

## NACAC ARTICLE

# Admissions Officers Should Consider Congressional Award in Admissions Decisions

By William E. Kelley, CAE

Navjit Chatrath, 18 years old, believes the time and effort he put in to earn the Congressional Award Gold Medal may have had a negative impact on his college admissions process. He worked to become Editor-in-Chief of his high school newspaper. He improved his skills as a shot putter to the extent that his coach called him one of the most improved athletes in a very competitive athletic league. He arranged to live and work with an Amish farm family in Pennsylvania for several days. And, after he noticed that elderly people in a nursing home were often out of touch with their loved ones, he co-founded a charitable organization, CEE-Computer Education for the Elderly. "I thought that if someone could bring the power of the computer and Internet to their world, their lives would vastly improve", he said.

To earn his award, did require Navjit to put in a lot of time: 400 hours of community service, 200 hours of personal development, 200 hours of physical fitness over a period of no less than 24 months. And, his stay on that farm had to be at least four nights in duration.

I hope Navjit was wrong about his college admission chances. **College admission officers need to know about the Congressional Award.**

We often think of the U.S. Congress as an institution solely charged with governing our nation.

But NACAC members will be pleased to know that Congress has created an important program for young people that can help admissions officers in their annual decisions.

Chartered by Congress and supported by top Congressional leaders, the Congressional Award recognizes young people (ages 14 through 23) for achieving individual goals in four program areas:

- Volunteer Public Service – serving others and the community (Example: volunteer work at nursing homes, libraries, or parks)
- Personal Development – developing interests and social and employment skills. (Example: learning a new language, public speaking, or part-time jobs)
- Physical Fitness – improving the quality of life through fitness activities (Example: basketball, dance, or exercise with appropriate modifications for the disabled)
- Expedition/Exploration – Encouraging team building and leadership to plan and conduct an activity. (Example: a wilderness or venture experience for a group of urban youth, a visit to a large city and use of public transportation by a group of rural youth, primitive camping, a bicycle tour, or studying in a foreign country)

Young people select what they will do to earn the award based on their own interests and abilities. They select an unrelated adult to act as their advisor. Currently, more than 13,000 young people are working to earn a Congressional Award, a number that is growing rapidly.

The Congressional Award is about service, initiative and achievement- some of the factors admissions officers want to consider. It's a non-competitive program open to anyone in that age group. Awards are earned – not won. Participants work entirely at their own pace over an extended period of time so that the value of volunteer service, staying fit, learning new skills and exploring new places and activities are made part of the young person's lifestyle. Participants frequently gain leadership experience from working with others. There are six levels of recognition: certificates and medals, bronze, silver and gold. There's no limit to the number of award recipients each year.

Members of Congress usually present the Award in a ceremony within their Congressional District, but the highest award, the Congressional Award Gold Medal, is presented in the Capitol in Washington DC. The Award builds confidence and self-esteem in countless young people as they grow into productive citizens in all walks of life.

Any adult may apply to become an advisor or facilitator to help young people achieve their personal goals through this program and earn recognition. To learn more about The Congressional Award, visit [www.congressionalaward.com](http://www.congressionalaward.com) or call (202) 226-0130.

*William E. Kelley, CAE, is National Director & CEO of The Congressional Award Foundation.*

### **Suggested sidebar**

The 24 year-old Congressional Award was modeled after The Duke of Edinburgh's Award in the United Kingdom, established over fifty years ago. College and University admissions forms in that country often have a question asking if the applicant has earned the award and, if so, what level. Nearly 250,000 young people participate in the UK. An International Award for young people also exists and there are similar national programs in sixty countries around the world. In South Africa and the Republic of Ireland, the program is known as the President's Award. In Senegal, the award is the Merite International de la Jeunesse. In all of these countries, earning the award requires the combination of volunteer community service, personal development, physical fitness and expedition/exploration.