

Promoting Student Service and Effective Service-Learning

Overview

The goal of the Learn and Serve America programs is to make service an integral part of the education of all young people and instill a lifelong ethic of civic engagement and service. All Learn and Serve America programs – for K-12 and higher education – integrate community service with academic curricula or with extracurricular learning opportunities. Students who participate in these programs demonstrate increased civic and social responsibility and higher academic achievement. In addition, Learn and Serve America programs encourage and foster beneficial collaboration among schools, community-based organizations, institutions of higher education, and others, to meet community needs and to strengthen the fabric of local communities.

A 1999 U.S. Department of Education study identified a growing trend within public elementary and secondary schools to offer service and service-learning classes. The study found that 32 percent of all public schools organized service-learning as part of their curricula, including nearly half of all high schools, and 57 percent of all public schools organized community service activities for their students. This growth is significant when compared to a similar study conducted in 1984 that found only 9 percent of all high schools offered service-learning, and 27 percent of all high schools offered some type of community service (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). In higher education, service-learning has had similarly expansive growth.

Unfortunately, Federal Work-Study program participation among college and university students does not reflect the same trend. The original Federal Work-Study Program had as its purpose: “to encourage students receiving Federal student financial aid to participate in community service activities that will benefit the Nation and engender in the students a sense of social responsibility and commitment to the community.” Current law requires that colleges and universities place only 7 percent of Work-Study students in community service positions. Even so, many colleges and universities fail to meet this very minimal requirement. Moreover, many colleges and universities fail to inform students that they have the option to perform community service to meet their Work-Study requirements.

The Administration proposes to make changes in Learn and Serve programs at all education levels to increase the number of students participating in high quality service programs.

Summary of Proposals

To foster more quality service learning and opportunities for students in K-12 and higher education, the President proposes the following reforms:

Enhance quality by more effectively targeting Learn and Serve America grants.

Under current law, a majority of Learn and Serve America resources are divided into formula grants to the states. Each state education agency then divides its formula grant amount into smaller grants to local schools and school districts. This formula funding approach should be balanced with more targeted funds awarded to research-based, high quality service learning programs. In addition to state education agencies, the list of entities eligible for Learn and Serve America grants should be expanded to include a wider range of public agencies and nonprofit organizations. Moreover, Learn and Serve America funds should be made available for research and demonstration projects that highlight quality service learning programs.

Demand accountability for results.

Grantees must have specific program objectives and accountability requirements. The Chief Executive Officer of the Corporation for National and Community Service should be given statutory authority to: (1) work with grantees to establish performance measures for each grantee; (2) require corrective plans for those not meeting goals; and (3) reduce or terminate grants if corrections are not made.

Amend the Higher Education Act to require every college and university to increase, over several years, the percentage of Federal Work-Study funds devoted to community service to 50 percent.

In addition to increasing the participation requirement to allow more college and university students to engage in community service activities, colleges and universities should be encouraged to devote at least 5 percent of Federal Work-Study funds each year to homeland security activities (including public safety, public health, and emergency preparedness). Financial incentives, such as increased flexibility in using student financial aid administrative funds, should be provided for institutions that meet these goals.