

Service and Civic Engagement at Princeton

*A statement by
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The Task Force on Service and Civic Engagement has delivered a creative, thought-provoking, and highly readable report on a topic of great importance to Princeton's future. The report offers a compelling vision for the value of service to the mission of a liberal arts university, and it recommends concrete steps that Princeton can take to achieve that value more fully.

We are grateful to the task force for its conscientious work and innovative thinking, and we are eager to build on the foundation that it has constructed. In this memorandum, we respond to the task force report, outline initial steps that the University will take in response to it, and identify some recommendations that will need further consideration.

As the task force recognized, this University has a longstanding commitment to service, reflected in Princeton's informal motto—"in the nation's service, and in the service of all nations"—and exemplified by the extraordinary contributions that Princetonians make to society. The Board of Trustees recently approved a mission statement describing Princeton as a university that "advances learning through scholarship, research, and teaching of unsurpassed quality ... with a pervasive commitment to serve the nation and the world."

As the task force rightly observed, the notion of service reflected in these principles is both broad and multifaceted. It embraces "social service, entrepreneurship, military service, policy work, government involvement, and community activism" (p. 7). We agree with the task force that

"Service at its most capacious is a response to the needs named by harms such as injustice, inequality, and unsustainability ... [Put] most ambitiously, service and civic engagement are activities that aim to heal the world: encompassing the very broad and manifold goals—from poverty to health to education to environment to international relations, to name only a few—that define the service-relevant community in the broadest sense." (p. 7)

So understood, service is an ideal that can be pursued in almost any profession, vocation, or role; it is not about *what* role one chooses, but about *how* one lives it. Princetonians engage in service on campus, in the local community, in the region, and on national and international scales. Our alumni serve as leaders in government, the academy, and the for-profit sector; they volunteer in community organizations and join the military; they are teachers and doctors, journalists and entrepreneurs, caretakers, friends, and advisors.

Princeton's commitment to service derives directly from the University's aspiration to promote the public good. Princeton and other great universities are animated by a conviction that, over the long term, high-quality teaching and research will enhance human wellbeing in a multitude of ways. Service, broadly construed, is one of the goals that justify what universities do, and we agree with the task force that teaching and research are "themselves vital kinds of service and civic engagement."

The task force report argues persuasively that there is a second and equally fundamental connection between service and Princeton's teaching mission. Liberal arts education aims not only to teach skills and convey knowledge, but also to prepare students for meaningful lives connected to a larger purpose. It seeks to inculcate in students a capacity for and habits of reflection about their relationship to the world. Service is a part of that relationship, and a good liberal arts education inevitably illuminates its character, its potential, and its limitations. Conversely, experience with service can motivate engagement with and insight into questions at the core of a liberal education.

Service is not unique in this regard. International experience, for example, also provides students with generative opportunities to consider and rethink their relationship to the world. That is one reason why Princeton encourages students to go abroad and is expanding opportunities for them to do so. More generally, the residential model of liberal arts education presupposes that students will benefit from constructive feedback between their academic and extracurricular pursuits.

The task force report's recommendations do not, however, depend on any claim that service is uniquely important to liberal education. The report instead emphasizes that the best and most effective way to enhance Princeton's commitment to service is to reinforce and capitalize upon the connections between service and our core teaching and research mission. We embrace this vision.

Supporting programs that connect service and learning

The task force identified three important parameters to help shape Princeton's service and civic engagement initiatives.

- Service should be voluntary.
- The University should encourage bottom-up, student- and faculty-initiated service activities that are supported through systematic, top-down structures.
- Service at Princeton should encompass all scales: local, regional, national, and international.

We endorse these parameters and the reasoning behind them. We agree as well with what we take to be the report's most fundamental recommendation: that Princeton should develop the connection between service and learning to make service more central to its mission and enhance its connection to the liberal arts.

Academic departments, centers, and institutes at Princeton already offer an array of service-focused classes, seminars, and independent research experiences. The task force report describes several examples (pp. 26-27). One innovative and successful model is the Global Health Program, which integrates field internships with interdisciplinary coursework, junior papers, and the senior thesis. Another is the Grand Challenges Program, which brings students into research projects and internships addressing urgent issues about the environment and health care. These offerings and others complement powerful and important co-curricular and extracurricular service initiatives, including the Bridge Year Program and robust offerings at the Pace Center for Civic Engagement, which celebrates its 15th anniversary this year.

Linking service to learning will require leadership from faculty willing to invest time and creativity to develop courses and programs. It will also depend on the availability of resources that support the faculty's efforts and open new doors for students. One of the task force's key recommendations is that Princeton should raise funds to encourage and facilitate additional programs of this kind. The University already has some programs—such as the 250th Anniversary Fund in the Office of the Dean of the College—that defray the costs of designing new programs. We agree with the task force that Princeton should raise funds to supplement existing resources and to sustain programs as they mature and grow.

We will ask the Dean of the College to consider the task force's recommendations to develop service-related curricular components, including freshman seminars, writing seminars, and 200-level "S" courses as well as curricular offerings for juniors, seniors, and graduate students. These recommendations, like other proposals for curricular change, would benefit from the judgment of the dean and the faculty. We hope, however, that faculty from across the disciplines will be interested in pursuing such courses.

We will also ask the strategic planning Task Force on General Education to consider the service and civic engagement task force's question of whether a service course might be incorporated into the general education curriculum. More broadly, the Dean of the College, the Dean of the Faculty, and the Dean of the Graduate School, in partnership with the new Steering Committee on Service and Civic Engagement (described below), will explore the development of teaching and research programs to advance the University's goals for service and civic engagement. Given the connections between service and learning, and the synergies between curricular and extracurricular initiatives, the deans will work closely with the Executive Vice President and the Vice President for Campus Life to help integrate academic and non-academic programs.

Specific curricular proposals

The task force focused much of its attention on the ways in which the freshman and sophomore years could provide undergraduate students with the opportunity to experience and reflect upon a diverse and interconnected suite of curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular service and civic engagement activities. One of the task force's most intriguing suggestions is its proposal for a "long sophomore year" that links a service-related summer internship after freshman year to curricular offerings and other structured activities in the sophomore year. We find great promise in this suggestion. It not only provides an attractive way to connect service

and learning, but also has two other virtues. First, it supplies students with a valuable option for the summer after their first year of studies, a time when some of them might otherwise struggle to find rewarding experiences. Second, it adds more structure to the sophomore year curriculum, which tends in non-engineering disciplines to receive less attention than either the suite of introductory courses for freshmen or the disciplinary curricula available to juniors and seniors.

We will facilitate pilot programs in the direction suggested by the task force. We will also begin fundraising efforts immediately to support the expansion of opportunities for service-related internships as well as other co-curricular and extracurricular opportunities. The service internship programs should provide the support and resources necessary to enable all undergraduates to participate, regardless of financial circumstances.

We are more ambivalent about the task force's suggestions regarding student-initiated seminars focused on specific service-related topics. The connection between service and the liberal arts does not, in our view, depend on the establishment of such seminars. On the contrary, the task force has persuaded us that these linkages exist throughout the curriculum: students' service experiences may enhance their appreciation for courses about topics as varied as behavioral psychology, Congressional politics, environmental engineering, or the motivation of literary characters. We are accordingly disinclined to accept the task force's recommendation about creating a prize to encourage student-initiated seminars; if students create such seminars, and if faculty members agree to lead them, they should do so because of their educational value rather than because of the stimulus supplied by a prize.

Establishing the Service and Civic Engagement Steering Committee

Many of the most powerful service and civic engagement initiatives will develop organically through bottom-up projects that are led and organized by students and faculty. The success of these projects and the extent to which, taken together, they can shape the campus culture will require central support and coordination.

We will accordingly establish immediately the Service and Civic Engagement Steering Committee. Working closely with the Dean of the College, the Dean of the Graduate School, and the Vice President for Campus Life, this committee will complete its work over the course of 18 months. The steering committee, which will include faculty from all divisions, students, and staff, will articulate a path forward to advance the University's commitment to service and civic engagement, focusing in particular on the student experience. This includes setting priorities; helping to design pilot initiatives; generating additional ideas; defining additional tactics; and serving as ambassadors to the wider University community in advancing this work.

We have authorized the Pace Center to establish a program coordinator position to support the work of the steering committee.

Measuring impact

The task force proposed the development of a new suite of metrics that would go beyond measuring participation rates in service and civic engagement activities to assess the value and impact of these initiatives: “If we are going to do this work, we suggest that our service should actually have results; there should be a positive social impact. We thus recommend defining, pursuing, and evaluating service with rigor.”

We agree that Princeton has an opportunity to play a leadership role and make a distinctive contribution to the systematic assessment of service that will, in time, advance the education we provide to our students and enhance the positive societal impact of service. We will support the Service and Civic Engagement Steering Committee and interested faculty in their efforts to develop relevant metrics.

Providing a more visible home

The task force observed that “the Pace Center has become a robust presence on campus despite an inconspicuous physical location.” We agree that there is a significant need to provide the Pace Center for Civic Engagement with a more visible home that would better support community-building and enable the types of interactions that would help make service more central to the student experience.

We have asked the Campus Planning Steering Committee to take this recommendation into account as part of the campus planning process that will guide the physical development of the campus over the next decade and beyond. The decision about whether and how to create a facility to support service and civic engagement will be made in connection with the University’s strategic framework and informed by an assessment of fundraising possibilities.

Conclusion

We are grateful to the faculty, students, and staff who dedicated tremendous passion, commitment, and expertise to answer the key strategic question: “What must we do to make service central to the mission of the University?” The task force has outlined an inspiring vision that will renew and deepen the University’s commitment to service and civic engagement. We will need to challenge ourselves, individually and as members of the broader University community, to realize this vision and support our students and faculty as they pursue service in all of its forms.