunteering with the summer meal program. The guide outlined:

- Benefits and challenges of the opportunity
- Tips for making a greater impact
- Common obstacles volunteers should anticipate
- Strategies for getting started quickly

Recruitment Materials

The students also designed a flyer that the school district and community partners could use to recruit future student volunteers.

Professional Validation

Both the public librarian and the school district's summer meal program manager gave them a shout out on LinkedIn after the students posted the project to their new profiles. The validation for their contributions and a track record they can keep going was created.

Resume and College Essay Advantage

What initially felt like a failed project became a compelling story of personal growth.

Instead of writing about a perfect volunteer experience, the students were able to demonstrate qualities colleges value highly:

Adaptability

Problem-solving

Initiative

Resilience

Community engagement

Leadership through reflection and improvement

Their experience showed that meaningful service is not always measured by how closely a project follows the original plan. Sometimes the greatest value comes from learning how to pivot, solve real-world problems, and leave behind resources that help others succeed.

Key Takeaway

Volunteer experiences don't have to be perfect to be powerful. The students started with a plan that never fully materialized, but through reflection and strategic storytelling they transformed a somewhat frustrating week into a compelling example of growth, leadership, and impact—exactly the kind of narrative that strengthens resumes, scholarship applications, and college essays.