The Importance of Higher Education to the Future of Democracy

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I was sitting across the lunch table struggling to catch each word of the heavily accented Albanian academic who had sought me out to talk about developing democracy through service learning. He had gone online to check out Defiance College and was thrilled with what he read. "My university is the Science, Technology, and Mining Engineering University of Albania," he said. "I believe this, Dr. Wood. We cannot fully become a democracy in my country until we educate our university students to develop a culture of democracy." He went on to say that such an education would teach students to appreciate democratic values, support rights, and take responsibility for the public good. He emphasized that it is not enough to have a constitution, elected officials, and a police force. A nation must have a "culture of democracy" in which the citizens participate, and that must come through education from the elementary level through universities.

The place was Strasbourg, France, at the Council of Europe Forum "Higher Education and Democratic Culture." I was there with other presidents and academics from colleges and universities in the United States, Western Europe, and Eastern Europe, including Russia, to work on a declaration to the world. Honored to be invited, I was humbled by the bravery of many of the Eastern Europeans as they told their stories of advocacy for freedom in their developing democracies. I was also reminded of what we as Americans so easily take for granted.

There is a real irony here. In spite of the aggressive effort by the U.S. government to spread democratic ideals around the world, the practice of democracy at home is at a crisis point. In both the U.S. and Western Europe, there is a crisis in confidence among the populace, fueled by a sense that the rhetoric of democracy does not always guide practice. The future of our own democracy is a cause for concern when we consider the decreasing level of participation in politics, the retreat from civic involvement, and the

decline in trust of public authority. Partisan politics aside, I worry that the fabric under-girding our common enterprise—this thing called democratic culture that binds together democratic institutions and infuses our body politic with values like fairness and justice for "all"—is growing ever weaker from neglect and mistrust.

One of the Strasbourg forum speakers, Thomas Ehrlich, reminded us that the American Revolution was not founded simply on lofty "Lockean principles of Republican virtue," but on a productive political culture that was practical, down-to-earth, work-centered, and energetic. Ehlrich recounted historian Gordon Wood's observation that recognition of the necessity of democratic cohesiveness was evident in the thinking of the Founding Fathers. Even when those ideals were compromised by injustices and broken promises, democratic cohesiveness continued to be practiced by the "plain ordinary people" (2006).

Educating for democracy from grammar school onward was long recognized as essential to a healthy democracy, and putting that education into energetic practice was the glue that held the republic together. Let us not deceive ourselves. If our democracy is to be healthy and vital, we must continue to educate young people to be citizens in a democracy. If government is to be by and for "WE the PEOPLE," then WE must be active, informed participants. Aleksander Xhuvani from Albania reminded me at lunch that June day in Strasbourg, France, how precious the democratic way of life is, and how precarious.

It was for this reason that I was proud to sign the Declaration on higher education and democracy that was the last act of the Forum and to commit myself and the college I serve to enacting its principles.

The Declaration reads, in part:

> *We subscribe to the responsibility of higher education to foster citizen commitment to sustainable public policies and actions that go beyond consideration of individual benefits. We accept our responsibility to safeguard democracy, and promote a democratic culture, by supporting and advancing within higher education as well as society at large, the principles of:*
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> - *Democratic and accountable structures, processes and practice*
> - *Active democratic citizenship*
> - *Human rights, mutual respect and social justice*
> - *Environmental and societal sustainability*
> - *Dialogue and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.*
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> (Council of Europe 2006)

DEFIANCE COLLEGE PRESIDENT GERALD WOOD (LEFT) WITH DR. GABRIELE MAZZA, DIRECTOR OF SCHOOL AND HIGHER EDUCATION, COUNCIL OF EUROPE

The dialogue and practice of democracy can be messy and even disconcerting to those who recoil from active practice. Yet the gift of human freedom comes with a responsibility to advance the common good. Defiance College, along with a growing number of other colleges and universities, is working to nurture a new student democratic impulse that can invigorate our society and the body politic.

In the last year, we at Defiance College have redoubled our efforts to educate students for democracy through providing opportunities for them to participate in communities at home and abroad as active citizens. However, we have come to realize that education for democracy may remain more implicit than explicit, especially in terms of curricular structure and the work of the service programs. A dialogue has begun on what it will mean for our campus – or for any campus – to commit fully to the Council of Europe's Declaration. How do we put into practice a commitment to: "accept our responsibility to safeguard democracy, and promote a democratic culture, by supporting and advancing within higher education as well as society at large," the five principles outlined above?

Enacting this commitment cannot happen in a vacuum. The academic culture of our institutions both reflects and contends with the culture at

large. Take for example the service learning movement which has for nearly three decades kept alive in U.S. colleges and universities the values of active civic involvement necessary to sustain a culture of democracy. Certainly there have been notable achievements, and a cadre of committed academics has provided invaluable opportunities for students to understand and participate in the work of a democratic culture. Yet, it has been and remains an uphill battle. While leaders of higher education institutions will readily invoke the good work of service learning when opportune, for the vast majority of institutions service learning touches only a small percentage of students and does not penetrate academic culture. I would argue that in this lack of deep commitment, American higher education reflects the values of the larger culture, which is fundamentally cynical about the role of political leaders, government, and institutions of power in terms of their potential to be responsive to the will of the People. Many of those who are not feeling disenfranchised are more focused on material prosperity, vocational success, and personal aggrandizement. We live in a cynical time, if not in public pronouncements, certainly in personal and institutional practice.

Currently, the version of service learning in vogue is one that focuses on doing "good" without considering the broader political, social, or economic causes or consequences of the human suffering that service projects address. Few are likely to object to the kind of work done by the occasional volunteer service project of a fraternity or sorority, a high school group, or the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts. There is a long tradition in this country of volunteering and volunteerism. And this is a good thing. There is nothing wrong with random acts of kindness. However, few if any of these activities are strategically tied to the betterment of the community as a whole. Where is the consciousness that the rights and freedoms I as a citizen hold dear are entwined with my responsibilities as a citizen to work for the common good?

If our democracy is to remain vibrant, individuals must be empowered, inspired, and committed to work in communities as active citizens. They must learn not to speak from narrow self interest but to find a voice that asks the hard and challenging questions that help communities—large and small, local and global—resolve conflict and solve problems. This learning is essential to the health and preservation of democracy, and it is a role that institutions of higher learning cannot shirk.

I recently returned from accompanying a group of students to New Orleans, where we spent our time both doing direct service gutting houses (an activity that is shockingly still needed sixteen months after Katrina struck the Gulf Coast), and also meeting with civic and church leaders to find a

way as citizens to respond responsibly to the ongoing national challenge the Katrina recovery represents. We met with citizens, mainly from the hard-hit Ninth Ward, and we talked extensively with pastors of churches who are courageously working to rebuild churches and through that work to rebuild the communities around the church one home at a time. Just as significant, we met extensively with officials at City Hall, from the president of city council to the director of health services for the city. A group of Defiance College students have formed a Katrina Movement to offer ongoing support to the region and to educate themselves about the many complex issues behind the devastation of New Orleans. They are tuned into the labyrinth of problems and the many questions of injustice brought to light by this tragedy. These young people are working with – and being inspired by – citizens who have not given up but are committed to building community and rebuilding structures even under the most adverse circumstances.

During the eighteen-hour bus ride home from New Orleans with the students, I reflected on the good work that we did, modest as it was, and

President Wood working in New Orleans
with Citizen Leaders Chris Beck and Eric Litle

the incredible relationships we built. I asked myself whether this trip was part of fulfilling the commitment Defiance College made through signing the Council of Europe's "Declaration: Higher Education and Democratic Culture." It was a partial fulfillment, as is our international work in Cambodia, Belize, Guatemala, Jamaica, and Israel and the Palestinian Territories. However, as I thought about the fact that the students would begin their spring semester classes the next day, I wondered how their classroom experience would reinforce what they had learned in New Orleans. Would there be any connections, and, if so, would they be apparent to undergraduate students, some of whom were first-year students? Would the content of their courses challenge them to value, articulate, and continue to develop their newfound commitment to work for the Common Good in a very concrete way? I don't know the full answers to those questions, but I do know that we – myself as president, the academic dean, and our faculty colleagues, are committed to asking these questions and seeking answers to them.

Moments of active service in our communities, even if the activities are very meaningful, will not build in students a lasting commitment to the principles of democratic culture unless those experiences build upon an education that provides a solid foundation in the ideas that guide the best of our human nature. Our challenge as educators is to infuse our classrooms with the great ideas of democratic culture as we engage our students in the communities of the world to become active citizens with an educated democratic conscience.

REFERENCES

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