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Youth Service: A Comprehensive Perspective

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Abstract

When youth are involved in their communities, they typically do so through institutional structures. We construe youth service as a type of long-term, intensive volunteerism or civic service, which takes a range of institutional forms including service-learning, national service, and international service. We define these forms as having common operational features, and summarize what is known about them and their effects on youth and the individuals and communities with whom the youth are engaged. We identify directions for future research, including issues of server inclusion and impacts on the served.

Keywords

youth, civic service, service-learning, national service, international service

Youth Service: A Comprehensive Perspective

Youth may indeed be future employers, employees, politicians, neighbors, and parents, but increasingly, they are today's leaders and engaged citizens—even though statistic after statistic bemoans the civic status of youth in the United States. The voting rate among youth dropped significantly between 1972 and 2000, and is currently lower than any other voting-age cohort (Gibson, 2001; Levine & Lopez, 2002). In addition, youth are less likely than adults to be involved in political activities such as contacting public officials or newspapers, participating in protests, marches, or demonstrations, or canvassing for a political cause or candidate (Olander, 2003). Youth are also found to exhibit low levels of knowledge about politics and government (CIRCLE, 2003). But today's youth may be more engaged in their communities than previous generations (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002). Volunteer engagement among 15-25 year olds is higher than all other cohorts (Keeter et al., 2002). About half of all teenagers are estimated to engage in community service (Zaff & Michelsen, 2002).

In the United States and worldwide, institutional structures have emerged that mobilize and organize youth to address pressing social, economic, health, and environmental issues through volunteerism and service. These youth service institutions include service-learning, national service, and international service programs, which are sponsored by schools, governments, community groups, nongovernmental organizations, and religious-based associations. While the orientation of these programs may be to create lasting social, cultural, educational, and civic outcomes among youth, the youth are also affecting change in the individuals, organizations, and communities that are served. To be sure, not all of this civic activity is voluntary or performed purely for altruistic purposes. For example, students report that they volunteer in order to build their resumes, increasing their chances of college admittance (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin, 2002). Motivational factors of community-based volunteering are an empirical question, but they need not obviate the positive effects that may result (McLellan & Youniss, 2003). As a result of youth service, children are taught, tutored, and mentored; oral histories are recorded from village elders; neighborhood gardens, nature trails, and homes are built; economic development programs are researched and developed; and environmental resources are preserved.

We define “youth” as ranging from 15 to 25 years of age.¹ This encompasses a wide developmental range, but our construct of concern covers this age range. Youth today may be involved in one or all three institutional forms of youth service during their development, for example, a service-learning program during secondary school, an international service experience in college, and a stint of national service following college graduation. We define youth service as a distinct concept within the construct of civic service. We propose that the forms of youth service are not that different from each other, begging for identification of

¹ It is worthy of note that this age range may or may not accurately represent the transition from childhood to adolescence and from adolescence to adulthood (Tolman & Pittman, 2001). The range may be extended depending on physical, social, and cultural factors. Within the United States, the lower age limit may be extended to include youth in primary or middle school settings. Outside of the United States, for example, the upper limit may be 30 years of age (Johnson, Benitez, McBride, and Olate, 2004).

common operational features and development and expansion of a common knowledge base.² From this comprehensive perspective, we identify programmatic issues that may mediate effects on the servers and the served, including access, inclusion, and facilitation issues and program philosophy and approach. We conclude by specifying research directions for youth service.

Youth Service as Civic Service

In this paper, we distinguish youth service from youth volunteerism. Youth service is conceived as a subset of volunteerism, a manifestation of long-term, intensive volunteering or civic service (Tang, McBride, & Sherraden, 2003). Whereas volunteerism overall may be sporadic or informal, not necessarily occurring through programs, civic service can be defined as “an organized period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national, or world community, recognized and valued by society, with minimal monetary compensation to the participant” (Sherraden, 2001, p. 2). Civic service programs offer distinct roles for the servers, whereby a defined time commitment—which may be intensive and of a sustained duration—is required to accomplish distinct objectives. The server engages in meaningful activity that is part of a larger program, which has social, economic, or community development goals. “Civic” is attached to “service” because the service activities are intended to have public benefit (Sherraden & McBride, forthcoming). Targeted server groups in civic service programs vary, and may include such populations as youth, elders, students, or people of faith. The servers may receive limited stipends or post-service awards, such as educational credit. The programs may be local, national, or transnational in scope (McBride, Benitez, & Sherraden, 2003). Examples from the United States include AmeriCorps*VISTA, Retired Senior Volunteer Program, Peace Corps, Jesuit Volunteer Corps, American Field Service, and the Student Conservation Association.

Across this range of civic service programs, we define youth service as those programs that specifically target youth as the server group or those for which the majority of servers are youth. It is not necessary that all servers be youth because some programs, while targeting youth as the servers, may be intentionally intergenerational or include the youth’s family members. Youth service programs may be unique because of their explicit dual focus on the servers and the served. Program designs integrate activities, incentives, and supports, which are widely attributed with effects on youth development, but the youth are also “*Getting Things Done*” (AmeriCorps’ motto) for those who are served.

Youth service programs have likely increased in prevalence in recent years, but their incidence has largely not been systematically tracked. Only rough, cross-sectional estimates exist. In a recent global assessment of civic service programs used to operationalize the concept worldwide, 210 programs were identified (McBride, Benitez, & Sherraden, 2003). Fifty-one were located in the United States, and of these, 28 were specifically youth service; eight were national service programs, and 20 were international or transnational service (service-learning was not included). As of 1999, almost one-third of all public primary and secondary schools in the United States sponsored service-learning programs (Skinner & Chapman, 1999), and they were found at 50

² The program examples we cite are from the United States even though youth service is a global phenomenon (see McBride, Benitez, & Sherraden, 2003). Scholarship on youth service is also global, which if shared across nations and cultures would further common knowledge development (see Sherraden & McBride, forthcoming).

percent of the community colleges (Prentice, 2002). In 1999, service-learning was part of 11,800 courses within 575 colleges and universities in the United States (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

These three institutional forms of youth service—service-learning, national service, and international service—share a focus on intensive service for a sustained duration. They are also marked by both governmental and nongovernmental (NGO) sponsorship as well as public-private partnerships (McBride, Benitez, & Danso, 2003). Across the programs, collaborative arrangements are very common among multiple organizations and/or government entities. However, the programs may vary along the common, distinguishing civic service attributes. The following defines these three institutional forms of youth service, and operationalizes and discusses program context and activities, server groups, and goals and known effects for each.

The Operational Forms of Youth Service

Service-Learning

Definition. Among both researchers and practitioners, conceptualizations of service-learning vary widely (Billig, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Furco, 2002; Hinck & Brandell, 2000; Pritchard, 2002). Consistent across these definitions is an emphasis on academic content that is not typically part of other types of service. While research emphasizes the importance of structured student reflection, service-learning programs differ in their degree of application (Eyler, 2002). As the name “service-learning” indicates, there is a dual emphasis on service to the community and on learning by the participants, and programs differ in how this balance between service and learning is struck. In its most balanced, service is pedagogically linked with academic course content as a “credit-bearing educational experience” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 222). At the other end of the spectrum, some programs have minimal service requirements, which stretch their qualification as civic service, and are only loosely connected to classroom learning (Eyler, 2002; Moore & Sandholtz, 1999). We define service-learning as students’ planned and structured community service, based on a pedagogical approach with time for systematic reflection.

Context and activities. Service-learning is sponsored most often by educational institutions, including primary and secondary schools, trade and professional schools, colleges and universities, and continuing education programs. Schools may work with NGOs in the development and implementation of service projects as well as different levels of government. For example, the Learn and Serve Program directs federal funding to service-learning programs throughout the United States (Melchior & Bailis, 2002). The program itself may also exist as a result of state mandate.

Students participate in service-learning activities domestically and internationally. Students’ activities may be educational in nature, environmentally-based, or focused on a variety of community needs. For example, high school students may tutor and mentor middle school students for a year (Moore & Sandholtz, 1999). Elementary school students may research local history and reenact war battles at a local fort, and alternative high school students may study and maintain a five-mile stretch of river (Billig, 2002). Students also travel to different countries where they live with native families and work with local organizations, while studying the culture and critically reflecting on their experience (Grusky, 2000). In one such program,

community college students majoring in health traveled to Nicaragua, where they implemented health clinics, conducted family health assessments, and provided health education to the local community (Kiely & Nielsen, 2002).

Servers. Due to its quasi-mandatory nature in some cases, service-learning may be a more inclusive form of youth service. Muscott (2000) has identified programs in traditional schools, special education classes, and residential treatment settings in which students with emotional and behavioral disorders participate. One of these programs targeted Native-American teenagers who had dropped out of high school. As part of their project to research and create a native garden on their reservation, the youth wrote a newspaper article; provided tours to Head Start children and community members; presented a story-telling session to the children; and created a trilingual activity book. At-risk, rural high school youth at a Kansas charter school were involved in multiple service-learning projects, including linking classroom work to service at a local domestic violence shelter and assisting people with multiple sclerosis in a therapeutic horseback riding program (Kraft & Wheeler, 2002).

Goals and effects. The intended effects of service-learning are at the levels of the student, sponsoring institution, and those served. Results are generally mixed regarding positive associations. The majority of service-learning research focuses on the students, including their academic outcomes (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000), acceptance of diversity (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Morgan & Streb, 2001), self-esteem (Morgan & Streb, 2001; Rossi, 2002), pro-social behavior (O'Donnell et al., 1999), and their civic engagement (Morgan & Streb, 2001; Yates & Younniss, 1998). Effects on the educational institutions are anticipated through the achievement of universities' civic missions, for example (Ramaley, 2000). Identified impacts include improved classroom management, improved discipline in classrooms, and improved focus on how to best teach students (RMC Research Corporation, 2002). The impacts of service-learning on the community have been the target of far fewer studies in the United States, and generally focus on university-community relations, benefits to community partners, or the ability of partner agencies to leverage funds or create networks (Cruz & Giles, 2000).

National Service

Definition. Defining national service is not as clear-cut as it may seem. Is national service a program implemented by government for citizens who serve within their home country? To qualify as national service, must the program be connected to government? For example, AmeriCorps, commonly understood as a national service program, is sponsored by government but implemented through NGOs. There are also many NGOs within the United States that sponsor and implement programs, which only accept youth who are US citizens and place them in locations throughout the nation. But what of programs that are sponsored by government for United States' citizens who then serve in other countries, e.g., the Peace Corps? Some may consider this latter type national service (Perry & Thomson, 2003), but we consider it international service.

We define national service as a program sponsored and implemented by NGOs or government for citizens of a nation who serve within that nation (McBride, Sherraden, Benitez, & Johnson forthcoming). The key criterion is the scope of the program; it is sponsored and implemented within a single national context. Another distinguishing aspect of national service is that the youth may be required to make a full-time commitment for an extended period of time. Seventy-seven percent of 73 national service programs worldwide were found to require full-time service, and the average time commitment was 10 months and ranged from one month to three and half years (McBride, Benitez, & Sherraden, 2003).

Context and activities. National service, in terms of government sponsorship and implementation, has existed in the United States since the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933 (Sherraden, 1979), and has roots in military service. NGOs have sponsored youth service programs for decades; among these programs, the activities appear to be the same as government-sponsored programs, but it is not known if NGOs may sponsor programs with more parochial interests. National service programs tend to be oriented toward nation-building goals and issues of pressing national concern, such as literacy, poverty, housing opportunities, and bridging the digital divide. The activities create public goods. For example, AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps members build and repair trails in national and state parks, and through the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps (NASCC), youth provide emergency response to natural disasters and restore watersheds on national, state, and local public lands (McBride, Benitez, & Sherraden, 2003).

Servers. National service is commonly targeted to youth over age 18, after they have completed secondary education. Like service-learning, national service begs consideration of the compulsory nature of service (Clotfelter, 1999). In the United States, national service is not required of all citizens, but at this writing, policy proposals are being developed connecting civic service with military service and civic service with college aid (Progressive Policy Institute, 2004). National service programs sponsored by government are also known to offer stipends during service and post-service awards such as tuition remission or a lump-sum payment. This may make them more inclusive than those offered by NGOs, which may not have the resources to support or award the students.

Goals and effects. National service is common in countries around the world, and it has been widely attributed with multiple effects (Sherraden & Eberly, 1982; Sherraden, Sherraden, & Eberly, 1990). Like other forms of youth service, national service in the United States has evidenced positive outcomes for the servers in a range of areas, including self-esteem, job readiness, and civic attitudes (McBride, Lombe, Tang, Sherraden, & Benitez, 2003; Perry & Thomson, 2003), though a number of studies have found null or even negative effects. For example, Jastrzab, Masker, Blomquist and Orr (1996) found a negative relationship between service in the AmeriCorps Conservation and Youth Service Corp and the likelihood of earning a technical certificate or diploma within a 15-month post-service period. In terms of impacts on the served, while many are anticipated, there is demonstratively less research, and results are mixed. Immediate outcomes for individuals are most likely to be assessed, e.g., academic performance of tutored students, but there have been studies on organizational capacity-building, which is a distinct goal of AmeriCorps (Perry, Thomson, Tschirhart, Mesch, & Lee, 1999; Thomson & Perry, 1998). NGOs participating in AmeriCorps have indicated increased

effectiveness in forming collaborations as well as an expansion of the numbers and types of organizations involved in the issues being addressed (Aguirre International, 1999).

International Service

Definition. Proceeding from the notion of “scope” articulated above regarding national service, international service occurs across two or more nations; there is a “transnational” dimension in terms of the nationality of the servers and/or the service placements (Sherraden & Benitez, 2003a). In the case of service placements within a single nation, the youth who serve are from a different nation(s), e.g., Amity Teachers Program and Himalayan Explorers Connection. In another variation, the youth may be from a single nation with service placements possible in multiple countries, e.g., Peace Corps, American Field Service, and the American Jewish World Service. These may be sponsored by governments, serving a diplomacy as well as development function (Cobbs, 1996; Daftary & McBride, 2004; Rodell, 2002). The youth could be from multiple nations with service placements in multiple nations, e.g., Cross-Cultural Solutions and Heifer Project International. Youth in these programs may also serve together, rotating to projects in each of the countries as they do across the three countries comprising the North American Community Service pilot program (Sherraden & Benitez, 2003b).

Context and activities. International and transnational youth service programs have undoubtedly increased in recent years, fueled in part by globalization and the desire to promote tolerance and cultural understanding as well as to address pressing development issues worldwide (Pinkau, 1979; Schroer, 2003; Sherraden & Benitez, 2003a). The roots of international service are in faith-based missions and diplomatic aid (Daftary & McBride, 2004). As with the other forms of youth service, international service has long been sponsored and implemented by governments as well as NGOs. The administrative arrangements can be complex among the “sending and hosting” partners (McBride, Benitez, & Danso, 2003), which can be related to the degree of co-management and active involvement of host organizations and locals in the development and implementation of the program (Sherraden & Benitez, 2003a; Smith & Elkin, 1981). International service activities are known to focus on education and literacy; environmental protection, which may include sustainable agricultural practices; and health services. In the transnational North American Community Service pilot program (Sherraden & Benitez, 2003b), the youth worked on an organic farm and participated in wetlands research in Nelson, British Columbia. They helped restore a mission founded in 1680 in Socorro, Texas, and they expanded community greenhouses and developed trout breeding tanks in a mountain stream in Coyopolan, Veracruz.

Servers. International service programs have transformed greatly over the years with the recognition that servers need more than a desire to learn about other cultures; they need knowledge and skills so that they can meaningfully contribute to the host communities (Coleman, 1980; Grusky, 2000; Rivera, Hansel, & Howard, 1989). Among the forms of youth service, the eligibility criteria for international service may be more numerous and stringent, e.g., multilingual, advanced education or technical skills, or resources to pay for the service experience (McBride, Benitez, & Sherraden, 2003). Those who participate may be more privileged as a result, although it is worth noting that some programs offer stipends, post-service awards, and physical accommodations to make them more inclusive, e.g., Peace Corps. Most

servers may be 21 or older, though some international service programs explicitly adopt a service-learning approach and are connected to secondary and university education.

Goals and effects. While the impacts on the server are similar to those for the other forms of youth service, an additional and somewhat unique area of impact for international youth service is increased tolerance and cultural understanding (Chevannes & Hansel, 1990; Ehrichs, 2000; Foroughi, 1991). The effects on the served, however, are rarely studied even though the risks are great for exploitation or negative effects (Brav, Moore, & Sherraden, 2002; Rehnstrom, 2000). For example, international service may actually reinforce stereotypes, particularly when servers of privilege are working with those who are less advantaged (Helms, 1990) and when there is reduced training (Shea, 1994) or no on-site supervision or mentoring (ISVS, 1969).

Toward a Comprehensive Youth Service Knowledge Base

We have presented youth service as an encompassing concept with distinct attributes, which are found in the three programmatic forms discussed here. The service forms vary in terms of scope, context and activities, server eligibility and inclusiveness, and goals and effects. The variation, however, is not that vast. The convergence and divergence is an empirical issue, where studies within any one form of service can inform the others. The knowledge base for each is porous, tenuous, and scattered across the disciplines—from education to political science to sociology—making it hard to unify (Sherraden & McBride, forthcoming). Integration is promoted through this comprehensive youth service perspective, which stresses commonalities across the programmatic forms.

Applying this comprehensive perspective, we identify directions for youth service scholarship, including server inclusion and impacts on the served, which relates to program philosophy and aspects of the server role. But first, we acknowledge the limitations of this integrated youth service perspective. More debate and discussion is needed regarding the utility of this perspective. Do the similarities outweigh the differences?³ We offer this perspective to build linkages across these areas so that knowledge development progresses more efficiently and effectively among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

Access, Inclusion, and Facilitation

Agency and meaningful engagement. The primary issue with “access to service” is that of deeming youth as agents capable of meaningful engagement and contribution (Checkoway et al., 2003). Service programs differ in the manner and degree to which youth are involved. When and how youth are involved may influence the effects on the youth and the served. For example, student involvement in the planning of service-learning projects and substantive responsibilities during implementation are associated with improved self-concept, political engagement, and positive attitudes toward the elderly and people with disabilities (Morgan & Streb, 2001). Students also benefit when they are challenged, participate actively, and have positive interactions with others in the field (Eyler & Giles, 1999). In some instances, the nature of the issues to be addressed may dictate these circumstances. In AmeriCorps*VISTA, youth

³ Another line of critique relates to the utility of the civic service construct itself, and whether civic service is demonstratively distinct from occasional volunteering (Sherraden & McBride, forthcoming).

commonly research strategies and assess needs for economic development programs. To what degree does youth agency influence outcomes on the servers and the served?

Who serves? We contend that the opportunity or “ask” to serve still far outpaces youth’s internal motivations or resources to initiate activities that “get things done” in people’s lives and communities. In this institutional context, “who serves” is a critical issue because it is likely based on who was presented with an opportunity to serve. Elsewhere, we discuss inclusion as a social justice issue facing the field of civic service (McBride, Sherraden, Benitez, & Johnson, forthcoming). If positive effects are indeed accruing to the youth who participate, then who does not have the opportunity to serve matters. Service-learning programs at the primary or secondary levels can be inclusive, but they are not at the university level as access to advanced education is limited. Mandatory national service is certainly inclusive, but what of voluntary national service programs sponsored by NGOs? International service programs are likely to be the least inclusive, requiring resources or supports for participation. Who serves also influences programming and the perceptions and effects on the served (Cohn, Wood, & Haag, 1981; Foroughi, 1991; Rivera, Hansel, & Howard, 1989; Thompson, 1979). What incentives and strategies promote participation by excluded groups? What are the benefits relative to the costs of these strategies?

Service role facilitation. How the servers’ roles are defined and supported may affect outcomes for the youth and the served as well. Both duration and intensity of students’ service-learning participation have been linked with positive outcomes (Eyler & Giles, 1997; Melchior & Bailis, 2002; Moore & Sandholtz, 1999). In particular, program duration has been associated with positive plans for the future and school socialization (Moore & Sandholtz, 1999). As part of an evaluation and follow-up of three national service-learning programs, Melchior and Bailis (2002) found that without continued participation in service-learning programs in particular, short-term gains disappeared a year after service. Across service forms, the impact of service is mediated by institutional factors, such as whether the service experience is supervised, reflection sessions are offered, there is communication with other servers, and former volunteers provide mentoring (Cohn & Wood, 1985; Coleman, 1980; Grusky, 2000; Moss, Swartz, Obeidallah, Stewart, & Greene, 2001; Rolles 1999). How do service role definition and program supports influence outcomes for the individuals and communities being served? Positive impacts on the served may be anticipated from longer service roles and more supports for the servers.

Impacts Beyond the Youth

If youth service programs are to exist and thrive, especially with policy support and funding, then attention to the impacts beyond the youth is imperative. A dearth of research on the effects for the individuals and communities served was evidenced across all forms of youth service discussed here. While this is likely the status of the research and evaluation fields overall, it is not acceptable as the consequences from either positive or negative results are great. Youth service is surely not a panacea. We emphasize the link between the institutional models of youth service and their potential impacts where mediators include program philosophy and server role definition.

It may seem trite today to claim that youth should “work with communities not for communities” (Perold, 2000; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000), but this community-based approach undoubtedly influences the orientation and impacts of service programs. Community-based approaches have been part of international service programs in recent years, and can inform the strategies used by other youth service programs. In service-learning, Moore and Sandholtz (1999) compared the outcomes of three different settings: in the community, at another school, and in the students’ home school. They identified the strongest outcomes for students who were involved in service in the community. Students were found to exhibit positive attitudinal outcomes when they were directly involved with community members as part of their service activities (Moore & Sandholtz, 1999). Further, when students were involved in projects in which needs were identified by community members, students exhibited higher personal development outcomes and increased connectedness to the community (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Through this type of community-based development and implementation, youth can lead research and evaluation efforts, implementing participatory models that further enhance their experience and learning (Adams, Dienst, Schroer, & Stringham, 2001; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). But the question remains: how are communities impacted by these youth-led efforts?

Conclusion

A more comprehensive perspective on youth service and a grander vision regarding the role it may play in the lives of youth and our communities is proposed. From this perspective, a common knowledge base can be forged that promotes more effective and efficient—as well as “just”—programming. In this short space, we recognize that we may not have thoroughly defined the issues or identified the range of significant directions for future youth service research and program and policy development; we offer this perspective for debate and discussion. Have we drawn the circle too widely across service-learning, national service, and international service?

And what of the grander vision of youth service? What might our youth, communities, country, and world look like if youth engaged in periods of service throughout their development (Sherraden, 2001)? What trajectory does youth service place them on to be the leaders and engaged citizens of today—and tomorrow? William James, the noted American psychologist and philosopher, wrote in 1910 that if youth were oriented toward civic action “. . .the injustice would tend to be evened out and numerous other goods to the commonwealth would follow” (p. 17). Almost 100 years later, the prevalence, levels, and continuity of youth service among present generations may usher in the next greatest civic generation in the United States, but arguably, only if the institutions are accessible and far-reaching in their positive effects.

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