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Moving into Citizenship: Teaching Toward Common Ground

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In the United States of America, we hold the notion of “citizenship” in a special, almost sacred status. We have great debates over who gets to be a citizen and who should be denied this privilege, for that is how it is conceived—as a privilege. If you are a first-year student at UNH, you are likely just achieving full citizenship as you turn 18 this year. Prior to this point, your exercise of free speech, the right to assembly, the right to vote, the right to sit on a jury, and in general the right to determine independently where you will live, who you will associate with, or how you will express your religious convictions have all been limited by the authority of your parents as well as the government. With the happenstance of your 18th birthday, you have moved into full citizenship and assumed both the rights and responsibilities of this exalted status. What does it mean to be a citizen not only of this country but of the world? What special privileges come with this new status, and what special obligations will be thrust on you?

Citizenship in a pluralistic democracy such as the United States presents particular challenges related to the theme of this year’s University Dialogue on “Finding Common Ground.” How do we collectively solve complex social and political problems, how do we find common ground when by nature we are such a diverse collection of individual citizens? How do we honor our ideological, ethnic, racial, gender, and socioeconomic differences while working together to address the most pressing problems faced by our country—economic disparities, inadequate educational systems, burgeoning health care and energy costs, the degradation of the environment, etc? These questions are at the heart of a course that Vilmarie Sanchez and I have taught at UNH over the past few years, as part of the University’s

Discovery Program. EDUC 444, *Be the Change You Wish to See: Active Citizenship in a Multicultural World*, enrolls 20 to 25 first-year students each fall, usually in the context of a residential learning community. We are mindful that our students all have recently or will soon achieve the age of majority, the age of full accountability and responsibility as a citizen. Class discussions and readings help the students think about what it means to be an active, contributing member of a community, whether defined as the floor on their residence hall, the wider community of UNH, or the seacoast region and the larger world beyond. We tackle big, complex questions that arise from historical conditions and contemporary events (e.g., we examine the meaning of social identity in a society that is both egalitarian and highly divided along lines of race and class; we explore the meaning of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, when the displaced population, mostly black and poor, was referred to as “refugees,” implying they were not citizens in their own right).

Throughout the course, and in the work that I and my colleagues carry out in New Hampshire Listens (see www.NHListens.org), we thread together three strands of thought and action that in complementary fashion can increase our capacity to live as citizens within communities. These three foundational concepts include participatory citizenship, community change, and social identity and context. Each strand is reflected in the readings and conversations we have with our students, when we think together about what community means, how we come to participate in and improve those communities, and how to negotiate differences through explicit deliberative processes. Each of these ideas will be briefly examined in the following paragraphs.

Participatory citizenship is the glue that holds a pluralistic democracy together. This approach to active citizenship has been described as “shared” or “participatory” governance, implying more direct forms of governance than we find in formal structures in which we elect someone else to “represent” our ideals and beliefs. Participatory citizenship leads us to “strong democracy” in Benjamin Barber’s words, away from “thin” structures that are distant and disconnected from our immediate realities. Our particular approach to creating a stronger, more participatory democracy capable of addressing complex social challenges emphasizes face-to-face deliberation among community members. We use small group, facilitated processes that are sustained over time to enable and empower participants. As Matt Leighninger, in his groundbreaking book, *The Next Form of Democracy*, has written, there are four basic principles necessary for successful citizen deliberation. First, participants are recruited to create the most diverse possible membership in the group, to assure that a wide range of ideas and perspectives are contributing to the problem-solving process. Second, these participants work in both small-group and large-group venues, with skilled facilitators, to examine objective data, seek solutions that represent common ground, and plan for ways to move from talk to action. Third, the essence of the deliberations is found in the individual values and experiences that each participant brings to the conversation, requiring careful, respectful listening in order to understand sources of disagreement and to surface areas of common ground or consensus that can serve as the basis for solutions. Fourth, the ultimate aim of deliberation is to affect the actions and decisions of elected officials, community leaders, and organizations. Participatory governance, using facilitated, sustained forms of face-to-face deliberation (sometimes augmented by social media to expand the number of participants and deepen the conversations) pay as much attention to action as talk. It is not sufficient to bring citizens together for talk; there must be

commitments on the part of decision makers to pay attention to citizen voices and incorporate the results of deliberative processes into decision making and policy development.

Community change is the second strand which must be at the forefront of working toward common ground. The forces of change are multiple and sometimes unpredictable in the modern world. In New Hampshire, economic shifts (from manufacturing to service and high-tech jobs), demographic pressures (we are both older and more diverse than was the case ten years ago), political oscillations (from red to blue and back again), and climate change (affecting our coastal regions as well as the Great North Woods) all are creating change that must be addressed in the public policy arena. Our large, volunteer citizen legislature cannot solve these problems alone, nor can individual communities. Deliberative processes must bring new voices to the table, from youth to recently arrived immigrants to professionals who have migrated here to take advantage of our high standard of living. The tensions that arise between economic growth and historical preservation, between urban and rural lifestyles, between “natives” and “newcomers” must all be acknowledged and addressed head on. Such tensions can only be sorted out through the sometimes messy, long-term processes of participatory governance rather than relying only on those who hold formal power at the local or state level.

The conditions described above also need to take into account the increasingly pluralistic nature of American communities. The diverse students who enroll in EDUC 444 help us to think openly about what it means to be one of the few at UNH rather than one of the many. We each bring our social identities into the room, twice a week, and work with and through those identities as we (re) learn the democratic ideals that can be at the center of participation and change. Across those identities, we can conceive of a common core that

we share, the place where our hearts truly connect as we seek solutions to a troubled world. This is what Terry Tempest Williams means when she writes that the heart is, ...”where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up—ever—trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy”?

That is, our journey toward common ground begins inside each of us, constructed in our interactions with each other in ways that affirm the trust that Williams writes about. Participation, change, and connecting our idiosyncratic, passionate selves to our communities in order to both honor and engage with disagreement can help to move us toward a culture where differences are seen as generative and shared understandings are a means to improve our collective lot. These are the ideals of a pluralistic democracy and suggest a means to go beyond the prevailing cynicism about our government and the enormity of our problems. Citizens are not merely occasional voters; we are active participants in shaping the future of our communities and the world. When we listen to each other, carefully and deeply, when we have the courage to express our convictions in a safe, civil setting, and when we understand our differences as a catalyst rather than an obstacle to change, we will have begun to create a better world for ourselves and our children.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Everyday Democracy

A national leader in the field of civic participation and community change, Everyday Democracy helps people of different backgrounds and views talk and work together to solve problems and create communities that work for everyone.
www.everyday-democracy.org

New Hampshire Listens

A civic engagement initiative of the Carsey Institute at UNH, New Hampshire Listens works at the local and state level to facilitate and support civil, public deliberation of complex, polarizing issues. We share resources on dialogue design, train facilitators, and work with local and state leaders to create opportunities for informed conversation on social, economic, and policy matters.
www.nhlistens.org

The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation

The National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) is a network of those who use dialogue, deliberation, and other innovative group processes to help people tackle our most challenging problems. We provide our members with the support, connections, and resources they need to do their work better.
www.ncdd.org

AmericaSpeaks

AmericaSpeaks’ mission is to reinvigorate American Democracy by engaging citizens in the public decision making that most impacts their lives. Our vision is that the public’s business will be conducted differently—that by developing a rich national infrastructure for democratic deliberation, we can provide the public with a real voice in our nation’s governance.
www.americaspeaks.org

The Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation is an independent, nonpartisan research organization rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Everything Kettering researches relates to one central question: what does it take for democracy to work as it should? Or put another way: What does it take for citizens to shape their collective future?
www.kettering.org