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Giving More than We Get Civic Engagement Programs Inspire a Lifetime of Service

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This is the time of year when people make a special effort to be of service to others less fortunate and to the organizations that serve the greater good.

Although the annual advent of the holiday season may re-ignite feelings of social responsibility, a true personal commitment to serve does not come by chance or seasonal cycle. It comes from upbringing, modeling, religious and secular value orientations, and, of course, from education that promotes empathy, cultural competencies, and a concern for social justice.



This kind of “personal and social responsibility” is one of the four areas of Essential Learning Outcomes that characterize quality higher education designed to prepare students for 21st century challenges.

Universities foster the development of these outcomes by establishing curricular and co-curricular programs that inculcate knowledge and understanding of diverse others, set expectations for civic engagement, arouse concern about social inequities, and motivate the students to “pay it forward,” in acknowledgement that those fortunate enough to be attending college cannot actually repay the people who have made their good fortune possible. These students can, however, take deliberate action to improve the lives of others and their communities.

In recent weeks, we all have been made aware of widespread and painful funding cuts (made or proposed) for higher education. The reductions being considered cut across many areas of programming, student aid, and grant support and could dramatically affect the access to and quality of the higher education we deliver. If that is all you pay attention to, you could be fairly disillusioned right now.

I believe a more uplifting approach, for those of us working in higher education and for the overall higher education agenda, might be to reflect less on the threats to what we get and more on the promises delivered by what we give.

In some ways that is easy to do.

College and university students across the county invest literally hundreds of millions of hours in service learning and volunteerism each year. Campus Compact, “a national coalition of more than 1,100 college and university presidents — representing some 6 million students” — conducts an annual survey of membership to assess institution-specific and sector-wide commitment to service, service-learning, and civic engagement. The 2010 survey results show that students at responding institutions contributed 382 million hours of service in 2009-2010. Based on Independent Sector’s 2009 value of volunteer time (\$20.85/hour), these students contributed a record \$7.96 billion in service to their communities.

The U.S. President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll, launched in 2006, recognizes institutions for effectively supporting this other-oriented spirit on their campuses. So one piece of the overall national bipartisan governmental agenda is to help students understand the connection between their own lives and the lives of others and to steer them toward a life-long commitment to civic engagement.

Ironically (and I do hate to go here), the House version of the Labor-HHS Appropriations bill eliminates funding for the federal agency called the Corporation for National and Community Service, which includes AmeriCorps. Fortunately, the Save Service in America (SSA) coalition has already sent an appeal to Congress signed by 1000+ organizations. And the SSA also is organizing a call for signatures on a similar appeal to President Obama.

At this holiday season, I remain optimistic that in the end, Congress will allocate federal funds to support the CNCS’s cost-effective programs because they reflect our nation’s commitment to inspiring public service.

As Congress moves through those painful deliberations, let’s all take pride in knowing that every day we work in higher education we make a contribution to the greater good and inspire our students to do the same.