

7 | PREPARATION FOR CITIZENSHIP

From the time of Thomas Jefferson to the present day, leaders in America have pointed to education as the key to a healthy democracy. And for good reason. Civic responsibility must be learned, for it is neither natural nor effortless. It takes work to inform oneself sufficiently to cast an intelligent vote, let alone equip oneself to make wise decisions as an elected public official. It takes a sense of civic duty and an understanding of the importance of elections in a democracy merely to cast a ballot at all. After all, to borrow an observation attributed to Edward Banfield, voting is irrational from a purely self-interested point of view, since the odds that any single person will affect the outcome of an election are lower than the risk that he will be hit by a truck on the way to the polls. Education is the obvious means to foster the civic commitment and intellectual competence that citizens need to participate effectively in public life. That must be what John Dewey had in mind when he declared, “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.”¹

THE CHALLENGE OF CIVIC APATHY

Preparing citizens has taken on new urgency given the long slide in civic participation over the past 40 years. From the early 1960s to 2000, voting rates in presidential elections fell from almost 65 percent to barely 50 percent, a drop of roughly 25 percent.² In off-year elec-

tions for Congress and for governorships, participation sagged from 48 to 36 percent.³ Similar declines have occurred in all active forms of civic engagement, such as working for a political party, attending meetings on town or school affairs, signing a petition, or attending political rallies and speeches.⁴

Political participation is especially weak among younger citizens. Their voting rates are well below those of older age groups. The percentage of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 who cast a ballot in presidential elections fell below 40 percent before rebounding in 2004.⁵ Of course, younger people have always been less inclined to vote than their elders. Still, turnout among 18-to 24-year-olds has been dropping with every succeeding generation for decades—in presidential elections, from more than 50 percent in the early 1970s to less than 40 percent in 2000; in alternate-year elections, from almost 30 percent in the early 1970s to less than 20 percent in 1998.⁶ Other forms of civic and political participation also show greater declines among younger people than among their elders.⁷ Since new cohorts of young Americans will steadily take the place of citizens currently over 65, who have the highest voting rates of any age group, participation seems likely to erode further unless something happens to reverse the long-term decline.

Not only do young people vote less than their parents and grandparents, they know less about public affairs. In the 1960s, Americans aged 18–29 read newspaper articles about national elections at the same rate as those over 65. By 2000, the percentage of young people reading newspapers about political campaigns plummeted to a level less than half that of senior citizens.⁸ Knowledge of politics followed the same pattern. In National Election Study tests, Americans under 30 scored about as high in the 1960s as people over 65. By 2000, young people did only two-thirds as well as seniors.⁹

How concerned should one be about these trends? Why worry if a young New Hampshire woman tells a reporter on national television that she is not planning to vote in the upcoming national primary because “politics isn’t one of my hobbies”? After all, won’t election turnouts as low as one-half or even one-third of the potential voters still bring many millions to the polls and keep officials responsive to the will of the people?

On closer inspection, citizen apathy turns out to be a more serious problem than this question would suggest. In fact, it has something to do with almost all the features of American politics that trouble people most. Failure to vote does not occur randomly throughout the population. Those who are more extreme in their liberal or their conservative views are generally more zealous and hence more likely to continue voting; it is the moderates who stay away from the polls. Hence low turnouts cause politics to become more polarized, more partisan, less amenable to compromise, and less civil. Declining interest in politics also forces the media to struggle to retain their audience by cutting back on hard news about public affairs in favor of stories of violence, personal tragedy, and other forms of “infotainment.” Similarly, apathy invites the use of widely disliked campaign tactics, such as attack ads, that are designed not to build support for a candidate but to discourage supporters of opposing candidates from voting at all. Low turnouts also weaken the influence of poor people, who vote least, while giving undue influence to well-organized groups, such as the National Rifle Association, that are adept at getting their members to the polls. When few people vote, such groups can easily exert an influence far beyond their actual numbers, especially in primary elections in which only 15–20 percent of potential voters normally bother to cast a ballot. In fact,

civic apathy helps special-interest lobbyists even more by making it harder for citizen groups to rouse enough grassroots opposition to defeat efforts to push through self-serving legislation.

After many years of neglect, writers on American government have finally begun to pay more attention to the problem of civic engagement. As William Galston points out, “Compared with previous generations, scholars today are more likely to agree that well-designed institutions are not enough, that a well-organized polity requires citizens with the appropriate knowledge, skills, and traits of character.”¹⁰ The American Political Science Association Task Force on Civic Education (made up of professors of political science) has declared it “axiomatic that current levels of political knowledge, political engagement, and political enthusiasm are so low as to threaten the vitality and stability of democratic politics in the United States.”¹¹

Fortunately recent events give some hope of reawakening a stronger sense of civic engagement among Americans of all ages. In the wake of the close 2000 presidential race and stepped-up efforts by political parties to get their supporters to the polls, voting rates turned sharply upward in the election of 2004.¹² Citizens under 30 joined the surge, increasing their voting from 16.3 million in 2000 to 20.9 million in 2004.¹³ By all accounts, college students shared fully in the larger turnout, offering universities a chance to build on this resurgence so that it can continue and increase.

Schools and universities have a special responsibility to take citizenship seriously because of the close connection between education and political engagement.¹⁴ Studies consistently show that years of education are the strongest factor in explaining voter turnout, and several analysts have found that the civic attitudes young people acquire tend to

persist through adult life.¹⁵ Knowledge of government and public affairs also contributes to more enlightened voting that reflects more accurately the interests and preferences of those casting ballots.* Investigators even find that people with a greater knowledge of politics are less distrustful of government, more likely to support democratic values, more willing to tolerate differing views, and more inclined to vote. As Sam Popkin and Michael A. Dimock have concluded, “the dominant feature of nonvoting in America is lack of knowledge about government; not distrust of government, lack of interest in politics, lack of media exposure to politics, or feelings of inefficacy.”¹⁶

Since most young people will eventually be eligible to vote, the best place to offer a proper civic education is in the schools. Unfortunately public schools have not done much to overcome the ignorance and apathy their pupils display toward government and public affairs.¹⁷ On the contrary, declining interest in politics has been matched by diminished concern for teaching civics, as education officials have turned their attention increasingly to training the workforce to function well in a global economy. Although more than 40 states require course work in civics, at least as one part of a social studies course, the emphasis is typically on memorizing facts about political institutions and processes rather than acquiring real understanding of how our government works and why it matters. The most positive development

*See generally Michael X. Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (1996). Contrary to the claims of some political scientists, citizens who vote in ignorance of the issues do not necessarily cancel each other out, since neither ignorance itself nor the errors that it produces are distributed randomly throughout the population. This point is explained at greater length in Derek Bok, *The Trouble with Government* (2001), pp. 378–81.

has been the growth of community service programs, which now exist in half the nation’s public high schools, although even here the quality of the programs is uneven.¹⁸

With civics courses in a weakened state, test scores measuring the political knowledge of high school students appear to have dropped during the past few decades.¹⁹ Interest in public affairs has also dwindled. According to the annual survey of entering college freshmen, the proportion keeping up with politics fell from 58 percent in the mid-1960s to 26 percent in 2000, while the proportion who claim to discuss politics frequently dropped from 29 percent in 1968 to 14 percent 30 years later.²⁰ Since 2000, fortunately, these figures have finally turned upward, but the percentage who think it important to “keep up to date with political affairs” has still regained only a quarter of the ground lost since the 1960s.²¹

THE RESPONSE OF THE COLLEGES

Since the public schools are unlikely in the foreseeable future to prepare students adequately for citizenship, the role of colleges has taken on a special significance. Not only will college graduates continue to vote more frequently; since they are better informed than those with less education, their influence on the outcome will be greater. As in the past, they will likewise make up the vast majority of all public officials, elected or appointed. All these factors make their preparation for enlightened citizenship especially important to the nation.

Oddly, however, despite frequent references to citizenship in college brochures, faculties have paid little attention to the subject. Here and there, a college announces a full-blown commitment to civic education backed by appropri-

ate courses and a variety of supporting extracurricular programs.²² But these instances are extremely rare. Very seldom does a faculty give any explicit consideration to civic education in their periodic reviews of the undergraduate curriculum. The president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, Carol Schneider, has even reported that, after “five years of active discussions on dozens of campuses, . . . I have been persuaded that there is not just a neglect of but a resistance to college-level study of United States democratic principles.”²³

Why have universities shown so little interest in civic education? Decades ago, perhaps, faculties could believe that a sound liberal education was all that was needed to prepare students for a role in politics and public life. Whatever the apathy in the electorate as a whole, most colleges could count on their alumni to vote and participate in local affairs at a time when fewer than 5 percent of the population graduated from college and those that did were natural leaders in their communities.

After World War II, the situation changed dramatically. Once a majority of young people began attending college, one could no longer assume that undergraduates were immune from the apathy that affected the public as a whole. Informing oneself about civic and political issues became a more formidable task as the government assumed greater responsibilities at home and overseas. At that point, surely, civic education became a subject deserving explicit attention from the faculty. Before colleges had much opportunity to respond, however, they were engulfed by the struggles of the 1960s. Students rebelled against authority, defied long-standing conventions, and mocked their elders for their tolerance of racism, poverty, and discrimination against women. In such an atmosphere, civic apathy hardly seemed

a problem. Instead, with undergraduates inflamed by an unpopular war in Vietnam, patriotism and citizenship became suspect words on campus, associated with swaggering militarism and mindless obedience to country “right or wrong.”

One must still ask, however, why colleges have continued to neglect civic education 30 years after the era of campus turmoil came to an end. While some faculty members are still suspicious of civic education, surveys show that substantial majorities of the nation’s professors agree that “[preparing] students for responsible citizenship is an ‘essential’ or at least a ‘very important’ aim of a college education.”²⁴ Apparently, then, many faculty members continue to believe that a normal undergraduate program, by itself, will suffice to serve the civic purpose.*

This view is not entirely without substance. After all, almost every generally accepted aim of undergraduate education—critical thinking, moral development, racial tolerance, communication skills, global understanding, breadth of learning—can be thought to contribute to good citizenship, generously defined. Beyond the classroom, extra-curricular experiences in student government and other undergraduate organizations offer training in democratic procedures. Democratic and Republican clubs provide forums in which to discuss politics and talk with public offi-

*Some faculties may avoid paying explicit attention to civic education because the subject seems so contentious. Opinions are divided on whether such education should emphasize rights or duties, whether to stress national or world citizenship, and whether to try to foster loyalty to the country and its system of government or mobilize students to be activists in a struggle against the oppression of minorities, women, and poor people. While these disagreements may explain the reluctance to address the subject, they do not justify it. Differences of opinion surround most important educational issues, but the differences are normally faced and eventually resolved.

cials. Working as a volunteer in housing projects and homeless shelters instills a greater awareness of human needs and the inadequacies of laws and policies that affect the poor. When so much in the college experience seems relevant to responsible citizenship, it is easy to conclude that nothing further needs to be done.

Moreover, the findings of researchers indicate that colleges do produce significant results in preparing students as citizens. According to Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini, studies “almost invariably indicate changes during the college years in students’ political attitudes and values toward . . . greater interest in social and political issues and greater interest in and involvement in the political process.”²⁵ More precisely, the same authors concluded that “net of other factors, including prior levels of involvement, individuals with a bachelor’s degree (compared to those with only a high school diploma) were 1.8 times more likely to be frequently involved in political activities, 2.4 times more likely to be involved in community welfare groups, 1.5 times more likely to be highly committed to community leadership, and 2.5 times more likely to vote in a national, state, or local election.”²⁶ In recent years, the growth of community service programs has helped to increase civic engagement even further. Linda Sax and Alexander Astin analyzed the responses from 24,000 students attending college from 1985 to 1989 and determined that “controlling for students’ pre-college disposition toward service, students who spend time volunteering during college, compared to those who do not volunteer, become more convinced that individuals can change society, feel more committed to personally effecting social change, and develop stronger leadership skills.”²⁷ Since almost half of all students in four-year colleges now spend time volunteering, these findings bode well for democracy.

Another study by William Knox, Paul Lindsay, and Mary Kolb has shown how the civic contributions of college continue on in adult life by tracing the political and civic involvement of 5,409 individuals who graduated from high school 14 years before. The authors found that the percentages voting, volunteering in the community, and frequently discussing politics all rose steadily with higher levels of educational attainment. These effects persisted strongly even after introducing controls for differences in wealth, parental education, and other characteristics of respondents when they graduated from high school.²⁸ Still another study involving the 1988 presidential election found that the amount of formal education citizens received had much to do with how much they knew about the candidates and the positions candidates took on the issues.²⁹

These findings are encouraging. Still, as with so many other aims of undergraduate education, a closer look at the evidence suggests that colleges could be accomplishing a great deal more to prepare their students as citizens. Rarely does a faculty adopt course requirements to reflect its conviction that certain bodies of knowledge are essential to enlightened, responsible citizenship. Outside the curriculum, student government and Democratic and Republican clubs generally exist but attract only a limited number of participants. Even community service programs, for all their recent popularity, enroll fewer than half of all undergraduates.

The fact that so few institutions pay any explicit attention to civic education seems to have had an effect on students. In 2004, the Association of American Colleges and Universities conducted a series of focus groups among undergraduates (and college-bound high school students) to explore their attitudes toward preparing themselves as citizens. In every group, civic involvement was regarded as the least or

next to the least important reason for attending college. "Collectively, these students had no developed conception whatsoever of the role their education might play in preparing them to work on significant social questions confronting their democracy or the larger world. Indeed, it was clear from the conversation that civic responsibility was not really a part of their vocabulary at all."³⁰

The attitudes just described are reflected quite clearly in the choices students make about which courses to take. It is obvious (as political scientists increasingly emphasize) that citizens need to have a basic knowledge of government, politics, and public affairs in order to vote intelligently, let alone carry out other civic responsibilities. There is clear evidence, however, that many students graduate from college without taking even the most basic courses they need to prepare themselves for these functions. According to Department of Education statistics, barely one-third of undergraduates ever complete an introductory course in American government and politics. Fewer than one in ten study political philosophy or international affairs. More than 40 percent do not even take a basic course in economics.³¹ Although college graduates do score much higher on tests of political knowledge than those with only a high school degree, researchers estimate that college-educated students today possess only approximately the same levels of political knowledge as high school graduates achieved in the late 1940s.³²

Recent research by Norman Nie and Sunshine Hillygus has also reached the surprising conclusion that several subjects that are popular with students actually tend to discourage active citizenship.³³ The more undergraduates study social science, the more likely they are to vote and participate in community activities. In sharp contrast, however, the more courses they take in science or engineering, the less they par-

ticipate politically. More striking still, the more courses they take in business, the most popular of all majors, the less they engage in community service, the less they vote, and the less they feel inclined to try to have an influence on the political process (even after controlling for prior grades, test scores, parental education, race, gender, and other variables). On second thought, perhaps these results are not so surprising after all. In most colleges, many students who major in science or in some form of vocational program graduate without taking any course that might awaken an interest in public life or convey some knowledge of the institutions and procedures of government.

Even community service work may not do all that one might think to promote habits of civic responsibility. It is true that participants are more likely to get involved in politics than classmates with no community service. Nevertheless surveys show that most volunteers come to community service not as a stepping-stone to civic engagement but as an *alternative* to politics and government.³⁴ To many of these young people, politics is unsavory, politicians hopeless, and petitioning the government a waste of time. Serving in homeless shelters or tutoring poor children emerges in their mind as the *only* effective way of doing something about social problems.

Such attitudes seem plainly shortsighted. Feeding the homeless is laudable and even essential as a stopgap measure, but it is hardly a cure for the conditions that give rise to widespread homelessness in the wealthiest nation on earth. While the reasons for this condition are complex, the fact that many participating undergraduates do not see a connection between homelessness and government policies toward mental health, poverty, affordable housing, and the like demonstrates a failure of education. The same is true of

their mistaken belief that no useful results ever come from citizen efforts to persuade the government to respond to social needs. By itself, therefore, community service, however laudable, cannot provide an adequate civic education. On the contrary, it underscores the need to pay more attention to educating students about the role of government and the importance of civic participation to our democracy.

Once students graduate, of course, they do participate more actively in civic affairs than their fellow citizens who did not go to college. Still, their levels of involvement are far from optimal in absolute terms. Over the past 40 years, college graduates have shared in the decline in civic participation throughout the population as a whole.³⁵ Moreover, according to Knox, Lindsay, and Kolb, while civic participation among recipients of B.A. degrees 14 years out of high school was above the levels of those without a college degree, fewer than 10 percent of the graduates were active in political campaigns or participating in community groups or volunteer work, and fewer than half reported engaging frequently in discussions of political issues.³⁶

The failure to mount a deliberate program of civic education not only gives students inadequate preparation to participate effectively in government and community. Together with the precarious state of practical ethics, it also leaves undergraduate education largely bereft of a compelling public purpose. Most people today think of college primarily as a stepping-stone to well-paid careers but not as a vital means for achieving better government or stronger communities. At best, undergraduate education provides the human capital to build a stronger economy, but that is a benefit for which students receive an ample private reward and not something most people think of as a valuable public service. Since universities receive tax exemptions, financial aid, and many

other direct and indirect subsidies, they have an obligation to use their educational resources to meet legitimate public needs. To the extent they fail to do so, they can hardly complain when state legislators shift more and more of the financial burden of attending college from taxpayers to parents and students. After all, the more colleges neglect the task of preparing moral human beings and active, enlightened citizens, the more their education resembles a private investment rather than a public good.

TOWARD A MORE DELIBERATE PROGRAM OF CIVIC EDUCATION

How, then, should a college go about trying to prepare its students as citizens? The first step, surely, is to agree in general terms on what colleges can appropriately seek to accomplish. For reasons already explained, no institution should try to indoctrinate students to embrace a particular political agenda. Where issues of policy are concerned, the role of the faculty is to raise questions, not impose answers. At the same time, the need for political neutrality does not excuse universities from their responsibility to prepare students as citizens. How to vote and what causes to support are matters that students must decide for themselves. But the need to vote and the importance of becoming informed and active citizens are values so widely recognized and so fundamental to our system of government that no university oversteps the bounds by endorsing them.

The least that colleges can do to fulfill this responsibility is to offer their students an intellectual foundation that will enable them to vote and participate in public life as wisely and thoughtfully as possible. Such an effort clearly encompasses most of the familiar aims of undergraduate education—

enhancing students' analytical and problem-solving abilities, developing their ethical awareness and powers of moral reasoning, and enhancing their tolerance and respect for other points of view. These qualities, however, are not uniquely relevant to citizenship; they would be important even if students had no responsibility toward their government. The distinctive role of civic education is to give students enough knowledge to make the thoughtful, informed choices that enlightened citizenship requires.* As William Galston observes, after summarizing a variety of recent studies, "competent democratic citizens need not be policy experts, but there is a level of basic knowledge below which the ability to make a full range of reasoned civic judgments is impaired."³⁷

Defining the content of this basic core of knowledge is admittedly a difficult process. The possibilities are endless, since government enters into almost every facet of American

*Some authors have argued that people should be taught to be citizens of the world more than citizens of a particular country; see, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (1996). While it is important to prepare students to live and work in a more interdependent, or global, economy (see Chapter 9), such an aim should not be equated with developing *citizens*. It cannot replace the need to prepare students to vote and participate actively and knowledgeably in the civic life of their own country. The United States and its various subdivisions will almost certainly remain the most important units of democratic government for the vast majority of undergraduates during their lifetimes. In contrast, the family of nations, in its current and foreseeable form, offers many fewer and less consequential opportunities for individuals to participate in multinational governance by helping to influence policies or to choose political leaders. International relations and other nations and cultures are undoubtedly among the areas of knowledge that citizens of the United States should know something about. But educating students to be active, enlightened citizens of *this* country remains the most important civic goal for American universities to pursue.

life from science and medicine to crime, education, and the arts. It is clearly not feasible to acquaint every college student with all the information required merely to understand the most important policy problems confronting the government. Even if it were possible to do so, faculties have no way of anticipating the issues that will prove most pressing over the lifetimes of today's undergraduates.

Certain bodies of knowledge, however, have such enduring importance for active citizenship that every student should be acquainted with them. Four subjects arguably qualify on these grounds. One is an introduction to American democracy that goes well beyond the typical high school civics class to combine a basic understanding of our institutions of government, our rights, and our freedoms with a realistic appreciation of the way in which policies are actually made, including the role of public opinion, the media, interest groups, party politics, campaign financing, and judicial review. Such a course should convey not only a sense of the strengths of our democracy but also an awareness of its persistent problems, such as the influence of money in politics, the political weakness of low- and moderate-income groups, and the diminishing number of truly competitive elections for national and state legislatures. Another important subject is political philosophy, including such fundamental normative issues as the nature of a legislator's duty to represent constituents; the meaning of the claims of equality, equal opportunity, and social justice; and the arguments over redistribution, civil liberties, and minority rights, among others. The third important area of knowledge includes the basic elements of economics, since issues such as unemployment, growth, inflation, and trade are so important to citizens and public policy and because the government itself is so constrained by economic considerations, such as

budget deficits, trade balances, and fluctuations in the value of the currency. The last component is a knowledge of America's engagement in world affairs—its role as a military and economic power, the international institutions and arrangements through which it interacts with other countries, and the dilemmas it confronts in fields ranging from combating terrorism to promoting trade interests to global warming and other international environmental issues.

How a faculty should combine elements of political science, economics, political philosophy, and international affairs and how much space in the curriculum they should receive are questions best left to each individual institution. What is hard to justify, however, is the decision to keep these subjects optional, as they are at present in the vast majority of colleges. Citizenship is *not* just another option for students to pursue or not as they choose. Virtually all American undergraduates will be eligible to vote, and society has a compelling interest in having them sufficiently informed to do so thoughtfully. It is surely odd to require all students to take courses in the sciences or study a foreign language while taking no steps to ensure that they have enough knowledge to understand the basic problems and processes of their democracy. Many graduates will go through life never using the language they studied in college, and even more will make only occasional use of the scraps of knowledge they recall from their course in introductory chemistry, biology, or physics. But very few will escape the responsibility of being a citizen and having to understand something about the operation of their government and the major recurring issues that every modern democracy confronts.

Preparing citizens involves more than imparting relevant knowledge, more even than developing the cognitive qualities required for enlightened political participation. As in

building good character, students must not only gain the knowledge and intellectual competence to make enlightened choices, they must develop a sense of responsibility to fulfill the basic obligations of citizenship and participate in civic life. For some undergraduates, such commitments may be forged by serving in student government or by working in a political campaign. Only a few students, however, will enjoy these experiences in the normal course of events. Most will arrive at college affected to some degree by the civic apathy that pervades the population as a whole. Thus colleges need to consider taking affirmative steps to nurture a stronger sense of the responsibilities of citizens in a democracy.

There is recent evidence that professors who try to encourage civic participation can increase the interest and commitment of their students in becoming involved with politics and public issues. Investigators examined the results of 21 courses given on a variety of campuses. Although the classes were on different subjects, all included some attempt to stimulate civic engagement. Half of the students in the study were already very interested in politics, but the other half were politically disengaged and took the courses to fulfill a college requirement or for some other extraneous reason. Surveys taken before after the students completed the courses showed that disengaged students became significantly more interested in politics, more committed to involving themselves in politics and civic affairs, and more confident of their political skills. In view of the concerns of some skeptics about the risk of indoctrination, it is interesting to note that participants did not change their political orientation or party allegiance as a result of taking the courses.³⁸

In recent decades, many campus leaders, aided by organizations such as Campus Compact, have helped to encourage civic commitment by expanding and improving com-

munity service programs. Researchers confirm that participating in such activities has positive effects on civic involvement. For example, Linda Sax and Alexander Astin concluded from an extensive study of college students in the late 1980s that, after controlling for initial differences in attitude and personality, community service had a substantial effect "on students' lifelong commitment to volunteerism and community activism."³⁹

Academic leaders can take various steps to expand and improve service programs. Merely expressing support for these activities will signal their importance and encourage more students to participate. Limited amounts of seed money can launch new programs and pay for experienced advisors to help participants perform more effectively and derive added benefit from their experience. Equally important is an effort to link community service more closely to related studies of government policy and politics by providing a background course on poverty or incorporating a service component within regular courses on subjects such as health care, housing, and welfare policy.⁴⁰ Fortunately initiatives of this kind have multiplied in recent years. In addition to giving students a broader perspective on their service experience, such linkages can help to counter the all-too-prevalent notion that community service and political involvement are alternatives rather than complementary pursuits.

University officials can also foster active citizenship by encouraging the growth of student government and the use of democratic processes in all extracurricular organizations. Some form of student government exists in almost every university, but its importance varies widely from one campus to another. At some colleges, holding elected office is a mark of great prestige and carries considerable responsibility; at others, it is something of a joke. Unfortunately indifference

seems to be winning out. According to surveys conducted by Arthur Levine and Jeannette Cureton, the percentage of students voting in campus elections dropped by more than half from 1978 to 1997 to a range of 11–15 percent.⁴¹

While attitudes toward student government are not entirely within the university's control, much can turn on the responsibilities entrusted to the undergraduates involved. Where student representatives can only give advice (which frequently goes unheeded), their work will hardly amount to much in the eyes of other undergraduates. But if a student senate administers a budget and has significant functions to perform, it will normally enjoy a higher status, and its members will derive more value from the experience of serving. This is not to say that undergraduates should sit on tenure committees or assume other tasks for which they lack the necessary experience. Yet many issues of importance to students, such as those affecting living arrangements, intramural athletics, and other social and extracurricular activities, are well within their capabilities and can lend substance to the work of student leaders. By trusting them with such functions, a university can accomplish more than one might think. According to Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady, participation in democratically run student organizations is a more powerful predictor of future political participation than taking courses in American politics or political science.⁴²

Finally, university presidents can offer leadership by making clear in words and actions that they consider voting an important obligation for every citizen. Of course, campus officials must take great care not to act in any way that could be construed as politically partisan. But it is surely appropriate for universities to enlist student volunteers to encourage all undergraduates to register and vote, and to acquaint them

with the procedures in their home state for voting by absentee ballot. A widely overlooked provision in the Higher Education Act requires universities receiving benefits under the act to obtain registration forms at least 120 days prior to a federal election and to distribute them to all students enrolled in regular academic programs.⁴³ According to a 2004 national survey, only 17 percent of colleges responding to the poll were in full compliance with the law.⁴⁴ One-third had not even taken steps to secure registration forms or to organize any kind of registration drive on campus. Another 19 percent were “not sure.” Surely colleges can make a better showing than that.

College officials can also stimulate interest in forthcoming elections and foster knowledge of the issues involved by organizing debates, candidate visits, mock conventions, and other similar activities. They can try to establish a polling place on the campus instead of forcing students to hunt for somewhere to vote in the neighboring town or city. They can actively oppose efforts by local officials to inhibit students from registering and voting. They can even encourage undergraduates to play a role in the surrounding community by working in nearby high schools to register 18-year-olds or by serving as poll watchers on election day. In all these ways, universities signal to their students the importance of citizen involvement and help build habits of civic responsibility that will persist after graduation.

The steps outlined in the preceding pages are neither especially novel nor unusually difficult. The fact that they are so often lacking on American campuses suggests that the principal challenge in civic education is not deciding how to take constructive action. Rather the challenge is to persuade college faculties and their leaders that educating citizens and

strengthening their sense of civic responsibility are important tasks for a college to perform and that a traditional liberal arts education is not sufficient in itself to impart either the knowledge of public affairs or the sense of civic obligation that a vibrant democracy requires.

It is strange that universities should need convincing of this fact. After all, developing citizens is not only one of the oldest educational goals but a goal of great significance for educators themselves. Universities are peculiarly dependent on an active, flourishing democracy, since no institution of learning can expect to prosper under an authoritarian regime. As Robert Hutchins once remarked, “the death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.”⁴⁵ At a time when the quality of American public life is jeopardized by ignorance and apathy, it is an act of self-interest, as well as a civic duty, for educators to do whatever they can to address the problem.