

The Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service

LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE IN TIMES OF NATIONAL CRISIS

The Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service is a national network of foundation representatives interested and invested in community and national service programs. The organization was inspired into existence by President Clinton's vision of an America where young people would commit a year of their lives to addressing critical human and social problems by serving in community-based nonprofits across the country. President Clinton's vision became AmeriCorps – a partnership between government, nonprofits and philanthropy that annually offers 25,000 Americans a small federally-funded stipend and education award in exchange for committing a year of their lives to “getting something done” for the nation.

When foundations like the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, IBM, the New York Community Trust, the Butler Family Fund and The James Irvine Foundation heard Clinton's plan, they became concerned about how the federal government would interface with the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors. What did the federal government know or understand about the role of philanthropy? And so, these foundations, and others like them, called a meeting with public policy leaders and began a conversation that has continued for nearly a decade.

A NEW TIME FOR AMERICA

Since the attacks of September 11th, the nation is more focused than ever on the importance of all Americans assuming their responsibilities as citizens. President George W. Bush has called for an expansion of the AmeriCorps national service program. He has asked every American to give 4,000 hours to the service of others. And he has established a cabinet-level coordinating council, the USA Freedom Corps, to engage federal agencies in this endeavor.

On April 29, 2002, the Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service sponsored a discussion as a pre-conference session at the Council on Foundations Annual Conference to explore the roles service and leadership play in times of national crisis. Mr. Jim Marks, Associate Director of the Greater Milwaukee Foundation and Vice President of the Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service, introduced the conversation. It was moderated by Ms. Dot Ridings, President and CEO of the Council on Foundations. The panel included Mr. Paul Glastris, Editor in Chief of the *Washington Monthly*, and Dr. Leslie Lenkowsky, President and CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service. This document offers highlights from their conversation.

WHO CARES ABOUT SERVICE AND WHY?

“It's no secret that...this topic resonates for me personally,” asserts Ridings in her opening remarks, explaining that the service ethic and volunteering are issues and acts that she has been interested in her whole life.

In his State of the Union speech, President Bush called upon every

American to give something back. He asked that each of us, over a lifetime, give 4,000 hours to volunteer efforts and that we define ourselves “first as citizens, not spectators.”

In introducing the panel, Ridings asked them to share how they got involved in service and volunteering. Why this issue, and not something else?

Lenkowsky, former head of the Hudson Institute, a policy think-tank, associates his own commitment to the ethic and practice of service and volunteering to his belief and confidence in American democracy.

Glastris describes himself growing up in a family with parents who were “utterly uninvolved in politics.” His commitment to service came as a result of observing the benefits it yielded for the folks serving and the communities served. “The more you look at national service,” Glastris explains, “the more good things it seems capable of accomplishing...” As a journalist, Glastris was inspired to write stories about national service and “became a champion” for the cause.

THE ROLE AND LIMITS OF LEADERSHIP

If we agree that President Bush has opened a door with his vision of an engaged America, Ridings states, “How, then, do we translate that vision into action?” There are essentially two levels on which this question can be addressed. The first is how do we as a nation seize the moment that Bush has presented? The second is how does the philanthropic sector respond to the President’s call in such a way that maximizes the value of his leadership for the nonprofit sector?

On the first issue, Glastris notes that primarily “this is a political battle...” and for those who care about service and volunteering, “one shouldn’t trust the high-minded talk of a national leader. There are political interests and concerns that will dictate the final chapter of this endeavor, and they relate to the federal government’s commitment of resources to national service.” How much financial support will be provided to promote service and volunteering? How will those funds be delivered and to whom? What assistance will be available, either financial or technical, to help non-profits improve their ability to recruit, train, supervise and deploy volunteers?

Lenkowsky argues that this President is in fact deeply committed, and his leadership is of critical importance to the promotion of service and volunteering. He notes, “When the President spoke about his call to serve... it was an expression of his view of the responsibilities of citizenship...He (believes in) a culture of citizenship, service and responsibility. And to this President,” explains Lenkowsky, “that’s what service is all about.”

WHAT ABOUT HOMELAND SECURITY?

USA Freedom Corps is more than an idea - it is a council of delegates representing cabinet and non-cabinet level agencies. Its mission is to encourage the ethic of volunteering and to coordinate the federal government’s efforts on behalf of that mission. The concept of a federal level coordinating council specifically relates to the role that service and volunteering will play in homeland security.

Lenkowsky points out that linking volunteering and service to homeland security has historical precedent. “How did the greatest generation become great?” Lenkowsky asks. In researching the history of the Civilian Conservation Corps, Lenkowsky uncovered pamphlets developed by the Office of Civilian Defense during the Roosevelt administration. These pamphlets offered Americans practical ways they could be involved in homeland security. “Watch for enemy airplanes,” says one. And then there is a whole category of other things such as, “Help a needy neighbor. Care for somebody who is

sick.” These are activities, Lenkowsky argues, that many of us regard as acts of service.

Ultimately, President Roosevelt understood that it is the “character of a nation that is its strongest asset,” explains Lenkowsky. This may be true whether we are in a time of war or peace.

“If anything,” Lenkowsky posits, “it is easier to show character in a time of war.”

REDEFINING CITIZENSHIP WITH UNIVERSAL SERVICE

How important are the events of September 11th to the President’s expectations for all Americans to serve? Paul Glastris believes that September 11th “redefines the challenge for national service in America.” He argues that the nation would not be having this conversation without the war, and notes that September 11th has “fixed our attention on national service and the meaning of service to a healthy democracy.” Glastris proposes that we use this opportunity “to build a system of universal service for all Americans.”

Glastris suggests that this may be the right moment to rethink national service and frame it as encompassing the full spectrum of military to non-military service. Under this paradigm, service to the nation is defined by activities that require personal commitment of time, effort and energy, with a focus on character and nation-building rather than personal gain.

“The nation is ill-prepared for the threats we face,” says Glastris. “We don’t have anywhere near the resources required to deal with those threats.”

*President Bush asks that each of us,
over a lifetime, give 4000 hours to
volunteer efforts, that we define
ourselves first as citizens,
not as spectators.*

A broad-based universal national service program is “vital for the security of the country.” National security needs, according to Glastris, should drive the reframing of national service.

Lenkowsky disagrees. The call to engage people in civic life, Lenkowsky argues, is not an outgrowth of the events of September 11th and those events should not have anything to do with defining the future of national service in America. The problem that national service can help to solve, according to Lenkowsky, is the trend of civic disengagement. Service and volunteering may be strategies to combat that disengagement.

Ridings returns to the issue of universal service, asking Glastris to explain what he means by the term. Glastris offers that a universal service initiative could be an organizing tool for effectively responding to or anticipating global threats to national security. “I don’t ultimately think we’re going to get where we need to be without a draft,” he claims. “It’s something we have written about in our magazine quite a bit in recent months. And it’s got traction... I think it’s popular with the American people,” Glastris explains. He goes on to point out, however, that there isn’t a single political leader in Washington who will touch the issue.

Glastris is proposing a system of universal service where every young person between the ages of 18 and 24 is expected to serve for an 18-month or two-year period. At the end of the service one receives benefits such as an educational scholarship. Under such a system, individuals are given a choice of how they serve, either military or non-military; domestic or international. Under such a system, the service is meaningful, makes a difference to the neighborhood or nation, and is ubiquitous — it is a common expectation for all Americans to serve.

Lenkowsky argues strongly against universal service both because he is skeptical of its political viability

and because he considers it to be a “divisive proposition that would destroy the incentives to service we already have.”

“One of the originators of the idea of national service was the philosopher William James. James was not only a great philosopher, but a great psychologist,” explains Lenkowsky. Most importantly, “James was a pacifist. Around the time of the First World War James wrote an article urging pacifism, an end to war. Being a psychologist he realized that ending war would have an unfortunate by-product: there would be young adolescent males with lots of aggressive energies and nowhere to put them. So he

advocated the moral equivalent of war, national service, as a way of getting young men into (other) things.”

President Franklin D. Roosevelt had studied under James at Harvard and, according to Lenkowsky, the Civilian Conservation Corps was modeled on this notion. Before serious thought is given to establishing a real draft, asserts Lenkowsky, we should consider ways to establish

the “moral equivalent of the draft” by organizing ourselves and institutions in such a way that we make it the “wrong option” to refuse to serve. This could be accomplished with peer pressure, or with conditions or benefits that provide incentives to serve.

“I think,” concludes Lenkowsky, “that if we have truly exhausted those possibilities...and we still have a country where people say, ‘Not my responsibility,’ then perhaps we do need to consider a draft.”

ASK WHAT I CAN DO FOR MY COUNTRY

Ridings has a different perspective on the value of a universal system of service, pointing out that as a woman she was not eligible for the draft during the Vietnam war. The message she got from her country was that she was not needed. “I will just tell you,” she offers, “how it felt when I was in college and my male counterparts were being draft-

☞

“My notion of national service... is that really there should be a seamless connection between military service, homeland security service and national service, generally understood as AmeriCorps and such programs, and that what we should be building toward is a system of universal service for all Americans.”

PAUL GLASTRIS



ed or going off to serve in Vietnam. It hit me with such force that my country was not requiring anything of me..."

"I paid my taxes and went to school," Ridings states, "but in point of fact, paying taxes was all the nation expected of me. And it made me indignant."



"Certainly September 11th...was a catalytic event. But the President's concern about service...stemmed from a concern about the kind of nation we are, the kind of culture we are developing."

LES LENKOWSKY



According to Ridings, it is critical to give all young people a sense that their country needs them – that they have something to give and that their contributions are required and valued.

CONCLUSION

In an uncertain world, it is important to strengthen the bonds that make us a nation. It is important to nurture our humanity so that we are able to maintain our humanity in our dealings with others. Would universal service strengthen our sense of common destiny and purpose? This question is worthy of discussion and debate. But what is not controversial, what is very clear, is that in his call to the nation, the President reminds us that we are connected to one another, that we have responsibilities to one another, not just because we share a neighborhood, but because we share a nation.

TIPS FOR FOUNDATIONS TO PROMOTE ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

The national conversation about service and civic engagement offers foundations some opportunities to examine how their policies and practices promote civic engagement and active citizenship. Some suggestions for foundations emerged during the conversation.

Lenkowsky suggests that any foundation funding community-based nonprofits can rethink the questions they ask potential grantees about how they involve volunteers or AmeriCorps members. From a broader civic engagement standpoint, foundations can also ask how a potential grantee engages local residents in the work of the organization. This can raise consciousness and potentially stimulate requests from nonprofits for assistance in developing their civic volunteer recruitment and training programs.

Foundations providing grants to academic institutions can ask grantees about their commitment to service-learning and community service and about their use of Federal Work-Study funds. The Federal Work-Study program now requires that at least 7% of a college's Work-Study slots be used for community service jobs. The Federal Work-Study program was enacted in 1965 as a way of providing youth from lower-income families with financial support for a college education in return for their "giving something back" to the community. Over time, however, college campuses came to rely on Work-Study students to fill on-campus jobs rather than community-based service work. Harris Wofford, former CEO of the Corporation for National Service, led the effort to amend the Work-Study rules to increase the required percentage of community service jobs.

Nonprofit organizations need funding to manage, educate and coordinate the activities of volunteers. Foundations have an opportunity to step up to the President's call by identifying best practices in volunteer recruitment and training, and either funding or proposing a partnership with government to fund the infrastructure required to provide meaningful service and volunteer experiences.

Join the discussion on this and other topics at the next Grantmaker Forum Annual Conference –
"Calling the Nation to Serve:
Opportunities and Challenges for Philanthropy,"
November 14 & 15, 2002
in Washington DC.

For conference information or to register, visit
www.gfcns.org
or contact the Grantmaker Forum:
Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service
2550 Ninth Street, Suite 113, Berkeley, CA 94710
Telephone 510-665-6130
gfcns@informingchange.com
