Summer 2005

Quo Vadis: What Can Students Do for American Cities?

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Quo Vadis:  
What Can Students Do for American Cities?

The experience of service learning can be deeply rewarding, whether the service rendered is voluntary or a required part of the curriculum; whether it is part-time or full-time (as it is in most programs of national service); whether it takes place in the community where the college or university is located, in a student’s home community, or in other parts of the country—or overseas in the Peace Corps.

If teachers play a Socratic role in helping students prepare for and reflect upon such learning-by-doing, it can be a powerful form of moral and civic education. With luck, students will better understand major problems on which they work—such as homelessness, drug addiction, and illiteracy—and the role of government, business, nonprofit and faith-based organizations, and education in solving those problems. They will learn how to work together on civic problems; discover new relevance to academic studies; gain a better perspective on their communities; feel both warmer sympathy and realistic discouragement; and hopefully commit themselves to a life of civic responsibility.

In this light, cities can be seen as a valuable laboratory in which students can learn. But these are difficult and challenging times for America, especially for American cities. The dimensions of the needs of our cities require a far larger response than We the People have yet given. This we, of course, includes government at all levels, but also it includes all of us who are involved with higher education. In this sharper light, an approach that sees the city primarily as a learning laboratory for students is self-centered and self-defeating.

Emperor Nero didn’t do service learning while Rome was burning. The ancient empire was being destroyed from within by terrible divisions between the rich and the poor. In America today, there is a slow-burning crisis that is festering in our cities and endangering our nation’s future. Our leaders call on us to become One America by overcoming divisions of class and race; yet millions of fellow Americans are born into poverty and don’t know how to climb out of it.

The problems of our cities don’t usually take the form of a sudden, dramatic crisis, until there’s an act of nature that wakes us up and brings us together: a fire, flood, or tidal wave. Human-made problems seldom come to a head unless a riot erupts. When Washington and other cities were burning in the angry aftermath of Martin Luther King’s assassination, it caught the nation’s attention. But millions of children who lack the education they need to get out of poverty do not capture that kind of attention.

The list of needs in major metropolitan areas and in poorer areas of other communities is staggering. Americans living in smaller towns, pleasant neighborhoods, or gated communities may feel safe and satisfied, and many colleges and universities may feel happily located and far removed. Nevertheless, we are all citizens of one America, and American education has a responsibility to help Americans realize this.

The human resources and the money necessary to meet these needs are severely limited by budget deficits, and by lack of vision and will. In delivering his I Have a Dream speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom with water from a tedious well of mediocrity.”
Lincoln Memorial, on August 28, 1963, King called on us "to open the doors of opportunity for all of God's children . . . with the fierce urgency of now."¹ In the process of educating citizens, higher education can help us regain that fierce sense of urgency to open those doors.

Six Ways to Help American Cities
In this essay, I offer six pointers for college and university students who may be asking themselves what they can do to help America’s cities.

Think About the Cities’ Needs, Not Your Own
When you consider voluntary service, focus on goals to be achieved to help meet those needs, not just on the general value of volunteering.

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Have you ever volunteered just for the sake of volunteering? When you committed yourself to sustained civic action or citizen service, was it ever in the name of volunteerism? Aren’t you most stirred to action by specific aims that you consider important? Tutoring a child who needs help in reading. Becoming a Big Brother or Big Sister to a boy or girl who needs a caring adult. Organizing middle school students to form a Saturday service corps. Taking part in outreach education to prevent AIDS. Registering citizens to vote. Campaigning for a candidate you believe in. Protesting a war you don’t believe in.

The largest expansion of AmeriCorps came about in the 1990s because the president, governors, mayors, and many educational organizations joined in the America Reads campaign—later enlarged to include America Counts—to see that every elementary student learns to read independently by the end of third grade and makes progress in mathematics. AmeriCorps members and work-study students were needed to help organize the massive volunteer tutoring program required. Congress provided the money for the additional thousands of AmeriCorps members and college students and other citizens volunteered in large numbers.

Another clear and present need is mentoring children of prisoners, a national effort now also under way with presidential urging and congressional funding. Some two million such children are likely to go to prison sometime in their own lives if no one intervenes. This too is a call to service that can make a difference.

The problems of children and youths do not have to be your priority. The needs of the environment are also calling. Bill Buckley proposes large-scale national service focused on help for aging Americans to enable them to live independent and happy lives in their last years.²

Remember what motivates you; it is probably not service learning as a pedagogical doctrine. If the focus is not on real needs that you are called on to help meet but instead on how you learn subjects for your class, doesn’t that dim your enthusiasm and in fact diminish the educational impact of the experience? To stir your fellow students into action, don’t you need to make an appeal to the spirit?

So respond to real needs that move you, set your sights on demanding goals, and go to work to reach them.

Collaborate; Don’t Be a Lone Ranger
Concerted action is needed to solve almost any serious social problem. Usually no one organization is enough. Don’t worry about the turf of your particular organization, or which organization gets the credit. Recall the biblical advice that in losing yourself you will find yourself.

The United Way’s Success by Six program for young kids did not succeed in any community until there
was community collaboration with the key sectors of society working together. The same is true for community collaborations created to provide the five fundamental resources promised "for all American children and youth" at the 1997 Philadelphia Summit: caring adults as parents, mentors, tutors, coaches; safe places with structured activities in which to learn and grow; a healthy start and healthy future; an effective education that equips them with marketable skills; and an opportunity to give back to the community through their own service.

Join an important cross-sector collaboration under way in your community, or help to create one.

Be More Inventive If You Are Going to Do Your Duty

Remember what young people have done in the past:

- Wendy Kopp, while a student at Princeton, planned and then after graduation started Teach for America, to recruit outstanding recent graduates to teach for two years in the nation's neediest urban and rural public schools; now three thousand corps members are doing so, with many of the seventy-five hundred alumni giving continuous leadership in educational and social reform.

- David Battey, after graduating from Williams College, started the Youth Volunteer Corps of America (YVC) in Kansas City, to enlist high school students to serve in the community part-time in the school year and full-time in the summer, with team leaders who are generally of college age; initially hosted by Youth Service America and then funded by million-dollar grants from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and the Kauffman Foundation and AmeriCorps support, YVC has spread to more than thirty cities and engaged thousands of students.

- Vanessa Kirsch, after graduating from Tufts University, founded the Public Allies program, enlisting young leaders from distressed communities as interns in nonprofit organizations and municipal agencies, starting in Washington, D.C., but now operating in eleven cities; she went on to found New Profit, a venture capital fund that helps effective civic ventures go to scale.

- Anthony Shriver, while a student at Georgetown, started Best Buddies, to enhance the lives of people with intellectual disabilities by creating opportunities for one-to-one friendship and integrated employment—and built it into an international organization with fifty thousand volunteers in more than a thousand participating middle school, high school, and college campuses across the country and in more than twenty countries (following the example of his mother, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, who organized the now-worldwide Special Olympics).

- Ira Harkavy, after being a student activist at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1960s, went on as a faculty member to found and direct the Center for Community Partnerships, and with the help of a succession of Penn presidents has built a many-sided structure of engagement in the schools and economic development of the neighboring West Philadelphia community, with a range of courses in service learning and thousands of student volunteers.

If you are not ready to create a new program yourself, then join one of more than a thousand nonprofit organizations seeking AmeriCorps members and other volunteers. You don't have to invent something new. Another biblical injunction holds true: hold fast to that which is good!

Ask

Most of us don't volunteer, even for the best of causes, until we are asked. Research shows that the great majority of volunteers say they did it because they were asked.

Ask your fellow students to join you in answering the call to commit two years of your lives, or four
thousand hours, in service, at home or abroad—in AmeriCorps, the Jesuit Service Corps, the Lutheran Service Corps, the Peace Corps, or other intense full-time service, or in part-time volunteering in one of the many educational and nonprofit organizations needing your help. For example, ask students to join you in organizing a team to help Habitat for Humanity build houses during spring break or summer vacation.

Ask your college or university president to join the Campus Compact, if not already a member. Ask that service learning be further developed and supported on campus. Ask for the president to lead in the effort to fulfill the Five Promises for children and youth agreed on at the Philadelphia Summit, and become a College or University of Promise. Ask that a campus-based AmeriCorps program be developed. Ask that the majority of work-study jobs be in service to the community, not on campus.

Ask students who are eligible for work-study jobs to press for assignment to a job that serves the community. The work will probably be harder than shelving books in the library but more worthwhile, for those you help and for your own education. If you are eligible, do it yourself.

Give Special Attention to Your College or University’s Work-Study Program

New funds to expand service programs are now being curtailed in a cascading drive to overcome budget deficits in federal, state, and local governments. But there is a large ongoing program of federal student aid waiting to be tapped and restored to its original purpose.

A billion dollars of annual federal grants funds almost a million student jobs for an average of eleven hours a week during the school year, and they may be combined in full-time work in the summer. President Bush, Clinton when he was president, Colin Powell as chair of America’s Promise, and academic leaders such as Tom Ehrlich and Father Hesburgh have called for the majority of work-study jobs to be in service to the community.

When the federal work-study program was created during the War on Poverty years, the sponsors assumed that most such jobs would be in service to the community, giving students firsthand experience in helping to solve important community problems. By the mid-1970s, colleges and universities were claiming almost all of those jobs for campus work.

That was good for college budgets, easier to administer, and more convenient for students, but not good for the community or for educating the students. You can help reclaim this vital resource for the community.

In 1999, a thousand college and university presidents signed on to a committee, led by San Francisco State’s President Robert Corrigan, to seek one hundred thousand work-study students as tutors in a campaign for America Reads and America Counts. Many colleges helped enlist about fifty thousand such student tutors, and good work was done in communities across America. But the yearly total of work-study students engaged in the community is still less than 15 percent of the total, far short of the goal of 50 percent of work-study in service to the community set by President Bush in his call to service after September 11, 2001.

Find out what percentage of work-study jobs are in off-campus service in your college or university. Make it clear you want the community to come first, and you want your college to be one of those passing the 50 percent goal. Emphasize that the college should not deny lower-income students (who have little time to serve in the community if their job is on campus) the chance for this valuable service learning. Get the organization in which you work to press financial aid officers or your president for assignment of work-study students as a vital new resource for their programs.
Look what the successful Jumpstart program did for preschool education through one-to-one adult-child interaction, to get its own jump start. Its founder, Aaron Lieberman, himself a recent Yale graduate, went to financial aid offices in a half-dozen Boston area colleges and universities and asked for work-study students. Within a week, he had his first staff of more than thirty work-study students serving regularly each week. Now Jumpstart operates in thirty cities, sponsored and hosted by a local college or university; it serves in nearly two hundred Head Start and other learning centers and has more than two thousand college work-study students as its main teaching force, working toward the day when every child in America enters school prepared to succeed.10

We have all seen plenty of accident and force in the wars of our time. As students, you can hope—we all must hope—that the conduct and example of your generation will prove that our society is really capable of reflection and better choices.

Read
Read not just to children you may be tutoring but to yourself. Read and discuss with your colleagues some of the best and most useful writing on service, civic engagement, citizenship, and civil disobedience. Read current literature on the theory and practice of service learning and national service, such as E. J. Dionne's collection of essays United We Serve11; the case studies and essays in Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility12; the provocative Wingspread statement on student engagement, The New Student Politics13; and other publications by the Campus Compact, the Pew Trust, the Brookings Institution, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

But also read de Tocqueville, Thoreau, Lincoln, Gandhi, King, and the words of America’s founders. As the first proposition in the first Federalist Paper, Alexander Hamilton wrote that “it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.”14

Notes


Harris Wofford is a former U.S. senator and an assistant to President John Kennedy for civil rights and the Peace Corps. He has also served as president of Bryn Mawr College and the State University of New York College at Old Westbury, CEO of the Corporation for National Service, and chairman of America’s Promise. He is the author of the book Of Kennedys and Kings: Making Sense of the Sixties.

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