AGAINST THE CURRENT

Developing the Civic Agency of Students

By Harry C. Boyte

O ne chill morning in 1965 when I was an undergraduate at Duke University, a friend and I made our way across campus seeking Oliver Harvey, a janitor on the night shift who had been involved in the black-freedom movement in Durham, N.C., since the 1940s. He explained to us why nonacademic employees like maids and janitors needed a union. He asked if students from the Duke Chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality would back the workers' effort to affiliate with Local 77 of the American Association of State, County, and Municipal Employees.

We did. Hundreds of students became active in the unionization campaign. Debates about nonacademic employees and the union spilled out of classrooms into countless conversations. The year I left for graduate school in Chicago, more than 1,000 students sat on the president's lawn to support the union. The trustees promptly chose a new president, Terry Sanford, who recognized Local 77.

I don't know of any longitudinal studies of our cohort of students, but I am certain that the organizing effort shaped our identities in lasting ways and gave us a sense of "civic agency" that endured. We may also have learned something about how political action scrambles conventional hierarchies. Harvey and other leaders of the union, invisible according to the customary standards of success at Duke, were the great civic teachers of my generation. During that campaign and later, Oliver Harvey taught me about union organizing in tobacco and textile factories in the 1930s and about a campaign in Texas he had been involved in against the poll tax (used to keep poor whites as well as blacks off the voting rolls).

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Lessons about who teaches civic agency and how it is taught go to the heart of challenges facing higher education.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: THE NEXT STAGE

Leaders in higher education's civic-engagement efforts recently have argued that those efforts need reinvigoration. "While the movement [to date] has created some change, it has also plateaued and requires a more comprehensive effort to ensure lasting institutional commitment and capacity," says John Saltmarsh, director of the New England Resource Center for Higher Education and formerly a scholar in residence at Campus Compact, the organization of college and university presidents committed to civic engagement. Saltmarsh argues that our next task is to "empower students and other citizens in the work of democracy."

A focus on civic agency has far-ranging implications. Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mishe have defined such agency as the ability to negotiate and transform a world that is understood to be fluid and open. But, they observe, this ability "has been overshadowed by an emphasis upon clear and explicit rules of conduct, concepts that permit relatively little scope for the exercise of situationally based judgment."

Put differently, the iron cage of technical rationality, which holds ends to be constant and focuses on efficiency of means—

described by theorists as diverse as Max Weber, Hannah Arendt, and Michel Foucault—has shaped theories of individual and collective action as well as those who develop them. We live in a hyper-regulated world that constrains agency on every side, a world of hidden manipulations, standardized programs, mass mobilizations, and bureaucratic interventions. In a memorable turn of phrase, the South African writer Xolela Mangcu has termed the invisible virus spreading through modern societies that erodes agency "technocratic creep." Given this erosion, it is no wonder that our students feel powerless about changing institutions that seem to have a life of their own, even if institutional pathologies insult their basic values and standards (a theme Parker Palmer explored in the November/December 2007 issue of *Change*).

But the concept of agency is clearly emerging in many fields. Thus, in *Culture and Public Action*, a collection of essays on community development, Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton argue for a shift from "equality of opportunity" to "equality of agency," from expert-led interventions to "creating an enabling environment to provide the poor with the tools, and the voice, to navigate their way out of poverty." Civic agency emphasizes not only individual action but also the collective capacity to act on common challenges across differences. Rao and Walton's invocation of both an *enabling environment* and people's *navigation* usefully suggests the two axes of the concept.

Most emergent scholarship on agency focuses on what constitutes "enabling environments." Conventional theory about "the commons," for instance, removed civic agency from communities on the grounds that government or markets must manage shared resources such as inshore fisheries, forest management, and irrigation systems. As Elinor Ostrom puts it in her book *Governing the Commons*, "Until a theoretical explanation—based on human choice—for self-organized and self-governed enterprises is fully developed and accepted, major policy decisions will continue to be undertaken with a presumption that individuals cannot organize themselves and always need to be organized by external authorities." Ostrom and her collaborators in the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis at Indiana University have found that when it comes to managing the commons, decentralized governance in a polycentric system with high popular participation has key advantages in terms of sustainability, as well as efficiency and equity.

In addition to enabling environments, there is another, equally important dimension to civic agency that particularly concerns educators: Developing the skills and capacities for self-reliant public action. Civic education today in the schools usually means knowledge about government (as in "civics courses"), while colleges and universities focus on values such as care and responsibility and, in service learning, on the connections between the content of academic courses and community problems.

But service learning, like civics courses, neglects the dynamics of power and politics. In *Educating for Democracy*, Anne Colby, Elizabeth Beaumont, Thomas Ehrlich, and Josh Corngold point out that among the 600 or so service-learning programs they studied, only one percent included "a focus on specifically political concerns and solutions such as working with groups to represent the interests of a community," while more than half provided direct service, such as serving food in shelters and tutoring.

The concept of civic agency highlights the broader set of capacities and skills required to take confident, skillful, imaginative, collective action in fluid and open environments where there is no script. Teachers or organizers who inspire, agitate, energize, and constructively challenge students, like those "pushy" teachers whom Margaret Miller described in her editorial in the November/December 2007 issue of *Change* as helping motivate students "to become agents of their own learning," generally become learners in the process.

I saw the development of navigational capacities all the time in the citizenship schools of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), for which I worked as a young man. The aim of such teaching was captured by Dorothy Cotton, director of the Citizenship Education Program of SCLC, in her song, "We are the ones we've been waiting for."

Civic learning enables people to practice civic politics, or self-directed public action. I use the term "politics" here in the way it is described in Bernard Crick's classic *In Defense of Politics*—not as partisan warfare but as something close to the opposite, a method that humans have developed to negotiate different, sometimes conflicting interests and views in order to get things done. The aim is not to do away with conflict—politics sometimes *surfaces* submerged clashes of interest—but rather to avoid violence and contain conflicts, to generate common work on public questions, and to achieve beneficial public outcomes.

TECHNOCRATIC CREEP

One Saturday morning in 1997, I went to an exhibit called "A New Deal for the Arts" at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. The exhibit featured public artwork from the Great Depression of the 1930s and celebrated the contributions of ordinary people in addressing hunger, poverty, racism, and soil erosion. I left thinking about how "the people," seen by intellectuals in the 1920s as the repository of crass materialism and parochialism, were rediscovered as a source of strength and hope in the 1930s. "The heart and soul of our country," Franklin Roosevelt said in 1940, "is the heart and soul of the common man."

But respect for ordinary people's talents has declined in public life in tandem with technocratic creep. The Roosevelt Memorial near the National Mall has two sets of statues by George Segal that convey a very different message than New Deal art does. In "Rural Couple," a woman sits on a rocking chair with a man standing beside her. Nearby, "The Breadline" portrays citizens in an urban environment. In both, the figures are drained of energy. Their faces are vacant; their posture droops. They are "the masses," anonymous and miserable. The message, I realized, is that Roosevelt saved a helpless people and that professionals' role is to rescue people and solve problems.

The professionals who do this are not in the least malevolent but are rather infused with good intentions. When I talk

with students about the possibility that their efforts to help the poor and oppressed might disempower people, they react with shocked disbelief. But disempowerment invariably results from interventions that erode the capacities and confidence of those without credentialed expertise.

TECHNOCRACY ON CAMPUS

Higher education is both a source and victim of technocracy. We justify expert control in part with meritocratic assumptions about "the best and the brightest": The belief that we are preparing students to join the elect permeates the air we breathe in research institutions. Technocracy's authority also comes from our purportedly apolitical, objective methods of knowledge-production, a default positivism of practice described by Donald Schön that was incorporated into higher education even as that philosophy's foundations were being effectively challenged.

The values and habits associated with this stance—such as appreciation for excellence, attention to method, respect for evidence, self-reflexivity, the need for diverse views, and openness to feedback—are more important than ever in a world of manipulated passions and revealed truth. Yet these are far better realized by understanding scholarship and teaching as public crafts. Craft traditions treated knowledge-making as a social process and recognized the importance of apprenticeships and contextual practice to student learning. The craft nature of the scholarly disciplines has diminished; we need to revive it.

Ubiquitous but normally implicit on campus, the assumptions undergirding technocracy occasionally surface, as they did in a 1989 David Dodds Henry lecture at the University of Illinois by Donna Shalala, then chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and later Secretary of Health and Human Services. In her talk, "Mandate for a New Century," Shalala made an early, impassioned call for public service and social justice; for struggles against racism, sexism, and homophobia; for peace and environmentalism.

Her good intentions were palpable—and tied to technocracy. For her, "the ideal [is] a disinterested technocratic elite" fired by the moral mission of "society's best and brightest in service to its most needy." The imperative was "delivering the miracles of social science" to fix society's problems "just as doctors cured juvenile rickets in the past." This leaves most people with little to do except to give thanks or to complain.

The devaluation in the academy of the intelligence and talents of those without degrees and credentials is tied to detachment from place, what the intellectual historian Thomas Bender has described as the shift from "civic professionalism" to "disciplinary professionalism." As the cultures of research universities became detached, higher education lost the connections that teach students how to work in communities.

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I often wonder how many nonacademic staff in universities and how many civic leaders in surrounding communities might be like Oliver Harvey, with the potential to help our students become powerful agents of change but who remain unrecognized because of their invisibility in our hyper-credentialed culture.

Civic Politics on Campus

I also think about how technocracy's iron cage constrains the "successful." The growing body of scholarship about "what works" to create enabling environments and to promote effective agency holds the exciting potential to counter the despair about the world that is widespread among students and faculty, the product of a narrowing of agency to critique and detached observation.

In 1997, the Kellogg Foundation asked our Center for Democracy and Citizenship to investigate possibilities for renewing the University of Minnesota's land-grant mission. Ed Fogelman, chair of the political-science department, and I interviewed several dozen faculty. They voiced alarm at turf wars, hyper-competitive norms, the "star system," and the erosion of apprenticeship relationships with graduate students. "Our whole department feels too cloistered," said one department chair in the College of Liberal Arts.

Across disciplines, faculty members often feel detached even from their departments. "I talk far more to the 50 people in my sub-discipline on the Internet than I do to the people on my hall," said one. Faculty members said that they avoided mention of their public interests, which led most of them into academia, for fear that they might jeopardize their reputation for "rigorous scholarship." (These interviews are described in *Public Engagement in a Civic Mission.*)

So what does "civic politics," a term coined by practitioners and scholars of the emerging interdisciplinary field focused on civic agency, look like in higher education?

At the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota, we have taught, learned, and practiced such politics. In doing so, we have been inspired and informed by the broad-based organizing that brings together people of diverse religious, political and other positions to address public issues from poverty to housing, from environmental restoration to school reform. Doran Schrantz, who co-directs the ISAIAH group in the Twin Cities (part of the Gamaliel Foundation's network of citizen organizations—for which Barack Obama worked as an organizer in Chicago in the 1980s) describes this development in ways that bring to mind Miller's "pushy" teachers:

> Love and power, that's what I saw in the organizers—the idea that the path to my liberation was liberation of other people. The organizers were real; they were able to reach out and grab

people not because they wanted to manipulate but because they loved them. They were saying, "I want you to be who you can be." I thought of that as freedom that only exists in certain spaces that have to be created.

The coupling of "love" with "power" rarely appears in discussions of civic engagement in higher education. In fact, language about *power* is largely absent. Working with these themes over the years has brought home the reason: Technocracy, control by experts who imagine themselves to be apolitical and disinterested outsiders to a common civic culture, has us in an iron grip.

During its first decade, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship mainly worked with community partners to develop civic agency outside of academia. The partners ranged from local schools, parent groups, a nursing home, and local government agencies to the federal government when I coordinated the nonpartisan "Reinventing Citizenship" effort with the White House Domestic Policy Council from 1993 to 1995.

I joked then that it would be easier to "put the civil back in civil service" than to change the University of Minnesota. But the Kellogg Foundation's request in 1997 stimulated us to do more systematic work with a civic-agency focus within academe. We have since worked with college students and teachers across the country (these initiatives are described in *The Citizen Solution* and *Voices of Hope*). But some of our most important work was aimed at developing students' civic learning and institutional change at the University of Minnesota.

Public Achievement

Our major vehicle for developing civic capacities for action among students has been Public Achievement, or PA, a program begun in 1990 with youths from elementary through high school. At first college students only served as coaches to the younger children and teenagers, but in the last several years they also have begun to do projects themselves, coached by adults.

Public Achievement is self-directed collective action by teams of about five to 10 young people, who work on projects of their choosing over months, a year, or sometimes more. These students learn organizing skills and concepts such as one-on-one interviewing, public speaking, and collective evaluation. They also learn about political concepts such as power, self-interest, and "public work" across differences.

As we define it, public work is sustained effort by a diverse mix of people that generates lasting civic goods, material or cultural. In public work, the citizen is not mainly a voter, volunteer, protestor, or customer but rather the foundational agent of democracy, solving problems and co-producing public goods. In PA, we regard young people as *citizens today*, regardless of age, not *citizens in preparation*.

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We describe PA teams as "free spaces," drawing on a concept that Sara Evans and I developed from our study of the wellsprings of democratic movements. Free spaces are public settings in community life, owned by participants, where powerless groups develop a new confidence, going from seeing themselves as aggrieved victims to understanding themselves as agents of constructive change.

From the start, PA has dramatically confounded conventional wisdom about young people's supposed apathy. Every cultural, income, and age group with which we have worked has major public concerns, ranging from violence, teen pregnancy, drugs, gangs, and racism, to depression, schools that fail to engage student interests, lack of time with families, war, and global warming. We have heard again and again from young people that they are almost never asked what *they* can do to address these problems—a very different question than *what should be done*, which displaces agency onto others. Most youths strongly emphasize that although they have never developed the skills and capacities for such action, they want to.
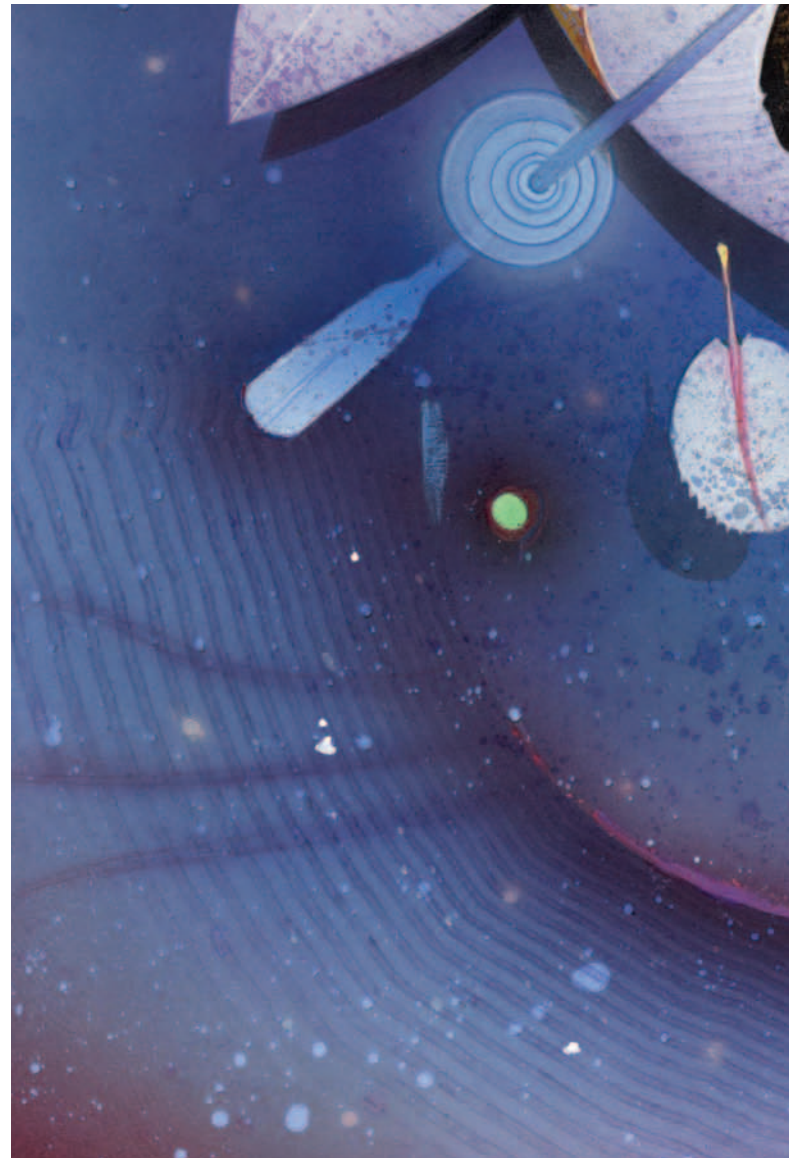
Public Achievement has kinship with service learning, especially its emphasis on community-based learning and its values of community, responsibility, and concern for the common good. But unlike service learning, PA is explicitly political, in the older sense of politics. PA also challenges the paradigm of "helping" that erodes the agency of others, focusing instead on civic capacities such as learning to work with others with whom one disagrees, reading the political and cultural dynamics of settings, learning how to act in open-ended situations with no predetermined outcomes, respecting others' capacities for self-directed action, and being responsible for one's actions and accountable to one's peers.

In a 2005-06 handbook on the Public Achievement program, written by students of Eric Fretz at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado, college students serving as coaches identified how their work challenged the "helping" paradigm. "The coach must actively facilitate and encourage students to take on the responsibility and direction of the group," wrote Leanne Bird in her "Letter to a New Coach." She added, "Your role is to coach these students while holding them accountable, but the end goal is for the students to develop the confidence and skills to do public work independent of a coach. I struggled with this idea throughout the semester, and still need to remind myself of it from time to time."

The handbook writers also describe their frustrations, challenges, and exhilaration as they coached large numbers of Spanish-speaking and low-income teens at Centaurus High School, bridging a large cultural divide. That year seven teams worked on issues such as racial conflict, immigrants' rights, and improving the public reputation of the school.

Good PA coaches are not disciplinarians, but neither are they "buddies." They see their role as helping young people to become confident, self-reliant, and powerful. Good coaches let participants learn from mistakes. They challenge them to try out new roles and skills. They get to know each member's interests and potential.

We discovered that making college students into good coaches of children and teens in developing civic agency necessitates much greater faculty or staff involvement than is common in service-learning courses. Finding faculty or staff members with a strong interest in building public relation-

ships, a key to teaching civic agency in higher education, is also a challenge. Our leading exemplar has been James Farr, a political theorist at the University of Minnesota who forged an intensive partnership with St. Bernard's Catholic elementary school in St. Paul. Public Achievement has flourished in sites like St. Bernard's, where the principal, Dennis Donovan (now a national organizer for PA), made it central to school's mission and culture. Farr's commitment to his undergraduate students' political development matched Donovan's passion for his students' growth as citizens.

The broader obstacle to Public Achievement in higher education is the way it goes against the educational current. PA's open-ended qualities are often disconcerting to students raised in highly structured environments since PA unfolds differently in every team project, school, community, and society. I have heard countless times, "This is too messy," although such sentiments generally give way to enthusiasm as coaches and teams gain in skill and confidence.

Public Achievement has spread to several hundred sites in the United States and 12 countries, including Northern Ireland, Scotland, Turkey, Palestine, Israel, Poland, and South Africa. PA participants have a rich record of accomplishment: building playgrounds, marching against violence, challenging racial

profiling, effecting curricular reform, taking action on global warming, and so on. Deep changes often occur in young people's sense of the world and themselves. The world becomes more open and subject to change, and they begin to see themselves as agents of that change.

RMC Research, a leading evaluator of service learning, undertook a two-year study (supported by the Carnegie Corporation) of the PA programs in 12 schools. Researchers found gains in the skills of working with others, planning, and organizing, as well as greater interest in public affairs and confidence that young people can make a difference. High-school students gained deliberative and communication skills such as oral presentation and an ability to listen even to those they disagreed with.

Civic Learning on Campus

Public Achievement has become a core element of the leadership and community-engagement curriculum at the University of Minnesota, Denver University, Naropa University, and elsewhere. Minneapolis Community and Technical College's urban teacher and parks and recreation programs have integrated PA concepts and skills into their core curricula. Colgate University

in New York has done the same across a range of student-affairs and student-life activities.

Colgate University's experience is described in David Brown's interview of Adam Weinberg, the former Colgate vice president and dean of students who led PA's integration into co-curricular activities, in *Agent of Democracy: Higher Education and the HEX Journey*. Building on community partnerships for economic revitalization in Hamilton, New York, and prompted by high-profile incidents related to alcohol abuse, Colgate undertook a year-long process of exploring and debating the meaning of "civic learning" more deeply.

"We spent a year talking about civic learning" said Weinberg. "The circles were wide and the conversations were open-ended. People had space to talk across the community in ways that typically had not happened before." Psychologists, deans, campus-safety officers, career-services staff, faculty, students, and students-affairs staff all got involved. "For example, a group of students, faculty, and administrators met weekly to talk about building civic life as a way to deal with alcohol issues."

Such conversations generated hope that shifting the collegiate culture away from what Weinberg calls the "Club Med" model is possible. Through the process, awareness grew that the problem did not lie in student values but rather in a lack of the skills and habits to act on them, an absence compounded by the professional-service model "where people solve problems for students," as Weinberg noted. "For example residential halls are filled with layers of professional staff who spend their time solving problems by enforcing an endless stream of rules. This is a horrible way to organize an educational environment. We rob students of opportunities to learn through problem solving."

To develop civic agency students need not only new skills but a much more robust definition of democracy, citizenship, and politics. Colgate has developed a democracy-education effort that involves strong co-curricular staff coaching. The university defines democracy as "a way of life" and uses the conflicts that erupt all the time in increasingly diverse residential halls and campus organizations as opportunities for growth. When students clash over dirty dishes, residence advisors serve as coaches, not service providers.

Institutional Change

Colgate's experience demonstrates the importance of high-level champions if civic agency is to become a focus for our institutions. We saw a similar dynamic at the College of St. Catherine in the early 1990s, when Nan Kari and a group of colleagues took an organizing approach to curricular and cultural reform, with strong support from the president, Anita Pampusch.

We took lessons from St. Catherine's to institutional change efforts at the University of Minnesota, starting with the Kellogg planning grant. Ed Fogelman and I worked with then-provost (now president) Robert Bruininks, whose passion for the land-grant public-service mission we discovered in one of our interviews. While we worked with him to put together a university-wide task force on civic engagement, Bruininks, an astute political leader, led conversations among the regents and deans.

The task force took a comprehensive approach, using public-work theory that emphasizes the productive public possibilities in different work roles, paid as well as unpaid. From this perspective, civic engagement is not about after-hours

service but rather is an integral dimension of scholarship and teaching that takes different forms in each department and collegiate unit. This diversity of approaches facilitates buy-in from deans and department chairs.

The experience led us to argue that democratic society-building should become the overall mission for higher education in the 21st century, as embodied in the description of colleges and universities as "agents and architects of democracy" in the *Wingspread Declaration: Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University* (1999). Such a view of higher education's mission leads to a focus on cultural change: Civic engagement needs to infuse organizational identity, not simply take shape in discrete activities. For example, at the University of Minnesota, as Fogelman put it, the aim should not be to *do* civic engagement; rather, it should *be* an engaged institution.

Many changes have resulted from the University of Minnesota's task-force work. The university now has an Office of Public Engagement, directed by Andrew Furco, associate vice president for public engagement, and is advised by a university council on public engagement. The keynote speaker at the university-wide public-engagement day in 2007 was Atum Azzahir, a prominent public intellectual in the African-American community who stresses the rich knowledge-making work of communities.

But we have also come up against the entrenched norms of meritocratic success and detached scholarship that are sustained by the competitive pressures of academia. "We're in a fight for the soul of the university," says Gail Dubrow, dean of the graduate school at Minnesota. Dubrow described pressures for the university to fit in with the dominant model of high-pressured individualistic scholarship, as reflected in rankings such as those by *U.S. News and World Report*. Those pressures can destroy good teaching, relationships with students, and ties to communities. Dubrow adds, "The question is whether we'll go along with a hyper-competitive culture— or take leadership in the effort to change it."

As we have thought about how to change sources of civic dysfunction into wellsprings of civic renewal, we have tried to identify settings hospitable for widespread experimentation with civic agency. This has led to planning discussions with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the Kettering Foundation about a long-range project to incorporate civic agency into regional institutions and minority-serving institutions such as historically black colleges and universities. A key characteristic of AASCU institutions is that they are "stewards of place," focused on local and regional issues. As such, argues George Mehaffy, AASCU vice president, they "are ideal places to focus on building the capacity for civic agency among students, faculty, and staff." The task force called on these institutions to serve as "learners as well as teachers in tackling the myriad of opportunities and issues facing our communities and regions" (http://www.aascu.org/pdf/stewardsofplace_02.pdf).

Mehaffy's conviction about AASCU institutions as promising settings for civic agency grows out of his experiences in directing AASCU's American Democracy Project (ADP), a civic-engagement initiative now involving 228 colleges and universities that is focused on higher education's role in preparing the next generation of citizens. That project, created in 2003 without any external funding, began with a call for campus participation; within a month, 135 institutions had signed up, and many more have joined since.

The ADP has spawned an array of projects and activities, national conferences, a Wingspread report, and two national initiatives—the Political Engagement and the Stewardship of Public Lands projects. In both, campuses stress the roles and responsibilities of ordinary citizens and emphasize the development of political skills. Many ADP campuses are already working on the revised faculty-reward structures and measures for assessing student learning that will be required for such a focus to take root and spread. As civic innovations such as these develop, they will liberate the talents and energies of those in more traditional research universities as well.

Developing civic agency is the great challenge and promise of the new century. ▣

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