Civic Engagement in High School and College: Perspectives of today's students.
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My first awareness of my image as a citizen and a young person came through a series of media images and sound bites during my college years. The image wasn’t good. As part of Generation X, I was repeatedly confronted with the Slacker—the young person glued to the couch, gaze unfocused on the glowing television, remote control ready. We were condemned as a generation of consumers, lacking the vision or ambition to do more than complain about the thousands of choices before us. We sat on the receiving end of society unprepared to step up into our roles as citizens and participants in democracy.

Personally, I hated this image. Douglas Copeland didn’t speak for me. Slacker was just a movie. Kurt Cobain didn’t capture my thoughts and feelings. I was active and interested in the world around me. I volunteered, voted, protested, read news and books, and could talk quite extensively about my desire to make a difference in the world. I didn’t deserve this image and neither did my friends. However, if you’d asked me if I was interested in politics, I would have said no. I voted but only because it was easy. I lived in the nation’s capital and couldn’t say who the cabinet members were or what they did. I would show up at the soup kitchen every morning at 6 a.m. but had no idea what the government’s policies were on housing and homelessness. I had no connections with influential adults and didn’t want them. Politics was full of compromise, and I wasn’t about to compromise. In many ways I was active but not engaged.

My generation has been somewhat vindicated in the last 10 years. We’re recognized as the entrepreneurs who created Teach for America, helped to expand AmeriCorps, and played a vital role in an explosion in technology. However, in the realms of political and civic engagement, we remain a topic of concern. The focus of this concern has widened to include a new cohort of young people, and whether we call them dot.net, GenY, Gen9-11, they face many of the concerns and criticisms of my generation. While there is recognition that young people today are volunteering in record numbers (CIRCLE, 2003)
and are capable of remarkable leadership in the right circumstances (James & McGillicuddy, 2001), there's no argument that 18-25 year olds vote less and express less interest in formal politics than previous generations (see CIRCLE, 2003 for review). Furthermore, there is evidence that the majority of young people do not participate in alternative forms of politics either (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin, 2002). These trends have led foundations and policy-makers to commit resources to efforts to renew school-based civic education and to find ways to reverse these trends.

One such effort was the 3rd Annual Educational Leadership Colloquium. This year’s colloquium focused on developing strategies for education to serve democracy. As part of the colloquium, a number of student-leaders were present to describe their work and share their perspectives. The students at this conference represented a range of ages, races and political and religious affiliations. What they held in common was their commitment to mobilize students on their campuses and in their local communities to address pressing issues around them. They remind us of the diversity within the categories of “youth” or “college students”. They also remind us that within the youth and student populations, there is potential for both alienation and engagement. How we approach and work to include students makes a difference as to which outcome we obtain. The students who spoke at the conference give us insight into what happens when things go right with student civic engagement.

**Defining Civic Engagement**

*Civic engagement is first and foremost about social justice and social change.* The students at this conference all seemed to agree that for them civic engagement meant believing in and acting on their ability to bring about change in their communities. From this perspective, civically engaged students question structures and institutions and works to address inadequacies. They ask "why?" and "what can be done?" and then commit to action. These changes don't follow a proscribed political agenda—not all college students are liberal--but they do involve a critical analysis, a desire for change, and a willingness to act on that desire.
*Civic engagement can but may not include political action.* The kinds of actions students engaged in ranged from service activities with no political engagement to activities in which the end goal was to change campus or city policies. Some students were indeed cynical about the role of politics and politicians in creating change (one student referring to the political machine in his community). Others felt that policy work was a natural extension of the service activities.

*Civic engagement is social in nature.* These students saw their activities as involving a complex network of people that make up the communities with which they were involved. Civic engagement is not an act between two people but a set of actions embedded in a larger social context. A civically engaged person knows how to promote dialogue and how to show respect and appreciation for the ideas and contributions of others. A civically engaged person is connected to mentors, role models, and other students.

*Civic engagement is also personal in nature.* Not only is civic engagement an opportunity to make a contribution to society, but it's also an opportunity to make claims on society. Students repeatedly referred to the importance of recognizing personal and professional goals in civic activities. Over and over they stressed the importance of addressing the questions, "what does this have to do with me?" Civic engagement can be an important opportunity for self-expression, a chance for self-definition and self-representation either as individuals or parts of groups. A civically engaged person promotes their own vision, brings their own interests and skills to the table. "Self realization isn't possible unless you're engaged in the world."

*Civic engagement is a set of skills:* While some students stressed this component of civic engagement more than others, most students mentioned the importance of practical knowledge for civic engagement. As one student voiced, many college students do care, they just need to learn how to transform their care into action. Another student stressed the importance that students be informed when trying to voice their concerns. These
students here had to go through a process of learning how to effect change, learning how to assess needs and how to make their voices heard.

*Civic engagement is believing in the potential of others:* A final persistent theme was that all of these students believed they could engage others. That young people do have humanitarian concerns and do want to make a difference. Helping others to realize their ability to contribute to the world was an important motivation for all involved.

**Supports and barriers for student civic engagement:**

*Student government:* None of the students here worked as members of student government. Some included student government in their work. Others operated separately or in spite of the interests of student government. Still others operated in absence of a student governing body. In one case, student government was a source of skepticism and doubt about the civic potential of other young people.

*Mentors:* Some students mentioned the importance of good mentorship in their efforts. Having a faculty member or some other adult resource to share ideas and resources can make a very important difference in the success and motivation of a young person.

*Campus community:* When asked what universities can do to help, students delivered a powerful message. If universities want students to be committed to civic engagement, universities themselves need to demonstrate similar commitment. Students here didn't seem to express strong opinions about service requirements, a very common form of university and school support for civic engagement. Instead students mentioned the importance of seeing faculty involved in community issues and getting clear communication that the university has a civic mission that results in the cultivation of a campus community and a relationship with outside communities.

*Persistence:* Not every project went well in the beginning or was fully supported. Therefore, persistence was an important theme. In one particular case, the student in
question had a plan and carried it out without any reassurance that it would work. This willingness to risk failure was a remarkable quality that helped with the success of her efforts.

Recommendations

Don't assume students don't or won't care. Many students do want to participate when they feel they can. Find ways to connect with their skills and interests through coursework, clubs, and extracurricular activities. Emphasize the connection between their daily lives and abstract social and political issues to spark interest. Service-learning is one popular effort. However, partnerships with student clubs and sponsorship of events that blend elements of activism and popular culture are other avenues for youth activism.

Engage students in dialogue and listen. Both leaders and less engaged students are more likely to participate if their ideas are responded to in a genuine manner. Including students in committees, boards, and meetings can be an important step, but only if adults are prepared to hear their ideas and respond sincerely. When this happens, students begin to talk more and take more interest.

Provide students with adequate mentorship. Having experienced and concerned adults or peers to help develop ideas and action plans is an important component to the development of student activities. Good mentors can both act as resources and supports and also as friendly critics to challenge and improve student efforts.

Work to create a democratic and civically committed campus community. Students will respond to a campus environment that places a priority on open dialogue, critical analysis and community involvement. Similarly, if these activities are clearly a low priority, many students will not go out on a limb the way some of these young leaders have.
Examine the role of student governments in schools. It seems possible that student government is an activity with a slightly different set of ideas around civic engagement than was espoused here. Looking at the goals and efforts of student councils and student governments along-side other efforts may shed light on conflicts within student life.

Examine the interests and activities of students who are not engaged. For many young people there are likely to be points of connection that have yet to be explored. Knowing how today's young people do spend their time can provide insights into how to connect with their interests and concerns.

Look more closely at the kinds of campus environments that support student engagement. Students implied that the level of campus engagement plays a role in the level of student engagement. Research comparing campuses where students are engaged at different levels may shed light on some of the factors that support good student work in this area.

Conclusion:

Recently, while reading a review article devoted to the topic of the decline of youth civic engagement (see Soule, 2001), I found a surprise. Buried amongst the familiar statistics about declines in voting, political discussions, and political activities was a less familiar finding—when compared to previous cohorts, young people aged 18-24 received the fewest requests for political participation (Schlozman, Verba, Brady, & Erkulwater, 1998). While this statistic isn’t surprising, the fact that it wasn’t so familiar to me was surprising. It called my attention to the other side of the issue of youth civic engagement. So much research is focused on figuring out what young people value and how to influence those values towards civic and political concerns. However, equal attention needs to be placed on how often young people are invited into political discussions or how often they are invited to participate in political action.
The students at this conference showed an unusual determination to seek out or create opportunities for action. They’ve shared their insight into the kinds of factors that support their involvement and the factors that make it difficult for students to invest their time in civic activities. The next step then, is to use this information to increase the number and quality of invitations we extend to students.

References:


Schlozman, K., Verba, S., Brady, H. & Erkulwater, J. (1998). Why can’t they be like we were? Understanding the generation gap in participation. Paper presented at the June APSA Political Socialization Subcommittee Meeting, DC.