

# Educating Students to Foster Active Citizenship

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**S**trengthening the preparation of active citizens is important first and foremost because the future health of our democracy depends upon it. All too often we take for granted the continuation of America's unique democratic system, and we do so at our peril. Colleges and universities have a large unmet responsibility in this regard. As Brian O'Connell has stated, "No leader or leadership institution—particularly no educator or educational institution—can presume that fostering active citizenship to prolong our democracy ... is someone else's business." (O'Connell 1994)

A less obvious reason to care about the civic engagement work of higher education is student demand. In increasing numbers, today's undergraduates come to college expecting that community service and civic education be part of their undergraduate years (Kiesa et al. 2007). Twenty-seven percent of incoming undergraduates say there is a "very good chance" they will participate in community service—up from 17 percent in 1990 (Pryor et al. 2007).

We are in a period of escalating public criticism about the costs and productivity of higher education. Re-embracing the historic civic education role of higher education can play a part in addressing this challenge—by preparing future community leaders, undeniably an important public purpose and benefit.

There exists today increasing evidence that some forms of civic education also enhance students' academic achievement in other subjects (Lee et al. 2000). Furthermore, improved civic education yields additional benefits to students' personal and professional development. Political and civic engagement encourages ethical development and reflection. Engaged students are more likely to think about other people's needs and interests, about the communities in which they are studying, about the purposes of their education, and about the obligations that come with their privileges. This is especially important now that success in college has such

evident financial advantages, and there is such a strong ethos of careerism in higher education.

## CAMPUS CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

A growing number of colleges and universities have developed impressive initiatives in civic and political participation (Brown and Witte 2008). These programs, many of them now reasonably mature and well-established, constitute a growing body of experience to learn from, models to adopt and adapt. Campus Compact, the nearly 1,300-member-strong national coalition of college and university presidents, makes readily available the civic engagement experience of its member institutions, which enroll six million students.

The civic engagement programs of colleges and universities represent a rich array of approaches: community service learning, selective leadership development groups, extracurricular activities, student voice in governance, internships and other external experiences, political research and action projects, bringing in role models, and political discourse events and processes (Colby et al. 2007). These diverse approaches show a broad range in orientation—from community service learning to education for political participation and civic agency. An increasing number of colleges and universities have taken significant steps to bridge the "service gap," to encourage and guide student volunteers to take action on the root causes of the issues around which they are volunteers. At the same time, many ardent volunteers continue to eschew political participation, missing the opportunity to have a greater impact. This reality is a central challenge and opportunity.

Just within the last two years, institutions of higher education have moved into a new zone of financial and organizational commitment to their civic engagement work. Jonathan Tisch's \$40 million gift to name the Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University was followed quickly by the Lilly Endowment's grant of



\$40 million to the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis, the Gates Foundation and Duke Endowment’s commitment of \$30 million for an undergraduate civic engagement program at Duke University, the Argosy Foundation’s \$13 million gift to support a new Center for Community Engagement at Amherst College, and Barbara and Edward Netter’s gift of \$10 million to the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Community Partnerships. In the next few years, these gifts will no doubt be followed by others of a similar size, most of them from alumni, to many more schools.

This new level of financial support moves higher education civic engagement work from the periphery to center stage. At the same time, a growing number of colleges and universities have elevated leadership of civic engagement activities within their organizational structures—witness the creation of university-wide positions such as associate vice president for public engagement at the University of Minnesota, vice chancellor for public service and engagement at the University of North Carolina, and associate vice chancellor for community partnerships at UCLA, and at Tufts, the elevation of Tisch College from program within a school, to a school itself, with the dean as peer to all other school deans at the university.

Moreover, after some decades of steady decline in the voting rates of young people, including college students, youth participation in the current U.S. presidential campaign has expanded dramatically. In the 2008 primaries, about 17 percent of the U.S. population under age thirty voted, almost doubling from the comparable primary election of 2000 (Kirby et al. 2008). Unfortunately, among young people with *no* college experience, only about one in fourteen voted in the 2008 primaries.

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

This growing civic engagement movement—characterized by the factors

noted above—provides a series of important opportunities to expand the scale of student participation and impact and to involve more students in political activism as well as volunteering. Political participation should include not only participatory acts (like voting) but coalition-building, analysis of complex situations, advocacy, communication, and organizing.

In this period of expanding opportunity, it is essential to be realistic and strategic about the persistent obstacles and challenges. These include the common bias in academia that public service programming is academically inferior, and concern that efforts to strengthen political participation tend to promote a liberal political agenda and to detract from other educational priorities.

Further, although some students seek opportunities for civic engagement and say that they want to become community leaders, “becoming well off financially” remains a far more common motivation for incoming students (Pryor et al. 2007). Many students have an interest in getting civically or politically involved, but worry about anything they perceive as distracting them from meeting academic or “purposeful” goals (Peter D. Hart Research Associates 2004).

Institutions that compete for undergraduates must emphasize economic benefits. Meanwhile, for many faculty, excelling within their own academic disciplines seems more important than labor-intensive local work with students and communities. Those who are motivated to be civically engaged scholars and teachers often face a lack of rewards and incentives (Gibson et al. 2006, Ellison and Eatman 2008).

## STRATEGIES THAT HOLD PROMISE

The recent experience of colleges and universities that have the most robust and innovative civic engagement programs suggests a set of strategies that hold particular promise for advancing this work throughout higher education. We advocate

the following fifteen-point approach:

1. Define political participation and civic agency broadly. This definition should include electoral politics and support the fundamental role of government, and also to support pathways to community change through nonprofit and private sector action (Colby et al. 2003; CIRCLE and Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2006).
2. Integrate education for political participation across the curriculum. Involve all disciplines, not only the social sciences—in order to reach more students and also engage the insights and models of more fields of study. We need not only social science majors, but also future engineers, natural scientists, business people, doctors, journalists, and artists who are both competent in their professional roles and also are active, effective citizens.
3. Stop relegating civic engagement to the cocurriculum. Actualize the rich synergies between students’ curricular and extracurricular experiences.
4. More fully exploit the educational potential of cocurricular activities. Invest heavily in elevating what students learn by volunteering and through political activity.
5. Demonstrate that programming to elevate civic agency can lead to higher quality education. Political participation is important in and of itself, but proponents can garner additional support by demonstrating its broader educational benefits as well.
6. Involve all constituencies. Administrators, faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community partners all play substantial roles in the development of current effective models. Support collective leadership, and both top-down and bottom-up leadership. Some of the most powerful civic initiatives have been invented and organized by students. Community partners can be great coeducators.



7. Take advantage of student-produced news and information. This rapidly growing form of student democratic participation is one that will grow in its influence on students and on other constituencies as well.
8. Encourage students at different institutions to collaborate. Peer effects are powerful: by concentrating on young people who are civically engaged and academically successful on certain campuses, we strengthen their civic development (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). However, we also isolate them from much less engaged groups of students and young people, for whom peer effects may be negative. Deliberate efforts should be made to bring young people from different campuses together in civic projects.
9. Strengthen research about youth civic engagement. The further development of this area of research can support, guide and reinforce educational programming. This is a particularly important opportunity for research universities that, with a few notable exceptions, have been comparatively cautious in their civic engagement programming.
10. Attend to the international as well as the domestic context and dimensions of civic agency. Educate for global as well as local and national citizenship.
11. Work for real academic culture change, not just effective programs. Overall campus climate matters; it has a powerful effect on this dimension of student learning (Colby et al. 2007). The twenty-two authors of a consensus report on higher education and civic engagement in 2006 found that individual programs were common and effective, but “few colleges and universities today have thought through an overall framework for civic and political education that is comprehensive, coherent, conceptually clear, and developmentally appropriate” (CIRCLE and Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 2006)
12. Measure student learning outcomes. The civic engagement movement of higher education has been long on rhetoric, short on evidence. Treat the obvious methodological difficulties as an opportunity, not an excuse.
13. Take steps to elevate institutional citizenship, which can only reinforce educational programming. When institutional politics and practices are in tension with educational goals and values, students notice the contradiction and it undercuts their learning of civic values and skills.
14. Advocate for public policies that support this area of education, including financial aid tied to public service and increased funding for national service (highly effective federal initiatives that warrant greater investment include the Learn and Service Program of the Corporation for National and Community Service, and community placements in college work–study).
15. Pay more attention to what happens after students graduate. Take steps to reinforce their civic agency in the years after they receive their degrees.

#### TUFTS' APPROACH

The development of the Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University illustrates the value of the strategies described above. The mission of the Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University, which illustrates the value of the strategies described above, is to educate students in all fields for lifetimes of active citizenship. The prospective result of this ambitious goal is a much greater scale of impact than if Tufts were to concentrate its civic engagement functions in a separate school or center. When the trustees voted in November 1999 to create what was originally called the University College of Citizenship and Public Service, they

consciously rejected the “separate center” model and launched a university-wide virtual college. To deliver on this promise, Tisch College has employed an infusion strategy, working as a catalyst and a resource to integrate and elevate civic values and skills across the entire curriculum and across the whole university.

The development of Tisch College has been a process of collective invention by multiple groups—faculty, administrators, student, alumni and community partners. Our basic strategy has been to ensure that a decisive majority of students have multiple experiences—in courses, internships, and extracurricular activities—that cumulate and make active citizenship a significant part of their college or graduate school experience and that become a lifelong commitment. The combined effects of our multiple initiatives and interventions is making active citizenship a pervasive part of Tufts’ ethos, an essential part of our institutional DNA.

Tisch College supports faculty in all parts of the university to conceptualize active citizenship in terms that fit their disciplinary methods and traditions. We have had considerable success with a faculty fellows program—two-year, part-time appointments of faculty members from diverse fields, supported to lead curriculum development and engaged research in all schools of the university. The thirty-five faculty fellows program alumni have evolved into the adjunct faculty of Tisch College. Each term, more than one hundred undergraduate courses in arts and sciences and in engineering place significant emphasis on active citizenship values, skills, and knowledge. Graduate programs are implementing the same integrative strategy. A growing number of professors support this effort because they have personal experience that courses that incorporate active citizenship often enhance students’ learning of other material. Civil and environmental engineering professor



Chris Swan explains, “Students in my soil remediation class started learning the technical engineering content better after Tisch helped me to add a community service project to the class.”

In addition, the provost and dean of the college are supporting the leadership of a network of a dozen endowed chairs that concentrate on public service. As we endeavor to inspire and guide the civic development of students, we have been impressed with the powerful impact of several courses that are taught by practitioners—distinguished public leaders who share their vision and experience, and whose role modeling reaches far beyond what even the most activist full-time faculty member can accomplish.

Our student programming features a flagship peer-leadership program for undergraduates called Citizenship and Public Service Scholars—eighty students from a broad spectrum of majors who receive civic leadership training and function as ambassadors and organizers to elevate the civic development of their fellow students. Like our sister institutions, Tufts is experiencing a much-increased student demand for paid public service and social change internships and summer projects. Through Tisch’s Active Citizenship Summers and other programs, Tufts supports more than one hundred students each summer to participate in internships and social change projects. Tisch College provides staff, organizational and financial assistance to several student partner organizations, including a one thousand-student-strong undergraduate volunteer service society that is the largest extracurricular group on campus, to strengthen their capabilities and the civic learning of their members. The office of undergraduate admissions, which emphasizes active citizenship in its recruitment materials, reports that Tufts’ strong emphasis on this topic has attracted

top students who otherwise would have chosen to attend other schools.

Students have initiated a pair of efforts that focus primarily on increasing political participation—a voter registration and education campaign called Tufts Votes! and the Institute for Political Citizenship, a program of policy internships in Massachusetts state government. We are documenting and analyzing the educational results of Tisch College programs through an elaborate longitudinal study that follows students into their initial years after graduating and through other surveys of a sample of sophomores and of all graduating seniors.

Tufts alumni have played a major role in building Tisch programs. They raise money to expand public service internships, mentor summer interns in five major cities, advise on program directions, guest lecture in classes, and provide public service career advice. Local alumni chapters around the world have developed strong service projects and the Office of Alumni Relations emphasizes active citizenship in its programming. Most recently, the university established a Loan Repayment Assistance Program to help graduates of all Tufts degree programs who work in comparatively low-paying nonprofit and public sector jobs to pay back their educational loans.

After initially concentrating entirely on educational initiatives, Tisch College has added civic engagement research to its mission, supporting scholarship about civic learning and citizen participation, and facilitating community-engaged research through the Tufts Community Research Center.

Dynamic presidential and provostial leadership has been a key part of the development of Tisch College. President Lawrence S. Bacow has made active citizenship one of three defining themes in the University’s strategic vision. Biannually, in his matriculation address the president

gives entering students their first homework assignment: “Register and vote.” In order to magnify the college’s impacts, Provost Jamshed Bharucha elevated it to an organizational status equivalent to that of Tufts’ seven other schools. President Bacow convenes an Annual Presidential Symposium on Community Partnerships and each year presents Presidential Awards for Citizenship and Public to the dozen undergraduate and graduate students who have demonstrated the most outstanding civic leadership. ■

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