

For much of our history, civic education

was thought to be primarily the province of the schools—initially the grammar schools, and then the high schools as well. But now, with a new majority of high school graduates proceeding on to higher education, and with Americans newly sensitized to the complexity of our role in the global community, civic engagement is becoming an organizing principle in today’s discussions of higher learning. Preparation for civic responsibility is assuming new prominence, not just as a strand in general education programs, but also in contemporary conceptions of good education both in the disciplines and in the professions.

As in any cultural change, there are not only advocates and adopters, but vocal resisters too. This spring, Stanley Fish, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, published an arresting critique in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, titled “Aim Low: Confusing Democratic Values with Academic Ones Can Easily Damage the Quality of Education.” Speaking directly to faculty, Fish opined: “You can reasonably . . . put your students in possession of a set of materials and equip them with a set of skills (interpretive, computational, laboratory, archival). . . . You have little chance however . . . of determining what they will make of what you have offered them. . . . And you have no chance at all . . . of determining . . . their behavior and values . . . in those aspects of their lives that are not, in the strict sense of the word, academic.”

Fish is right, of course, that the campus cannot—and indeed, should not—seek to instruct students on the judgments they will make as citizens and human beings. The academy in a free society seeks to educate students *for the responsibilities of freedom*, and not to instruct them in one doctrine or another. But are teaching concepts and procedural knowledge the whole of our obligation to students? Or, in a knowledge-intensive society, do we have some responsibility to give our students practice in considering the implications of their knowledge—and especially the implications of different courses of action that may be based on their knowledge?

As we at AAC&U review educational innovations emerging across the nation, one of the most prevalent trends is the effort to create and explore more powerful connections between knowledge and society. Thematically linked learning communities (which Fish’s campus is sponsoring), community-based research, collaborative

projects, service-learning, mentored internships, reflection on what has been learned from experiential learning and/or study abroad: All are efforts to help students make connections between scholarship and public questions, consider alternative frameworks for judgment and action, draw meaning from experience, critique theory in light of practice, and evaluate practice in light of new knowledge. All are practices that require students to negotiate their differences with colleagues and which therefore have clear implications for cultivating thoughtful and reflective forms of citizenship in a diverse democracy.

One impetus for these widely adopted educational innovations is the recognition—grounded in decades of cognitive research—that students’ learning is deepened when they can see the implications—the larger contexts—of particular concepts. In other words, even “academic” learning as Fish delimits it is improved in quality when students are encouraged to make connections. Moreover, as Pat Gurin and her colleagues at the University of Michigan have effectively documented, students’ cognitive skills are deepened when students confront difficult and consequential differences in their own views and those of others.

A second impetus, however, is the realization that too many graduates have entered the community—and the professions—armed only with technical and procedural knowledge. Brutalizing governments, today’s terrorists, renegade corporate criminals—each of these horrific examples reminds us in different ways that conceptual knowledge and technical skills can be turned to profoundly destructive ends. And each of these examples, in its own way, illustrates the dangers of learning too little tempered by an ability to engage and respect the humanity of those outside one’s own circle of identification.

In short, whether we are concerned in traditional terms with the “depth and breadth” of academic learning, or in more contemporary terms with helping students explore the implications and contestations surrounding the uses of knowledge, civic engagement claims a formative place in today’s conceptions of educational excellence. ■

—Carol Geary Schneider, president,
Association of American Colleges and
Universities

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