



What Has Happened to Our Citizens-in-Training?

BY BILL COPLIN

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HIGHER EDUCATION leaders publicly claim that their undergraduate programs develop active and responsible citizens. Lobby groups and nonprofits such as the College Board and the Institute for Higher Education present studies to "prove" that undergraduate programs are making good on that promise, showing that college graduates vote more, express higher trust in social institutions, and participate in community groups more than noncollege graduates. Because these studies do not control for the income of the parents, despite these assertions, there is no definitive way to tell if there is a cause and effect relationship between a college education and the civic responsibility of its graduates.

Moreover, there is a chorus of studies demonstrating that students are not connected to the larger purposes and aspirations of American democracy: voter turnout is low; feelings that political participation will not make any difference are high; and there is a profound sense of cynicism and lack of trust in the political process.

So, how can undergraduate institutions do more to develop civic responsibility among graduates? The general answer is to treat undergraduates as citizens-in-training. In addition to providing at least one course on participating in government, administrators and faculty need to establish the types of relationships with students that would reduce cynicism and increase trust. Students who learn to trust authority in college will find it easier to trust governmental institutions. However, the reverse also is true, and may be a reason why college graduates treat political institutions with cynicism and distrust while exhibiting hostility or apathy to college rules, regulations, and programs.

The first and most important action would be for colleges and universities to stop raising tuition two or three times the rate of inflation—with no transparency on what the increases pay for, as this is a form of "taxation without representation." Universities claim to raise tuition because their costs are higher but, the truth is, they have done it simply because they can. There are various factors leading to higher fees, one of which is too many students. Blessed with an increasing demand—which they have helped to generate through lobbying for government subsidies and massive

advertising campaigns—colleges have enjoyed market conditions that will bear just about whatever prices they decide to charge.

Students see high tuition as only one form of an arbitrary and excessive source of taxation. They feel overcharged for everything from books to bagels. When I explain to my students that, for instance, Syracuse University is a nonprofit corporation, they are incredulous. They see the university as a business; they are just not sure who gets the profits. Cynicism and lack of trust will continue to grow when the institutional leaders claim to be serving the public good, but appear to be maximizing their own salaries and escapades.

The second action for universities would be to provide students the services they feel they are paying for. The vast majority of students assume that a college education will prepare them for a more interesting and better paying career. However, with an estimated 60% living with their parents following graduation, many feel they did not get their money's worth from the academic portion of their college experience. There is some truth to that. Employers consistently report that college graduates are not well-prepared for the workforce. Studies of their basic skills demonstrate they are lacking in areas such as reading, writing, and math.

In addition, students are forced to take baskets of courses to earn their diploma that appear to be relevant to something other than their employability. They are treated like consumers of cable television who are coerced to pay for programs they never watch. The only difference is that students cannot surf past these classes like they can with their TV clicker. The lack of relevance to career exploration and skill-building can be a source of anger for students who already feel the price is too high. To compound their curriculum concerns, students too often have instructors who do not order books in time for the first class, require the purchase of books that are not used, and fail to hand out a well-developed syllabus.

Even caring and competent faculty members may have a troubled relationship with students because of conflicting goals. Students see themselves as consumers buying preparation for a future career, and most faculty members would prefer to see them as scholars-in-training. The conflict is particularly troubling for students who perceive that leaders of higher education treat

them as consumers when deciding the price of tuition but as something else when they get on campus.

Students might view the curriculum as more legitimate if they were not ignored in its design, faculty selection, and program requirements. Students should not have power over these decisions, but should be consulted on a systematic basis. Feeling they have no voice in the curriculum process, students simply hunker down and shut up. Accepting what the “man” says is not exactly good preparation for civic responsibility.

A third action is to teach students about government. Few colleges require all of their students to take courses on government. The absence of some kind of government requirement sends a clear message that, either citizenship is not about government, or preparing to be an active and responsible citizen is not as important as learning whatever the faculty chooses to teach. The curriculum chaos that characterizes undergraduate education, especially in the liberal arts, has made a basic government course one of thousands of electives.

Coursework on government taught in most colleges today is heavy on the theory and “big” issues and light on the practical and specific. Students are provided scholarly theories of political behavior or ideological discussions of the weaknesses in the current system. If there is any serious coverage of how government works, it is at the national, rather than local, level—even though a vast majority of college graduates will begin practicing (and continue to exercise) their citizenship skills and responsibilities at the local level.

A fourth action would be to provide more balanced viewpoints about governmental authority. College administrators and faculty call for—and teach—openmindedness, and seem to be good at it. One of the few empirically backed findings about universities is that a college educated person has an open mind. On the whole, college graduates can see ambiguity and question dogma better than those with just a high school diploma. Good citizens should be able to reserve judgment until they have listened to all sides and questioned the assertions and values related to a policy decision. However, an open mind is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for civic responsibility. Governmental authority in the vast majority of situations must be accepted. I had a discussion with a colleague in the mathematics department a few years back who said that the essence of citizenship was questioning authority. I hope my colleague does not question the authority of a traffic light when I am approaching an intersection that he is planning to cross.

The well-documented liberal bias of the bulk of college faculty members also leads to cynicism and distrust. Using the classroom as a platform to promote social change creates an intellectual environment where the status quo—as opposed to radical change—inevitably is viewed as unjust and incremental. This practice denigrates the idea that citizens can look at both

sides and make up their own mind. If they cannot do it in a classroom where scholars are supposed to be as objective as possible, where can they do it?

Those faculty members who have a liberal agenda in the classroom run the risk of appearing hypocritical with their \$100,000-plus salaries and their tendency to treat students in an authoritarian manner. They may talk about helping the oppressed, but then they support a system that rejects students as consumers and citizens.

Leaning to the left

The problem of liberal bias is exacerbated by a recent trend in the behavior of some leaders of higher education. They support liberal positions, not just by using the rhetoric of social justice, but by taking action in the name of their university. Their position is clear: “We have a fundamental task to renew our role as agents of our democracy.” Some leaders have taken that to mean that the university should promote democracy as they define it. It has justified spending resources, much of which come from undergraduate tuition, on direct investments in the local community. They also have supported efforts at the state, Federal, and international level to promote social change using “research” as a cover for lobbying efforts on various policy questions.

Administrators may justify these actions as a way to build civic responsibility among their undergraduates, but without getting clear approval from the undergraduates, they appear to be doing just the opposite. Most students would prefer that the leaders use student tuition to make a better world for the student community rather than for the rest of the world. Forays into the social justice arena by the university appear to be asking the serfs to support the escapades of the monarchy.

A final action that could improve the learning of the citizen-in-training would be to provide more support for community service and selected student activities. Most faculty members do not see these experiences as worthy of academic credit. They would prefer students spend more time on their studies. Participation in student groups and interscholastic activities rarely generate credit. One can understand why a scholarship athlete on the football team might not earn credit, but it is difficult to understand why members of the debate or mock trial team are given no credit or very little compared to the hours spent, effort made, skills developed, and knowledge learned. The offices of residential life in many colleges and universities provide programming directly aimed at increasing community and civic responsibility. Yet, academic credit is denied, and faculty members always are asking why we are spending money on their efforts.

Administrators, however, usually do encourage all types of community service and other student affairs programming. They make a sharp distinction between academic and student affairs

because they realize most faculty members do not see these experiences as valuable learning activities. Some administrators pressure for more academic recognition of these activities, but they tread lightly in dealing with the faculty.

These suggestions to improve civic responsibility among undergraduates are based on my experience over the past 30 years with an undergraduate major, Policy Studies. The tagline for the major, “undergraduates building professional skills through community service and research,” suggests a hands-on approach that will help students “do good and do well.”

I have not tried to get tuition reduced for students in this major, but I have encouraged early graduation to help save them money. The program has several courses designed to provide the skills they will need in the world of work. It connects them to alumni of the program so they can get internships and jobs. The program begins with a course where students develop policies for local conditions and offers several courses in which local politicians and government officials teach classes. I have invested a faculty position in a community service administrator to ensure the majors obtain valuable community service and internship experiences (generating more than 31,000 hours of student services each year, and those hours are part of the required coursework).

Evidence of the success of this approach in contributing to graduates who most would consider to be “good citizens” never can be conclusive, but some patterns suggest it has considerable potential. Each year, more than 25% of the seniors in the major apply to Teach for America, and 70% are accepted—compared to a national acceptance rate of about 12%. All but one of the university’s 12 Truman Scholars—a highly competitive national scholarship competition given to juniors who show potential for outstanding public service—are from this program. A higher proportion of students from this program win an internal scholarship competition that, in effect, is a measure of citizenship. Students in the major represent all areas of the political spectrum. They obtain skills and perspectives that should serve them well. Alumni keep sending me reports on how they are doing good by volunteering, serving on the boards of nonprofits, taking jobs in government and the nonprofit sector, and participating in politics, mostly at the local level.

While it is true that the success of Policy Studies merely provides anecdotal and limited empirical support for improving the performance of undergraduate programs in encouraging civic responsibility, it can serve as a good starting point for a better way for universities to treat their citizens-in-training. ★

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