

The process of replacing the federal student aid programs could begin by allowing young Americans to earn college aid through national service. Like the

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series of education programs to benefit returning soldiers, the new plan could guarantee access to college or post-secondary training for all who are willing to serve their country. Instead of limiting educational benefits to military veterans, however, it would mobilize a new "Citizens Corps" of civilian volunteers to tackle the most stubborn domestic and social problems. Like the military, the Citizens Corps would both impart job skills and instill the values of discipline, responsibility, and civic obligation.

Unlike programs that recruit college graduates, the Citizens Corps would target secondary school graduates who need financial help for college or skills training. The labor intensive tasks envisioned for volunteers do not require a college degree. The corps would not be a public jobs program. Labor unions fret that national-service volunteers might displace public employees, but the corps would focus on tasks that remain undone because there is no profit in them for the private sector and because they

are too costly for the public sector.

For example, volunteers could be put to work combatting illiteracy and serving as tutors and teachers' aides in public schools; working in hospitals, hospitals, outpatient facilities, clinics, and mental health centers; providing in-home care to the ill and elderly; expanding day care opportunities for working parents; repairing run-down housing; staffing shelters for the homeless; assisting in public safety; and more. To win broad public backing, national service must put the needs of society first.

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Eventually, participation in the Citizens Corps could become a prerequisite for receiving federal student aid. Exemptions could be made for older students who are more likely to have jobs or families, as well as others, such as single mothers, for whom national service as a costly boon.

Education and citizenship

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Some liberals and education lobbyists maintain that linking student aid to a service obligation discriminates against poor and minority Americans, who have no alternative means of paying for college. This argument, however, overlooks several realities.

Many middle-class families also need financial help to educate their children. Moreover, most students already must work to make up the difference between the federal aid they receive and college costs, even more to the point, national service would open avenues for youths who now aren't planning to attend college. Finally, the services rendered by citizens corps volunteers would primarily benefit poor and minority communities.

The idea of national service has intrigued Americans since philosopher William James first proposed it in his 1910 essay, "The Moral Equivalent of War." James saw national service as an alternative to the military that would integrate that will spawn new layers of bureaucracy. However, a true cost accounting must reckon not only the public costs but also the value of the services delivered by volunteers. These include potentially enormous savings from volunteering for part-time service, for commensurately smaller rewards.