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*This chapter describes fears that may lead to faculty resistance to civic engagement and suggests approaches to conquering these fears in order to further develop the civic capacities of our students and institutions.*

## Overcoming Faculty Fears About Civic Work: Reclaiming Higher Education's Civic Purpose

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De Anza College is a large regional community college located in the heart of the Silicon Valley. Our students are ethnically diverse and largely come from low-income backgrounds. De Anza has a reputation as an excellent transfer institution, so our students are on average highly motivated. Faculty and staff at De Anza have been working on equity and social justice agendas for many years, and the college's senior staff is committed to those goals. Our college president, Dr. Brian Murphy, is a cofounder of The Democracy Commitment, a national network of community colleges dedicated to achieving civic goals at our institutions.

For the past 3 years, I have been the director of De Anza's Institute of Community and Civic Engagement. The institute started as a focus group to see what kinds of civic engagement would fit with the culture of our campus and evolved into an office with a director and a small annual budget. My office has a number of successful projects, but few of them engage the faculty as a whole. This year I decided to reach out and encourage a broader range of faculty to engage in the work of developing the civic capacity of our students. This chapter describes the issues that arose in the process.

I began the project thinking that faculty already did a lot of civic work in their classes; they just didn't always know that they were doing it. Like many faculty members at De Anza and elsewhere, I have found that doing civic work in my own classes has been one of the more deeply rewarding aspects of my teaching. Thus, I assumed that with just a little bit of encouragement, I would find faculty ready to embrace the incorporation

of civic practices into their classrooms. I assumed that I could facilitate this by helping them to see what they were already doing as civic and expanding on those strategies and activities. What I encountered, however, was a widespread and deeply rooted anxiety about stepping into the political, often seen as forbidden territory. After a brief description of how De Anza has worked over the past few years to develop the civic capacity of our students, this report describes the fears that I have come to see as the root of faculty resistance to civic engagement. I conclude with a few ways that my colleagues and I have worked toward conquering these fears in order to further develop the civic capacity of our students and our institutions.

### **The Move Toward Civic Skills at De Anza**

In 2013 De Anza began to reexamine our core competency of “Global, Social, Cultural and Environmental Awareness.” At the beginning of this process, many of us realized that the wording of the competency was very weak and that it needed to be redefined. In April 2013 the Institute began working with the director of equity, social justice, and multicultural education to develop a set of definitions for what faculty and staff were doing to increase the global, social, cultural, and environmental awareness of our students. What we realized during this process was that this core competency is inextricably intertwined with the civic skills and capacities of our students and indeed everyone on our campus. Thus, we recommended that the core competency be changed to “Civic Capacity for Equity, Sustainability, and Social Justice,” a shift that has been embraced by the college’s student learning outcomes team. We believe that having civic capacity for equity and social justice means that our students see themselves as active agents who have the skills and the motivation to bring about outcomes where people are treated with respect and empathy and where students are able to build a sustainable world in which people can realize their capacities.

### **Engaging Faculty in Developing Civic Competencies**

As De Anza began to promote our redefined civic competency of Civic Capacity for Equity, Sustainability, and Social Justice, I began to engage faculty in conversations about what the competency means to them and how they would go about doing it. In particular, I began looking into the following questions:

- How can we encourage faculty to incorporate civic engagement when it is not a big part of what they do or teach?
- What kinds of trainings, invitations, or support result in faculty adopting some form of civic engagement into their classes?

- What language can be used to help faculty to see *what they are already doing* through the lens of civic engagement?
- What language can faculty use to help their *students* see what they are doing as civic engagement?

I believed that asking these questions would help De Anza better integrate a commitment to civic engagement into the college's culture. Therefore, I developed and piloted a short survey to assess how well faculty understood the concept of civic capacity and to ask them to identify ways they can work to develop the civic capacities of their students. I piloted the survey and led an in-depth discussion with a group of nine attendees at a workshop titled Developing Civic Capacity for Equity and Social Justice. What follows is a brief description of the survey results, as well as a larger exploration of some of the deeper and more useful findings from the workshop.

**Survey Results.** Generally, faculty answered yes to almost all of the items I included in the survey as examples of things that would increase students' civic capacity. But very few of them said they were doing more than two or three of them. Thus, the issue was not about understanding the nature of civic capacity, but in taking on the work of developing students' civic capacity as one's own.

As noted previously, before administering the survey, I thought my main task would be to help people see the work they were already doing within the frame of civic capacity and that I would then use that frame to leverage more civic work and give faculty some tips on ways to integrate that work into their classes. I thought I would encounter resistance based on the worry that there isn't enough time to cover something more. The results were quite different. Almost all of the things that I had identified as civic were also agreed to as such by the participants in the survey. In other words, although not all of the faculty I surveyed employed all of the approaches to developing students' civic capacity, at least they understood that those approaches existed. Although I took some comfort from this, it left me asking why. If faculty are aware of these tactics for developing students' civic capacity, and they know doing so is an important part of our college's mission, why aren't they employing them?

## The Root of Faculty Resistance: Fear

Although I learned a few things from the pilot administration of the survey, much more significant findings about the fears that faculty have about doing civic work emerged from our workshop conversations and from service learning training sessions. I quickly developed a strong sense that De Anza faculty—and likely those at other community colleges—believe that engaging students in civic work can be inappropriate or even dangerous. The fears I encountered fall into four categories: fear of abusing one's power as a faculty member, fear of being inappropriate, fear that civic discourse is

dangerous in the classroom, and fear that civic discourse trains student to act in ways that will endanger them.

**Fear 1: Engaging in Civic Discourse Imposes Our Values Inappropriately on Students.** One of the issues that surfaced repeatedly during conversations with faculty was the appropriateness of talking about politics in class. This view that politics and political opinions are inappropriate in the classroom appears to be quite widespread, even in political science classes, where faculty sometimes believe they must impart factual information and not engage in value-laden conversations. In my workshop, one faculty member said he'd love to talk about politics and civic issues but that he couldn't without it being an imposition of his power. This fear seems to be related to the view that an expression of an opinion is an *imposition* of one. This professor was sensitive to the power one holds as a faculty member and expressed a very sincere compassion for his students and a desire to not abuse that power.

Another poignant moment occurred when a different faculty member related that she always feels that students are looking to her for mentoring on what to think about important issues. She said she accepts this role except when it comes to controversial things like gay marriage. She then mused about what it might mean to go silent at precisely those moments when conversations are about issues of deep concern for students.

When I discuss this issue with colleagues, I hear many deeply felt worries about the importance of not proselytizing. So one question we need to wrestle with is where the boundaries are between proselytizing and being present as engaged individuals. It seems to me that an important aspect of this is our own experience with mediating conversations across different points of view and our ability to hold open space for people whose views differ significantly from our own.

**Fear 2: Engaging in Political or Electoral Discourse Is Illegal or Inappropriate.** The second fear expressed by many faculty at De Anza relates to the sense that it is illegal or inappropriate to discuss political or electoral issues in class or on campus. In 2012 there was a ballot initiative in the state of California to raise taxes. There was much at stake for higher education, as we were at the bottom of a multiyear budget crisis. The school was faced with a question of how to engage with the initiative. I asked one of our political science faculty members to write guidelines. In summary, these guidelines stated that as citizens of the state of California, it is essential for faculty to engage students about the importance of the election. It is illegal to tell student how to vote, but it is not illegal, or inappropriate, for faculty to talk about the factual implications of voting either way, or for the faculty member to express his or her own opinion.

These guidelines were presented to the faculty and staff on the first day of classes that year. Many of the faculty and staff worked hard to register students and to mobilize them to vote. We also informed students of what was at stake in the election. We did not tell them how to vote. Despite all these

activities, there was much discomfort expressed on campus about faculty involvement in electoral issues, and many professors did not engage with the election at all. Still, many did, and the message from the administration that this form of political engagement was acceptable did seem relieving to many, who went on to talk to students about the election or to invite partisans to present on either side of the issue.

**Fear 3: Teaching Our Students to Engage Civically Will Get Them into Trouble.** Another issue raised in the workshop was that if we help our students develop a civic voice they are likely to employ their voices in inappropriate places such as the workplace and get into trouble. Although we live in a nominally democratic society with constitutionally protected rights to free speech, within our culture are deep-seated prohibitions on engaging in civic discourse, especially in certain environments. The old adage that we should not talk about politics or religion is alive and well. It seems that many people in our society find civic discourse troubling and to be a source of conflict.

As we get students used to engaging in civic discourse, one of the things we need to do is teach them how to be smart about using their voices. Surely there are places and situations in which expression of political opinion is likely to elicit some negative responses. Students need to know that, and they need to learn to take risks intelligently. It seems that we need to teach not only civic skills, but strategy around when and where it is appropriate to use those skills, and to educate our faculty in ways of doing so.

**Fear 4: Engaging in Civic Discourse Leads to Violence and Turmoil.** A final issue raised in the civic engagement workshop essentially boils down to the fear that when people talk about politics, they inevitably get into fights. For example, one faculty member said she focused on providing only factual information in her classes—and never normative information—for fear that discussions of politics would lead to violence or at a minimum increased racial tensions or deeper divisions among student groups. We need to find ways to assuage faculty fears about this, provide professional development to help faculty feel more comfortable engaging their students in controversial issues, and put into place protections that will ensure that productive dialogues do not lead to nonproductive arguments or behaviors.

## Internalized McCarthyism

As I learned more about faculty fears, I developed a profound respect for how devastated our public sphere is. Even at a college where the president and the senior staff openly support the need for civic discourse, faculty do not feel safe engaging in it. Reflecting on this, I realize that our campus actually offers little support for faculty in this regard. Recently, as students have begun to have more of a voice in campus political issues, I have been surprised how often their interventions—no matter how polite—are seen

as inappropriate. Perhaps we have less of a democratic culture at my campus than I had realized. True, we often hold forums where controversial speakers come to speak, we put students in charge of a large budget, and the student government deliberates intensely on how to spend that money. We also have committees where faculty, staff, and managers deliberate in committee meetings about how to proceed in relation to various issues. Yet it is still quite rare to have serious issues deliberated publicly, and even rarer for students to be engaged in those deliberations. Why are we so afraid of civic discourse and of developing the civic capacities of our students? What can be done to combat faculty fears and, ideally, employ larger numbers of them in working toward a common goal of better preparing our students to live and work in a diverse democracy?

Upon reflection, I realized how long it has taken me to become comfortable with my role as a civic educator. Over the course of many years, I have worked though my thinking about this and debated it with many people. My own discipline is philosophy, with a specialization in social and political philosophy. I came to philosophy as a political activist and was appalled by the lack of engagement with real-world issues in my discipline. However, I was lucky enough to study in a program where faculty were engaged in a very explicit departmental struggle over the right for philosophy to be engaged. The book *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy in the McCarthy Era* (McCumber, 2001) chronicles in great detail the shift in the discipline of philosophy from one of preparing people to be good citizens and moral agents to a very narrow concern with the analysis of language. McCumber argues that the transformation in the discipline was a direct result of a McCarthyist attack on academic philosophers who were social justice advocates. He shows how what began as an explicit political battle against the rights of left-wing philosophers to express their views came over the years to be accepted as normative behavior.

It seems that many people in the academic world have come to see their roles as imparters of neutral truths and not as coaches of living, social, human beings. My own perspective is that there is no such thing as neutrality. When we say we are neutral, we are usually manifesting the biases that are generally accepted within our community as normative. Furthermore, when faculty believe themselves to be neutral, they do not take responsibility for their positions and biases (conscious or un-). I have always let my students know that I have strong and unusual political views, that one of my political values is deep respect for the dignity of all people, and that a big part of my job is to open up space for people to explore who they are and what they believe in order to deepen those beliefs. This approach has worked well for me, and I find my classrooms to generally be places of open debate with diverse points of view being expressed. However, I now see that for those who do not have experience bringing their full civic selves into their work with students, the barriers to opening up civic space in the classroom are enormous.

## Conquering the Fears

The four fears I describe in this chapter are powerful, and they won't disappear overnight. Yet I believe that there are things we can and need to do to conquer these fears and play a positive role in developing the civic culture of our students:

- Our institutions need to model the democracy we wish our students to learn. Students need to see examples of people talking about real issues that have real consequences, and then see them coming away from these dialogues with mutual respect and safety.
- Faculty need to hear from administrators, in ways that are believable, that there is an expectation that we engage in civic dialogue and that we show our civic selves, full of opinions about real life issues and ready to engage opposing views with respect.
- We need to help develop in our students a sense of how to be strategic in their communication, when it is safe to be opinionated, when it is dangerous, and when those dangers are worth facing.
- We need to let faculty know the legal limits of political engagement in the classroom, not in order to chill their activity but to open up the space for all of the activities that fall short of that very narrow limit.
- We need to run our institutions in democratic ways, such that we teach democracy to our academic community by treating the places we work as microdemocracies in which people feel free to ask questions, challenge power, and deliberate productively.

One of the most productive questions I have found in my work with faculty on developing civic capacity is to ask them to reflect on the civic purposes of their discipline. We tend to fall into ruts and teach what we were taught so that students will succeed in school. When I asked faculty to think about the civic purpose of their discipline and the implications of this for their teaching, many responded that the question really challenged them to rethink what they were doing. For example, in my civic engagement workshop a professor in the hard sciences said that to her, science is a deep part of everything in the world. And yet, she hadn't thought about teaching science in ways that connect formulas and laws to broader civic themes. Similarly, we had a very lively discussion of math and the purposes of math and how wonderful it is to be in a class where math is put into the context of solving real problems, a class where students gain a sense of how they may end up using higher math in real life. How different a class like this is from simply being told a set of rules and being asked to apply them to equations.

To accomplish these objectives, we need to engage in serious staff development that asks faculty to reflect on their roles as civic educators. We need to help them to see themselves as engaged citizens and to see the development of a robust democracy as a part of their role as educators.

## Conclusion

If one of the purposes of higher education is to build the culture required to have a democratic society, we have a very long way to go. Higher education for many of us has been narrowed to a functionalist purpose. And yet, if our students don't learn how to be democratic citizens in college, where will they learn it? This brings to mind the admonition to parents that if they don't engage their children in conversations about sex, the knowledge their children acquire will be mostly what is found in commercial media. Similarly, if we don't teach civic skills, our students will learn from what they see in the media and in our capitalist culture. They will learn to avoid serious conversation; they will learn that those conversations are dangerous; and they will learn to remain silent.

Our society could be greatly enhanced by developing robust civic culture on our campuses and in our classrooms. We need campus administrators that give faculty explicit permission to engage; we need to provide faculty with the skills to open up conversations in ways that respect differences of opinion; we need to give faculty real experience negotiating differences in the microdemocracies that are our institutions. If we do this intentionally and explicitly, perhaps our colleges and universities can continue to be key sites for the strengthening of democracy.

## Reference

- McCumber, J. (2001). *Time in the ditch: American philosophy in the McCarthy era*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press.

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