

Volunteerism and Service-Learning: The 20th Century

By Susan Ellis

Education and volunteerism evolved together under the pressures of wars and economic changes.

In "American Traditions of Volunteerism and Service-Learning: Colonial Days to 1900," Winter 1978, the author showed that "learning by doing" was the nation's first educational philosophy. In the colonial period, the entire family had to work in order to survive, so classrooms were few and the apprenticeship system of career education was common.

After Independence public education became important and one method of providing it to many at low cost was to have the older students teach the younger ones.

During the nineteenth century young volunteers took part (with their elders) in major movements, such as the campaign to abolish slavery, and in major events, such as the Civil War.

The Morrill Act of 1862 changed American education by establishing land-grant colleges which integrated practical subjects into the curricu-

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lum, but theory and practice did not begin to merge for another decade. Toward the end of the century the Student Christian Movement, women's clubs, the Grange, and Children's Leagues increased young people's involvement in community service.

In the twentieth century student volunteer and service-learning programs continued to evolve concurrently with education and the roles of young people in the society.

By 1900 young Americans played only secondary roles in their communities. Generally, they were expected to spend most of their days inside the schoolroom, emerging in their teen-age years to select one of a bewildering and ever-increasing number of career options.

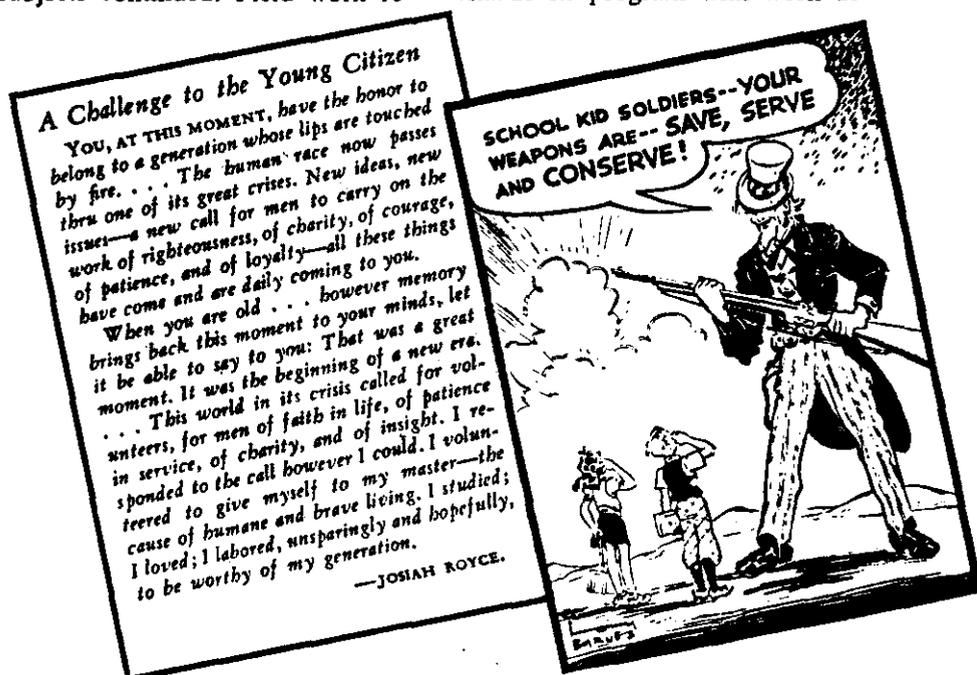
Only in time of war did adults see youth as a national resource, but the volunteer war work they willingly did on behalf of their country had little direct relevance to their classroom education. Up to the 1950's, high school students usually worked on projects assigned by their teachers and involving their peers. Only in the 1960's did students begin to seek ways to affect the community at large by working on assignments side by side with adults.

On the college level, the tension between academic and utilitarian subjects continued. Field work re-

quirements for a variety of majors gave students the chance to apply their classroom learning. As the century moved on, experiential learning options increased in scope and purpose. But it was not until well after World War II that student volunteer opportunities became institutionalized parts of the educational system.

In the early 1900's the United States was swept by Progressivism with its active reexamination of all aspects of society. Education received particular attention, with high schools being built on the average of one a day and the minimum school-leaving age being raised in state after state.

Demand for a utilitarian secondary education increased as industrialization changed the nature of work. Because of resistance by the regular schools, educators developed the concept of special vocational schools as a parallel system. Agriculture and home economics were the core courses, with work projects assigned in the home or on the farm. The Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 provided funding for this idea and entrenched it despite its problems. Therefore, as Milton J. Gold pointed out in *Working to Learn*, "The academic high school lost the opportunity it might have taken to vitalize its program with work ac-



Preface to *The American Citizens Handbook* published by the National Council for the Social Studies, 1941 edition.

tivities; the vocational school became an arena for learning skills and subjects without depth or intellectual content, without stress on social and scientific meaning of work performed."

Not surprisingly, the offerings of the vocational school were seen as second-best to the "real" education available in the academic high school. Though the work projects in the vocational schools may have had little educational value in the beginning, the Smith-Hughes Act did fund teachers to supervise the work experience of the students. Such supervision ultimately improved the educational merit of the work projects by integrating them into the classroom curriculum.

In rural areas, one of the concerns was how to keep the young interested in farming as a career. Beginning in 1898 and continuing strongly throughout the early 1900's, rural youth were the targets of Junior Naturalist campaigns, nature study clubs, and contests of all sorts. Students were urged through the schools to do soil testing, plant identification, and other projects on their farms. Such practical assignments were then incorporated into the classroom.

From 1902 to 1910, many teachers and school administrators launched boys' and girls' agriculture clubs. Activities included planting gardens, growing corn, canning fruit, and related contests.



The many separate clubs and events, often led by adult volunteers, eventually became the organization known as 4-H, still active today. When the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 established the Cooperative Extension Service, 4-H Clubs received structure and funding through the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the state land-grant colleges.

Because of the influence of local tuberculosis associations, public schools across the country became involved in the Modern Health Crusader program, an attempt—amazingly successful—to instill good hygiene and health habits. To accomplish this goal, an intricate scheme of feudal pageantry was de-

signed in which the new recruit, or Page, was enlisted by his school-teacher, or Crusade Master, and agreed to abide by a list of regulations under which he could hope to progress to Squire, Knight, Knight Banneret, and, if sufficiently sanitary, could achieve that highest of honors, a seat at the Round Table.¹

Students earned promotions by obeying long lists of hygiene rules, including taking 10 deep breaths a day, bathing twice a week, and getting up with a smile. The movement was active from 1910 to 1920, after which the schools automatically integrated the teaching of basic cleanliness.

On the college level, the move toward practicum requirements for professional education continued from the late 1800's. Medical schools took the lead with more and more structured internships, and other professions followed suit. Practice teaching became part of the education of future teachers; field experience was required of those studying social work.

The key to these and other service-learning requirements was supervision by professors. Such terms as practicum, field work, and moot court became an established part of academic life. Ironically, these "new" approaches to practical education were a rediscovery of the apprenticeship system by which colonial scholars learned their vocations.

Around 1906, an engineering professor at the University of Cincinnati began what became known as the Co-op Program. It met students' needs for both on-the-job experience and money to finance their education. Industrial establishments hired students under the Co-op plan, launching an innovative avenue to service-learning.²

When World War I broke out, "doing your bit" became a slogan for the organizers of innumerable war support activities, many involving youth. Elementary and high schools sponsored scrap drives, food conservation projects, and aid to soldiers' families. Because of the shortage of men at home, many schools gave academic credit to teen-age boys, among them Charles Lindbergh, who agreed to work in

¹ Richard Carter, *The Gentle Legions* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1961), p. 74.

the factories or do full-time farm work.

While the war disrupted the education of most college students and preoccupied the days of younger students, it did provide the opportunity for youth to play a welcomed part in the life of the community.



After World War I, the country experienced a certain euphoria. In the Roaring Twenties even educational activities tended to emphasize the superficial.

Concerned educators felt compelled to inaugurate programs such as the National Honor Society to reward academic achievement as a balance to the stress put on athletic excellence.

One serious and important development in this period was accident prevention education. The numerous new gadgets in the home and factory created previously unknown hazards. The National Safety Council, its members being volunteers, coordinated a major safety awareness effort in the schools. Student Safety Committees were formed everywhere. Students were urged to study safety hazards and to assist in preventing accidents.

In 1922 an official of the National Safety Council summed up the emphasis of safety education this way, "Unless we perceive it to be a problem for the education of life itself, a training in citizenship in its broader sense, for a better participation in a democratic form of government, we have missed the fundamental character of this new type of education."³

In the late 1920's Junior Leagues were formed to enable "society" girls to learn their civic and social responsibilities. The young women developed leadership skills and soon molded the Junior League into an active national network of community charity workers.

The Great Depression abruptly ended the Roaring Twenties. Quickly, formal education became a luxury few could afford and life itself again became the best teacher. Public education and recreation alike focused on developing a sense of community responsibility in children—a response to the sudden

³ Frank C. Adams and Clarence W. Stephens, *College and University Student Work Programs* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press, 1970), pp. 23-4.

awareness of adult Americans to social problems.

The early 1930's saw the rise of a remarkable variety of youth organizations channeling young people into community involvement. The government led the way with its Civilian Conservation Corps program, putting thousands of unemployed youth to work on civic and forestry projects.

The American Friends Service Committee organized work camps which continued even after World War II as work weekends. Groups such as the Catholic Youth Organization, which developed in Chicago, provided constructive outlets for urban youth. Farmers Alliances found projects for rural youth.

On college campuses, fraternities began to seek out civic projects. The Kiwanis Clubs and other business associations supported such collegiate service groups as forms of leadership training.

The problems of financing higher education were ever present in this decade. In 1935, the federal government established the National Youth Administration (N.Y.A.) Student

Work Program, the first federal financial assistance program to aid high school and college students directly. Each educational institution administered its own program, so great variations in application occurred. N.Y.A. guidelines stressed, however, that the work experience should relate to the student's major field of study and supplement regular school work. Because many educators still felt ambivalent about the academic value of work, job assignments tended toward the two extremes of highly research oriented or highly menial in nature.

Between 1935 and 1943, more than 600,000 students participated in the N.Y.A. program, financing their education while gaining work experience. They focused attention on the educational value of work experience and consequently the government program paved the way for innovation and experimentation in career-oriented work-study programs around the country.

The 1930's witnessed a rash of experimental education programs, notably John Dewey's Laboratory School in Chicago and the emphasis on learning by doing.

During the 1930's and 1940's, some juvenile courts, disturbed by the rise in juvenile crimes, looked for ways to involve youth themselves in combating delinquency. Among the techniques in vogue were juvenile juries and even units of boy sheriffs.

The outbreak of World War II again evoked a tremendous outpouring of civilian volunteer war work.

Children played a vital role in such things as buying bonds, saving tin cans, collecting old newspapers and hunting up scrap metal.

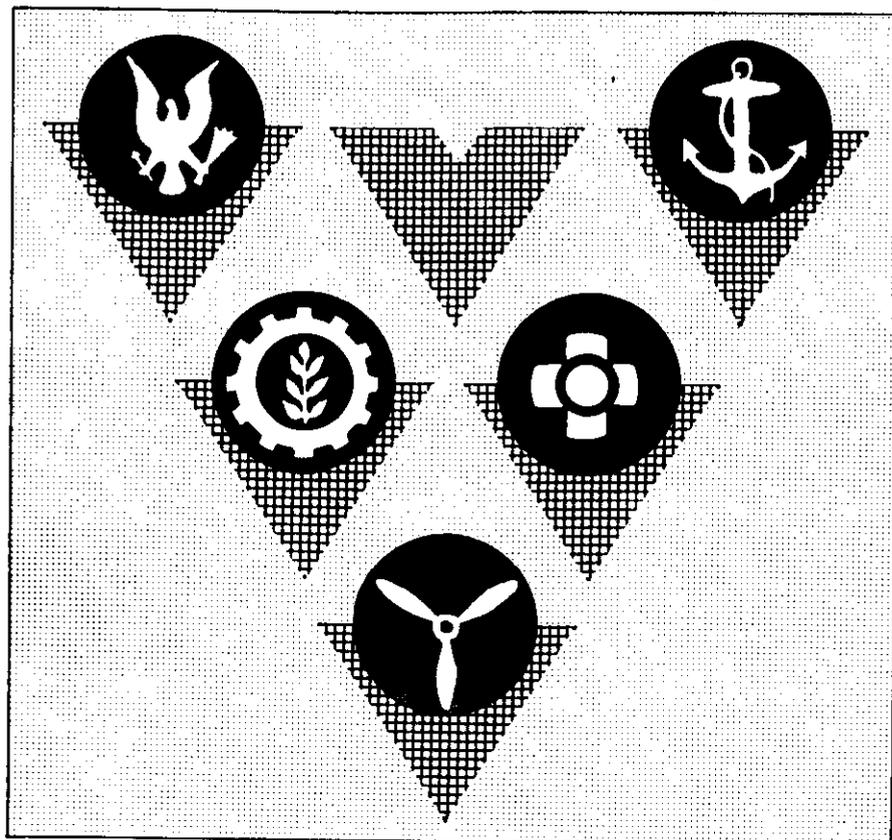
Aircraft spotting was encouraged by the federal government and more than half a million volunteers eventually registered in the Civilian Air Warning System. To help spotters, high school students constructed millions of model airplanes. A mania for first aid and civil defense classes was evident all over the country.

Two of the most important civilian efforts, both involving youth heavily, were scrap drives and Victory Gardens. Everything from tin foil to toothpaste tubes was collected to make up for shortages. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt made a special plea for donations of critically-needed rubber and announced that the rubber floor mats from the White House cars had been sacrificed, Boy Scouts gathered at service stations to ask motorists to surrender theirs.⁴

Young people were so enthusiastic about such activities that, to channel their work, a High School Victory Corps was created in the summer of 1942. Under the direction of the schools, and for academic credit, they prepared for war work or the services. Actually, most of their time went to parades, scrap drives, bond sales, and calisthenics.⁵

As the war wore on, volunteer activities became more meaningful, as in food production through Victory Gardens in towns and "An Acre for a Soldier" in rural areas. Young people assisted adults in hospitals, day-care centers, servicemen's canteens, and an incredible variety of war-supported projects.

When the war ended, students looked for new community projects.



Victory Corps Insignia. Top row: Land Service, General Membership, Sea Service. Center: Production Service, Community Service. Bottom: Air Service.

⁵ Proceedings of the National Safety Council (Eleventh Annual Safety Congress, Detroit, Michigan, August 28-September 1, 1922), p. 329.

⁴ Geoffrey Perrett, *Days of Sadness, Years of Triumph: The American People 1939-1945* (New York, Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, Inc., 1973), p. 234.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 368.



VICTORY GARDENS

GROWTH OF CHARACTER

Conservation of natural resources was becoming a national issue, and students joined in the struggle to create and protect parks and forests. Summer camps, such as the 1947 Conservation Camp for New Hampshire Young Leaders, trained students in forestry and preservation skills.

The concern for safety, especially for traffic safety, continued in this period. While the adults in thousands of communities formed Traffic Safety Councils, students were organized into the School Safety Patrol.

Many adults who had been out of school for several years sought advanced schooling. Public Law 346, or the G.I. Bill, gave an enormous number of veterans the opportunity to receive degrees they could not have afforded otherwise. Enrollment rocketed.

One resulting trend was for schools to grant some sort of academic credit for life experience. This generally began with business administration departments. Academic advisors were also pressed into adjusting course requirements according to individual students' special backgrounds. After all, if a student already spoke two or more languages, why insist on the language course requirement? Flexibility such as this was introduced in a variety of ways. By 1954 Brooklyn College had devised a system for granting life experience credits, and by 1957 the University of Oklahoma had created a B.A. degree earned without traditional credits.⁶

The N.Y.A. had been discontinued in 1943 when student employment was not a need. Though many campuses still had student work-study programs, they lacked

the coordinated leadership provided by N.Y.A. The decentralized work programs were often relegated to individual financial aid officers who had neither the time nor the training to continue the career-related thrust integral to the N.Y.A. concept. The student work programs which did flourish in the 1950's were those supported by college administrators, and they focused on helping qualified high school graduates to pay tuition.⁷ Paid student employment programs drifted away from connection with academic studies.

In the 1950's some subtle changes occurred in the field work experiences required of students. While previous practica had stressed observation of the problems that might be encountered while practicing the profession, now students were encouraged to study the normal conditions of life. For example, medical students were assigned to multi-generation families and told to handle or refer their health needs over a period of years. Other professions similarly found ways to train students to understand the real-life context of the various situations needing their professional attention.

Summer field trips, conducted tours, and structured terms abroad provided many young people with educational experiences designed more to broaden them as individuals than to provide specific on-the-job skills. Of course, for language majors or would-be archaeologists, such new opportunities were exceptional experiential learning.

In the two decades after World War II, student government was active on most campuses. Though this movement declined as students became disenchanted during the political unrest of the 1960's, self-govern-

ment affected the quality of student life. Campus events were usually determined by the student councils, and often discipline was enforced by them as well. Many future leaders developed organizational and management skills.

Universities began to move away from wholly prescribed curricula. New structures had to be found to make higher education work with greater flexibility. Majors, minors, electives, honor points, subject departments—all were developed in response to the need to meet individual educational requirements. Educators also attempted to quantify, in academic credit terms, the value of experiential learning. This was the period when rules such as two hours of laboratory work equals one hour of lecture came into being.⁸

The last two decades have seen far-reaching changes in education and in the ways students can blend community work with classroom learning. In some ways, more real innovations have occurred in this short time than in the entire history of American education up to this point. Most adults have only to examine their own formal education and compare it to what students have today to understand the magnitude of the differences. Remember the chairs bolted to the floor? Remember how the campus security officer warned against straying into the local neighborhood? School carefully protected students from the real world.

The 1960's and 1970's have witnessed social upheaval in many areas. Students—reacting to assassinations, a frustrating foreign war, the struggle for civil rights—became

⁶ Morris T. Keeton, ed., *Experiential Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Publishers, 1976). Cyril O. Houle, "Deep Traditions of Experiential Learning," p. 32.

⁷ Adams and Stephens, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁸ Keeton, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

vocal and even violent in protesting the lack of relevance and imagination in course work. The road had already been prepared for experimentation with academic requirements; the students, however, vocalized the problem with immediacy and succeeded in speeding up progress.

Among the innovations of recent years is the expansion of field work assignments to major fields of study not usually considered pre-professional education. Today students in subjects as diverse as geography, business administration, physical education, and psychology can receive credit or at least support for finding community work relevant to their field. The common denominator is teacher supervision. In some cases, volunteer work substitutes for one aspect of classroom work, such as a research paper; in other cases, the community assignment can be of such depth and duration that an entire semester's worth of credit is earned. The spectrum of field work covers every conceivable variation between these two extremes.

A parallel development of academic field work programs is the student volunteer program. In the last two decades, schools have found ways to channel student interest in community work through campus-based, organized volunteer projects. Often young people in any major can join in the activity, which can range from neighborhood improvement to tutoring children. The possibilities are limitless.

Recently some colleges have opened Volunteer Offices to assist individual students in finding satisfying volunteer work in the community. Concurrently, local agencies and organizations have begun to recognize the worth of student volunteers and have developed a range of service-learning assignments. Though a debate has formed over the differences—if any—between a student volunteer and a student doing field work, the fact remains that community directors of volunteers are increasingly prepared to welcome youth into their programs.

The diversity of programs can be sensed by browsing through *Synergist*, which itself represents a new



development. Since the creation of the National Student Volunteer Program (NSVP) in 1969, NSVP has provided information and training to thousands of educators, students, and agencies seeking to improve the quality of student volunteer service-learning programs. In 1971 NSVP became part of ACTION, the umbrella agency which coordinates the federal government's volunteer programs. ACTION has initiated special student volunteer programs: the University Year for Action (UYA), an intensive one-year service-learning option for college students, and the Youth Challenge Program, a part-time volunteer program for young people from 14 to 21.

Work-study and cooperative education have continued to play important roles in financial aid. Today, one trend is to find work—whenever possible—suited to the students' interests.

The field also has expanded to include community colleges, junior highs, and even elementary schools. Students of all ages and backgrounds now have the chance to learn by doing—and to help others while they learn.

Continuing education, growing explosively these last years, must find ways to integrate the extensive life experiences of its students into academic course work. This is the challenge whenever mature adults decide to return to school—and especially when current programs invite senior citizens to become students again.

While it is difficult to maintain perspective on today's programs, they clearly are rooted in the tradition of the past and are proliferating at an awesome pace with modern and creative twists.

Service-learning and student volunteer programs give young people a chance to be involved meaningfully in the life of their communities. In a world where new careers are created almost monthly and old careers undergo constant change, service-learning must be geared toward generic skills and personal development. The goal has become to train young people to adapt to progress rather than to learn the specifics of a very focused problem. Application of knowledge in a variety of situations is stressed.

While there is confusion about terminology—experiential learning, field work, service-learning, practicum—the intent of all the programs clearly is to provide a link between the classroom and the outside world. Perhaps in the future service-learning programs will be such an integral part of education that they will need less formalization. Then we will have come full circle from colonial days by again seeing the constant partnership of life, learning, and community involvement. **S**

The research for this two-part article was drawn in part from a forthcoming history of volunteers in the United States, By the People, by Susan J. Ellis and Katherine H. Noyes.