

# An Internet Dialogue: Mandatory Student Community Service, Court-Ordered Volunteering, and Service-Learning

Susan Ellis, Andrea Fey, Shelly Field, Gayle Gifford, Jacquelynn Grote,  
Nan Hawthorne, Wendy Lavine, Retha Patton, Robin Popik,  
Dawna Sarmiento, Karen Shaw, John Spencer, Catherine Thomas,  
Maureen Watkins and Deborah Witmer

## INTRODUCTION

In February 1997 Nan Hawthorne, the host/owner of CyberVPM, an Internet listserv, asked "Are you pro mandatory community service?" The question attracted many posts to her list. What follows are selected excerpts from the discussion.

## THE DIALOGUE

### GAYLE GIFFORD

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*(Cause & Effect is a consulting agency offering services in management, fund raising, and communications to non-profit and government agencies.)*

It's [mandatory community service] the equivalent of conscription and contrary to our first (freedom of assembly) and thirteenth (involuntary servitude) amendment rights.

### SUSAN ELLIS

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*(Energize, Inc. is an international training, consulting, and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism.)*

Gee, wish I'd thought of [Gayle Gifford's] argument when they made me take physical education for four years in high school! Or algebra, or all the other things adults routinely "mandate" kids to do. We force students to read literature to teach them things, but also in the hope

that they will continue to read books when they are adults. Why is community service so different? (It used to be called "Civics.")

Isn't the real issue not that it's required, but how well it's handled? I hated gym and still hate sports. I loved English and guess I still use lots of words! If we help students to have great service experiences, why not assume they'll end up liking it?

### GAYLE GIFFORD

My concern about conscription and mandatory community service had to do with national service for all US citizens rather than students.

I'm not sure how I feel about mandatory service for high school students. I guess I still feel that it should be optional. Would participation in advocacy group activities, volunteering with Amnesty International by writing letters, or participating in political campaigns (no matter how distasteful), or volunteer activities of your religious organization fulfill a school's requirement for community service? I think of all of these as community service. Do others on the list?

### DAWNA SARMIENTO

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My experience has been extremely positive. Not only do we encourage mandatory school community service, but also court-ordered. For the most part the youths continue to volunteer after the mandatory hours are completed. This is a great way to help influence the youth of today to become involved in their communities and feel their involvement does make a difference. Our agency is committed to providing emotional support and supervision to all youth volunteers. In addition, I ask these volunteers to write at least a one-page paper on their experience at our agency. I have been overwhelmed by their responses. The court-ordered, especially, seem to have learned many valuable life lessons.

#### MAUREEN WATKINS

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Why do I favor required student service? Because it's a way to introduce young people to the concept of becoming community participants in ways beyond their initial understanding of that concept. And it's a way for communities to see young people as helpers and providers as well as consumers of goods and services. We had students and their parents moan and whine about "mandatory service" or "prompted participation" (an Ivan Scheier-ism). But I applaud schools that understand that learning about your community and how to become effective citizens of that community are as much a part of education as learning math and language.

Now, is it "volunteerism?" I'm not sure. But the management of student service can fall within the scope of volunteer administration.

#### JOHN SPENCER

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*(Francis House provides a loving, home-like environment where people with terminal illnesses can die in peace and dignity.)*

I tend to fall on the anti-mandatory service side, but I'd be more than happy to be convinced otherwise. Can someone who is pro mandatory service address the issues of whether mandatory volunteerism is moral (is it forcing students to act against their values)? Is it truly promoting volunteerism or is it just making kids jump through another hoop? If students are allowed to volunteer at "any" non-profit, how can we be sure they're getting a worthwhile experience? If they're only allowed to volunteer at "certain" agencies, are we enforcing our own set of values?

Thanks in advance for any thoughts!

#### JACQUELYNN GROTE

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*(Richmond CLASS is a support system for 13 tutoring and mentoring programs at the University of Richmond.)*

John [Spencer] asked: "If students are allowed to volunteer at 'any' non-profit, how can we be sure they're getting a worthwhile experience? If they're only allowed to volunteer at 'certain' agencies, are we enforcing our own set of values?"

Excellent questions!! One solution to this dilemma may be to recruit a set of agencies you know will work well with students. That is, they have a history of working with short-term volunteers and they have the manpower to supervise. If there is no agency the student finds appealing, he or she can take the initiative to go out and find one that is. In most cases this works well. Even if the agency would not normally work well with ser-

vice-learning (or any mandatory service), students who take the initiative to set up the project will most likely follow through and make it work.

Has any of this convinced you, John?

RETHA PATTON

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*(Volunteer ETSU provides student-led programs committed to involving students in effective, meaningful community service activities that enhance lifelong learning.)*

I really do not follow the logic of [John Spencer's] statements. Where does the idea come from that performing service is forcing students to act against their values or enforcing our values?

In service programs students are presented with a wide variety of choices of placements so, therefore, they should be enthused about at least something that is offered. The flack of "I'm being forced to do this" is what every person in authority (parent, teacher, etc.) hears from teenagers who resent being told what to do, whether to clean their rooms, do their homework, perform chores around the house, be home at their curfew, etc. Instead of worrying about "forcing our values on them," let's spend more time making sure the school programs are staffed with trained volunteer coordinators (or run by community volunteer centers) and that [the school is] running a QUALITY site placement/referral program, matching students with sites that meet the students' needs/values as well as the school's requirements.

NAN HAWTHORNE

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*(CyberVPM is online discussion for volunteer program managers.)*

Retha Patton said: "I really do not follow the logic of [John Spencer's] statements. Where does the idea come from that performing service is forcing students to act against their values or enforcing our own values?"

Here's an example. Let's say I'm a 14-year old in a smallish town. My high school just said I have to volunteer for 30 hours or I don't graduate. As it happens, there are only six approved organizations, all run by church-based agencies. But I am either of a different faith or an agnostic. What do I do?

Being forced to take a class like English or math is not the same thing at all.

This example could be re-argued in a number of different situations. What if you were forced to donate money to graduate? Why isn't our time as important as our money?

If my high school had a mandatory service requirement, I would've never graduated. I was in essence a Mom, raising my little sister. I never joined ANY extracurricular activities. If my husband's high school had required service, he would never have graduated. He lived in a rural area and had no transportation. Neither one of us would've gotten our diplomas, so no college, no college degree, no decent job where we could afford a computer, no access to the Internet, no Nan setting up CyberVPM, so we wouldn't be having this discussion here because there might be no here!

ROBIN POPIK

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*(The City of Plano's VIP Program promotes citizen participation in all departments of city government to enhance and expand services.)*

It has been very difficult to place youth who are school-ordered or court-ordered in our city program. The three to six hours they need makes for a recordkeeping and sometimes supervision nightmare. Supervisors are constantly having to explain the

system and direct them. Many youth volunteers do their community service in libraries and by the time they catch on, their time is up. YES, some kids stay on and that is rewarding to all of us.

What I would like to see is the schools picking three or four large projects and dates, then have the kids choose between those projects. The kids can discuss the rewards of each project in their group or school. This would actually help us more because there are always places to clean up or a special event to work on.

I have stopped taking TRUANCY kids because they either do not show up or cause trouble when they do. I would like to see the truancy offenders go along with the adult probation groups that work on outdoor projects because of their offenses and help them clean the streets and parks on weekends.

#### ANDREA FEY

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*(The Volunteer Center mobilizes volunteers to address community needs and strengthens local organizations to involve volunteers effectively.)*

I am on a service-learning committee in Hendersonville, NC, to promote student service. Our committee is a small but diverse group of a couple of educators, a parent, a concerned citizen, and me, representing the Volunteer Center. We first came together because we believed that when students serve, everyone benefits.

When our group started meeting we had very different ideas about the way in which service-learning should be implemented in our community. Some felt that service hours should never be mandatory. I felt service-learning has the unique characteristic of reaching those hard-to-reach students who are at risk of dropping out of school, who are using illegal substances, who are engaging in sexual intercourse, etc. Show those kids that school is,

in fact, relevant to them and you've really accomplished something. I believed that community service should be mandatory for all students.

Our committee came to a consensus that incorporating service-learning into the curriculum softened the "mandatory" vs. "voluntary" debate. What became clear to us is that there is a great distinction between "community service" and "service-learning."

A good service-learning program has three components: preparation, action, and reflection. Community service, technically, consists only of action.

While service-learning does not need to be included in the curriculum, that is where it is most effective and inclusive, in my opinion. If it is not in the curriculum, some type of preparatory work and reflection must be involved, lest the project turn into "community service." I am in favor of community service, but not to mandate it as a graduation requirement. For students who might have a values conflict, I would suggest independent service projects. Rural areas that have few service agencies to choose from may have a more difficult time developing local service projects. However, advocacy is a far-reaching service that can be performed from any location.

Service-learning programs do not develop themselves. Teachers need to be trained to use service-learning methods. They also need to be given incentives (i.e., money) to develop new curricula. But this innovative concept is worth it.

#### DEBORAH WITMER

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I echo [Andrea Fey's] belief that there is a big difference between "community service" and "service-learning" and, like her,

I advocate for the latter.

Here at our agency, we use many volunteers, some doing "community service" (through the courts) and some students doing "service-learning" projects. I have had both good and bad experiences with individuals from both groups, but by far find the "best service" comes from the students! Both groups are being "forced" to do the work, but the students are looking to learn/gain something from the experience, while the "community service" folks are just trying to get it over with by and large, although there have been some exceptions.

Although I bet teachers groan when something else is added to their already full plates, I believe these programs, incorporated into the curriculum, are tremendous learning experiences and should be graduation requirements.

#### SHELLY FIELD

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I agree with the many who have already made eloquent cases for promoting curriculum-based service-learning instead of co-curricular service requirements. Although we don't require students at the UW to do volunteer work or service-learning, we have very high voluntary participation rates in service-learning because students are excited about the opportunity to learn in a new way and to test and challenge the relevance of the more traditional theoretical curriculum. Many also tell us that they have always wanted to get involved in the community but they have been too busy or they didn't know where to start. There are ways to entice students to engage in service-learning (instead of requiring

them to) by responding to their particular interests and limitations.

I am opposed to mandatory co-curricular service for many reasons, most of which have already been raised. But I'm surprised that no one has raised the issue of the potential negative impacts—for the students and the agency clients alike—of requiring that unmotivated and possibly resentful students do community service. I believe students who are forced to serve are much more likely to come away from the experience with their negative attitudes and stereotypes reinforced. And I hope that organizations that take students who have been required to volunteer [and don't want to] conduct careful screening to put them in roles far away from clients. Someone [Susan Ellis] was suggesting that requiring community service is similar to requiring PE or English. The problem I have with this comparison is that the consequences of the SCHOOL's requirement must be borne by the COMMUNITY.

#### WENDY LAVINE

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*(Triad Health Project provides practical and emotional support and prevention education to those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.)*

Just wanted to add my two cents. This has been a great topic!!!

One of the keys to making [mandatory community service] work is to be up-front from the start. If I get students with finite assignments, I tell them the options they have and if we can cooperate it works well. I want it to work for them without making too much extra work for the agency.

My favorite part of required service is the stealth education we are giving students. Direct contact with certain populations, i.e., substance abusers, people with HIV/AIDS, the homeless, young parents, can be an eye opening experience that

may change behavior more than any video or pamphlet can. Of course it does not always work. Like the truant kids who have had such a good time doing grunt work in the office they want to quit school and stay all the time, or when a parent wants to use the service as a punishment. But spending even a little well-supervised time out in the "real world" may be the best education experience kids can get.

#### JOHN SPENCER

Well, I gotta say I'm pretty impressed with the arguments in favor of service-learning. Making it an active part of the educational curriculum including both preparation and follow-up alleviates many problems.

Two issues I'm not totally convinced of: 1) As Nan [Hawthorne] pointed out, what about the agnostic student who is asked to participate in a project for a religious institution? 2) What about those "non-service-learning" programs that simply require XX amount of community service? I haven't seen much support for these in the discussion.

Absolutely loving this discussion, by the way!

#### RETHA PATTON

John Spencer asks: "What about the agnostic student who is asked to participate in a project for a religious institution?"

No coordinator who is doing a decent job would only come up with six placements, all affiliated with religious groups. That is not what I would consider a quality service program. The placements offered HAVE to be diverse, to offer something for everyone.

I also don't buy Nan's [Hawthorne] arguments about small rural communities, transportation problems, time commitments, etc. I am from a small high school (350 students - 73 in my graduating class), a small rural community (population about 5,000) 10 miles from the nearest big town. There are plenty of

things going on or that can be started in small rural communities. Some examples are clean ups, low-income housing rehabs (Habitat for Humanity type stuff), meals-on-wheels deliveries (assistants!), helping an elderly neighbor with chores or just visiting, starting an after-school program/club at the local elementary school, assisting a local Scout troop or 4-H club as a co-leader or junior leader, in-school assistance such as working with the librarian, resource teachers, tutoring programs, bulletin boards, advocacy work, re-building the baseball field or track bleachers, sewing up some new curtains for the cafeteria or gym, etc.

Somewhere we are forgetting that students don't have to do 100 hours of service within the last week of school to graduate. It should be broken down into very small increments of time over the four years of high school attendance (and what about summers?). Again, if the program is implemented correctly—and administered correctly—through the classroom with teacher facilitation, the service components would not be an additional burden.

Transportation can be worked out as necessary. A lot of students don't seem to have problems getting to Little League games and the malls. I used to ride into town after school with a teacher who was my mother's good friend to attend a monthly 4-H Council meeting at the Extension office in town. She dropped me off there because it was directly on her way home after school. Another member's Mom picked up two other Council members after school and drove them to the monthly meeting. Some Council members were old enough to drive themselves. When there is a will, there is a way. Of course I am NOT advocating that all students start riding home with teachers, but just trying to illustrate that students and their parents have resources available to them when transportation is a problem.

#### SUSAN ELLIS

Without quoting anyone in particular, I

wanted to comment on a few things that have been said over the last few days.

First, the person [Shelly Field] who noted (in response to my posting) that requiring kids to take phys. ed. or algebra is different because community service imposes kids on the community made a very good point. I hadn't thought of that and appreciate the distinction.

However, I still think that the issue is HOW community service is imposed, not that it is required. Nan [Hawthorne] and several others seem to feel it is always coercive, with little choice to anyone. I must say the programs I've seen give students an extremely wide range of choices and, as someone else [Jacquelynn Grote] posted, allow students who don't like what's on the list already to go out and find their own placement sites. Church-related volunteering (directed at programs, not at religious service), activism of all sorts, and other types of service are also usually allowed, as long as there is truly an organization and an adult supervisor. In a well-run program, everyone's "values" can be accommodated. In fact, many schools even allow students to conduct their own personal service campaign (such as trying to get the county commissioners to put up a stop sign) if there isn't an agency that suits their tastes.

I don't buy the comparison to "what if you were required to give money." Along those lines, we do require students to buy gym uniforms, some additional books, etc. So schools are already "mandating" expenses. Maybe the question is one of time. If the school is telling students to do the volunteer work on their own time, that may be seen as oppressive. But if they can use classroom time, it's up to the school to direct how they use those hours.

Given the range of organizations in this world, it should be possible for 99 percent of students to find an agency they can care enough about for 40 hours to learn what they can there. I just don't get why this is wrong. In rural areas, or for people like Nan and her husband, a school ought to be able to work out options for com-

munity service (virtual volunteering, taking part in a babysitting cooperative, whatever).

To the people who feel that agencies are being dumped with unwilling students, just say NO. The student may be required to serve, but you sure aren't required to place them! Never accept anyone who doesn't want to be there. But also don't ASSUME that students are negative. In fact, again, 99 percent of them (OK, maybe 92 percent) actually like the chance to get out of school and do something different. And often will remain active afterwards as "pure" volunteers.

One more thought: You don't have to "take" only a limited number of hours of service. If 40 hours won't work for you, make your minimum requirement 75 hours or whatever. If the student can't meet your minimum needs, they have to look elsewhere. Don't do this as an obstacle course, but if you really need the extra time to make training worthwhile, stick by your guns!

NAN HAWTHORNE

Thanks for your thoughtful comments, Susan.

I did want to point out that much of what you said in response to my and others' objections to the mandatory part really boils down to "ideally" or "it should." Ideally every volunteer, no matter the age or circumstances, should get the best opportunity to be effective. But you and I both know that doesn't always happen.

I still object to MANDATORY (put in all caps because I've had several people suggest I am somehow against volunteering—huh????!—or youth service) community service on ethical grounds. I believe it is just plain wrong, very much in the same camp with school prayer. But I'm willing to concede that an ideal program with buckets of different opportunities and lots of respect for and support for students' choices and efforts would at least have a fighting chance of not being a negative experience. But certainly when a whole state makes service mandatory,

there's little or no guarantee that those ideal characteristics will become or stay reality for every young person in every city, town, or village. Like saying there should be buses for rural kids. Yeah, should. But there generally isn't the money for them.

I've always believed that for volunteering to be successful for all involved, we must accept that individuals will have a wide range of reasons for volunteering that are not always (in fact rarely are) pure altruism. And that there were only a few actual BAD reasons: intending to hurt or exploit, conflicts with the mission of organization, and SOMEONE ELSE'S REASON, Mom's, or God's, or the Governor's, no matter. In my experience, if you don't go in with a desire to volunteer, you have less than an even chance of having a good experience.

#### CATHERINE THOMAS

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This is my first posting to the list. I have quietly reviewed and reflected on the many thoughts that have been shared.

I have worked in the volunteer management arena for more than 15 years and am the mother of three daughters (now 17, 19, and 21). Each has been volunteering since they were 10 years old. Like Nan [Hawthorne], I believe that if my children had been required to do community service when they were younger, because of a lack of resources (mine and the system's) to support them, none of them would have graduated. As fate would have it, because we had the "freedom of choice" and the desire to be involved, they

were able to experience community service with a variety of organizations. My oldest daughter escaped the mandatory service requirement for graduation, but was faced with service requirements through organizations in which she was a member. In addition, she served two years in a local AmeriCorps program that had a requirement of service hours. My younger two daughters did not escape the [mandatory] requirement, but saw it as a way to expand on what they were already doing.

"Mandatory" service produces some interesting challenges for all parties involved, but I am not so concerned with the "mandatory" as I am with the resulting "experience."

#### KAREN SHAW

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Let's say you're in high school. The school requires you to take PE, which you hate. The school says you can't graduate without taking this. The school gives you a list of different PE courses you may take. High schools require all kinds of things to graduate. What is so different about this?

#### NAN HAWTHORNE

You [Karen Shaw] asked what the difference is between requiring a PE class and requiring community service. There are two differences:

PE is a class, supposedly teaching skills for keeping fit while service is labor, it's work. Whatever ostensible good one is doing, it is still a job, tasks, working for someone.

AND community service is intended to teach "values" along with skills and knowledge, whether a specific value about contributing to a community need or the general value of volunteering. Whether we like it or not, not everyone

agrees with this value. Why are we so willing to set it up as an absolute in spite of others' beliefs? Would we be so sanguine if someone else decided their "absolute value" should be enforced on us? Heck, several people went ballistic on this list over someone simply sharing his political point of view about gun control. What if the majority decided teaching all kids to use guns was important to teach them to be self-reliant and defend their family and property? I somehow doubt you'd be so quick to defend the forced teaching of that value.

Believing we should or must make community service MANDATORY assumes several things:

1. Young people cannot be trusted to develop the value of community service on their own.
2. You can make someone value something by forcing him or her to do it.
3. The individual's right of choice will be respected. (I'm particularly skeptical on this one. Since their right of choice as to WHETHER isn't being respected, why should their right of choice as to HOW?)
4. Everyone will be able to do it, they have the time, the transportation, the ability, or that every school district will have the money to provide buses, time away from school, tools, access to it.
5. The best possible use will be made of the young people's time availability and talents and the experience will be relevant to their schoolwork.
6. Local volunteer programs will have the volunteer opportunities, the staff, the record-keeping ability and opportunities, the funding, the knowledge of how to work with young people, the willingness to use these volunteers productively.
7. Young people will feel comfortable objecting or dissenting when faced with authority or peer pressure.
8. Religious, political, and social organizations will not take the opportunity

to proselytize.

9. Opportunities to volunteer will exist for ALL young people, including disabled kids. (I see reluctance to work with disabled adults. Why would young people be any different?)
10. Everyone SHOULD believe volunteering is an absolute good. Not everyone does, nor do I have the b\*\*\*s to demand they do.

I don't think any of these points is a given.

I honestly believe that modeling is the appropriate way to teach the value of community service. Modeling shows that you care enough about something to live it. And it shows you respect a young person and trust him or her to observe, make choices, act on his or her own volition. Volition—Volunteer. Same root: "willingness."

Your PE example may come back to haunt you. I did take it. It was required. I did hate it. I did resent being forced to take it. My disability put me at a disadvantage. I did poorly and was tormented by other kids. I still hate PE. If I had a kid who wanted out of PE, I'd do anything I could to help him/her get out of it. I have never participated in a single sporting activity in my entire life. I don't support sports programs. I don't vote for new stadiums. I tune out when sports news comes on. I don't buy Nikes.

No one forced me to volunteer. My mother volunteered. I had a very good first experience with volunteering. I love it. I put in at least 10 hours a week doing it. I speak and write constantly on the benefits of volunteering. I share my pleasure in volunteering with everyone. I even make respecting my volunteer work a condition of hiring me.

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#### EDITOR'S NOTE

Nan Hawthorne writes:

*A "listserv" is one type of "mailing list," one form of discussion possible on the Internet. What distinguishes a mailing list from the other forms, such as chat, newsgroups,*

*and message or bulletin boards, is its method of delivery. Mailing lists are conveyed entirely via E-mail. A central computer acts as the distributor for all messages, or "posts," to the list. Members, called subscribers, can send their messages to one E-mail address and have them automatically forwarded to every other subscriber. Likewise, each subscriber receives a copy of every other subscriber's messages. A subscription to a mailing list is almost always free-of-charge. Most mailing lists allow the subscriber to either receive each message as it is sent, or in digest format (a collection of all posts for a given day). An excellent resource for finding mailing lists and other online discussion groups on any topic is Liszt at <http://www.liszt.com>.*

To subscribe to the CyberVPM listserv, send the E-mail message "subscribe CyberVPM <your name>" to [Listserv@CharityChannel.com](mailto:Listserv@CharityChannel.com), use the Web-based form at [www.CharityChannel.com](http://www.CharityChannel.com), or contact [listmaster@cyber-vpm.com](mailto:listmaster@cyber-vpm.com). CyberVPM's Website address (URL) is [www.cybervpm.com](http://www.cybervpm.com).