

Book Sheds Light on Practices for Instilling Civic Values and Engaging College Students in Political Life

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Ileana Marin and Ray C. Minor (Eds.), *Beyond Politics as Usual: Paths for Engaging College Students in Politics*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2017, 252 pages. ISBN: 978-1-945577-02-04

Institutions of higher education have played a central role in American democracy, from the early days of the revolution, when colonial colleges were centers of debate and breeding grounds for early American political leaders, to the development of land-grant institutions created in the mid-19th Century to serve America's working citizens (Mathews, 2017). Today, amidst concerns about political apathy among Millennials, or those born between the early 1980s and mid-1990s, (Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge, 2013), coupled with higher education priorities shifting away from public service and more toward cost-effective career preparation (Small, 2017), it is important to reflect on the critical role that colleges and universities can play in fostering civic participation, and to share best-practices for doing so. The Kettering Foundation's new book, *Beyond Politics as Usual: Paths for Engaging College Students in Politics*, provides readers with an overview of the political learning, values, and action of American college students today, and presents several practices employed by colleges, universities, and nonprofit organizations throughout the country to promote civic values and encourage engagement in the political process. The collection of thoughtful essays in this book can be useful for a diverse audience interested in these issues, from faculty members and administrators, to community partners, to student leaders.

The book begins with an introduction by the editors, Marin and Minor, program officers for the Kettering Foundation. Their introduction provides a summary of the Kettering Foundation's interest and involvement in higher education and democracy, and describes the genesis of the current publication, which emerged from a series of meetings with college and university faculty and others on how college experiences could best be shaped to encourage today's college students to become involved in the political life of their communities and the nation.

The second chapter, by Constance Flanagan, provides a comprehensive review of the literature on opportunities and challenges for political learning among college students today. Flanagan describes the period of young adulthood as a formative period ripe for the development of civic values and political engagement. She cites research, however, which cautions that simply exposing college students to diverse issues, populations, and community needs is not enough to spark positive civic growth, and may even reinforce negative stereotypes in some cases. Rather, colleges must proactively structure conversations and experiences, and provide opportunities for thoughtful reflection, in order for college students to crystallize their views and foster civic engagement. The remainder of the book provides several rich examples of such initiatives.

Chapters 3 through 6 are essays focused on classroom experiences. In Chapter 3, Elizabeth Hudson explores perceptions of civic engagement as reported by college students participating in deliberative dialogue courses at seven colleges and universities. In Chapter 4, Timothy Shaffer shares his experience with integrating the study of democratic practice and theory into a communication studies course at Kansas State University, noting that while colleges and universities have embraced civic education through the development of centers and hiring of professional staff focused on these issues, such efforts have rarely been integrated in courses outside of political science and related disciplines. In Chapter 5, Elizabeth Trentanelli presents students' experience with deliberative democracy in a specialized course dedicated to the topic, as well as in honors courses with deliberative democracy components, at Gulf Coast State College, a community college in Florida. Finally, in Chapter 6, Lindsey Lupo and Rebecca Brandy Griffin discuss the role of political science instructors in teaching civic skills, and share their experiences integrating political participation exercises

in political science courses at three universities in Southern California. Taken together, these chapters provide a wealth of ideas for faculty members at diverse institutions, and from a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds, who may be interested in embedding civic education in their classrooms.

Chapters 7–12 are essays focused on co-curricular opportunities to develop civic values and promote political participation. In Chapter 7, Mark Small provides an overview of the Living-Learning Communities (LLC) movement, describes the experience of students involved in an LLC focused on civic engagement at Clemson University, and proposes strategies for colleges and universities to integrate civic education into diverse LLCs. Chapters 8 and 9 present civic participation organizations spanning multiple campuses. Rhonda Fitzgerald, Jo Constanz, and Darby Lacey describe students' experience with the Sustained Dialogue Campus Network, a campus movement at 44 colleges and universities founded by the late diplomat Harold Saunders. Joelle Gamble, Lydia Bowers, Taylor Jo Isenberg, and Madeleine McNally present results of a survey of members of the Roosevelt Institute Campus Network, a student policy organization with chapters at 120 colleges and universities in 38 states. In Chapters 10 and 11, Martín Carcasson of Colorado State University and Lisa-Marie Napoli of Indiana University present the experiences of their students who are trained in deliberative dialogue and facilitate political discussions in the local community. Building upon these essays, in Chapter 12, Katy Harriger, Jill McMillan, Christy Buchanan, and Stephanie Gusler report the results of a follow-up survey of alumni from Wake Forest University's Democracy Fellows program, a four-year program engaging students in deliberative dialogue efforts. The authors report that, 10 years after graduation, Democracy Fellows alumni were more politically engaged, and more comfortable communicating about political issues, than a comparison group of Wake Forest alumni who did not participate in the program. As a whole, these chapters provide rich ideas for administrators, community partners, and students who wish to enhance or expand co-curricular activities that promote civic education and engagement.

The book concludes with an essay by David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, who provides a brief history of the role of higher education in democracy. Mathews concludes that the “challenge for higher education in a democracy is to align what they do with the work citizens

do—to nurture and facilitate it” (Mathews, 2017, p. 237). Asking whether college students are adequately learning how to do the work of citizens is a pressing question that must continually be explored by colleges and universities and related stakeholders.

One critique of the book is that only one of the essays focused on a two-year community college. Given that approximately two out of five undergraduates in the United States are enrolled at community colleges (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2016), a broader discussion of the ways that two-year colleges can promote civic values and political participation would be helpful. However, the absence of additional essays about programs at two-year colleges in this book may not stem from a lack of interest from the book's editors so much as from the challenges presented by Trentanelli in Chapter 5 of this book, namely heavy teaching loads for community college faculty and more limited resources. A second critique is that given the related content of each chapter, there is considerable overlap in many of the literature reviews introducing individual authors' essays. Readers interested in the entire book may be tempted to gloss over these individual chapter introductions given their apparent redundancy, but in the process may miss out on important background context relevant to the initiatives described in each essay. A final critique is that the book was mostly divided between curricular and co-curricular approaches to promote civic engagement, and a broader discussion of how the two approaches can be integrated across disciplines could also be beneficial.

Nevertheless, *Beyond Politics as Usual* does a commendable job of shedding light on the political learning and action of college students today, and offers several examples of successful initiatives to promote civic and political engagement on college campuses and in local communities throughout the United States. I am a current graduate student in an interdisciplinary program focused on community engagement, and this book helped me to reflect on the value of the opportunities I have had to connect my studies to pressing issues in the community. As an instructor for a freshman seminar at a local community college, and as an aspiring professor, I picked up several ideas for how to incorporate civic education, both in and out of the classroom, particularly for students majoring in disciplines where such opportunities are rare. I believe that a wide audience of faculty members, administrators, community partners, and student leaders interested

in enhancing or expanding efforts to instill civic values and promote political participation among college students will find this book to be a worthwhile read.

References

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About the Reviewer

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