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HOW IMPORTANT IS COLLEGE VOLUNTEERISM?

Cultivating the character and civic commitment of students is one the main charges of American education. Teaching responsibility for the common good, developing independent thinking, and providing for economic contributions to society are companion goals of the academy (Robb 1985). Within that framework, volunteer service has been and can be a vital part of an undergraduate education.

Through volunteer service, students have learned essential lessons about responsibility to others, lessons that are difficult to convey in the classroom. In fact, one survey of student volunteers has found that 90% reported their service-learning experience was as valuable or more valuable to them than classroom work (Boyer 1987).

Undergraduate volunteerism has taken many forms over the years, from folding bandages for soldiers at war, to providing tutorial services for elementary and secondary school children, to staffing medical programs in Appalachia. Broadly defined, student volunteerism encompasses paid and non-paid positions, internships or other work resulting in academic credit, and community service. Today, it may also affect student financial aid and related legislation.

THE "ME" GENERATION

In recent years, college students have been described as narcissistic, or part of the "me generation" (Levine 1980). One profile of undergraduates between the ages of 18 and 24 compiled during the period 1981-1985, showed volunteer participation declining 11% (Hodgkinson & Weitzman 1986). This finding seems indicative of a shift from civic responsibility toward self-interest (Robb 1985).

REACHING OUT--WHAT MOTIVATES STUDENTS TO VOLUNTEER?

There are signs, however, that current undergraduates are more altruistic, although torn by the push toward careerism. A growing number of students and student organizations are reaching out to help others (Boyer 1987). Institutional initiatives to support student volunteerism are increasing as well.
What are the roots of this renewed interest in volunteerism? Frank Newman, executive director of the Education Commission of the States, has offered three reasons:

1. Young adulthood is the time when persons are most open to the concept of citizen responsibility.

2. Society today demands that young people understand the great impact of social issues and make a commitment to the public.

3. Classroom study does not of itself suffice to teach public leadership and civic responsibility (Newman 1985).

The American legacy of educating for civic responsibility is also a factor, as are periodic national swings in emphasis from individual to the community (Levine 1980).

Personal motivation for volunteer service is linked to three basic factors: altruism, egoism, and social obligation. The first two must generally be balanced in some way if volunteer activity is to be successful (Fitch 1987). The reported reasons for volunteering include a desire to help others, an interest in the activity, and enjoyment of the work (Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1986).

Many students are neither apathetic nor uninterested in the welfare of others, as they might appear. So, at least, says Wayne Meisel, executive director of the Campus Outreach Opportunity League. Rather, Mr. Meisel feels that many students are frightened and unsure of where or how to initiate volunteer involvement.

Administrators and faculty who coordinate volunteer efforts at the institutional and even national level can activate widespread student involvement. Faculty, administrators, and recent graduates can also serve as role models for students; faculty at many institutions provide technical assistance or work directly with students as volunteers. The importance of role models is shown by a study of college student volunteers, 78% of whom had parents who were themselves volunteers (Fitch 1987).

More direct methods of encouraging student volunteerism are also being debated. These include:

. an institutional or governmental community service requirement; and

. financial aid programs linked to community service.

WHO IS ENCOURAGING UNDERGRADUATES TO VOLUNTEER--AND HOW?

In 1985, Howard Swearer, the president of Brown University, proposed a federally mandated program of national service for young persons. Subsequently, he and a group of fellow college presidents, including Donald Kennedy of Stanford and Timothy S. Healy of Georgetown, founded Campus Compact: The Project for Public and Community Service.
Headquartered at Brown University, Campus Compact is a national effort to make public service increasingly visible, to make information about it easy to obtain, and to remove barriers that discourage students from engaging in volunteer activities. Working in conjunction with business leaders, policymakers, community agencies, and students (Swearer 1986), Campus Compact has grown from an institutional membership of 12 in 1985 to 150, currently (Campus Compact Fact Sheet 1988).

Created and staffed by recent college graduates, the Campus Outreach Opportunity

League (COOL) was established in 1982. COOL provides technical assistance to institutions initiating or expanding volunteer programs; awards fellowships to students who commit time to the organization; and coordinates workshops for specific campuses. COOL also documents students' contributions and recognizes those individuals and colleges that successfully bring community service to the forefront of campus life. The COOL network now comprises some 450 institutions (W.J. Hoogterp, personal communication, December 12, 1988).

At Stanford University, the recently established Public Service Center already involves 60% of the undergraduate seniors in some form of community service. The Center coordinates local, state, national, and even international programs through the Overseas Development Network (Stanford Report 1988).

At Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, social consciousness has long been a part of the campus ethos. The Earlham Volunteer Exchange included over 600 student participants during the 1988-1989 school year. Earlham student worked with the handicapped, in the Special Olympics, and in an "Adopt-a-Grandparent" program. The college supports these programs visibly, providing vehicles for student use.

At Miami University in Ohio, a student organization coordinates and publicizes the efforts of 19 student groups that are involved in community service.

Fortunately, stories like these are being repeated across the country. The types of volunteer activities vary widely and include adult literacy instruction and tutoring, a variety of inner-city programs, work at shelters for the homeless and for battered women, and home care for the elderly.

SHOULD UNDERGRADUATE VOLUNTEER WORK AFFECT FINANCIAL AID?

The potential relationship of college student volunteerism to financial aid is an increasingly important one (Newman 1985; Robb and Swearer 1985). The following proposals are already under consideration:

. Make eligibility for grants and loan forgiveness dependent upon volunteer service. This suggestion is similar to a plan that reduces loans for students who became teachers. (The greater the number of years devoted to teaching, the greater the increase in loan forgiveness).

. Resurrect the G.I. Bill, with modifications. Students could devote one or two years to public service in military or civilian programs to receive G.I. benefits for college attendance.

. Enact legislation linking financial aid eligibility to national youth service programs.

Legislation to this effect has been debated over the last 10 to 15 years, and several such bills are currently before Congress.

Many observers also feel that additional work-study funds should be available to students to reduce their escalating long-term debt. Such funds, administered flexibly, would enable institutions to support off-campus student volunteer programs.

Some analysts who have studied proposals such as the above are concerned that tying financial aid to community service would mean a reduction in the amount of financial aid awarded solely on the basis of need. This, they fear, would discourage college attendance among groups already underrepresented. This reservation, however, is counterbalanced in the minds of some by the societal benefits expected from increased student volunteerism.

Since the late 1970s at least ten major center have been established in institutions of higher education, many with endowed chairs, dedicated to studying and teaching philanthropy and volunteerism. Foundations and corporations are funding these efforts, and research is expanding (Payton 1988). Already the number of organizations and programs seeking to encourage and enhance student volunteer efforts is impressive. In fact, by 1988 there were 40 state-based programs to ensure youth volunteer activity (Theus 1988). If these trends continue, volunteer service should emerge as an even more potent influence in the collegiate experience.

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