

Reflections on Higher Education and Citizenship Preparation

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In the aftermath of September 11, there has been a renewed interest in what it means to be an American and what there may be about our society that distinguishes it from other countries. How do Americans differ from Algerians, Albanians, Australians or Azerbaijanis? How do we distinguish our nation? By geography? Ethnicity? Religion? Economic systems? A distinctive culture? Material possessions? Or even unique hedonistic pursuits?

While many answers may be offered in response to these questions, it strikes me, as a "recovering" political scientist, that the answer must in good part revolve around the nation's Constitution and especially its distinctive and pervasive Bill of Rights. If the educational system has a social responsibility, and I believe it does, to prepare our students for citizenship in our democracy, we need to focus far greater attention not only on democratic principles but also on the meaning and personal responsibilities attendant being an American citizen.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities has a deep commitment to civic engagement and to strengthening higher education's pursuit of that commitment. The premise of our work is that the nation's educational system is capable of better preparing students to fulfill their civic responsibilities.

Society's neglect of civic education is appallingly manifest. Citizen participation in community and public affairs has markedly declined--a trend noted by several observers, most notably Robert Putnam in his work, *Bowling Alone*.

Secondly, participation of the electorate has declined to a point that fewer than a fourth of the nation's eligible voters actually select our elected officials. And among youth aged 18-25--the age group most directly impacted by educational institutions--voting participation is the lowest of all age cohorts.

Thirdly, and in many ways most perplexing, is the disengagement of most Americans from social and political decision-making. This growing disdain for "politics" and the governing process has facilitated a pervasive corruption of that process, resulting in the immense and pernicious influence of money in executive and legislative halls. The noted commentator, Bill Moyers, described these trends as heralding a new era of the "Robber Barons."

While higher education has a rich heritage of political observation and analysis, we recognize that it is beyond our power and influence to effect political change. On the other hand, we shortchange our capabilities if we fail to recognize our potential impact on our primary constituency--18 to 24 year-olds. We can influence them to be responsible citizens--and we can also have influence on a smaller, but growing number of older adults who enroll in our programs.

Before further commentary on what higher education leaders can do, we should acknowledge that there are several bright spots in the rather dismal picture of civic engagement. First is the growing and significant movement toward service learning and the gratifying engagement of college youth in volunteer efforts--not only through established programs, but through innumerable community programs in schools, hospitals, neighborhood centers, and through groups such as Boys and Girls Clubs.

We should also note the remarkable expansion of American Humanities programs on college campuses and the large number of students seeking careers in youth and family service organizations.

The silver lining in the tragic clouds spawn by September 11 is the renewed sense of patriotism and a greater willingness of Americans to serve and sacrifice for their country.

These positive developments, nevertheless, have not improved the inexcusably poor engagement of Americans in the electoral and policy making processes. Illustrative of this point is the fact that last year the typical graduate of a public university walked across the stage with approximately \$17,000 in educational debts. When I graduated from college, student debt was rare.

What happened between the '60s and the '90s? The answer is easy to understand. Two major events occurred. In state after state, appropriations for higher education remained stable or declined, and tuition was raised to make up the loss. And in Washington, the federal government adopted policies to promote student borrowing in lieu of funding Pell and other need-based grants. Students have been the big losers. You might ask why did these events come to pass. The answer is fairly clear. Students do not vote in large numbers. And people in public office know that. The law of politics is the same as the law of the jungle: The strong prey on the weak.

In contrast, look at issues affecting the elderly. No politician dares to reduce Medicare or to eliminate the cost-of-living adjustment for Social Security. Few in political office will risk the electoral wrath of the age group with the highest voting percentage--the elderly. One of the most important lessons in Civics 101 is that even if

your candidate loses, you win when you vote. And when you don't vote, you and your kind lose!

To distill these reflections into a plea for voter registration and enfranchisement would be overly simplistic. We cannot ignore our fundamental responsibility as educators--to construct programs and experiences that truly educate, enlighten and inspire students to be informed, caring and engaged citizens.

Lee Dreyfus, former chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, and Governor of Wisconsin was once asked why state legislators were not as supportive of higher education as their counterparts from earlier years. He quickly replied: "Today legislators are primarily our graduates."

In these difficult economic times on campuses, I reflect on then-Governor Dreyfus' observation and note the inverse relationship between the growing percentage of legislators with college degrees and the declining percentage (and in many states actual dollars) of the state budget going to higher education.

Reflecting upon the education received by policy makers, I focus on the core curriculum required of all graduates--a core curriculum built around the liberal arts, whose virtues have become a virtual mantra of the Academy.

I once read and recorded a statement detailing the purpose of liberal education, a statement to which I subscribe. Regrettably, I failed to record the author or the source. Please excuse my plagiaristic error. The Liberal Arts, it was expressed, "should help students distinguish probability from certainty, rational beliefs from superstitions, data from assertions, and theory from dogma."

As I look at what our nation's decision-makers have decided over the past twelve months, I find little evidence that policy making comports to the functioning of a liberally educated society.

My point is that the manipulation of public opinion, the obfuscation of political agendas, the substitution of rhetoric for logical reasoning, can and do succeed when a citizenry cannot distinguish probability from certainty, data from assertions, facts from opinions, and theories from dogma.

In short, I have come to the conclusion that our efforts to provide a truly liberalizing education have failed. Allow me to repeat the Academy's "F" word. Our efforts to provide through general education or the core curriculum, a liberal education for our graduates, in the main, have been a failure.

The time has come to rethink not the value but the content of liberal education. We need to reconstruct that core on the basis of outcomes, not imputed inputs. The American Democracy Project provides a sterling opportunity to redefine and reconstruct a liberalizing core based upon the goal of achieving an engaged, enlightened and productive citizenry.

This task will not be easy. Discarding a curriculum sustained by interdepartmental politics, graduate student recruitment, textbook availability, and credit-hour generation will truly require a Herculean effort, but the task is worth doing.

I recently ran across the words of Edward Gibbon, the renowned classical historian, who penned his thoughts about the collapse of the Athenian democracy. "In the end," Gibbon wrote, "the Athenians more than they wanted freedom, wanted security and a comfortable life. When the Athenians finally wanted not to give to society, but for

society to give to them, when the freedom they wished for most, was freedom from responsibility, then Athens ceased to be free."

AASCU is proud to be partners with the *New York Times* and with you, representing over 150 public colleges and universities, in this wonderful undertaking better to prepare our students--and ourselves--for citizenship. And in the process to help sustain and strengthen our democracy.