



Students, faculty and staff leaving Emory & Henry's McGlothlin Center for the Performing Arts to begin Service Plunge. (Photo courtesy of Maggie Obermann; photographer: Rachael Wilbur.)

Emory & Henry Students Care for Community in Hands-On Service Learning

By: Justin Hartsell

Damascus, Va. — On Tuesday, Aug. 27, a group of [Emory & Henry College](#) students headed to Damascus to clean up riverbanks and a local hiking trail as part of the college's annual [Service Plunge](#).

[E&H's Service Plunge](#) is part of new students' orientations that focus on having students, faculty and staff go out to sites in the surrounding region to give back in some way.

Community Engagement

According to Jim Harrison, Director of [Outdoor Programs](#) at E&H, he and a group of 23 students went to the South Fork of the Holston River to pick up trash alongside the riverbanks in Damascus and a nearby portion of the [Virginia Creeper Trail](#).

"We all have a responsibility to the community," said Harrison, "and to accept that responsibility in a tangible way is very fulfilling."



South Fork of Holston River. *(Photo courtesy of Justin Hartsell; photographer: Justin Hartsell.)*

Sarah Ingram, a junior at E&H, went with the group and helped in the cleanup. "[A group] goes to this location for every Service Plunge," said Ingram, "[but] it surprised me how much trash was still there."

Despite the litter accumulation, she highlighted that the efforts of the freshmen were inspiring. "Though it is always disheartening to see the negative impacts humans have had on beautiful areas, it was awesome to see new students putting in the effort to restore the beauty," said Ingram.



Students gathered in the Kennedy-Reedy Theatre of the McGlothlin Center for the Arts to hear about the role of Service Plunge in the lives of students, the college and the surrounding region. *(Photo courtesy of Maggie Obermann; photographer: Rachael Wilbur.)*

Rewards of Community Engagement

Maggie Obermann, [Civic Engagement Coordinator at the college](#), plans and organizes the entirety of Service Plunge each year.

For the Fall 2019 Service Plunge, Obermann reported 385 students and 450 total individuals took part in all of the community engagement projects combined.



Students laughing and interacting as they leave for Service Plunge. (Photo courtesy of Maggie Obermann; photographer: Rachael Wilbur.)

Obermann shared the many benefits for a student to serve a local community include having a "heightened self-efficacy and understanding of one's identity, [and] an understanding of communities and different cultures..."

Other benefits include "developing a civic identity and commitment to community, gaining skills to be more active in making meaningful change towards real issues, connecting academic learning to real-world experiences, and learning how to communicate and cooperate with others," said Obermann.

Ingram talked about how she saw students taking pictures of their site alongside the river and the Creeper Trail. "It was nice to see their appreciation," said Ingram. "[It] reminded me how special this place is."



Maggie Obermann, Civic Engagement Coordinator. *(Photo courtesy of Emory & Henry College website.)*

The College's Mission for Students

The Holston River Cleanup and other Service Plunge activities are meant to be a "reflection of [Emory & Henry's mission](#) and values of service to others in our region and the larger world," said Obermann. "It is our hope...that the day will be a spark that ignites students' continued engagement in ongoing meaningful opportunities to make Southwest Virginia thrive." ◇