

Civic Service Worldwide

Impacts and Inquiry

Foreword by Amitai Etzioni

Edited by
Amanda Moore McBride and Michael Sherraden

M.E. Sharpe
Armonk, New York
London, England

Foreword

Civic Service Analysis Has Come of Age

Amitai Etzioni

Local, national, and international civic service is again a hot topic in the wake of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq (Dionne, Drogoz, and Litan 2003; Schulman 2002; Wilhelm and Williams 2002; Dionne and Drogoz 2003; Galston 2001). Questions are raised about the distribution of the burden of military service among various social groups, the need for a draft, and the need for alternative services (Lind 2002; Glastris 2002; Etzioni 2002; Confessore 2003). There is, however, a group of dedicated scholars who have studied the conditions under which civic service thrives, year in and year out, whether or not the subject is popular. The solid work of these scholars is well represented in this volume.

Most important, both for the world of action and that of study, the analysis of civic service has come of age. Civic service has long been rhapsodized. It has been credited with ennobling people and making society better for it; with serving the poor and the ill; with saving the environment, reducing public costs, and lifting the nation's spirit; and even with finding peaceful alternatives to war. Too often these blessings were poorly documented, giving the whole enterprise an aura of unreality. No more. The studies collected here fully qualify as social science research, and they deal candidly with challenges and not merely successes. They show that civic service studies have matured.

Before I discuss what I consider the main challenges to civic service, a few words on its unique profile. It constitutes a highly communitarian line of action by serving both the person and the community. Communitarians differ from each other as do other schools of thought. I refer here to those who see the essence of a good society as a carefully crafted balance between autonomy and social order, in which the social order is based as much as possible on moral suasion (Etzioni 1996; Communitarian Network). Many other activities enrich individuals or corporations at the expense of the community—for

instance, environmental exploitation. Others require personal sacrifices or risks to serve the common good—liver donation by live donors, for example. Civic service makes people and communities better for it.

People who serve lead more meaningful lives and are more socially and politically aware than others. They are less isolated, better informed, and more connected than many others. Civic engagement promotes democratic values and political participation. Individuals who are aware of and involved in social issues have a greater sense of human sympathy and responsibility and are more minded toward diverse interests and collective action. Moreover, the societies they serve are the richer for it (Galston 2003; Bok 2001; Carnegie Foundation 2003; Ehrlich 2003). Civic service allows societies to pursue many goals that otherwise would be left unattended or poorly attended. Furthermore, it reduces divisiveness among people of divergent social backgrounds. Civic service enables people to find common ground that bridges cultural and political differences because it focuses on community strengthening (Joseph 2004; Diversity Within-Unity). For all this and more, see the essays here collected.

Civic service, though, faces a whole raft of challenges that should not be taken lightly. I here briefly outline them as challenges for future research and service planning. Before I proceed, I should note that they all jointly point to one common conclusion: Civic service best starts on a small scale with a narrow agenda, and on a voluntary basis, before it expands, embraces more goals, and becomes—if at all—mandatory. I refer to these limited beginnings as thin starts.

Make Work

Those who have never participated in or studied civic service may be inclined to think that every hospital, school, and welfare service has volumes of work that needs doing but for which they have no hands, and hence, if offered rows of civic service participants, the organizations would be overjoyed. This is often not the case. Much of the work requires some skill and experience. Those who come to serve may not have these. Labor union (and many nonunionized) workers fear that free or low-cost labor will jeopardize their jobs, and thus they oppose or undermine civic service. All work must be organized; someone must lay out what needs to be done, supervise those who do it, and so on. Many an overworked organization does not have extra supervisory personnel. Management may be afraid to rely on civic service volunteers and thus assign them trivial work, which in turn alienates them and makes them work poorly, which further leads management not to entrust them with meaningful work.

All these matters can be handled by proper training of volunteers, by joint planning with the beneficiary organization, by providing a civic service infrastructure of supervision, and by other measures needed to ensure reliable, quality work. These in turn require effort, investment, and time. Hence the hypothesis that, when civic service is newly introduced to a community, it will develop more effectively if it starts modestly and grows rather than going to full scale from the start.

Face Costs

A wit once suggested that for economists everything has a price and for sociologists nothing has a price. One can read many a fine study of civic service without finding a mention of the costs involved. Indeed, in several treatments of the subject it is implied that civic service is all a gain: It provides a service such as helping take care of patients in a nursing home, without charge to the nursing home, a net gain. However, people who participate in civic service must be recruited, fed, housed, clothed, insured, covered medically, transported, and supervised—and in some cases rewarded for their service, say with college tuition.

The resulting costs vary a great deal, depending on how elaborate the living standard, infrastructure, and rewards are. They can be quite substantial. For instance, the costs of introducing universal national service to the United States have been estimated to run well over \$50 billion (Bandow 1994). Aside from needing to provide some assessment of the costs of various programs, one must address the question of the source of these funds: are they going to be taken from some other program, to which they have been previously dedicated? Or will taxes be raised for this purpose? Or will the program rely on large-scale donations? And will these, if available, drain those available to other goals? And is national service more valuable than these other endeavors?

To keep the costs low and to minimize competition with other social goals that compete over scarce resources, it is best not to piggyback other missions on civic service. Take, for instance, income transfer (from those well endowed to those less privileged), arguably a noble goal but one that is not integral to civic service. Hence, if one sets up recruitment to civic service in such a way that it draws largely from those less well off, allowing people to do minimal service (say a few hours a week, from home) and then providing the graduates with several years of ample college tuition, one advances income transfer considerably, advances civic service not so well, and above all hugely drives up the costs of the whole enterprise. One can strongly favor income transfer (or other social goals), but its costs should not be charged to the civic service budget, or it will tend to become so high that it will undermine civic service.

The first goal of civic service should be civic service. Add-ons best stay limited, at least initially.

Social Mixer

Civic service promises to bring people of different social backgrounds together, under conditions that do not privilege those already privileged, and thus it contributes to community building. It can do so, but not just by throwing a bunch of inner-city youngsters and lower-class whites from Appalachia and Ivy League graduates together or by joining people of different nationalities on the other side of a mountain or ocean. Communicating across subcultures or cultures is for most a learned skill and not an inborn one—hence the need to teach it, and hence the need for coaches. New civic service units are thus best equipped with social organizers who are skilled in opening channels of communication and interaction among people who have different habits, tastes, viewpoints, and, above all, life experiences. When social organizers are well prepared and available, civic service still requires time and effort, well worth investing, to fulfill this community-building promise.

In Toto

The list of challenges with which civic service researchers and practitioners vie is not trivial. However, the challenges have to be first acknowledged before they can be analyzed and mastered. In the infancy of civic service, they were often glossed over. No longer. Hence we should expect a much more robust civic service, albeit at least initially more modest in scope of members and goals, than the one its early pioneers envisioned.

References

- Bandow, D. 1994. *National Service: The Enduring Panacea* (Cato Policy Analysis 130). Washington, DC: Cato Institute. www.cato.org/pubs/pas/pa130.html.
- Bok, D.C. 2001. Easing political cynicism with civic involvement. *Chronicle of Higher Education* 47 (27): B7–B11.
- Carnegie Foundation. 2003. *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Communitarian Network. www.communitariannetwork.org.
- Confessore, N. 2003. G.I. woe. *Washington Monthly*, March. www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2003/0303.confessore.html.
- Dionne, E.J., Jr., and K.M. Drogosz. 2003. The promise of national service. www.brookings.edu/comm/policybriefs/pb120.htm.
- Dionne, E.T., Jr., K.M. Drogosz, and R.E. Litan, eds. 2003. *United We Serve: National Service and the Future of Citizenship*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.

- Diversity Within Unity. www.gwu.edu/~ccps/dwu_positionpaper.html.
- Ehrlich, T. 2003. Civics and the spirit of liberty. *Christian Science Monitor*, May 13. www.csmonitor.com/2003/0513/p09s02-coop.html.
- Etzioni, A. 1996. *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in Democratic Society*. New York: Basic Books.
- . 2002. For a homeland protection force. *Responsive Community* 12 (2): 50–52.
- Galston, W. 2001. Can patriotism be turned into civic engagement? *Chronicle of Higher Education* 48 (12): B.16.
- . 2003. Civic education and political participation. *Phi Delta Kappa* 85 (1): 29–33.
- Glastris, P. 2002. A new draft for a new time. *Responsive Community* 12 (2): 40–43.
- Joseph, J.A. 2004. Soft power in a world of hard power: The globalization of community service. Comments presented at the CYZYG Y Annual Conference, June 2, Boston, Massachusetts.
- Lind, M. 2002. National service is essential to our security. *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, April 4.
- Schulman, B. 2002. The new public spirit. *Responsive Community* 12 (2): 30–35.
- Wilhelm, I., and G. Williams. 2002. An appeal for action. *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, February 7. www.leadershiponlinewkf.org/emerging/news/actionappeal.asp.