



## **A "Civil" Education for the 21st Century: Preparing Students for a Three-Sector Society**

Jeremy Rifkin  
President,  
The Foundation  
on Economic Trends  
Washington, D.C.

**T**he shift from the Industrial Age to the Information Age is transforming our civilization. Preparing the next generation for the twenty-first century and a radically different world requires a rethinking of the very purpose of American education.

Corporate downsizing, the increasing automation of the manufacturing and service sector, the shift from mass to elite workforces, growing job insecurity, the widening gap between rich and poor, an aging population, and the globalization of the economy are creating a host of new uncertainties and challenges for millions of Americans as well as American businesses. At the same time, government, at every level, is being fundamentally transformed. The "welfare state" is being pared down and entitlement programs are shrinking. The social net is being streamlined and overhauled and government subsidies of various kinds are being reduced or eliminated.

The new economic and political realities require us to rethink the mission of the Civil Society in the years ahead. The Third Sector will likely play a far more expansive role as an arena for job creation and social-service provider in the coming century. The civic sector is also likely to become a more organized social force in every community, working with, and on occasion pressuring the market and government sectors to meet the needs of workers, families, and neighborhoods. Thinking of society as creating three types of capital — market capital, public capital, and social capital — opens up new possibilities for reconceptualizing the social contract and the kind of education we give our young people.

### **The Wellspring of the American Spirit**

For most of the current century American education has focused on preparing students for the marketplace and the responsibilities of

citizenship. Broadening the mission of American education to include a renewed commitment to the civic life of the country now needs to be given equal priority if we are to meet the growing challenges of the coming century.

While historians are quick to credit the market economy and democratic form of government with America's greatness, the Civil Society has played an equally significant role in defining the American way of life. For more than 200 years, the Third Sector has shaped the American experience, reaching into virtually every corner of American life, helping transform a frontier culture into a highly advanced modern society. The nation's first schools and colleges, its hospitals, social-service organizations, fraternal orders, women's clubs, youth organizations, civil-rights groups, social-justice organizations, conservation and environmental-protection groups, animal-welfare organizations, theaters, orchestras, art galleries, libraries, museums, civic associations, community-development organizations, neighborhood advisory councils, volunteer fire departments, and civilian security patrols are all creatures of the Third Sector.

Today, civic organizations are serving millions of Americans in every neighborhood and community of the country. Their reach and scope often eclipse both the private and public sector, touching and affecting the lives of every American, sometimes more profoundly than the forces of the marketplace or the agencies and bureaucracies of government.

There are currently more than 1,400,000 non-profit organizations in the United States whose primary goal is to create social capital. Social capital is based on the notion of giving freely of one's time, energy, talent, and skills to help others and advance the interests of the larger community. By doing so, each individual's own interest is optimized in the process. *Community* activity is substantially different from *market* activity, in which exchanges between people are always commercial in nature and based on the supposition that the well-being of the rest of society is best secured by each individual pursuing his or her own material self-interest.

Community service stems from a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all of life. It is, first and foremost, a social exchange, although often with economic consequences to both the beneficiary and the benefactor.

While the business sector makes up 80 percent of the economic activity in the United States, and the government sector accounts for an additional 14 percent of the gross national product, the civil sector currently contributes more than 6 percent to the economy and is responsible for 10 percent of the total national employment. More people are employed in Third Sector organizations than work in either the construction, electronics, transportation, or textile and apparel industries.

The assets of the Third Sector now equal nearly half the assets of the federal government. A study conducted in the 1980s estimated that the expenditure of America's voluntary organizations exceeded the gross national product of all but seven nations. Although the

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civil sector is half the size of government in total employment and half its size in total earnings, it has been growing twice as fast as both the government and private sectors.

### Thinking of Society as a Three-Legged Stool

Despite the fact that the Civil Society plays an essential role in the life of the country and boasts economic clout that exceeds the GNP of most nations of the world, it is often ignored by policy makers who prefer to view America as a polar spectrum, running from the marketplace on one side to the government on the other. It is more accurate, however, to think of the society as a three-legged stool made up of the market sector, government sector, and civil sector. The first leg creates market capital, the second leg creates public capital, and the third leg creates social capital. Of the three legs, the oldest, but least acknowledged, is the Third Sector. The civil sector has traditionally played a critical mediating role between the formal economy and the government, taking on tasks and performing services that the other two sectors are unwilling or incapable of handling and often acting as an advocate on behalf of specific groups and constituencies whose interests are being ignored by the forces of the marketplace or compromised in the councils of government.

The Third Sector is the bonding force, the social glue that unites the diverse interests of the American people into a cohesive social identity. If there is a single defining characteristic that sums up the unique qualities of being an American, it would be our capacity to join together in civic associations to serve one another. Yet strangely enough, this central aspect of the American character and experience is rarely examined in the classroom and in the textbooks used in our nation's schools and colleges. Instead, our children are taught about the virtues of the marketplace and the checks and balances built into our representative form of government. The Third Sector, if it is mentioned at all, is usually glossed over as a footnote to the American experience, despite its critical role in forging the American way of life. The problem lies, to a great extent, with the way we have been taught to think of the American experience.

For most of this century, finding the proper balance between the market and government dominated public discussion. In the coming century, finding a balance between market, government, and Third Sector forces will become paramount. Elevating the profile of the Third Sector and making it an equal player with the market and government sectors becomes all the more important now, in the wake of the tumultuous economic and political changes sweeping the country.

### Preparing the Next Generation for the Civil Society

A quiet revolution, reflecting the new interest in the Third Sector, has been spreading through the nation's schools and colleges over the past ten years and is continuing to gain momentum. It's called

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service learning and it represents a potential paradigm shift in the philosophy of American education. States, localities, and individual school systems are introducing community service in neighborhood non-profit organizations as a requirement in curriculum.

Teaching children the value of service and the importance of creating social capital in their own communities is being viewed as a learning tool to prepare the next generation for its responsibilities to the Civil Society.

At a time when teachers, parents, and communities are becoming more concerned about the growing sense of alienation, detachment, and aimlessness of the nation's young people, service learning is an important development. By giving young people an opportunity to learn and serve in the community, schools are providing a much-needed alternative frame of reference for a generation increasingly immersed in the simulated worlds of the new telecommunications revolution.

It's no secret that television, computers, and now cyberspace are becoming an ever-more-pervasive force in the lives of our young people. The new Information Age media technologies offer an array of innovative teaching tools and learning environments for American students. Still, some critics warn that electronic mass media has transcended its traditional role as a source of education and entertainment and now serves as a primary value-creating institution, often exercising greater influence over children than parents and teachers. Many educators are also becoming alarmed over the narrow commercial values extolled by the new media and worry that children growing up in front of the TV set and computer screen are at risk of being exposed at a decreasing rate to the kind of authentic real-world experiences that are such a necessary part of normal socialization and child development. Service learning is an antidote to the increasingly isolated world of simulation and virtual reality children experience in the classroom and at home in front of the television and at their computer work station.

Service learning engenders a sense of personal responsibility and accountability, fosters self esteem and leadership, and most of all, allows the feeling of empathy to grow and flourish. Anecdotal evidence suggests that student involvement in service learning reduces the incidence of depression, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, and violent crime. This isn't surprising. Service learning can give a youngster a sense of place, and belonging, as well as add meaning to his or her life — all of which reverberates back into the classroom, creating a more responsive and motivated student.

Until recently, the service-learning experiment has been viewed as a peripheral part of the educational process. Now, however, a growing number of educators are suggesting that it be incorporated into the heart of the school experience and be integrated more directly into the curriculum itself. Weaving the rich 200-year historical legacy and values of the Third Sector into every aspect of curriculum provides a context and framework for children to understand the importance of service learning in the community and the

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central role that social capital plays in the life of the country. Learning about the heroes and heroines and the many organizations, movements and causes that have helped forge America's Civil Society offers historical role models for children to emulate and a positive vision to help guide their personal journeys in life.

At the dawn of the Information Age, we face the very real challenge of redirecting the course of American education so our young people will be ready to wrestle with both the demands of the new global economy and the austere new realities facing government. We need to bear in mind that the strength of the market and the effectiveness of our democratic form of government have always depended, in the final analysis, on the vitality of America's civil sector. It is the wellspring of our spirit as a people. Shifting the social paradigm from a two-sector to a three-sector focus and strengthening the role of the Civil Society — making it once again the center of American life — is essential if we are to renew our social covenant in the new century. Preparing the next generation for a life-long commitment to the Civil Society is, perhaps, the single-most important challenge facing educators and the American K-12 and collegiate systems as we make the transition into a new era and a new economic epoch in history.

### About the author

Mr. Jeremy Rifkin is the author of 13 books on the impact of technological changes on the economy, the workforce, society, and the environment. His books have been translated into 15 languages and are used in hundreds of colleges and graduate schools around the world. Rifkin has lectured and been a resident scholar at more than 300 universities in some 10 countries in the past 25 years. His most recent book, *The End of Work*, published in January of 1995, is the result of a three-year study of the changing conditions and nature of work in the Information Age.

Rifkin holds a degree in economics from the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce of the University of Pennsylvania, and a degree in international affairs from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He speaks frequently before business leadership forums and is a guest lecturer throughout the year at the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce Senior Executive Training Program (The Aresty Institute of Executive Education).

In the mid 1970s, Rifkin's books *Common Sense II* and *Own Your Own Job* were the first to popularize the idea of worker-owned and managed companies. In the late 1970s, Rifkin co-authored *The North Will Rise Again: Pensions, Politics and Power in the 1980s*. In the 1980s, Rifkin wrote *Entropy*, the international bestseller that brought together environmental and economic theory for the first time.

Rifkin has been influential in shaping public policy in the United States and around the world. He has testified before numerous congressional committees and has had consistent success in litigation against the government to ensure responsible government policies on a variety of environmental and technology issues. His unique perspective and social commentary have made him a frequent guest on numerous television programs. He has been featured in many of the nation's most prominent news weeklies.

Rifkin is the founder and president of the Foundation on Economic Trends in Washington, D.C.