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Restoring the Civic Mission of Higher Education

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As the school year begins anew in the midst of high unemployment and skyrocketing student debt, institutions of higher education are under increasing pressure to justify their worth and to demonstrate the economic value of the degrees they confer. For many, the dominant, if implicit, mantra seems to be "learn to earn."

It is important that students graduate with the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in the workforce. But it is even more critical that students graduate with the requisite expertise and abilities to be informed and engaged citizens of the American democracy. Unfortunately, in recent years, colleges have been shirking their civic duty. In the midst of a messy election season, this is the ideal time to have a serious conversation about how we can restore the civic mission to higher education.

Historically, colleges sought to mold our country's future democratic leaders by integrating academic instruction with cultivating a sense of moral and civic responsibility for community and country. Indeed, most university mission statements still have a strong civic bent (Brown University aims to prepare students to "serve the community, the nation, and the world"). Remaining true to these civic missions until the turn of the 20th century, many universities incorporated civic and moral content into mandatory capstone courses that encouraged students to think critically about their role in our democracy.

This is rarely the case today. As academic specialization and culture warfare intensify, controversy-shy colleges have retreated from their civic mission. It sometimes seems colleges fall into two categories (sometimes on the same campus): intellectual oases, in which students explore important issues, but do not act upon them, or economic engines where the goals are human capital formation and churning out ever more profitable industrial patents.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these trends have paralleled the atrophy of our democracy. Americans exhibit historically high levels of distrust towards elected officials and their ability to solve entrenched public problems. At the same time, Americans know less about government (only 1/3 of Americans can name all three branches of government, and 1/3 can't name any), and vote in fewer numbers; only 20 percent of 18-30 year olds voted in the 2010 midterms, comprising only 10 percent of the overall electorate. The U.S. now ranks 139th out of 172 democracies in voter participation.

Griping about civic disengagement in the midst of a global recession might seem trivial. How is learning to become a knowledgeable and active citizen going to help graduates get jobs? But such a view would be myopic. The deep-seated problems facing our country, from education to infrastructure to immigration to economic growth, need deep societal involvement and debate. We need citizens who can thoughtfully deliberate on moral and civic issues. Higher education is not the only sector that has too often failed in promoting deliberative discussion. But it can and must play a vital role in the revival of our democracy.

Wagner College, which one of us heads, provides an example for others to follow. A small liberal arts school in Staten Island, Wagner has created a strong partnership with the nearby low-income community of Port Richmond. Collaboration with local officials and

institutions has led to a mutually beneficial partnership that has made possible a wide variety of applied learning opportunities in which critical reflection on civic issues is an essential and inherent component. For example, Wagner nursing students work in Port Richmond hospitals and health clinics, in which they learn not just clinical aspects of health, but its myriad social determinants as well. Wagner business students don't just learn accounting from a textbook; they work with local entrepreneurs to apply it and to address the needs of real Port Richmond businesses.

Wagner has also teamed up with Generation Citizen to work in Port Richmond High School. Wagner students work with teachers to implement an action civics curriculum in which students themselves identify and take action to address community issues they care about, from teen pregnancy to public transportation. Through the semester-long program, both the high school and college students gain the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to serve their communities as active citizens now and in the future. The results are a more vibrant, cohesive community with stronger town-gown relations, unparalleled applied learning that complement and deepen Wagner's academic program, and college and high school students who better understand their roles and responsibilities as active citizens who can change their community for the better.

Our approaches are still far from perfect and they represent just a few ways for colleges to achieve their civic mission in a very specific urban setting. But civics is for every institution of higher education, from community colleges to large research universities. If we truly wish to prepare students to solve the complex problems facing our country and world today, we can no longer afford the narrow, dollars-and-cents view of higher education. If colleges and universities truly mean the words inscribed in their mission statements, preparing students to be active citizens must be at the top of the agenda.

Daniel Millenson, Managing Director of Generation Citizen, was integral in the authorship of this piece.