

**TAKING ENGAGEMENT SERIOUSLY:  
ACADEMIC SUCCESS, CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY  
AND THE FIRST-YEAR STUDENT**

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“...young people remain marginalized in our society – and their plight has worsened since the 1960s as we have become more and more fearful and dismissive of our youth. Implicitly and explicitly young people are told that they have no experience worth having, no voice worth speaking, no future of any note, no significant role to play” Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*

### **Introduction and Background**

Over the past 20 years, the importance of addressing the special needs of first-year students has attracted an ever wider academic audience. Not only has the number of colleges and universities offering first-year seminars grown to a significant majority of America’s higher education institutions; research on many aspects of the first-year experience has developed apace. At the center of this national movement stands the University of South Carolina’s National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, and in the history of the National Resource Center, no one looms larger than its first director, John Gardner. After his retirement from the university in 1999, Gardner went on to launch still another national center focused on the first-year experience: The Policy Center on the First Year of College. The following essay draws upon many sources, but none is more important than the scholarship published by the National Resource Center and a personal opportunity to work with Gardner during the 2004-2005 academic year.

At the time I started working with Gardner, The Policy Center’s self-identified “signature project” was an initiative called Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year: “a comprehensive, guided self-study and improvement process that enhances an

institution's ability to realize its goals for student learning, success, and persistence" ([www.firstyear.org](http://www.firstyear.org)). Funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies and the Lumina Foundation for Education, this initiative sought to bring a new deliberateness to the design of first-year programming. Indeed, in comparison with an earlier effort by the Center simply to identify strong *existing* programs (published in 2005 as *Achieving and Sustaining Institutional Excellence for the First Year of College*), this initiative would take program design and institutional self-understanding to a new level.

The initiative was officially launched in February of 2003

with an open invitation to over 900 four-year campus chief academic officers at member institutions of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC). These campuses were invited to participate with the Policy Center in the development of standards for the first year, which we termed "Foundational Dimensions®" or "Dimensions" for short. Over 200 member institutions of both organizations agreed to participate in the project and to establish campus-wide "Foundations Task Forces" to consider an initial short list of six Dimensions developed by Policy Center staff... ([www.fyfoundations.org/projectOrigins.aspx](http://www.fyfoundations.org/projectOrigins.aspx))

At the core of this effort lay a "highly intensive year-long assessment project, involving both qualitative and quantitative measures, to measure [a] campus's achievement of each Dimension" ([www.fyfoundations.org/projectOrigins.aspx](http://www.fyfoundations.org/projectOrigins.aspx)). A complementary, but secondary, aspect of this work focused less on the diagnosis and assessment of existing programs than on what was referred to as the project's "aspirational" dimension. It was this aspirational dimension that accounted for my own participation.

During the second half of the 1990s, much of my professional work revolved around a series of monographs exploring the relationship between service-learning and individual academic disciplines/disciplinary areas. Once this series had been launched, Gardner suggested the creation of a complementary text focused on service-learning and

the first-year experience. I agreed, and the resulting text was published by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition: *Service-Learning and the First-Year Experience: Preparing Students for Personal Success and Civic Responsibility* (2002).

Work on this text eventually led to an invitation to join Gardner's Foundations initiative as a faculty associate. In the following sections of this essay, I have tried to capture some of the more important things I learned during my year with the Foundations project, especially with regard to the often marked difference between the attitudes and interests of first-year students and those of their instructors. Since my work allowed me to visit 22 of the participating 24 campuses and to hold focus groups with students as well as faculty members, I was able to compile an extensive set of notes that I could then set over against relevant published research. By drawing upon these two independent sources of information, I hope to have achieved for the following both an immediacy and a broad relevance it might otherwise lack.

I have grouped my observations into two general areas: one dealing with *traditional* academic engagement and one dealing with civic or community engagement. I emphasize "traditional" because the civic or community engagement I focus on is itself an academic undertaking. "Service-learning" or "community-based learning," as it is sometimes called, entails community-based work formally sponsored and deliberately utilized as a learning strategy by an academic unit. All the institutions I visited had at least some interest in civic awareness and public service, and some had developed institution-wide service-learning programs to help address that interest. However, although engagement in both its forms was an explicit concern of the Foundations project,

my job was not so much to assess current practices as to suggest future initiatives. For this reason, I have decided not to identify the specific institutional source of any of the oral or written statements to which I refer. (The names of all institutional participants can be found on the Foundations website.) Like my campus visits, this essay is meant to serve primarily as an incentive to new initiatives vis-à-vis first-year programming.

### **Perceptions and Expectations**

A key tool all Foundations institutions used in assessing the success of their first-year efforts was the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). George Kuh, the NSSE's director, describes the initiative's "conceptual framework" as follows:

What students **do** during college counts more in terms of desired outcomes than who they are or even where they go to college. That is, the voluminous research on college student development shows that the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development...The implication for estimating collegiate quality is clear. Those institutions that more fully engage their students in the variety of activities that contribute to valued outcomes of college can claim to be of higher quality compared with other colleges and universities where students are less engaged. (original emphasis) ([http://nsse.iub.edu/pdf/conceptual\\_framework\\_2003.pdf](http://nsse.iub.edu/pdf/conceptual_framework_2003.pdf))

With this finding as its guiding premise, the NSSE gives higher education institutions an opportunity to find out directly from their students the extent to which those students have participated in activities thought to promote academic engagement.

However, as campuses participating in the pilot year of the Foundations project quickly noted, "existing surveys [focus] primarily on student characteristics or 'what students do' rather than 'what institutions do'" ([www.fyfoundations.org/surveys.aspx](http://www.fyfoundations.org/surveys.aspx)). Hence, to "meet the needs of [institutional] task forces for multiple perspectives on first-year institutional efforts," the Policy Center, in partnership with Educational

Benchmarking, Inc., developed several additional surveys, one of which was designed to gather “information from faculty and selected staff members about the effectiveness of current first-year practices and policies” ([www.fyfoundations.org/surveys.aspx](http://www.fyfoundations.org/surveys.aspx)). Such an adjustment speaks well to one of the most important discoveries I made during the course of my own work with the Foundations project; namely, that there exists in many instances and in many different ways a significant gap between what students claim to have experienced and what faculty/staff members claim to have provided in and through first-year courses.

Such a gap is not, of course, limited to first-year courses. Nor does it appear only in the case of certain kinds of courses or programs. However, at almost every school where I was able to meet a student focus group to discuss their first-year experiences, I quickly discovered that the typical student complaint leveled at first-year seminars differed considerably from the complaints leveled at introductory discipline-based courses. While students found much to praise and much to blame across the first-year curriculum, complaints about the first-year seminar tended to fall into one of two broad categories; either that the amount of work the seminar required far exceeded the number of course credits it carried or that there was no workload consistency among different sections of the course. In other words, the majority of student complaints pertained to workload equity issues, not to course content or teaching style. Introductory discipline-based courses, on the other hand, came in for very different kinds of criticism and tended to spark the most vehement complaints.

Although first-year students have more opportunities to encounter an unsatisfactory introductory discipline-based course than they do an unsatisfactory first-

year seminar, the fact that their complaints about these two kinds of courses tend to point in different directions suggests an interesting possibility; namely that there exists for many students a disjuncture in their first-year academic experience. Indeed, while the literature abounds in examples of first-year seminars that have played an important role in promoting student success and persistence ([www.sc.edu/fye/publications/topical.html](http://www.sc.edu/fye/publications/topical.html)), that literature also indicates that much of what we know about promoting such success and persistence has not moved out into the general first-year curriculum. For example, in a study published in 1998, Catherine Reynolds and Claudia Nunn note that

Freshmen respondents report substantially more interaction in University 101 (U101) [a first-year seminar] classes than in their other first-year classes, with 62% stating that they participate verbally “almost always” or “frequently” in U101 classes. Only 37% of these students report participating “almost always” or “frequently” in other first-year classes. (12)

Furthermore, when asked “if they ever feel fearful about participating in University 101 (U101) classes, 90% of the freshmen report ‘almost never’ or ‘infrequently.’ When asked about other freshman classes, however, only 57% say they feel fearful about participating ‘almost never’ or ‘infrequently’” (12).

Among the many reasons for the kinds of differences noted here one of the most common would seem to be divergent student and faculty perceptions not only of what should be happening in the classroom but also what is in fact happening. While most faculty I met on my campus visits described themselves as promoting “active learning” and academic engagement, one of the most common student complaints was that their instructors lectured much, if not most, of the time. Similarly, while no faculty member ever admitted to discouraging student participation, just about every one of my student focus group yielded at least a few examples of what the students regarded as hostile

faculty behavior. Variations on this student-faculty perceptual disjuncture are well documented in the first-year literature.

In an especially thoughtful and thought-provoking study, Linda Marie Fritschner (2000) set out to investigate whether student participation in introductory and upper-division classes differs to any significant extent. She also sought to determine whether faculty and students understand “participation” in the same way. During the course of two spring semesters (1996 and 1997), she observed fourteen introductory-level courses, six 200-level courses, and twelve upper-division courses. These included courses in the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. Among her findings was a discrepancy of 16% vs. 65% between students in the introductory and upper-level courses who made at least one class comment (345). Furthermore, while only 17% of female students participated in the introductory courses, that percentage increased to 34% in 200-level courses and 47% in upper-division courses. The percentage of participating males remained fairly constant at slightly over 50% (347).

Thus, even by a very modest standard of engagement – comments made in class – first-year students, especially first-year female students, do not score highly, and although it may be tempting to chalk this up to some kind of beginner’s “natural” reticence, Fritschner’s data point in a far more intriguing direction. She begins a section on “Faculty Views of Class Participation” by citing one introductory-course professor who noted that he has faculty “friends who think that if they’re [the students] awake at the end of class, that they’re participating” (354). What is interesting about this comment is not just the skepticism it suggests about the capabilities of first-year students but also the implication that, however low an instructor’s expectations, failure to meet those

expectations [here staying awake] should be laid exclusively at the students' feet. As far as instructors are concerned, "their job" is simply

to provide a basis for future education and to give the students as much information about the subject as time would allow. The instructors all seemed to be in a race against time to teach the "basics" so their students would be prepared when they took higher-level courses." (354)

For first-year students, however, "staying awake" while their instructors reeled off a seemingly endless series of "basic" facts was not what they understood by "engagement." As Fritschner summarizes the student response,

They [the students] thought that participation was more than showing up for the class and taking notes. For example...a nontraditional female student stated her definition of participation as being actively involved in the class discussion.... [Another] student, a traditional male, said that class participation was "group activities where you interact with the rest of the class in open discussion." (355)

Such student responses are certainly much closer to the understanding of engagement I found among the students I interviewed. Not surprisingly, these students also described many of their introductory course instructors as being in a rush to get through the material and anxious about falling behind. Indeed, at times they echoed the views of those students who told Fritschner that some of their instructors "didn't seem to want" participation (355). As a student remarked of one class in particular: "Nobody really participates. The man starts the minute class starts and doesn't shut up until class ends....if you want class participation, you have to give the opportunity. It's kind of like rushing himself along" (355). In short, Fritschner found that

In the survey-level courses, there were two dilemmas. The instructors claimed that they didn't like to lecture, but they lectured anyway. The students claimed that they wanted more verbal participation in class, but they participated only when prompted by the instructor. (355)

So powerful is the desire or need of many instructors to lay out the “basics” of whatever it is they are teaching, they seem largely unaware of just how much their own voice and authority dominate the first-year classroom. On more than one visit, I left a conversation with students or instructors only to hear in the very next meeting their opposites offer a completely contradictory assessment of the amount of lecturing to be found in the first-year curriculum. And while it may be true that students overestimate the degree to which they fail to participate even when given a chance to do so, there can be no doubt that there exists a serious disjuncture between general faculty recognition of the importance of student engagement and classroom practices driven primarily by a commitment to coverage. There was, in fact, nothing that brought even an animated conversation about student engagement to a more abrupt end than for me to suggest that improved engagement might entail less of a commitment to coverage. Many first-year instructors seemed to believe it was their professional responsibility to leave out as little material as possible.

After basic composition and various kinds of entry-level mathematics courses, few courses appear on the first-year schedule more frequently than Psychology 101, and like many disciplines, psychology has questioned both the goals and the effectiveness of its introductory course many times over the decades. In an article published in 1998, Benjamin Miller and Barbara Gentile make a significant contribution to this ongoing review by reporting on their own nationwide survey of introductory course instructors. Their findings provide insights relevant not just to the introductory psychology course but to introductory discipline-specific courses in general.

There was, to begin with, no lack of awareness or good intentions on the part of the instructors they surveyed. Not only did their psychologists clearly recognize the importance of student engagement, it was the goal their participants most frequently recognized as important (70% of all participants). Unfortunately, their participants also agreed it was the goal they least frequently achieved, with only 20% of them indicating they had “very definitely” done so (91 & 93). In sharp contrast, the second most frequently identified goal, providing a survey of the field, was the goal identified as most frequently achieved. As Miller and Gentile summarize their findings,

[a]lthough instructors rated the goal of engage [sic] as most important, what instructors believed their courses did best was to provide a “comprehensive survey of the field” and an introduction to the “different approaches psychologists take.” (91)

In other words, what the introductory course did best was expose the students to information. It did not so much facilitate a learning *experience* – an opportunity for students to think or work like psychologists – as it did provide a conceptual map – an overview of disciplinary topics. Unfortunately for many students, such topics did not speak convincingly to their interests in taking the course. This we know because Miller and Gentile also surveyed students. In this way, they were able to document still another significant disjuncture – one between what students were seeking and what they actually encountered.

Students’ descriptions of the introductory course at the end of the semester were different from their expectations at the beginning. The most widely held expectations [i.e., “understanding people and relationships, gaining knowledge useful in personal or professional life, and learning to think critically” (94)]...were less likely to be checked on the posttest than on the pretest. Few expected the course to be easy, but more found that it was; more than a third expected an intellectual challenge, but fewer found it. (95)

Not only were the students disappointed in their initial expectations that the course would improve their understanding of people and relationships; they were also disappointed in its relative lack of intellectual challenge. Instead of intellectual challenge (e.g., “learning to think critically” [94]), what they found was more of a “comprehensive survey of the field” (91) – a kind of disciplinary narrative: “The biggest change between pretest and posttest was in the proportion of students who expected a comprehensive survey. Forty-eight had this expectation at the beginning of the course, but 69% described the course this way at the end” (95).

Thus, despite discrepancies between goals/expectations and outcomes on the part of both instructors and students, the two groups ultimately agreed that a “comprehensive survey of the field” was the introductory course’s single most reliable outcome. And they reached this agreement even though *both* groups would have preferred a course that allowed for greater student engagement. What Paolo Freire (1971) called “the fundamentally *narrative* character” (original emphasis) of contemporary education ultimately prevailed:

This [character] involves a narrating Subject [sic] (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. (57)

They also tend to become boring, for the “outstanding characteristic of this narrative [approach to] education...is the *sonority* of words, not their transforming power” (emphasis added) (57). Thus, what comes to define most of the first-year classroom experience is not creative faculty-student interaction but exposure to demonstrable faculty expertise. As Fritschner and her colleagues (2000) found in their research on faculty expectations of student engagement, what many instructors – regardless of their

stated goals or values – ultimately want from their students is “showing up...and taking notes” (355).

This widespread preference for “narrative” introductory course teaching, in actual practice if not in original intent, is not news. As I have noted elsewhere (Zlotkowski 2002), not only individual scholars but even national disciplinary associations have lamented what the American Historical Association (AAC 1991) has called “‘the one-damn-fact-after-another’ approach to the “foundation course” (47). These groups are well aware that in many cases this approach means that the foundation course will also be the only course students will take in their discipline. To the associations, if not to the individual instructors, the implications for health of their disciplines is clear: failure to engage students in the introductory course means fewer majors; fewer majors means fewer upper-level courses; fewer upper level courses means fewer faculty positions.

But faculty positions are not the only casualty of this widespread lack of student engagement. Given enough negative experiences, disappointment and dissatisfaction may well lead students to drop out of college entirely. According to Astin (1984), academic boredom is *the* most frequently reported reason students give for leaving school, and there can be little doubt that “narrative” introductory courses, especially outside one’s major, represent for many students a textbook example of boredom. In a study of 252 college students, all of whom were enrolled in at least one remedial class, Mavis Aldridge and Robert DeLucia (1989) found that 80% of the students surveyed wanted “more interesting classes”; 70% reported feeling “occasionally” bored, and over 40% reported feeling bored “often” (46).

Furthermore, these students were quite clear about what led to their boredom. As Aldridge and DeLucia (1989) note,

These students regard the “role of the instructor” as paramount to their level of interest in the class. Instructors who are perceived as being unprepared, unclear, uncaring, or unwilling to engage students in lively classroom discussion are considered the most boring. Common feelings expressed in these classes are frustration, anxiety, impatience, lethargy, and drowsiness. (50)

Such a finding coincides closely with what I found in my own student interviews.

Instructors’ unwillingness or inability to engage – whether it manifested itself in insufficient clarity, a perceived lack of commitment, or a schedule that left little room for substantive discussion – came up at a majority of my focus group meetings. Indeed, almost all the statements Aldridge and DeLucia (1989) cite as examples of what students told them in response to the question “Why do you think the professor is boring,” could have been said verbatim by my own student interviewees: “low, monotonous voice”; “cheerless”; “hates student opinion”; “no sense of humor”; “never talks to us”; “attacks students”; “always in a rush” (48).

Especially worth noting are words like “hates” and “attacks,” for in my student interviews no complaint sounded more harshly than one aimed at an instructor who had adopted an adversarial or even disrespectful attitude in class. While faculty may regard comments about students’ lack of knowledge or weak academic preparation as simple statements of fact, students typically registered such comments as gratuitous put-downs. More often than not, such comments, when directed at an individual student, had led to bitterness and psychological withdrawal. Statements like “That was the last time I ever asked her/him a question” came up in almost every group.

Few instructors nowadays would publicly admit to deliberately putting students down in class, but such actions need not be consciously intended. Fritschner (2000) describes a variety of situations where introductory course instructors allegedly sought to promote engagement but did so in a way that made engagement *less* rather than more likely. She cites, for example, one introductory class “where the instructor changed the course structure to facilitate discussion, but the students perceived that questions and discussion were unwelcome anyway” (356), and goes on to note that “observational data suggested that...professors were unaware of the effects of their frowns, wry smiles, and gruff voice. The overall result was a dampening of class discussion” (356).

Thus, whether the issue is an instructor’s stated intention vs. his/her underlying agenda or his/her stated intention vs. the students’ reading of his/her presentational and verbal mannerisms, the culture of the introductory discipline-based course can communicate a wide variety of obstacles to engagement – obstacles far less likely to arise in first-year seminars where making students feel both welcome and competent is a part of the course design. Given this contrast, we should not be surprised that so many studies have shown first-year seminars can play a decisive role in promoting student success and that first-year discipline-based courses are often more effective when linked to first-year seminars in a collaborative curricular arrangement.

Still, despite the promise of such cross-course connections, the question remains: is it possible to create a truly effective, truly integrated first-year program without a strategy to convince academic departments to rethink their approach to the introductory course? In some ways, the situation here is comparable to one faced by the national service-learning movement some ten years ago when many began to realize that (1)

service-learning and civic engagement would never become institutional priorities until a significant number of faculty became involved and (2) no significant number of faculty would become involved until a variety of discipline- and department-specific resources had been created and were made readily available. These realizations led to several important initiatives including the American Association for Higher Education's 21-volume series on service-learning in the academic disciplines and Campus Compact's Engaged Department Institutes. As a result, faculty began to find support for community and civic engagement directly through their professional disciplinary networks. Since, in the past 20 years, many academic disciplines, especially among the natural sciences, have launched major efforts to rethink how they reach and teach undergraduates, developing *department-based* resources and strategies for first-year courses should actually be an easier task than developing discipline-specific service-learning models.

It is, however, indicative of how little responsibility many academic departments currently assume for the special needs of first-year students that they not only staff their introductory courses with individuals temperamentally and/or professionally unsuitable for the task, but even fail to support relatively simple measures – like making use of materials developed by their own national association – that could make their introductory courses more appealing and accessible. While few departments are in a position to include among their members someone with the kind of special skills Marvin Druger (2003) identifies as important for introductory science course instructors, they can nonetheless avoid tapping instructors who relay to their students their own lack of enthusiasm for the course they're teaching (a practice the students I interviewed referred to with surprising frequency) and can *insist* that introductory courses demonstrate “the

relevance of science [or whatever the academic discipline] to society and the intellectual life of the student” (Druger 148).

Unfortunately, over 75% of the discipline-specific introductory course syllabi I reviewed in conjunction with the Foundations project – whether they were in the natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, or the arts – failed to meet even this last, rather modest criterion. Instead of helping students begin to answer the question “Why do *I* need to know this?”, the vast majority of the syllabi read like legal contracts minus the legalese, consisting almost entirely of self-referential academic course objectives; a schedule of topics and class meetings; a list of texts and major assignments; institutional boiler plate about issues like attendance, plagiarism, and students with disabilities; and, perhaps 25% of the time, assurances that the instructor was rigorous, vigilant, aware of student ploys, and fully prepared to take punitive action if tested. More often than not, these documents had all the excitement of a car rental agreement.

Of course, as was pointed out to me almost every time I mentioned the impersonality and thinness of a set of syllabi, students don’t read syllabi anyway, so why bother making them more inviting? The answer, I believe, has been well captured by Sharon Parks (1991) in her book *The Critical Years: Young Adults and the Search for Meaning, Faith, and Commitment*: “We might say that in preparing a syllabus, educators profess what they believe to be of value – worthy images, insights, concepts, sources, and methods of learning that they have found to lead toward a worthy apprehension of truth” (174). It may indeed be the case that students largely disregard syllabi, but is this neglect the cause or the result of what an instructor sets in front of them? And does the instructor

deliberately use his/her course syllabus as a potentially important teaching-learning opportunity or merely as a schedule of assignments and penalties?

To be sure, a syllabus is not a course, and one must be careful not to extrapolate too much from what a syllabus fails to address. Still, when an introductory political science syllabus never refers to a single concrete issue facing American government today or a chemistry syllabus doesn't name a single substance anyone but a chemist would recognize, or a composition 101 syllabus all but accuses participating students of (1) illiteracy and (2) dishonesty – one may justifiably wonder how much thought has been given to student engagement in the courses these syllabi represent. Often I was left with the feeling that if I were a student and received such a syllabus, I would either switch to another course or prepare myself for the likelihood of a very long term.

It would be hard to overestimate the importance to first-year students of personally relevant learning. While 79% of the students surveyed by Aldridge and DeLucia (1989) wanted “more interesting classes,” almost the same percentage – 82% – wanted classes “more relevant to [their] career” (47). Furthermore, such an interest in career relevance does not necessarily represent a vote to eliminate whatever remains of liberal education. When these same students were asked open-ended questions about what made a subject exciting, their answers turned less on career preparation than on personal interest and useful skills. In other words, students wanted courses that allowed them to invest their time and energy in something they themselves could see mattered. As Erickson, Peters, and Strommer (2006) stress in what is one of the best introductions to first-year student needs, one simply cannot afford *not* to make a case for *why* a given subject is important and *how* it relates to students' own concerns and experiences.

First-year students enroll in many of their courses to meet curricular requirements, and they bring about as much enthusiasm to the task as we might expect from people doing something that someone else has decided will be good for them. Yet there is no getting around the relationship between motivation and learning...

The reasons first-year students give for coming to college...may not give us much to go on. Few of us can claim a direct link between our course and a better job or higher salary – and we are not convinced we should even if we could. It is also true, however, that students are just as interested in what is happening in their lives right now as they are in the good life they envision down the road. If we can find even one or two connections between our subject matter and the questions, issues, or dilemmas students encounter, their motivation will be strengthened. (69-70)

In other words, what first-year students need in almost any academic situation is precisely what Miller and Gentile's psychology 101 students were expecting but not getting: some way to locate their academic experiences in a broader context, be that context personal relationships, contemporary concerns, or general academic/professional utility. Hence the literature on foundation courses is rich in urgent recommendations to contextualize and connect. As Judith Ramaley, former assistant director of the National Science Foundation's Education and Human Resources Directorate, explicitly noted at an American Chemical Society conference in 2003: "the major challenge facing contemporary higher education is to enhance its relevance and connectedness to the issues and problems faced by the broader society" (Jacobs 2003, 34). Nor does such connectedness mean sacrificing academic rigor. In recommending the development of new science initiatives, the 2003 "Report on Yale College Education" recognized that "What is lacking are courses that make serious intellectual demands but have a different ambition than laying the groundwork for advanced study. Broad introductions to fields of science organized around topics of interest to educated citizens would be obvious examples..." (32). One chemistry syllabus I reviewed organized all its labs around

substances students were likely to encounter in their everyday lives – substances like cigarette smoke and cleaning detergents. A course designed to serve as an introduction to the liberal arts included a research assignment requiring students first to identify the countries where their own clothing had been manufactured and then to investigate typical garment-worker conditions in those countries. I would venture to guess there are no academic areas in which one could *not* compile a dossier of academically rigorous assignments illustrating this kind of personal connection.

### **Learning Styles**

Towards the beginning of the previous section I noted that my Foundations work made me aware of the many ways in which first-year instructors and first-year students evidenced different – even contradictory – perceptions, goals, needs, and expectations. Differences as to what counts as engagement, what constitutes faculty friendliness and support, what makes an introductory course interesting and worthwhile – these and other, related divergences often serve to thwart what is, in most instances, good will on both sides. There is, moreover, still another kind of divergence that has, up until now, been only obliquely referred to: the divergence between faculty and student learning styles as well as each group’s understanding of a whole series of related terms like “pedagogies of engagement,” “active learning,” “hands-on learning,” and “learning by doing.” Indeed, as various Foundations of Excellence institutional self-assessments made clear, there was not even much consensus among and within participating schools about the meaning of these important terms.

As part of their first-year program review, Foundations schools were asked to address the question: “To what degree do the following first-year courses include

pedagogies of engagement (i.e., active learning strategies)?” The courses to be assessed included (1) required, non-developmental first-level writing courses; (2) first-level psychology; (3) first-level history; and (4) first-level biology (lecture portion only). Many schools also assessed and discussed other courses that serve as mainstays of their own particular first-year curriculum.

From the 20 sets of institutional responses I was able to review, a number of potentially significant trends and similarities emerged. For example, almost all the schools ranked their required, non-developmental first-level writing course as exhibiting a “high” degree of active learning and, in most cases, as the most engaged of the four identified courses. This is not at all surprising since, as more than one school explicitly noted, their first-level writing course primarily deals with the *process* of writing – i.e., learning by doing is what the course is all about. In assessing the three content-based courses, the schools showed far less unanimity although introductory psychology was rarely ranked as “low,” and history’s rank differed perhaps most dramatically among the 20 institutions – from “low” (straight lecture) to “high” (played a key role in promoting pedagogies of engagement across the curriculum). The fact that only the non-lab portion of introductory biology was to be included in the biology course assessment puzzled – and in some cases even angered – biology chairs who saw lab work as biology’s natural vehicle of active learning. Indeed, some simply refused to make the requested distinction.

As for what one should understand by “pedagogies of engagement (i.e., active learning strategies),” widespread variations in interpretation helped complicate matters even further. Perhaps the only consensus among respondents was that whatever these pedagogies were they meant to indicate something different from “straight lecture”

(though one liberal arts campus insisted that “philosophical” engagement or “engagement of the intellect via abstract thought” was independent of the teaching strategy used). One especially thoughtful response to this item reported that

There was some discussion of what engagement might be. A pedagogy of non-engagement, for example, would be the traditional historical model of pure lecture the choice of engagement being left entirely to the student. Undoubtedly, active learning techniques are more engaging. We ultimately defined pedagogies of engagement in a very general way: activities used in and out of class which require students to do things and reflect on what they’re doing.

However, even more valuable than this definition was an accompanying reflection on the way in which differences in faculty and student understanding can complicate, or even undermine, efforts at pedagogical reform. Like the majority of their colleagues at other institutions, the authors of this assessment noted that many of their school’s “faculty believe they use a high level of pedagogies of engagement.” On the other hand, the authors also noted that this high self-rating was hard to reconcile with the fact that the school’s students gave the institution “low engagement scores on the National Survey of Student Engagement.” Hence, the report concluded: “If student ideas of active learning differ from [those of] the faculty, perhaps the faculty were not the ones we should have asked.”

Such a juxtaposition of contradictory faculty and student responses might well lead one to wonder whether what “most faculty might intuitively regard as constituting active learning” is what the “current literature” on active learning describes and recommends. It also raises doubt as to whether “even faculty who embrace active learning [in the fuller sense]” use techniques “proven to enhance learning” sufficiently and consistently enough to make a difference. As Charles Schroeder (1993) has observed in a widely cited study of first-year student learning styles:

Colleges and universities today show an increasing disparity between faculty and students...What suffers as a consequence is the learning process itself – an observation that pervades in numerous national reports...Unfortunately, the natural differences in learning patterns exhibited by new students are often interpreted by faculty as deficiencies. What may be happening, then, is a fundamental "mismatch" between the preferred styles of faculty and those of students. (25)

Several aspects of this statement warrant further exploration. Perhaps what is most important for our purposes is the recognition that differences in learning style can easily translate into an underestimation of the academic potential of first-year students. We have already seen how discrepancies between what faculty and first-year students understand as sufficient engagement as well as the different kinds of significance faculty and students attach to faculty mannerisms can impact students' ability to engage course material. We can now add to these disjunctures the often unaddressed tensions that exist between what first-year students and their instructors understand as "active learning" strategies.

Here is the way in which Schroeder describes the preferred learning style of "60 percent of entering students," those who prefer what he calls a "sensing mode of perceiving":

The learning styles of those who prefer sensing are characterized by a preference for direct, concrete experiences; moderate to high degrees of structure; linear, sequential learning; and often, a need to know why before doing something. In general, students who prefer sensing learning patterns prefer the concrete, the practical, and the immediate. (22)

Such a "sensing mode of perceiving" has – or should have – important implications for how faculty translate "pedagogies of engagement" and "active learning styles" into classroom practice. For while academic departments may judge themselves committed to pedagogies of engagement and active learning on the basis of class discussion, group

work, computer-based assignments, and research projects, these do not *necessarily* coincide with what a majority of first-year students understand by these terms. This is not to suggest that such activities do not, in fact, constitute legitimate active learning strategies or are in themselves ineffective. However, one still might want to question whether an exclusive reliance on strategies with which *instructors* feel especially comfortable is sufficient to engage the majority of today's students.

We must, in short, make several key distinctions within the general concept of "active learning." At the very least we need to distinguish between "doing" in a purely verbal sense and "doing" that includes "direct, concrete experiences." We should also distinguish between doing that results in more or less self-contained academic products such as papers, reports, and presentations, and doing that results in products that possess more than academic value. If, as Schroeder (1993) points out, "The path to educational excellence for sensing learners is usually a practice-to-theory route, not the more traditional theory-to-practice approach" (24), honoring such a path would seem to demand that faculty include in their teaching strategies opportunities for inductive as well as deductive processes; i.e., opportunities for students to begin with specific cases, concrete problems, and real people. It would also seem to speak to the importance of becoming familiar with the implications of recent research on the relationship between learning and cultural orientation.

For example, Roberto Ibarra (2001-2002) has proposed that much current diversity work fails to address issues critical to the success of an ever-larger segment of America's student population, especially students of color, because it fails to take into account the fact that cognitive learning styles are culturally conditioned. Higher

education, he maintains, “is stalled at a cultural crossroads because we still misperceive diversity systems as separate from the primary academic systems and structures of higher education, namely, the departments and programs within the faculty domain” (63). Not unlike first-year programs that develop effective first-year seminars, orientation programs, and advising arrangements but fail to convince academic departments to re-conceptualize and redesign their discipline-based introductory courses, most diversity programs content themselves with initiatives that focus on social inclusion and lifestyle recognition but fail to deal with the ways in which culturally determined factors can affect cognitive understanding and academic success.

What this means in practice is that minority students – students from what Ibarra and others refer to as “high context cultures” – are far less likely to flourish if the cultural conditions in which they learn best are missing from their academic environment. Those conditions include “the multiple streams of information that surround an event, situation, or interaction (e.g., words, tones, gestures, body language, status or relationship of speakers)” that allow such students “to determine meaning from the context in which it occurs” (53). In other words, they include the sensory and social particulars in which concepts and facts are embedded. For students from high context cultures it is precisely these particulars that help trigger and guide the learning process. Historically, however, academic environments in the United States have catered primarily to the cultural conditions favored by “low context” learners. – i.e., environments that “filter out conditions surrounding an event, situation, or interaction to focus as much as possible on words and objective facts” (53). In such a learning environment, even the inclusion of

multicultural readings, examples, and references may not be enough to facilitate success for a majority of high context learners.

To be sure, Ibarra is not suggesting that the adoption of a genuinely “*multicontextual* approach to teaching and learning” (emphasis added) (2001, 199) should preclude the continued use of traditional teaching methods. The key here is to “identify and reconfigure the imbalances in our educational systems” (200), and the imperative for doing so *especially* in the first year of college is that a failure to do so at this point may well result in a widespread failure to persist among high context learners. As Jeff King (1995) notes in an article on learning styles and rates of absenteeism,

One aspect of self-efficacy is students’ judgments about their learning ability. If they do not learn quickly, they can draw damaging conclusions about their ability to learn. First-quarter students would be particularly susceptible to such an interpretation because they may consider themselves academically and/or socially incompetent to compete in their new environment. (69)

King suggests that instructors need “to be more knowledgeable about their students’ preferred learning styles and points out that the research indicates a positive relationship between a preference for kinesthetic learning and increased absenteeism (76). If as many as 20% of all students fall into the kinesthetic learner category (77) but a majority of instructors avoid kinesthetic teaching strategies such as “field trips, hands-on learning, role playing, and other body- or emotion-based learning” (75), we should not be surprised if many students with strong athletic interests are often among the hardest to engage.

“Sensing learners,” students from high context cultures,” kinesthetic learners – one need not determine the extent to which these terms describe the same or different student populations to recognize that collectively they include a large percentage of today’s students, and that that percentage, whatever it is, is not well served by majority

faculty practices. In fact, Schroeder (1993) suggests that Myers-Briggs data collected over the years “reveal that over 75 percent of faculty prefer the intuitive learning pattern, with the vast majority of these preferring the abstract reflective (IN) pattern. On many [of the campuses sampled], fewer than 10% of the faculty prefer the concrete active (ES) pattern” (25). Thus, the likelihood, in any given first-year classroom, of instructor-student learning style mismatches – with a resultant faculty underestimation of student abilities – is considerable.

This is not to deny that many of today’s students do indeed have real academic weaknesses. Schroeder (1993) characterizes first-year sensing learners as students who “often lack confidence in their intellectual abilities,” “are uncomfortable with abstract ideas,” have difficulty with complex concepts and low tolerance for ambiguity” (25). He also notes that they are “more dependent on immediate gratification and exhibit more difficulty with basic academic skills” (24). Such liabilities, however, do not mean these students have *no* “path to educational excellence” (24). If that path has not been much in evidence in their educational experience up to this point, it is not surprising that they enter college with the weaknesses they do. The real question may not be whether they have the ability to succeed but whether colleges and universities have the ability to distinguish between a genuine lack of potential and an absence of the academic conditions that allow potential to reveal itself.

Nor should the above be taken to imply that all students who either require or desire something different from the traditional academic fare of lecture or lecture-discussion necessarily lack academic skills. Many of the students in my focus groups were specifically selected to participate because their institution considered them

especially thoughtful and articulate and likely to represent the school in a good light. Such students often identified their favorite class as one that “really stretched me,” that “opened me up,” that “made me see things in a new way.” They were not unmotivated or without talent. Nevertheless, it was these same students who, when asked to identify a favorite assignment, more often than not chose assignments that involved off-campus work or that required something beyond reading, researching, and writing. Certainly the one term that most frequently came to their lips when I asked them to describe themselves as learners was “hands-on.”

In *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* (2001), Richard Light reports on what he found as a result of approximately 1600 student interviews, many with Harvard undergraduates. Although Light’s research did not focus specifically on first-year students, it is nonetheless significant to note what he puts at the head of his list of “findings”:

First, I assumed most important and memorable academic learning goes on inside the classroom...The evidence shows that the opposite is true: learning outside of classes...is vital. When we asked students to think of a specific, critical incident or moment that had changed them profoundly, four-fifths of them chose a situation or event outside the classroom. (8)

Even “important and memorable *academic learning*” (emphasis added) takes place most often “outside the classroom,” and in his opening chapter, Light provides several detailed illustrations of the proposition that “Those students who make connections between what goes on inside and outside the classroom report a more satisfying student experience” (14).

What could differ more from such an experience than the experience afforded by many, if not most, discipline-based introductory classes? If even Harvard students –

students with strong traditional skills – find a linking of hands-on experiences with their courses one of their most satisfying *academic* experiences, why should this not be true for all those students whose personal approach to learning would seem to *require* such experiences? If students who do not lack for intellectual self-confidence find real world connections deeply empowering, what might such connections mean to students who have little more than their own real world experiences to contribute to the task of creating a successful academic self? As Lynn Donahue (2004), in looking at the factors that constitute a positive first-year learning environment, concludes,

[if] peer and faculty connections, interactive learning environments, and co-curricular learning are what create a positive community of learners, the current trend toward more experiential approaches to learning is our best source of support for first-year students. Relationships can be developed and fostered through initiatives like collaborative learning; living/learning connections in the residence halls; service-learning; learning communities; and campus-wide collaborations among students, faculty, and staff. (95)

Those concerned about the success and the persistence of first-year students would do well to take this finding to heart.

### **Service-Learning and Civic Engagement**

Service-learning, with the related concept of civic engagement, represents one of the most popular, interesting, and in some ways contentious examples of the “current trend toward more experiential approaches to learning” (Donahue 2004). As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, such learning – sometimes called “community-based learning” – was an area of special expertise I brought to the Foundations project and was the subject of many conversations on the campuses I visited. Indeed, service-learning and civic engagement lent themselves to two different but complementary kinds of institutional interest, the first of which is clearly reflected in Donahue’s statement; namely, service-

learning has much to contribute to the creation of an interactive, hands-on learning environment.

A second, more contested source of institutional interest revolved around the desire of many instructors and administrators to address directly and effectively what they regarded as an alarming decrease in student political and civic engagement. Like their colleagues across the country, these individuals were well aware of studies suggesting, for example, that becoming well off financially had far eclipsed developing a sense of social responsibility as a primary reason for attending college. Although they may not have been personally familiar with the American Political Science Association's Task Force on Civic Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, they implicitly shared its concern that "current levels of political knowledge, political engagement, and political enthusiasm are so low as to threaten the vitality and stability of democratic politics in the United States" (*PS* September 1998, 636).

However, what I found especially interesting about this genuine concern with public engagement was the extent to which many of the schools, asked to evaluate their own curricular and co-curricular efforts in this area, clearly saw those efforts in a much more favorable light than one might have assumed given the acknowledged extent of the problem. Asked to respond to the question: "To what degree does your campus provide structured opportunities for students to practice the habits of civic engagement?" and then to summarize how they arrived at their judgment, many schools gave themselves higher marks than even their own explanations would seem to justify.

As some of the institutional responses explicitly pointed out, a lack of definitional clarity made it difficult to address this question. Indeed, this difficulty was compounded

by the fact that *both* words in the term “civic engagement” lend themselves to multiple interpretations. What, for example, is the relationship between “civic” and “political”? Even the APSA statement (1998) just cited could be said to contribute to this confusion. While the word “political” dominates the statement’s formulation of “The Problem,” the task force that drafted it chose to call itself the “APSA Task Force on *Civic* Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (emphasis added), and its members sought to identify the “most important single *civic* lesson” (emphasis added) citizens of a democracy must learn.

The second word in the term, “engagement,” also slides into neighboring concepts. How does “engagement” relate to “responsibility” or even “awareness”? Although it is not difficult to distinguish these words formally, they are, in fact, often used and understood more or less interchangeably – civic engagement, civic responsibility, and civic awareness – and the degree to which they are cannot help but affect the degree to which one sees opportunities for civic engagement them being adequately addressed.

There is, however, still another factor that may have contributed to the surprisingly positive self-assessments in this area. As many recent critics of higher education have noted, the public purposes – as opposed to the private benefits – of higher education have been receding into ever greater insignificance. This recession has been less the result of a deliberate turning away from public purposes than of a failure to redefine and recommit to those purposes in an effective, contemporary way. As William Sullivan (2000), one of the co-authors the influential *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985), has written more recently in an essay focused specifically on higher education,

[i]n the absence of an updated version of its founding conception of itself as a participant in the life of civil society, as a citizen of American democracy, much

of higher education has come to operate on a sort of default program of instrumental individualism. This is the familiar notion that the academy exists to research and disseminate knowledge and skills as tools for economic development and the upward mobility of individuals. This “default program” of instrumental individualism leaves the larger questions of social, political, and moral purpose out of explicit consideration. (21)

Sullivan’s “default paradigm” is especially useful here not only because it posits “drift” rather than intent or deliberate indifference as largely responsible for the academy’s lack of civic engagement but also because it helps explain why some of the campuses that participated in the Foundations project cited pre-professional internships and career development workshops as instances of civic engagement. As a clear strategy for civic engagement fades more and more into the background, another, less precise, less legitimate understanding of civic engagement begins to take its place, and private benefits are themselves seen as a form of commitment to the common good. (In this regard it is interesting to note how frequently national surveys of student interest and experience treat pre-professional and civic/service activities as a single item.)

Nor is it only pre-professional experiences that get thrown into the pot of civic engagement. Just as some faculty maintain that their lectures constitute a form of “active learning,” albeit of a more “philosophical” kind, so many more faculty assume that the standard components of a liberal education – e.g., exposure to certain cultural topics and the development of certain skills – constitute in and of themselves “habits of civic engagement.” Carol Schneider (2000), president of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, has identified an important manifestation of this assumption when she points to the disconnect that exists between “the actual content of Western Civilization courses [i.e., the cultural side of the general education curriculum] and... students’ self-identification as American citizens responsible for the policies and

practices of a particular set of communities” (104). In other words, although campuses like to point to courses in their general education curriculum as evidence that first-year students have “structured opportunities” to acquire habits of civic engagement, in point of fact the instructors in these courses most often leave it “to the students’ own determination” to make meaningful connections between course content and contemporary “policies and practices” requiring public action. Rarely is the curriculum used to help students clarify their responsibilities as citizens of a democracy and members of specific communities.

In short, much of what colleges and universities identify as justifying their claim to high levels of civic engagement turns out to be little more than a grab bag of courses, programs, and activities that leave students no more inclined or empowered to participate effectively in civil society than did their high school experiences. As the 2002 “Oklahoma Students’ Civic Engagement Resolution” ([www.okhighered.org/campus-com/cc-pdfs/civic%20engagement%20resolution.pdf](http://www.okhighered.org/campus-com/cc-pdfs/civic%20engagement%20resolution.pdf)) laments,

We [the students of Oklahoma] value education and the knowledge required to become informed citizens. However, the higher education institutions [in Oklahoma] do not provide adequate education and knowledge about our civic responsibilities. We often do not know how to address civic issues. Higher education institutions’ primary focus is to produce professionals, when instead they should be producing citizens.

Exposure to cultural topics and the development of skills like effective speaking and critical thinking are as essential to a fulfilling life beyond the academy as they are to college success, but in and of themselves they are unlikely to advance the civic engagement of students who “often do not know how to address civic issues.” As Schneider points out in the same essay cited above, “[c]ultivating analytical abilities in citizens is certainly important to the health of a political democracy as it is to the modern

economy [but] it is not...sufficient to the vitality of a healthy and self-correcting civic society” (108).

There are, of course, many first-year programs and activities that do focus on the *public* as distinct from the *private* realm and do seek to promote more than a general cultural awareness and/or stronger analytical abilities. The question is: how effective are they as vehicles of civic engagement? According to a widely cited definition of civic engagement formulated by the Pew Charitable Trusts ([www.pcc.edu/resources/service-learning/faculty/civic-engagement.html](http://www.pcc.edu/resources/service-learning/faculty/civic-engagement.html)), this concept should be taken to describe “[i]ndividual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern.” Examples can range

...from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. [Civic Engagement] can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy.

The bottom line here would seem to be “efforts to directly address [a public] issue,” and such an emphasis accords well with the capstone recommendation of the APSA Task Force on Civic Engagement (1998); namely, that faculty should above all “[t]each the motivation and competence to engage actively in public problem solving” (636).

But if one were to take such a fostering of both “the motivation and the competence to engage actively in public problem solving” as one’s measure of success, how many first-year programs could honestly rate themselves “adequate” – let alone “excellent”? Is it not indicative of a general failure to “update” (Sullivan 2000), to design and assess, institutional strategies to advance civic engagement in the first year of college, that the topical index of the *Journal of the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition* (<http://www.sc.edu/fye/publications/topical.html>), the field’s premier peer-

reviewed publication, includes no category centered on civic engagement or related concepts? Or that a search of the journal's on-line abstracts from 1989 – 2005 (the last year available) will not turn up a single reference to the word “civic” or the word “citizen”?

What, then, is one to make of those countless examples of first-year public service activities – day-long community “plunges,” service in the context of an orientation program or a first-year seminar, student club- and residence hall-organized volunteer work – in short, all those explicitly community-based, “structured activities” colleges and universities like to cite as primary evidence of their commitment to fostering “habits of civic engagement”? Surely programming of this nature should legitimately “count” – whether or not it has received much scholarly attention?

At this point it may be good to remind ourselves of the original question that launched this discussion: “To what degree does your campus provide structured opportunities for students to practice the habits of civic engagement?” Up until this point our observations have revolved around the meaning of “civic engagement,” but how one answers this question will also depend upon what one emphasizes. Does the weight of the question fall upon inputs – “structured opportunities” – or outcomes – “habits of civic engagement”? Opportunities, even “structured” opportunities, are easier to recognize than “habits” of engagement. Clearly, many first-year programs offer students “opportunities” to become civically engaged. However, whether those opportunities are sufficient to nurture “*habits of civic engagement*” is another matter. As the Reverend Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, noted in 2000 in a key address on Jesuit education:

Our universities...boast a splendid variety of in-service programs, outreach programs, insertion programs, off-campus contacts and hands-on courses. These should not be too optional or peripheral, but at the very core of every Jesuit university's program of studies. ([www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/bannan/eventsandconferences/justiceconference/nationalconference/kolvenbach.cfm](http://www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/bannan/eventsandconferences/justiceconference/nationalconference/kolvenbach.cfm))

In other words, one can offer opportunities – a “splendid variety of programs” – without ever dealing with the degree to which those opportunities remain essentially “optional or peripheral” to what students perceive as really important. Assuming the Foundations question was concerned at least as much about impact as about opportunities, even many of the seemingly legitimate service activities schools boast of hardly justify a high self-assessment.

For the most part, the first-year service activities offered by America's colleges and universities do not differ significantly from the community service activities young people now encounter in high school. When the students who drafted the “Oklahoma Students' Civic Engagement Resolution” (2002) noted that more members of their generation “participate in community service than any other cohort,” it was in large part to this high school service that they were referring. Indeed, it is only by taking high school as well as college service into account that one can justify such a claim. As Jones and Hill (2003) point out at the beginning of their important study of student service motivation, “Understanding Patterns of Commitment,” “Findings from the 2000 survey of first-year college students report that just over 81% of students had performed volunteer work in the last year” (516). However, the same survey also indicated that only 22.7% of these same students felt “it was important to participate in a community action program” and only 30.9% “valued becoming a community leader” (516). Given this discrepancy between past actions and present values, we should perhaps not be surprised

that “only 23.8 of first-year students...indicated that the chances were very good that they would participate in volunteer or community service work” in the future (516).

Thus, it seems safe to conclude that, however much service activity today’s traditional aged first-year students are being exposed to, that activity is not leading the vast majority of them to develop “habits of civic engagement.” As a related, subsequent study by Marks and Jones (2004) suggests,

For the majority of students...involvement in community service may be episodic and contextually driven – not so much a deeply motivated value-oriented choice as an occasional activity that personal circumstances may dictate, encourage, support, or deter. The responses of the first-year students to other [Marks and Jones’s] survey items appear to support this claim. For example, while volunteering in high school is on the rise among the respondents, trends over the past decade indicate a simultaneous decline in both interest and participation in other forms of voluntary activity, including community action programs, social activism, political participation, and general civic engagement and altruism...

Most strikingly, just 59% of first year students reported a personal commitment to “helping others in difficulty,” the lowest response level in over a decade. Paradoxically, while more students are volunteering than ever before, they are not espousing the civic values that community service is intended to encourage. (307-308)

What many educators – on both the secondary and the post-secondary levels – would like to imagine is a valuable step toward developing an ethos of civic responsibility turns out to be, for many students, merely an enjoyable group activity with a rush of self-approval or even a cynical exercise in improving one’s personal advantage in certain competitive contexts.

This was certainly a widely held view among the first-year students I interviewed in the course of my Foundations work. Over 90% of these students had been involved at least briefly in some kind of service during high school. Many had been required to serve in order to graduate. All were acutely aware of the value community service activities

had added to their college applications. But now, having encountered college service activities as an *options* – or “opportunities,” to use the word in the Foundations survey – many had decided not to participate. Indeed, even where they had found such activities *required*, many had found a way around that requirement. One group, for example, described with some pride how easy they had found it to fabricate the “reflection essay” used to document and assess their school’s requirement. To be sure, many others had genuinely *enjoyed* their service experience either because they “liked to give back” or because got to spend time with friends, but very few spoke of their collegiate service experiences as important or educational in any substantive way. A slight majority indicated they probably wouldn’t volunteer again any time soon. My overall impression was that most simply did not see service activities as a “big deal,” one way or the other.

Such attitudes not only cast additional doubt on the value of much of what passes for civic engagement in first-year programs; they also lead us to ask what kind of programs might actually achieve that end. There are, I believe, several considerations that should guide the design of such programs. Perhaps not surprisingly, these considerations clearly echo themes we have encountered in our exploration of first-year *academic* engagement.

One of Jones and Hill’s (2003) key findings was that “...almost without exception, students noted that *required* service quickly took on a negative connotation for themselves as well as their friends. They were clear: as soon as they met the requirement, they were moving on to other activities” (emphasis added) (524). However, as those responsible for first-year service activities well know, if a service activity is made optional, it will probably miss many of the very students most in need of personal and

civic development. Thus, the question becomes, how does one shift the emphasis of required service from the requirement to some other feature capable of effecting substantive outcomes?

Students themselves have been suggesting at least one answer to this question for many years. As one of Jones and Hill's interviewees remarked of her required high school service, "If I knew what I was doing, what the reason was, and I knew the person or organization it was helping,...maybe that would make me feel better about doing [community service]" (524). In other words, one of the things that makes service activities more than still another hoop to jump through is contextual understanding – the same thing students want in their discipline-based introductory courses. Jones and Hill (2003) note that the most successful examples they found of first-year service, service that resulted in genuine civic engagement, were programs that

included small groups of students who received training to prepare them for their experiences and on-site reflection with the faculty and staff who traveled with the students. These were the most structured community service opportunities we heard about from students and also, not coincidentally, the experiences about which the students spoke with the greatest enthusiasm and insight in relation to their interest in and commitment to community service. (529)

Unfortunately, such careful planning, especially with regard to contextual preparation and rigorous reflection, is rarely the norm, in part because it tends to require substantive faculty involvement. If, however, service work is to be embedded in an educational context that transforms acts of charity into opportunities for systemic understanding, it is difficult to see how one can do without active faculty participation. In other words, the model for civic engagement programming must be *service-learning* in the full sense of the term, not community service or community service simply relabeled "service-learning." While nothing intrinsically precludes substantive civic engagement

from taking place without faculty participation, by far the easiest way to facilitate such engagement is through a classroom/curricular connection.

In *The New Student Politics: The Wingspread Statement on Civic Engagement* (2002), a publication documenting the conclusions of 33 students from 27 campuses gathered to discuss student civic engagement, academic service-learning, “with [its] rich integrations of readings, reflection, and class discussion,” clearly emerges as the strategy most likely to help them “realize that collectively we are a powerful force for social change” (7). This they explain as follows:

Community service without a curricular connection often does not allow students to realize interconnections between the service work and larger systemic issues. Service-learning provides the “why” – the reason for doing service, and shows us how we can attempt to bring about greater social change. (7)

Although many of the campuses I visited in the course of my Foundations work boasted at least a few examples of service linked to the first-year academic curriculum, this arrangement was far less in evidence than one might have assumed, especially given the commitment several of the campuses had made to service-learning in general.

Furthermore, whatever curriculum-based service activities there were tended to be focused on the first-year seminar where an already unmanageable agenda helped insure that those activities never moved beyond the traditional community service students had experienced in high school.

The sense of “been there, done that” can be extremely counterproductive. One of the most frequent academic complaints I heard in my student focus groups was that a certain course was merely a high school repeat: it did not open up new perspectives, did not develop new skills, did not meet the expectation that college means moving on to a new level. Most first-year service requirements produce precisely the same response:

they do not open up new perspectives or develop new skills; they do not meet the expectation that college means moving on to a new level. Far from showing how intellectual analysis, historical awareness, and societal context are essential in addressing public issues, instead of developing “the motivation and competence to engage actively in public problem solving” (APSA 1998), they simply offer more of the same – philanthropic “chores” students have already performed numerous times. No wonder only 22.7% see more community service in their future!

A linking of intellect to action is, however, only one design change needed to make first-year service a gateway to substantive civic engagement. At least equally important is a deepening of the affective dimension. Kolvenbach, in his statement on Jesuit education, points to this necessity when he suggests that

Students, in the course of their formation, must let the gritty reality of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage it constructively” ([www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/bannan/eventsandconferences/justiceconference/nationalconference/kolvenbach.cfm](http://www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/bannan/eventsandconferences/justiceconference/nationalconference/kolvenbach.cfm))

Engagement of this kind – what Kolvenbach calls “solidarity” – “is learned through ‘contact’ rather than through ‘concepts’” ([www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/bannan/eventsandconferences/justiceconference/nationalconference/kolvenbach.cfm](http://www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/bannan/eventsandconferences/justiceconference/nationalconference/kolvenbach.cfm)), for it requires more than the ability to analyze. It also requires the ability to empathize.

This is also the conclusion of Russ Edgerton, former president of the American Association for Higher Education and former director of the Education Program at the Pew Charitable Trusts. In a 1997 white paper for the Trusts, Edgerton calls for the development of a “‘new civics’ of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. “[L]earning about things,” he explains, “is not enough”:

Graduates also need to learn how to do things. Having looked at the new civics, we can further conclude that learning how to do things is also not enough....

To be a citizen one must not only be informed. One must also care, and be willing to act on one's values and ideas. Crucial to all the new civic literacies is the development of an emotional identification with the larger community and the belief that, in the face of overwhelming complexity, one individual can make a difference. (37)

“Emotional identification,” “solidarity,” Blythe Clinchy's (2000) “connected knowing” – whatever term one uses, the basic idea is the same: while a willingness and an ability to analyze public issues is essential to substantive civic engagement, it is not in and of itself enough. Students must also learn to form powerful affective bonds with others, especially those whose voices are often overlooked in the public arena. Just as faculty and administrators need to learn to hear and respect the voice of first-year students, so first-year students, as they begin their transition from simple service to civic engagement, need to learn to hear and respect the voice of community members.

Furthermore, if adding intellect to action implies recognition of an important faculty role in designing and implementing civic engagement programs, so adding “solidarity” to analysis implies recognition of a corresponding community role. In the vast majority of first-year service programs, in one “community plunge” or “make a difference” day after another, the operative word is almost always “placements”: literally, places where students can perform service. What “the community” comes to mean in most of these cases is first and foremost the place where students have raked leaves, picked up trash, painted rooms, stacked cans, delivered food, or played with children while the actual members of that community either did other things or, in some cases, simply sat and watched. The community's one “essential role” in this scenario is to express

gratitude for the students' services. Community gratitude neatly complements student self-satisfaction.

Whatever such programs may accomplish in providing genuinely needed assistance or in facilitating inter-student bonding, they rarely result in anything even faintly resembling an "emotional identification with the larger community" (Edgerton 1997, 37). If they did, their influence would not fade so quickly from students' lives. This is why Jones and Hill (2003) found multi-day immersion programs particularly effective in developing such identification and why the students they interviewed spoke of these programs "with the greatest enthusiasm and insight" (529). The intensity of community contact that multi-day immersion experiences almost always involve makes them different in kind from what typically passes for civic engagement.

Naturally, such programs require a considerable investment of time, energy, and money, and most campuses are either unwilling or cannot afford to make such an investment for an entire first-year class. Still, there are many cost-effective ways to move at least beyond what prevails today. The service-learning literature abounds in examples (<http://www.servicelearning.org/resources/index.php>; <http://www.compact.org/resources/>), and some of the campuses participating in the Foundations project – for example, IUPUI among AASCU institutions (<http://csl.iupui.edu/index.html>) and Augsburg College among CIC colleges (<http://www.augsburg.edu/cswl/>) – have themselves played an important role in exploring and modeling such partnerships.

To be sure, most of these of substantive partnerships and programs do not specifically target first-year students. Indeed, as has already been suggested, even on campuses that have developed exemplary service-learning programs, first-year service

activities often remain relatively weak and/or unassimilated into any broad-based plan to help students “practice the habits of civic engagement.” One of the reasons for this, I suspect, is the fear that first-year students already have enough to take care of without their also worrying about civic engagement. As Jones and Hill (2003) report,

Nearly every [first-year] student not currently involved in community service in college mentioned time and setting priorities as a deterrent to their continued participation in service. In addition, every participant, with the exception of two, was balancing significant employment obligations, with more than half working over 11 hours a week. (526)

Thus, the temptation is very strong to “postpone” substantive civic and community engagement to a later point in students’ careers. Some four-year schools actually do postpone off-campus community-based experiences in a very deliberate, constructive way, using the first-year to lay a *conceptual* foundation for later *hands-on* service activities designed to build on that foundation. Schools that have adopted this comprehensive approach can hardly be charged with paying insufficient attention to the civic dimension of their students’ first year experience.

However, in the majority of schools, the absence or relative thinness of first-year community-based programming has no redeeming four-year logic. On these campuses, creating a first-year program substantive enough to be worth the effort will require a fundamental change in attitude. Instead of introducing students to a short-term service experience as part of their collegiate initiation – an experience on approximately the same level as a tour of the library – community-based work will have to be seen – *and experienced* – as the development of a critically important set of competencies students will need to draw upon again and again over the course of their academic careers and professional lives. In other words, it will have to be seen and experienced as the

equivalent of other foundational literacies like writing and mathematics. No one argues that the full-schedules first-year students keep justify postponing the development of basic writing and math skills until sophomore year. By sophomore year one wants students to be already in a position to draw upon their basic skills in a wide variety of academic fields. Indeed, we lament long and loud about students who advance through their academic careers with only minimal verbal and quantitative literacy skills. We should be equally concerned about students who advance through their academic careers with a correspondingly low level of civic literacy. If we insist on not feeling any concern, we should at least have the honesty to delete from our mission statements all reference to graduates *prepared* to lead and to serve their fellow human beings.

## **Conclusion**

By this point we have ranged over a fairly wide variety of topics. However, one theme that has run through many, if not most, of them is the gap between what first-year students experience and what the programs led by faculty and staff purport to deliver. Also recurrent has been a tendency to underestimate what those students can contribute and therefore a habit of putting them in situations where their primary role is to follow or react. Hence, for too many students, the first year of college comes to resemble – psychologically if not circumstantially – a fifth year of high school. While the rhetoric of higher expectations is never far away, opportunities for genuine personal, intellectual, and civic empowerment are as elusive as genuinely learner-centered teaching. As Benjamin Barber has noted in his *An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Politics of Education* (1992),

...students seem more powerless than ever, being offered endless freedom to say no, to indulge their own opinions and needs and desires, but given little real responsibility and no genuine power at all; power is not a right at this stage – it is simply the necessary condition of teaching and learning. (231)

Barber’s qualifier “at this stage” can also alert us to another, ultimately deeper kind of continuity that runs through most of this paper. Like Dewey almost a century earlier, Barber is acutely aware that the way in which students experience their formal education has enormous implications for how they will lead their civic lives: “The spirit of inquiry (asking tough questions) coupled with the capacity to judge (offering provisional answers) defines both liberal education and education for liberty, both critical learning and deliberative democracy” (262). The fateful connection between how we learn and how we govern ourselves has become all but invisible.

Our discussion of first-year civic engagement programs began with my observation that many of the schools participating in the Foundations project gave themselves surprisingly high marks for providing “structured activities for students to practice the habits of civic engagement.” In a number of cases these marks were noticeably higher than those they gave themselves for fostering “pedagogies of engagement (i.e., active learning strategies).” Could it be that colleges and universities are less critical of their civic engagement efforts because the standards they have set for themselves in this area are so much lower than in other areas? And could it be that those lower standards reflect the very problem civic engagement urgently needs to address: the overshadowing of our shared, public life by individual, professional interests? How many campuses, looking at some of the research findings cited in this paper, are likely to conclude that the issue of academic engagement in the first year is far more serious than that of civic engagement and that addressing the latter will have to wait?

I would like to suggest we sever “pedagogies of engagement” from “civic engagement” at our peril. Even if it is true that there exist specific strategies and techniques that can help first-year students become more academically engaged, do we really want to nurture a generation of students who see personal academic success as an end in itself? In an essay Dewey wrote for the journal *Science* (1910), he put the matter this way:

The modern warship seems symbolic of the present position of science in life and education. The warship could not exist were it not for science: mathematics, mechanics, chemistry, electricity supply the technique of its construction and management. But the aims, the ideals in whose service this marvelous technique are displayed are survivals of a pre-scientific age, that is, of barbarism. Science has as yet had next to nothing to do with forming the social and moral ideals for the sake of which she is used. (192)

For Dewey, the same power of engaged thought (which he identified with the scientific method) that makes possible a weapon of great destructive capability “must have something to say about *what* we do and not merely about *how* we may do it” (original emphasis) (192). With today’s America in possession of the most technologically advanced weapons in human history, how can we even consider subordinating the development of social solidarity to self-referential academic and technical success?

It is hard not to conclude that American higher education is suffering from a serious case of self-deception. While colleges and universities like to think of themselves as providing an important counterforce to America’s materialistic culture, most colleges and universities – implicitly, if not explicitly – seem to operate on a set of values and priorities that closely parallel that separation of technical success and human need that prevails outside the academy. When professors insist on stressing course coverage over “messy,” time-consuming discussion, when they limit their professional responsibility to

developing discipline-specific concepts and skills, do their actions not model the belief that mastery can indeed be stripped of “distracting” non-technical considerations? Have students whose academic experiences have been confined to a campus or even a classroom “bubble” been made or less likely to see themselves as responsible for the future of our diverse democracy?

In the end, academic engagement and civic engagement equally need each other, and our students need to embrace both from the very beginning of their college careers. Only a constant interweaving of the two will serve us all in the long run. Just as intellect must complement empathy and action in addressing public issues, so the civic must help the academic in teaching students not only why they need to learn but also why they must learn to act. Without a civic “assist,” it may be impossible to move the majority of today’s students beyond a “training” approach to education.

At the same time, such an interweaving of civic engagement and academic engagement can provide us with useful strategies for addressing other, more concrete questions. How can we make our first-year programs more truly effective, comprehensive, and coherent? How can we achieve the kinds of “aspirational” goals the Foundations of Excellence project set out to clarify and develop? How can we close the many gaps that those concerned about the first year of college must find a way to close – from the gap between central program and academic departments to the gap between students as “customers” and students as “colleagues” to the gap between the power of personal experience and the necessity of analytic rigor? In striving to achieve a deep educational integrity, we can make discontinuities such as these far more manageable.

During the teleconference that formally concluded the Foundations project, I was struck by the number of faculty participants who raised questions related to the distinctive nature of their own role as concerned academics. Surely, they seemed to ask, an exemplary first-year program rests on more than clarified principles, coherent procedures, and measured outcomes, however important these may be. What is such a program's *educational soul*? In this essay I have tried to locate that soul – and the faculty role in sustaining it – in a habit of never underestimating what our first-year students are capable of. By constantly helping them inform their studies with meaning – personal, professional, and civic – we put them on a path that will lead to both academic excellence and democratic empowerment.

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