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JOSÉ MARICHAL

Why Diversity and Civic Engagement Don't Talk to Each Other on College Campuses: The Need for Public Work

Unless our children begin to learn together, there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together. MILLIKEN v. BRADLEY 1974.

THURGOOD MARSHALL'S ONE SIMPLE SENTENCE captures a vexing problem for American higher education: how do we educate for a multicultural society in a way that recognizes our need to address common problems? This task requires striking a balance between recognizing and affirming difference (learning together as learning from each other) and encouraging commonality and collaboration (living together).

These two tasks are presumably carried out through university *diversity* and university *civic engagement* initiatives. Both of these efforts are socially and politically fashionable on college campuses. On the one hand, universities (and other social institutions) purport to be engaged in creating “diverse learning environments” that reflect the complexity and pluralism of the society in which we live. On the other, public universities are increasingly justifying public funding by emphasizing their civic missions. Many campus efforts are designed to foster a culture of “civic engagement” where young people come to recognize their *linked fate* (Dawson) and get involved in their communities to solve common problems.

Despite the obvious interdependencies between these two efforts, they are often conceptually detached from one another in practice on college campuses. Civic engagement and its progeny—service learning, community service, and university-community partnerships—often proceed on different tracks than campus diversity initiatives, including multicultural clubs and events, and co-curricular programming.

As McTighe-Musil observes, the explosion of civic engagement initiatives on college campuses has occurred without a serious discussion of how diversity and otherness related to addressing social issues. In her view, “the language of diversity has been decoupled from the language of civic engagement” at colleges and universities (18). This decoupling of diversity and civic engagement as concepts means both efforts proceed without serious reflection on how they work together to promote common ends. *Diversity work* without a solid foundation in a civic purpose becomes little more than, what I call, *menagerie diversity*, or an examination of difference that ends at the classroom bell or when the mandatory campus event ends. Conversely, civic engagement efforts that do

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not seriously consider diversity run the risk of merely reaffirming pre-existing structures of injustice and exclusion (Stephan; Eby; Hepburn, Niemi and Chapman).

This essay thus engages the question of why diversity and civic engagement initiatives on college campuses often proceed on parallel tracks. I argue that this disconnect exists primarily because both diversity and civic engagement efforts are undergirded by *thin* or pluralist notions of democracy that emphasize adversarialism and rights-claims rather than a *strong* notion of democracy that encourages deliberation, collaboration and civic obligation (Barber). To the extent that civic engagement encourages students to work collaboratively, it is largely in voluntaristic ways that do not challenge underlying pluralist assumptions about what it means to be a citizen of the United States and the world.

In this article, I illustrate how both diversity and civic engagement efforts reinforce a *thin* view of democracy. I then review the empirical research to highlight the shortcomings of a thin approach to civic engagement and diversity practices. I conclude by advocating for a *public work* (Boyte *Everyday Politics*) perspective as a means to linking diversity and civic engagement and discuss the implications for Lutheran higher education.

Thin vs. Strong Democracy

Both civic engagement and diversity have underlying socio-political assumptions that motivate their work. Guinier calls the process of constructing a freshman class at colleges and universities a public act that either challenges or reinforces current structures of power and oppression. Those engaged in diversity and civic engagement efforts are similarly engaging in political actions. While institutions differ in the actual practice of diversity and civic engagement, there are overarching trends that inform institutional efforts. I argue that, in general, both efforts are tied to a thin version of democracy.

Thin democracy is a term coined by Benjamin Barber to describe what he viewed as an individualistic and interest-based notion of citizenship and social relations. Barber argues that the Lockean tradition of the state as a guarantor of fundamental liberties through a contractual relationship with the citizen encourages a “thin” perspective on the individual’s role vis-à-vis government. Government in this instance is presumed to be in need of “watching” from an adversarial public. The extent of civic responsibility in a *thin democracy* is to keep government from infringing upon the individual’s fundamental liberties.

A thin democracy also reinforces *pluralist* notions of democracy. A pluralist perspective presumes individuals and groups in the political sphere present a neutral government with competing claims and allow government to arbitrate among them (Truman).

Glendon refers to this tendency in American politics as a *rights talk* culture that emphasizes “rights assertion over reason giving,” “individual demand vs. collective responsibility,” and “debate over dialogue.” A protective and pluralist view of democracy reinforces a “thin” (i.e. instrumental) notion of the individual’s obligation to his or her fellow citizens.

Barber argues that democratic states need vibrant civil societies that encourage a “strong citizenship” based on identifying shared problems, seeking common ground and working towards the common good. He emphasizes moving from a moribund civic sphere where state and market make the majority of decisions, what he calls a “politics of zoo-keeping,” towards a *politics of amateurs* “where every man is compelled to encounter every other man without the intermediary of expertise” (152). The emphasis in strong democracy is developing participatory habits by creating structures for citizen deliberation and decision-making.

The Decline in Political (not Civic) Engagement

The decline in democratic participation (thin or strong) is particularly acute among college-age youth. To the consternation of democratic theorists, there has been a steady decline in youth political engagement in the last three decades (Zukin). Despite the upsurge in voting during the 2004 and 2006 election cycles, young people report significantly less interest in politics than either previous generations or their peers (Zukin). A 2002, study found that only 24% of 18-24 year olds reported “following government and public affairs most of the time” (Keeter et al.). Perhaps more alarming are the decreased levels of social trust among young people. The study found that 70% of 18-25 year olds agreed with the statement “most people look out for themselves,” compared to 40% of persons 65 and over (Keeter et al.). A majority (56%) agreed that “most people would take advantage of you” compared to 29% of persons over 65.

What is curious is that this decline in civic-mindedness is happening at the same time a “civic engagement” revolution is happening in U.S. high schools and colleges. In 2002, three out of four high school students and about two out of three (65%) of college students say that their school arranges or offers volunteering opportunities (Keeter et al.). Similarly, one out of five (19%) college seniors participated in service learning in 2004. This was up from one out of eight (12%) in 1999 (Kuh). This increase in civic engagement opportunities is driven by the documented effectiveness of service and experiential learning programs in enhancing student learning (Battistoni).

Not surprisingly, given the effort put forth by secondary and post-secondary institutions, young people report levels of volunteerism comparable to older cohorts. In 2006, 15-25 year

olds were more likely than older cohorts to have volunteered in the last twelve months (Keeter et al.). Over one-third (36%) of 15-25 year olds had volunteered in the last twelve months compared to 32% for persons over twenty-five. Evidence suggests that people who engage in mandatory service learning projects go on to volunteer at greater levels than those who do not (Lopez et al.). Thus at first glance, it would seem that students involved in service learning are developing habits that lead to more political engagement in a strong democracy.

However, the upsurge in volunteerism has not brought with it an increase in political engagement. Why is this? In the same 2006 survey, only 13% of young people ages 15-25 who had volunteered in the last twelve months reported volunteering for a “political group” (Lopez et al.). This is because community service might connect young people to others in their community, but it does nothing to alter their fundamental understanding of the political system and their role therein.

Levels of political engagement among young people could be low because there is a time lag between doing service learning and civic engagement projects and translating those civic skills into the political sphere. Perhaps if we check back in ten years, this generation will be as politically active as their grandparents’ generation. This may turn out to be the case. Young people’s levels of social trust and their attitudes towards citizenship suggest, however, that the larger culture is reinforcing a sense of atomism that is difficult for campus service projects to combat. Lopez et al. found that only 38% of young people thought that being a citizen entailed a sense of responsibility (as compared to 60% of people over forty years of age). The typical view of young people was that being a citizen meant being a good person and following the law (Lopez et al.).

“The larger culture is reinforcing a sense of atomism that is difficult for campus service projects to combat.”

Given the data, it would appear that civic engagement efforts on college campuses do not appear to be altering a thin view of citizenship. I argue that if civic engagement efforts hope to produce democratic citizens, they must explicitly challenge thin notions of democracy. As Theiss-Morse and Hibbing recently suggested, it may be challenging, if not impossible, to develop democratic habits through volunteerism, largely because volunteerism does not necessarily promote or teach democratic values of deliberation, compromise and conflict-resolution. One way

that campus civic engagement efforts can provide citizens with these vital democratic skills is by being deliberate about combining civic engagement with diversity.

Diversity Work and Thin Democracy

The American Association of Colleges and Universities statement on diversity suggests that diversity is to be centrally linked to civic engagement. Its statement calls on universities to deploy “diversity as an educational asset for all students, and prepare future graduates for socially responsible engagement in a diverse democracy and interdependent world” (AACU “Statement on Diversity”). Inherent in the term “diverse democracy” is recognition that engagement with otherness is important for democratic practice. These efforts seem to be complementary. Just so, a number of amicus briefs in the *Grutter v. Bollinger* Supreme Court decision on affirmative action at the University Michigan Law School argued that educating citizens for a diverse society served as a “compelling governmental interest” needed to support affirmative-action programs.

Indeed, diversity serves a great many pedagogical purposes. It serves to enhance cognitive complexity among those exposed to “diverse courses” (Antonio et al.), it leads to greater empathy and openness to other views (Astin), and it provides students with the *cultural competency* needed to function in a diverse workforce (Carnevale).

The academy, however, is unsure how to “deploy diversity” toward the end of training democratic citizens. A recent call for papers to an American Association of Colleges and Universities conference on the intersections of diversity and civic engagement suggests as much:

The Academy has witnessed a significant expansion of innovative civic engagement programs in recent years, driven by student interest, community needs, social inequities, new understandings about teaching and learning, a growing commitment to social responsibility. At the same time, decades of work in diversity and global education driven by similar forces and committed to similar goals have often developed on separate tracks (AACU “Call for Papers”).

The presumption is that increased exposure to otherness translates into increased tolerance towards out-groups which will lead to more acceptance of pluralism and difference in a democracy. Indeed, as diversity initiatives have increased on college campuses, so too have tolerant attitudes. Keeter et al. found greater acceptance of gay marriage and immigrants among people aged 15-25 than older cohorts. This tolerance is reflected in a number of

attitude surveys that show greater affinity for once taboo subjects like inter-racial dating, gay marriage and immigrants.

However as important as tolerant attitudes are, it is not altogether clear that they translate into cross cultural engagement. Residential segregation patterns across the United States have changed only incrementally since the 1960s (Adelman). Driven by persistent residential segregation, public school systems in the United States are in the process of re-segregation (Orfield and Yun). Two current cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* and *Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education*, designed to provide remedies for de-facto segregation, are likely to deem voluntary desegregation programs unconstitutional.

“This evidence presents a challenge to linking diversity to civic engagement.”

Recent work suggests that an “add diversity and stir” notion leads to negative effects on civic engagement. Research from the civic engagement benchmark survey reveals that people in diverse communities are less trusting of others, more personally isolated, had lower levels of political efficacy, and had fewer acquaintances across class lines (Saguaro). On college campuses, as every diversity officer knows, there is an inherent tendency to form friendship bonds based on *propinquity*, or shared likeness. Maramos and Sacerdote found in their study of social networks at a small liberal arts college in the Northeast that race was a greater determinant of social interaction than common interests, majors, or family background.

This evidence presents a challenge to linking diversity to civic engagement. Why do people report increased levels of tolerance for other groups but are not any more disposed to want to interact with them? Again, we must return to the thin notion of democracy. A view of democracy that treats diversity as a set of competing rights claims that should be respected rather than an obligation to engage each other to explore areas of commonality and pursue the common good does not change the underlying structure of society.

Undoubtedly, making people aware, particularly white males, that “race” and “gender” are phenomena that structure the social world is important work. But is it insufficient to prepare young people to address looming social problems. Making students aware of “isms” and hoping that by some alchemy, students from different racial and ethnic back-

grounds have the tools to, as Richard Rorty puts it, “achieve our country,” is misguided.

While students are learning all these “isms” in diversity courses (hopefully), they are also being asked to engage with a political system that emphasizes conflict over consensus and claims-making over collaboration. Failing to engage the underlying political factors upon which issues of race, gender, class, etc. are played, means leaving students to ponder the tip of the iceberg they can see above water.

Merging the Civic and the Multicultural Through Public Work

How do we make civic engagement and diversity conform to notions of strong democracy? I argue that both initiatives must be tied together through the notion of *public work*. Boyte defines public work as

sustained effort by a (diverse) mix of citizens whose collective labors produce things of common and lasting civic value.

Public work solves common problems and creates common things. It is also cooperative work by “a public,” a mix of people whose interests, backgrounds and resources may be quite different. And it is work that creates “public goods,” things of general benefit and use (“Civic Populism” 7).

This emphasis on diversity as *public work* links it to civic engagement by emphasizing diversity as *practice* rather than as an intellectual exercise. This perspective does not replace diversity initiatives on college campuses, but rather integrates them intentionally by creating contexts on campuses and in communities where diverse students work to address common problems (providing day care services, building a well, putting on a play, teaching Shakespeare to high school students).

Far from being a “whitewashing” of differences, a public work perspective that takes diversity seriously engages students and communities without ignoring the group identities that give meaning to them. Diversity brings to collective activity the innovative capacities of “weak ties” necessary for groups to address complex, evolving problems (Granovetter). A *public work* approach focuses on a definition of the political based on “negotiating plurality” and finding common solutions rather than fostering adversarialism or paternalism (Boyte *Everyday Politics*).

Constructing *public work* oriented assignments emphasizing deliberation and collaborative work is made significantly easier by the advent of social networking websites like Wikipedia or De.licio.us that allow users to create on-line group products. The Web can be an effective tool for facilitating

community-based action research, engaging students in organizing campus or community-wide town halls, or study circles.

The Role for Lutheran Colleges and Universities

Lutheran colleges and universities, with their emphasis on vocation as a *call to the world* rather than away from it, are better positioned to bridge the divide between diversity and civic engagement than both public institutions with their wariness of values-based education and more fundamentalist-oriented, religiously-affiliated institutions that emphasize a retreat from the secular rather than a dialogue with the secular (Christenson).

The challenge of getting our students to both “learn together” and “live together” can be both frustrating and invigorating. If we hope to move our students beyond recognizing injustice and intolerance towards acting on that knowledge through the political process, we must challenge our own assumptions of what it means to be a citizen in the United States. Moreover, it requires us to reflect on how that notion of citizenship affects those outside of the United States.

It also means we move ourselves beyond a “thin” view of both diversity and civic engagement. Too often we repeat mantras of “engaging with otherness” that we in the academy do not heed. If we do “engage with otherness” it is an otherness with which we are comfortable. We should not be immune from engaging in *public work* with those whom we might disagree or feel threatened.

This is easier to say than to realize. Private institutions, particularly smaller liberal arts institutions, are heavily dependent upon private benefactors for their survival. As a result, emphasizing a strong democracy that might motivate citizens to participate in ways contrary to those favored by sought after benefactors is a source of tension for institutions. A participatory culture that engages students in collaborative decision-making might produce outcomes that abut the interests of corporate capital. All institutions, including ELCA affiliated ones, must ask themselves how they will address potential conflicts between donor interests and pedagogical practice.

Furthermore, public work is hard work. As faculty at some teaching-oriented colleges are aware, innovation is not always rewarded if it results in poor student evaluations. Those who have entered the exciting yet challenging world of service learning pedagogy will tell you that it takes a great commitment of time on the part of faculty to make it work. At some places, it may not be worth the time and effort. Certainly at Research-1 universities where teaching is not a priority, there is little incentive to bring public work into the curriculum. Institutions like ours can serve a vital niche by creating the

institutional infrastructure to support faculty in their efforts to link diversity and civic engagement through public work.

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