

JOHN SALTMARSH

# The Civic Promise of

MANY CAMPUSES ACROSS THE COUNTRY intentionally create opportunities for students to actively participate in the processes of democracy: community-based learning, service learning, action research, public and community service, deliberative dialogues, community building, and public deliberation, among others. There has been less attention, however, to heeding John Dewey's admonition that democracy is a learned activity. To engage effectively in the processes of democracy, both during and after their college years, students will need to acquire, as part of their education, the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to participate as engaged, democratic citizens. Civic engagement can only come about with the development of a capacity for engagement. That development is what constitutes "civic learning."

## Civic engagement and service learning

While at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in the early 1980s, Frank Newman, an innovative leader in higher education, asserted that "the most critical demand is to restore to higher education its original purpose of preparing graduates for a life of involved and committed citizenship.... The advancement of civic learning, therefore, must become higher education's most central goal" (1985, xiv). While Newman grounded the civic work of higher education in community service, he did not specify what civic learning entailed. What is it that we would want a civically educated student to know?

Through an agenda focused on promoting community service, a number of organizations and campuses pursued civic learning, vaguely construed, during the 1980s. By the end of the

decade, the severe limitations to advancing civic learning separately from the core work of the academy had become clear. Thus, beginning in the early 1990s, service and academic study were integrated. Even with this shift, however, the emphasis was on a reflective, community-based pedagogy rather than on civic learning outcomes. While it was assumed to occur, civic learning was oftentimes omitted as a curricular goal. The emphasis was on adopting service learning as a pedagogy that would allow faculty across the disciplines to teach the content knowledge of their courses more effectively. Little attention was paid to using service learning to teach the civic dimensions of a discipline or to foster the specific civic learning outcomes that students were to achieve in addition to mastering the course concepts. A review of service-learning syllabi reveals that some of the most exemplary curricular models of service learning focus on the technical aspects of a discipline, almost to the exclusion of its civic dimensions. While there is evidence of faculty success in adapting service learning to teach course content, there is little evidence of faculty success in focusing attention on civic learning.

By the mid-nineties, service-learning practitioners were faced with a new challenge, fueled in part by the accumulated data from numerous studies indicating that, even as they were increasingly involved in volunteer activity, students were increasingly disinterested in traditional political involvement. At the same time, there was increased awareness of what some defined as a "crisis of civic renewal" in America and deep questioning about higher education's role in addressing this crisis. Higher education's response to this shifting context, framed through efforts to consciously link civic renewal with education for democratic participation, coalesced into the concept of the "engaged campus." Service learning, it has been observed, was "the leading edge of

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# Service Learning





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an academic ‘glasnost’ to create democratic, engaged, civic universities” (Benson, Harkavy, and Hartley 2005, 191). Civic engagement pursued through teaching and learning found kinship in the pedagogy of service learning. As the larger institutional agenda became better defined and more comprehensive, and as it took on a distinct civic renewal flavor, “civic engagement” gained widespread acceptance as the encompassing conceptual framework.

Support for service learning and other civic engagement activities in higher education is stronger now than at any other time in recent history. Civic engagement is featured in the strategic agenda of nearly every national higher education association, including the American Council on Education, Association of American Colleges and Universities, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the American Association of Community Colleges, the American Association for Higher Education, Campus Compact, the Council of Independent Colleges, and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, and others, including an increasing number of disciplinary associations. The powerful attraction of civic engagement is in its broad appeal; there is room inside the civic engagement tent for the inclusion of issues of community development, student leadership, academic leadership, mission reclamation, pedagogical excellence, engaged scholarship, civics education, the renewal of liberal education, and more.

At the same time, this fragmentation of intention has resulted in a civic engagement agenda that does not have clear goals or outcomes. In a 2002 report, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities noted that while engagement has become “shorthand for describing a new era of two-way partnerships between America’s colleges and universities and the publics they serve . . . it also presents the risk that the term can say everything and nothing at the same time. . . . [T]he lack of clear definition can leave some campuses and their leaders with the impression that they are ‘doing engagement,’ when in fact they are not” (8). A lack of clarity about what is meant by the term “civic engagement” is evident when, at almost any

gathering convened for the purpose of furthering civic engagement in higher education, questions inevitably arise about what is meant by civic engagement and about how it relates to civic education, service learning, democratic education, political engagement, civics, education for citizenship, or moral education. Moreover, the lack of clarity fuels a latent confusion about how to operationalize a civic engagement agenda on campus. In particular, with the ascendancy of civic engagement, there has been a diminished focus on the relationship between civic engagement and improved student civic learning. As a curricular outcome in courses across the disciplines, civic learning remains largely unaddressed.

**Civic learning**

In issuing a “call for a newly understood civic learning,” Caryn McTighe Musil (2003, 4–5) makes the case that civic learning must be academically based. On campus, she asserts, “responsibility for orchestrating such events is usually assigned to student affairs, or to students themselves, through freshmen orientation programs, student clubs, campus-based religious groups, or volunteer community centers on campus”; as a result, “civic engagement is not rooted in the very heart of the academy: its courses, its research, its faculty work.” If educating for democratic citizenship is understood “as a fundamental goal of a twenty-first century liberal education,” argues Musil, then it should be conveyed as fundamentally “what is learned through the curriculum.”

A civic learning framework is consistent with the concept of “civic professionalism,” which points to the public purposes and social responsibilities of professional education and practice. Civic professionalism “recognizes that there is finally no separation between the skills of problem solving and those of deliberation and judgment, no viable pursuit of technical excellence without participation in those civic enterprises through which expertise discovers its human meaning” (Sullivan 1995, xix). It draws attention to the civic dimensions of education, emphasizing the need not only for the development of disciplinary mastery and competence, but also for civic awareness and purpose. Civic learning illuminates

the socially responsive aspects of disciplinary knowledge, those dimensions that expand the view of education to include learning and developing the knowledge, skills, and values of democratic citizenship.

Vital and dynamic, civic learning is rooted in respect for community-based knowledge, grounded in experiential and reflective modes of teaching and learning, aimed at active participation in American democracy, and aligned with institutional change efforts to improve student learning. It is important to recognize that civic learning will be defined differently depending upon disciplinary perspective, the identity and mission of the institution, the academic strengths on campus, and the unique social environment of the local communities. Civic learning outcomes need to be thoughtfully constructed and carefully assessed if there is a serious interest in knowing that students are learning the knowledge, skills, and values for active, engaged civic participation.

In this context, civic learning includes *knowledge*—historical, political, and civic knowledge that arises from both academic and community sources; *skills*—critical thinking, communication, public problem solving, civic judgment, civic imagination and creativity, collective action, coalition building, organizational analysis; and *values*—justice, inclusion, and participation.

### **Civic knowledge**

The knowledge necessary for effective civic participation includes, but is not limited to, traditional notions of “civics”—including the study of structures and processes of government and the obligations of citizenship. It also includes, but is not limited to, the historical foundations of the country and the emergence of American democracy. This is knowledge that can be learned in the classroom through the study of texts, but it is richer and more vital when it is integrated into the life of a community. Emphasis on the community-based



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aspect of civic knowledge is consistent with the formulation provided by the U.S. Department of Education (Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education 2003, 7):

A good understanding of the democratic principles and institutions embodied in our history, government, and law provide the foundation for civic engagement and commitment, but the classroom alone is not enough. Research shows that students are more likely to have a sense of social responsibility, more likely to commit to addressing community or social problems in their adult lives as workers and citizens, and more likely to demonstrate political efficacy when they engage in structured, conscious reflection on experience in the larger community.

A key element of civic knowledge is historical knowledge that contextualizes community-based experiences such that past events provide a context and a foundation for present community-based problem solving. Every community has a rich and unique history that fundamentally shapes the present social environment. This history also shapes current politics in the community, drawing upon a definition of politics, broadly conceived, as

“the way a society as a whole negotiates, argues about, and understands its past and creates its present and future” (Boyte 2004, 1). As such, an understanding of the community’s history is essential to effectively participating in it as well as effectively shaping its future. Further, it is important to conceive of civic knowledge as knowledge that emerges from community settings. Civic knowledge, in this framework, emphasizes the role that the community, in all of its complexity, plays in shaping student learning. Additionally, every discipline and profession has a history that is unique to its particular intellectual community and social purpose. That history contextualizes the profession and allows for exploration of its public and social dimensions.

#### **Civic skills**

Richard Battistoni’s *Civic Engagement Across the Curriculum* (2002) is perhaps the best resource available for framing a civic skills component for curricula in a variety of disciplines. Battistoni draws on multiple disciplinary perspectives to explore a range of civic skills that can be incorporated into courses. In some ways, the skills he addresses are traditional liberal



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learning outcomes, but they are translated into a public context. For example, critical thinking skills are a widely expected outcome in liberal education. In Battistoni's framework, those skills are shaped by the challenges that community-based experiences place on student's cognitive assumptions; "students' ability to analyze critically is enhanced by confronting ideas and theories with the actual realities in the world surrounding them" (32). Similarly, Battistoni reframes communication skills, a foundational liberal learning outcome, as skills that are "essential to effective civic participation and to the values of civility and public deliberation" (33). He employs this "translation" of traditional liberal learning outcomes into learning outcomes with a civic dimension to suggest a range of civic skills that include public problem solving, civic judgment, civic imagination and creativity, collective action, community/coalition building, and organizational analysis.

The skills base that Battistoni argues for is precisely what Mary Kirlin (2002) identifies as a deficiency in many civic education programs. Her research suggests that many service and service-learning programs have weak impacts in the area of civic engagement because they have not sufficiently addressed the development of fundamental civic skills.

### **Civic values**

Articulating civic values suggests that it is legitimate to frame a discussion of values around "democratic values." As presented here, key democratic values are participation, justice, and inclusion. The point is that faculty, based on their disciplinary contexts, and campuses, based on their unique social, historical, and community contexts, will frame the values of democracy somewhat differently. At the same time, a focus on democratic values suggests that there is, fundamentally, a set of values essential to a functioning democracy that can be widely agreed upon and shared.

### **The civic promise of service learning**

Attention to civic learning reflects an effort to move beyond effective educational strategies like service learning to learning outcomes that have a civic dimension. An essential point made by Edgerton and Schulman in reflecting on the 2002 National Survey of Student Engagement results is relevant here: "students can

be engaged in a range of effective practices and still not be learning with understanding; we know that students can be learning with understanding and still not be acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are related to effective citizenship" (National Survey of Student Engagement 2002, 3). A focus on civic learning will build upon effective teaching and learning practices by linking them more deliberately to civic learning outcomes. In this sense, service learning can be viewed as an effective engaged pedagogy; the next step is to employ service learning for the achievement of civic learning outcomes. □

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