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nurturing future leaders via service-learning

John T. Boal

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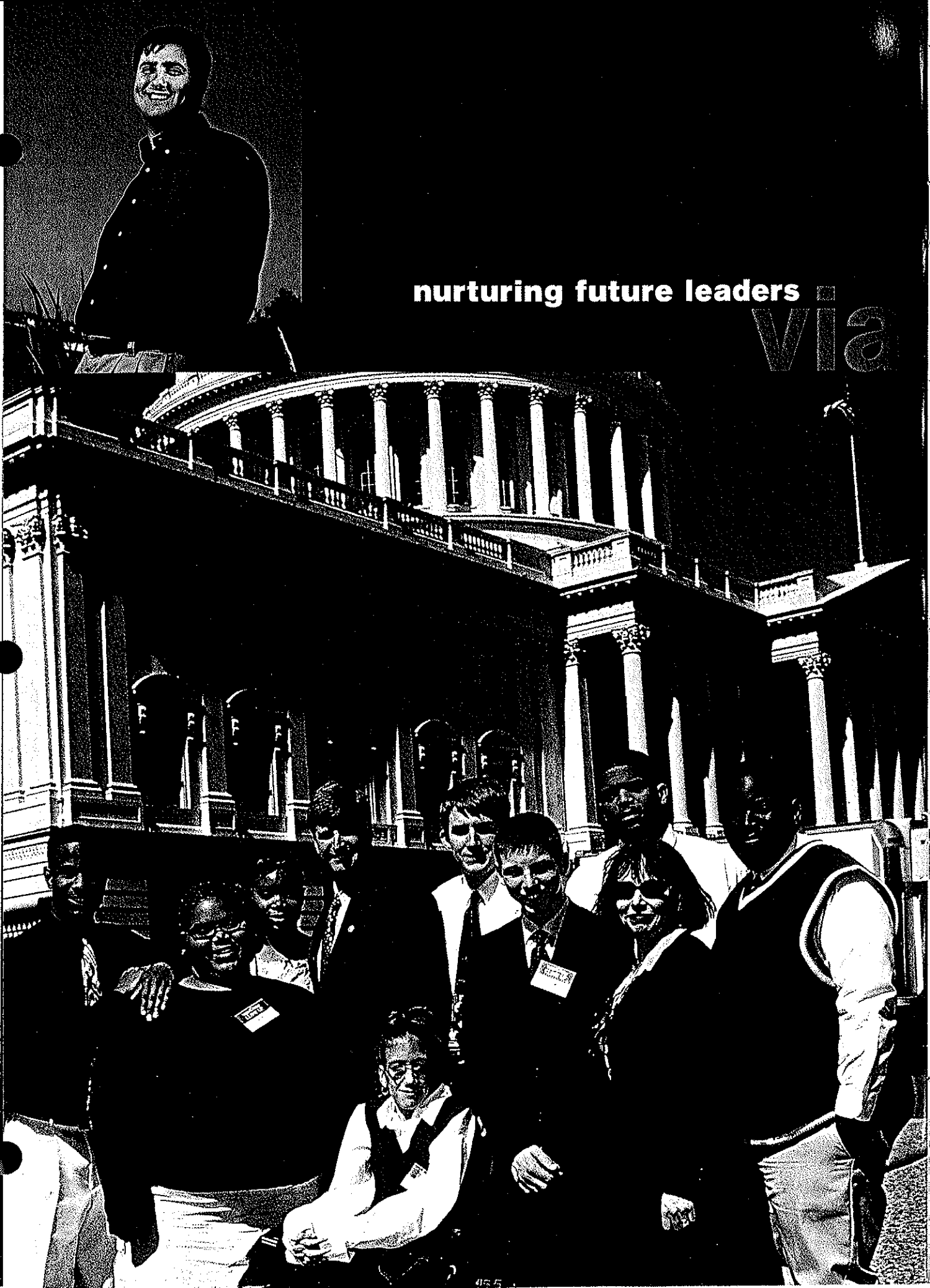
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nurturing future leaders

via

COMING INTO THE NINTH GRADE, JON PORGES WAS ADMITTEDLY "A SHY GUY" WHO HAD A LEARNING DISABILITY AND WHO HAD NEVER VOLUNTEERED IN HIS LIFE. BUT WHEN HE SAT DOWN IN FRESHMAN ENGLISH CLASS AT WATERFORD HIGH SCHOOL IN WATERFORD, CONNECTICUT, IN 1996, A SLOW TRANSFORMATION— LIKE A COCOON BECOMING A BUTTERFLY—TOOK PLACE.

service-learning

By John T. Boal

In that class, teacher Justin Trager conducted an orientation for a "service-learning" program. Students were told they would need to perform 80 hours of service in the community as a requirement for graduation.

Since Jon had a prior interest in criminal justice, he called the Explorers program at his local police department. Getting no response, he called and called again to get it started. Through his initiative, he took on more responsibility and the program eventually flourished, as did several other projects he commanded that required leadership skills. "Then I got on the Service-Learning Advisory Committee. I spoke at a conference in Minneapolis, volunteered at a women's shelter, delivered Thanksgiving baskets for an AIDS project, and worked at a soup kitchen. By the end of my senior year, I had over 400 hours above my mandatory 80," he proudly recalls. "The Service-Learning Program made me the person I am. I can speak confidently and do a lot more things, whereas before I just would have said, 'I can't do that.'"

Jon is now a student at Mitchell College in New London, Connecticut. Does he believe the service-learning seed planted in ninth grade will blossom in his adult life?

"Well, don't laugh," he says forthrightly, "but I want to be Governor of Connecticut."

DIAMOND IN THE DIALOGUE

Amid all the public debate on how to improve public education (standards testing, reducing classroom size, social promotion, teacher performance reviews, charter schools, and everything in between) combined with today's numbing electronic distractions, the largely unheralded educational concept known as service-learning (which was introduced over 100 years ago) is finally experiencing a rising tide of acceptance among educators, government agencies, foundations, and — most importantly — students.

Educator John Dewey first articulated the powerful, synergistic connection between education and youth service in 1900 when he stated that "... the school itself shall be made a genuine form of community life instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons."

In its purest and most effective form, service-learning inspires students to initiate and conduct meaningful activities at community-wide program such as shelters, disability centers, or environmental habitats. Then the approach encourages the students to reflect in the classroom on their service experiences to enhance the learning of academic subjects.

"Education requires young people to get engaged with their community and the common good," insists Harris Wofford, co-founder of the Peace Corps, and president of the \$851-million Corporation for National Service, which selected its first crop of 70 exemplary "Leader Schools" in 1999. (Jon Porges' Waterford High School was one of

FACING PAGE: (top) Jon Porges, no longer a shy guy. (below) An eager crew of young people joins Rep. Patrick Kennedy (fourth from left) in their search for needed actions at our Nation's Capitol.

Young people
want to
be active
participants in
seeking a
sense of
self-worth

"We have found that service-learning is the most powerful approach in youth leadership development."
Joy Des Marais

them.) "We want the next generation of American leaders to learn how to become active, caring, responsible citizens with character," he adds. "Those are qualities that must be taught by example and by practice."

LABS FOR LEADERSHIP

Initiated after three years of development, the National Service-Learning Leader Schools program is an open competition among any middle school or high school in the United States that wants to apply.

"Schools which feel they are providing excellence in service-learning, promoting civic responsibility, and improving student performance must submit an incredibly large portfolio that has to be put together by the community and then vetted through a peer review process," explains Marilyn Smith, Director of Service-Learning for the Corporation for National Service. (To learn more about the application process go to www.cns.gov/learn/leaderschools/index.html.)

"In 1999, we had 146 schools entering the competition and selected 70," Smith notes. "The reason service-learning is catching on in the schools is that the way we construct our education doesn't work in the new millennium. Students don't want to be passive receptacles of information. They want to be active participants. If you use service-learning as your approach, the students become decision-makers by taking leadership roles right from the start. They are empowered and get a sense of their own self-worth as they see themselves making differences when they help other people. Very simply, if you give students leadership opportunities, they become leaders."

While the concept is brilliant, why has a full-scale adoption of service-learning been so difficult to achieve? "For the most part, the field of leadership development has concentrated on adults involved with organizational management and has relied on methods such as simulations and case studies," wrote Joy Des Marais, Director of Strategic Youth Initiatives for the National Youth Leadership Council in St. Paul, Minnesota, in the May 2000 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine. She continued, "For young people, the best approach is to develop leadership in situations. We have found that service-learning is the most powerful approach in youth leadership devel-

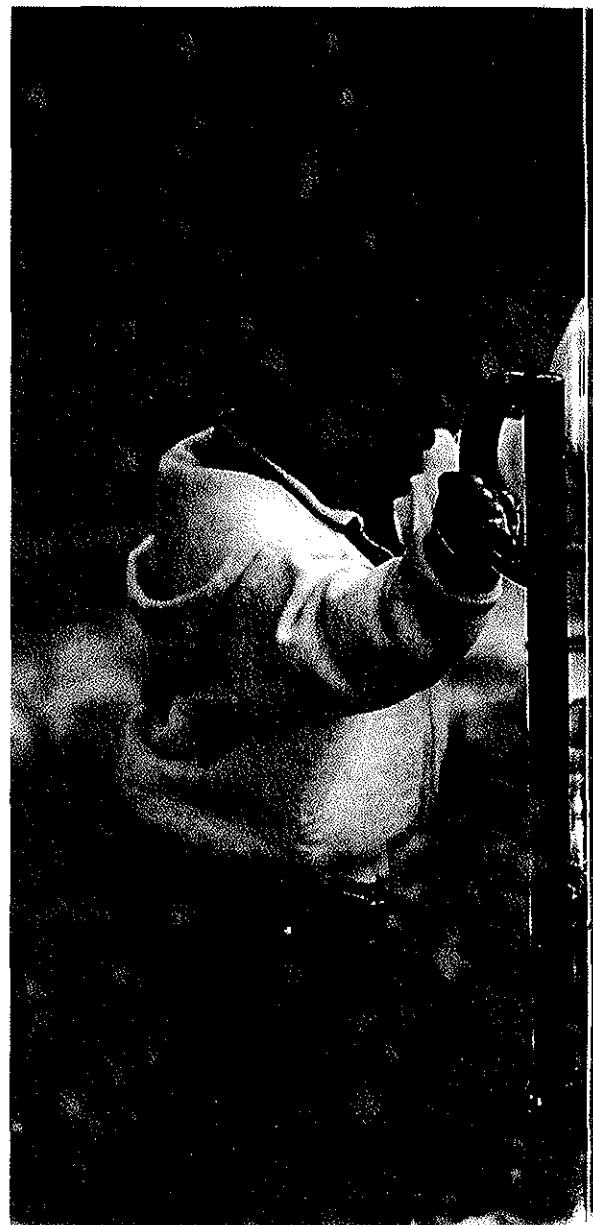
opment. However, if it is such a powerful method of developing leadership, why isn't it better known and more widely practiced?

"Because it's challenging. It's threatening to the status quo. It allows for mistakes. It means sharing power and responsibility between youths and adults. It means blurring the line between teaching and learning. With that distinction gone, the ageist hierarchy collapses, and many people assume that chaos will follow.

"Our experiences as emerging service-learning leaders contradict such pessimism. Through service-learning, young people become engaged leaders taking responsibility for solving complex problems and meeting the tangible needs of a defined community."

THE KELLOGG FOUNDATION STEPS UP

In the late 1980s, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in Battle Creek, Michigan, started



funding multiple service-learning programs. Collecting research and positive results from those early programs, the foundation then stepped up in 1998 with a \$13 million, four-year initiative called "Learning In Deed" to further accelerate its commitment to service-learning as an essential ingredient that should be in every public school.

"We now know that this whole idea of service-learning can transform how teaching and learning are conducted," says Chris Kwak, Program Director of Philanthropy and Volunteerism at the Kellogg Foundation. "It's [responding to] the toxic reaction of 'Why do I have to learn this?' that you hear in schools everywhere. They get the 'why' and they go about their business of learning it."

Besides developing an extensive database of coalitions, organizations, and concerned

individuals, the Learning In Deed initiative is establishing "demonstration projects" in five states — California, Maine, Massachusetts, Oregon, and South Carolina—to "scale up" service-learning at the state, district, and local levels.

"Positive service-learning experiences get students to care and get them to stick their heads out of their navel-gazing," says Kwak. "It gives them the ability to start identifying needs, structure their contributions, and see 'where are the places where people have it worse than I do?' All these stages give them the courage to start stepping up to the plate, making contributions, and using skills they didn't know they had in what we call leadership."

For more information about the Learning In Deed initiative visit them on the web at www.learningindeed.org.



A SHORT HISTORY OF SERVICE-LEARNING & COMMUNITY SERVICE

- 1900** — Educator John Dewey first articulates the service-learning concept.
- 1984** — Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) formed. League advocates student volunteerism at collegiate level.
- 1985** — Campus Compact formed. Today over 670 member colleges and universities promote community service to their students.
- 1990** — National and Community Service Act. Points of Light Foundation formed; act also authorized grants to schools to promote service-learning.
- 1991** — Service-learning called "sleeping giant of education reform" in *Phi Delta Kappan*.
- 1993** — Maryland becomes first state to make service-learning a requirement for high school graduation.
- 1993** — National and Community Service Trust Act. Corporation for National Service formed to administer AmeriCorps, National Senior Service Corps and service-learning (Learn and Serve America).
- 1997** — Huge (3,663%) growth in number of high school students engaged in service-learning from 1984 to 1997. (Source: *National Service-Learning Clearinghouse*)
- 1998** — W.K. Kellogg Foundation creates \$13 million "Learning In Deed" Initiative to promote service-learning.
- 1999** — Sixty-four percent of all U.S. public schools now arrange some form of community service opportunities (with 32% of all public schools organizing service-learning as part of their curriculum) according to surveys from the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics.
- 1999** — Corporation for National Service selects nation's first 70 Leader Schools as models for blending academics with community service.

Young people generally seek "the next pleasure" unless they can see a value in creating a reinvigorated society

Young people learn that the usual school classroom doesn't teach leadership skills.

THE BENEFITS OF SERVICE-LEARNING

Educators involved in service-learning confirm that students' skills grow in many areas. They have observed increases in:

- personal and social responsibility
- self-esteem and self-efficacy
- kindness to fellow students
- trustworthiness
- cooperation with adults
- empathy
- awareness of cultural differences
- awareness of community needs
- sense of civic responsibility
- rate of voting as adults
- participation in community organizations
- feeling of making a difference
- scores on state tests of basic skills
- GPA scores
- class attendance
- problem-solving skills
- career skills
- respect toward teachers
- connectedness to school

To derive all these benefits, what must be incorporated into service-learning programs?

"Our experiences have taught us that several elements of service-learning are critical to the development of effective young leaders: granting young people decision-making power and responsibility for consequences; a broad context for learning and service; and recognition of young people's experience, knowledge, and skills," says Des Marais at the National Youth Leadership Council.

Even schools that are just beginning to introduce their service-learning programs are reaping benefits. "Everyone here believes service-learning is an integral part of what we do," says Alvaro Garcia-Velez, president of Notre Dame Middle School, a Catholic girls' school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. "It increases their civic skills; teaches self-esteem and gives them a cross-cultural experience. We're getting good results."

SERVICE-LEARNING IN COLLEGE AND BEYOND

"I've interviewed hundreds of students [about their service-learning experiences] and they just talk about, 'Oh, I've just learned so much more,'" reports Elaine K. Ikeda, Ph.D., formerly Project Director at the UCLA Service-Learning Clearinghouse Project. (Ikeda is

now Executive Director of the California Campus Compact in San Francisco.) "Service-learning is the antidote to the growing amount of academic disengagement. But when students do engage in service-learning, we see a lot of connections between their confidence levels and their own leadership skills. It becomes personal to them. It helps them realize this is a part of real life. They understand they can take this knowledge and put it to use in society. Not only do they become empowered to change something, but they also recognize they have certain skills and abilities that do not come out in the classroom."

While some — most notably The Ayn Rand Institute — have criticized service-learning as a way for Big Government to force students to volunteer there is considerable evidence to correlate a connection between early volunteering in school to later engagement in civic responsibility. "Those who volunteered frequently in high school (one hour or less per week) were more than twice as likely to devote at least some time to volunteer/community service work nine years later than those who did no volunteer work during high school (64% versus 30%)," wrote Alexander W. Astin, Director of UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, in the winter 1999 issue of *The Review of Higher Education*.

"Service-learning without intentional leadership development is trivial and shallow," adds Des Marais emphatically. "The most powerful aspect of service-learning is the opportunity it provides to all young people to be leaders, now, today in their own lives and in their communities."

Considering the overall decline in civic participation and volunteering, as documented in Professor Robert Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone* (2000), service-learning has the potential to be the ideal crucible for redirecting students (and subsequently future generations) away from obsessively seeking the next pleasure, sports, or electronic fix and, instead, leading not only fellow students but also today's apathetic adults back into participating and creating a more fairly balanced and reinvigorated civic society.

A resident of Burbank, California, John T. Boal is the author of Be a Global Force of One! (1999) and a co-author of the forthcoming Chicken Soup For the Volunteer's Soul (2002).

ADOPT A HIGHWAY
 NEXT 2 MILES
 MN/DOT THANKS
CAAP
 St. Ann's School

2
3
0



LEFT: Participants in the Civic Achievement Award Program (CAAP) take a break from cleaning up alongside a highway in Wadena, Minnesota.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON BEHALF OF ALL AGE GROUPS

There are literally scores of information resources to help you get up to speed on service-learning. I suggest you begin with the "crown jewel" of all clearinghouses. The National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (NSLC) is the most in-depth, national resource center on every minutiae of service-learning for K-12 schools as well as higher education. Partners with the Points of Light Foundation and the Corporation for National Service, the NSLC is based at the University of Minnesota and has the friendliest, most helpful researchers and librarians. From the simple to the sublime, start all your research at the NSLC. Visit their website at umn.edu/~serve or call 800-808-SERV.

OTHER RESOURCES:

Leading Service-Learning Organizations/Foundation

Close Up Foundation 703-706-3300 www.closeup.org	Corporation For National Service 202-606-5000 www.cns.gov	National Youth Leadership Council 651-631-3672 www.nylc.org	Points of Light Foundation 202-729-8000 www.pointsoflight.org	W.K. Kellogg Foundation 616-968-1611 www.wkkf.org
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Service-Learning Organizations for Higher Education

American Association for Community Colleges 202-728-0200 www.aacc.nche.edu	Campus Compact 401-863-1119 www.compact.org	UCLA Service-Learning Clearinghouse Project 310-206-4815 www.gseis.ucla.edu/slc/
American Association for Higher Education 202-293-6440 www.aahe.org	Campus Outreach Opportunity League 617-695-2665 www.cool2serve.org	University of Colorado service-learning Website (lists more than 350 collegiate service-learning programs) csf.colorado.edu/sl/academic.html
Community-Campus Partnerships for Health 415-476-7081 futurehealth.ucsf.edu/ccph.html	National Society for Experiential Education 703-933-0017 www.nsee.org	