

HOPE AND HISTORY

The Challenge of Civic Organizing

by Harry C. Boyte

Upon occasion, as the Irish poet Seamus Heaney has put it, hope and history rhyme. This may be such an occasion for state and regional colleges and universities. Moreover, presidents have a crucial leadership role. In recent decades, presidents across the vast landscape of higher education have all too often become simply fundraisers and managers, not public philosophers. But the great potential of the presidents' role is to bring poetry – breadth and depth and lilt of vision – back into the work of making clear the public purposes of our institutions. In specific terms, presidents need to address the fact that the recent dramatic increase in young adults' participation in public affairs has been accompanied by growing evidence that young people want fundamentally different *kinds* of participation. Together, these present both challenges and opportunities for AASCU in 2009, whichever party wins, to help craft a new public purpose for higher education.

The seeds of this role already exist. The 2002 Task Force on Public Engagement, *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place*, called for AASCU institutions to engage more deeply with communities and regions. If AASCU translates this vision into widespread curricular and co-curricular initiatives that prepare students to become life long stewards of places, regional colleges and universities will take leadership in the great transformation

of the early years of the 21st century. Across many fields and arenas, from public health to public resource management, from education to poverty reduction, from addressing climate change to lessening cultural, racial, religious, economic and other conflicts, signs of a shift are visible from “mobilizing methods” -- top-down, technocratic ways of public problem solving -- to

self-organized collaborative citizen solutions. This shift is driven at least as much by practical self-interests in more productive public outcomes as it is by civic ideals and values.

In mobilizing, experts and public leaders rally people to achieve pre-determined outcomes. In contrast, in self-organized cooperative public work government and experts are resources, catalysts and partners, “on tap, not on top.” People develop capacities for civic agency, the skills, habits and identities for collaborative work across differences on common challenges in open environments where there is no predetermined script. For communities to develop such civic agency

on a large scale, our institutions must prepare a new generation of citizen professionals with the skills, talents and identities to engage with their fellow-citizens in a different way, what might be called civic organizing. “Civic organizing,” in this sense, entails a very different mind-set and skill-set than prevailing mobilizing approaches.

History says, don't hope

On this side of the grave.

But then, once in a lifetime

The longed-for tidal wave

Of justice can rise up,

And hope and history rhyme.

—Seamus Heaney, *Cure at Troy*

Young people are eager—sometimes desperate—to learn skills and habits of such civic organizing. But they find relatively few opportunities.

The growing interest and involvement of young people in public affairs is well-documented by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), the nation's leading research center on young

people's civic engagement. The record youth voting turnout for the 2008 presidential primaries – 6.5 million citizens under the age of 30 participating – is almost double the youth vote in 2000, an increase from nine percent eligible voters in 2000 to 17 percent in 2008. Of the 17 states in which exit polls were also conducted of youth voting in 2000, 16 saw increases, with some seeing triple or even quadruple increases. Increases in voting have been accompanied by other examples of interest in public affairs. As Peter Levine, CIRCLE director, puts it, "Since 2000, young people have been volunteering at high rates and are becoming more interested in news and public affairs." Of particular importance, CIRCLE has found that young people want opportunities for learning skills and habits of collaborative work across differences. But in fact, it is here they also encounter considerable frustration. As the *Civic Health Index*, the annual report of the congressionally mandated National Conference on Citizenship, observed in 2007, "Millennials [those born after 1975] have the fewest *opportunities* for civic engagement and express the most *demand* for it."

Most often young people learn to mobilize, not to organize collaborative action. In citizen action groups, mobilizing has become a fine art, with a highly developed formula: define an enemy, pose the issue as good versus bad, create a script that shuts down critical thought (any questioning of predetermined goals), and convey the idea of rescue of those being victimized. Most large civic groups, as well as election campaigns, use mobilizing as a matter of course.

Mobilizing approaches also subtly shape professional practices of all kinds. This is because the dominant higher education model prepares students to be mobile individualists concerned about their individual careers, detached from the communities in which they work and the cultures from which they come, who see people in terms of their deficiencies, not their capacities. The historian Thomas Bender calls this shift over the last 50 years in the U.S. the change from "civic professionalism" to "disciplinary professionalism." For instance, Joe Nathan, director of the Center for School Change at the

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Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, has found that teacher education generally includes little or nothing on learning to work collaboratively with parents and other stakeholders, who have often far different backgrounds and interests.

When such learning is absent, graduates see themselves as detached experts providing solutions *for* people, not as citizens working

with fellow citizens on public problems. In the December, 2007 issue of *Change* magazine, Parker Palmer described the weak sense of civic agency and the posture of "value free" practice that results. "The hidden curriculum of our culture portrays institutions as powers *other* than us, over which we have marginal control at best."

The skills and habits needed for students to become "stewards of place," adept in citizen practices, are far different. In civic organizing and public work, people are not empowered *by* leaders but rather empower themselves, developing cooperative skills and habits, defining problems, solutions and assessment measures appropriate to their particular contexts. Public work involves learning to understand human complexity -- the stories and interests of others of different income, religious, cultural or partisan backgrounds. It requires negotiating different institutional and organizational interests. It entails skills of building "public relationships" across differences, learning to think in long term and strategic ways, paying close attention to local cultures and contexts, and developing capacities to help groups to work together.

As I described in *Change* recently ("Against the Current: Developing the Civic Agency of Students," May/June, 2008), learning the skills and identities of civic organizing "goes against the current" of most curricular and co-curricular efforts. To spread learning for civic agency broadly will entail broad institutional, cultural and pedagogical changes.

I am also convinced that through heritage, institutional self-interests, and foundations already laid through the American Democracy Project, AASCU is uniquely positioned to take leadership in bringing civic organizing to higher education. Presidents will play a crucial role in this process. **P**

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