Cal Poly Rates High in Student Service to Community

Measured by the percentage of Cal Poly students using Federal Work-Study financial aid for jobs in community service, the university is among the top schools in the nation in serving its neighbors.


Almost 30 percent of Cal Poly students with Federal Work-Study jobs are working in local schools, government social service departments and other organizations. That rate places the university 14th in its category.

"And that's a conservative figure," said Cal Poly Federal Work-Study Program Manager Luann McDonald. Her office doesn't count students engaged in off-campus community-service work if they're hired by a Cal Poly office, such as many education students working in local schools part time as tutors through the University Center for Teacher Education.

Cal Poly's conservative tallies are in contrast to the practice at many schools, according to the Washington Monthly article. The journal and Northwestern found that many schools inflate their community service figures by including jobs that don't really qualify, such as working in the campus library or theater. The two organizations conducted the study to see how well colleges are serving one intent of the program: to encourage students to serve their communities.

Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Sen. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.) have introduced legislation that would require colleges to spend at least a quarter of their Federal Work-Study money on community service, the article said. The current requirement is 7 percent.
The Washington Monthly-Medill analysis found 174 schools don't even nominally meet the minimum requirement and discovered that many prestigious universities, especially on the East Coast, are the least involved in community service.

The largest off-campus employer of Cal Poly Work-Study students is the County of San Luis Obispo. Second-largest is the San Luis Coastal Unified School District. Many of the students are involved in tutoring at all grade levels. Others work for such agencies as the city's Housing Authority, helping with after-school programs for youngsters.

The federal program pays 75 percent of the students' wages and the employing agency pays the remainder. Local agencies can thus afford to hire help they otherwise couldn't.

"It's a total win-win all around," McDonald said. "Employers love it. Students love it. The community benefits."

McDonald attributes Cal Poly's high rate of off-campus community-service employment partly to the university's learn-by-doing philosophy.

"Our students are the type to be looking for experience in a real job in the field they're interested in," she said.

More than 600 Cal Poly students hold Federal Work-Study jobs in a typical year. McDonald notes that community service at Cal Poly isn't limited to the Federal Work-Study program. Many students serve as unpaid volunteers in county nonprofits or are involved in community projects through a wide range of related academic and other programs.

The Washington Monthly article, "The Other College Rankings" by Joshua Green, is available at www.washingtonmonthly.com.

- 30 -