

# Ask not what graduates can do for the nation

**Instead, ask how community leaders and the government can help them do it.**

*By Paul C. Light*

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New York - It's high school graduation time and the halls are ringing with John F. Kennedy's exhortation to "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

Public service has been prominent in the presidential campaign narratives, and should be a focus at graduations. But such rhetoric is not quite enough to launch this generation into a lifetime of service.

Just as young Americans have redefined social networking through Facebook, they have changed the basic meaning of public service. It no longer denotes a 30-year career in government, but a kaleidoscope of engagement that covers everything from voting to military service.

Young Americans sort through these new options based on the chance they'll make a difference on a specific cause, not with an innate sense of civic duty. They have set records in volunteering for their country and are highly aware of issues such as Darfur, global warming, and the latest international disaster.

Whether they participate in public service as occasional volunteers or as full-time employees, they want meaningful assignments, the chance to learn new skills, and the opportunity to help people.

Young Americans believe that public service is something they can do anywhere at any time. They seem to feel just as engaged in great causes by wearing cancer bracelets, shopping at Whole Foods, and buying clothes as part of Project Red, as they do in voting, writing letters to Congress, and giving a few dollars to a candidate.

Government jobs have little appeal as a path to service for students about to graduate. And government is its own worst enemy here. Young Americans rightly view the government hiring process as slow and confusing, their pay tied more to time on the job than performance, and the chance to make a difference limited by a persistent lack of resources. They also worry that they cannot make a difference in mind-numbing bureaucracies.

So how should commencement speakers approach their speeches given this?

For starters, they should be careful about invoking Kennedy in an era of \$4-a-gallon gasoline and stagflation. With the student loan crisis looming, why shouldn't young Americans wonder whether their country can do for them what it did for Bear Stearns and wealthy farmers? Young graduates have shown they are willing to sacrifice, but need help.

Speakers should promise instead to make it easier for young Americans to solve the big problems facing the world. Stop lecturing graduates about their responsibilities to society. They get it.

Instead, address the parents, teachers, and civic leaders. Help communities understand their responsibilities to young Americans, not vice versa.

Tell these leaders it's important to make time available – during work – to young Americans for volunteering. Tell them to restore civics to the curriculum. Even tell them to create new campaign finance incentives for

online fundraising. But most of all, tell them to support the needed expansion of government programs that do a good job, such as Americorps. Tell them to support the quadrupling Americorps and an increase in its tuition benefit.

Congress actually passed the prototype of a new tuition benefit last month when it created a new GI Bill of Rights. Under the \$52 billion program, three-year veterans can earn up to full tuition at any public university in their state.

Why not make a similar program available to Americorps members? Let them earn a year of full tuition in return for the year that they serve.

For a fraction of the cost of the new "Yellow Ribbon" GI bill, a larger Americorps would send a clear message that public service is not only conceivable, but doable. It would also help ease the student loan crisis without a heavy federal investment in new subsidies.

Moreover, new research strongly suggests that Americorps members are much more likely than their peers to increase their volunteering after they leave the program. And they are more likely to take public service jobs such as teaching. Why not tap into that?

Given the state of the economy, speakers might rephrase Kennedy as follows: "Ask what you can do for your nation, and we will ask what the nation can do about Darfur, global warming, health insurance, an affordable college education, and a long overdue expansion in Americorps." Now that's worthy of a standing ovation.

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