

Educating Citizens: Civic Engagement and the Urban/Metropolitan University

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Abstract

The recent pledge by 400 college and university presidents to reinvigorate the civic mission of their institution is an impetus for members of academe to more clearly define "civic engagement." This paper is a first step in the exploration of this concept at a Southern California university campus. Five faculty from four colleges are interviewed regarding their perceptions of "civic engagement" and the relevance of the values of their discipline to this activity.

Universities and colleges across the United States are revisiting the public purpose of higher education. Social problems are continuing to grow as new ones emerge. The global interdependence of nations, peoples and our natural resources pose complex dilemmas and challenges for future citizens. At the same time there is evidence that the public's commitment to civic life has waned (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler and Tipton 1992, Putnam 2000). College age students also are disillusioned and disengaged from public life (National Commission on Civic Renewal 1998).

In 1999, 400 college and university presidents signed a *Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education* (Campus Compact 1999). Although they acknowledged in the document that higher education has a long standing mission to educate students for future roles as citizens, the signatories declared that they are leading a national movement to "reinvigorate the public purpose and civic mission" of the university as the "challenge of the next millennium is the renewal of our own democratic life and reassertion of social stewardship" (2).

But what exactly is "civic responsibility?" Can higher education play a key role in educating students toward citizenship "without a political agenda," as the declaration maintains? Where do values come into play, for example, in defining "social stewardship" or the "public good?" In the highly specialized environment of academe, does a faculty member from, say, theatre arts, perceive civic responsibility in the same way as a management professor?

These are questions that shaped the present inquiry. The university context of this exploration is a small sized public university in a rapidly growing metropolitan area of southern California. This university has an active service-learning program, which

holds as one of its student learning goals “the enhancement of their sense of civic responsibility.” But as the director of service-learning at this institution remarked, in the aftermath of a nationwide conference on civic participation, “Everyone uses these terms, but their definitions are all over the map!”

The impetus for this study was born. If we are to join with our university president in the effort to institutionalize education for “civic responsibility” in the classroom and community experiences of our students then we need to see how our own faculty perceives this construct. This paper reports on this exploration. But first, we will take a brief look at the literature regarding the definition, conceptual frameworks, skills, and the place of moral development in “civic engagement.”

What is Civic Responsibility/Engagement?

In a publication of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), civic responsibility is defined as “active participation in the public life of a community in an informed, committed, and constructive manner, with a focus on the common good” (Gottlieb and Robinson 2002: 16). Battistoni (2002) points out the reality of such an ambiguous definition:

“The language of citizenship is ideological. Faculty on the left complain that citizenship education tends to convey images of patriotic flag-waving. More conservative faculty see civic engagement masking a leftist, activist agenda. [But] civic engagement is not a monolithic idea to be narrowly defined...There are multiple pathways to civic engagement....from multiple perspectives...” (10-11).

Battistoni proposes two sets of conceptual frameworks: one for social sciences and one for other disciplines ranging from humanities to natural sciences. These delineate the conceptual framework, the view of citizenship, the associated skills, and the disciplines most likely to affiliate with the conceptual.

The skills or “civic” competencies needed by students have also been researched. Gottlieb and Robinson (2000) have adapted from The Constitutional Rights Foundation four areas of skills: intellectual, participatory, research, and persuasion skills. Another rubric these same authors adapted from Vaughn involves four elements of assessment of civic responsibility: community involvement, interpersonal skills, model citizenship, and systems analysis. Although one can infuse or interpret the inclusion of morals and ethics into several of these skills categories, neither is explicit in the delineation of moral competencies. Thus, we turn to the Carnegie Foundation.

Moral Responsibility

In *Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*, the authors report on a five-year effort to review the moral and civic educational models at 12 colleges and universities across the country. These institutions, diverse in mission and type, are explicit about their goals in the moral and

civic development of students. This review rests on the authors' assumption that "the moral and civic strands of education for citizenship cannot be separated" (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont and Stephens 2003: xiii). A second important assumption they hold is that educational institutions are not value-neutral; it is better to examine and acknowledge the value base the institution stands on in shaping the role of future citizens.

In their examination, Colby and colleagues discovered that most educational institutions' mission statements recognize their obligation to prepare citizens in a democracy. This implies certain values such as the following: mutual respect and tolerance; recognition that each individual is part of the larger social fabric; concern for the rights and welfare of individuals and the community, critical self-reflection; commitment to civic and rational discourse (Galston 1991, Gutmann 1987, Macedo 2000). In their analysis of the competencies of moral civic involvement, Colby and colleagues grouped them into three categories: moral and civic understanding such as interpretation, judgment and knowledge; moral and civic motivation (values, interest, emotions such as empathy and hope); and core skills, such as effective communication and ability to engage people to action. Research on human development indicates three areas that are key in future mature moral and civil functioning: knowledge, values and skills (Colby et al. 2003). Thus, one can conclude that if educational institutions are committed to the enhancement of civic responsibility of its future citizens, values and ethics may be an important part of this educational process.

The Current Exploration

The current inquiry took place at a California State University campus committed to service-learning and community partnerships. The number of students involved in service-learning classes increased from 280 students in 2003-04 to more than 1,000 students in 2004-05. The program has an active service-learning cabinet, and is involved in a range of activities from volunteer service, leadership development and service learning workshops for faculty and community, and courses for students. The exploration of civic engagement, then, began with a selective group of faculty who had a history of involvement with the community.

Three areas of inquiry were posed to faculty: What is civic engagement and what does it look like? What opportunities do your students have to be involved in it? What do values and specifically the values of your discipline have to do with civic engagement?

Method

Interviews were co-led by the two authors with five faculty members. The sample was taken from 20 faculty across disciplines who had significant involvement with service-learning classes and community partnership projects. An attempt was made to sample from all five colleges in the university.

Due to the exploratory nature of the inquiry, interviews were conducted from a grounded theory approach. Questions were added from interview to interview as new

concepts and trends arose. Questions regarding defining civic engagement, student opportunities and their values were open ended. The frameworks of Battistoni were provided to the interviewees prior to the meeting, to give them time to review them. They were then asked to comment on which frameworks best described their perception of their discipline's conceptualization of civic engagement. A list of activities was provided, requiring a response of "yes" or "no" as to whether the item demonstrated civic engagement. If a code of ethics was available for that discipline, it became part of the discussion of values.

What We Found Out

Interviews were held with a social work professor and an anthropology professor, both from the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences; a science, math and technology professor from the College of Education; a theater arts professor from the College of Arts and Letters, and a management professor from the College of Business and Public Administration.

From Your Professional Vantage, What is Civic Engagement?

As one might predict, there was a broad range of responses as to the definition of civic engagement and its relationship to the faculty member's discipline. The two professors from social work and anthropology saw civic engagement as endemic to the work of their professions. As the social work professor put it, "The whole thing is civic engagement...it's hard to disentangle professional practice from civic engagement." Similarly, the anthropology professor found a strong link between the two: "Applied cultural anthropology could be a form of civic engagement."

The professor from education defined it in a very nebulous way: "It's everything you do in the community...from the arts to humanities...civic events, the news and media."

The theatre arts professor gave a definition: "Some kind of participation in the community that directly connects with discipline related skills and/or discipline knowledge that serves to enrich or benefit the community. The outside group sees a greater benefit than the provider."

The management professor was the outlier:

"I don't think my discipline has a definition for it. It's not in the curriculum. It's not a term that is important or one we talk about in my discipline."

This professor went on to say that there is a "stakeholder" model for business from the 1950s which charges businesses with a responsibility to multiple constituencies, but remarked that, though it is still taught, "It is at odds with the behavior of companies."

Do Your Students Have Opportunities for Civic Engagement?

The range of student involvement reported mirrored the degree to which professors saw civic engagement as relevant to their discipline. To the social worker, social work was civic engagement, and students practice it all the time in their work with families and organizations. Management students, on the other hand, “might, potentially, but there is no mandate in business classes.”

Students in applied anthropology classes would definitely be involved as “they have to have credibility in the community they work with.” The education and theater arts professors both reported their students to be involved. Because teachers have to do hands on work, the teachers in training would, for example, work at a homework or community center helping kids learn new vocational skills. Theater arts students in drama education “have the biggest opportunity to connect with the school communities,” and the “performance students could take part in a tour and performance at a school.”

What Does it Look Like?

The interviewees were given the following list of activities, adapted from Gottlieb and Robinson (2002: 26), and asked to put a “Yes “ or a “No” by each to indicate if it was an example of civic engagement:

- ___ Helping start an after-school program for children whose parents work during the day
- ___ Joining the armed forces
- ___ Providing dinner once a week at a homeless shelter
- ___ Working for a candidate in a local election
- ___ Walking a frail person (stranger) across a busy street
- ___ Participating in a rally at the state capital opposing a policy position taken by the state legislature or governor
- ___ Leaving your car at work and biking to work every day
- ___ Donating money to a local charity
- ___ Giving blood (not for a specific person such as a relative)
- ___ Tutoring a migrant worker

- _____ Visiting different houses of worship (churches, synagogues, mosques, temples) every week to learn about different religions in the community
- _____ Adopting a child of a different ethnic background
- _____ Working as a state legislator
- _____ Voting

The social work and theater arts professors had almost identical responses, marking all but a couple of items as examples of civic engagement. The other professors gave mixed responses. Universal agreement existed for only two of the items. All respondents agreed that helping start an after school program for children whose parents work, and tutoring a migrant worker were examples of civic engagement. When asked to explain why their rationales for a “Yes” or “No,” the criteria became clearer.

The three faculty with mixed responses were more in agreement on what is and is not civic engagement:

Civic engagement is not something that is effortless e.g. voting, walking a frail person across the street. It goes “above and beyond.”

Civic engagement is “selfless;” it does not primarily serve your own “self interests” or is an action to make you feel good e.g. visiting different houses of worship to learn about religion; proving dinner once a week at a homeless shelter.

Civic engagement takes a longer term commitment. In response to biking to work everyday, the anthropologist remarked, “That’s just another band-aid.”

Disagreement existed related to two criteria: whether or not you can be paid for it (can it be your job?) and if your own motivation or your own “political agenda” can enter into it. This relates to the end product of civic engagement: the common good.

Can We All Agree on the “Common Good?”

We asked faculty members to respond to Gottlieb and Robinson’s (2002) definition of civic engagement: “Active participation in the public life of a community in an informed, committed, and constructive manner, with a focus on the common good” (16).

The rub, of course, was what is the common good? Four of the five faculty members could agree that this was an acceptable general definition that could be tweaked and adapted for various disciplines, but that “the common good” needs to be defined. The anthropology professor went so far as suggesting that the definition for the common good in sustainable development could be used:

...That “resources should be extended to serve future generations, e.g. comfortable shelter, medical care, food, sanitary water, the right to live within a caring, cohesive community, good education, your basic rights are provided for.”

The management professor, on the other hand, responded, “From a perspective of a private citizen, it is a good definition. I’m not sure how it might be modified for a business context. Many businesses would resist presenting documents to the community that would have that language because it implies connection, commitment, and proaction. They would rather say they are law abiding.”

How do Values of the Profession/Discipline Relate to Civic Engagement?

Since civic engagement has to do with benefiting the community in some way, the researchers were interesting in how something is determined “beneficial” and how values come into play, if at all, in determining in what to engage. Interviewees were asked: a) Does your discipline/profession have a universal set of values or code of ethics? And, b) Does this relate at all in guiding civic engagement?

Of these five faculty members, the closer the fit between civic engagement and the discipline, the more relevant the discipline’s values were to that engagement.

The social work professor remarked that the theme of the social work code of ethics is “that you operate in an engaged and responsible manner.” Can civic engagement be value neutral?

“Well, no because it is a value. It is a point of view. Some people may say it is not a good thing....that we should just do our individual thing, achieve what we can by ourselves...go on our own...without engaging.”

Similarly, the anthropology professor noted, “We (anthropologists) can get in big trouble if we don’t follow ethical rules.” This professor pointed out the consequences of not sharing information with a group, such as the Hmong during the 1960s and the 1970s, and then having the information usurped by the Department of Defense and used against them. “You make sure that the projects help the people themselves the most.”

The theater arts and education professors reported that values were an important piece of their discipline. In theater, the faculty member noted that the colleagues in the department have been talking about how to move the rules of the Actors Equity Association into the classroom as well, beyond the performance itself.

“(They need) a deep understanding of what the characters do. It means that these actors are observant, sensitive, and communicative. Students need to be able to put themselves in any place and understand the people in it and become like them. They are empathic observers. Then the place imprints to you. This translates to the

community they work in (in civic engagement). You develop a conscious understanding about what you are doing when you are there.”

The professor of education did not point to any one code of ethics. Rather, the professor stated that students are introduced to principles via authors such as Steven Covey and theorists such as Glasser, and “these principles create a value system...that become part of the core of the conversation in their papers.” This respondent stated that “it is hard to separate civic engagement from thinking about values.

Civic engagement is “getting faculty out of their comfort zone and doing something new. You facilitate a discussion that may be controversial. People’s experiences and cultures come into play.”

The management professor, in contrast, stated, “There is no training for business professionals that give standard business ethics that everyone follows. It is unstated that there is a common acceptance of what is ethical.” In response to the question of whether civic engagement could be value neutral, the response was:

“...(Y)ou could conclude that you may do things that are inherently valuable that would, for example, reduce crime, protect the rights of women, and not do them out of some moral sense.... For example, Jane Jacobs, in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, gives an example of how cities may have a lot of people on the streets for whatever reasons, due to density, work schedules, etc., and the result is that there are watchful eyes out for children. This result was not necessarily planned for consciously, but it resulted in safety for kids.”

This response begs the question: Does civic engagement have to start with a conscious effort or can it be a serendipitous result?

Frameworks for Civic Engagement

Prior to each interview, each interviewee was sent the two sets of frameworks from the literature on the topic and asked to think about which ones, if any, best described their discipline’s perspective on civic engagement. The results are in Table 2.

Table 2		
Respondent/Discipline	Choice #1	Choice #2_____
#1. Social Work	Public Intellectual	Social Capital
#2. Management	Civic Professionalism	Constitutional Citizenship
#3. Education	Communitarianism	Social Responsibility
#4. Anthropology	Social Capital	Communitarianism and Participatory Democracy
#5. Theater Arts	Social Capital and Connected Knowing	Public Intellectual

As the descriptions of each of these philosophies or theories provided are cursory, and the amount of time spent during the interviews was limited, this data is not definitive. In some cases, the affinities are consistent with those provided by Battistoni. For example, “social capital” is preferred by sociologists, which is related to social work and anthropology, and “public intellectual” is preferred by those in the visual and performing arts.

Others, however, do not coincide with Battistoni’s preferences. For example, the management professor chose “civic professionalism” which is commonly chosen by those in professional disciplines, but also chose “constitutional citizenship” which offers a more narrow definition of civic participation, an affinity of political scientists and those studying law.

In sum, data on these frameworks did not provide valid conclusions, but rather served as a further stimulant for thinking about civic engagement within the context of a discipline or profession.

An Emerging Theme

As the interviews progressed, a theme emerged which was incorporated into subsequent questions for interviewees: Is there a developmental theory of civic engagement?

The first faculty member interviewed, the social work professor, made the comment that perhaps “there should be some kind of developmental theory of civic engagement,” as the way youth become involved e.g. protesting, may change as one grows older. When this was brought up with subsequent interviewees, the anthropology professor made the point that “you need to take a look at the environment and changes in the circumstances as well.” To this, the theater arts professor added that “it may also depend upon where you are, how your resources change, if you have money and if you have something to contribute.” In sum, the respondents were speaking to individual as well as environmental variables that might affect how and why people engage in civic engagement at various times in their lives.

Reflection and Recommendations

The university at which both authors work has, in its mission statement, made a commitment to “building partnerships with communities throughout the region in order to identify and solve mutual concerns and problems.” It has also, in this same statement, declared a commitment to “including experiential approaches to learning for undergraduate and graduate students.” As this university’s president has also signed on to the *Presidents’ Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education* (Campus Compact 1999), civic engagement becomes a part of this university’s mission. This beginning exploration needs to be continued and expanded if we are to successfully integrate civic engagement into student learning across disciplines.

A couple of faculty in this dialogue deemed civic engagement to be very closely related to their discipline/profession, and very much guided by values. Another

perceived it to be somewhat irrelevant to theirs and an activity that could occur without a value base. What is its purpose and whose responsibility is it?

The following recommendations for future research follow from this need and may be appropriate for other universities as well as the one under study:

More faculty need to be engaged in this dialogue about civic responsibility.

One activity we intend to facilitate is a group meeting of our interviewees to inform them of the above impressions and to continue to hone in on the concept.

Additionally, we may want to provide a venue for discipline discussions of the relevance and meaning of civic engagement to each department.

Service learning is a pedagogy. What is civic engagement? The dimensions of civic engagement need to be explored i.e., are there general values, skills, and knowledge related to civic engagement that cut across all disciplines?

Can civic engagement really be value free? Are there some general values that all disciplines can agree on that help guide involvement in civic participation?

Students and graduates of many disciplines are involved in policy advocacy and political arenas. Do all disciplines embrace some form of policy advocacy or political involvement? Are there professors of any disciplines who perceive this activity as inappropriate or not germane to their field of study?

Are there specific roles that some departments should play and others should not? How is each department uniquely poised to be involved in civic engagement?

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