

The Role of Universities in Voluntarism in the Twenty First Century

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The paper presents a vision of voluntarism in the 21st century, with special reference to the volunteer service movement in academe. It focuses on why voluntarism will be needed in a highly technological age and what the universities must do in order to support that need.

The twenty first century is now upon us, if not in the calendar, at least in the postmodern culture in which many of us already participate. Its contours are becoming more clearly defined. Community and national economies are being integrated into a global system, with parts of one product manufactured in several different places, the research for that done in still other places, and the good itself sold throughout the world. In this seeming homogenization lies the potential for continuing fractiousness between those who can afford it and those who cannot, between those who insist one cannot live without it and those who feel it is an unwise capitalist imposition, between those who think it is an improvement on nature and those who think the environment is diminished by its invention. It is a world that creates new types of organizations and social relations to bring a new product into being at the same time that social relations themselves are increasingly being regarded as just another commodity. It is an era very dependent on and continually inventing ever higher technology while large masses of people still live without electricity, potable water, and other simple requirements of the twentieth century. The metaphor of a global village is being fulfilled, but town criers, gossip mills and diviners continue to coexist with satellites, cellular phones and electronic mail.

The 21st century shall see a new relationship among the government, business and the citizenry. The state will continue to shrink and will give up not only its business enterprises but also the functions it has taken up to redistribute benefits from rich to poor. Money, or more accurately, the plastic card and computerized financial instructions will be even more the key medium of exchange in the market, in the state and even in personal relations.

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Voluntarism will still be needed in such a world for four reasons: (1) the need for civil society to take up the slack left by both public and private sectors; (2) the fact that volunteers respond to people in need; (3) the need for voluntarism to humanize the technology; and (4) the ability of voluntarism to bridge divisions among people.

The first reason emphasizes the need to develop the civil society in the emerging culture of the new millennium. Responsible, active citizens—persons who give of themselves to public service, persons known as volunteers—will be needed to take up the gap to be left by a government which has withdrawn from service delivery and by business firms which have come forward to deliver them, but only at a cost. Many more people will find themselves in need, which leads us to the second reason.

The second reason centers on the fact that volunteering is primarily a response to what people need. This will not change even in the twenty first century. One can imagine the continuation of demands for assistance in dealing with social problems, both at an individual or community level, or in coping with stress accompanying family, corporate or global disasters. Most of these are low-tech and may thus give the wrong impression that volunteering will not be useful as cybernetics becomes even more pervasive. Indeed, needy people seem most comfortable with, and demand services at, the more basic side of the technological revolution.

Nevertheless, low-tech volunteering is simply a characteristic accompanying many projects volunteers do, rather than a necessary limitation of voluntarism itself. For instance, we offered services at the high end of technological requisites in a remote rural municipality in the Philippines, including assistance in the computerization of its operations and geographic information system for its town planning, the better to regulate a multinational that dominates its territory. We can easily picture a volunteer as a counselor, helping a person make sense of his life, but she can just as easily run a computer science lab for a university's learning resource center. He can serve as a pro bono lawyer instructing members of a rural NGO how to form a cooperative or defend their human rights or he can teach them how to prepare and read environmental impact assessments. She may bring tertiary-level medical service, complete with miniature lasers to downtrodden areas while manifesting the bedside manner of physicians of yore. In other words, the limit to the level of technology that a volunteer can impart is set by her level of knowledge, competence and commitment, if not the type of projects she gets into, but voluntarism itself may range from the lowest to the highest level of technology available.

Third, volunteers keep interaction at a human level; this also gears their actions for the twenty first century. As globalization proceeds, a person can

easily become just a faceless statistic in the vast marketplace of new varieties of commodities. Alienation may result unless individuals continue to enjoy human contact that affirms their humanness and identity. Moreover, as technology encompasses our lives more comprehensively, people will fight the anomie by emphasizing values that bind them to others, i.e., solidarity over individualism, collective good over self-interest.

Such a reaction is already building up. More and more people in so-called developed societies are seeking to remain human by counterposing community against technology. One such means is through voluntarism which tends to humanize the interaction whatever level of technology the volunteers use. For the service they give transcends any mechanical gadgetry. They are not delivered by people acting like administrative robots, but by human beings who care.

Fourth, since stratification and inequality will continue through the next millennium, volunteers will remain necessary to connect people across the artificial divisions imposed by society. It is not true that most volunteers are ladies of leisure seeking to assuage their conscience through pragmatic altruism. Yet voluntarism still provides opportunities for many urbanites to learn firsthand the hardships experienced by those who work on the farm through serving a year with them. It also spans the class divide by bringing upper-class professionals to poor communities. The gap between young and old is erased as college students serve in nursing homes and hospices, or, on the other hand, retirees tutor youth with learning disabilities. The physically handicapped are recognized for their abilities by able-bodied volunteers in such programs as special olympics. The way many volunteers leave situations they are most comfortable in to serve in culturally strange areas recall a hymn I learned in childhood:

We would be building temples still undone,
O'er crumbling walls, their crosses scarcely lift;
Waiting till love can raise the broken stone,
And hearts creative bridge the human rift.
(Purd E. Deitz, 1935)

"Bridging the human rift" may be too poetic a way to describe voluntarism but it is accurate because it is rare for voluntarism to be service of like people to each other. Rather, it is almost always a reaching out to someone quite different in station, in location, and in circumstances of birth, occupation, health or power. This is not to say that the effects of voluntarism flow only in one direction. For, as many volunteers can testify, the good they do is returned to them in multiples, not only in the sense of fulfillment they feel, but also in what they learn from the persons and communities they serve.

What is the relevance of all these to universities and university voluntarism now?

The University of the Philippines is a union of six universities and eleven campuses throughout the country. It has 40,000 students and 3,000 faculty members and prides itself not only for academic excellence but also for its social orientation. But in 1992, we conducted a study on the attitudes and values of our students and found them worried about their individual advancement and economic potential, their ability to lead and their intellectual prowess, but social commitment and ethics were very low in their scheme of values. The faculty, by the way, had the same array, but did not even mention ethics (Doronila and Cariño 1993).

It is to counteract this trend, to prove that UP has not lost its soul, that the Board of Regents (BOR) created the Ugnayan ng Pahinugód/Oblation Corps, the UP's volunteer service program in 1994. Its mandate from the university is to promote and provide volunteer work by students, graduates, faculty and staff in the geographic and substantive areas of greatest need. The Ugnayan ng Pahinugod also rests on the ethical base of U.P.'s social and moral responsibility to get involved in the life of the nation through the willing service of the University constituency. In rendering this direct method of public service, the University is undertaking an integral part of its mission, as the program would enhance its performance of the functions of instruction, research and extension even as it expresses in a more forceful and focused way its nationalism and social commitment. Yet, even as they serve, the University volunteers are expected to learn more from the people than what they give to them. This will encourage them to commit themselves more fully to the Philippines, so that the University may truly develop what former U.P. President Rafael Palma had called "an aristocracy of brains and character."

We thought we would be lucky to have 200 volunteers after two years, and indeed we were overjoyed when 20 students joined our first training program. But after only two years, we have in our roster 3,000 volunteers—students, faculty, staff, alumni. We have sent over 60 surgical/medical missions, 500 tutors to public elementary schools, 300 volunteers in our disaster relief and rehabilitation program. We have counseled trauma victims, stopped an epidemic of carabao deaths, assisted agrarian reform communities. The communities we serve taught us that farmers can be scientists, that seawater can be an effective fertilizer, that our indigenous tribes are the equal of Forestry professors in choosing mahogany seedlings to reforest a relocation area. We have had quite a harvest of hearts.

Academic institutions are supposed to be in the business of preparing students for life. While I maintain that campus life is the real thing and is not just a preparation for life, it is still incumbent upon universities to ensure that their students have the proper equipment for the years ahead. What would be important in a period such as the twenty first century is not the accumulation of information about its requirements but the ability to survive and master the

very rapid social and technological change it promises. That ability must include the capacity for continuous learning, critical thought and a solid sense of values. I submit that voluntarism helps in the development of all these capacities and therefore must be a subject of study, discourse and analysis in academe.

Involvement in voluntarism teaches facts and values, unconsciously, without any preaching. The empirical lessons are numerous. It adds to a volunteer's grasp of social realities, her appreciation of social class and inequality, and the merits and dangers of political dynasties, his knowledge of the appropriateness of government policies or technological innovations to the situation of fishing communities or urban squatter areas. It allows volunteers to recognize the wisdom of ordinary people in some important respects and their ignorance in others, their infuriating stubbornness and their cheerful resilience, their subservience and their aggressiveness. Many volunteers are thrown into situations that teach them the problems wrought by the social inequalities that were supposed to have disappeared due to the assumed growth of democratization and the leveling effect of technology.

These facts, being learned in experience, tend to last longer than something just read in books. And because learning is not set apart from life, they form together a continuous tapestry that allows a person to move from one to the other, or better, to integrate living and studying so that studying is not simply what one does in school, but is what she undertakes in all areas of her life. As such the volunteer becomes equipped for learning all her life.

As they absorb facts, volunteers also learn to understand and even test concepts, theories and philosophies some of them might have dismissed as too academic while in the classroom. For instance, they learn to identify categories of psychological behavior, awaken to the strength of structural conditions as factors more influential than a farmer's sloth or ignorance in explaining the persistence of poverty, recognize why Immanuel Kant regards morality as the categorical imperative.

Voluntarism is an instrument of values education as well. It forms or reinforces the commitments that connect a person more closely to his nation as well as humanity itself. Seeing oppression, a volunteer becomes more committed to justice. Living with poverty, she becomes less materialistic and more unselfish. Honing his survival skills in a calamity-stricken area, he learns the imperatives of cooperation and community. Voluntarism builds character; we have seen it create compassionate men and women out of the youngsters primarily giddy with the sense of adventure that we sent out only a few weeks before.

These lessons are accessible to all volunteers whatever the nature of the organization that sends them, whether they be from government, nongovernmental groups, or universities, or indeed, even if they serve following individual initiatives of compassionate persons and families. In most cases, the lessons voluntarism imparts would at best be unconsciously or subconsciously absorbed. Universities have the advantage of mining the potential of voluntarism as a teaching device by the conscious and systematic use of it as a subject of study. As part of the instruction function, universities can then offer voluntarism and volunteer management as an academic program, or infuse existing courses with the activities and values of the voluntary effort.

In the broad area of voluntarism itself, our priority list of courses includes the philosophy of voluntarism, its roots in indigenous culture, its role in the development of civil society, its merits and pitfalls as an alternative delivery mechanism, and the methods and techniques it requires.

In addition, volunteer management is an emerging field of administration that can be recognized as separate from business and public administration, but more closely related to the latter than the former. Let me first discuss how it is different from both of them. The private sector relies on profits for its funds, while government is propped up by taxation. Meanwhile, volunteer management relies on neither, but raises funds from philanthropic sources or from activities the generated income of which does not go to owners or investors but to the persons to be served. Personnel administration in the three types of organizations also differs: private firms pay according to what the market will bear; government follows civil service rules and the voluntary sector recruits partly based on the market (for paid staff) and on commitment to social causes (for volunteers). The last creates situations which make the recruitment, nurture and incentives of staff of voluntary service organizations different from modes of personnel administration touched in business or public administration courses. For instance, the mix of paid and volunteer staff, the relative strength of financial and psychic incentives that would be operative, the expected greater idealism of those who work for free—these raise theoretical questions not tackled in the more developed fields of management. If universities improve volunteer management, then voluntarism can be strengthened and volunteers prepared to serve in the emerging global system I have described.

The faculty of the UP College of Public Administration has already agreed on the need for a separate stream of volunteer management within the wider field of public administration. Although there are many points of differences between volunteer and public administration, they are similar in two important respects. First, they are both concerned with improving the access of the most needy to available services, and the field of public

administration is already recognizing and analyzing voluntarism through its focus on alternative delivery systems. Second and more important, they are both aimed at managing for the public interest. With the goal similar, the differences between their organizational, personnel and financial systems become relatively small. If both voluntary management and public administration are administration for the public good, then their programs and practices—that is, the area of program administration and strategic management—would likely have great overlap. In any case, both their programs aim at service rather than profit making.

Degree programs will not only put voluntarism on the academic agenda, but will also make involvement in it a profession and a career for those with such a calling. They will also help in strengthening the possibility that lessons learned from voluntary effort are more systematically studied and disseminated.

Aside from these degree programs, the university can propagate the values of voluntarism by combining service and study in courses outside the content area of voluntarism. In this case, the hands-on public service is a method of teaching, but is not itself the subject of study. The University is now experimenting with a technique called “service learning option” (SLO) whereby students volunteer to serve as an integral part of their coursework (Florencio *et al.* 1995, Cariño 1996). As they serve in communities or welfare institutions in ways negotiated with their instructor, they are also asked to consciously apply the principles and theories they learn in the classroom and to reflect on their relevance, significance and appropriateness. They are graded on their demonstrated learning of the concepts in the field. Often their grasp of them—because learned and seen in application—is superior to that of their classmates who only apprehended them in textbooks or through the teacher’s lectures.

Aside from knowing concepts and relationships better, many SLO students report a change in attitude and values (although this is not graded). The qualities often mentioned are patience, a sense of responsibility, love of country, a more unabashed sense of caring and compassion, a greater appreciation of parents and family, a new resolve to pursue justice and equality. Their stint as student volunteers develops in students a social conscience that is not tied to the status quo and strengthens the liberal tradition of objective critique of even a country one loves fiercely.

The development of such courses depends to a great extent on the creation of a body of works on voluntarism. The journals and reflection papers submitted by our volunteers at the close of their year with the people provide invaluable insights on the challenges and pitfalls of voluntarism, and the values education it engenders (Leyesa and Marcelo 1995). The study of the

institutionalization of a volunteer program tests theories of both politics and program administration. In addition, topics like the psychology of volunteers, the comparison of voluntarism with regular service delivery channels, the indigenous roots of voluntarism, and cross-cultural analyses of different styles of voluntarism and philanthropy come easily to mind as areas of voluntarism research.

Because volunteer service is people-centered and people-involving, first-person accounts of voluntarism and their integrative reanalysis can help develop social science tools of oral history, participatory action research and new modes of program evaluation.

There are others, not carrying the name of voluntarism, that are also pertinent to a research program of a volunteer corps. These include questions like responsible citizenship and the development of civil society, the nurturance of idealism, ethical fund raising, and non-traditional means of character formation and civic education. Some research projects arise as a by-product of the voluntary service itself, for instance, comparative ways of teaching literacy, gender issues in environmental projects, crisis management, people's reactions to new technology. Here, the voluntary effort serves as a laboratory where concepts and theories of the substantive area may be encountered and analyzed. The research will support not just courses on voluntarism, but the technical fields in which they arise, as well. Although public service may be regarded as an end in itself, analysis of that act yields lessons that add to the storehouse of knowledge not only about voluntarism, but of other fields as well.

Voluntarism in universities thus supports people and society as they prepare for the challenges of the next century. At the same time, it may be noted that voluntarism is able to assist in the university's performance of all its substantive functions as well. A university has the merit of being able to truly root the voluntarism movement within its institutional framework through instruction and analysis, even as it teaches all its students, including volunteers, how to cope with the latest advancements of science and technology and the imperatives of globalization. As it makes voluntarism an object of its academic concern and deepens its involvement in it through teaching and research, it thus prepares people for living a human life even in a technological age.

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