

# **Serendipity at Kaimuki High School: A Honolulu Civic Education Experiment Jells**

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## **Abstract**

University of Hawai'i at Manoa faculty members are utilizing community-based education as an instrument to foster engagement with democratic citizenship. Using the "Project Citizen" program, UHM students mentor ninth and tenth grade Kaimuki High School students in identifying and locating responses to institutional dilemmas impacting their lives. During the spring 2004 semester, one key problem which became the subject of research and action was the school's unsafe, unsanitary bathrooms. The surprising outcome of this campaign empowered both student servers and high schoolers, highlighting the extraordinary possibilities in American life when ordinary people understand and exercise their democratic rights and organize for change. The project journey and its positive outcome strengthened the relationship between the institutional partners and built a basis for future collaboration.

## **Introduction**

Thank you for helping us to get our voices heard.  
Also for helping us to realize that we have a voice  
and/or say what goes on in Hawaii and that we can  
make a difference.

10<sup>th</sup> grader, Kaimuki High School

During the Fall 2003 semester, a modest University of Hawai'i Manoa faculty-student experiment in civic education was launched. For its organizers the main point of concern was the continuing alienation of so many Americans from civic engagement.

The 1998 National Commission Report on Civic Renewal laid this out clearly:

Too many of us have become passive and disengaged. Never have we had so many opportunities for participation, yet rarely have we felt so powerless...In a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators.<sup>1</sup>

Particularly disturbing is the estrangement of young people from any and all public democratic processes. Surveys have shown that "political disinterest and

disengagement are more widespread and deeper than was true of young people in previous decades.”<sup>2</sup> One alarming piece of evidence is the profound drop in the numbers of young people voting in presidential and congressional elections between the 1970’s and 2000 (when only one-third of 18 to 29 years olds voted). Too often, young Americans seemed to value “consumer sovereignty” above democratic rights.<sup>3</sup>

Project organizers, UHM social sciences faculty with some years of experience in service learning activities, realized that any viable program would have to genuinely engage young people and tap into their deeply felt grievances and interests. Through contact with Dr. Lyla Berg, an innovative and seasoned educator heading up a number of educational initiatives in Honolulu, the UHM faculty members learned of “Project Citizen.” The mission of Project Citizen is “to motivate and engage youth in participating in the processes of the American constitutional democracy”-seemed in line with our own. We were also attracted by the goals of supporting

youth regarding their roles and responsibilities as citizens as provided for in the U.S. Constitution, to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning publicly...

Highly structured in format, Project Citizen challenges high school students to define public policy, identify problems of crucial importance and research the issues involved. Students gather information on current policies and identify relevant policymakers, communicate with them about policy alternatives, and (possibly) begin a campaign of advocacy for change. Individual students keep portfolios of their project work and may present them at statewide competitions. The UHM faculty chose to utilize

“Project Citizen” and enlist the help of Dr. Berg, herself (who became an invaluable advisor).

Locating a reliable partner for the program was, of course, essential. Here, we were fortunate to make connections with the Kaimuki High School Social Studies Department faculty. Kaimuki High School is located in the east central part of Honolulu: Extremely diverse ethnically, it serves middle class as well as a number of poor and immigrant communities. It might be noted that a third of the students are in free or reduced cost lunch programs. To get faculty “buy in,” the U.H. faculty met with these teachers regularly and aligned the program to help facilitate their stressful classroom agendas. Time was spent in dialogue about how to integrate the program into existing curricula. A small Campus Compact grant provided project materials and a few amenities.

The new wrinkle added to Project Citizen was service learning. During the spring 2004 semester, student volunteers were drawn from a Juniors Honors class devoted to investigating U.S. political economy and ethnic/race relations. Our UHM student-learners performed various roles here. They were involved in coordinating the activities of the Kaimuki students and helping them to conduct research about the issue they had chosen, to build display panels and personal portfolios, and to conduct problem solving sessions.

Over a period of six weeks, the UHM students met with the three ninth and tenth grade Kaimuki classes and journeyed through the various stages of the project. There were the usual missteps: Perhaps most serious were the frustrations of the UHM students because the Kaimuki students were not fulfilling their assignments; Such “apathy” created doubts that the Kaimuki students were really committed to the project. But as the

weeks passed and the students took an increasing interest in the work, UHM students, themselves, became more motivated. What also ensued was a surprisingly high level of rapport between the student mentors and the younger students.

Within each class there was some intense discussion about which issue should be investigated. One class identified “teen pregnancy” as critical; the second chose school bathrooms so dark, unsanitary and dangerous that students were reluctant to use them; and the third, the need to upgrade the generally worn and decrepit classrooms at the school. All of these situations contributed to the students’ frustrations with their school lives and the sense of generalized powerlessness they felt.

As the project started to jell, the process was engaging both service learners and high school students at a fairly intense level. UHM students showed a growing sense of empathy: “I was really touched by what the kids were thinking about for their problems,” mused one mentor, “It is really sad that they have to attend such a run-down school. I am not sure that if I went to such a school I would have turned out the way I did.”

Student mentors helped the students they were working with to locate materials on official policy and information about what other schools were doing. The groups working on school maintenance and bathrooms realized that the public had to be informed as to how badly things had been allowed to deteriorate at Kaimuki. Groups were assigned specific tasks such as visiting the bathrooms and taking photographs and finding the addresses of people to whom letters should be sent to. The research and interviews got done and the high school students discussed solutions to various problems and wrote letters as part of a petition to policymakers for change. This passion and flurry

of activity excited our UHM student mentors and one wrote in her journal, “All in all, things are looking really good, and I can’t wait till next week.”

The classroom oral presentations by the Kaimuki students turned out to be articulate and poignant beyond anyone’s expectations. The process of talking openly about teen pregnancy in class obviously pushed both boys and girls to think hard about their maturation as sexual beings and the risks attached to it. The students’ articulate, heartfelt letters about dilapidated bathrooms and facilities, along with graphic photographs, were sent to the Board of Education, politicians (from the governor of the state to legislators from the local area) and the media. One typical letter read:

Our restrooms need to be fixed. Some students wait to go home and use their restrooms because the restrooms in school are not clean. The one things (sic) that’s really dirty in our restrooms are the used toilet paper on the wall and the ceiling Also we don’t have lights in our restrooms...some of the toilets don’t flush... We need soap too...”

Another student wrote: “These are not acceptable conditions, this is disgusting and I don’t think anyone would like to use our bathrooms.” His letter, as did others, cited facts discovered by the class during their research into the issue. One was a clearly inadequate public school maintenance budget; another, the news that the state bureaucracy had not scheduled Kaimuki for bathroom repairs for at least another two years.

Given this gloomy situation (and prevailing feelings of powerlessness), expectations of making real changes were fairly minimal. A UHM student acknowledged in her journal:

If these kids could get some response, even a small thing, like their letters appear in a newspaper or something, they would feel that they accomplished something.

Then, something quite serendipitous occurred. The media picked up the story of decrepit bathrooms and carried it to a prominent place in public awareness. There was a front-page newspaper series featuring the bathrooms at Kaimuki and virtually indicting the State Department of Education for its six hundred million dollar maintenance backlog. The *piece de resistance* came as the UHM semester was ending: The State agreed to build several new bathrooms at Kaimuki and a number of other schools. Both high school and UHM students felt hugely empowered and vindicated by this outcome. If there are any doubts about the ethical dimensions of the project, there are the words of two Kaimuki students;

This project really taught (sic) me how to be responsible and how to take action for your own learning.

You show us that each and every one of us can make a difference in our school and community.

As for the UHM service learners, they felt a difficult, sometimes frustrating project had been redeemed with genuine achievement. “At the beginning, I was very reluctant to do this project,” wrote one service learner in her journal, “but as it proceeded, I started to enjoy it. We had so many problems but I think that we overcame them as a team. I am glad that we could affect at least some of the students.”

In a letter to the UHM service learners, the social studies teacher at Kaimuki, Ms.

S. Kawakami said:

“Thank you so much for doing such a fantastic job with the students in Project Citizen. I know for a fact that the kids not only enjoyed the process, but they learned how to communicate their concerns and exercise their rights in constructive ways. As their teacher, it was my joy to see their enthusiasm as well as their connection with all of you.

Thank you very much. 4

Because of this success, Project Citizen gained real credibility on the Kaimuki campus and beyond. The following semester, classes tackled the problem of poor cafeteria food (with modest success). One of our visions is to use the Kaimuki experiment as *a prototype for promoting civic engagement in all of Hawai'i's high schools*. A former Kaimuki teacher who transferred to another high school will be running "Project Citizen" starting in spring 2006 and a third high school will initiate it in Fall 2007. Both will be collaborating with UH Manoa faculty.

### **Conclusion**

This modest experiment in civic education in Honolulu revealed that student service learners can (given the right mixture of elements) combine with community partners to challenge institutional dysfunctions and make needed changes. At various places along this journey, changes in attitudes and a sense of wider possibilities among participants took place. Among some high school and college students a re-conceptualization of their own ethical responsibilities to society occurred. These young people began viewing citizenship in a democratic society as based on an ethic of reciprocity and "shared responsibility" for the community.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

1. National Commission on Civic Renewal, *A Nation of Spectators How Civic Disengagement Weakens America and What We Can Do About It*, Washington, 1998.
2. Stephen Earl Bennett, "Political Apathy and Avoidance of News Media among Generations X and Y: America's Continuing Problem." In *Education for Civic Engagement in Democracy: Service Learning and Other Promising Practices*, ed. Sheilah Mann and John J. Patrick, Clearinghouse for Social Studies, 2000.
3. Henry A. Giroux, *The Abandoned Generation*, New York: MacMillan, 2003; Sax, Linda J., "Citizenship Development and the American College Student." In *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*. Ed. Thomas Ehrlich. Phoenix: Oryx Press.
4. Ms. S. Kawakami to Noel Kent, May 20, 2004.
5. Mark Robert Rank, *One Nation Underprivileged Why American Poverty Affects Us All*, Oxford University Press, 2004, 152.