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Lessons in the Common Good

Voluntarism on College Campuses

Jodi Raybuck

This article describes the current interest and activity in community service and the undergraduate educational experience. Many examples of campus-based voluntarism with a social reform twist set the stage for passage of the National and Community Trust Act of 1993. What is still necessary, however, is recognition by faculty, administrators, and agency officials that the community service experience must be structured properly, so that both service and learning take place. Drawing on the efforts at Babson College and direct involvement with the national scene, this analysis offers recommendations for implementing a program that helps to cultivate good citizenship and values.

Over the past several years the national sentiment toward community service has been changing, and voluntarism is becoming increasingly popular, particularly within academe. While the concept of service is not new (it dates back to archaic societies, in which acts of generosity and benevolence helped to hold communities together; by the early nineteenth century, it was characterized by Alexis de Tocqueville as a central facet of democracy in America), colleges and universities are embracing the theory that the merit of voluntarism should be instilled during the college experience, if not earlier. The idea is to teach citizenship and values and to foster a productive sense of civic engagement. This article examines some of the roots of college-based community service, major initiatives, implementation barriers, and puts forward thoughts for the future, drawing upon my experience at a local college.

History of College Voluntarism

Although the popular movement in college community service emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, campus-based service activity has been around much longer. For example, since the turn of the twentieth century, fraternities and sororities have had at the core

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of their charter a philanthropic good cause, which they support through service and fund-raising; academic programs to prepare professional leaders in areas such as religion, law, education, medicine, and social work have often featured a service component; and the noble tradition of campuswide blood drives embodies the notion of giving of oneself to help others. These efforts were well intended and helped to address a community need. Typically, however, such efforts were ancillary to the primary educational mission rather than an extension of it.

In response to this perceived gap between mission and service, two important organizations were created in the 1980s for the express purpose of promoting campus-based community service. In 1984 the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) was launched by a group of recent college graduates to provide incentives and support for student-initiated public service programs. COOL was cofounded by Wayne Meisel, a young man who journeyed fifteen hundred miles on foot, from Maine to Washington, D.C., visiting various colleges and universities along the way to gauge the level of student voluntarism. To his dismay, Meisel learned that there were few organized efforts of any kind. In response, he, along with colleague Bobby Hackett, formed COOL. Operating out of the University of Minnesota, COOL has since grown into a national network of colleges and universities whose purpose is to assist in the establishment and support of programs that promote student voluntarism as a form of student empowerment to make the world a better place. COOL, whose 1994 annual conference, held in Boston, attracted more than two thousand students, faculty, administrators, and other leaders in student community service, provides resources, programs, training, and technical support to help college students to begin programs, college administrators to increase student involvement, and faculty to incorporate community service into the curriculum.¹

All too often, however, campus-based programs flounder or fail owing to an absence of top-level institutional support. Recognizing this fact, the Campus Compact Project for Public and Community Service was organized in 1986 by the Education Commission of the States at Brown University. The Campus Compact is a coalition of more than 120 college and university presidents who have committed their institutions to public service programs and serve as national advocates for the social responsibility dimension of higher education. The Campus Compact provides information on public policy that encourages public service and sources of financial support; documentation of the broadly diverse public service activities at selected Compact institutions and of the different university structures supporting student initiatives; and referral to member institution programs. Participation in the Campus Compact requires significant commitment from the college president who, along with a cross-divisional team from the school, must agree to attend a week-long program to learn about service and effective ways in which it can be integrated into the college culture.²

The latest boost to college voluntarism is passage of the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 signed into law by President Bill Clinton on September 21.³ The act amended previous provisions of the National and Community Service Act of 1990, which concentrated on helping states and communities provide public service opportunities for the nation's young people. Among other things, the 1993 act created the Corporation for National and Community Service, whose mission is to engage Americans of all ages and backgrounds in community-based service.⁴ Specifi-

cally, this service is to address the country's educational, public safety, human, and environmental needs and should achieve direct and demonstrable results. The corporation's goal is to foster ongoing civic responsibility in addition to providing educational opportunities for those individuals making a substantial commitment to service. Itself a new governmental entity, the corporation has absorbed the work and staff of two precedent agencies, the Commission on National and Community Service and ACTION, established in 1971.

The corporation is funding a new national service initiative called AmeriCorps, which includes a variety of programs operated by grantees, the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), and the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) program. In addition, the corporation will support service-learning initiatives under a program called Learn and Serve America, which focuses on elementary and secondary schools and higher education institutions. This year, roughly \$9 million will be awarded on a competitive basis to a wide array of colleges, universities, and other eligible organizations that seek to make service an integral part of the education and life experience of the nation's college students. One of the most publicized aspects of the AmeriCorps program is the availability of modest stipends and educational benefits to individuals who complete a year of full-time service or a year's equivalent of part-time service.

Colleges and universities are getting additional support through the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which designates that 5 percent of an institution's federal work-study budget must be used to fund student participation in service projects, both in the community and on their campus. This requirement goes into effect in the fall of 1994.

After decades of community service's being viewed as a "nice thing to do if you have the time," a great deal of financial and pedagogical support is now being mobilized around the service cause. Why is this the case? How is service viewed? What are the stumbling blocks to fuller integration of community service into the undergraduate educational experience?

Community Service as a Vehicle for Teaching Democracy and Values

Educators, administrators, and students who believe in community service as a valuable dimension to life have long recognized that service learning is a powerful educational tool capable of accomplishing a wide spectrum of results. They often have different perceptions, however, of the meaning and benefits of service. At minimum, students involved in service outside the classroom discover that it makes them feel good, is fun, and is a good way to spend free time. While that sounds somewhat superficial, many volunteer programs have had success in recruiting volunteers for just those reasons. Given the traditional age of college students — seventeen to twenty-one — and their level of development, a large number of students like to participate in short-term projects with their friends, for example, a Saturday work-day at a local shelter, a fund-raising walk for the March of Dimes. While it is true that there are a number of mature, actualized students who serve for deeper reasons and work to alleviate human suffering, many others have not quite reached that level of development in their critical thinking skills which prompts them to engage in service for more altruistic reasons. (Indeed, many never do!)

By contrast, most educators and administrators perceive service on a different plane of significance. An increasing number of faculty and program administrators are recognizing that volunteer settings expose students to the complex and diverse nature of populations in need and offer a powerful means of educating students about a world beyond their own. When properly prepared, placed, and supervised, students can experience a myriad of thought-provoking situations that beg deeper questions and insights about political, social, and economic conditions. For example, a student who works with children in a family homeless shelter may begin to wonder, Why are these kids homeless? Why can't their families afford a place to live? Even more powerful is having their long-held stereotypes of citizens in need critically challenged: anonymous faces they viewed as lazy, drug dependent, and victims of their own behavior give way to real people with names, stories, and a desire for dignity, policies, or economic models.

Most people who support community service as a valuable learning experience also know that it can catalyze students to act in a way that promotes social change. When community service is coupled with opportunities for reflective discussion and learning, students can begin to think about our nation's complex system of social ills in a way that promotes them to seek more information, to take more action, and to explore other policy approaches that could alleviate or eradicate these ills, rather than a blind acceptance of "the way things are and will always be." The long-held premise that one person can make a difference can easily be lost if the volunteer service experience does not offer a forum for critical discussion and reflection of the student's feelings, thoughts, and ideas about why these social problems exist.

Given the potentially powerful impact of a properly structured service experience, one then wonders why all students don't choose to partake in an activity that could be a positive benefit to them. What are the barriers that keep more students from getting involved? There are several interrelated ones, most of which are structural rather than attitudinal. Because of this, positive and concrete action can be taken.

1. *Competition for time as a resource.* Students on college campuses must balance multiple course demands in addition to their involvement in athletics, leadership positions, student organizations, fraternities and sororities, work, job searches, social time, and time simply to relax. Voluntarism often comes at the end of this long list, and the complaint often heard is, "I just cannot find the time."

2. *Unclear reward/recognition or "payoff."* Because of tough economic times and the increasing difficulty of finding good jobs, students on today's campuses are more forward thinking, weighing their involvement in any activity in terms of the potential benefit to them personally, their peer group, their academic standing, and their ability to find employment when they graduate. Unfortunately, we have not been successful in adequately rewarding and recognizing volunteer efforts or articulating the long-term benefit to students for the investment of their time and energy in volunteer projects. Merely touting service as a "good thing to do" is not enough for students facing an uncertain economy and shrinking job markets.

3. *"Try it . . . you'll like it."* But do they? Close supervision in volunteer projects is essential to ensure that young people have a positive experience and want to volunteer again. However, it takes time and resources to find appropriate volunteer sites, adequately prepare students prior to placement so that they have an understanding of what they will encounter, and obtain feedback on what they did or did not enjoy about the experience. The commonly held belief that voluntarism doesn't cost

anything is just not true, and unfortunately, most volunteer programs are run with few, if any, human or financial resources. Without that essential groundwork, the likelihood that students will either have a forgettable or even unpleasant experience increases. Moreover, students talk to other students, and once the well has been poisoned, it is very difficult to undo that harm. This sets the stage for another important barrier.

4. *Managing expectations.* There are things that community service will and will not do for its participants. Many people engage in service because they truly want to help others and make a difference. Unfortunately, disappointment comes easily to those who enter a service project with unrealistic expectations. Helping students understand what they will find during their project and what is reasonable for them to accomplish is critical to avoiding disappointment, but often this important aspect is not addressed within the context of a volunteer program. For example, a student who visits a soup kitchen at a local shelter expecting to be welcomed with open arms and drawn gratefully into the bosom of the homeless community will most likely come away feeling cheated and unhappy that the time given did not make him or her feel as good as anticipated. Dealing with prospects realistically up front can go a long way toward ensuring that students' expectations are met more completely.

5. *Faculty and administrators as role models.* Sadly, the old saying, "Do as I say, not as I do," is alive and well with regard to campus-based volunteer programs. If the institutional message is that service is important and students are expected to get involved in service projects, it is imperative that the same expectation be directed to the faculty and administrators. This is commonly referred to as "walking the talk," and must involve the same reward and recognition for faculty when tenure decisions are made, provide for volunteer release time for administrators, and feature an institutionwide commitment that service can benefit and teach everyone something. While the service learning field is making some strides in this area, it still has a long way to go.

6. *Community service as restitution.* We hear every day that white-collar criminals are sentenced to many hours of community service as a form of punishment, a practice that is becoming more commonplace in campus disciplinary sanctions. One wonders what type of message this sends to students we are trying to involve. Although service as restitution is utilized in the hopes of making the offending student see the error of his or her ways, I have yet to encounter such a program that truly has a positive impact on the student without affecting the integrity of campus-based volunteer programs. Campuses need to stop sending this double message about service and find more creative ways to reach students who are involved in disciplinary incidents in what campus judicial officers refer to as teachable moments.

Babson's Approach

Babson College has experienced all these barriers in its effort to develop community service programs for undergraduates. While we have been successful in increasing student awareness about the benefits of service, we continue to wrestle with the challenge of involving greater numbers of students in volunteer projects.

Located in the upper-middle-class town of Wellesley, Massachusetts, Babson has an undergraduate population of sixteen hundred students, all of whom receive

a bachelor of science degree in business administration. Babson students typically know when they enter college that they wish either to work in a business or to start and run a business of their own. Because of its focused business orientation, the college does not offer the human service disciplines that might attract students wishing to serve in order to prepare themselves for careers in health, social services, and education.

The GIVE (Get into the Volunteer Experience) program was developed in 1990 on the basis of feedback from an alumnus. He told us he believed that more students would volunteer if they knew how to access local volunteer networks and find out where they were needed. The original premise was to build a clearinghouse of opportunities, but we soon realized that simply making the opportunities available was not enough. Our strategy turned to student recruitment. Although there is a core group of committed students who willingly give their time to various volunteer projects, we have yet to build the critical mass needed to make service a well-known experience on our campus.

Recognizing that the competition for students' time was a key factor in increasing our volunteer base, the college, in 1991, received a minigrant from the Campus Outreach Opportunity League to develop a service learning component for a senior-level liberal arts elective entitled "Individualism, Philanthropy, and American Public Life." Taught by Dr. Marcy Murningham, the course, which examines the roots and evolution of philanthropy in America, was amended to incorporate readings and discussion on the issues surrounding homelessness in our country. Students in the class were required to participate in a ten-week volunteer internship, serving at least four hours per week. They were placed at one of eight area agencies that deal with the homeless or hungry.

Response to the class and the service learning component has been very positive, and we find that students' reasons for taking it center around the opportunity to serve and receive course credit, as well as to participate in a complete service learning experience.

Other initiatives have been launched to incorporate service into the curriculum, the most recent being the Freshman Management Experience (FME), a pilot program for eighty students that integrates management and computer instruction and provides students with the opportunity to create and run a business of their own. FME also aims to teach students about business civic responsibility; in addition to designing and operating a business plan, they are responsible for the design and implementation of a community service project. In the fall of 1994, the FME project will begin its second year of operation with 160 students.

Babson also places students in nonprofit settings as part of an upper-level program called Management Consulting Field Experience (MCFE). Students who are accepted for the MCFE program work in teams at selected sites, solving a problem identified by the client. Student teams are guided by a faculty preceptor, and the semester-long project culminates in a presentation to the client. The MCFE program serves for-profit as well as nonprofit clients, including agencies such as the South Shore Association for Retarded Citizens. The nonprofit field experience provides students with a firsthand look at some of the challenges agencies face while exposing them to the social issues with which they struggle.

Babson College is redesigning its undergraduate curriculum in response to student feedback that the current curriculum is too rigid and to employer feedback that our

students have too little field-based experience. One of the facets of the new curriculum will address the need to increase field-based opportunities, of which service learning will be a part. As the plan develops, the college will look toward incorporating multiple opportunities for students to broaden and practice their classroom learning in the context of a nonprofit setting.

Thoughts for the Future

What are the challenges for educators? As mentioned earlier, service learning, a concept that has existed since the early seventies, is experiencing a rebirth of interest within the academy. Service learning can be distinguished from other community service programs by its focus on reciprocal giving between those who serve and those who are served and the structured learning fostered in participants about the larger social issues that lie behind the needs of the groups with whom students work.⁵ The field of service learning continues to expand as we begin to understand more clearly the need for three key elements necessary in facilitating students' learning: (1) preparation; (2) action; and (3) reflection. Moreover, educators are noticing a difference between service within the context of the classroom and service as an extracurricular activity.

Put another way, there will always be a need for extracurricular community service projects. They serve a purpose to the agencies and expose students, if even for a limited time, to social problems within the community. However, to sustain a longer-term impact, colleges and universities are increasingly recognizing that service anchored in the curriculum gives students a broader understanding of the factors that give rise to the social dilemmas facing our nation.

Implementing this philosophy comes with a price, however. To fully integrate a service experience within a course requires creativity on the part of the faculty and support on the part of the administration. Selecting and cultivating sites for service projects is time-consuming, as is supervision and follow up. Busy faculty unaccustomed to working with agencies can find them overworked and understaffed; our experience has been that responsibility for follow-through must rest with the college. It is all too easy to let communication fall by the wayside, believing that agency supervisors will let the college know if there is a problem. Experience has shown that regular and frequent contact with the agency initiated by a faculty member or administrator to assess students' progress is absolutely essential in avoiding the black hole of student placements.

Another challenge is that because service learning is getting a great deal of publicity, as is the whole notion of "civic responsibility," and funding is being made available, there is danger in launching a program that may get the college easy publicity, but will not sustain itself on a long-term basis. Service learning programs need to be developed in concert with institutional goals, community needs, and in the best interest of the student. As schools move forward to implement service learning on campus, they must engage colleagues in discussion of some of the following issues:

1. How does our program help us fulfill our institutional mission?
2. Do we fully understand what our community agencies need, and does our program assist in meeting those needs?

3. Is the service one of a reciprocal nature, in which the students and the agencies are equal partners?
4. Given that transition is an all too well-known fact of life for the clients and staff of agencies, are we being realistic in our commitment to them? What mechanisms are in place to ensure that the commitment of students, time, resource, and equipment will be fulfilled?
5. Are we ensuring that our students are adequately prepared for their service experience?
6. Will there be ample opportunity for students to reflect on their experience? Are there plans in place to train faculty to facilitate these discussions?
7. How we will evaluate the learning that takes place? How we will assess the impact of the program?

For those working in the field of community service and service learning, an encouraging development is the collaboration of campuses on a local, state, and national level. The Massachusetts State Commission on Community Service was formed in 1991 in response to earlier federal community service legislation that allowed states to apply for funding as a consortium rather than individual schools' competing against one another. The result has been positive: a group of colleges across the state now participate in resource sharing in the areas of training and technical support, which is made available to all campuses in the commonwealth interested in starting or expanding their community service and service learning programs.⁶

On a local level, a collection of campuses in the Greater Boston area communicate regularly to share ideas and support for their programs. This has resulted in schools with novice programs being able to draw on those with more established ones. The combined strength of several programs collaborating on projects adds value to the clients, the participants, and the project. For example, both Babson College and Wellesley College participate in an after-school project with children in a low-income housing project. The students benefit from their interaction in the program, and the children benefit from the extra attention they get from the increased number of volunteers. Wellesley, the town in which the campuses are located, also recognizes the contribution of the colleges to a segment of the community badly in need of assistance; by engaging in these tasks, the two colleges are seeking to fulfill their obligations to their community.

At a broader level, particularly as the federal government decreases its funding for social programs and local service agencies, the responsibility for assisting those in need will increasingly fall on the community to bridge the gap, and those communities will increasingly turn toward institutions of higher education. Expectation will rise with regard to the reciprocal obligations of colleges and universities, namely, that they give something back to the communities from which they draw students, funding, and human resources to survive. Concurrently, higher education will be expected to teach students to be good citizens who also give back to their communities in a constructive way. As Professor Benjamin Barber of Rutgers University reminded participants in a conference held by the Partnership in Service Learning, quoting Thomas Jefferson, "Democracy needs civic fuel in order to survive." He went on to

note that good citizenry is not necessarily innate; it must be taught.⁷ Service learning is one key way to impart to our students the knowledge of what it means to be a good citizen.

As our nation increasingly turns toward higher education for solutions to the tough questions posed by a growing number of social problems, educators and administrators must work together with community members to identify critical needs and engage students in service to help fill those needs. To teach our students the habit of getting involved, thinking critically about social issues, and working to help find solutions is perhaps the most valuable thing a college can do. Indeed, it is a competence students must have if we are to prosper as a nation. ❧

Notes

1. For further information on COOL, contact the Campus Outreach Opportunity League, 386 MacNeil Hall, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, Minnesota 55108.
2. For information on the Campus Compact, write Campus Compact: Project for Public and Community Service, Box G, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island 02912. See also Marc J. Ventresca and Anna L. Waring, "Collegiate Community Service: The Status of Public and Community Service at Selected Colleges and Universities," in *Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service, Volume 1*, edited by Jane Kendall and Associates (Raleigh, N.C.: National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, 1990), and Janet Luce, ed., *Service Learning: An Annotated Bibliography — Linking Public Service with the Curriculum, Volume 3 of Combining Service and Learning* (Raleigh, N.C.: National Society for Internships and Experiential Education, 1991).
3. The purpose of the 1993 act was articulated as follows:
 - (1) Meet the unmet human, educational, environmental, and public safety needs of the United States, without displacing existing workers;
 - (2) renew the ethic of civic responsibility and the spirit of community throughout the United States;
 - (3) expand educational opportunity by rewarding individuals who participate in national service with an increased ability to pursue higher education or job training;
 - (4) encourage citizens of the United States, regardless of age, income, or disability, to engage in full-time or part-time national service;
 - (5) reinvent government to eliminate duplication, support locally established initiatives, require measurable goals for performance, and offer flexibility for meeting those goals;
 - (6) expand and strengthen existing service programs with demonstrated experience in providing structured service opportunities with visible benefits to the participants and community;
 - (7) build on the existing organizational service infrastructure of Federal, State, and local programs and agencies to expand full-time and part-time service opportunities for all citizens; and
 - (8) provide tangible benefits to the communities in which national service is performed.

National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 (Public Law 101-610, as amended; 104 Stat. 3127; 42 U.S.C. 12501).
4. For further information on the Corporation for National and Community Service, write to 1100 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20525.
5. Jane Kendall, "Combining Service and Learning: An Introduction," *Combining Service and Learning*, 20. For more information on the NSIEE (now called the National Society for Experiential Education, or NSEE), write to 3509 Haworth Drive, Suite 207, Raleigh, North Carolina 27609.
6. For information on the Massachusetts Commission on National and Community Service (as it is now called), contact Joe Madison, Executive Director, 87 Summer Street, 4th floor, Boston, Massachusetts 02110, telephone (617) 542-2544.

7. His remarks were made at the conference "Service Learning: Education for Real," sponsored by the Partnership for Service-Learning, February 25-27, 1994, Washington, D.C. For information on the Partnership for Service Learning, write to 815 Second Avenue, Suite 315, New York, N.Y. 10017-4594, telephone (212) 986-0989. See also Benjamin Barber, *An Aristocracy for Everyone: The Politics of Education and the Future of America* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992).