

National Service: A Prospectus for Student Service

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If it is true that there can be as much as a fifty year gap between the time a concept is generally expressed and the time of its general acceptance, then a national youth service may not appear for another 15 to 20 years—if at all. By "national youth service" I mean a program in which all young adults between the ages of 18 and 21 would be required by law to volunteer a prescribed number of hours within a legitimate, recognizable, and certified human service agency in lieu of a military commitment. However, there are now several strong and persistent indicators which suggest a vigorous support for some kind of national youth service.

First among these indicators is the present surge in school-based volunteer service programs. In Atlanta's high schools, students must perform 75 hours of community service outside of the schools in order to graduate. In Detroit, the requirement is for 200 hours of service. Similar programs exist in Maryland and Rhode Island.¹

Concurrent with the school-based volunteer service programs are the Federal Government's initiatives and programs to encourage and to promote volunteerism. Most notable of these is ACTION, which provides for the administration and the coordination of a broad spectrum of volunteer programs. More specifically, the Young Volunteers in ACTION program (YVA) has encouraged young people 14 to 22 years of age to participate in volunteer activities which would benefit the low income community and at the same time would offer a veritable cornucopia of volunteer opportunities. ACTION's YVA program ended in 1988 and was superseded by the Student Community Service Projects whose intent and purpose are to

build partnerships between the school, the community, and today's youth in the effort to address poverty-related community needs.

Furthermore, there appears to be strong support among high school students themselves for a national service program as well, and that support is evident within urban-based school volunteer programs such as those in the New York City-Metropolitan area as well as those in statewide or national programs (e.g., Minnesota Youth Service and the Student Conservation Association).² New York City's School Volunteer Program, begun in 1956, initially focused on freeing teachers from paper work. It later was expanded to include students who served both within and outside of public schools. Should the interest in a national youth service continue, that interest would include most logically the possibility of student service.

Student volunteer service can take many forms. It can be elective or compulsory. It can be integrated into the overall school curriculum and be credit bearing, or it can be defined as a co-curricular activity. To be most effective, a high school student volunteer program should be integrated thoroughly into the school curriculum. A full-time staff person should be hired to develop volunteer opportunities; to identify, place and to direct all aspects of the volunteer program; and, finally, to serve as an active liaison to the community and to volunteer agencies. The volunteer coordinator would also seek out and encourage communication with local, state, and federal volunteer agencies. School-based student volunteer service programs have already attracted many notable proponents.

John Battaglia has been the coordinator of Fort Lee (NJ) High School's School and Community Service Program for the last seven years. This elective service program has a yearly enrollment of approximately 150 students (from a school population of 800), with nearly 80% of those enrolled coming from the senior class. Over 26 schools and agencies are served by the student volunteers.

Dr. Ernest Boyer, past president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, stated that student volunteer service is one of the most powerful answers to what he terms a "sense of drift" among today's youth.³ Additionally, a recent study by Richard Danzig and Peter Szanton which was completed for the Ford Foundation suggested that the nation's schools might serve as the conduit for national student service.⁴ The Danzig/Szanton report outlined four models for national youth service: (1) mandatory school-based programs; (2) universal service; (3) a federally supported all-volunteer agency; and (4) a national draft. Of the four models, a school-based program might be the most acceptable politically and socially, and could possibly provide the most effective volunteer service.

Socially, a mandatory, school-based volunteer program would be the least intrusive to the educational, career, and family circumstances of those affected. High school students would simply treat volunteer service like any other prerequisite for graduation—a prerequisite which might be satisfied by serving before, during or after school and which is dependent upon a student's personal and academic schedule and the creative variety of volunteer opportunities from which to choose.

Therefore, such a program would suffer none of the hardships or potential detriments to family, career, or to personal freedom which might clearly be at risk within the other models identified by Danzig/Szanton. *Ergo, a priori* of a political definition, a mandatory school-based volunteer program would also be the model most acceptable.

Thus, lawmakers like Congressman Robert Torricelli (N.J., 9th District) have begun to promote the idea of a national youth service. Congressman Torricelli has asked a House Education and Labor subcommittee "to endorse his bill that would establish a commission to study national youth service programs."⁵ Congressman Torricelli also sponsored a bill which would require young people to serve one year of national service to be completed any time between one's 18th and 21st

birthday in an acceptable human service agency.

The support of Dr. Boyer, the research of Danzig and Szanton, and the growing political interest by Congressman Torricelli and others all give further indication of the credibility of national youth service. Another significant sign of the potential strength of a national youth service is the long and proven success of current student volunteer programs. Across the country, programs such as those at the Moses Brown School in Providence, Rhode Island, at the Taylor Allderidge High School in Pittsburgh, and at the Riverside University High School in Milwaukee all serve as testaments of community good will and civic responsibility and as educational vehicles for students to explore careers and to heighten self-esteem and self-awareness. In Fort Lee's (NJ) School and Community Service program, for example, approximately 140 students (from a school population of 800) elect to serve in nearly 30 human service agencies in and around the community. One-third of all volunteers serve within the public schools themselves as teachers' aides, student tutors, peer counselors, and as school aides. Another third serve within the community's department of parks and recreation and assist as coaches, pre-school helpers, after-school arts and crafts instructors, and as supervisors in the youth center. The final third of the student volunteers serve in such agencies as the volunteer ambulance corps, fire department, public library, local hospitals, and nearby nursing homes.

Many of the volunteer programs listed above are not new. They reflect years of trial and error and are the results of continued refinement in order to meet student/community needs and expectations. Their common denominator, however, is that they work. They work for the volunteer who may not have had his/her first "real life" experience outside of school except for volunteer service, and the programs work for the community and the volunteer agencies which receive an often badly-needed infusion of volunteer service. An example of one volunteer's personal assessment of the role of volunteer

service in his life is included herein as Addendum A and is printed with the volunteer's permission.

Should a national program of student volunteer service become a reality, agency volunteer coordinators would be the primary beneficiaries. Coordinators must be skilled in the areas of volunteer placement, training, supervision, and recruitment as they apply to the youth volunteer. The agency coordinator must also develop a rapport with the directors of school and college volunteer programs in his/her immediate area. The coordinator should give the school-based directors a clear and comprehensive appraisal of the agency's volunteer opportunities and of the agency's expectations regarding volunteer service. After an understanding is reached, both the agency coordinator and the school's director can develop strategies for recruitment and placement. The school's director is also the most valuable resource person for the agency coordinator in acquiring an initial understanding of a youth volunteer's credits and liabilities.

In the absence of a school-based volunteer program, the agency volunteer coordinator's first contact with the school should be with the principal and/or director of guidance. Most schools also have one or more service organizations, *e.g.*, the Key Club or Student Council, and it would be advisable to meet also with the advisors to these organizations.

In attracting youth volunteers, the key word is "saturation." A persistent and varied promotion of volunteer opportunities works best with an emphasis in the positive status of volunteer service *vis-à-vis* college applications and work résumés. In high schools, public address announcements should be coordinated with written invitations to explore volunteer opportunities. These invitations should be short and precise, and should state hours of service, nature of service, and any pertinent information on orientation and training. Group orientation and introduction sessions in school are also helpful in appealing to the school volunteer. Group meetings should be followed by individual conferences whenever possible, and potential volunteers should be

encouraged to include any friends who might also have an interest in a particular volunteer opportunity.

In all cases, however, the prospective youth volunteer should be given a thorough sense of the proposed volunteer service. A "walk through" or trial period works best. At every turn, the agency volunteer coordinator should repeat the agency's expectations for volunteers, volunteer procedures, and all possible contingencies of the volunteer service. The youth volunteer should be given every opportunity to modify or to end gracefully his/her service after this initial get-acquainted period. Regular (albeit informal) meetings between the volunteer and the agency coordinator are most helpful during this time. Because of the many forces vying for the attention and the time of the youth volunteer, he/she should be treated with care and regard and without the threat of loss of self-esteem should a service be unrealistic for the volunteer. The youth volunteer should be encouraged to consider his/her service as a safe, positive, and predictable haven in an otherwise rather demanding and frenetic world. Given the above parameters, the youth volunteer can bring energy, innovation, and verve to any volunteer opportunity.

The most effective volunteer programs, then, would seek their fair share of youth volunteers. In considering high school seniors alone, the agency volunteer coordinator is faced with approximately 2.7 million potential volunteers. Should a national student volunteer program be applied to all high school students, the pool of potential volunteers reaches nearly 10 million. Of course, not all volunteer opportunities are suited for all youth volunteers. Restrictions as to volunteer age, maturity level, and temperament should all be considered in placement. As with most things, a volunteer coordinator will be more adept at setting these restrictions with time and experience than at first. Additionally, an agency coordinator must be aware that "too few" challenges may be just as damaging as "too many" with regards to a volunteer's morale.

In sum, I submit that the question is not whether or not a national student volunteer program will become a reality, but rather how can we best meet the challenge of an already strong and pervasive source of volunteerism: the student volunteer? The innovative agency volunteer coordinator will reach out to the schools and the universities and will accept the challenge. Through a program of outreach and of personal contact, the agency volunteer coordinator can effect a partnership between the schools, the agency, and the community which would capitalize on the energy of the youth volunteer.

ADDENDUM A

One Student's Personal Assessment

Nothing can compare with the personal satisfaction and feelings associated with helping people. I am a member of the Fort Lee Volunteer Ambulance Corps and have made a difference. There are people who are alive today because I was there to help them. There are other people who can still walk and function normally as a result of properly executed vehicle extrication procedures. I provide the community with my services and at the same time have found something that I really enjoy.

The Fort Lee Volunteer Ambulance Corps is unique in that it requires its members to be in the building during their shifts. The reason for this is that Fort Lee is required to provide the George Washington Bridge with its services. During an average week, I work 15 hours. I have been elected co-chairman of the youth corps. I currently provide Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and Basic Life Support (BLS) to people in need. I am an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT). My experiences on the corps have run the gamut. They have rendered me a more responsible person and have enhanced my leadership abilities. They have taught me to communicate clearly, react quickly, and make important decisions in a matter of seconds.

The corps has made me a better person. My greatest ambition is to assist in the delivery of a baby. It would be incredible to see a life come into the world. It would also be a change from the norm! I

have a basic need instilled within myself to help others.

The most important factor in my life right now is to further my education. This education will allow me to achieve my goals, and enable me to continue to make a difference now and in the future.

—A High School Volunteer

FOOTNOTES

¹Phi Beta Kappa, November 1984, p. 5.

²Education USA, January 5, 1987, p. 139.

³Ibid., p. 137.

⁴Carole Douglis. Study Offers Blueprints for National Service Projects for Youths, *Education Week*, June 18, 1987, p. 7.

⁵J. Schott Orr. Torricelli pushes for teen service, *The Star-Ledger* (Newark, N.J.), July 1, 1987, p. 51.

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