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## In the National Interest: Community College and Their Community Service are Vital to Democracy

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# IN THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Community Colleges and Their Community Service Are Vital to Democracy

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By HUGH BAILEY

*Hugh Bailey is senior program officer for the Learn and Serve America program of the Corporation for National Service. The following is adapted from a speech he delivered at the Campus Compact National Center for Community Colleges' national conference, "Visioning Leadership," in Scottsdale, AZ, May 31, 1996.*

**L**et me get right to the point and give you a sense of why the Corporation for National Service sees community colleges as such critical partners in our efforts. Your students across the country have been engaged in community service for many years. Indeed, during the past decade we have seen a resurgence of grassroots activity that helped catapult the issue of service onto the national agenda. Now we are asking institutions of higher education and their students to continue their leadership and involvement.

One reason why we envision the participation of community colleges in national service is that we want participants to reflect the diversity of America. As institutions rooted in communities of accelerating transformation—demographically, economically, culturally—the schools you represent account for a population of students that reflects the changing make-up of the nation's student body. As you are well aware, students with families, part-time students, students of racial and ethnic minority groups, students who commute, immigrant students, and older, returning students are attending college in increasing proportions. This reality challenges us to stretch our creativity in structuring programs that enable all students to serve.

Quite a challenge—but also quite an opportunity, for these students come to your colleges with a wealth of real world experiences under their belt. They come from the local community, they know the problems that exist, and they are motivated to address those problems. Your colleges have the potential to create some of the most effective service programs in the country, for the simple reason that your students are some of the best resources we have for community problem-solving.

Another reason why we are encouraging community colleges to participate is that incorporating service into the education and experiences of college students simply makes a great deal of sense. Community service is a way to engage students in helping to meet community needs, but it is also a vehicle for learning and growth. In fact, when community service programs occur within a strong educational framework, they are more likely to maximize their potential to affect positively both the communities

and the students involved.

It is important for programs to integrate a structured educational component with the service activity, so that students can reflect critically on and learn from their experiences. Service will not help students to understand our society and their role in it and service will not become institutionalized in higher education until we make deliberate efforts to tap its educational potential.

Integrating service with academic curricula is one very powerful way to structure service experiences so that they simultaneously meet community needs, contribute to student learning and meet your learning objectives.

Let me offer a few examples. If you are teaching students about social policy related to poverty, welfare or homelessness, doesn't it make sense for students not only to learn the models, explanations and predictions that political and economic theory provide, but also to develop a first-hand understanding of how the complex realities of

people's lives intersect with public policy? Without opportunities to tackle these issues in direct (albeit limited) ways, students are left to rely on textbook analyses of why some policies fail while others succeed, never grasping the human dimension, never testing their preconceptions against reality, never informing their hypotheses with personal observations.

I should add that service learning is aligned with another set of educational objectives that distinguishes it from other forms of experiential learning and that is equally important to the mission of higher education. And that is the broader aim of preparing students to be citizens and leaders, in a 21st century democracy. A thriving democracy will require leadership that is developed not only through specialized training in the professions and disciplines. More importantly, it will require leadership developed through education that fosters real capacities to work in complex communities, to recognize diversity and use it as a resource in problem-solving. We need leaders who are prepared to build community and to work for the common good. Linking service with education can help.

The notion of service taps into the civic dimension of the educational mission upon which your institutions were founded. In many ways, the time is right to renew this civic purpose. The poverty of our people and our spirit is tearing apart our social fabric at its very seams, and a promising yet fledgling movement to revitalize the ethic of participatory citizenship has yet to become a transformative force in American life. It is an opportu-

nism for institutions and individuals to demonstrate leadership by shaping a vision of social purpose that strategically links the signs of despair with the signs of hope, under the banner of community.

But in other ways, for higher education, it is perhaps the worst time to be discussing lofty social agendas. Under the pressure of shrinking budgets and a diversity of internal and external demands, most colleges are struggling to focus—not broaden—their institutional mission. Focusing usually entails prioritizing and choosing. Of course, hard choices are necessary. But we must be careful not to limit our imagination about the alternatives. For in the challenge of focusing an institutional mission that encompasses several unrelated

pieces lies an opportunity to redefine the pieces so that each can be articulated not as an agenda unto itself, but as a contribution to a larger purpose. Maybe what ails American higher education is not its multiplicity of purposes, but the lack of

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integration among them.

There is a critical and fragile interdependence between education and democracy. Today we are presented, I think, with an opportunity to strengthen that. The Corporation is turning to you for leadership in reminding all of the higher education community that colleges and universities have a civic dimension to their educational mission. This is something that you have long known and put into practice. One hundred years ago community colleges made access to higher education a reality for populations that had not had the opportunity before. In this history lies a strong tradition of commitment to the community. Your institutions help make the point that community does not refer simply to the homeless, the hungry and the poor—to whom and for whom service is done. Community need not be defined in opposition to campus. Indeed, the two are, or ought to be, one entity engaged in a mutual, on-going enterprise of self-sustenance, advancement and achievement.

The involvement of community colleges in national service is a natural extension of their mission. Your institutions model the civic character that they seek to develop in their students through the educational process. You are setting a first-rate example of what it means to be an educational institution inspired by civic purpose. You are showing us how the mission, welfare and fate of the college and the community are integrated. And, you are giving us an excellent point of reference as we call on your peers in higher education for participation, support and leadership.

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