Essay Review of Higher Education's Imperative: Rising to the Challenge of Educating Citizens

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Citation Details

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Review Essay

Higher Education’s Imperative: Rising to the Challenge of Educating Citizens

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Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility
Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, Elizabeth Beaumont, and Jason Stephens

In a recent Peer Review article on “Educating for Citizenship,” Caryn McTighe Musil (2003) of the Association of American Colleges and Universities writes:

There has been a quiet revolution occurring in the academy over the last two decades. Civic concerns have achieved new visibility alongside the traditional academic mission of higher education. It is difficult to find a college campus that does not tout a coordinated center for community service, service-learning, or research centers devoted to distinctly civic issues. Institutions have redefined themselves to be more responsible citizens in their communities. Nearly a thousand college presidents are members of Campus Compact, an organization created to promote greater campus-community involvement. Seventy percent of students participate in some sort of service before they graduate (p. 4).

Musil’s reference to a “quiet revolution” is timely. In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in challenging academia to explicitly articulate its role in educating citizens. Our institutions are asked to confront their indulgence with age-old specialized curriculum fragmented into disciplinary boundaries that produce graduates skilled more at reading impersonal maps than mapping their own community’s civic interests through direct participation. Our inflexible and pedantic classrooms are being challenged for entrenched pedagogical habits of pedagogy disconnected from real life. Our fixation with efficiencies, competition, and economies of scale controlled by market forces is increasingly coming under scrutiny as we ask, what is education for? And, in particular, the lethargy, cynicism, and skepticism toward anything “political,” seen among 18-25 year-olds and undergraduates, are causing alarm as our democracy is progressively becoming a citizenry of spectators rather than participants. Consequently, the traditional goals of liberal arts education are being forced to be recast as the discourse of “engagement” becomes increasingly center-fold.


Colby et al. are troubled that higher education institutions by and large have ignored their moral and civic goals. They are particularly disillusioned that academic cheating is increasing and there is less interest among youth in voting and political participation. They critically examine the historical underpinnings of pedagogical practices that are traditionally rewarded in academia and the rigidity of an educational system grounded in specialization and devoid of much connection with the realities of life. One outcome of burdensome teaching loads in universities is that students customarily become passive learners. Passivity is the wholesale reliance on classroom instruction exacerbated by separation of campus and community. Colby et al. call for change in precisely those approaches that lull faculty into believing that they are adequately doing their job of serving students. The complexity of
world affairs, economic system of globalization, and plurality of public opinion force upon educators an imperative to search for more rigorous teaching forms and evaluation of their efforts. More importantly, Colby et al. point to the lack of conscious intentionality to bring moral education, character building, and civic participation into the academy’s mainstream discourse, recognizing that morality issues are traditionally tied to organized religion and right of center ideologies, a subject most teachers believe is outside their purview and would rather avoid.

However, instead of merely critiquing the decline resulting from the academy’s neglect, Colby et al.’s *EC* takes us on a journey of several institutions, programs, and courses where faculty and administrators are indeed making a difference. *EC* presents us with an array of case studies of higher education institutions that have defied the external pressures to conform to market demands and taken creative approaches to address their students’ moral and civic growth. *EC* surveys in depth a broad spectrum of 12 institutions that are public, private, faith-based, secular, research/doctoral, liberal arts, and community colleges. What binds these seemingly diverse institutions—for instance, Messiah College, Duke University, and Portland State University—is their commitment to integrate civic and moral concerns with mainstream academic life. Reminiscent of Ehrlich’s (2000) previous plea for civic responsibility in higher education, Colby et al.’s dedicated work is a call for revolutionary thinking within academia. They take it upon themselves to move readers for change in academia, illustrating cases that should be inspiring and groundbreaking to those uncertain of concrete benefits of restructuring a system that has resisted change. Colby et al., thus, have brought us a book that inspires a vision of the possible through concrete, down-to-earth examples.

From Margin to Center: A Multi-Faceted Approach

Colby et al. start from the fundamental assumption that “it is not possible to create a value-neutral environment” in colleges and universities. Hence, higher education “ought to educate for substantive values, ideals, and standards...and should not be content with what is sometimes referred to values *clarification*” (italics in original, p.11). Rather than pretend, the authors urge that institutions make conscious and deliberate choices about the “basic moral principles, ideals, and virtues” that can form a common ground to guide their work, including the work of educating citizens in a democracy (p.11). They also urge that academia acknowledge there is a hidden curriculum often fraught with moral messages. Integrity is about making transparent to the community what one stands for and why.

Lest we think that higher education is impervious to outside influence, Colby et al. remind us that permeability is quite natural; hence, the task is to “find common values that constitute the foundation for moral and civic learning...while still recognizing that those shared values often come into conflict with each other and that different individuals and subcultures may create different hierarchies among these values” (p.12). Most likely, the mission of colleges and universities entails “a core set of values, such as intellectual integrity, concern for truth, and academic freedom;” nonetheless, they must also foster “values such as mutual respect, open-mindedness, the willingness to listen to and take seriously the ideas of others, procedural fairness, and public discussion of contested issues” (p.13). *EC*’s authors aim to develop “the whole person, as an accountable individual and engaged participant in society—local, state, national, and global” (p.18).

Given that *EC* is about preparing undergraduates for both moral and civic responsibility, Colby et al. clarify that the moral and the civic are inseparable. The term *morality* describes “prescriptive judgments about how one ought to act in relation to other people” (p. 15). It follows that “many core democratic principles, including tolerance and respect, impartiality, and concern for both the rights of the individual and the welfare of the group, are grounded in moral principles” (p. 15). Moral considerations are always included in civic decisions. Hence it is crucial that good judgments and a strong moral compass be used during civic and political involvement.

In trying to further clarify their conceptual framework, Colby et al. view political engagement as a particular subset of civic responsibility, yet distinct from other forms of civic participation because political engagement exists on a continuum with apolitical forms of civic engagement. Going beyond electoral politics, the authors define political engagement as “including activities intended to influence social and political institutions, beliefs, and practices and to affect processes and policies relating to community welfare, whether that community is local, state, national, or international” (p. 19). Political engagement, therefore, may include:

- working informally with others to solve a community problem; serving in neighborhood organizations, political interest groups, or
political organizations; participating in public forums on social issues, discussing political issues with family and friends, and trying to influence others’ political opinions; working on a campaign...; thus, not all forms of civic involvement count as political. (p. 19)

To educate citizens, then, is to develop a wide array of capacities:

The first is moral and civic understanding, which includes dimensions such as interpretation, judgment, and knowledge. The second category is moral and civic motivation and includes values, interests, emotions such as empathy and hope, sense of efficacy, and moral and civic identity. Finally, some core skills are essential for carrying out moral and civic responsibility by applying core knowledge and virtues and transforming informed judgments into action. Given these capacities, moral and civic maturity requires competence in a wide range of practical areas, including moral and political discourse and other forms of communication, interpersonal relationships, and civic and political engagement. Among the skills needed for the latter are the ability to lead, to build a consensus, and to move a group forward under conditions of mutual respect. (pp. 19-20)

The curriculum, extra-curricular activities, and campus culture are all fertile sites for such holistic learning in higher education. EC presents a forceful argument for restructuring the current paradigm of education by showcasing the work done in 12 institutions of higher learning, along with dozens of courses and programs from other campuses. These colleges and universities vary in organization, size, location, and ideological persuasion—religious or other—demonstrating the varied modifications of moral and civic education, and its ability to fit multiple institutional philosophies. Most of the institutions provide rhetorical, structural, and functional support to administrators, faculty, staff, and students to keep alive the vital discourse of moral and civic education. The case studies also share a number of general features: integrating moral and civic education into the curriculum, connections with real life, and creating campus-wide shared cultural values. Based on the authors’ field research, the text is rich with myriad practical examples of ways that campuses can make education of citizens their primary focus.

Alverno College, most notable for its assessment efforts and a diagnostic digital portfolio, is a small Roman Catholic college for women in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Since the 1960s, it has been a leader in “spelling out competencies that its students should have when they graduate and in defining and assessing those competencies” (Colby et al., p. 53). At Alverno, a large number of academic programs have moral and civic responsibility. There is even a major in community leadership and development, and another in experiential learning and community development (p. 54). Abilities such as “Valuing in Decision Making, Social interaction, Global Perspective, and Effective Citizenship” are assessed and required for graduation. Along similar lines, at Greenville, Tennessee-based Tusculum College, students must demonstrate nine competencies titled, Self-Knowledge: The Examined Life, Civility, and Ethics of Social Responsibility (p. 54). This small liberal arts college has also instituted a required Commons Curriculum and has a strong program of service-learning with a community governance structure. The College’s Ethics and Social Responsibility competency addresses further categories such as: Individual and Community, Public and Private Life, Diversity and the Common Good, and Civic Responsibility and Social Change. In the latter instance, students gain understanding in complex social issues by actually participating in, and improving, their own communities.

Under the leadership of its President, Duke University in North Carolina has restructured its general education program to include two required Ethical Inquiry courses and a first-year writing program emphasizing ethics. Duke houses the Kenan Institute of Ethics that also promotes honor codes on academic integrity. Portland State University’s motto, “Let Knowledge serve the City,” displayed prominently on the bridge accessing the campus, is an important visual and philosophical backdrop to hundreds of community-based learning courses. This large university in Portland, Oregon, with mostly commuter students, has a decade-strong general education program called University Studies, which foregrounds civic involvement in freshman inquiry courses through senior capstone experiences undertaken exclusively to address community needs and interests. Like Duke, Portland State University’s reform efforts were led by its President (p. 59). At Spelman College, which is a historically black women’s college in Atlanta, community-based service forms the main drive of its moral and civic development efforts, though social justice is a strong “subtheme” of the campus ethos. A plaque that reads, “Spelman College, Women Who Serve,” acts as an unofficial motto as “leadership, service, and commitment” are embraced for improving the largely black local community (p. 60).

Kapi‘olani Community College, in Honolulu, has a diverse student body that fiercely protects its
students' right to appreciate their own cultural identity and difference, and that of others. Hawaiian and Asian-Pacific influences are included into teaching even as the college has adopted six emphases, across the curriculum, one of which is service-learning. "Campus leaders see the incorporation of values, ethics, and service into the curriculum as an organic, bottom-up process triggered and fostered to a large extent by the involvement of the institution with the community" (p. 61). The United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado, has instituted the Center for Character Development to oversee its stated goal of moral education—character development, using the language of virtues: "forthright integrity, selflessness, commitment to excellence, respect for human dignity, decisiveness, responsibility, self-discipline and courage, and appreciation of spirituality" (p. 62). Similarly, Turtle Mountain College espouses values sacred to the Chippewa tribe—humility, love, creation, bravery, honesty, knowledge, wisdom, and truth. The college is located in Minot, North Dakota, and their curriculum has full commitment to the tribal community and Native American culture. At the Protestant Christian institution, Messiah College, located in rural western Pennsylvania, one can see commitment to combining civic education framed within Christian values and faith throughout the curriculum. California State University at Monterey Bay, which is a newly built campus on an army base, has a distinctive vision statement committed to civic engagement and social justice goals in the community embedded within its outcomes-based curriculum. The vision statement is signed by all new faculty and staff and displayed in several locations on campus. Along parallel lines, another campus, the University of Notre Dame, a Catholic institution in South Bend, Indiana, has a distinctive mission statement that is testimony to its commitment to social justice. At graduation, students take a pledge to accept jobs that uphold their own and their alma mater's promise toward goals in service and justice. Social justice and community activism are also recurring themes in the curriculum at the College of St. Catherine, the largest Catholic women's college, situated in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Many of the values upheld by these institutions are explicitly stated in their mission statements—a critical first step to establishing and changing institutional culture. Furthermore, a variety of required undergraduate courses explicitly include promoting and fostering civic and moral responsibility. And, these campuses ensure that the students are connected to their communities through active engagement in issues of civic welfare and social justice. These institution-wide efforts are indicators that shaking free of the status quo of higher education can indeed be made a priority.

Rising to the Challenge: An Impetus for Change

The education terrain is considerably different from the 1920s liberal arts school in which Colby et al.'s upper-class model student Virginia Durr studied to prepare herself to be a good wife and citizen, while still doubting the benefits of racial equality. When she is asked to share her dinner table with a person of color, she recoils, pleading that her father would not approve and the authorities respond that her father is her problem and not theirs. Feeling suitably challenged, Durr stays. She later reflects upon this incident and her character-building years in college, once she is married and has acquired status in life, which then lead her to become an activist for social justice.

Unlike men and women of Durr's generation, our current students have to learn quickly to live with each other while assimilating the vast knowledge base within their own majors. Therefore we do not serve the cause of moral and civic education by designing courses in morality, ethics, and community that are peripheral to students' core disciplinary education. The student body as well as the world in which our students, domestic and international, participate are now culturally and politically contingent. Hence, Colby et al. use a more acceptable and apt variation of the term liberal arts education—liberal education—to encompass the vastly adjusted reality of our educational actors, i.e., students and their faculty. Since democracy should not be taken for granted, as John Dewey (1910) urged, we take on the directive posed by Colby et al. and ask: (i) How must students conduct themselves in order to be the true inheritors and makers of democracy? and (ii) What pedagogical practices can faculty embrace to incorporate the political, historical, and cultural interests no matter what their disciplinary leanings?

Universities and colleges that are most successful in making students mindful of their conduct are those that have codified and enumerated civil expectations on campus. An "anything goes" attitude does not allow students to reflect upon their own behaviors and assumptions, nor does it order their thought process when interacting with the diverse contexts they are bound to be part of on and off campus. As seen in EC, Spelman College has a decorum guide, Air Force Academy believes in systematic character development of its cadets, and all students at California State University at Monterey
Bay take a course on ethical communication. In addition, students at several campuses in EC frequently endorse academic integrity charters and sign honor codes. Colby et al. believe that participation in these activities is a bold and rare move by students who stand to destabilize their own social world that places value on loyalty to friends and the dominant cultural value of individual advancement. We believe that self-discipline comes from constantly deliberating on moral and ethical questions, some of which are bound to arise while serving in community organizations, domestically and overseas.

Bringing its idealism and wisdom to academia, EC poses teachers to stave off practices they have accepted not because they believe in them, but because they are taught so. As teachers, we must give varied formats a chance to develop students' abilities and decenter inflexible teaching practices that prevent students from interacting gainfully in a pluralistic world. For instance, when we place students in nonprofit, service-based organizations, they confront their racial and class positioning in a way they rarely have previously. This chance to learn and serve is a valuable opportunity to connect with diverse community organizations and bring back practical insights to class work, contextualizing one's theoretical learning on varied subject matter. To examine the kind of pedagogy that enhances developing moral and civic responsibility is instructive here. Pedagogy is not simply a series of skills or techniques; rather it is cultural and performative. We believe that as educational practitioners we must broaden the possibilities of incorporating political, historical, and social considerations in our daily pedagogies. We must speak to the students' everyday lives: faced with countless cultural, political, and historical realities and discourses—many within popular culture domains—that students in turn challenge, confront, comprehend, and/or imbibe. As performative practice, pedagogy questions traditional knowledge production and canonizing thought within the academy by reconfiguring the teacher and student location whereby they can engage with, produce, and make sense of knowledge and theory while contributing to their institutions and communities. Multiculturalism debates have served an important influence in academia while transforming teaching practices and philosophies, curricula, and student participation in higher education. In the same way, moral and civic consciousness inculcated through coursework and community-based learning promises to transform university life and the quality of democratic participation in society. Scholars today are addressing the lack of faith our youth have in political democratic processes by consciously creating spaces and opportunities on campuses whereby students can delve into learning and serving, and grappling with the nitty-gritty of democratic community participation. Moral judgment and development are decidedly enhanced through deliberative pedagogies at college. Students' chronic tendency to believe that each position presented in an academic argument is equal and opposite to another, without weighing the moral, ethical worth of it, is an opportunity for faculty. The challenge is to overturn this form of relativistic and simplistic tendency through transforming it into a learning moment. In such cases relevant reading and community-based interventions present rewards as time spent in the community is a phenomenological, embodied experience and goes beyond hypothetical examples from texts.

In conclusion, the post September 11, 2001 social and political climate, passage of the Patriot Act, and the most recent challenge to Affirmative Action make the analyses of Educating Citizens and its imperative of moral and civic education more pressing and current. Struggle to maintain democracy and plurality of viewpoint is not over in western societies, in this case the United States, which prides itself on values of freedom and justice. Democracy requires active participation in social, cultural, and political processes toward the common good. Education that is mindful of this goal is the key to continuing the legacy of democratic participation.

Notes

Both authors have contributed equally to this essay.

1 See for instance, Campus Compact www.compact.org/civic for scholarship, conferences, research undertakings, and special issues of journals devoted to this topic.


References


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