

## **Community Service-Learning: Two Student Views**

### **An Education Lived Is an Education Learned**

Joan Cripe

What could Lindsay and I have possibly imagined sitting in a writing classroom on the first day of school? Four weeks later we took on an investigative assignment for Michigan Literacy, Inc. Instead of agonizing through the sixth draft of a boring essay on Ben Franklin, we were at the state capitol reporting on a raucous senate budget hearing. Writing classes like the one Lindsay and I enrolled in as freshmen at Michigan State University incorporate conventional classroom work with real life situations which call upon the practical application of course knowledge. By actually interacting with senators we had only seen on television, we found that service-learning provides an exceptional alternative to students otherwise sentenced to serve educational time in the bondage of a classroom.

Allen Wutzdorff, Executive Director of the National Society for Experiential Education, firmly supports service learning programs like ours at MSU. He defends mandatory service education programs in his essay, "Moving in from the Margins." "Community service, when combined with an intentional program of learning," Wutzdorff believes, "not only assists the community, but also creates a critical mass of citizens who have a positive attitude toward service, are more knowledgeable about societal problems and issues, and are experienced in skills necessary for effective service."

Wutzdorff further supports his case with four points linking service-learning to basic education. First, service-learning motivates students by integrating "real world" situations with conventional classroom-based subjects. Second, students apply a great amount of knowledge when they deal with the situational demands of the service experience. Furthermore, students encounter and overcome obstacles, which immensely help their ability to solve actual problems. "Students experience problems from multiple perspectives," Wutzdorff concludes, "and move beyond simplistic views of the issues involved." Students can better understand others and their diverse views. Above all else, Wutzdorff believes, "Students are simply better prepared to meet the challenges of a changing society."

Stanford University student Jeremy Taylor also supports classroom-based community service programs. He has participated in Stanford's Community Service Writing Program

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and presents his arguments in a thoughtful and persuasive essay, "Service-Learning: Education with a Purpose." Taylor vigorously defends service-learning. "The successful integration of a service-learning curriculum," he argues, "demonstrates that civic responsibility is fundamental to the advancement of society."

Taylor offers various explanations for the benefits service-learning bestows upon students. He agrees with Wutzdorff. Combining classroom work with community projects enables students to see the practical applications of their knowledge. By becoming active participants in their learning outcomes, Taylor insists, students do not feel like passive bystanders in education. Community service increases students' motivation to learn. He adds, "Students who participate. . . develop a more positive attitude towards others as well as a higher sense of self esteem." Furthermore, this increase in self esteem, Taylor believes, is attributed to the experiential knowledge one gains through service. Unlike the conventional classroom knowledge that evaporates as soon as a test is over, service-learning provides durable and lasting knowledge. "I would not trade my 'real life' experiences while working on this project for any other kind of essay assignment. Through my interaction with the organization and its members, I feel that in a subtle way, this project has prepared me to participate more effectively in society."

Despite the numerous ways service-learning benefits university students, some critics challenge its validity. Foes believe that service is a freewill offering drastically different from the performance of a civic obligation. Some even justify their position by citing the case of *U.S. v. Seeger*. In this 1965 Supreme Court case, Seeger claimed that due to his religious belief he should not be drafted into the Army. The court upheld his claim and Seeger was not drafted to serve. Opponents of service-learning therefore interpret the court's decision as encompassing any student forced to perform a service for a university requirement.

But isn't there an overwhelming difference between risking your life in the deadly jungles of Vietnam and supervising a gym area for underprivileged children? Service-learning doesn't impose dangerous involuntary servitude, but instead emphasizes expanding the student's personal learning horizons.

Opposers further argue that service-learning exploits cheap labor. In turn, the labor of volunteers represents an opportunity cost, time that students could spend in other more useful ways. But what is truly more beneficial than actual hands-on experience in the "real world"? What better program than service-learning could benefit community projects that are in need of volunteers? Students take an active role while participating in service programs. Isn't that vastly more beneficial to society than the time students spend blinking through classroom lectures on Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*?

As a student interested in furthering my education while serving my community, I gladly support mandatory class-

room-based community service. I believe that if students aren't required to participate in community activities, many would never experience the vital "real world" application of their knowledge. Service creates more well-rounded students like Jeremy and Lindsay who, instead of hibernating in a classroom, enter into the working world. Furthermore, work experience is one of the most vital elements in a graduate's qualifications when applying for a job. Service-learning greatly enhances a student's resume. It attests to his or her experience in the workplace. Service-learning helps students' career decisions and provides them a way to "try out" their life-goals.

Service-learning provides vital experience that complements traditional classroom-based learning. In such a diverse and constantly changing world, shouldn't we welcome this new resource in education? Service programs should be applauded for offering my generation the opportunity for innovative "real world" participation before we have to work at life-long commitments. Without a service experience, we are robbed of a vital piece of our education. Especially with skyrocketing tuition, shouldn't we be offered the opportunity to apply our knowledge outside of the boundaries of the classroom?

### **Mandatory Community Disservice**

Nathan Werner

Community service is a highly valued commodity, but is becoming increasingly controversial because of the growing call to include mandatory service in educational course work. To some, the argument for community service rests on the clear cut foundation of moral values and responsible citizenship. To others, the moral arguments are less clear. A growing majority of Americans nonetheless insist that moral values arising from community service must be encouraged, indeed promoted among today's slacker generation.

Those who propose compulsory community service as a duty of citizenship have many arguments that seem to support their view. Some supporters claim, for example, that service confronts students with the actual application of newly learned knowledge to real world situations and requires students to examine day-to-day problems from multiple perspectives. Such skills supposedly cannot be developed as highly within conventional school confines and are thought to be achievable only through practical application that comes with service. These complex problem-solving skills supposedly will lead to a higher rate of knowledge retention, a better understanding of community problems, and an increased sense of realism in the learning process.

These claims might all seem fairly believable. They may even be good arguments for requiring community service. Upon close examination, however, the claims lose credibility.

The supporters claim that doing community service gives

Like most peers in my Service-Learning Writing Project class, I can readily attest to Taylor's statement, "Classrooms are filled with students asking questions such as 'Why do I need to learn this?' and 'When am I ever going to use that?'" Participating in service-learning experiences in the 'real world' helps students to begin to find some answers to these challenging questions."

What these do-gooder adults don't realize, however, is that mandatory community service raises the specter of forcing students to perform public service as a prerequisite of graduation. This easy answer to the perceived problem of enhancing volunteer work creates a series of nettlesome problems that undercut the core arguments of those who favor obligatory service.

students a higher sense of accomplishment and boosts self esteem. Does raking leaves in a park or painting worn out buildings really boost student self esteem? A feeling of accomplishment and an increased level of self esteem cannot come from mandates to do forced labor. Instead, these feelings must arise from each student's prevailing value system learned through cultural acquisition, parental training, religious instruction, and long exposure to powerful role models. Besides, if students do not value the opportunity to do community service, they will waste time seeking feelings of accomplishment and self-esteem cut off from the contexts of culture, tribe, family, church, etc.

By implementing mandatory service in the university curriculum, students lose precious time to complete their scholastic studies. But even worse, there is a blurring of the roles that students and professors traditionally hold. Presently, faculty are seen as givers of knowledge. Proposed mandatory service would turn them into mere supervisors of laborers. To take the educational role out of teaching is a great disservice to the profession. Concurrently, students would no longer seek teachers as sources of information, but view them as bosses or managers.

The proposition that mandatory service programs save money is also a fallacy; actually, such programs drain our tax dollars. The cost of community service is a "hidden cost," tangled in paper work, bureaucratic procedures, and time spent away from more productive tasks. If private organizations implement voluntary service programs, tax dollars would be reallocated to more effective areas and taxes would decrease, thereby benefiting the private sector, service industries, and home owners. Once the domain of local service organizations and churches, mandating service in public education cuts into philanthropy's traditional area of expertise. Moreover, mandatory service undermines citizens' faith in these organizations as vital providers of social charity and civic service.

Obligatory community service also robs America of jobs. As the number of positions allocated to required service programs increases, the number of paid positions must necessarily decrease. This exploitation of involuntary labor causes severe problems in an economy seeking to create additional jobs for its workers. With the shortage of employment in today's job market, every job counts. Transforming even a fraction of those jobs into unpaid and part-time volunteer work only aggravates the unemployment situation.

Further consequences for mandatory service deal with the effect it has upon the actual providers of service. What formerly was an act of kindness, giving feelings of pride and accomplishment in return, now becomes merely a project to finish. Any feeling of genuine concern for those being cared for will be lost.

Subsequently, as students begin to do service on a required basis they will feel as though they have exhausted their duty to society. They might not continue further with service in their lives and careers. A life-long commitment to service is essential to keep the volunteer sector vibrant and

alive. As the majority of service providers become students with little experience or real interest in providing needed work, quality and efficiency of volunteer service will also decline, leading to an erosion of overall productivity.

But not only does the devaluing of services include the providers, it also demeans receivers. Those in need of service expect care from people dedicated to the outcome of their work. Under the mandatory service project, the beneficiaries of service become objects, a means to an end, a way to achieve a goal. Making service mandatory uncouples a genuine altruism on the part of students from the service task at hand. Any real-time human problems encountered along the way may be seen as speed-bumps on the road to a college degree, not as real life problems facing real and often suffering human beings.

There is an even more basic premise in the argument against mandatory community service: mandatory service is involuntary servitude plain and simple. In fact, the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights contain language that clearly underscores the difference between service and servitude. Specifically, the Thirteenth Amendment states, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." To implement a curriculum with mandatory community service flies directly in the face of the amendment, unless students are treated as criminals fit for punishment. Without a trial, indictment, or even a judicial hearing, supporters run the risk of sentencing our children to an unconstitutional act.

In the next millennium, America needs to consider seriously where it is going to place the priorities of service ideals. Will we continue to push the concept of mandatory service, creating a resentment among students and citizens towards charity? Or will America leave the question of service and obligation where it belongs: in the private, moral realm?

In a word: mandatory service is a disservice to all.

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