

# How Civic Engagement Is Reframing Liberal Education

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Conceptions of society lie at the heart of how we envision particular views of higher education. In an authoritarian state, for example, higher education presumably would reinforce the state's interests by constructing hierarchical relationships between students and knowledge, with students mostly acting as silent consumers of state-supported definitions of the true and the good. Alternatively, in a global democracy, colleges and universities ought to give serious thought to the nature of student learning and development in such a way as to promote cross-cultural understanding and civic mindedness (Harkavy and Benson 1998; Mendel-Reyes 1998). As John Dewey (1916) reminded us years ago, a democracy depends upon the willingness of learned citizens to engage in the public realm for the betterment of the larger social good.

Traditionally, liberal education has been seen as the primary vehicle for fostering learned, democratic citizens. The common belief has been that, through a range of intellectual and academic experiences, students develop the kinds of understandings and dispositions necessary to maintain the vitality of a democratic society. For countless decades, such a system served our country fairly well.

## Reframing Liberal Education

In recent years, however, we have witnessed some cracks within the armor of liberal education and within the structure of undergraduate education in general. During the 1980s, for example, many became increasingly concerned that students were not as engaged in

their collegiate education as previous generations were believed to have been (AAC 1985; Boyer 1987; Study Group 1984). Some suggested that undergraduate education had become compromised, as a consequence of the professorate elevating research over teaching (Boyer 1990). Others believed that, as expanded enrollments in higher education led to dramatic changes in student populations, different conceptions of undergraduate education were required (Gaff 1992; Rhoads 1995). A more recent concern is that students are more committed to career interests than the kind of idealism that liberal learning traditionally sought to foster (Astin 1998; Kuh 1999).

Student disinterest in the social good is not surprising to some, given the academy's distance from real-life needs and concerns (Bok 1982; Checkoway 2001). Given the various critiques of academic life, it seems most reasonable to conclude that many complex forces have contributed to the need to rethink traditional notions of liberal education (Wingspread Group 1993). What we have witnessed is the need to reframe liberal education in ways that are more likely to ensure an engaging undergraduate experience. A primary tool for accomplishing this has centered on civic education and the use of service-learning as a vehicle for fostering active and engaged citizens (Boyte 1998; Giles and Eyster 1999; Rhoads and Howard 1998).

Driven in part by visions of education advanced by Dewey (Kezar and Rhoads 2001), service-learning has grown as a movement that seeks to link liberal education and civic engagement (Zlotkowski 1995, 1996). An

innovative pedagogical model aimed at fostering socially responsible and caring citizens (Rhoads and Howard 1998), service-learning links classroom knowledge with real-world community service (Howard 1998). The inherent belief is that service tends to foster lives of commitment in which work for the larger good becomes central to one's life (Barber 1992; Bellah et al. 1985; Coles 1993).

If we juxtapose traditional notions of liberal education with emerging views of civic engagement, captured most forcefully by the service-learning movement, we see common themes rooted in a democratic vision of society and the power of education to advance citizenship. While liberal education and civic engagement both suggest a view of citizens as actively engaged in public life, the manner by which each seeks to accomplish this goal varies. Liberal education focuses more on the life of the mind and citizens as critical thinkers; civic engagement often involves experience-based understandings fostered through activities such as community service. When liberal education and civic engagement are structured so that each influences the

other, in a dialectical manner, the true power of the undergraduate experience may be realized.

### Democracy and Education

When one thinks about the relationship between liberal education and civic engagement, the work of Dewey often

comes to mind. For Dewey, democracy was something much more than simply the right to vote. He understood democracy as a way of relational living in which the decisions and actions of one citizen must be understood in terms of their influence on the lives of others. Such a

vision of democracy demands that citizens be knowledgeable of others' lives and that they seek to build decision-making processes that are collaborative and inclusive.

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nations, and economic ambitions. And he saw democracy as more than a political economy of free markets, competition, and entrepreneurship. A vital democracy must also include attention to non-profit organizations, volunteer agencies, churches, schools, and communities, as

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well as the collective interests of various social groups. Democracies are dependent on interactive spheres—families, friends, acquaintances, strangers—out of which often come the basis for public engagement or disengagement, social concern or apathy (Bellah et al. 1985). As Dewey (1927, 213) noted, the essential work of democracy begins with communities and meaningful interactions: “There is no substitute for the vitality and depth of close and direct intercourse and attachment. . . . Democracy begins at home, and its home is the neighborly community.”

When we think about education and the needs of a democratic society, a key question arises: In what ways might we structure students’ educational experiences so as to promote the kind of citizenship important to a democracy? In other words, what types of learning experiences are most likely to encourage the development of concerned, caring citizens? Consideration of such questions leads us to examine the relationship between “self” and “other” and the changing context of our society.

## Self, Other, and the Global Context

If we want students to assume active roles in society based on an attitude of care and concern for others, we must help students foster a caring sense of self, or what I have elsewhere termed the “caring self” (Rhoads 1997). The challenge then is to create educational contexts in which caring is a vital component in the process of teaching and learning. When caring becomes central to how we educate our students, identities rooted in caring and a concern for others are more likely to emerge (Noddings 1984).

At the heart of developing a more caring self is the concept of “otherness” and the role that interactions with others play in identity development. George Herbert Mead’s (1934) notion of the “social self” called to mind the reality that selves emerge within the context of community, through interactions with others. By taking on the role of the other, one comes to develop conceptions of one’s self. Social interaction—as defined as the interplay between self and other—is key to the developing self. Along these lines, Nel Noddings (1984, 14) argued that moral

education involves building caring relationships through a deep exploration of otherness: “When we see the other’s reality as a possibility for us, we must act to eliminate the intolerable, to reduce the pain, to fill the need, to actualize the dream. When I am in this sort of relationship with another, when the other’s reality becomes a real possibility for me, I care.”

Given the fact that social interactions occur within a societal and community context, we must consider the ways in which such interactions change as society becomes increasingly diverse, even global. One might argue, for example, that as cultural differences between self and other expand, the skills and abilities needed to take the role of the other increase. Thus, from the perspective of a multicultural and increasingly global society, liberal education has an important role to play in helping students to develop complex selves capable of negotiating diverse cultures. Such a perspective suggests the increasing relevance of pedagogical models such as service-learning.

In thinking about the potential contribution of service-learning to foster culturally

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skilled and engaged citizens, the work of Howard Radest is important. Radest (1993, 120) described the community service context as an “encounter with strangers,” and highlighted the potential of such encounters to foster important explorations in otherness: “Being embedded in a plurality of life-worlds is now ‘normal.’ So, the community service project always involves crossing some cultural line and entails a meeting of strangers.” Radest went on to argue that such encounters offer students opportunities to explore different social worlds and at the same time recognize the common connections that many of them share.

From my own work with students engaged in community service, I have found that students often are forced to confront their notions of otherness and construct more complex and multiplicitous notions of cultural diversity (Rhoads 1997). In the process, they also come to know themselves better, as they begin to see the sophisticated ways in which identities intersect and diverge. In essence, they become more comfortable with that which is different and more sophisticated in locating that which is similar.

The challenges involved in preparing students for life and work in a global, democratic society are many. Clearly, though, liberal education informed by civic engagement, and visa versa, offers an important path for fostering knowledgeable and concerned citizens. But while we know a great deal about the contribution of service-learning, there is much more that needs to be examined as we advance the relationship between liberal education and civic engagement.

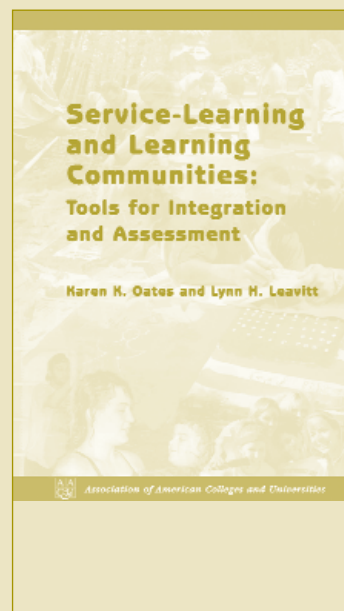
For example, are there different forms of civic engagement that colleges and universities are more likely to promote? What are the differential impacts of diverse engagement programs? Do civic engagement programs adequately address the diversity of community needs as well as the diversity of the students who participate in such programs? These are just a few of the questions that empirical inquiry has yet to adequately address. ■

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