



Stories of Service

College Possible Milwaukee



Tia Powell, College Possible student, College Possible coach 2018-2020

It seems that College Possible has always been a part of my life. My journey with College Possible began my junior year of high school in 2011. In starting the program, it created a chain reaction of events. I did tons of stuff in order to get into college, got into college, and with College Possible's help, I graduated from college. I started serving with College Possible in 2018. This also created a chain reaction of events. At the time, I was fresh out of college, shy, and felt a bit powerless. Throughout my first year, I became a different person. Not only did I have a first year, but I also got a second. I chose to do a second year because I liked the person I had become over the course of the first year and I wanted to continue to grow. I also chose a second year because I liked the relationships I was building and wanted more relationship building.

I started my second year with College Possible in 2019. It was my second year, which meant I knew more than the new corps coming in. All returners knew that as returners we had to take on a leadership role. I knew from watching the returners the year before that leadership came in different forms. I knew that I was more of a silent leader, but somehow I had it in my head that I needed to be a type of leader who knew it all and had everything under control. Since that was not me, it meant I had to fake it until I made it. The crazy thing about faking it though is that you actually gain the skills you were faking in the process. While faking having a voice, I actually got one. I went from pushing myself to speak in every meeting to speaking when I had something to say (which ended up being every meeting). I went from looking like I knew what I was doing to actually knowing what I was doing. I gained confidence in my work and myself. I gained confidence in talking professionally and to my students by asking the right questions and leading with curiosity. I never expected to grow as much as I did this year but I did.

I am grateful to College Possible and AmeriCorps for two wonderful years. I grew in ways I never thought I could. I am thankful that College Possible gave me the freedom I needed in order to grow. At any other job, one would be afraid to try new things. There was room for trial and error. At College Possible, I was able to be both a masterpiece and a work in progress all at once.

Maddie Zzas, CPT member 2019-2020

When thinking about how my College Possible and AmeriCorps experience impacted me as a person, I think about the word *influence*. The definition of influence is "the capacity to have an effect on the character, development, or behavior of someone or something, or the effect itself."

When I think about my College Possible experience, I not only think about the influence it has had on me, but the influence an organization like this has on thousands of young, growing, deserving individuals all over the nation. The passion I have developed for the individuals, families, and communities we serve has come so naturally because of the passion that radiates throughout this organization every day. I have never before been surrounded by so many people who all share such a strong passion for one mission. It has been an incredibly humbling journey to be a part of, and I never thought I would experience the impact I have, on both a professional and personal level. There was so much I learned – so much I discovered about others and myself – and so much I came to love. I hope to continue to live out this level of passion and create space for influence as I move forward in my career and in life, just as College Possible has done for me.

Kadesia (Kayydee) Hill, college coach 2019-2020

Since the beginning of my term at College Possible, it took a lot of adjusting. I was not used to how things worked as a site, so it took a lot of asking and then implementing the things I had learned in order to push my success here at College Possible. I really did not know what to expect. I did not know that I would talk some of my students through their problems and pain that they were feeling besides being in school. Some of my students had to struggle, some of them had financial issues, some of them had more than one family role and had to keep up, and some of them just were not interested. How I responded to those things showed me what type of coach I am. I am a strong believer in motivation and healthy spaces to have these in depth conversations. It was a struggle at first to be able to grow a relationship with my students, but ultimately, they would come around. I appreciate my term here at College Possible because I have learned so much from my peers, our leadership, and my students. What helped me ground into my role is the training that has been provided. If I had not had that training, I would not know how to be able to do my job effectively.

What we do here at College Possible can sometimes be overwhelming and at many times I felt that way, but in the end, it is rewarding. It is rewarding for working within your own community, creating pathways for your students, showing them the way, and reaching out to your peers and supervisor for additional support. I also learned a lot about portfolio management and how not every week will be the same. I have had a great deal of systems in order to reach out to my students. It took a lot for me to be able to know what works, what does not, what I can control and what I cannot. This was by far the most humbling work I have ever done, but I have learned so much that will help shape me into who I am for my future endeavors for life after College Possible.

Acacia Balsewicz, College Possible student, college coach 2019-2021

Coming into this term of service, especially as a former student, I was not 100% sure what I should expect. Being on the outside looking in, I did not think about how much work went into the role of being a coach. The role of a College Coach, or any coach, is not easy work. As a student, I saw my College Coach as someone who was there to check-in, answer any questions I had, and be there to make sure I was getting from semester to semester. I did not know the large number of students they were working with at a given time. I did not realize that it is normal to have a student not respond to you right away or even hang up the phone on you.

Alongside the challenges, there were tons of great experiences I was not expecting to have. I did not know I would come into this role and form such meaningful, lasting relationships with my peers. I did not know I would make such a difference in the lives of my students, as they shared so much about their personal lives. I did not know I would step outside of my comfort zone as much as I did. I did not know I would feel more comfortable having my thoughts and ideas heard. I did not know I would have so many opportunities to improve and gain skills that would be benefit me long after I have left College Possible.

What I do know now is that my term of service taught me things about myself that I did not know I was capable of doing. It brought me new people, new experiences, and new skills that I will hold with me forever. I also know that the students we serve are some of the most strong, ambitious, and talented people I have had the pleasure to work with. They taught me so much and pushed me to be a better version of myself and learn new things in order to best support them. I would not change anything about my term of service, and I know it will take me far.

Ben Dubielak, high school coach 2019-2021

My year of service has really opened my eyes and my mind to the power of community and solidarity. I have always been a very independent person: I like to work individually and my introverted nature can take over sometimes in different situations. I usually work through issues or problems on my own, thinking through them and maybe asking my roommate for advice.

Yet this year showed me how important and impactful it can be to lean on other people and create a support network around you that allows you to step back and ask for help sometimes. My fellow AmeriCorps members, the Leadership Team, and even the students I worked with all supported me in different ways this year, which is amazing to go back and look upon months later. I learned the value of having people around you who care for you and are working toward the same mission and goal as you. We created great spaces and feelings of community--both in the College Possible office space and at the high schools I entered. Having a community to support me this year has allowed me to be more confident in my choices, more organized (which has always been my struggle), and has provided me with much greater educational resources than I ever would have on my own. Independence is still my thing: I spend a lot of my time alone and genuinely prefer it that way in my personal life. My professional development, however, has greatly benefitted from having other people to lean on and bounce ideas off in a community atmosphere, which I am certainly grateful for.

Adam Hoefs, High School coach 2018-2020

I am incredibly proud of my student, Isabel* (pseudonym). Her relationship with College Possible and myself did not start well; she was almost dropped from the program in the fall of her junior year. Thankfully, she had a change of heart and became very active in the program. I got to know her very well over the rest of my 2 years, and learned about everything that she has had to overcome to get to where she was. She has had a tumultuous life, and her challenges did not end in high school. We talked often and I did whatever I could to support her. Isabel* is very driven and independent, and it was a pleasure to see her continued growth in my time with College Possible. Through resources from College Possible, we learned about the Horatio Alger scholarship. Isabel* was a good fit for this, and she worked hard to make a great essay and complete the application. Her hard work paid off, and she received a \$10,000 scholarship. Because of this, she will not have to worry about going into debt for college, and will even be able to buy a car. I am incredibly proud of what Isabel* has accomplished, and am excited to see what she does in college and the rest of her future.

Maddy Saunders, College coach 2019-2020

When I started this position, I had two goals: I wanted to get to know Milwaukee and find friends in my new state, and I wanted to decide if higher education advising was a passion or just a fleeting desire. As far as I was concerned, if I ended the year with a couple of friends and a plan for the next year, I would count it as a success. I didn't think this year would be easy, but I thought I already knew how it would be hard: I'd be living on a stipend, I didn't know a soul in the city, and I would have no idea how to help my students. Looking back, none of those really represents the challenges, successes, and growth I experienced this year.

This year of service was not what I expected. I definitely accomplished my goals, but that is not what I think about when I think about my year. I think about the relationships I built with my students and all the breakthroughs and achievements they shared with me. I think about my fellow AmeriCorps members, how they sat with me and encouraged me on the hard days and celebrated and laughed with me on the great ones. I think about all the ways I have grown in knowing myself and learning about others this year. I think about all the trainings we had that helped me start to see all the issues in the higher education system, and gave me the tools to start to combat those issues. I think about the confidence College Possible gave me to speak on injustices. I think about how profoundly this year affected who I am. This year was not what I expected by any means, and not just because a pandemic disrupted my term of service. Despite the changes, I know the effects of this year will ripple far into my future, and for that, I am so grateful.

Kaleigh McGinn, college coach 2019-2020

When I came into this year of service, I really did not know what to expect. I was open to learning new things and growing in any way that I could. Having the experience of being a nontraditional student myself made me feel, as if I could to some extent, understand what my students were experiencing and support them the best way possible. I greatly enjoyed having Alverno and MATC as my institutions to look over. I could identify with not only being a two-year student, but also a commuter student. There are many stigmas nontraditional students have to overcome, and my overall goal was to let students know it truly is okay to not be on the same path or trajectory as other students. My mission this past year was to empower students to realize not every path to a degree has to look the same and they are in fact creating their own path.

Too often, my students would feel as if they were confined to a strict timeline. Family responsibilities, inadequate financial aid, failing a class, and so many other situations would deter them from the timeline they desperately wanted to be on. I had to have many candid conversations with students to recognize that they are truly on their own time. I could see this being an empowering moment for students to realize they did not need to be on a strict timeline, even as idle as it was maybe. Of course financial aid is still something to think about, but as long as students were informed of how the change could affect them, students would be well on their way. I could see them light up and lose the feeling of judgment and disappointment. However, that feeling would not totally go away, but it did help to break the negative barrier they were tying themselves to.

I not only saw this in my enrolled students, but particularly in my unenrolled students. I had many conversations with unenrolled and re-enrolling students who were worried they could not fully commit to being full time students. It was empowering for them to know they could do what they could within their capabilities to make their goals and dreams a reality. With more confidence in their path, I could see students had more confidence in themselves and their capabilities. These conversations helped to push students to realize their potential of moving forward pursuing their education.

I had many conversations with students about being on their own time and breaking the stigma of college solely being four years at a university. One instance sticks out in particular. I had an interesting relationship with my student Hope* (pseudonym). It took a while for her to get comfortable with me. She had transferred from Alverno to MATC and then experienced difficulties completing the semester. One day she messaged me saying how far behind she had felt to other people her age and just felt in a low place. Everything she said resonated with me – it was how I had once felt. I wanted her to realize what she was going through was only temporary and whatever other people were doing is not right or wrong. In the same way, what she was doing was not right or wrong, either. As she began to feel less of the social pressures and stigmas, she expanded her horizons to consider other areas of studies that might be a better fit.

I am glad I was able to empower her to feel as if she truly was on her own time. It is something I would say often to my students in messaging and in the things I would share but I am sure they deemed as nonchalant. For the students who I have very intentional conversation with, they would know it was not just something I would just say, it was something I truly meant and stood by. I can feel for some students, like Hope*, that have embraced the differences in their paths. I could see if they needed to adjust their plans and how they felt stronger and more confident in the direction they wanted to go. This is what it is all about: stretching our students to their highest potential to advocate and be confident in themselves.

I hope that if my students have taken anything away from me, it is that they should be proud of themselves and their paths. Taking a nontraditional path is not always the easiest one, but it is the one they are on. I hope they can embrace it and make the most of their journey.

Rachel Novak, STEP coach 2019-2020, college coach 2020-2021

I started my term with a strong sense of imposter syndrome. Since when was I qualified to work with students? Who let me do this job in the first place? I felt like every other coach interacted more naturally with their students and provided more for them than I could. I have learned a lot during my term of service, but the most important thing I am taking with me is the confidence I have built over the year. My experience with AmeriCorps has given me the space to develop and grow in a safe environment; everyone is so supportive and focused on the same goal: helping our students succeed. In working with students and collaborating with the other AmeriCorps members, I have come to realize that I do have a lot to offer and I am indeed qualified for this position. I have also had the opportunity to learn from the amazing and talented people around me, which inspires me to continue working on my own skills. I am very grateful for my time with AmeriCorps, and I am confident that I will carry this experience into any position I hold in the future!

Brennan Maly, high school coach 2019-2020

Although all of my students have impressed me in both their work ethic and resiliency, two of my students have been especially inspirationally perseverant this year. Julianna* (pseudonym) struggled through much of this year due to the health concerns of both her grandma and grandpa, who she lives with and largely considers as the adults closest to her. I could see the distress and worry through much of this year in her eyes, I would ask if everything was okay, feeling for her, but also feeling helpless knowing that I could only do so much. "It's my grandparents," she would say, looking down. Despite the adversity felt both at home, between working 20-30 hours a week at her job, and at school (especially from the college application side of things), Julianna* was accepted into 8 colleges and graduated 2nd in her class. She will attend Carroll University in the fall with nearly a full-ride scholarship where she plans to study to become a nurse. Heartbreakingly, her grandmother passed in May due to the ongoing health complications that burdened Julianna* throughout much of the year. Despite living in tumultuous times, stories like hers shows that hope and determination can outlast pain, and she is an inspiration and not an inspiration in the insincere, overused sense, but definitively so. Her hard work and triumph in the midst of what has been a continually stressful year--on all fronts--serves as a moving and heartening lesson of perseverance.

Second, I want to highlight Diana* (pseudonym). I remember first meeting Diana* in the hallway of her high school sometime in early September after what would have been her lunch period. I recognized her from her picture in Salesforce and offered a smile, extended my hand, and introducing myself as her senior coach. I was met with the blankest, most unconvinced stare I think I may have ever seen. "Okay", she said. Flustered, I sort of rambled about what we were going to work on over the course of the year and quickly fled, saying something along the lines of nice to meet you. I remember one of her friends telling her: "you're supposed to say nice to meet you back" ...to which I was met with silence. I am not sure where there was a shift, but soon thereafter Diana* regularly stopped by my classroom to talk about her personal statement, college, and the FAFSA. Throughout this time, I learned about how Diana* had been born nearly three months prematurely and was required to have an esophageal stent surgically implanted to support her undeveloped neck muscles. Consequently, she was unable to speak until she was 4-years old. Despite being a couple of years tardy to speaking, Diana* made up for lost time by being one of the most talkative students in the cohort. She regularly told stories about her childhood, such as when she was little and she cried when she learned that she could not go to school during the weekends, so her mom called her teacher to talk to Diana* and console her. Soon enough, Diana* was ahead of the majority of her peers, being one of the first to successfully complete her FAFSA and have applied to five schools by the end of the fall semester. Subsequently, Diana* was accepted into seven of the nine schools she had applied to and will attend Alverno in the fall, where she will also study to become a nurse.

Although service reflections are often supposed to be about member impact, my experience is largely tied to that of my students and their stories. I have been moved by my students, and getting to know them and seeing their growth has been reinvigorating. I am more hopeful now than prior to my AmeriCorps experience, because I see the potential in my students and what I believe to be a better future because of them. It is easy to be swept up in the cynicism of the day-to-day, but getting to know my perseverant, bright students over the course of my term of service has given me a feeling of peace for a better tomorrow.

Josie Hildebrandt, high school coach 2019-2021

I was nervous the day of my first after-school session. We had just done all the legwork of recruitment and now it was time to shift gears into actually coaching. I spent the hour before the session reviewing the lesson plan I had put together for that afternoon and triple-checking that I had all the materials I needed. The last bell of the day rang, and shortly after, about twelve students filled in the seats at the tables around me. A few minutes into the session, my nerves started to melt away and a more natural flow took over as I noticed my students were eager to get started and they already had so many questions about college. We casually chatted about college – what they wanted to know about it – and I got to hear more about their own interests. Over the year, we continued to chat about anything from the excitement and nerves of landing their first job, to their frustrations with a particular subject or teacher. By springtime, I felt that I had gotten to know each of them so much better and supporting them in writing their stories and exploring their college options was energizing. I was honored when one of my students asked me to be her “woman educator honoree” at an international women’s day celebration her club was organizing. Listening to her and her peers speak on what the meaning of being a woman was to them and address intersectionality within woman identities was so inspiring. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to get to know and empower my students this year and I am so excited for all of their bright futures.

Hannah Bluett, college coach 2019-2020

When asked in my final coach meeting for a word to describe my term of service, I spent some time reflecting and finally arrived on a word that captured what I wanted to say: winnowing. Initially, the definition of winnow that struck me was its literal meaning of to separate the wheat from the chaff, to divide what matters and gives sustenance from its less-substantial covering. In public service, it is of the utmost importance to consistently remind oneself of what matters, what gives sustenance, what is fulfilling – and it can sometimes be difficult to sort that out from what has less impact and less reach. At the very least, it is a revolution to resist what is comfortable, complacent, and surface-level. Those revolutionaries who push for more, who push for better, and who hold our organization, communities, and government accountable are those who have dedicated their lives to public service. This kind of work requires heart: the kind of heart that can hold the hands of joy and sorrow at the same time, the kind of heart that understands a symphony has notes that rejoice, grieve, celebrate, and mourn together.

The second thought that struck me about winnowing was the movement of the wind that separates this wheat from its chaff, the kind of wind that blows through the grass with purpose and agility. Much of this year of service has been about movement, both literal and figurative. We have moved out of offices and into homes and communities that are experiencing a great social movement. We watch and participate as people move through our streets for change. Our centers of gravity have moved as our hearts and those of us around us are moved by the testimonies of those whose voices for too long have not been heard. These changes required service members to move their priorities to address what matters for our students, perhaps where these two examinations of winnowing meet. To exist in such a time of movement has been incredibly impactful as a service member; it is with purpose and agility that this year of AmeriCorps members will move into the next phase of their lives, and our students will move into the next phases of their journey. It is these individuals whose hearts are capable of revolution and of connecting those narrow spaces where joy and sorrow intersect.

Gladys Mora, College Possible student, high school coach 2018-2020

Thinking back to my service as an AmeriCorps member, I can easily say that I am proud of everything my students have accomplished. One student really stood out to me – Natalia* (pseudonym). Her motivation was able to motivate me as well. Her life at home was not the easiest, but she never let that stop her from prioritizing her college plans. Natalia* had explored her college and career choices before her senior year began, and she was ready to just start applying. As soon as she was able to, she applied to her top five choices, and was admitted to each one of them. Her dream college was Marquette University; she put in hard work and became an EOP recipient. Not only did she receive EOP, but she also received the All-In Milwaukee scholarship.

Natalia* was ecstatic when she heard all this news, and she was happy to know that her dream of attending college was going to happen. Natalia* was very independent, motivated, and determined. She would always share these qualities with her classmates. She was always willing to help her classmates and give them advice. Her optimistic and cheerful personality could always make anyone’s day. She motivated me to be more disciplined in whatever I do. I am so proud of her work and I cannot wait to hear about her future achievements.

Stella Sun, high school coach 2019-2021

Serving as a junior coach in College Possible is the first job I have had after college. This experience has been thought provoking to me, revealing different aspects of education and the work environment that I have not explored before. Working with my fellow AmeriCorps members and students has enabled me to see my unique quality as an American citizen that grew up in China and is currently working in America.

In my cohort, I am the only person who grew up in a foreign country. This unique background allows me to see things in a more objective and analytical manner, enabling me to gain a more holistic view of how education works and functions. When analyzing problems American public education encounters, I try not to recall my personal stories and let my preference interfere with the judgement I make. Instead, I try to see things from the perspective of an educator. For instance, when students told me that their Math teacher always played videos from Khan Academy in class and had them do math problems on their own, rather than criticizing this teacher for what she was doing, my first reaction was to see what made such a thing happen in the first place. I then realized the workload of that Math teacher was overwhelming. Moreover, she did not major in Math in college and did not know much about Math. She was assigned to be the math teacher because the school needed one. Informed of all of that, I then developed a deeper understanding of the dilemma in which many American public high schools are trapped.

On the other hand, during the course of my service, my background has also endowed me with a subjective and nuanced perspective to understand my students. This perspective allows me to deeply relate to how my students feel living as a newcomer in a foreign country. To me, working with a group of people who grew up in a different country than me is both enriching and challenging. This experience leads me to explore an unique approach to interpersonal communication, from which I learn to differentiate what I take for granted and what my colleagues might take for granted. This difference in understanding between us helps me develop a strategy to predict ways in which miscommunication between my colleagues and I might occur. Therefore, for me, being the only person who grew up in a different country at my workplace uncovers challenges my students might face in a new country and lessons my students might learn from overcoming these challenges. This shared experience between most of my students and me is one of the most valuable takeaways from my wonderful journey in College Possible.

In light of the above, having lived and worked in both America and China has provided me with a valuable and unique perspective to look at College Possible, education and beyond. It is my honor to work for College Possible at this stage of my life. This experience certainly broadens my view and paves the way for my future career as an educator.

Kishauna Harper, high school coach, 2019-2020

When I began my term of service with AmeriCorps and College Possible, it didn't take me long to notice how much the students welcomed mentorship. Now in the midst of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, these same students appreciate coaching and support more than ever. It has been striking to see how our conversations switched during the last few weeks. We went from discussing the letter of the day and college essays to ensuring they will be fed and have adequate Wi-Fi.

As high school students adjust to the "new normal" of lodging at home and carrying out classes online, they find solace in knowing they are in the majority. We are all trying to navigate these waters of uncharted territory. I, like everyone else, have had to make some major adjustments personally, while providing the constant support students deserve. Instead of meeting with students in school, I have been communicating with them through Google voice, phone calls, video chats and email to ensure I am providing them with as much support as they can possibly handle. Whether it is learning new platforms to help students with their online classes or picking up their school laptop while they are at work, I want students to be confident that they can lean on me while we are living in uncertain times.

Dani Creasey, college coach 2019-2020

When I first decided to accept a term of service with AmeriCorps, I had many people in my ear telling me what a great opportunity it was. I heard words like "prestigious" and "intriguing". I realized that this support did not lie in advocacy for service, but as an opportunity to pad my resume. A key misconception about that is the idea that service is passive.

To truly live a life in service to others is to make the decision every day to commit yourself to a higher purpose and work toward the greater good. Service is not just about photo ops or Facebook posts, it is about allowing yourself to undergo the vulnerable, oft difficult, task of knowing yourself and your place in the world.

By immersing myself in service and by opening myself up to the insight of others, I was able to form meaningful relationships with my students and colleagues. I learned (and continue to learn) how to interrogate my own privilege and bias. This year has brought unprecedented loss, anguish, and cumulative grief – a terrain that is impossible to traverse if your primary concern is self-motivation.

To serve, to truly serve, is to pour yourself into the community, open your heart to feelings of others, and pass the mic to the communities you are in service to. It is not asking what service means for you, superficially, but how the year can enrich you as an individual and member in your community.