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How Campuses Can Create Engaged Citizens: The Student View

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Students Envision a Truly Engaged Campus

On this imagined campus, respectful dialogue about public issues resonates through residence halls, public spaces, and classrooms. A sense of commitment and purpose is palpable among students, as well as among administrators, staff, and faculty. Students find ways to contribute to the public good that they enjoy and find fulfilling and that often intersect with their course of study. There is constant activity around campus as students and others work on service projects, advocacy campaigns, and community based research.

In administrative offices and program centers, staff members and administrators solicit and value students' opinions. Because of these forums, students feel ownership of their education, and especially of their civic learning. Rather than a responsibility thrust upon them, the students see civic engagement as something they can choose and shape to fit their own lives and interests.

Graduates of this school leave the campus as active and engaged citizens. As businesspeople, public servants, nurses, or chemists, these graduates bring a strong commitment to society into their field. Outside the workplace, they raise the quality of public dialogue, use their knowledge of public issues to hold their legislators accountable, and contribute to community improvement. They go on to build a society in which more people live in a respectful, responsible, and civil way.

Five Campus Compact student fellows spent the summer of 2004 drawing together the lessons learned from Campus Compact's three-year Raise Your Voice (RYV) student initiative and crafted the above vision of an engaged campus as part of their final document (*Raise Your Voice Lessons Learned: How Students Are Changing Their Campuses and Their Communities;* Campus Compact, forthcoming). The RYV campaign emerged from a desire to understand more about how students view their own civic development and the role that higher education can play in helping them fulfill their responsibility to their communities.

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Campus Compact's National Student Campaign

The student initiative began in 2001, when Campus Compact convened a Wingspread summit of student leaders from around the country to talk about their experiences and perceptions of civic engagement. The summit led to the publication of *The New Student Politics: The Wingspread Statement on Student Civic Engagement* (2002), Campus Compact's first published student statement on engagement. Based on the insights from this publication, Campus Compact soon thereafter initiated the Raise Your Voice campaign, with support from The Pew Charitable Trusts. The campaign had three main goals:

- Increase college student involvement in public life and connect these actions with a larger national student movement around civic engagement.
- Document student civic engagement activities and issues important to college students.
- Mobilize higher education in a way that gives more voice to students and makes civic engagement central to student learning.

Campus Compact used its national and state structure to connect hundreds of campus-based RYV initiatives to a common framework that allowed data collection, a national Month of Action, and opportunities for student leadership training and development. (The Compact structure includes more than 950 member campuses, a national office, and 31 state offices.) Through grants from the national office, state offices hired coordinators to focus on student initiatives. The coordinators used Campus Compact's extensive relationships with campuses, particularly presidents and community service/service-learning directors, to identify student leaders. They then used a variety of strategies, including state advisory boards and fellowship programs, to organize and train student leaders.

The national student campaign grew from just 33 Wingspread summit students in 2001 to more than 270,000 students between 2002 and 2005 on more than 500 campuses across the country. The campaign's broad goals allowed student leaders to shape their own activities. When students felt their peers were not talking about important issues, they instituted campus dialogues. When students were discussing issues, RYV leaders challenged them to take on those issues through direct service or political action. This nonpartisan movement to invite students to engage in the public sphere spread rapidly across the country, especially among students who felt as if they hadn't received such an invitation before.

Students' Understanding of Civic Engagement

Rather than presenting students with a single definition of civic engagement, the Raise Your Voice website and trainings offered several possible definitions alongside a form for submitting alternatives. The definition with which the RYV students became most familiar was *The New Student Politics: The Wingspread Statement on Student Civic Engagement*, the document that precipitated the RYV campaign. In that document, author Sarah Long recorded and interpreted conversations by campus leaders about their own engagement. A key concern those leaders expressed was the common description of college students as shunning participation in electoral politics in favor of service activities, with the implication that service work is inadequate or inferior to political action.

On the basis of the Wingspread conversations, Long argued that between the two poles of service and politics is a third mode of action, *service politics.* This category encompasses the work of young people who understand that their service activities have a political dimension. It also recognizes that as students become more engaged, they often progress from activities that are solely service-based to those that include a mixture of service and political activity to address the issues underlying the need for service.

The Wingspread statement was a vital step in breaking down the service-politics dichotomy. RYV students were introduced to the concept of service politics in state trainings, and many were emboldened by its sanctioning of service as a legitimate mode of engagement.

Learning from the Campaign

Based on observations and feedback from two years of the Raise Your Voice campaign, the student authors of the Lessons Learned document expanded on Long's conception of service politics in several ways, including the following.

Social Engagement, Not Service. Lessons Learned argues that "service" is an inadequate term to describe activities that are not specifically political in nature. Many students participated in volunteer activities, but they also developed tools such as community and asset mapping, facilitated on-campus dialogues, and designed experiential learning activities. None of these activities are strictly service oriented, but neither are they political. To better describe the range of students' nonpolitical strategies, Lessons Learned suggests the term *social engagement* to encompass "the social or community-oriented strategies students use to create change."

Political Engagement, Not Politics. At a Lessons Learned conference in 2004, students expressed their strong negative associations with the idea of politics—terms they used included "corrupt," "irrelevant," and "full of old, rich white men." Politics is an ambiguous term to students. Some students use it to describe only activities related to electoral politics, while others use it to refer to all activities that reflect a person's political convictions (e.g., civil disobedience or direct action). To circumvent this confusion, Lessons Learned suggests using the term *political engagement* to describe the various strategies students use within the political realm to create change.

Economic Engagement. The Lessons Learned document asks the question, "Does the sociopolitical spectrum adequately describe all possible forms of engagement?" While most of the activities RYV leaders planned and executed fit into the categories of political and/or social engagement, a few exceptions stood out. These examples include students acting as "engaged consumers" or tying event funding to collaboration between organizations. Lessons Learned describes such activities as *economic engagement*—creating social change through participation (or non-participation) in economic activity.

Deep Engagement at the Intersections. RYV leaders observed that the deepest engagement exists, and the greatest social change is possible, when people experienced in many different kinds of engagement work together. Most targets for social change have political, social, and economic dimensions, and civic engagement efforts have the greatest chance of succeeding when a variety of tactics across several dimensions are used.

Students who understood this concept were less likely to characterize social, political, and economic engagement as competing, or as a hierarchical structure delineating more and less useful methods. Instead, they began thinking of their chosen tactics as part of a repertoire that could be enhanced by working with others who employ different tactics from different areas of the engagement spectrum. Some students chose to expand their repertoires; others chose to work in one area and collaborate on others.

Defining Engagement

Students' discussions of civic engagement led the Lessons Learned authors to conclude that engagement should be defined, and its effectiveness evaluated, not by the tactics chosen but by the incorporation of several principles: *voice, action,* and *reflection.* Action (doing something) and reflection (processing it afterwards) are familiar to those involved in civic engagement initiatives, but students' conception of voice merits further discussion.

Deliberative, open dialogue, or voice, is a central part of the democratic process. In some cases, effective dialogue can itself facilitate change, precluding the need for further action. In other cases, such dialogue can help define a worthwhile course of action, and can engender community ownership of actions that are taken.

Even schools that have extensive civic engagement programs do not usually have established methods to help students develop and utilize their civic voice. Engaged students sometimes question the need for "sitting around and talking" when they could be doing something more active. As predominantly young, stereotypically radical people, students felt that their voices were not heard on campus committees, in government houses, or in other decision-making forums.

The best strategy RYV leaders found to overcome this dynamic was to create spaces on campus for students to find and practice using their voice. The knowledge to formulate opinions, the confidence to articulate points, and the skill to listen to others' views do not come naturally—they are learned. RYV leaders helped their peers develop voice by hosting student dialogues. The dialogues often began by focusing on issues that directly affected students—such as a lack of availability for student parking—and evolved into broader discussions of social and political problems.

The Lessons Learned authors observed that dialogues were most successful when 1) they were led by trained peer moderators rather than "experts"; 2) they were designed to be nonpartisan, with no preconceived conclusion or course of action; and 3) they made use of devices such as personal story to help break down barriers between participants.

In combination, voice, action and reflection allow people to be informed about an issue, to see the issue in context, to connect their actions to related actions, and to learn from each experience. When each of these principles is used in planning and executing an activity, it can be considered an engaged action. Without these principles, any action, social or political, is not engaged. The Lessons Learned authors postulate that even voting—long considered the hallmark of engaged citizenship—is not truly an act of civic engagement unless the process of doing so includes voice, action, and reflection.

The authors note that while the lack of a single definition of engagement had been one of the campaign's strengths, a new definition of civic engagement encompassing these principles would be valuable. They offer the following definition:

> Engagement is more than just volunteering—although volunteering can be engagement. Engagement is more than just voting—although voting can be engagement. Engagement is a combination of voice, action, and reflection.
>
> Engagement exists when individuals recognize that they have responsibilities not only to themselves and their families, but also to their communities—local, national, and global—and that the health and well-being of those communities are essential to their own health and well-being. They act in order to fulfill those responsibilities and try to affect those communities for the better. Those actions, in turn, give them an even deeper understanding of their interdependence with communities.

Overcoming Barriers to Engagement

How can students and campus administrators help achieve this vision of broad student engagement? The students identified several key barriers to their engagement and strategies to address them. We discuss five here:

Fragmented Campuses. College campuses are characterized by a multiplicity of civic engagement efforts, both co-curricular and curricular, that are not generally coordinated. Although students found multiple opportunities for engagement valuable, RYV leaders sought to encourage collaboration among these efforts and urged their peers to research existing opportunities before creating new groups or projects. One student called herself a "spider woman" for the way she, like other RYV students, wove webs among the many fragmented communities of students and student organizations on her campus.

Students also recommended a central resource for engagement. While different departments and programs can house their own civic engagement work, having one place on campus that coordinates all civic engagement opportunities allows students to get involved easily, communicate and plan strategy, and use resources efficiently.

Navigating Campus Administrative Structures. A common refrain among RYV student leaders is that college bureaucracies are difficult to navigate. Even when service-learning or community service staff support student voice and leadership (which was the case on most RYV campuses), it often took students many months to learn the correct avenues for working with higher-level administrators.

Many RYV students created detailed "campus maps" as a means of identifying potential allies on campus, available resources, organizational structures, and areas where gaps exist. Through mapping, students gained a broader understanding of their institution, helping them to become more efficient and knowledgeable when trying to make change. The best mapping projects included a strategy to make the information available to other student leaders and keep it updated.

Isolated and Detached Student Lives. While a large portion of students do community service and a larger percentage of young adults voted in 2004 than in the previous four elections, millions of students are still detached from civic life. The reasons are many and complex, including not

just television and the Thursday-to-Sunday party scene but also distrust of public figures and important responsibilities, like coursework, athletics, jobs, and families.

Students at the Lessons Learned gathering spoke overwhelmingly of the need to use personal relationships in their efforts to engage their peers. This "relational organizing" is what can make student-led engagement unique and powerful. Students made use of social networks to bring people to the table, using strategies such as personal phone calls and social events for both recruitment and retention. Relational organizing is particularly important for motivating students to become active in electoral politics. Rather than focusing on issues that media outlets or politicians deem important, RYV students often worked on issues such as education funding cuts and tuition increases. By appealing to students' personal lives, RYV students could overcome a sense of distance and detachment from politics.

Lack of Diversity in Student Engagement Efforts. Because many RYV efforts were facilitated by existing community service and service-learning structures, they did not typically represent the full diversity of their campuses. Statistics show that women comprise the majority of campus service participants and that most campus service programs involve students who are in the ethnic and racial majority.[1]

Multicultural centers, women's and ethnic studies centers, and identity-based fraternities and sororities are the most likely areas on campus to find those who feel deeply about issues of diversity, including race, class, and gender. To establish a broad, strong movement focused around civic engagement, students must build relationships with the diversity movement on campuses, along with student organizations, multicultural groups, faculty, staff, and the community. Forming partnerships with these constituents will help to expand reach on campus and ensure that the voices represented in the movement are as diverse as possible.

Reaching Students in the Classroom. Many RYV student leaders realized that they could reach far more students if they could tie civic engagement to interesting academic work. Unfortunately, the power dynamics of classrooms usually inhibit suggestions from students about teaching and learning. Therefore, finding ways to reach unengaged students through classrooms was a major challenge. The vast majority of RYV students organized co-curricular activities, but a few approached professors to collaborate on classroom initiatives.

When professors show students the practical application and social relevance of what they are learning, they foster engaged learners. Students value the real-world experience while benefiting and learning from the community. In addition, when service and academic learning are blended with critical reflection, they are powerful tools to spark students' interest and involvement in public issues. This form of classroom engagement is essential for creating an engaged campus culture.

In 2006 Campus Compact will publish *Students as Colleagues: Expanding the Circle of Service-Learning Leadership,* a book co-edited by faculty and students that offers examples from around the country of students working with faculty to design and teach service-learning courses. This book can be a useful tool to help students make the case for service-learning and to become leaders in expanding classroom engagement.

[1] Source: Campus Compact (2004). *2003 Service Statistics: Highlights of Campus Compact's Annual Member Survey.* Providence, RI: Campus Compact.

Conclusion

A final recommendation in the Lessons Learned document is that students find people who have a national perspective on student civic engagement. National organizations have been created for nearly every issue possible. Participating in a national network helps students on three levels. First, it is inspiring to see the big picture and to find peers who share a commitment to an ideal. Second, students can learn from other campuses' successes; often national organizations can provide detailed information about successful strategies and programs. Finally, through a national network, students can make unified demands and increase their clout in higher education and in society.