Reflections on a Birthday

The American Democracy Project Turns Five

by George Mehaffy

At a 4th of July family gathering, my nephew reported that his son, 16, said that I was the coolest old man he had ever met. I think he meant it as a compliment. I just had a birthday, so his observation was particularly vivid.

AASCU’s American Democracy Project (ADP) just celebrated a birthday as well, its fifth. As I thought about birthdays, the project’s and mine, I was reminded of that adage about old dogs and new tricks. What have we learned over the past five years? The project continues to focus on the role of AASCU institutions in preparing the next generation of informed, engaged citizens for our democracy. As a community of institutions, AASCU colleges and universities have proudly proclaimed themselves as “Stewards of Place,” reflecting the deep and pervasive connections that AASCU institutions have with their surrounding communities. The American Democracy Project contributes to that powerful notion of regional stewardship. The goal of our project is to strengthen our universities as “Stewards of Place” by producing college graduates who can be agents and architects of positive change in local and regional communities. We want to develop the civic skills and civic identities of undergraduates, preparing students to be contributors to thriving local communities and regions. That’s a statement of purpose that I don’t think I could have articulated five years ago. But it has certainly been the emerging, and now dominant, conception of our work.

But what else have we learned along the way? As our project has unfolded, we have learned an enormous amount about the work of preparing undergraduates as future citizens. And we’ve learned a lot about the broader field of civic engagement. First, we’re learned that in the academy, words are important…but they are also sometimes confusing. Everywhere, it seems, the new phrase in higher education is civic engagement. Evidence of the focus is found in articles and presentations, in new journals, and in new seminars and development programs. While many in the university community recognize that civic engagement has become a pervasive theme within higher education, I’m reminded of an observation made by Lewis Carroll in Through the Looking Glass. “When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.” Terms such as civic engagement, it turns out, like Humpty Dumpty’s words, have many different meanings. For some, civic engagement means building institutional connections to the larger community. For others, civic engagement means faculty research focused on local and regional issues. Often missing in these institutional and faculty definitions is any attention to students, and especially student learning outcomes. For the American Democracy Project, concerned as it is with preparing the next generation of informed, engaged citizens for our democracy, the focus on student outcomes is paramount.

Yet even civic engagement outcomes for students often carry multiple meanings. Student civic outcomes are at times taken to mean a focus on increased volunteerism such as engaging in local Habitat for Humanity projects, Katrina relief efforts, or fund-raising for special needs. Many of these programs happen in conjunction with service-learning. These volunteer activities frequently focus on remediation, that is, fixing specific problems. The experiences are often engaging, as they provide an introduction to cultures and communities that students have never experienced, and usually result in greater learning outcomes.

Audacious as they are, my concern with these student-focused efforts is that they do not engage students in the world of politics and public policy, where core decisions of society are made. Students too often build houses for low-income families but aren’t further challenged to consider why the richest country on earth has so many of its citizens living in sub-standard housing. They go to the Gulf Coast for Katrina relief efforts at spring break but don’t study the failure of government at many levels to first prevent, and then respond, to the enormous human catastrophe spawned by this crisis. Students raise money for some special concern, such as breast cancer awareness, without comprehending the political and policy dimensions of drug development, access to medical treatment, and the disparities of breast cancer survival between rich and poor.

In a democracy, politics is the process we use to collectively address critical issues, solve complex social problems, and attempt to balance between competing and often conflicting interests. Most importantly, politics—when practiced well—involves rather than isolates citizens in the quest to find common ground and compromise. Therefore, while volunteering and charitable work are crucial to the health and well-being of our society, preparing our students for a life of service is simply not enough. Our students must become competent participants in the world of politics if they are to become truly informed, engaged citizens in our democracy.
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The American Democracy Project increasingly focuses on preparing undergraduates not only to be community-minded volunteers, but also citizens who act politically and collectively to effect positive change. This focus requires campuses to become intentional about preparing future citizens as competent political actors. Attention to the political dimensions of civic engagement requires campuses to include the study of political controversies in all disciplines. It requires each discipline to deliberately incorporate the study of public policy and political issues in their field. It demands that campuses explicitly teach political skills such as articulating and advocating positions, listening respectfully to other opinions, organizing for change, and learning to compromise.

Yet some campuses, understandably, have deep reservations about focusing on the political rather than the volunteerism end of the civic engagement continuum, fearing that they will become embroiled in liberal or conservative politics. For campuses worried that the teaching of politics will become a partisan quagmire, a new resource will provide both reassurance and guidance. Anne Colby and Tom Ehrlich, senior scholars at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, have recently published a new book, Educating for Democracy (Anne Colby, Elizabeth Beaumont, Thomas Ehrlich, and Josh Corngold. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), which reports the conclusions of the Political Engagement Project (PEP), a project that studied faculty efforts to engage students politically in 21 courses and programs in institutions across the United States.

For those concerned about political indoctrination, the book reports two key findings:

1. Political engagement can be taught. Furthermore, significant learning gains can be made by students who did not have an initial interest in political issues.

   But perhaps the most important insight that came from this research is this:

2. Political engagement does not change party identification or political ideology (as alleged by some higher education critics).

   For those seeking specific guidance about how to focus on political engagement, Educating for Democracy offers five key pedagogical strategies that detail how faculty might approach the teaching of politics in balanced, non-partisan ways. Filled with rich examples of instructional strategies, the book is a grand repository of ideas and pedagogical tools. To add to the usefulness of this work, the authors have posted a substantial collection of additional material on the Carnegie Web site at www.carnegiefoundation.org/files/elibrary/educating_for_democracy/docs/. Included in the web collection are instruments that measure civic engagement outcomes.

   This is the second book by Anne and Tom to be used in this project. The first, Educating Citizens, published in 2003, the year our project began, was used on many ADP campuses as the centerpiece for campus conversations about the role of higher education in the preservation and strengthening of our democracy. For senior university leaders interested in civic engagement, this book offers a new opportunity for campus discussion, consideration and inspiration. For those involved in the American Democracy Project, Educating for Democracy will serve as a critical tool to advance the work of preparing citizens. Some campuses have already begun planning campus conversations this coming fall, using Educating for Democracy to launch the conversation.

As I reflect on these insights that have been gained over the past five years, I’m pleased to report that it appears that old dogs can, indeed, learn new tricks. For those of us involved in the American Democracy Project, that learning has been an exhilarating ride. We continue to celebrate the truly inspired leaders (presidents, provosts, faculty and staff in AASCU institutions across this nation) who are deeply committed to the work of preparing the next generation of citizens. They think of their institutions as the marketplace of free ideas. They embody what John Dewey meant when he said “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.” They are committed to the preparation of the next generation of informed, engaged citizens for our country.

All of us who care about the fragile state of our democracy, torn as it is by deep divisions and bitter partisanship, should be reassured by the innovative work being undertaken at AASCU institutions across this land.

Anne Colby and Tom Ehrlich’s first book, Educating Citizens, highlights a group of campuses that made civic outcomes for students central to their mission and purpose. When Educating Citizens was published in 2003, AASCU’s new civic initiative, the American Democracy Project (ADP), used it as the focal point for Campus Conversations on many participating campuses. Campus Conversations typically involved convening members of the campus community (sometimes faculty alone, sometimes with staff, and occasionally students) to discuss the role of higher education in preparing the next generation of citizens. Campus Conversations were used to engage campuses in planning what they might do in their local context to address the civic preparation of undergraduates. From those conversations emerged an enormous outpouring of project ideas and programs, demonstrated by more than 24,000 entries in a recent Google search for the unique term “American Democracy Project.”

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