To Get to Harvard, Go to Haiti?

Frank Bruni    AUG. 13, 2016

This summer, as last, Dylan Hernandez, 17, noticed a theme on the social media accounts of fellow students at his private Catholic high school in Flint, Mich.

“An awfully large percentage of my friends — skewing towards the affluent — are taking ‘mission trips’ to Central America and Africa,” he wrote to me in a recent email. He knows this from pictures they post on Snapchat and Instagram, typically showing one of them “with some poor brown child aged 2 to 6 on their knee,” he explained. The captions tend to say something along the lines of, “This cutie made it so hard to leave.”

But leave they do, after as little as a week of helping to repair some village’s crumbling school or library, to return to their comfortable homes and quite possibly write a college-application essay about how transformed they are.

“It rubs me the wrong way,” Hernandez told me, explaining that while many of his friends are well intentioned, some seem not to notice poverty until an exotic trip comes with it. He himself has done extensive, sustained volunteer work at the Flint Y.M.C.A., where, he said, the children he tutors and plays with would love it “if these same peers came around and merely talked to them.”

“No passport or customs line required,” he added.

Hernandez reached out to me because he was familiar with writing I had done about the college admissions process. What he described is something that has long
bothered me and other critics of that process: the persistent vogue among secondary-school students for so-called service that’s sometimes about little more than a faraway adventure and a few lines or paragraphs on their applications to selective colleges.

It turns developing-world hardship into a prose-ready opportunity for growth, empathy into an extracurricular activity.

And it reflects a broader gaming of the admissions process that concerns me just as much, because of its potential to create strange habits and values in the students who go through it, telling them that success is a matter of superficial packaging and checking off the right boxes at the right time. That’s true only in some cases, and hardly the recipe for a life well lived.

In the case of drive-by charity work, the checked box can actually be counterproductive, because application readers see right through it.

“The running joke in admissions is the mission trip to Costa Rica to save the rain forest,” Ángel Pérez, who is in charge of admissions at Trinity College in Hartford, told me.

Jennifer Delahunty, a longtime admissions official at Kenyon College, said that mission-trip application essays are their own bloated genre.

“Often they come to the same conclusion: People in other parts of the world who have no money are happier than we are!” she told me. “That is eye-opening to some students. But it can be a dangerous thing to write about, because it’s hard to rescue the truth from that cliché.”

Many of the students taking mission trips or doing other charity work outside the country have heartfelt motivations, make a real (if fleeting) contribution and are genuinely enlightened by it. Pérez and Delahunty don’t doubt that. Neither do I.

But there’s cynicism in the mix.

A college admissions counselor once told me about a rich European client of his who called him in a panic, wanting to cancel her family’s usual August vacation so
that her son could go build roads in the developing world. She’d just read or heard somewhere that colleges would be impressed by that.

He asked her if she had a roadway or country in mind. She didn’t.

Richard Weissbourd, a child psychologist and Harvard lecturer who has studied the admissions process in the interest of reforming it, recalled speaking with wealthy parents who had bought an orphanage in Botswana so their children could have a project to write and talk about. He later became aware of other parents who had bought an AIDS clinic in a similarly poor country for the same reason.

“It becomes contagious,” he said.

A more recent phenomenon is teenagers trying to demonstrate their leadership skills in addition to their compassion by starting their own fledgling nonprofit groups rather than contributing to ones that already exist — and that might be more practiced and efficient at what they do.

“It’s a sort of variation on going on a mission trip and figuring out that people all over the world are really the same,” said Stephen Farmer, who’s in charge of undergraduate admissions at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

“I don’t mean to make light of it,” he added, acknowledging that many such trips and nonprofits have benefits, and not just for the college-bound students engaged in them.

But they’re largely reserved for students whose parents are affluent enough to assist the endeavors. And they’re often approached casually and forgotten quickly. “My concern is that students feel compelled to do these things — forced — rather than feeling that they’re answering some inner call,” Farmer said.

In many cases they are compelled. Tara Dowling, the director of college counseling at the Rocky Hill School in East Greenwich, R.I., said that many secondary schools (including, as it happens, Dylan Hernandez’s) now require a minimum number of hours of service from students, whose schedules — jammed with sports, arts, SAT prep and more — leave little time for it.
Getting it done in one big Central American swoop becomes irresistible, and if that dilutes the intended meaning of the activity, who’s to blame: the students or the adults who set it up this way? Dowling noted that without the right kinds of conversations and guidance, “Kids don’t know how to connect these experiences to the rest of their lives, to the bigger picture.”

There are excellent mission trips, which some students do through churches that they already belong to, and less excellent ones. There are also plenty of other summer projects and jobs that can help students develop a deeper, humbler understanding of the world.

Pérez told me that his favorite among recent essays by Trinity applicants came from someone “who spent the summer working at a coffee shop. He wrote about not realizing until he did this how invisible people in the service industry are. He wrote about how people looked right through him at the counter.”

Helicopter parents, stand down! Pérez’s assessment doesn’t mean that you should hustle your teenagers to the nearest Starbucks. It means that whatever they do, they should be able to engage in it fully and reflect on it meaningfully. And if that’s service work, why not address all the need in your own backyard?

Many college-bound teenagers do, but not nearly enough, as Hernandez can attest. He feels awfully lonely at the Flint Y.M.C.A. and, in the context of that, wonders, “Why is it fashionable to spend $1,000-plus, 20 hours traveling, and 120 hours volunteering in Guatemala for a week?”

He wonders something else, too. “Aren’t the children there sad, getting abandoned by a fresh crop of affluent American teens every few days?”

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