

Student Political Engagement and the Renewal of Democracy

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Abstract

In this essay some emerging trends in college student political engagement are reviewed and ideas presented for educating this generation of students for democracy. Drawing upon their work with students on college campuses around the country, Hollander and Longo argue that students are not apathetic, but colleges and universities need to do more to tap into their interest in a different kind of politics by developing more opportunities for students to create a public life that is more open, participatory, relational, and inclusive.

Democracy must be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.

John Dewey, 1916, p. 122

In the early days of the 21st century, we realized that for Campus Compact to fulfill its mission of educating the next generation for a democratic society, we could not continue to talk *about* students, but had to have conversations *with* students about their ideas and understandings of public issues crucial to our democracy. One of the very first forums of our national student civic engagement campaign, “Raise Your Voice,” was instructive. We asked a diverse group of students during the opening of a workshop to tell “stories of service” and “stories of politics” in which they had been involved as college students.

The students began by reporting on some of their community service projects. Not surprisingly, students spoke with passion about their service and the relationships they formed, providing examples ranging from tutoring in schools to working with the homeless. It was, however, much more difficult for the students to recount stories of politics. In fact, the room fell silent, and we received mostly blank stares. Eventually, the students spoke up, explaining a lack of interest in, or time for, politics. But when students began to talk about some of their campus activities, it became evident that engagement work among this generation is much more complicated. Students in the

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group had volunteered with local immigrants in their local communities, and this led one to campaign against an anti-immigrant proposition on the ballot in California. Students also found time to organize efforts on behalf of a state law that would ban the use of Native American names and mascots in all public schools. When asked about the seemingly political nature of these activities, students explained their problems with politicians and the negative connotation that came with the term. One student finally reflected, "I don't do politics, but my service work is political."

This type of service seems to be an example of the kind of "politics that's not called politics," a trend that David Mathews (1993), president of the Kettering Foundation, saw emerging in focus groups the foundation was conducting with college students in the early 1990s. This type of engagement, he argued, is more deliberate and more pragmatically oriented toward solving problems. This idea seems even more pronounced when considering the current generation of college students.

The millennial generation—those born after 1982—are certainly not apathetic. They care deeply about public issues, even as they sometimes feel overwhelmed and unsure how they can have an impact. They are also involved in multiple forms of engagement, especially when offered the opportunity, as we have seen in the rising numbers of students involved in community service over the past decade, even as conventional political engagement was declining (Longo and Meyer, 2006). Students are also involved in using new technologies in creative and more political ways. But they continue to reject the language of "politics" and the divisiveness that has come to be associated with our current political culture. In short, students do not want to be asked to participate in the system as it is, but would rather strive to be part of creating a public life that is more open, participatory, relational, and inclusive.

This idea is also strongly rooted in the Wingspread Conference on Student Civic Engagement in 2001, a conversation with thirty three college students from campuses across the country on their "civic experiences" in higher education. This dialogue led to the student-written *New Student Politics* (Long, 2002), which forcefully argues that student work in communities is not an alternative to politics, but rather an "alternative politics."

Of course, we agree that not "all community service counts as or can be automatically equated with political activity," as Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich and Corngold caution in *Educating for Democracy* (2007, p. 34). As they argue in their study of innovative political engagement programs in higher education: "civic participation can potentially contribute to political development but often it does not realize that potential" (p. 38). This is similar to what Westheimer and Kahne (2004) found in their study of the conceptions of citizenship in civic education programs, which leads them to ask: "What political and ideological interests are embedded in varied conceptions of citizenship?" (p. 246).

And yet, understanding how students view and practice political and civic engagement must be a foundation for efforts to increase student engagement in public life. Students in the Wingspread statement argued for a blend of the personal and the political, helping them to be more whole as they address public issues through community-based work. While many of the students at Wingspread expressed frustration with politics-as-usual, they were not apathetic or disengaged. To the contrary, they

pointed out that what many perceive as disengagement may actually be a conscious choice; they argued that, in fact, many students are deeply involved in non-traditional forms of engagement. These students saw their “service politics” as the bridge between community service and conventional politics, combining public power with community and relationships. This new politics connects individual acts of service to a broader framework of systemic social change.

The students at Wingspread noted that they see democracy as richly participatory; that negotiating differences is a key element of politics; that their service in communities was done in the context of systemic change; and that higher education needs to do more to promote civic education. Furthermore, the students proclaimed, “We see ourselves as misunderstood by those who measure student engagement by conventional standards that don’t always fit our conceptions of democratic participation” (v). The *New Student Politics* concludes by quoting E.J. Dionne’s (2000) analysis that “the great reforming generations are the ones that marry the aspirations of service to the possibilities of politics and harness the good work done in local communities to transform a nation” (p. 20). The students, it seems, are part of a long tradition of younger generations casting a new civic identity and different kind of politics (Longo and Meyer, 2006).

The “new student politics,” writes Harry Boyte (2004), is a “sign that today’s students in American colleges and universities are beginning to think and act politically, as organizers for change” (p. 85). A series of public declarations and national initiatives on college campuses further illustrates this trend toward students acting as political organizers for an alternative politics. For instance, following up on the Wingspread Conference, as mentioned above, Campus Compact launched a national campaign to encourage college students to be more involved in public life called “Raise Your Voice.” Over a four year period from 2002 to 2006, students on more than three hundred college campuses were involved in mapping issues and power on campus, hosting dialogues on campus and community public issues, and attempting to bring about civic change. Students from campuses across several states, including Oklahoma, Michigan, Maine, and West Virginia, wrote “civic declarations” calling upon policy makers and leaders in higher education to increase their support of student political engagement (see www.actionforchange.org). The Oklahoma Students' Civic Engagement Resolution (2003) is especially eloquent, as students from eighteen colleges and universities across public and private campuses in Oklahoma issued a declaration to the governor, state legislators, college and university presidents, and other civic leaders:

We declare that it is our responsibility to become an engaged generation with the support of our political leaders, education institutions, and society. . . . (¶ 8)

The mission of our state higher education institutions should be to educate future citizens about their civic as well as professional duties. We urge our institutions to prioritize and implement civic education in the classroom, in research, and in services to the community. (¶ 10)

Even more recently, Mobilize, a national youth civic engagement network, launched Democracy 2.0 with the underlining idea of “Young people not only contributing to, but also building the democracy they want to inherit.” Mobilize has been especially successful at using technology to engage young people in public life. At a summit of youth leaders, they developed a call to action:

Our generation is telling a different story. We are uniquely positioned to foster community engagement through social networks of all kinds. It is our responsibility to use information and technology to upgrade democracy, transform communication and advance political engagement and civic participation Most importantly, we are leaders in a society that yearns for leadership. It’s our democracy, it’s time to act. (¶ 10)

This civic action often looks different from generations of the past. W. Lance Bennett (2008) writes about a generational change in civic identity from *dutiful citizen* to *actualizing citizen*. The former is characterized by the duty to vote, becoming informed on public issues, and joining civil society organizations. The latter, by contrast, reflects a diminished sense of government obligation and a higher sense of individual purpose. Voting is less meaningful than such actions as volunteering, boycotting, or boycotting (purchasing socially responsible products); media and politicians are mistrusted, while loose networks of community action are maintained by interactive information technology.

The use of new technology is an important development in understanding student political engagement. Technology-driven social networking, for instance, has been at the center of the surge of interest among young people in the 2008 presidential campaign, where youth turnout has almost doubled (compared to the last comparable election cycle in 2000), and in many states—ranging from Iowa to Mississippi—it has tripled, according to data compiled by CIRCLE. Youth engagement in the election is most especially seen with the candidacy of Sen. Barack Obama, who has overwhelmingly won the youth vote in most Democratic primary states and seems poised to galvanize young voters in the general election.

The Obama campaign has inspired young people to use technology to engage in politics. For instance, two Facebook sites, started by two different college students, have matured into sophisticated web-driven grassroots campaigns that include field organizing and fund raising. For each of these two political organizers, it was their first foray into electoral politics.

So why has the Obama campaign been so attractive to young people? As one editor of a college newspaper described it, Obama brings a multiracial background to the most diverse and tolerant American generation in history (Graham-Felsen, 2007). His “post-partisan” rhetoric appeals to a politically disillusioned generation coming of age during the impeachment of Bill Clinton, the 2000 election debacle, 9/11, and the invasion of Iraq. For students who are very involved in community service, but skeptical about conventional politics, Obama’s community organizing background also seems to resonate.

Focus groups conducted by CIRCLE also illustrate changes in civic attitudes and practices among the current generation of college students. *Millennials Talk Politics* (Kiesa et al., 2007) finds that students today are different from those in the 1990s. Based on focus groups with more than 400 college students on a dozen college campuses, the researchers found that today's college students are (a) more engaged than GenXers; (b) involved locally but are ambivalent about formal politics; (c) dislike spin and are looking for authentic opportunities to discuss public issues; and (d) getting uneven opportunities for civic engagement depending on the college or university they attend. The report concludes that while students are not fully engaged with the political system or fully informed on issues, they are "aware of the importance of policy and politics, conscious that it is desirable to be informed and engaged, and fairly optimistic about the power of collective action" (p. 10). At least partially, the report contends, these changes can be attributed to the increase in the institutional infrastructure for engagement, beginning in the 1990s. "It is clear that today's college students, compared to students from Generation X, have more structured opportunities to engage in community service and are presented with more messages about the importance of civic participation" (p. 11).

Cultivating Student Political Engagement

What does this mean for those of us who want to encourage the civic engagement of college students and foster an institutional commitment to educating for democratic citizenship? We stipulate that this generation is not apathetic, nor even necessarily apolitical. But the form of their participation looks different, and their distaste for a politics of division, big money, and "slick" sound bite advertising is palpable (and shared by many in older generations). To give students a strong civic foundation, it is important that colleges and universities not shy away from supporting students' political engagement, as well as their service work. In doing so, we can help students to understand that politics are not inherently "bad," but rather a set of tools for self-governance in a representative democracy. To be effective in political engagement requires an understanding of power relationships, of public policy making, and of the history of American political structures, including how they were developed and how they operate today. It also requires a set of public skills that can be learned through civic practice, skills that can help students re-make politics in a way that it is more in line with their vision for public life.

The most important principle for colleges and universities to promote political engagement is not to assume how this generation thinks about politics or civic life, but rather, to engage students in ways in which they can express their own perspectives and find their own political voices. None of us should assume that rhetoric we take for granted, such as "democracy," "civic engagement," or "political engagement," is understood in the same way by current college students as we mean it. This does not mean students cannot learn from history; it does mean that we need to "listen eloquently" to where students are coming from, while at the same time be explicit about our own understandings and perceptions. It must be a conversation about the very meaning of

democracy. And we have to create spaces on campus for students to struggle with their own conceptions of these terms, and to begin to build a rich and relevant public culture.

Rigorous, not rancorous, dialogue about important issues is something students expect to encounter in college more often than they actually do. In fact, one of the key findings from the focus groups conducted by CIRCLE was that, “We see evidence that there is substantial demand for deliberation on college campuses” (Kiesa et al., 2007, p. 32). The report also stipulates that, “College students are hungry for a particular kind of conversation that is serious and authentic, involves diverse views, but is free of manipulation and ‘spin’” (p. 32).

One fruitful approach is to determine what issues students care about and engage them in civil conversations about these issues. On campuses around the country, students are using National Issue Forums, study circles, world cafe, sustained dialogue, and other methods to discuss the issues they care most about (Dedrick, Grattan, and Dientsfrey, 2008; Gastil and Levine, 2005). In one example, at Widener College, there is a student driven dialogue about the uses of personal web networking sites. This debate addresses the implications of third party access to information that students share on their social networking accounts (which many consider to be “private”) and the appropriate role of the college administration and/or government as either a censor of content or access, or as an enforcer of an online code of conduct. Embedded in this discussion, of course, are important principles of free speech, right to privacy, and social responsibility in the age of technology.

Similarly, deliberation can help connect service with politics when it is used as a reflection tool for students involved in community service by helping students develop civic skills, knowledge, and values during reflection upon their service in communities. Another increasingly promising practice which links development of students' civic skills with community base work is to train students to become facilitators of community-wide deliberations on critical issues such as local growth policy or school funding.

Supporting the development of students as “colleagues” to lead dialogues on campus is another important approach for cultivating student agency in the academy. We need to see students as co-creators of both academic and co-curricular engagement opportunities. To this end, campuses are using student teaching or community assistants in service learning courses, including maintaining community connections and leading reflection sessions. Many students are designing their own engagement projects in the local and international communities and seeking faculty assistance in preparing for, and then reflecting on, these experiences.

This idea is central to *Students as Colleagues: Expanding the Circle of Service Learning Leadership* (Zlotkowski, Longo, and Williams, 2006), which has a myriad of helpful examples of how to build the civic skills of students through collaborative, reciprocal approaches. The most effective of these programs are framed by a developmental approach to building civic skills, knowledge, and competency. Another innovative practice, which we think can be rather easily adopted, is providing scholarships for students with experience with service in high school, and then using this team of students to play leadership roles in service and civic engagement on campus. Other examples include student-led courses and student-designed community-based research projects.

Finally, colleges and universities must provide more institutional support for educating students for *political* engagement. The highest levels of colleges and universities, from college presidents and chief academic officers to members of the boards of trustees, must make student engagement in the democracy a priority. But empowering students for real leadership also means being ready to be challenged. It must be said that students learn about politics from the way it is practiced on campus and when they become engaged, this is often where they turn their attention. For instance, in addressing civil rights, apartheid in South Africa, sweatshop labor practices, and the working poor, students organized politically in ways that might have threatened some administrators. These campaigns should be celebrated and seen as part of the many teachable moments available on campus.

Former Duke President Nannerl Keohane saw this when she was confronted by one of the nation's first anti-sweatshop campaigns. She speculates that the protests at Duke, asking that university apparel manufacturers provide a living wage and independent monitoring of their workers, grew out of the students' sensible and relational approach, along with their interest in seeing the impact of their efforts—which often gets credited for the rise in community service. “This generation is one where there's a strong sense of personal responsibility to make a difference for immediate, real people you can see and touch,” Keohane said, adding, “My own hunch, as a political theorist, is this sweatshop movement is a direct outgrowth of this practical mindset” (as cited in *Greenhouse* 1999, A14).

Colleges and university leaders should encourage the development of students' “practical mindset” from direct service to more political action. This is beginning to happen in a variety of programs, many of which are highlighted in *Educating for Democracy* (Colby et al., 2007). But if we are going to meet the challenge set forth by John Dewey, if we are going to continue to see education as the midwife for the renewal of democracy, these programs are not enough.

For colleges and universities to support fully the cultivation of non-partisan political engagement, there is a need for more opportunities and resources, especially in making the connections between volunteer work in communities and political engagement. Unfortunately, federally funded programs such as VISTA, federal work-study, and AmeriCorps, have placed restrictions on any student political involvement. Students supported with federal funds are not even allowed to conduct voter registration drives. These limitations make it imperative that campuses find other means to provide students with opportunities for political engagement. Opportunities for engagement can be achieved with more service learning courses that connect service and political change. Private donors can support student political engagement and a number of campuses are responding with endowed centers for civic engagement (e.g. Tufts, Amherst, DePaul, and Duke).

We need to create innumerable opportunities for our students to do the “real, hard work of citizenship,” and this means, as was argued in the *Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education* (Campus Compact 1999), “committing ourselves to helping catalyze and lead a national movement to reinvigorate the public purposes and civic mission of higher education.” Students, as we have found, are central

to this effort, but we need to listen carefully to their voices as we continually strive to make our campuses practice grounds and agents for a new democracy.

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