The 2008 presidential primaries have captured the imagination of young voters turning out in record numbers to participate in the elections. As the February 2008 cover of *Time* magazine portrays, multicultural young voters are re-engaging in elections with conviction and a belief that their vote will “make a difference.” Young voters “care again,” *Time* declares. Red and blue states and counties are steeped in the vibrant energy of youth interest and participation in electoral politics.

The pollsters and pundits now have a wide open playing field to analyze and explain this swelling youth interest in voting after nearly three decades of declining political participation. In 1993, the Kettering Foundation published the results of a national study to better understand college students’ political disengagement. Extensive focus groups with students on campuses around the country indicated that “most college students believe that politics is not about solving problems; rather, …students saw politics as individualistic, divisive, negative, and often counterproductive to acting on the ills of society” (Longo & Meyer, 2006, p. 2). Two decades of research and policy analysis bring much-needed visibility and understanding to the political disengagement of young adults. Many studies found that “among the greatest dangers for American democracy was that politics was becoming a spectator sport, an activity that relegates citizens to the sidelines” (Longo & Meyer, p.2).

Punctuating these findings, a recent report, *Millennials Talk Politics* (Kiesa et al., 2007), presents a study of college students that draws upon a representative sample of 386 undergraduates who participated in 47 focus groups on 12 campuses nationwide. The study concludes that while today’s college students volunteer in unprecedented numbers and are deeply concerned about social issues, millennials (those born in the 1980s) shy away from “formal politics” and dislike the “spin and polarized debates.” Instead, they seek authenticity for discussing public issues. The study recommends that institutions of higher education provide students with opportunities for civic and political participation and space for deliberation on public issues. Longo and Meyer (2006), in their literature review of college students’ participation in politics, conclude that what is needed is a “more robust understanding of the emerging movement among college students to define an alternative politics that is more participatory, inclusive, open, creative, and deliberative…” (p. 3).

John Dewey (1916, 1927) provides deep insights into this interplay between how college students might be educated to participate in politics and how democracy itself becomes the means for this participation. Almost a century ago, he reminded us that since democracy is always-in-the making, the give and take between politics and the citizenry is an important dynamic on which education must focus. Education, for Dewey, is critical to the development of political imagination that nurtures democracy. In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey (1927) stresses the importance of discussion, consultation, persuasion, and debate to encourage a robust decision-making process that democracy demands. It is via these processes—albeit slow ones—that public awareness of problems can be extended and deepened (p. 364).

Democracy as a social mode of living requires not only that the public comes to an agreement over attaining desirable goals but also collectively inquires into what the desirable goals are in the first place. This process of arriving at a common understanding is not simply about presenting one’s individual self-interest and holding on to it; rather it is about developing common interests through communication and deliberation. Education is growth;
with each new day presenting its new problems, the milieu of education is enriched only to the degree that political skills and understanding are developed and practiced (Dewey, 1916). To govern itself, the citizenry must develop intelligent judgment; to do so, both the content and practice of education must be re-visioned with each generation.

In Educating for Democracy: Preparing Undergraduates for Responsible Political Engagement, Anne Colby, Elizabeth Beaumont, Thomas Ehrlich, and John Corngold offer not only a vision but an incisive program of political engagement poised to address the concerns of disengaged youth. The principal motivation for the book is that undergraduate education is one of the most valuable venues to address political engagement. “A person’s education is deficient if she has not developed at least a basic working knowledge of the political world in which she lives,” argue Colby and colleagues (p. 276). Since there are more than 15 million undergraduates in American colleges and universities, college students are a captive audience to prepare for responsible political engagement. Undergraduate institutions are in a position to promote democratic competencies and participation, and prepare students to be thoughtful, responsible, and creative citizens, Colby and colleagues note (p. 5). However, colleges and universities in the United States pay too little attention to students’ political learning. “This is a lost opportunity,” the authors lament (p. 5). Acknowledging that while many undergraduates are engaged in individual community service or service connected to the curriculum through service-learning courses, of the six hundred programs reviewed (Robinson, 2000), only “1 percent of service-learning programs included a focus on specifically political concerns and solutions, such as creating or working with groups to represent the interests of a community” (p. 5). There is a disconnection between service-learning and other forms of civic education and efforts for political engagement, according to Colby and colleagues. They assert that when undergraduates have the understanding and skills to be politically engaged, many are motivated to do so.

Political Engagement Project for Undergraduates: A Study of Educational Practices

For Colby and colleagues, the umbrella term “political engagement” includes political knowledge and understanding, political skills, and political motivation. Their interest lies in educating for participatory and deliberative democracy beyond electoral politics or representative democracy. In Educating for Democracy they present a study of their Political Engagement Project (PEP), sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, that addresses political engagement across a diverse set of 21 courses, programs, and co-curricular activities offered by an equally diverse set of higher education institutions.1 Spanning a broad landscape that covers urban and rural institutions, two-year community colleges and private four-year universities, elite universities and open-access colleges, PEP has drawn both first generation students and racial and ethnic minorities into its fold. The participating students are from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and cover all levels of interest in politics — from total disengagement to intense prior involvement. The book examines and documents the goals of the single and multiple semester courses and programs, pedagogical approaches used, students’ perspectives on their experiences, and impact of these experiences on student learning vis-à-vis political engagement. Educating for Democracy also has compiled a practical resource called the “PEP Document Supplement” that details PEP courses and programs, available at http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/.

This review essay provides a snapshot of the 364-page volume rich with insights into the PEP courses and programs. The authors capture PEP’s impact based on interviews and focus groups, along with pre- and post-survey data. Qualitative data reveals student and faculty voices as they grapple with teaching and learning activities associated with the courses, and various outcomes of engagement. The authors are particularly sensitive to the allegations of homogeneity related to the “liberal” slant on college campuses and charges of indoctrination related to anything “political.” Hence, their main principle for producing responsible political engagement is to do so in an environment of “open inquiry.” Nine of the thirteen chapters are devoted to the extensive data on teaching and learning within an environment of open inquiry, where discourse, deliberation, and reflections provide the pedagogical framework guiding undergraduates’ educational experiences.

The diversity of the content and approaches to teaching presented in PEP courses is laudable since PEP is not limited to students majoring in Political Science, traditionally seen as the field where political matters are discussed and addressed. For example, at Duke University, Alma Blount offers a two-semester interdisciplinary program, Service Opportunities for Leadership, which includes a summer internship where students work on social and political change projects for organizations across the country and abroad. Enrolling a mix of freshmen, sophomores, and juniors from a variety

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of majors, the program aims to help students “become engaged citizens in a democratic society” (p. 300). On returning from their internship, students take part in a public policy research seminar where they reflect on the internship and prepare a Social Issues Investigation Portfolio with a policy recommendation. As Colby and colleagues report, Blount “focuses on the concept of political power and how important understanding power is for being an effective political actor” (p. 136). Via relevant placements in community organizations, Blount’s pedagogy becomes active and purposeful as students “…carry out research projects in the course that follows their community placement. These subsequent projects are intended to deepen students’ political learning about the issues raised by the activities during the placement” (p. 225). Service Opportunities for Leadership ties students’ direct service back to the systemic issues related to policy addressed in the readings and classroom discussions; absent that, the summer internship would be simply service.

Meta Mendel-Reyes at Berea College offers a one-semester general studies seminar entitled Introduction to Service, Citizenship, and Community. The course enrolls mostly sophomores from a variety of majors. All students at the institution are low-income and work to support themselves and their families. With a particular focus on Appalachian issues and communities (given the College’s location), the course focuses on grassroots democracy by addressing local issues through service projects with an accompanying structured reflection seminar (p. 306). Local community activists from the Appalachian region are invited to the classes to share their work with students (p. 212). Local activists have “particularly compelling stories of effective political action to share” and they “illustrate that political power can be exerted from the bottom up as well as from the top down and they convey a tangible sense of how this kind of political action works” (p. 201). As Mendel-Reyes explains: “Part of what I hope to do is help students unlearn their expectations or stereotypes so they can learn a more complex, more realistic, more motivating approach” (p. 117). But, merely bringing speakers to class is not enough; it is followed by intense discussions integrating the texts students have read.

In The National Model United Nations course at Dutchess Community College and Vassar College, Richard Reitano “guides students to learn that not all skills gained from other political experiences, such as activism or debate clubs, are equally useful for simulating the activities of the United Nations” (p. 134). Since the “context of Model United Nations requires skills of diplomacy, especially achieving a compromise to which all parties can agree,” students become finely tuned and perceptive, going from “winning the argument to wanting to find a solution” (p. 135). Similarly, according to Douglas Morgan at Portland State University, when students leave his courses on Civic Initiative: The Ethics of Leadership and Civic Engagement: The Role of Social Institutions, they “should have a greater appreciation for the competing and conflicting values that elected officials must reconcile” (p. 118). As the authors indicate, it is important to Morgan that students understand the necessity of political compromise to “appreciate the hard choices elected officials face and see the process as legitimate even when it does not conform to their idealized notions of it” (p. 118). Covering foundational knowledge related to political theories, institutions, and organizations, while simultaneously engaging students in practice to familiarize themselves with current issues and events, PEP courses and programs ground students in the complexities of the political landscape and the skills needed to become effective political agents.

The book describes a wide range of PEP experiences, including: Students at Providence College “learn democracy by doing democracy” both outside and inside the classroom (p. 299); students at Brown University, working with state agencies, learn about public policy concerning children and families (p. 301); students at California State University at Los Angeles, studying the basics of American and Californian government and politics, keep journals and reflect together on what advocacy work means given their political and civic local culture (p. 303); students at Harvard University use tools of reflective practice to develop leadership capacity to mobilize resources and devise strategies for change (pp. 303-304); and in a semester-long program for women from Mills and other colleges, the Institute of Civic Leadership offers four courses, an internship, and a mentor program pairing students with experienced civic leaders as mentors (pp. 304-305).

Participating students from all PEP courses and programs completed a survey before and after their involvement, and a sample of students was interviewed in-depth. The faculty leaders were interviewed and completed a survey, too. The data revealed that different motivations drew students to the PEP courses and programs. Some enrolled because course goals and content matched their interest in politics, while others enrolled to meet graduation requirements, for a professor’s reputation, or the lure of a particular field placement. The authors found that PEP increased both groups of
students’ political foundational knowledge and understanding, awareness of current events, and participation, skills, and motivation for action. Students gained a stronger “sense of politically engaged identity, internal political efficacy, and interest in reading about politics in newspapers,” as well as “several types of political knowledge, skills of political influence and action,” and intentions for active political engagement (p. 11). The results held true for students across a broad spectrum: those who entered the courses and programs with little interest in politics and those with strong interests and a high-level of engagement. Interestingly, students with little initial interest in political issues made especially substantial learning gains along more dimensions of political engagement than their more politically interested classmates (pp. 11-12). Since low-interest students tend to represent the politically disengaged undergraduate population, these results encourage political learning and engagement in undergraduate education.

What makes the PEP courses unique is that students practice political skills of influence and action, analysis and judgment, communication and leadership, while developing teamwork and collaboration skills. In addition, PEP courses and programs evoke emotions of hope, passion, frustration, confusion, anger, and compassion, as evidenced in survey results. The authors note, “We saw in these interventions that political motivation can be strengthened by helping students develop constructive approaches to negative emotions such as cynicism, which can prevent political participation of inexperienced students but can also grow out of engagement with the gritty world of political action once they begin to participate” (p. 16). The experience of political participation serves as a motivator to further develop political skills.

The Pedagogical Attributes of Political Engagement

Educating for Democracy articulates the conditions under which political teaching and learning in college is and is not legitimate. The authors make the case that education for political development can and must be conducted in a manner that is “consistent with the core values of higher education institutions, which include intellectual pluralism, rational discourse, intellectual autonomy, open-mindedness, and civility” (p. 21). The authors suggest ways to ensure that educational programs are firmly founded in these values.

The methods and nuances of PEP teaching are complex and interconnected, and reflect basic principles of good pedagogy:

(a) Internships, placements, and service-learning experiences in partnership with a variety of organizations—governmental, non-profit, community-based—enlarge political and policy understandings. The authors see these as meeting the Deweyan test of the “democracy-enhancing value of experiential learning” (p. 222).

(b) Political research and action projects enhance political knowledge. As the authors argue: “Responsible and effective political action depends on up-to-date information, thoughtful exploration of alternatives, planning, and strategic considerations—all of which require some form of research or faculty inquiry” (p. 175).

(c) Invited speakers and mentors, representing a wide spectrum of practical wisdom, enrich student learning (p. 199).

(d) Discussion and deliberation offer students the foundation for thoughtful and discursive participation needed in democratic political decision-making (p. 156).

(e) Structured reflection connects the readings, placements, speakers, community experiences, and classroom discussions and deliberations.

The study presents a range of pedagogical approaches with “open inquiry” as the guiding principle. While students entered the PEP courses and programs with a broad spectrum of political beliefs, and although some individuals shifted direction, “the overall distribution of party identification and ideology did not significantly change as a result of participation” (p. 11). This finding indicates that efforts to teach for political development “do not guide students toward a particular party affiliation or ideological viewpoint” (p. 11). Yet, any project on political engagement that advocates a dramatic increase in college and university efforts to strengthen student interest in politics is likely to be questioned for its potential to indoctrinate. Lee Shulman, in the foreword to the book, comments that “liberal education must liberate, not indoctrinate. That is, faculty must teach students the tools they need for successful engagement, a deep appreciation for and understanding of the political process and its complexities, but must not shape the political beliefs of the students to match their own” (p. xi). There is an expectation in a democracy that education should avoid indoctrination and instead permit the values of freedom of thought, speech, and action to flourish.

In its pejorative sense, indoctrination is associat-
ed with the teaching of doctrines and beliefs. The PEP courses and programs provide a rich array of content to counter this charge. Students are provided the opportunities and skills to examine contrary evidence and evaluate differing positions on issues, enabling them to develop habits of mind crucial to a liberal arts education. In keeping with this, and to counter any doubts of indoctrination, an entire chapter in Educating for Democracy is devoted to the “open inquiry” imperative.

Renowned philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre once observed: “…most public argumentative debate is sterile. We have lost forums of genuine, extended public debate. Ask yourself when last the United States Congress assembled with senators ready to have their opinions formed through debate, rather than bring intransigent opinions to debate” (Briand, 1999, p. 3). Millennials are looking for authentic and meaningful ways to engage in politics. PEP provides hope and possibility through its pedagogical emphasis on face-to-face discussions, deliberations, and reflections that help students connect the political dots, thereby countering the worry about partisanship or indoctrination in the teaching profession.

According to the authors, the PEP pedagogical approaches work because “structured reflection” helps students integrate their various experiences. As Colby and colleagues point out, “reflection is itself a goal for political development, as well as a set of learning activities or pedagogical strategies. As a goal for democratic citizenship, reflection includes certain intellectual skills—reflective and critical thinking of various sorts; it is also a habit of mind or inclination—a tendency to think about and take time to consider, interpret, and integrate one’s own experiences…. Reflection also can support the integration of learning across multiple contexts” (p. 255). For instance, a Duke student’s commitment to staying engaged was largely due to his experience with Service Opportunities in Leadership. Colby and colleagues believe that this was the result of a reflection process that, as expressed by the student, “…involved a lot of questioning in terms of how I should live my life and how I should choose my career…I didn’t really reach any definite answers, but I think the answer I did reach was that no matter what, it needs to be making a positive contribution to the world around me” (p. 262).

Extending the Discourse and Research on Political Engagement

In the emblematic tradition set by Carnegie senior scholars Colby and Ehrlich, who have examined for decades American colleges and universities’ civic, moral, and political missions and practices (Colby et al., 2003; Ehrlich, 2000), Educating for Democracy is another stepping-stone to expand undergraduate education for responsible political engagement. To extend the discourse and research on political engagement, I offer four recommendations.

First, given that the authors are working with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) to disseminate PEP lessons learned via its American Democracy Project by involving eight AASCU campuses’ committed to using Educating for Democracy as a guide and core text, I recommend undertaking further research as an integral part of the project. Replicating the study undertaken by Colby and colleagues by using the research tools already developed would advance understanding of PEP outcomes. Studies that document the process of deliberation across communities of color and class would advance our understanding of how to expand the sphere of political engagement beyond participation in electoral politics and academia.

Second, intense faculty development in the pedagogical features of PEP is needed, particularly around how to build community partnerships and foster student deliberation and reflection. Faculty need to know how to set up strong partnerships that are sustainable over time. They need to learn how to create an environment of “open inquiry” where discussions and deliberations are promoted. Equally important, campus administrators need to support faculty engaging students in deliberative democracy.

Third, if the apparent interest of young voters in the 2008 presidential elections continues, Colby and colleagues might consider joining forces with the dozens of initiatives and efforts related to deliberative democracy across the country. They can encourage and facilitate PEP instructors to engage youth around a plethora of local, national, and global issues affecting the young: the environment, healthcare, poverty, erosion of the commons, food security, terrorism, the widening gap among the wealthy and poor, and the state of public schools.

Finally, learning political engagement and deliberative democracy is part of preparing undergraduates for lifelong citizenship. Longitudinal studies that pursue the long-term impact of projects such as PEP would be of great benefit to the civic engagement field. Questions to be addressed might include: Did students change their course of study or their selection of subsequent classes because of PEP courses and programs? Did PEP serve as a gateway for students to play significant political or civic roles 5-10 years after PEP? Do the skills of political engagement learned in PEP transfer to stu-
dents’ other spheres of learning and life? Inquiries such as these would provide much needed understanding of the long-term impact of courses and programs aimed to advance student political and civic learning.

In 2003, Caryn McTighe Musil of the Association of American Colleges and Universities proclaimed that there was a “quiet revolution occurring in the academy as civic concerns achieved new visibility alongside the traditional academic mission of higher education” (p. 4). Five years later, the revolution is no longer “quiet.” Dewey’s democracy is being “reborn with each new generation.” In The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens, Peter Levine (2007) argues that we must both prepare citizens for politics and improve politics for citizens. This improvement of politics will come with a generation ready to change the dynamics of public political discourse. Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, and Corngold make a persuasive case that the undergraduate experience provides a significant pathway to political engagement that has the promise to shift the political discourse for the millennial generation.

Notes

1 The diversity and range of institutions participating in the Political Engagement Project are reflected in the following list: American University; Berea College; California State University, Monterey Bay; California State University, Los Angeles; Colgate University; Duke University; Dutchess Community College & Vassar College; Georgetown University; Harvard University; Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs (St. Paul, Minnesota); Mills College; Portland State University; Providence College; San Francisco State University; University of California, Berkeley; University of Illinois; University of Maryland; University of Massachusetts, Amherst; University of Minnesota; University of Virginia; Wayne State University.

2 The eight AASCU campuses are: Ferris State University, Illinois State University, Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI), Kennesaw State University, Medgar Evers College of the City of New York, Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, Sam Houston State University, and Western Kentucky University.

References


Author

DILAFLUZ R. WILLIAMS is Professor of Educational Policy, Foundations, and Administrative Studies, Graduate School of Education, and (by courtesy) Professor of Public Administration, Hatfield School of Government, at Portland State University. She was elected to the Portland School Board in 2003 and reelected in 2007, serving as its co-chair. Her long-term scholarship examines civic engagement, service-learning, and the modern challenges to the formation of community in urban settings.