

Civic Engagement in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices

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Barbara Jacoby and Associates. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA. 2009. 265 pp.

Civic Engagement in Higher Education is a timely publication because it focuses higher education's attention once more on a topic that many of us have long thought as central to the mission of American colleges and universities. In a Forward to this volume, Thomas Ehrlich, a beacon in the movement to promote institutions of higher education to engage actively in educating students for civic participation, emphasizes that "the rhetoric of civic engagement was unmatched by reality" (p. vi). This discrepancy occurred despite the enthusiasm and dedication of many campus leaders, faculty, and student affairs personnel on campuses across the country for the past twenty years and the support of organizations such as Campus Compact and the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Ehrlich's admonition rings particularly true for those involved in pioneering efforts of the 1990s and early 2000s to bring to national attention a critical vision for higher education: colleges and universities could serve a central role in inspiring and preparing students to participate more actively in the democratic processes of our own country and to assume the challenges of addressing social and political crises and injustices faced by people around the world. Those were rather heady days of what we believed was becoming a larger movement parallel to those of the civil rights era and the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Higher education leaders and organizations such as the American Association of Higher Education, American Council of Education, and the Association of American Colleges and Universities featured panels and presentations at a range of conferences and forums to introduce and sustain the vision that higher education could again become an important source for social change. Ehrlich's publication, *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education* (Oryx Press, 2000) had just come out and served as an inspiration for all committed to the cause.

Almost ten years ago, I worked with Arthur Chickering to develop the Civic Engagement Cluster, a national initiative to promote civic learning across ten diverse campuses around the country, and we were honored to have Thomas Ehrlich as a member of our advisory board. The ten Cluster institutions, which were selected to represent a cross section of institutions of higher education, also epitomized the range of civic engagement initiatives being implemented at that time. Some of the institutions, such as Rutgers University, had established centralized procedures for involving a significant number of faculty and community service organizations in providing over 400 service-learning courses on its three campuses as part of the undergraduate curriculum. A few institutions such as Portland State University had made service-learning and civic

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engagement central to their institutional mission and identity. Other institutions were just beginning to initiate systematic approaches to civic learning and engagement. Morehouse College introduced a 21st Century Racial Justice program that built on its 100 year history of producing major African-American leaders by encouraging a new generation of African-American men to become leaders in addressing racial and ethnic injustice in the United States and globally. To inform other campuses about their variety of approaches to civic learning, the Civic Engagement Cluster provided presentations at a number of national conferences and was featured at the 2002 Institute on College Students Values.

In the past ten years many more campuses have introduced and strengthened service-learning courses and civic engagement opportunities for students. As Ehrlich succinctly states, however, the hope we had for major campus transformation has not yet resulted in higher education incorporating education of students for civic responsibility as a central institutional priority. The range of topics and insights in this volume provided serve as a platform for reviving the interest and commitment of campuses to realize their missions for preparing their students for “lives of civically engaged citizenship, scholarship and leadership” (p. 227).

Civic Engagement in Higher Education also is a timely publication because there now exists a significant accumulation of practical experiences in implementing service learning and civic engagement programs and opportunities on a range of campuses across the country. One of this volume’s key contributions is the compendium of information it offers for practitioners working on campuses to implement, expand, and sustain civic engagement efforts. As reflected in the topics and experiences of authors contributing to the publication, the potential audience for *Civic Engagement in Higher Education* is broad: institutional leaders, faculty, student affairs personnel, and the “professionals and graduates students who usually work in the trenches of service-learning, leadership development, campus activities, and civic engagement” (p. 2). For those being introduced to the concept of civic engagement, many chapters provide overviews of conceptual frameworks defining the reasons for and importance of implementing civic learning and engagement programs on college campuses. And throughout the volume there are numerous references to key publications from which greater insights on the various facets of civic engagement can be obtained. The diverse institutional functions and level of operation of the individuals who may benefit from this volume are epitomized by the range of practical examples of civic engagement described in this volume: from the first year to the capstone experience, with stop-offs for infusions of engaged citizenship into the general education curriculum, through integrative and interdisciplinary programs, and in learning communities, leadership programs, and international service learning experiences.

Caryn McTighe Musil’s chapter on “Educating Students for Personal and Social Responsibility” makes a major contribution to understanding the ways in which student learning goals of civic engagement are inexorably linked to two other major educational priorities: U.S. diversity education and global learning. Musil’s analysis demonstrates the interconnections between these three separate educational reform movements:

The effort to diversify higher education is, of course, a reflection of the larger societal demands that American democracy extend its opportunities, education among them, equally to everyone. At its heart, then, the U.S. diversity reform movement is civic work and offers deliberation across differences as an everyday encounter. (p. 54)

Musil further argues that global learning also is closely aligned with the U.S. diversity reform movement and with civic engagement:

With an ever sharpening awareness of the inescapable interdependency in the world, with all the asymmetries of power inherent in those relationships, higher education has recognized the necessity of incorporating global knowledge as a fundamental dimension of learning for contemporary graduates. (p. 54)

She goes on to point out that

Like the U.S. diversity movement, global learning is both about new knowledge and about reframing existing knowledge. Global learning also has profound civic dimensions since it is not just about what students think but what they do as a result of what they have learned. (p. 55).

In practice, the innate interconnections among civic engagement, multi-cultural and diversity education, and global leaning have been long recognized and integrated programmatically on campuses, particularly in civic engagement initiatives. Nonetheless, as Musil emphasizes, each of these critical educational reform movements has typically created its own sphere, with disparate histories of development, distinct conceptual frameworks and pedagogies, different personnel, and associations with different campus departments or divisions. To achieve institutional goals of broadly educating students, Musil makes a powerful case for eliminating the institutional silos that have developed around these educational efforts and for “maximizing the educational capital of all three movements” (p. 57).

Structured first year experiences have become widespread in higher education in the past ten years. Authors Mary Stuart Hunter and Blaire L. Moody summarize the importance of the first year experience: “The first year of college is an opportunity for unprecedented growth, development, and change for new students [and] institutions of all types have implemented special initiatives to assist students as they transition into higher education” (p. 69). Since first year programs generally are encouraged, if not required, for all students, they represent an exceptional opportunity for institutions to introduce topics and learning experiences designed to promote and assist students to examine their own purposes, meanings, and values, including their civic and social responsibilities. The first year experience also offers a potential avenue for achieving one of the broad goals of the civic engagement movement: to institutionalize service learning through a campus wide infrastructure.

Michelle R. Dunlap and Nicole Webster provide particularly valuable insights into the critical challenges encountered in designing and implementing effective civic engagement programs with students. Their focus on “Enhancing Intercultural Competence Through Civic Engagement” emphasizes some of the realities of civic engagement work that must be addressed for this work to be successful. “Civic engagement requires working collaboratively and productively with others who may be different from ourselves to address common issues and to achieve common purposes” (p. 140). Dunlap and Webster argue that creating “high-quality opportunities for students to work in environments outside their comfort zones. . . presents several challenges for educators” (p. 140). Their recommendations for addressing these challenges are drawn from their own experiences with community engagement programs for students at Connecticut College and Pennsylvania State University and from examples of other colleges and universities around the country. These recommendations, outlined as follows, offer a solid blueprint to other practitioners for designing and refining service-learning courses and community experiences that reduce the potential problems faced by students in what may be difficult encounters with the community’s social and cultural differences.

- Recommendation 1: Provide a Thorough Introduction to the Community
- Recommendation 2: Work to Dispel Myths and Negative, Inaccurate Stereotypes
- Recommendation 3: Consider the Multidimensionality of the Social Factors and Systemic Issues Affecting the Community
- Recommendation 4: Take into Account the Intragroup Diversity that Exists Between the Community and Those Engaged with the Community
- Recommendation 5: Attempt to Develop Trust Gradually and Over an Extended Period of Time. (pp. 141-148).

As the insights and examples provided in this chapter suggest, while the goals of civic engagement are lofty, the actual process of creating meaningful community learning experiences for students and engaging students in community work that will improve the lives of others who are less fortunate than themselves is often fraught with rocky waters.

Barbara Jacoby and Nevin G. Brown provide an overview of the emerging interest in and guiding principles for developing international service-learning programs. They conclude that

International opportunities for students to learn about and practice civic engagement belong at the core of undergraduate education because they enable students to develop the very qualities to which liberal education aspires: understanding of our complex and interconnected world, reflection and critical thinking, problem solving, communication, tolerance for ambiguity, appreciation of diversity, and respect for the views of others. (p. 225)

As is the case with many publications, in addition to providing insights and answers, *Civic Engagement in Higher Education* surfaces a number of questions that call for further research, development of new program models, and additional publications. One of the primary issues raised by authors throughout this volume is how to secure the involvement of faculty in furthering the goals of civic engagement. This is a long-standing concern in the civic engagement movement. Ehrlich summarizes the situation in his Foreword: “By the 1990s, it was clear that civic engagement by students would never be viewed as central to the educational mission of their institutions unless it was linked to the curriculum through community service-learning” (p. vi). In his chapter on “Moving From Service-Learning to Civic Engagement” Marshall Welch reiterates the continued significance of faculty involvement. He identifies one of the major challenges to realizing civic engagement on campuses as

How to integrate civic knowledge and skills within the discipline-based courses. . . . Although faculty may be interested in the civic dimensions of their disciplines, they may be unfamiliar with how to teach the concepts and practices of civic engagement. (p.190)

Welch underscores the obstacles to addressing this challenge:

As we work to identify and teach a curriculum and set of skills to empower students to become engaged citizens and be critical thinkers that transcend partisan politics, we will be required to revisit culturally entrenched values and norms of the academy and build the infrastructure and resources to support this work. (p. 192)

In their summary chapter, Barbara Jacoby and Elizabeth Hollander also identify a critical faculty-related barrier to overcoming the academy's "entrenched culture":

Faculty are in the best position to make the case for building civic learning and engagement into the curriculum. Because faculty stature depends so much on recognition within the disciplines (perhaps even more than on the campus), disciplinary support for civic engagement is essential. (p. 240)

Many of the authors of this volume identify a need for more extensive research on the extent to which civic learning and engagement shape students' later lives. The examples of civic engagement practice from campuses around the country also call for further investigation and publication. Although the volume clearly seeks to move beyond a theoretical discussion of civic engagement and into the practice of civic engagement, the many practical examples are ultimately more tantalizing than valuable for practitioners. Most of the examples appear to be suited primarily to the particular culture and type of institution in which they have been implemented. And few of the authors examine the many challenges and pitfalls involved with designing and implementing effective service learning and civic engagement programs. Dunlap and Webster provide one of the only serious examinations of the difficulties frequently encountered in community engagement and offer useful recommendations for working to overcome these challenges. Overall the body of practice described in this volume calls for an in-depth evaluation on a national level of the range of civic engagement models now available to identify useful approaches for building and refining effective programs that will have maximum impact on students. In the same vein, since we now have a significant body of experience around the country in implementing civic engagement programs, a handbook of civic engagement practice that provides broadly applicable extended case examples would be useful for practitioners. If practitioners are going to learn from each other, we need to share our detailed knowledge of what works and what is problematic, and how to address challenges and barriers successfully.

Civic Engagement in Higher Education embodies the dedication and passion of many individuals who have worked in a variety of capacities on campuses across the country to focus the expertise and resources of higher education on preparing young people to become informed participants in our democratic process and to address social and political injustice around the world. The promise of higher education's civic engagement roles and responsibilities are worthy and lofty. Despite the dedication and passion, however, the vision of civic engagement as a central higher education priority has yet to be achieved. Barbara Jacoby and Elizabeth Hollander conclude this volume with an insightful assessment of the current state of the civic engagement movement, the barriers to achieving its goals, and a call for continuing the work. They assert that for civic engagement to survive as an institutional priority, it "must be central, rather than marginal, institutionalized rather than fragmented" (p. 227). This has long been the mantra of the civic engagement movement. Based on some years of experience, however, Jacoby and Hollander correctly appraise the current state of affairs: "in practice, civic engagement is one of many competing priorities on campuses and exists at a wide range of levels and support" (p. 227). In the current economic climate this may become even more the case. As the many examples in this volume attest, despite the vision of its proponents, civic engagement remains another "silo" on college and university campuses. The examples, however, also demonstrate that we now have an increasingly solid knowledge base for creating the best possible civic learning and engagement experiences for students on our campuses.
