

The Call to Civically Engage

An election year always presents the best opportunity to enlist students in the critical processes of civic engagement. We know our students, particularly at community colleges, enthusiastically participate in service learning in great numbers. At North Shore, for example, more than 1000 students have been engaged in over 6000 hours of service learning experiences at more than 285 community-based organizations since the program began in fall of 2001.

We also know that transferring that enthusiasm from service learning to civic engagement has proven highly problematic. Those who participated in drafting Campus Compact's *Wingspread Statement on Student Civic Engagement* expressed frustration with conventional politics - a toxic political climate, economic pressures, disillusionment, and the professionalization of government are among the contributing factors. But, as representatives of diverse colleges and communities, they "were neither apathetic or disengaged." They were able to identify the subtle progression from "building relationships" through service learning to "building a movement" through community organizing.

My professional and personal quest is to significantly increase the number of students participating in the political process. Two strategies I embrace include linking service learning with policy analysis to excite students to pursue a role in public policy making and setting a personal example myself of positive participation within a partisan context.

In conversations with students returning from their service learning assignments, what strikes me most is their thirst to understand how the conditions they found came about. Whether it be the homeless, the battered, the illiterate, or others disempowered within our society, the students sense that public policy must address their circumstances and should be encouraged to challenge their systemic causes.

As institutions of higher education, we have a responsibility to advance the public good. Long steeped in ivy-walled tradition, the academy has responded in recent years to a call for public engagement. Distinguished colleges and universities, such as Trinity College and Brown University, provide benchmarks for such initiatives. But, community colleges are where the real action takes place. With campuses uniquely sited and linked to regional partnerships, community college graduates are poised to become the next generation of leaders. We take seriously a rigorous academic curriculum that changes lives while it changes communities.

But it is our task as educators to provide students with the means to become an engaged citizenry. We begin with service linked judiciously to curriculum and "let the chips fly." Democracy is a process, not a textbook replete with rules of governing. This year at North Shore Community College we have established a Public Policy Institute that will provide the resources we think students need to link their service to the policy areas that cause or purportedly address societal pathology. When they understand how policy can impact conditions, we hope to assist students to participate in the policy-making process related to those circumstances.

The national level of politics offers several arenas for interaction – the re-authorization of Higher Education Act, increasing Pell Grant awards, improving the Workforce Investment Act, enhancing Perkins Act support for technical education. But, on our campuses, students with service learning experiences at community-based organizations such as the Salem Mission and Operation Bootstrap will be faced with the "other America" and, with our help, they will transition their service to activism. Together we work to implement our college's Vision Statement, "North Shore Community College will be a catalyst for personal, community and regional change through education, training, and civic engagement ..."

On a personal level, I believe college presidents, because of our vastly expanded fund-raising responsibilities, have muted our voices and eschewed visible participation in public policy making. We cannot expect our students to engage in the political system if we are not willing to do so ourselves.

The JFK Library in Boston includes this message

"In a democracy, every citizen, regardless of his interest in politics, holds public office; every one of us is in a position of responsibility", wrote John F. Kennedy. "The kind of government we get depends on how we fulfill those responsibilities."

President Kennedy inspired a generation to accept responsibility for its government, its world, by taking political and social action. His own energetic leadership set a pace. He believed the presidency has a duty to defend the public good against all special interests and to safeguard the rights of individuals against all who would limit them....

John F. Kennedy's legacy is a vision of political action and public service based on courage, excellence, compassion and hope."

We fulfill his legacy and ensure our future when we work to instill in our students both a love for public service and a motivation to participate in the political processes that will benefit significantly from increased citizen participation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "W. J. Benton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a prominent initial "W".

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