

## **“Integrating Civic Responsibility into the Curriculum”**

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### **Integrating Civic Responsibility into the Curriculum**

By Karla Gottlieb and Gail Robinson

*If there is a crisis in education in the United States today, it is less that test scores have declined than it is that we have failed to provide the education for citizenship that is still the most significant responsibility of the nation's schools and colleges. (Newman 1985)*

If community college faculty and administrators are to address effectively the crisis cited by Frank Newman nearly 20 years ago, they would do well to examine their role in instilling students with the requisite knowledge and skills to become active, effective citizens. This examination should take place on all levels, ranging from the educational institution as a whole to individual classes to specific interactions with students.

### **Goals and Purposes of Community Colleges**

In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey ([1916] 1966) proposed two radical ideas: first, that all citizens—not just the elite—can have a life of the mind, and second, that lives that are only of the mind are not adequate to meet the demands of democracy. At a fundamental level, Dewey declared that Americans, as citizens, must be engaged both in thought and in action. He argued that education is the key to civic engagement. Therefore, institutions of learning must adequately prepare students for such activity and should be viewed as microcosms of society that should model community behavior (Ehrlich 2000, 1999).

Since their inception, colleges and universities in the United States have been responsible for developing both knowledge and character in their students (Colby et al. 2000; Komives and Woodard 1996). In fact, the goal of higher education is not only to prepare students for productive careers, “but also to enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose; not only to generate new knowledge, but to channel that knowledge to humane ends; not merely to study government, but to help shape a citizenry that can promote the public good” (Boyer 1987). Community colleges in particular have worked to achieve these goals while also remaining accessible and affordable to all who wish to study at these institutions.

Using service learning to develop civic responsibility allows community colleges to fulfill their basic mission of providing a quality educational experience and serving the needs of the community. Service learning combines community service and classroom instruction, with a focus on critical, reflective thinking, community-identified needs, and personal and civic responsibility.

By nurturing the development of civic responsibility in students, community colleges can help counteract citizen disengagement. To do this, however, opportunities must first exist or be created for citizen involvement in solving public problems (Boyte 1991). Many students care about the world around them but need to learn how they can affect community issues. Students also need to recognize their own voices, as well as hear and consider the voices of their fellow citizens in the decision-making process. Classroom and service activities that include discussions of civic responsibility can help students hone the skills that are vital to the success of the college and the community at large.

### **What Is Civic Responsibility?**

Civic responsibility means active participation in the public life of a community in an informed, committed, and constructive manner, with a focus on the common good. It evokes notions of what it means to live in a democracy, in addition to the complementary ideas of citizenship, social responsibility, civic engagement, and community involvement.

Given this definition, how can faculty make civic responsibility an integral part of their curriculum and potentially affect student learning outcomes? By adopting service learning as a teaching and learning strategy.

Service learning offers the greatest potential for fostering civic responsibility because it provides opportunities for students to engage directly in their communities and meet community needs while enhancing their course work. It is important that, at the same time, students purposefully explore what civic responsibility means and the importance of both understanding and embracing this concept.

Because some college students reflect a pattern of the larger society toward civic disengagement, one of the roles of higher education should be to find ways to renew and strengthen the commitment of students to civic life. It is critically important for the leadership of higher education to call on their institutions to play an active role in civic renewal. However, this renewal will not happen until faculty find ways to engage students in their communities and take the time to help them think critically about the importance of civic responsibility and their role as citizens.

Although service learning continues to gain momentum as an important and far-reaching movement in higher education, it seems that faculty and service learning program coordinators are not sufficiently addressing the concept of civic responsibility with their students. Simply involving students in a service experience does not necessarily result in students gaining a better understanding of the importance and complexities of civic responsibility. It is imperative to help faculty better understand this concept and how it relates to service learning, and provide tools to help them more purposefully integrate learning about civic responsibility into their teaching. AACC's *A Practical Guide for Integrating Civic Responsibility into the Curriculum* is one such tool.

## Academic and Institutional Considerations

Higher education has always had a responsibility and commitment to helping students become good citizens. What better place in which to carry this out than the college classroom? Faculty cannot necessarily teach people to be good or active citizens, but they can create opportunities and exercises to provide their students with the skills to do it for themselves. Faculty and academic administrators should consider:

- What is the mission of the college's academic courses? What are their learning objectives? How do they relate to civic responsibility?
- What changes need to be made—in syllabi, assignments, and assessment measures—to incorporate civic responsibility into both the mission and the learning objectives?
- How will intended classroom learning outcomes be balanced with anticipated service and civic responsibility outcomes?
- Are other faculty members open to curricular change? Does the college or any of its departments have a mission statement that includes civic responsibility? If not, what will it take to make a change?
- How can students' service learning activities and faculty members' involvement in service and civic engagement be promoted as examples of citizenship?

Faculty are in an ideal position to help students understand that they have a responsibility to become engaged citizens. How much or how little a part civic responsibility plays in the curriculum and institution is up to those faculty and their academic administrators. AACC's *Civic Responsibility Guide* can help in taking the first step.

## References

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