

The New Student Politics

The
Wingspread
Statement
on Student
Civic Engagement

Second Edition



Campus Compact

By Sarah E. Long, Providence
College undergraduate and
participant in the 2001 Wingspread
Summit on Student Engagement

“Cynicism is not the opposite of civic engagement; indifference is. The promise of education is to foster an attitude of questioning, including the questioning of political authority and process...Our job, among colleges and universities, is to foster both the critical judgment and patterns of challenge that are required for education, and to broker the conditions that support students, and that amplify their voice, as they engage in serving and learning—enduring features of civic responsibility and political action in a democratic society.”

Donald W. Harward
President Emeritus
Bates College

From March 15 to 17, 2001, a group of 33 juniors and seniors representing 27 colleges and universities gathered at the Johnson Foundation in Racine, Wisconsin for the Wingspread Summit on Student Civic Engagement. The students were nominated by faculty and community service directors and asked to participate in a candid group discussion focused on their “civic experiences” in higher education. This Statement is not intended to be the final word on student engagement. Instead, we hope it captures the tensions and promise surrounding meanings we, as students, assign to politics and our development as citizens of American Democracy.



Above: The group of 33 students representing 27 colleges and universities at the Wingspread Summit on Student Civic Engagement.

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Second Edition

By Sarah E. Long, Providence College undergraduate and participant in the 2001 Wingspread Summit on Student Engagement with analysis by John Saltmarsh of Campus Compact and Kerrissa Heffernan of the Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University



Campus Compact

The Mission of Campus Compact

Campus Compact is a national coalition of college and university presidents committed to the civic purposes of higher education. To support this civic mission, Campus Compact promotes community service that develops students' citizenship skills and values, encourages collaborative partnerships between campuses and communities, and assists faculty who seek to integrate public and community engagement into their teaching and research.

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Campus Compact

Brown University
Box 1975
Providence, RI 02912

phone: 401 867-3950
email: campus@compact.org
website: www.compact.org

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iii
Introduction	v
Part One: Democracy and Education	1
Our Perspectives on Democracy	1
Analysis	5
The Role of Higher Education	7
How to Make Service-Learning Even More Powerful and Substantive	7
Analysis	9
Student Voice	11
Analysis	13
Part Two: Service and Politics	15
Frameworks for Political Engagement	15
Conventional Politics	15
Community Service	18
Service Politics	18
Endnotes	21
Works Cited	23

“As a generation, we have many problems to deal with. We embrace our identities, we are a multi-tendency and cross-cultural group of citizens untangling problems on a local level that, for the first time in history, are inseparable from the global critique. . . . We will be criticized for a “lack of focus,” for being whiners, and social critics from movements past will scratch their heads as we united for political prisoners on Monday, dispossessed indigenous persons on Tuesday, workers rights on Wednesday and spend the rest of the week quietly reading Howard Zinn to grade school kids, but unlike our predecessors, we will not sell out after the “revolution.” We were sold out in the cradle, and now we’re expected to counter the most widespread, pervasive and well-founded monolith that mankind has ever seen. We were raised to believe that the monolith was as the world is. It is all that there ever has been. When we realize that a good portion of humanity is being crushed beneath it we don’t know where to begin chipping away. Service is a small hammer. By itself it can send small chips flying. Politics act like a chisel. To its own, it can gouge the perfect surface. Together, with our hard work and inspiration, the hammer and chisel begin to carve something new, less perfect, and more human.”

Fabricio Rodriguez
Mesa Community College
Wingspread Summit Participant

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Wingspread Student Participants

Amy Achor, Harvard University

Manuel Arenivaz, California State University-Monterey Bay

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Michael Coatney, Indiana University-Purdue University

Ama Codjoe, Brown University

Devon Chaffee, Hampshire College

Britt Crowley, Bryn Mawr College

Valerie Denny, Stone Child College

Rebekah Easton, Berea College

Catrina Flores, California State University-Monterey Bay

Lori Goldammer, Michigan State University

Ryan Hodgman, Unity College

Brandon Hofstedt, Augsburg College

Jason Joseph Ingram, Morehouse College

Rachel D. Karess, Indiana University

Michael Kirkpatrick, Fort Lewis College

Kara Lemma, University of Southern California
Ivy Nicole Lewis, Miami Dade Community College
Jacob Liechty, Goshen College
Sarah E. Long, Providence College
Sierra Melcher, University of Vermont
Paul Payne, University of Southern California
Sharmeen Malik Premjee, Yale University
Sadia Rahman, Tulane University
Cherise Ratcliff, University of Maryland-College Park
Carrie Lore Redfern, Fort Lewis College
Jorge Sebastian Roberts, University of Washington
Fabricio Rodriguez, Mesa Community College, Arizona State University
Michael Scott, North Carolina Central University
Kerriane Sullivan, Loyola College in Maryland
Elizabeth Westhoff, Loyola College in Maryland
Brian Wolford, University of Notre Dame

Wingspread Facilitators

Richard Battistoni, Providence College
Amy Cohen, Corporation for National and Community Service
Mary Angela Coleman, Campus Compact National Center for Community Colleges
Richard Cone, University of Southern California
Cynthia Gibson, Carnegie Corporation of New York
Kerrissa Heffernan, Swearer Center for Public Service, Brown University
Elizabeth Hollander, Campus Compact
Craig A. Rimmerman, Hobart and William Smith Colleges
John Saltmarsh, Campus Compact
Tobi Walker, The Pew Charitable Trusts
Isa D. Williams, Agnes Scott College
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Introduction

From March 15 to 17, 2001, a group of 33 juniors and seniors representing 27 colleges and universities gathered at the Johnson Foundation in Racine, Wisconsin for the Wingspread Summit on Student Civic Engagement. The students were nominated by faculty and community service directors and asked to participate in a candid group discussion focused on their “civic experiences” in higher education. These students represented diverse institutions and diverse communities, which provided for a series of rigorous and provocative dialogues. Campus Compact’s purpose in organizing this meeting was to hear directly from students about how they view their own civic development rather than relying on surveys about student civic engagement.

This document describes student political and civic engagement as defined by students at the Summit. It examines contemporary conceptions of civic engagement, politics, and service and provides specific suggestions about how campuses can improve their commitment to student civic engagement through service-learning, increased support for student political activity, and attentiveness to student voice.

The students who met at Wingspread articulated a clear vision for what it means to be engaged in civic life and why particular forms of engagement were chosen. The message can be synthesized into four specific points as defined by the students:

We view democracy as richly participatory rather than procedural, we see the work of negotiating difference as the work of democracy;

We recognize and seize opportunities to put our community service activities in context, to provide our actions with systems perspectives that politicize service;

We see ourselves as misunderstood by those who measure student engagement by conventional standards that don’t always fit our conceptions of democratic participation; and

We have a clear sense of how higher education can and should change to provide an environment more conducive to civic education.

A NEW DEMOCRACY

The students at the summit defined democracy less in terms of civic obligation than in terms of the social responsibility of the individual. There is a significant emphasis on inclusion—the ability of all to participate—as a cornerstone of democracy. Students make choices about participation associated with certain social issues based upon per-

The Wingspread student participants represent private and public two- and four-year colleges and universities in 22 states across the country. There were 12 male and 21 female students, ranging in age from 20 to 47. There were 20 Caucasian, six African-American, two Mexican, one Mexican/Chicano, one Chicano, one Native American, and two Southeast Asian students.

sonal interests or experience. Their participation is highly individualized (where the personal is linked to the political) but this should not be equated with individualism (where self-interest is the overriding motivation). Therefore, their participation is not tied to any agreed upon or widely shared goal—on the contrary, the highly individualized nature of participation means that their efforts are highly fragmented.

SERVICE POLITICS

The students at the Summit described three distinct forms of political engagement: conventional politics, community service, and “service politics.” Wingspread students argued that community service is a form of alternative politics, not an alternative to politics. Participation in community service can be undertaken as a form of unconventional political activity that can lead to social change. Service politics is the bridge between community service and conventional politics. It is through service politics that many students make the shift toward more conventional forms of political activity.

This Statement is not intended to be the final word on student engagement. Instead, the students who met at Wingspread hope it captures the tensions and promise surrounding meanings they assign to politics and their development as citizens of American Democracy.

Democracy and Education

OUR PERSPECTIVES ON DEMOCRACY

How we define civic engagement

The manner in which we engage in our democracy goes beyond, well beyond, the traditional measurements that statisticians like to measure us by, most notably voting. Indeed, student civic engagement has multiple manifestations including: personal reflection/inner development, thinking, reading, silent protest, dialogue and relationship building, sharing knowledge, project management, and formal organization that brings people together. Cultural and spiritual forms of expression are included here, as are other forms of expression through the arts such as guerrilla theater, music, coffee houses, poetry, and alternative newspapers.

Although we recognize that not every activity should be measured as political activity, many do have political dimensions. One student noted that if an activity is aimed at unraveling obstacles to progress then it is civic engagement—if you are dismantling “-isms,” then you are engaged. Another student added that civic engagement involves “confronting the norm.”

In addition, we have more interest in local politics and global politics than national politics. To us, local politics are more accessible than national politics, and both local and global politics often involve issues that are of special concern to us. And, it should be noted, almost all of us at Wingspread voted in the last presidential election, motivated by both global and local issues.

How we relate to conventional politics

For the most part, we are frustrated with conventional politics, viewing it as inaccessible. We discovered at Wingspread, however, a common sense that while we are disillusioned

with conventional politics (and therefore most forms of political activity), we are deeply involved in civic issues through non-traditional forms of engagement. We are neither apathetic nor disengaged. In fact, what many perceive as disengagement may actually be conscious choice; for example, a few of us at Wingspread actively avoided voting, not wanting to participate in what some of us perceive to be a deeply flawed electoral process. Others chose to vote solely on local referendums and initiatives. As one student noted, “There were state-

wide issues that were very important; there was an abortion question, there was a medical marijuana question, and there was another one about allocating a large sum of money for conservation issues in the state of Maine. So there are a lot of issues that sparked my interest.” We have chosen to become involved in unconventional political activities. While we still hope to be able to participate in our political system effectively through traditional means, service is a viable and preferable (if not superior) alternative at this time.

What many perceive as disengagement may actually be conscious choice.

How we see service as alternative politics

Many of us at Wingspread perceive service as alternative politics, as a method of pursuing change in a democratic society. We want to address immediate problems in our communities as a way to begin. Building relationships with others through service is often preparatory to building a movement, as we learn skills that can help us take on the roles of community organizers. Through relationships with community members, we learn about real community wants and needs. We learn about local policies and politics and see how they affect people in our communities. By deepening our connection to the community, we become aware of issues and examine strategies for solving problems.

Translating personal interests and issues into civic engagement

We spent a good deal of time at Wingspread discussing our personal motivations for being civically involved, especially in community service. Some of these motivations were common amongst the group, while others were unique to individual participants.

- We agree that we engage in service to address problems and needs in our communities.
- Our concern about local and global issues motivates us.
- Some of us engage in service work to avoid apathy.
- Our personal identity plays a huge role in the activities we choose to pursue. For example, two students at Wingspread, one Catholic and one Muslim, revealed that their service is faith-inspired.
- Our families, especially our parents, inspire us.
- Many of us are uncomfortable with our own privileges, such as opportunities for higher education, material security, and so on.
- Most of us engage in service to address the injustices that we see in our society.
- Many of us are angry at the intolerance and human suffering in our world, and we often correlate that injustice with our own personal experiences with discrimination and other forms of elitism.
- When we are told that we cannot do something because we are too young, we lack experience, etc., we often try even harder to prove these stereotypes wrong and to prove ourselves knowledgeable and adept.
- We also hope to inspire others, especially younger generations, through our service.
- We see possibilities for change in our respective communities, and we have seen positive outcomes of working with others. We hope to build bridges between people and communities.

- Some of us feel divided from our communities while at college, so we try, through service, to keep one foot in the community and the other foot in academia.
- Finally, we are motivated to engage in service because we see ourselves in the people we serve.

Private activity taking on a larger public commitment

One student's view of public civic engagement is that politics is a stage upon which we all play different roles. From community service, we learn that we need to value and honor these roles because they lead to collective action. A related belief is that service allows us to see both human potential and the need for our communities to overcome barriers. Through community service, we can build relationships and connect with others in concerted action. Starting small, we build a movement one person at a time. We characterize these movements as decentralized and less hierarchical than many historical social movements. Although they are informal, these social networks are reflective of collective action.

Lastly, in some cases our private acts take on a public commitment because we realize that our actions and choices have an impact on the world. For this reason we try to lead our lives in a manner consistent with our ethics, living by example.

Personal, ethnic, racial, religious, and sexual identity shape public activity

Our politics are consciously shaped through the lens of our social, national, ethnic, racial, economic, gender, sexual, and religious identities. While we are all Americans, we are each rooted in unique sub-cultures. We share the belief that each of us deserves a chance at the "American Dream" and that equality is tremendously important. Identity motivates us to do service work, and service work can lead to self-reflection that impacts our identity.

Our identity prompts us to engage in our communities in many ways:

- One student at Wingspread told us that kids in his community need to see black college students because their teachers and administrators are all white.
- For students who come from an upper-middle class background, a feeling of guilt about their privilege may motivate them to serve the less fortunate and "give back" to the community. Their service experiences have the potential to guide them in examining the power and privilege that society has associated with their identity.
- Many students engage in service that is faith-inspired, as religion plays a strong role in their identity.
- A lesbian college student chooses to volunteer with a group of gay and lesbian teenagers from the surrounding community because they share a common identity.

- Some college students feel that they should help those who share their identity, in order to aid the entire group. For example, a Latino college student starts a program to teach English in a nearby Latino community.
- As one African-American woman from a primarily white Southern campus noted, “For black students, simply going to class is a political act.”

We have multiple identities, and claiming these identities is an important aspect of higher education. In fact, higher education sometimes prompts a re-evaluation of identity as students react against stereotypes—such as the ‘good Notre Dame boy’ or ‘the party girl’—that they encounter during their college years. Students are often forced to look deeper into themselves to figure out who they really are, as well as to determine how their identity manifests itself through their political and civic lives. Because higher education allows us the freedom to represent multiple aspects of our identities, it may facilitate an identity politics that is fragmented and/or divisive, leading to moments of confusion and uncertainty. At the same time, higher education offers students an opportunity to examine multiple identities that is liberating and transformative. This opportunity to struggle with questions of personal identity, power, and privilege is invaluable to the development of our civic identity.

We define democracy as inclusive and accessible

The politics of participatory democracy should start with the question of who is allowed to participate. In theory, everyone should be included in “collective” decision-making. As young people, however, we are often left out of this process, even when the decisions may directly impact our lives. Our experiences with oppression and exclusion have shaped our identities and have made us committed to political inclusion. We see many people in our communities—the young, the poor, and the uneducated—being left out of decisions that affect them. Power and access in our political system have historically been granted primarily to upper class, well educated, older white males.

At Wingspread, we “re-imagined” our political system. One of the first things we would do is open doors to those who are voiceless and reintegrate them in collective decision-making. Our experiences have demonstrated to us the importance of allowing all people to participate in political and civic life. We would work to change the political system by “giving power back to the people,” by educating them about the inner-workings of their political system, and helping them to access it. Ideally, we would also broaden awareness about issues that impact the lives of different groups in our society.

Although many people think that college students have legitimacy to speak out and participate in politics (as we are the next in line to inherit power), some do not.

At Wingspread, one student suggested that the lack of focus characteristic of some student movements is really a struggle for inclusion in politics, as those at the “center” of the system continue to be unresponsive to the needs and voices of people in the “mar-

We would work to change the political system by “giving power back to the people,” by educating them about the inner-workings of their political system, and helping them to access it.

gins.” We have found that it is very difficult to accomplish change through conventional means when you lack access to the system. For us to address the policies and practices that create inequalities in our communities, we need to learn to better work within the system—or reconceptualize it.

ANALYSIS

Democracy is defined less in terms of civic obligation than of the social responsibility of the individual. Students make choices about participation associated with certain social issues based upon personal interests or experience. Their participation is highly individualized (where the personal is linked to the political) but this should not be equated with individualism (where self interest is the overriding motivation). Their participation, therefore, is not tied to any agreed upon or widely shared goal—on the contrary, the highly individualized nature of participation means that their efforts are highly fragmented. Democracy is defined largely in terms of a deep sense of individual participation and the ability of all to participate as individuals—there is a significant emphasis on inclusion as a cornerstone of democracy.

Democracy is also, to an extent, place-based: Students exercise their responsibility foremost at the local level where they can make direct connections and experience feedback that reassures them that their actions have a meaningful impact. Democracy at this level is defined as a process that is “by the people.” Students’ understanding of their responsibility at the national level is less refined since, for the most part, they do not see a direct relationship between many federal policies and community life. Take, for example, the leading issues that were debated in the 2000 presidential campaign: taxes, social security, health care, prescription drug costs, educational testing, campaign finance reform, the death penalty, gun control, to name a few. The effect of these government programs is dissipated and amorphous at the level of local community life. Democracy as experienced through the federal government is “for the people” at best, and does not align with student persuasions toward participatory democracy.

The local level is also where students confront the profound question of their national identity. Students describe an emerging national identity that is not based on an idealized notion of the democratic citizen. Rather than embrace a traditional model of one national identity based upon recognizable civic markers, students engaged in community service often choose to explore a national identity that makes fewer claims on the individual. Students often explore and cultivate a national identity based upon a “community of kind” defined by ethnicity, religion, racial, and/or sexual identity. This identity is often highly focused on the primacy of individual rights, yet claims to hold a larger social imagination or vision. An obvious problem is that without a coherent national identity it is hard to embrace one national agenda.

The Wingspread students believe that their community experiences encourage them to develop a larger, more inclusive, social imagination. Developing this social imagination provides them with a sense of how to advocate beyond their own desires and taught them the value of subordinating themselves to a larger purpose (Glendon). Over time, the Wingspread students, like many students engaged in service, begin to question the social and economic forces that encourage Americans to pursue individual desires. These

students are often faced with the sobering realization that one's life choices tend to be enacted in particular social contexts, which in turn will impact the choices of others. As such, their sense of social responsibility tends to have a global as well as a local dimension because global issues, largely defined by the authoritarianism and exploitation of global capital, impinge on local community life whether those communities are in Southeast Asia or Seattle, Washington, or Genoa, Italy. Many students make the connection that globalization is neither of, for, nor by the people and hence, they both resist it and resist being associated with it through monetary and trade policies at the federal level.

The realization that individual choices have larger public repercussions is an integral piece of one's moral, social, intellectual and civic development.

Many students, including those at Wingspread, come to college with a limited understanding of what one needs to know and how one must act to become a citizen. Their grasp of citizenship is often very isolated, rooted in a belief in the primacy of individual rights (a belief reinforced by the market). Through this private lens, students attempt to define what counts as citizenship and what the experience of higher education might mean. Colleges have a significant role in challenging students' private, individual, rights-based orientation by helping students develop a public, social imagination, and an understanding of how and why securing rights benefits a larger community. The Wingspread students suggest that colleges challenge them not by informing students of a set of civic duties, but by modeling the right way to be in a community, particularly how to subordinate individual desires to a larger public purpose—even while living in a market economy that defines success by the fulfillment of those individual desires.

While the students whose words are reflected in this document speak in almost reverent terms of inclusion and equity, they are discerning. They choose their words carefully; they “turn away” or “lose faith” instead of confronting or forcefully indicting systems; they employ a well-honed, cool, detached skepticism in their discussions and are well aware that this uncontested skepticism is welcomed in contemporary university culture as a sign of intellect. Yet there is an underlying poignancy to that skepticism, as students long for ideals to believe in and for those “idealists” who will inspire them. They look for connections to community and want higher education to provide them with those connections and with opportunities to explore critical social issues. The question may not be whether service makes students “better citizens;” rather, what civic skills do they gain that allow them to better connect to communities and develop a reflective, social imagination (to balance the private and the public)?

The Wingspread students suggest that colleges challenge them not by informing students of a set of civic duties, but by modeling the right way to be in a community, particularly how to subordinate individual desires to a larger public purpose—even while living in a market economy that defines success by the fulfillment of those individual desires.

THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

How service-learning bridges service work with politics

At Wingspread, we discussed the importance of service-learning as a mechanism that connects service and politics. Service-learning has been called a “strategy for civic engagement.” Through service-learning, we have the opportunity to share and relate our experiences with others and to explore the broader context of our service activity. Service-learning, with its rich integrations of readings, reflection, and class discussion, offers feedback and recognition and makes us realize that collectively we are a powerful force for social change.

Community service without a curriculum connection often does not allow students to realize interconnections between their 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. One student noted that although she had little interest in politics, service-learning showed her that politics was a “natural step” from service.

Through service-learning, important relationships between professors and students are developed, evidenced in some instances as mentoring. Service-learning also builds bridges and pathways to career possibilities. By merging academics and service, service-learning makes systemic social and political issues an obvious extension and duty of higher education.

HOW TO MAKE SERVICE-LEARNING EVEN MORE POWERFUL AND SUBSTANTIVE

The Wingspread dialogues capture an understanding of ways to deepen service-learning and enhance its capacity to promote civic engagement. First, whenever possible, establishing and maintaining a strong relationship with the community is essential. Community members should not be made to feel as if they are being studied or objectified. The professor should know the community and community-based organizations well enough to be able to facilitate deep reflection in the course material. (As a way of equalizing the playing field between academics and community service providers, it has been suggested that professors co-teach courses with community partners.) We agree that the focus of our education is changed immeasurably through a community-based perspective. It is necessary, however, to prepare students for service. For example, some of us mentioned that student volunteers should participate in some type of orientation (including diversity/sensitivity training) before entering into the community. This was a point of contention, however, since many of us felt that diversity training often unwittingly reinforces rather than obliterates stereotypes, and ends up doing more harm than good.

On the academic side, service should be integrated into curricula so that it fits within the student’s course and major. In addition, it is important for professors to consider that competition for grades (e.g., going for the “A”) may detract from actual learning. Another suggestion is that there should be less emphasis on the number of hours of service required to complete a course, and more concern for a quality experience. Also,

the number of students in a service-learning course should be limited in order to maximize learning (for example, having a smaller number of students may enhance discussion among classmates).

Universities often see service and civic engagement through a philanthropic lens, resulting in token gestures (i.e., their “excess” time, talent, and resources) to the community. They seem to view service more as a public relations strategy, while in reality, they keep the community at arm’s length.

The degree to which the larger activities and mission of the campus are aligned with the values of inclusion, justice, reciprocity, community building, and participatory democracy At Wingspread we examined the connection between the campus’s actual relationship with its surrounding community and its stated mission. We concluded that the theoretic relationship with the community often differs from the real. A number of universities appear to promote service and community outreach as ways to make themselves appear involved but do not seem interested in any real commitment to the outlying community. Case in point: One student mentioned that her school marketed itself as “College of the Year” based on an award it received, but quietly deleted “for outreach to community.” Although this institution appears committed to the community, it chose to diminish the “community,” the aspect that was most significant about its award, in its marketing and public relations materials. Universities often see service and civic engagement through a philanthropic lens, resulting in token gestures (i.e., their “excess” time, talent, and resources) to the community. They seem to view service more as a public relations strategy, while in reality, they keep the community at arm’s length.

Some institutions construct real barriers to community engagement:

- One student noted that his campus interpreted work-study in such a manner as to prohibit some students from doing the kind of work they would prefer do in their communities.¹
- Compulsory community service programs (such as those administered by the criminal justice system) send a message to students and community members that service is a form of punishment.
- Many campuses do not attempt to orient students to the neighborhood outside of campus, leaving it to individual students to become self-educated about the community.
- Oftentimes there are physical barriers between the university and the community that augment the disconnection between them.
- Community service centers on campuses (if they exist at all) often lack adequate resources, staffing, and funds.

Overall, we have found that colleges and universities do not teach us the community-building/organizing skills that we need. They rarely provide models for healthy communities, either on the campus itself (where the hierarchical nature of the institution often overlooks student needs/input when making decisions), or through relationships with

the surrounding community. Many campuses view engagement in communities in terms of what the institution can do for the community, instead of how they can work together for the benefit of both. This leads to the exclusion of community members in university plans that affect the community.

Institutional indicators of a commitment to student civic engagement

There are many indicators that institutions are moving toward or have concern for student civic engagement. One indicator is making service a part of the curriculum.

Committed institutions may also have a service-learning program and an institute or center that acts as a liaison to the community and provides resources and support for students and faculty.

Another indicator is the level of commitment among faculty members. One student commented that schools should raise the standard of what it means to be civically engaged, but should not judge students for their current level of engagement.

College presidents can provide open forums to encourage the growth of various forms of civic engagement. Institutions can send students to conferences (such as Wingspread) where they can learn more about civic engagement through dialogue with their peers. Campuses can support students who are involved in service by creating dorms with community outreach missions and running alternative spring break programs. Institutions can create community service scholarships and allocate a percentage of student activity fees to support student efforts to engage in the community. The mission and culture of the institution can encourage engagement by providing space, resources, recognition, information, transportation, and other forms of support. Consistent leadership from college presidents is very important, but difficult with the current pressure presidents are under to be fundraisers. Colleges and universities need to work with students and community members to promote and sustain civic engagement, both on and off campus.

Students often find that traditional faculty are unable to make the deeper connections because they live too exclusively within the disengaged and isolated culture of academia.

ANALYSIS

When provided opportunities through education, students understand and act upon the distinction between service—which encourages us to think that individual actions are a substitute for focusing on larger structural issues—and political activity—which involves working with others to influence (or alter) societal institutions. They recognize and appreciate the value of service-learning in connecting their personal actions to larger social action. They see service-learning as a primary vehicle for connecting service with broader social and political dimensions.

Students are also closely attuned to the processes and institutional context for service-learning. Through community-based experiences, they increasingly appreciate the ability of educators on campus to help make the connections between their work in the community and the knowledge and skill base that deepens their community work. Students often find that traditional faculty are unable to make the deeper connections because they live too exclusively within the disengaged and isolated culture of academia.

The overwhelming message is that one does not enter the public arena until one's private life is secure. As such, measuring student political behavior in the context of higher education is likely to yield disappointing results.

Additionally, students find that the most effective teachers and mentors for their community work and those who help the most in making connections to larger social issues—and offer the most in terms of shaping their career goals—are likely to be the staff members who administer the campus community service center. These people embody more closely the students' ideal of being situated both on campus and in the community. At the same time, students experience a curricular deficit: some of the most important knowledge and skills we need for communi-

ty-based work—around advocacy, organizing, conflict resolution, community economic development, etc.—are not taught in any courses or through any programs on campus. As students look elsewhere to acquire these community competencies, their campus life becomes less relevant to their civic aspirations.

Student participation in larger social issues is also directly impacted by the institutional environment, which may only be tangentially related to service-learning. Students are subtly conscious of and respond to the campus climate as it relates to political activity. This can be experienced in ways related to the kinds of opportunities that are made available: Is there a community service center on campus? Are there opportunities to enroll in service-learning courses? Are there forums on campus for dialogue about larger social issues? If so, who is allowed to take part? Does the rhetoric of public service and being a good neighbor belie the realities that the students experience in the local community? This can also be experienced in terms of acceptable means of political activity: Are students encouraged to challenge the administration about campus policies? Is a diversity of political voices brought to campus? Are students reprimanded or punished for political activity that associates them—directly or indirectly—with the institution? To what degree is democracy practiced on campus? Student engagement is directly related to how these questions are answered through students' experiences of whether the campus is a safe place for civic engagement.

Many of the Wingspread participants acknowledge that while citizenship requires them to assume certain duties, social and economic forces tend to encourage college students to defer those responsibilities until they are established in their careers. The overwhelming message is that one does not enter the public arena until one's private life is secure. As such, measuring student political behavior in the context of higher education is likely to yield disappointing results. Students perceive their institutions as willing players in the message of deferral of responsibility. They believe higher education is complicit in compartmentalizing the public-civic life and the private-economic life of students. This is illustrated in pedagogy that requires students to live in bifurcated worlds of theory and action. Students are told to ingest large amounts of information that point to a concern, yet are often discouraged from acting on their knowledge and idealism until they have secured their own economic futures. This deferral, coupled with a belief in the primacy of one's rights, leads to a perception that disengagement and apathy are youthful character flaws, when they are more accurately flawed social norms.

The Wingspread students were confounded to realize that higher education does not concentrate its full potential upon alleviating social ills. It is worth noting that students do not express anger at this revelation; they express disappointment. This reaction may be self-serving: Students, like many others, are unwilling to indict systems that they need. Moreover, to indict higher education may have larger, personal implications for students.

Students often reside in college communities that allow them the freedom to assume multiple identities, to negotiate power and privilege, and to examine the complexity of democratic tenets like inclusion and access. In such a community, students are attuned to how agents of the institution model these tenets. Students pay close attention to where these individuals and their beliefs stand in the priorities of the institution. The Wingspread students described faculty who risk their careers—tenure and promotion—to pursue a pedagogy of responsible civic engagement; marginalized service centers crowded into basements and crumbling houses that are engaged in transformative community work; poorly paid community service directors with little access to power; community partners who are denied access to institutional resources; and career centers and external affairs offices that promote limited markers of success. Institutions send these powerful signals to students and community members about where their civic priorities lie. Higher education should take note: The Wingspread students were remarkably attuned to the ways in which community service centers that are not integral to the pedagogical mission “let the institution off the hook.” As the institution points with pride to its community service center, and presidents preach about empowering students, these marginalized centers become an excuse for institutional disengagement from the community.

STUDENT VOICE

Student input and agency shaping civic engagement on campus

Many of us do not feel that our views are heard on our respective campuses. What became evident during the Wingspread Summit was that students want to be in conversation with college presidents and other administrators. Some students expressed that, as community volunteers, they are treated as “fine china” brought out to impress trustees and honored guests. In other cases, administrators seem more preoccupied with what students are not doing. Some administrators send the message that, although the vocational aspects of service are good for résumé-building, the service itself is of little value. We feel that the leaders of colleges and universities often consider the voices of trustees and donors to be more important than that of their students, creating an academic atmosphere that is not necessarily conducive to civic engagement. Presidents should instead “practice what they preach” to their students, by facilitating quality service-learning opportunities.

In addition, students are generally unaware of how to participate in the college community. They know little about the administrative functions of higher education and are organizationally illiterate about the particular universities they attend. Many of us who do try to navigate the bureaucracy often lack access to the institutional system and find progress to be painstakingly slow and difficult. We often don’t understand the inner-workings of our institutions until we are well into our college careers; by then it is often

too late to put this knowledge to work in attempting to make changes on campus. It is conceivable that colleges and universities do not educate students about their bureaucratic pathways just so that students will not try to “reform” the system. The energy required to navigate and translate the bureaucracies is often too great a hindrance to overcome, which further contributes to the perception that college students are apathetic, even on their own campuses.

A perception many people have about college students is that our movements lack focus. At Wingspread, we argued that although many student movements have multiple goals, they are, in fact, highly organized. As one student noted, “we confront power and the lack of democracy [on many levels], but that does not mean that we lack focus.”

Students are also uneasy with the fact that their generation is being held accountable to a different generation’s standards of political involvement, such as those of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. We believe that through our work in community service we effectively confront some of the same “-isms” and institutional inequalities that the Civil Rights Movement challenged. However, our challenge is often to recognize and address more subtle forms of sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, etc.

Students as active producers (as opposed to consumers) of knowledge and democracy
Administrators and others in higher education often dismiss student voice. Instead, we are encouraged to be primarily consumers of knowledge and democracy—not active producers. This sends the negative message that our contributions to knowledge, as well as the very tenets of democracy, are unimportant or misguided. We feel that we are discouraged from participation because schools tend to emphasize grades over experiences of self-actualization. Service is rarely celebrated on par with academics. Although some students in our consumer-driven culture “want to be involved in everything,” many who get involved in “radical” activities such as protests are seen as outcasts or misfits because our culture is generally unsympathetic to political protest or activism. The media portrays activism as unsophisticated, futile, and often infantile. In our discussions about what an engaged campus might look like, one student mentioned that the stigma of activism must be erased. There needs to be greater awareness of the multiple modes of participation and levels of activism, as well as increased knowledge about both past and contemporary social movements. Colleges and universities should also encourage student service groups to work together, and should even facilitate opportunities for them to do so.

In an attempt to draw from our experiences in higher education and provide feedback to college presidents, at Wingspread we were asked to read and respond to the Campus Compact *Presidents’ Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education* (2000). This Declaration makes many observations about students that may be well-intentioned, but are not well-founded. One concern we had with the Presidents’ Declaration is that it implies that college students are in dire need of assistance. As one student commented, it seems like the signers of the Declaration are saying “Okay, kids [college students, youth of America] are falling apart, we’ve got to help fix them and save them.” While we as students want to work with college faculty and administrators, these are not attempts at self-preservation. We would like to be in respectful conversation with faculty and others at our schools, and to work with them on community building and civic engagement.

We are open to dialogue with our colleges and universities, and we hope to better cooperate with them for the benefit of our shared/common communities.

ANALYSIS

One major theme that came out of the Wingspread Summit is the importance of student voice. At Wingspread, it was clear that students are not provided sufficient opportunities on campus to voice their social and political concerns in constructive and effective ways. Students want to be consulted about their thoughts, opinions, and feelings on important public decisions and issues, especially those that affect them directly as members of a campus community or as community builders off-campus.

Institutions must investigate ways to engage in conversation with students from many different areas of the college in order to make a greater commitment to incorporating student voice into discussions and decision-making. Student representation in administrative areas should not be limited to one token student sitting on a number of committees. In addition, it is not merely enough to talk with students; their input should have equal weight when compared to the input of other stakeholders in the decision-making process.

One important point students made is that they are often organizationally illiterate about the colleges and universities that they attend. In order to facilitate student participation and student voice on campus, students must be educated about the inner-workings of campus bureaucracy. Colleges and universities should not fear students who attempt to navigate administration in hopes of making changes on campus.

Students should also be viewed as producers of knowledge, not consumers. For example, they should be encouraged to work with other students and professors on research projects that focus on community problems and social issues. In addition, community service should be given legitimacy and value as an important part of a student's educational experience.

Colleges and universities across the nation should make a commitment to finding new ways to foster student voice and incorporate student concerns into discussions and decision-making. If students, faculty, administration, and community partners are able to work together, they will have the potential to successfully address important campus and community issues.

Colleges and universities should not fear students who attempt to navigate administration in hopes of making changes on campus.

“This conference seriously reawakened my sense of hope and redoubled my commitment to the utility of service, both personally and generally. I was blown away (still am) by the energy, awareness, concern, ingenuity, courage, perseverance, and faith of my fellow student participants. Knowing that these people are exemplary—but in many ways representative of the larger community—is a powerful antidote to apathy and a cause for optimism. I wish everyone, students and non-students alike, had the opportunity for such an immersion, and I plan on working toward that goal by starting similar dialogues on our own campus.”

Michael Kirkpatrick
Fort Lewis College
Wingspread Participant

Service and Politics

FRAMEWORKS FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

At Wingspread, students expressed frustration about the derogatory ways in which they are often characterized by college and university presidents, faculty, and the public regarding their levels of political and civic engagement. Our contention is that, in fact, we are politically engaged, although we may participate in politics in unconventional ways.

At Wingspread, we described three distinct forms of political engagement: conventional politics, community service, and “service politics.” Conventional politics focuses on the role of government to protect individual rights; promote interests; and provide needed policies, laws, and services. Political engagement in conventional politics, as Richard Battistoni points out in *Service Learning and Civic Education*, “involves political participation to the extent necessary to provide for the individual’s particular interests: voting for public officials who will represent them in public affairs and joining interest groups or lobbying for legislation that accords with their interests and values” (2000, p. 20). In this government-centered form of engagement, the citizen’s primary role is that of voter. The government works “for the people” by providing services and guaranteeing rights.

A second type of political engagement is community service. In this form of engagement, citizens act as volunteers, seeking to alleviate immediate social needs. They view government as being “of the people” and undertake roles that are similar to those of established government bodies.

A third type of engagement is “service politics,” where government is “by the people” and individuals act as co-creators of a public, common good. Service politics connects individual acts of service to a broader framework of systemic social change. This may lead to institutional transformation as campuses, government, and public policy become more responsive, public-spirited, and citizen-centered.

CONVENTIONAL POLITICS

Conventional forms of political engagement focus on local, state, and federal government and entail working within institutions to shape policy and create systemic change. For many who would define this type of political activity, the first (and sometimes only) thing that comes to mind is the act of voting. Delli Carpini and Keeter write:

Citizenship in the United States is often described as “thin,” meaning that expectations of civic responsibility are low and that the political system can operate without a great deal of public input. This characterization is based on the assumptions that the United

Our contention is that, in fact, we are politically engaged, although we may participate in politics in unconventional ways.

States is a liberal democracy; that liberal democracy requires little from its citizens beyond the occasional (and noncompulsory) act of voting for representatives... (1996, p. 4).

While voting is highly emphasized, conventional political engagement involves other activities. In addition to selecting qualified representatives, citizens must serve as the pool from which representatives are selected, and must reward or punish office holders for their past performances. Citizens vote directly on policy issues through initiatives and referenda and fill the thousands of voluntary, appointed, and bureaucratic civic roles required for the machinery of campaigns, elections, and government to work effectively. They shape local, state, and national political agendas through public opinion polls and demonstrations and by contacting elected officials (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996, p. 4).

Other “conventional” political activities include supporting and cooperating with the implementation of public policies, navigating government bureaucracies for information, goods, and services, and attending local government and civic meetings. In addition, discussing politics with neighbors, wearing buttons, signing petitions, writing letters to the editor, speaking out on talk radio (Putnam, 2000, p. 31), serving jury duty, and paying taxes (Barber, 1998, p. 124) are included as well. While there are many avenues for conventional political involvement, many people neglect to participate at all, unless, as in the case of jury duty, they are compelled to participate.

There has been an abundance of discussion and debate about the disengagement of citizens (especially younger generations) from conventional politics. Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari write, “In place of government of the people and by the people, today we focus on government for the people whose primary responsibility is to provide services. ...” (1996, p. 16). More and more citizens are declining to become involved in the democratic process, yet they still expect government to address their needs. Political disengagement has been attributed to apathy and frustration: As Boyte and Kari also write, “Americans in the mid-1990s are angry and disgusted at politicians. ... Yet simple anger at politicians lets us off the hook. ... In our time, politics and public affairs are seen as the work of politicians. But our real crisis is the disengagement of ordinary people from productive involvement in public affairs” (1996, p. 14). In addition, voting is frequently used as an indicator of decreased political involvement; for example, only 32 percent of 18 to 24 year-olds voted in 1996, compared to 52 percent in 1972, when the voting age became 18 (1998 National Secretaries of State study). In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam writes, “Like the decline in voting turnout, to which it is linked, the slow slump in interest in politics and current events is due to the replacement of an older generation that was relatively interested in public affairs by a younger generation that is relatively uninterested” (2000, p. 36).

Some of us at Wingspread are critical of the fact that many surveys and literature on youth civic disengagement rely solely on conventional political activities—such as voting—as indicators of student political involvement. As one Wingspread student said, “I think voting has an important role in society for showing that you’re involved in your community and what’s going on around you, but I don’t feel that it’s the most important factor that we should be looking at.” Another student added, “Voting in some respects is irrelevant for some college kids’ political involvement but at the same time is very repre-

sentative of maybe some of the problems inherent in the political system.”

Survey data from the past decade illustrates a consistent trend of decreasing interest in conventional politics and increasing participation in volunteer activity. The surveys indicate that students are not engaged in conventional political activities because conventional politics corresponds to an institutional system that they view as antiquated and irrelevant to their concerns and passions for social justice. Rather than confront the existing systems, college students (along with other Americans) have turned away from political engagement and citizenship rooted in institutions and systems in favor of civic engagement through local, community-based activities characterized as “community service.”

A criticism Wingspread students had about the surveys is that they draw a sharp distinction between community service and conventional political activity, indicating that community service lacks a political component. Students also reject many of the surveys, studies, and literature that have become the basis for a generalized portrait of young Americans, as this information often disregards local, relational, and unconventional forms of political/civic engagement. It may be true that many college students are not very interested in politics or in discussing political affairs; however, it is apparent that students are heavily involved in volunteer activity and it can legitimately be argued that students’ service activities have a deliberate and recognizable political dimension. (A summary of student surveys, which was included as an appendix in the first edition, is now available on the web at www.compact.org/students.)

Three main factors distinguish community service from conventional politics: institutional focus, policy-making, and approaches to systemic change. Conventional politics tend to focus on institutions as agents of social change. Because of this institutional focus, conventional politics is more concerned with the creation and implementation of policy than is community service. When students serve outside of institutions, it is usually unrelated to policy—plans or strategic courses of action pursued by organizations to bring about social change. Although community service may motivate one to become more involved in conventional political activity, it is rare that those involved can create or change policy through service itself. The small bodies of influence that students form to address particular issues often lack sufficient organizational or political power to enable them to effect large-scale change.

Another factor that distinguishes conventional politics from community service is an approach to systemic change involving systems-thinking. It is necessary to understand systems and plan within their framework in order to effect change. Anti- or non-institutional, individual service work does little to alter existing policy or create new plans of action to address systemic problems in our society and generate long-term social change. Although students who do community service often become aware of societal problems, service cannot be the direct means of tackling these issues as it does little in and of itself to effect social change.

“Voting in some respects is irrelevant for some college kids’ political involvement but at the same time is very representative of maybe some of the problems inherent in the political system.”

While many have argued that this generation is neither politically active nor civically engaged, we think time may prove that ours is one of the most politically active generations in recent history.

COMMUNITY SERVICE

One reason many of us choose to become involved in community service is that we dislike the institutional focus of conventional politics. We are frustrated with the workings of institutions, ranging from the federal government to our own colleges and universities. Many of us have developed an anti-institutional bias that shapes our views of most (if not all) of the institutions that we see around us. For example, some have turned away from religion because of their distaste for church-based institutions, choosing more individual and “spiritual” forms of worship. Others become disappointed and discouraged when the service organization with which they are involved becomes too “bureaucratized” or “professionalized.” The larger organizations grow, the more skeptical we become of them as agents for social change, and we are often concerned that the organizations may lose sight of their original mission, or, worse, reinforce the systems that perpetuate inequity. Many students are inclined toward community service over conventional forms of political activity because they see conventional politics as inherently tied to institutions that seem impersonal and unresponsive.

To many of us, developing real relationships with others through service is civic engagement. We at Wingspread associate affecting people with affecting the system. As one student said, “I work with people and affect people and then I affect systems.” Summit facilitator Tobi Walker argues that, “In a culture that regards politics with distrust and disgust, for young people eager to make a difference service may present a welcome way of ‘doing something’ without the mess and conflict of [conventional] politics.”

While many have argued that this generation is neither politically active nor civically engaged, we at Wingspread think time may prove that ours is one of the most politically active generations in recent history.

SERVICE POLITICS

The Wingspread dialogues defined a third form of political engagement, what we have chosen to call “service politics.” Service politics is the bridge between community service and conventional politics. As Craig Rimmerman notes, “critics of service-based experiences lament the fact that most student participants avoid tackling larger policy questions and issues. In this sense, they often conceive of service as an alternative to politics” (1997, p. 105). At Wingspread, we argued a different position, that service is alternative politics, not an alternative to politics. Participation in community service is a form of unconventional political activity that can lead to social change, in which participants primarily work outside of governmental institutions; service politics becomes the means through which students can move from community service to political engagement. Those who develop connections to larger systemic issues building on their roots in community service adopt a framework through which service politics leads to greater social change.

Students, like some other groups of Americans, find contemporary political life distasteful and unresponsive to their efforts. Therefore, students have adopted service as politics, finding in service more hope and more possibilities for change. Loeb described this idea in his study of college students, *Generation at the Crossroads*:

As a response to the standard barriers, and to the real and perceived flaws in existing campus movements, students have begun looking for different ways to voice social concern. They want to act. They want to help. They don't want to deal with complicated issues and factions, or the messy contention of politics. Instead, they've revived approaches to involvement that focus on individual service, and organized volunteering in local communities. Yet these same approaches often lead them back to larger social change (1994, p. 231).

It is in service politics that service becomes political. As such, students' personal service activity often becomes the basis of their political thought and action. As one student notes, "I think personal politics translate eventually into greater citizen participation on higher levels, but I think it's kind of like an evolution—you get involved in the community, you get involved in personal politics, you get involved in traditional politics, but none of them is necessarily better than the other."

Despite their similar nature, there are many differences between community service and service politics. Service politics is a form of civic engagement that looks at systems, while service is typically geared toward symptoms. With service politics, those participating in service attempt to impact the "circle of influence" around them by raising awareness and concern about the issue(s) their service addresses. They start expanding this circle by informing their friends, families, and others who are close to them about the problem their service addresses, hoping that they too will make a personal commitment to the issue (or at least pass this knowledge along to their friends). Essentially, while service addresses immediate needs, service politics attempts to address the systemic issues that create these needs. For example, as part of a service-learning course, a volunteer at a homeless shelter investigates the reasons why people become homeless in her community. This may lead her to advocate for the homeless by attending demonstrations and petitioning local government to address the existing housing crisis in her city. Service politics has bridged her service at the homeless shelter with involvement in conventional political activity.

Service-learning functions as a catalyst for service politics because it provides a reflective component that connects community service to a political framework (institutional involvement, policy, and models of systemic change), linking individual acts of service with involvement with institutions.² Service-learning provides the tools and background knowledge needed to address the broader problems students recognize in their communities. It aids students in addressing questions of power, conflict, and privilege. In addi-

"I think personal politics translate eventually into greater citizen participation on higher levels, but I think it's kind of like an evolution—you get involved in the community, you get involved in personal politics, you get involved in traditional politics, but none of them is necessarily better than the other."

tion, service-learning may make citizens more personally and socially responsible, more compassionate toward the disadvantaged, more aware of their agency as community leaders, and more accepting of diversity (Kahne, Westheimer, & Rogers, 2000, p. 42).

Service becomes political when it operates as the means through which students may become invested in conventional politics through a commitment to social change.

Through service politics (catalyzed by service-learning), students who have no interest in conventional politics may find connections between community service and conventional politics.³ As one Wingspread student noted, “I have no faith in the political system; I don’t, but I still know I have to work within it to solve the bigger problem.” Students who enter into the realm of conventional politics by way of service politics are likely to approach conventional politics with a unique perspective. In addition, they are likely to have a personal connection to a particular issue and direct experience with the social implications of that issue. They are knowledgeable about the issue and its complexity and are often enthusiastic and committed to identifying potential solutions. They may also have gained experience in local politics.

As E.J. Dionne writes, “the great reforming generations are the ones that marry the aspirations of service to the possibilities of politics and harness the good work done in local communities to transform a nation.” If the current generation of students is able to use service politics to bridge direct service with conventional political activity, then they will be empowered to make necessary and important changes in society.

Endnotes

¹Although universities are required by law to use seven percent of their work-study funds for community service (unless they obtain a waiver), there are restrictions that govern the type of service work that can be done, sometimes with good reason. Examples of jobs in the public sector that are not considered to be in the public interest are: jobs that primarily benefit the membership of an organization that has membership limits, such as a credit union, fraternal or religious order, or a cooperative; jobs involving any partisan or nonpartisan political activity or association with a faction in an election for public or party office; jobs working for an elected official, unless the official is responsible for the regular administration of federal, state, or local government; jobs working as a political aide for any elected official; jobs that consider the student's political affiliation for hiring purposes; or jobs that involve lobbying on the federal, state, or local level. (Chapter III, Expanding Federal Work-Study and Community Service Opportunities: An FWS Resource Guide from the U.S. Department of Education.)

²Service-learning is defined as “a credit-bearing, educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility” (Bringle and Hatcher, 1995).

³Lori Vogelgesang from Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) writes, “In plain language, even after taking into account many student and some institutional characteristics, those students who participated in community service were more likely than non-service participants to say they voted in a state or national election during college. Service-learning participants were even more likely than community service participants to have voted.” It is evident that a correlation exists between service-learning and voting (a very conventional indicator of political engagement).

“I’ve kind of made it a personal mission to ensure that professors and administrators embrace the civic mission. Administrators often talk about creating better citizens, but that mission never filters down to students.”

Rachel Karess
Indiana University
Wingspread Participant

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To support this work, Campus Compact has created a curriculum to go along with *The New Student Politics* to facilitate classroom discussion and reflection on community-based experiences. You can download the curriculum at

www.compact.org/students

"In a time when college students are often labelled as "apathetic" or "apolitical" or even simply mindlessly materialistic, *The New Student Politics* is a wonderful testimony to young people's seriousness and desire to build a flourishing democracy, and a humane and democratic world."

Harry Boyte
Co-Director
Center for Democracy and Citizenship
University of Minnesota

"The concept of an integrated "service politics" is a profound, useful, and timely challenge to the conventional language of "moving from service to politics," more accurately reflecting the experiences of committed, caring students who understand service as a dimension of their public, political work."

Keith Morton
Feinstein Institute for Public Service
Providence College

"If our efforts to educate students toward the voting booth aren't working, we should meet our students where they are at (engaged in community service!) and help participants widen their sense of communities' needs and possible citizen responses. The student authors of this report lead us to a rethinking of our courses, student research, and student governance."

Cheryl Keen
Professor
Antioch College

"In this publication, students articulate their own points of view about how they see themselves as politically and civically engaged. Whether through fighting prejudice, voting on issues they care about, or engaging in service day-to-day, students today see themselves as working to build a stronger democracy. Understanding students' views can help us in the field of campus community engagement can support students' efforts on campus, local, national, and global levels."

Ariane Hoy
Executive Director
Campus Outreach Opportunity League
(COOL)

"*The New Student Politics* demonstrates that we have not in fact abdicated our position on the forefront of progress, but rather have once again redefined what progress means. This book should be required reading for all those interested in reinvigorating our democracy and finding out where the next generation is leading our nation."

Ben Branzel
Student
Brandeis University

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Campus Compact
Brown University
Box 1975
Providence, RI
02912-1975
(401) 867-3950
(401) 867-3925 fax
campus@compact.org
www.compact.org

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