

The Spirit of Liberty

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Abstract: A commentary on the responsibility of colleges and universities to make moral and civic learning an integral part of the undergraduate experience.

Essay:

Sixty years ago, in 1944, Judge Learned Hand spoke to thousands, including many new citizens, at a huge "I Am An American Day" ceremony in Central Park in the midst of wartime. "The spirit of liberty," he said, "is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias."

Those civic virtues are much in need these days, as America is struggling with discord both at home and abroad. Over the past several years, we have been looking hard at campuses throughout the country to examine how and how well they are promoting the development of their students as ethical and committed citizens, imbued with the spirit of liberty.

Undergraduate experiences are just one part of a life-long developmental process. But we have come to see that if campus programs and activities are intentionally designed with these outcomes in mind, colleges can establish the groundwork that students will later build on, shape the intellectual frameworks and habits of mind they bring to their adult experiences, change the way they understand the responsibilities that are central to their sense of self, teach them to offer and demand evidence and justification for their moral and political positions, and develop wiser judgment in approaching situations and questions that represent potential turning points in their lives.

When we examined moral and civic education in America's colleges and universities, we found, regrettably, that undergraduate moral and civic education is not an institutional priority on most campuses. This is particularly unfortunate because national studies show a number of troubling trends among young Americans, including undergraduates. Cheating in college, for example, has increased considerably in recent decades. Research suggests that students do not understand or share the values of academic integrity. Substantial evidence also makes clear that the overall decline in civic and political participation is especially pronounced among young adults, including college students. Americans growing up in recent decades vote less often than their elders and show lower levels of social trust and knowledge of politics.

A few colleges and universities build moral and civic learning into the heart of what they are doing with undergraduates. They make a conscious effort to reach all of their students and use multiple approaches to address the full range of dimensions that constitute moral and civic development. We found institutions that do this in every category from small religious colleges to urban public universities and colleges, elite private universities, military academies, and community colleges. And they do so in ways that ensure the full spectrum of perspectives, from conservative to liberal.

Among the undergraduates at every campus are some who look for ways to contribute to something larger than themselves, who are inspired by moral ideals or who are passionate about social or political issues. They are primed to take advantage of the many ways a college education can deepen those convictions and bring them to a higher level of intellectual and practical sophistication and competence. But most students need help in college to further these goals. That help should come in three arenas: the curriculum, including both general education and the major; extra-curricular activities and programs; and the campus culture, including honor codes, residence hall life, and spontaneous "teachable moments," as well as cultural routines and practices. Weaving moral and civic issues into the fabric of every student's life should be an explicit goal on every campus.

At Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina, for example, all students are required to take two courses in ethical inquiry. The curriculum committee that designed this approach saw it as a "moral primer," complementing co-curricular programs and enabling students to think about their own moral compass and how to use it. Moral and civic issues have also been integrated into the first-year writing program, and students' writing has improved significantly along with their capacity to understand complex ethical and social concerns, according to Elizabeth Kiss, the Director of the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke. In addition to these curricular changes, Duke has also put in place a number of steps to create a sense of community on the large campus, a "community of communities," as President Nan Keohane calls it.

Along with incorporating moral and civic issues into coursework, students often undergo dramatic transformations through their participation in extra-curricular programs. Students in a sociology and anthropology club called Sassafras at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, for example, apply what they are learning in their classes to projects

that help revitalize local low-income neighborhoods, and are aided in their efforts by faculty. The work of this and many other programs is coordinated through the Johnetta B. Cole Center for Community Service and Community Building, which is named for a charismatic former president of the college who brought a heightened concern for moral and civic issues.

It is also important to have a campus climate that supports positive values like honesty, open-mindedness, and respect for others. This means not only having a strong honor code against cheating, though that is certainly important, but also tangible symbols of a college's values. At Portland State University, for example, a bridge linking two buildings at the main campus entrance proclaims in large letters, "Let Knowledge Serve the City." The university has many programs in place to make that motto (which was initiated by students) a reality. Service to the community and community partnerships are key elements of curricular and extra-curricular activities and also provide the focus for much faculty research.

We have seen some wonderful success stories such as the ones we've mentioned, but we have also seen too many campuses where the moral and civic development of students is ignored. If we are fighting to protect our basic moral values, our freedoms, and our democracy, we must do more to ensure that succeeding generations gain the understanding, skills, and motivations needed to preserve and promote the spirit of liberty.

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