

Politics, Rhetoric, and Service-Learning

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The potential cross-purposes of service-learning came home to me recently, when a colleague showed me one of her students' journal entries. Suzanne was assisting a local nonprofit agency by checking facts and editing documents for publication. Her journal reflected dismay and agitation as she wrote, "I learned today that the people who used to do my job actually got paid for it. I know that I have no experience, but it doesn't seem quite fair that I am doing the same work for free." My first response was reactive: it seemed to me that, in failing to reflect on the *service* features of her service-learning project, Suzanne had skipped a crucial metacognitive component of her assignment. But her observation haunted me, and I kept returning to its more fundamental questions: Where had the employees who had previously done this job gone? Had they been dismissed when funds ran out? And if so, would those funds ever be forthcoming if our community outreach¹ students could be counted on to fill this gap indefinitely? I want to raise these issues as I examine the political rhetoric of service and service-learning. As I hope to make clear by my analysis, while most college-level service-learning programs work to challenge popular beliefs and address systemic causes of social problems, the corresponding political discourses that support this effort reinstate a rhetoric of personal responsibility, and, in this way, are able to exploit community outreach as a conservative economic expedient. These

concerns are especially salient for writing program administrators, who are often called on to institute service-learning projects for first-year composition.

In the second year of his presidency, George W. Bush launched a campaign to promote his USA Freedom Corps by “calling for a new ‘culture of *personal* responsibility” (Moran A1), where individuals were to help other individuals to improve society’s ills. Yet, Bush’s invocation was only the latest example of an individualist discourse of community outreach, which dates back at least several decades and which has, I believe, serious implications for the way we understand service-learning. In the discussion that follows, I will look more directly at the political rhetoric of service-learning. Ronald Reagan’s *Address to the Nation on the Program for Economic Recovery* in 1981 and Bill Clinton’s *Remarks on the Signing of the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993* construct the discursive groundwork that makes appeals to individual effort in Bush’s Freedom Corps campaign seem natural and appropriate.

As I examine affinities between the three talks, I want to argue that from its beginnings the political discourse of advocacy for service-learning has undermined what many compositionists understand to be its larger efforts toward social transformation. Rather than dispelling a radically individualist ideology, the political rhetoric of volunteerism and service fuels cherished notions of equal opportunity, merit-based rewards, and individual action as a patriotic ideal. By presenting these values as commonplaces rooted deeply in the discourse of our American heritage, political leaders make social change a personal—rather than a governmental—concern.

Since first-year writing courses frequently include service-learning components, WPAs are often the ones to decide how such programs will be implemented. Yet, little work has been done to link service-learning directly with writing program administration. As a group and individually, WPAs are positioned to question who stands most to profit from a virtually inexhaustible corps of unpaid labor, whether we are colluding with the very systems we seek to rectify, and how we might participate in the movement without becoming part of the exploitation. I hope that the following exploration of the political discourse of service-learning will better equip directors of first-year writing to address its perils, even as we explore its possibilities.

SERVICE-LEARNING VERSUS VOLUNTEERISM IN EDUCATIONAL AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Although advocates of service-learning have taken great pains to distinguish it from “mere volunteerism,” much of the relevant scholarly literature traces the history of service-learning to national volunteer programs of the 1960s

and 70s, such as the Peace Corps, Vista, and the Youth Conservation Corps, and then to 1980s grassroots organizations that promoted voluntary labor or service in North American communities and neighborhoods, such as Campus Compact, the Campus Outreach Opportunity League, the National Association of Service and Conservation Corps, and Youth Service America. The first Bush administration is credited with advancing the cause of volunteerism by creating the Office of National Service and the Points of Light Foundation in the late 1980s and by supporting the National Community Service Act of 1990, which promoted service-learning by giving grants to schools and by providing demonstration grants to, among others, national service programs and colleges and universities (Deans; Bridwell-Bowles; Stanton, Giles, and Cruz).

While service-learning has its roots in volunteerism, current research emphatically distinguishes between both traditional charitable projects or course-based internships and the critical, classroom-based practice of service-learning. As Thomas Deans explains in *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition*, service-learning is an instructional method: within a carefully organized curriculum, learning derives from a combination of active civic participation, the application of skills to “real-life” situations, and written and oral reflection on the experience itself (1-2). Further, Deans observes, serving the community in this way engenders in students responsibility and concern for the welfare of others (1). In addition, many first-year writing teachers see in service-learning opportunities for composition students, in particular, to engage in social critique and to use their writing skills to promote social change (see, for example, Herzberg; Heilker; Bickford and Reynolds; Flower). Thus, while it is certainly possible to view community outreach projects exclusively as “real-world” writing experiences, free of social agendas, most of the recent service-learning literature emphasizes its potential to foster (or at least raise awareness of the need for) social justice or social transformation. This is not to say that such goals are, or necessarily should be, the primary objectives of first-year writing courses but, rather, that for advocates of service-learning, reflection on social conditions crucially distinguishes this pedagogy from volunteerism.

However, in the space between an ethic of personal concern and an ethic of social transformation, composition studies professionals have begun to perceive colliding commitments. Thus, Linda Flower cautions that while sustained community service “can lead to self-discovery and caring relationships,” individual students’ “private experiences often build merely personal stories: they fail to challenge the public representations of the ‘others’ a student serves; they define social problems as personal ones; and they place agency (knowledge, power, and self-determination) with the tutor [or

student volunteer]” (182, citing Herzberg; Shutz and Gere). Service-learning scholarship repeatedly stresses the importance of interrogating popular assumptions and working for large-scale change, recapitulating Bruce Herzberg’s warning that “if our students regard social problems as chiefly or only personal, then they will not search beyond the personal for a systemic explanation” (58). Aware that community outreach is rooted jointly in “the conservative soil of charity and the rocky ground of activism” (Flower 183), that it can easily become “missionary work” (Bridwell-Bowles 26), “lapsing into habits of paternalistic charity or nobless oblige” (Deans 22), writing teachers have been designing service-related courses and programs that demand more than easy conversion narratives or testimonials of identification and mutual-ity (see, especially, Welch’s critique of “the point of entry narrative”).

Despite these educators’ best efforts, however, the ubiquity of concerns about the volunteer ethos of service-learning suggests that students continue to experience community service as an individualist enterprise. Citing as evidence an extensive list of service-learning researchers, Donna M. Bickford and Nedra Reynolds observe that “although some service-learning practitioners theorize about and advocate a more activist model, few students understand their service as a contribution to structural social change” (238). Similarly, contrasting her action-oriented service goals with her students’ entrenched traditional viewpoints, Nancy Welch notes that although she takes an activist, grass-roots approach to service-learning, she finds that most of her students are motivated by traditional notions of volunteerism and charity (262).

It seems to me that one reason service-learning students find it difficult to shed the mantle of volunteerism (and all that the term implies) is that popular and political discourses repeatedly “hail” students to service by placing their work into a highly individualist framework even as they invoke social responsibility. As I will illustrate, this has been the case in the political rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, American presidents who have actively advocated public and community service. In the analysis that follows, I focus on two interconnected themes in the presidential discourses of service: 1) the republican ideals of social responsibility and individualism (with their competing and potentially contradictory impulses), and 2) the efficacy of a limited role for government in addressing social problems. I suggest that these discourses, emerging as they do from long-standing sentiments and national mythologies, can undermine the goals of service-learning programs, by reifying individualist alternatives and, ultimately, repositioning community outreach as stopgap economic solution.

While popular historical narratives of service-learning often highlight Bill Clinton's role in the creation of Americorps, his speech on signing that legislation has significant affinities to Ronald Reagan's tribute to volunteerism in his *Address to the Nation on the Program for Economic Recovery*. Taken together, these orations provide a way to view George W. Bush's rhetoric of service and to consider its implications for WPAs whose programs support service-learning in nonprofit workplaces.

REAGAN'S RHETORIC OF CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

In the early 1980s, the Reagan administration was facing economic recession, steadily rising interest rates, spiraling living costs, and an increasing federal deficit. In his 1981 *Address to the Nation*, the President announces as his central goal the balancing of the federal budget by 1984. Reagan then describes a series of programs for reducing spending in the form of decreased appropriations to government agencies and programs. His plans include cutting the number of non-defense federal employees by 75,000 workers, dismantling the Cabinet Departments of Energy and Education, reducing federal loan guarantees, and reforming welfare and entitlement programs. To solve problems that would arise from these substantial reductions in government funding to social service programs, Reagan proposes "a nationwide effort to encourage our citizens to join with us in finding where need exists, and then to organize volunteer programs to meet that need."

To make his argument, Reagan calls upon America's "spirit of volunteerism," and he alludes to the country's mythic founding, with its "proud tradition of generosity." Invoking cherished images of our republican past, he describes a society committed to the general welfare, ready "to help where help is needed." Thus, he implies, we share with our forefathers the attributes of republican citizenry expressed in the Puritans' characterization of their "mission" in shared social responsibility and formally articulated in Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*,² reflecting "a commitment on the part of each individual to value the commonweal over his own selfish interests, and to place his specific virtues, e.g., courage, wisdom, a talent for leadership, and so on, in service to the community" (Hanson 62).

In his call for volunteerism, Reagan's *Address* appeals directly to common notions of a social good secured through a dedicated public commitment. Citing Alexis de Tocqueville's description of the national character in *Democracy in America*, Reagan asserts,

More than a century ago, a Frenchman came to America and later wrote a book for his countrymen, telling them what he had seen here. He told them that in America when a citizen saw a problem that needed solving, he would cross the street and talk to a neighbor about it, and the first thing you know a committee would be formed, and before long the problem would be solved. And then he added, "You may not believe this, but not a single bureaucrat would ever have been involved."

By retelling Tocqueville's story this way, Reagan fosters nostalgia for past American values while reinforcing the possibility of their recovery in contemporary political and social activity. Moreover, in this rendition, civic duty is coupled with America's ongoing traditions of self-reliance and resourcefulness, as Reagan deftly blends the best attributes of individualism (self-sufficiency, creativity) with the ideals of civic virtue (a committee is formed; civic needs are met). The autonomous individual is, of course, an adjacent founding cultural symbol in the United States, and equally part of our national mythic identity.³ Through figures like Benjamin Franklin and Abraham Lincoln, our national heroes embody the spirit of the "rugged," self-reliant individual, who despite his crude beginnings, achieves success by means of his intellect, will, and independence.

The challenges of individualism were not lost on Tocqueville, who wrote that "individualism . . . disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself" (qtd. in Bellah et al. 37).⁴ In such a society, an individual's rights may conflict with society's needs, and in its extreme, self-interest may turn to selfishness and greed. As history has shown, the republican dream of a selfless, civic-minded citizenry can give way to the realities of economic and political struggles, acquisitiveness, inequality, and private interests (Wilentz; Hanson). Yet, as Robert N. Bellah et al. found through their study of contemporary American values and mores, we continue to "believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness of the individual. Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our own lives as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious" (142).

In Reagan's tribute to American culture, individualism and social responsibility are not antitheses but rather two sides of the same coin: he closes Tocqueville's anecdote by stressing that solutions to social problems depend on the independence and ingenuity of individuals and local committees.⁵ Thus, Reagan strategically discharges the United States government

from responsibility for meeting its obligations. By reenlisting the sentiments of Paine and his compatriots that selfless public commitment leads to social harmony and limits the need for government interference (Hanson 78), Reagan conjures another image of our American past. "Blessed with a spirit of independence and pride," he continues, Americans of the past built barns, attended to local disasters, forged cities, and developed the West "without Federal planning." As in days of old, Reagan insists, government support is not requisite to economic or social stability. Social and educational problems can be solved without funds because Americans will take responsibility for each other's problems and meet them.

Sustaining the dual impulses of republicanism and individualism, Reagan's closing remarks link individual choice to notions of democratic freedom. Charging past administrations with "tak[ing] away many things we once considered were really ours to do voluntarily, out of the goodness of our hearts and a sense of community pride and neighborliness," Reagan expresses his confidence that "private citizens" will provide human resources and charitable contributions for programs previously supported by the federal government. As he explains it, governments hamper freedom by curtailing individual desire to serve and support. Declaring that we have been stifled by our government's programmatic interference, he avows that he is giving the public the chance to take up a role that should have been exclusively theirs to begin with.

Putting aside Reagan's political rhetoric and its attendant mystifications, there was the practical question of whether this call for volunteers could provide the remedy it advocated. In a *New York Times* editorial dated October 10, 1981, a contributor writes that although "the tradition of community service and philanthropy does indeed run strong and deep in American society [. . .] if the President expects private giving and volunteerism to bridge the gap created by his Administration's massive withdrawal from the support of health and social programs, he is tragically mistaken." He continues, "Were corporations and private individuals to substantially increase their contributions, they still would not fully compensate for the loss of the governmental share." At the same, the writer points out that Reagan's tax package contains "serious disincentives to private philanthropy, [. . .] [since it] virtually eliminates the inheritance and gift taxes, which have heretofore proven powerful incentives for the wealthy to give to hospitals, social agencies, and educational institutions" (D. Harris 24). From this perspective, Reagan's rhetorical appeal for the "spirit of volunteerism" and social responsibility, an appeal that is taken up again in later administrations' incentives

for service-learning, looks a lot less like a tribute to a way of life, however mythological, and more like a stopgap effort to provide a pool of free labor to fill positions no longer staffed or salaried.

CLINTON'S RHETORIC OF DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

In the literature of service-learning, President Bill Clinton's *Remarks on the Signing of the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993* assumes a prominent position. The National and Community Service Trust Act created Americorps, and the Corporation for National and Community Service pledged federal funds to sustain a number of student volunteer programs. With Americorps, students could contribute significant public service "from flood cleanup to housing rehabilitation, from being tour guides in our national parks to being teachers' aides in our schools," while accumulating college credits and future educational funding (Clinton).

For my purposes, the relevant portion of the speech is the final section, where Clinton asserts that volunteerism is crucial to America's future. Here, he casts individualism as the cornerstone of service as he links the rebuilding of our nation's communities to three related concepts: freedom, democratic equal opportunity, and individual accountability. In his penultimate paragraph, Clinton states, "My fellow Americans, there are streets and neighborhoods and communities today where people are not free. There are millions of Americans who are not really free today because they cannot reach down inside them and bring out what was put there by the Almighty." "Streets and neighborhoods" provide the subtext of poverty and crime, social factors that enslave individuals who are unable to realize their potential, unable to "reach down" to their bootstraps and achieve the American dream. Such citizens are not free, Clinton suggests, because they are denied equal opportunity to realize their individual human potential, the manifest destiny of all Americans.

Like Reagan, Clinton places the burden of responsibility on the volunteer's personal efforts to rescue those in need. Thus, he assures us that "the young people of America will preserve the freedom of America for themselves and for all those of their generations by assuming the responsibility to rebuild the American [community]," and he expresses his hope that national service programs "will help us to remember in the quiet of every night that what each of us can become is to some extent determined by whether all of us can become what God meant us to be."⁶ Although Clinton acknowledges that the conditions of "enslavement" of human potential are a social product, he repeatedly elides these problems with the notion of individual civic duty. In taking responsibility for those who cannot otherwise achieve their individual potential, volunteerism helps to preserve democracy.⁷

Clinton's call to service, like Reagan's, relies on familiar commonplaces relating to individualism and democracy. In his essay on service-learning, Bruce Herzberg discusses the dangers of a naturalized rhetoric of freedom and universal opportunities. Referring to Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, Herzberg explains that such discourse actually serves to "validate and sustain" meritocracy, to imply that individuals alone are responsible for their own successes and failures (61-4). Moreover, as Welch argues, citing Rachel Martin, enduring myths of equal opportunity and merit-based rewards inhibit collective action, even for those engaged in radical critique (248).

Nowhere in his *Remarks* does Clinton suggest that service might be reciprocal, that communities might have much to teach the students involved in outreach; nor does he acknowledge that organizations and residents of these "streets and neighborhoods" have histories and mechanisms of agency that predate the arrival of student volunteers (for discussions of shared service projects and mutual learning, see, for example, Shutz and Gere; Welch; Flower; Cushman, "Sustainable"). As a result, Clinton's speech fails to encourage "systemic analyses of social ills from multidisciplinary perspectives" (Bridwell-Bowles 26, citing Herzberg); rather, he sustains a vision of service-learning as missionary work dependent on individual conscience.

Rhetorics of personal culpability reinforce for students their roles as personal saviors summoned to help deserving others reach their full potential. But by naturalizing individual duty and coding personal effort as a cherished American value, Clinton's discourse, like Reagan's, ultimately insists on individual solutions to systemic problems while deflecting federal fiscal, legislative, or moral accountability. Even as he crossed the country observing acts of public service, he "realized there was no way any Government program could solve these problems, *even if we had the money to spend on them, which we don't*, but that the American people, if organized and directed and challenged and asked, would find a way." Later he reiterates his goal: "to help reinvent our Government, to do more and *cost less*, by creating new ways for citizens to fulfill the mission of the public" (emphasis added).

In Clinton's proposition that "if we challenge people to serve and we give them a chance to fulfill their abilities" (*Remarks*), we hear echoes of Reagan's assertion that many Americans "want to be involved if only someone will ask [them] or offer the opportunity." Like the missionary "calling" of the Puritan founding fathers, in both of these speeches the impulses of individualism and social responsibility merge so "naturally" that intervention at the level of government seems unnecessary.

BUSH'S APPEAL TO INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Among his list of goals for the 2003 presidential year, President George W. Bush's *State of the Union* address calls for congressional support for his proposed faith-based initiative and the Citizen Service Act to "encourage acts of compassion that can transform America, one heart and one soul at a time." An outgrowth of the USA Freedom Corps, which promised federal support to existing Americorps and Senior Corps programs and introduced the Citizen Corps, a community security first-response effort, the Citizen Service Act pledges increased program funding, greater access to voluntary participation, and assessment and reauthorization of federally-funded service programs (*Principles* 3).⁸ While only a brief portion of the *State of the Union* address is taken up with the Citizen Service Act, Bush's call to action is captured in the phrase, "One mentor, one person can change a life forever. And I urge you to be that one person."

In his April 9, 2002, *Remarks by the President on the Citizen Service Act* in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Bush presented a more comprehensive vision. As the Executive Summary of the *Principles and Reforms for a Citizen Service Act* makes clear, volunteerism is patriotic, begetting social improvement, fostering progress, and fighting tyranny.

Citizen service has always been a cornerstone of our democracy. Citizens have acted individually or through voluntary associations to found hospitals and libraries, start fire companies and civic improvement projects, and help cure diseases and advance rocketry that would fulfill our most distant dreams. Today, millions of Americans continue this tradition of service. (3)

Gesturing toward familiar republican ideals, Bush seamlessly binds together democracy and the American spirit, compassion and civic service, and personal responsibility for betterment of others' lives. More directly than Reagan and Clinton, Bush taps the impulses of individualism manifest in contemporary society: "People say, what can I do to join the war against terror. And I said, love your neighbor just as you'd like to be loved yourself" (*Remarks*). For Bush, poverty, illiteracy, and despair can be remedied on a one-on-one basis, by inspiring hope and fostering efforts on the part of the most needy to change their own conditions. Again, when Bush discusses Americorps specifically, it is difficult to tell exactly who is going to be changed by the experience, but it is certain that these effects occur at the level of individual giving. Repeating his refrain, he praises student tutors and mentors, who know that they can "change America one person, one soul, one conscience at a time" (*Remarks*).

Like Reagan, Bush alludes to Tocqueville, stating “if he were to come back, he’d be just as proud of America now as he was then, when it comes to the willingness of our citizens to serve each other” (*Remarks*). Just as in Reagan’s speech, however, the reference to the French writer applauds governmental nonintervention. In place of federal funding, Bush encourages citizens to affiliate with their religious groups or other organizations to “devise a program to feed the homeless,” or take some other public action to “spread love, one person at a time” (*Remarks*).

Few educators would deny the value of student outreach, and I definitely do not want to suggest otherwise; my concern, however, is that advocating funding for service and volunteer programs as the central means of resolving social problems becomes a too easy means of passing the buck. While WPAs are helping their departments to design the kind of service-learning program that “addresses structures” and “induces students to ask [not] only ‘How can we help these people?’ [but] the harder question, ‘Why are conditions this way?’” (Bickford and Reynolds 231), presidential rhetorics of compassion return responsibility for conditions to private citizens, to charitable organizations, and to the recipients of voluntary efforts.

WHO IS SERVED BY SERVICE-LEARNING?

In principle, service-learning benefits both students and communities, and fosters social change through cross-cultural interaction, participant reflection, and curricular support. WPAs play their part by designing curricula for community service components in first-year writing courses. But as for all academic programs, we must step back and examine service-learning for its immediate and its broader implications. Given the Bush administration’s recent economic difficulties and its fiscal precedent in the Reagan years, a call for a patriotism of “personal responsibility” seems suspiciously timely. Given the slant of presidential rhetorics of service over a period of almost thirty years, we can begin to understand the depth of our students’ entrenched, radically individualist beliefs. Moreover, we can see how such beliefs might enable relevant constituencies to exploit readily available resources of college and university service-learning in order to divest themselves of responsibility for addressing or funding systemic correctives to intolerable social conditions. We are thus reminded of Suzanne’s observation that “the people who used to do my job actually got paid for it.”

If political interests can profit by exploiting the resources of academically sponsored outreach programs, as corporate-university alliances expand, the question of who gains from service-learning becomes all the more vexed. As Harriet Malinowitz argues, referring to Masao Miyoshi’s critique, today “the very meanings of ‘profit’ and ‘education’ threaten to converge: univer-

sity officials sit on corporate boards and industry figures serve on university boards of trustees and regents”; ultimately, “the very mission of the university is transformed” (314; see also, Giroux 313). Today’s college administrators seem widely committed to what Jeff Williams terms, the “profit-protocol of the new university,” where students are “unabashedly reinvented as consumers, as shoppers at the education store, buying a career-enhancing service” (747). In such a climate, service-learning courses with socially reflective and academically focused objectives, such as “authentic, autonomous learning” situations and “site[s] for real-world writing” (Dorman and Dorman 122), may unintentionally support a commercialized subtext.

Malinowitz’s description of the contradictions that lie at the heart of composition studies’ mission illuminates the conflicts inherent in rhetorics of republicanism and individualism: on the one hand, we believe that “composition is ideally situated to be a bastion of radically transformative social critique and of resistance to the ideological and economic prerogatives of a globalized capitalist economy”; on the other, we know that “composition certainly stands to gain in status and material recognition if it dedicates itself to promoting the literacy goals of [corporate] entities” (313-15). These dual identities, Malinowitz says, allow us to imagine that our writing instruction is ethically and intellectually grounded in the mission of social justice when all the while our institutions are promoting the professional benefits of mastering oral and written communications (315; see also Smit 202).

In terms of service-learning, these contradictions are evident when colleges and universities invoke consumerist rhetoric to explain that students receive course credit and valuable “on the job” experience for resumes and graduate school applications. In this regard, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles shows that because “students, parents, and legislators ask what kind of ‘value added’ marketable skills and abilities can be guaranteed by increasingly expensive baccalaureate degrees” (19), service-learning programs are understood to give their colleges or universities a recruitment advantage. Citing a 1996 article in *U.S. News and World Report*, Bridwell-Bowles points out the when it comes to service-learning, “the benefit[s] most often advertised to students and their bill-paying parents [are that] students develop contacts in real-world programs that can help them get jobs” and promise them “a competitive advantage” (21).⁹ Within corporate model configurations, institutions can gain eminence and grants by requiring faculty to develop service-learning components and by advertising these service-learning initiatives.

HOW SHOULD WPAs RESPOND?

For WPAs who are committed to service-learning as a mechanism for social change, seeing it exploited to serve other interests can be discouraging. How can a writing program director promote outreach as a social good when the college or university's marketing or development office is advertising the program as career preparation? If Suzanne is learning her job skills at the expense of paid workers, doesn't the goal of social justice become superfluous? One obvious response for directors of composition is to collectively refuse to participate. After all, as one WPA reviewer of this article reminded me and as presidential rhetorics reveal, "the idea of participation for the sake of developing democracy and contributing to the public good is a republican ideal that it is just as value-laden as any other principle we advance." Perhaps the only way to resist these fundamentally hegemonic discourses is to opt out of the game.

However, as I examine my own role in the composition and advanced writing programs at my college, this solution seems unsatisfactory. It feels too much like throwing the proverbial baby out with the bath water. I propose instead that if we are going to support community service in our writing programs, we will need to take greater responsibility for its effects. To date, there is no body of literature that links writing-focused community outreach directly to writing program administration. As directors of first-year writing are likely to organize and oversee such initiatives, perhaps it is time for that scholarly work to begin. For as David Smits asserts, speaking more generally about the "rich contested history" of first-year writing curricula, "It should be a source of inspiration for WPAs to join the history of this conversation and to make their mark on the way writing is taught to first-year students at American colleges and universities" (204).

More immediately, we can intervene institutionally and programmatically to ensure that in our university's service-learning courses "social justice work [is] made part of the educational project" (Bickford and Reynolds 244). At the institutional level, this means acquainting our university administrators, as well as the faculty we supervise, with the history and theory of service-learning and emphasizing the college or university's role in fostering meaningful outreach programs. It means refusing to allow our composition faculty to do the "short" version of the service-learning course, which supplies free labor devoid of critical consciousness. It means insisting on workshops and other types of training as prerequisites to launching service-learning courses, with a significant portion of such training focused on the social, ethical, and political questions that frame outreach efforts.

Writing program administrators can do much to guide their composition faculty by introducing instructional approaches that reveal that social problems cannot be solved “one heart and one soul and one conscience at a time.” We can, instead, encourage “activist” models like those described by Bickford and Reynolds, which call upon students to interrogate the very acts in which they are engaged. Stressing that any course requiring volunteer work also include “a critique of volunteerism” (232), they argue that classroom projects must be aimed at “recognizing the effects of structures on the lives of individuals, and on focusing student attention on the need for activist work and daily practices of dissent that are committed to changing those structures” (247). In their program, for example, students working as literacy tutors in a local elementary school reflected on their work by addressing such questions as, “What does it mean that the schools must rely on volunteer labor to achieve their educational mission?” (250). Likewise, prompted by Suzanne’s observation, instructors might invite their students to investigate and publicly report where indeed all the people who “used to do [their] job” have gone and whether funds will ever be sufficient for their return to employment.

Furthermore, we can suggest that writing teachers guide their students to examine the political and educational rhetoric of service and of service-learning in order to expose discourses of radical individualism and top-down volunteerism as mechanisms for developing an ideology of blind individual responsibility. Students can study the speeches and web sites of our nation’s leaders to investigate how readily such discourses draw attention away from government fiscal support, even as students are praised for their efforts. The rhetoric of service-learning organizations’ web sites and brochures should likewise bear fruitful analysis, encouraging students to question their own roles as service providers, to ask how all participants are cast as subjects (or objects) of service and what purposes such discourses serve. Service-learning courses should take students beyond the coursework-outreach connection, beyond even a critique of systemic conditions and hegemonic discourses, to interrogate as well their own roles (and complicity) as service learners.

Deans’ categories of service-learning projects (writing for the community, writing with the community, and writing about the community) offer program directors an array of possibilities for guiding their writing faculty. Implicit in all of these is potential for raising questions about injustice while using literacy activities to address an organization’s immediate problems or needs. This work is worthwhile and important, but it does not reach far enough toward intervene systemically. I would like to extend the activist

orientation advocated by Bickford and Reynolds and by Ellen Cushman (“Public”) to propose a fourth category of service-learning, which I call *writing for change*.

With the model that I have in mind, student writers can produce not only community-based documents and reflective or analytical research, but also the kinds of public writing that engage “an audience of local, regional, or national groups or individuals in order to bring about progressive societal change” (Weisser 90; see also Wells; Ward and Carpenter; Herzberg; Grobman). By bringing their experiences and insights to bear on writing that publicly questions and informs, students can assume roles in public advocacy. For example, for a culminating course project, a student like Suzanne might take up the issue of agency funding and the need for permanent employees. She could work with her agency to write grants or create awareness through letters to congressional representatives or newspapers. Such ambitious activist assignments should advance the semester’s coursework, projects, and reflection; they will thus require careful preparation and organization. WPAs can facilitate these efforts by serving as clearinghouses and site contacts for initiating projects and by supporting faculty through discussion groups during the semester.

Presidential rhetorics of service illustrate how naturally cultural values can be exploited for hegemonic ends. As Schutz and Gere wisely observe, “Despite our best intentions, if we are not careful we may end up reinforcing ideologies and assumptions that we had hoped to critique” (147). If service-learning programs are to meet the socially critical, socially responsible goals they were initially designed to achieve, and if such programs are to distinguish themselves from volunteerism on the one hand and internships on the other, then writing program administrators at the forefront of community outreach initiatives must interrogate, critique, and intervene in the discourses and the practices of service.

NOTES

¹ I am aware that in recent literature, the terms “service-learning,” “community outreach,” and “community service,” among others, may be used to designate specific kinds of service activity and that, in particular, the work of service-learning courses is intended to emphasize equally both *service* and *learning*. With that acknowledged, for the purposes of this paper, I do not want to make such fine distinctions. For stylistic variety, I use the terms interchangeably to signify course-based projects that we commonly understand as “service-learning.” In contrast, in this paper, the term “volunteerism” has specific meaning and intention.

² One’s social and moral obligation to the greater community is articulated in the sermons of the New England Puritans. Bercovitch explains that in early

political sermons, seventeenth-century Puritan leaders' could "join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity, the shifting 'signs of the times' to certain traditional metaphors, themes, and symbols" (*American xi*).

³ According to Bercovitch, American individualism has roots in the transported mission of the New England Puritans, with their belief in the unmediated relationship between man and God, their ethic of material and spiritual salvation, and their conviction that they were God's new chosen people. Bercovitch notes that eventually this "correspondency [sic] [between the ecclesiastic and secular orders] yielded the secular basis of multi-denominational religion and the sacral view of economic free enterprise" (*Rites* 148).

⁴ In contrast to republicanism's ethic of "public good," individualism was first understood as "an ideology of privatism, counseling a withdrawal from public affairs, contrary to republican injunctions concerning the need for an active and vigilant citizenry" (Hanson 129). Tocqueville stated that individualism "at first only dams the spring of public virtues, but in the long run it attacks and destroys all the others also" (qtd. in Bercovitch, *Rites* 309).

⁵ I want to emphasize that Reagan's ability to elide these competing ideologies derives from deep-rooted perspectives reaching back at least to the Puritan leader Jonathan Edwards. Edwards affirmed that "American Protestants, after all, had a special role to play in God's plan. For them, above all other peoples, conversion, rebirth, and 'generic consciousness,' were manifested typologically, through the correspondence [. . .]" (Bercovitch, *American* 108).

⁶ Sociologist John W. Meyer notes that this correlation between God's will and its individual, personal realization is a foundational "truth" of modern capitalist societies. In capitalist ideology, "the individual confronts an integrated moral universe in which he is defined, increasingly, as a sacred equal to all the other members. [. . .] The underlying idea is that society fulfills the will of God, not directly, but by maximizing the welfare of each individual. This modern convention [. . .] [assumes] that every individual has the right and the obligation, not only to develop himself as fully as possible, but to produce and consume as much as he can" (210). Historically, the New England Puritans' individualist principles were realized in the combined attributes of "liberty, equality, and property [, which] were not merely civic deals. They were part of God's plan. America, as home of libertarian principles, was the lasting 'habitation of justice, and mountain of holiness,' [. . .] as John Barnard said in 1734, quoting Jeremiah 34" (Bercovitch, *American* 111).

⁷ Clinton cautions that "The great English historian Edward Gibbon warned that when the Athenians finally wanted not to give to society but for society to give to them, when the freedom they wished for most was the freedom from responsibility, then Athens ceased to be free." But as Hanson, among others, argues, our definition of democracy and its immediate connection to various notions of freedom is itself ideological, saturated with cultural-historical values that make it impossible to imagine an alternative to liberal democracy (13–15, 375–98).

⁸ The Citizen Service Act is linked to the President's Faith-Based and Community Initiative, by which religious organizations will compete with nonsectarian charitable organizations for federal grants and other forms of support (*Principles* 3).

⁹ Ironically, service-learning undergraduates pay for the privilege of serving, often by borrowing tuition from the federal government. (For an overview of the student loan business franchise, see J. Williams 748–49.)

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