



University of Nebraska Omaha
DigitalCommons@UNO

Special Topics, General

Special Topics in Service Learning

2-1989

National Youth Service: The Proposed Legislation

Robert H. Atwell

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcestgen>

 Part of the [Service Learning Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Atwell, Robert H., "National Youth Service: The Proposed Legislation" (1989). *Special Topics, General*. Paper 19.
<http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcestgen/19>

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Topics in Service Learning at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Special Topics, General by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.



✓ 1-26-99

**THE PARTNERSHIP FOR SERVICE-LEARNING
6TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE**

February 24-26, 1989: Maricopa Community Colleges, Phoenix, Arizona

UNITING SERVICE AND LEARNING

.....

NATIONAL YOUTH SERVICE: THE PROPOSED LEGISLATION

Robert H. Atwell
President
American Council on Education

.....

I'm very happy to be back in sunny Arizona. I was here just a few weeks ago for another meeting, but this week I'm especially glad to be out of Washington, where the weather has been dreary and some of the political debate even drearier.

Because I work in Washington, everybody always wants to know what's really going on in the nation's capital, and why the government can't seem to get anything right. So I thought I'd begin by telling you about something you didn't read in the newspapers, and that's a meeting that took place the other day at the White House, between President Bush, Alan Greenspan, the chairman of the Federal Reserve, Dick Darman, the head of the Office of Management and Budget, and God.

First President Bush asked God, "When will the economy start growing at 10 percent a year?" and God answered, "Not until 1998." President Bush thought for a second, then said, "Golly, that's not until after my administration."

Then Alan Greenspan asked, "When will interest rates come back down to 3

for a second, then said, "Well, that's not until after my administration."

Finally, Dick Darman asked God, "When will we be able to balance the federal budget?" And God thought for a second, then said, "Well that won't be until after my administration."

The only thing we know about the future, of course, is that it won't be like we think. Some of us have an optimistic view, and look forward to better times. Others hold with Murphy's Law - whatever can go wrong, will go wrong.

I would guess that most of you in this room fall into the former category - which is another reason I try to get outside of the Washington Beltway as often as possible. It does a lot to renew your faith in humanity.

I originally accepted the invitation to speak here today in part because Alfredo de los Santos asked me to. Alfredo is a member of my board of directors and therefore one of my bosses, and it's hard to say no to your boss.

But even more, I was excited about the work you're doing linking service and learning activities for college students, especially on the international level. ACE has played an active role in promoting international education, and this spring we will be issuing a major new report and some important recommendations from our Commission on International Education that focus on the need to expand these activities.

Originally I thought I might use this platform to discuss that subject, but in recent weeks some developments have taken place that caused me to change my topic. I would be happy to talk to any of you afterward about international education, but for now I would like to focus on something else.

You are holding this conference at a propitious time. We in the United States have now begun a major national debate on volunteer service, and the proper role of

government in fostering such service on the part of our young people. The outcome of that debate will have a significant impact on programs like yours, and it could have a tremendous impact on the lives of millions of citizens in the not-too-distant future.

Let me set some context. In the last few years we have seen a veritable explosion of interest by students and college leaders in volunteer service activities. In part I believe this is a healthy reaction to the preoccupation with self that characterized the so-called "me generation" that came of age in the 1970s and early 1980s.

But I believe it also reflects an educational concern - that the narrowly focused, career driven college experience of too many of our students serves neither them nor our society very well. It doesn't matter whether they're learning to interpret a profit and loss statement, or a set of blueprints, or the symbolism of 18th century French poetry. Students who have no sense of the mutual responsibility that comes with citizenship in a democratic society - students who do not understand the relationship between their own work and the lives of real people in the world around them - those students have not been fully educated.

If we in higher education focus solely on training students to meet the narrow requirements for competence in academic disciplines, and fail to impart to them that we have a higher duty in life than the pursuit of material goals, then we are doing little more than operating elaborate trade schools, and don't deserve the special place our institutions have attained in American society.

Of course, even in the most hedonistic days of the 1980s - which probably date from the end of the recession in December 1982 to the stock market crash in October 1987 - volunteerism was not dead on our campuses. Some schools have had extensive service programs for decades. For example, the Office of Volunteer Programs at

Michigan State University is now in its 21st year. Each year that office identifies community service opportunities for several thousand MSU students, and also arranges academic credit and, where appropriate, student financial aid for volunteers.

But there has been a rebirth of interest in service and volunteerism in recent years, and as might be expected in an enterprise as diverse as American higher education, it has taken a variety of forms. The programs range from the large to the small. Some are operated at the campus level, or by groups of campuses. Others are operated by national organizations, or by state and local governments.

Your own program, with its emphasis on full-time student experiences that closely coordinate the service and academic components, is one very exciting example.

Campus Compact is often cited as evidence of interest by institutional leaders and public officials in spreading the notion of community service. Since it was organized in 1985 by the Education Commission of the States, Campus Compact has grown to include some 140 institutions, and still other schools are members of several state-level Compacts.

Some colleges require community service as a condition for graduation, and several states and cities operate service programs that offer educational assistance. For instance, in New York City the Volunteer Corps enrolls 100 part-time and 300 full-time volunteers for weekly stipends of \$81, plus eligibility for free tuition during their one-year terms and for scholarships afterward.

Still other programs offer opportunities for those finishing college to spend time in service before moving on to careers. One example is the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, which currently has 354 volunteers from about 115 public and independent colleges serving one-year terms in 58 cities. The Jesuit International Corps has another 44 college graduates working in four foreign countries.

This kind of diversity - and the varied opportunities it offers to students and other citizens - is important to keep in mind as this national debate about volunteer service develops. Because unless that debate is conducted on the basis of accurate information - including a realistic appraisal of current opportunities - and takes into account how volunteer organizations actually work, we run the danger of subverting existing programs and replacing them with a costly, ineffective system that produces mainly disillusion and deficits.

Let me take a few minutes to discuss some of the proposals we have seen. Then I would like to lay out several criteria I believe should be used to guide the development of final legislation.

Some of the proposals have been introduced before. For example, Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island shortly will reintroduce his bill to establish a Voluntary National Service and Education Demonstration Program. That bill would authorize \$30 million annually for a five-year program of grants to states to set up volunteer programs for high school graduates ages 16 to 24. It also would provide extra educational benefits for those who complete the program. As a demonstration project, this program would involve only a few thousand volunteers each year.

Representative Leon Panetta of California, the Chairman of the House Budget Committee, and Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut have introduced legislation that would establish a Youth Service Corps and a Youth Conservation Corps, also with supplementary educational benefits.

New bills have been introduced in this session of Congress by Senator Barbara Mikulski of Maryland, Senator Edward Kennedy, Representative Barbara Kennelly of Connecticut, and Representative David Bonior of Michigan, and I'm sure more are

coming. Also President Bush has promised to send up legislation soon to establish a program called Youth Entering Service to America, which he promised during the campaign, and his budget plan includes \$25 million a year to finance it.

But the proposal that has gotten the most attention so far is one developed by the Democratic Leadership Council. The DLC is a group of younger moderate to conservative Democrats devoted primarily to regaining control of the party's agenda. They have done a very good job of promoting their bill, which is called the Citizen and National Service Act, including doing national opinion polling, to test what approaches might sell with the public, and an all-out PR campaign.

In addition, they have lined up a powerful group of sponsors, led by the chairman of the DLC, Senator Sam Nunn of Georgia, who also chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Representative Dave McCurdy of Oklahoma. As a result, the DLC bill has become the focal point for the emerging debate, and it's built up a certain momentum.

Let me make it very clear that I think the introduction of so many proposals is a healthy development. How we inculcate a service-oriented mentality in our young people; how we fairly distribute the rewards and benefits, as well as the opportunities, for service; how we guarantee that the program is effective and doesn't become just another bureaucracy; how we balance civilian and military needs - these are important questions that deserve a great deal of discussion and the answers to which require widespread consensus. We need as many options and ideas as we can get.

But I also want to make it clear that I am concerned that the excitement around this issue, and the apparent desire by so many political players to do something, and do it quickly, may lead us astray. This is a familiar phenomenon in Washington, as the

political community gets swept up in a notion or a buzzword, and the results can be devastating. If you don't believe, just read my lips.

And I am especially concerned that the Nunn-McCurdy bill has become the focus of so much enthusiasm. Let me outline several reasons for this concern, and why you should be worried as well.

First, Nunn-McCurdy would erect another set of obstacles to higher education for low-income students. For most students in the traditional age groups, the bill would wipe out current federal student aid programs. Instead, the only way to qualify for federal assistance would be to serve in the Citizens' Corps it would set up.

As a result, I believe Nunn-McCurdy would create a two-tier system: one for low-income students and the other for those from more affluent families, who would be free to continue their education without enrolling in national service. That strikes me as exceedingly unfair. For low-income students, if they wanted to go to college, this program would be mandatory, not voluntary. About 70 percent of Pell Grant recipients come from families with incomes below \$15,000.

Under the current system, low-income students can receive up to \$2300 in Pell Grants, plus other federal aid, each academic year. Under Nunn-McCurdy, they would have to work for a year at subsistence wages to qualify for a one-time voucher of \$10,000 that they could use for college tuition, for other training, or for a down payment on a house.

It's true that some more affluent students might enroll in the program for altruistic reasons. But for most of those who don't need federal aid, or who can find other ways to finance their education and get on with their studies, there would be very little incentive. In our past experience, the Peace Corps is the only volunteer program that

has drawn heavily from upper income college graduates, and of course that program combines the aura of idealism and international experience as major attractions.

A second problem with Nunn-McCurdy is that it stands the historic principle of need-based federal student aid on its head. For 30 years, the principle that the federal government should provide equal access to educational opportunity for those without the means to pay for it has been at the heart of our student aid system.

Under Nunn-McCurdy, low-income students and wealthy students each would get the same size grant at the end of their service, regardless of need. In fact, low-income students would "earn" about the same amount of grant benefits they now receive during a four-year educational program - and they would have to complete at least a year of national service to be eligible for student loans.

A third problem: the cost of this bill would be excessive, and add significantly to the federal deficit. The bill itself does not have any cost estimates, but the authors argue that much of it would be paid for by eliminating much of the current student aid system.

However, ACE has done up an estimate, and we project that the potential cost of the program would be as much as \$50 billion. Currently we provide aid to about 2 million new needy students in postsecondary education each year, and about 6 million students altogether. To maintain benefits for that many students, the Nunn-McCurdy Citizens' Corps would have to enroll over 3 million new volunteers annually. Of course, some would drop out, and others would elect the housing voucher rather than the educational benefits.

The average per-volunteer cost for stipends and benefits would be \$15,000 - not including the cost for the bureaucracy needed to administer the program. This is 10

times the average of \$1800 per year received by needy students under current federal programs, and several times what students receive in total federal aid over the one to four years they are in college.

Finally, the premise of the bill is educationally unsound. The whole philosophy of Nunn-McCurdy is one of postponing education. For needy students coming out of high school, they would have to serve for a year before continuing their education.

Yet national surveys indicate that students who delay going to college after high school are unlikely to complete a degree. For the average student, it reduces the chances that they will finish college from 75 percent to 20 percent, and for low-income students, their chances are reduced from 65 percent to 8 percent.

In addition, the bill contains an age cap of 26, after which students would be eligible for existing student aid programs without serving. Thus it also would encourage potential students older than the traditional college age to wait until they are 26 to begin their studies so they could qualify for benefits.

The Citizens' Corps would be administered by a government-appointed corporation that is slightly redolent of the National Draft Board. It would determine the number of national service positions, how people will be selected, and what types of service activities will be authorized.

The authors would phase the program in over five years and talk about having up to 800,00 volunteers. Presumably, people who could not get slots would remain eligible for other forms of student aid.

However, the program still would be subject to annual appropriations. That would put it in competition for dollars with other domestic programs, which already get a much smaller share of the budget. So it's not clear just how the hundreds of thousands of

needy students who couldn't participate in this program would get the money to continue their education.

I had a chance to discuss this proposal with Senator Nunn on the MacNeil-Lehrer show last week, and he argued that the sponsors want to provide a guaranteed opportunity to young people, not a guaranteed benefit. Yet for millions of American youngsters, this approach would limit their opportunities, not expand them.

He also argued that the work experience would be valuable for the participants, and that too many of our young people lack such experience. But he's got the wrong group. Most high school graduates who go on to college - and especially those from low-income families - have been working all along, and most of them continue to work while in college.

The young people who suffer most because they lack work experience are those who drop out of high school - yet they would be excluded from participating in the Citizens' Corp. In effect, we would be writing off a disproportionate share of our minority young people. Currently, the dropout rate for black high school students is about 24 percent and for Hispanics about 40 percent, compared to less than 17 percent for whites.

Despite all the publicity about the Nunn-McCurdy bill, and despite its obvious drawbacks, I believe it will be possible to craft legislation that expands the opportunities for both service and education. But as the debate proceeds, I think we must have certain basic criteria we can apply to any proposal to test both its desirability and its workability.

The first test that volunteer service legislation must meet is the test of fairness. It is not enough to claim equality of opportunity if the structure of your program

guarantees inequality of result.

I live in a society that in recent years has become increasingly unfair. A national service program must be designed to solve this problem; its effect must not be to exacerbate it. Therefore it must do something that we in America are often uncomfortable doing: it must confront the realities of race and class in our society.

The economic and social gaps between rich and poor, between white people and people of color, have been growing wider, not narrower. We face long-term dangers to our economic competitiveness, our national security, and our democratic ideals if we fail to narrow the gaps.

Second, a volunteer national service program should be flexible enough to provide opportunities for service in a variety of forms to citizens of all ages and income levels.

For example, service after college, with a chance to earn forgiveness of educational loans, should be an option, especially for academically at-risk students. With the growing body of evidence showing the importance of continuity for such students, we should be doing everything we can to encourage them to stay in school.

Nor should we do anything that would damage those institutions that currently do an excellent job educating these young people. I'm thinking in particular of our historically black colleges. Those schools enroll about 18 percent of black students in higher education but account for 34 percent of the degrees awarded. At most historically black colleges, over 90 percent of the students are receiving some form of federal aid.

Similarly, service for pre-college youths who failed to complete high school should be available. Such service should include a strong component of remedial academic work to prepare the participants for postsecondary work.

Service also should be available for those enrolled in college, on weekends and

vacation periods. Such service would offer opportunities for the older and part-time students who make up a significant and growing percentage of enrollments in higher education.

Third, any educational benefits earned through voluntary service should supplement, rather than supplant, the current system of need-based aid. This system is designed to assure postsecondary opportunities to all students who have the ability, regardless of their financial circumstances. This principle would be seriously compromised if student aid were made available without regard to financial need, and solely on the basis of prior national service.

Fourth, to avoid the creation of a large federal bureaucracy, states and localities, educational institutions, and public interest organizations should have maximum flexibility to develop their own programs. The last thing we want is a new federal program that undermines or destroys those that already are doing a good job.

President Bush has talked about a thousand points of light. If we rely on a federal bureaucracy to run the nation's volunteer efforts, we'd be replacing a thousand points of light with a single dim bulb.

We can't afford to run the risk of discrediting the whole system of volunteer service in the public eye by bureaucratizing it. Those of us who are old enough should learn from what happened in the 1960s and early 70s when an unpopular war and an arbitrary, unfair draft system discredited the very idea of military service.

And a final criterion: Any federal program should be undertaken on a pilot or experimental basis. This would allow us to test the concept and evaluate its performance over a specific time period. Obviously, we don't want to jump blindly into a massive program that might disrupt our system of higher education and the structure of our

military and end up costing far more than anticipated.

People like you can have a significant effect on how this debate turns out. You should take it as part of your job to let members of Congress, governors, and other leaders know just what is going on in the field right now - about this program and others that teach the right values and enrich people's lives.

You should be telling them what works and what doesn't, and the importance of building on existing structures. The need to know that, in the best American tradition, individual citizens and institutions are not simply waiting for the government to act, but have gone ahead with their own experiments and trials, in their own communities and even internationally.

I'm confident that if they hear from you, if they get that information, the result will be a stronger system of volunteer service that benefits participants and recipients alike. That's some of the best volunteer service you yourselves can provide.

.....

Atwell, Robert - B.A. College of Wooster, M.A. University of Minnesota; President, American Council on Education; previously served as executive vice president of ACE for six years; 1970-1978, President, Pitzer College; 1965-1970, Vice-Chancellor for Administration, University of Wisconsin, Madison; Mr. Atwell has been deeply involved in efforts to preserve and expand federal funding for higher education, increase educational opportunities for minority citizens, improve the competitiveness of the American economy and address the problems of intercollegiate athletics. Mr. Atwell is widely published in the field of higher education management and student aid policies, and has served on numerous national committees and boards.