

Disengagement in Decline

I've spent the past week moving from one office to another. I've gone through boxes of old files, and found in them notes from presentations about civic engagement that I made a decade ago. Though the prescriptions I use today haven't changed—support service-learning, build reciprocal partnerships, involve students with topics they are passionate about, ensure that higher education embraces its mission to train citizens—the symptoms today are almost entirely different than they were when I created those files. Service-learning advocates agreed then that students were disengaged from public life. Students, our story went, were focused on personal success, disconnected from their communities, and apathetic about politics. To make matters worse, colleges and universities enabled student disengagement by offering enormous classes embedded in incoherent curricula. And the broader society did little to make up for higher education's weaknesses, as fewer and fewer people joined political parties, socialized with neighbors, or served in the community (Putnam, 2000).

Since the late-1990s, though, trends have been moving in the right direction. More colleges and universities—be they 2-year or 4-year, public or private—have embraced their civic missions. Largely past are the days where proposing to teach a service-learning course met with opposition or confusion. Nor is it possible for faculty to complain about the absence of information about civic engagement, as the past ten years have witnessed the birth of a half-dozen journals and the publication of hundreds of articles about civic engagement.

Students, like the colleges and universities they attend, are much warmer to service and service-learning than they were in the 1990s. By some reports as many as 80% of high school seniors are involved in community service. That number declines, but only modestly, for college students (Vogelgesang and Austin, 2005). The percentage of first-year students expecting that their colleges and universities will require them to participate in community service has doubled since 1990 (Kiesa, et al., 2008). And as reported in articles published in the *Journal for Civic Commitment* and elsewhere, student learning in service-learning classes is richer, deeper, and more durable than in classes without it. Perhaps most encouragingly, after a long period of disengagement from the political process, voting among the 18-25 year old demographic is up, and more and more students are seeing an alignment between their community service and the political process (Kiesa, et al, 2008).

Connecting Service and Politics

These trends toward greater engagement among colleges, universities, and their students give the 2008 presidential election added importance, not because it is likely that college students will sway the election one way or another, but because it might show that students and politicians alike have dropped the false distinctions between service and politics. During the 1990s it was common for students to say that they were involved in community service because they did not trust the political system. In turn, the political parties could safely ignore college-aged voters because they voted in such small numbers.

In the current election season, the media have rightly noted that more young people are involved in presidential politics than ever before. But they have missed a more important trend—that colleges and universities have found a way to connect service and politics that advances learning, respects the political neutrality required of (at least) public institutions, and builds the civic infrastructure. Here are a few examples:

1. *Voter Registration Drives*—Campus Compact has begun to track campus-based voter information and registration drives at www.compact.org/vote. There are listed dozens of successful examples of colleges and universities bringing new voters into the political system. Among the most noteworthy features of these drives is the fact that students are leading them, using social networks and the internet to involve fellow students.
2. *Poll Worker Recruitment Programs*—One of the ignored crises in American civic life is the disappearance of poll workers. Jurisdictions across the US struggle to recruit, train, and retain

people willing to spend election day at the polling station. Higher education has begun to innovate here as well. In one leading program, featured in the Spring 2008 Issue of the *Journal for Civic Commitment*, faculty have begun to use service-learning methods to involve students as poll workers (Cobb, 2008). In Salt Lake City, where I work, a consortium of 2- and 4-year colleges is working with the county election office to recruit hundreds of college students to work at the polls. Their effort is supported by service-learning centers, faculty, college presidents, and elected officials.

3. *Exit Polling*—Colleges and universities have research expertise missing in the civic infrastructure. Now that faculty have begun to embrace community based research, hundreds of students across the US are involved in gathering and analyzing data about voter motivation, choice, and demographics. One of the most venerable of these exit polling efforts, sponsored by Brigham Young University's *Center for the Study of Elections and Democracy* (<http://csed.byu.edu/>), involves statistics students in writing and analyzing exit polls, and political science students in doing the actual exit polling.

Leadership, Political and Otherwise

These practices in higher education are likely to be more influential in 2008 because for the first time ever, both major parties have nominated candidates for whom the connections between service, learning, and politics are clear. Barack Obama, as a community organizer, professor, and politician, has lived out these connections through his career. And they are central to his policy proposal for a vastly increased national service infrastructure, one that increases funding for AmeriCorps and expands service-learning in higher education (<http://www.barackobama.com/issues/service/>). John McCain's life story likewise connects service and politics in powerful ways. His military service, imprisonment as a POW, and subsequent career in the House and Senate are tied together by the twin themes of sacrifice and service. Their interconnections are put most clearly in his eloquent 2008 address to the Naval Academy (<http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/News/Speeches/9AB40F08-D2CE-46C4-BAE4-18E65994927C.htm>).

As editor of the *Journal for Civic Commitment*, I look forward to continuing with you in the work of building a better society through service, learning, and civic change. And I call on you to join your faculty, staff, and administrative colleagues across the US in making the 2008 election season one to be remembered, not for its venality or cynicism, but for its ability to deepen civic commitment among all of the residents of the United States.

Sources Cited

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