Citizen Leader: A Community Service Option for College Students

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The author compares and contrasts three approaches to community service—charity, service learning, and citizen leader—and argues for the citizen leader framework as the preferred approach because it educates students for leadership and emphasizes reciprocal learning for all involved, fitting the egalitarian values and the skills needed in a democratic society.

Democracy is in danger of becoming a spectator sport.
H.C. Boyte and R. Breuer

Interest in community service—that is, volunteer work intended to benefit a community, encompassing volunteer programs and activities of the types that have been called civic service, national service, public service, and service learning—has increased greatly in the past several years. This interest was demonstrated by the National and Community Service Act of 1990 and the National and the Community Service Trust Act of 1993, which established the Corporation for National and Community Service, combining the White House Office of National Service, the Commission

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on National and Community Service, ACTION (the federal domestic volunteer agency), and AmeriCorps, President Clinton’s program designed to develop citizens’ problem solving skills that can be used to meet community needs (User’s Guide, 1993).

The national popularity of community service has been reflected on college campuses (Farr & Kari, 1993; Harward & Albert, 1994; Morse, 1989), and this has led in the past decade to the establishment of national organizations like the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL), which was initiated by students in 1984 to link students with community needs. In 1985, universities collaborated to form Campus Compact to serve as a clearinghouse for university-sponsored community service activities (Morse, 1989). This recent work builds on the earlier and ongoing work of the National Society for Internships and Experiential Education (NSIEE), which was founded in 1971 and has since played a major role in sustaining college-community relationships in the wake of the decreased activism of the late 60s and early 70s. The continuing importance of the NSIEE is demonstrated by the publication of a three-volume compendium concerning the philosophy of service learning and programs related to such a philosophy (Kendall & Associates, 1990).

The increasing interest in community service, both nationally and on campus, derives from several different concerns, including the individualism of United States society, the alienation and consequent withdrawal of citizens from the political process and the affairs of their community, and the variety and depth of problems and unmet needs in the society (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Franklin, 1995; Mathews, 1993; Morse, 1989; Yankelovich, 1994). Community service provides one means of involving young people in serving their society and is premised on the assumption that if service begins early enough in life it will, in a phrase used by Bellah and associates (1985), become a “habit of the heart.”

This increased interest in community service and the availability of federal funds may tempt colleges to establish community service programs without taking the time to think through the advantages and disadvantages of various alternative approaches. This article is designed to assist colleges in evaluating their options by comparing and contrasting three community service approaches: (a) charity and (b) service learning, which are currently in use, and (c) citizen leaders, which is being proposed in this article.
Community Service as Charity
In the “charity” approach, community service is seen as involving the use of one or more of a variety of options for helping the less fortunate. Kendall (1990) defines charity as “doing for” or “helping” other people (p. 10), and its intent is to serve those who are less fortunate than oneself. Such programs establish a giver-receiver relationship in which students provide benefits to poor and other disadvantaged people. Common activities include working in a homeless shelter, clerking in a food bank, visiting residents in a nursing home, or tutoring at-risk students. Although organizers of these programs do not label them as charity, charity is what often results. Charity helps people concretely and, in the best cases, students may learn from providing services; they may, for example, become aware of the various needs that exist in their community and of the human faces behind those needs. They may learn also that positive emotional rewards can be derived by helping and thus become motivated to want to continue to help.

Even with the best intentions, however, the help that is given may be offset by negative consequences. Cotton warns that it is easy for service to become “patronizing charity” (as cited in Kendall, 1990, p. 9). Another potentially negative outcome is an unconscious message of superiority of the givers over the recipients. Rather than broadening and increasing the givers’ understanding of the lives of others, the experiences may only reinforce stereotypes about the economically poor, the culturally different (e.g., Cruz 1990; Illich 1990; Kendall 1990). This can lead to the reinforcement of feelings of powerlessness and lack of control on the part of the recipients (Lappe & DuBois, 1994). As Kendall (1990) explains, “a program for ‘charity’ focuses on ‘doing for’ other people without asking Robert Greenleaf’s important question: ‘Are those being served better able to serve and be served by their own actions?’” (p. 20).

Community Service as Service Learning
A more promising approach is “service learning” which, as the name implies, puts an emphasis on both service and learning. This approach is clearly articulated by Kendall (1990) who describes service learning in terms of programs that “emphasize the accomplishment of tasks which meet human needs in combination with conscious educational growth” (p. 20). Unlike the charity approach, learning is integrated into the structure of the program rather than just occurring by accident or as a byproduct of student service. The educational component includes learning goals, conscious reflection, and critical analysis (p. 20). Moreover, this type of program helps students identify the causes that lie behind the human
needs they are trying to address and "helps participants see their ques-
tions in the larger context of issues of social justice and social policy—
rather than in the context of charity" (p. 20).

Reciprocal learning, in which all participants both give and receive, is
another key component of service learning. This avoids the unidirectional
approach in which the group with the resources provides charity to those
who lack resources (p. 22). Participants—community members and stu-
dents—learn from each other; everyone is both a teacher and a learner
(Kendall 1990; Stanton 1990a, 1990b) and participants determine what they
want to learn (Stanton 1990a).

The differences between the charity and the service learning approaches
can be illustrated using a hypothetical example of working in a homeless
shelter. In the charity model, students see themselves as helping a less
fortunate population whose members are viewed as being dependent
upon the givers' skills. For some students, such an experience may rein-
force a view that if the receivers were not so lazy and did not have bad
personal habits they would not have ended up in a shelter. Under the
service learning approach, students learn—prior to serving—the wide
range of social, political, and personal forces that are responsible for
homelessness. They learn to ask questions such as, "How did the mas-
sive cuts in low income housing contribute to the homeless problem?"
and "What was the effect on families of the massive layoffs by corpora-
tions?" Their questions can lead to the consideration of a number of other
possible factors, such as the problems of a consumer economy that does
not reward saving, of a society where the increase in divorce leads to a
consequent increase in women heading families, of a wage system that
results in full-time workers living in poverty, and of a policy of
mainstreaming of mental patients.

With the greater awareness engendered by such questions and the ex-
amination of the causal factors that stand behind people's needs, stu-
dents are less likely to cast blame on the receivers of the service for their
plight, have stereotypes reinforced, or perceive the receiver of the help in
an inferior role. Their learning provides them with a broader perspective
on society's problems, the root causes of social ills, and the potential solu-
tions that are available. By broadening students' perspectives and bring-
ing about an understanding of people's lives and the social causes behind
their problems, the service learning approach has distinct advantages over
the charity approach.
Community Service as Citizen Leadership

An alternative approach uses a citizen leader model that focuses directly on educating for leadership and working for changes that shape a common future. It conceptualizes community service within an approach that both encourages and educates students to become active citizens. The approach views students and other community members as fellow concerned citizens and provides the leadership education and training necessary for their efforts for the future. The citizen leader approach borrows concepts from the University of Minnesota’s Project Public Life (Boyte & Breuer, 1992) and is a logical extension of the service learning approach. Because “democracy is in danger of becoming a spectator sport” (Boyte & Breuer, 1992), project leaders seek to increase the participation of citizens in public life and government. They argue that Americans have left their nation in the hands of experts and professional politicians whom they expect to solve their problems for them; the country has become a passive and deficient nation of clients, who have their problems defined by professionals and not a nation of citizens (The Book, 1992, p. 8). Such clients have restricted private lives (p. 8) and have characteristics that closely match the recipients of charity.

Project Public Life proposes a “citizen politics” in which ordinary citizens are at the center of public problem-solving (The Book, 1992, p. 11). Citizens are active and creative, define their own problems, and engage with others in the public arena to seek solutions. Citizens, not government, provide the basic resource for addressing social problems. Professional politicians and government agencies are “supplements and adjuncts” to the work of citizens (p. 11).

Other educators, scholars, and writers also call for a focus on citizenship. For example, Newmann (1990) suggests the need for a broader view of citizenship: “...the current crisis in civic life is caused in part by the society’s reliance on a view of citizenship that sees democracy essentially as a set of procedures for the pursuit of private interest” (p. 83). He argues that “the main task for the democratic public citizen is to deliberate with other citizens about the nature of the public good and how to achieve it” (pp. 76-77) and advocates support of activities that increase students’ competence as public citizens. Morse (1989) makes similar arguments in an ASHE-ERIC report on Renewing Civic Capacity. Colleges and universities “have a mandate to develop responsible citizens” and can have an important impact on students in the “very critical formative years” (p. v).
The citizen leader approach builds on service learning. Indeed, the ingredients of an effective service learning experience would lead naturally to the emergence of citizen leaders, although the awareness of the need for leadership may occur late in the project. For example, a few years ago YMCA students at the University of Minnesota concluded that they needed to do more than help the people they were serving. They saw that the needs were endless and would always be so unless the root causes of the problems were addressed. This example illustrates that once students identify the root causes (as they do in service learning programs), the next logical step is to explore what can be done. In educational sessions before and during a project, participants explore the nature and causes of a community problem or issue and collectively decide how they want to address it.

In the proposed citizen leader model, the relationship of the participants is egalitarian, representing an inclusive philosophical approach. It is also a practical strategy derived from the work of community leaders such as Lappe and DuBois (1994), who conclude from their own work that effective decision-making “depends on the ingenuity and experiences of those who are directly affected” (p. 17). Under the egalitarian view of citizen leadership, participants become fellow citizens rather than givers and receivers (or clients). Students are encouraged to see themselves as citizens engaged with fellow citizens in constructive change efforts to help shape a common future.

Participants are provided with education and training that focuses specifically on educating for citizen leadership (Perreault, 1994). The education is structured and includes all participants. Leadership concepts, skill building, and reflective components are threaded through the education and training from the beginning to the end of a project. Participants collectively define a problem and set project goals, analyze the causes of the social issue they are addressing, and work together to try to constructively ameliorate its effects or change the conditions. In the process, students and community members develop the perspectives and skills necessary for citizen leaders.

The citizen leader approach has a number of common elements with the service learning approach. Both focus on the importance of learning, the necessity for structured learning, including reflection and for asking questions that help discover the reasons that lie behind the needs participants are addressing, and the egalitarian or reciprocal relationship of all the participants. The major differences between the service learning approach and the citizen leader approach is the latter’s dual focus on constructive change which helps shape the future and on the explicit education of the
students for leadership. The differences among the three approaches are summarized in the outline in Table 1.

The citizen leader approach can, again, be illustrated by using a homeless shelter project. Through college-community connections, the shelter invites students to establish a mutually beneficial relationship. Citizen leader students and everyone involved with the shelter—the homeless, staff, board members, funders—work together to define the issues they want to address and determine the leadership skills they want to acquire. All the participants receive leadership education and skills training designed to assist them in their work. As a group, the participants decide which goals and strategies they want to pursue. They might work on concerns about how the shelter is run (e.g., its lack of safety) and develop group strategies that can lead to change. They might organize a campaign to educate the public about the need for more shelters or lobby state or national government offices for changes in the policies that contributed to the need for shelters in the first place (e.g., cuts in funding for low-income housing). The training assists them in setting their goals and in planning the strategies necessary to achieve them.
There are many other possibilities for engaging students in community service work as citizen leaders. They might assist in a community political campaign, coordinate a recycling campaign on campus or in the community, link up with farmers fighting for the right to label their beef additive-free, or work with a mayor's office on a "healthy communities" project. The potential for projects is unlimited.

The citizen leader approach educates students for leadership. In its emphasis on reciprocal learning of all involved, the citizen leader approach fits the egalitarian values and the skills needed in a democratic society. It also assists colleges in meeting their often-stated goal of developing the leadership abilities of their students (Roberts & Ullom, 1989).

Conclusion

Colleges interested in community service may wish to implement programs using the citizen leader model. Student affairs staff and faculty interested in developing such programs may find a natural ally in the college leadership programs that have grown rapidly in the last few years and are both curricular and cocurricular in nature (Freeman, Knott, & Schwartz, 1994). Many of these programs include service activities (Knott and Freeman, 1994) and may be capable of incorporating citizen leader opportunities for their students. Many colleges have a history of collaborative efforts of student affairs and academic affairs departments that provide the working relationship necessary for the development of students as citizen leaders (Erickson, 1995).

There are many advantages to a citizen leader approach. It is in line with the goal of college and universities to develop future citizens and leaders (e.g., Roberts & Ullom, 1989); it provides students with a range of abilities, skills, and values needed for these roles; it helps meet societal needs; it assists students in the movement from passive spectators to active citizens, thus lessening the risk of democracy "becoming a spectator spot." In short, it develops the "habit" of true citizenship, allowing participants—students and community members—to learn to see each other as fellow citizens, and to develop the capacities necessary for effective participation in a democratic society. It develops leaders for today and for the future.
References


