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Combating the downturn:
Students in Service members lead CSU Fullerton's effort
to aid Orange County's hungry and homeless



As students at California State University, Fullerton, in Orange County, Nicole Muth and Dora Armenta have devoted thousands of hours to serving their community over the last two years.

Muth, 22, and Armenta, 19, are among the 500 members of California Campus Compact's Students in Service AmeriCorps program, which encourages and supports college and university students to make a difference in their communities while earning an educational scholarship.

With students from more than 20 California campuses participating in the nine-year-old program each year, California Campus Compact makes available more than \$570,000 in scholarship awards for participating students. Upon successfully completing a term of service, students receive a scholarship valued at between \$1,000 and \$2,300, depending upon the number of hours of service they contribute.

"I've put in 1,000 hours of volunteer work over the last two years through the Students in Service program," notes Muth, a senior who is double-majoring in psychology and women's studies. "The scholarship is a big incentive to put in as many hours as I do, but I love volunteer work. Volunteering as a Students in Service member has completely changed my life and how I see the world. Every project I take on, I learn something new about myself and about the community."

Adds Armenta, a junior sociology major, "'Being a part of the Students in Service program really emphasizes how important volunteering is to me. By having a goal of a certain number of hours to reach, I have that extra push to give more to the community.'"



As Students in Service members, both Muth and Armenta serve as project directors for CSU Fullerton's Volunteer & Service Center. According to Amy Mattern, the coordinator of the Center and its student volunteer program, "Our student project directors are provided with an incredible opportunity to develop their leadership skills. All of our projects are student-driven. Students are empowered to make decisions and to be innovative. They get to decide the change and see it happen. They take on everything from recruiting volunteers to acting as liaisons to our community partners to leading reflections for volunteers at the end of the service experience.

"All of the Center's projects are more than one-day volunteer events," Mattern continues. "They provide opportunities to serve the community while also illuminating the root causes of problems facing our world. Our motto, 'It's your world – change it,' is not just an empty promise. It is what we believe."



As the Center's only staff member, Mattern says the student project directors are crucial to the significant impact the Center has on the Orange County community each year. Given the current economic downturn, the 11,000 hours of service that Muth, Armenta and the Center's other 2,900 volunteers provide to the community each year are especially crucial.

"It's gone from bad to worse this year," says Mattern. "There are more people in need, and those individuals who nonprofits have been relying on for contributions have less ability to give. Our food banks are critically low. There's a misperception about Orange County – that everything is just like you see on TV shows, like 'The OC.' A lot of people don't realize that there are people living on the streets, in motels and in shelters as well as facing many other issues."

This academic year, with the assistance of Students in Service members like Muth and Armenta, the Center is trying to ramp up its efforts as quickly as possible to serve those in the community who are hungry and homeless. Activities that soon will be underway include preparing and serving food at local soup kitchens and shelters; packing food for needy and homeless families; and coordinating campus drives for food, clothing and hygiene kits. With Mattern's guidance, students also will spend time interacting with homeless individuals and families to better understand the conditions they face.



Plans also are underway for CSU Fullerton’s annual Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week to be held November 16-20. Last year, nearly 170 volunteers contributed more than 1,000 hours in planning, promoting and implementing the week’s student-hosted activities that aim to engage peers in helping to alleviate homelessness and hunger.

Students in Service member Muth coordinated a College Day Experience for homeless and at-risk children from local shelters and a local school for homeless children. Children attended specially designed science and theater classes and visited the campus radio station. Participating high school students met with the director and students from CSU Fullerton’s Guardian Scholars Program, a program that supports former foster youth in their efforts to gain a college education.

“This was a remarkable experience for me,” says Muth. “The day was a huge success. The kids had huge smiles on their faces and were having so much fun. People were congratulating me about how well-organized everything was. I was ecstatic – on Cloud Nine.

“With this kind of work, there’s never a dull moment,” she continues. “It has really allowed me to put myself out there. It has not only made me realize how great I have it, but it has helped me figure out that I want to do social work as my career.”



Fellow Students in Service member Armenta concurs: “Every time I go to the soup kitchen and hand out food, I know that I’m serving more than food. I look into people’s eyes as I serve them and I see a little bit of hope – because someone does care – and then I see a smile on their face. Just by making this very small contribution, I am letting someone know that I am there for them, and that is a wonderful thing.”

To learn more about California Campus Compact’s Students in Service AmeriCorps program, please visit www.cacampuscompact.org.

Does your campus currently participate in California Campus Compact’s Students in Service program? We’d love to hear about the innovative ways in which your Students in Service members are working with communities. Please email Kathy Dalle-Molle at kathydm@cacampuscompact.org.