

1-1-1999

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Recommended Citation

Cirone, William J., "Community Service and Civic Literacy" (1999). *Service Learning, General*. 279.
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COMMUNITY SERVICE AND CIVIC LITERACY

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By William J. Cirone

IN A SPEECH urging students at Stanford University to get involved in community service, John W. Gardner, former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare and author of *Self-Renewal*, asked rhetorically, "Why bother?"

"For two reasons," he replied to his own question. "To give your life meaning and to discharge your obligation to society."

The notion that the citizen has an obligation to reach beyond himself is ingrained in the American value system. As an educator, I believe that our schools not only can, but must, provide opportunities for young people to derive the benefits that come from service to the community. The concept of community service is integral to the notion of civic literacy. Simply stated, civic literacy encompasses the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for participation in a democratic society. And high school community service provides incomparable hands-on teaching opportunities in civic literacy.

Ernest Boyer has urged our schools to develop community service programs to "provide students with an opportunity to reach beyond themselves and feel more responsibly engaged."

The need to help young people "feel more responsibly engaged" is indicated by a 1984 Kettering Foundation study: only 40 percent of the college students surveyed expressed interest in public affairs; only 20 percent said they were involved in some form of community activity. The same study found that personal affluence was the top college goal of 80 percent of the freshmen surveyed.

Contrast this with the 80 percent of freshmen in a 1968 poll who identified "development of a meaningful philosophy of life" as a major goal.

Syndicated columnist Richard Reeves quotes a professor of physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: "Public policy is of almost no interest to the people of MIT today; the students are looking for private solutions. They are not interested in government or in community issues. They are interested in themselves."

One explanation for the lack of interest in government may be found in the results of a recent Roper study, which found that the proportion of Americans who believe that "government cannot be trusted to do the right thing" has doubled over the last 20 years to 54 percent!

"Meism" is an alarming phenomenon indeed in the light of the complex social, economic, technical, moral, and political issues today's students will face tomorrow: the control of nuclear weapons, protection of our environment, integration of a growing minority population, control of genetic engineering, and a changing world economy. If ever there was a time for an informed and involved

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public, that time is now. It seems to me that educational institutions have no choice but to refocus their energies on developing civic literacy in the young.

E DUCATION, in its fullest sense, must include the development of ethical behavior, a sense of civic responsibility, and concern for others. Education can no longer attempt to be value-neutral; it must teach those values that are held in common by our citizens, and that are a part of the foundation of our democratic way of life.

There is a growing consensus across the political spectrum, about this. Norman Lear, president of People for the American Way; Terrell Bell, former U.S. Secretary of Education; Bill Honig, California Superintendent of Education; Floretta Dukes McKenzie, Washington, D.C., Superintendent of Schools; and Jeane Kirkpatrick, former UN ambassador—to name just a few—have all called upon schools to rededicate themselves to the teaching of civic virtues. The question, really, is how?

Civic education can be improved in at least three ways:

1. By providing students with the basic knowledge they need about civics and history.
2. By teaching students commonly agreed-upon civic values and developing in them a sense of civic-mindedness.
3. By helping students develop the skills they need to participate in a democratic society.

Basic knowledge about civics and

history is a prerequisite to developing a set of civic values. Knowledge must go hand-in-hand with, and be the foundation for, those values we can surely agree upon: justice, freedom, equality, truth, authority, respect for persons and property, and personal responsibility for the common good.

But knowledge and values are not enough. We must also teach our young people the skills they need to participate in a democracy. They need critical-thinking skills, so they can process, analyze, evaluate, interpret, and apply the mass of information available to them; consensus-building and bargaining skills; and conflict-management and citizen-participation skills. All of these can be taught.

One way of learning is through voluntary service, which is in the best American tradition. In 1984, California State Senator Gary Hart introduced state legislation that would have established a High School Community Service Program. Under the proposed program, the state would provide funding to help high schools establish voluntary community service programs; students would work a prescribed number of supervised hours serving the community and would receive high school credit for it. In the words of Senator Hart's bill, "Providing service in the community is an effective way for all pupils to acquire a sense of usefulness and contribution to society, as well as the opportunity to develop and utilize citizenship skills . . . and to acquire the experience necessary to make effective career, education, and character choices while also responding to the needs of others."

The bill passed both houses of the California legislature but, unfortunately, was vetoed by the governor. Whether the legislation is revived in a subsequent legislative session or not, I think we will have to, as a nation, find some way to encourage community service, since it is, in my opinion, the best possible training for responsible citizenship. The need for teaching civic literacy and incorporating community service into the curriculum is clear, and the opportunities are available. What a splendid way to help our young people, in John Gardner's words, give their lives meaning and discharge their obligations to society. □