

TO SERVE THE NATION, YOUTH MUST BE HEARD

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By Wayne Meisel

National service is now a top theme on the American agenda. Large national organizations are gearing up to receive federal money through the new AmeriCorps program, which has its official kick-off next month. But in all the planning for the new service corps, one voice has been conspicuously absent: that of the young people who played a key role in promoting the national-service movement. It is impossible to have a successful service corps without youth leadership.

The Corporation for National Service--which is in charge of overseeing AmeriCorps and other volunteerism efforts--has yet to give young people a serious role in policy making. Just as one can be a friend of agriculture without being a friend of farmers, so to can the corporation be a friend of youth service without being a friend of young people.

Youth leadership is not just a nice idea. It is a critical element to assuring not only that national service will be a success, but that its participants are motivated by a vibrant and powerful vision of social change and justice. Our ability to make youth leadership a key element of all types of service programs will determine whether the new-found interest in national service will be an inspiration and source of support for young people everywhere--or whether it will end up crushing the spirit and creativity of a young people's movement.

Though well-intentioned, the Corporation for National Service has not given young people the opportunity to lead the movement they created. The federal Commission on National and Community Service--the body that led to the formation of the corporation--had recommended unanimously that applicants be required to demonstrate that young people were involved in creating, operating, and evaluating service programs. Yet when the grantmaking regulations were published and sent out, no mention was made of that requirement. A year and a half later, the requirement has yet to work its way into any of the corporation's regulations or guidelines.

In a move that further limited youth involvement, the corporation dissolved the Youth Voice Committee, which the commission had created to make sure that young people had an opportunity to be involved in the policy-making process. Although corporation officials promised to setup some kind of structure to perform the same tasks as the youth committee, they have not yet done so.

Before it was dismantled, the committee oversaw the creation of "From the Hip," a photojournalistic effort to get young people to define and express what youth service was and what it meant. Hundreds of young people teamed up with adult mentors to take photographs and write stories about youth service. The stories that came back were not just about traditional kinds of service like tutoring kids and serving the elderly; they were also about race, sexuality, politics, and religion.

To create a national-service corps that is relevant to young people, we need to know what they think. But the corporation has not taken any action to figure out what young people value.

Federal officials have done further damage to the youth movement by taking over projects that were designed and run by young people. Case in point: the Road Scholars program run by the Campus Outreach Opportunity League.

For the past decade, cool has sent staff members out to towns and cities across the country that wanted help developing and strengthening campus-based community-service efforts. Initially, the Commission on National and Community Service made a grant to the Road Scholars program that would have allowed many more communities to be served by cool. But instead of continuing the league's tradition of getting

young people to advise and inspire their peers, the Corporation for National Service withdrew federal support and established its own program to provide the same services as cool.

You cannot hire someone else to implement another person's or group's vision. Through cool, Road Scholars were able to lead with authority. They were all recent college graduates with experience building successful service efforts. They were accountable not to a large institution or a government entity but to an idea, a common vision, and a shared value. Perhaps that was threatening to federal leaders. The real question is whether in its new training program, which borrows the techniques developed by cool, the Corporation for National Service will give young people adequate authority.

Officials of the Corporation for National Service have emphatically denied that they are trying to discourage the youth voice.

But they must realize that the corporation, through its influence and sheer size, controls the youth-service movement. The greatest tragedy in all this is that after working so hard to get to the place we are now, the movement finds itself at its most vulnerable point. The corporation's takeover could leave us with uninspired leadership that fails to articulate a clear and powerful message while creating a bureaucracy that becomes an expression of institutionalized mediocrity.

Although I am critical of what has happened so far, there is much that the Corporation for National Service and the foundation world can do to make national service flourish. Among the steps they can take to bring life, vision, and youth back to what can be the most powerful movement of this decade:

The corporation must put into its regulations a requirement that all its grantees have young people involved in the creation, implementation, operation, and evaluation of their programs.

The corporation and foundations need to realize that for community service to have meaning to a broad range of young people, it has to deal openly with issues of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, politics, justice, and power.

Foundations should take a close look at projects the corporation does not support. Private grant makers should consider giving money to efforts that have the potential to break new ground in the way youth-service efforts are run.

The corporation should be encouraged to identify, develop, and support programs that educate non-profit organizations about the importance of youth involvement in policy making and that train them in ways to win youth participation.

Foundations should be inspired to follow the lead of the Lyndhurst and Echoing Green Foundations, which provide fellowships to young people who want to pursue careers in community service and activism.

Many people have worked hard for national service to become a reality. National service is a call to all Americans — regardless of their age — to serve in their communities and to build the country we all dream about. But for youth service to work, young people must have opportunities to be heard. Youth is the leadership of tomorrow only if we procrastinate.