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Journal of Adolescent Research 2011 26: 414
DOI: 10.1177/0743558410396860

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://jar.sagepub.com/content/26/3/414
The transition to adulthood, typically 18-to-25 years of age, poses challenges for young people, such as leaving home for the first time to go to college, entering the job market, negotiating new personal and professional relationships, and dealing with economic stresses. This transition, referred to as the transition to adulthood or as emerging adulthood, is also potentially unique in providing formative opportunities since young people have fewer expectations imposed by society and have more opportunities to explore their own identity and the world around them (Arnett, 2000).

These opportunities are coupled with a high rate of civic participation among those in this age range. Thus one could imagine that the energy within this cohort could be leveraged to effect considerable community and societal change. In fact, there are several initiatives across the country that are seeking to do just that. **Heads Up, DC**, recruits college students to provide tutoring and mentoring to students in the highest risk schools in that urban center. **LIFT** engages college volunteers in five major cities to provide case management services to residents in the communities surrounding universities; connecting residents with the social services that they need for economic and psychological stability. **City Year**, the granddaddy of efforts to engage young people in addressing social problems, places this energetic cohort into some of the most underserved schools in the nation to provide mentoring, tutoring, and other important educational and life supports. All of these organizations are unique in that the young people are in leadership roles and help to guide the organizations’ strategy and practice. In addition, explicit within these organizations’ visions is that the young people are impacted by the experiences in the organization as much as the people who they are serving.

In his book, **Shelter**, Scott Seider suggests there is an opportunity to leverage the enthusiasm of college students to address the issues of today and to...
develop in these students the attitudes and competencies that they will take with them as they develop into the future leaders of the country. He takes an in-depth look into an organization providing unique developmental opportunities for young adults to impact their community; the first-(and only)-in-the-nation student-run homeless shelter, just outside the ivy-covered walls of Harvard University. As Seider describes, the heightened optimism, adventure-seeking, and passion during the transition to adulthood can be directed toward society’s most vexing problems. Homelessness would fall into this “vexed” category. With tens of thousands of homeless on the streets or in temporary housing situations on any given night and no near-term end in sight, finding ways to best support the homeless becomes paramount to the well-being of the homeless. The students working at the shelter are given the opportunity (and responsibility) to refine and sustain a psychosocially nurturing temporary shelter, directly address the needs of the homeless who enter the shelter, and to consider additional ways that they can impact the lives of the homeless in Harvard Square and possibly the homeless throughout the country. According to scholars such James Youniss (e.g., Yates & Youniss, 1998), such experiences in the service of others encourage civic identity development of the individual while impacting the lives of those around them.

To understand the individual and societal impacts of the shelter, Seider conducted semistructured interviews with a set of current students working at the shelter, alumni who previously worked at the shelter, and homeless who have called the shelter their temporary home. The themes that are derived from the interview data form the substance of the book. The narrative unfolds in two compelling sections. The first half of the book focuses on the impact that the students have on the homeless community that surrounds Harvard University and the second focuses on the impacts that these experiences have on the students. The shelter itself is run by committee by all the shelter workers. There is much leeway given, which provides opportunities for creative solutions.

By bringing these two pieces together, Seider makes an argument for creating student-run homeless shelters in other university communities throughout the country. He provides a window into the students’ compassion for the homeless who come to the shelter and passion for social justice, describing the personal relationships that the students build with the clients (e.g., intensely helping a young homeless man apply to and be accepted into a prestigious college) and the broader actions that the students take while in school (e.g., creating a street outreach team to address the nutritional needs of the homeless who do not necessarily enter the shelter) or the community or
policy actions in which they engage after they graduate. Through this window, the reader gains an appreciation for how formative this experience is, the high level of quality support that the students give to the homeless and, importantly, the support and nurturing that the homeless provide to the students.

There are also a host of potential downfalls to this model about which Seider is thoughtful, but about which he could expand and offer some solutions. For instance, in the chapter, “Outside the Box,” Seider emphasizes the benefit of the students, who are in the midst of trying on different identities, being more nimble in their decision making as compared to a traditional homeless shelter. Such nimbleness is not always a good thing, especially when, as Seider alludes, the students are inexperienced in dealing with the serious problems that the homeless face and typically are naïve about how the “world works.” Yes, there is passion and energy—and hope and optimism—among the students running the shelter, but these factors can also lead to over-confidence in believing that they are making the correct decision. Indeed, real people are being impacted by any and all decisions that the students make.

Other programs that enlist the energy, passion, and optimism of college students (LIFT, Heads UP) provide important oversight from more seasoned professionals who can offer wise recommendations as well as provide some soft parameters within which the students can work. This guidance, which could be considered scaffolding of learning (Vygotsky, 1978), results in an environment that supports the social, civic, and professional development of the students. The oversight also offers protection to the clients coming through their organizations’ doors. The shelter has developed reflection sessions during which the student workers can delve more deeply into their work at the shelter, the impact of their work on the clients, and the impact of the work on their own development. However, Seider reports that few students take advantage of this opportunity.

It would also be interesting to understand the counterfactuals to the positive experiences that serve as proof points to Seider’s thesis that the Harvard Shelter is inherently beneficial to the students and the homeless. Much emphasis in the book is placed on the college students being positioned to be listeners because of the generational divide that is typically seen at the shelter (the homeless typically being much older than the students), but there is then only a brief mention that not all of the homeless at the shelter appreciated this dynamic. This idea that the students are uniquely adept, based on their development, at addressing the needs of the homeless leads to a need for more evidence that the “typical professional” and the “typical experience” at other homeless shelters is typically negative. Seider is clear that he is not out to belittle or dismiss
the passionate, hard work put in by “typical” workers, but he also makes many statements about comparisons (e.g., that emerging adulthood makes these college students “uniquely suited to play the roles of listener and confidante.”). There are undoubtedly those who “get it” and are incredibly effective running and staffing homeless centers throughout the country. There are also examples of organizations in all sectors providing an array of services that have democratic and fast-acting processes.

A counterfactual to the student benefit of working at the shelter would also be helpful to understand whether the picture being painted is one of the super-engaged among those who are engaged. For example, in the chapter, “Sheltered From the Ivory Tower,” Leo Scala one of the college students states,

I was one of the very few shelter directors that didn’t miss a single one of my shifts because of my thesis . . . I was like, I spend all writing my thesis, this is my time to not think about it. And even other stressful stuff that’s happened with family stuff, relationship stuff, getting in there is a good way to have it all off your back (pp. 148-149).

This sounds like a very unique perspective. I wonder if the majority of students who walked through the shelter doors had similar experiences or whether there is a weeding out process among the shelter workers, resulting in high dropout rates. A weeding out process would not necessarily be bad. In fact, I would argue that having the most engaged and passionate students for whom the shelter’s experience is a good match would result in the most attentive and effective staff. The question of “whom” also has implications for the overarching theoretical frame of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Are the experiences that Seider examines generalizable to young people in their late teens and through their 20s, as might be assumed based on Seider’s emphasis on Erikson’s identity theory and Arnett’s concept of emerging adulthood, or are the experiences restricted to college-attending youth? For example, would a 20-year-old mechanic living on his own, possibly married, have the same level of optimism and freedom of choice that characterizes emerging adulthood? He very well might, but directly addressing noncollege or even nonelite college populations would be helpful for understanding who would be most likely to be impacted by these high intensity service experiences.

The most engaged might have had earlier experiences, which would have led them to their experience at the shelter. Only six of the student (or alum) interviewees mentioned previous service experiences, but there is the possibility that all, or at least a high percentage of the interviewees (and shelter workers more
globally) had been highly engaged but that they did not consider their work in such terms; that is, that they did not consider their previous experiences to be related to “service,” instead considering previous experiences to just be something that they do and not something done in service. McAdam (1986), in his research on Freedom Summer participants, found that participants were more likely to have been highly engaged in civic activities going into the summer than those who withdrew from participation. The long-term benefit to intense service, which Seider describes, especially high-risk activism (McAdam, 1986) should not be assumed. There is evidence that such engagement can lead to negative psychological, social, and economic outcomes (McAdam, 1989), whether because there is a greater appreciation for the difficulties in addressing social problems or because of the stress brought on by the work.

With appropriate social supports and guidance, though, failures and other potentially negative experiences can be turned into formative experiences that lead to positive adjustment and strengthened civic identities. Seider provides a compelling picture of the transformation that occurs when the “right” person is matched with this “right” experience of working at the shelter, consistent with a developmental systems theory perspective of the development of civic engagement (Zaff, Hart, Flanagan, Youniss & Levine, 2010). They become the doctors, legislators, community organizers, and other leaders who continue to push for health and well-being of all Americans. Considering that there are 12.2 million young people enrolled in college in America (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009), imagine the societal impact if even 1% (122,000) of the students were matched with a homeless shelter or other community setting that resulted in a transformative experience. Shelter provides a compelling argument, in spite of potential drawbacks, for providing more opportunities on and off campuses throughout the country.

References


**Bio**

Jonathan F. Zaff, PhD, is Vice President for Research & Policy Development at America’s Promise Alliance and a Research Associate Professor in the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development at Tufts University. His research focuses on the ways that the different contexts of youths’ lives come together to promote positive youth development, with a particular interest in the development of civic engagement.