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Helping with the “How”: A Role for Honors in Civic Education

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The current political moment in the United States puts an exclamation point on years of growing concern for our civic culture. We have a president who neither understands nor cares for the processes and norms of the American system of government, a Congress that seems almost indifferent to the real issues of governing for the public good, a news cycle driven by flippant tweets, and a toxic social media environment. There is little current recognition that, in our system, how we debate the alternatives and arrive at policies is as important for our long-term civic enterprise as the resulting policies themselves. As far apart as we are about the desired ends, we are at risk of coming together in ignoring the importance of the proper means. For many of our students, this is the first presidential election, administration, and Congress in their awareness and will set their expectations about process and norms for public life. Our students have precious few examples of a healthy public environment and few models for how to partake in one, not simply in what they should accomplish but in how they should go about trying. In this context, honors programs and colleges have distinct opportunities

to help our students navigate and enhance our public space, thereby providing a vital service for them and for our communities.

One challenge for students is a lack of familiarity with the institutions and conventions of public life. We hear in the news about student failures to appreciate the processes and the virtues on which our system of self-government is built, such as students purportedly favoring repeal of the First Amendment. But media attention favors the flamboyant at the expense of the mundane, and careful studies of college-age attitudes about such matters are mixed. Subtler observations closer to home are what have me thinking about how students view and respond to current issues and public engagement. One fairly typical example occurs when I assign competing op-eds on an issue of current controversy. Under certain circumstances, students consistently interpret the opinion of an author exactly wrong. That is, they believe she opposes the very position that the op-ed is written to support. What are the circumstances? Within the op-ed, the author critiques an argument or person associated with her own position on the issue. Students reason that if the author supported this position, surely she would not criticize arguments in favor of it. To cite just one recent example, my students were convinced that Ross Douthat, a traditionalist Catholic columnist for the *New York Times*, favored same-sex marriage because he opened a column by dismissing three weak but often-used arguments defending traditional marriage. That the rest of his column argued the opposite eluded them. Whether a conservative author admitting some arguments for traditional views of marriage are weak, a liberal criticizing abuses of the social safety net, or one of countless other examples, students struggle to comprehend political self-critique.

While tempted to view these misattributions as the result of sloppy reading, I have seen such misunderstandings far more often about current, especially hot-button events than about academic issues that seem less connected to today's sociopolitical controversies. I suspect the phenomenon results from assumptions about our political environment, where purely tactical maneuvers substitute for honest debate and substantive process, where self-critique and healthy nuance are rare, and where means and ends are often confused. Students who internalize these tendencies while becoming active in the public sphere are at greater risk of missing the weak spots in their own or others' arguments and of failing to recognize and substantively address valid points from others. Among options to help students navigate this tendency, opportunities lie in the careful work that students do in their academic endeavors.

I have little difficulty getting my history majors to value the careful use of sources, attention to both sides of a historical argument, and thoughtful engagement with other arguments. They understand that method matters and that acknowledging and accounting for solid counterarguments result in a better research outcome. Likewise, my colleagues in biology have little difficulty getting students to recognize the importance of proper method in the lab; they know that a shortcut to get a certain result risks the entire project and undermines its purpose. Humility and appropriate process are vital components of effective research: always checking how my conclusions may not be correct, how my sources may be misleading me, how I may be cooking the books, whether my results are replicable, how I may need to adjust my conclusions to fit the evidence (and not the other way around), what good points I may glean from those with different conclusions, and how I might adapt my approach to fit them in. Students get this. But too often, when our materials converge more directly with current events and political issues, this care, humility, and process-focus fade into the background. Of course, political activism and civic engagement are not the same as a lab or studio or seminar, but attention to process and a concern for good methods to shape results can only enhance our political environment.

The problem is not, as perhaps it once was, a lack of student interest or opportunity to act in the public sphere. Despite hand-wringing over the future of our civic culture and complaints about millennials, we do see some encouraging trends. Students increasingly arrive at college expecting to become involved, if they are not already, in service and activism both on and off campus, and college student voting rates have gone up in recent years. For their part, colleges and universities have been ramping up programs to help students become engaged both in community service and in civic responsibilities like voting and campaigning for issues. Whether organizing such opportunities as service learning within an existing curriculum, centering them in an office of student life, or using some other approach, institutions of higher education are returning to their often stated but too often neglected role of developing students to be engaged citizens as well as effective leaders, skilled workers, and life-long learners. Studies of student engagement, tolerance, and political influence are documenting the success of these developments.

The data are encouraging but do not tell us everything. They tend to reveal the rates at which students are active in the civic process: how often they vote, work on a campaign, advocate on an issue, participate in an event,

or serve in a community organization. This information is helpful and important, and getting students to do something (anything?) in the civic sphere is a worthy goal, but it should not be the only goal. In addition to increasing how often students engage, we should also work to increase how well they engage by asking key questions: Are they sensitive to the process while pursuing desired outcomes? Do they seek the appropriate means or focus only on ends? Are they willing to learn while pursuing their vision of the common good, whether adjusting their objective or their approach to getting there? On this score the results are less clear. Given student interest and a renewed commitment among colleges and universities, we are at an opportune moment to raise the quality of student civic engagement by helping students apply the good processes they know from their disciplines to a civic environment sorely in need. In this project, honors programs and colleges are particularly well suited to help achieve the goal.

As colleges and universities encourage civic participation among students, we need to be intentional about helping students connect the processes they learn for good, sophisticated work in the classroom or lab to the ways they think about and act in civic space. Majors teach students the methods to follow in a discipline to increase their knowledge. Internships, experiential learning, and civic engagement programs encourage students to apply that knowledge to public contexts. We should also encourage students to apply what they have learned about good processes and principles to public contexts. They may do so intuitively, but we should push them to do so deliberately.

Honors programs and colleges have some particular advantages for this sort of project. While service learning is becoming more common, many colleges still have no institution-wide program, if the option is available at all. The honors emphasis on experiential and applied learning can create opportunities for students to apply the processes as well as the outcomes of their research to public issues. Capstones and senior projects are a fruitful place for this sort of work, but academic departments can be reluctant or unable to give students freedom to deviate from discipline- or profession-specific final products. The interdisciplinary nature of honors allows for the cross-pollination that can encourage application of disciplinary methods as well as knowledge to a problem in the civic sphere. Honors capstone projects can free students from the more specific focus of a major department and allow for experimentation, risk-taking, and non-traditional definitions of success. For campuses where civic engagement and service are driven through offices

of student life, an honors program or college—as one of the few places where academic affairs and student life intersect—can contribute academic grist to such efforts. In any of these cases, honors can implement a prototype that may be adopted by other departments and offices or by the campus as a whole once its efficacy has been demonstrated.

Many honors programs and colleges emphasize civic service and implement a variety of programs to this end, as recent issues of the *JNCHC* attest. At my institution the honors component for the senior capstone requires students to apply knowledge and skills from their major to an issue of the public good while consulting with a specific community organization or civic office to address its particular needs regarding that issue. The contributions they make generally stem from knowledge gained through their majors, which is a worthy and valuable result, but we could do more to encourage students to draw on their disciplinary methods and habits of mind, not just their knowledge, to enhance their involvement in the community and to view proper process as vital to a good outcome. For example, history majors recognize that they are in a conversation with their sources and each other. They seek ways to synthesize the arguments of two or more scholars in an interpretation of the past rather than simply declare one right and one wrong. I need to help them apply these same tendencies to an issue they feel strongly about in the public realm. When they go from the history seminar to the honors capstone and work on a public issue of immediate interest to them, I need to help them see if their preference for an outcome has led them into shortcuts in thinking through their position, dismissing their critics as wrong, or ignoring contrary evidence. They should see the value, or at least understand the coherence, of an opposing view and address it to build toward a more constructive result.

Encouraging our honors students in this way can have ripple effects. When they leave us to become leaders and influencers in their fields and communities, they will be more responsible, deliberate, and process-oriented in their political activity. They will more easily recognize process-ignoring tendencies when they encounter them in others and will have language to argue for a better way. They will be able to avoid the worst examples within their own position while dismantling the worst examples within the positions of others. Perhaps they can even join with some of their political opponents in affirming common standards of evidence for public debate. Toward these ends, honors programs and colleges can provide a vital service in helping students allow their high-quality academic work to inform their approach to

political issues. They may feel that too much is at stake in current politics to apply the careful, methodical approaches they use in the research for their majors. Precisely because so much is at stake, however, they must. We can help them.

SUGGESTED READING

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