LOOKING BACK ON his undergraduate years, Alan D. Solomont, A70, A08P, says it was “probably not until I was a sophomore or junior that I started getting the most out of my Tufts education, and then it was life changing.”

He wonders how a program like Tufts’ 1+4 Bridge-Year Service Learning Program might have made a difference in his life. Although he built a successful career in the private sector and in public service, which led to his appointment as U.S. ambassador to Spain and Andorra, Solomont, the Pierre and Pamela Omidyar Dean of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service, believes a program like 1+4 would have made his undergraduate experience at Tufts considerably stronger.

In its inaugural year, the 1+4 program, developed and run by Tisch College, provides a structured year of full-time community service before students begin their four years of undergraduate study at Tufts. The experience is designed to help prepare students to begin their first year of college with “a much greater sense of direction and purpose,” Solomont says.

“Spending some time in service to your community or to your nation or to the world gives you a sense of responsibility and a sense that you’re part of something bigger than yourself,” he says. “We think the students in the program will come to campus next year better prepared for academic success, better prepared to take on leadership roles and better prepared for success in life.”

Fresh out of high school, the dean says, students “have just gone through this pressure cooker called the college application and acceptance process. They’re coming into a big, different kind of world, living more independently, taking new courses. It takes a lot of students a while to find themselves, to point themselves in the right direction.” For some students, the 1+4 program can serve as their compass.

Fifteen 1+4 Bridge-Year fellows arrived on campus last August for a two-week orientation before they headed off to program sites in Brazil, Nicaragua and Spain. (Program organizers are planning to add a domestic site in Washington, D.C., next year.) Through the 1+4 partner organizations Global Citizen Year, Amigos de las Américas and United Planet, the fellows are volunteering in the fields of child development and education, community health, social entrepreneurship and nonprofit management.

MAKING CONNECTIONS
Out in the field, the fellows report their progress through monthly Skype sessions with the 1+4 program administrator, Jessye Crowe-Rothstein, who also makes biweekly check-in phone calls with staff at each partner organization.

The fellows build upon the bonds they formed with each other at orientation by participating in a collaborative online course, Communicating for Change, led by Felicia.
Sullivan, a senior researcher at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at Tisch College. Across seven time zones, they email, text, blog and post on discussion boards. Sharing and evaluating each other’s experiences, they complete assignments that range from self-evaluations to community needs assessments.

The course also includes “virtual reflection sessions,” which Sullivan describes as guided series of questions. How are they coping? Finding their way around new places and situations? Moving forward in their work? “The answers help the fellows connect the experiences out in the field to their future education and careers,” says Sullivan. These exercises also provide important data to improve the program each year and demonstrate its impact.

In May the fellows will return to the Medford/Somerville campus for a retreat, where they will further assess their experiences and plan ways to connect them to their next four years on campus.

Fellow Isabel Schneider, from Lincoln, Nebraska, is working in a school in León, Nicaragua, “wrangling kids into doing their schoolwork or playing games fairly,” she says.

In Madrid, Daniela Sanchez, from Albuquerque, New Mexico, works afternoons and evenings with troubled children and teenagers. On the occasional free morning, she puts her high school theater skills to use by volunteering with a branch of the international organization Payasos Sin Fronteras (Clowns without Borders). The mission of the NGO, Sanchez writes on the fellows’ blog site, is to “soothe communities that have undergone trauma,” such as refugee camps, conflict zones or any place where people have suffered adversity.

Steven Schwab, from Danbury, Connecticut, is busy at a university in Brazil, where he’s “had the opportunity to work in a biotechnology laboratory and to help teach English,” he reports.

“Our goal is to provide transformative learning experiences to the Bridge-Year fellows,” says Solomont, and based on these early reports, “we think we’re succeeding at that.”

“The Tufts 1+4 program isn’t for everyone,” he notes. “There are students who want to get to college as soon as they can. But if I were a parent of a freshman, I’d at least want to have a conversation with my student about whether this might be a good bridge between high school and college, and whether they’re open to giving this a try. I think there’s incredible value for students and parents knowing that there is a springboard to make the most out of their Tufts education and beyond.”

Unlike many gap-year programs, Tufts 1+4 has democratized the experience. No student accepted to Tufts is precluded from participating because of financial need. Alumni, parents and Santander Bank, N.A., through its Santander Universities Division, are providing financial support to the program. Santander has a long-standing relationship with Tufts, including supporting the Talloires Network, an international association of 325 institutions in 72 countries committed to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of colleges and universities. Tufts is a founding member of the network, and Tufts President Anthony P. Monaco chairs the network’s steering committee.

Learn more about the Tufts 1+4 Bridge-Year Service Learning Program at go.tufts. edu/1plus4.