

**National Information Center**  
for Service Learning  
1954 Buf... Room R290  
St. Paul, MN 55105-6197  
1-800-808-SERVE

Citation: The Nation, May 13, 1991 v252 n18 p626(3)

Title: Turning on youth to politics; beyond community service.

Authors: Boyte, Harry C.

Subjects: Youth volunteers in community development\_Public opinion

Reference #: A10686160

Full Text COPYRIGHT The Nation Company Inc. 1991

Studies by the Times Mirror Center ("The Age of Indifference") and others purport to reveal that today's teenagers and young adults view politics with nearly universal hatred and express apathy toward public affairs generally. A little more probing uncovers a more complex set of attitudes. Allan Moyle's film Pump Up the Volume, based in part on workshops with teenagers in New York, reveals a generation not so much apathetic as disgusted with adult hypocrisy, furious at adults' apparent inaction on mounting social problems, cynical about 1960s-style protest and uncertain about what else there is to do. But it is clear enough that civics classes, weekend senior trips to Washington and simple exhortations to be "good citizens"-the stuff of political education for earlier generations-are not going to do much to interest young people in the political world.

Into this breach has come youth community service. Its advocates claim that voluntary service prepares a self-centered, materialistic generation for citizenship through cultivating a civic concern for others. Thus, one recent major report on young people, the Grant Commission's 1988 study, "Youth and America's Future," argued that "if the service commitment begins early enough and continues into adulthood, participatory citizenship would become . . . 'habits of the heart: family and community traditions of local political participation that sustain a person, a community and a nation:' The term "community service" is generally used to refer to individual voluntary efforts: tutoring; working in food shelters, adult literacy programs, nursing homes or hospitals; programs like Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America. It is a growing movement.

A handful of Ivy League college and university presidents organized the Campus Compact in November 1985 to stimulate voluntary community service. By 1987, 259 campuses were involved. The city of Detroit passed a requirement of 200 hours of community service for graduation from high school; Atlanta issued a seventy-five-hour minimum requirement "in an effort to enhance students' understanding of the obligations of a good citizen." Springfield, Massachusetts, made service part of the curriculum from kindergarten through high school. In Washington a bipartisan consensus, stretching from Edward Kennedy to George Bush, passed the Community Service Act of 1990, which provides a mechanism for federal funding of community service projects through public schools and volunteer organizations.

Community service can make important contributions to education through exposure to other cultures, experiential learning and personal growth. In reality, however, service does little to interest students in politics or teach citizenship.

Service is like a generational ink-blot test: How one views it depends on one's politically formative experiences. Older adults across the political spectrum believe that service involvements will revive the kind of political idealism that puts aside self-interest in the pursuit of a larger cause or the common good. Such hopes grow from memories of the idealistic ambience of their own youth. For the right, community service recalls the unambiguous patriotism of the 1950s, when the "Free World" battled countries behind the "Iron Curtain" and the United States was the unique repository of moral rectitude. For the left, community service aims at restoring the idealism of civil rights and antiwar protesters who went into nonviolent combat against segregationists in the South or military recruiters on campus. William R Buckley and Jesse Jackson may disagree about which ideals community service should cultivate, but both see service as a way of generating altruistic concern.

Community service has a different meaning for young people, however. Steven Conn, a recent college graduate, summarized his generation's views in an open-letter response to Buckley's call for national service: "Many of us in the twentysomething crowd feel we are being bequeathed a colossal mess' "

Today's youth see service as an alternative to moralized politics and citizenship as normally understood by left or right. Service involvements offer opportunities for real-life experiences that are down-to-earth, serious and immediately relevant to people's lives. This appeals to young people who have grown cynical about hortatory political rhetoric of any sort.

While college presidents were forming Campus Compact and school systems were instituting service requirements, young adults were creating their own service movement. The most dramatic story is that of the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL), launched in 1984 by a group of recent college graduates to provide encouragement and technical assistance for youth-initiated service programs. When co-founder Wayne Meisel began a 1,500-mile trek starting in Maine and ending up in Washington, D.C., to help spark community service projects on campuses, he found little volunteer activity of any kind. Six years later, COOL was at the center of a vital and expanding national network, with 600 campuses involved and almost 1,500 students attending its annual conference last year at U.C.L.A.

Far from seeing its purpose as reviving youthful citizenship or political idealism, COOL was from the beginning overtly apolitical. Indeed, it billed itself as an explicit alternative to the political wars on campus between right and left. Meisel depicted the service movement as aimed at the "silent majority" on campuses, between "knee-jerk liberals" on the left and "jerks" on the right.

To younger Americans, repudiation of self-interest sounds disingenuous in a world that trumpets the life styles of the rich and famous and praises the virtues of free enterprise. From its inception COOL stressed benefits that students receive from service involvements. "Self-interest, readily understood, is a win-win deal," said Meisel. "This whole movement is about linking complementary needs." Behind such sentiments lies a palpable hunger for community on the part of a generation that has seen the family disintegrate and neighborhoods torn apart by racial discord. Volunteers focus on concrete tasks, disavowing sweeping political or social reconstruction. "I do community service for myself," said one woman at a North Carolina college who began a mentoring program for pregnant teens. "I have a passion for it. I can't save the world."

However, the absence of a broader vocabulary of politics that draws attention to the public realm has problematic consequences. Most service programs include little learning or discussion about the policy dimensions of the "issues" (such as poverty, homelessness, drug use, illiteracy) that students work through through person-to-person effort. Volunteers—usually middle-class and generally white—rarely have occasion to reflect on the complex dynamics of power, race and class that are created when young people go out to "serve" in low-income areas.

Moreover, absent a vocabulary of public politics, community

service adopts the therapeutic language of personal development that now pervades society. From TV talk shows to Congressional debates, terms and concepts like accountability, respect for public contribution, negotiation and recognition of honest differences have been replaced by a therapeutic vocabulary of personal intimacy. This has strengths within communities of friendship. But it assumes sameness-"we all have the same feelings under the skin, after all"-and blurs racial, ethnic, economic and religious differences. It also obscures questions of power and accountability. Marion Barry appealed for personal sympathy when questioned about drug abuse; Senator David Durenberger told voters in Minnesota that he felt cut off from his friends in the Senate as a result of exposure of his misdeeds.

In community service, a similar emphasis on feelings and personal expressiveness is at work. In high schools, for example, most curriculums for community service stress personal growth. A representative listing of the learning objectives in youth service elaborates goals like self-esteem, "a sense of personal worth," self-understanding, independence, personal belief in the ability to make a difference, "consciousness about one's personal values," "openness to new experiences," "capacity to persevere in difficult tasks," "exploration of new identities and unfamiliar roles" and "skills in caring for others." Politics was entirely absent. Campus service projects are similarly suffused with a personalized language. Campus programs have names like GIVE; Project LOVE; Si, Se Puede ("Yes, You Can," a high school program at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts); and HOT (Helping Others Today). COOL's logo consists of hands reaching out to mend torn hearts.

There are signs of growing restiveness with such excessively apolitical language. In Pump Up the Volume Christian Slater, playing a high school student who creates an underground radio persona named Harry Hard-On, exposes the psychobabble of the guidance counselor and his "full array of counseling resources" as a cover for the school administration's heavy-handedness, deceit and incompetence. In COOL, behind the posture of a politicized generation there has been a slow process of political self-definition for a generation distinguishing itself from the 1960s and convinced it does not need much more "consciousness raising." Since they entered school, teenagers and young adults have heard from parents and teachers-1960s veterans, after all-an unremitting litany of problems, crises and disasters facing American society, from poverty to pollution, from racism to falling S.A.T. scores. What they haven't heard is what is actually being done to solve those problems. The real-world experience of dealing with diverse environments has prompted

within COOL a desire for practical knowledge about what can be done. Over the past year, the organization has begun to develop curricular materials addressing questions of policy, power and politics.

A different way to teach politics is essential if we want to encourage teens and young adults to assume the full responsibilities of citizenship, that is, a significant role in public affairs. Partly, this means retrieving older definitions. The word "politics" comes from the Greek *politikos*, meaning "of a citizen." A citizen-centered politics re-creates the concept of a public realm, different from private life, in which diverse groups learn to work together effectively to address public problems, whether or not they like one another personally or agree on other issues. Politics, to be meaningful, also requires an experience of power.

Project Public Life at the University of Minnesota's Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, which has worked with COOL in developing materials and training for groups to use in political debates and education, has found that teenagers also respond well to a "problem-solving politics" in which they take on roles as important actors. The Public Achievement program of Project Public Life, co-sponsored with St. Paul Mayor Jim Scheibel, Minnesota 4-H and others, is based on a pedagogy in which young people define their own goals and have the space to work on them. Issues sometimes resemble those dealt with by community service, such as concern about the environment. More often, Public Achievement's emphasis on teens' identification of issues in which they have a direct stake leads to projects that explicitly raise questions of power and that address problems close to home, like day care for unwed mothers, relations between school officials and students, and racial conflict among teens. Public Achievement regularly brings together different teams of teenagers in public environments where they learn how to work practically across racial and class lines.

Participants clearly distinguish this experience from community service and other conventional educational activities. "I thought politics meant politicians lying on TV," says one student. "I hated it. Now we've lived out a whole new meaning of politics." Another student, Mary Brennan, from St. Bernard school, says, "It feels good to be able to show what you can do without the shelter of adults. I learned I have a lot of talents that I haven't been using."

Young people come into the world with no special knowledge about politics; political skills and arts are learned, like basketball or music. The goal of civic education should be to provide young

people with hands-on public experience, with opportunities to practice political skills like strategic thinking, bargaining, negotiation, listening, argument, problem solving and evaluation. It should teach both the rewards and the effectiveness of politics. This also requires a process of systematic reflection on the nature of public life and key political concepts like power, accountability and interests.

Such an approach is a significant shift from conventional community service. Service as practiced today is important, but its language of caring and community is no antidote for youthful cynicism about politics, and its predominantly one-on-one character leaves little room for political learning.

As this generation defines itself politically, it is likely to focus less on altruism, protest or flag-waving than on finding practical answers to the critical problems of the nation. We badly need this kind of pragmatic populism, in which citizens have far more power, authority and responsibility than they do as sentimentalized "points of light." The end of the gulf war has left America with an even larger mess, which only politically active citizens can solve.

