

Introduction

Dari Sylvester and Gary Daynes

For as long as Americans have thought about higher education they have hoped that it would lead to civic engagement. The Massachusetts Bay Colony supported Harvard University because it trained ministers – the cornerstone of most Puritan communities. Benjamin Rush, physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, proposed the creation of a Federal University in 1786 to train public servants for the new nation. And every variety of college and university – from private universities to community colleges--proclaims a civic mission.

There is some evidence that colleges and universities have met this mission. Civic education has a long (if not always glorious) place in the curriculum. Colleges and universities have been sponsoring service-learning-like activities for well over a century. And education is positively correlated with voter turnout and a host of other civic behaviors.

But every success in *civic* engagement is accompanied by a significant doubt about its impact on *political* engagement. American knowledge of politics is low and by some measures declining even while college-going has increased markedly since 1940. Voter turnout on the whole has been steady and low since the 1910s, at least when compared with the robust voter turnout of the 1880s and 90s. And for all of the good service-learning has done for student learning and community organizations, it is not at all clear that service-learning leads students to engage in political life.

This last point – that service-learning might encourage students to volunteer without inspiring them to be politically engaged – has long troubled service-learning practitioners. But in the past ten years there are signs that political engagement is improving. Students have become much more active in defining their own approaches to political life. Voter turnout has gone up among college students in the past two presidential elections. And the service-learning field has expanded its focus to explicitly include political engagement as a desirable result of civic engagement.

This special issue of *The Journal for Civic Commitment* is evidence of that expanded focus. It contains the results of a special project, co-sponsored by California Campus Compact, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and Learn and Serve America, to create service-learning courses that inspire political engagement.

The *Service-Learning for Political Engagement Program* got its start in 2007. At the time, Tom Ehrlich, a senior scholar at The Carnegie Foundation, long-time advocate for service-learning and former chair of the national Campus Compact Executive Board, was co-directing the Foundation's Political Engagement Project, a study of

educational practices that prepare higher education students for responsible democratic participation. Ehrlich also was finishing work on his latest book, *Educating for Democracy: Preparing Undergraduates for Responsible Political Engagement* (with Anne Colby, Elizabeth Beaumont and Josh Corngold), which showed that education for political development can increase students' political understanding, skill, motivation and involvement while contributing to many aspects of general academic learning.

Given Ehrlich's research focus at the time and that a presidential election was only two years away, California Campus Compact and The Carnegie Foundation agreed that a Faculty Fellows program focusing on service-learning for political engagement made sense. As Tom Ehrlich explained at the outset of the program, "Political participation is necessary for democracy to survive and flourish. Yet, political participation by young people, including the college-educated, is distressingly low. Colleges and universities have long claimed a role in educating young people for democracy, but many faculty remain unclear or conflicted about how to do so in ways that are academically rigorous and scrupulously unbalanced. The Faculty Fellows in this program will provide models of how to do so."

The *California Campus Compact-Carnegie Foundation Faculty Fellows: Service Learning for Political Engagement Program* assembled twenty three outstanding tenured and tenure-track faculty members from twelve different public, private and faith-based colleges and universities to lead the effort to increase college students' political engagement and advance the field of service learning by focusing on dilemmas inherent in teaching for political involvement. These faculty, starting in the summer of 2007, participated in a two-year effort to define political engagement, explored what their definitions meant for planning service learning projects, and assessed their students' learning with an eye towards implications for refining instruction geared towards greater political engagement. Fellows represented thirteen academic disciplines including agriculture, computer science, modern languages, and sociology. The methods for incorporating political involvement into their classes were as diverse as the Fellows' academic disciplines.

This special issue of *The Journal for Civic Commitment* features reflections from six of the Fellows who participated in the program. David M. Donahue and Christine Cress frame the creation and development of the Fellows program, address the challenges of creating a diverse community of scholars dedicated to service-learning for political involvement, and recommend next steps. Dari E. Sylvester proposes a model of service-learning designed for a public policy course that successfully increased student political efficacy. Judith Liu explores generational differences in the way individuals process "political" phenomena and recommends a way to engage younger generations through a re-visioning of political activity in terms of social justice. Marcia D. Hernandez and Lorrie A. Knight present a collaborative model of service-learning instruction based on the theory that enhancing one's ability to become a critical consumer of information thereby augments one's ability

to effectively participate in the political domain. Sandra Sgoutas-Emch investigates the impact of developing a service-learning course in health psychology to illuminate the salience of politics in health care, particularly with regard to the role that race, gender, and economics play in health care disparities. Finally, Kathleen S. Yep's piece focuses on the role of dialogical pedagogies and how the intentional, assignment-based raising of students' critical consciousness contributed to a documented increase in their sense of political efficacy.

Taken together, these articles do something small and something large. The small thing is to provide specific examples of service-learning courses that purposefully engage students in political life. And the large thing is to provide evidence that American higher education can, if it wishes, fulfill the whole range of its civic mission – not just to teach students about politics or encourage them to serve, but to take an active role in shaping policies and practices that strengthen democracy.