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Opinion: Does America Need a Public-Service Academy?

By Pablo Eisenberg

The notion of public service has swept the country. Young people everywhere are expressing a desire to serve other people and their country, and President Obama's strong support for volunteerism has prompted a wave of proposals to encourage Americans to commit their time to serving the public good.

Among the ideas gaining significant attention in Congress is a plan to create a U.S. Public Service Academy to develop a cadre of highly qualified civil servants and civic leaders.

The brainchild of two former Teach for America volunteers, Chris Myers Asch and Shawn Raymond, the academy would be a Congressionally chartered and federally subsidized four-year college patterned after the military academies and focused on public service and leadership. In exchange for a free education, graduates would be required to serve at least five years at a government agency.

There has been too little discussion about the academy to decide whether it is necessary and worth the expense.

Many other ways to promote public service are available, especially at a time when the nation is in a financial crisis. Besides, hundreds of colleges and universities already stress the importance of public service and leadership, so it is unclear why America needs a new specialized institution. The support and encouragement of public service deserve applause, but that does not make it smart to build a costly, military-style institution, susceptible to political influence and control and potentially elitist in nature.

Supporters of an academy say the United States has a critical shortage of competent civil servants and that, therefore, the nation must recruit and train Americans to fill this vacuum. They also assert that many college graduates, saddled with thousands of dollars worth of tuition loans, cannot afford to consider a public-service job, let alone a career in government or at nonprofit groups. A free university education with a focus on public service, in their view, could be the gateway to public-service careers.

But there is no dearth of interest in public service. The enormous

popularity of Teach for America and other volunteer programs reflect this desire on the part of young Americans to become involved in social change, participate in antipoverty projects, and improve social institutions. It is not surprising that government jobs lost their sheen during the past decade. The role of government was continually undermined and attacked by conservatives and members of the Bush administration. And young people were reminded by President Clinton that the “days of big government were over.”

Now all that has changed.

President Obama has declared that government is a crucial instrument in revitalizing and transforming our society. Much as in the days of President Johnson’s Great Society programs and the War on Poverty, students and other young people find exciting the possibilities that a government job—and indeed a career—holds for them. There will be a huge demand and rush for public-service jobs. In the face of such a development, the urgency of an academy seems to fade away.

Nor is the notion that young people cannot afford a career in government because of their large loans very convincing.

The real barrier to entry-level jobs in public service lies in the nonprofit world. In recent years, nonprofit salaries and benefits for young people have been low, making it difficult, if not at times impossible, for college graduates to accept nonprofit jobs. With the economic recession, moreover, the number of such jobs has decreased as charities have cut their budgets. By comparison, beginning federal-government salaries have been substantially higher and, were it not for the poor reputation of government in the Bush years, would have been much more attractive to graduates seeking public service.

The structure of the proposed academy presents another set of questions and concerns. The blueprint for the academy states that the institution would foster a campus esprit, culture, and pace of life resembling those of the military academies, complete with compulsory uniforms and class attendance, designed to build discipline, unity, and an ethic of service.

However, West Point, the Naval Academy, and other such institutions are training officers, or leaders, for a narrow line of activity and specialization: how to fight battles and win wars. That is not the case for public service, an immense landscape of government agencies, colleges, religious institutions, international organizations, and other nonprofit groups with their own distinctive needs, missions, objectives, operations, and styles. So

why pattern an academy after the military schools that are so different in purpose and process? And why believe that specific training in public service is the way to develop great public servants and civilian leaders?

The academy would be housed within the Department of Homeland Security. It is a curious place for an educational institution that wants to develop independent public servants. Why put it in a department associated with terrorism and national security? Why not the Department of Education? Or, better yet, why not make it independent?

The president, with the advice and consent of the Senate, would appoint the academy's 15-member board as well as its superintendent. Why should an academic institution have a board of trustees and a superintendent appointed by the president? How would it protect academic freedom?

The proposed admissions policies are even more alarming. Like the military academies, members of Congress would nominate most of the students who attend the U.S. Public Service Academy. The president would nominate 25. Why shouldn't the academy follow the admissions policies of universities and colleges? Why should they be part of a political process? Why shouldn't all students be able to apply directly for admission to the academy? The fact that the federal government would pay the full educational cost for students should not serve as an excuse for politics as usual or, even worse, political control.

The costs of the academy are also worrisome, especially given the state of the economy and competing priorities.

Supporters have estimated that the annual cost of operating the academy would be about \$205-million. Some experts say the expenditures would be much higher. Moreover, the cost of building a new campus could prove to be a gigantic expenditure.

Plenty of other ideas for promoting public service are probably more efficient. For example, it might be smarter to offer a free medical education to doctors and dentists who agree to serve at least seven years in parts of the country that face severe shortages of such medical professionals. Such a program would produce concrete results, not the ephemeral promise of developing public servants that might be done more effectively by other institutions.

Another approach would be to establish full scholarships at colleges and universities for students interested in public service. Hundreds, if not thousands, of such awards could be available to students on a competitive basis on the condition that the students

would be required to serve at least five years in public-service jobs, either in government or with nonprofit organizations. They could go to the colleges of their choice, as long as they agreed to take a certain number of courses focused on subjects related to public service.

Congress could also expand loan-forgiveness programs for students who have spent years in government or nonprofit employment. That approach would favor students from low- or moderate-income backgrounds. Yet another idea might be to provide direct grants to universities and colleges that establish programs stressing public service and leadership development. Two other concerns cloud the proposed creation of a public-service academy: how graduates will be allocated to employers and the danger of establishing an elite group of public servants. In recent years, both issues have stirred heated debate in France about its exclusive National School of Public Administration.

Critics say the French school has given the plum, prestigious jobs within the government bureaucracy to favored students, especially those who achieved the highest academic scores. Politics may have been a factor, too, according to press reports.

Would the proposed American academy have similar problems in distributing government jobs to its graduates? What placement criteria would the academy adopt?

The National School of Public Administration has also been accused of fostering elitism and arrogance among the ranks of public servants. Its alumni include a number of powerful and influential people in France. Would an American college be similarly affected by a cult of arrogance and elitism? There are aspects of the proposed curriculum that could foster such attitudes.

While the momentum for a public-service academy is building, the concept leaves too many questions unanswered. It is time for a serious public debate about the pros and cons of such an academy. People who support public service but know little about how best to entice more public servants should think twice before pushing Congress to buy this idea.

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