

ROBERT E. POLLACK

THE PLACE OF SERVICE

IN THE CURRICULUM AND INSTITUTIONAL LIFE

PERSPECTIVES

Most colleges have service programs. All engage the time and energy of their students, and some yield academic credit for participation. Developing the ideal service program and the ideal service course, I believe, requires that there be a direct relationship between a college's policies and its service programs.

I interpret "service" as an action on the part of a student that serves another person or group of people. We are all committed in one or another way to the proper uses of service, and to the larger task of removing the barriers that separate the American classroom from the diverse world.

Essential to devising a service program is ensuring that the servant wants to serve, and that the served want the service. Otherwise, the outcome is not service, but hypocrisy or coercion or both. How can we assure that service is neither hypocritical nor coercive?

One way is by remembering that service, like charity, begins at home. A teaching institution teaches through its actions as well as within its classrooms. Service, therefore, must be part of the ethos of the institution and not just a discrete set of programs. Policies relating to admissions, financial aid, social organizations, residence hall life, health services, campus jobs, placement: all contribute to a student's four years of education at least as much as classroom content.

A proposed service project thus may be viewed from various perspectives. How are students allowed to live together in a college's residence

halls? Does a college permit social organizations to exclude students on grounds of race or religion or ethnicity? How does a college admit students? Are Afro-American or Asian-American students expected to be a certain way, or women to study certain majors, or all premeds or all pre-laws to come from the middle class? Is sexual or religious harassment too embarrassing for the college to acknowledge, so that the victim is encouraged to add the pain of this embarrassment to the pain of the event itself? Does a college treasure the bottom ten percent of its graduating class as much as it does the top ten percent? Does it do its best to see that every entering student graduates, and that every graduating student gets a job or more education? Does a college admit people on the basis of their ability to do the work, or does it look also at their ability to pay? Does it take away scholarships if students remain in good standing but cease to perform in athletics?

All of these questions are parts of one question: Does a college take "service" seriously enough to teach the notion through its own actions? We must be very careful not to ask our students to provide moral leadership if we ourselves are afraid to provide that leadership by our example.

Does a college value diversity for its own sake? Then it should admit students from all backgrounds, practicing affirmative action wherever necessary to attract and keep bright young people.

Does a college give financial aid to all students, meeting their real need? This is very expensive, but the alternatives diminish the value of cultural diversity in the central college experience.

Does a school see each of its students as a full citizen? The greater mental distance one has to travel to get to college and the fewer examples of the experience one can call upon from friends

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ROBERT POLLACK is dean of Columbia College, Columbia University, and a member of AAC's Board of Directors. This essay is based on a talk he delivered at a conference of the Bard College Center in cooperation with the Association of Episcopal Colleges.

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and family, the more difficult it is to excel. A school should apply the concept of service by assuring that it has done its best to redraw the starting line for its student body as a whole, bringing the least advantaged up to that line by tutoring and by quiet forms of counseling and help. Clearly, if socially exclusive organizations and inadequate financial aid policies exist, they exclude the least advantaged students from a full life on campus.

Is each student valued for his or her own unique history? In the curriculum and in the dormitory and student center, a college teaches the importance of mutual respect for human differences of every sort. If there is an unchallenged set of social, economic, religious, racial, or ethnic norms by which students measure their own "normality," then what can be the purpose of introducing the notion of service into a restricted context? No student can learn the lesson of service unless he or she is first served well by the school and not made to bend, conform, and distort himself or herself to fit another's social norms.

Measuring service programs

Not all service programs are equal. We all know of some that work well and others that do not. What makes the difference? Let me suggest five criteria to measure the legitimacy of any proposed cocurricular college service program.

Service should be voluntary. Students are in college to learn. They cannot learn how to think, however, if they are at the same time told how they must behave. Required service is not service but servitude. It does not free the young person from the anxiety of competitive schoolwork nor does it make an unclear future in the world more clear.

It should do no harm. Titles do not confer competence. Before students are let loose on people outside the campus community—no matter how deeply felt is their wish to help—they must be professionally trained to do no harm. In particular, they must be taught to protect their "clients" from their own anxieties and preconceptions. This is never easy, but it is easier than dealing with the consequences of projection, panic, and transference.

It should be *of* service, that is, of demonstrable benefit to someone else besides the "servant." Before a service program begins, the organizers should be able to present a plan for measuring the success of the program. How success is measured is of less importance than that there be agreement that it should be

measured. People who want to help others should easily agree to be held accountable for the results of their efforts; the opinions of the people to be helped, furthermore, must be included in any measurement of a program.

It should be structured so that service will be stable over the long term—even during exams and breaks in the school year. College takes four years. In my experience, the most dramatic of campus events is retained in the cultural memory of a population of students for about two years at most. After that, seniors are telling freshmen about history, and no one can reconstruct what really occurred. If "service" is to have meaning, administrators and faculty must agree in advance to be present and attentive for a period longer than the memory of a college cohort.

It should require that the servant respect the served. Any plan to extend community must be based on mutual respect. Are students and staff prepared to respect homeless men as they shelter them? Are students in Latin America for a semester prepared to respect the "superstitions" that sustain the people they visit? And as for leaves taken in service to one or another part of our wonderful but flawed country, are students of one race prepared to respect people of another? If the answer is maybe or no, or if the question is embarrassing, then service is mere condescension, and it would be better not to bother.

It is easy to think of many programs that fail by one or all of these criteria. At worst, one imagines a spastic, spontaneous outpouring of self-righteousness that would require every student in a college to obtain a quota of predetermined responses from an unwilling and disinterested community. Do such programs get suggested? Yes. Should they be welcomed by those of us responsible for a college? I think not.

Columbia's Project Double Discovery meets the criteria I have outlined. Founded in 1965, it remains one of the few "Great Society" programs still supported by the federal government. It operates out of rent-free quarters in our student center. One of its counselor alumni is now the dean of students at Columbia College; another is the director of the program. The center enlists students, mostly black and Hispanic—all economically disadvantaged—from local public junior and senior high schools in a program of tutoring and activities revolving around a summer residency on the Columbia campus. The name "Double Discovery" indicates the meaning we give to service: Our students, serving as tutors

and counselors, discover the value and complexity of the lives and backgrounds of their young charges. The program never presumes that "we" show "them" the "right" way to live. Each group discovers the other.

As for the criteria: Our program depends upon student volunteers but is supported by a paid director and staff. It is harmless: Students are helped with their schoolwork and introduced to other motivated students from other neighborhoods as well as to the Columbia campus community, but we discourage attempts at amateur psychology. We measure by monitoring the grades of our high school students and tracking their capacity to get into college. Both are better than they would have been without participation in our project, and this has been true for two decades. The director reports to the dean of the college, and funding for the director's salary and that of his staff comes from federal grants and voluntary contributions. Volunteers, tutors, and counselors come and go, but the program and its support remain in place. It is respectful: Program staff, Columbia administrators and faculty members,

tutors, and the students and their families meet periodically. We are all committed to helping these youngsters, and their families know it.

Service-based courses

My five criteria are necessary but not sufficient for an adequate curricular service-based course. No curriculum needs "gut" courses slipped in through the service entrance. Even the best co-curricular programs may be inappropriate for academic credit toward a liberal arts degree. I would add two more criteria, therefore, for programs that are to be sheltered in the curriculum:

- The teacher in charge must be in some way expert in the subject taught.
- There must be objective criteria for grading a student's performance in the program.

If an academic service program is to have standards of any sort the agenda must address who decides those standards and who enforces them. There can be only one answer: Just as the program should depend on volunteers, it must have the attention and commitment of the full-time, paid members of the administration and faculty



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At Columbia we do not give academic credit for service experiences, no matter how highly structured these experiences and no matter how committed we are to the success of our programs. This is not because we do not care whether our students bring their worldly experiences together with their classroom lessons. It is simply that our faculty properly regulate the content of the courses they offer. They expect each of those courses to contain rational, reproducible, structured events, while “field experience” can be unstructured, unmeasured, and therefore all but completely subjective. I am not absolutely certain that an unstructured new experience cannot be graded, but I suspect that it is difficult; when it is not planned in advance, moreover, it is impossible in retrospect.

The misuse of service programs

I have some concerns about the misuse of service programs. The Constitution guarantees every American citizen a set of rights, and it is a crime to deprive any citizen of his or her rights. Service programs can compensate in some measure for the loss of a public right by substituting a private, volunteer service. We must be careful not to soften the reality of illegal deprivation, however, thereby delaying its proper correction under law. Consider programs that shelter the homeless. They are exemplary, but certainly the homeless are still citizens. What are their rights? Do campus-based volunteer programs become the excuse for civic default on a legal obligation to these citizens?

Perhaps the most tendentious and controversial aspect of this question of rights versus favors is in the realm of human sexual behavior and its consequences. As a molecular biologist I study viruses that cause cancer. I have therefore more than a passing acquaintance with the clinical and fundamental problems raised by the appearance about five years ago of a new infectious agent in the human species—HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. One to two million fellow citizens are now infected with this virus. The best estimates are that at least 20 percent of those now infected with the HIV virus—about half a million people—will come down in the next five years with some of the symptoms that precede AIDS, and that many of these people will then die of the disease and its complications.

We—colleges, hospitals, our whole vast American enterprise—are not prepared to handle this problem. If a college is burying the problem on the assumption that it is the consequence of

exotic personal habits that none of its students or staff share, then a surprise is coming. I have seen faculty friends and young alumni die of this disease. Is a college prepared to isolate, ostracize, quarantine, and dehumanize putative victims of AIDS? If so, how can it be consistent when it plans programs in service for students? Will a college play around at the edges of its employment, admissions, and other policies with the hope of keeping out potential victims? This is illegal, and it is also wrong. To hesitate to teach all about contraceptive devices that protect against the transmission of HIV is not merely foolish, it is dangerous. A college should help to assure that all its students are informed of the best available means of protection. This disease, although incurable, is avoidable. If a college is unable to tell its students this, then the idea of service to others is untenable at that college.

There is, finally, a definition of service from which I wish to dissociate myself. That is the notion of service as an ideological event, the expression of a national policy, an extension of patriotic duty. We ought to have seen enough of this to know the dangers of confusing what is private with what the state owns. In Stalin's heyday, students in the Soviet Union were taught to emulate and honor a hero of voluntarism named Pavel Marosov. Clubs were formed in his memory, and Young Pioneers held ceremonies in his honor. Pavel had been a Ukrainian student who overheard his parents criticizing the Soviet regime. Out of a sense of service to the state, he reported this to his school. The school reported it to the authorities. The authorities took direct action, and Pavel's parents were no more. Pavel was lynched by his neighbors—who were, in turn, dealt with harshly by the regime. That did not in the least stop the state from making him a posthumous hero and a model for youngsters.

Service may be public, but morality is based on private choices. The Constitution is the foundation of American public morality; the Bill of Rights binds and protects us all. All public displays of morality, especially well-meaning ones, must be bounded by the Constitutional protection of each citizen's right to a private life.

Thus, cocurricular service programs should be voluntary, harmless, reasonable, stable, and respectful. Curricular ones should be, in addition, faculty run and gradable. Neither kinds of program should substitute a favor for a right. Most importantly, neither should violate the private lives of either the servants or the served. □