Building Democracy Colleges: A Different Kind of Politics

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A fit with the season of tornadoes across the nation this year, the Citizens United Versus the Federal Elections Commission court decision has unleashed a venomous tsunami of attack ads by Super PACs. The political weather threatens to get worse before November. In such a climate, what does it look like for higher education to take leadership in "a politics of constructive action by the citizenry across divisions to meet the nation's challenges," as Nancy Cantor and I proposed last year ("We Are the Ones," Huffington Post, August 24, 2011)?

We need changes different than incrementalism, wishful calls for "all of us to get along," or fracturing of the nation into implacably hostile camps. The freedom movement again holds lessons.

Thelma Craig, a remarkable civil rights leader in southern Alabama whose organization, the Citizens League, elected more black candidates to local office than anywhere else in the South, most certainly believed in citizen-driven change -- "We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For," in the words of the freedom song. Craig, a battler in the hard knocks school of racial oppression, challenged those who advocated for cautious gradualism and those who called for militant polarization alike.

In 1999, at a gathering in Nashville, Tennessee of leaders from the Industrial Area Foundation network of broad-based community organizing groups which I attended as well, she communicated such wisdom. She argued that genuinely transforming a racist society requires winning over 80 percent of the population. "There will be opponents, hold-outs, die-hards. But real change in culture takes place when the overwhelming majority of the population learns to see it as in their own interests." She felt that the movement's failure was not to educate young people clearly enough in such broad, majoritarian approaches to change. "We didn't instill in young people enough of the understanding that with power, you have to have responsibility."

There are parallels in higher education reform today. Focusing on pedagogies of empowerment, or "civic agency," the citizen-centered approach to change which animated the freedom movement a generation ago, shows signs of being a promising approach to major changes.

This is a central focus in a new coalition of colleges, universities, schools and others, the American Commonwealth Partnership (ACP), growing out of the Civic Agency Initiative, a partnership between the American Association of State Colleges and
Universities and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship. Empowering pedagogies teach skills and disciplines of learning to work with people whom one may disagree with on issues, or even dislike, for the sake of solving problems or getting things done.

Such empowering pedagogies were highlighted at a White House meeting on January 10th. Government leaders -- Valerie Jarrett, Senior Advisor to the President, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and others -- joined with the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the Civic Mission of the Schools Coalition, and ACP in a meeting called "For Democracy's Future -- Education Reclaims Our Civic Mission." All aim to advance civic learning and democratic engagement against forces which dumb down educational purposes.

The event celebrated the release of A Crucible Moment, a report by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement and organized by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), calling for civic learning in higher education to become "pervasive," not "partial."

The ACP coalition featured stories from the Civic Agency Initiative that embody empowering pedagogies, using the "democracy college" concept out of land grant history and celebrating the 150th anniversary year of the Morrill Act which established land grant colleges in 1862. ACP reclaims the idea of democracy colleges as relevant for all of higher education. Democracy colleges educate for empowering citizenship as a signature identity, and are deeply tied to communities.

One such story is CRAFTS at Northern Arizona University, developed in partnership with Northern Arizona Interfaith Council (an Industrial Areas Foundation affiliate). CRAFTS trains hundreds of students in skills of cross-partisan broad-based community organizing that make their education far more relevant.

"I come from 17 million acres of land where 80 percent of the people don't have electricity or running water," said Nikki Cooley, a young member of the Diné or Navajo Nation, at the White House meeting. In high school she had trouble in math and science because they didn't seem relevant. But when she had opportunities to learn that spoke to her interests and combined learning with consequential work, she changed her view. "I realized I had opportunities that used my background as a Navajo woman." Pursuing these interests led her to complete a Master's in forestry, and work on a major National Science Foundation grant helping to educate Navajo youth about climate change on the Colorado Plateau in northern Arizona.

CRAFTS grows out of the First Year Seminar Program at Northern Arizona University, which involves incoming freshmen in undergraduate research based on faculty members' research interests. It enlists about 1,600 of NAU's 4,000 incoming freshmen. Since 2009 Blase Scarnati, director of the First Year Seminar Program, and Rom Coles, a political theorist long active in IAF and director of the Community, Culture
and Environment Program, have brought community members and colleagues together in CRAFTS with an explicit mission to "build the democratic capacities and skills among NAU undergraduates."

CRAFTS involves Action Research Teams (ARTS) which tie student public work projects to interdisciplinary study. The Teams collaborate with members of the larger community in public work on environmental, social, educational, economic, and political issues. In the fall of 2011, eighteen First Year Seminar sections enrolled more than 350 students.

FYSeminars on Water in the Southwest; Power-Justice-Freedom; Art, Immigration & the Border; Southwest Sustainable Foods; Indigenous Environmental Justice; and Student Democratic Initiatives, for example, bring students together in ARTS on Water, Immigration, Weatherization, and Food. ARTS involve juniors, seniors and graduate students as well as multi-generational community partners -- K-12 students and their parents, community members and organizations, and Navajo elders.

Pedagogies stress student ownership of their education, and cultivate the "knowledge, dispositions, values, skills and habits that promote civic agency and foster grassroots democracy."

The work in and around Northern Arizona University recall the wisdom of Thelma Craig, showing possibilities for building coalitions across today's bitter political divides which would be now hard to imagine on most college campuses.

According to NAU graduate student Jason Lowry, "We've seen conservative leaning students with ties to the Tea Party become really interested in community owned enterprises, and we've also seen left-leaning students develop a different understanding of where conservatives are coming from. There are many new possibilities for coalitions developing."

Skills and knowledge of civic agency amount to "a different kind of politics," recalling earlier meanings of the word 'politics,' inverted in the polarizing climate of today. Such politics involves engaging others to get something of public value accomplished across widely different ideologies, faiths, income levels, and racial or cultural backgrounds.

Everyday politics like this urgently needs reinvention in the 21st century. And experiences like CRAFTS at Northern Arizona University suggest how higher education can help to drive this reinvention, this conversion of the exceptional into the everyday work of building democracy colleges, for a democratic society.

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