

Education and citizenship

INNOVATIVE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

The process of replacing the federal student aid programs could begin by allowing young Americans to earn college aid through national service. Like the 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 combating illiteracy and serving as tutors and teachers' aides in public schools; working in hospitals, homes, 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. After all, the United States has a military to meet a pressing national need, not to mature young men and women. The same standard must be applied to civilian service.

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 would pose a special hardship. They should also have the option of volunteering for part-time service, for commensurately smaller rewards.

A comprehensive system of national service could also play a key supporting role in a new work-based social policy that ends permanent welfare in America. Under this approach, eligibility for welfare would be limited to two years. Welfare recipients who fail to find private-sector jobs before their eligibility ends should be offered community service work at the minimum wage. This would allow them to help their communities in return for society's help and assist them to gain experience and contacts as they make the transition from welfare to work. Moreover, mixing former welfare recipients with youths from all social backgrounds in a Citizens Corps would avoid the stigma that usually attaches to public jobs programs intended exclusively for the poor.

Critics describe national service as a costly boon-

doggle 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 cutting illiteracy rates, giving elderly people an alternative to nursing homes, and reducing welfare payments, as well as the higher earnings—and tax payments—of people who find private-sector jobs before their eligibility ends. Overhead costs for the Citizens Corps can be minimized by relying extensively on the nation's 100,000 private, nonprofit community groups and other volunteer organizations as the principal sponsors of youth service. To discourage "make-work," such groups would be expected to pay a fee—perhaps \$1,000 a year—for each volunteer working for them. This approach not only reduces government costs but makes for more effective grass roots delivery of services. Germany, for example, manages 130,000 civilian

servants with a federal staff of only 400 people.

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 impart to civilian service the

same heroic and patriotic qualities that were associated with warfare, virtue of military service rests in its character as one of the deepest forms of citizenship obligation and sacrifice for the good of a democratic commonwealth. This quality is true of civilian service as well.

Finally, national service can be a democratizing and integrating force. The Citizen Corps would be a common civic endeavor for youths of all backgrounds, who would meet on a strict equality. And by linking government benefits to volunteerism, national service could awaken a new spirit of civic enterprise and responsibility.

In modern times both conservatives and liberals of a libertarian bent have de-emphasized the role of citizen duties in favor of a highly individualistic ethic. Whether advocating an activist state handing out benefits, as liberals do, or favoring a state that needs to be curbed, as conservatives do, the concept of citizenship remains undeveloped; individuals are bound by no meaningful obligations. Creation of a Citizen Corps would point to a more balanced and nuanced formulation of citizenship duties and rights.

—DIA MOCUE