TRIO Students Paying it Forward to Chicago  
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Students from TRIO Student Support Services at Metropolitan State University were given an opportunity to participate in a Pay it Forward Tour – with Student Today Leaders Forever (STLF). The Tour was to Chicago with students doing a service at each of the city that they visit. During the week of August 15, 2016, thirty-three TRIO students and three staff completed three service learning projects and visited a graduate school over the four day period. The service learning projects consisted of reforestation at Festge Forestry Park (Madison, WI); Feed My Starving Children (Schaumburg, IL) and St. Jerome’s Soup Kitchen and neighborhood clean-up (Chicago, IL).  The primary purpose was about building better communities, building an engaged community of learners, and building a better sense of self.

On Monday, August 15, our first service learning project was with the Festge Forestry Park cutting down buckthorn and spraying it herbicides. We also cleared out the area by picking up branches and debris from the trees that was cut down a few weeks ago. This was an exhausting service project because we were outside and it was a very warm day. After that, we were able to shower briefly at a YMCA. That night, the group slept in a church in Madison and we got to know each other a little more by doing a trust walk.

The next day, we went to the University of Wisconsin- Madison to learn more about their graduate school. We toured the campus and stopped at Babcock Hall Dairy Store to get ice cream samples. After that, we were able to explore State Street and have lunch on our own. It was interesting, being immerse into a large, but yet at the same time, small community.

After Madison, we arrived in Schaumburg, Illinois where our second service project was at. We participated in Feed My Starving Children service project. For this service project, our goal was to pack as many packages of food within an hour and a half session. We were given the opportunity to choose certain roles at each table. Some students would pour the ingredients for the packaged meals into a bag, others were in charge of opening the bag and making sure the package were within the weight range needed, one person would be the sealer of the package and others would place the packages within boxes. There were several people working in the back as well, running and lifting the boxes whenever one was completely filled. It was an amazing experience. Once our session ended, we were amazed to see how much of an impact we had made on the communities who were going to receive the food we just packed. After the service project, we went to a church to spend the night. That night we did a reflection that allowed each one of us to share what we valued the most in our lives. It gave us the opportunity to understand one another. We then gathered into our small groups to reflect about what we learned and enjoyed that day, as well as our thoughts about the service projects.

The next day, we headed off to Chicago, Illinois for our next service project. The next service project we took part in was St. Jerome’s Soup Kitchen and neighborhood clean-up. Half of the group cleaned up around the neighborhood while the other half assisted with the cooking and set up within the church. It was an interesting experience working together with everyone and with the St. Jerome’s Soup Kitchen staff. After the service project, we all gathered together to do another activity called the shoulder tap. The shoulder tap activity allowed us to acknowledge each individual for certain aspects they held. Later that day, we had plenty of free time to explore Chicago together as the trip was slowly coming to an end.

After an adventurous week, the trip came to an end. Every moment was memorable, from the hard labor service projects to the times of reflection and individual growth, as well as the time of exploration of different cities during our free time. Even the long bus rides were memorable, especially when we were given the opportunity to write positive words to one another for our “yeah buddy” bags. The whole trip was amazing due to the eye opening service projects within the different cities, as well as the amazing students and staff that came along for the journey.

TRIO is a federally-funded program through the U.S. Department of Education. Certain eligibility requirements and criteria must be met to participate in programming. Please visit [www.metrostate.edu/trio](http://www.metrostate.edu/trio) to learn more.