



NATIONAL COMMISSION ON MILITARY, NATIONAL, AND
PUBLIC SERVICE

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Subject: Roundtable discussion with Tennessee national service and service learning leaders

The following is a record of a meeting with Commissioners and Tennessee leaders in national service and service learning, which took place on August 16, 2018, at a county government building in Memphis, TN. At the meeting, participants discussed local efforts to run national service programs and to integrate service learning in K-12 schools and at postsecondary institutions of higher education. The conversation was facilitated by Mr. Mark Gearan, and included Commissioners and staff members. This memorandum is protected by the deliberative process privilege and should be treated as For Official Use Only. This memorandum is not a verbatim transcript of the discussion.

Attendees:

- Commissioners: Dr. Joe Heck, Ms. Shawn Skelly, Ms. Avril Haines, Mr. Mark Gearan, Ms. Deb Wada, Mr. Steve Barney
- Commission Staff: Kent Abernathy, Annie Rorem, Katie McSheffrey, Cristina Flores, Brian Collins, Tara Razjouyan
- Representatives of service organizations, colleges and universities, CNCS, and the state service commission.

Key Takeaways:

- There is strong interest among college students in service learning, but resources (especially for transportation) and lack of faculty interest in incorporating service learning in the curriculum are barriers.
- Tennessee used CNCS funding to train K-12 teachers to incorporate service learning in their teaching, but that funding has ended, which severely limits their ability to promote service learning.
- Service learning is generally not taught in colleges of education—adding it to methodology classes could be one approach to promote it.
- Many participants had mixed feelings about mandatory service. Some were concerned that harm could be caused to those being served by people who are required to serve but do not want to serve.
- Many suggested starting early—in elementary or middle school—to build a culture of service.

Meeting Discussion

Mr. Gearan introduced the discussion and offered background on the commission. He noted that CNCS previously had a Learn and Serve program that was eliminated. He asked for recommendations on what the Commission should consider regarding service and experiential learning, specifically where service learning affects campus culture and student life.

A participant said that he has seen students latch on to experiential learning opportunities at his university. Of the 120 college students that have participated in the service learning program, they have 100 percent retention and persistence to graduation. Assessments and data collection show they are more apt to listen and to learn. He said it is amazing to see students recognize issues and problems, apply them to coursework, and see how they communicate the skills they have learned to potential employers.

Mr. Gearan asked if college and universities have seen the benefit of service learning electives in Tennessee high schools.

A participant said that students enter college with greater social awareness, as well as a sense of pride to improve their own community.

Another participant agreed, stating traditionally aged students enter college with a consciousness and are looking to connect that to their major and the classroom. She said there is a need to train faculty to close that loop. Many of her students are underrepresented minorities and first-generation college students. She suggested focusing energy on training K-12 teachers to help their students reflect on their service learning experiences and connect volunteer work to the curriculum. She advised starting with students early.

A participant said his organization was primarily engaged in K-12 when they were making grants. They conducted a quasi-experimental design and found that service learning resulted in decreased truancy, fewer behavioral issues, increases in attendance, increases in locus of control, and greater connection to community. He added, “all of the good, soft-skilled things you hope to get out of the educational system, we saw here in Tennessee with service learning.” He suggested including service learning in methodology classes within teacher-training programs. He said their approach has been to encourage current teachers to take service-learning training during their professional development days, but they have found it hard to attract them. He thinks it would be more effective to reach them when they are initially being trained.

Another participant said that it has been difficult to convince faculty at his university to incorporate service learning within their curriculum as a test. He said they are not receptive—even though his office will handle all of the service arrangements for them—perhaps because there is no incentive for them to do so—there is no extra compensation or praise from superiors.

Mr. Gearan pointed out that investing time in service learning could be seen as a disadvantage by faculty since it does not count for getting published and securing tenure.

A participant said that service learning is a bit easier to fit into community college, since faculty are not promoted on the basis of their research. Teachers in K-12 are often focused on following state or district policy. The participant added if a statewide test focuses on service learning, then teachers are obligated to implement service learning.

Another participant said their only experience with service learning was at another college, where one of their students took a year off of school to serve in AmeriCorps. That former student is still involved in service and works as a coordinator for Senior Corps. It gives students—especially those who are indecisive about their career path—exposure to greater possibilities.

A participant said various service options feed into each other—service during K-12 can lead to service participation during college, national service, internships, leadership programs, and public service careers.

***Mr. Khazei** asked about the ideal time for students to begin participating in service learning, and what are the challenges to offering service learning in high school and college.*

A participant said that when his organization was promoting K-12 service learning, a few of the schools included elementary school, but most schools focused on middle and high school. It can be done for as young as kindergarten, though is more difficult for younger kids to do parts of it (such as the investigation phase). He said fourth or fifth grade is probably the point where most students are intellectually mature enough to grasp the concepts and complete the service learning cycle. He argued that service learning is a good way to engage students and encourage them to stay in school, and he noted that early middle school attendance is a leading indicator of high school drop out rates. Attendance rates increased when students were engaged in service learning.

***Mr. Khazei** asked how service learning is different in fourth and fifth grade, and what are the strongest tools to promote service learning.*

The same participant said service learning for younger students is more inwardly focused on or near the school campus. As they get older, students become more aware of social issues and think beyond needs close to school—for example, instead of developing a garden on campus, they might go across town and build a community garden in the poorest neighborhood, so people have access to fresh vegetables in a food desert. He added that they were most successful at promoting service learning when his organization had funds to provide to the school systems to cover the cost of supplies, travel, and training. The cost was \$180,000 for 5-6 school districts.

***Dr. Heck** asked whether there is longitudinal data on retention rates, whether the dropout rate is lower for those who have done experiential learning in K-12, and whether participants continue serving at a higher rate than nonparticipants.*

A participant said that better data is needed—all they have is anecdotal.

Other participants agreed, adding that long-term data collection is hard given turnover and changing institutional priorities.

***Mr. Gearan** asked if “service learning” is the wrong term. Massachusetts enacted a civic education bill that included experiential learning for high school students. He added, “If this were framed as civics, would that have a different political resonance?”*

A participant said they use different phrasing. Behind closed doors, they talk about service learning, but it is framed to students as “civic engagement” or “civic service.”

Another participant said that, on their campus, they refer to it as “engaged scholarship.”

Another participant said service learning is a structural methodology—a tool teachers can use that can be effective for many goals.

Mr. Khazei asked if it helps to inculcate a culture of service.

A participant said it is a way to have more control over the culture, but that it can be harmful if done badly. It is not necessarily creating a culture—that culture might already be there.

Ms. Wada asked: If it is called different things around the country and it is really a teaching methodology, how can the Commission make it easier for teachers and professors to incorporate? She added, “If you are a teacher and it is effective, why not automatically incorporate it?”

A participant said that limited resources is the main barrier.

Mr. Gearan said that if a university does not have an office to support service learning, the professor has to find the service site.

A participant said Memphis has many not-for-profit organizations, so there are a lot of opportunities for service, so he just needs to organize transportation and people. Transportation is the most expensive and challenging, because not everyone has a vehicle. The need exists, and students want to help, but some do not have the ability to get there.

Mr. Gearan said service learning is probably easier to incorporate in some fields than others—for example, sociology as opposed to physics.

A participant said momentum is important—he found the biggest advocates were teachers who had already been trained and started using service learning in the classroom. The participant added when one teacher started participating, the next year several more would join the training. The participant added getting the first one in a school is challenging.

Ms. Wada asked about getting support from national teacher organizations.

A participant said that would help. If teachers knew they would get an endorsement on their teaching license with professional gains, that would encourage teachers to participate.

Another participant said a grassroots approach is helpful—teachers talking with other teachers.

A participant argued for starting to build a culture of service early on in elementary school.

Mr. Gearan asked, “If CNCS restarted support for service learning tomorrow and gave you \$200,000, how would that change Tennessee?”

A participant said they would restart old programs, reach out to K-12 school districts, and start training as many teachers as possible. They would focus on 4-5 districts and try to train all the teachers in those districts, regardless of grade level, then they would provide those teachers with support through the academic year to implement service learning. They would also restart providing incentives for colleges of education in Tennessee to rework teaching methodology coursework to include service learning.

Another participant said their campus trains their students to facilitate service opportunities, adding that they have integrated with some high schools.

Ms. Wada asked about private-sector funding.

A participant said that State Farm had supported service learning for a long time, including providing funding for a statewide conference and scholarships to attend the conference. There is probably room for more corporate involvement.

Another participant said that faculty members have to write and publish, and many of them might not have experienced service learning or any kind of community service work. It is hard to understand the value without that experience.

A participant said it should be called service, adding that their 18-year-old students do not understand civics, but they do understand service.

Mr. Gearan asked *what is drawing AmeriCorps members to serve in Tennessee?*

A participant said that previous experience with service is important.

Another participant said that his university is hosting VISTA members for the first time, and that they typically want to make a difference in the environment where they came from.

Mr. Gearan asked *why others do not participate.*

The same participant said students do not participate due to a sense of privilege. The participant added most people do not have to think about social issues because they do not face those kinds of hardships, adding that it is especially difficult to attract white males to participate in service learning at his campus, and that he attributes that to the element of privilege they grew up with.

Mr. Gearan asked *about the gender breakdown of their student cohort.*

The same participant said it is about 80 percent female.

Dr. Heck said *he thinks everyone has a service gene, but the challenge is how to turn it on. He asked if mandatory service could be a way to help some people realize that they like service when they would never try it voluntarily.*

A participant said he opposed mandatory service, adding, “You can do a lot of damage if you are out there because you have to be. You could hurt someone, say the wrong thing.” He added that they had some success combining a service trip with an away football game—students paid \$50 for transportation and tickets, and they did a 5-hour service project before the game. He said the participants had more fun at the service project than at the game.

Ms. Skelly added that service leaders in Clifton, Texas, made a similar point—to get people to serve, “Tom Sawyer” them into it.

Another participant voiced opposition to mandatory service.

A participant said they thought their not-for-profit partners would also oppose mandatory service, because they can tell if someone does not have their heart in it, and that condescending attitudes can damage the people being served, especially children.

Mr. Barney asked *about the potential of changing the culture so that service is an expectation.*

A participant said that American children grow up in schools—focus on the K-12 experience and baking service into the culture of K-12, and it will become a mindset in which people will look for service opportunities when they enter college and their profession.

Dr. Heck referred to the Commission's visit to the Denver high school where students said everyone should serve but do not force people to do it. He asked about making the second semester of senior year a service semester.

A participant said that some students would prefer to graduate early and go to work than do a service semester.

Dr. Heck asked how to create a universal expectation of service.

A participant said that he is conflicted by the question. He recognizes that other countries have mandatory military service, and it is not a big issue. He is receptive to the libertarian argument that people should not be forced to do things they do not want to do, but he also recognizes the social justice argument that service can be an equalizer if everyone must serve, regardless of income or background. He added that currently it is not equal. The people who participate overwhelmingly in the military are mainly lower-income Americans, and the people in AmeriCorps are mostly people who are going to college—both national service and military service should involve a broad cross section of America.

Dr. Heck asked about promoting a bridge year between high school and college that would not be mandatory but that is available to everyone.

A participant was not sure if that would be useful, adding that many of their students are lucky to make it to college, and that college itself is not a great equalizer. It is ideal to cultivate interest in service, but for some, other obligations, such as children and school, take precedence.

Mr. Khazei asked if mandatory service would not be as problematic if it took place during high school.

A participant agreed, adding that K-12 is already mandated. He said, "Part of our culture is that you graduate from high school. Start there, then take it to scale."

Mr. Barney said it could be a capstone for the entire K-12 education.

Mr. Gearan asked what else the Commission should explore.

A participant said, "definitely resources—financial resources." He encouraged the Commission to consider a two-pronged approach, one focused on faculty, the other focused on students.

Another participant said transportation is the largest hurdle. There are always students that want to serve but do not have a way to get there.

A participant said to build a pipeline of service from kindergarten up. If not mandatory, at least allow everyone who wants to serve the opportunity to serve.

A participant voiced support for Public Service Loan Forgiveness and suggested that more AmeriCorps programs should be available on a part-time basis, which would allow members to maintain outside employment to support themselves.

Another participant suggested changing the tax status of the AmeriCorps living allowance and education award, recommending to perhaps lower the tax rate for those engaging in service.

A participant said that they turn away projects every month from organizations that want AmeriCorps and Senior Corps members.

Mr. Khazei asked if they keep data on projects that are turned away.

**FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY
DELIBERATIVE & PRE-DECISIONAL**

The same participant answered that they do not keep data but suggested looking at nationwide AmeriCorps data on the number of organizations that start an application and the number that submit an application.

A participant said they track how many apply versus how many are funded but was not sure if other states track that data. They had 5 or 6 new applicants and could only fund 2.

Another participant said AmeriCorps recruitment is down this year because of the strong economy.

A participant suggested talking to faith-based organizations, since they seem to have strong cultures of service. The participant added many nondenominational churches have captured the hearts and minds of young people.