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Where are the young people?

This is the question I find myself asking as I make my way around the offices of national and community service programs in Washington and across the country. I have worked in and for youth service and youth serving organizations since 1985, so I have few illusions. Offices are for adults. If you want to find the youth in youth service, you generally have to get out to project sites—schools and playgrounds and parks—where young people are actually doing service.

Some of the offices of the top programs around the country, however, have a significantly more youthful ambiance. Young people are in the office for training sessions and meetings. They are helping with the administrative work or waiting to travel with staff to a funding or press meeting. It is not your typical work environment. It is noisier, more dynamic. You can almost hear what many call "youth voice"—young people involved in planning the fundamentals of community service programs.

As President Clinton attempts to re-energize the country's idealism through his national service plan, it is exactly this "noise" that national, state and local service planners should be tuning to. Clinton's plan will inject a massive influx of funds into the community service field, and this spending will put pressure on service programs to expand—quickly. This feverish growth, however, must not subvert sound planning. And, since young people have a huge stake in national service programs, it is critical that their voices be heard.

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Ways to Include Youth Voice

In the rush to make application deadlines, it is easy to consult only the people who are in the office. Programs and planners must resist this expediency and make deliberate and ongoing efforts to listen to young people—their ideas, their hopes and fears, and their expert knowledge of their peers. It's not always easy, but it is far from an insurmountable goal. Here are some basic ways to do it.

1. Put young people on the team. The easiest way to get youth voice heard on the national level is to include young people in all upper-level planning meetings and groups for the burgeoning National Service Corporation. The over-30 crowd, wary of letting inexperienced young people into the process, need not worry. Groups of young people—many with their own programs—are well-versed and well-prepared to present some of the best thinking in the field. One need only look as far as Young People for National Service, Youth Service America's Youth Action Council, the Points of Light Foundation's Youth Engaged in Service (YES) Ambassadors, or the Participant Council developed during Summer of Service to find fistfuls of qualified young advisers.

2. Bring young people on the board. The National Service Corporation should also appoint a significant of young people (ages 16 to 25)—as many as four—to its planned 14-member board. This will ensure that young people have a meaningful role in the broad decision-making that will take place in the coming months and years. Again, these need not be "token" appointments. Some recent college graduates involved in service have almost a decade of experience in the field. Young people's presence on this highly visible national board, as well as on state commissions on national and community service, sends an important message to young people that their concerns are important and, through their representatives, their issues can be raised.

3. Get out of the office. National, state and local planners should also get out into the field to hear what community service program participants are saying and suggesting. PennSERVE, Pennsylvania's state office of volunteerism, has developed "speakouts," where administrators and board members travel to different communities to listen to what young people and adults in the field have to say. These "hearings" are informal and interactive and create a "safe" environment for young people to talk frankly with adults. Young people might well be hired to do this research themselves.

4. Create youth forums. Another way planners can get the feedback required to ensure their ideas meet the needs and inspire the hopes of young people is to fund and create national, state and local youth advisory councils. Many states—including Michigan, California, Maryland, and Ohio—have already formed these 15- to 25-member bodies that meet quarterly. Some point to the danger of marginalizing youth voice by locating it simply in these groups. Real decision-makers, the argument goes, can then more easily ignore youth input. From what I've seen, these councils are widely effective. They provide sound

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advice for service planners, but also train young people to participate in other local, state, and national forums around service—including state commissions and non-profit boards of directors.

The strength of youth advisory councils is that they create a sanctioned space for talented young people to think and act together, to gain a sense of their own power. Once involved on this kind of a state platform, they become savvy political players and articulate spokespeople.

5. Let young people decide. Finally, the Corporation, as well as state and local groups planning service initiatives, can ask young people to read and review grant and other proposals. The success of numerous mini-grant programs run entirely by young people (such as the scores now operating in Michigan under the aegis of the Michigan Council of Foundations) speaks to young people's proven seriousness and fiscal responsibility. Unused to throwing money at problems, young people gravitate to practical, low-cost alternatives that nevertheless meet their needs.

How Youth Voice Helps

Serious inclusion of youth voice in the national and community service initiatives will go a long way toward improving service programs. The stress and routine of young people's lives are largely known only by young people themselves. Even team leaders, teachers, and community service staffers are a step removed. One junior high school program in Washington state, for example, foundered until *the students* pointed out that few could participate because after-school buses were not available. When City Year in Boston changed its year-round program to a nine-month one, adult planners intended to start the program in January and end in September, until a young corps member argued that it would be far better to coordinate with the school year, to start in September and end in June. Teach for America built in more training and support mechanisms for its teachers after listening to its first year of recruits, who found their teaching environments much tougher than expected. Aspects of day-to-day life that escape over-30 planners in a central office may seem obvious to young people, and can make all the difference in whether a program works. How can we succeed in providing meaningful service experiences for young people—and good services to the community—if we are not continually asking young people, "Does this make sense to you? Will this work?"

Making sure youth voice is heard at the policy level has a double benefit. On the one hand, it helps insure getting better programs. On the other, it gives young people an opportunity to take on leadership roles they otherwise have few opportunities to attain. At its best, national service can be a rite of passage in a society with few constructive routes into adulthood. Service, however, can only play this role if young people are challenged in work that builds skills and offers increasing amounts of responsibility. Though menial tasks may be part of the package when it is neces-

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sary to get a job done, national service should not be menial. Asking young people—working in a corps team, for example—to plan out their work each day, to take turns serving as a site leader, and to spend time investigating the impact their service is having on the community—distinguishes the service experience from entry-level jobs that demand little responsibility and allow no autonomy.

To reach its transformative potential, service must ultimately give young people an opportunity to act on their own ideas. Throughout our society and our educational system, young people are expected to follow along, to sit passively while a teacher or perhaps even Beavis and Butthead inform them about how the world works. Service gets young people off the couch, but may unwittingly reinstantiate societal codes that expect young people simply to follow orders. National service, of course, can do much better.

There are models of good, individual placement programs—like Southern Community Partners, for example—that allow young people to propose, start, and then run their own community initiative. Some may argue that this kind of fellowship is suitable only for an elite few, but even individual placements set in community agencies (like those proposed as a national service option) could well provide an analogous opportunity, where a young person might spend his or her second six months working on a self-designed project. When young people get this kind of a chance, they take responsibility for their successes and failures, and learn about the complexities decision-making involves. In short, they learn a little of what it's like to be an adult in our culture today.

Seeking out young people's ideas and involving them in the planning and decision-making of national service should be part of a larger process of seeking out and valuing important information and informants that mainstream culture and government planners often ignore. While adult society generally disregards young people, we must ask for their ideas on national service because young people know young people best.

Similarly, we must engage community members because they are the experts of their own communities. They know their communities' strengths and needs. And if asked, they will have important ideas about if and how a national service program can help. The many reasons community voice must be heard go beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say, national, state, and local service plans must allow the real "experts"—that is community members and young people—to drive the design and implementation of any service initiative. This will assuage the paternalism and marginalization that any central planning for "at-risk" communities or groups almost invariably (and also unwittingly) carries.

A Chance for Healing

I have concentrated primarily on young people's planning roles in national service, but I believe we must attempt to suffuse *all* national and community service programs with youth voice. This does not mean that young people should run the whole show. Youth voice is not about young people taking over. It is

about young people and adults working together in partnerships based on mutual respect. This sounds facile, but it is a profound challenge for young people and adults working in national and community service programs today.

John Bell at YouthBuild USA has described extensively the "adultism" in American society—adults' systematic mistreatment of young people simply because of their age. In YouthBuild's *Leadership Development* handbook, Bell argues that with the exception of prisoners, "young people's lives are more controlled than any other group in society." Adults tell young people when to eat, go to bed, go to school, and talk. They "reserve the right to punish, threaten, hit, take away 'privileges,' and ostracize young people," says Bell, all in the name of "discipline." Institutions, in particular school, reinforce this mistreatment, enabling young people to accept others evaluating their work, performance, thinking, and ultimately themselves. From "adultism," young people learn two important lessons—first, that it is all right to be disrespected, and second, that it is all right to disrespect others.

Of course, not all adults are "adultist." But all young people, Bell argues, are disrespected in some form or another. I highlight this analysis because it suggests an important role for the service initiatives. National and community service programs that encourage respectful youth-adult partnerships, that encourage youth voice, can help to combat "adultism." Service programs can be safe places where young people are listened to, where their ideas are respected and acted upon, where decisions about them are made with them.

Creating these kinds of programs is not easy. It is not as simple as adults simply handing over all responsibility to young people. Nor is it simply using a young person on a board as "window dressing" to demonstrate a commitment to young people. Rather, it involves finding a middle ground. Adults must make the space for young people to take an active and engaged role in their service experience; in turn, young people must respect adults' skills and resources. Adults must provide enough support that young people have a chance to succeed, but not so much that their freedom to test out their ideas is too constrained or even too safe. Young people, in turn, must take their work seriously and commit to the ongoing effort success demands. Building youth voice into national and community service programs is a process that takes time and an unyielding belief in the potential of young people. It is worth the effort.

Thanks to President Clinton's national service plan our country's parks will probably be cleaner, our elderly citizens less lonely, and our schools improved. National service, however, also represents an opportunity for adults to do something important with young people, rather than simply to them. Finally, national service, enriched by youth voice, is an opportunity to heal—not only the divisions that divide rich and poor, Black and brown and white, but the hurt that society puts on all of us as we make the difficult passage from youth to adulthood.

Clove cigarettes and coffee are staples at the Fusion Café, in Jacksonville, FL. The café was started by 25-year-old Stephen Dare with $1,500 and the vision of a for-profit hangout that serves as an alternative youth center for teens. At left, Eric Olsen, 18, and Sarah Yerkes, who prefers not to reveal her age. Photo by Missy Ammann.

On the first of two community service days during the national training of the Clinton Administration's Summer of Service (SOS), volunteers helped convert a closed school into a community center. Criticized by some volunteers as a grand publicity stunt, others enjoyed the day they spent off the Treasure Island training site, and felt they performed valuable services in very little time. Photo by Michael Emery.