

Chapter 75

Performing Arts for Effective Civic Engagement: Developing Creative Civically Engaged Student Leaders

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ABSTRACT

There is a dearth of civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and interest among pre-and post-secondary students and the general public. Many people are not equipped with the necessary knowledge of American political history, democratic institutions, processes, and civic life needed to allow them to become active, effective, responsible, and empowered citizens and leaders of the future. The traditional mode of incorporating civics in the lecture format in social studies and political science curricula is ineffective. The Performing Arts for Effective Civic Engagement (PAECE) program is a cross-disciplinary, multi-institutional effort that was created to address this problem through creative, entertaining performance-based content delivery that is designed by students. This paper describes the details on the program implementation, evaluation, as well as its outcomes, in an effort to disseminate pertinent information for possible replication or adaptation of the model by other institutions. The paper concludes with some implications for higher education institutions.

INTRODUCTION

There is a dearth of civic knowledge among college and pre-college students and the general American public. According to the survey reports by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1998) and other assessment organizations, over 25% of college freshmen have inadequate

or superficial knowledge of and interest in civic matters. Many of them do not know the structure of the U.S. government. Neither do they have sufficient knowledge of the U.S. Constitution (informal class surveys conducted by the author, 2000; 2004). Generally, students are unable to name more than two cabinet secretaries, the vice president of the country, or the purpose of the

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Bill of Rights (Dillon, 2011). In the 2012 general elections, only 45% of the youth (18-29) voted (CIRCLE, 2013; United States Census Bureau, 2012). Oftentimes, students do not know election dates for any of the offices. The picture in kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) schools is even less encouraging, where many students struggle to say the Pledge of Allegiance, indicating that the traditional methods of “teaching” students about civic life in the traditional disciplines, including social studies and political science, have failed the American people. This decline, or even lack, of civic knowledge is quite alarming for the United States and must be addressed (Dillon, 2011).

The problem of citizens’ lack of participation in key aspects of citizenship, such as voting and jury duty service, is yet another aspect to consider. The results of the surveys for presidential elections for the years 1964 through 2008 indicate a decline in voting in general (Coley & Sum, 2012). However, this widening decline is even greater for individuals with lower education levels. According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s population survey (2010), only 41.8% of the participants reported voting in the November 2010 elections. Voter apathy devalues the democratic process, leaves important voices unheard, and results in a non-representative government (Flagg, 2000). When citizens seek ways to avoid jury duty, they jeopardize every American’s right to criminal trial by a jury of peers (Gastil & Weiser, 2006). The development of civic skills is not only beneficial to democratic engagement, but is also essential in other spheres of life, such as the workforce. Employers look for employees who understand history on a global basis and its multicultural foundation, exhibit ethical judgment and civic engagement (*The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement*, 2012). Healthy democracy needs its citizens to fulfill their basic yet crucial duties.

Determined to prevent a catastrophic future, one where the majority of leaders and active-age citizens would be hard-pressed to name one branch

of government, the PD actively began seeking more effective ways of addressing the problem. Why did students not seem to be learning or enjoying the academic content related to civic education? Why did they seem to lack skills and dispositions to be fully-actualized and engaged citizens? Surprisingly, many institutions of higher education contributed to the problem of civic disengagement by failing to achieve their civic missions. Colleges and universities were viewed as disengaged from the concerns of the general population and unresponsive to public needs (Hollander & Saltmarsh, 2001). Few high-level American university administrators consistently committed to preparing students for “active participation in a diverse democracy and to develop[ing] knowledge to improve communities.” Furthermore, few faculty members considered teaching students about civics and cultivating civic engagement to be “central to their role” (Checkoway, 2001).

The Performing Arts for Effective Civic Engagement program (PAECE) was created in response to concerns about the perceived lack of civic knowledge, interest, and engagement among college students in both majority and minority institutions of higher education in the United States (Chitiga, 2005). PAECE ultimately endeavors to help community members more effectively enact their roles as civically active citizens who strive toward the attainment of social justice. PAECE seeks to enhance the civic awareness, responsibility and engagement of K-16 and other community members. Currently, PAECE strives to partner with pre- and post-secondary institutions and various community organizations to achieve its original goals and aspirations. It uses innovatively entertaining theatrical, poetic, musical and other performances that are themed on pertinent and contemporary civic and political issues. In other words, its goal is to *edutain* - to educate via entertainment - various audiences in hopes to inspire effective civic engagement (Chitiga, 2005).

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