



“**T**he proposition that ‘Young People Don’t Vote’ has finally been proven wrong,” proclaimed Heather Smith, executive director of Rock the Vote, a nonprofit group that encourages young people to participate in the political process. This claim seems justified—the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) reports that more than 6.5 million young people under the age of thirty participated in the 2008 primaries and caucuses. According to CIRCLE, this marks a dramatic increase in youth voter turnout over the last comparable election cycle in 2000.

At this exciting time when our country’s leadership is on the threshold of change, this issue of *Peer Review* examines how the academy engages students in their learning today to help them grow as engaged citizens for tomorrow. And because it is a presidential election year, we decided to focus in on “political engagement,” as opposed to the broader goal of civic engagement with all that entails. For many years, AAC&U campuses have successfully involved students in service-learning and community-based research, and other forms of civically engaged learning. But campus leaders have bemoaned the fact that while college students are enthusiastic about these kinds of programs, they lack interest in *electoral* politics. Is 2008 a turning point?

As I read about the innovative programs that schools are putting in place to expand their efforts to encourage and engage students politically, I learned that many students are embracing their roles as agents of change in their communities and in local and national politics. Heartened by this knowledge, I decided to use my immersion journalism training to gather firsthand evidence of student political engagement. I was not disappointed.

First, I attended a conference sponsored by Demos, a nonpartisan public-policy research organization, called “A Better Deal: Reclaiming Economic Security for a New Generation.” There, I heard a diverse group of student activists address the growing economic plight of young voters. From those responding to the stirring opening session given by Andy Stern of the Service Employees International Union to the small-group discussions and the thought-provoking closing comments, every young adult with whom I spoke was actively engaged in the political process.

I also attended a group discussion on “The Current Political Scene, as Viewed from the Left and the Right,” sponsored by the Paul Peck Institute at Montgomery College. In this classroom setting, students of traditional and nontraditional ages, professors,

an administrator, institute director Francine Jamin, and I had a lively discussion based on readings by Robert Reich, David Brooks, and Paul Gigot. From my time spent with this community-college-based group, I found that passionate political ideas and ideals span across generations and campus roles.

Finally, I attended the 2008 Campus Progress National Conference, which included sessions such as *What’s Next?—Transforming youth voting into youth power* and *Rap Sessions—How the hip-hop generation is reshaping politics*. I spent a few hours in the exhibit hall going from table to table talking with student interns from nonprofit organizations such as Young People For..., DC Vote, Spiritual Youth for Reproductive Freedom, 1 Sky, and Green Corps. These young people, many of whom had arranged their own internships, spoke clearly and passionately about the goals of their organizations. It was clear to me that the active roles they had taken in determining this country’s future would continue long past November’s election.

AAC&U has joined with other higher education groups to launch “Your Voice, Your Vote,” a Web-based campaign that gives campus leaders tools for encouraging students to register, learn about the issues, and go to the polls on Election Day. Campuses are embracing the campaign’s message—this summer, my daughter, who attends Goucher College, received an e-mail communication from Sanford Ungar, her school’s president, urging students to register to vote in their home states. To underscore his message, Ungar wrote, “Voting is about more than the feuds and foibles of individual candidates. It’s about taking advantage of a right that many people in the world do not have. In former careers, I have worked in countries where people spent their lives fighting for the right to vote—and where many died pursuing the right to have their voices heard.”

This edition of *Peer Review* features a range of articles about student political engagement written by leaders of prominent groups who are experts on these issues and by faculty who teach, inspire, and lead. With this issue, we hope to give readers an understanding of this critical topic and supply them with tools to further engage and prepare students for their roles as leaders in a world of complex challenges and unlimited possibilities.

—SHELLEY JOHNSON CAREY