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Maximizing Civic Learning and Social Responsibility

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In August 1999, the *Presidents' Fourth of July Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education*, drafted by a select group of scholars and college presidents that was convened by Campus Compact and the American Council on Education (ACE), hit the streets. It said,

“We have a fundamental task to renew our role as agents of our democracy. This task is both urgent and long-term. There is growing evidence of disengagement of many Americans from the communal life of our society, in general, and from the responsibilities of democracy in particular. We share a special concern about the disengagement of college students from democratic participation. A chorus of studies reveals that students are not connected to the larger purposes and aspirations of the American democracy. Voter turnout is low. Feelings that political participation will not make any difference are high. Added to this, there is a profound sense of cynicism and lack of trust in the political process....

This country cannot afford to educate a generation that acquires knowledge without ever understanding how that knowledge can benefit society or how to influence democratic decision making. We must teach the skills and values of democracy, creating innumerable opportunities for our students to practice and reap the results of the real, hard work of citizenship” (2).

Earlier, in February of 1999, the Third Report of the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities, entitled *Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution*, said,

“[I]t is time to go beyond outreach and service to . . . ‘engagement.’ By engagement we refer to institutions that have redesigned their teaching, research, and extension and service functions to become even more sympathetically and productively involved with their communities, however communities may be defined” (9).

Since these calls to action were issued, a variety of initiatives have been underway. There is the Council of Independent College (CIC) project *Engaging Communities and Campuses*. The American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) is pursuing support for a multi-institutional effort to create *Learning Communities on the Purposes, Practices and Processes of Democracy*. Campus Compact continues to expand service-learning programs across the country and among increasing numbers of disciplines. The New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE), with support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, has created a “civic engagement cluster” of ten diverse colleges and universities undertaking comprehensive changes to strengthen civic engagement by the institutions and civic learning and social responsibility among their students.

The introduction to *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education* says “Enriching the moral and civic responsibility of all members of the campus community is best achieved through the cumulative, interactive effect of numerous curricular and extracurricular programs, within an environment of sustained institutional commitment to these overarching goals” (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, Rosner and Stephens, 2000, xxvi). This paper aims to describe the “numerous curricular and extracurricular programs” called for if a college or university is to achieve that cumulative effect.

Clear Purposes

In the 1980s, Boyer found a pervasive absence of clear and consistent objectives from colleges and universities. He says, “during our study we found divisions on campus, conflicting priorities and competing interests that diminish the intellectual and social quality of the undergraduate experiences and restrict the capacity of the college effectively to serve its students. At most colleges and universities we visited, these special points of tension appeared with such regularity and seemed so consistently to sap the vitality of the baccalaureate experience that we have made them the focus of this report” (1987, p. 2).

In 1998 Stanley Ikenberry, then President of the American Council on Education, agreed. “Ultimately, the crucial challenge facing colleges and universities is not so much cost or technology, as profound as these may be, but the challenge of purpose: the demand to define and clarify why we exist; what it is we do best; what it is that we care about most....If the purpose of the campus is the creation of a community of students and scholars who accomplish important things that are highly valued by the society, survival is not an issue...”

Until an institution's purposes are clear, conflicting priorities and competing interests will prevail. Once clear purposes concerning desired outcomes for students are defined, then educational practices can be coordinated in their service. Each institution needs its own, widely shared definition, in language consistent with its mission, culture, and constituents. For what it's worth, my candidates are *Knowledge, Intellectual Competence, Interpersonal Competence, Emotional Intelligence, Integrity, and Motivation.*

Knowledge

When fools rush in where angels fear to tread, even though their motives and ideals are admirable, they often do more harm than good. The key point is that being well informed and reasonably sophisticated about general political and economic systems and processes as well as about particular contexts or issues is the starting point for civic learning and socially responsible citizenship. Powerful curricular implications which flow from this purpose are discussed below.

Intellectual Competence

The ability to analyze and synthesize stacks of data, diverse theoretical perspectives, and wide-ranging opinions is critical. So is the ability to evaluate the soundness of varied inferences, to recognize underlying assumptions, to distinguish between elegant, emotionally loaded rhetoric and hard nosed logic. Well-honed critical thinking skills and high levels of cognitive complexity are required to convert information into sound working knowledge.

Interpersonal Competence

All the significant civic work in our society is done by groups. These groups increasingly include participants diverse in gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, and socio-economic status. The ability to listen empathetically, to repeat accurately others' points of view, to be aware of one's own mental models and biases, to understand productive group processes and to call attention to unproductive behaviors, to exercise leadership, and to be a courageous follower all are required for effective contribution.

Emotional Intelligence

Most social issues generate strong feelings in ourselves and among others who hold varied points of view. Being tuned in to our own reactions and expressing those feelings in ways which do not demean or antagonize others who differ is critical for reaching the compromises inevitably required for solid, broadly owned, decisions and actions.

Integrity

Every social issue is value laden. Every dollar we spend is a value statement. Understanding the implied as well as the espoused values which underlie varied positions and decisions is critical for dealing with means-ends issues and for anticipating the long range implications of particular actions. Being clear and open about our own values so there is internal consistency between word and word, word and deed, deed and deed means that others, whether or not they agree, know where we stand. Furthermore, because significant social change takes substantial investments of time, energy, and emotion, unless we are value driven, we are unlikely to hang in there for the long haul.

Motivation

Finally, the capacity to invest oneself in something larger than one's own self-interest is fundamental. All change starts with a single person. The sense that we, working well with others, can make a difference, rather than that we are feeble pawns in the hands of fate, underlies any civic contribution.

So the starting point for maximizing civic learning and social responsibility is reaching reasonable consensus on institutional purposes. Next we need to address academic policies and practices.

Academic Policies and Practices at the Core

Although it is true that “moral and civic responsibility...is best achieved through the cumulative, interactive effect of numerous curricular and extra curricular programs,” appropriate academic policies and practices are critical to maximizing these outcomes. Unless curricular content and structures, pedagogical practices, experiential learning, peer relationships, and student-faculty relationships are properly aligned, there will not be much contribution to the knowledge, intellectual competence, interpersonal competence, emotional intelligence, integrity, and motivation necessary for responsible citizenship.

We need curricular content concerning the general structures, systems, and processes that characterize varied political and economic systems. We also need content pertinent to local, regional, national, and global issues such as prejudice (i.e., gender, race, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, national origin), the environment (i.e., consumption, water resources, land use, energy, air pollution), the economy (i.e., poverty and wealth, corporate hegemony, employment opportunities, and dislocations), and morality (i.e., political corruption, abortion, crime and punishment, dis-information and mis-information.)

This curricular content cannot be carried simply by special courses or programs. It needs to pervade all our curricular structures: general education, majors and concentrations, interdisciplinary institutes and programs, living and learning centers and communities, capstone experiences, freshman, transfer, senior year experience courses, individualized degree programs, undergraduate research, and residential programming. It needs to cut across all our academic disciplines and professional preparation programs.

But strengthening curricular content will not have much impact if it is “delivered” only by a text, lectures, and multiple choice exams, even if that delivery is jazzed up with technological bells and whistles, PowerPoint presentations, and such. Pedagogical practices need to call for behaviors that are consistent with our desired outcomes and that generate learning that lasts: collaborative and problem-based learning, case studies, learning teams and research teams, socially responsible learning contracts, criterion referenced evaluation.

These pedagogical practices need to incorporate concrete experiences and reflection, applying and testing academic concepts, principles, and theories in real life situations. Off campus, service learning, internships, field studies, and volunteer activities make powerful contributions. On campus, student government, student activities, residence hall governance and decision-making, and accreditation processes for fraternities and sororities also can play a significant role. Intercollegiate and intramural athletics provide potent contexts for reflecting on social stratification, interpersonal relationships, motivation, and integrity.

All these formal academic policies and practices need to be supported by faculty members who are psychologically, physically, and temporally accessible. They need to be supported by peer cultures which emphasize mutual respect, reciprocity, active collaboration, and assistance through peer tutoring, study groups, social action, and multicultural friendships.

Institutional Evaluation

Boyer's "scholarship of teaching" and "scholarship of application" must be explicitly encouraged. Criteria and processes for faculty renewal, promotion, and tenure need to reward community contributions and civic engagement on and off campus. Institutional program evaluation needs to examine the degree to which varied interventions concerning curricula, pedagogical strategies, student-faculty relationships, peer interactions, experiential learning, and new governance arrangements actually improve civic learning and social responsibility among students, faculty, staff, and administrators.

Institutional Governance and Decision Making

"Each institution should consider whether it has its own 'democratic community' in order At many colleges and universities, the typically hierarchical governance structures fail to follow democratic principles. Institutions might consider conducting an internal review of their decision making processes, with particular attention to faculty and student roles, written policies vis-à-vis actual practices, and institutional values. They should face issues and problems squarely, invite diverse opinions and dissent, discuss how to balance competing interests, and encourage collaborative decision-making authority and responsibility. In short, colleges and universities should practice, not just teach, the 'arts of democracy—dialogue, engagement, and shared participation.'" (Thomas 2000, 94)

Participatory decision making provides opportunities to experience the challenges, frustrations, satisfactions, and contributions that accompany shared problem solving. An active community government with significant areas of responsibility, a clear constitution, and shared rules and norms for decision making can be a powerful vehicle for widespread participation by students, staff, faculty members, and administrators. Student participation on all major institutional committees, including those that make personnel decisions, can provide useful opportunities for many students. Constituent representation, by students, staff, and faculty, as well as administrators, on boards of trustees expose key stakeholders to larger issues concerning institutional policies, practices, and support.

"Our ways of handling power differences and diverse points of view and cultures should be models of the civic life we wish to engender in our communities. Encouraging the articulation of differences, and then finding areas

for collaboration, should be the norm rather than the exception.” (Gamson 2000, 372)

Institutional Culture

We will know we have made substantial progress when the institutional culture reflects an overarching concern for civic engagement and social responsibility. We will be getting there when desired outcomes are fully endorsed, widely known, and part of the community vocabulary. We will be getting there when we have a widely owned “campus compact” which outlines the agreed upon behaviors that demonstrate civic engagement and social responsibility, and which apply equally to students, staff members, faculty members, administrators, and trustees. We will be getting there when we share institutional rituals and symbols that emphasize civic learning and social responsibility.

Conclusion

The basic premise here is that colleges and universities can play a critical role in preparing students to be socially responsible citizens. Higher education must reaffirm that liberal learning and civic engagement are key to preparing students for responsible and satisfying lives in a pluralistic democracy. Further, it is incumbent on institutions of higher education through their students, faculty, and administration to fully participate as citizens of the communities in which they reside.

To maximize civic learning and social responsibility calls for major changes in curricular content and pedagogical practices. It calls for widespread, systematic experiential learning throughout academic programs and extracurricular activities. It requires evaluation practices which recognize and reward the scholarships of teaching and application and which examine the effectiveness of varied interventions. It means that institutional governance, decision making, and power sharing must practice what we preach. Ultimately we must generate institutional cultures which give primary place to institutional engagement that strengthens effective citizenship, not only for students, but for staff members, faculty members, and administrators as well.

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