

College Students, Creative Nonviolence, and Social Enterprise: Community Service Changes with the Times

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Abstract

Numerous scholars have offered labels and characterizations of contemporary young adults and compared these characterizations to those of previous generations. In this article, the author draws on findings from a study of a student-run homeless shelter that has been in operation for the past 27 years. Through interviews with current students volunteering at the homeless shelter as well as former volunteers from the 1980s and 1990s, the author points to differences in the way contemporary and previous generations of the shelter's college-aged volunteers conceptualize public service.

In a 2009 article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled “The Millennial Muddle,” journalist Eric Hoover criticized attempts by various scholars to offer labels or characterizations of contemporary young adults. Hoover astutely pointed out that assigning labels to an entire generation of Americans can have the effect of “flattening out diversity” and expressed skepticism about the claims of some of the most notorious labelers: Neil Howe and William Strauss (2000) (*Millennials Rising*), Jean Twenge (2007) (*Generation Me*), Mark Bauerlein (2008) (*The Dumbest Generation*), etc. It must be with great caution, then, that one offers comparisons of different generations of college students.

The Higher Education Research Institute's Annual Freshman Survey offers useful data for such comparisons. For the past 44 years, the Annual Freshman Survey has been administered to more than 400,000 entering freshmen at nearly 700 colleges and universities across the United States. In a report on these data entitled, “The American Freshman: Forty Year Trends,” Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, and Korn (2007) considered changes in the demographics, attitudes, values, and aspirations of American college students between 1966 and 2006. In regard to student values, these researchers found that 73% of college freshmen in 2006 ranked “being very well off financially” as “essential or very important” whereas only 42% of college freshmen had expressed a similar perspective 40 years earlier in 1966. On a similar note, 69% of college freshmen in 2006 expressed their belief that a key reason to attend college is “to be able to make more money,” and 67% agreed that, “the chief benefit of a college education is that it increases one's earning power.” Less than 50% of college freshmen expressed similar beliefs 30 years earlier in 1976. In other words, over the past 30 years, college students have increasingly come to see the purpose of the college years as linked directly to future earnings.

In contrast to this increased focus on material gain, Pryor et al. (2007) reported that 67% of college freshmen surveyed in 2006 cited “helping others” as “essential or very important”—the highest that survey item has reached in 20 years. Moreover, more than 35% of these freshmen

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in 2006 cited the importance of “becoming a community leader”—the highest percentage in the 40-year history of the survey. Finally, 27% of the college freshmen surveyed in 2006 expressed their intention to participate in community service endeavors in the upcoming year, and another report issued in 2006 found that more than 3.3 million college-age Americans are now participating in community service opportunities annually (Dolte, Cramer, Dietz, & Grimm, 2006). In short, there would seem to be evidence that contemporary college freshmen are both more materialistic *and* more altruistic than their counterparts in previous decades.

These seemingly divergent findings make contemporary college students difficult to characterize. Howe and Strauss (2000) have asserted that members of the millennial generation are qualitatively different in their values, outlook, and aspirations than generations who came before them. Specifically, they characterize contemporary college students as “conventional” and “achieving” and have predicted that, “this generation is going to rebel by behaving not worse but better. Their life mission will not be to tear down old institutions that don’t work, but to build up new ones that do” (p. 41). In contrast, other scholars have interpreted the trends reported above in the annual survey of college freshmen as evidence that “changes among students happen gradually, not abruptly” and that “today’s students are not significantly busier, more confident, or more positive than they were in recent decades” (Hoover, 2009, p. 11). So the question remains up for debate: how do contemporary college students compare to their counterparts from previous decades in terms of their beliefs, values, aspirations, and worldview?

Over the past 2 years, I have had the opportunity to consider this question within a very particular context. I have been carrying out a qualitative research study and writing a book about the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter—a student-run homeless shelter in Harvard Square that has provided shelter, food, and support to homeless men and women in Cambridge, Massachusetts, seven nights a week all winter long for the past 27 years. The shelter—which operates out of the basement of the University-Lutheran Church—is entirely operated and managed by undergraduate volunteers from Harvard College. These students take turns staffing the shelter each night, preparing dinner and breakfast for the 30 homeless men and women staying in the shelter, keeping the shelter fully stocked with food and supplies, and cleaning up each morning after the shelter closes. These students also meet each week to make decisions about shelter policy, troubleshoot dilemmas that have sprung up over the course of the week, and divvy up additional tasks necessary to keep the shelter open and operating. It is truly impressive to see college students willing and able to take on such significant responsibility.

Over the course of this research project, I have conducted more than 45 interviews with Harvard students currently involved in the operation of the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter. In these interviews, I asked students about their motivation for volunteering at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter; what they expected to get out of the experience; their beliefs about the causes of homelessness; their beliefs about the impact of public service; and their future career aspirations. I also conducted interviews with Harvard alumni between 30 and 50 years old who had volunteered at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter during their own undergraduate days. I asked these alumni similar questions about their motivation for getting involved with the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter and how they believed their volunteer experience there had impacted their subsequent career trajectory. What I share below are some impressions that emerged from these two sets of interviews about how contemporary and previous generations of college students *conceive* of public service.

Social enterprise is the application of market-based principles toward a social purpose. One of the most notable characteristics of the current crop of Harvard students running the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter was the extent to which their commitment to public service was informed by a spirit of social enterprise. For example, one of the shelter’s student-leaders during the 2008–2009 academic year, Robert Vozar, explained that, “I think we can dramatically

improve how much we actually help homeless people by applying the same standard to our social policies that we expect from our drugs and [that] we expect from our projects in the developing world.”² By “same standard,” Vozar meant there should be “randomized evaluation of programs [in which] we randomly assign some people to the program, assign some people not into the program, and actually see” what is being accomplished. He expressed his intent, following college, to pursue a doctoral degree in economics, so that he could apply the analytic tools of an economist to improving social service programs.

Vozar was not alone in his focus on data and evaluation. During the 2008–2009 academic year, a group of the Harvard Square Shelter volunteers decided that the shelter did not have to limit itself to aiding the homeless men and women who came to the shelter seeking shelter, food, and resources. There were scores of other homeless men and women in Harvard Square who were *not* accessing the shelter’s resources, and these students decided to bring the shelter’s resources to them. They founded a group they called “Street Team” that went out into Harvard Square six nights a week from 9 to 10 pm distributing sandwiches and blankets, referring homeless men and women to the shelter, and offering a few minutes of company and conversation.

Interestingly, the students in charge of this quixotic endeavor kept meticulous records all winter long of the number of homeless individuals with whom they conversed (more than a hundred), food distributed (15 pounds of sandwiches), and referrals made to local homeless shelters (several dozen). Then, after the Harvard Square Shelter closed for the season, the students most involved with the Street Team began to draft a handbook for operating Street Team with the goal of making the program a sustainable one. As one student explained, recognizing that their time as college students would soon be coming to an end, they sought “to make sure the program is as easy to run as possible.” In short, they sought to systematize the operation of the Harvard Square Shelter’s Street Team.

A third example of the entrepreneurial spirit of the current crop of Harvard students operating the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter was evident in their response to the “Housing First” movement. The “Housing First” movement calls for placing homeless men and women into permanent housing and then providing supports that allow them to live independently. The basic philosophy behind the movement is that it is both more humane and cost-effective to place the homeless into private housing units than to let them stay out on the street or even in homeless shelters (Gladwell, 2006). As the executive director of the Massachusetts Housing & Shelter Alliance, Joseph Finn, explained, “There’s a revolution that’s going on, and I think that the revolution is around the delivery of services in our society today. And there’s a focus on more of a residential-based, community based approach.”

Although it is yet to be seen whether “Housing First” will become the dominant approach to combating homelessness, the college students running the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter during the 2008–2009 season had no intention of being left out of the movement. As Harvard Square Shelter volunteer (and Harvard junior) Nathan Small explained, “I think that the direction homeless policy is taking is really away from emergency shelters and towards Housing First, or it’s working with people towards sustainable long term solutions.” Towards this end, Small convened a working group to explore the possibility of raising funds to buy a piece of property and then transform that property into transitional housing for homeless men and women

² All of the students, former students, homeless men and women, and formerly homeless men and women referenced in this article are referred to by pseudonyms. The one exception is Stewart Guernsey, the founder of the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter, because his name has already been widely reported in newspaper accounts about the shelter.

currently staying at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter. As another student involved with the Harvard Square Shelter explained:

They are doing a lot of research now into the potential availability of such housing, how it might work, where it might be. Their idea is to compile this report at the end of the year that they will then take action on in the fall. That we present to people giving money. They haven't figured it out; they are just doing research now.

Certainly the endeavor these Harvard students were considering is a formidable one, and none expressed certainty that all of their planning and researching would actually come to fruition. However, as Harvard junior Nathan Small explained, "Maybe running a program like that just isn't feasible for us as an organization, but I won't believe that until it's been proven to me." This entrepreneurial bent—along with the convening of a working group and carrying out of "market" research—serves as a clear example of the spirit of social enterprise shaping the vision of these 21st century Harvard Square Shelter volunteers of what public service and social action look like.

Interviews with Harvard alumni who volunteered at the Harvard Square Shelter in the 1980s and early 1990s suggested that these young adults had been motivated by a very different sort of spirit. Dr Fredric Reisz was the pastor of the University-Lutheran Church when the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter was founded in 1983 and worked closely with the Harvard students operating the shelter during its first 10 years of operation. When he compares contemporary college students with the Harvard students involved with the shelter 25 years ago, Reisz does believe there to be some differences between the two groups. Speaking of those Harvard students volunteering at the Harvard Square Shelter in the 1980s, Reisz explained, "There was in the air among students a different kind of feeling of commitment to social kinds of things. Students have that these days, but it's different. Then, it was more kind of nitty-gritty, anti-establishment."

One example of the shelter's antiestablishment roots was the decision to open the shelter in the first place despite lacking the appropriate permits from the City of Cambridge. According to Stewart Guernsey—one of the Harvard students who founded the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter—when he and other students approached Cambridge officials in 1982 about opening a shelter in the basement of the University-Lutheran Church, "Their comments were, 'Oh, no, no. You can't do it for this reason. You can't do it for that reason.' There were 93 ordinances and 47 reasons that we couldn't do it." However, with the support of the congregation of the University-Lutheran Church, the students decided to open the shelter anyway. Guernsey characterized this decision as a legitimate act of "civil disobedience." As he explained:

The approach I took was here is a dire emergent problem that's got to be addressed today. I don't have time to set up a corporation, to get approval from the city of Cambridge, to get actual new beds and mattresses because people are freezing now.

In short, there was little that could be characterized as systematic about the opening of the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter.

Nonetheless, the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter opened for business in February 1983 with no permit from the city of Cambridge, 25 second-hand mattresses scrounged up from wherever they could be found, and a commitment to creating an egalitarian community between Harvard students and the homeless in the basement of the University-Lutheran Church. Dennis McGonagle, who volunteered at the Harvard Square Shelter as an undergraduate in the late-1980s, recalled: "We were essentially doing Catholic Worker kinds of stuff. It was low-budget; we were building relationships; all that kind of thing. We weren't getting paid." By "Catholic

worker kinds of stuff,” McGonagle was referring to the Catholic Worker movement exemplified by Dorothy Day, which aimed to provide support to society’s most marginalized citizens by prioritizing human dignity and solidarity. A number of the Harvard alumni who volunteered at the Harvard Square Shelter in the late 1980s characterized the shelter as seeking to exemplify these principles.

Ward Welburn, who volunteered at the Harvard Square Shelter as an undergraduate in the late 1980s, emphasized the shelter’s egalitarian (if chaotic) atmosphere. As an example of this atmosphere, Welburn offered the following description of the staircase leading down into the shelter:

It was always filled with a million people, and they would be sitting on every step all the way up and down. And everything would be wet and smelly, and it was a funny combination of very direct, clear parameters, and yet this incredible freedom for people to be their own individual, funky selves in that environment More than any shelter that I’ve ever been part, it was charcoal drawings in the corner, it was having a debate about Wittgenstein with a graduate student. These people were talking about films and so forth. And there were so many people, that I would climb the stairs vertically, so I’d climb through the railings, with my feet slipping, and I’d think “God, I can’t believe we’re doing this,” and be juggling plates of food to feed people who couldn’t stay but had to move on.

In nearly identical language, Lucy Draper—a formerly homeless woman who ate dinner at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter in the late 1980s—described the respect for human dignity she encountered there:

People were wandering in and out. Students were hanging out with us on the stairs. People were going downstairs. They were letting people take showers. It was very casual. People that didn’t use shelters used the Harvard Square Shelter because it was a place everyone was treated with respect.

Perhaps not surprisingly, all of these individuals expressed nostalgia for the Harvard Square Shelter of the 1980s. Upon learning that the shelter had hired a professional security guard in the late 1990s, Professor Dennis McGonagle noted that, “Having a paid security guard would be pretty anathema to Catholic workers.” Ward Welburn acknowledged that the 21st century version of the Harvard Square Shelter was probably safer, cleaner, and better run, “but there are probably some things that have disappeared.” In reference to several of the shelter’s earliest volunteers, Welburn expressed his confidence “that the people who came before me . . . would find the current version far too watered down and easygoing.” Lucy Draper, still effusive in her praise for the Harvard Square Shelter, lamented the existence of greater barriers now between students and the homeless. She speculated that the security guard “is a barrier that you have to cross that makes it feel a little more like a regular shelter.” She also regretted policies that—for health code reasons—now prohibited homeless men and women from helping to prepare the shelter’s meals or even entering the shelter’s kitchen. Finally, Stewart Guernsey—the shelter’s co-founder—noted that the contemporary version of the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter “is a much more establishment approach And while I certainly see the advantages of the social entrepreneurial approach, I also see the advantages of the ‘jumping into the water’ approach and doing what you can where you can.”

On the other hand, praise for the current incarnation of the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter comes from as lofty a vantage point as former homeless czar Philip Mangano, who

served as executive director of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness from 2002 to 2009. According to Mangano:

If good intentions, well meaning programs, and humanitarian gestures could end homelessness, it would have been history decades ago, with all the good intentions we have in Cambridge, Boston, and around our country. But they never correlated with a reduction, never mind ending homelessness. So if they don't work, we can continue to maintain them and be demoralized that there's nothing we can do, or we can think, well if those don't work, what does work? And of course that's what's driven us to the notion of cost studies and reframing the issue away from the social service frame to a business and economic frame.

In these words, one can see that Mangano approaches the issue of homelessness through an unabashedly entrepreneurial lens, and he credits the college students operating the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter with having "evolved from simply a social service frame to more of a solution-oriented frame." According to Mangano, "They may not use the nomenclature of a business approach, but nonetheless, when you treat a person as a customer, you ask them what they want, then you go create that product, that's the basics of American business." Mangano added that many long-term social service workers become so entrenched in a particular way of thinking that they grow resistant to innovation whereas the young adults operating the Harvard Square Shelter have no qualms about "putting into place the innovative ideas" they believe can provide support to the homeless men and women they are serving.

Certainly the differences between the Harvard Square Shelter volunteers circa 1988 and circa 2008 should not be overstated. Recall Hoover's (2009) warning that characterizations can have the effect of "flattening out diversity," and there is no question that there were Harvard Square Shelter volunteers in the 1980s with an entrepreneurial spirit just as there are shelter volunteers today motivated by the principles of creative nonviolence, human dignity, and solidarity. For example, one of the current shelter volunteers described her commitment to volunteering at the Harvard Square Shelter as motivated by a high school teacher who billed himself as "the last socialist in North Dakota." Another current volunteer described the influence of a high school teacher who had introduced her to the community organizing principles of 1960s icon, Saul Alinsky. Clearly, the shelter volunteers of yesterday and today are not entirely separate species. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that, on average, there seem to be clear differences in these two groups' conception of and approach to public service. Whether these differences emerge cyclically as Howe and Strauss (2000) contend or in a more linear fashion has yet to be proven.

Having depicted the way in which the Harvard Square Shelter volunteers in the first decade of the 21st century approach public service through an entrepreneurial lens, I will be interested to see whether this approach to public service continues in the decade ahead. It would seem that public service *as social enterprise* rose to prominence, in large part, as a result of the American economic boom of the 1990s. Between the seemingly endless rise of the stock market and the gold rush-like atmosphere of the technology sector, it is not surprising that social activists at the conclusion of the 20th century and start of the 21st century sought to tap into the credibility and optimism associated with entrepreneurship.

However, the opening decade of the 21st century has included a series of corporate scandals—for example, Enron, WorldCom, Arthur Anderson, Bernard Madoff Securities—that have shaken Americans' confidence in business leaders and corporate America (VanSandt, 2005). Opinion polls have found that the American public now holds corporate CEOs in lower esteem than politicians and believe that the integrity of corporate leaders has dropped over the past

20 years (Hellweg, 2002; Merritt, 2002). In such a climate, it seems entirely possible that, in the years ahead, we will begin to see the public service community tack away from the language of enterprise and entrepreneurship. It will be fascinating to see, then, how Harvard Square Shelter volunteers in future years conceptualize and articulate the motivation driving their volunteer work at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter.

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