FEATURED TOPIC

Practicing What We Preach

Cultivating Democratic

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Examining the way institutions model democracy on campus is an important, but often overlooked, step in advancing students' democratic learning

AS A NATION, we are experiencing a troubling civic recession. This is a central theme of *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*, the report of the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, which was released in January by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Yet, at the AAC&U annual meeting, the discussions about how to reverse this civic recession were heartening. We are at a moment of convergence; there is a widespread awareness of public consternation over our nation's polarized political discourse, a surge in grassroots activities such as the "Occupy" movement, and a recognition among many scholars and practitioners that the academy must play a role in reclaiming and reenergizing the participatory democracy our founders intended. We believe the strategies recommended in *A Crucible Moment* will be a major part of the way forward. However, the curricular and pedagogical solutions that comprise the core of the report's "call to action" cannot succeed unless we also critically examine our institutions' governance practices.

A Crucible Moment points to numerous structural and cultural refinements that are required in order to create a civic-minded campus, but the report devotes too little attention to how colleges and universities are governed. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis (1928) once observed, "Our government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or ill, it teaches the whole people by its example." Extolling the virtues of democratic practice, on the one hand, while practicing exclusion from the decision-making process, on the other, will not produce civic agency in our students. Furthermore, in the phrase attributed to Lotte E. Scharfman, a refugee from Hitler's Germany and a voting rights activist, democracy is not a spectator sport. If our colleges and universities are not designed to enable students to practice democracy, then our efforts to promote civic engagement are doomed to failure. It is incumbent upon our institutions of higher learning not only to make governance processes more transparent, but also to devise ways to draw students into important decision-making processes on campus, especially those that have an impact on them.

In this article, we explain why examining the way institutions model democracy on campus is an important, but often overlooked, step in advancing students' democratic learning. First, we note how a decline in shared governance produces an educational environment that adversely affects students' civic inclinations and agency. Next, we discuss ways that modeling democratic practices through governance can enhance students' civic learning. We conclude with suggestions for action. We can succeed in supporting our nation's emergence from the civic recession, but first we must look inward to examine and alter our own institutional processes in order to counter the current civic malaise.

Why are students disengaged, and what is our role?

A theme touched on by a number of speakers at AAC&U's annual meeting was the troubling degree of civic disaffection among students (and society in general). What are the conditions that produce this disengagement on campus?

Extensive surveys by the Higher Education Research Institute demonstrate that students

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are interested in being involved in their communities but disinterested in political engagement (Sax 2000). In 1966, well over half (approximately 60 percent) of incoming college students indicated it was important to keep up to date with political affairs; today, this is important to just one-third of students. This decline has occurred during a time when student involvement in community service and institutional support for service learning (linking community-based activities with the curriculum) has dramatically expanded. When students are asked why they favor one over the other, they explain that they want to make a difference and to see results from their efforts. Service learning provides this opportunity, whereas political engagement does not. Few have access to examples where political engagement made a difference.

Limiting opportunities for faculty, staff, and student participation in decision making creates fertile ground for cynicism and disengagement

Regrettably, students are not likely to find encouragement on campus. Many civic engagement efforts on campuses are anxious to avoid encouraging any activity seen as being activist or political. Nor are students offered many examples where debate and discourse on campus have produced change in institutional life. The purview of student government is most often limited to the organization of social activities. Further, students encounter faculty and staff who are increasingly disengaged from governance, either by choice or by overt exclusion. Limiting opportunities for faculty, staff, and student participation in decision making creates fertile ground for cynicism and disengagement. These are elements of a hidden curriculum that instructs students about how much institutional citizenship matters and how much difference they can make.

These messages pervade our campuses, rationalizing students' belief that engagement is neither important nor viable. We know from learning theory that students learn as much from what they see modeled as from what they are told. If we model behavior that is at odds with our civic ideals—if we are attentive to some voices, while marginalizing others—we undermine the learning in our classrooms and within community partnerships. But what if we could alter this hidden curriculum and expose students to a campus where they, along with faculty and staff, could make a difference by participating in decision making and influencing a broader system? Civic education may, in fact, sell itself.

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Shared governance as a mechanism for modeling democracy

Colleges and universities are not democracies. Nevertheless, our decision-making practices can model approaches that are more or less democratic. Robert Birnbaum (1989), a longtime researcher of governance, noted that while decision making is a main objective of governance practices on campuses, many latent functions served by governance are just as important as decision making itself. Governance, Birnbaum suggested, helps campuses articulate values, develops relationships and collegiality, and creates social capital and cohesion. One of the key values reinforced by governance is a leadership philosophy that is either inclusive and democratic or exclusive and hierarchical.

Higher education institutions have not always had a history of shared governance. During the last sixty to seventy years, as universities have gained ascendency as central societal institutions, shared governance has emerged as an essential principle of practice contributing to institutional excellence. The American Association of University Professors' 1966 "Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities" notes an "inescapable interdependence among governing board,

administration, faculty, students and others" (AAUP 2006, 136). To some extent, campuses mirrored the larger political changes of the progressive era and populist movements by engaging in more democratic and collaborative approaches to decision making. However, changes were also the result of growing influence among certain campus constituencies. The twentieth century saw a significant strengthening of faculty voices, which followed the emergence of funded research as a key concern on many campuses. The resulting "academic revolution" enabled faculty to garner greater influence and to emerge as significant decision makers at their institutions (Jenks and Reisman 1968). Similarly, student activism led the way for a greater student voice.

During the civil rights and antiwar movements of the 1960s, campus leaders and stakeholders began to accept the efficacy of shared governance as a means for producing better decisions, and as an expression of democratic ideals that were the basis of fundamental societal change occurring at that time. Lisa Wolf-Wendell and others (2004) have documented how student affairs administrators supported student involvement in campus decision making in the 1960s and 1970s, believing that this was part of an important learning process about democratic engagement. A proclivity toward collective decision making not only was evident in the greater interaction between formal bodies (boards, academic senates, and committees), but it also created an environment that was hospitable toward informal actions like campus protests, letter-writing campaigns, and petitions—undertakings that drew students into campus decision-making processes.

However, the 1980s brought some significant shifts in societal values related to higher education that shaped student views of the purpose of college as well as approaches to governance. A college education came to be seen less as a formational experience than as a ticket to a well-paying job (Bloom, Hartley, and Rosovsky 2006). The shifting attitudes of students underscore this: In 1969, 80 percent of incoming freshmen said that developing a meaningful philosophy of life (the ideal of a well-rounded, formative education) was an important goal. By 1996, that value had dropped by nearly half to 42 percent. During that same time period, the proportion of students who said they were attending college "in order to be very well-off financially" increased from half to three-quarters (Astin 1998).

Also in the late 1980s, management practices from the corporate sector were being introduced into higher education. Decision making around larger strategic issues tended to reduce or mitigate the involvement of faculty, staff, and students. Researchers including Gary Rhoades (1996) and Mary Burgan (2006) have argued that the corporate management practices adopted over two decades have concentrated decision making among a few administrators at the top of the institutional hierarchy. Rhoades reviewed hundreds of employment contracts to show how, from 1980 to the mid-1990s, faculty autonomy and rights in governance diminished substantially. Burgan, using information and trends on governance collected by the American Association of University Professors, described the increased incidence of censure on campuses as a response to governance violations and an increase in reports of the elimination of shared governance from faculty across the country.

Increasingly, as these changes occur, decisions are made without advice or consultation. Faculty on many campuses have gone from being viewed as having authority over the curriculum, admissions, and student life to serving in an advisory capacity on these issues (Kezar and Eckel 2004). Today, most faculty have only token input on budgets, strategic plans, and major decisions. While many campuses maintain senates and other accoutrements of traditional academic

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governance, such groups are involved in fewer campus-wide decisions and rarely provide significant checks on administrative power.

Another symptom of the breakdown of governance is a rise in the proportion of non-tenure-track faculty. Although over two-thirds of all faculty members nationwide currently hold non-tenure-track positions, these faculty are typically excluded from governance and many aspects of campus life (Hollenshead et al. 2007). Also, since non-tenure-track faculty have no academic freedom protections and limited job security, their ability to speak out is compromised (Kezar, Lester, and Anderson 2006). As a result, a majority of faculty members have no input into campus operations, and their ability to engage the larger campus community is limited. Few campuses have actively considered ways to better protect these faculty or to engage them in governance, much as other problems have been ignored. Some argue that campuses have become too complex for shared governance. However, numerous studies demonstrate that as decisions get more complex, more input is needed to weigh various options (Pearce and Conger 2008). None of the research on decision making supports the use of more centralized models. Ironically, while higher education increasingly adopts hierarchical management models, many corporations that once practiced centralized forms of management are now moving toward broader, more collaborative approaches.

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Potential directions from A Crucible Moment

While *A Crucible Moment* does not offer detailed recommendations for governance, several components of the report reinforce the importance of governance and could be used to support the logic behind reexamining governance processes. The report speaks to a civic ethos, advocating that democratic values should be infused into the custom and habit of everyday practice, structures, and interactions. The report also points to a public-mindedness that ought to influence the goals of institutions and lead to engagement with local and global communities. The practices that stand to contribute most to a civic ethos are the formal and informal facets of governance addressed above. The report promotes processes defined by civility, concern for the well-being of others, and ethical behaviors. We agree with this approach. But we are concerned by the multitude of examples on campuses where top-down decisions have had a negative impact on constituencies or where students have become witnesses to rancor and division between faculty and the administration. These occurrences do not serve a civic ethos, and they demand that we attend to our own civic discourse—for our own good, but also for the good of our students.

A Crucible Moment also describes collective civic problem solving as a civic pedagogy that can advance democratic engagement. Building on the work of John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley (2011), the report notes how students learn to cooperate and engage in creative problem solving when faculty, students, and individuals from the community work and celebrate together. While the report emphasizes partnerships between the university and the community, the same cooperation and approach to problem solving should also be reflected in shared governance. Students need to see and be part of efforts on and off campus to address challenges faced by our campus communities, as well as the broader communities we support. This makes civic problem solving something greater than just part of the curriculum, engaging students and campus leaders in solving real-world problems within their own campuses, not just outside them. This is an important lesson from the civic engagement of the 1960s: meaningful opportunities for collaboration, student leadership, and democratic learning can be created on campus through shared governance.

Promising Examples

A number of campuses have made what we believe are promising efforts to create opportunities for students to practice civic agency. We provide a few examples here to show that it is possible to make changes without reinventing governance and decision-making processes. We also review ways that campuses can rethink their approach to governance in order to model civic engagement.

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Wracked by a series of difficult issues in the late 1990s, faculty, staff, and students at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) embarked on a series of initiatives aimed at promoting greater democratic dialogue on campus (Mallory 2008). At the heart of this effort was a desire to cultivate a more capacious form of shared governance. In relating experience, UNH Provost Bruce Mallory explained that "shared governance is about learning, developing, and enhancing the lives of the members of our community, which in turn leads to a strengthening of the community itself" (Mallory 2008, 94). This entailed cultivating a culture of deliberation in which faculty, staff, and students came together to discuss and debate important matters facing the institution. New structures were created to provide opportunities to be involved in governance, and leaders made it a priority to discuss the value of shared governance. Ongoing discussions, which have influenced institutional policy, have focused on promoting a more tolerant and inclusive campus. Discussions about alcohol use included members of the local community and law enforcement officials.

Of course, creating such venues for discussion and debate is not without risk. There are times when constituent groups clash. Further, there is the great danger of creating a kind of democratic theater that approximates real decision making but fails to influence policy decisions. Both of these risks underscore the importance of clarity when it comes to defining roles in decision-making processes—who has a say in various matters—as well as the importance of clarity in distinguishing between those discussions that are consultative and those that are determinative.

While broad, shared governance models democratic practice, campuses should also ensure opportunities for students to engage in substantive self-governance, particularly around issues that directly affect student life. One area in which students can meaningfully participate in decision making is in the cocurriculum. Some institutions have begun to reimagine their residential life and student activities programs in order to place more control in the hands of students. While dean of the college at Colgate University, Adam Weinberg worked with student leaders to empower students to self-organize. Weinberg explained, "We have redefined the role of our residence advisors, or RAs, (student staff who live on each hall). Rather than being police officers who enforce rules or professionalized staff who solve problems, we want them to think of themselves as coaches and mentors who organize teams of students to tackle problems and/or take advantage of opportunities" (2008, 105). Student leaders promoted the idea of allocating student activities dollars so that groups can only access them if they collaborate with another student group with whom they rarely interact—such as a collaboration between Colgate's College Republicans and the Muslim Student Association.

Another example of the value and potential of engaging students in campus decision making is provided by a study conducted by Maldonado, Rhoads, and Buenavista (2005). The study examined and compared two processes aimed at creating student interventions

in order to ameliorate high attrition rates—one was led by students and involved input from many stakeholders, and the other was led predominantly by campus administrators with little input from other groups. Not surprisingly, the initiative that deeply involved students and stakeholders had greater success in retaining students. There are many ways to include students, but through these kinds of efforts we teach them the value of democratic decision making and that their input matters. We allow them to learn firsthand that collaboration creates solutions to complex problems. Imagine if we seriously engaged students in some of the pressing challenges facing our campuses, such as increasing completion rates or increasing capacity with reduced funding.

Today's leaders are often worried about consequences for fundraising and, rather than risk alienating donors, choose not to speak up

Of course, we also need to think more broadly about partnering in the community to make a difference in civic affairs beyond the campus. If students were routinely part of community-based problem-solving work with faculty, staff, and community members to address key issues such as local development, water or air quality, or human services, we could share the experience and create a template for how to get involved. Also, what if campus leaders were more vocal in civic affairs? It was once common for presidents to speak out on a range of civic issues, from foreign affairs to domestic policy. Today's leaders are often worried about consequences for fundraising and, rather than risk alienating donors, choose not to speak up. Such silence sends a poor message to our students. How can campus leaders regain their voice and model civic commitments?

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A Crucible Moment points to the need to create civic-minded institutions. We believe governance can be an effective vehicle for achieving this goal. Leaders need to prioritize and provide incentives for involvement in governance. Promotion to full professor, for example, should include as one criterion greater institutional service and leadership. Administrators need to resist the temptation to centralize decision making or to maintain processes that are merely symbolic. If governance processes are not quick or nimble enough, why not restructure them rather than sidestepping them? This is hard work, but leaders who care will spend time creating meaningful structures for input, rather than shaking their fists with frustration because current structures do not work. Faculty also need to be willing to help change these structures, many of which are based more on tradition than on functional, effective approaches to decision making.

We need to come together as a community, rethink our forms of civic engagement and our governance structures, and develop processes that work for all stakeholders and that both mirror and model our civic values. Campuses—particularly those with hierarchical, tiered faculties—need to undertake efforts to include all faculty in governance and to address their academic freedom protections in faculty handbooks or collective bargaining agreements. Campuses should also consider multiyear contracts for non-tenure-track faculty as another way to protect academic freedom. Since staff are often left out of discussions of shared governance, particularly at elite institutions, efforts should also be made to ensure that staff input is included in key institutional decision making.

Conclusion: Being the change we want

A Crucible Moment and the ongoing efforts of our partners at AAC&U are helping reinvigorate a dialogue about the academy's role in reversing the civic recession. However, widespread success in achieving our civic learning

goals requires expanding the blueprint provided in the report and developing clearer strategies for modeling and rewarding engagement practices on our own campuses. At each institution, these efforts should begin by changing institutional governance processes in order to model the ideals we wish to create, and then expanding beyond the core to encourage broader democratic engagement.

We are hopeful that campus communities will come together—faculty, students, staff, and administrators—to envision and implement new, collaborative decision-making standards that revitalize broader efforts to address the national civic malaise. New governance models and changes in local practice may serve to promote much broader changes to practices globally. Existing and emerging democracies around the world still look to the United States for leadership on democratic practices, and the growing numbers of international students studying on our campuses will export the behavior we model. Working together, we can restore our institutions' potential to produce strong examples of civic engagement. US institutions of higher education were once strong models of civic engagement through shared governance, and we believe we can inspire countries once again with our democratic practices. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors' names on the subject line.

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