

# *Educating for Service*

Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.

I applaud the National and Community Service Act and the distinguished Commission that has given it life and meaning in our society so needful of service to those less fortunate.

From my own experience working with Sarge Shriver and (now Senator) Harris Wofford at the beginning of the Peace Corps over thirty years ago, I have one suggestion to make for the future of higher education through voluntary service.

The worst virus to infect higher education a generation ago was the "me first" generation of self-indulgent and self-serving young people. It struck at the heart of what higher education is really about: developing the minds and hearts of young people so that they might become contributors to the general well-being of our society, to make it more equitable for all, to make it a caring society for those on the fringes. After all, society puts up most of the money to support higher education. At least society can rightly expect those it educates to be more intelligent, more

capable of personal development, and willing to use this enlarged capability to benefit not only themselves but their fellow citizens as well. As John Donne said, "No man is an island." No woman, either.

I believe we successfully eliminated this "me first" virus in recent years, and we did it by stressing that service to others in need is an essential goal of all education, especially that on the college and university level.

I remember that when I entered the freshman class at Notre Dame in 1934, during the Great Depression, there was only one student I knew who was engaged in voluntary public service. I still remember his name, Vince McAloon. Vince used to pick up all the leftover food at the dining hall each night and deliver it to the "jungles" near the railroad station where the unemployed (they were called "hobos") dropped off the freight cars and gathered around a fire to share the few scraps of food they could beg, borrow or steal. Interestingly, Vince, now over 80 years of age, has spent all these years in a variety

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of full-time service capacities, helping thousands of unfortunate people. What he began as a young man became a way of life, here and abroad, and the world is richer for his service.

By contrast, today over two-thirds of Notre Dame's 7,500 undergraduates are engaged in a wide variety of voluntary services. They serve in many ways in our local South Bend Hospitality House, which helps thousands of homeless men, women and children each year. It is not just a soup kitchen. It meets all of these people's needs, physical and spiritual, health and home finding, job training and correction of drug and substance abuse, child care and family reunion, whatever is needed and responsibly received.

The students are largely responsible for the Logan Center, which cares for hundreds of children afflicted with Downs Syndrome. This is a very demanding task, but one that the young men and women who do it will never forget. Then there are the myriad other tasks that need to be done in any society, more than twenty-five in number. To name some: Big Brothers and Sisters for children without family support, tutoring those who might otherwise drop out of school; helping minority children, mainly Hispanic, with a language problem; Head Start; Christmas in April; Habitat for Humanity and many more. Our students do them all.

During fall and spring break, hundreds of our students fan out across the land, living and working at established service centers of all kinds: battered women shelters, drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers, food for the poor or bedridden, juvenile criminal rehabilitation, Dismas Houses for released jail prisoners (we operate one in South Bend, too), and on and on. There are good results from these programs. The local alumni clubs (of which we have over 200) both locate the public service centers in their locality and support the students who work there during

brief vacations or through the long summer break.

Thus, both the students and the alumni and alumnae are being educated about the need out there, forgotten by most, and learning what they can do to help, in both a temporary and permanent way.

How did all this get started? First of all, it happened because the most visible leaders at Notre Dame, both administration and faculty, were concerned about social problems and engaged in serving. Secondly, when students became interested in service, the faculty either accompanied or debriefed them in groups on their return to the University to solidify the lessons learned and motivate each other to do more when possible.

This led to another development. At graduation each May, we have a special ceremony to send off more than a hundred graduates who have volunteered to spend a full year or two of their lives, right now, in various forms of special service. For those going overseas, we provide language training for two or three months. Different tasks also have appropriate orientation and training when needed.

Another reason that the student service program prospered and grew at Notre Dame is that we gave it visibility on campus. When our TV station moved to a new location, we gave the old building to what is now called the Center for Social Concerns. Everybody knows where C.S.C. is and what it is doing. Those who are doing nothing to help others feel a twinge of conscience when they walk by the Center each day.

We have also established annual awards for outstanding student and faculty service. The Center has a faculty priest-director and a dozen or so staff people, some of them also volunteers. We have been asked, "Why don't you make student service required for graduation?" The day we do that the service will cease to be voluntary and generous.

In the context of this article, I must admit that all of this has been accomplished at one school (and many others) without a cent of federal money—or state money, either. However, we do have indigent students who are working all year round and unable to break free for voluntary service.

I am sure that if federal scholarship grants were available, we could enlist the services of many of our indigent and minority students, who tend to be underrepresented even in areas of service where they could have maximum impact. Also, it would be enormously helpful if our graduates who spend a year or two in service here and overseas would have graduate fellowships, federally funded, available to them on their return. As it is, they come back not only broke financially, but often in debt.

I finish where I began. Higher education has the greatest pool of young and educated potential volunteers (14 million). They are easy to locate, many right in the midst of some of the greatest social needs of our time in the inner cities of America. It may take federal grants to start a series of programs such as we have here at Notre Dame. Campus Compact was organized to help college and university service programs develop. Still, in many impoverished areas, start-up grants would help and all American higher education would be enriched.

The only addition I would suggest for the National and Community Service Act would be some support and reward (mainly educational benefits) in recognition of national and international service on the part of young Americans.