Preparation Students for Work as Citizens

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Reflections of a New College President

In the introduction to this edited volume, Harry Boyte argues for an expanded view of citizenship. Boyte’s call rests on the assumption that we face a series of critical global issues that most Americans feel powerless to address, leading to a narrowing of citizenship as seen in voting and volunteerism. Boyte articulates a deep desire to revive and reinvent notions of citizenship in which people get off the sidelines and work with others to solve problems and create things of lasting social value.

The key concept for Boyte is public work, defined as "sustained, largely self-directed, collaborative effort, paid or unpaid, carried out by a diverse mix of people who create things of common value determined by deliberation. Public work is work by publics, for public purposes, in public."

Boyte expands on his early writings by calling on higher education leaders to capture the growing debate over jobs and to consider how we expand notions of citizenship and public work to include the sphere of work. As Boyte correctly notes, work and workplaces are too important to be left out of the debates over revitalizing citizenship. People’s lives and identities are consumed by the world of work. Likewise, work and workplaces are vitally important to addressing most critical global issues.

As I have transitioned into the role of president of Denison University, I have been reflecting on Boyte’s challenge. My thinking has been informed by my own personal experiences doing public work through my professional pursuits. First, I spent a decade as a faculty member and dean at Colgate University working on a series of campus-community partnerships directed at economic development. For the last eight years, I worked for a global organization called World Learning, often known as The Experiment in International Living or The School for International Training (SIT). Each year, World Learning works with about 10,000 young people from over 140 countries to address critical global issues.
In the course of my work, I came to believe that there is a growing gap between the possible and the likely. Let me explain.

First, we have what we need to address significant global challenges, so there is great potential in doing so. In the sociological sense, we have the technology (e.g., knowledge, methods, processes, and physical tools) and the locally rooted assets to focus on climate change, human rights abuses, water shortages, joblessness, ethnic conflict, and other critical global issues. What we lack is the capacity to come together as human beings and socially organize ourselves to use our technology and assets to address these problems. While the potential is huge, the reality is daunting. Colleges can play a larger role in closing this gap by increasing the capacity and commitment of our students, faculty, staff, and alumni to engage in public work.

Second, the potential to act as a citizen-professional is increasing. Across the globe, the most interesting and meaningful forms of citizenship are coming from those who find ways to engage in public work through their professional careers. This is happening in a myriad of ways, including new kinds of social entrepreneurship and socially responsible businesses. It is also happening within large firms as a new generation of managers—more socially oriented than in the past—retool old business practices. And it is happening across the professions as lawyers, doctors, engineers, graphic designers, and other professionals use the new economy to "go it alone" and find ways to be citizen-professionals.

At the same time, there is growing anxiety over joblessness and increasing pressure on colleges to track students narrowly into careers and professions that bifurcate citizenship and work. Jobs matter. Colleges have an obligation to prepare people to thrive in their post-college life. To do this correctly, we need to change the narrative and articulate how we will prepare students to succeed in their personal, professional, and civic pursuits by learning to design lives that connect these spheres in mutually re-enforcing ways. That is the true promise of higher education.

Third, higher education has an expanding civic engagement tool kit, but we keep using the same narrow tools. We need to broaden our approach. The usual calls for more service learning classes and student volunteer groups have their natural limits in reaching our student body. We need to look for new places on our campuses to engage students in civic conversations and actions.

Narrowing the gap between the possible and the likely requires a nuanced understanding of how we increase the capacity and commitment of students to be citizens. It also requires exposing students to effective mentors and role models, while also helping them develop their interest and potential in various careers and professions.

**Taking Capacity Development Seriously**

If we want students to be effective citizens, we need to help them develop the capacity to engage in public work. This means knowing how to do the mundane stuff, including asset mapping, agenda setting, meeting facilitation, and evaluation. And it requires a grounding in the arts of the
tougher stuff: how to listen and hear somebody who sees the world differently, how to persevere through repeated failure until you succeed, how to effectively manage constant change, and how to understand the ways in which local, regional, and global perspectives and issues are interconnected. There are a range of skills that good community organizers, nonprofit managers, and others know that allows them to organize diverse groups of people to get things done over sustained periods of time.

People learn the subtleties of public work by doing public work. It is an experiential process that requires coaching and training. Too often, we send students out into communities with little training. They sign up for some sort of campus volunteer organization. We send them an email about when the van is leaving and off they go. We do a great job of giving students opportunities to get off campus and take actions in the local community, but we do a poor job of using these actions to train students to be successful in the art of community engagement. We can start by making sure that every student engaged in the local community has the necessary coaching and training before they start to do work that matters.

But this alone will not get us very far. We need to look beyond community service and view our own campuses as sites for civic learning. For example, first-year residential halls are among the best places to teach the arts of public work, and almost nobody in the civic engagement community is paying attention to them. In the typical first-year residence hall, we pack a diverse group of people into small rooms. For many of them, it will be the first time that they have shared a room with another person. It's also the first time that many of them have bumped up against diversity. Over the last 30 years, our residential halls have become increasingly diverse, mixing students of different racial, ethnic, religious, and economic backgrounds; sexual orientations; mental and physical challenges; alcohol or drug issues; and a range of other characteristics or issues.

Students come to our residence halls with an array of needs, likes, dislikes, passions, and goals. As the reality of everyday living sets in with inevitable clashes, we have moments to coach them as they learn to build understandings and behavior patterns for the future. Instead, we often avoid conflict and professionalize problem solving. Before students have a chance to learn to work through their differences, we ask our professional staff to step in and mediate conflict, move roommates, or enforce rules. We would be better off training students to communicate more effectively, resolve conflict, and solve problems creatively.

Take the following two examples. A typical roommate conflict begins with students getting annoyed, but rather than deal with the problem directly, they often text their friends and/or use cell phones to call their parents. Eventually they talk to a resident advisor (RA) or a member of our staff. By the time they confront their roommate, they are angry and often voice the annoyance in an extremely negative way. Everyone gets upset. Friends take sides, and the hall becomes divided. Paid professionals then step in to solve the problem. Sometimes we move one of the students. Other times we create rules that allow for people to share space by minimizing social interaction.
Rather than seeking quick fixes to roommate problems, we should see them as moments to teach students the habits and skills of civil discourse. Roommate conflicts are opportunities for students to learn to voice opinions in a constructive fashion, hear different viewpoints, and reconcile competing views into an action or policy. In my experience, the largest problem faced by most public work projects is the inability of people to effectively work with people they don’t understand or like. Roommate conflicts may be our best place to help young people develop this capacity.

A second example is the typical problem of late-night noise on a residence hall floor. Under the current model, students learn poor civic responses that mirror society at large. First, the individual usually approaches the group and asks if they could lower the noise level. When that doesn’t work, students call the local authorities, often campus security or RAs. If this does not have the desired effect, they lump it by either finding another place to study or learning to live with it. Another approach would be for our students to be coached to organize their neighbors to solve the problem. In the process, students would learn to work in groups, develop the art of creative problem solving and project implementation, and acquire the skills of persistence, communication, and conflict negotiation. They also would learn to hold their peers accountable—and be more accountable themselves.

Student organizations are another lost opportunity. If one treats the campus as community, then student organizations are our local associations. Imagine using the language of civic opportunity and public work to get student organizations to understand themselves as community-based organizations. Too often, students involved in these groups are learning poor organizing skills. Meetings are poorly run. Programs are unsuccessful. Conflict is not negotiated. By committing ourselves to well-run campus organizations, we would both improve campus dynamics and capture many educational moments to help students develop the arts of public work.

How do we capture these opportunities?

We can start by exposing students to the liberal arts, especially during their initial years in college. Former Bennington College president Liz Coleman captured this well when she wrote, "‘Deep thought’ matters when you're contemplating what to do about things that matter.” The historian William Cronon articulates why the liberal arts are crucial to our ability to do this when he articulated the outcomes of a liberal arts education as fostering the capacity of students to listen and hear; read and understand; talk with anyone; write clearly and persuasively and movingly; solve a wide variety of puzzles and problems; respect rigor as a way of seeking truth; practice humility, tolerance, and self-criticism; understand how to get things done in the world; nurture and empower the people around them; and see connections that allow one to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways.

Whether our students are English majors or in nursing programs, we need to use the initial years of college to provide them with a broad-based curriculum that gives them the attributes of
engaged citizens. We need to use what they are learning in the classroom so they can understand campus life as a design studio for translating the liberal arts into civic skills, values, habits, and knowledge.\(^5\)

This will require a much deeper commitment to student mentorship and coaching. It also requires a more concerted effort to use the language of civic action. For example, we often use the concept of community when talking about campus life, but then we juxtapose the language of rules and processes. In effect, our campus nomenclature mixes frameworks of civic engagement with language of social control and bureaucratic management. There is a rich language used by people engaged in community work that is powerful, historic, and largely absent on our campuses.

As part of this shift, we need to focus on a different kind of training for both our staff and student leaders. Very few people on our campuses have been trained to do community work. If we inventoried the different kinds of leadership training at our institutions, we might be surprised at how much goes on and how little of it involves the skills, values, and habits of community work. People trained to do public work know how to canvass a neighborhood and conduct one-on-one conversations with people who hold different views. And they are well equipped to facilitate contentious meetings, set agendas, and keep people organized and aligned over time. They understand the art of framing an issue and are adept at seeking allies in unexpected places.

Finally, we need to embrace the messiness that comes with civic life. As a new president, I am keenly aware of how much easier my job is when the campus is free of conflict. This tends to lead to an overly professionalized or managerial view of the job. Quickly we slip into treating the campus as a residential facility, not a site for civic learning—a messy place filled with competing views, publicly contested issues, and engaged citizens. To transform our campuses into sites for civic learning, we need to take an experiential approach, giving students more space and time to learn by doing. This would lead to some messiness and, frequently, to some conflict. But we would see these as positive learning moments and not messy moments to be avoided.

**Exposing Students to Mentors Who Model Citizenship through Work**

Many students have grown up in families and communities with poor civic role models. They have seen few people exert effective citizenship, either in private, public, or in their professional lives. We need to expose them to mentors and role models.

It starts on campus by supporting faculty and staff who want to engage in public work. There are a range of ways that administrators send out cultural signals and construct incentive structures that place tremendous obstacles in the ways of our faculty and staff who want to be citizen-professionals. Do we encourage junior faculty to get involved in public work projects? Do we free staff to attend civic meetings that take place during the workday? How do we treat staff when they take public stands that might not benefit the college? This requires tackling difficult and deep issues around how we define and reward different kinds of teaching and research.
means being willing to talk openly about what counts for promotion and tenure, and incentive structures within our institutions that have mostly pushed faculty to be less engaged with our students and local communities.

But it goes well beyond role modeling on campus. Our students need mentors within local communities. In subtle and not so subtle ways, colleges shape the availability of these role models. Every day, colleges make a myriad of decisions about how to operate. In doing so, we shape the local environment in ways that either expand or constrict the ability of everybody in the local community to be citizens through work, and hence role models and mentors for our students. For example, as I have transitioned into Denison, I have met people who are starting businesses and stores with an ecological bent; creating organic farms; engaging in social entrepreneurship; and working as independent professionals who have more time to participate in community-based endeavors.

As Denison makes daily decisions about how to operate, our actions either support this work or constrain it. In my first few months as president, I am keenly aware of how subtle and easy it is to miss the connections. For example, we have told our new food vendor to purchase food from farmers who are trying to construct an innovative regional food system, allowing us to deepen relationships and help to stabilize a few farms that are connected to our environmental studies and first-year programs. We are exploring ways to get students off campus to support local stores run by citizen professionals. In my initial talks to civic organizations, I am talking openly about the need to protect the civic fabric of our community by more consciously supporting members of our community who are blending work and citizenship. As part of this, I am meeting with social entrepreneurs to open a dialogue on how the college impacts their potential success.

These “ordinary” decisions have deep impacts. By role modeling, I am trying to implicitly give our faculty and staff more space to act in a similar way. I am also trying to consciously operate the college in ways that create room for more local community members to be the kinds of coaches and mentors our students need.

**Helping Students Find Careers that Matter**

Many students crave jobs that matter. Students are starting small-scale NGOs and seeking out firms that contribute to the social good. They are applying for positions at Teach for America and the Peace Corps by the droves. We can make progress by continuing our work to prepare students for jobs in nonprofits, education, socially responsible businesses, and as social entrepreneurs.

At a deeper level, we need to prepare students to work in ways that transform the professions. We want to educate our students to be doctors, lawyers, financial investors, and others who approach their jobs as engaged citizens. It's one thing to prepare students to seek careers that have a positive social impact. It's even more exciting to nurture a generation to transform professions into jobs that have a social impact.
There are some complex shifts to this idea. Fundamentally, we need to transform how professionals see themselves in relation to others. How do professionals see their work in relation to their role as citizens? If compartmentalized, how do we break down silos and let people work together as citizens? Are they professionals by day and citizens by night, or are they community members who seek to drive their businesses forward in ways that have social benefits? Second, when professionals act in the community, do they act for us or with us? How do we shift the professional mindset from someone who acts on us to somebody who acts with us?

This requires rethinking the career development process. The ramp into college needs to create a more intentional connection between the curriculum and career development, but not in the ways we usually articulate. We need to find ways early in a student’s college career to frame large questions about their place in human history. The first-year experience should be filled with classes that explore the classic liberal arts issues. We then need to build on those classes during the sophomore and junior year to get students to draw connections between liberal arts frameworks and skills, and real conversations about careers and professions. Imagine a pre-professional engineering program with a series of ethics, creative writing, and anthropology courses that help students explore what it means to be an engineer in the context of large historical sweeps of history. We need more thoughtful and intentional ways to connect classes that create an arc which helps students develop clear views about how civic lives are led through the professions—and this should be the main narrative, not just an addendum.

We also need to rethink the ways we launch students into their first jobs and ultimately into a profession. We need to expose them to alumni who can speak about jobs and about the ways people blend professions and public work. Too often we bring in alumni who work in the nonprofit sector and who speak to the civically minded students with a narrow focus on their notions of work. We then bring in alumni who work in the private sector and who often focus on more material goals in their talks with students. Why not blend the two? Why not use internships, externships, off-campus excursions and campus programs to expose students to alumni who are working in a range of professions to build meaningful lives where public work is infused throughout their work lives. We need to give people permission and space to make the hidden visible to our students as part of a larger process of linking jobs to citizenship and public work.

At Denison, we are at the very beginning of a long conversation about how to move in this direction. We are taking a hard look at the first year to make sure we are effectively getting students to ask big questions as a way to unearth and upend assumptions, freeing their minds to explore and imagine. We are taking a hard look at the sophomore year to find places to get students to make better decisions about academic majors because this is another place where students start to form decisions about jobs that bifurcate work and citizenship. We are asking how we can use the time between semesters to expose students to alumni and parents through internships, externships, and profession-specific training. And we are examining new language
and forms of mentorship that help students understand the career arc and the notion that the first few years out of college is the time to take some risk and explore.

**Conclusion**

Boyte’s call to action has led me to consider a new perspective on my work that blends my professional practice with my civic passions in ways that are mutually re-enforcing. I am also trying to lay out a blueprint for how higher education can better prepare our students to be effective and engaged citizens.

Boyte is correct in calling for a revived conversation about an expanded notion of citizenship. He is also right to connect it to the sphere of work. In my view, we have a generation of college students who crave this conversation. I also believe colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to lead the way in creating a new kind of exciting citizen-led future.

**Endnotes**


