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Walt Whitman Center for the Culture and Politics of Democracy

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**Civic Skills Assessment: A Critical Examination
Working Group Summary Report
November 7 to 9, 1993**

**Walt Whitman Center for the Culture
and Politics of Democracy**

Introduction:

From November 7 to 9, 1993, the Walt Whitman Center hosted the second of two working conferences convened to produce a civic skills assessment instrument.* The working group meetings are a central component of a collaboration by the Whitman Center and The Surdna Foundation, Inc. with additional support from The Markle Foundation designed to produce a civic skills assessment instrument that will be useful for measuring civic attitudes and behaviors within the context of a wide variety of civic experiences including education-based service learning programs and service corps. With most participants attending both meeting, the two conferences brought together in total 47 scholars, community activists and representatives from foundations and government to assist in the development of a civic skills assessment (Participant Lists Attached, pp. 13 - 17).

The members of the working group were charged with the task of developing and clarifying empirically testable concepts of community, service, learning, and democratic citizenship that were to be incorporated into the civic skills assessment. The first working group meeting held from November 22 to 24, 1992, brought together 31 representatives from universities, community

*Special thanks to Mark Brown, Michael Cripps, J. Crosson, Kim Downing, Doug Emery, Erika Gabrielsen, David Gutterman, Claire Snyder and Greg Vafis for the many important contributions they made to the 1993 working group.

organizations, and foundations to focus on this critical task. At the working group's second meeting, several new members with special skills in the areas of measurement and in running community based service organizations joined the group for two days of intensive analysis and criticism focused principally on the first working draft of the Center's civic skills assessment.

As a result of the systematic constructive criticisms voiced at the second meeting, the Whitman Center's Measurement team is thoroughly revising the civic skills assessment instrument to enhance its usefulness for the assessment of civic education and other service based citizenship experiences. The Center's Measurement team, led by Prof. Jeff Smith (Department of Educational Psychology, Rutgers University), intends to complete the revision process by June 1994. The Center is interested in collaborating with other organizations to field test the civic skills assessment in 1994 and 1995.

The Conference Process:

This collaborative project had the practical goal of producing a working civic skills assessment instrument and has succeeded in doing so. The Whitman Center's planning process for the second meeting was driven by the results oriented character of the project. We were particularly anxious to bring together not only theorists and skilled social science research specialists but also the service learning and community organization leaders whose constituencies are those who may benefit from using the civic skills assessment. The 30 participants who attended the second meeting engaged in an exchange that included the theoretical and technical concerns of the measurement specialists and political theorists as well as the pedagogical and

civic concerns of the practitioners, allowing us to focus both on the constraints imposed by objective measuring and the demands of the subject to be measured -- in this case, the rich kind of citizenship associated with service learning and other local civic practices.

In preparation for the second working group meeting, the Whitman Center's Measurement team (Janice Ballou, Director, Center for Public Interest Polling, Eagleton Institute, Benjamin R. Barber, Director Walt Whitman Center John Dedrick, Project Director, Brenda Loyd, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia and Jeff Smith) developed and pre-tested three versions of the civic skills assessment tool. The audiences pre-tested included an introductory political science course at Rutgers University and the volunteers enrolled in the Newark Summer of Service Program. Each of these preliminary assessments took the form of close-ended questions designed to tap attitudes and behaviors which the team believed might constitute civic skills for democratic citizenship of both traditional pluralist (Madisonian) and participatory (Jeffersonian) types. The Measurement team collated findings from the three assessments in a workbook that was given to conference participants. The results were helpful in assessing the usefulness of the measures developed by the team.

The conference sessions were organized around the presentation of this working document. The aim was to encourage a constructive dialogue between the measurement experts and community leaders about the conceptual and measurement strategy developed by the measurement team. Following a technical presentation of the items along with some of the assessment results and their apparent implications for the validity and reliability (or not) of the

instrument, the floor was open to extended critical discussion from the theorists (including Benjamin R. Barber, Pamela Conover, Richard Battistoni, Donald Searing, Manfred Stanley, Mary Stanley, and Linda Zerilli,) service learning and community leaders (including Michael Brown, Keith Canty, Ernesto Cortes, Jr., Vanessa Kirsch, Goodwin Liu, Keith Morton, Beate Schewick Mary Strong and Tim Stanton) and representatives from foundations and government (including Edgar Beckham, Martin Friedman, Kirin Handa, Jim Mustaachia, Trish Thompson, Edward Skloot, and Deborah Visser).

Monday, November 7, 1993:

Benjamin Barber chaired the meetings. He introduced the sessions by way of a cautionary story about a man who after a long unsuccessful search for his lost wallet was asked whether he was sure he had lost it where he was looking and who replied, "No. I lost it on the other side of the street, but the light was better here." Barber charged the group with the difficult task of producing a conversation that would not only enable those who might eventually use the assessment instrument to understand the constraints imposed by social science methodology on those designing it (who tended to work where the light was brightest!), but also one that would enable the testers to understand the normative aims and pedagogical ends of those for whom the assessment was being designed. The dilemma for the group was how to be sure that the assessment does not represent what is a workable methodology for the testers but one that largely is irrelevant to the concerns of those who were looking for the wallet (the community leaders).

This dilemma turned out to be defining of the first day's discussion in which the leadership of community and service learning organizations again and again alluded to the normative character of their work, which challenged conventional paradigms of politics, the ways in which their constituents were likely to reject the very notion of conventional citizenship being put forward implicitly in the instrument and generally expressing a deep dissatisfaction with both the conceptual clarity and programmatic applicability of the assessment as developed to that point.

- Participants questioned the general applicability the assessment as initially drafted to their program needs. Keith Canty, Director D. C. Service Corps, gave voice to this thread of criticism when he reported to the working group that he had shared the preliminary assessment with his staff. According to Canty: "I took the questionnaire to my staff to get some discussion from them and they were very angry about it. They felt that I had wasted their time.... They felt that either the document was extremely irrelevant or was extremely dangerous in doing no more than validating the status quo. This was because they felt that it had no application to what citizens did in their world and what they really needed to know to be able to do to be valued productive members of the community".
- Several members (including Ernesto Cortes , Director, Texas Industrial Area Foundation, and Edward Skloot Executive Director, Surdna Foundation, Inc.) expressed concern that the assessment focused too much on attitudes and self-reports rather than on an actual account of civic behaviors. For instance, Cortes remarked that the instrument

asks people if they think of themselves as leaders rather than demonstrates if they actually are leaders.

- Still others (including Manfred Stanley, Professor of Sociology, Maxwell School, Syracuse University and Linda Zerilli, Associate Director, Whitman Center) questioned the utility of the assessment on the grounds that it did not account for the effects of the social contexts in which it would be used.

The afternoon session of the first day opened with a presentation by the Whitman Center's Measurement team that was designed to respond to criticisms raised in the morning. The Whitman Center Measurement team was sympathetic to the practitioners concerns, and responded by trying to more fully include the practitioners in dialogue about civic skills assessment as it had evolved at Rutgers since the group's last meeting.. Janice Ballou and John Dedrick recounted many of the theoretical and practical issues the Measurement Team encountered in their attempt to develop a civic skills assessment tool that was conceptually inclusive enough to be valid, methodologically reliable, and still brief enough to be generally useful. This presentation by the Measurement team was followed by a fruitful afternoon session in which the group worked together to try to find ways to meet the demands for validity, reliability, and believability in social scientific research with the normative and pedagogical concerns of community leaders. By the end of the first day of critical debate, there was not a consensus within the group about how to best accomplish this goal, but there was tangible progress. The Measurement team understood better the insufficiencies of their pilot instrument with respect to the needs of the communities in which it was likely

to be used. The community leaders understood better major constraints operating on those who design replicable, objective skills assessments of any kind. Still, there was no agreement on how the assessment might be successfully modified to maintain standards and at the same time meet the imperatives outlined by the community representatives.

To conclude the first day, the Whitman Center asked a number of the community and service learning program leaders to comment on the project. Their remarks are suggestive of the progress the group made over the first day's meetings.

- Keith Canty, Ernesto Cortes, and Goodwin Liu (Program Officer, Corporation for National and Community Service) each suggested that the project needs to address more explicitly an overt normative model of good citizenship. As Liu and Canty argued, the use of such an assessment drives larger considerations about the content of good citizenship. Community leaders and teachers may design service learning programs geared to the assessment. They will teach to the test.
- Richard Battistoni (Director, Rutgers Citizenship and Service Education) suggested that qualitative evaluation strategies provide the best information for leaders running citizenship programs. Nevertheless, he argued that quantitative assessments need to be used. For Battistoni, this project is valuable because it is considerably more sophisticated than the current voter registration question used to assess civic outcomes.

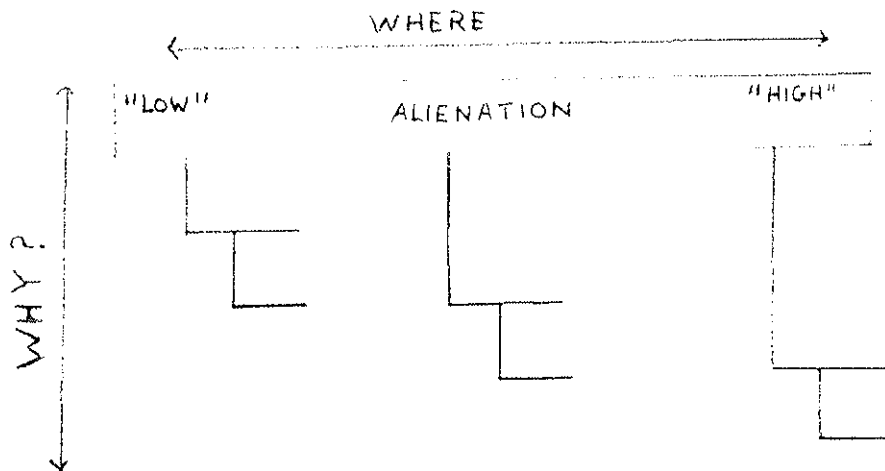
- Edgar Beckham (Program Officer, Education and Culture, Ford Foundation) told the group that there is considerable skepticism within philanthropic foundations about the viability of quantitatively measuring citizenship. Still, he argued, this kind of project is important because it furthers discourse about the nature and assessment of citizenship education programs.
- Michael Brown (Co-Director, Boston City Year) discussed the problem of recovering public space in American society. He encouraged the group to think about developing questions that would help to capture paths to good citizenship. He asked whether the instrument was designed primarily to assess learners or to assess programs.

Tuesday, November 8, 1993:

On the morning of the second day, following an extended and relaxed evening of informal exchange and leisurely discussions, which as sometimes happens, were even more productive than the formal debate preceding them, the conferees engaged in what turned out to be a breakthrough session. The nub of the first day's debate turned on whether objective assessments could really investigate important "why" questions: not just does someone register as "tolerant" on a scale, but why? Not just whether someone votes or not, but why? Apathy? Anger? A sense of Powerlessness? Not just where someone scores on traditional alienation questions, but again why? The measurement team was well aware of the problem. Smith pointed out that answers to many of the important "why" questions could be answered through a more complex

assessment instrument, but such an instrument would be more useful for research purposes than civic assessment. In not the aim, he asked, to identify a range of civic attitudes and behaviors and develop measures that capture where an individual is at a given point-in-time on those measures? Explaining why an individual is where he/she is on the scales is another task and challenges the limits of a self-administered assessment. Yet, replied others, it is answers to why questions that permit us to discriminate between different kinds of citizenship and get at the important normative characteristics of good citizenship.

Towards the end of the early morning session, Dr. Jeff Smith, with his strong capacity to visualize methodologies, devised an ingenious solution to help broaden the usefulness of the civic skills assessment for research purposes without forgoing the primary task of developing a set of valid, reliable, and believable scales which capture central civic attitudes and behaviors. Using an "alienated - integrated" spectrum to identify the "where" question, he demonstrated by using a pictorial equivalent of formal grammatical parsing how follow up deepening "why" questions might be folded into more conventional "where" questions.



Thus, we might still have a scale in which alienation was measured in conventional ways, but it could also be a scale that could be parsed and thus modified by follow-up questions which could establish whether alienation was the result of complacency, indifference, a sense of victimhood, or rage of a kind that might energize politics.

This in turn would make it possible to reinterpret data about alienation in more complex ways that addressed the concerns of educators, trainers and community organizers. For example, young people engaged in service might well initially register as "more alienated" than they were before their service began as a consequence of growth in their sensitivity and political perception -- actually a positive result of service which evaluators would hope to measure. An assessment instrument that cannot capture the meaning of this temporary "backslide," which actually is a form of pedagogical progress, would miss the meaning of what it was measuring. Similarly, someone self-reporting on a tolerance scale might well acquire greater honesty about some of their prejudices as a result of service learning and report out as "more intolerant" on a simple tolerance scale. Again, the training would seem to have "failed" when in fact it had succeeded in creating more self-critical honesty -- a first step on the way to challenging and overcoming real prejudice. Only with questions that parse "where" (simple scale) questions as more complex "why" questions, can such "developmental" features of civic learning be captured. If Smith's breakthrough method can be implemented, we may yet develop an instrument that gets below the veneer of conventional definition and in effect permits those taking the assessment to offer their own insights and explanations about their objective behavior as determined by the assessment. This gives to the assessment a strong normative flavor and enables those who wish to use it to

challenge conventionalist notions of political behavior. At the same time, by retaining the first level of conventional measures (where measures) it provides a first stream of data fully compatible with and comparable with existing social science data sets. All of Tuesday's participants sensed the importance of this breakthrough.

Tuesday's discussions also resulted in additional important conceptual developments that will need to be carefully considered and judiciously integrated into the assessment.

- Deborah Visser (Program Officer for Community Revitalization, Surdna Foundation, Inc.), Erin Flannery (Evaluations, Public Allies), and Keith Morton (Campus Compact) each pushed the group to consider further the relationship between mentoring and democratic citizenship.
- Keith Canty, Manfred Stanley, and Mary Stanley (Professor of Public Affairs, Maxwell School, Syracuse University) discussed the importance of developing measures of agency.
- Benjamin Barber and Donald Searing (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) struggled with ways the assessment could include measures of deliberation.

Next Steps:

The Whitman Center based Measurement came away from this second working conference excited, energized, and committed to trying to develop a revision of the civic skills assessment instrument that was consonant with Tuesday morning's breakthrough discussion-- a discussion that emerged from Monday's highly productive "muddle" and opened everything to critical examination. Our aim will be to design and then to test a version of the assessment which responds particularly to the concerns and outcomes of the conferences. The first post-working group revision will be developed primarily for research purposes. We hope that a second post working group revision of the civic skills assessment instrument designed principally for assessment purposes will be available by June 1994. Many representatives from community and service organizations at the conference generously offered to test the instrument in its new form with their constituencies. Following completion of the revision we will move to test it on learners from as many different groups as our project budget permits. Following further revision and testing we intend to create what we hope will be a beta version of the assessment which will be ready in the fall of 1994 to begin a large scale norming study.

Walt Whitman Center and Surdna Foundation, Inc.
Participant List
Clarifying and Measuring Community, Service, Learning,
and Democratic Citizenship
Working Group Meeting
November 22-24, 1992

Ms. Janice Ballou; Director, Center for Public Interest Polling, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University

Professor Benjamin R. Barber; Director, Walt Whitman Center for the Culture and Politics of Democracy, Rutgers University

Professor Richard Battistoni; Director, Civic Education and Community Service Program, Rutgers University

Professor Harry Boyte; The Humphrey Center, University of Minnesota

Mr. Keith Canty; Director, D. C. Service Corps

Professor Jean Cohen; Department of Political Science, Columbia University

Mr. Ernesto Cortes, Jr.; Director, Texas Industrial Areas Foundation

Ms. Dorothy Cotton; Cornell University

Mr. David Crowley; Project Director of CampusServe, Council on Higher Education

Mr. John Dedrick; Project Director for Surdna Grant, Walt Whitman Center

Professor Lisa Disch; Department of Political Science, University of Minnesota

Ms. Monique Dixon; Director of Programs, Phillips Brooks House, Harvard University

Mr. Donald J. Eberly; Executive Director, Coalition for National Service

Professor Amitai Etzioni; University Professor, George Washington University

Ms. Franciena Fowler-Turner, CVA; Director, St. Ann's Volunteer Program

Professor Ricard Gomà; Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Professor Carol Gould; Stevens Institute of Technology

**Walt Whitman Center and Surdna Foundation, Inc.
Participant List Continued
November 22 to 24, 1992**

Professor Brenda Loyd; Curry School of Education, University of Virginia

Dr. Suzanne Morse; Director, Pew Partnership for Civic Change

Mr. Keith Morton; Project Director of Integrating Service with Academic Study,
Campus Compact

Professor Alan Ryan; Department of Politics, Princeton University

Ms. Smita Singh; Program Officer, Commission on National and Community
Service

Professor Jeff Smith; Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University

Professor Rogers Smith; Department of Political Science, Yale University

Professor Manfred Stanley; The Maxwell School, Syracuse University

Professor Mary Stanley; The Maxwell School, Syracuse University

Mr. Charles Supple; Vice President, Youth Engaged in Service, The Points of Light
Foundation

Mr. Edward Skloot; Executive Director, Surdna Foundation

Mr. Gerald Taylor; National Staff, Industrial Areas Foundation

Dr. Josep Valles; Rector, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Ms. Deborah Visser; Program Officer for Community Revitalization, Surdna
Foundation

Walt Whitman Center and Surdna Foundation, Inc.
Participant List Continued
November 22 to 24, 1992

Participant Observers:

Professor Eleanor Brilliant; School of Social Work, Rutgers University

Mr. David Burns; Assistant Vice President for Student Services Policy, Rutgers University

Dr. Martin Friedman; New Jersey Department of Higher Education

Professor Norman Glickman; Director, Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University

Mr. Mark Murphy; Executive Director, Fund For New Jersey

Professor Catherine Stimson; University Professor, Rutgers University

Professor Jon Van Til; Department of Urban Studies, Rutgers University

Professor Linda Zerilli; Associate Director, Walt Whitman Center for the Culture and Politics of Democracy

Dr. Susan Zivi; Director, The New Jersey Academy for Service and Service Learning, The New Jersey Institute of Technology

Project Staff:

Michael Cripps, Lynn Davern, Wendy Gunther-Canada, D. A. Hamlin,
Megumi Kinoshita, Scott McLean, Greg Vafis, Michelle Yurecko

Walt Whitman Center and Surdna Foundation, Inc.
Participant List
The Civic Skills Assessment: A Critical Examination
November 7, 1993 to November 9, 1993

Ms. Janice Ballou; Director, Center for Public Interest Polling, Eagleton Institute,
Rutgers University

Prof. Benjamin R. Barber; Director, Walt Whitman Center, Rutgers University

Prof. Richard Battistoni; Director, Citizenship and Service Education, Rutgers
University

Mr. Michael Brown; Co-Director, Boston City Year

Mr. Keith Canty; Director, D.C. Service Corps

Mr. Edgar F. Beckham; Program Officer, Education and Culture, Ford Foundation

Prof. Pamela Conover; Department of Political Science, University of North
Carolina, Chapel Hill

Mr. Ernesto Cortes, Jr.; Director, Texas Industrial Areas Foundation

Mr. John Dedrick; Project Director, Walt Whitman Center, Rutgers University

Prof. Janet Eyler; Department of Human Services, Vanderbilt University

Ms. Erin Flannery; Evaluation, Public Allies

Dr. Martin Friedman; Office of Special and Interagency Programs,
New Jersey Department of Higher Education

Ms. Kiran Handa; Governor's Office of Voluntarism, State of New Jersey

Prof. Jane Junn; Department of Political Science, Rutgers University

Ms. Vanessa Kirsch; Executive Director, Public Allies

Mr. Goodwin Liu; Program Officer, Corporation for National and Community
Service

Prof. Brenda Loyd; Curry School of Education, University of Virginia

**The Civic Skills Assessment: A Critical Examination
Participant List Continued**

Mr. Keith Morton; Project Director for Integrating Service with Academic Study,
Campus Compact

Mr. Jim Mustacchia; Economic Development Amelior Foundation

Dr. Beate Schiwek; Vice President, Felician College

Prof. Donald Searing; Department of Political Science, University of North
Carolina, Chapel Hill

Mr. Edward Skloot; Executive Director, Surdna Foundation, Inc.

Prof. Jeffrey Smith; Department of Educational Psychology, Rutgers University

Prof. Manfred Stanley; Maxwell School, Syracuse University

Prof. Mary Stanley; Maxwell School, Syracuse University

Dr. Tim Stanton; Director, Hass Center for Public Service, Stanford University

Ms. Mary Strong; Chair, Citizens' Committee on Biomedical Ethics

Ms. Trish Thompson; Corporation for National and Community Service

Ms. Deborah Visser; Program Officer for Community Revitalization,
Surdna Foundation; Inc.

Prof. Linda Zerilli; Associate Director, Walt Whitman Center,
Rutgers University

Project Staff:

Mr. Mark Brown , Mr. Michael Cripps, Mr. J. Crosson, Ms. Kim Downing,

Dr. Doug Emery, Ms. Barbara Fitzgerald, Ms. Erika Gabrielsen,

Mr. David Gutterman , Mr. Scott McLean , Ms. Claire Snyder , and Mr. Greg Vafis