

Building a Partnership *for* National Service



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Building a Partnership
for National Service

by Jill Blair, Director

The Grantmaker Forum on
Community & National Service

The Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service

The Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service, founded in 1993, is an association of grantmakers representing the full spectrum of philanthropy: private foundations, individual donors, corporate foundations and community foundations. The mission of the Grantmaker Forum has been to provide leadership and information about the value of service and volunteering and to encourage private and public investment in the field as a means of strengthening communities and building a healthy democracy. The Grantmaker Forum pursues its mission through its sponsorship of events, community dialogues, issue-based research, networking and publications. In the past few years, most of the Grantmaker Forum's conferences, major educational sessions, and publications have focused on the role service and volunteering play in advancing active citizenship.

For more information about the Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service, its publications, upcoming events and more, visit the GFCNS web site at www.gfcns.org.

Henry M. Jackson Foundation

Since its establishment in 1983, the Henry M. Jackson Foundation has been committed to the principles, values, and interests that guided the late Senator during his 43-year career in the United States Congress. His emphasis on the need for objective analysis, making informed policy choices, and taking a longer term view is reflected in all of the Foundation's work. It seeks to promote dialogue between the academic and policy worlds, between the public and private sectors, and between citizens and their government. It also endeavors to foster the development of educational programs for the next generation of leaders.

The Foundation has been interested for several years in acquiring a better understanding of the reality and potential for public/private partnerships around national and community service, believing that a healthy and strong democracy requires active civic and political participation by its citizens. It is particularly critical that young people view their nation as one that welcomes their engagement.

For more information about the Jackson Foundation, visit their web site at www.hmjackson.org. Funding for this publication was provided by the Henry M. Jackson Foundation.

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The Roles of the Public and Philanthropic Sectors in National Service—An Overview

National Service

- Who should serve?
- How should service be organized?
- Under whose auspices and direction?
- And, most importantly, at whose expense?

The act of service, defined in Webster’s as a contribution to the welfare of others, is a notion that on the surface seems to be universally supported. Who would be against the idea that we all have something to give; that there is value in “giving of ourselves for purposes greater than ourselves”? In practice, however, the “who,” “what,” and “how” of service are both complicated and elusive.

In recent months here in the United States, we have witnessed vigorous debate about national service and the future of AmeriCorps. Policy makers question the premise of stipended service; some suggest that this is the equivalent of paying volunteers, which, they argue, corrupts the underlying value of the volunteer experience. Non-profit leaders, however, note that there are costs associated with organizing and deploying any volunteer labor. National service, they say, is a source of support that helps to offset those real costs while strengthening programs that engage thousands of unstipended community volunteers. At the same time, national service gives young people experience working for the good of society while cultivating the ethic of giving.

It is perhaps the coupling of the word “national” with the word “service” that exacerbates this debate even further. To some, national service is almost by definition an expressed commitment by the “state” to support service as a strategy for encouraging and reinforcing democratic practice. There would be no “national” in the concept of service if there were no “nation.” In this frame, national service is conceived as half of the social order equation where the goal is to achieve balance between one’s rights and one’s obligation in a civil and democratic society. In this context, national service is a state-supported opportunity for young people, in particular, to exercise their democratic muscle.

This suggests that there is some consensus about the role government plays in not only promoting service, but making it possible for people to serve. In fact, however, this consensus does not exist. President George W. Bush has been a leader in supporting the service ethic, encouraging all Americans to serve, offering a vision for Americans to contribute the equivalent of two years of their lives to



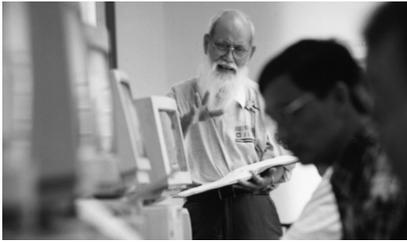
the service of others. But his personal conviction and his “call” to the nation have failed to transcend the politics of funding, operating and leading a national service initiative that would move this vision to reality.

And so the debate continues. Is there a role for government funding of a program that provides opportunities for young people to contribute their time and energy to the non-profit sector working on issues that address important social problems? This is a highly charged question and has been since 1993 when President Bill Clinton launched AmeriCorps, the largest national service initiative since President Franklin Roosevelt’s Civilian Conservation Corps. AmeriCorps was deliberately designed to be implemented at the community level with the leadership and involvement of each state and funding from the federal government. This approach was intended to ensure that local communities would identify the problems that national service would solve.

Even this deliberate effort to design and present national service as a community-based initiative has done little to abate the underlying controversy. Should the federal government finance opportunities for Americans to serve? Among those who see value in having young people involved in community-based problem-solving—even among those who can find common ground on the importance of providing stipends to those young people—the question of who should absorb the cost remains. But, if it is NOT the responsibility of government, then who is responsible? Should private philanthropy pick up where government funding leaves off? Some believe the answer is “yes.”

A Survey of Grantmakers

Last year, the Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service undertook an evaluation of its programs, publications and offerings to assess the value of its work. The study included a survey of foundation leaders that asked about their financial and philosophical support for service and volunteering as well as related program areas.¹ The study shed important light on the perspective that philanthropy² holds of the role government should play in support of service and volun-



“We can do some things that government cannot do easily. We can, for example, support more risk taking around models of civic engagement.”

Foundation Leader

teering, as well as philanthropy’s own sense of responsibility to the field.

When we began this effort we wanted to better understand the role and responsibility that philanthropy would assume for promoting and funding the ethic and practice of service. We have learned in this exercise that, in general, philanthropy sees itself as an important promoter and supporter of the service ethic. More specifically, philanthropy finances nonprofit organizations and is frequently the lead supporter of the infrastructure those organizations require to recruit, train, deploy and retain volunteers.³ In far fewer cases, philanthropy is stepping up to the federal government’s challenge and providing financial support to AmeriCorps programs by subsidizing the programmatic and administrative costs of national service.

Philanthropy is split on its view about whether government should be involved in service—with some expressing a general distrust of government’s ability to execute programs. More specifically, foundation leaders note that the federal government’s involvement in service may undermine or compromise the ability of local communities to set their own priorities for service and address their own problems. Despite the skepticism among some members of philanthropy about the federal government’s role in service, a large-scale national service effort will require federal involvement, if only because the resources required to engage large numbers of Americans in service are beyond the financial capacity of the philanthropic sector by itself.

Government’s View of Philanthropy’s Role

This analysis of our research provides some insight into philanthropy’s view of the role of government with respect to service and volunteering. But what is government’s view of the role philanthropy should play in support of service? We do know from the matching requirement of the existing national service legislation that governs AmeriCorps, that at the federal level political leaders believe that philanthropy should contribute to national service.⁴ We know that as funding for AmeriCorps is debated even now, there is talk about

establishing the equivalent of a term limit for federal support of programs with the expectation that “others” will assume responsibility for the long-term support of programs. From the perspective of philanthropy, this is a misguided assumption. Philanthropic giving, even in its entirety, is marginal given the scale of the problems we face as a nation. Moreover, philanthropic giving is most often restricted to certain communities, regions, issues and needs as a result of bylaws developed by each set of founding donors.

Resolving the Debate

In addition to the findings from the Grantmaker Forum’s research, this paper offers a perspective on the unique role that both philanthropy and government can play in support of service. These insights are based on years of experience working on the issue of service through the lens of philanthropy.

The productive resolution of the debate about the appropriate roles and responsibilities of government and philanthropy in support of service and volunteering will be found by having the two sectors come together to form a partnership that is built on a deep understanding of the capacities and commitments of both to the field.

We hope this paper will serve as a catalyst for productive cross-sector discussions that will clarify the roles and responsibilities of each sector in supporting the ethic and practice of service.

Selected Findings from a Survey of Grantmakers

This paper highlights those aspects of the Grantmaker Forum’s research that respond to the following questions: What is “the state” of philanthropic support for service? What are grantmakers’ views of the role of government in supporting service? For each question, we provide a summary of the data and a discussion of implications.

QUESTION 1

What is the state of philanthropic support of service?

DISCUSSION

On the face of it, any act of philanthropy is rooted in the service ethic—to give of one’s time, talent and treasure is to be of service to community. It is as if philanthropy itself equates with support of the service ethic. It is a value that is imbued in the work of philanthropy and reflected in every philanthropic endeavor. We are especially interested in understanding whether this theoretical (tautological) commitment to the service ethic translates into financial support for service-related programs and activities.

Although information about foundation grants is systematically collected and made public by many sources, including The Foundation Center, “service” is not a stand-alone category of program investment. It is necessary to probe beyond the funding of service as a stand-alone program and to identify proxies for service-related funding in order to gain a sense of financial commitment to the field. Unlike content areas such as health or education where grantmakers fund a health-related program or an educational initiative, service tends to be used as a strategy that relates to other content areas. For example, a foundation is funding the volunteer manager at an after-school program, and the funding is likely reported under the category of “youth program” even though the grant money is used to enable the program to recruit and engage community volunteers in service to the children in the program.

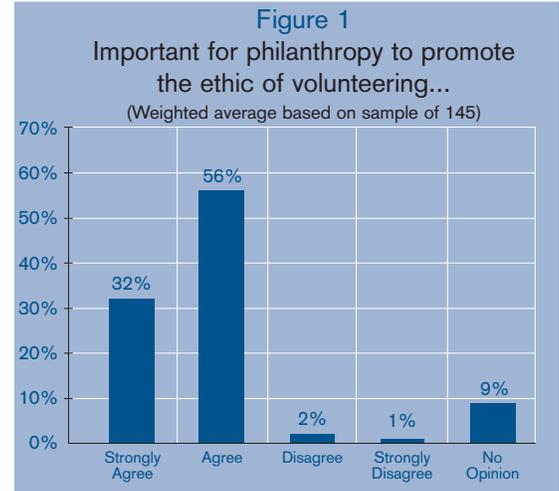
In order to capture the breadth of service-related grantmaking, it is necessary to ask grantmakers about their financial support of a broad range of service-related programs and issues, from service-learning to community organizing.



FINDING

Grantmakers believe that philanthropy should promote the service ethic.

Foundations clearly see a role for themselves in promoting the service ethic, in particular promoting volunteering and community and national service. Figure 1 shows that 88% of the grantmakers surveyed either agree or strongly agree that it is important for philanthropy to promote the



ethic of volunteering. This finding was consistent across all types of foundations (family, corporate, community and independent).

IMPLICATIONS

On a practical level, grantmakers believe that they have a role in promoting the service ethic, but they are less inclined to support national service than almost any other form of service and volunteering. This finding appears to reflect a fundamental tension about roles and responsibilities of the sectors in support of a concept that incorporates the notion of “nation.”

Philanthropy has assumed for itself a clear role in supporting nonprofits that engage “traditional” volunteers in community-based work and, to the extent that these nonprofits serve as the “host sites” for national service (AmeriCorps) members, they are indirectly supporting national service. But they appear to resist financing national service as a category of investment. This is further reinforced in the next finding.

FINDING

Grantmakers believe foundations should fund organizations that promote volunteering and community and national service.

Grantmakers in our survey believe that foundations must “walk the talk” when it comes to promoting service and volunteering—they should not only promote the service ethic, but they should finance the nonprofit organizations that promote volunteering and service as well.



IMPLICATIONS

Figure 2 shows that 76% of grantmakers agree or strongly agree that philanthropy should financially support organizations that promote volunteering and community and national service.

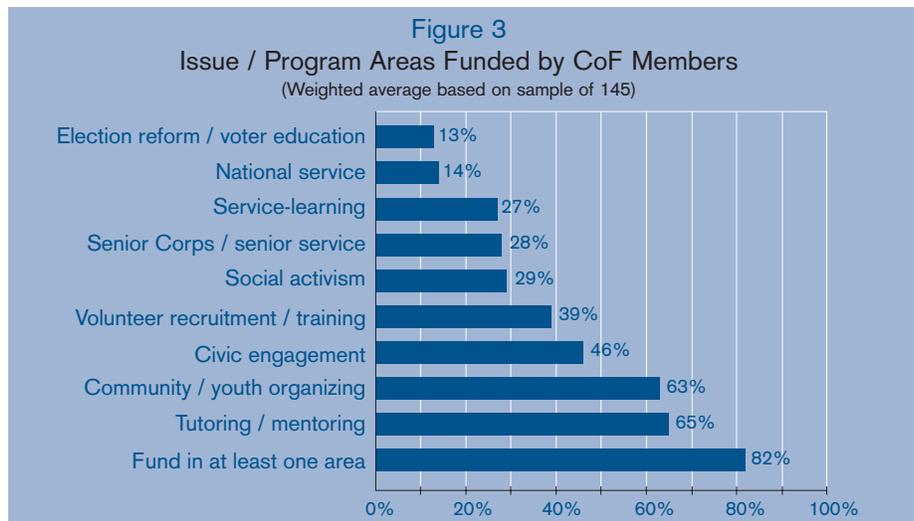
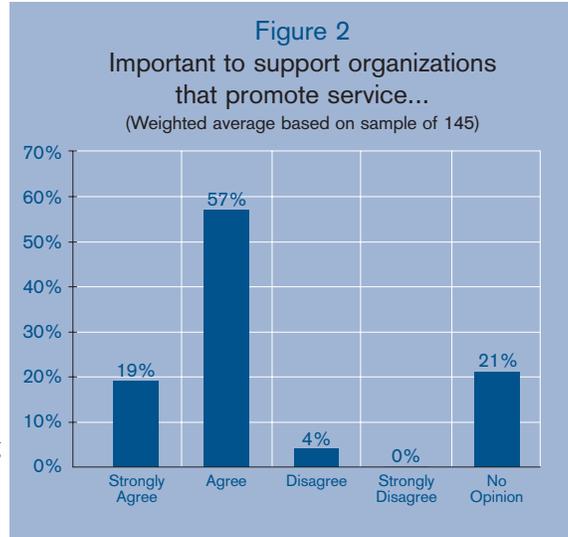
It is worth noting that 32% of the foundations surveyed expressed strong agreement that philanthropy itself has a role in

promoting the service ethic as compared with only 19% who expressed the same conviction for funding other organizations to promote service. Grantmakers may have more passion to promote service themselves than they have passion to fund others to do so.

FINDING

Philanthropy is funding service-related programs with a focus on volunteering.

Figure 3 demonstrates that 82% of grantmaking organizations provide some level of financial support to issues or programs related to service and volunteering. But foundations are more likely to support “traditional volunteering,” with 65% reporting that they fund tutoring





IMPLICATIONS

QUESTION 2

DISCUSSION

programs compared with only 14% supporting national service.

We also asked grantmakers if they were interested in learning more about any of the issues or topics listed in Figure 3. In response to that question, the topic of least interest to the foundation community was national service, with only 9% saying they would like to know more about that subject. Foundation representatives were most interested in learning more about civic engagement, community/youth organizing and tutoring/mentoring programs, with some 46% of the respondents expressing interest in those areas.

Philanthropy is providing financial support that enables people to engage in community life, to volunteer and participate in civic life. The findings demonstrate, however, that fewer foundations see value in funding national service (14%) or election reform (13%).

What role does philanthropy see for government in supporting service?

Since national service was reinvigorated in 1993 with the launch of AmeriCorps, which provides stipends and educational awards to those who serve, there has been an expectation established in legislation that the private sector would contribute to financing service opportunities. This expectation was intended to encourage public/private partnership in the national service enterprise. The legislation was authored at a time when there was a great deal of emphasis on reducing or carefully limiting the role of government in the lives of the American people.

The result was a program design that reflected and expressed ambivalence about whether national service was first and foremost in the interest of the nation or in the interest of the individual serving. This is further demonstrated by much of the research that has been done around AmeriCorps that is more likely to focus on the impact of service on the individual serving rather than the community served.⁵ Ten years after its launch, AmeriCorps still struggles annually to defend its survival, and the debate about financing service persists. This suggests that despite the rhetoric, our political leadership has not embraced the notion that national service is in fact a nation-building enterprise.

In contrast, Katimavik, Canada's national youth service program, is



fully funded by the Canadian government. It provides young people with an intensive residential experience where they travel together as a cohort to different Canadian provinces contributing their time and energy to addressing community problems. The program goals explicitly express the interest of the state in promoting positive youth development and fostering a better understanding of Canada. The program is geared to bringing young people together from different backgrounds and exposing them to the diversity of the country as a whole and the complexity of the problems the nation confronts. In Canada, national youth service is about developing better citizens. It is “in the national interest” and conducted on behalf of the public’s overall welfare.

Here in the United States our ambivalence about national service and how it should be supported may reflect the tension between two fundamental values—the value of individual rights and the value of obligations.⁶

This tension plays out and will need to be resolved both at the policy level and at the level of program and practice. How is national service organized and to whose benefit? If national service is understood to be a strategy for encouraging self sacrifice in the interest of the polity, the need for government funding seems clear. On the other hand, if national service is perceived primarily as a workfare experience, or a wage subsidy for nonprofits, it is an essentially private enterprise that is being conducted at public expense.

FINDING

Half of the grantmakers believe strongly or very strongly that the federal government has a role in financing opportunities for Americans to serve and volunteer; the other half is less certain.

Figure 4 shows that only 50% of grantmakers believe it is important for the federal government to finance opportunities for Americans to serve and volunteer (including providing incentives and stipends). Some 16% had no opinion on the subject, suggesting either ambivalence or a lack of information about the practical aspects of funding national service. However, 34% of grantmakers either disagreed or disagreed strongly with the suggestion that the federal government



MORE INFORMATION AND IMPLICATIONS

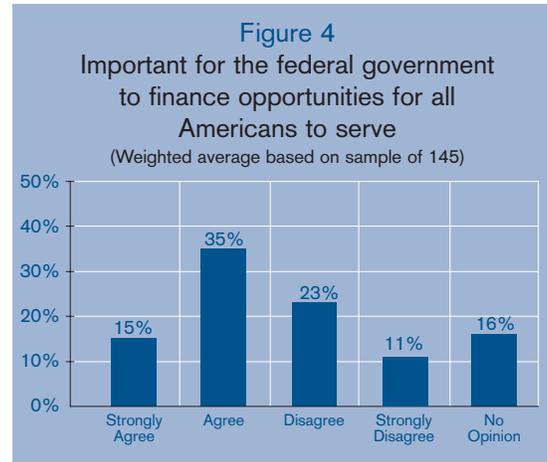
should fund opportunities for all Americans to serve.

The survey tells us that philanthropy is essentially split in its opinion about the need for the federal government to finance service and volunteering, but it doesn't tell us why. To deepen our understanding, we conducted interviews with key philanthropic leaders and explored these results with them.

Some informants noted that service and volunteering is all about citizens helping one another directly or indirectly—volunteers who engage in mutual aid or rely on nonprofit organizations to deploy their talents. This is expressed in the following comment: “Some (of us) see service as citizens helping citizens outside of government and politics.” This view was expressed by leaders who acknowledged that philanthropy is a primary funder of the nonprofit organizations that are hosting volunteers.

Others with whom we spoke argued strongly that government “should and must” be involved in funding national service, as demonstrated by the following comment: “This ambivalence about the role of government in service reflects the archaic egocentric nature of the foundation community...the fact is that if government *doesn't* get into this we are in big trouble.” Another informant said, “National service—AmeriCorps—is and *should be* federally supported.”

Some foundation leaders noted that they have little confidence in the government's ability to effectively execute programs. These individuals express concern that the closer government gets to programs, the less efficient and effective the programs will become. “Government will turn service into a bureaucracy,” noted one informant. “People are concerned about a heavy bureaucracy squeezing the life out of the nonprofits that host those who serve,” stated another.



“There is the alarming misperception [on the part of government] that private philanthropy can pick up the slack. There is no sense that philanthropy is a miniscule part of the support for service and volunteering.”

Foundation Leader

Building a Partnership

A partnership between government and philanthropy offers the potential to expand and increase the civic and social benefits of service. To contribute to the cultivation of such a partnership, we offer the following suggestions for the roles and responsibilities that philanthropy and government may be best suited to assume, together or independent of one another. The purpose of presenting the following is to begin a conversation between the sectors that deepens the understanding that each has of the other so that productive partnerships can be developed in many realms, including in the field of service and volunteering.

Shared Interests and Responsibilities

- Government and philanthropy share responsibility for and interest in ensuring the health and capacity of nonprofit organizations that address important social and public problems.
- Government and philanthropy benefit from a national service initiative that addresses important social and public problems and leaves the server with new skills for addressing problems and a sense of personal responsibility for doing so.

The Strengths and Limits of Both

- Philanthropy has limited financial capacity but greater flexibility in financing general operating costs for nonprofit organizations—philanthropy is better suited to support start-up funding or smaller organizations with less infrastructure. Philanthropy may be better suited for funding program evaluation, planning and new program design.
- Government has greater financial capacity than philanthropy, though its process for funding is more restricted and bureaucratic, and is therefore better positioned to support ongoing, large-scale programs in more sophisticated organizations.
- Philanthropy may be better positioned to assume leadership in funding research and promoting good practice through publications, conferences or recognition awards.



- Government and political leaders are well positioned to define the civic value of national service and articulate the relationship between individual rights and public duty obligations.
- Government and political leaders are well positioned to establish the national purpose for national service and make a compelling case for all Americans to serve.
- Philanthropy is well positioned to continue its support of volunteer programs housed within nonprofits that provide opportunities for people to contribute in their own communities on issues of personal interest.

Conclusion

Like philanthropy, government clearly has a stake in supporting the service ethic. Organized service can be a remedy for social disintegration—it can help create social capital, if properly structured, connecting people from different backgrounds and providing a basis for mutual understanding, compassion and cooperation. It can position citizens in a healthy and balanced relationship with government, working together as joint problem-solvers.

Political leadership should begin by defining the philosophical framework within which they see national service operating—in whose interest and to what end? To the extent that national service is positioned as a workfare program, a wage subsidy or government funding for community-based nonprofits, it will be treated essentially as a publicly funded private enterprise. To the extent that national service is conceived as a civic venture, a federally-funded initiative that brings Americans together from all backgrounds to solve important social problems, then national service will be treated as public effort in the public interest.

In either case, this analysis demonstrates that there is a role for both government and philanthropy in support of the ethic and practice of service. The potential for service to yield great social benefit is most likely to be achieved through an effective partnership between philanthropy and government that recognizes the interests of both sectors and their respective strengths and limits. Such a partnership requires a shared understanding of purpose, a realistic assessment of capacity and an appropriate allocation of responsibility.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The research presented in this publication is excerpted from a larger evaluation report that provided the Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service (GFCNS) with an evaluation of GFCNS programs and services and the demand for future services. For a copy of the complete report which includes a detailed description of research methodologies, please contact GFCNS at 510-665-6130 or info@gfcns.org.
- 2 For this study, we use a representative sample of the Council on Foundations members as “philanthropy.”
- 3 Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service, *The Cost of a Volunteer: What It Takes to Provide a Quality Volunteer Experience*. (Berkeley, CA: Author, 2003).
- 4 Programs that receive federal funding for national service are required to demonstrate that other sources also fund the program. The matching requirement can be met with contributions by local and state governments as well as foundation grants and private donations. In 2000, the Grantmaker Forum conducted an analysis of state and local support for AmeriCorps and found that in most cases the support delivered to AmeriCorps programs by state and local governments was in-kind. To the extent that there was a funding match of any kind it was provided by philanthropy and/or the private sector.
- 5 Perry, James L. & Thomson, Ann Marie, “The Effects of National Service in the United States.” Paper presented at Civic Service: Impacts and Inquiry, the International Seminar of the Global Service Institute, St. Louis, MO, 2003.
- 6 Barber, B.R., *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984) and Morone, J.A., *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990). Cited in Perry, 2003.

Credits

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