

Ductus Exemplo: Student Leadership By Example in Civic Engagement

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Background

This article presents an example of a successful, but challenging, holistic student learning experience in the realm of civic engagement at St. Mary's University of San Antonio, Texas, a Hispanic-serving Catholic university. Within the article, the authors explore student attitudinal, civil authority, and contemporary cultural challenges to engaging the community civically in a manner consistent with the mission of the university. Then the authors offer an example of how faculty, student affairs professionals, and students tackled these challenges together to animate their community through a unique Service Learning course, *Political Communication*, within the 2004 election season.

Introduction

In light of the upcoming 2008 national campaigns, this article presents a successful example of a holistic student learning experience in civic engagement at St. Mary's University of San Antonio, Texas, a liberal arts, majority-minority Catholic university, sponsored by the Society of Mary (Marianists). During the 2004 election season, faculty and professional staff joined together at this Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) to develop and implement a Service Learning course, *Political Communication*. This course, rooted in the national Debate Watch program sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), was the University's response to a need for civic conversation. A study by the Leon and Sylvia Panetta Institute for Public Policy, *Attitudes, Politics, and Public Service: A Survey of American College Students* (May 2004) had revealed that college students were much more likely to engage politically if they had had a discussion about the election with someone in their community. However, to promote such discussion through a course required tackling some "environmental" challenges: a negative student political outlook nationally, possible Church and State tension resulting from a religiously affiliated institution sponsoring civic activities, and the ironic impulse that permeates contemporary life. Using a model that combined academic and student affairs, Mary Lynne

Gasaway Hill, Ph.D., a faculty member with a specialty in politics and language, and Andrew J. Hill, J.D., Director of the Service Learning Center, tackled these challenges to develop and teach *Political Communication*, which generated over 2,700 hours of civic service by only sixteen students.

The Attitudinal Environment: The National Student Political Outlook

To offer a civic engagement course was irrelevant if students were not interested in taking it. Therefore, Hill and Hill confronted the attitudinal environment of students' negative political outlook. Initially, the most critical aspect to address was the lack of student recognition of the connection between politics and their daily lives. This lack reflected a trend among many American youths who did not vote in 2000 because they felt that the issues were not relevant to them. According to the 2004 Panetta study, few American college students indicated that politics was relevant to their lives. Despite the growing dependence of college students on various forms of governmental financial aid to support their studies, a mere 19 percent contended that politics was very relevant to their lives, while another 37 percent stated that it was fairly relevant to their lives. Two out of five college students (43 percent) claimed that politics was only somewhat or not relevant at all to their lives.

Along with this relevancy problem, the mood of colleges students regarding the country's direction mirrored the sense of division in the country overall. Among the American adult population, 41 percent felt that the country was headed in the right direction while 49 percent felt that it was headed in the wrong direction (NBC/ *Wall Street Journal* Poll, 2004). College students' responses, according to the Panetta study, reflected the same sort of division with 40 percent saying that the country was headed in the right direction, 42 percent saying that it was headed in the wrong direction, and 14 percent having mixed views about the country's direction. However, this outlook was more pessimistic for the two largest American minority groups. Half of Hispanic students and 59 percent of African American students felt that the country was moving in the wrong direction. Also, large percentages of students majoring in the social sciences (50 percent) and the humanities (49 percent) thought the country was moving in the wrong direction. This mixed view was also apparent in the responses regarding the economy. More than half (58 percent) of student respondents rated the economy as failing. This percentage was higher amongst Hispanics (71 percent), African Americans (77 percent) and students living in the western United States (67 percent). In conjunction with this tension about the economy and the country's overall direction, half (50 percent) of students stated that they felt uncertain and

concerned about the nation's future; only 35 percent stated that they felt more confident and secure about it. Within the more uncertain and concerned half, 60 percent were Hispanics while 74 percent were African American students.

However, on the individual level, students were much more optimistic demonstrating an underlying confidence about their own abilities and future. When asked if they were confident about obtaining a suitable job after graduation, two-thirds (68 percent) of them expressed confidence that they would be able to do so. Half of all students predict that they will be better off than their parents. Among Hispanic students and African American students, this prediction was considerably more upbeat with 75 percent and 60 percent, respectively, predicting they would be better off financially than their parents.

With this national data at hand, particularly that pertaining to minority students, Hill and Hill interviewed potential class members, discussing this data with them before inviting interested students to enroll in *Political Communication*. Because the class would be extremely time-intensive, registration was restricted to students who had completed the interview process. This process yielded sixteen highly motivated students (14 undergraduate and two graduate students) who were predominantly female; ten were of Hispanic heritage; two were Asian-Americans; two were African-Americans; one was a Lebanese American; and one was a white American. One Hispanic male, with a wife and child, was also a non-traditional student on active military service.

The Civil Authority Environment: Church, State, and Tax-Exempt Status

To produce an actual class for this diverse group of students at a Catholic University, Hill and Hill had to design it in a way that was respectful of the American civil environment. When dealing with questions of civic engagement, Catholic colleges and universities have the right to speak and act in a way that reflects their missions as religious institutions, but they must do so in a way that respects their role in the larger civil, secular society that protects their rights. The First Amendment states, in part, that: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Following this principle, the federal government struck a bargain with organized churches, regarding political activity and their tax-exempt status. The Internal Revenue Code prohibits the intervention into political campaigns by certain organizations, such as the university, as a condition for exemption from federal income tax under section 501 (c)(3) of the United States Code, which grants tax-free status to educational, charitable, and religious organizations. If the university were to violate these federal

guidelines by sponsoring a partisan event and endorsing a candidate, it would put at risk its tax-free status. The relevant section of the Code states:

A Section 501(c)(3) organization is defined in part as an organization “no part of the net earnings of which inures to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual, no substantial part of the activities of which is carrying on propaganda, or otherwise attempting, to influence legislation (except as otherwise provided in subsection [501](h), and which does not participate in or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office” (IRC 2007).

Fortunately, the Office of General Counsel for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has written “Political Activity Guidelines for Catholic Organizations,” which provides guidance on these issues, because “very little additional interpretation is provided in the regulations, [and] the penalties for violating the prohibition are severe. In addition to loss of tax-exempt status and deductibility of contributions, two-tiered excise taxes may be imposed on the exempt organization (10% and 100%) and on the organization manager (2-1/2% and 50%) for political expenditures (IRC § 4955). In flagrant cases, the IRS may seek an injunction against further political expenditures (IRC § 7409[a]) and immediate determination and assessment of income and excise taxes (IRC § 6852)” (USCCB 2004). Thus, the class as a whole, or any student representing the class (and in turn, therefore, the University), could not engage in any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office. They could advocate for positions on issues, but not endorse any candidates as a class or as its representative. The bottom line was this: to maintain the University’s tax-free status, the class’s efforts needed to be about ideas and not about candidates.

The Cultural Environment: The Ironic Impulse

Upon tackling the tax-exempt challenge, Hill and Hill had to hone their awareness of the ironic impulse, prevalent in contemporary culture, which seems to be toxic to a belief in civic institutions. Jedidiah Purdy (1999) articulates this ironic cultural moment quite effectively in *For Common Things: Irony, trust, and Commitment in America Today*.

Irony has become our marker of worldliness and maturity. The ironic individual practices a style of speech and behavior that avoids all appearance of naiveté – or naïve devotion, belief, or hope. He subtly protests the inadequacy of the things he says, the gestures he makes, the acts he performs ... His wariness becomes a mistrust of the language itself. He disowns his own words ... There is something fearful in this irony. It is a fear of betrayal, disappointment, and humiliation, and a suspicion that believing, hoping, or caring too much will open us to these. Irony is a way of refusing to rely on such treacherous things. However, there is also something perceptive about irony, and sometimes the ironist is right. The ironist expresses the perception that the world has

grown old, flat, and sterile, and that we are rightly weary of it. There is nothing to delight, move, inspire, or horrify us. Nothing will ever surprise us. Everything we encounter is a remake, a rerelease, a ripoff, or a rerun. We know it all before we see it, because we have seen it all already... So we sense an unreal quality in our words and even in our thoughts. They are superficial, they belong to other people and other purposes; they are not ours, and it may be that nothing is properly ours. It is this awareness, and the wish not to rest the weight of our hopes on someone else's stage set, that the ironic attitude expresses.

Contemporary students, along with an increasing number of their faculty and staff mentors, are blessed and cursed with this sense of awareness. Certainly, many of us do not wish to appear naïve by resting the weight of our hopes on someone else's stage set.

According to a *New York Times* poll, "Americans tend to be cynical about politicians, distrustful of institutions, and civically disengaged" (Wolfe 2000). To believe in officials and institutions risks appearing naïve. Faculty, staff and students have politically come of age in an era of exposure of the bleaker sides of socio-civic life as manifested in the Vietnam War, Watergate, the Iran-Contra affair, the collapse of corporations such as Enron, the child sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church, and the on-going Iraq War.

Not surprisingly, many Americans have indeed disengaged as indicated by lower voter turnout rates, lower levels of political efficacy (the belief that our voice and vote count), and a forty-year decline of trust and confidence in our public institutions (Fukuyama 1999). The emergent wariness of the public arena challenges a form of civic engagement that requires, at least, a minimal trust in the civic process and the ability of people to contribute to the common good. This trust in the process and the potential for contributing to the common good requires authentic conversation within communities. The ironic impulse undermines authentic conversation by rejecting the sincerity of speakers as well as the meaning of the words, themselves. Therefore, Hill and Hill and their students had to strive to create a campus environment that allowed for the possibility of real conversation throughout the election season.

Real conversations were critical for the course's success given the 2004 Panetta survey's recognition of "a link between the level of discussion that students have had about politics and public service and their political and public service behavior. More than half (52%) of American college students say that during their time as a high school or college student, no one has ever spoken with them about getting involved in politics or in public service. A very high correlation was demonstrated between students who say that no one has spoken with them about getting involved in politics or public service and those who are not registered to vote. Nine in ten (91%)

students who say they have had discussions about these issues report being registered to vote versus 75 percent of those who have not spoken with anyone about these issues during their time as a student” (Panetta 2004). Apparently, authentic conversation could, indeed, help to overcome the ironic impulse and lead to civic engagement.

Wrestling with These Environmental Challenges in *Political Communication*

To address this need for sustained conversation, Hill and Hill drew upon Alexander Astin’s theory of student involvement for the pedagogical foundation of *Political Communication*. This theory suggested that a specific curriculum, to attain its desired effect, must elicit sufficient student effort to accomplish the goals and objectives of the course (Astin 1984). With Astin’s theory as the foundation, they chose a service-learning model, requiring intense student involvement to integrate theory and praxis, as the pedagogical method to elicit student effort in and out of the classroom. The course’s service activities were focused on the national Debate Watch program sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD). Debate Watch provides opportunities for communities to gather to watch the televised debates, discuss what they have learned, and then share this information with the CPD. The students in the course would serve as the planning and implementation team for three Debate Watch programs (one for each presidential debate) as well as other civic activities.

With Astin’s theoretical approach being animated by service-learning, the goal of *Political Communication* was to engage the community in the electoral enterprise as an extension of the University’s concern for the common good. The objectives of the course were to offer opportunities for the class to organize Debate Watch programs for the larger community, to articulate and demonstrate the relationship between civil discourse and democracy in practical ways, and to hone public communication skills. To meet this goal and these objectives, the Hills partnered with Migdalia Garcia, the University’s Civic Engagement Coordinator, and Patricia Mejia, Associate Director of the University’s 21st Century Leadership Center, to construct the course syllabus. They chose readings to address not only *how* to do political communication (e.g., *Communication Planning* by Ferguson, 1999), but also *why* to do political communication at a Catholic and Marianist university (e.g., *Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility* by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004; *Characteristics of Marianist Education* by the Society of Mary, 1999; and *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in a Cynical Time* by Paul Loeb, 1999). They also designed writing assignments for students to integrate theory with praxis, culminating in the writing of student political autobiographies.

With its initial gathering, *Political Communication* moved rather quickly. In its first session, the class reviewed portions of the University's mission statement, its strategic plan, and the *Characteristics of Marianist Education*. With this review as prologue, Mr. Rey Gustamente, of University Ministry, guided the class through an exercise to determine its own mission. After personal reflection, group sharing, and a lively discussion, the class composed the following mission statement:

"Through education and involvement, we strive to empower our human family to embrace civic responsibility."

This statement reflected the group's commitment to model civic engagement for the community and *ductus exemplo*, leading by example. Next, the class identified various on- and off-campus constituencies with whom it would work through the election cycle. These included organizations such as: the Commission on Presidential Debates; the Student Government Association (SGA); all of the on-campus student groups; various University offices; the San Antonio City Council; and the Archdiocese, as well as many others. Each student served as a liaison to several of these organizations, providing them with Debate Watch information and updates as well as assisting them throughout the election season with voting-oriented concerns such as registration or absentee ballots.

After working with Mr. Gustamente, Kurt Weber, Ph.D., of the University Counseling and Testing Center, introduced the text *Soul of a Citizen*, focusing on the civic challenges of "learned helplessness" in contemporary American culture, and assisted the class in visioning the connections between the ideas of the text and the events which they would be organizing and facilitating in the weeks ahead. This discussion provided the framework for the creation of a marketing campaign for *Debate Watch 2004* for which students produced political buttons, t-shirts, posters, and other advertising materials.

Also in these first few weeks of the course, the students began researching *Voter's Guide 2004*, attended a Rock the Vote event at another local university, and initiated their partnership with the SGA. To determine which issues concerned the St. Mary's student body, the class created a survey that listed issues to rank in order of importance. They generated this list of issues through discussion as well as a review of several national opinion polls (e.g., *Time* Poll, conducted by Schulman, Ronca & Bucuvalas [SRBI] Public Affairs, September 21-23, 2004; CBS News/ *New York Times* Poll September 12-16, 2004). Class members gathered input from fellow students in various settings ranging from classes, the cafeteria, meetings of student groups,

and in the residence halls. While gathering this data, the class also accepted an invitation from Ms. Jennifer Hudson, a St. Mary's alumna, to attend a Rock the Vote event with MTV's Syrus at Schreiner University. This was the first event of the election season where the students publicly voiced their political opinions and engaged fellow students in a civic conversation.

This experience convinced the students to partner with SGA for a campus-wide voter registration drive. At their annual retreat, SGA invited members of the *Political Communication* class to be deputized to register people to vote. After being deputized, class members canvassed the campus to register fellow students, faculty, and the professional, cafeteria, housekeeping, and physical plant staffs. They went door-to-door through the residence halls, visited staff meetings, and attended athletic practices and games, registering almost 90 percent of the student-athletes. The class also participated in Common Cause's PLEDGE, LEARN, and VOTE program, a non-partisan effort to increase voter turnout through face-to-face communication and encouragement. They asked potential voters to complete voting pledge cards, mailed them to Common Cause, and encouraged pledge-takers on Election Day to exercise their right to vote. Along with their Common Cause effort, class members assisted the retired religious community on campus, along with fellow students who were participating in the London study abroad program, with absentee ballot questions and concerns.

During the weeks of the voter registration drive, the *Political Communication* students experienced a variety of political communication challenges when attempting to register some community members. One of the major ones concerned students who did not want to register because they did not see a connection between their lives and the government. This attitude was consistent with the national trends found in the Panetta survey. Generally, the *Political Communication* students drew upon common ground, such as the importance of federal financial aid, to demonstrate the relevancy of politics to students' lives.

Along with confronting this relevancy obstacle, the students were faced with the uncertainty of out-of-town students about their registration status in their home counties. When confronted with this situation, the *Political Communication* students encouraged individuals to change their registration to Bexar County, the University's home county. Many did not realize that, unless they changed their registration, they could not vote at school but only in their home precincts. Others confused registering for Selective Service with registering to vote, while a few even said that they were registered when they actually were not. In the course of these

interactions, class members had to develop mediation skills, articulate the relevance of elections to daily life, clear up confusion about the voter registration process in general, and persuade potential registrants to engage in the civic process. All total, the class registered over 550 of their fellow citizens to vote and the SGA registered hundreds more.

While registering others to vote, gathering data for *Voter's Guide 2004*, and reading their texts, the *Political Communication* class planned and implemented three outstanding Debate Watch events. At these events, participants watched the debates together and then discussed what they had learned in small groups of approximately ten people each. Each group, under the guidance of a facilitator, completed a survey for the CPD. On the following day, class members compiled the data and electronically transmitted it to the CPD.

To tap into the relationship between conversation and activism, students invited nationally known activist, Rev. Andy Hernandez, co-author of *The Almanac of Latino Politics 2002-2004*, to emcee the first program, and civically-minded faculty and staff members, including the University president, Dr. Charles Cotrell, to serve as discussion group facilitators. For the second Debate Watch program, the *Political Communication* class partnered with local St. Mary's alumni to emcee the event and to serve as discussion leaders. They also partnered with the University Park Neighborhood Association to provide pre-debate entertainment. This performance energized the audience that included high school and university students and elected officials. The final Debate Watch program differed from its predecessors in that the emcee and discussion facilitators were all St. Mary's students. Michelle Gonzales, president of the SGA, emceed the event while the *Political Communication* students, themselves, served as facilitators for the discussion groups. So, although for the first two programs, the *Political Communication* students relied on professionals connected with the St. Mary's community to lead the programs, for the final event, the students, themselves, emerged confidently as the civic conversational leaders.

Attendance and media coverage of these events were tremendous. With the encouragement of the class, the SGA and other student leaders, 268 community members participated in this first event, whereas the national average was 30 people per program; 160 community members participated in the second event whereas the national average was ten; finally, 214 community members participated in the third program whereas the national average was 13 participants. This high rate of participation was closely connected with the *Political*

Communication students' close work with the University Communications office to coordinate media coverage of these events. This office and the students managed coverage by all of the local television stations (Spanish and English), which included student interviews, as well as the *San Antonio Express News*, *La Prensa*, and *The Rattler*, the University student newspaper.

This strong showing at the University was also related to the opportunity for the *Political Communication* class to partner with Student Development and with Academics to meet their learning objectives. The Service Learning Center and University Ministry consistently provided various types of support while many faculty members built Debate Watch into their syllabi, bringing their classes *in toto* to the events, and basing assignments on what students learned from their experience.

Concurrently, while pursuing the Debate Watch program, the *Political Communication* students were researching and writing *Voter's Guide 2004*. Overall, based on the data gathered from the Debate Watch surveys, along with the class's non-random survey research, five major areas of concern emerged, in the St. Mary's student body, in the following order of importance: the economy, national security, education, health care, and civil rights. After they calculated the top five issues, the class re-visited *Faithful Citizenship* with these issues in mind, identifying key sections concerning each issue to include in the text of the guide. They then researched the Republican and Democratic positions on these issues and wrote up their findings. During this process, several students, who were not even enrolled in *Political Communication*, began coming to class anyway, graciously conducting research for the guide, as well as contributing to other class activities. Not only were students in the course pouring their time and energy into this learning experience, but they were also inspiring their classmates to join them in the enterprise.

With the research and writing completed, the *Political Communication* students and colleagues handed off the material to their publication partner, the *Desktop Publishing* class, who translated it into *Voter's Guide 2004*. These guides, which were possible due to financial support from the president's office, the Service Learning Center, the Student Life office, and the SGA, were distributed the week before the election at University events. On Election Day, the *Political Communication* students cast their votes and then followed up with those individuals who had completed the Common Cause pledge cards to encourage them to do the same. The students also supported the SGA's "Choose Cruise" which provided rides to the polls and attended the Election Watch program that night.

Although the election ended the first week of November, the work of the *Political Communication* class did not. For a Veteran's Day tribute, the class partnered with the Service Learning Center and University Ministry to commemorate military sacrifice using a Southwestern tradition: *luminarios*. In the week leading up to Veteran's Day, students, faculty, and staff wrote on white paper bags the name, rank, and hometown of each U.S. and coalition soldier killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. These bags were in turn filled with sand and a single tea light candle. On the evening of Veteran's Day, the 1200+ bags were lined up and lit, burning for over four hours into the night across campus. The Student Writers group and the Native American Student group sponsored a poetry reading while the University orchestra played a Veteran's Day concert. These artistic endeavors cradled community members who walked the trail of light with words and music that resonated with the sacrifices represented by the individual luminarios.

Through the 2004 election season, the *Political Communication* students brought to life the Marianist ideal that "the intellectual life is undertaken as a form of service in the interest of justice and peace, and the university curriculum is designed to connect the classroom with the wider world." (CMU, 1999, p. 20). By connecting the classroom with the wider world, the students animated Astin's theory of student involvement through their dedicated work to increase civic engagement on campus and in the wider community. Based on community feedback, media coverage, and student evaluations, the class successfully accomplished this task by facilitating a sustained civic dialog. Through the facilitation and implementation of various events, the students created a campus atmosphere conducive to a sustained authentic conversation about the common good.

Because it has been shown that conversation can transform non-participants to participants in the civic enterprise, the non-partisan service of the *Political Communication* class contributed to the health of democracy in South Texas where the majority of the population is of Hispanic heritage. Nationwide, only seven percent of Debate Watch 2004 participants identified themselves as Hispanic (CPD 2004); at St. Mary's, the majority of participants claimed Hispanic heritage at each event. As Hispanics have emerged as the United States' largest minority group, their participation in the civic life of the country has steadily increased. By rising to the challenges of this Service Learning course, the *Political Communication* students, the majority of whom were also Hispanic, worked to ensure the continuation of this trend. By investing over 2,700 hours of their time, the students exemplified Astin's claim that to achieve desired learning

effects, a particular curriculum must elicit sufficient student effort and investment of energy. By *ductus exemplo* these students brought their readings and class discussions to life as they fulfilled their own mission statement: “Through education and involvement, we strive to empower our human family to embrace civic responsibility.”

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