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In light of Charlottesville, colleges must teach civic learning (essay)

Submitted by Carol Geary Schneider on September 25, 2017 - 3:00am

Sobered by events in Charlottesville ^[1], Va., leaders from all walks of life have rallied to fiercely repudiate this nation's legacies of racial hostility and white supremacy and to vigorously proclaim our responsibility to create a more just society. Jamie Merisotis, president of Lumina Foundation, where I am now a fellow, was especially cogent. "We all must do more," Lumina's statement ^[2] on Charlottesville was headlined. And that "more" should begin with a recognition that "whites in America are [not] disadvantaged by the color of their skin ... We must be clear with ourselves about the realities of privilege and disadvantage -- and the roots of both."

Those calling us to action are entirely right. As Americans, we must certainly challenge and change the myriad practices through which racial and ethnic disadvantage are perpetuated and compounded -- in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces and even, appallingly, in the new surge of restrictive voter identification requirements.

Some of the needed change is near term and involves actions leaders can take soon to affirm their commitment to equal justice and to invest in expanded opportunity for marginalized communities. But we also have long-term work to do in the way we educate Americans -- *all* Americans -- both as citizens and as co-creators of the "more perfect union" that is heralded in our Constitution but that remains illusory, if not an outright lie, for too many people.

If we want Americans to seriously engage the roots and realities of our nation's racial and class-based disparities, educators need to ensure that our students actually learn -- in far more depth than they currently do -- about the long history of ferocious struggles over the meaning and application of democratic principles in the United States. Our society is unlikely to successfully overcome a history of exclusionary practices if comparatively few of us actually know about those practices in any detail. And, similarly, Americans' widespread ignorance about other cultures and democracy struggles around the world prevents our gaining insight from elsewhere into the challenges we face at home.

To repair democracy in the United States, educators will need to make equity-minded civic learning central rather than evanescent in any efforts to strengthen educational quality and support student success. Overcoming long histories of exclusion, estrangement and simmering

distrust will further require the creation of curricular pathways -- from school through college -- that are well designed to build all graduates' capacity and commitment to engage difficult differences, work collaboratively on tough problems and create over time a more just and equitable future. Americans have always been quick to insist that other countries should face up educationally to their own histories of bigotry and brutality. It is time for us to do the same.

That may sound like a tall order. But across the United States, the hard work of creating a more equity-minded civic learning has already begun. The most constructive response to Charlottesville would be for leaders across all sectors to visibly join forces with those people who are already leading the effort to build this equity-minded learning -- knowledge, skills and applications -- into the warp and woof of our country's educational practices.

Examining Our Learning Frameworks

One place for the higher education community to begin would be to revisit the frameworks educators are using to develop curricular pathways. For instance, the widely promulgated Degree Qualifications Framework, developed with support from Lumina Foundation, sets reference points for quality college learning -- starting with the associate degree and continuing through the master's degree. That framework makes both civic learning and "engaging diverse perspectives" necessary components of college learning. Educators can examine this and other learning frameworks to ask: Do the expected proficiencies build the knowledge and skill Americans need to work collaboratively on difficult equity issues? How can these frameworks be strengthened to help Americans build new capacity to overcome, once and for all, our society's long history of racially and economically rooted disparities?

As we consider these questions, we can learn from educators who have already taken the time to ask what civic learning needs to include in a democracy still struggling to live up to its own ideals. In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education released an invited national report on where America needs to go in order to prepare graduates for civic problem solving. Thousands of administrative and faculty leaders from reform-minded organizations, schools and colleges helped craft the report. The recommendations that resulted were forthright in urging that civic learning throughout school and college needs to directly address both societal diversities and continuing efforts to overcome disparities.

Titled "A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future ^[3]," this national stocktaking presents a four-part template to describe the preparation needed for "21st-century civic learning and democratic engagement." The template describes knowledge, including knowledge of "the diverse cultures, histories, values and contestations that have shaped U.S. and other world societies"; skills, including "deliberation and bridge-building across difference"; values, including empathy, tolerance and justice; and collective action, including "public problem solving with diverse partners" and "compromise, civility and mutual respect."

The full set of recommended capacities ^[4] stretches far beyond what might be achieved in a course or two on American history in elementary and secondary school, augmented for some but not all Americans by a diversity or world-cultures course taken in college.

Recognizing the inadequacy of current educational practice, the report's authors called for a reshaping of the entire progression from school through college, with civic inquiry and democratic

values exploration addressed in multiple ways, and at increasingly challenging levels, including in all postsecondary majors.

A Time for Action

Unhappily, the report's release did not prompt national investment or action to connect civic learning with the challenges of our time. To the contrary, in the years since, Americans have witnessed a determined drumbeat of assault on the humanities and many of the social sciences - the very disciplines best suited to help students learn about cultures, histories, religions, democratic values, social systems, disparities and diverse communities' struggles for justice.

At the college level, general education has been the primary curricular pathway for exploring issues of democracy, diversity and global interdependence. But as an unremarked consequence of well-intended efforts to speed students' progress toward degree completion, the curricular time devoted to general education across the nation now is being cut to the bone.

As a result, at the very moment we need richer, fuller, deeper and more incisive learning about democracy's past and future, it is becoming more rather than less difficult for American students to learn even half of what they ought to know about the roots and realities of societal disadvantage and its possible repair.

Nonetheless, these troubling trends notwithstanding, the 2012 release of "A Crucible Moment" did in fact inspire the formation of a still-active coalition of 12 national organizations: [the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Action Network](#) [5]. Working independently of government but in direct partnership with hundreds of postsecondary institutions, including some 200 community colleges, these organizations seek to make civic learning and democratic engagement at the college level expected rather than optional.

Prompted in part by this work, at least one state system, Massachusetts, now has made civic learning in public postsecondary education one of the [quality learning outcomes](#) [6] that two- and four-year institutions need to document and demonstrate.

Massachusetts and a dozen other state systems and consortia have become partners in the nationwide LEAP initiative -- Liberal Education and America's Promise -- which also promotes civic, diversity and ethical learning as integral parts of college quality. Recently, the heads of all the regional accrediting associations released a [shared statement](#) [7] affirming that the most important college outcomes include those intended to prepare graduates as "productive and contributing citizens in a democratic society." Side by side with these postsecondary reform efforts, there also is a robust effort in the states to revive and strengthen civic learning in public schools.

All this is a start, but only a start. Valuable though they are, such efforts are flying under the national radar. Postsecondary endeavors remain disconnected from civic learning reforms in the nation's schools. At best, we can describe what is happening as pockets of promising reform.

Charlottesville reminds us starkly how far we have to go.

It is time to act on the first recommendation of "A Crucible Moment," which is to "reclaim and

reinvest” in the fundamental civic mission of both schools and colleges. Using the templates and tools that “A Crucible Moment” provides, educators in all settings, from department heads to state system leaders, can develop their own “next-level” action plans for helping learners build: 1) knowledge about democracy, diversities and disparities, 2) skills for deliberating and working together across differences, 3) practice in examining the hard questions inherent in such contending values as freedom and interdependence, and 4) experience in connecting knowledge with “collective action” on important public questions.

In the America, education has always been, at least in principle, intended to build capacities that are required to sustain freedom and self-governance. But the need for a new kind of equity-minded civic learning -- embedded across all educational settings and studies -- is writ large in everything that is now happening in our society.

The foundations on which we can build have already been laid. With Charlottesville at the fore, we need to mobilize with new determination to ensure that every one of our students -- whatever their background, age or ethnicity -- emerges amply prepared to contribute to not only the economy but also a more just, equitable and inclusive democracy.

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Links:

[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/08/14/white-nationalists-rally-university-virginia>

[2] <https://www.luminafoundation.org/news-and-views/merisotis-statement-in-wake-of-charlottesville>

[3] <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/college-learning-democracys-future/crucible-moment.pdf>

[4] https://ihedc-my.sharepoint.com/personal/sarah_bray_insidehighered_com/_layouts/15/guestaccess.aspx?docid=1ff61be859ed84e2bb10667da93ce8bdc&authkey=AcKKqmSq7QUUhCLHnHoogQw

[5] <http://www.aacu.org/clde>

[6] <http://www.icicp.org/2014/05/massachusetts-adopts-nations-1st-statewide-civic-learning-policy>

[7] <https://www.wscuc.org/announcements/statement-council-regional-accrediting-commissions-student-outcomes>