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National Youth Service: A Developing Institution

By Donald J. Eberly

This writer traces the highlights of the evolution of student community service over the past two decades, describes the current situation, and offers a possible future for the development of a new institution in our society.

Twenty years ago, it was rare to find students integrating community service with their formal education. The phrase "service learning" had been born only a few years earlier, and was not yet in common usage.

Today, service learning is fairly common in high schools and their surrounding communities. Many high schools and a few school systems have made it a requirement for graduation. And the federal government now supports service learning both with exhortation and with dollars.

Twenty years from now, service learning may well be as common a curricular offering as English and history. And it may join with full-time civilian national service in an institution known as national youth service.

The Past

NASSP has played an innovative and vigorous role in the evolution of service learning. Early in 1972, under NASSP's Youth in

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the Mid-Seventies Project, high school students in Prince George's County, Md.; Portland, Oreg.; and Sheboygan County, Wis., assessed the demand among public service employers for service by teenagers. The survey in these fairly representative areas found that "there would be enough jobs to provide every 15 through 20-year-old in the areas surveyed with almost three hours of service learning opportunities a week."¹

NASSP convened a national conference on service learning in late 1972, and got the word out via the *Bulletin* and other publications. It had effect. I heard from a number of principals and other educators that the NASSP initiative had inspired, facilitated, or legitimized efforts in their communities to introduce opportunities for students to integrate their schoolwork with community service.

Some of the early going was rough. The early '70s was also a time of youthful demands for participation. Sometimes too hurriedly, students were brought onto school boards and other educational bodies. And sometimes students were given academic credit for having done community service absent any requirement for reflection on what might have been learned from the service experience.

With the end of the draft in 1973, and of the Vietnam War in 1975, high schools settled down and worked on refining student participation in communities. Parochial and other independent schools led the way in mandating a period of community service. Two factors led to the more rapid adoption of a service requirement by them than by public schools. Parochial schools found a service requirement consistent with their religious outlook and the values they were trying to instill in the young. Independent schools, with their largely upper class clientele, were motivated by a tradition of *noblesse oblige* as well as a genuine desire to expose their students to life in poor neighborhoods.

Early in the 1980s, the public school systems of Atlanta and Detroit instituted community service as a requirement for graduation. More recently, consideration has been given to statewide requirements in Maryland and New Jersey. The trend appears not to make it mandatory for all students in a state, but to require all high schools to offer the service learning option.

Also during the 1980s, we began to see the emergence of support for student community service by national bodies. While NASSP was first off the mark, in recent years support for service learning has been offered by such national bodies as the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Association of State Boards of Education, and the National Governors Association.

1. Robert A. Havighurst, Richard A. Graham, and Donald Eberly, "American Youth in the Mid-Seventies," *NASSP Bulletin*, November 1972.

Also in recent years, several high-quality sources of materials and advice on service learning have been founded in the states of Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Vermont, and Washington (see box). With modest financial support, they may develop into regional technical assistance centers for service learning.

The Present

Today, educators are learning from experience and improving their own programs. It has been demonstrated that the single most important feature of a service learning program is a service learning coordinator. This is someone who integrates the community's interest in meeting its needs with the faculty's interest in education and the students' interest in serving.

The Commission on National and Community Service began operations late in 1990. It provides financial and moral support both for service learning activities and for full-time stipended youth service. With only \$73 million of first-year funding, its beginnings have been modest. But the Commission has the potential to become the kind of decentralized National Youth Service Foundation needed to support national youth service as an institution.

The Commission's commitment to student service was evident in its first open meeting. It considered the breakdown between K-12 and university of the \$22.5 million that had

been appropriated for student service at all levels. Several members expressed a preference for putting as much as the law allowed (80 percent) into K-12, because of the importance of giving the students early exposure to community service. Those who argued for more money at the university level based their case on the fact that many college students did their volunteer work with children and adolescents. In the end, the Commission voted to dedicate 75 percent of available funds to K-12.

The International Picture

The United States is not the only country that supports national youth service activities. University students in Mexico serve from several weeks to a year in a fairly decentralized program known as Servicio Social. Students in the health sciences have been serving for a full year in the countryside for half a century. In other fields of study, the service activities tend to be less substantial because Servicio Social for them has been introduced only recently and because they receive less financial support than those in the health sciences.²

Young adults between secondary school and university in Botswana spend a year in National Service—

2. Donald Eberly and Michael Sherraden, *The Moral Equivalent of War? A Study of Non-Military Service in Nine Nations* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

often in remote villages—where they serve in such capacities as teacher aides and health aides. They maintain a daily journal and are visited once a month by a supervisor who discusses problems the young person is experiencing as well as the learning the student is acquiring from the experience.

National youth service would help to define a more positive view of citizenship than is often found today, especially among young people.

In Nigeria, university graduates serve for a year in the National Youth Service Corps. Corps members typically serve in their fields of study in areas far removed from their home towns. The certificates of national service they receive at the end of the year are passports to future employment.

While youth service activities in Botswana and Nigeria are quite sharply defined, one finds a more varied set in Great Britain. Community Service Volunteers runs an array of programs fairly similar to those to be supported by the Commission on National and Community Service in this country. Under the generic title of Community

Links with GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education), Community Service Volunteers has produced a pioneering set of guidebooks that go well beyond the model found in many American schools that require, say, 75 or 100 hours of community service and an essay on it for graduation. These guidebooks point out in detail how the individual teacher can integrate student community service with the curriculum. Here are two projects recommended for science students:

- Look around your local area for evidence of pollution, take photographs of this evidence. Analyze the type of pollution and its effect upon the environment and suggest ways in which it could be alleviated. Present your findings and solutions to your local Environmental Health Officer, and those responsible for the pollution.
- From your knowledge of dietary requirements, plan a three-day menu for either a preschool child or an active teenager. Discuss your plans with a dietician or a health visitor and modify your menus if necessary. Carry out a survey to find if the children or young people in your area are eating a similar diet to that which you have devised. Make recommendations based on your findings.³

3. Jack and Doroth Marsh, *Community Links with GCSE: Math and Science* (CSV Advisory Service, 237 Pentonville Road, London N1 9NJ, 1990), p. 44.

Back in the United States, there is a lot of interesting experimentation in the field of service learning. One of the more notable can be found at Rutgers University in New Jersey, where a former fraternity house has been converted into a residence for students engaged in community service activities.

If the intentions of a group of educators, young people, and youth policy specialists come to pass, national youth service will be viewed as an institution 20 years from now.

Speaking at the Wingspread Conference Center in Wisconsin several summers ago, Michael Sherraden of Washington University, St. Louis, described how the institutions of education and work have evolved over the last two centuries. Sherraden reviewed the profound changes that have taken place in both these institutions, and how some three decades ago an institutional gap began to form that has become both wider and deeper over time. He noted that existing institutions were not to blame for this gap any more than the existing institutions of the early 1800s were to blame for the absence of public education. It was simply a matter of historical evolution.⁴

The Wingspread conferees agreed that the gap exists, and that "if society does not offer its young people legitimate, safe, positive means to the transition to adulthood, then some young people will find their own means of survival in underground, dangerous, and anti-social activities."⁵

The conference concluded that most of the existing institutional gap could be constructively filled by an institution known as national youth service and embracing an array of service choices for young people. Such choices would be available to all young people, and would include service learning opportunities in schools and colleges, stipends for periods of full-time service either at home or away from home, and a voice by young people in the kinds of service activities they undertake.

The shape of this new institution was further defined in a paper written by James C. Kielsmeier, president of the National Youth Leadership Council, and myself. We describe what happens at the boundaries of national youth service and existing institutions. At the boundary of education and national youth service, we find service learning, which we define as the integration of service with academic growth, wherein the service informs the

4. Michael Sherraden, "Youth Participation in America," In *National Youth Service: A Democratic Institution for the 21st Century*, edited by Donald J. Eberly (National Service Secretariat, Washington, D.C., 1991).

5. Donald J. Eberly, ed., *National Youth Service: A Democratic Institution for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: National Service Secretariat, 1991).

learning and the learning informs the service.

Another interface with education would occur for persons contributing a year of full-time service that would also form the basis for academic credit equivalent to one year of college.

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Before entering service, the student and professor would outline learning objectives and decide on a reading list. During service, the student would report from time to time on progress toward the learning objectives and would participate in seminars designed to reflect on the service activities. At the end of service, the student would submit a final report that demonstrated learning in the context of the service activities and the original set of learning objectives. Thus, one year of service would be incorporated into a four-year baccalaureate degree.

The interface between the institutions of work and national youth

service would also be important. We suggest that employers recognize the value of the service experience in the same way they now recognize the value of education and work. Also, employers can serve as mentors to young people in service and can provide the earnest money that may be requested of sponsors receiving full-time servers.

The interface between national youth service and the public sector would be akin to the interface between the public sector and the Civilian Conservation Corps, Peace Corps, and VISTA.

There would be certain refinements. Public and private nonprofit agencies receiving full-time, stipended participants would have to provide the necessary training and supervision as well as 10 percent of the participants' stipend in cash. Also, the federal government would establish a National Service Education Fund that would be dedicated to the education of the individual, and that would receive deposits from the government for periods of service (perhaps \$5,000 per year of service) as well as from employers and relatives of the individual. The deposits would accrue interest and could be used only for education and training up to the age of 55, when they would revert to the individual.

The possibility of draft resumption seems more remote now than it has for more than half a century. Still, if a peacetime draft should return, we propose that the National

Service Option Plan⁶ take effect. Under the Option Plan, persons liable for military service—which will likely include women as well as men in a future draft—could choose whether to enter civilian or military service, with those making no choice being exposed to a draft for military service.

National youth service would help to define a more positive view of citizenship than is often found today, especially among young people. They often describe good citizenship in the negative—i.e., the absence of drug use and trouble with the law. By 2012, the public may well view participation in national youth service as an attribute of good citizenship, just as it now views voting and jury duty in this light.⁷

From Here to There

Since the NASSP initiatives of the early '70s, service learning activities have taken root and prospered in many schools, and mandatory community service has either been adopted by, or is on the agenda of, many state and local school systems. With the passage of the

National and Community Service Act of 1990, both service learning and full-time, stipended youth service are national policy.

The question now is whether or not the momentum of the last 20 years will continue in a way that national youth service becomes recognized as an institution by 2012. Here are some markers to judge what kind of progress is being made toward that end:

- By 1995, 100,000 men and women 18 to 24 years of age are members of full-time community service or conservation corps (the 1990 figure was 10,000, including persons of that age range in the Peace Corps).
- By 1997, at least 25 states require their high schools to offer service learning opportunities to all students.
- By 1998, all 18-year-olds receive a mailing from the government informing them about opportunities for joining a variety of military and non-military service programs.

Now is the time for high school leaders to take two steps that will help determine whether or not national youth service should take a place beside education and work as societal institutions.

First, high school leaders should encourage students to think seriously about their responsibilities to their nation and to their fellow human beings. When the draft was in effect, it caused most young men and many young women to think deeply about these responsibilities.

6. Donald J. Eberly, ed., *National Service: A Report of a Conference* (New York City: Russell Sage Foundation, 1968).

7. Donald J. Eberly and James C. Kielsmeier, "National Youth Service," In *National Youth Service: A Democratic Institution for the 21st Century*, edited by Eberly (Washington, D.C.: National Service Secretariat, 1991).

With a return to the draft unlikely, educators and other leaders should bring the question of national youth service to the attention of students. The accompanying box cites several books that would facilitate the process.

Second, high school leaders should challenge students to consider what they should be doing so as to manifest these responsibilities right now, in their own communities. They should be exposed to the needs of the very young, the very

old, and the environment. They should have opportunity to do something about the problems they see, to reflect on what they learn from such activities, and to debate public policy issues drawing from their experiences.

These two steps may or may not lead to an institution called national youth service. What they will do is to set in motion a process by which those who will be making such decisions in the next century acquire a solid foundation for those decisions.

Resources on National Youth Service

These books give the reader an understanding of the history and possible future of national youth service, the major issues surrounding it, a description of how it might work on a large scale, and a comparative analysis of national service around the world.

Eberly, Donald J. *National Service: A Promise to Keep*. Rochester, N.Y.: John Alden Books, 1988.

Eberly, Donald J., ed. *National Youth Service: A Democratic Institution for the 21st Century*. Washington, D.C.: National Service Secretariat, 1991.

Eberly, Donald, and Sherraden, Michael, eds. *The Moral Equivalent of War? A Study of Non-Military Service in Nine Nations*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1990.

Evers, Williamson M., ed. *National Service: Pro & Con*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, Hoover Institution Press, 1990.

Moskos, Charles C. *A Call to Civic Service: National Service for Country and Community*. New York, N.Y.: The Free Press, 1988.

These organizations offer information and technical assistance on service learning activities by young people.

- Community Service Learning Center, 258 Washington Blvd., Springfield, Mass. 01108 (413) 734-6857.
- SerVermont, P.O. Box 516, Chester, Vt. (802) 875-2276.
- National Center for Service Learning in Early Adolescence, Room 612, 25 West 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036 (212) 642-2947.
- National Youth Leadership Council, 1910 W. County Road B, Roseville, Minn. 55113 (612) 631-3672.
- School Improvement Program, 2810 Comanche Drive, Mt. Vernon, Wash. 98273 (206) 428-8553.