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Recovering the Civic in Public Affairs Education

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Public affairs programs play at least two roles in shaping civic engagement in our society. One role involves how we prepare our students, future professionals, to engage citizens. Citizen participation is one of the hallmarks of American democracy. Administrative institutions can be formidable obstacles to citizen engagement, and the public officials who populate these institutions may, intentionally or unintentionally, be viewed as anti-democratic (Morone, 1990). Another role by which our programs shape civic engagement is as learning contexts for future generations of citizens. Students learn about the civic and moral responsibilities of citizenship in our classrooms, in cocurricular experiences, and in the behaviors we model for them. This symposium is focused broadly around these twin perspectives of civic engagement.

The state of civic engagement in American society has been the object of deep concern and debate in recent years. From a popular perspective, Robert Putnam (1995, 2000) was one of the first to draw attention to the decline of social capital in America and its consequences. Putnam has documented the decline of civic engagement across a broad range of indicators, including voter participation, religious affiliations, union membership, volunteering, fraternal membership, and other measures of civic engagement.

Despite the depth of the case Putnam and others (Bellah et al., 1985) make, Stolle and Hooghe (2005) review several alternative explanations and conclude that the case for the decline of civic engagement is far from airtight. They document four contrarian perspectives, including rejection of the decline thesis on the grounds that Putnam simply got his numbers wrong, the conceptual one-sidedness of the decline thesis that ignores new forms of participation, and the prospect that traditional mass participation is irrelevant to the health of modern democratic systems.

These alternative explanations notwithstanding, civic education and civic knowledge are declining in America. In 1998, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Report Card (Lutkus et al., 1999)
found that about 70 percent of fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders performed at a basic level of achievement, but only about 25 percent were proficient. A survey of high school students conducted in 2004 found that nearly three-fourths express little appreciation for the First Amendment and that they are less likely than adults to think that people should be allowed to express unpopular opinions or that newspapers should be allowed to publish freely without government approval of stories (John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, 2004). A more recent American Bar Association poll shows that barely half of all Americans can identify the three branches of government (American Bar Association, 2005).

In the face of perceived declines in social capital and civic education, colleges and universities are reassessing their roles in preparing future citizens for engagement in civic and political life (Jones and Perry, in press). The mission of Campus Compact, a coalition of nearly 1,000 college and university presidents, revolves exclusively around promoting civic engagement. Leading associations of colleges and universities, among them the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC), and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), are pursuing efforts to enhance the attention their member organizations give to civic engagement. Regional and state accrediting bodies have begun to make institutional service and engagement core criteria for the accreditation of institutions of higher education, and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has embarked on a pilot project for classifying community engagement.

The concerns Putnam and others have expressed about the decline of popular engagement are echoed by others in the context of the professions. Steven Brint (1994) and William Sullivan (2005) have analyzed the evolution of professions in America. Brint observes that a key historical change in professions has been a transition from what he calls social trustee professionalism to expert professionalism. Sullivan refers to the transition of professionals as purveyors of expert services as technical professionalism. The key transformation associated with this transition in professionalism is the loss of, in Sullivan’s terms, “the ethical-social values of professional identity” (2005, 28). Bonds between professionals and communities of stakeholders have grown more complex, and their civic content has been diminished. In Sullivan’s view, professional life “needs to be restructured in ways that suffuse technical competence with civic awareness and purpose” (32).

Brint and Sullivan’s research has immediate implications for public affairs. As scholars and educators, we have reached a juncture where we should be looking hard at public affairs professions and their relationship to civic engagement (Perry, 2004). The markets and organizations in which our graduates are embedded have changed radically in the last thirty years (Light, 1999). But what are the larger consequences of these changes for the professional identities of our degree holders and, more generally, for the social contract between our graduates and the communities of which they are parts?

The call for greater attention to the civic in public affairs is not new. More than twenty years ago, for instance, H. George Frederickson (1982) wrote about the centrality of “a new civism” in public administration. He saw the civism movement as an agent of innovation, change, and responsiveness, a stark contrast to cutback management, which was getting widespread attention at the time. It is not clear that Frederickson’s optimism about what he termed the civism movement has been realized, but his assessment of its importance is no less relevant today: “The effective public administration of the future should be intimately tied to citizenship, the citizenry generally, and to the effectiveness of public managers who work directly with the citizenry” (502).

THE SYMPOSIUM

In the opening symposium article, “Explicating Factors that Foster Civic Engagement among Students,” Masami Nishishiba, Hal Nelson, and Craig Shinn pose a fundamental question: What factors explain the civic engagement of college students? They begin by defining the dependent variable, that is, civic engagement. Their operational definition
entails six dimensions: advocacy for personal ideas and concerns; direct action to protest for their issues of concern; organizational participation; volunteer time; attitudes toward voting; and diversity-related civic engagement behavior.

Using structural equation modeling, Nishishiba and colleagues examine how three sets of predictors—expectations of community and political efficacy, attitudes about citizen control of government, and attitudes toward diversity—affect students' civic engagement behaviors. The study finds that each of the predictors plays an important part in understanding college students' civic engagement.

In "The Challenge of Assessing Civic Engagement: What We Know and What We Still Need to Learn about Civic Education in College," Elizabeth Beaumont builds upon empirical research from her coauthored book, Educating Citizens (Colby et al., 2003). The book reports a three-year empirical study of twelve diverse campuses. Her article takes up two crucial issues not addressed in the book: the empirical evidence the project elicited about the effects of college and university programs and practices on undergraduates, and the evidentiary issues and challenges involved in assessing students' moral and civic learning.

Beaumont notes in her article that civic education is, in fact, three-dimensional. Educators must be attentive to understanding and knowledge, values and motivation, and civic skills. Referring to Tocqueville's classic research, Beaumont notes that "each subsequent generation constitutes a new people, and therefore rising generations must acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to maintain their democratic institutions."

In her article, "Understanding the Relationship between Civic Skills and Civic Participation: Educating Future Public Managers," Mary Kirlin provides explicit guidance for public affairs educators about the civic skills dimension of Beaumont's tripartite civic education construct. Drawing upon an eclectic evidentiary foundation, she develops a persuasive case that fundamental elements of civic and political participation are skill based and must be practiced to be learned. More importantly, she is quite explicit about the civic skills that our students need to learn in order to become engaged citizens. Critical thinking, communication, collective decision-making, and organizing comprise the package that defines civic skills.

The final two contributions to the symposium discuss pedagogies helpful for developing student understanding, motivation, and civic skills. In "Learning and Teaching about Deliberative Democracy: On Campus and in the Field," Morse, Dudley, Armstrong, and Kim explicitly address means for teaching deliberative democracy. Their suggestions advance understanding and civic skills. They describe how public affairs programs can include learning about deliberative democracy by teaching basic participation models, the art of reasoned judgment, moderator skills, issue framing, and the crafting of research agendas from practice. Developing these democratic competencies will benefit students as future citizens and/or public officials.

Renee Irwin's focus in "The Student Philanthropist: Fostering Civic Engagement Through Grantmaking" is on how a philanthropy project can make a difference in a students' understanding of the philanthropic sector and motivations to volunteer. Irwin describes grantmaking projects that have been incorporated into freshman and graduate courses. She illustrates how students study local nonprofit organizations and award a grant to the organization of their choice. Although the instructional focus of the freshman and graduate courses are different, the grantmaking project at both levels proved manageable for the instructor and participating nonprofit organizations. Irwin's article is especially helpful for visualizing how common ideas apply at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

CONCLUSION

The contributions to this symposium provide theories and practices for faculty and schools to embrace in their program and curricular designs and teaching for civic engagement. They contain five principles that are widely understood as prerequisites for effectively educating citizens (Jones and Perry, in press):
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1. **Intentionality.** As Beaumont and Kirlin argue, we must be intentional in our efforts if we want to prepare students for active civic and political participation.

2. **Engagement/active learning.** The contributions from Kirlin, Morse, et al., and Irvin show that we must provide students with active, engaged learning experiences.

3. **Meaningfulness.** Teaching and learning strategies must seek to integrate civic learning with students' personal and professional aspirations and interests. Irvin's philanthropy project is a wonderful example of meaningful civic learning. Using real problems to teach civic skills and deliberative democracy, as suggested by Kirlin and Morse et al., also exemplify ways of making meaningful connections between civic content and what is important to learners.

4. **Demonstrable outcomes.** As Beaumont's article illustrates, colleges and universities that effectively educate their students for citizenship are not only intentional, but they seek to achieve demonstrable outcomes. Demonstrable changes in students' knowledge, skills, and motivations are the learning outcomes that must be obtained.

5. **Integrated teaching and learning.** Students need to be able to connect what they are taught to a large social context. Learning about civic skills and deliberative democracy, for example, is not an end in itself, but rather a means for students to pursue future roles as active citizens and professionals. This integration is essential for rebuilding the social contract between the public and public affairs professionals.

**References**


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