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YOUTH SOCIALIZATION VIA NATIONAL SERVICE

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ARGUMENTS AGAINST WORK EXPERIENCE

As a frame of reference for this paper, I have chosen the 1977 keynote address given by Harry Silberman to the Society for Experiential Education. At that time he outlined "five major arguments against using work experience as a vehicle for the socialization (of youth) to adulthood."¹ They were, in brief:

1. Legislative support for work experience programs is generated more from a desire to reduce unemployment than from a desire to assist in the maturation of young people. Consequently, publicly-supported work experience programs tend to push young people into jobs that do not offer opportunities for growth and advancement.
2. The recent isolation of young people from adult society is not a problem; the problem was the Vietnam War and the overreaction of adults to normal youthful behavior during the 1960s.
3. The targeting of work experience programs on disadvantaged groups further stigmatizes the participants and dooms many of them to a lifetime of boring jobs or unemployment.
4. Work experience advocates are

"too soft" on young people, stressing youths' rights at the expense of their responsibilities.

5. Any kind of large-scale work experience program will be too costly and will be resisted by union leaders, employers, parents, teachers, and students.

These are important concerns.

Proponents of work experience programs should have rebuttals to these arguments.

Some answers emerged from an experimental youth program conducted by ACTION in 1973. The ACTION program did not originate as a work experience project, a socialization of youth project, an educational project. Yet it was all of these. It had its origins in the concept of national service, the idea that the nation can invest in its future by encouraging and enabling young people to serve their fellow humans and, young people have a responsibility to their country to contribute a period of time to meeting other's needs.

In 1973, with a one million dollar grant from ACTION, the state of Washington initiated the Program for Local Service (PLS). One-page application forms were sent to all eighteen-to-twenty-five year olds in the Seattle area who held motor vehicle licenses. These applications reached at least three-quarters of the target population, while others in this population learned of PLS from friends and relatives, youth organizations, and media announcements.

A follow-up study conducted after this campaign found that

about one young person in five was aware of the opportunity to apply.

Approximately 10% of the "aware" population did apply for PLS, representing all segments of the 18- to 25-age group. The demographic profile of the young people who became PLS participants was not significantly different from the profile of PLS applicants. Three out of five applicants were women. One out of five was from a minority group, whereas only one out of every seven young people in the Seattle area is from a minority group. Rather surprisingly, PLS applicants were somewhat better educated than the average, and also came from families of less-than-average income. One high school dropout and one college graduate could be found among every seven PLS applicants. The remaining five had completed high school and some of them had attended college. The most common characteristic of PLS applicants was their employment status. Seven out of ten were unemployed and looking for work, a proportion estimated to be at least twice as high as that of 18- to 25-year olds in the Seattle area at that time.

Several dozen people acted as brokers or facilitators. These brokers were on call to assist the applicant and the prospective

community sponsor (the person or organization) in understanding PLS and in working out the details of a service agreement. Facilitators were especially useful to younger applicants, those without work experience, and those who were mentally retarded or otherwise handicapped.

Participants received \$2,970 for their year of service, approximately 10% below the minimum wage at that time. They performed a wide variety of services: helping an elderly woman fix a clothesline, caring for a person who had epileptic seizures, giving weekly physical therapy treatments to sixteen people at the Fircrest State School for the mentally deficient, involving youthful first offenders in a mini-bike program designed to build a sense of responsibility and self-worth, and serving as advocates for new clients at the United Cerebral Palsy Association.

Overall, the work of the PLS participants was evenly divided between public agencies and non-profit organizations in the private sector. The field of education claimed 25% of the participants while mental health, other health services, crime and protection, and recreation each claimed approximately 10%. The remaining 35% were engaged in a variety of social services. PLS also served a wide range of clients although special projects tended to emphasize children and youth, low-income and handicapped people, the elderly, criminal offenders, and women.² Evaluation studies of PLS was conducted by Kappa Systems, Inc. Outcomes of these studies provide some answers to the arguments cited by Silberman:

1. PLS was designed primarily as a service program, not as an employment program or an education or training program. However, we were still interested in the secondary effects of PLS. The evidence available is positive both for reducing unemployment and helping young people

advance and grow. The unemployment rate fell from 70% to 18%, with many participants obtaining jobs with their sponsors. Also, PLS participants were found to advance in their careers at twice the normal rate.

2. PLS did contribute to increasing the awareness of the participants about the needs of the poor.
3. PLS was not a targeted program, even though the majority of participants could have qualified for the Neighborhood Youth Corps. Participants were seen as members of a youth service program rather than a "jobs for needy youth" program.
4. Firm discipline was exercised in PLS. Participants who gave evidence of an unwillingness to serve were counseled. Ultimately, 12% of the participants and 1% of the sponsors were dropped for not fulfilling the terms of the agreement.
5. The present cost of PLS would be about \$6,300 per person per work year. There is, of course, resistance to any new program. National service can be used to supplement other youth programs, and replace these programs only if and when it proves itself more effective.

But PLS is not a panacea. There are several changes to be made before its full potential can be realized.

First, since the program is for the 18- to 25-age group; PLS holds out no hope for children and young teen-agers. This absence of hope is a major cause of the anti-social behavior of students in the upper primary and secondary school years. If junior high and high school students were able to count on getting paid for doing useful work and being treated as the equal of any other young person, the chances are that many would improve their behavior and finish high school.

Second, participation in national service could help restore the rights and responsibilities so important to the youth socialization process. As is the case with PLS, both young people and sponsors should be expected to uphold their

agreements. We should consider awarding educational entitlements to those youth who fulfill their responsibilities. To what extent should we set aside federal education money for persons who have completed a year or more in national service? At a time of limited resources, it seems appropriate to establish an educational incentive for those who contribute a period of national service.

Third, opportunities for national service have to be made available to youth of all backgrounds. It is acceptable to screen Peace Corps volunteers because the United States vouches for their commitment and competence. Domestic national service is for the youth within the "national family." Every year some four million Americans turn 18. Most of them have as a primary activity work, school, housekeeping, military service, or unemployment. The addition of a national service option would probably draw most heavily from the ranks of the unemployed, but would also attract some of those in school and elsewhere. If national service had been in effect in the U.S. for several years, about one-quarter of the eligible population would probably have entered.³ Today, that would mean an enrollment of approximately one million 18-24-year olds.

Fourth, national service should offer more diverse activities than were available in PLS. Although PLS participants had the option of designing their own service projects, very few actually did so. There should be opportunities in cultural and conservation projects, in public works, and in human need areas not being addressed by any institution.

National service as described above holds a great deal of promise as a youth program that would help to socialize young people—yet

"I think we're going to be talking seriously in this country about a universal youth service." —WILLARD WIRTZ

give them the freedom to develop individually and serve in a wide variety of endeavors. Participants would also enjoy knowing that they are needed by society.

A barrier to the creation of national service has been its multi-purpose nature. Although national service can be justified solely as a service program, a work experience program, an educational program, or a youth development program, the promise of national service will be reached only if it is based on all four rationales. A holistic perspective is needed. One way to obtain this perspective might be through the creation of a National Youth Commission.

This National Youth Commission would have in its purview the full range of youth concerns—from education to work experience to military service to delinquent behavior. Some nations, especially developing countries, have, at the Cabinet level, Ministries of Youth to deal with this array of concerns. While it is conceivable that the United States might eventually have a Department of Youth, and while this Department might not be limited to youth employment only, it is suggested that the Commission focus on youth employment and closely related areas.

More specifically, the Commission could have five basic functions. It could: 1) evaluate present youth programs; 2) conduct research on youth development and participation; 3) experiment with possible youth initiatives; 4) act as a forum for the coordination of youth programs; and 5) make recommendations relating to a national youth policy.

Evaluation

As an evaluator of youth programs, the Commission would produce for the first time data for direct comparison among programs. It would insist on comparable age cohorts and would employ comparable measures of program costs and output. It would also explore the side effects, whether positive or negative. For example, in each of the several programs supported by YEDPA the Commission would assess:

- The value of the work or service performed by youthful participants, by service category (Energy conservation, health, housing, etc.),
- The extent to which regular employees were displaced by youthful participants,
- The extent to which new jobs were created, and the subsequent funding source for such jobs,
- The effect of participation on employability,
- The temporary and long-term effect on youth employment,
- The learning (skill training, problem solving, working with people) acquired by youthful participants,
- The effect on crime and delinquency, and
- The direct and indirect program costs.

Comparable evaluation data across programs should lead to some discoveries. The data might show, for example, that more

pertinent skill training is acquired from work experience programs than from job training programs, or that certain types of job training programs produce more results (such as energy conservation) than service programs aimed at those objectives.

Comparable data will also greatly reduce the time lag between evaluation and decision-making. Typically, by the time a program is evaluated for a certain purpose, that purpose is no longer a high priority and the evaluation is disregarded. The data will permit sound decisions to be made on new priorities.

Research

The research branch of the Commission should first of all be a clearinghouse of information on youth research. In this respect, the Commission could assume the lead role in supporting the Interagency Committee on Research in Adolescence. This activity should be extended by developing linkages to the University of Minnesota and other places where youth research is conducted. Also, it should much more actively inform the public of findings in youth research. Once the Commission has a comprehensive view of the developments in youth research, it can develop a program to fill in the gaps.

Experimentation

Emphasis here should be on projects which cut across departmental lines. A first test, for example, could be conducted on the GI Bill for National Service, which would provide education and training entitlements to persons who serve in the Peace Corps, VISTA, Young Adult

Conservation Corps, and other federally-supported programs in YEDPA (or elsewhere as designated by the Commission).⁴ The tests should be of sufficiently large scale; then, if the program is successful, national replication could be the next step.

Typically, the Commission would support no more than two or three such programs at a time. Small-scale tests can be conducted under the headings of research.

Forum

It is important to note the distinction between providing a forum of coordination and having the power to coordinate youth programs. So long as major youth programs are housed in different units of government, the latter would be very difficult to achieve. A forum, on the other hand, would offer a non-threatening environment where ideas, problems, and progress may be discussed. Over a period of a few years, such a forum might lead to a better articulation among youth programs. There are many possibilities for this forum. For a general forum, the Commission could convene meetings and conferences on the subject of youth. The decennial White House Conference on Youth could be assigned to the Commission.

Recommendations

Based on its research, evaluation, testing, and forum activities, the Commission would make recommendations to the President, to the Congress, and to the public. These recommendations could be made at any time and would be included in the Commission's annual report.

The President could also stipulate topics and deadlines for Commission recommendations. More specific assignments would be more difficult. For example, consider three possible assignments:

1. Prepare the broad outlines of a national youth policy.
2. Examine the national youth service concept and make recommendations.
3. Devise and test a system which guarantees, but does not require summer work or service positions for all 14-17-year olds and one-year work or service positions for all 18-24-year olds.

The first assignment will produce platitudes and polite debate. The second will produce debate but little action. The third will produce action.

The Board of Commissioners would include the Secretaries of the Interior, Commerce, HEW, Labor, HUD, and Agriculture, the Directors of ACTION and CSA, leading private sector figures in education and other youth areas, and several young people. The Commissioner would be appointed by, and report to, the President, who would also designate the Chairperson.

A core budget of \$10 to \$20 million would provide for four of the Commission's functions: evaluation, research, forum, and recommendations. The fifth function, experimentation, would normally require a larger budget since it would include experiments ranging from pilot projects to nationwide implementation. For example, a proper test of the GI Bill for National Service would require about \$100 million.

A weakness of the United States today is that it does not demonstrate a faith in young people of the kind expressed by Eleanor Roosevelt and Hubert Humphrey. It seems clear that an educational process is needed. A National Youth Commission would be the proper vehicle for the process. It could lead us to the day when the nation may expect young people to be responsible citizens, because the nation has first fulfilled its responsibility to young people.

FOOTNOTES

1. These arguments are taken from the March 1977 revised version of Silberman's address. The arguments originate from a variety of sources and do not necessarily describe Silberman's viewpoint.

2. This description of PLS is taken from Donald J. Eberly, "National Youth Service," *New York Affairs* (Winter 1977). Reprinted by permission.

3. The basic method for projecting national service enrollment was developed in Donald J. Eberly, "The Estimated Effect of a National Service Program on Public Service Manpower Needs, Youth Employment, College Attendance and Marriage Rates," (Russell Sage Foundation, January 1970)

4. The GI Bill for National Service is put into an educational context in Donald J. Eberly, "Service Experience and Educational Growth," *The Educational Record*, (Spring 1968). Variations on the idea are described in Robert L. McKee and Michael J. Gaffney, "The Community Service Fellowship Planning Project," (Association of Community and Junior Colleges, April 1975.) Charles Killingsworth has extended the concept by suggesting that "service credits" take forms such as employment subsidies and lifelong education in addition to further education in the short-term.

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