

The Place of Political Learning in College

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Although preparing young people for intelligent democratic participation is undeniably important for them and for the country, this goal is not addressed in a direct and systematic way in American higher education. To be sure, higher education does improve political understanding and engagement. Virtually every study of political knowledge, interest, and participation shows a positive relationship of these variables with educational attainment. But, despite this positive effect, many college graduates are not very politically knowledgeable, sophisticated, skilled, or engaged.

Even though the proportion of the U.S. population attending college has increased dramatically in the past fifty years, according to some indicators, political knowledge and engagement have actually decreased. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), for example, found that from the 1940s to the 1990s, overall levels of political knowledge did not go up, while the percentage of Americans attending college more than doubled. As they put it, “Today’s college graduates are roughly equivalent [in political knowledge] to the high school graduates of the 1940s.” Likewise, Bennett and Bennett (2003) report that the statistical strength of the relationship between higher education and political knowledge and participation has weakened in recent years. They found, for example, that exposure to higher education had a weaker differential effect on news consumption in 2000 than in 1972. Research my colleagues and I have conducted suggests that this trend could be reversed if higher education would address students’ political learning more directly.

DEFINING POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

The relative lack of attention to college students’ political learning becomes apparent only if we distinguish between political and apolitical civic engagement. In the past couple of decades, both secondary and higher education have done a remarkable job of encouraging and supporting young people’s involvement with their communities through programs of extracurricular volunteer

work and service learning, in which volunteer service activities are integrally connected with the substance of academic courses. This community service is often a valuable resource for nonprofit organizations, local communities, and the disadvantaged people these organizations serve. Volunteer experience helps establish a philanthropic mindset and habit in those who take part. Properly scaffolded, it can widen students’ circle of identification, helping them see the disadvantaged as less alien than they otherwise would, and inspiring a desire to contribute to purposes beyond the self. But this kind of voluntarism is inadequate preparation for democratic citizenship. For that, we need explicit attention to political learning.

What counts as “political” learning? In a study of programs that support students’ political development, my colleagues and I defined political engagement broadly enough to include the wide range of ways that people, especially young people, participate in American democracy, without making the definition so broad that it includes all of civic voluntarism. Political engagement, therefore, includes community and civic involvement that has a systemic dimension and various forms of engagement with public policy issues, as well as electoral politics at all levels. A key criterion is that political activities are driven by systemic-level goals, a desire to affect the shared values, practices, and policies that shape collective life.

But does this distinction between political and apolitical civic engagement make any real difference developmentally or educationally? Many educators assume that voluntarism of a nonpolitical kind will lead eventually to political engagement. In fact, civic participation *can* contribute to students’ political learning, but there is no guarantee that this will happen.

Civic engagement sometimes exposes participants to political knowledge or imposes political demands, thus drawing them into the political realm. For example, if students are stocking shelves in a food pantry when state funding for hunger programs is cut, volunteers may be drawn into efforts to raise public awareness of state budget issues and the community’s need for these services. But



this kind of thing does not often happen. In fact, there was a consensus among the undergraduates in our study that students are seldom helped to connect their volunteer work with systemic issues that relate to it and are unlikely to make those connections on their own.

Civic participation can also lead to the development of politically valuable skills—e.g., planning and running meetings, writing memos, various kinds of public persuasion, and many more. But not all settings or roles build these kinds of skills. That only happens if the role is one in which the person needs and therefore learns and practices those skills. In many kinds of civic engagement activities, like tutoring children or cleaning up a beach, students are not in roles where they learn these kinds of politically relevant skills.

We know that students are given many opportunities and incentives to do individual volunteer work. But they generally encounter very little encouragement to get involved in politics, even broadly defined. The result is that most students are unclear about how they might become politically engaged and what that would involve. For this generation of young people, politics is unfamiliar territory, whereas community service has become almost as familiar as going to school. As one student in our study put it, “There was always more pressure toward community service and more opportunities available. Our high schools promoted community service activities, but never, ever, promoted a political engagement activity. I don’t remember that happening even once. Community service is just so much more emphasized to our generation.”

THE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

A study of college level moral and civic education that my colleagues and I did several years ago (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens 2003) confirmed

this impression—that education for specifically political learning is not widespread on college campuses. Even so, we were able to find some promising courses and cocurricular programs that address this set of goals. We undertook a new study, the Political Engagement Project, in order to learn more about these efforts to support college students’ political learning. The project investigated the impact of a variety of efforts to educate for political learning, documenting the goals and teaching strategies of twenty-one courses and cocurricular programs located at a diverse array of institutions throughout the country. Our book, *Educating for Democracy: Preparing Undergraduates for Responsible Political Engagement* (Colby,

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Beaumont, Ehrlich, and Corngold 2007) presents the results of that investigation, along with an exploration of the goals of political teaching and learning and guidelines for how to use the central pedagogical strategies documented by the study.

The faculty who teach in these twenty-one courses and programs treat political learning as importantly multifaceted. For them, the quality of political engagement is at least as important as the frequency of engagement. High-quality participation reflects wise judgment grounded in political knowledge and understanding, familiarity with and competence in a wide array of political skills, and a strong strategic sense for when and how to deploy these skills, along with steadfast motivation, including the capacity to withstand setbacks and disappointments

and a commitment to basic democratic principles such as equal opportunity and majority rule. It is also important to work toward a sense of political participation that is emotionally compelling, intellectually interesting, exciting, attractive, and personally consequential. An undergraduate education can make only a start toward these goals—none will be fully achieved. But a clear vision of the multidimensional nature of the goals will go a long way toward ensuring that the endeavor will at least be headed in the right direction.

Teaching for political understanding and engagement involves helping students find political issues they can be passionate about while also staying open to opposing

views. It involves teaching students to be sensitive to others’ feelings about hot-button issues while also encouraging them to be tough and slow to take offense themselves. Students also need to develop a thoughtful, reasoned approach to politics without becoming immobilized by doubt. They need to take politics seriously but also see how it can be fun, at least some of the time.

Can this be done? The answer is yes, it can. This is not the place to give a detailed account of our research, but the bottom line is clear: Students show significant, usually substantial, increases along many dimensions of political understanding, skills, and motivation after participating in academic courses and cocurricular programs designed to foster that development. There are many different ways to accomplish these



outcomes. We studied a diverse array of courses and programs, with different structures, pedagogies, and content. They include summer institutes, a semester-in-Washington program, both summer and academic-year internships, academic courses in various departments, cocurricular programs, and multiyear living-learning programs. They all use active pedagogies, including invited speakers and mentors, deliberation about politics, internships and other placements, political action and research projects, and structured reflection on their political experiences.

These active pedagogies are especially well suited to accomplish deep and enduring learning, because they engage students simultaneously on several different levels: intellectually, emotionally, socially, and personally. In many of the courses, students take key ideas learned in an academic setting and apply them to the complex and uncertain realities of policy implementation or political action, with important reciprocal impact from the realm of action back to the intellectual domain, enriching their grasp of the intellectual subtleties of the classroom material. Most of these pedagogies offer ongoing assessment, coaching, and feedback, often self-consciously instilling in students the capacity for self-assessment and an active search for multiple sources of guidance.

Furthermore, the active pedagogies we studied connect students not only with ideas but also with *people*. Students interact with faculty, program staff, and peers, with mentors, speakers, and staff at placement sites, and with clients or constituents of placement organizations. These people are often inspiring—personalizing and dramatizing the issues, offering solidarity in a common quest, and leading students to new identifications that change their sense of who they are and who they want to be (Colby and Damon 1992; Youniss and Yates 1997).

Students chose to participate in these courses and programs for many different reasons. For some, the course just fit well into their schedules or fulfilled a requirement. Others were seeking out politically focused experiences. In our assessment of the programs' impact on students, we found, first, that those who came into the courses and programs already very interested in politics and those who came in with very little political interest and experience both showed significant gains on just about every dimension, with larger and more consistent gains in the group that started with little prior interest. Second, two items showed no change in either of these groups—political ideology and political party affiliation. These programs do work to strengthen students' political

understanding, skills, and motivation and, equally important, they do so without pushing students toward one end of the political spectrum or the other.

THE IMPERATIVE OF OPEN INQUIRY

The finding of no systematic shift in ideology is notable because of the widespread fear that education for political learning is bound to be ideologically driven, imposing faculty biases on students. This could otherwise be a serious stumbling block, especially since conservative critics have been drawing public attention to the alleged liberal biases of higher education.

My colleagues and I share with the critics the conviction that education for political learning is legitimate *only* if it is implemented in ways that are compatible with the central values of academic life. What are these values? To reduce a very complicated set of issues to a simple list, scholarship and teaching in higher education need to be guided by intellectual integrity, mutual respect and tolerance, a willingness to listen to and take seriously the ideas of others, public consideration of contested issues, and a commitment to rational discourse and civility.

In practice, it is not easy to sort out exactly what it means to align efforts to support political development with these core academic values. It does not mean giving equal time to ideas that are without merit, for example. But it does require a real commitment to open-mindedness on the part of faculty and administrative leaders.

In the courses and programs in our study, we saw that it is possible to combine passionate concern and commitment with openness to views different from one's own. Many of the students reported that they gained a gut-level understanding that those with opposing views are real people, not demonic caricatures.





They learned how to find common ground with people whose interests are quite different from their own and saw that both can benefit when they cooperate around shared goals. We were continually impressed by the ways these courses and programs were able to work toward political clarity and conviction combined with human understanding, tolerance, open-mindedness, and a sense of community that transcends ideological difference.

At the level of the campus as a whole, we have seen faculty and administrative leaders who are quite deliberate in raising the issue of open inquiry, fostering conversation about what it is, why it is important, and what the principle of open inquiry means in practice. At the level of individual courses, faculty support open inquiry by working to ensure that students encounter in readings, invited speakers, and other experiences a wide array of perspectives on the policy and other political issues addressed by their courses. These faculty also pay attention to establishing a civil atmosphere in their courses, and report that creating a sense of community early in the course helps students engage diversity of opinion without personal animosity.

COMPATIBILITY WITH COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Many educators acknowledge the importance of preparation for thoughtful, effective citizenship but don't believe they can afford to make it a high priority, given the press of other goals. Fortunately, high-quality teaching for political understanding and engagement contributes to other aspects of academic learning in college, so these goals need not be traded off against each other. In a recent statement about pressing challenges for American higher education, five influential

national education associations pointed to "some fundamental aspects of higher education" that "do not and should not change"¹: "The most basic goals of an undergraduate education remain the ability to think, write, and speak clearly; to reason critically; to solve problems; to work collaboratively; to acquire field-specific knowledge; and to acquire the judgment, analytic capacity, and independence of thought to support continued, self-driven, lifelong learning and engaged citizenship" (American Council on Education and others 2006). Education for political development can address directly every one of these outcomes.

A highly regarded instrument for assessing what students learn in college, the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), illustrates the intersection of political learning with the kind of general intellectual development that is the hallmark of successful collegiate learning (Klein and others 2005; Shavelson and Huang 2006). The CLA assesses students' critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, and writing abilities, using performance tasks of several kinds.

To measure problem solving, the CLA uses tasks in which students are given multiple sources of information about a problem and are asked to evaluate and analyze the information and use it to draw and defend conclusions about the problem at hand. These problems are often questions of public policy, and are very similar to questions addressed in the courses and programs we studied. For example, students must integrate information from newspaper articles, federal investigation reports, scientific studies, internal memos, and other documents to formulate a policy recommendation for an organization. The CLA analytic writing measures are similarly consistent

with the kinds of skills students learn in the programs we studied.

COMPATIBILITY WITH PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Intellectual development is universally acknowledged as among the most important goals of higher education, but it is not the only goal. Preparation for a career is at least as salient in many students' thinking about the purpose and value of a college education. The majority of respondents (73 percent of women and 65 percent of men) in the 2005 freshman survey conducted by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute said that they are attending college in order to pursue training for a specific career. Seventy-two percent of both women and men said they had decided to attend college in order to get a better job (Pryor and others 2005).

In this area, as in the case of general intellectual development, it is clear that political learning makes an essential contribution. Every occupation affects and is affected by the public-policy contexts within which it is located. Issues of professional licensing and accreditation, the institutional settings of work and regulations that affect them, workforce and compensation issues, and the complex of forces that shape the clientele or other publics the occupation serves are just a small sampling of topics within the political domain, broadly understood, that students preparing for a particular occupation can benefit from studying.

In addition, virtually every occupation has the potential to serve the public good. A major longitudinal study that followed students during and after college found that six years after college, graduates' civic voluntarism that is unconnected with their work had fallen off significantly, but more than half (57.7 percent)



report participating in volunteer service opportunities through their employer. In addition, these alumni increasingly believe the work itself contributes to the greater good: “Two thirds (66.2 percent) of the study participants are satisfied or very satisfied with the opportunities to contribute to society through their job,” (Higher Education Research Institute 2006). A survey by Cone, Inc. also found that “young people are extending their social consciousness to the workplace. Of the 28 percent of young people (ages 13–25) who are employed full time, 79 percent said they want to work for a company that cares about how it affects or contributes to society” (Jayson 2006). A strong background in thinking about the public purposes of one’s chosen work and the broader issues connected with the social impact of a range of institutions and occupations can help ensure that this desire for social contribution is more than wishful thinking or rationalization.

A good liberal education should provide students with the intellectual capacity to make sense of their environment and to locate themselves within the complex influences of their time and place (Sullivan and Rosin 2008). Learning about political institutions, issues, contexts, and practices should be an integral part of that enterprise. College graduates cannot make sense of their environment and their place in it if they are politically ignorant, unskilled, and lacking in a sense of civic agency, the sense that they can work with others to solve problems that concern them – in their communities, workplaces, or elsewhere. In this sense, a basic understanding of the political and policy contexts in which people live and work is an essential dimension of liberal learning, and students are not well educated if they fail to develop that understanding. ■

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