

Civic Education versus Civic Engagement

Donald A. Downs

Published online: 14 July 2012
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2012

The Obama administration's new report, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*, confronts a genuine problem in American education.¹ The decline of civic education and knowledge in America is one of the few problems about which both sides of the political spectrum can agree, at least in principle. Many surveys and studies in recent years have exposed a stunning lack of basic knowledge among the citizenry—especially the young—about America's constitutional system and the political systems of other countries. According to political theorist William Galston, civic education concerns itself with “the formation of individuals who can effectively conduct their lives within, and support, their political community.”² Galston's understanding of the purpose of civic education poses the central problem we confront as a nation: civic education's eclipse threatens to eviscerate meaningful and critical commitment to the heritage of liberal democracy in America. The “civil religion” that Lincoln hoped would instill the love and

¹The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012).

²William Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 242–43.

Donald A. Downs is Alexander Meiklejohn Professor of Political Science, Law, and Journalism and the Glenn B. and Cleone Orr Hawkins Professor of University of Wisconsin–Madison, Madison, WI 53706; dadowns@wisc.edu. His latest book is *Arms and the University: Military Presence and the Civic Education of Non-Military Students* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

understanding necessary to sustain the constitutional order appears to be floundering.

As E.D. Hirsch, Jr., has shown, a proper liberal education requires sufficient “cultural literacy” in citizens, which entails a basic knowledge of important cultural facts.³ In a similar spirit, “civic literacy” requires adequate knowledge of basic political and social institutions and affairs as a necessary, if not sufficient, condition of citizenship. Beyond such knowledge, citizens must also appreciate and understand the core values that are necessary to sustain democratic life and legitimacy, such as individual freedom and equality under the law.

More recently, critics have taken what could be called a “Tocqueville turn,” casting their attention to the importance of actual engagement in civic activities as a method of fostering civic education. This is the theme of *Democracy at Risk*, a major study sponsored by the American Political Science Association in 2006.⁴ The blue-ribbon authors of this study expressly eschew looking at education and knowledge presented in schools, focusing instead on “civic engagement,” which they define as “any activity, individual or collective, devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity.”⁵ Examples include such activities as participating in the political process, performing public service, and working with various voluntary and community groups.

Most citizens agree that there is a crisis of civic illiteracy. But two inherent problems, substantive and institutional, not surprisingly emerge when we leave the realm of crisis discernment and enter the realm of remedy proposals. Substantively, conflict naturally reigns regarding the content of civic education. Should educators stress traditional civic institutions and values or social change? Consider the politics of sex education. Even if we agree that some sort of sex education is desirable in schools (not exactly a self-evident proposition), intense controversy often erupts when school boards get down to the messy business of putting content into this aspiration. The “textbook wars” that plague the teaching of American history in many states present another example of seemingly intractable conflict. The reality

³E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

⁴Stephen Macedo et al., *Democracy at Risk: How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation, and What To Do About It* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

⁵*Ibid.*, 6. Similar definitions are found in Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). See, “America’s Declining Social Capital.”

of value conflict is obviously compounded when we move from a commitment to civic *education* to civic *engagement*, for the latter propels students into the realm of social, political, or economic activity. Is it right for a school to give credit to students who end up helping partisan political campaigns or causes, especially if those causes tend to favor one side of the political ledger?

On the institutional side, is it the proper business of educational institutions to promote civic *engagement* above and beyond civic *education*? Some critics maintain that educational institutions should limit themselves to the business of civic *education*. After all, education is their moral charter, and they are not exactly doing a great job of educating civically in the first place. The debate over the relationship between education and engagement is reminiscent of the tussle between Hegel and Marx over the purpose of philosophy. Hegel said the purpose of philosophy is to *understand* the world, whereas Marx countered that the purpose of philosophy is to *change* the world. Educators disposed to the Hegelian perspective in this debate—and the real-world track record of Marxist-inspired change is hardly, shall we say, inspiring—reply that it is irresponsible to change the world before we understand it.

With respect to higher education, it is, in my view, a question of abiding by the proper priorities. A vibrant university should be engaged with the real world around it, but it must do so on its own distinctive terms, maintaining its core identity, which is as an institution dedicated to the intellectual virtues. These virtues include freedom of inquiry, diversity of viewpoints, and the highest intellectual standards in the pursuit of knowledge. In *Mission of the University*, José Ortega y Gasset accentuates the university's obligation to be *what it is*, which is an institution dedicated to the highest intellectual standards of inquiry—what Ortega called “science” in the broad, timeless sense of that term. But Ortega also wrote, that “on pain of atrophy [the university] needs contact, likewise, with public life, with historical reality, with the present, which is essentially a whole to be dealt with only in its totality.... The university must be in the midst of real life, and saturated with it.”⁶ “Contact” with the world is proper and necessary, but only if the university remains true to its *raison d'être*, which lies in science and the pursuit of truth.

⁶José Ortega y Gasset, *Mission of the University* (1930; New York: Norton, 1966), 88–89.

“Contact” is one thing, “engagement” another. In being in vital contact with the world, the university must do so for intellectual reasons and guard against simply becoming yet another political aspect of the world. Universities’ claims to financial support of whatever form and to such distinctive protections as academic freedom are premised on their contributions to knowledge and understanding of the world, not to their picking a side in partisan policy debates and sending students out to promote particular causes.

Enter *A Crucible Moment* into this debate. *Crucible* does not provide a way of untying the Gordian knot discussed above. Rather, its agenda would probably tie the knot tighter, because it takes a side in the debate over the content of civic education and engagement, and over the mission of educational institutions. In so doing, its emphasis threatens to violate the Ortegán balance between intellectual integrity and political/historical relevance. Let me focus on just a few concerns.

My first concern arises on page 18 of *A Crucible Moment*, where the authors state that the United States “found itself in a new global role as the leader of the ‘free’ world” in the aftermath of World War II. Placing scare quotes around “free” is disconcerting, for this usage signifies two things: a discomfort with core American principles of freedom (hence *Crucible*’s repeated emphasis upon “transforming” America), and a concomitant emphasis on a particular notion of social and political change, which animates the entire report. I would be the last person to argue that social and political change is not desirable in some important respects, but many Americans understandably prefer change to take place with due esteem for what is valuable about our constitutional heritage.

Beyond this, the report’s authors appear oblivious to the fact that vibrant debate reigns over what type of social change—and what means to achieve it—is advisable. This is not surprising, for *A Crucible Moment* is the product of a progressive administration elected on the basis of “hope and change,” and it was influenced by academics who largely support this agenda. But as other critics have revealed, *Crucible* harbors a not-so-hidden agenda of progressive political change that amounts to taking a side on content and commitment. The report favors government programs pushing diversity and overcoming inequalities through politics rather than endorsing private economic initiative to deal with these concerns. We are given a smorgasbord of liberal progressive prescriptions to our ills. Along with human rights, basic environmental health, and other universally shared concerns, we are lectured on such politically loaded matters as “the transformations necessary for this generation” (19), “more just and

equitable workplaces, communities, and social institutions” (11), “economic sustainability” (11), “growing global economic inequalities, climate change and environmental degradation, lack of access to quality health care, economic volatility, and more” (19).

As Peter Wood points out in his commentary on the report, several concerns that lie outside the progressive framework find no voice in *Crucible*: property rights, ballot initiatives, fiduciary responsibilities, rights that are not congenial to progressives (e.g., Second Amendment rights), military service, and constructive tax policy.⁷ Because our normative disputes often boil down to the *means* of achieving desirable ends rather than the (often vague) ends themselves, *Crucible*'s lack of attention to disputes regarding means lets us down. Hence, we find little discussion about private rights and classical economics as means to achieve more economic equality, even though large sectors of our society consider these means indispensable.

More broadly considered, in assuming a decidedly progressive posture on civic education and engagement, *Crucible* ironically represents a failure of the civic education and engagement it purports to champion. My point here is not that the progressive position is wrong as policy, but that a persuasive report on civic education and engagement that attempts to see things from a higher perspective should recognize two truths: that profound and legitimate disagreement reigns over the best solutions to problems the report cites, and *that recognizing this disagreement is essential to civic education and engagement*. As Samuel P. Huntington taught in his classic *American Politics and the Promise of Disharmony*, American history has been constituted not by agreement over fundamental questions of citizenship and public philosophy, but rather by agonistic conflict—what Huntington called “creedal passion.”⁸ Nowhere in *A Crucible Moment* do we find meaningful discussion of creedal passion and disagreement, which is the stuff of First Amendment law, legacy, and lore.

Crucible no doubt will generate creedal passion in its own right. But it lets us down by failing to integrate creedal disagreement into its vision of citizenship, civic engagement, and civic education. It reminds me of a seminar dealing with a controversial topic in which only one point of view is discussed. Compare that to what happens when a different point of view enters the fray. Now *that's* civic education!

⁷Peter Wood, “Civic Lessons,” *Innovations* (blog), *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 26, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/innovations/civics-lessons/31423>.

⁸Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).