THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN VOLUNTARISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY*

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The twenty first century is now upon us, if not in the calendar, at least in the post modern culture in which many of us already participate. Its contours are becoming more clearly defined. Community and national economies are being integrated into a global system, with parts of one product manufactured in several different places, the research for that done in still other places, and the product itself sold throughout the world. Into this seeming homogenisation lies the potential for continuing fractiousness between those who can afford it and those who cannot, between those who insist one cannot live without and those who feel it is an unwise capitalist imposition, between those who think it is an improvement on nature and those who think the environment is diminished by its invention. It is a world that creates new types of organisations and social relations to bring a new product into being at the same time that social relations themselves are increasingly being regarded as just another commodity. It is an era very dependent on and continually inventing ever higher technology while large masses of people still live without electricity, potable water, and other simple requirements of the 20th century. The metaphor of a global village is being fulfilled, but town criers, gossip mills and diviners continue to coexist with satellites, cellular phones and electronic mail.

Voluntarism will still be needed in such a world for many reasons. Let me cite just three: (1) the fact that volunteers respond to people in need; (2) the need for voluntarism to humanise the technology; and (3) the ability of voluntarism to bridge divisions among people.

The first reason centres on the fact that volunteering is primarily a response to what people need. This will not change even in the 21st century. One can imagine the continuation of demands for assistance in dealing with social problems, both at an individual and community level, as well as in coping with stress accompanying family, corporate or global

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* *This paper was presented at the Australian Conference on Volunteering, Launceston, Tasmania, Australia, 1996.*

disasters. Most of these are low-tech and may thus give the wrong impression that volunteering will not be useful as cybernetics becomes even more pervasive. Indeed, needy people seem most comfortable with, and demand services at, the more basic side of the technological revolution.

Nevertheless, low-tech volunteering is simply a characteristic accompanying many projects volunteers do, rather than a necessary limitation of voluntarism itself. For instance, volunteers offered service at the high-end of technological requisites in a remote rural municipality in the Philippines, including assistance in the computerisation of its operations and geographic information system for its town planning, the better to regulate a multinational that dominates its territory. We can easily picture a volunteer as a counsellor, helping a person make sense of life, but she/he can just as easily run a computer science lab for a university's learning resource centre. He can serve as a *pro bono* lawyer instructing members of a rural NGO how to form a cooperative or how to prepare and read environmental impact assessments. She may bring tertiary-level medical services, complete with miniature lasers, to remote rural areas while manifesting the bedside manner of physicians of yore. In other words, the limit to the level of technology that a volunteer can impart is set by her level of knowledge, competence and commitment, if not the highest level of technology available.

Second, volunteers keep interaction at a human level; this also gears their actions for the twenty-first century. As globalisation proceeds, a person can easily become just a faceless statistic in the vast marketplace of new varieties of commodities. Alienation may result unless individuals continue to enjoy human contact which affirms their humanness and identity. Moreover, as technology encompasses our lives more comprehensively, people will fight the anomie by emphasising values that bind them to others, ie, solidarity over individualism, collective good over self-interest.

Such a reaction is already building up. More and more people in so-called developed societies are seeking to remain human by counterpoising community against technology. One such means is through voluntarism which tends to humanise the interaction whatever level of technology is used. For the service they give transcends any mechanical gadgetry. Nor is it delivered by people acting like administrative robots, but by human beings who care.

Third, since stratification and inequality will continue through the next millennium, volunteers will remain necessary to connect people across the artificial divisions imposed by society. It is not true that most volunteers are ladies of leisure seeking to assuage their conscience through pragmatic altruism. Yet voluntarism still provides opportunities for many urbanites to learn first hand the hardships experienced by those who work on the farm through serving a year with them. It also spans the class divide by bringing upper-class professionals to poor communities. The gap between young and old is erased as college students serve in nursing homes and hospices, or, on the other hand,

retirees tutor youth with learning disabilities. The physically handicapped are recognised for their abilities by able-bodied volunteers in such programs as special Olympics. The way many volunteers leave situations they are most comfortable in, to serve in culturally strange areas recall a hymn I learned in childhood:

We would be building temples still undone,
O'er crumbling walls, their crosses scarcely lift;
Waiting till love can raise the broken stone,
And hearts creative bridge the human rift.
(Purd E Deitz, 1935)

'Bridging the human rift' may be an accurate though poetic way of describing voluntarism because it is rare for voluntarism to be a service of like people to each other. Rather, it is almost always a reaching to someone quite different in station, in location, and in circumstances of birth, occupation, health or power. This is not to say that the effects of voluntarism flow only in one direction. For, as many volunteers can testify, the good they do is returned to them in multiples, not only in the sense of fulfilment they feel, but also in what they learn from the persons and communities they serve.

What is the relevance of all these to universities and university voluntarism now?

Academic institutions are supposed to be in the business of preparing students for life. While I maintain that campus life is the real thing and is not just a preparation for life, it is still incumbent upon universities to ensure that their students have the proper equipment for the years ahead. What would be important in a period such as the twenty-first century is not the accumulation of information about its requirements but the ability to survive and master the very rapid social and technological change it promises. That ability must include the capacity for continuous learning, critical thought and a solid sense of values. I submit that voluntarism helps in the development of all these capacities and therefore must be a subject of study, discourse and analysis in Academe.

Involvement in voluntarism teaches facts and values, unconsciously, without any preaching. The empirical lessons are numerous. It adds to a volunteer's grasp of social realities, her appreciation of social class and inequality, and the merits and dangers of political dynasties – their knowledge of the appropriateness of government policies or technological innovations to the situation of fishing communities or urban squatter areas. It allows volunteers to recognise the wisdom of ordinary people in some important respects and their subservience and their aggressiveness. Many volunteers are thrown into situations that teach them the problems wrought by the social inequalities that were assumed to have disappeared due to the growth of democracy and the levelling effect of technology.

These facts, being learned in experience, tend to last longer than something just read in books. And because learning is not set apart from life, they form together a continuous tapestry that allows a person to move from one to the other, or better, to integrate living and studying so that the latter is not simply what one does in school, but is what one undertakes in all areas of life. As such the volunteer becomes equipped for learning throughout life.

As they absorb facts, volunteers also learn to understand and even test concepts, theories and philosophies some of them might have dismissed as too academic while in the classroom. For instance, they learn to identify categories of psychological behaviour, awaken to the strength of structural conditions as factors more influential than a farmer's sloth or ignorance in explaining the persistence of poverty, and recognise why Immanuel Kant regards morality as the categorical imperative.

Voluntarism is an instrument of values education as well. It forms or reinforces the commitments that connect a person more closely to his nation as well as humanity itself. Seeing oppression, a volunteer becomes more committed to justice. Living with poverty, she becomes less materialistic and more unselfish. Honing his survival skills in a calamity-stricken area, he learns the imperatives of cooperation and community. Voluntarism builds character; we have seen it create compassionate men and women out of the youngsters primarily giddy with the sense of adventure that we sent out only a few weeks before.

These lessons are accessible to all volunteers whatever the nature of the organisation that sends them, whether they be from government, non-governmental groups, universities, or indeed, even if they serve following individual initiatives of compassionate persons and families. In most cases, the lessons voluntarism impart would at best be unconsciously or subconsciously absorbed. On the other hand, universities have the advantage of mining the potential of voluntarism as a teaching device by the conscious and systematic use of it as a subject of study, discourse and analysis. As part of the instruction function, universities can then offer voluntarism and volunteer management as an academic program, or infuse existing courses with the activities and values of the voluntary effort.

Australia is ahead of my country in the variety of academic programs on voluntarism so I would like to learn from you about their theoretical thrusts rather than discuss my own very preliminary notions about them. I can only mention the issues in our priority list. In the broad area of voluntarism itself, they would include the philosophy of voluntarism, its roots in indigenous culture, its role in the development of civil society, its merits and pitfalls as an alternative delivery mechanism, and the methods and techniques it requires. I am a little more familiar with the probable content of courses on voluntary management, being trained in public administration.

I see volunteer management as an emerging field of administration that can be recognised as separate from business and public administration, but

more closely related to the latter than the former. Let me first discuss how it is different from both of them. The private sector relies on profits for its funds, while government is propped up by taxation. Meanwhile, volunteer management relies on neither, but raises funds from philanthropic sources or from activities that generated income which does not go to owners or investors but to the persons to be served. Personnel administration in the three types of organisations also differs: private firms pay according to what the market will bear; government follows civil service rules and the voluntary sector recruits partly based on the market (for paid staff) and on commitments to social causes (for volunteers). The last creates situations that make the recruitment, nurture and incentives of staff of voluntary service organisations different from modes of personnel administration touched on in business or public administration courses. For instance, the mix of paid and volunteer staff, the relative strength of financial and psychological incentives that would be operative, the expected greater idealism of those who work for free – these raise theoretical questions not tackled in the more developed fields of management. If universities improve volunteer management, then voluntarism can be strengthened and volunteers prepared to serve in the emerging global system I have described.

In my own college, we have already agreed on the need for a separate stream of volunteer management within the wider field of public administration. Although there are many points of differences between volunteer and public administration, they are similar in two important respects. First, they are both concerned with improving the access of the most needy to available services, and the field of public administration is already recognising and analysing voluntarism through its focus on alternative delivery systems. Second and more important, they are both aimed at managing for the public interest. With the goal similar, the differences between their organisational, personnel and financial systems become relatively small. If both voluntary management and public administration teach administration for the public good, then their programs and practices – that is, the area of program administration and strategic management – would likely have great overlap. In any case, both their programs aim at service rather than profit making.

Degree programs will not only put voluntarism on the academic agenda, but will also make involvement in it a profession and a career for those with such a calling. They will also help in strengthening the possibility that lessons learned for voluntary effort are more systematically studied and disseminated.

Aside from these degree programs, the university can propagate the values of voluntarism by combining service and study in courses outside the content area of voluntarism. In this case, the hands-on public service

is a method of teaching, but is not itself the subject of study. In my university, we are experimenting with a technique called 'service learning option' (SLO) whereby students volunteer to serve as an integral part of their course work (Florencio et al 1995, Carino 1996). As they serve in communities or welfare institutions in ways negotiated with their instructor, they are also asked to consciously apply the principles and theories they learn in the classroom and to reflect on their relevance, significance and appropriateness. They are graded on their demonstrated learning of the concepts in the field. Often their grasp of them – because learned and seen in application – is superior to that of their classmates who only apprehended them in textbooks or through the teacher's lectures.

Aside from knowing concepts and relationships better, many SLO students report a change in attitude and values (although this is not graded). The qualities often mentioned are patience, a sense of responsibility, love of country, a more unabashed sense of caring and compassion, a greater appreciation of parents and family, a new resolve to pursue justice and equality. Their stint as student volunteers develops in students a social conscience that is not tied to the status quo and strengthens the liberal tradition of objective critique of even a country one loves fiercely.

The development of such courses depends to a great extent on the creation of a body of works on voluntarism. The journals and integrating reports submitted by our volunteers at the close of their years with the people provide invaluable insights on the challenges and pitfalls of voluntarism, and the values education it engenders (Leyesa & Marcelo 1995). The study of the institutionalisation of a volunteer program tests theories of both politics and program administration. In addition, topics like the psychology of volunteers, the comparison of voluntarism with regular service delivery channels, the indigenous roots of voluntarism, and cross-cultural analyses of different styles of voluntarism and philanthropy come easily to mind as areas of research.

Because volunteer service is people-centred and people-involving, first-person accounts of voluntarism and their integrative reanalysis can help develop social science tools of oral history, participatory action research and new modes of program evaluation. One such technique is described by Wood (1993) where practitioner's theories are used to document program results through a self-assessment scheme centred on the volunteer.

There are others, not carrying the name of voluntarism, that are also pertinent to a research program of volunteer corps. These include questions like responsible citizenship and the development of civil society, the nurturing of idealism, ethical fund raising, and non-traditional means of character formation and civic education. Some research projects arise as a by-product of the voluntary service itself, for instance, comparative ways of teaching literacy, gender issues in environmental projects, crisis management, people's reactions to new technology. Here, the voluntary effort serves as a laboratory where con-

cepts and theories of the substantive area may be encountered and analysed. The research will support not just courses on voluntarism, but the technical fields in which they arise, as well. Although public service may be regarded as an end in itself, analysis of that act yields lessons that add to the storehouse of knowledge not only about voluntarism, but of other fields as well.

Voluntarism in universities thus supports people and society as they prepare for the challenges of the next century. At the same time, it may be noted that voluntarism is able to assist in the university's performance of all its substantive functions as well. A university has the merit of being able to truly root the voluntarism movement within its institutional framework through instruction and analysis, even as it teaches all its students, including volunteers, how to cope with the latest advancements of science and technology and the imperatives of globalisation. As it makes voluntarism an object of its academic concern and deepens its involvement in it through teaching and research, it thus prepares people for living a human life even in a technological age.

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