

Political Engagement in Higher Education Curricula

Iris M. Yob

Walden University

Aimee Ferraro

Walden University

As more demands are made for universities and colleges to commit to public service, curricula in higher education may need to include the development of knowledge of and skills for political engagement. In an interview study, students, faculty members, and alumni at Walden University reflected on their understanding and experience of political action and working with policymakers for social change. The responses overall indicated a general agreement that politics, political action, and policymaking have roles to play in ensuring the lasting effects of social change activity, but they also indicated significant limitations to their effectiveness. Participants also showed a reticence to participating in political engagement. The findings suggest that understanding of and confidence in political engagement could be enhanced through connecting scholarly skills and knowledge to political activity and utilizing and stimulating personal interests and professional concerns as a basis for such activity. A curriculum that includes hands-on learning opportunities in social change may be most effective in preparing learners for political engagement.

Keywords: *higher education, policymaking, political activism, politics, public service, social change*

Introduction

Many institutions of higher education, recognizing that “public service must continue to be an important responsibility of the American university” (Duderstadt, 2000, 2003, 146), need to consider including in the curriculum the knowledge of, and skills for, public service through civic and political engagement. Impetus is coming from many accrediting bodies that are increasingly looking for learning outcomes around public service in their preparation programs. For example, the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration underscores public service, and the American Nurses Association includes standards around advocacy skills and the integration of system and community support services for healthcare. The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education envisages professional development schools, working with community and home partnerships, impacting school reform policy from local to national levels. Public service as envisaged by these bodies may require advocacy, policymaking and policy-changing, securing community resources, and other activities related to elected and legislative bodies.

The importance of political engagement is underscored by Miller (2000) in his reflections on the activism in which he was involved as a student at the University of California, Berkeley in the late 1950s. He described the university’s efforts, and many similar efforts by others since then, as apolitical—that is, they were characterized by self-perpetuating boards and dependency on foundations and tended toward an isolationism that may have leant toward an arrogant dismissal of external powers. He has argued now, however, that a successful contribution to the common good depends on building institutional power that can negotiate with political and other external and

dominant powers. In other words, activists should cultivate political skills and allow the individualism of their organizations to develop into mutual obligation and authentic community.

Lee and Rodgers (2009) retold the story of the 12-year-old who died in 2007 because of the lack of dental care. The first step counselors would take in addressing this need, they suggested, would be in grief counseling for the family and ensuring that the family had access to the services available. But another level of required professional responsibility is for members to take “action that will have far-reaching impact” (p. 284) beyond this family to all families facing similar problems; counselors, they argued, “must be willing to assume an advocacy role that is focused on affecting public opinions, public policy, and legislation” (p. 284), that is, on taking political action. In their article, they identified some of the political processes that can create systemic change: dissemination of information through various media channels, public demonstrations, marches, rallies, and editorial initiatives (print and electronic). Other processes that can create systemic change include forming action coalitions with stakeholders, lobbying legislators and policymakers, and influencing the passage of legislation (pp. 285–286).

The National Survey of Political and Civic Engagement of Young People (2007), conducted by political science students at the Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University, commonly known as the Tisch Survey, revealed that there is greater civic and political engagement of young people generally than is commonly believed. The report available online does not give the findings for questions related to political activity, other than voting, such as the attitudes and beliefs of these young people about the relevancy and effectiveness of political engagement, although these kinds of questions were part of the survey.

This study of perspectives on political engagement in some ways builds on and extends the Tisch study. It seeks to gain some understanding of the attitudes and behaviors in political engagement by adult university students, rather than younger undergraduates. It is part of a larger study conducted at Walden University around a variety of topics related to social change: how it is understood, what kind of social change activities have been undertaken, and how the university might strengthen its support of students in social change. Since its founding in 1970, Walden University, an accredited online school, seemed a good place to start because the university has envisioned its mission in terms of preparing scholar-practitioners who can apply their professional knowledge to promote positive social change.

The purpose of this study was to discover the understandings and experiences of faculty members, students, and alumni engaged with social change with a particular focus on their views on political engagement. Implications of the findings might provide guidance to curriculum builders and teachers in higher education who seek to prepare students to make a positive professional contribution to the common good.

Method

Given that the study was seeking to discover the understandings and experiences of adult university students in their engagement in social change activities and the faculty members who teach them, a qualitative research design using one-on-one interviews was chosen so that participants could reflect on their experiences and provide depth and nuance to their responses. The two lead-in question sets that are the focus of this report were as follows:

1. How important is it for social change to focus on policy and policymakers?

2. What do you think of when you think about political activism? How important is political activism in social change? What kind of political activism would you engage in (or encourage your students to engage in)?

Interviewees for the study were purposefully selected for their recognized commitment to the social change mission and their perceived ability to engage in thoughtful discussion of it. Ten faculty members, 8 students, and 12 alumni were interviewed, including 5 who had graduated in 2011 shortly before the study was conducted. The interviews were conducted by telephone conference calls that were recorded and transcribed.

Several measures were taken to ensure trustworthiness in data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings: interviews were conducted by researchers experienced in qualitative methods, all researchers met for specific training sessions prior to data collection, each team piloted the interview questions to ensure clarity of wording and the probes being used, and interviews were conducted with teams of two who interviewed all the members of one group to ensure consistency and support inter-rater reliability.

For the questions related to political engagement, the transcribed interviews were imported into NVivo9 qualitative analysis software (QSR International, 2011). Responses were coded manually into three categories/themes: policy, policymakers, and political activism. Entire statements and/or paragraphs were coded as blocks to maintain context and the integrity of the qualitative information provided. In some cases, information was double-coded if the content related to more than one category (for example, policy and policymakers). Reports were generated according to each category/theme for general analysis; faculty members, alumni, and students then clustered them to facilitate comparison between groups. Overall results, as well as similarities and differences between faculty members, alumni, and student responses, are discussed below. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Results

Political Engagement

Faculty members, alumni, and students collectively indicated that working with policy and policymakers is an important aspect of social change, although frequently they also indicated that it is not the only means for making a difference. Brenda, an alumna who works with older community members, suggested, “The importance [of policy] is that it allows for top-down change. And that’s one approach to it. That’s not always necessary. There’s also grassroots starting from the bottom up.” John, a student, noted that “for real social change, the people have to get involved in it at the lower levels and build it up,” a response also echoed by faculty members and alumni. In a similar vein, some faculty members and alumni argued that policymaking is often reactive as opposed to proactive. As alumnus Charlie, who has founded a business to promote cross-cultural communication, put it:

The policymakers, the decision makers, quite often are the ones who jump in front of the parade and say, “Okay, everybody—follow me!” But they only do that in response to the ground swelling, the demand for change at the bottom. Other than that, the status quo is very inert, very static. So it’s got to take somebody at the bottom pushing it along.

Christine, a faculty member, agreed that “policy follows the people’s will as opposed to directs people [...]. So for social change, I don’t want to have to wait for policy.”

Faculty member Brian pointed out that policy is important, but not paramount, because “there is a great deal that goes on outside of the realm of public policy,” citing as examples the work of religious and private education organizations. Ray, another faculty member, recalled that the Civil Rights movement still had work to do after legislative and judicial victories in “changing the life situations of people who were living in poverty, of bringing those policy changes and translating them into changed attitudes on the part of people.” He added, “The policy changes are important because they laid the groundwork for the larger societywide changes in a social change movement. [...] So I guess that’s how I view policy changes in terms of large social change movement is that they are important as a starting place, but they certainly aren’t the end.”

Similarly, several interviewees noted that policy can be extremely important when social change is needed at the society or systems level. Eileen, a faculty member, stated, “Well, if we don’t have policy and policymakers creating broad social possibilities, the rest can’t happen.” Faculty member Peggy noted that “[because] policy can affect more than one person, obviously, at some point, it is really key that individuals involved in social change who really believe in what they’re talking about need to influence the policymakers who can change the direction in which a society is moving.” Janice, a current student in the M.S. in Leadership program, added, “If you’re going to do something with a systems approach so that you can have that sustainable change, then I think it is extremely important to involve policymakers and policy change.”

Social change through policy is obviously more relevant for certain disciplines, such as public health and education, as these fields naturally affect the whole population in particular ways. Several alumni and faculty members provided rich examples of the relationship between policy and social change that were drawn from their work or field of study. For instance, faculty member Margaret, who has raised funds and visibility for breast cancer treatment, provided several examples from her field of public health: policies around smoking, fitness, school lunches, and the clean air and water acts.

While alumni and faculty members were able to articulate specific areas where policy can impact social change, some students could only suggest that the influence of policy and policymakers “depends on what the issue is or what you’re trying to do.” Claire, a nursing student who has developed a broad response to domestic violence and rape, has worked to change policies around the collection of forensic data. She commented, “I think [policies are] important to a degree; it depends on what the issues are but I think that policies are certainly good guidelines to follow, but I don’t think that a policy or lack thereof should stop something from happening if it should.”

Overall, faculty members and alumni (especially in public policy, public health, and education) have a stronger understanding of how policy and policymakers relate to social change. About half of the students were less able to see and/or clearly express this connection, often speaking from personal anecdotes rather than an understanding about how politics work, indicating an area that could be addressed through course curriculum.

Policymakers

Most participants granted some importance to involving policymakers in the social change process. Faculty member Tom pointed to the importance of keeping policymakers aware of changes that are taking place because it may “allow things to happen” that might not otherwise. Nonetheless,

interviewees had less confidence in the intentions of policymakers. Many saw a disconnect between the kinds of social change people are wanting and working for and the legislators who can reflect those changes in policies. Kim, whose Ph.D. in Education dissertation research is set in poor rural areas, stated: "I'm not sure that they even hear what people say." Faculty member Brian expressed similar thoughts regarding politicians, wondering about their insensitivity, lack of courage, and unwillingness to make personal sacrifices for those who need their help. Arsi, whose dissertation captured the life stories of impoverished basket weavers in remote parts of Jamaica, expressed her disillusionment with policymakers by pointing out that they need to "have a commitment to stay as close to the original agenda as possible so that it doesn't lose some of its original intent."

Justin, who completed his master's degree in Public Health and has been an advocate for child HIV patients around the world, was more experienced with policymakers and also more optimistic about working with them to bring about change: "It's definitely important to have the support of your policymakers to basically go out there ... and you can change their attitude." Faculty member Carol also recognized that social change agents need to put in the effort required to bring about change in policy: "They want to please us because they want to be re-elected. So they want our information. They want to know what we think."

Political Activism

The first thing that most interviewees thought about when they heard political activism was "protest" and "sit-ins," although some of the older faculty members, alumni, and students who lived through the 1950s and '60s noted that this idea comes from living through the era of the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam War. Some modern examples of political activism that numerous interviewees mentioned were the Tea Party, Occupy Wall Street, and Arab Spring movements. Faculty member Eileen added that "one of the interesting things about this country is [that] we have protests but we don't have riots for the most part."

Interviewees also noted that engagement may take many forms, such as being involved in a political campaign or going door-to-door with flyers in support of a candidate or cause. Becky, a student in the Public Policy and Administration program, added, "It can be making phone calls, writing letters, sending emails, or getting other people to do the same. These things can be as simple as posting a message on your Facebook account and letting all your friends read it." Arsi also added that political activism "can start as close to home as where I live, [from] making sure that the traffic signal is working in a school zone to going as far as Capitol Hill and saying we need more funding for education."

Some faculty members expressed a more nuanced version of the varieties of political activism. Peggy included "having a conversation with people who make policy. Lawmakers, people in even the local community... [L]obbying is another form of political activism." Doris alluded to underlying personal values when she spoke of political activism as "a commitment to a purpose, obviously, or a cause, or an agenda. I think it can take form in many ways, through the media, through individuals, corporations. It's just multilevel."

Some students and alumni admitted that the term political activism can have negative connotations. For instance, Diane, a social change project winner, connected it with "money and futility." Fellow student Janice aptly concluded, however, that, "Activism doesn't have to be adversarial. There you go. That's a good bumper sticker." Some viewed political activism as a positive term. Another student, Barbara, who is researching restorative justice, stated: "I think that in being American, we all have the right to advocate for the things that we believe in." Wendy, who has started her own

school, saw political activism as “standing up for something you believe in and letting your voice be heard,” while Eric, who researches charitable corporate investments, added, “The opposite of activism would be passivism,” which is unacceptable in his mind. He saw engagement as “a critical part of any type of social dynamic.” Bonnie, who works on breast cancer awareness in Appalachia stated, “political activism is defined by any action that desires to seek change in policy or systems to make the world a better place.”

Faculty member Linda pointed out that political activism should focus on “the greater good,” although she also raised the question of who would determine this greater good. This question also resonated with John, a current student who works with an organization that serves the homeless—his response reveals some ambiguity in his position on political activism (“We don’t know whether that’s going to be for the good or for the bad yet”), but also his ultimate optimism (“I personally think over the long haul, it’s going to be better”).

Interestingly, very few interviewees considered themselves political activists. Among the alumni, Charlie noted: “I’m not a political activist. I just see that as kind of the final stages of an issue. I try to deal with some of the more sweeping questions, I think, in front of us rather than the specific and the legislative.” Fellow alumna Wendy sees herself as a “sidelines person,” where she can “watch and listen and just kind of take in what people are saying and translating that to the situation that I’m in.” Kim reported that she has engaged in political activism “very quietly, maybe attending an event where I’m getting some facts, so if someone asks me, I can certainly be accurate about that.” Brenda stated that she was embarrassed by the fact she has not been more politically active, admitting that voting is the only way she has been involved. John, whose time as a student in the business program helped him develop the skills and knowledge for social change activity, nevertheless admits, “I wouldn’t call myself a political activist. I think I’m active in the overall call to social justice, and I address it in various ways, but I’m not out there with the banner leading a parade on it.”

Not surprisingly, the interviewees who tended to be more open to the idea of political activism are in the field of public policy. It could be concluded that a strong understanding of the political process encourages political activism, as argued by Brian, a faculty member in the School of Public Policy and Administration:

Political activism is not just about picketing. You have to bring solutions and you have to bring solutions that are plausible and doable, so I encourage [my students] to study the issues, to become so knowledgeable about them that they’ll be looked at as a resource rather than an irritant.

Christine, both a faculty member and alumna in the School of Human Services, also noted that her graduate degree gave her more credibility in the field. With her qualifications, she explained, “I can sit on committees of foreign policy. I can actually write policy. That I could not have done without that degree.”

When interviewees considered political activism, it tended to be around issues that they are personally passionate about, such as speaking out about increased funding for children with HIV/AIDS (Justin, a survivor of HIV/AIDS since childhood), working on programs and policies to combat obesity among youth (Christine, faculty member from College of Health Sciences), fighting the school board against closing inner-city schools (Eric, alumnus and father), rallying for support of teachers (Margaret, alumna of the College of Education), providing informational readings to parents and students about actions and behaviors that can make a better school community (Linda, faculty member from College of Education and former principal), rebuilding a local school district

based on the Malcolm Baldrige process of instituting qualities (Tom, faculty member and member of the American Society for Quality), lobbying Washington for a more balanced approach to food (Peggy, faculty member and vegan), or working for the presidential campaign (Eileen, faculty member and proponent of organizations such as Move On). These activities naturally revolved around issues that interviewees work with, think about, and study.

It also appears that interest in an issue is insufficient motivation to become politically active in it. For example, Brenda, an alumna of the College of Education, conveyed an interest in the mistreatment of Muslims, the peril of Palestinians, and the need for healthcare change as it relates to the elderly; however, she does not engage in political activism regarding these issues because these topics do not relate to her field of study and she is not Muslim, Palestinian, or elderly. Following the wrongful conviction of her cousin, Doris would like to help “individuals who through no fault of their own were found guilty, that now have felonies, that cannot find gainful employment.” She also commented “If I had star power or whatever, I really would do something about it,” which suggests that another limiting factor may be the feeling that the political process is too large to handle, even though she is a faculty member in the School of Public Policy. Eileen would like to be involved in getting unemployed youth to help poor black people with their voter registration, and even though she knows this type of social policy change is important, she simply does not have the time to engage in it.

Students seem to have even less time for civic and political engagement. Janice reported, “I haven’t given political activism much thought. Right now, I have my head down, working full-time and getting through my master’s degree.” John stated that he was previously on several boards (such as one to combat homelessness), but he reduced his responsibilities to concentrate on his studies. Others are like Barbara, who has plans to engage in specific political activities when she completed her studies (she plans to focus on insurance company definitions and medical coverage for patients with craniofacial anomalies, the topic of her research); however, another student, Judy, who is a foster parent and respite caregiver, had no idea what political activism is. “What do I think about it? I don’t even know what that is—something with politics.” The responses indicate that alumni have clearer ideas about civic and political engagement, suggesting that experience out of the classroom can clarify appropriate political action.

As a group, faculty members reported that they are cautious about asking students to engage in political activism, mainly because of the diversity of the student body, although they do encourage learners to explore issues more deeply, follow their conscience, and use their voice. Ray explained:

If that leads them to a position where political activism is necessary to achieve their vision of social justice, then yes, I would encourage them to engage in that activism. I encourage people to write letters to the editor. I encourage people to speak to their legislators. I encourage them to share their studies.

Some faculty members have found specific activities that are useful in exploring the notion of political engagement. Christine described a blogging assignment that helps students discover their voice in a discussion: “What blog did you find and what are they discussing? What do you think about what they are saying? Do you feel you can contribute? Did you post? What impressed you? What didn’t impress you?” Tom has posted articles to the Student Lounge, calling the area “news and discovery” to create informal conversation about stories relevant to community involvement, professional affiliations, and sharing of information. Eileen has also posted news articles and outside

resources to the discussion board and “challenges students in a low-key way” to get them to reconsider issues in a different manner.

Faculty members, for the most part, appear to be interested in helping students find their passion and engage in social change through increased awareness of the world and political activism. They understand their role in transforming students into scholar practitioners and see the importance for all citizens being involved in the political process as a means to implement social change, especially on a broad scale.

Discussion

Working for the common good may primarily focus on acts of *charity*, which can ameliorate an immediate need, or on *change*, which seeks to remedy the underlying causes of need. Mitchell (2008, p. 52) indicated that charity givers tend to serve the needy, while for change agents, service has to become a true community effort, involving the needy, the caregivers, policymakers, and others in the social context. So change goes beyond “doing for,” “serving,” or “giving to” those in need, to working together against systems of injustice and for the development of individuals, communities, and society. Social change activity seen in this light implies the need to consider policy changes and political action.

Overall, the participants in this study tended to agree with the need for public service and social change to take into account policymaking, politics, and political activism if it is going to create change beyond providing immediate charity, but their responses were hedged with caveats. They indicated that political engagement is an important piece of the larger puzzle, but it is not always necessary, not always reliable, and although it may have a role at the beginning or end of a change movement, other kinds of service activities are personally preferred. This reticence to engage with political processes in support of social change activity may be a reflection of the pervasive mistrust of politics at the present time or a personal aversion to working at such a public level. Some faculty members may be concerned about maintaining political neutrality when working with students. The reticence may also suggest that students could be better prepared for, and hence have greater confidence in, political engagement.

The responses imply some guidelines for such a curriculum. The participants were cognizant of the range of political actions that can be undertaken (writing letters, distributing leaflets, appearing before legislators, running for office, joining protests) and included the broad sweep of politics from the local to the national level. Building on this, curriculum designers may want to expand the range of actions that might be considered for social change. With their research and study skills, critical thinking and writing abilities, and professional knowledge base, students may need to see how these skills and knowledge can be employed in political processes. Drawing deliberate connections between what they know and can do as scholars and community needs requires a little planning and thought, but connecting political action to their scholarly skills and knowledge could put their unique contributions to work for the larger and more permanent changes they seek.

A second guideline, which grows out of the first, is that people who attach personal meaning to social and political events are more likely to engage in political activism, a finding that is suggested also by Duncan and Stewart (2007). The majority of interviewees who reported political engagement recounted stories that were related to personal obstacles and professional interests. In education programs for students preparing for greater roles in their chosen professions, a community of learner-practitioners can study issues, conduct research, and propose solutions to shared

professional concerns and interests, including the policy work that is needed to support long-term solutions.

A learning model that can effectively incorporate both guidelines is one that provides real-life opportunities to address needs. Action projects provide a context for learning about the value of political activism, where and when it may be appropriate, and what kinds of political action might be most helpful. The theory and research undertaken in class can be applied to solving authentic issues and to informing policymakers and policies; because the activity is designed to address a specific problem, it is not narrowly focused on party politics and, from that perspective, can remain politically neutral. Building strategic planning for and execution of social change projects into the curriculum also ameliorates the time crunch students feel since their involvement is part of their educational program and not something added to it. Practice in planning and executing meaningful projects can also utilize or stimulate personal commitments and interests. In other words, a curriculum that includes action projects around professional concerns can capture the immediacy and relevance that grounds meaningful political activism. As part of a larger strategic initiative, political engagement to affect public opinion, win over politicians, and improve policies can be considered for the contribution it can offer to the project. Such a hands-on approach can give direction and context to any political activity that might be included.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that faculty members, alumni, and students are passionate about creating change for “the common good,” although many are in need of tools and training to turn their scholarly knowledge and personal emotion into civic engagement and political action. Student views of civic and political engagement indicate that these concepts could be better developed through the curriculum and encouraged through active participation that is supported throughout the learning program. The findings imply that expanding present understandings of civic and political engagement, building and developing curricula to prepare students for social change, and developing faculty member skills and knowledge in preparing students for political engagement might meet a need for well-informed and skillful public service.

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