Enabling College Students to Volunteer

Catherine Milton

INTRODUCTION

Popular wisdom suggests college-age young people are very much part of the "me" generation with values that promote materialism over altruism. For the past ten years, surveys of incoming freshmen nationwide conducted by Professor Alexander Astin at the University of California, Los Angeles, indicate that these students have diminishing concern about social and political problems. The surveys also report a dramatic increase in the percentage of students who state that the primary objective of a college education is "being very well-off financially" (76 percent in 1987 compared to 44 percent in 1966).

Many have speculated on the reasons for these trends: some place the blame on our national leaders, especially our two most recent presidents who both ran on anti-big-government platforms; others have placed the blame more on the institutions of higher learning themselves, claiming that they have fallen down in the important role of training young people to be well-informed citizens. Others claim that the reasons are economic, pointing out that students feel the need to work in order to get a jump on their careers and to offset the costs of higher education. The need for increased financial security is viewed by many as competing with the desire on the part of college students to be involved in important societal issues.

Whatever the causes, the problem has been of concern to many leaders of higher education. In 1985, Frank Newman wrote a report for The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching called *Higher Education and the American Resurgence* in which he states (p. 31):

> *[i]f there is a crisis in education in the United States today, it is less that test scores have declined than it is that we have failed to provide the education for citizenship that is still the most significant responsibiity of the nation's schools and colleges.*

In 1985 the presidents of Brown, Georgetown, and Stanford Universities, with assistance from the Education Commission of the States, announced the formation of Campus Compact as a means of stimulating student involvement in public service on college campuses. Today, over 200 college and university presidents have joined the national coalition and helped the formation of state compacts in Michigan, California, and Pennsylvania. At the same time, legislators in California, Connecticut, Delaware, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina and Vermont have passed laws which mandate that students attending state universities must "volunteer" a number of hours before graduation.

For the past five years I have worked to develop a program to involve college students in public service activites. Successful programs require support from the university at large, from community agencies seeking to use volunteers, and from the students themselves. The next sections present ideas that have been useful in the Stanford experience which I think will help others.

HELP FROM ABOVE—ROLE OF TOP ADMINISTRATORS

Developing and administering a program to encourage students to want to volunteer is a challenge in an era when some of the disincentives—financial,

Catherine Milton is a founder and director of the Public Service Center at Stanford University and a lecturer in the Stanford University Public Police Program. For 15 years she worked in Washington, D.C. on criminal justice issues, working for the U.S. Treasury Department and other Federal offices, and was staff member of the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging. She has published *Police Use of Deadly Force*, *Little Sisters and the Law*, *Women in Policing*, and *History of Black Americans*.

peer pressure, academic programs which ignore the value of experiential learning—are very real. At those universities where volunteer programs are working well, several lessons can be learned.

First, the support of the president and other top administrators who are visible to the student body is very important. Students are faced with important choices about how to spend their time. While it is a given for many students that they will have to work while in college (The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 1984 reported that 38.8% of all students worked part-time and 23.5% worked full-time), most new students arrive with important unspoken questions as to where they should put their energy: into studying, making friends, or volunteering. They are at a point in their lives when they are still open to advice from authority figures. I have heard many new student volunteers make such a comment as "I'm here to follow the advice given to freshmen by President (Donald) Kennedy" (the president of Stanford University). While there are examples of thriving volunteer programs that do not have the active support of presidents, most of these programs were established in an era when either the top administrator lent support or, as was the case at a number of universities like Yale and the University of California at Berkeley, an outside agency (the YMCA) established the programs by making a significant financial commitment.

Second, the support of the president, provost, and deans translates also into the allocation of resources to establish volunteer programs. An important resource is space, an identifiable place that is known on the campus where one can go if interested in volunteering or known in the community as the place on campus to find student volunteers. At Stanford we have a small building called Owen House which is home to the Public Service Center, at Brown University the Center for Public Service has space in an administration building in the heart of campus, and at Harvard the Phillips Brooks House is at the center of the campus. Equally important as an identifiable space is the presence of professional staff or faculty to administer the programs and ensure that the programs help fulfill the academic mission of the university. At a private university, support for staff also means approval for and assistance in fundraising so that an independent program endowment can be established.

ROLE OF COMMUNITY AND FACULTY

Even if the administrator of a program has the active support from above, he or she cannot run a well-managed program without the active support of the community and of faculty. Training students to be effective volunteers requires assistance from faculty and staff as well as from community agencies. I consider it my most important task to help the students learn by doing without inflicting harm on those who are the objects of good intentions, but I am able to accomplish that goal only with the active help of experienced people in the community. Students who want to volunteer often approach their tasks with incredible enthusiam and energy. Most of the time, these traits are positive additions to the agency. The agency which is on the receiving end of such a volunteer can get new ideas for approaching difficult tasks, can feel reenergized about the importance of the task at hand—whether it is helping to feed the hungry, playing with children who are terminally ill, or running a voter registration drive in a poor community.

Working with students, however, can also present problems. The community agency desperately in need of volunteers can be greatly disappointed when exam period or Spring Break comes and it suddenly finds that the college volunteers are not available. Yet if these kinds of problems are anticipated and programs are planned in advance around the predictable school schedules, then success is much more likely. The administrators of programs on college campuses play the important role of mediators between student responsibilities and agency needs.

One example of a program that works extremely well within the constraints of the university calendar is a tutoring program at Stanford which matches 200 Stanford students with school children in the nearby Ravenswood School District, one

of the poorest in the state of California. For at least ten years, Stanford students, either as individuals or in groups, had volunteered to tutor in East Palo Alto. Students managed to establish one program which provided some continuity from year to year; but as this program had no formal relationship with the school system, teachers were usually unaware of what the tutors were doing at their Saturday morning tutoring sessions and the tutors were left unguided as to what to teach. The result was often frustration on the part of all involved.

After the Public Service Center at Stanford was established, an early goal became the establishment of a formal tutoring program with the Ravenswood School District. A grant from the San Francisco Foundation made it possible to hire a program director. Three years later, with an additional grant from the Stuart Foundation, we have added more structure to the program by using experienced tutors to help select and orient new tutors and be liaisons with each principal. We also work closely with teachers and the school system to specify realistic academic goals for the tutors and clear responsibilities. (We require a minimum of two hours per week and at least a six month commitment.) During the 1988-89 academic year we have a full contingent of tutors and have had to turn away those who were not able to sign up early in the quarter.

The program also has been successful in providing a variety of ways for faculty and students to get involved. Through the School of Education we can now offer preparatory courses for the tutors, which means that interested students can get academic credit for their training. Faculty have joined the effort by developing curriculum for the students; for example, a professor of linguistics worked with a sixth grade class on language skills. We also have an additional 250 students who are working weekly in the school district to provide physical education during the school day. Another group of students plans, raises funds, and runs a summer enrichment program on the Stanford campus for middle school children.

Whether an agency is seeking the assistance of one student volunteer or a group, it is important to structure the experience in advance. Requiring prospective placement agencies to fill out a form in advance describing the project or tasks, identifying the supervisor or mentor, and clearly stating the expectations in terms of hours, makes it more likely that the experience will be a positive one for both the agency and the volunteer(s). It is also important for all the volunteers to be trained or oriented in advance by the university staff, the agency staff, or a combination of both. And, in those cases where the orientation is done by the community agency, there should be a clear understanding that once orientation is completed, the student, if still acceptable to the agency, has an obligation to fulfill his/her commitment to that agency. Students are also more likely to want to volunteer for an agency that has some flexibility in hours expected or has some jobs that can be done from the dorm room—for example, a number of our students are glad to take "hot line" calls from their dorm rooms, do "office work," or work on special projects at a time that is convenient for them.

The community agency leader plays a pivotal role in maintaining a student's interest in volunteering in the community. Those individuals in the community who can comfortably join in partnership with the university to offer the students the opportunity to search for new experiences in the field are more likely to attract students who will be committed in the long run to the agency's goals. Students appreciate the opportunity to learn firsthand from their supervisors about the agency and what is expected. Students are eager for mentors and will be more likely to return to those agencies with staffs that take an interest in them and make them feel that their contribution will really matter. Students who are volunteering their time want to feel that they are making a difference.

The administrator of a college volunteer program needs to understand that for the program to succeed, in the long run, it must help fulfill the mission of the university to teach the student. Volunteering can provide the student with an opportunity to be exposed to a set of

situations very different from what they have encountered before. For example, one group of students last Spring volunteered to work in homeless shelters for a week. They were accompanied by a faculty member who had experience with mental health issues and public policy. None of these students had ever been in a shelter before and after the week's experience all were motivated to try to do something that would help alleviate the problems of the homeless. The students formed a task force to publicize volunteer opportunities in the nearby communities. One was asked to join a local government task force on the homeless; a few others are working with a faculty member on a report on the special problems of the children of the homeless; and all are committed to educating the college community about the problems through conferences and individual speakers.

We have formalized our relationships with the community and with the faculty by establishing an advisory committee and a faculty steering committee. On our advisory board we have asked the assistance of people who represent the many different "communities" whose support we need. Frank Newman, executive director of the Education Commission of the States, is obviously able to help with ideas from higher education; John Gardner, because of his wealth of experience in launching new ideas and new organizations helps us to remain entrepreneurial; California State Senator Becky Morgan has helped us begin a state internship program; and Charlie Mae Knight, Superintendent of Schools in East Palo Alto, helped us develop our tutoring program. Other members of the advisory committee bring skills and insights from their roles as directors of foundations, directors of nonprofit agencies that host our students, members of the Stanford Board of Trustees, and community volunteers.

A faculty steering committee composed of well-known and respected Stanford faculty has helped to guide the staff and students with advice on how to evaluate programs and the complicated process of linking the volunteer experiences to academic programs when appropriate. Members of the faculty committee also serve on selection committees for our fellowship and internship programs.

Faculty involvement is critical because in some instances what the community agency needs from the volunteer is more than what a student alone can offer. Students working with faculty are able to develop important research skills while contributing to the community. In some classrooms, professors have been able to integrate the volunteer experience into the curriculum either by helping to prepare the student for a particular volunteer experience (working with handicapped children, the elderly, or tutoring, for example) or have made it possible for students to learn the complexities involved in such a project as cleaning up toxic wastes. Integration of the volunteer experience into the curriculum can be an ideal arrangement: the community agency is more likely to have volunteers who have an intellectual understanding of the issues and the time to fulfill the commitments.

CRITICAL ROLE OF STUDENTS

But the role of an administrator of a volunteer program on a college campus is more than simply putting together a well-managed program. It is also to blend together the best of student and administrator's abilities. A successful volunteer program designed for students must have students actively involved in all aspects of the program—fundraising, management, recruitment and training volunteers. The administrator's role is to encourage students to get involved, to try to make a difference, and to learn from their experiences.

There are a variety of incentives one can offer students. One obvious one is financial. For example, the idea for the East Palo Alto Summer Academy (EPASA) was that of a student who was a junior. He was encouraged by a public service summer fellowship program, which offered a stipend of up to $1200 to students who developed summer service projects. With his fellowship he designed and implemented a summer program for seventh graders from the Ravenswood School District that would encourage them to pursue higher education rather than drop out of high school. Funds for

...ship were provided by ... who, because of his own ...e, recognized the importance of ...ense summer opportunity.

Other important incentives are encouraging a sense of ownership of the programs on the part of students. Many of the most successful college volunteer programs are run by student organizations in close cooperation with a faculty or staff advisor. The students decide on priorities, have responsibility for fund raising, and pick their leaders. The advisor is supportive in a quiet way. One such organization is Stanford in Government (SIG), a student organization which was established 25 years ago to help students find internships in government. Every summer, SIG helps place over 100 student volunteers in government offices in Washington and volunteers have recently lobbied state legislatures and local governments to raise money to develop programs. Student leaders of such volunteer organizations learn how to manage a complicated organization, how to motivate volunteers, and how to create incentive programs for other students.

Programs like Stanford in Government work well because both students and administrators contribute important skills. For example, students develop the promotional materials since they know how best to reach other students, and student identification with the program allows a large percentage of its financial support to come from the student body itself. The advisor serves as a memory bank and can warn of possible problems, stressing the need to plan ahead. If problems arise with an outside agency, the advisor can be a representative of the university in an attempt to work out the best solution. The advisor also supports the program in those years when the student leaders are weak and assures continuity of the program by helping to select strong leaders to carry on.

NEED FOR COMPREHENSIVE PROGRAMS

A comprehensive volunteer program will attempt to serve a wide variety of students, and one important means of doing so is through a "volunteer clearinghouse" that is geared for the college community. A clearinghouse can provide an important avenue for students who are interested in a particular subject area, whether it be health care, the environment, education, or international development. By listing volunteer opportunities for students in these and other categories, the students have the chance to learn in a practial setting more about subjects they may be studying. At Stanford, we are now able to place more than 600 public service opportunities on the mainframe computer system so that students sitting in the library or in their dorm can browse through various listings and decide if they want to pursue some further.

Creating a successful volunteer program for college students involves finding the best way to get students to participate and ensuring that once they participate they have positive experiences. Variety is an important ingredient in any volunteer program designed for students because it is through variety that large numbers of students are first attracted to the programs and through variety that they are encouraged to expand and try new ventures. For example, all of the successful programs have their own techniques for recruiting new volunteers (at a university, a fourth of the student body may be new in any given year). Annual programs must be presented to reach these new students when they first come. "Community Fairs," "Open Houses," or one-day service projects provide easy and effective ways to interest students in volunteer opportunities.

If a one-day service project is programmed, planning with the community agency is required so that the students are made aware of how this project fits into the bigger picture. For example, students who are being asked to serve food at a program for the hungry need to be educated about the problem of hunger in the community and that what they may be doing is only a part of a larger solution.

Many students are uncomfortable volunteering alone. At Stanford, a number of students from the same dormitory often volunteer together on a weekly basis. Group projects help build a sense of com-

munity among students as they provide physical education to youngsters who do not have athletics at their schools, or collect food for the hungry, or help in a reforestation program.

CHALLENGES

The challenges in developing and administering a volunteer program for college students are many. At Stanford, we now have about half of the undergraduate population (approximately 3,000 students) involved as volunteers at some point during their college career. If we are to make these positive experiences for all, we need to continue to work to integrate the experiences into the overall educational experience for the student and to work to eliminate the severe financial disincentives that discourage students from becoming active volunteers.

The work on integrating public service with the curriculum has to be done by faculty, but the work on financial incentives is something that all involved can influence. There are several legislative proposals that have been introduced in Congress, and hearings are being held to consider a variety of college loan forgiveness programs based on volunteer service either during or after college. Anyone interested in nourishing a climate where volunteering is encouraged needs to take an interest in these proposals since they will have an impact if implemented. For example, if more states follow the lead that California and others have taken to "mandate" a certain number of volunteer hours for college students at state-supported institutions, what will be the impact on the community agencies which suddenly have to train and place thousands of "volunteers"? Without proper staffing at the college end, it could create confusion and actually end up discouraging future volunteers.

If, however, programs can be developed that will make it possible for students seriously interested in volunteering to have the opportunity to do so, then the likelihood is that those young persons will experience first hand the joy and satisfaction that can come from helping someone else.

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Anna Waring, graduate student at Stanford's School of Education.