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CIVICS

A Mandate For Liberty: Requiring Education-Based Community Service

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The extraordinary rise in American interest in community service has inspired widespread participation by the nation's young in service programs. It has also provoked a profound and telling debate about the relationship of service to voluntarism on the one hand, and to civic education and citizenship on the other. Two complementary approaches to service have emerged that are mutually supportive but also in a certain tension with one another. The first aims at attracting young volunteers, particularly students, out of the classroom and into service projects as part of a strategy designed to strengthen altruism, philanthropy, individualism, and self-reliance. The second is concerned with integrating service into the classroom and into academic curricula in hopes of making civic education and social responsibility core subjects of high school and university education.

Underlying these two complementary approaches are conflicting though not altogether incompatible views of the real aim of student community service programs. The differences are exemplified by the issue of whether education-based service programs should be voluntary or mandatory. If the aim of service is the encouragement of voluntarism and a spirit of altruism—if service is seen as a supererogatory trait of otherwise self-regarding individuals—then clearly it cannot be mandated or required. To speak of coercing voluntarism is to speak in oxymorons and hardly makes pedagogical sense. But if service is understood as a dimension of citizenship education and civic responsibility in which individuals learn the meaning of social interdependence and become empowered in the democratic arts, then to require service is to do no more in this domain than is done in curricula decisions generally.

As it turns out, the educational justification for requiring courses essential to the development of democratic citizens is a very old one. America's colleges were founded in part to assure the civic education of the young—to foster competent citizenship and to nourish the arts of democracy. Civic and moral responsibility were goals of both colleges organized around a religious mission and secular land-grant colleges. The premise was that democratic skills must be acquired. We think of ourselves as "born free," but we are, in truth, born weak and dependent and acquire equality as a concomitant of our citizenship. Liberty is learned: it is a product rather than the cause of our civic work as citizens.

When we coerce behavior we impose beliefs heteronomously. When we require a certain pedagogy we aim at empowering the person and thus at cultivating autonomy. Those most in need of training in the democratic arts of citizenship are, in fact, least likely to volunteer. Complacency, ignorance of interdependence, apathy, and an inability to see the relationship between self-interest and broader community interests are not only the targets of civic education: they are obstacles to it, attitudes that dispose individuals against it. The problem to be remedied is here the impediment to the remedy. Education is the exercise of authority—legitimate coercion—in the name of freedom: the empowerment and liberation of the pupil. To make people serve others may produce desirable behavior, but it does not create responsible and autonomous individuals. To make people participate in educational curricula that can empower them, however, does create such individuals.

In most volunteer service programs, those involved have already learned a good deal about the civic significance of service. Students who opt to take courses incorporating service have often done extensive volunteer service prior to enrollment. Such programs reach and help students who have already made the first and probably most significant step towards an understanding of the responsibilities of social membership. They provide useful outlets for the expression of a disposition that has already been formed. But that preponderant majority of young people who have no sense of the meaning of citizenship, no conception of civic responsibility, is, by definition, going to remain entirely untouched by volunteer programs.

Thinking that the national problem of civic apathy can be cured by encouraging voluntarism is like thinking that illiteracy can be remedied by distributing books on the importance of reading. What

young people require in order to volunteer their participation in education-based community service courses are the very skills and understandings that these courses are designed to provide.

There are, of course, problems with mandating education of any kind, but most educators agree that an effective education cannot be left entirely to the discretion of pupils, and schools and universities require a great many things of students—things less important than the skills necessary to preserve American freedoms. It is the nature of pedagogical authority that it exercises some coercion in the name of liberation. Civic empowerment and the exercise of liberty are simply too important to be treated as extracurricular electives.

This account of education-based service as integral to liberal education in a democracy and, thus, as an appropriate subject for mandatory educational curricula points to a larger issue: the uncoupling of rights and responsibilities in America. We live at a time when our government has to compete with industry and the private sector to attract servicemen and women to the military, when individuals regard themselves almost exclusively as private persons with responsibilities only to family and job, with endless rights against an alien government, of which they see themselves, at best, as no more than watchdogs and clients, and at worst, as adversaries or victims. The idea of service to country or an obligation to the institutions by which rights and liberty are maintained has fairly vanished. "We the People" have severed our connections with "It" the state or "They" the bureaucrats and politicians who run it. If we posit a problem of governance, it is always framed in the language of leadership—as if the preservation of democracy were merely a matter of assuring adequate leadership, surrogates who do our civic duties for us. Our solution to problems in democracy is to blame our representatives. Throw the rascals out—or place limits on the terms they can serve. Our own complicity in the health of our system is forgotten, and so we take the first fatal step in the undoing of the democratic state.

Civic education rooted in service learning can be a powerful response to civic scapegoat-ism and the bad habits of representative democracy (deference to authority, blaming deputies for the vices of their electors). When students use experience in the community as a basis for critical reflection in the classroom, and turn classroom reflection into a tool to examine the nature of democratic communities and the role of the citizen in them, there is an opportunity to teach liberty, to uncover the interdependence of self and other, to expose

the intimate linkage between rights and responsibilities. Education-based community service programs empower students even as they teach them. They bring the lessons of service into the classroom even as they bring the lessons of the classroom out into the community. A number of institutions around the country have been experimenting with programs, a few have even envisioned mandatory curricula. Many others, including Stanford University, Spelman College, Baylor University, Notre Dame, the University of Minnesota, and Harvard University, are beginning to explore the educational possibilities of service learning as a significant element in liberal education.

Rutgers University has tried to offer pedagogical leadership to sister institutions. In the spring of 1988, the late Rutgers President Edward Bloustein gave a commencement address in which he called for a mandatory program of citizen education and community service as a graduation requirement for all students at the State University of New Jersey. In the academic year 1988-89, I chaired a Committee on Education for Civic Leadership charged with exploring the president's idea, and trying to develop a program through which it could be realized. We began with nine governing principles—the foundation of the practical program—which continue to govern the development of the Rutgers program following the tragic death of President Bloustein in 1989:

- That to teach the art of citizenship and responsibility is to practice it: so that teaching in this domain must be about acting and doing as well as about listening and learning, but must also afford an opportunity for reflecting on and discussing what is being done. In practical terms, this means that **community service can only be an instrument of education when it is connected to an academic learning experience in a classroom setting.** But the corollary is also true, that **civic education can only be effective when it encompasses experiential learning of the kind offered by community service or other similar forms of group activity.**
- That the crucial democratic relationship between rights and responsibilities, which have too often been divorced in our society, can only be made visible in a setting of experiential learning where academic discussion is linked to practical activity. In other words, **learning about the relationship between civic responsibility and civic rights means exercising the rights and duties of membership in an actual community,**

whether that community is a classroom, a group project or community service team, or the university/college community at large.

- That antisocial, discriminatory, and other forms of selfish and abusive or addictive behavior are often a symptom of the breakdown of civic community—both local and societal. This suggests that to remedy many of the problems of alienation and disaffection of the young requires the reconstruction of the civic community, something that a program of civic education based on experiential learning and community service may therefore be better able to accomplish than problem-by-problem piecemeal solutions pursued in isolation from underlying causes.
- That respect for the full diversity and plurality of American life is possible only when students have an opportunity to interact outside of the classroom in ways that are, however, the subject of scrutiny and open discussion in the classroom. An experiential learning process that includes both classroom learning and group work outside the classroom has the greatest likelihood of impacting on student ignorance, intolerance, and prejudice.
- That membership in a community entails responsibilities and duties which are likely to be felt as binding only to the degree individuals feel empowered in the community. As a consequence, empowerment ought to be a significant dimension of education for civic responsibility—particularly in the planning process to establish civic education and community service programs.
- That civic education is experiential learning, and community service must not discriminate among economic or other classes of Americans. If equal respect and equal rights are two keys to citizenship in a democracy, then a civic education program must assure that no one is forced to participate merely because he or she is economically disadvantaged, and no one is exempted from service merely because that individual is economically privileged.
- That civic education should be communal as well as community-based. If citizen education and experiential learning of the kind offered by community service are to be a lesson in community, the ideal learning unit is not the individual but the small team, where people work together and learn together, experiencing

what it means to become a small community together. Civic education programs thus should be built around teams (of say five or ten or twenty) rather than around individuals.

- The point of any community service element of civic education must be to teach citizenship, not charity. If education is aimed at creating citizens, then it will be important to let the young see that service is not just about altruism or charity, or a matter of those who are well-off helping those who are not. It is serving the public interest, which is the same thing as serving enlightened self-interest. Young people serve themselves as members of the community by serving a public good that is also their own. The responsible citizen finally serves liberty.
- Civic education needs to be regarded as an integral part of liberal education and thus should both be mandatory and receive academic credit. Because citizenship is an acquired art, and because those least likely to be spirited citizens or volunteers in their local or national community are most in need of civic training, an adequate program of citizen training with an opportunity for service needs to be mandatory. There are certain things a democracy simply must teach, employing its full authority to do so: citizenship is first among them.

The program we developed on the foundation of these principles has been endorsed by representatives of the student body and by the Board of Governors and is currently being reviewed by duly constituted faculty bodies and by Rutgers' new president, Francis L. Lawrence. It calls for:

A MANDATORY CIVIC EDUCATION COURSE organized around (though not limited to) a classroom course with an academic syllabus, but also including a strong and innovative experiential learning focus utilizing group projects. A primary vehicle for these projects will be community service, as one of a number of experiential learning options; while the course will be mandatory, students will be free to choose community service or non-service projects as their experiential learning group project. The required course will be buttressed by a program of incentives encouraging students to continue to participate in community service throughout their academic careers at Rutgers.

COURSE CONTENT will be broad and varied, but should guarantee some coverage of vital civic issues and questions, in-

cluding the following:

- 1) The nature of the social or civic bond; social contract, legitimacy, authority, freedom, constitutionalism—the key concepts of political community;
- 2) The meaning of citizenship—representation versus participation, passive versus active forms of civic life; citizenship and service;
- 3) The university community; its structure and governance; the role of students, faculty, and administrators; questions of empowerment;
- 4) The place of ethnicity, religion, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in a community: does equality mean abolishing differences? Or learning to respect and celebrate diversity and inclusiveness? How does a community deal with differences of the kind represented by the dis-equalizing effects of power and wealth?
- 5) The nature of service: differences between charity and social responsibility; between rights and needs or desires. What is the relationship between community service and citizenship? Can service be mandatory? Does a state have the right to mandate the training of citizens or does this violate freedom?
- 6) The nature of leadership in a democracy: are there special features to democratic leadership? Do strong leaders create weak followers? What is the relationship between leadership and equality?
- 7) Cooperation and competition: models of community interaction: how do private and public interests relate in a community?
- 8) The character of civic communities, educational, local, regional, and national. What is the difference between society and the state? Is America a "community"? Is Rutgers a community? Do its several campuses (Camden, Newark, New Brunswick) constitute a community? What is the relationship between them and the communities in which they are located? What are the real issues of these communities—issues such as sexual harassment, suicide, date rape, homophobia, racism, and distrust of authority?

A SUPERVISORY BOARD will oversee the entire program, including its design and development, its standards, and its op-

eration. This Board will be composed of students, faculty, community, and administrators who will act as the sole authority for the civic education program and who will also supervise the planning and implementation process in the transitional period. The Board will work with an **ACADEMIC OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE**, a senior faculty committee responsible for academic design and for ongoing supervision over and review of course materials. This committee will work closely with community representatives and School of Social Work experts to assure quality control over community service and other group projects. Course sections will be taught by a combination of volunteers from faculty, graduate students, and more senior students who have graduated from the program and wish to make seminar leadership part of their continuing service.

VARIATIONS ON THE BASIC MODEL will be encouraged within the basic course design, with ample room for significant variations. Individual colleges, schools, and departments will be encouraged to develop their own versions of the course to suit the particular needs of their students and the civic issues particular to their disciplines or areas. The Senior Academic Committee and the Supervisory Board will assure standards, by examining and approving proposed variations on the basic course. Thus, the Engineering School might wish to develop a program around "the responsibilities of scientists," the Mason Gross School for the Arts might wish to pioneer community service options focusing on students performing in and bringing arts education to schools and senior centers in the community, or Douglass College might want to capitalize on its longstanding commitment to encouraging women to become active leaders by developing its own appropriate course variation.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING is crucial to the program, for the key difference between the program offered here and traditional civic education approaches is the focus on learning outside the classroom, integrated into the classroom. Students will utilize group projects in community service and in other extra-seminar group activities as the basis for reading and reflecting on course material. Experiential learning permits students to apply classroom learning to the real world, and to subject real world experience to classroom examination. To plan adequately for an experiential learning focus and to assure that projects are pedagogically sound and responsible to the communities they may

engage, particular attention will be given to its design in the planning phase.

THE TEAM APPROACH is a special feature of the Rutgers proposal. All experiential learning projects will be group projects in which individuals learn in concert with others and experience community in part by practicing community during the learning process. We urge special attention be given to the role of groups or teams in the design both of the classroom format and the experiential learning component of the basic course.

COMMUNITY SERVICE is only one among the several options for experiential learning, but it will clearly be the choice of a majority of students, and is, in fact, the centerpiece of the Rutgers program. For we believe that community service, when related to citizenship and social responsibility in a disciplined pedagogical setting, is the most powerful form of experiential learning. As such, it is central to our conception of the civic education process.

AN INCENTIVE PROGRAM FOR CONTINUING SERVICE is built into the Rutgers project, because our objective is to instill in students a spirit of citizenship that is enduring. It is thus vital that the program, though it is centered on the freshman year course, not be limited to that initial experience, and that there be opportunities for ongoing service and participation throughout the four years of college.

OVERSIGHT AND REVIEW are regarded as ongoing responsibilities of the program. In order to assure flexibility, adaptability to changing conditions, ongoing excellence, and the test of standards, every element in the program will be subjected to regular review and revision by the faculty and the student body, as represented on the Supervisory Board, the Academic Oversight Committee, and the Administration. This process of review will be mandated and scheduled on a regular basis, so that it will not come to depend on the vagaries of good will.

In a vigorous democracy capable of withstanding the challenges of a complex, often undemocratic, interdependent world, creating new generations of citizens is not a discretionary activity. Freedom is a hothouse plant that flourishes only when it is carefully tended. It is, as Rousseau once reminded us, a food easy to eat but hard to digest, and it has remained undigested or been regurgitated more often than it has been assimilated by our democratic body politic. Without

active citizens who see in service not the altruism of charity but the necessity of taking responsibility for the authority on which liberty depends, no democracy can function properly or, in the long run, even survive.

National service is not merely a good idea, or, as William Buckley has suggested in his new book endorsing a service requirement, a way to repay the debt owed our "patrimony." It is an indispensable prerequisite of citizenship and thus a condition for democracy's preservation. Democracy does not just "deserve" our gratitude: it demands our participation as a price of survival.

The Rutgers program and others like it offer a model which integrates liberal teaching, experiential learning, community service, and citizen education. It also suggests a legislative strategy for establishing a national service requirement without raising up still one more elephantine national bureaucracy. Require service of all Americans through federal guidelines, but permit the requirement to be implemented through service learning programs housed in schools, universities, and, for those not in the school system, other local institutions. Using the nations' schools and colleges as laboratories of citizenship and service might at once offer an attractive way to develop civic service opportunities for all Americans and help educate Americans in the indispensable obligations of the democratic citizen. This would not only serve democracy, but could restore to our educational institutions a sense of mission they have long lacked.



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