

Center for the Study of Liberal Democracy: Undergraduate Essay Competition

Service is one of the proudest badges Americans wear on their chests. In 2014, Americans were twice as generous as our Canadian neighbors, and three to fifteen times as generous as any other developed nation.¹ Over a quarter of U.S. adults volunteered in 2017, donating their time, energy, and expertise to help those less fortunate.² Service is woven into every aspect of our society and it improves the lives of millions of citizens every year. At the same time our generosity grows, however, so does the segmentation of the shared American psyche.

Compulsory national service should be a keystone event of every young Americans' education. Upon graduation from high school, two years of required service would expose a graduate to a broad collection of cultures, offer them an opportunity to experiment in a variety of occupations, and contribute to the greater good of the nation. While this essay does not delve into economic or operational particulars, it will describe the promising benefits of enacting a national service program.

Modern technology has allowed us to tailor our news and information sources to outlets that match our view of the nation and the world. Today, eighty-six percent of news-consuming Americans receive their information from a source on the internet.³ This new information ecosystem has introduced a situation in which a high school graduate in Milwaukee, WI could be entering society with an inaccurate understanding of their counterpart's life in Birmingham, AL, with no way for their misconceptions to be challenged. Challenging an individual's knowledge and perceptions is a difficult task, but physically relocating to experience the lifestyles of fellow citizens can produce enduring results. Life experiences unquestionably play a major role in our general worldview. Thus, fostering a plethora of experiences for young citizens, as a national service program would do, will encourage them to consider new ideas and appreciate the diversity of the nation.

¹ "Statistics on U.S. Generosity," Philanthropy Roundtable, March 15, 2021, <https://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/almanac/statistics/u.s.-generosity>

² "Charitable Giving Statistics," National Philanthropic Trust, March 15, 2021, <https://www.nptrust.org/philanthropic-resources/charitable-giving-statistics/>

³ "More than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices," Pew Research Center, January 12, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>

In addition to cultural appreciation, compulsory national service could provide an opportunity for recent high school graduates to learn a variety of skills and evaluate potential career paths that may not have been considered had they immediately entered the workforce or a university. By creating a program where participants are sent on a tour to do diverse jobs, they can narrow down the professions that they enjoy, or, perhaps more importantly, identify the professions they would not. Over the last decade, an average of eleven percent of American employees were dissatisfied with their job, and thirty-nine percent were only somewhat satisfied.⁴ Increasing the number of workers who are happy doing their jobs does not only benefit the workers, but it leads to more creativity and new ideas that will grow the economy in the long run.^{5,6} For those who do not want to pursue a post-secondary degree, the skills and lessons they learned can help them excel in their desired craft. For those considering further education, there is an abundance of research confirming that a break between high school and college improves performance and commitment during undergraduate years.⁷

National pride, duty, and coming of age cannot be overlooked in a mandatory service program, either. There is a foundation on which every nation is built that all citizens honor; an understanding and common good that will never be set aside but must be relearned by each generation. The original idea of organized national service was introduced in William James' 1910 essay – through advocating for an antiquated idea of equality – that urged for a “moral equivalent of war,” where “martial virtues, although originally gain by the race through war, are absolute and permanent goods.”⁸ Our nation needs to have a common filter that every generation of citizens goes through so that we all have a basis of respect for one another. While for some it may be military service, the rest of the populace must learn this through another experience. Future Americans may be able to look at this vast nation and identify public goods or services that they helped create. When our homeland inevitably comes under threat, the groundswell of patriotism for a nation each citizen built will eclipse any we have seen before.

The mythology of individualism in American society must be confronted in order for the program to be successful. It would be anathema, naysayers will undoubtedly say, to the bedrock

⁴ “Work and Workplace,” Gallup, March 16, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1720/work-work-place.aspx>

⁵ “How Liking Your Job Will Help You Succeed,” USC Dornsife, March 16, 2021, <https://appliedpsychologydegree.usc.edu/blog/how-liking-your-job-will-help-you-succeed/>

⁶ “How does innovation lead to growth?” European Central Bank, June 27, 2017, <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/explainers/tell-me-more/html/growth.en.html>

⁷ “Gap Year Data & Benefits,” Gap Year Association, March 16, 2021, <https://www.gapyearassociation.org/data-benefits.php>

⁸ “The Moral Equivalent of War,” University of Kentucky, March 15, 2021, <https://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/moral.html>

of American identity for the U.S. government to control how its citizens live their lives. However, here lies one of the paradoxes of America. The value we place in the individual does not exist without the community. Communities have a shared history, a collective knowledge that sculpts who and what America is. Every individual has shared rituals, ethics, stories, hopes, and fears with a group of fellow citizens. Americans are individuals that belong to the greater American collective. Mandatory service is not a violation of individual rights, but a contribution by every community member to their common identity. No better example of this was conscription in WWII, which gave us the “Greatest Generation.”

United States citizens already donate two percent of the nation’s gross domestic product and volunteer almost nine billion hours on a yearly basis.^{9,10} A compulsory national service program would build on our generous populace’s work and provide other invaluable services to the next generation. Citizens who may never have the opportunity to venture outside their home cities would be sent all over the country to experience and learn from the diversity of cultures our nation has to offer. Since its founding, the American psyche has always been divided to a certain extent, but we have a chance to mend those divisions and grow as a nation through national service. Though some may hope a service program would bring about an American utopia, it will only be one step towards a better future. Democracy requires constant maintenance, and compulsory national service may cultivate the mechanics necessary for its continued care and upkeep.

⁹ Philanthropy Roundtable, “Statistics on U.S. Generosity”

¹⁰ National Philanthropic Trust, “Charitable Giving Statistics”

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