

Readings

Our first reading is an exploratory essay by student writer Kent Ansen on mandatory public service for young adults. After completing the exploratory essay, Kent continued his research, writing a proposal argument on the benefits of instigating mandatory public service. Kent's final argument is our sample MLA student research paper that appears in Chapter 16.

Kent Ansen (Student)

Should the United States Establish Mandatory Public Service for Young Adults?

- 1 During high school, I volunteered at an after-school tutoring program in a poor neighborhood near my school. My guidance counselor stressed the importance of volunteer work in strong college applications, which was my primary motivation for volunteering. The more I volunteered, though, the more I began to see evidence of the two-way benefits of volunteer work. The program I volunteered with connected community members to a number of resources, such as food and healthcare benefits, and organized community cleanups and neighborhood celebrations. At the same time, I diversified my résumé and had memorable experiences that gave me a different view of the community I lived in and people who were struggling with issues like poverty and hunger.
- 2 This experience was in the back of my mind during some recent conversations I had with friends who are college seniors. As they make plans for their lives after graduation, some of them are questioning the value of their majors as they face the competitive job market. Others are not sure what they want to do, even after four years of focused study in a particular field. I have heard a lot of buzz about volunteer programs like AmeriCorps and Jesuit Volunteer Corps, which place volunteers in needy communities for a year in exchange for a living stipend and the opportunity to gain work experience. In fact, the tutoring program I volunteered with was run by an AmeriCorps team. This type of volunteer work seems like a valuable opportunity for our generation, often referred to as the "Lost Generation" because of our struggles to settle on career paths and find direction, find jobs at all, and achieve stability in our lives. I have even heard of proposals to bring back the draft, not necessarily for military service but for national service on a broader scale. While mandatory public service would probably be controversial, it might benefit the country and youth in numerous ways. Pondering what I could gain from a mandatory year working on a national service project, I decided to pose the following question for this exploratory paper: Should the United States require a year of national service for all its young adults?
- 3 To begin, I wanted to familiarize myself with current national service programs in the United States. First, I wanted to have a good grasp of the range of work that AmeriCorps workers do, so I consulted the AmeriCorps website. According to this site, team-based projects focus on service in five areas: "natural and other disasters, infrastructure improvement, environmental stewardship and conservation, energy conservation, and urban and rural

development" ("AmeriCorps"). Another part of the site spelled out this work even more concretely, explaining that participants can "tutor and mentor disadvantaged youth, fight illiteracy, improve health services, build affordable housing, teach computer skills, clean parks and streams, manage or operate after-school programs, and help communities respond to disasters" AmeriCorps also supports the work of nonprofit organizations such as Habitat for Humanity and the Red Cross.

- 4 I then did several Google searches using search terms such as "national public service," "mandatory public service," and "AmeriCorps." These searches gave me a quick overview of the issues. The first lead I followed in depth was an article from a fact-checking website run by the Annenberg Corporation, which explained a proposed bill in the House and the Senate aimed at expanding national service (Robertson). Called the GIVE Act ("Generations Invigorating Volunteerism and Education"), this bill expands national service organizations like AmeriCorps and funds increased participation to include 250,000 volunteers in the near future. Currently, 75,000 people participate in national service programs, so the GIVE Act represents a drastic increase in participation. Notably, the GIVE Act is not a bill for mandatory national service. It seems heavily reliant on expanding the current AmeriCorps program, which places volunteers in a variety of different volunteer settings in nonprofit and public agencies in exchange for a living stipend and an education award to pay for student loans or future educational opportunities. The GIVE Act helped me understand the scale of our current national service system. I was encouraged that the GIVE Act has strong bipartisan support. It suggests that there is public support for an expansion of national service.
- 5 To understand what an expanded national service program would look like, I wanted to find out if anyone had ever proposed a model. From my notes on my original Google searches, I found a 2007 article from *Time* entitled "A Time to Serve" (Stengel), which I then located in print in our library. Stengel describes a ten-point plan for creating universal national service, including a cabinet-level Department of National Service and the government purchase of a "baby bond" for each American baby. This bond would mature to around \$19,000 by the time the baby reached young adulthood. This money could then be accessed if the person committed to a year of national service. The plan also includes ideas for a rapid response corps for disasters like Hurricane Katrina and for creating a national service academy. In addition to offering practical suggestions about how a national service program would work, Stengel argues that "a republic, to survive, [needs] not only the consent of the governed but also their active participation," asserting that "free societies do not stay free without the involvement of their citizens."
- 6 This article made me confident that mandatory national public service was feasible, but I also began to realize why many people might object to mandatory service. It is one thing to recruit more young adults to volunteer for public service. It is another thing to require them to do so through a draft-like process. But then I noted that this article does not actually advocate *mandatory* national service. Instead it's calling for the "compelling idea that devoting a year or more to national

service, whether military or civilian, should become a countrywide rite of passage" or a socially perpetuated norm, not a government-mandated one. It seems like a nation powered by a socially conscious momentum rather than a national service law would inspire more pride in and ownership of the service experience. Yet, would the people who might most benefit from doing public service actually volunteer if they weren't compelled to serve? For these people, national service could be incredibly transformative, but they might miss out on these opportunities if service were optional.

7 At this point, I decided I should investigate more thoroughly the drawbacks of mandatory national service, so I turned to an online *Time* article that was a direct response to Stengel: Michael Kinsley's "National Service? Puh-lease." (I Googled Michael Kinsley and discovered that he is a widely known conservative writer.) Kinsley uses a sarcastic tone to raise several problems with a mandatory national service plan or voluntary plans with strong incentives to participate. He argues that Stengel's proposal for a \$19,000 bond that a person could access after completing a year of service would appeal to poor people more than rich people. In effect, the rich would simply buy their way out of public service. He also notes the hypocrisy of using social pressure and government incentives to encourage participation and then calling it "volunteerism." He sees Stengel's proposal as an infringement on personal freedom and on free markets. Arguing that people are willing to do any job for the right amount of money, Kinsley wonders why we would force someone to work for drastically less than a traditional employee would be paid when there is already a supply of workers in the market willing to do the same job for reasonable pay. Instead of making someone happy by providing a decently paying job, Stengel's proposal would put poor people out of work and force volunteers to work unhappily at minimum wage. For me, Kinsley's most powerful point was a reference to George Orwell's novel *1984*, which he uses to paint a picture of people forced into doing jobs that they would otherwise not take. Kinsley is also worried that volunteer work would be "make-work," meaning bureaucrats would spend time finding trivial ways to keep all the volunteers busy.

8 While I think Kinsley vastly underestimates the value of community service, I do understand his concern that forcing people to volunteer could undermine its impact. For me, though, a larger problem is putting volunteers to work on projects that require a lot of care when the volunteers themselves may not feel the intrinsic motivations and empathy required to deliver good service because they were forced into the role rather than choosing it for themselves. His article made me consider exactly how our democracy and the market do and should work together to create a socially optimal reality. I agree that mandating service is problematic in a country that values freedom, but I also agree that many young Americans seem to take our democracy for granted. I understand Kinsley's point that mandatory service would interfere with market solutions to problems. Yet my understanding of government is that it exists to provide goods and services that the market fails to provide on its own. If the market is failing poor people, why should we rely on it to provide the solutions? Again, the conflict seems to come back to values, in

this case the disagreements between those who value market solutions and those who value government intervention.

- 9 I decided I needed to pursue the perspective of someone who values government intervention and found Mark Rosenman's 2007 article "A Call for National Service." Rosenman's main argument is that military or civilian national service "may be invaluable for getting Americans more involved in their government and more concerned about influencing public policy." He argues that through this direct service, citizens become more involved in government-provided services and "would more likely demand accountability from their elected leaders." Rosenman is concerned that we have become citizens whose only responsibility to government is to pay taxes and user fees, which makes us customers who passively take from government without investing effort to maintain and manage our democracy. Becoming more involved through national service will help restore citizens to being "owners" of government.
- 10 Overall, I found Rosenman's argument compelling, even though it did not help me resolve the conflict between those who value market solutions and those who value government intervention. His thoughts on active versus passive citizens echoed some of the points raised by "A Time to Serve" and got me excited about the idea of using national service to reinvigorate our levels of public engagement. However, Rosenman did not offer any concrete evidence in support of his claims. Instead, his philosophical approach helped me understand some of the moral arguments—essentially, that public service can make us better people who live in better communities—but these arguments would not convince people who value small government and dislike government intrusion on personal freedom. I was particularly drawn to the idea that national service would make people feel more invested in their government. I wondered if I could locate any evidence showing that community service led people to become more personally involved in working on our country's problems.
- 11 At this point, I realized it would be helpful to gain the perspectives of young adults who had volunteered for public service. I decided to look more closely at the experiences of young adults who had worked for AmeriCorps ("AmeriCorps Reviews"). Several alumni noted the learning opportunities offered by AmeriCorps such as better understanding of the kinds of problems experienced by vulnerable populations and the difficulty of getting help. Several alumni noted how AmeriCorps provided opportunities for professional development and gave them work skills and leadership experiences that would transfer to future careers. Others noted how inspired they were by the people they worked with, both clients and coworkers.
- 12 These testimonials highlighted how impactful a year of service can be for individuals professionally and socially. I became convinced again that community service nurtures personal growth and civic engagement. Through helping others, AmeriCorps members are also able to help themselves—some even note they gain so much more than they give. This seemed like direct evidence of the two-way benefits I had experienced as a volunteer in high school and highlighted the potential value of service opportunities in light of the challenges young adults are facing today. However, I reminded myself that these testimonials did not constitute a random

sample of AmeriCorps volunteers and didn't provide evidence that every volunteer (much less somebody forced to serve) would experience the same benefits.

13 The testimonials highlighted the anecdotal evidence of the benefits of national service. However, I wanted to find out whether there were any empirical studies that showed these benefits. On the Web I found a report titled "Serving Country and Community: A Longitudinal Study of Service in AmeriCorps" (Jastrzab et al.). The study examines the impacts on participants' civic engagement, education, employment and life skills by surveying members upon entering and completing a term of service, including some follow-up three years after enrollment in AmeriCorps. This study found that participation in AmeriCorps had positive impacts on civic engagement and employment outcomes. In comparison to a control group not enrolled in service, alumni across AmeriCorps programs demonstrated statistically significant gains in basic work skills. Additionally, civic engagement behavior and attitudes were positively affected. Participation in AmeriCorps led to higher community-based activism and to a greater belief that communities could identify and solve problems. This study seemed to corroborate the AmeriCorps testimonials, providing evidence of the benefits of national service in terms of greater civic engagement.

14 Looking back over my research, I think the rewards of national service to individual volunteers and the communities they serve are clear. However, I continue to worry about the feasibility of making national service a mandatory program. As I end this exploratory paper, I still have some more research and thinking to do before I am ready to start my proposal argument. I am leaning in the direction of supporting mandatory public service. I am convinced that such service will benefit America's communities and also help the "Lost Generation" find themselves through learning more about our country's problems and developing valuable job skills. But the clincher for me—if I go in the direction I am leaning—is that mandatory public service would get Americans more involved in their government.

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