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COMMENTARY

Don't Retreat. Teach Citizenship.

By Michael B. Smith, Rebecca S. Nowacek, and Jeffrey L. Bernstein | JANUARY 19, 2017

In 2010, the three of us edited and contributed to *Citizenship Across the Curriculum*, a book in which we argued for a broader conception of citizenship than is conventionally promoted and for the teaching of the attitudes and behaviors of citizenship across a wide range of academic disciplines.

"Educating for citizenship certainly entails helping students become more civically engaged in the traditional ways," we wrote. "But [we] also believe that citizenship education embodies more abstract qualities: learning how to become more comfortable with ambiguity and complexity, how to disagree without being disagreeable, and, perhaps above all else, how to be more empathetic."

We have often thought of these ideas in recent years, but never so much as in the past two months, since the election of Donald Trump.

This presidential election demonstrated a paucity of the citizenship skills and dispositions that the contributors to our book emphasize in their teaching. Crucially, the case studies in the book offer abundant evidence that it is possible to cultivate these qualities in courses across the curriculum. Here, we focus on three traits that citizenship requires:

A breadth of knowledge from across a range of disciplines. In our book, we presented examples drawn from mathematics and chemistry, among other subjects, to show how policy arguments in highly technical fields are driven by those who have substantive knowledge. Addressing climate change requires some scientific knowledge, ideally from sources better than Facebook or radio talk-show hosts. Understanding the complexities of health insurance requires expertise more substantive than details of Aunt Mildred's latest experience with her insurance company.

There is no way, of course, that educated citizens can become experts on every subject. In those areas where we lack our own knowledge, we find experts — true experts — on whom we can rely. This is not as easy as merely listening to the loudest voice or to the voice that fits our prior beliefs. It requires reading multiple sources, triangulating among them, and reaching our best sense of the truth. In an election in which so many falsehoods were routinely propagated as truth, our obligation to be educated as well as active increases.

Empathy. During the campaign, Trump revealed a shocking lack of empathy, whether it was for Gold Star parents, women, immigrants, Muslims, or more than a few other groups. While we certainly do not draw a moral equivalence between his comments and Hillary Clinton's

comments, we should note that describing one's opponent's supporters as a "basket of deplorables" also reflects a breach of empathy.

Empathy, which can be loosely defined as an ability to understand the perspectives and feelings of others (especially, perhaps, those with whom we disagree or whose life experiences are radically different from our own), requires that we see the world as others see it. That can mean understanding the experience of an immigrant, seeing the obstacles faced by women, understanding the economic displacement of less-educated workers in the Rust Belt, or imagining what it must be like for a young African-American man to be pulled over by the police. We need not be persuaded by the perspectives of others, of course, but our ability to realize what they are thinking and feeling makes us better citizens.

Political participation. Citizenship is not exclusively the domain of political science and history; effective citizenship can, and should, be learned across a wide range of other academic areas as well. However, in some cases, the political world is the battlefield on which we all must engage. As we look back at a pivotal election in which we saw a decline in voter turnout, it is clear (as clichéd as it is to say) that decisions are made by those who show up.

We applaud those whose conceptions of citizenship leads them to work in soup kitchens, to tutor immigrants, or to teach children. We respect those who donate large amounts of money to charity or who found communal organizations. Those who increase tolerance, moral virtue, charity, and empathy have our utmost admiration. But all of that is no substitute for participation in politics.

Elections have consequences, as the daily dose of news about the shape of the Trump administration reminds all of us. Empathy, volunteerism, and charitable contributions help solve societal problems, but so does the right set of government policies. Abstaining from politics is rarely a good thing, but it is especially dangerous when the choices become so stark and the consequences so severe.

More than ever, higher education has an obligation to provide opportunities to help our students learn about citizenship across their classes. We must help them develop their inborn capacity for empathy and caring about the other, including (and especially) those who are different from them and who face more challenges than they do. And it requires that we not only impress upon them the importance of political action but also help them develop their skills in this realm.

We all can, and should, take up the aspects of this work that best intersect with our areas of expertise and our disciplinary learning goals for students. Empathy, social engagement, intellectual rigor — these do not constitute a partisan agenda — are the means of robust engagement.

If, in the wake of this election, too many of us in higher education retreat to our campuses as redoubts in a hostile political landscape, we will be missing a great opportunity. Ed Zlotkowski sagely notes in his chapter of our book that "citizenship — on any level and in

any context — cannot flourish without the skills, values, and habits of heart and mind that the academy is uniquely positioned to develop." And without an abiding capacity for citizenship, it is doubtful that democracy can flourish. It might not even be able to survive.

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