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How colleges can teach students to be good citizens

by SHANNON NAJMABADI

When Elizabeth A. Bennion asked students in her political-controversies course to discuss gun control, the conversation could have dissolved into fractious debate. Her class included strong supporters and staunch opponents of gun-control legislation.

Equipping the class with readings and a list of gun-control measures, Ms. Bennion, a political-science professor at Indiana University at South Bend, asked the students to devise a policy. The catch? They were divided into groups that deliberately had both proponents and adversaries of gun control.

When they were forced to seriously consider an opposing view and to listen to their classmates' concerns, Ms. Bennion says, students were able to move beyond rhetoric and arrive at a reasonable compromise. "What's amazing," she says, is "every team ends up with multiple policy changes on which they agree."

That ability to engage in productive dialogue about contentious issues is increasingly timely in the wake of a presidential campaign marred by intolerance and bombast.

Many professors and administrators are now giving renewed attention to civic engagement — a catchall phrase for teaching students how to be good citizens. It encompasses a range of approaches, such as helping students have conversations across ideological differences, providing opportunities to engage in community-service projects, teaching critical-thinking and media-literacy skills, and building knowledge of political processes.

Ms. Bennion's efforts are part of a broader movement to make civic learning and democratic engagement a priority, which is notable for taking place at a time when higher education is increasingly geared toward work-force preparation.

Five years ago this month, the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement released a report, "A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future." It sounded the alarm about what one of its authors called "a moment of serious reckoning for our democracy." The report and an accompanying campaign are credited with giving legitimacy to professors already working on civic-learning initiatives, and to regional and state systems that are making such efforts a priority.

But incorporating civic learning also faces broad challenges: How is it best to teach? Who is responsible for it? How do faculty members integrate it into their courses? And what do students take away from it?

Tensions and Trade-Offs

One tension arising from civic-learning efforts is whether it should focus on transmitting a body of knowledge or be taught as a general skill or disposition. Traditional civics courses teach students about government structures and democratic principles, says Caryn McTighe Musil, the lead author of "A Crucible Moment," but not "how to 'do' democracy." Students must know not just how a bill becomes a law but also how to call their legislator or where to vote. "Democracy is dependent on verbs," says Ms. Musil, a senior scholar and director of civic learning and democracy initiatives at the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

To do that, some colleges focus on linking theory and practice, such as by building fieldwork, case studies, or simulations into course curricula. Many colleges arrange service-learning positions where students can apply their classroom knowledge to meet a community need. Students want to see the connection between their academic work and the world at large, says Richard Guarasci, president of Wagner College, in New York, and a longtime proponent of civic engagement. At Wagner, for example, students with finance or accounting skills sometimes team up with local businesses to help apply for bank loans or develop business plans, he says.

But that approach has its critics. A recent report by the National Association of Scholars, an advocacy group with a traditionalist view of higher education, criticized this “new movement” to infuse civics education with “progressive political activism.” The report called instead for traditional civics courses covering how democracy works, and denounced service learning as “an effort to divert students from the classroom to vocational training as community activists.”

Assessing the impact of civic engagement is another challenge that scholars are grappling with, says Mr. Guarasci. Assessment can be difficult because civic learning encompasses so many skills. And each of those skills is often hard to quantify. In a rubric to gauge students’ levels of civic engagement, the college and university association tries to. Among other things, the scholars who created the rubric say high performers should be able to “tailor communication strategies to effectively express, listen, and adapt to others,” and to “collaboratively work across and within community contexts.”

While professors and administrators can rely on surveys or attendance at community or campus events as one metric when students are in college, the true measure of civic engagement comes later in life, as students graduate, enter the workplace, and settle down in communities, says John J. Theis, executive director of the Center for Civic Engagement for the Lone Star College system, in Texas. “It will be difficult to assess,” he says, “but hopefully we’ll see a more-engaged citizenry.”

A study by Katy Harriger, a co-chair of Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement at Wake Forest University, suggests such long-term engagement may be occurring. Ms. Harriger, a professor of politics and international affairs, and her research partners followed up with a cohort of students who had been exposed to various civic-learning initiatives while undergraduate “Democracy Fellows” a decade ago.

Those fellows participated in seminars and events around deliberation, democracy, and other civic issues. When compared to a group of control students who had lacked similar exposure, Ms. Harriger found the Democracy Fellows were, 10 years later, generally more willing to be engaged in political life and to converse with people they disagree with.

Practical Steps

“A Crucible Moment” urged colleges to teach civic learning within disciplines. But, at many colleges, faculty buy-in can be difficult. According to Indiana’s Ms. Bennion, professors may not be comfortable teaching civic engagement or may feel they’re being burdened with one more obligation. But she says including civic learning doesn’t have to mean giving up on existing departmental goals.

Ms. Bennion, a co-editor of *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen*, a 2013 book, is working on a follow-up volume to be released in August. In part it will aim to provide discipline-specific examples of civic learning so faculty members see that it isn’t as difficult as they might fear. Professors can include a unit or add an exercise asking students to reflect on the connection between course topics and public policy. “There are very practical steps

that you can take to integrate this into your existing curriculum and enrich students' learning," she says.

Christopher Swan incorporates an element of service learning into his civil- and environmental-engineering courses at Tufts University. In one class about hazardous waste, for example, Mr. Swan, an associate professor, gave students data on three contaminated lots in the Boston area and asked them to develop a system to clean the lots up.

He used to make up data about waste sites, but when he started using real examples, he was struck by how much more involved and motivated his students became. When the students work with a community, they learn real-world skills, like how to deal with incomplete data or to satisfy multiple stakeholders — skills they don't learn from him "standing in front of them and reciting case history after case history, or just saying, Do this calculation."

"In terms of what they were learning," Mr. Swan says, "they were going beyond what I would teach in a class."