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Matthew Countryman

Lisa Sullivan

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National Service: "Don't Do For, Do With"

National Information Center
for Service Learning
1954 Buford Ave, Room R290
St. Paul, MN 55108-6197

Matthew Countryman and Lisa Sullivan are co-directors of the Ella Baker Child Policy Training Institute, a summer internship program sponsored by the Black Student Leadership Network. Countryman is a graduate student in history at Duke University; Sullivan is a doctoral candidate in political science at Yale.

Matthew Countryman & Lisa Sullivan

President Clinton's signing of the National Service Act on September 21, 1993, was a triumphant moment for the "community service movement" that first emerged a decade ago in response to the Reagan Administration's cutbacks in domestic poverty programs. As we look forward to an expansion in federal sponsorship and funding for the community service efforts of young people, it is important to step back and ask what young people can achieve through their service efforts in poor communities. In particular, the service movement needs to grapple with two weaknesses that have plagued it throughout the past decade: 1) the underrepresentation of young people of color and young people from working-class and poor backgrounds in the leadership of most of the nationally recognized service organizations; and 2) the failure to develop strategies that seek to solve the problems caused by persistent poverty, rather than just meeting the immediate needs of poor people.

We believe that the causes of and solutions to the service movement's lack of diversity and its failure to address adequately persistent poverty are closely linked. As activists who helped to found the Black Student Leadership Network two years ago, we write primarily from the experiences of African-American students involved in community service. But we believe our analysis will hold true for young people of all ethnicities and classes who have felt themselves outside the service movement.

Despite their underrepresentation in the mainstream service movement, African-American students can be found on every college campus quietly doing their best to give back to their communities and to their younger brothers and sisters. Black students work innumerable hours as mentors, tutors, and Saturday school teachers, often in Afrocentric programs. They also work as voter registration organizers, education reform activists, and volunteers in prisons and juvenile detention centers. Black students have commonly rooted their service work in Black student unions, churches, and fraternities and sororities—organizations with a demonstrated history of community service within the Black community. The quintessential Black student volunteer, often unrecognized by the service movement, is a youth choir director or Sunday school teacher at the church he or she grew up in.

We recognize, however, that the commitment of Black students to community service alone cannot solve the deep crisis facing poor children and their families in the 1990s. Our experiences in the Black Student Leadership Network demonstrate that young people who want to find solutions to the problems caused by persistent poverty must find ways to link their service efforts to effective grassroots advocacy for changes in public policy. You cannot enter a community hoping to save children from the perils of poverty and hopelessness without immediately recognizing the need for fundamental changes in government policies. Teach five and six year olds at a summer program in East Oakland, and you will find mothers unsure of why their children have been placed in special education class before their first day of kindergarten. Organize

a parents' meeting in Harlem, and you will meet parents desperate for your help in getting the school board to do basic maintenance in their children's elementary school. Set up an after-school program in a Raleigh housing project, and you will discover that none of the children living there attend the magnet school across the street. Furthermore, you will find that school officials have placed as many as one-third of the children living in the project on a drug called Ritalin to control their "hyperactivity," and that these school officials have threatened to report mothers who are on AFDC to the Department of Children and Youth Services if they question the diagnosis of their child. Inevitably, young people engaged in service in these communities must make a political decision: either you focus solely on the individual children who have that special something it takes to make it out of their community (talent, determination, a committed parent); or you begin to mobilize the local community to work for changes in government policies and programs that will improve the life chances of every child.

A Thousand Points of Light?

Unfortunately, few within the mainstream service movement share the view that the primary mission of community service ought to be the mobilization of poor communities. Two different perspectives on community service command much more attention, both from the leaders of the service movement and from the policymakers promoting the idea of a national service program.

The first is encapsulated in George Bush's notion of "a thousand points of light." In this voluntarist view, the most important aspect of

community service is its impact on the service (i.e., volunteer). Through volunteers are learn important charity and. However, the volunteer receives little or approach. It is (class) young people less fortunate than

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Service Effort

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community service is its impact on the person doing the service (i.e., the volunteer). Through their service, volunteers are supposed to learn important lessons about charity and compassion. However, the actual impact of the volunteer's service receives little or no attention in the voluntarist approach. It is enough to know that a (middle-class) young person cares enough about those less fortunate than her- or himself.

Though the idea of voluntarism as a substitute for government programs was important to the Reagan/Bush ideology, it would be a mistake to see the voluntarist perspective as solely a conservative one. The rapid growth of the community service movement on college campuses was driven as much by cynicism about government's ability to solve domestic problems as by a resurgence of paternalistic notions of charity. Nor is this cynicism the sole purvey of white middle-class college students. Afrocentric Black students have been just as likely as their white counterparts to be suspicious of government programs and funding.

Service Entrepreneurship

If voluntarism was what made the Bush Administration "kinder and gentler," national service is now a prime example of what Bill Clinton and his new Democrats mean by reinventing government. This second perspective on community service promotes young people's service efforts as a low-cost solution to the country's ever-expanding social service needs. In this time of economic austerity,

many New Democrats and moderate Republicans have begun to see the community service efforts of young people as a potential way of bridging the gap in services to poor communities left by underfunded schools and social service agencies.

The depth of the service movement's enchantment with the new Democrats is seen in its embrace of the concept of "service entrepreneurship"—a notion largely derived from the Clinton Administration bible, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*. A central argument of the book is that government should create a mechanism for bureaucrats and citizens to test their ideas for improving government services in a forum that would reward the most efficient and discard the rest. Within the service movement, entrepreneurship has come to mean the creation of funding and institutional mechanisms that give young people with good ideas the opportunity to test those ideas by establishing service projects in communities of need. The Commission on National and Community Service, for example, will soon be making 25 Service Entrepreneurship Awards to young people who participated in the president's Summer of Service Program.

At first glance, service entrepreneurship would seem a wonderful mechanism for giving young people the opportunity to experiment with different ways of addressing the wide variety of problems plaguing poor communities. However, by connecting these

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opportunities with the "spirit of entrepreneurship," the service movement encourages the creation of funding and evaluation criteria that push young people toward the provision of services for poor people and away from efforts to empower poor people to find solutions to problems caused by poverty. The danger of service entrepreneurship is that it risks rewarding clever ideas and programs that may come and go, while diverting resources from established service and advocacy programs already operating within poor communities.

The concept of entrepreneurship also brings with it the marketplace's fixation on the bottom line. Successful service entrepreneurs are expected to produce immediate and quantifiable results. Such quantified measures tend to emphasize the impact on individuals, while failing to ask whether the service program is addressing the conditions that caused the problem in the first place. A more appropriate evaluative measure would examine the impact of the service program on the community as a whole, not just the program's clients. Known as community impact, such a system of standards would encourage service programs to address directly the breakdown of basic infrastructure in poor communities, and to seek ways to help community residents push for reform in local institutions. Service entrepreneurship encourages young people to *serve* the poor, rather than *work with* them. Community impact, by contrast, would encourage young people to develop the skills necessary for working with local institutions, leaders, and residents, in the collective search for solutions to common problems.

Just Another VISTA?

Most advocates of national service believe that an emphasis on service provision and service entrepreneurship is essential to keeping the president's program nonpartisan and free from political patronage. Would not a service program that promoted collective problem-solving at the community level be open to the same charges of political cronyism that addled VISTA and ACTION under President Carter? While the potential surely exists, there are numerous working models of community-based programs that neither skirt the serious challenges facing low-income communities nor violate government requirements for nonpartisanship. For example, Youth Build, a Boston-based youth organization, has developed a model job training program that combines much-needed services for poor youth with training in the skills and strategies that young people need if they are to have an influence on public policy.

More to the point, however, is the question of what happens to national service if we do not seek alternative ways of thinking about service. The glaring absence of racial and social class diversity in the service movement is in many ways a direct result of both the volunteerist and service entrepreneurship models. Many poor youth from communities besieged by persistent poverty are drawn to the service movement, but they know from experience that what ails their community requires a fundamental transformation of programs, institutions, and leaders. Failure to substantively address poverty and its concomitant social ills infuriates young people who are seeking ways of responding to the specific crises that plague

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Robert Fredericksen, a Tsimshian storyteller also known as Ravenspeaker, teaches Alaskan Native traditions through song, dance, and storytelling to children in the Seattle area. "I just discovered a love for dancing and telling stories so much that I worked at being good. Anyone that's going to do anything in the name of their people has an obligation to be excellent at it." Photo by Wes Pope.

their communities—the stench of urine in housing project elevators, a dysfunctional recreation center with no athletic equipment or safe playing field, the violent murders of their peers.

There is no better example of what happens when youth of color encounter community service models rooted in voluntarism and service entrepreneurship than the training week for the Summer of Service program (SOS) that took place this June. Many of the

week's problems were the result of the radical disjuncture between the training's emphasis on physical exercise and team-building, and the experiential understanding that the SOS participants who came from poor communities brought with them of what their communities need. What these young people craved was the space to have structured discussions about the causes of the social problems in their communities, and an opportunity to develop specific ideas for how they might solve them.

The Future of National Service

National service can make its greatest contribution to solving the problems of persistent poverty in rural and urban America by focusing on building the leadership capacities of young people from poor communities. Service opportunities should not be limited to poor youth, but the central mission of national service should be to strengthen the capacity of poor communities to solve their own problems. While the War on Poverty is often cited as an example of the failure of federal initiatives that promote community-based leadership, the facts point to a contrary lesson. The War on Poverty's emphasis on community participation produced a whole generation of skilled leadership for local governments, social service provision, educational institutions, businesses, and foundations. By learning what worked and what did not during the War on Poverty, national service can become a seedbed for building the capacity of a new generation of leadership to restore and revitalize the institutions that have broken down within communities.

If national service is to become such a seedbed, we must break with many of the presumptions of voluntarism and service entrepreneurship. The first step is to encourage poor youth to develop explanations for the realities they perceive in the community. Many poor youth experience their communities as places where nothing works. Everything from the housing project elevator to the local schools and social service agencies seems to have broken down, and no one—not the churches, not the schools, not the local politicians—seems to care enough to do anything about it. While few are surprised that the white talking heads

on national television care little about their problems, they can't understand why the local politicians—even those who look like them—seem unable or unwilling to do take real action. Worst of all, when young people do try to come up with better ways to do things in the community—whether by reorganizing a local basketball tournament or neighborhood block party, or by setting up an after-school drop-in center—the adults who run the institutions in the community are rarely supportive. Too often, adults are simply not prepared to share leadership with “a bunch of kids.”

The second step is to support the efforts of community-based projects to find solutions to local problems. Problem-solving in low-income communities requires service projects that develop capacity within the local community, not just promote the one-shot provision of service by young people entering the community from the outside. Young people who desire social transformation of impoverished urban and rural communities must learn how to work with ordinary people in the search for permanent solutions to their problems. Through community service, participants in the national service program should learn the skills that will enable them to advocate for improvements in the operation of local institutions. Young people are less in need of partisan political skills than they are in need of skills that will help them organize their peers, their parents, their younger sisters and brothers to hold the schools, service agencies, and government bureaucracies accountable for their policies and the quality of their programs.

Audrey Gartner,
of *Social Policy*,
Riessman, editor
directors of the
Laboratory, of T
of New York.