

Raising service dogs gives Tulane students a new 'leash' on life

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Take a stroll across Tulane's campus, and you may catch sight of Labradors bounding across Berger Family Lawn or wagging their tails in the Lavin-Bernick Center for University Life. But the four-legged companions aren't just the campus welcoming committee. The dogs are in training to be service animals who will one day assist people with a variety of disabilities, both visible and invisible.

Founded in 2013, the Tulane University Service-Dog Training and Education Program (TUSTEP) offers students the chance to carry out Tulane's service-learning mission through collaboration with a national service dog nonprofit, Canine Companions for Independence.

"Even if I only spend a couple of months with a dog, that dog goes on to be someone's greatest companion and greatest source of independence," says Ella Box, a senior at the School of Science and Engineering who serves as the secretary of TUSTEP. "That is such a fulfilling feeling, and I'm so grateful to be a part of it."

For students inspired to get involved, the application process is rigorous. Potential raisers attend information sessions, fill out questionnaires, undergo interviews and complete a trial run with a dog in the program. All the hard work pays off the following semester, when new members receive an eight-week-old puppy to train and teach commands.

The puppies go everywhere with their raisers, from classes to campus events. The energetic collegiate setting provides the necessary socialization they will need. When the puppies are about a year and a half old, they are handed off to professional trainers outside of Tulane, where they learn more complex commands and tasks. These dogs will eventually become companions for individuals with a wide variety of disabilities, from visual impairments and epilepsy to PTSD and anxiety disorders.

“People don’t really understand the weight that these dogs carry in these people’s lives,” says Box. Those who receive the dogs rely on them in their day-to-day lives. For students who aren’t raising a service dog, there are still plenty of ways to get involved with TUSTEP, including volunteering as a puppy sitter or joining puppy yoga classes, which raise money for necessary supplies.