Forcing Students to Give Service Is not Justified

To the editor:

“Community Service Order Should Expand” (Aug. 24, 2004) provides two inadequate justifications for requiring all high school students to provide 40 hours of community service as a condition of graduation.

The first justification is that “shrinking revenue streams” make the state “unable to support not-for-profit groups at previous levels.” In other words, the state government lacks the political will to raise taxes to what some apparently think are needed levels, presumably because of fear of voters. The suggested response is to conscript the labor of a nonvoting subgroup of the population. However, if the state wants to subsidize these nonprofit groups, it should do so out of general revenues rather than imposing the burden on a subgroup of the population simply because it has the power to do so.

The second justification is that the service requirement will, in Governor Granholm’s words, result in “young people who embrace service to others as a way of life.” It’s an empirical question whether forcing people to do something now will make them more likely to do it voluntarily later, but it seems doubtful. The reasoning amounts to “let’s tax the heck out of them now so that they will voluntarily give lots of money to charity later.” Don’t hold your breath.

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