

Reaffirming the Value of Civic Engagement on Community College Campuses

Paul A. Elsner, Chancellor Emeritus, Senior Advisor to the Center for Teaching and Learning, Mesa Community College, Maricopa Community Colleges, Mesa, Arizona

This article draws upon works by Robert Bellah (1985) and John Gardner (1991), as well as personal experiences and testimonies in an attempt to understand the evolution of student volunteerism. It discusses how the self-centered “me too” philosophy of American society has influenced students, prompting the formation of a national program to promote community service. From there, the evolution of Campus Compact is addressed, including its successful offshoots on local campuses. Finally, the impact of service learning on the curriculum is explored, demonstrating how volunteer work can be mutually beneficial to students, faculty, and those who are helped through service.

Colleges and Universities that wish to set forth argument or rationale for promoting civic engagement can look to resources in both likely and unlikely places. Perhaps one of the most likely sources comes from the wisdom of the late John Gardner, who stated that "humans need communities -- and a sense of community, the foundation for promoting our students' larger engagement with society's needs." He writes:

Without the continuity of the shared values that community provides, freedom cannot survive. Freedom is not a natural condition. Habeas Corpus, trial by jury, a free press, and all other practices that ensure our freedom are social constructions. . . . A community has the power to motivate its members to exceptional performance. It can set standards of expectation for the individual and provide the climate in which great things happen. It can pull extraordinary performance out of its members. The achievements of Greece in the 5th century B.C. were not the performances of isolated persons but of individuals acting in a golden moment of shared excellence. The community can tap levels of emotion and motivation that often remain dormant. . . . Humans need communities – and a sense of community (1991, p. 5).

For years, UCLA has supported the work of Sandy Astin and other researchers, who have established longitudinal studies on "freshman attitudes and values." Statistical curves from those studies have demonstrated a dramatic shift in students' values over time, as students seek to find their way in an increasingly complex world. In more recent times, students have stressed the need for suitable vocations, preferably one that pays

well. During the halcyon days leading up to the junk bond scandals, attitude surveys showed that as many as 80 percent of students wanted to make money; this high percentage alarmed many higher education researchers. A humorous story circulated about an enthusiastic research analyst storming into the door of the project director of the freshman attitude surveys and declaring, "It is not true that 80 percent of the students just want to make money – it's only 60 percent. The other 20 percent want to make a hell of a lot of money."

One of the works that drove us into the debates about student commitments was Robert Bellah's research project, later published by his colleagues, titled *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Bellah, et al., 1985). His research provided the foundation for serious dialogue about not only student commitment, but the holding together of American society, an issue that has received increasing attention in the past decade. Bellah insists that we must engage students through charitable works or volunteerism, lest society not hold itself together. His eloquent argument leads to his thesis: America suffers from fragmentation and the loss of more universally agreed upon moral and societal themes.

Bellah is quoted as emphasizing that "There is wide-spread feeling that the promise of the modern era is slipping away from us" (1985, p. 277). He argued convincingly that our colonial heritage involved the disengaging from an older world of European society. The separation gave impetus to the early founders, fostering a kind of social obligation and group responsibility. This encouraged them to recreate in America structures of families, church and polity that would assure stability and societal coherence. It emphasized the meaningfulness of living together cooperatively, oftentimes putting community above individualism.

Observers of society seem to alternate between the desirability of individualism and freedom, and the values of connection, engagement, and belonging to community. Like John Gardner's above statement, Robert Bellah set out to analyze what keeps a society cohesive and well-integrated for society's best interests. Bellah quotes this poem from metaphysical poet John Donne, circa 1611, as an example of new thinking of the modern era (1985, p. 276):

'Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone;
All just supply, and all Relation:
Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot,
For every man alone thinkes he hath got
To be a Phoenix, and that then can bee
None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee.

Sandy Astin's description of more recent students' attitudes falls short of what is needed for future leadership for a purposeful and successful society. Perhaps the flaw in our youth is that they buy into the message – probably taken from the free market system under which we all operate – that individualism, getting it for yourself and competing for the prizes and rewards of society is what life is all about.

This flawed theory on attaining life satisfaction prompted the formation of Campus Compact, and the subsequent creation and institutionalization of service learning on many community college campuses. This was started under the inspiration of the late Frank Newman, along with Howard Shearer, former President of Brown University; Father Timothy Healy, one time President of Georgetown University; Martha Church, past President of Hood College; and Donald Kennedy of Stanford University. There were others in the Georgetown group, but the response to forming the Campus Compact was overwhelmingly encouraged by the following conditions:

Tom Wolfe was writing *Bonfire of the Vanities* at that time, and the junk bond scandals dominated the news. A few higher education leaders – Frank Newman and Donald Kennedy – began to raise the question as to whether our “best and brightest” could be persuaded to choose public service such as teaching, social work, and reworking our social agenda so that the best of innovation and the best of creativity would be brought to bear on our growing and evident social problems. I remember sitting at a table at the Business-Higher Education Forum and listening to the above-mentioned leaders at a meeting in Phoenix, Arizona.

Alexander “Sandy” Astin of UCLA continued to report the results of his longitudinal studies on freshman attitudes. These studies, at that time, began to show the drop-off of student expression of personal goals that would incorporate public service. Moreover, students in these studies – who in the early 1950s and 1960s had expressed the desire to find a meaningful philosophy – had now subverted such personal convictions and values to getting “Ahead” in life, which to most meant getting a good job. The “me too” generation was, for the most part, seeking professional degrees and vocational prosperity – in short, “getting a good job and making money” was the predominant issues. Goals that would assist them

in finding “themselves” (values) hardly seemed to enter their thoughts (Elsner, 2000, p. 212).

The Campus Compact initiative was initially driven by the four year college and university sector, but rested mainly with the more prestigious public and private independent research universities. Stanford University, under the leadership of Donald Kennedy, was one the first to promote student volunteerism programs. Kennedy stressed that personal development and individual formation grew out of student service; he cited the many students who were volunteering to tutor in the ghetto schools in East Palo Alto as an example. Father “Monk” Molloy, the President of Notre Dame University, which would later join the group, claimed to the executive committee of Campus Compact that the volunteer work he had done in South America was a truly defining moment in his personal formation.

If students were truly more materialistic, more occupationally oriented, and more eager to make money than eager to find meaning in their lives, a national program promoting volunteerism was needed. Hence, the largest collective effort for student volunteerism in higher education was born.

Initially, one shortcoming of Campus Compact was that it did not include many of the largest providers of higher education. Among those initially overlooked were community colleges, which now account for close to half of the 14 million students enrolled in all of higher education. Even many large state colleges were not involved until the State Compacts were formed. For community colleges that later came into the Campus Compact movement, the development of a national center to train students and faculty to set up volunteer programs was obviously needed. The opening of such a center at Mesa Community College in the Maricopa Community College District in the Phoenix area marked a critically important milestone in the evolution of national student volunteerism in higher education. Its Executive Director, Lyvier Conss, ably led one of the most comprehensive and wide-reaching training structures for community college personnel in both the United States and abroad. The Community College National Center has now moved out from under the Campus Compact sponsorship from Brown University to its own Community College National Center for Community Engagement.

Those faculty members who have worked and given leadership to service learning and volunteerism projects communicate a clear message: Service learning should be anchored in the curriculum. The best programs grow out of the integration of subject matter disciplines and volunteer service. Subject disciplines come alive when students see the implications of what they have been studying in volunteer settings. For example, working in a nursery crisis center where children and babies are brought after being abused can open whole new horizons for students to explore. Questions such as "What child protection policies exist in our state?" "What is the reason a baby could ever be battered?" "What services protect children and how are they funded?" "What is 'good' children's' policy?" and others are raised. Thus, Sociology, Child Development, Psychology, Family Living are changed from a burden of study to a living subject matter.

Marybeth Mason, one of the early faculty organizers of volunteer programs at Chandler-Gilbert Community College clearly points out what it means for a faculty member to be involved in service:

The second way in which service-learning has impacted me is on a very personal level. When I began requiring my students to serve, I became a much more committed server myself, and with that new commitment came a heightened sense of understanding about the needs of my community. I have worked with abused and neglected children, homeless families living in both emergency and transitional housing facilities, women fleeing abuse seeking shelter in a place where they cannot be found, and many lonely elderly. I have seen firsthand the effects of poverty and discrimination, the lack of affordable healthcare, insurance and child care, the lack of education, the prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse, the trap of credit card addiction, the lack of availability of birth control and sex abuse programs, and the lack of familial support. But I have also seen the strength and resilience of children, the tenacity and determination of mothers and fathers, the joy of telling and listening to stories from generations past, and the satisfaction on the faces of my students that comes with giving. I have been exhilarated by the new friendships I have developed with those who work in non-profit agencies. I have watched and learned from their commitment, resourcefulness, and professionalism as they worked day after day to do so much with so little. My family has joined me in service and together we have been reminded so many times of how fortunate we are for all we have. It's not an unfamiliar refrain; I hear it from my students all the time and must agree, "When I serve, I give a little, but receive so much more in return" (in Elsner, 225, 2000).

In conclusion, the case for student engagement grew out of a larger fragmentation of modern American society and an inclination of our students to follow much of our

own adult lead. That was simply that rugged individualism, making it on your own successfully, ignoring important and vital connections to the community, would allow students to fare well in their lives. Thanks to great leaders like Lyvier Conss, teaching faculty like Marybeth Mason, impressive leaders like Donald Kennedy, Frank Newman, Monk Molloy and others, we have instilled a significant part of the community college movement's impressive and solid models of student engagement in service learning.

Works cited:

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About the author:

Dr. Paul Elsner served for over 22 years as Chancellor at Maricopa Community Colleges, the largest community college district in the United States. He is also Founder and President of the Sedona Conferences and Conversations. As President of Paul Elsner Associates, he consults and speaks worldwide on numerous issues affecting higher education and technology. His most recent book, addressing civility in higher education, is due out in the fall of 2004. You can reach Dr. Elsner at Mesa Community College, Maricopa Community Colleges, 1025 N. Country Club Dr., Mesa, AZ 85201, (480) 472-0844, or by email at paul.elsner@domail.maricopa.edu.