“Three People are Better Than No People:”
Students as Community Members, Activists, and Change Agents for Democracy

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Photo by Spoma Jovanovic

To engage students in social justice issues while also examining beliefs (their own and others’) and questioning institutional policies and practices, faculty have an important role to play as teacher, mentor, and ally.

Higher education serves as a cultural resource for the promotion of democratic values and fosters the development of students into civic actors (Dewey, 1916). In consideration of social justice, we must keep in mind that ethical concerns, structural analyses, and a commitment to the community is necessary to foster ethical, activist actions (Frey & Carragee, 2007). Thus, this roundtable discussion asks….

_How can faculty bring forward and center the requisite democratically-based teaching and research practices to support students in their quest for meaning-making as social justice practice?_

From my two decades of experience in the academy as a community engaged scholar and mentor to new student activists, I have found that collective action is the most powerful means by which people can express their support and dissent. Teaching students about how, with whom and through which routes to do so embraces lessons in the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Those of us in higher education need to teach students how to take action, organize, and respond in productive ways in these troubled times. Fannie Lou Hamer said, “Three people are better than
no people,” to remind us even small collectives can create the conditions for people’s voices to be heard and action to be taken on the pressing issues of our time.

What critical skills, knowledge, and cultural values do we need to teach in the classroom to cultivate and support student activism?

1. Introducing specific, current issues in the nation and world to students (police shootings, the fear that terrorism leaves in its wake, lingering racial inequities, the school to prison pipeline, etc.) and then offering a bridge from those matters to student experiences or interests.
2. Connecting academic scholarship with public debates.
3. Teaching students the political skills and pathways for speaking out in public meetings, organizing collective action, drafting resolutions and legislation for local governments, and in other ways organizing campaigns, in addition to engaging in one-time actions.
4. Brokering introductions to community activists, local officials and others with whom alliances can be forged.
5. Teaching students how to craft arguments and messages that work toward building larger democratic actions.
6. Establishing achievable student/community goals within the limitations of the semester so that all can build upon the successes of their and experience progress of their own.
7. Reinforcing the necessity of one-on-one conversations where students can listen, identify the issues, educate and address misinformation, talk about future community action, and consider alternative non-violent practices that express dissent, when needed.
8. Discussing how to effectively combine on-line and off-line activity (ex: click for more information; follow up with in person conversation; send emails and letters, follow up with visits).
9. Learning about the resources available in our communities for this work.
10. Teaching the genealogy of activism.
11. Recognizing that some (many?) students’ experience of bewilderment and trauma is pervasive.
12. AND FOR US… Tapping into collaborative field research, alliance formation, and writing that speak to the needs and concerns of the communities in which we live and work.

Our work is not done…we have the opportunity and responsibility to reframe discussions away from a “rhetoric of blame” that is ubiquitous in public spaces, and towards positive dialogue and deliberation, informed by historical precedents, research findings, and contemporary examples of how to engage in positive, collective action for social change.