

Reversing the downward trend of civic engagement

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An involved citizenry is a necessary prerequisite to a vital democracy. Yet, the statistics show that the vast majority of young adults are generally not voting and are not interested in getting involved in public life.

For the future of our country and the preservation of our democratic heritage, it is imperative that we reverse this trend.

Indiana State University is excited to be one of the institutions involved in the conceptualization and implementation of the American Democracy Project, a three-year program sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and The New York Times.

Students who are informed and who become engaged as active citizens will continue to be involved throughout their lifetimes. The American Democracy Project is designed to increase the understanding among undergraduate students of the importance of civic engagement, and to produce graduates who are committed to being actively involved as citizens in a democracy. Indiana State University is one of more than 160 AASCU institutions participating in the project.

Indiana State launched its American Democracy Project in September 2003 with a two-day visit to campus by former Congressman and White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta, who co-directs the Leon and Sylvia Panetta Institute for Public Policy at California State University – Monterey Bay.

Mr. Panetta, the child of Italian immigrants, relayed to our students how his parents always stressed the importance of giving back to the country that had given them so much. His evening address, “Leadership in Challenging Times,” stressed the important role students can have in shaping public opinion and policy. The speech was attended by more than 1,500 faculty, staff, community leaders and students, including the majority of our freshmen learning communities. The next day, Mr. Panetta met with our academic department chairs and leaders of local social service organizations. He also hosted a discussion session with our students.

The greatest success of the kickoff can be measured in the number of students who have come forward to indicate they want to get involved – now.

Those students, and others, are actively working with our faculty and staff to plan a comprehensive program of activities that will span over the three-year project. Highlights of the projects already underway are:

- **Educating Ourselves about “Educating Citizens”** -- So far, eight reading groups have been organized to read and discuss “Educating Citizens.” While the task force is serving as one group, its members have organized other groups around the issues of service learning, student leadership, academic advising and general education. In addition, a community group, which includes the editor of the local newspaper, is also serving as a reading group. These groups will provide feedback to the task force and help shape the activities that are planned.
- **4002 in 2004** – This voter turnout campaign targets the first-year classes of 2003 and 2004 as potential first-time voters for the 2004 national election. Students majoring in public relations will be assisting in designing the campaign. Students in various businesses classes and those in information technology also will be asked to assist with building a business plan for the program and utilizing technology to promote awareness and participation. The goal is to have 4002 of Indiana State University’s 11,360 students vote in the 2004 national election. Organizers are working to attract the Declare Yourself Campaign to our campus as part of the 4002 in 2004 initiative.
- **Service Learning Mini-Camp** – In the spring of 2004, Indiana State University will bring groups of students and teachers from area high schools to campus to work with our students and faculty. The two-day service learning mini-camp, a joint effort between the American Democracy Project and Indiana State’s Center for Public Service and Community Engagement, is designed to help high school and university students develop an intellectual connection between civic responsibility and community service and build the skills to develop service-learning programs at their schools. In addition to educational sessions, keynote speakers and team building activities, the student groups will be paired with an ISU student who will help them plan a service project. Students will be given training on topics including planning, making presentations, fundraising, recruiting volunteers, grassroots organizing and other subjects. The culmination of the camp will be the completion of several youth-initiated service projects in conjunction with Make a Difference day in October 2004.
- **Reaching out to help others** – This fall, students in our American Humanics Program studying the social service and reform measures initiated by Jane Addams, founder of Chicago’s Hull-House settlement, decided to combine an educational field trip with a hands-on opportunity to reach out to those in need. A group of 36 students and faculty traveled to Chicago to visit the Hull-House museum and spend the weekend helping low-income seniors winterize their homes through the Housing and Maintenance for the Elderly program and the St. Vincent de Paul Center. (For more info, see: <http://www.indstate.edu/news/archive/2003/oct/chicago.html>)

This is merely a snapshot of the myriad of programs Indiana State University is planning as part of the American Democracy Project. Eventually, the program will have made a significant impact on our curriculum, our extra-curricular activities, our students, faculty and staff, and our community.

For more information on the kickoff of our program, please visit:

<http://helix.indstate.edu/ramgen/opa/video/2003/oct5/panetta.rm> (video feature)

<http://helix.indstate.edu/ramgen/opa/video/2003/democracy/panetta.rm> (Mr. Panetta's full speech)

http://isunews.indstate.edu/photodatabase/Events/2003_leon_panetta_democracy_speakers_series/ (Photos)