Civic Engagement: A Broad Perspective

Richard Battistoni

Before discussing the rationale for and examples of department engagement, it is helpful to define what is meant by engagement—more specifically, civic engagement, which is the underlying conceptual framework for this volume. One of the earliest expressions of the engagement agenda in higher education is found in the Campus Compact Presidents’ Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education, endorsed by more than 400 college and university presidents (Ehrlich & Hollander, 2000). In this document, campus leaders committed themselves “to renew our role as agents of our democracy, [to] catalyze and lead a national movement to reinvigorate the public purposes and civic mission of higher education” (pp. 3–4). The declaration reflects a major change in the way campuses view their civic mission and the role of service in this mission. The ultimate aim has shifted from promoting community service to institutionalizing service-learning, and now to fostering student civic engagement in a diverse democracy.

Why Civic Engagement?

There has been great concern about citizen disengagement from public life and anxiety over the decline in the social capital necessary for the survival of a vibrant democracy (Galston, 2001; Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002; Putnam, 2000). With mounting evidence of disengagement from American politics and
public life, especially among young people, there is an ever-deepening feeling that our educational institutions are leaving students unprepared for a life of engaged, democratic citizenship.

Higher education in particular seems concerned about this civic disengagement, and is sensitive about its own failings in involving students as active citizens in their democracy. In the early 1990s, a report by the Kettering Foundation charged that higher education “appears to leave students without concepts or language to explore what is political about their lives” (Harwood Group, 1993, p. xii). When the National Commission on Civic Renewal reported on the state of civic disengagement in 1998, it seemed to offer no role for higher education in providing solutions. Once again, academia was subjected to the charge of being irrelevant to public problems and unresponsive to public needs. Bok (1990) put it this way: “Communities have problems, universities have departments” (p. 4). Campus Compact’s recent efforts, as exemplified in the Presidents’ Declaration, can be seen as a response to this charge of civic deficiency on the part of higher education.

A common strategy for meeting the challenge of stemming the tide of civic disengagement has been to connect work in service- and community-based learning to the campus’s civic outcomes. The idea behind these efforts has been to capitalize on the well-documented involvement of students in community service to advance the mission of civic engagement. This strategy assumes that a clear relationship can be developed between acts of service and citizenship, which depends on how concretely campuses and their academic departments can define the civic engagement outcomes for students.

What Is Civic Engagement in the Context of Higher Education?

The emphasis on engaged departments is part of a broader agenda to comprehensively promote civic engagement across the curriculum, to get each academic unit to define their civic goals.
In 2002, I tried to make a comparison to previous higher education initiatives involving writing across the curriculum. The movement for writing across the curriculum was based on the premise that whatever a student’s major or future aspiration, he or she needed to be proficient at written communication to be effective. Similarly, the current movement toward civic engagement assumes that just as we want students to be good writers, we want them to be good citizens. Whatever the student’s major, career, or life goals, he or she will be a member of some community, and for our democracy to continue and to flourish, we need people who will effectively exercise their civic rights and responsibilities. All faculty need to be enlisted in this effort to improve civic education.

Although we might like to draw a parallel between civic engagement across the curriculum and writing across the curriculum, there is an immediate difference. Those in higher education who advocate civic engagement across the curriculum face an immediate disadvantage not confronted by their counterparts who launched writing across the curriculum. While there may be some disagreements, especially around the margins (no pun intended) about quality writing, there seems to be basic consensus around the question—What is good writing? The question of what constitutes good citizenship, however, is highly controversial and contested. And the controversy surrounding definitions of good citizenship stems in part from the way citizenship language is used. I can think of three areas where citizenship language actually serves as a barrier to positive conversations in the academy about education for civic engagement. First, citizenship is a legal status, a status not shared by all in our educational institutions or in the communities of which they are a part. Language around citizenship can be a real barrier when working with immigrant populations. This extends to the academy itself, where admonitions to faculty to be good department citizens overlook the differential status between senior and junior, full- and part-time faculty members.
Second, the language of citizenship is ideological. More liberal faculty complain that citizenship education tends to convey images of patriotic flag-waving, while more conservative faculty see the language of civic engagement masking a leftist, activist agenda. Either way, the goal of civic engagement seems to lack objective, academic substance.

Third, the language of citizenship and civic engagement conjures up a childhood past that many faculty would just as soon forget, or at least would not endorse as characteristic of democratic life in a diverse society. Some of us remember our grade school “civics” courses as pedestrian and/or downright boring. For me, growing up in California, public schools gave “citizenship” grades on report cards based on a student’s silence in the classroom, neatness, politeness, and passive obedience to school rules (I am told this still occurs in some school districts across the country). When citizenship is tied to exclusive legal identities, ideologically charged language and symbols, or conformity to institutional norms, it is bound to raise suspicions, especially in the minds of academics.

Moreover, civic engagement language tends to be somewhat amorphous, meaning different things to different people. This, of course, is its strength, as it can be attached to a number of issues—community development, student leadership, service-learning as a pedagogical strategy, mission reclamation and the public perceptions of higher education, and more (Saltmarsh, 2004). But civic engagement language tends to lack concreteness or clarity, especially when it comes to learning goals for students.

Civic Engagement and Civic Learning

Perhaps a better way to conceive of civic engagement, in the context of higher education, is to ask ourselves which student learning outcomes should be associated with a civic engagement perspective. Newman (1985) argued for this approach:

The most critical demand is to restore to higher education its original purpose of preparing graduates for a life of
involved and committed citizenship.... The advancement of civic learning, therefore, must become higher education’s most central goal. (p. xiv)

More recent studies have begun to emphasize the civic learning outcomes we should seek for our students (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Saltmarsh, 2005; Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2004). Howard (2001) offers a definition of civic learning in particular that begins to capture what could be a common framework to inform any academic department.

We conceive of “civic learning” as any learning that contributes to student preparation for community or public involvement in a diverse democratic society. A loose interpretation of civic learning would lead one to believe that education in general prepares one for citizenship in our democracy. And it certainly does. However, we have in mind here a strict interpretation of civic learning—knowledge, skills, and values that make an explicitly direct and purposeful contribution to the preparation of students for active civic participation. (p. 38)

Under this definition, the focus should be on what types of knowledge, skills, and values we seek to foster in students to better enable them to actively participate in the public life of our diverse democratic society. Each disciplinary department or interdisciplinary program can, in turn, determine how it will contribute to the civic learning of students on its campus and what primary pathway—knowledge, skills, or values—it will pursue to make this contribution. Some examples follow.

Civic Knowledge
When defining civic knowledge, past educators tended to focus on the purely academic forms that this knowledge takes: dates and places of important civic events, knowledge of the different
conceptions of citizenship in a democracy, knowledge about the institutions and operations of our democratic government. Indicators of civic knowledge once included the ability to answer questions about how a bill becomes a law, the names of your congressional representatives, and how many justices sit on the U.S. Supreme Court. But we have learned from students engaged in community-based experiences that civic knowledge is much broader than this and comes from multiple sources, including community members. It involves a deeper knowledge of issues, or what some might call the root causes of public problems, and an understanding of how different community stakeholders perceive the issues. An understanding of “place” and the community history that provides a context for service and public problem solving—including learning about how individuals and community groups have effected change in their communities—is another key element of civic knowledge. An added benefit to defining civic knowledge in this broad manner is that students and community members become cocreators of knowledge, rather than simply relying on “expert” texts or professors.

Most important to a discussion about the engaged *department*, civic knowledge can be defined in terms of the distinct perspectives that different disciplines bring to questions of democracy and public life. There are several different conceptual frameworks of civic engagement that have been developed, in particular, by political and social theorists (Battistoni, 2002). These frameworks share some common themes, but are also distinct in their specific views of citizenship, understanding of civic education, and associated civic skills. These frameworks and the disciplinary affinities for each are illustrated in Table 2.1.

Rich conceptual frameworks also exist outside the social sciences and can be used by disciplinary departments to ground their understanding of engagement. Conversations with 13 national educational disciplinary associations as part of the Engaged Disciplines Project conducted by national Campus Compact with
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<tr>
<td>Constitutional citizenship (Rawls, 1971)</td>
<td>• Rights-bearing individual • Voter</td>
<td>Knowledge of government institutions, laws, elections</td>
<td>• Political knowledge • Critical thinking</td>
<td>• Political science • Law • Policy studies (health, education)</td>
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<td>Communitarianism (Etzioni, 1993)</td>
<td>• “Good neighbor” • Duty to fulfill common good</td>
<td>Knowledge of community values and civic responsibilities</td>
<td>• Civic judgment • Community building</td>
<td>• Philosophy • Religious studies • Social work • Public health</td>
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<td>Participatory democracy (Barber, 1984, 1992)</td>
<td>Active participant in public life</td>
<td>Knowledge of democratic participation processes</td>
<td>• Communication skills • Collective action • Civic imagination</td>
<td>• Political science • Education • Public health</td>
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<td>Public work (Boyte, 2000; Boyte &amp; Kari, 1996)</td>
<td>Cocrator of things of public value</td>
<td>Knowledge (through projects) of the skills, habits, and values of working with others on public tasks</td>
<td>• Public problem solving • Coalition building</td>
<td>• Political science • Public administration • Health administration • Professional disciplines</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social capital (Putnam, 2000)</td>
<td>Membership in associations of civil society</td>
<td>Knowledge of social connections and institutions</td>
<td>• Communication skills • Organizational analysis</td>
<td>• Sociology • Nonprofit management</td>
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support from The Pew Charitable Trusts identified a list of terms from each discipline that were summarized into seven conceptual frameworks connected to civic engagement (Battistoni, 2002). These frameworks are summarized in Table 2.2, along with their different answers to questions of citizenship, the nature of civic education, and the associated civic skills needed for effective public life. Also included is each framework’s disciplinary affinities.

Civic Skills

In Civic Engagement Across the Curriculum (Battistoni, 2002) I have detailed a set of civic skills that educators from different disciplines and/or parts of campus life should try to instill in students when preparing them for active participation in democratic public life. This set of civic skills includes critical thinking; communication and deliberation (speaking and listening); public problem solving; civic judgment; civic imagination and creativity; teamwork, coalition building, and collective action; community organizing; and organizational analysis. That work also contains exercises and assignments intended to develop these skills in students who are involved in community-based service and research connected to the curriculum.

In many ways, these civic skills have traditionally been defined as part of a liberal education. More recently, they have been associated with the “employability” or workforce development literature (see Battistoni & Longo, 2005). Still, the research suggests that many service-learning programs do not achieve their desired civic impact because they have not sufficiently addressed the development of fundamental civic skills (Kirlin, 2002).

Civic Values

Here I think we can run into trouble, mostly in the reticence of higher educators to broach the subject of civic values. This may be why some proponents of civic engagement use the seemingly more neutral terms of attitudes or dispositions to describe this area
of civic-learning outcomes (see Colby et al., 2003; Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2004). Values are an important dimension of civic learning, and I think we can have a conversation about what values are appropriate to democratic public life, even though there may be strong disagreement over them. Saltmarsh (2005) presents the “key democratic values” (p. 55) as participation, justice, and inclusion, values he believes “can be widely agreed upon and shared” (p. 55). Faculty from different disciplinary perspectives or frameworks will frame the question of civic values differently. For example, the framework of civic professionalism understands civic values as the way a professional’s technical expertise “discovers its human meaning” (Sullivan, 2004, p. xix). This perspective thus allows students to bring their own public values to the work they are doing, in the classroom and in the community.

Additionally, civic values might be framed by the values expressed in the institutional mission of the university. The University of Minnesota, for example, has an “institutional commitment to public purposes and responsibilities intended to strengthen a democratic way of life in the rapidly changing Information Age of the 21st century” (Bruininks, 2005). Portland State University (2006) uses the following value-laden definition: “Civic engagement aims to improve society, enhance the public good, and promote social justice.” These are just two examples of ways in which a public institution of higher education might define its civic values. Faith-based institutions may define civic values through a different lens. For example, at many Catholic colleges and universities, dialogue about civic values comes through concepts such as dignity of the human person, the preferential option for the poor, solidarity, and subsidiarity.

**Methods and Strategies**

While a department’s conception of civic knowledge, skills, and values provides the pathway to engagement, a department’s curriculum provides the primary resource for building the student’s
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<td>Civic professionalism (Sullivan, 2004)</td>
<td>Professional work with a civic purpose</td>
<td>Knowledge of the civic traditions and values of the professions</td>
<td>• Public problem solving</td>
<td>• Professional disciplines</td>
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<td>Social responsibility</td>
<td>Responsibility to the larger society</td>
<td>Knowledge of public problems most closely associated with chosen field of work</td>
<td>• Civic judgment</td>
<td>• Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social justice (Hollenbach, 1988)</td>
<td>Bringing one’s spiritual values to bear on social problems</td>
<td>Knowledge of the principles of social justice and their application to public life</td>
<td>• Political knowledge of issues</td>
<td>• Law</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connected knowing; ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982)</td>
<td>Caring for the future of our public world</td>
<td>Knowledge of others and their perspectives on the world</td>
<td>• Organizational analysis</td>
<td>• Public administration</td>
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<td>Public leadership (Greenleaf, 1996)</td>
<td>Citizen as “servant-leader”</td>
<td>Knowledge of the arts of collaborative leadership</td>
<td>• Critical thinking</td>
<td>• Health professions</td>
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<td>• Coalition building</td>
<td>• Business disciplines</td>
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<td>• Women’s studies</td>
<td>• Computer science</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>• Literature</td>
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<td>• Visual and performing arts</td>
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Table 2.2. Conceptual Frameworks from a Range of Disciplines

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| Public intellectual (Jacoby, 1987)   | Thinkers who contribute to the public discourse | Knowledge of the traditions of writers and artists who have served as public intellectuals | • Civic imagination  
• Creativity                                       | • Literature  
• Visual and performing arts |
| Engaged/public scholarship (Boyer, 1996) | Participatory action researcher               | Knowledge of how scholarly research might contribute to the needs and values of the community | • Organizational analysis  
• Public problem solving                               | • Journalism  
• Communications  
• Professional disciplines |

Note. See Battistoni (2002) for a more detailed discussion of each of these frameworks.
road to civic learning. Several methods and strategies are available for integrating civic learning into a department’s curriculum, and a department may deploy them at different stages in students’ academic (and professional) development (Gelmon & Battistoni, in press). These include course-based service-learning, field-based experiences and internships, capstones, community-based research projects, cocurricular activities and organizations, and professional development activities.

Many of these strategies are illustrated in the specific case studies included in this book. All have demonstrated impact as mechanisms for promoting civic learning and can be deployed depending on the level of curricular or student development, the orientation and training of faculty, and existing relationships or opportunities with community partners. Regardless of the methods chosen, research suggests that effective civic engagement strategies share the following common characteristics (Battistoni & Longo, 2005; Eyler & Giles, 1999).

Placement Quality and Curriculum Applications
Student learning is strongest when the service and work students do in the community is intentionally connected to civic development outcomes in the classroom. Colleges and their faculty need to be intentional in designing service-learning courses and projects, ensuring that the community experience is meaningful and ongoing and can be harvested for the civic outcomes they seek. In particular, it is important to incorporate the civic perspective and skill development necessary for effective public life into the curriculum itself.

Critical Reflection
Although reflection has almost become a mantra in the service-learning field, the research clearly demonstrates that reflection “transforms experience into learning” (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999, p. 180), and that it matters greatly in terms of maximizing stu-
dent impact. The quantity and quality of reflection has been consistently associated with academic learning outcomes, so engaged department faculty need to be intentional about incorporating civic reflection into their courses. Practitioners are also beginning to understand that reflection can take many forms, and it is most successful when faculty use a variety of reflection methods.

Community Voice

Successful service-learning programs have long understood the importance of reciprocity in their community partnerships. This begins with a commitment to work collaboratively with the community to establish projects and activities that meet community-identified needs. But it also goes well beyond that to seeing the community as a crucial partner in learning rather than merely as a "placement site." Community partnerships for learning imply strong, long-term relationships that students have the chance to experience fully. In particular, if we are to recognize the importance of place and public problem solving in educating students for civic development, we need to involve students in understanding the different stakeholders' interests in the community and in mapping the assets and resources that exist in a given neighborhood.

Student Voice

Research and practice in service-learning has established the importance of giving students a voice in the design of community-based projects connected to the curriculum and in the resulting discussions/reflections that accompany the community-based experience. But we are also finding that student voice means enabling students to be involved in public problem solving connected to the issues that they determine to be important. A quality program allows students to develop projects and activities connected to their interests and ideas about what could be improved in their communities.
Departments looking to engage students as active citizens in the lives of their communities have a number of pathways and strategies available to them. The important thing to remember is that civic engagement does not happen automatically; it must be nurtured through close attention to department-appropriate definitions of engagement and the intentional connection of these definitions to the curriculum and to corresponding community-based experiences.

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About the Author

*Richard Battistoni* is professor of political science at Providence College. From 1994–2000, he served as the founding director of the Feinstein Institute for Public Service at Providence College, the first in the nation degree-granting program combining community service with the curriculum. He is author of *Civic Engagement Across the Curriculum: A Resource Book for Service-Learning Faculty in All Disciplines* (Campus Compact, 2002).