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Civic Engagement and Curricular Enhancement

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I. Some Definitions

- *PACE's Working Definition:* By the term 'civic engagement' we mean those learning activities in which students (along with faculty and staff) become involved with the surrounding public communities (neighborhoods, municipalities, counties, non-profit organizations) for the primary purpose of cultivating in students an informed, thoughtful and responsible participation on behalf of the public good.

The goal of civic engagement is to inculcate civic dispositions in students that will lead them to become better citizens.

A desired outcome of such engagement will be the enhancement of the quality of civic life in those communities, thus making the University a more active citizen in the city

and

region.

- *Definition proposed by Thomas Ehrlich and his colleagues in Civic Responsibility and Higher Education:*

“Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes” (Preface, page vi).

“A morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own; such an individual is willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate” (Introduction, page xxvi).

- *Campus Compact's Definition of an Engaged Campus:* “One that is consciously committed to reinvigorating the democratic spirit and community engagement in all aspects of its campus life: students, faculty, staff and the institution itself”
- *Civic Engagement as Distinct from yet related to 'service learning'.*
The terms 'civic engagement' and 'service learning' are often used interchangeably as in #5 of the enhanced options.

We, however, do see an important difference in that civic engagement initiatives have as their primary purpose the explicit relating of community engagement with an understanding of the political and civic context. An example of service learning might be building a house for Habitat for Humanity while an example of civic engagement is a recycling project that reports to the city council. The distinction however need not be hard and fast when working with the specifics of curricular enhancement.

II. Some Concepts

Civic Engagement fosters experiential learning and reflection centered on citizenship.

There are many different models out there that can be adopted. For purposes of convenience, we offer the following three-fold breakdown and should be seen as more illustrative than comprehensive.

Each discipline can add its own specific items.

1. *Knowledge Component*

Every good civic engagement will have a reflective component that will foster:

- Ability to gather, research and analyze civic information
- Ability to make judgments about community issues and strategies
- Ability to assess strengths and limitations of engagement

2. *Affective Component*

Every good civic engagement will have an emotive component that will foster:

- Motivation to become more engaged as a citizen
- Development of civic virtues/dispositions (and avoiding their opposites) such as fairness, tolerance and responsibility for the public good

3. *Skill Component*

Every good civic engagement will have opportunities to learn civic skills

- Learning how to work effectively with other citizens to achieve goals
- Learning how to persuade others
- Learning how to communicate with others in a public setting

The civic engagement arena should be viewed broadly and the university and surrounding communities offer ample opportunities for civic learning.

We have developed (based on other models) what we call the “3Cs”: curriculum, campus and community. By those terms, we look for civic engagement arenas and opportunities found in the curriculum (1 credit enhancement), campus (events like lectures) and community (local issues). All three can be woven into an enhanced course.

III. Preliminary Suggestions

Tom Ehrlich has identified several educational strategies that develop college students' political understanding, motivation, skills and engagement. Three may be valuable for course enhancement in the Fulton School:

- political discussion and deliberation;
- speakers representing various levels of political involvement or participants in the development and implementation of public policy;
- structured reflection on these experiences. (Recommended for all experiences.)

Preliminary suggestions for course enhancement:

- "Your Subject in the News" - Students report on news stories in which knowledge gained from your course improves their understanding of events in the community, state, nation or world. This could be an individual or group assignment. (James L. Perry and Steven G. Jones, *Quick Hits for Educating Citizens*. This book is available at PACE.)
- Letters to the Editor – Groups of students research different issues with the goal of writing an informative or persuasive letter to the editor of a local, state or national newspaper. Writing an op-ed piece and submitting it to a newspaper is another possibility
- Classroom speakers – invite guest political/policy speakers to your class to discuss policies or issues relevant to the course or how they became involved in the political life of their community, state, or nation. Students frequently are interested in the positive and negatives of civic involvement. As time permits, PACE will help facilitate classroom speakers; please give us several weeks notice.
- University speakers – require students to attend several political/policy-related lectures during the semester and write reflective essays. A good place to start is the national Constitution Day, Sept 17. PACE and the Provost will sponsor an SU speaker around this date. Other ideas for Constitution Day are available at:

<http://www.constitutioncenter.org/constitutionday/display/MainS/Home>

- Current issues – Divide class into groups and assign groups the task of developing background papers on different issues by tracking issues that are continually in the news. Each student could be responsible for follow their group's issue in different newspapers, blogs, etc
- Presidential Candidate Debates, especially fall semester 2008, provide a number of opportunities. The Commission on Presidential debates (<http://www.debates.org/>) has a few useful ideas.
- Political Engagement Project's website is <http://www.nytimes.com/college/collegespecial10/>.

Almost a decade of research supports the idea that appropriately designed courses and programs

can increase our students' motivation and skills for civic engagement. Assessment tools to evaluate civic engagement programs are available.

IV. Sample Syllabus

Curricular Enhancement Syllabus in Political Philosophy: Fall, 2007

Political Engagement (25% of grade)

I want you to be able to apply what you are learning in this class to the real world of civic engagement. With that in mind, become engaged in the political community. You can do that in any number of ways.

Engagement with the organization for at least 2 hours a week for 10 weeks: 20 hours all told.

Students will keep a weekly journal of their engagement in which they will be asked to reflect on their engagement in light of the themes and discussions of the course. Your reflections will be judged on the quality of the experience and the depth of your reflection. I will periodically collect and grade the journals (on at least a monthly basis; depending on how many students are enrolled). I expect that writing and reflection will take at least an hour each week of their time: 15 hours all told.

At the end, students will write a final summation paper (3-5 pages) on their experience in the engagement piece and how it related to Robert Coles's book, *The Call of Service*. [10 hours]

Some options:

Voter Registration Drive: become involved in *The Institute for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement* and the University's voter drive this Fall semester. Dr. Long is running a 1 credit course or you can just volunteer your time. Lots of interesting and fun activities. Contact PACE on website or 410-677-5045.

Join a politically engaged organization on campus, such as the Republican or Democratic Clubs or Amnesty International. Become engaged with an issue in the community. Dr. Haven Simons is offering a 1 credit course on development in Ocean City.

[For purposes of better control, I am now considering making Dr. Creston Long's course the centerpiece but allowing some other options.]