Making a difference? Student volunteerism, service learning and higher education in the USA

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Abstract

This paper reviews evidence concerning the recent growth of volunteerism among college students in the USA. It describes the various pressures to expand such activities and outlines steps being taken to promote them. Reforms of student financial aid can be used to facilitate service among students who would otherwise have to engage in substantial paid work to afford education, while educational institutions are taking numerous steps, most notably through integrating community service and academic study, to promote such involvement. The more general issues raised by all this are: the likely impacts on servers and served of this activity; whether education-based community service has demonstrable educational benefits; its impact on higher education institutions; and the wider impacts in terms of political attitudes and behaviour.

Introduction

There is currently a striking emphasis from a range of participants in the American higher education system on the importance of community service. University presidents talk of the need to provide students with the opportunity to serve, as a good in itself; students talk of the need to ‘make a difference’ to someone or to a community; professors talk of the educational value of community service with some going so far as to argue for making service a component of the education of every student; and there are the debates about national service and the proposals for the linking of financial aid to community service (Mohan, 1994a). This paper describes elements of this growth in student volunteerism, including the demands for engaging more students in it and the various policies being developed.
to expand it, before assessing its wider significance.

The context for this is wider debates in American society about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and about participation in public life and the political process. These debates draw upon a civic republican tradition which suggests that the good citizen is concerned not just with private matters but with public affairs, pursuing the common good, not just self-interest. Participation in voluntary associations has always been held to be crucial to American public life, as commentators such as de Tocqueville (1848) noted, offering a bulwark against the dangers of excessive individualism and privatism. This tension between individualism and civic association links to the persistent debates about what it means to be 'American' and about the renewal of national identity. Given declining involvement in formal politics, commentators have argued that individuals must be educated in an environment in which they can 'acquire the skills necessary for participation in public life'; ways must be found for 'reconnecting citizens with the public world' (Morse, 1989, p.3). Democracy must be revived in ways which allow for 'modern society to move beyond special interests and partisan politics, and raise the expectations of ourselves and each other' (Morse, 1989, p.22). Education is potentially crucial in this since 'if people were born citizens there would be no need to teach them civic responsibilities' (Barber, 1992). There are proposals at all levels of the education system to engage students in service, including suggestions that community service should be a mandatory high school graduation requirement, and calls from national educational bodies to make service part of the experience of every college student (Newman, 1985; Boyer, 1987). These proposals draw on critiques of the educational system which have stressed that educational practices have reduced students to passive, servile consumers and reinforced tendencies within the larger culture towards pursuing individual interests to the exclusion of a broader community awareness and involvement (Schultz, 1990). They can be seen as part of a wider concern to rebuild the social fabric of America through reviving the notion of community (Putnam, 1993; Rowe, 1993).

At the national level there have been proposals to reinvigorate the notion of service, but to date these have had relatively little impact. Support for volunteerism during the Reagan and Bush administrations was criticised as being largely rhetorical and an ideological smokescreen for justifying withdrawal of government programmes and expenditures (Verveer et al., 1992). Some national agencies have promoted education-based community service mainly through funding pilot programmes but these have been relatively small-scale. The national service legislation will, of course, change this situation substantially (Campus Compact, '1993a).

However, even without vigorous encouragement of service at the national level, there has still been rapid growth of service within higher education institutions. O'Brien (1993) summarises most of the available evidence. There is little comprehensive national data on participation, though the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study indicated that 26 per cent of undergraduates were involved in service in 1990, averaging 5.3 hours per week, and a study of students in the California State University system (one of the largest public education systems in the country) showed that 32 per cent of students volunteered (California State University, 1989). Some institutions claim that up to two-thirds of their undergraduates are involved in community service in one form or another. In fact, Levine (1994), drawing on a national survey of 5,900 undergraduates, claims that by 1993 the proportion of students engaged in community service had risen to 64 per cent, and that this was true throughout different types of institution and across the country.

The results of this student volunteerism can be very impressive. Many universities have long-established centres for volunteerism (approximately one-fifth fund a community service coordinator; Waller, 1993), and in recent years these have been joined by a number of privately-endowed initiatives. Catalogues of the range of volunteer activities undertaken by students are routinely available in most major universities. These describe in some detail the projects concerned, the numbers of volunteers and the hours served. Campus Compact (1993b) provides profiles of many exemplary schemes.

The amount of service being generated through student volunteer activity is substantial. One estimate suggested that volunteer service totalling some 17 million hours was delivered at the member institutions of the organisation Campus Compact (which exists to promote community service in higher education; see below) in 1991-2, including an average of 460 students per institution on one-off projects and 468 students per institution participating in ongoing projects (there will be duplication of individuals in these numbers) (Campus Compact, 1993b). These figures cannot easily be generalised to the rest of the higher education community, of course: Campus Compact by definition represents the more active institutions since it is an organisation comprised of college and university presidents committed to service, and levels of participation in non-member institutions may not be so high. The most common schemes are those directed at children, whether in the form of tutoring, mentoring or support for youth projects: 88, 71 and 73 per cent respectively indicated that they had such schemes, followed by schemes targeted at homelessness (72 per cent), the environment (66 per cent), hunger (65 per cent), the elderly (64 per cent) and literacy (63 per cent). It is not possible to gauge
the extent of these programmes or to determine whether they are one-off schemes or whether they involve students in regular commitment to service. Statistics may also be misleading since many returns will include figures for such events as blood drives and also one-off programmes such as those run in the course of orientation programmes for new students.

Longitudinal surveys seem to indicate an upward trend in student participation. Thues (1988), drawing on data supplied by Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL, see below) suggested that campus-based voluntary service had increased by some 400 per cent between 1984 and 1988. The annual reports on the attitudes and background of college freshman by Astin et al. (1992) do suggest greater awareness of social issues among students. Their data suggest that since the early 1980s the proportion of students likely to seek business careers has fallen by almost half, that the proportion of students who have engaged in community service in the year prior to entering college has risen to nearly two-thirds, that increased proportions of students regard issues of racial equality and social justice as being of high priority, and that around one-fifth think it highly likely that they will engage in volunteer service during their college careers (the proportions are higher for religious and historically black institutions, and higher still for four-year private institutions). This is combined with a decline in participation in formal political activities: the proportion of students reporting that they had participated in a local, state or national political campaign is now half what it was during the late 1960s (Astin et al., 1992). In short the trend seems to be away from conventional political activity and towards more practical engagement in social problems — a point returned to in the conclusion.

Thus there is substantial evidence of a growth in service activity by students. The first question raised by all this is therefore just why there have been pressures for service in higher education. Second, how can service be promoted within the existing financial framework of higher education? Here, the question is what sort of institutional policies can expand the extent of student service programmes. Third, there is the issue of the relationship between service and academic study: is service to be integrated into academic programmes (and, if so, how?), or is it to be left to the voluntary efforts of students? Finally, I consider the wider significance of the growth in these activities.

Pressures for community service and community involvement

A range of perhaps unlikely partners have collectively and individually called for an expansion of student community action in the USA. From the top of the higher education hierarchy a coalition of university presidents, Campus Compact, has argued for education-based community service, drawing on critiques of higher education which stress the minimal contribution universities make to the solution of community problems (e.g. Bok, 1990, 1991, 1992). From the bottom, organisations such as Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) have organised students at a grassroots level.

COOL was founded in 1984 to support student involvement in community service; it provides resources and technical assistance to develop community service programmes. Initially a principal concern was the need to address campus racism, but the wider educational implications of community involvement have subsequently been incorporated into COOL's work. COOL's philosophy is that, without students encouraging other students to participate, institutional programmes to encourage service will be of little use. COOL runs national one-day initiatives such as 'Into the Streets' to recruit volunteers, and provides technical assistance to volunteer programmes through its staff; this includes its 'Road Scholars' scheme, involving COOL volunteers in travelling cheaply throughout the US to spread the word. As of 1992 COOL was working with more than 650 colleges and universities and 250 other organisations.

Campus Compact, a national coalition of university presidents, was founded in 1985 and its membership of approximately 360 means that over 10 per cent of post-secondary education institutions in the USA are represented. Campus Compact argues that colleges and universities could re-establish civic and moral leadership by ensuring that students gain an understanding of their duties as responsible citizens; by participating actively in the community and directing institutional resources to community development; and by 'modeling' the concept of community, cultivating open discourse on issues and values and taking actions that address those concerns within as well as outside campuses. There is some self-interest in this because universities, as tax-exempt non-profit institutions, are always subject to scrutiny by local and state governments, so institutions are keen to demonstrate their direct contributions to their local communities. Demonstrating a commitment to community service activities is therefore useful not just for public relations purposes but in the course of negotiations with government agencies. In addition, numerous Federal hearings on higher education have been notable for questioning the relevance of much American higher education against the context of the seemingly
intractable social problems the nation faces.

Campus Compact provides information and technical assistance, creates incentives for student involvement, and promotes a national awareness of the important resources students offer in the public interest. Within individual states, there are regional branches of Campus Compact (that in California has 55 member institutions), which develop collaborative projects between institutions. Institutions commit themselves to supporting service through admissions policies, work-study funds, financial aid, fellowships, graduation awards, alumni associations and staff development policies. Campus Compact report that 9 per cent of institutions had a formal graduation requirement relating to public service, 23 per cent had positive incentives to encourage faculty involvement or to foster linkages between service and study, and 66 per cent offered courses linking service with the curriculum (Campus Compact, 1993b); these may, however, be over-estimates. In particular, the notion that 9 per cent of institutions require public service before students can graduate is probably an exaggeration, since in some cases these figures probably include participation in community service in orientation programmes, which are de facto mandatory, but are not linked to curricula in any way.

Although Campus Compact and COOL exist to promote the same goal — increasing student involvement in off-campus service projects — there are clear differences in the ways they do this and to some extent in the motivations for it. Whereas COOL emphasises the importance of inspiring youth and training youth to serve, Campus Compact emphasises rather more strongly the educational benefits of service and the promotion of citizenship among students. Its major efforts at present are devoted largely to promoting service-learning, especially among member institutions which do not currently have service-learning programmes.

Policies to promote service: reforms of financial aid, national and local service programmes

Campus Compact and COOL work largely by exhortation; they have few levers they can pull to influence service directly. The infrastructure of community service coordinators is largely provided by institutions, often funded out of endowments or donations. The extent to which students themselves can participate in service programmes is constrained by their financial position. American students typically draw upon diverse sources of finance (loans, work-study monies, grants, part-time work) and so financial aid policies can help structure an environment supportive of community service; the aid system will reflect the values society is seeking to transmit to the rising generation (Newman, 1985). The growing reliance on loans during the 1980s led to socially-inequitable consequences, a growing problem of indebtedness and loan default (Frances, 1989), and rising anxiety about the costs of higher education (Astin et al., 1992). These costs would clearly militate against students participating in community service. Consequently there have been efforts to expand the amount of aid which is available to those participating in community service.

First, a number of colleges or foundations have promoted policies to support student service, often through schemes which offer recognition or rewards for those engaged in service. For instance, the Bonner’s Scholars Scheme, established in 1990, will eventually support around 3,000 students at some 20 selected institutions, offering 20-25 scholarships per annum to each institution. In return for financial aid, students must perform a minimum level of community service both during academic terms and in the summer vacation. By focusing on selected institutions, the programme helps build up a service ethos on campus, and thus strengthens the institutions in which service takes place. Unlike those advocates of study service which emphasise its educational benefits, the Bonners’ Scholars Program firmly emphasises the community benefits, although students do reflect on their service experiences through diaries and logs of activities.

Federal work-study monies also offer potential sources of financial support to student community involvement, but here the record is mixed. The Federal work-study programme was enacted in 1964 as a way of offering financial support to students who were employed by their institutions either in campus-based or community-based jobs. Post-secondary education institutions receive allocations of funds to cover a proportion of each college work-study student’s wages or salary plus administrative costs. The employer pays the balance, which ranges from 50 per cent for a private company, through 30 per cent for an education institution, to 10 per cent for a community-based organisation, and zero for an historically-black college. Hence market signals are, as it were, set in favour of community organisations. The initial legislation encouraged colleges to develop both on-campus employment, and off-campus employment in partnership with public or non-profit organisations where the employment was in the public interest and would not otherwise be provided. In 1972 Congress authorised $50 million annually for community service-learning (CSL) programmes, in order to give greater impetus to extending the learning experience beyond the classroom and to provide community service jobs in low-income communities. Institutions may use up to 10 per cent of federal work-study allocations to pay for up to 90 per cent of students’ earnings in CSL jobs. In an attempt to provide further
support for off-campus activity, in 1986 Congress increased the maximum federal share for CSL jobs while reducing the federal share for other work-study jobs.

In principle, therefore, these funds (totalling some $600 million annually) are potentially a major vehicle for supporting education-based community service. However, in general universities have used these funds to subsidise low-skilled, routine on-campus jobs; only a fraction of funds went to students engaged in off-campus community service-learning jobs and only a quarter of institutions actually had a CSL programme (General Accounting Office, 1992, pp.3-4). It is not surprising that colleges use this cheap labour in this way, but it certainly vitiates Congress’s original intentions, and legislation was passed in 1992 to require post-secondary institutions to use 5 per cent of their work-study funds to support students doing service. Institutions will also be permitted to use additional work-study monies for administrative expenses related to service programmes (Commission on National and Community Service, 1993, p.78). This will amount to approximately $40 million. For comparison, however, in 1972 the Congressional annual authorisation for CSL programmes was $50 million. Expansion of this work-study requirement beyond 5 per cent would almost certainly meet substantial university opposition. Part of the problem here is the multiple, perhaps conflicting, goals of work-study legislation: is it to promote community service or to provide students with a source of income and colleges with a source of cheap labour? (Mohan, 1994b).

Additional support for the expansion of campus-based volunteerism has come from the numerous state and (since 1993) federal programmes to promote community service. Various states have established service programmes (e.g. California and Pennsylvania) as well as individual city-government schemes (New York) and private initiatives (City Year, Boston). Some schemes were specifically designed to engage students in community service, such as the California Human Service Corps. Federal agencies also support these initiatives: ACTION, the domestic volunteer agency, funded student community service programmes in both high schools and post-secondary institutions (ACTION, 1992). The Federal Education Department’s Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) supports innovative programmes which seek to incorporate community service with academic study. However, the biggest impetus is likely to come from the recent national service legislation (Mohan, 1994a), an important element of which is that financial aid towards the costs of higher education will in part be contingent on performing community service. The Corporation on National and Community Service (otherwise known as AmeriCorps) sees higher education as one of the building blocks for a broad-based network of service opportunities. A report by its predecessor organisation, the Commission on National and Community Service, argued that most colleges and universities ‘should be offering a wide variety of opportunities for students to undertake worthwhile service in their communities’ (1993, pp.58-9), funded out of College budgets since these programmes would be seen as part of – integral to – the educational process. The programmes instituted by the Corporation will offer a number of funding opportunities to higher education institutions to expand not just community service programmes but ways of integrating them with the curriculum. Waller (1993) suggests that up to one-third of the national service budget could be directed towards engaging higher education institutions in their immediate communities, through funding resource and placement centres for volunteers, expanding service-learning courses, community-based research and evaluation efforts, and technical assistance to community-based organisations. This could greatly expand the impacts of such service activities. More significantly, however, the fact of some 20,000 young people annually undertaking community service — in most cases before attending college — will itself provide a considerable stimulus to campus-based service programmes. However, one criticism of the national service legislation is its emphasis on full-time service, whereas the great majority of campus-based volunteering is, of course, something in which students engage on a part-time basis; consequently, some suggest that the National Service Corporation should provide more funds to sustain part-time, campus-based programmes.

Integrating community service and higher education

Financial aid policies are essentially a way of reducing the obstacles in the way of low-income students who might otherwise be unable to serve because of financial pressure. However there are other ways in which post-secondary institutions promote service. At its simplest, institutions promote service as a co-curricular activity rather than being formally integrated into academic programmes. Some institutions also incorporate an element of community service into their ‘freshman orientation’ programmes, requiring that students perform a certain number of hours of service. However, such programmes are generally run by those responsible for student welfare and not connected with the curriculum. Such service is best regarded as philanthropic rather than civic, being done for altruistic rather than educational reasons: service is ‘often segregated from civic responsibility, and is instead associated with altruism or charity — a supererogatory activity of good men and women rather than an obligatory activity of responsible citizens’ (Barber and Battistoni, 1993).
However desirable volunteerism might be, the strongest arguments for service within higher education seem to be those which stress its educational benefits. Such arguments focus on the benefits of service in terms of promoting civic values and citizenship, and — to a lesser degree — the value of experiential education for developing students' skills. Many have deplored the decline of moral education in the American university, arguing that 'education for humane citizenship remains a stunted enterprise' (Bok, 1991, p.7). Morse (1989) identifies five ways to prepare students for citizenship: through a classical education in Western culture; through community service and experiential education; through studies of leadership; through a general or liberal arts education; and through civic or public leadership education.

It is the emphasis on service-learning and experiential education which is most novel in the USA at present. The emphasis on experiential education draws heavily on Deweyan theory — a school 'cannot be a preparation for social life except insofar as it reproduces, within itself, typical conditions of social life' — which stresses experience as a vital component of learning, and which is differentiated from civic and public leadership education, which is taught within a traditional pedagogical framework. Service-learning, by contrast, is something which stresses acquiring the civic awareness of educated citizens and developing the capacity to reflect on and attempt to solve social problems. Few institutions have made service a graduation requirement in the way that some school districts have done, the exceptions being some colleges where service is already central to the ethos of the campus. However, there is rapid growth in service-learning courses (see Campus Compact, 1993b), while some individual institutions have shown a dramatic growth in such courses. Service-learning courses typically combine classroom-based and experiential education. Students must usually engage in a minimum level of service and pursue a course of study in which they reflect on their experiences, and attempt to connect the academic literature on the topic with their practical experience as volunteers. Assessments are therefore based not on crediting service per se, but on how well students integrate the two elements of the course. Some 66 per cent of Campus Compact's membership now offer such courses (Campus Compact, 1993b), and in some places growth has been very rapid: Bentley College, Massachusetts, which had no service-learning courses in 1990, but now has some 50 courses. 10

While many agree on the desirability of service as part of an education for citizenship (see various essays in Sagawa and Halperin, 1993), there are numerous variations on this theme. First, there are several different models of service learning: the most common are probably those of an internship character, whereby the student spends time with a community-based organisation and writes a report based on his/her work done while there, which is intended to meet the needs of the organisation (for instance, the numerous institutions which operate internship clearing-houses, like the Field Studies Center at UCLA). On a smaller scale, students carry out short assignments for community-based organisations, as in the Stanford University Freshman Writing course, one part of which engages students in carrying out writing tasks required by community organisations. Growing in importance are those courses which require an element of direct service of participants; this can be achieved through, for example, tutoring in a school or volunteering in a homeless shelter, followed up by classes which require participants to reflect on their experiences (for example, the Rutgers University courses on Civic Education and Community Service). These different models all require students to apply their existing skills or to deliver direct service. A development of them would be to set up service-learning projects as problem-solving exercises — that is, students do not merely deliver service, they attempt, through their work, to devise practical responses to social problems. This is the model being developed at the University of Pennsylvania through the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps (WEPIC); here, students, faculty, teachers and pupils in local schools combine in a process of participatory action research, in which the research and teaching activities of parts of the university are geared towards devising solutions to problems defined by the community (Harkavy and Puckett, 1994; Mohan, 1994b).

Whatever the precise nature of the courses, the most contentious issues are whether or not to make service mandatory, and whether or not to count credit for service and if so, how. Some, such as Barber (1991, 1992), suggest that if the aim of service is simply promoting altruism and volunteerism, then service cannot be mandated. However, if his argument that service is to be viewed as a 'dimension of citizenship education and civic responsibility' is accepted, then to require service is to 'do no more in this domain than is done in curricular decisions generally' (Barber, 1991, p.46). Barber's premise is that the skills required to operate in a democracy must be acquired: 'we think of ourselves as born free but in truth we are born weak and dependent and acquire liberty as a condition of citizenship' (p.47).

While Barber contends that service must be mandated by a society committed to socialising its future citizens in democratic values, others regard this as a contradiction in terms. This is especially noticeable in the case of debates between local governments and parents, where school boards have attempted to mandate community service as a high school graduation requirement. The problem with this is that individuals do not have a choice about whether or not they attend
school, so parental challenges are based on whether their children can be further coerced into doing service. Universities are in a slightly different position — individuals don't have to go to university and they don't have to choose a specific institution — but they remain in a competitive situation, so anything which might hinder recruitment may be looked at askance, especially if a student were to reach for the Constitution and pursue a case in the courts. Given the diversity of American higher education, however, it is difficult to envisage large numbers of institutions adopting, collectively, a policy whereby some form of community service is mandatory. Some institutions may make a virtue of their emphasis on community involvement in recruiting students; others may regard this as inappropriate or impracticable. However some — perhaps optimistic? — observers contend that if service is successfully integrated into undergraduate curricula, it will become mandatory by default, since every student will regard it as a valuable educational experience.

On the second point, there is general agreement that it is not the service per se that is being assessed. Instead, the common feature of most programmes which integrate service and study is that they provide a context for reflection: on the nature of the service they are performing, on the causes of the social need for that service, on alternative policy options for dealing with the problems, and on the ethical and moral questions associated both with volunteerism and with making social choices. Thus participants in courses are judged by how well they can absorb the experience they have gained and reflect on it. There is no automatic credit for community service.

These are the most important questions to be answered regarding integrating service and academic study, but they are by far from being the only ones (see Barber and Battistoni, 1993). What is certain is that a steadily-increasing number of service-learning opportunities will be offered within American higher education institutions, so that even if it is not made a graduation requirement, it will become increasingly visible on campuses.

Concluding comments

Four points may be made in conclusion. These relate to the long-term impacts of the growth in student volunteerism on the social conditions they seek to alleviate, those who participate in volunteerism, the higher education system, and American domestic politics more generally.

Judging the impacts of the service being performed is contentious. No-one is under any illusions that the expansion of student voluntary service will in any realistic sense 'solve' social problems. As Heginbotham (1990, p.34) put it, in a British context, 'centralising the state, cutting back on welfare, and sending in an army of young people to make good the damage, will neither encourage long-term voluntary activity nor enhance the ability of communities to be interdependent'; in the USA, where Federal programmes to aid cities were cut by some $50 billion during the 1980s, volunteerism at best papers over cracks, although such volunteer efforts can provide very valuable services in some situations where, for example, local government funds have been cut. But the inherent unevenness of volunteerism means that services are not always provided where most needed and they clearly overlap — the multiplicity of tutoring schemes in any large American university being a case in point, though this is an argument for better coordination rather than discouraging the efforts of those involved.

In terms of the impacts on those served, more evaluation of the growing public service activities in universities would be helpful, since at present there is a great deal of assertion — for example, that service-learning is necessarily beneficial — but not much demonstration of its benefits to server and served, whether in terms of learning outcomes or quality of life and attitudes (Stanton, 1991). Little is known especially on learning outcomes: what forms of knowledge are gained through service learning, how far classroom-based learning is enhanced through service experience, what role does reflection play in this process and so on (Schmidt-Posner, 1989). Since the strongest claims being made for service are those concerning civic education, it will be essential to test, on a long-term basis, whether students engaged in service continue to do so after leaving university and what effects service-learning experiences have had on their attitudes and beliefs. Some work has begun on this issue in the Rutgers University programme on Civic Education and Community Service, while the collection edited by Kupiec (1993) provides useful suggestions.

Third, what of the impacts on institutions promoting service: can universities and colleges become genuinely civic institutions, geared to the production of educated citizens and the solution of urgent social problems rather than to the arcane individualism and research specialism of the research-oriented university? Such issues must be addressed if we are to know whether community involvement has really made a difference rather than remaining on the periphery of campus culture. For Harkavy (1993), a greater engagement in an institution's local community could contribute significantly to integrating the three missions of research, teaching and service, and begin to transform American universities into 'responsible civic institutions that significantly contribute to creating a fair, decent and just society' (see also Harkavy and Puckett, 1994). On this view, higher education...
institutions should regard the current wave of student volunteerism as an opportunity to provide educational leadership, by integrating community involvement into academic curricula. Whether this will be possible in other higher education systems remains to be seen. In the broad-based undergraduate tradition of American higher education, it is perhaps easier to incorporate community involvement than in a system where the single honours degree retains its prominence (as in most British higher education institutions, though to a lesser extent than formerly). On the other hand, the question of education for citizenship is one that cannot be avoided and, particularly as British higher education moves from an elite to a mass system, there will be a need to consider whether curricula largely driven by faculty research interests are most appropriate in these new circumstances. Several other higher education systems already incorporate, to a greater or lesser degree, some forms of service-learning or experiential education (see Eberly and Sherraden, 1990; or Goodlad, 1982).

A final issue is the wider significance of the movement towards greater student engagement in service. Although some welcome this as the first spark of social involvement among the student generation since the heady days of the Peace Corps and the student activism of the 1960s (Theus, 1988, p.27), participation in volunteer activities alone is not necessarily a guarantee of social activism for change. Levine (1993, p.14) suggests that today's students 'emphasise the local in their thinking and action', a conclusion echoed by Coles (1993) and Hirsch (1993). Rather than focusing attention on major national issues where change is at best likely to take place over a very long term, the focus instead is on making a difference in an immediate community, or even to just one individual. Nor is this kind of idealism necessarily 'connected to established or institutionalised politics' (Coles, 1993, p.20). This kind of localist idealism may not, however, be all that surprising when one considers the contrast between the lavish facilities of many American private universities and the decaying urban fabric around them (the Milken Institute, 1993, provides some interesting statistics on the demographics of university neighbourhoods). It was often suggested that this sort of contrast had stimulated students to do what they could to assist their off-campus neighbours. It had also been stimulated by a distrust of established social institutions and a belief that they (notably, government and big business) were more likely to worsen the country's problems than help to solve them. Students, according to Levine (1994, p.4) feel that 'they are compelled to confront the problems, indeed that they have been forced into service' (emphases added), because of the neglect of America's social infrastructure. This practical action does seem to offer some hope that a generation might be educated which will at least contemplate solutions to major social problems, rather than retreating to segregated, privileged suburbs — a generation which will be 'socially engaged rather than socially estranged and institutionally alienated as occurred in the 1960s' (Levine and Hirsch, 1991, p.127).

Some twenty years ago, Holman (1972) commented on the nature of student community service schemes. He usefully distinguished between community service, community work, and community action. The first of these is when volunteers improve conditions by offering a service which would not have been provided otherwise. Most student projects do that. The second — community work — is concerned with affecting the course of social change through two processes of analysing social situations and forming relationships with different groups to bring about desirable change' (1972, p.187). The third — community action — refers to action with or by socially deprived people to increase their part in the social processes which affect their lives. Only the third, according to Holman, really begins to empower the poor; the former two are essentially responses from external agents to the presumed plight of disadvantaged groups. The process of offering service to disadvantaged groups is far from unproblematic, particularly when it involves relations between privileged university institutions and deeply disadvantaged urban minority communities (see Harkavy, 1992; Barber and Battistoni, 1993; Nyden and Wievel, 1992). The logic of student community action, if it involves identification with the disadvantaged, means a 'shift in power mechanisms in favour of the poor ... (which) may well mean a reduction in the power of the social class from which many students come and of the professions for which their university life may be preparing them' (Holman, 1972, p.194). Precisely how far service, as part of higher education, will lead to a transformation in these power relations will depend not only on students being willing to act but also to vote for a political party which will attempt to relieve the social conditions which motivate this involvement by students; given current political and fiscal constraints, it does not seem likely that any party would be elected on that kind of programme in the USA. However, the growth in student volunteerism has been a primary motivating factor behind the national service legislation announced by President Clinton; that involvement has created the conditions in which making some student financial aid conditional on community service is politically feasible. Indeed, some suggest that, to the extent that service will be genuinely national, it will be in part because it has built up from the service movement within higher education. In this sense the growth of student volunteerism has already had an impact.

Nevertheless, the reservations of Gorham (1992) and Bellah et al. (1985) are relevant here. Writing of national service schemes, Gorham
challenges the ways in which some of the most prominent advocates of service depoliticise the issues by asserting that there simply are few — if any — alternatives to volunteerism as a means of coping with social problems. Gorham argues that a service ethic can actually distort the idea of citizenship, conceived as the practice of contestation, and it ‘removes civic and political concerns from the idea of public deliberation’ (Gorham, 1992, p.111). Gorham therefore criticises national service legislation and education-based service programmes for teaching their participants not to challenge social norms, but to conform to them. He suggests that the way in which service-learning courses are taught risks presenting service as apolitical and as an exercise in individuation, and at worst promotes a conformist, deferential stance little removed from servility. Bellah et al. (1985) likewise caution that service could become merely a therapeutic exercise in personal growth, rather than a collective response to severe social problems. In other words, rather than leading to change in political attitudes and behaviour, service is treated merely as a way to acquire skills and credentials which can then be deployed in the market place: on this account it is currently seen as the fashionable thing to do on campuses, but will have no longer-term impacts. This is perhaps too pessimistic: arguably the strongest feature of the current enthusiasm for campus-based service programmes is that they are being supported by an expanding infrastructure which is embedding them into the education system. At the very least this ought to help produce future generations of educated citizens who are not only better informed about the social issues facing the country, whose educational and service experiences have taught them that those issues cannot be ignored, and who are capable of confronting some of these social problems, informed by their experiences, and of attempting to devise solutions to them.

Notes

a Lecturer in Geography, Queen Mary and Westfield College, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS

1 This article draws on work undertaken at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, between September 1992 and May 1993 on the subject of university-community relations. This was undertaken under the auspices of a Harkness Fellowship of the Commonwealth Fund of New York. As well as published documents cited, it draws on material gathered from discussions with personnel responsible for university community service programmes, faculty engaged in service-learning initiatives, and state, national and federal agencies (governmental and non-governmental) concerned with the promotion of volunteer service and its integration into higher education. I am grateful to Ira Harkavy and the Center for Community Partnerships, University of Pennsylvania, for their hospitality in the course of my time there.

2 T. Stanton, Director, Haas Center for Public Service, Stanford University, personal communication.

3 This paragraph draws upon information supplied by COOL staff.

4 Several community relations personnel, notably from private institutions, emphasised this point, in one case describing in depth the case the institution was making to the state legislature for maintenance of its existing levels of financial aid, and attempting to put a cash equivalent value on the contribution its students made to community service in the city.

5 This section is based on unpublished material from Campus Compact and on conversations with Campus Compact staff in national and regional offices.

6 Bob Hackett, Bonner’s Scholars Program, personal communication.

7 I am grateful to the staff of Sen. Harris Wofford (Democrat, Pennsylvania) for supplying the information on which this paragraph draws.

8 This point was also made by several individuals involved in campus-based service programmes. See also Levine (1994).

9 This section draws upon conversations with coordinators of student voluntary service programmes, with faculty members involved in service-learning programmes, and with national organisations aiming to promote volunteer service.

10 Ed Zlotkowski, Director, Bentley Service Learning Program, personal communication.

11 The most prominent university to consider making community service a graduation requirement was Rutgers University, New Jersey, where the former President, Edward Bloustein, had proposed this; however, this was withdrawn following his death in 1989.

12 Interview with director of a state campus compact office.

13 As one coordinator of a university community service centre put it, discussing various summer programmes operated by students on a volunteer basis, in a particular part of the city ‘we’re the only player in the ballpark’.

14 Which is under way in some cities: supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts, what are known as ‘community compacts for student success’ attempt to coordinate the extensive range of partnerships between schools and higher education, business and other agencies, and to direct resources to where they are most needed.

15 R. Battistoni, Rutgers University, personal communication.

16 This point was made repeatedly by community service coordinators and by students involved in service programmes.

17 Remarks by John Briscoe, Governor’s Office of Citizen Service, Pennsylvania, to conference on National Service, University of Pennsylvania, April 1993. One of the most popular of Clinton’s election campaign pledges was his promise to enact a national service programme, which was greeted with enthusiasm on many college campuses.
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David Horton Smith

Commentary

Some understudied research topics: the 1994 ISTR Conference and beyond

The 1994 ISTR Conference in Pécs, Hungary, touched on many facets of Non-profit Sector research and delved into a few areas in some depth. I want to suggest here a few areas of possible Non-profit Sector research that received inadequate attention there, and in the field more generally, in my view. Some of these remarks were presented more briefly in the final Plenary Seminar on Theory of the Conference.

The nature and foundations of the Civil Society

Many researchers at the Conference mentioned the 'Civil Society'. It was one of five 'regular' tracks for papers. However, nobody seemed to want to define it. Is it just a new term for democracy? Is it a new term for participatory democracy, going beyond meaningful voting to other citizen involvement? How much citizen participation in the polity is necessary, at a minimum, for that polity to be part of a Civil Society? What political structures, at a minimum, have to be operative in a polity for it to be part of a Civil Society? What federal/central government arrangements are necessary? What aspects of the non-profit sector are necessary? Are there specifiable requirements for variety, quantity (for example, per thousand population), and freedom of non-profit groups, formal and informal? What are the value and attitudinal bases of the Civil Society (cf., the Conference paper by Lyons, 1994 on Australian society)? Are there personality or national character underpinnings of the Civil Society (cf. Smith, 1995). What non-profit groups train their members best for participation in the Civil Society? What societies today are Civil Societies, what are nearly so, and what are far from this ideal type? Is Amitai Etzioni’s (1968) *The Active Society* a good model for the Civil Society? What are other