

Developing Student Leaders for Appalachia

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Good morning scholars and administrators. I want to talk this morning about leadership, about why I think developing student leaders is so important, and about how we in higher education can best accomplish that goal.

Two interesting trends have been developing side by side for the past couple of decades. One is a redefinition of leadership which has implications for all areas of our public life. The other is a remarkable re-engagement by young Americans, particularly college students, in national and community service. I do not believe they are unrelated.

The New Leadership

Robert Burkhart captures the essence of the new leadership as well as anyone when he says that leadership is the inability to sit back and watch the world go to hell. Robert Greenleaf called this new type of leader the "servant-leader." New ideas about leadership focus on character, on greatness of spirit, and are about leading from the inside out. They are about ethics—not just about the capacity to manipulate individuals or events towards a desired conclusion, irrespective of the process or the impact on others or on the earth. They are about action for the common good, even solo action, not about training oneself in the uses of power, or positioning oneself within the corridors of power. Machiavelli would not be pleased.

Student Leadership Today

Since the mid-1980s, the new resurgence in student leadership has had a profound impact on students themselves, on education, and on the nation. In the past ten years the number of college students involved in community service has increased tenfold. Nearly one-half of American college students now engage in some form of community service before they graduate. Vast numbers of students K-12 are

involved in service and service learning. The new AmeriCorps program for college students and recent graduates has 25,000 young Americans serving full-time in communities around the country. Foundations like Ford, Kellogg, and more recently Bonner are pumping many millions of dollars into the education community to support this renewed emphasis on service. All in all, this resurgence of youth involvement in service constitutes one of the most interesting and unsung social movements of the last half of our century.

Colleges and universities are responding. A new career title has developed—the campus service director. More and more faculty are developing courses that involve students in service as well as learning, with an eye to improving both. A national association of service-learning educators has formed. Co-curricular transcripts detailing service and leadership experiences are being developed. In slow-moving higher education all of this constitutes speedy and notable change. There are many passing fads in education—and I do not believe this is one of them.

Although he would not tell you this, in the room with us today is one of the individuals credited with launching what is now called the youth service or national and community service movement, the man who coined the term "AmeriCorps." Wayne Meisel, long before he became the executive director of the Bonner Foundation, was a feisty undergrad who defined the then prevailing perspective of young people as apathetic and uncaring. What he discovered at Harvard, and later at campuses all over the country after founding the Campus Outreach Opportunity League or COOL, was that college students are not apathetic. On the contrary, when asked to serve they jump at the chance. His thesis—that the very nature of young people is idealism, the desire to make a contribution—has been confirmed again and again both quantitatively and anecdotally. COOL, now fifteen years old, still attracts 2,000 college students a year to its annual conference, students who are serious, for the most part, about the challenge of servant-leadership. Campus service is here to stay.

A fascinating thing about these young leaders is that without anybody telling them much about it, without their reading all those books about the new leadership you can find in the business section of bookstores, they exemplify surprisingly well this new model of the servant-leader. Thomas Petzinger, writing for the *Wall Street Journal* on September 18, reported on a recent survey conducted on young people eighteen to thirty. One conclusion: "Young people overwhelmingly describe a model of leadership that is built from the bottom up." Petzinger notes that "small groups are leading change at the local level,

in contrast to the traditional concept of American leadership as a strong, select group of individuals." Sixty-eight percent of those surveyed also claim involvement in community service.

Columnist E. J. Dionne, writing for the *Washington Post* on September 1, pointed out that "it is possible to hope that this generation will do a better job than its predecessors in sorting out the conundrums of democracy. The call to service is inspired not only by altruism but also by a desire to build a stronger community for one's self and family as well as others... The great reforming generations are the ones that marry the aspirations of service to the possibilities of politics and harness the good work done in local communities to transform a nation. Might this generation be one of them?" Is this the GenX he's talking about? It is my firm belief that one of the highest callings of higher education today is to help this generation develop the skills and attitudes they need to become outstanding servant leaders—a task I feel is important not only for our students and for our communities, but also for higher education itself.

Why Developing Student Leadership Is Important

I need not say much to this audience about why our communities are so in need of leadership. You already know that here at the brink of the millennium the gap between rich and poor continues to widen, that hunger and homelessness are growing, domestic violence is epidemic, the teen suicide rate is escalating, drug addiction and alcoholism are rampant, and handgun violence is shocking. I won't even start on the environment. Those of us from the Appalachian area know that generally speaking the problems, if anything, are worse in the mountains. One wonders whether the great American melting pot might soon become the great American meltdown instead. In short, our communities and our country need servant leaders badly.

Students involved in service and leadership report more personal growth and development, and the few studies that exist confirm that students actually do better in academic work when they are involved in service or leadership activities. More and more organizations and corporations are looking less at GPA and more at service or leadership experience on a résumé. And be sure that the type of leader the flatter workplace of the future is leaning toward is one with a strong capacity for team skills, a service attitude, and the ability to make responsible decisions—even at the entry level.

Developing student leaders is important for higher education, too. More and more parents, businesses, government officials, and community leaders are calling on higher education to become more deliberate in developing citizens, along with expanding their minds and preparing them for careers. Berea College has recently been through an extensive strategic planning process that culminated in the mission statement "to develop service oriented leaders for Appalachia and beyond." Seven hundred institutions are now part of Campus Compact, the association of college presidents who support service and citizenship education. Institutions that are active in service and leadership development report a new vitality on campus—not only for students but for faculty as well.

As Appalachian colleges we know about the brain drain, and we know about the struggle to keep mountain students in the region both during and after higher education. I believe that well-conceived leadership and service programs can help on both counts. A lot of mountain problems would be solved if a lot of informed and active servant leaders populated our hills. A lot of campus problems would also be solved.

I have spent over half of this talk building a case for why the development of student leaders is important, because how we choose to go about the work of developing leaders will depend, in large part, on how important we think that work is. To date, student leadership development has been a marginal enterprise on the college campus. It will continue to be a marginal enterprise unless we understand its importance. If we understand its importance we will provide adequate human and financial resources. We will not tag it onto other programs and to already overworked missions and allocate accordingly. We will not look down our intellectual noses at it, and not harbor private or public doubts about whether all this service and leadership detracts from the "real" work of the classroom. I believe that to do so will imperil our communities, our students, and not least, our own credibility as institutions in this troubled democracy. Ira Harkavy at Penn was right when he said that "universities cannot afford to remain shores of affluence, self-importance, and horticultural beauty at the edge of island seas of squalor, violence, and despair."

I know that many of your colleges already have leadership and service programs. Others are thinking about how to get started. As each of our campuses is different, so the fit on each campus will also be different. Here are some basic principles that I think can help guide us.

First Principle: Attitude is everything.

E. J. Dionne in his *Post* article noted that “the surest indication of creeping middle age is a proclivity towards whiny speeches about what’s wrong with the new generation.” I am sorry to say that I hear a lot of that kind of rhetoric about today’s college students from today’s college officials. Fail to honor students, they fail to honor you. Too many of us have a profound lack of understanding about today’s students, their problems and their potentials. I believe that Students for Appalachia was successful largely because I came to regard my students as colleagues, younger and less experienced perhaps, but colleagues nonetheless—in the shared business of learning about our communities, of serving others, of becoming servant leaders.

Second Principle: Formal service and leadership programs are not enough.

Why not teach principles of servant leadership across the whole of campus—in residence halls, in workplaces, in activities, in sports, and in classrooms, as well as in formal service or leadership programs? Otherwise the definition of the servant leader is tied too narrowly to service, severely limiting the number and type of students who are likely to participate. There is no reason why education majors off to do their student teaching could not see themselves as servant-leaders, and receive some preparation in this regard. Spreading the ethic and practice of servant leadership throughout the campus culture is also important because even wonderful programs tend to become marginalized and seen as nonintegral parts of the institution.

Third Principle: Leaders learn best when solving real problems.

Working with real issues, on campus or in the community, creates a powerful “need to know.” A need to know is the best motivator. That’s why service programs are such good places to learn about leadership. Many colleges now teach leadership simply as an academic subject, like astronomy. But the study of leadership does not produce leaders any more than the study of anything produces an educator. The best-case scenario is to utilize the methodology of service learning to combine leadership study and leadership action.

Fourth Principle: Take structure and training seriously.

A lot of student leadership and service programs are pretty sloppy. Excellence in leadership or service is not always expected, because students are “having a learning experience.” The campus service movement has come a long way, but still many students—without the necessary direction and support—are being encouraged to go out there and “start a program.” The results are often disastrous for both students and the community. We are setting them up to fail. Effective training is critically important. Our communities deserve our very best. So do our students. Rigor is as appropriate here as in the formal disciplines.

Fifth Principle: Legitimize the learning.

A huge amount of real learning takes place in leadership and service programs. Very little of it receives formal recognition. Award ceremonies are not enough. They are for the elite few, and reinforce the old attitude that leadership is only for the special ones, rather than for all. Official recognition for every student who is serious about service and leadership is important. The law on campus is that what receives credit is what matters. We must find ways to do this with leadership development.

Sixth Principle: Lead by example.

Developing complicated and expensive leadership and service programs may not be nearly as important as modeling the skills of servant-leadership ourselves—in the classroom, in the lunchroom, in the boardroom. If we do not respect the students in front of us, can we really expect them to respect the tobacco farmer learning to read at age forty-five? Servant-leadership is something each of us is capable of, and that each of us is responsible for. Better to avoid the enterprise of leadership development altogether than to fail to walk our own talk.

It was my great privilege to spend ten years directing Berea College’s Students for Appalachia program. Our official mission was to “enrich the lives of children, adults, and the elderly in our community and to provide meaningful service, learning, and leadership experiences for Berea students.” On our T-shirts we put it like this: Transforming ourselves and our world through service.

One of my former students dropped a paragraph on my desk one day just before her graduation. She came from a desperately poor family in Eastern Kentucky whose basement home flooded when it rained. This is what she wrote:

"My life has been changed forever by the experiences I have had; through the people I have helped and through the service I have been part of. No longer am I without purpose. I have come from being a woman full of unfocused anger at the system, to a woman working towards a better world, focusing my anger, my frustrations, my energy towards the work that I do, the speeches that I give, the hugs that I share, and the education that I provide. I have become a servant-leader, serving those who need to be served..."

Lisa Perkins has gone on to earn a master's degree and now counsels troubled young people. I don't know about all of you, but I am full of deep admiration for the students I have worked with, and for the great privilege of having been an influence in their lives. Yeats said that "education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire." In my experience, nothing lights that fire for students, or for us, more than the call to servant-leadership.