

A Campus View: Civic Engagement and the Higher Education Community

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In recent years, there have been a variety of efforts to define, develop, and implement civic engagement programs in institutions of higher education. As happens with most changes in curriculum and new programs, results are often mixed or still unknown. Most programs are in their infancy, and it is far too soon to know if they will have their desired outcome of strengthening individual student civic engagement and thus reinforcing American democracy. What follows is a brief discussion of civic engagement, some thoughts on current efforts to broaden it, and a series of suggestions regarding what we need to know in the future.

Although the precise intellectual forebears of the new emphasis on civic education can be debated, there is a long tradition of concern for polity and civil society on the part of higher education and its supporters. Whether it is John Dewey's ideas about experience reinforcing classroom education or John F. Kennedy's call for service to country, a persistent theme has been the need to increase student participation and involvement with their political and governmental system. The assumption, questioned by some, is that such participation develops a better citizen, one more likely to be engaged and involved in the future. This increased engagement, according to proponents, will lead to better public policy and greater allegiance to democratic norms. Thus both the individual and society are transformed in the process.

The difficulty in this assumption is figuring out how engagement while enrolled in the academy leads to the desired results. Is civic engagement best taught in specific courses on ethics and individual responsibility, or as part of a broad curriculum where each course addresses the topic and develops the salient

points as it relates to, say, European or American history or literature or finance? Or is civic engagement more likely to be achieved by supplementing the in-class experience with the opportunity for community service or internships that give the student the real-world experience thought to be required for a thorough understanding of civic engagement and what it means?

Another view is that neither of these first two questions really takes into account the importance of unstructured experiences and thus comes up short. Only when the classroom and out-of-classroom experiences are integrated into individual life experience (actually working in a campaign or a social advocacy movement, or a student-run organization with a broad-ranging social program) is a significant lifelong commitment to civic engagement likely.

Another way to consider civic engagement is to ask what the desired outcome is.¹ Is it a citizen who has a better understanding of her or his world and thus is better able to be involved knowledgeably when such involvement is desired? Or is it a citizen who, because of various experiences and in-class education, is better able to understand, analyze, and influence public policy decisions when he or she chooses to but is not required to be active on all issues or on all levels at all times? Or is it increased political and social awareness that would then lead to a life entwined with advocacy and engagement in every aspect of one's life, from the purely social to the job site, to the family, and by extension to society itself?

Models

The vast majority of contemporary efforts to develop and increase civic engagement have centered on

the first two emphases of the preceding discussion. That is to say, most believe formal coursework or experiential education produces a more civically engaged individual who, when he or she decides to become involved with political or social decision making in the future, will be more likely to become engaged and better equipped to be successful.²

Perhaps the organization Campus Compact best epitomizes the belief that as one participates in service learning (working for an appropriate agency or other institution) one gains a better understanding of what it takes to be successful in influencing policy decisions as well as completely understanding them. Campus Compact programs have clearly integrated academic and experiential roles. Nearing its twentieth anniversary, Campus Compact has been an outstanding and very successful model for campuses interested in broadening their civic engagement to promote greater involvement for their students.

As discussed elsewhere in this issue of the *National Civic Review*, there are other organized, nationally funded programs that have stressed the importance of civic engagement. The impact of these programs and their success varies from campus to campus, but they have been important sources of funding for civic engagement.

For many campuses, there has not been any national organizational involvement in the civic engagement movement. Instead, the emphasis has been on nurturing a deeper relationship with one or two organizations in their community. It might be the local schools or a community center, but the emphasis is on student volunteerism as a way of improving the social conditions within the surrounding community and broadening the student's perceptions and understanding of society. Volunteerism and community service programs are important on many campuses.

In the past few years another emphasis has been developed through the auspices of a national pro-

gram known as Project Pericles, which stresses a basic commitment to civic engagement on the part of the institution's board of trustees as well as administrative and faculty leadership. Individual student engagement is not sufficient; it is imperative that the institution be engaged as a way of buttressing and supporting its civic engagement efforts. With the Periclean approach, a student has broader access to activities, discussions, and civic projects across the campus and within the curriculum, and in the broader community. It is much more a central mission approach.

Given the diverse approaches to the goal of increasing civic engagement, which common beliefs and outcomes are expected regardless of the intellectual or organizing approach used? A brief discussion of these beliefs and outcomes is helpful in understanding why it is so difficult to measure whether desired outcomes are happening.

Given the diverse approaches to the goal of increasing civic engagement, which common beliefs and outcomes are expected regardless of the intellectual or organizing approach used?

First, there is an underlying assumption that democratic society is improved by increasing the number of individuals who are engaged in the decision-making and public policy debates within the society. This perspective implies the present processes are too closed and do not have the extensive participation they should. Second, the college or university student needs to have a basic understanding of the significance of student participation. Third, as students learn about society and actually participate in it, they are more likely to want to stay involved and engaged in later life. Finally, this increased engagement then leads to better public policy discussion and subsequent policy decisions reinforcing civic engagement and strengthening the very fabric of democracy.

To achieve these outcomes, it is important for the curriculum, from first year to final year, to have a clear emphasis on civic engagement, and for the institution's expectation (in some cases, requirement) to be that students be engaged. The form of this engagement can vary a great deal, but the emphasis is on instilling a sense of community values in the students that will be with them for the rest of their life. As part of this stage of engagement, it is important for the student to understand the substantive aspects of public policy making. He or she needs to know specifics about the governmental public policy process, and have an historical understanding of how it evolved over time and what has caused it to take the direction it has. In addition, the student needs to understand how prior decisions influenced the human spirit and caused broad social movements and demographic shifts to occur. In short, a well-rounded and comprehensive undergraduate education is required.

As this classroom experience is occurring, the student needs more applied experience. This usually takes the form of a carefully monitored internship with an agency or group where the student interacts with the organization but also has responsibility to participate in a campus-based course or seminar and then uses the experience to better understand other students' experiences. Once all this is completed, the student is then expected to participate in a project or with a group where he or she is given more independence to not only observe but also actively participate and lead. Here the emphasis is on initiative, and on the student's ability to use creative problem-solving and leadership techniques that assist the organization in meeting its goals. In most cases, students interact with a mentor who provides support and suggestions at various stages.

At this point, completion of the undergraduate curriculum occurs and students graduate with full understanding of the positive role they can play within the American political system or other democratic polity in influencing public policy discussion

and decision making. This experience and knowledge lead to increased involvement and participation (both voting and actual participation in a variety of ways). It also broadens the base of the politically active. By so doing, the polity is strengthened and democracy and its basic tenets are augmented.

Some advocates of civic engagement argue that students should participate in a required national service program. Such service, full-time and rigorous, would not only have major benefits for society but also give the student a better and more holistic perspective on life. This experience would also broaden the array of benefits available to local groups needing assistance.

There are, however, a number of important impediments to having all of this happen. First, not all students wish to be engaged. Some feel it is a waste of their time and keeps them from their academic work and career preparation, so it is important to make sure students understand what the expectations are about civic engagement and to be sure they are relevant for their particular area of study. In addition, the level of expertise and knowledge expected must be clearly understood by the student.

Overcoming Obstacles

It is for these reasons that the civic engagement emphasis has been most applicable to the liberal arts collegiate setting, where students follow a similar, though not lock-step, curriculum path. For a college or university with a greater degree of diversity, a more general and flexible set of requirements is often needed. This degree of diversity may actually be an enhancement for the student and can result in more students being directly involved and engaged by providing more formal and informal opportunities.

A second major hindrance involves a two-prong concern. Faculty commitment and organization are often the key to the success of a program. It is important that the faculty be fully committed to civic engagement, understand its importance, and

be willing to do the work involved to develop and administer a successful program. Engaging and supervising community experiential learning opportunities can be a time-consuming requirement. Without the faculty's interest and active support, a successful civic engagement program is next to impossible.

A third factor often limiting the experiential aspect of these programs is that there may be a shortage of organizations, governmental and nongovernmental, that can and will take student volunteers and furnish the type of experience necessary for meaningful development. This may be the case in a small town or rural area. Time and money costs are serious obstacles to overcome, and in some of the essays in this issue creative ways to overcome these obstacles are discussed.

Finally, it is important that civic engagement not be the academic idea *du jour*. If it is, it will not be lasting. It must be seen as the absolute bedrock of the institution's commitment to educate its students for a life beyond career and beyond merely a life of the mind. As other competing ideas appear—whether greater emphasis in science education or emphasis on a healthy lifestyle—the higher education institution must keep the underlying commitment to civic engagement in the forefront. Commitment to civic engagement must be seen as a core value, one that resides in all the institution's goals. Time alone will tell if there is institutional commitment to this over an extended period of time.

Signs of Growing Student Involvement

Before turning to a discussion of the long-term impact of civic engagement and how we might measure it, I raise several points about what we currently know about student participation. It is most commonly measured by the turnout rate for various groups of students who decide to participate or not in national elections. Younger voters have historically voted at a lower rate than their older peers, and college and university students—

although usually having a slightly higher participation rate—did not match the participation of older voters. This has been a persistent tendency even after the many changes, constitutional and legal, to lower the voting age and increase participation by the younger voter.

One argument advanced for this was that registering to vote was often difficult for college students, and in many cases if they wanted to vote in their home jurisdiction or on campus they often had difficulty understanding registration rules and procedures. Recent federal legislation has made this less of a problem; the 2004 presidential election was expected to be the turning point in mobilizing the youth vote.

Policy differences with the major party candidates and the ability to register online and vote prior to Election Day were all expected to increase student interest and turnout for the 2004 election. The definitive studies of the 2004 presidential election are just now being completed, but preliminary evidence from two studies sheds considerable light on this issue.³

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Maryland concluded that “. . . the 2004 election was a historic high [in] youth voter turnout, and college students led the way with 77 percent of them going to the polls.”⁴ The students surveyed supported Senator Kerry by a margin of 55 percent to 41 percent. In general, CIRCLE found that college students were more likely to participate than many other groups in American society. CIRCLE attributes this to a variety of reasons, but if correct it is an important finding and could mark the beginning of a major trend toward greater participation by the younger voter, and especially students. The students' decision to participate would be in marked contrast to prior elections and could buttress the case for the civic engagement model as a way to capture the increased interest and channel it into a more lasting level of engagement.

A national survey conducted by Pace University and Rock the Vote also asked students if they had participated, and in this series of polls 95 percent of the respondents who indicated they were college students reported voting. They had partisan leanings similar to the CIRCLE poll results and also identified with the Democratic Party at a higher rate than with the Republican Party. In addition, 35 percent of these new voters said they were born-again Christians or Evangelicals, and 41 percent reported attending religious services once a week or more often. Clearly, students were engaged by the 2004 election and participated at a higher level than in the past.

The Pace poll and Rock the Vote survey also asked the students if they were likely to continue to be active in the future, given their experience in the 2004 election. Between one-half and two-thirds of the newly registered college voters indicated they were likely to be involved by attending political meetings, wearing campaign buttons and the like, distributing literature, and talking about politics; slightly less than a third indicated they were likely to give money to a political campaign or a candidate in the future. These results reinforce the expectation of greater engagement in the future and were more positive than for other respondents in the survey.

The Pace poll and Rock the Vote survey also measured another important dimension.⁵ Nearly three-quarters of the college students responding reported that (1) they had trust in the system to do the right thing, (2) the election was fairly counted, and (3) they were adequately prepared to understand and participate in the political process. This degree of confidence and trust is important since a lower level would likely erode any future commitment to participate. It appears many of these students will be engaged in the future.

These results clearly imply that students voted in high numbers in the 2004 election and their experience encourages them to participate in the future. This is especially interesting given the support for

Senator Kerry, who lost. It appears that, regardless of the outcome, students found the process rewarding and feel they made a difference. On the basis of these two studies, it should be clear that increased student participation is likely in the future. It will be important to see if these same students actually do remain active in the future and if that activity transcends just a year or two or an election or two.

The Need for Research

Now back to one of the more important but difficult issues involving civic engagement: the difficulty for those who advocate civic engagement is that the respondents in the various surveys cited were not asked whether they had participated in a civic engagement program. Thus the direct causal link between participation in such programs and an increase in civic engagement is difficult to make at this point. To ensure the future of this movement, it is important that more work be done dealing with the outcome of undergraduate experiences and whether the experiences lead to both expected and desired results. This is not easy to accomplish, for several reasons.

First, multiyear research is difficult to model; it is even harder to develop causality. Clearly, association can be established, but it is difficult to say precisely what caused an individual to be civically engaged. Perhaps a quasi-experimental or longitudinal research model would be useful in answering these questions. Clearly, imaginative research methodology needs to be developed.

Second, this research is expensive and takes a generation to be really conclusive. This means that the proponents of civic engagement must rely on the moral and intellectual persuasion they can muster as their major arguments for establishing and maintaining such programs. In a society often impatient for results, this may be difficult to do.

Third, it is difficult to separate out the impact of civic engagement programs from that of other

variables on subsequent behavior. Is it an experience preceding the college years, or afterward, that is the motivating force responsible for increased civic engagement? How does one survey the respondent to make sure the point relationship is clear? Multiyear research involving the same students is required.

Finally, who will do this research? Will it be a third party, the institutions as they monitor their graduates, or some other organization within the university? To date, there has not been a systematic effort to measure the impact of specific campus programs on subsequent behavior. Till this is done, it will be difficult to offer conclusive evidence to support the basic assertions often claimed by the proponents of civic engagement. Project Pericles is attempting to develop such a research agenda, but it is not complete at this point and is likely to be quite difficult to design as well as expensive.

A Bright Future

Given these findings and reservations, what can we say about the future of the civic engagement movement on our college and university campuses?

There is clearly a major and sustained commitment to civic engagement across the United States and on many college campuses. It appears to be growing, but perhaps at a slower rate than in the past few years. These civic engagement efforts often reflect a broad and sustained program and are subject to a number of forces affecting the future of all of these programs. Only time will tell if they are successful and if they reach their desired goals. What follows is a brief discussion of what I consider to be the most significant variables influencing the future of civic engagement.

First, the programs are dependent on adequate funding. These are not inexpensive programs, and many will have difficulty finding the resources needed to support the staff and faculty needed for adequate

teaching and off-campus program development. There is not a readily available supply of foundation or corporate support, and it is only a matter of time until old and new budgetary items compete for the resources civic engagement has had. Successful campus programs will find ways to build long-term institutional financial support. A combination of recurring institutional support, gifts, and other outside support is needed to be successful.

Second, there is also a strong relationship between program and institutional leadership and the viability of civic engagement programs. Without the continuing support of college or university leadership, the programs will have a hard time surviving. Thus the model of Project Pericles, requiring broad board of trustee support, may be the most viable option to ensure the commitment is institutional and not just based on current leadership. The importance of this should not be underestimated; college and university administrations come and go, but institutional commitment to an underlying mission of civic engagement is much longer lasting.

Third, student desires can often change. For most campuses today, students find civic engagement something they want to participate in, and most are prepared to make the commitment it requires. If this outlook should vary for any reason, then it will be tougher for civic engagement programs to flourish. Given the competitive nature of student recruitment, any program that is not attracting students will not find it easy to hold its position when budgetary decisions are being made.

Fourth, it is quite possible that local organizations, governmental and nongovernmental, may decide that the time and effort it takes for them to be involved with off-campus placements are not worth the gains accruing to them for their participation. This is especially possible in organizations with partisan political ties. It will be interesting to watch how this develops in the future.

Fifth, at present there is strong support for civic engagement across American society and even within both political parties. Over the upcoming years, such support must be maintained. If there is significant deviation from the current level of public support, programs emphasizing civic engagement will be threatened.

Finally, civic engagement proponents must show that such programs do in fact lead to more involved citizens in the future. This is not easy; it requires both short-term and generational research. What if, after exposure to these programs, there is no major change in underlying behavior and society does not seem to have benefited? Proponents are confident this will not be the case, but until the research is completed one cannot be certain. It is essential for the future credibility of civic engagement programs that the questions of evaluation and assessment be pursued by both individual programs and the various consortiums of programs and independent researchers. As this information is reviewed and discussed, civic engagement programs will make changes and also respond to real and perceived weaknesses. Not to undertake this type of assessment and evaluation will likely shorten the lifespan of civic engagement programs as more accrediting and rating agencies require independent verification of program effectiveness.

As a proponent of civic engagement, I think it has a bright future and is likely to be one of the most important programs offered in our colleges and uni-

versities. Without a student's ability to understand the public policy process and have a full range of civic engagement opportunities, both the student and society are kept from developing their full potential. Civic engagement, both as a concept and as a program, is not only an idea whose time has come but one that is likely to continue to have the impact promised by its advocates. Both the individual and society will be the future benefactors.

NOTES

1. Beaumont, E. "Engage Students Politically Goes Beyond the Voting Booth." *Carnegie Perspectives*, Oct. 26, 2004, 1-4.
2. Freeland, R. M. "Academia's Role in Strengthening the Foundation of a Democratic Society." *Presidency*, 2004, 7(3), 24-27.
3. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). "College Students: Mobilized, Engaged and Backed Kerry." Nov. 29, 2004, press release; CIRCLE Staff. "Youth Voter Turnout 1992 to 2004: Estimates from Exit Polls." Fact sheet, Jan. 7, 2005, 1-3. For a discussion of the Pace University/Rock the Vote Polls, see Caputo, D. A. "College Students and the 2004 Presidential Election." Feb. 1, 2005, presentation to National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU).
4. CIRCLE (2004).
5. Caputo (2005).

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