

FEATURE

CAREER

The pros of pro bono

Working for nothing doesn't seem like a good career move, but community service can do wonders for your job prospects and personal satisfaction levels

Ronwyn Masie (25) is a trainee doctor at Chris Hanu Baragwanath Hospital in Gauteng. On a bad day, she will work 24 hours straight, followed by ward duty and a clinic visit.

"There are days when you feel you are being exploited and you're too tired to think straight," Masie says. "But the practical experience you gain is unbelievable. I don't think doctors in other parts of the world get the kind of exposure we do here."

In response to an uphill battle to attract doctors to rural areas, government introduced compulsory community service for health professionals in the public sector to force doctors to work in under-served areas. This means that after studying for six years, Masie is required to do an internship in a public hospital for two years and then one year of community service at another public institution, such as a primary health-care clinic or a far-flung rural hospital. From next year, students will have to do two years of community service.

"This means that before you are even

able to specialise, you will have worked for 10 years at very low pay and in difficult conditions," she says. "Paying off your student loan can take a lot longer than if you worked soon after you graduated."

Students studying health sciences, such as physiotherapists and pharma-

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cists, also have to do community service. But so far, commerce and legal students have escaped the requirement. Still, there are plenty of opportunities for students from all disciplines to contribute to society while getting practical experience and beefing up their CVs.

Street lawyers

Taswell Papier, a lawyer at Edward Nathan Sonnenbergs and chair of the Law Society of SA's pro bono committee, started doing pro bono legal work as a student at the University of

Cape Town (UCT). Pro bono is a long-established principle at legal firms whereby attorneys render their services to those who can't afford them.

"In SA there is a great need for legal assistance in areas plagued by poverty and illiteracy," says Papier. "Students can do amazing work to improve access to justice."

Soon, all lawyers will be required to do 24 hours of pro bono work a year to meet the target set out in the legal services charter, which aims to improve transformation in the legal profession.

Firms such as Leppan Beech have set up dedicated pro bono departments to deliver services to the poor.

"We wanted to be able to share our skills and experience to help the communities in which we work," says Leppan Beech director Tinyiko Kubayi. "This means representing low-income clients directly or indirectly by assisting the charitable organisations that work in these communities."

"Each one of our attorneys across a range of departments is required to dedicate a certain number of billable hours to pro bono work. And we

encourage them to take part in projects which they are passionate about."

While at university, students can volunteer to work at law clinics, such as those at the universities of Cape Town and Witwatersrand.

The UCT Law Clinic offers practical training for senior law students while operating as a fully functioning law practice. It employs a staff of five attorneys and one candidate attorney.

The clinic has two sections: a litigation practice, which offers students their

first opportunity to deal directly with clients and gain first-hand experience of court procedures; and a refugee office, which gives students the chance to assist asylum-seekers.

Senior law students may register for the legal aid and legal practice course, which allows them to work in the clinic as legal advisors under supervision of the clinic's attorneys. Many students who have completed the course say it should be made compulsory.

Doing the numbers

Commerce students can help out in a myriad of ways. Nedbank, for example,

organises graduates on its programme to assist non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with their financial information.

"Some NGOs lack the most basic of skills – budgeting, raising finance, managing cash flow," says investment manager Mike Wilmot. "Students can help organisations become more efficient, which helps them attract future funding and remain sustainable."

And working on the board of an NGO can give you practical experience that may be useful later when you are eyeing a board position.

"By attending board meetings and learning the processes and administration involved, you can learn the ropes before being appointed to listed companies later on," says the CEO of recruitment company Landelahni, Sandra Burmeister.

With a shortage of skills in professions such as accounting, students can use their skills to teach disadvantaged students.

The SA Institute of Chartered Accountants (Saica), for example, encourages bursary students on its Thuthuka programme to go back to their high schools and tutor maths and accounting.

Students have, so far, participated in providing maths and accounting classes back at their own schools or at schools near where they are studying, acted as group leaders at development camps, been mentors for local and previously disadvantaged schools on the JSE/Liberty Life Investment Challenge and acted as invigilators for the Free State Pastel Thuthuka Accounting Olympiad. They have also played a role in career awareness programmes at their or local schools and act (and are trained) as mentors for younger students.

"We believe it is important that our students share opportunities with their communities," says Saica's Natalie Zimmelman, the project director for transformation and growth. "It is a

contract term for all Thuthuka students that they spend at least one holiday a year doing some sort of community service. It's their way of giving back."

Doing good

If you want to use your skills to benefit a less fortunate community (and it is not a requirement like community service), hook up with one of the programmes available on www.greatergood.co.za.

Greater Good will match your skills with organisations that need them. Whether you have a flair for marketing, a passion for business or a knack for numbers, there is bound to be an organisation that needs what you've got.

Jacqui Pile

PRO BONO

Upside

- You learn on the job. You get to translate theory into practice;
- It is personally rewarding;
- It helps you learn skills you wouldn't learn in the classroom, with the benefit of a mentor;
- It shows you are passionate about your career which looks good on your CV;
- It helps you make a decision about the career you want to pursue once you finish your studies.

Downside

- You don't always get financially compensated for your work. And community service can delay paying off your student loan;
- It is difficult to find a balance. Pro bono work competes with valuable study time;
- You may feel out of your depth in terms of practical experience;
- You may have to travel to poor or "dangerous" areas outside your comfort zone;
- It can be emotionally taxing.

SAY IT

"I've been spat on, kicked and vomited on by abusive drunken patients. But when just one patient out of 200 you've seen that day says thank you, it makes it all worthwhile." – Ronwyn Masie, trainee doctor, Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, Gauteng

"After I graduated from Rhodes with a BCom Hons, I sat on the board of an orphanage. You'd be surprised at what you can offer with even a little work experience, from raising funds, to accounting, to giving advice on how to invest the funds." – Mike Wilmot, investment professional

"Law is all about fairness, justice and equity. Doing pro bono work gives students a chance to put those values into practice." – Taswell Papier, lawyer and chair of the Law Society of SA's pro bono committee