

By Nancy L. Thomas

Democratic
Education
A Matter of Institutional Conscience and Skills

Educating for democracy has captured the imagination of many people in higher education, but is it occurring on campus?

If not, why not? What steps can we take to move democratic values education beyond thought and beyond isolated initiatives to truly engage the whole campus?

BY NOW most educators have heard the voices challenging higher education to play a more significant role in educating for American democracy. This challenge became particularly acute for me recently when I had the privilege of directing, for the American Council on Education (ACE), an initiative called Listening to Communities—a series of community forums on higher education’s role in American society. These forums illuminated the disconnect between higher education’s stated public mission and its actual practices. Since completing that initiative, I have been working with the Society for Values in Higher Education (SVHE), designing a follow-up project, Models for Democracy: Strengthening Higher Education for Social Justice and Civic Responsibility. The project seeks to strengthen the ways in which colleges and universities model the democratic process. Through these two projects, I am learning about how to move democratic values into practice in the ways that are necessary to have a meaningful impact on student learning and on our communities.

**LISTENING TO COMMUNITIES:
WHAT WE SAY VERSUS WHAT WE DO**

ACE sponsored eight forums, bringing together more than two hundred business, philanthropic, religious, nonprofit, neighborhood, and religious leaders as well as fire fighters, teachers, and volunteers. We asked participants how they thought colleges and universities can (and should) contribute to American society. We explored two roles that higher education typically plays: (1) educators of citizens and (2) institutional members of a community.

The good news is that colleges and universities, according to forum participants, are making significant contributions as institutional members of a community. Communities appreciate, and want to see expanded, university activities such as community-university partnerships in forums that draw attention to pressing public issues, student volunteerism and community-based learning, and research and scholarship that inform difficult public policy decisions. Communities also recognize the value of the cultural enhancements brought to a region by its proximity to a college or university.

However, participants were not so sanguine about how well colleges and universities are discharging their duty to educate future citizens. These community leaders repeatedly and emphatically expressed the compelling concern that higher education is simply not cultivating their successors—that is, individuals who, regardless of their professional choices, harbor a sense of ownership of and ability to engage responsibly in their communities.

The problem is partly a matter of numbers: An insufficient number of students are training for service professions and civic leadership roles. And colleges and universities seem all too willing to accommodate these choices without challenging students to consider public careers. But forum participants were concerned with something more than career choice. One participant, echoing the views of others, expressed the concern that students lack soul. Colleges and universities were urged to promote interdisciplinary learning that educates toward what one participant called “a complex way of being.” When asked how higher education can encourage and train their successors, participants recommended that colleges and universities deliberately cultivate students’ consciences, as well as the skills they need to act on their consciences.

On a national level, higher education seems to be preoccupied with just this issue. Judging from the conferences, workshops, Web sites, publications, and research, it appears that multiple values-based movements—efforts to strengthen student conscience and skills—have proliferated recently in higher education (see sidebar). But to what extent is this values-based agenda being put into practice on our campuses? The answer, it seems, is “Not enough.”

In their 1998 report, New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) researchers Sharon Singleton, Deborah Hirsch, and Cathy Burack conclude that public scholarship is often marginalized and invisible, and goes unrewarded. Similarly, I have found that initiatives linked to values-based movements are also confined to a single individual or small group, lost within an undersupported committee or isolated office, and disconnected from what most perceive as what really counts: theoretical scholarly research and student professional preparation. In short, colleges and universities seem unable to institutionalize these values-based movements.

MODELS FOR DEMOCRACY: INSTITUTIONALIZING DEMOCRATIC VALUES ON CAMPUS

AT THE SVHE, we have been examining this disconnect between educators' espoused values and institutional practices; we have been working to mobilize educators who agree that this is a problem worth addressing. Models for Democracy's primary focus has been to work with four pilot campuses that agreed to engage in what we call the arts of democracy: values-based decision making, dialogue, and collaborative action concerning a values-based issue. Specifically, it challenges campuses to examine a values-based issue of concern—any issue linked to one of SVHE's core values (identified in SVHE's mission statement as integrity, diversity, social justice, and civic responsibility)—and model the arts of democracy around that issue. What we believe will emerge from the process is (1) an institutional conscience regarding that issue as well as a commitment to it, which will then serve as the basis for institutional mobilization and change, and (2) an increased skill base—a cadre of individuals on campus who can serve as in-house experts on the arts of democracy. These individuals can then guide initiatives to strengthen the arts of democracy in the classroom, internal decision-making processes, and community partnerships. We believe that ultimately the work of Models for Democracy will help develop a generation of young people who are prepared for and committed to being active and effective participants in our democracy.

A major barrier to bringing democratic values to a campus is time—or lack of it. Without time to engage in meaningful dialogue, it is difficult to flesh out core values and an institutional ethos. Everyone is just too busy. Faculty members often carry heavy course loads and are required to publish within their disciplines, advise students, and serve on countless committees. It's clear that universities are no longer quiet places of reflective practice; the pace of campus life has quickened. In addition, we have found that dialogue-based projects are met with skepticism. Neither faculty members nor administrators want to engage in a navel-gazing exercise that results in yet another report that collects dust on a shelf. Absent visible and enthusiastic support (including financial support) from institutional leaders, people are reluctant to take part in these initiatives. In short, time-consuming, dialogue-driven initiatives are not perceived as worth the investment of time.

It is hard to quarrel with these views. Too often, initiatives like this one—or any committee work—are disorganized and frustrating, as well as time consuming. Certain skills, which may not come naturally, are required. One administrator, for example, expressed frustration over prior committees that had engaged in dialogue over difficult issues without any meaningful results. He eventually turned one issue over to university counsel, who quickly drafted a policy that the university then adopted.

Although Models for Democracy's pilot initiatives remain a work in progress, we have learned several lessons that have helped us overcome these barriers and increase our chances of success. The lessons are as follows:

Do dialogue well. The importance of this element simply cannot be understated. Dialogue is essential to any project relating to values because it strengthens personal relationships, generates trust and commitment, confers ownership of an initiative, and provokes diverse points of view—all of which enhance the quality of the strategies under consideration. Meaningful dialogue is the essential foundation for all of the other strategies we advise campus teams to use. For example, an inspiring vision is only inspiring if it is a shared vision, developed through dialogue.

Dialogue is not the same as conversation or debate; conversation is unstructured and informal, and debate is adversarial and defensive. Dialogue, by contrast, is a planned, nonadversarial, facilitated process that helps participants develop a shared understanding of an issue and its potential solutions. We stress dialogue because

we believe that real solutions to complex problems are complex and that the more views that contribute to those solutions, the better their quality.

Unfortunately, as Daniel Yankelovich notes in his book *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation*, most people assume that dialogue requires no special skills or discipline. But Yankelovich argues that they are mistaken. “Doing dialogue takes special skills that most Americans do not yet possess” (p. 17).

To help the leadership teams on our pilot campuses learn how to do dialogue well, we established partnerships with outside organizations that champion community action through deliberation and dialogue. On one campus, the leadership team convened groups to discuss a planned values-audit process and learned that a values audit completed ten years earlier, based primarily on one-to-one interviews and focus groups, had generated a report but no meaningful action. To avoid the same outcome, the campus has decided to convene small, long-term working groups, modeled after the work of the Study Circles Resource Center of Pomfret, Connecticut, to allow time for reflection and deepen the level of engagement in the project across the campus. On another campus, the leadership team engaged in an assessment exercise two months before the conclusion of the project. Using a facilitated process recommended by the Interaction Institute for Social Change (IISC) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the team members discovered that they shared concerns over the scope and goals of the project. As a result, they expanded the scope of their project with a view to broadening its appeal. In both cases, the use of facilitated dialogue brought out previously unspoken worries and unchallenged assumptions. It also caught the teams before they moved, arguably prematurely, to designing action strategies.

Develop a compelling message. Our message to campuses was essentially this:

- It is the duty of higher education to teach and model the arts of democracy, including values-based decision making, dialogue, and collaborative action. All learners should have the opportunity to explore and identify their values and to develop and experience the skills they need to act on their values.
- Higher education should offer students more than an opportunity to acquire a set of skills. It should provide formative experiences that shape how students think and their way of being. Every student can be called to principled and responsible citizenship in a diverse democracy.
- Conscience and skills are interrelated. Therefore campuses must carve out space for reflective thinking and raising social consciences and foster dialogue and collaboration skills. Models for Democracy seeks to strengthen the symbiotic relationship between conscience and skills, character and competence, substance and process. It challenges universities to adopt values-based and participatory approaches in the classroom, in internal decision-making processes, and in their surrounding communities.
- Change initiatives concerning values-based issues present campuses with opportunities to study experiences that shape how they think and their way of being.
- To reach the scale needed to build American democracy, higher education must create what Dave Stout, a Pacific University faculty member, calls “contagious ease” concerning values, dialogue, and collaborative action by emphasizing replication and a multitude of training and train-the-trainer activities.

We urged campus leadership teams to build on these ideas and develop their own compelling messages. We referred to Malcolm Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point*, an optimistic book about social change initiatives. After studying epidemics, social trends, and unexpected commercial successes, Gladwell concludes that these phenomena share common elements. If a small group (or even an individual) builds these elements into an action design, something contagious can start—something that tips.

One aspect of compelling messages is what Gladwell calls the stickiness factor. He maintains that messages must have a particular quality that makes them stick—makes them memorable. Both the quality of the ideas and the way they are presented are important. In the academic arena, the message will only stick if it reflects an inspiring vision. The message might present an image of an ideal student learning environment, describe something distinctive about the institution, or reflect shared values.

Follow a design that makes sense. Models for Democracy's approach appealed to institutional leaders because its design made sense. The process enabled campuses to develop a core group of individuals who had studied, experienced, and modeled the arts of democracy in ways that could be replicated. Developing a cadre of in-house experts who can facilitate initiatives has tremendous appeal to academic leaders.

We advised our leadership teams to follow a model that provides a continual, systematic process allowing for reflection, time to talk through issues, and trial and error. Most campuses began with project teams that considered their goals and objectives and mapped out a process consistent with the model. They then underwent a process of assessment, using values audits, surveys, focus groups, and other activities. They developed strategies to widen the circle of participants. Extended groups then engaged in dialogue about the issues at hand and collectively generated action strategies.

Midway through the pilot process, we realized that campuses need a more concrete framework in which to operate, so we formed a partnership with IISC. Drawing from best business practices, IISC teaches leadership teams how to frame issues, design projects, identify key stakeholders, plan and facilitate meetings, solicit views and participation broadly, create inspiring visions, and celebrate accomplishments. For the next round of campuses, all of the leadership teams will take part in an IISC-run workshop on facilitative leadership at the outset.

Another important philosophy that guided the project was a commitment to allowing flexibility in how the issues evolved, as in an emergent curriculum. Some uncertainty in campus work was both expected and encouraged. Because initial discussions were likely to raise more questions than they answered and expose more issues than had originally been anticipated, campuses were not wedded to the values-based issue they originally selected. Not unexpectedly, deeper values issues emerged as the projects progressed, and the leadership teams shifted their design or goals accordingly.

Engage the right people. NERCHE, long known for its cutting-edge research on change initiatives, has identified strategies for overcoming barriers to organizational change. One such strategy is to employ entrepreneurial, advocacy, and symbolic leaders in any change initiative, as presented in Singleton, Hirsch, and Burack's paper titled "Organizational Structures for Community Engagement." Entrepreneurial leaders are creative thinkers who provide good energy and often have the expertise to guide a project. Advocacy leaders are typically the deans and department chairs who play crucial roles as brokers, catalysts, liaisons, facilitators, and proponents. In the most effective change initiatives, advocacy leaders exist in both the central administration and academic units. Symbolic leaders, usually the president or chief academic affairs officer, can reinforce a project's mission, as Ronald Heifetz says in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, by "mobilizing people to tackle tough problems" (p. 15). Symbolic leaders are essential because they take action and challenge others to do the same.

In *The Tipping Point*, Gladwell calls this "the law of the few" (p.19). He maintains that a handful of exceptional people can make a big difference. They do so not because of their position but because of their personality, habits, background, or skills. He calls these essential people connectors, mavens, and salespeople. Gladwell also insists that word-of-mouth is extremely powerful; therefore, it's important to target messages to these people—people who are well connected, respected, credible, intuitive, knowledgeable, optimistic, and persuasive. These people then serve as messengers.

Several pilot campuses took this strategy very seriously. At one campus, participants actually skimmed the campus directory and highlighted individuals perceived to be connectors, mavens, and salespeople. They then asked the chief academic affairs officer to help recruit these individuals to the project. One of the people who may be essential to helping these initiatives succeed is the outside consultant. In my role as coach, I counseled, cajoled, advocated, cheered—roles that must be played by someone who has the time and is fully focused on making the project succeed.

Finally, as Arthur Chickering wrote in "Strategies for Change," "No innovation endures without support from the top. Institutionalization requires changes in resource allocation" (p. 5). It almost goes without saying that universities must support these kinds of projects with faculty development funds, release time, grant-writing and administrative support, office space, and so forth, if they are to succeed.

Pay attention to timing. Timing matters, but it should not be used as an excuse to avoid an important issue. The process followed by Models for Democracy can be linked to many common campus activities, such as selecting a new president or academic leader, strategic planning, seeking accreditation, managing crises, reviewing programs, creating a center or institute, designing a new program, reviewing core curricula, planning for action

on diversity, addressing troubling issues in student affairs or academic integrity, setting up community-university partnerships, and crafting grant proposals. With some creative thinking, the project can be woven into the activities of a campus. Doing so is simply a matter of getting started somewhere.

Assess progress often. Committees (and professors and organizations) usually assess their work at the end of a project (or semester or fiscal year), if at all. We recommend, however, that campuses move from assessment to dialogue to planning to action to assessment—repeatedly. We apply this recommendation at every level. One example would be to have a three-minute review of each meeting, large or small, at its conclusion.

To assess progress, we suggest that committees consider the elements identified earlier throughout the process. Is the leadership engaging the connectors, mavens, and salespeople? Is the message compelling and likely to stick? Have any strategies to widen the circle of participation been overlooked? Is the project well timed? These are a few of the questions a committee can consider as its work progresses.

CHANGEINITIATIVES can bubble up from the faculty, staff, trustees, administration, students, and, in the case of SVHE, an outside catalyst. As Margaret Mead said, “Never believe that a few caring people can’t change the world. For indeed that’s all who ever have.” Energetic and knowledgeable individuals who are passionate about an issue can generate enthusiasm that is contagious. They need the conscience to create an inspiring vision and the skills to act on that conscience.

The leadership teams on the pilot campuses are working on exciting projects that can have a significant impact on the value system and institutional ethos. This, in turn, will strengthen the link between their educational programs and the development of citizenship skills. By modeling the arts of democracy, these educators take important steps toward bridging the divide between the stated civic mission of higher education and actual practices. They will do so by participating in a process of assessment, dialogue, and action that centers on core democratic values.

By modeling the conscience and skills they hope students will develop, faculty and staff at colleges and universities will ultimately produce graduates who are action-oriented members of any community—that is, individuals with both a conscience and the skills needed to act on that conscience. These students will then graduate to be willing and able successors of the existing generation of community leaders.

NOTES

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