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[Op-Ed on National Service by Thomas Ehrlich, June 3, 1993]

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Thomas Ehrlich
June 3, 1993
op-ed on National Service

President Clinton's proposed national service legislation draws on a deep reservoir of eagerness among young people to do more than help themselves. Increasing numbers of young people-- more than at any time since the 1960's-- want to engage in volunteer service. At Indiana University and at other colleges throughout the country, I have talked with hundreds of student volunteers. Over and over they say they have found, through volunteer service, experiences they would never trade.

In the 1980's, young people were often pictured as self-involved and alienated. But the "me generation" is long gone, and never was as extensive as it once appeared. The Civil Rights Movement, the Peace Corps, Job Corps, Vista, and many other programs have been powerful engines for change, putting values into action and inspiring millions of Americans, young and old, to do their part to improve their communities and their world.

The spirit of service is there today in our youth and all our people. Voluntary action reflects distinctly American values, values that are fundamental to the strength of our society. No other nation's citizenry is so involved in helping others on an organized, voluntary basis.

Educational institutions bear a special responsibility to encourage the values that support public service. If those of us in education do our job, the school years -- from kindergarten to college and beyond -- should be a time to develop a personal sense of responsibility. We want our students to be educated

citizens. It is no less important that they also be thoughtful individuals who contribute their time and talents in the communities. President Clinton's national service plan offers tremendous promise for realizing that goal.

National and community service has no partisan boundaries. In recent years, politicians from every point on the political spectrum have championed volunteer community service. President Carter, since leaving office, has spent time each year helping to build homes for poor families. George Bush, during his presidency, sponsored the Points of Light Foundation because of his belief that, in his own words, "Any definition of a successful life must include serving others."

Also during the Bush Administration, Congress adopted the National and Community Service Act to encourage volunteer service, particularly among young people. Earlier, a nationwide consortium of college and university presidents, called Campus Compact, was founded by a group of university presidents to promote volunteer service for students, and for each institution as a whole, as a key responsibility to communities.

In the early days of the Commission on National and Community Service, I remember a passionate discussion on, "Why Service?" Some urged that service was needed because the problems faced by this country were so great that the government could not grapple with them. Without service, the crises of crime, drugs, and urban decay would overcome us.

In my judgement and in the judgement of many others, however, service is important in the lives of all of us,

particularly young people, primarily because it shapes our attitudes -- our sense of responsibility and self esteem, our leadership abilities, our appreciation of diversity, and most important, our civic sense of community.

A Gallup survey done in 1992 for Independent Sector reveals that those who active in volunteer service are much more likely to vote than those who are not. Similarly, individuals who give their time and talents in service generally involve themselves in the world around them through other avenues as well -- civic groups, alumni associations, and service organizations -- creating a network of citizenship in their communities and in their own lives.

The enduring measure of the success of President Clinton's program, therefore, will not be its direct impact on societies ills -- though the impact will be substantial -- but rather the impact on the character of those who serve. From this perspective, service is a far cry from charity or "doing good" for the sake of doing good. As a contribution to community and country, it is a civic act in the highest sense.

President Clinton said as much himself in announcing a national service initiative rooted "in the concept of community, the simple idea that none of us on our own will ever have as much to cherish about our own lives if we are out here all alone as we will if we work together." His is a vision that sees service not as a question of charity, but as a common bond of citizenship.

I can imagine no more important initiative than national service to help educate Americans for citizenship and to create the sense of civic responsibility that our democracy requires.

Thomas Ehrlich is President of Indiana University and Chairperson of the Commission on National and Community Service.