

Youth Volunteerism

Should schools require students to perform public service?

After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, Tulane University made volunteering for community projects in the ravaged city, such as restoring parks or tutoring grade-school students, a requirement for graduation. Since then, applications to Tulane have shot up. Schools and colleges nationwide have increased volunteer opportunities for students, and nearly 90 percent of colleges offer service-learning programs that tie class work with volunteer activities. Researchers see ample evidence that at least some service programs encourage students to participate in civic life as they grow older. Experts worry, however, that volunteer opportunities are far more prevalent for middle-class and affluent students than for those from low-income families. Meanwhile, many school districts continue to mull whether to require volunteer service for high school graduation. Courts have upheld the constitutionality of such requirements, but some students and parents resist them.



Students check their net during a water-quality test in Charleston, S.C. The project was organized by Earth Force, a national organization sponsored by the Corporation for National and Community Service that teaches youth how to improve the environment.

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Youth Volunteerism

BY MARCIA CLEMMITT

THE ISSUES

After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, Tulane University began requiring students to work on community projects closely tied to their coursework as a condition of graduation. Education majors might tutor elementary students, for instance, and architecture students could help restore parks.

The aim, says Vincent Ilustre, executive director of the university's Center for Public Service, is "to engage our students in rebuilding New Orleans."

Some worried the graduation requirement would send applications to Tulane into a nose dive. Instead, it has been a huge hit, Ilustre says. Before it was added in 2006, "we had about 18,000 applications for 1,500 slots" in the freshman class, he says. "Last year we had 44,000 applications for the same 1,500 places." Anecdotal evidence suggests the remarkable increase is closely related to the school's new mandate.

Tulane is far from alone in requiring — or at least encouraging — public service. *

Over the past two decades, schools and colleges nationwide have increased the number of volunteer opportunities they provide for students. Today, 89 percent of colleges sponsor some form of

* Campuswide service requirements at the college level are rare. Some schools have them, however, including Catholic-affiliated Belmont Abbey College, in Belmont, N.C.; Methodist-affiliated Centenary College, in Hackettstown, N.J.; historically black Benedict College, in Columbia, S.C.; and at least one public university, California State University at Monterey Bay.



Tulane University Center for Public Service

Students from Tulane University in New Orleans volunteer at City Park as part of efforts to restore the devastated city following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Tulane made community service a graduation requirement after the disaster and saw applications to the school shoot up. Nearly 90 percent of the nation's colleges provide service-learning opportunities.

service learning, in which volunteer work such as helping at a homeless shelter, is linked to studies in, for example, urban policy, says Andrew Furco, associate vice president for public engagement at the University of Minnesota. Meanwhile, volunteer rates among youths ages 16 to 19 soared from 13.4 percent to 24.5 percent between 1989 and 2007, largely because a rising number of high schools sponsor or require service.¹

Still in question, however, is how many programs are of high enough quality to improve students' learning, help communities and encourage greater civic and social commitment as students grow into adulthood.

Researchers see ample evidence that at least some service programs encourage students to participate in their communities later. "I'm working on a paper right now about whether willingness to serve on a jury" relates to an earlier history of volunteerism, and data suggest that "yes, it does," says sociology professor Marc A. Musick, associate dean for student affairs in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas (UT), Austin. Volunteering makes people more civic minded," says Musick, coauthor of the 2008 book *Volunteers: A Social Profile*. For example, he says, young people who have volunteered are likely "to look at government organizations in a different way because they've done some of the same kinds of service" for the community.

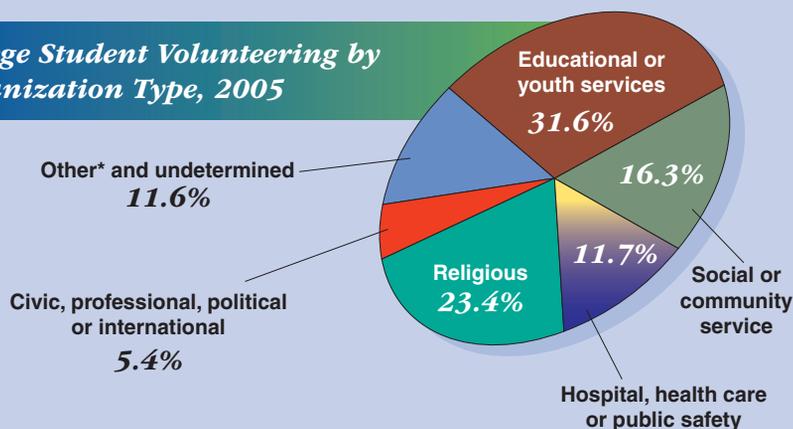
Students who do community-service projects "meet people unlike those they know" and "learn to know them as individuals," says Steven Meyers, a professor of psychology and social justice at Roosevelt University, in Chicago. That, he says, "can lead to a much more informed worldview" that encourages engagement in civic and community life later on.

But Leslie Lenkowsky, a clinical professor of public affairs and philanthropic studies at Indiana University, in Bloomington, argues that it's not so much service experiences as education that spurs civic engagement. "People don't just wake up one morning and say, 'How can I get engaged in something today?'" says Lenkowsky, who during the George W. Bush administration headed the Corporation for National and Community Service, a federal agency that runs AmeriCorps and other pro-

Where College Students Volunteer

Educational or youth service organizations attract the most college student volunteers, followed by religious programs.

College Student Volunteering by Organization Type, 2005



* Includes sports, hobby, cultural, arts, environmental and animal care

Source: "College Students Helping America," Corporation for National and Community Service, October 2006, p. 11, www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/06_1016_RPD_college_full.pdf

grams that place volunteers in non-profit organizations and help support their service with stipends and other assistance.

Lenkowsky says people pursue volunteer opportunities mainly "because they're concerned about something" — such as abortion, taxation or homelessness. "And how do people get involved in issues? It depends on the quality of education," he says. "The ability of young people to see public issues as important to their own concerns" — and thus worth committing themselves to through voting, volunteering or the like — "is less than it used to be," he says.

In the 1990s, some high schools began adding community service to their graduation requirements, but the practice remains controversial. Skeptics argue that so many students already have the motivation to volunteer that requirements are overkill.

"I don't see the necessity for a mandate," said Brett Fortin, a senior at Mansfield High School, in Mansfield, Mass., where instituting a requirement

was discussed last fall. "I do believe that most of the student body is actively involved," said Fortin, president of the student-run Student Service Corps, which has researched and helped organize voluntary student participation in more than 50 projects in the Mansfield area, including helping out at Special Olympics events and joining a community leaf-raking effort. ²

Some researchers say the opinions about service that students draw from school programs depend almost entirely on how well the programs are structured and managed, not on whether the service is required or not. After decades of research on the mandate question, "the data's clear on this, although people haven't really listened," says James Youniss, a research professor of psychology at Catholic University, in Washington. Numerous studies demonstrate that student attitudes after they'd performed service depended on the structure and quality of the programs they participated in, not on whether they'd chosen to

volunteer or been required to do so, he says. ³

Youniss and other researchers caution that unless volunteer programs actively promote thoughtful analysis of students' experiences and issues involved in their service, the programs' effects on students' attitudes and behavior will be nil.

"We studied one Catholic school where kids went to a soup kitchen" and through observation and discussion worked out theories for themselves about how homelessness originates and what things might help it, Youniss says. Data show that only programs that include such follow-up work affect student attitudes and behavior in the long term, he says.

Effective service experiences can be integrated into all kinds of subject matter, Youniss says. In two public schools in Iowa, he says, "kids looked at the disposal of oil filters from cars" in a science class, collected data, analyzed it in light of the science they learned, and ultimately "got a bill passed" directing proper disposal methods.

Community-service participation is particularly high among students at selective colleges and among college-bound high school students, a trend that reveals a troubling socioeconomic divide in who gets access to volunteer opportunities. Critics worry that volunteer opportunities are more prevalent among wealthier students and that those facing financial challenges often lack the time for public service because they are working to pay for school.

"There is a huge socioeconomic gap" for the poor in service opportunities, as there is for most other educational opportunities, says Youniss. "If a school has low-income students [or] many immigrants," for example, "it's less likely to have" programs known to improve students' civic involvement, including volunteer-service programs and even student government, he says.

The socioeconomic gap not only deprives young people of community-

engagement opportunities but also likely discourages activities such as voting, Youniss says. He notes that people with high school diplomas or less, and especially poor people, vote at much lower rates than college graduates. “You might want to trace that back to poor civics” education and fewer opportunities to build engagement among youth, at least partially, he says.

As lawmakers, colleges and school districts mull whether to expand or limit community-service programs, here are some of the questions that are being asked:

Does community service lead to greater civic engagement?

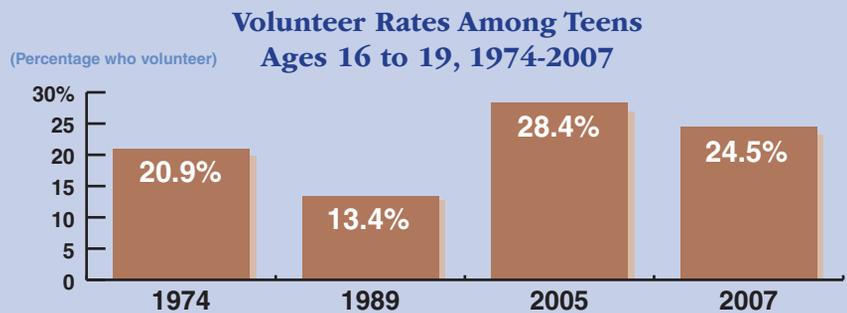
Supporters of volunteerism argue that community work encourages people to become more willing to help others and to fulfill civic duties such as voting later in life. The jury is out on how effectively service programs accomplish those goals, however. Researchers report that some programs appear very effective while others don't lead to long-term improvement in community engagement.

History provides strong evidence that at least some volunteer experiences — notably on behalf of a political cause, such as civil rights — can spur young people to remain socially engaged, says Youniss of Catholic University. “Young people who were involved in the civil rights movement” as well as Vietnam-era anti-war activities are “still very much engaged” in community life today, and even their children show high degrees of civic engagement, he says. “It's very clear that activism on behalf of these justice causes remains” with people throughout life.

Youniss sees two main reasons for the long-lasting effects. Civil rights and anti-war activists “were very effective” and thus saw the fruits of their labors in society, which likely encouraged them to remain engaged, he says. Furthermore, young civil rights volunteers

Teen Volunteerism Declined

Teen volunteerism rates have fluctuated drastically in the nearly four decades beginning in 1974. After declining to a low of 13.4 percent, volunteering more than doubled, to 28.4 percent in 2005, but then dropped nearly 4 percentage points in the next two years.



Sources: “Reaching Our Goals: An Overview of Research in Support of the Strategic Initiatives,” Corporation for National and Community Service, March 2009, p. 3, www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/08_1113_rpd_reachingourgoals.pdf; “Volunteer Growth in America: A Review of Trends Since 1974,” Corporation for National and Community Service, December 2006, p. 2, www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/06_1203_volunteer_growth.pdf

saw themselves as part of a historical tradition stretching back centuries. This gave them a sense of belonging and a feeling that their work had meaning beyond themselves, both factors that encourage continued involvement in community causes, Youniss says. Civil rights volunteers “saw themselves as jumping into history to participate in the abolition movement” against slavery that dated back 200 years.

In fact, simply belonging to any group in which service is the norm can lead to a longer-term interest in volunteering, even when the group's main function isn't service, says Musick. For example, at UT, Austin, and on other campuses where “students volunteer in groups,” often through fraternities and sororities, the phenomenon “creates a little culture of volunteering that's self-reinforcing” and encourages future involvement, he says.

Similarly, church-related service is fostered not just by religious principles but by the notion of “fellowship — getting together with other believers”

to serve, Musick says. “To get civic engagement, you need structures like this — situations where, if you're not volunteering, you're left out,” he says.

Many advocates of service-learning courses argue that volunteering frequently brings students into contact with people from very different backgrounds and circumstances than their own, which can spur civic engagement by broadening students' understanding of the world and its problems.

“Our students are more privileged, and when they go into inner-city schools and students begin to talk to them, the takeaway is, ‘Those kids have the same dreams I did, but they have challenges in their lives that I hadn't even imagined,’” says Sandra Enos, an associate professor of sociology at Bryant University, in Smithfield, R.I. “They get into conversations that disrupt their thinking” and, usually for the first time, learn things from experience without the learning being “mediated” by parents, teachers or textbooks, she says. Students regularly report that “their parents kept

‘Voluntourists’ Mix Pleasure and Altruism

Doing good in exotic lands has an allure — but also a downside.

In an era of easy worldwide travel and the ubiquitous, information-packed Internet, new kinds of volunteering have grown quickly over the past decade. There’s voluntourism — in which travel is combined with service work — and computer-based volunteering initiatives that invite Internet users to participate in social-issues campaigns. Reactions to both are mixed, however.

Combining volunteering with travel as an alternative to traditional vacations is growing in popularity, partly because of some other trends in volunteer behavior, wrote Beth Gazley, an associate professor in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University. More people are volunteering today, including more young people, “but for fewer average hours” than the typical volunteer committed in the past, she wrote.

Spending a week’s vacation performing service in a potentially exotic location — such as a wild-elephant preserve or a remote village abroad — fits in well with the shrinking time frame of modern volunteering, Gazley said. Furthermore, “potential volunteers often cite lack of available leisure time as one barrier to service,” so “volunteer vacations neatly circumvent this problem.”¹

Volunteer vacations also can last from a few days to months, most involve hands-on helping, such as building a trail or helping conduct research, and tourist volunteers pay their own way and, in some cases, also make additional financial contributions.²

Earthwatch, one of the oldest voluntourism organizations, began sponsoring environmental voluntourism in 1973. “We began with rocks and stars, where amateurs couldn’t hurt anything,” said founder Brian Rosborough.³ Now Earthwatch projects enable volunteers to help conduct scientific research and protect endangered animals and fragile habitats, Rosborough said.⁴

Nevertheless, since many, if not most, “voluntourists” are attracted more by the exotic travel than by the service itself, there’s a danger that trips will be created “just for the travelers,” and

that is “usually a waste of money and not a lasting solution to any problem,” said Daniela Papi, founder of PEPY Tours, which arranges voluntourism in Cambodia. “The hardest part is finding projects that both make the volunteers feel ‘needed’ and really ARE needed,” said Papi. A good project, for example, would be to have volunteers clear land for a new school in a community “already organized in a way that will take care” of the land when the tourists depart, she said.⁵

While some web-based volunteerism initiatives draw criticism as promoting a dangerously shallow view of what constitutes useful service, others provide substantive help to those in need.

In the Thurston school district of Lacey, Wash., the Intergenerational Grandfriend Project helped students, including those with special needs, link online with older people in nursing homes or retirement communities. The elders mentored the teens, while the teens provided stimulating youthful companionship. “Silver [Web] surfers and high-school students exchanged e-mails,” and most were extremely enthusiastic about the project, wrote teacher Martin Kimeldorf, who directed the project.⁶

Some websites link volunteers with service projects that need help. At San Francisco-based Sparked.com, for example, non-profit service organizations post “challenges,” or projects where added assistance and expertise are needed. For example, Cincinnati’s Ronald McDonald House — which houses families of sick children during hospitalizations — used the site to find Arabic translators for its written materials, while Chimpanzee Sanctuary Northwest found computer experts to help figure out how to prevent hacks of its website.⁷

For volunteers who can’t travel, some websites post do-at-home opportunities. The Extraordinaries, another San Francisco-based website, developed a mobile phone app that alerts users to small volunteer tasks that can be “completed in small snatch-

them in a bubble” that a service experience has broken.

However, many scholars say that while there’s good evidence that some volunteer programs increase the likelihood of long-term civic engagement, others don’t.

“There’s no evidence that anything happens, that anything takes” when students participate in volunteer programs that don’t help them think about the underlying causes of community problems they observe or don’t encourage them to see themselves as part of a solution, says Youniss.

“There’s nothing wrong with going to a soup kitchen to help out, but it won’t have a long-lasting effect on you” if “you just end up thinking of yourself as a sweet, little individual do-gooder,” Youniss says. Only students who actively think about the issues their service raises and see those issues in a historical and philosophical perspective are likely to parlay service into long-term community engagement, he says. Often, that deeper perspective grows out of volunteering with a group that holds certain beliefs about social problems, such as a

church or environmental organization, Youniss notes.

“People think of service as an individual action that by itself can somehow modify something inside a kid’s head” to increase his or her civic-mindedness, says Youniss. “But that’s not it.” Change in future behavior comes only when a young volunteer is induced to consider volunteering as part of some larger vision of society and one’s place in it, he says.

For example, if a young person in the mid-Atlantic region gets involved with one of the “hundreds of local

es of time,” wrote Mike Bright, founder of a British microvolunteering site, Help from Home. Microvolunteering “invites quick actions” such as signing up to donate your hair for wigs for sick children suffering from hair loss, making a “micro loan” to someone in a developing country, signing an online petition, or counting plants or birds in your back yard for a biodiversity project. Evidence is accumulating that microvolunteers can make “meaningful contributions,” Bright wrote.⁸

Others aren’t so sure. “My favorite pet peeve at the moment is . . . the notion that you can volunteer spontaneously via your cell phone for tiny periods of time — saving the world in 10-second intervals,” wrote Steve McCurley, editor of the online journal *e-Volunteering*. “It’s an idea that is emotionally endearing and intellectually absurd.”⁹

Other trends attract similar criticism. For example, some analysts worry that a shallow view of service may arise from high-profile volunteerism-related activities such as “sporting colorful empathy ribbons” or forwarding social-media messages — such as Twitter posts calling attention to a dangerous disease or environmental threat. “It’s legitimate to worry that public displays of emotion run the danger of diverting people from a more complex message . . . or course of action,” wrote *e-Volunteering* Editor-in-Chief Susan J. Ellis.¹⁰



AP Photo/Kalamazoo Gazette/John Lacko

Teenagers Cranston Mitchell and Amelia Hampton assemble parts for a water filtration system for use in Senegal last June. Eight students from Kalamazoo, Mich., spent 15 days in the West African nation last year doing community service as part of the Urban Youth for Africa program sponsored by the Kalamazoo Deacon’s Conference.

Nevertheless, wrote Ellis, even such shallow service participation presents an opportunity. “Public outpourings of emotion imply reservoirs of desire to affiliate and make a difference,” and service organizations and longtime volunteers could help to turn ribbon-wearers and message-forwarders into active volunteers, said Ellis.¹¹

— Marcia Clemmitt

¹ Beth Gazley, “Volunteer Vacationers and What Research Can Tell Us About Them,”

e-Volunteering, January 2001, www.e-volunteering.com/quarterly/01win/facintro.

² *Ibid.*

³ Quoted in “The Growth of Voluntourism,” *e-Volunteering*, July 2007.

⁴ For background, see Earthwatch Institute, www.earthwatch.org.

⁵ Quoted in “The Growth of Voluntourism,” *op. cit.*

⁶ Martin Kimmeldorf, “Wiring Friendships Across Time, Space, and Age: An Evaluation of Intergenerational Friendships Created Online,” *e-Volunteering*, October 2001, www.e-volunteering.com/quarterly/01fall/kimmeldorf.

⁷ Kivi Leroux Miller, “Microvolunteering: Small Jobs on Your Own Time,” *Kivi’s Nonprofit Marketing Guide blog*, June 22, 2011, www.nonprofitmarketingguide.com/blog/2011/06/22/microvolunteering-small-jobs-on-your-own-time-mds11.

⁸ Mike Bright, “Micro-Volunteering: Quickies, Quandaries and Questions,” *e-Volunteering*, October 2010, www.e-volunteering.com/volume-xi-issue-1-october-2010/feature-articles/812.

⁹ Steve McCurley, “Reflections on a Decade of e-Volunteering,” *e-Volunteering*, October 2009, www.e-volunteering.com/quarterly/09oct/09oct-points.

¹⁰ Susan J. Ellis and Steve McCurley, “Public vs. Private Compassion: Colored Ribbons, T-shirts and SUVs,” *e-Volunteering*, April 2004, www.e-volunteering.com/quarterly/04apr/04apr-points.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

and regional conservation organizations that have strong philosophies of protecting the environment” of the Chesapeake Bay, volunteering with the group “provides values education” and makes the student see himself or herself “as an actor in a larger story,” he says. It’s by “working your way into some civic tradition” rather than just engaging in individual “character-building activities” that long-term civic commitment is fostered, says Youniss.

“Focusing on trying to solve a particular problem, seeing that problem in a historical perspective” and, often, work-

ing with long-standing, service-oriented groups “who have a ready-made identity and offer a part that the kid can play” are the key elements of programs that change behavior in the long run, he says.

Should students be required to perform community service?

Over the past two decades, school districts around the country — including the entire Maryland system — have added community service as a high school graduation requirement. Critics argue that the requirements are a burden and disliked by so many students

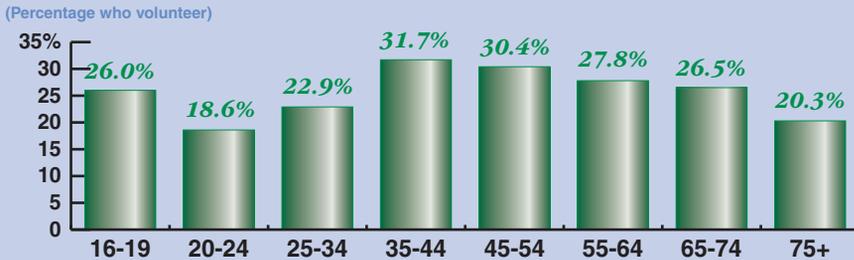
that they may decrease interest in volunteering later in life. Some studies find, however, that similarly structured service programs — whether voluntary or required — have basically the same effect on most students.

Students who face service requirements often approach the jobs halfheartedly and may become turned off to service altogether, some college students told University of Maryland researchers in a 2008 study. The “bad side” of a requirement is that it “reduces feelings of being altruistic, kind and loving, because it is seen as just

Older Americans Volunteer Most

Nearly one-third of Americans between ages 35 and 54 — the highest rate — participate in volunteer activities. Youths ages 16-19 are in the next-highest participation bracket, along with people from 54 to 74. Young adults ages 20-24 have the lowest volunteerism rate.

Volunteer Rates by Age Group, 2008-2010



Source: “Volunteering in the U.S.,” Corporation for National and Community Service, August 2011, www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/national

a mandate that I’ll just get done and it will be over with,” said one. “This cuts down motivation to want to go out and help others.”⁴

Requirement supporters argue that “everyone born owes a debt to society,” said Barbara Moralis, a librarian whose son attended high school in Bethlehem, Pa., which instituted a requirement in 1990. (See *Background*, p. 90.) But “I don’t think it’s up to government to decide who owes a debt and how it should be paid.” Mandates are “spreading like a cancer. Someone has to stand up for an American’s right to freedom,” Moralis said.⁵

Requirements sour some but not all students on service, according to a study by scholars from the University of Northern Colorado and two other colleges. Specifically, students who were inclined to volunteer before they faced a requirement still said, after completing the service, that they were open to volunteering in the future. Students who originally were “less inclined to volunteer of their own free will” and who felt they were “being controlled” by the requirement, however, told researchers that the man-

date made them even less likely to volunteer in the future.⁶

“I’m not in favor of community service for everyone,” says Tulane’s Ilustre. When schools require a certain number of service hours for graduation, “I think it’s too easy for volunteering to lose its flavor and turn people off against service” and, potentially, against community engagement generally, he says. “I don’t like it when universities penalize students with service hours,” for example. “That’s penalizing the community as well by sending them students who don’t want to be there.” Volunteering “should be done by those who want to do it,” Ilustre says.

Even though Ilustre runs the office that manages student placements under Tulane’s mandatory service program, he says he sees no conflict between his job and his opposition to requirements elsewhere. For one thing, he says, many if not most Tulane students actually choose the school because of its commitment to community involvement. And, most important, service to fulfill requirements is always tightly linked to students’ own curricular interests. For example, a Tulane

student taking pre-med courses to prepare for a career in cancer medicine will get a volunteer placement in a hospital oncology department, doing work that’s closely tied to classwork.

Some researchers find that required or voluntary service can turn students into more engaged citizens.

In research comparing two groups of college-bound high school students in Ontario, Canada — one that attended before service was required for graduation and one afterward — scholars at Wilfrid Laurier University, in Waterloo, Ontario, found that mandating service is beneficial for the community because it “draws students into the volunteer sector who probably would not go there if not required to do so.” Furthermore, the study of more than 1,200 students concluded that even those who said their personal experience wasn’t very rewarding still ended up holding “mandatory volunteering in high regard” as a way to create more “engaged citizens.”⁷

Another study by the Wilfrid Laurier researchers found that, at least in the short term, most “students who were mandated to perform community service exhibit the same attitudes and perspectives about community engagement as those who” didn’t face a requirement. “Requiring community service . . . does not detract from” young people’s “motivation to volunteer in the future,” and the quality of the service experience is likely a much more important determinant of young people’s attitudes toward volunteering than is the mandated or non-mandated nature of the experience,” the Canadian analysts said.⁸

Are more young people volunteering today?

School and government programs have led to steep increases over the past two decades in the number of young people who volunteer. But there is a significant socioeconomic divide in volunteering, with high rates concentrated among certain groups, such as

college-bound high school students. Community-service participation remains low among people in their early 20s. (See graph, p. 84.)

The volunteer rate among people ages 16 to 19 soared from 13.4 percent to 24.5 percent between 1989 and 2007, according to the Corporation for National and Community Service.⁹

Service learning — courses that require students to do a service project and analyze the experience in the light of

ideas studied in class — continues to rise around the country. Between 2008 and 2010, for example, the average number of service-learning courses offered per campus rose from 43 to 64 among colleges that responded to a survey by the college service consortium Campus Compact.¹⁰

Furthermore, more young people heading for college and graduate school are adding volunteer activities to their résumés, says Musick of UT. Many more people attend college today than in past decades, but because selective schools aren't significantly expanding their enrollments applicants must try harder than ever to gain an edge over the competition, he points out. Volunteering is one way to do that, he says.

But Musick cautions that the way colleges count volunteerism in admission decisions can lead to inequities between wealthy and low-income students.

"I look at these kids' résumés and see that some are doing an enormous amount of volunteering," he says. "But colleges have to be very careful" about how they compare students' records in this regard because many impressive-



Getty Images/Scott Olson

Student volunteers clear debris around a tornado-damaged apartment complex in Joplin, Mo., on July 30, 2011. A twister that hit the city on May 22 killed more than 150 people and destroyed some 7,500 homes. Nationwide, volunteer rates among youths ages 16 to 19 soared from 13.4 percent to 24.5 percent between 1989 and 2007, largely because a rising number of high schools sponsor or require service.

sounding volunteer opportunities are available for students who don't have to help out at home or take paying jobs to cover their school costs, says Musick. "If a kid lists going abroad to build clinics, it's likely that his or her family has paid for this," making it unfair to count it much in the student's favor because it's an opportunity that isn't available to most applicants, he says.

While volunteering rates among older teens have soared over the past two decades, a longer historical look reveals that recent rates, hovering around 24 percent, aren't much higher than they were decades ago. That's because between the mid-1970s and late 1980s teen community-service rates dropped substantially, from 20.9 percent in 1974 to 13.4 percent in 1989. That decline helped spur the recent rise in school community-service programs.¹¹

The dropoff raised concerns that schools were not turning out graduates who were likely to be involved in their communities or fulfill civic responsibilities, such as voting, when they became adults. What's more, Lenkowsky of Indiana University says concerns grew that

laissez-faire policies promulgated during the administration of President Ronald Reagan (1981-89) "were causing people to grow too self-interested." Those worries fueled establishment of programs to build a new spirit of service among American students, he says.

And while young volunteers showed the greatest percentage gain since 1989, young people still lag behind their parents when it comes to volunteering. The proportion of 16- to 19-year-olds performing service remained lower in 2007 than among the baby-boom generation born

between 1946 and 1964, whose volunteer rates grew from 24.1 percent in 1989 to 29.9 percent in 2007. Among those over 65, the volunteering rate rose from 16.9 percent to 23.8 percent from 1989 to 2007.¹²

In 2010, people in their early 20s volunteered at the lowest rate — 18.4 percent — while 35- to 44-year-olds volunteered at the highest rate — 32.2 percent — according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.¹³ The rate for people ages 16 to 24 hovered around 22 percent between 2006 and 2010, the lowest of any age group and well below the average volunteer rate for all people age 16 and over, which was about 27 percent.¹⁴

Low volunteering rates among the older part of the 16-24 age group account for the low overall rate in that segment of the population, says Lenkowsky. "We have data showing that over 90 percent of college-bound high school students" perform some kind of service, but the 18- to 24-year-old contingent "has the lowest rates of any age group" for several reasons, Lenkowsky says.

Students in that age group who are enrolled in selective colleges have high service rates, around 50 percent in some cases, he says. But very low rates of volunteering prevail among “many who aren’t going to college and thus are less engaged” in the community. Meanwhile, 20-somethings who are just out of college or who didn’t attend are busy with the “Sex and the City” scene — socializing and looking for jobs and careers — and thus have very low community-service rates, Lenkowsky says. Beginning around age 25, volunteer rates increase as people settle into jobs, have families and become more settled members of their communities, he says.

Furthermore, the country “is very stratified” when it comes to volunteerism opportunities for young people, says UT’s Musick. Volunteering among college students and college-bound high school students is at high levels, but “there’s too much tendency to focus on these populations,” which inflates the overall picture of whether volunteering is actually becoming more prevalent in our society, Musick says.

Based on his extensive study of factors that lead to volunteering, Musick says, even though rates have risen at selective colleges and among college-bound high-school students, “in the rest of the population, I’ll bet it hasn’t changed very much.” Churches are the main center of American volunteering, “and are they fundamentally changing in ways that would lead to more volunteering? No.” ■

BACKGROUND

Volunteers of America

From volunteer firefighting to street-cleaning brigades, grassroots voluntary efforts to serve and improve communities date back to America’s earliest

history. Starting in the mid-20th century, however, the federal government, schools and colleges began establishing formal volunteerism programs, sometimes integrated into class work, as education theorists found that real-life work enhanced learning.¹⁵

In 1736, young men in Philadelphia signed up for the first American volunteer firefighting company, founded by Benjamin Franklin. In the early 1800s, a Protestant religious revival in the United States known as the Second Great Awakening spurred many young people to work for the abolition of slavery and for the temperance movement to discourage drunkenness. In the early 19th century, juvenile anti-slavery societies collected signatures of teens and children on petitions they forwarded to Congress, urging lawmakers to abolish slavery.

In New York City in 1915, 25,000 children in neighborhood groups picked up litter, reported overflowing trash cans and urged adults to keep communities tidy. In the 1920s, the National Safety Council — a nonprofit group founded by volunteers in 1915 to tackle safety issues — helped students form school-based committees to study safety hazards and propose solutions.¹⁶

Beginning in the 1920s, volunteers conceived of and built the Appalachian Trail — the wilderness pathway for hikers that spans the mountain ranges of the East Coast. And in 1954, Philadelphia volunteers opened the first U.S. Meals on Wheels programs — begun in Britain in 1939 — to deliver food to homebound people; the initiative soon spread nationwide, with high school and college students making many of the deliveries.

During emergencies such as wars and natural disasters, many children and teens helped out because adults were busy elsewhere. During the Civil War, child volunteers sewed bandages and bedding for soldiers and collected money to buy them food. During

World War II, the city of Chicago established 30,000 small plots in parks where fifth- through eighth-graders cultivated “victory gardens” to boost the nation’s food supply. Communities around the country followed suit.¹⁷

American membership organizations, such as the business-networking group Kiwanis, founded in 1915 in Detroit, routinely included volunteer service as a top activity, “and many had youth auxiliaries,” says Catholic University’s Youniss.

The Great Depression of the 1930s saw students as well as adults volunteer in soup kitchens and breadlines for the jobless and homeless, says Youniss. “The thought was that if you were well enough off to be in school, then you should help” those in greater need.

The 1930s Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, provided work and a small stipend for young men who couldn’t find other jobs. The program was the first in a long line of government service projects for young people that have offered stipends. Others include today’s AmeriCorps and Teach for America programs. Despite its modest pay, mainly sent home to the young men’s families, the CCC was widely viewed as a volunteer program because the work benefited the community rather than private interests.

Beginning in the 1960s, some policymakers’ interest grew in government-sponsored volunteerism. Government service programs have had two main goals, says Indiana University’s Lenkowsky. “One is to get more people involved in working on society’s problems,” and the other “to encourage a lifetime of civic engagement.”

In 1961 President John F. Kennedy proposed and Congress approved establishment of the Peace Corps. The goal was to place volunteers of all ages — although mainly young adults — in less industrialized countries, to help with community-development projects and

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Chronology

1700s-1910s

Americans form volunteer groups to tackle social problems from disease to drunkenness.

1736

Benjamin Franklin enlists young Philadelphia men as the first American volunteer firefighters.

1835

In his classic book *Democracy in America*, French historian Alexis de Tocqueville reports on Americans' many voluntary groups promoting "public safety, commerce, industry, morality and religion."

1916

In *Democracy and Education*, American philosopher John Dewey argues that children's minds are formed only in the context of their experiences in society.

1930s-1970s

Beginning in the Great Depression, the federal government creates community-service programs.

1933

President Franklin D. Roosevelt creates the Civilian Conservation Corps, in which young unemployed men get modest stipends to restore public lands.

1961

President John F. Kennedy establishes the Peace Corps.

1964

President Lyndon B. Johnson establishes domestic volunteer programs, including VISTA, Job Corps, Neighborhood Youth Corps and the Teacher Corps.

1971

White House Conference on Youth calls for schools to link studies to community service.

1979

Volunteer rate among 16- to 19-year-olds is 20.9 percent.

1980s-1990s

As young people's volunteering rates drop, colleges, schools and the federal government seek ways to encourage community service.

1985

The presidents of Brown, Georgetown and Stanford universities promote community service.

1989

Volunteer rate for 16- to 19-year-olds hits a low of 13.4 percent.

1990

National Service Act authorizes funds for independent Points of Lights Foundation, proposed by President George H. W. Bush, to encourage volunteerism.

1992

Democratic presidential candidate Bill Clinton promises to create a young people's service corps and give college aid to anyone serving for at least a year.

1993

Congress enacts AmeriCorps, as proposed by President Clinton. . . . Federal appeals court declares that schools may require community service for graduation (*Steirer v. Bethlehem Area School District*).

1994

Led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., congressional Republi-

cans begin an unsuccessful multi-year campaign to end AmeriCorps.

1996

Two more federal appeals courts rule that service requirements don't violate students' constitutional rights.

2000s Volunteer service becomes a standard feature of high school and college life.

2005

After Hurricane Katrina, volunteers clear debris and begin rebuilding New Orleans.

2007

Volunteer rate for 16- to 19-year-olds rises to 24.5 percent.

2009

President Barack Obama signs a law to triple AmeriCorps in eight years.

2010

People ages 20 to 24 continue to have the lowest volunteer rate.

2011

Congressional Republicans vote to phase out AmeriCorps, but Senate Democrats block the move. . . . House Education and the Workforce Committee warns AmeriCorps against politicization after some volunteers are found to have worked in advocacy positions for Planned Parenthood. . . . AmeriCorps volunteers perform energy audits to aid conservation in Iowa and help police in Albany, N.Y., collect information from neighbors about a crime wave.

2012

White House says summer jobs program for disadvantaged youth will include 4,000 AmeriCorps positions.

Volunteer Programs Lacking for Low-Income Kids

“It’s not because adolescents aren’t interested.”

Volunteer opportunities are much scarcer for students from low-income families than for those from wealthy backgrounds — a problem that can have life-long impacts, including low participation in voting and other civic engagement, scholars say.

“There is a huge socioeconomic gap” in service opportunities, as there is for most other educational opportunities, says James Youniss, a research professor of psychology at Catholic University, in Washington.

“If a school has low-income students or many immigrants,” for example, “it’s less likely to have” programs known to improve students’ civic involvement, including service-learning programs that link classroom work with volunteer opportunities, Youniss says. It’s well known — and often lamented — that poor people generally vote at lower rates than better-off people, and fewer opportunities to build civic engagement during youth are partly to blame, he says.

Robert Atkins, an associate professor of nursing and childhood studies at Rutgers University, runs STARR, a multi-faceted youth-development program for teens in Camden, N.J., which consistently ranks among the nation’s poorest cities. In 2009, for example, 36 percent of residents lived below the poverty level and 18 percent of those had incomes 50 percent or more below the poverty threshold.¹ The gulf between volunteerism opportunities for low-income and middle- and upper-income

students mirrors many other socioeconomic gaps in society, such as health-care access, Atkins says.

Volunteerism among low-income young people isn’t rare “because adolescents aren’t interested,” Atkins says. His program, which he launched in 1995, includes various service opportunities that “the kids love,” he says.

For example, “we deliver turkey baskets” each Thanksgiving to needy families, Atkins continues. A church donates a room, “and the adolescents put the baskets together,” then “we sit in the car while they go to the door and say, ‘Happy Thanksgiving.’ It’s great for them, and they love doing the turkey baskets. They’re often the recipients of giving, so the opportunity to give themselves” is rare.

Other activities have included tree planting, voter-registration drives and walkathons for causes such as the immune-system disease lupus. “They don’t know in advance that they’re going to love doing these things,” Atkins says. “But once they do it, they volunteer to do it again. And it’s very good for the communities they’re part of” because it gives everyone a different view of the teens, he says.

A low ratio of adults to young people in low-income areas is one of the biggest obstacles to improving the rate of youth volunteering in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, Atkins says. “There are just simply fewer adults to pitch in and help” kids get involved, he says.

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spread goodwill for the United States; volunteers received modest stipends.¹⁸

In 1964, as part of his War on Poverty, President Lyndon B. Johnson created VISTA — Volunteers in Service to America — which placed volunteers in community organizations to help educate and train low-income people. VISTA workers got a modest living stipend and either a small cash payment or an education grant after a year’s service.

Individual programs came and went, but presidents Richard M. Nixon (Republican, 1969-1974), Jimmy Carter (Democrat, 1977-1981) and George H. W. Bush (Republican, 1989-1993) all supported and worked to maintain at least some federal role in youth volunteerism.

In 1993, Democratic President Bill Clinton created AmeriCorps — which places young people in community-

based nonprofit organizations to help with education, health, environmental and other projects — and the Corporation for National and Community Service to manage government volunteerism efforts.

During the Clinton years, however, Republican lawmakers increasingly argued that public-sector activity was damaging in arenas where private-sector initiatives existed.

“The program distorts the true sense of volunteerism and perpetuates the notion that the solution to every problem is just one big-government program away,” said Rep. Todd Tiahrt, R-Kan., pitching repeal of AmeriCorps in 1997.¹⁹

AmeriCorps won more Republican friends in the late 1990s and 2000s, however. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who had voted against establishing the

program in 1993, said in January 2000 that “overall, the program has been a success. And it was a failure on my part not to recognize that earlier.”²⁰

To the surprise of some, when Republican President George W. Bush took office in 2001, he urged every American to devote 4,000 hours over a lifetime to community service and won substantial conservative backing for doubling Peace Corps membership and increasing AmeriCorps membership by 50 percent. At Bush’s urging, Congress increased funding for both programs, although Peace Corps funds fell short of Bush’s goal.²¹

University Service

Around the turn of the 20th century, some American philosophers

Atkins says low-income urban communities tend to be “child-saturated,” with 30 to 40 percent of the population under age 18, making a ratio of only about two adults per child, compared to three in middle-income towns such as nearby Cherry Hill, where Atkins lives.

The high ratio of children to adults also “makes the kids seem more like a problem to be dealt with and kept out of trouble,” not “a resource that could do some service,” he adds. As a result, communities are more likely to organize activities they hope will keep teens off the street, such as “midnight basketball leagues,” and less likely to come up with ideas for adolescents to perform community service.

“There’s been a national effort to get kids more engaged, but I’m not sure if that can trickle down to Camden,” says Atkins. “Instead of helping these kids get involved in actively doing things, people are more likely to talk to them about what not to do, such as avoiding pregnancy.”

Adults in low-income neighborhoods generally “are less educated, and they’re working a lot. And . . . many don’t have



STARR Program/Bill Cramer

Tree planting draws eager volunteers from the STARR program at Rutgers University’s campus in Camden, N.J. STARR President Robert Atkins is at right.

any volunteering experience of their own” to draw on, he says.

Urban adults also tend to be younger, and many have young children of their own. Older adults are more likely to have the time and ability to engage in volunteer work and help out youngsters, Atkins says. Younger adults also “have less confidence in their ability to structure these opportunities,” and if adults aren’t there to

provide the foundation, “it’s not surprising that it doesn’t happen.”

Atkins is pushing one potential solution: “micro” projects serving perhaps a dozen kids rather than hundreds.

“You don’t need to build a big community center but just get individuals who are interested in something” — participating in the arts or fixing up a local park, for example — and encourage adults “to find a way to share that interest with some kids,” he says.

— Marcia Clemmitt

¹ “Camden, New Jersey, Poverty Rate Data — Information About Poor and Low-Income Residents,” City-Data website, www.city-data.com/poverty/poverty-Camden-New-Jersey.html.

theorized that real-world experience integrated into schooling would improve learning and society. John Dewey (1859-1952), a professor of psychology and philosophy at the University of Chicago and Columbia University, developed the theory that lies behind many of today’s university programs. “All genuine education comes about through experience” that the learner then reflects on, Dewey wrote.²² When education fosters “membership within . . . a little community, saturating” students “with the spirit of service, . . . we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely and harmonious.”²³

These ideas percolated in the education community throughout the 20th century. A follow-up report to a 1971 White House Conference on Youth, for example, recommended that schools

and colleges utilize the service-learning link to improve education.

But the movement among campuses to foster student service really took off in the 1980s, says Enos, of Bryant University. At the time, social analysts had christened the current generation of students the “Me Generation,” focused on furthering careers and making money and unconcerned with being good citizens and neighbors. In response, new organizations emerged to promote service.²⁴

Notably, in 1985, the presidents of Stanford, Brown and Georgetown universities joined the president of the Education Commission of the States — an information-exchange forum consisting of the governments of 49 states, three territories and the District of Columbia — to form Campus Compact, a group that would help colleges develop systems to foster student ser-

vice. As of 2011, more than 1,100 colleges and universities are members.²⁵

“The most important thing an institution does is not to prepare a student for a career but for life as a citizen,” said Campus Compact co-founder Frank Newman, former president of the University of Rhode Island.²⁶

Initially, Campus Compact mainly helped schools establish extracurricular service programs, but around 1990 the group began to focus on integrating volunteer work into academic courses — “service learning,” wrote Enos.²⁷ Also in 1990, President George H. W. Bush signed into law Serve America — now called Learn and Serve America, a federal grant program to establish service learning on campuses.

As usually defined, “service learning” means incorporating service, such as working in a homeless shelter, into

a class in a subject such as urban policy. But service done without a class tie-in also may fall under the definition if students are required to analyze the service by, for example, writing about it. Some schools, such as Kentucky's Berea College, have decades-long service-learning traditions, and in the 1990s the idea spread nationwide.

Today, 89 percent of colleges and universities sponsor service learning, says the University of Minnesota's Furco. Key to successful programs is integrating service into academic goals, he says. For example, tutoring might be good service experience in a math class if "one of a professor's learning objectives for students is how to communicate technical information so that it can be understood by lay people."

"The knowledge from the class informs what students do in the community, and what they do in the community makes information come alive in class," providing specific examples "to illuminate general concepts being studied," says Roosevelt University's Meyers.

But creating service-learning experiences that benefit both students and the community is difficult, many analysts say.

Some programs mainly provide good publicity for the school and résumé padding for students without meeting community needs, charged John W. Eby, a professor of sociology at Messiah College in Grantham, Pa.²⁸ For example, a semester's worth of course-related service may encourage a potentially harmful habit among young volunteers: pursuing service on a

given issue only briefly, wrote Eby. Short-term service "has potential to do actual harm to individuals," especially children who become attached to a young volunteer who disappears a few months later, he wrote.

Schools and Service

Beginning in the late 1980s, interest in service learning, along with general volunteerism, increased in high schools and even in some mid-

but service learning has been decreasing. In the 2003-04 school year, 44 percent of high schools offered service learning, but by 2008 only 35 percent did. Budget cuts and the need to prepare students for high-stakes standardized tests may explain the decrease. In a 1999 government study, almost all principals whose schools offered service learning said the programs helped the community and promoted altruism, but only 12 percent said they helped with academics and only 19 percent said they taught critical thinking.³⁰

California, Vermont and Wisconsin no longer put many resources into what were strong public school service-learning programs several years ago, and Florida's may be the only remaining volunteerism effort that truly weaves service and learning goals together, says the University of Minnesota's Furco.

In the 1990s, students brought three major lawsuits claiming that service requirements are unconstitutional. Federal courts decided all three in the schools' favor.

In a 1993 decision in *Steirer v. Bethlehem Area* [Pennsylvania] *School District*, the Third U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals rejected the argument that a district's 60-hour service requirement amounted to "involuntary servitude," banned under the 13th Amendment outlawing slavery. The amendment bans "forced labor through physical coercion," not service that is "primarily designed for the students' own benefit and education" by teaching them about the value of community work.³¹

While battles over service requirements grab headlines, researchers say



Habitat for Humanity/Steffan Hacker

Students from the Habitat for Humanity campus chapter at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, spent their week-long spring break building houses in Miami as part of Habitat's Collegiate Challenge program for high school and college volunteers.

dle and elementary schools. A sharp drop-off in teen volunteering between the early 1970s and the late 1980s sparked the interest.

In 1979, 92 percent of high schools reported making some extracurricular community-service options available to students, mostly informally, but only 15 percent offered service learning. By 1999, though, 83 percent of high schools offered service opportunities, many actually required it, and 46 percent of offered some service learning.²⁹

In the 2000s, volunteer programs, including requirements, persist in schools

Service-Learning Programs Aid Students, Nonprofits

Linking schoolwork and volunteerism is biggest challenge.

Service-learning programs, which tie students' volunteer work to their academic studies, are growing in popularity on college campuses, but they can be challenging to set up and administer effectively.

Schools must help both the students and the service organizations where they volunteer to understand what to expect from one another, says Vincent Ilustre, executive director of the Center for Public Service at Tulane University, in New Orleans.

On the volunteer end, "we encourage students to find something they love and stick to it, because we don't want the nonprofits to have to keep training new people," Ilustre says. Then "we need to educate the community about what these students can do," a challenge that generally requires a dedicated campus office, Ilustre and other experts say.

At Tulane, "I look at our community partners not just in terms of placement but as partners in educating our students," Ilustre says. "We run workshops that allow the community to understand the students, the university calendar" and so on.

Tulane has 420 nonprofits in its database, but with 1,200 to 1,500 students participating per semester, about two-thirds of the organizations won't get a placement at any given time, says Ilustre. To keep local organizations involved, the university provides workshops on topics such as nonprofit fundraising and budgeting.

Steven Meyers, a professor of psychology and social justice at Roosevelt University, in Chicago, says service-learning programs are most successful when they are "promoted by a university office that supports them" using "an up-to-date, well-vetted database of suitable programs for professors to use."

"It's unreasonable to expect" individual professors to delve into the community to find service-learning opportunities unaided, Meyers says.

Developing service projects that both serve the community and advance learning goals is a challenge for nonprofits as well as faculty.

Different schools and courses can take different approaches to doing this, says Sandra Enos, an associate professor of sociology at Bryant University, in Smithfield, R.I. Bryant, which began as a business school but recently added liberal-arts majors, generally favors projects in which students make specific, practical use of their class work, Enos says. For example, students might work with a community "client" to make the organization's marketing message more effective. Or students might help a school enhance the math-readiness of its kindergarteners.

For service learning to be effective, students must analyze their experiences and tie them to material they learn in class, says James Youniss, a research professor of psychology at Catholic University, in Washington.

"Discussions are a very effective tool" for fostering such learning, he says. For example, high-school students who volunteer in a daycare center should afterward be encouraged to discuss such issues as whether a pregnant 16-year-old should get a job, be allowed to go on welfare or be given an incentive to finish her education, he says.

Course-based service learning can work across the curriculum, says Meyers. For example, he describes an English composition course in which students worked with an anti-domestic-violence group, interviewed workers and then developed an effective way to write and post a blog to help inform people how to cope with domestic violence.

— Marcia Clemmitt

the more important question is whether programs are well managed.

For example, "the state of Maryland has this crazy 74-hour requirement" of service for graduation, "but they don't want to put resources into it," so that the quality of individual programs is all over the map, says Catholic University's Youniss. Furthermore, it's not even clear that such large programs are feasible, Youniss says. If every Maryland senior were to participate even in the most well-structured service programs, "organizations in the state couldn't absorb them all," he says.

AmeriCorps Questioned

Soon after Barack Obama took office in 2009, conservative opposition to AmeriCorps began building again.

Midway through 2009, his first year in office, Obama raised congressional eyebrows when he abruptly fired AmeriCorps' Inspector General Gerald Walpin. Inspectors general are government officials appointed to be independent watchdogs over federal programs. The administration said that the then-77-year-old Walpin had been "confused, disoriented" and "unable to answer questions"

at a Corporation for National and Community Service board meeting, raising doubts about "his capacity to serve."³²

Walpin argued that he was fired because he'd stated that an Obama supporter, Kevin Johnson, now mayor of Sacramento, Calif., had misused AmeriCorps grants at his nonprofit community-development agency, St. HOPE.³³

"While firing an investigator who uncovered the abuse of funds by a political ally might be considered an act of 'political courage' in Chicago politics, for most Americans it raises troubling questions," said Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., chairman of the House

Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.³⁴ (In November 2009, however, a Republican inquiry failed to find evidence that Walpin's dismissal was politically motivated.³⁵ In January 2011, a federal appeals court ruled against Walpin in a lawsuit he filed claiming wrongful firing.)³⁶

Also in 2009, Obama signed a bill passed by the Democratic-led Congress to triple AmeriCorps' size in eight years.³⁷

But AmeriCorps remains controversial, especially among staunch conservatives. As AmeriCorps expands, "there is a very strong chance that we will see that young people will be put into mandatory service," said Rep. Michele Bachmann, R-Minn., who campaigned unsuccessfully for the Republican presidential nomination. "There are provisions for what I would call re-education camps . . . where young people have to go and get trained in a philosophy that the government puts forward," she said.³⁸

CURRENT SITUATION

Federal Phaseout?

The Republican-led House of Representatives is pushing to phase out AmeriCorps, arguing that the pro-

gram wastes public money to accomplish community service that the private sector would effectively and willingly handle on its own.

In 2011 the House Appropriations Committee proposed cutting funding by about 70 percent, leaving money to



City Year volunteer Daniel Curme clears brush on a trail in Seattle on Oct. 7, 2011. The education-focused organization partners with public schools to provide full-time intervention for at-risk students.

City Year/Seattle/King County

support the National Senior Volunteer Program but gradually eliminating young-adult programs. Appropriators in the Democratic-led Senate, however, forced a compromise that resulted in only a minimal funding cut — about 2 percent — for the Corporation for National and Community Service.³⁹

Allegations continue to surface of left-wing politicization of AmeriCorps and were the subject of a June 2011 hearing in the House. Lawmakers queried Robert Velasco, the corporation's acting CEO, about two incidents, in New York City and Tacoma, Wash., in which AmeriCorps apparently violated laws against the use of federal funds to place vol-

unteers in positions related to "advocacy, lobbying, protesting, union organizing" or "partisan political activity." In both incidents, volunteers' work was related to the advocacy functions of Planned Parenthood, the reproductive-health provider and advocacy organization.⁴⁰

How the placements "could possibly abide by the spirit of volunteerism is beyond me," said Rep. Virginia Foxx, R-N.C., chairman of the Education and the Workforce Subcommittee on Higher Education. "I appreciate that once notified of these situations, the corporation acted swiftly to stop the prohibited activities," said Foxx. "However, our goal should be to prevent these kinds of activities before they take place."⁴¹

Both the corporation and AmeriCorps actively monitor local organizations that host volunteers for compliance with laws, but the large number of volunteers and organizations makes it difficult to spot all problems before they start, Velasco said.⁴² From now on, he said, the corporation would require organizations that host volunteers to reaffirm each year that they're following regulations.⁴³

Changing Landscape

The nature of volunteerism may be changing.

The worker pool has declined for some services traditionally provided by volunteers. Volunteer fire and emergency personnel, long a rural mainstay, have become harder and harder to find, for example.

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At Issue:

Should AmeriCorps be eliminated?



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Americans always have organized to help their neighbors. The government should stop paying for service through AmeriCorps. The budget crisis is reason enough to terminate AmeriCorps — and even the Corporation for National and Community Service, which oversees AmeriCorps.

Washington has funded many service, training and “volunteer” initiatives, which usually achieve some good but also plenty of bad. Journalist Jim Bovard has documented political abuse, waste and low priority work at AmeriCorps. Inexplicably, the Obama administration fired the corporation’s inspector general while Congress cut funding for his office.

Waste and inefficiency are inevitable because free labor will be treated like a free good. But even seemingly productive jobs won’t necessarily produce significant social benefits.

The critical question is not the cost-benefit ratio but the opportunity cost of AmeriCorps funding. Could the resources be better spent elsewhere? There is no reason to believe that a dollar for “national service” yields more good than an additional dollar spent on medical research or business investment.

Indeed, service comes in many forms. Being paid by Uncle Sam to shelve books in a library or teach in a public school is no more laudable than being paid by the local used book store or private school. Moreover, who should do the giving? It might be simpler if Washington empties pockets nationwide, giving either grants or labor to charity. But the right way is for individuals to directly aid deserving groups.

Nor is dependence on government healthy for private charities. Although charities get to train publicly funded volunteers, government inevitably will favor some activities. Such preferences subtly pressure organizations to adjust their mission to ensure eligibility for funding. An early review by Public/Private Ventures, a nonprofit that seeks to improve the effectiveness of anti-poverty programs, noted that the corporation aggressively shaped service programs. An assessment in the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* found that those involved sought to “influence the type of implementation process that fits their own political interests.”

Moreover, AmeriCorps is likely to encourage people to further abdicate their civic responsibilities. Federally funded service makes it less necessary for people to contribute and volunteer. People won’t do more if they perceive no need to do so, and they will see less need if Washington provides charities with “volunteers.”

Never content to wait for government to act, Americans always have worked with families, friends and neighbors to help those around them. Uncle Sam should stop paying them to help today.



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WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, JANUARY 2012

The vast majority of volunteers act without support from government, and that’s the way it should be. Every year, 63 million Americans strengthen their communities by leading scout troops or coaching soccer, raising money for band uniforms or leading museum tours. These are good things, and government doesn’t need to interfere.

On the other hand, many functions widely understood to be public priorities are in desperate need of an affordable source of dedicated human capital. For example, providing a quality education is labor intensive, particularly in high-poverty schools where many children need extra supports. National service can be a key part of a strategy to turn around failing schools. That’s why the widely acclaimed Diplomas Now initiative deploys City Year corps members to take action when middle school students exhibit early warning signs of dropping out.

In other cases, national service members play a critical role organizing community volunteers. For example, in Madison, Wis., the Schools of Hope initiative has wiped out racial disparities in reading with community and college volunteer tutors recruited and supervised by national service members. This kind of low-cost intervention saves significant public funding down the road.

AmeriCorps funding is key to both City Year and Schools of Hope. AmeriCorps members serve full time (or make a substantial part-time commitment) and receive a modest stipend and education award in return. In addition to serving in schools, AmeriCorps members address a wide range of locally determined needs, including community health centers, early-childhood programs and college access initiatives. In fact, AmeriCorps figures prominently in a Joplin, Mo., monument to the volunteers who helped its post-tornado recovery.

Not only is AmeriCorps a low-cost way to direct human resources to public problems but it also creates badly needed entry jobs for priority populations. Most AmeriCorps positions are filled by young adults — a group facing the highest rates of unemployment. Older adults who have more to give after retirement also serve — and by so doing, stay healthy and independent. A new priority for AmeriCorps is to engage veterans, a population suffering from high rates of unemployment and a strong desire to serve their communities.

At a time when nonprofit organizations are stretched thin with the weak economy, too many schools are struggling and millions of Americans are out of work and ready to serve, we should be expanding AmeriCorps, not eliminating it.

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Thomas F. O'Hara, coordinator of the Firemen's Association of the State of New York volunteer programs, noted last summer that the number of volunteer firefighters in New York "has declined over the past two decades — from nearly 100,000 in the 1990s to a little over 88,000 today," even as the population needing service has increased.⁴⁴

Largely thanks to school and university programs, young people volunteer more today than in the past. Studies also report, however, that young people tend to perform their service with less regularity than adult volunteers and don't volunteer for the same causes for years, as adults often do, so organizations and causes may benefit less, long term, from youth service.⁴⁵

"Religion is the best predictor we have of both giving and volunteering, including for non-religious causes," and religious affiliation is in a long decline, says Lenkowsky of Indiana University. Alongside the long, slow drop in religious affiliation, "we see giving and volunteering declining too."⁴⁶

Participation is sharply up for some community-service programs. Applications for AmeriCorps rose from 360,000 for 80,000 available slots in 2008-2009 to 536,000 applications for 2009-2010. Teach for America, which places graduates of selective colleges in high-need schools for two-year teaching stints, received 25,000 applications in 2008 and 48,000 in 2011.⁴⁷

The recession and resulting bad job market cloud the meaning of these statistics, however. The federal programs offer modest payment, a possible draw in a tough job market. In addition, volunteer service offers a chance to network and learn new skills, and "people might recognize this more in the recession . . . because they don't have a job and they are looking for ways to build their résumés," said Peter Levine, director of CIRCLE — The Center for Information on Research Learning and

Engagement, a research group based at Tufts University, in Medford, Mass.⁴⁸

But Teach for America Executive Vice President Elissa Kim is skeptical of that analysis. "I don't think people are just jumping on the bandwagon . . . because the economy is shaky." Teach for America applicants make the choice based on whether "this is the right thing for them," she says.⁴⁹ ■

OUTLOOK

Good Citizenship

Schools and colleges have built volunteer programs partly in hopes of creating a more involved citizenry. Research suggests that participating in thoughtfully structured service makes people more likely to participate in activities such as voting, which is traditionally seen as the key responsibility of citizenship.

Recently, however, some scholars have spotted an unforeseen trend that may change that equation. Young people, especially, say some researchers, have begun to view volunteer service itself as a far more important part of being a good citizen than political activities such as staying informed on public issues and voting.

"In the 1960s and '70s, young people's involvement [in society] tended to be political," as when they fueled the civil-rights and anti-war movements, says Catholic University's Youniss, "but now when kids think of doing service to society, they think of doing good deeds" — acts of charity, essentially — "not any kind of political acts."

Over the past three decades, numerous political analysts have raised alarms about Americans becoming too disconnected from society. They have pointed to evidence such as low voting rates, especially among younger people, and surveys showing that many

people have lost faith in government's ability to tackle important problems, wrote Russell J. Dalton, a political science professor at the University of California, Irvine. But alongside the drop in some traditional measures of active citizenship has come a rise in young people's affinity for volunteer service as a primary form of social engagement, wrote Dalton, one of the main researchers following that trend.⁵⁰

Despite the alarms of some, the new view of citizenship is not necessarily something to fear, since it replaces interest in politics with more concern about "the welfare of others," Dalton said. He describes a conversation he had with a college student who helped out in New Orleans in 2005, after Hurricane Katrina. While the young man "was active on a variety of social and political causes," including poverty in Africa and the Iraq War, he had "a stark lack of interest" in political parties and voting. That's typical of the "many Americans" who now "believe they are fully engaged in society even if they do not vote." Dalton said. Still, he argues, the rise in volunteerism can be used to turn young people on to voting as well.⁵¹

It's unclear whether the new trend relates to schools' emphasis on volunteer work or exactly how it will affect political and social life. However, the trend does mean that traditional groups such as political parties will have to re-tool their messages to appeal to young nonvoters who are nevertheless interested in public service, Dalton wrote. For example, a political campaign could explain "how elections can have an even greater impact on the issues for which youth now volunteer" than volunteering itself can have, he said.

Many experts on volunteerism would like to see it continue to rise among young people but wonder how to accomplish that. "We don't call on young people enough," says Indiana University's Lenkowsky. Rebranding might help, according to some social-marketing experts, he says. "The word 'volunteer'

sounds like something your grandmother would do. You need to make it cool” to continue to entice a new generation.⁵² ■

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Students partaking in a financial-aid program at Tulsa Community College in Oklahoma are required to volunteer 40 hours per year to remain eligible for assistance.

Trends

DiBlasio, Natalie, "Longer-Term Volunteering Is the Drill for Collegians," *USA Today*, Nov. 29, 2011, p. D3, www.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2011-11-23/sharing-college-students-volunteering/51447910/1.

Students who are volunteering are doing so more regularly or on a longer-term basis, according to an officer with the Corporation for National and Community Service.

Driscoll, Jessica, "Students Help Launch School Pantry," *Gloucester County (N.J.) Times*, Oct. 12, 2011, www.nj.com/gloucester-county/index.ssf/2011/10/clayton_school_district_partne.html.

The Food Bank of South Jersey is working with local high school students to open and operate pantries throughout the area.

Matchan, Linda, "Volunteering Spirit Catches Fire," *The Boston Globe*, Feb. 1, 2011, p. 1, articles.boston.com/2011-02-01/news/29339349_1_young-adults-college-students-national-service.

Community service applications are soaring in Boston, where college students abound and volunteer opportunities are plentiful.

Rampell, Catherine, "In Service to the Public," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2011, p. B1, www.nytimes.com/2011/03/02/business/02graduates.html?pagewanted=all.

Applications for AmeriCorps and Teach for America positions have increased in recent years as corporate job offerings have dried up.

Santana, Marco, "Kids With a Conscience — and a Camera," *Chicago Daily Herald*, April 8, 2011, p. 4, www.dailyherald.com/article/20110407/news/704079897/.

An Illinois volunteer group is encouraging youth volunteers to videotape their work in hopes of persuading other students to engage in community service.

Thomas, Emma, "A Yearning to Give Back," *News Sentinel (Knoxville, Tenn.)*, May 15, 2011, p. B1, www.knoxnews.com/news/2011/may/15/a-yearning-to-give-back/?print=1.

Previous volunteer experience is encouraging many college students to pursue public-service jobs upon graduation.

Trevizo, Eddi, "Youth Group Uses Social Media to Encourage Involvement," *Arizona Republic*, Feb. 12, 2011, p. 3, www.azcentral.com/community/swvalley/articles/2011/02/14/20110214arizona-project-five-community-involvement.html.

A group of Arizona high school students has created a social media campaign to encourage youths to volunteer and participate in community activities.

Tumulty, Brian, "New York State Has Lowest Rate of Volunteerism, Report Shows," *Journal News (Westchester County, N.Y.)*, Aug. 14, 2011, p. AWP14.

New York ranks last among states in volunteerism, according to a report from the Corporation for National and Community Service.

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