

4-11-2003

## Persuading Students to Care: Eugene Lang's program aims to prod colleges into encouraging civic involvement

Jeffrey R. Young

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcestgen>

 Part of the [Service Learning Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Young, Jeffrey R., "Persuading Students to Care: Eugene Lang's program aims to prod colleges into encouraging civic involvement" (2003). *Special Topics, General*. 116.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slcestgen/116>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Topics in Service Learning at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Special Topics, General by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).



THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION
-----------------------------------

## Students

From the issue dated April 11, 2003

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v49/i31/31a04701.htm>

### Persuading Students to Care

#### Eugene Lang's program aims to prod colleges into encouraging civic involvement

By JEFFREY R. YOUNG

New York City

Democracy in America is at risk, and colleges are not doing enough about it, says Eugene M. Lang, a philanthropist known for tackling large problems in education. Colleges may say they encourage good citizenship, he says, but their efforts are often "random," and students are increasingly tuning out of the democratic process.

Although more and more students are volunteering during high school and college, Mr. Lang says, fewer young people are voting or taking on leadership roles in their communities. It seems, he says, that college students feel that a few hours of community service are an adequate replacement for other civic involvement.

"It's very important that people understand that working in a soup kitchen is not the equivalent of voting," he says. "Just by putting in so many hours, they are presumed to have accomplished a purpose, and in some cases they do. But I think in most cases they don't."

Mr. Lang, a retired businessman and entrepreneur and a chairman emeritus of Swarthmore College's Board of Trustees, is trying to jolt academe into greater civic-mindedness. Two and a half years ago, he invited 10 college presidents to a meeting and challenged them to work together to improve their colleges' efforts in community service, and to make civic engagement a part of the curriculum in every department. The effort came to be called Project Pericles, after the Greek statesman who is seen as a founder of modern democracy.

The presidents were quick to join Mr. Lang's project -- perhaps because of his unusually successful and generous track record in philanthropy. His I Have a Dream Foundation, formed in the mid-1980s, has helped thousands of inner-city kids get to college, and it has inspired many states and foundations to set up similar efforts around the country.

Last week, those officials, as well as a delegation of students, faculty members, administrators, and trustees from each of their institutions, met at a planning conference here as they prepared to expand the program to other colleges.

In his keynote speech at the conference, Mr. Lang said that Project Pericles would bring a revolution in academe, and its creation "will come to be regarded as a seminal event in the history of higher education in the United States."

But some people question whether Mr. Lang's program, or any single effort, can change student attitudes. After all, numerous other groups already are working to promote community involvement by young people, and their campaigns have not stimulated a revolution of civic interest. In addition, some professors on the campuses involved in the Pericles project wonder how civics fits into their disciplines, or worry that their work in the community will not be given proper credit in tenure and promotion reviews.

### **A Pledge From Trustees**

What sets Project Pericles apart from other efforts to promote civic engagement is the top-level institutional support and coordination required of its members.

To join, a college must meet five requirements, including establishing a committee of its board of trustees to make sure the pledge of civic engagement is not just empty rhetoric.

"This is my business experience talking," says Mr. Lang. "Resolutions are fine, but we also require that the boards set up a formal, regular standing committee whose charge is to oversee the implementation of the resolution. That makes it organic."

As Hampshire College's president, Gregory S. Prince Jr., put it at the conference, "I don't think our goals are new -- the real focus is on practice and implementation."

Aaron Berman, dean of faculty at Hampshire, who helps oversee Pericles on that campus, says that involving the trustees was "a pretty significant step," even though the college was already a founding member of Campus Compact, an effort focused on integrating community service and college course work that has more than 900 college members.

Colleges in Project Pericles must also assign a staff person to oversee all community-service and civic-engagement efforts.

At many campuses, those projects have sprouted up independently in various departments without anyone trying to connect them -- or, as Mr. Lang puts it, they are "random activities, functioning at the periphery of curricula with imprecise standards and objectives, little accountability for performance or results, and poor if any criteria for evaluation."

The project looks at civic engagement more like a student would, says Karin Trail-Johnson, director of community service at Macalester College, a Pericles member. "If you ask a student about their Macalester experience, they're going to talk about things they were involved with in and out of the classroom and in the community in a very seamless fashion. It's faculty and staff and administrators that tend to segment things kind of artificially."

Ms. Trail-Johnson says that the interest and attention paid to Pericles by the highest levels of the college's administration has helped build support on the campus. "I'm confident that things are going to move quicker because of that," she says. "It's definitely created a buzz on campus."

Students who are involved with the project say they are trying to make sure the effort doesn't become too top-down, however, and that students have a voice in how Pericles develops.

"Being told what to do isn't always the most fun thing," says Karen Hoerst, a junior at Allegheny College who was chosen to attend the Pericles conference to give student input. "If the movement and

energy comes from the students, then I think it's a lot easier to get things done."

To get the project started, Mr. Lang offered each of the 10 pilot colleges a grant of \$50,000 if they provided matching funds. Eight colleges took him up on the offer for the grants. That grant money will not be offered to colleges that join the project in the future, however, says Mr. Lang.

Mr. Lang says he hopes membership in Pericles will become a kind of seal of approval that a college is serious about teaching students to be good citizens, and that member colleges will tout that membership in their admissions materials.

Officials at member colleges say they hope Pericles will become a clearinghouse of new ideas for blending community service into their curriculums and for encouraging civic-mindedness.

"We anticipate we can make our efforts even stronger if we have the benefit of a national organization," says Richard J. Cook, Allegheny's president. "I see a real opportunity for cross-fertilization of ideas and of sharing what works."

### **Service and Study**

Some of those ideas were presented at the conference.

Elon University, for instance, has established a Periclean Scholars program, in which a group of students will take a course together each semester with the goal of creating a community-service program of their own. Working with a professor, the students will select a social problem and then work together to design a project that would attempt to deal with the problem.

"The idea is that it's a service-learning experience wedded with academics that has a horizon that is far enough off that they can actually do something of major significance," says Tom Arcaro, a professor of sociology and director of the college's Project Pericles.

Damon T. Duncan, a freshman, was recently chosen as one of Elon's first Periclean Scholars, starting next semester.

He was drawn to the program because of its participatory nature, he says. "A lot of time you go to school and you just take tests or write papers, and this gave me the opportunity to do something hands-on and make a change in something," he says.

Mary-Ann Murphy, director of Project Pericles at Pace University, said that her college is working on incentives to get faculty members involved. She says the college has begun giving \$2,000 grants to professors to develop courses dealing with civic engagement and public values. "We'd ultimately like that to be included in the tenure and review process," she adds. Meanwhile, the college is calling professors who get grants in the program "Project Pericles faculty scholars," a title they can add to their vitae.

### **Strong Foundation**

Officials at participating colleges are far more upbeat than Mr. Lang is about the community-service programs they already have. Some say they see Pericles as more evolutionary than revolutionary.

"I wouldn't say it was broken by any means," says Mr. Berman, of Hampshire. "Community-based education ... is something that we've been doing for a long time."

Many colleges have. Campus Compact now has 917 members, up from 450 in 1997.

"I'm just astounded at how much momentum it's gained over the last five years," says Elizabeth Hollander, executive director of Campus Compact. "I think it's because we're worried about the state of our democracy, and that was before 9/11."

Frank Newman, the director of Brown University's Futures Project: Policy for Higher Education in a Changing World, says he sees Project Pericles as "a good thing coming at a critical time."

"You want to kind of rebuild the whole concept of civic understanding," he says. "I'm a little skeptical that you can do it with one silver bullet, but I do think every little bit helps."

Some students who attended the conference, however, have a different view of what the future of civic involvement should be. Patricia Ruby, a sophomore at Ursinus College, said many students view politics as a waste of time.

"They're not going to use what little time they have unless they think it makes a difference," Ms. Ruby said.

Kathy Hilimire, a senior at Pitzer College, said she and some of her peers are far more interested in alternative ways of enacting social change.

"To me, the difference between the Democrats and the Republicans isn't enough of a difference," Ms. Hilimire said. "You can choose not to vote because you are so fed up with the two-party system in the United States."

In an interview before the conference, Ms. Hoerst, from Allegheny, said she intended to question leaders of the project about their assumptions that voting and traditional political action are the best means of social change.

"Is it really the best way to get things done," she says, "or can we really change things systematically through this service stuff and through ways that we see as working?"

Ms. Hoerst, who is a Girl Scout leader, says that the girls see her as a role model. "The relationships that you build by doing the direct service work really make the changes happen."

Though she notes that students should also vote, she says that perhaps students are reinventing the notion of civic engagement through their volunteer efforts.

Mr. Duncan says he chose to attend Elon because of its reputation for encouraging community involvement.

"College students are a lot more engaged than what everybody thinks," he says. "I walk around everywhere on campus and everyone has Fox News and CNN" on, watching war coverage.

Mr. Lang says he sees his project as a way to resolve what he calls "the corrosive conflict that has been developing between democracy and cynicism."

"I want them to do the good things that they're doing now, but I want more than that," he says of today's students. "I want them to do it in an environment that not only appreciates that, but is constituted in such

a way that that's what you're supposed to do. We're saying that education for citizenship is not an extracurricular thing."

#### **PROMOTING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

##### **To qualify for membership in Project Pericles, each college must:**

- Secure a formal resolution by its board pledging that the college will "instill in students an active and abiding sense of social responsibility."
- Establish a standing, multi-constituency committee of its board to "oversee the implementation of the above commitment."
- Create a program on the campus that oversees all civic and community activities and courses there, with a central administrator assigned to the program.
- Attempt to involve all those concerned with the college—faculty and staff members, students, alumni, trustees, and administrators, as well as local residents—in community service.
- Set defined objectives and perform evaluations of programs aimed at fostering civic engagement.

##### **Some projects by member colleges:**

- **Periclean Scholars program at Elon University:**  
Students who apply and are accepted to the program will take a course together each semester throughout their career at the university. The students will investigate a subject of their choosing and then create a public-service project to help confront the problems involved. Students are applying now for the program, which begins next semester.
- **Engaged Departments Initiative at Macalester College:**  
It would provide \$1,000 grants to departments that agree to perform a self-evaluation of their existing civic-engagement activities and to propose new efforts, to be overseen by a faculty member outside the department. This program is set to begin this summer or fall.
- **Center for Political Participation at Allegheny College:**  
The program will bring together scholarly work on party politics, voter turnout, and related issues, and will hold voter-registration drives and other activities for Allegheny students. The center opened in October.

##### **Pilot members of Project Pericles:**

Allegheny College  
Bethune-Cookman College  
Elon University  
Hampshire College  
Macalester College  
New England College  
Pace University  
Pitzer College  
Swarthmore College  
Ursinus College

<http://chronicle.com>

Section: Students

Volume 49, Issue 31, Page A47

---

[Front page](#) | [Career Network](#) | [Search](#) | [Site map](#) | [Help](#)

---

Copyright © 2003 by The Chronicle of Higher Education