

Educating for Democracy

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Abstract: The author challenges us to reconsider the role of higher education in preparing students for potential roles in the political process.

Essay:

Young people in the United States today are much more likely to be involved in volunteer work of an apolitical sort than in politics. As part of a study on political engagement, my Carnegie colleagues and I surveyed students at a diversity of colleges and universities and asked them why they and many of their peers are so much more likely to participate in community service than in politics. Many offered explanations that are familiar from the research literature on the topic: "It is easier to see that we are having an effect when we help individuals; the rewards are often more reliable and immediate." "We don't see the relevance of politics for our lives." "We don't trust politicians or the political process."

Yet these familiar responses were not the dominant theme in our conversations with students about the disparity between rates of participation in community service and politics. A different point came up over and over, in both the student interviews and in our interviews with college and university faculty who teach for political development: Students are offered a great wealth of opportunities to do community service but they perceive very few opportunities and little encouragement to become politically involved.

Students are strongly encouraged—even required—to do community service in many high schools and some colleges. A key incentive to participate is the (probably quite well-founded) belief of many students that a record of community service strengthens their college applications. Community service is also incorporated into many college courses, and there are well-elaborated infrastructures to support it on most college

campuses.

In contrast, we found in our study that the route to becoming politically engaged remains unclear to most students. Politics is unfamiliar territory, whereas community service has become almost as familiar as going to school. As one student put it, "There was always more pressure toward community service, and more opportunities available. High schools promoted community service activities, but never, ever, promoted a political engagement activity. I don't remember that happening even once. Community service is just so much more emphasized to our generation."

It is often assumed that people feel varying degrees of motivation to participate in either community service or politics and become involved to the degree that they are motivated to do so. Psychologist James Youniss and his colleagues have suggested that this model has the causality reversed—that motivation is largely the *result* of engagement rather than the cause. Young people are recruited to participate in civic or political institutions and processes for many different reasons, including incentives that may have little to do with intrinsic motivation. Then, in the course of participating, they develop relationships that inspire and make demands on them, gain satisfactions that they could not foresee, and begin to expand and reshape the values and goals that led them to participate, often shifting their sense of identity in the process.

This alternative formulation of motivation and engagement suggests that the relative absence of opportunities and encouragement for political engagement, in contrast with the plethora of opportunities to engage in nonpolitical service, may provide a more powerful explanation for the disparity than the usual accounts—that students are turned off to mainstream politics, and so on. It may be that young people's high levels of involvement in community service, but not politics, is less a story of their natural inclinations and choices and more a story of structures of opportunity and incentives provided by adults. The imbalance can be read as a striking success story about efforts to encourage young people to give back to their communities, along with the absence of any comparable effort to get them politically involved.

We believe that youth political engagement is ripe for the same kind of success story if educators in control of opportunities and incentives begin to pay serious attention to this important domain. We are confident that efforts to foster students' political development will pay off, thus helping to ensure the informed and capable citizenry necessary for a healthy democracy. Our study focused on a wide range of different courses and programs with a diversity of students. The survey results clearly show that when students participate in courses and co-curricular programs that teach for political knowledge, skills and motivation, they gain dramatically on all these outcomes. And those who are least interested in politics at the outset gain the most.

It is well within our grasp to reach politically disaffected young people, and we urge educators and political organizations to create structured opportunities, offer encouragement, and provide incentives that will lead to more widespread youth political experience. If these experiences are carefully designed and effectively implemented, the

young people who take part will develop long-standing habits of participation, richer political knowledge, more effective skills, and a strong sense of themselves as capable, engaged and responsible citizens.

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