

**Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility**, by Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, Elizabeth Beaumont, and Jason Stephens. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003, 332 pp., \$40.00 hardbound.

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This book is part of a growing body of literature advocating the idea that colleges and universities must expand their role in civic education. The foreword presents an extended passage outlining John Adams's belief in the duty of the state to foster education for citizenship. The authors claim to have written in the spirit of Adams and in recognition of the importance of wisdom, knowledge, and republican civic virtue to the survival of democratic freedoms and institutions. While few will dispute that higher education has deemphasized its civic

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mission, the approach suggested by *Educating Citizens* to revitalize this mission is both insufficient and counterproductive to the development of a civic education program effective for citizens of American democracy.

Readers will encounter two intrinsic problems. First, the concept of civic education advanced is not nation-specific. The authors advocate a universal human rights orientation for a civic education program aimed at transnational application among institutions of higher education worldwide rather than a strategy focused on increasing citizens' knowledge of American democracy. (Tom Ehrlich, a principal author of *Educating Citizens*, led the drafting of the international Talloires Declaration on the Civic Roles and Social Responsibilities of Higher Education.) This approach does not encourage students to examine any of the actual historical or philosophical understandings of the American liberal democratic state, but instead relies over-optimistically on service learning pedagogy to foster moral and civic education.

Second, the authors espouse a prescriptive ideological agenda, stated in the preface written by Lee S. Shulman, then president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, which sponsored the

book. Shulman suggests that while “it is critical that we are responsible, responsive, patriotic and loyal to our nation and society,” this is “insufficient. Educated citizens must understand and accept their obligation to all humanity, to *making this a nation worth defending* in a world safe and promising for all its inhabitants” (emphasis added).

At many times, the reader is led to the conclusion that America will be deemed less worthy of defending if students are not galvanized into an activist political platform of Left-liberal change under the banner of universal human rights and “social justice.” *Educating Citizens* is especially significant since it is used as a workshop handbook of the American Democracy Project, a collaboration of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the *New York Times*, which has brought together hundreds of college leaders to develop implementation plans for campus based civic education projects based on the “portfolios of good practice” contained within the book. Such promulgation of prepackaged “social justice” programs has become widespread in American higher education and has begun to attract the attention of informed critics. The National Association of Scholars, for example, has launched an initiative called *How*

*Many Delawares?*—in reference to the extraordinarily intrusive civic education program based in residence halls at the University of Delaware. The NAS seeks to expose the radical bias disguised behind a variety of curricular and extracurricular campus projects.

The subtitle, *Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*, summarizes the book's clear purpose. Given the large percentage of the population that attends college, undergraduate education now has an unprecedented potential to influence citizen behavior positively. The authors report data that clearly demonstrate that post-secondary education is associated with increased interest and participation in politics. Dismissing civic education at the pre-collegiate level, they propose an entirely different type of civic education for higher education that fuses moral purpose and civic engagement. While fostering civic or social responsibility among students has been part of American higher education for generations, the authors of *Educating Citizens* make clear that their “sense of social responsibility” has ideologically specific “social justice” connotations calling for future political action.

Anticipating objections, the authors acknowledge that the “term *social*

*justice* has left-of-center political connotations for many people,” but they declare, without any significant demonstration, “that the theme of social justice can be consistent with a wide range of political perspectives.” Nevertheless, the authors must concede that on “some campuses this [left-of-center] perception was borne out” by events, and this acknowledgment explains one of the book’s most defensive and revealing passages in which the authors recommend that institutions seeking to implement their approaches may want to substitute the term “systemic social responsibility” for “social justice.” The authors unfortunately insist on using both terms interchangeably and indistinguishably.

This lack of clarity and the abandonment of a more traditional interpretation of civic virtue or social responsibility undermines the authors’ ability to demonstrate how their approach to moral and civic education is, and can be, free of a left-of-center bias. For example, it would have been possible to define “systemic social responsibility” as an understanding that an individual is part of a community and has both individual rights and community responsibilities—a more communitarian approach. The importance of education in fostering the good of society rather than only the good of the individual has roots in

America going back to the founding. Remember Benjamin Rush’s demand for republican civic virtue: “Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but he is public property.” The authors describe moral and civic learning in American higher education prior to the twentieth century, but appear unwilling to revitalize any of these past educational efforts “to foster republican ideals and virtues necessary for supporting the new democratic experiment.”

Instead, *Educating Citizens* is filled with case studies of social justice activism or declarations of the importance of social justice, along with strong encouragement for direct follow-up political involvement. At California State University, Monterey Bay, the outcome-based University “Learning Requirements” for Ethics, Democratic Participation, and Community Participation state that after completion of the course requirements a student should “be able to analyze and describe power relations, equity and social justice and find examples of each concept in U.S. society and other societies,” as well as “analyze historical and contemporary cross-cultural scenarios of discrimination, inequity and social injustice,” and to “*describe and plan personal and institutional strategies/processes* to promote equity and social justice” (emphasis added).

While it is not clear how these requirements are enforced, one presumes that students receive lower grades if they are unable to achieve these “learning requirements” in the estimation of the faculty.

The University of Notre Dame mission statement “seeks to cultivate in its students not only an appreciation for the great achievements of human beings, but also a disciplined sensibility to the poverty, injustice and oppression that burden the lives of so many.” The peace studies department sponsors a program at graduation in which students wear green ribbons indicating they have signed a pledge “to investigate and take into account the social and environmental consequences of any job [they] consider, thereby striving to create a just, peaceful and nonviolent world.” The College of Saint Catherine has a required capstone course, “The Global Search for Justice,” which according to the authors focuses on “issues of peace, meaningful work, and social justice, with the intention of helping students to develop the discipline and consciousness needed to change oppressive systematic conditions and reshape their world.”

Social justice is actually only one of three elements that the authors recommend be included in their “fused” approach of moral and civic

education. In addition, they advocate making efforts to build student moral judgment along with developing connections to the community beyond the campus. If this framework has three parts, however, social responsibility, or social justice, is the most desired feature. For example, they view the Air Force Academy’s focus on personal or moral character building without an activist social justice element as inadequate. In fairness, the authors include an exception, Messiah College, whose efforts at building moral character and judgment are distinctly Christian. While readers will encounter sporadic acknowledgements that different approaches to social responsibility and civic virtue are acceptable, these passages appear more perfunctory than reflective of the author’s ideal civic education model. Community involvement without a social justice orientation is also seen as a problem: “If community service does not include some attention to the systemic implications of the problems it addresses it is needlessly limiting students’ learning and the good they can do as engaged citizens.”

With social justice as the dominant element of the framework to foster civic responsibility, the authors fall into a trap they themselves forewarn. They acknowledge the “liberal bent” of the course learning requirements at

the University of California, Monterey Bay, for example, but insist that dissenting opinions are not suppressed there because of a campus norm of “ethical communication” encouraging tolerance of all viewpoints. This claim of “tolerance” arouses skepticism, to say the least, and the authors do not demonstrate its effectiveness in allowing expression from more conservative students. Likewise, although the authors suggest that an overemphasis on social justice “that does not include sufficient attention to moral virtue is especially vulnerable to the illegitimate imposition of a political party line” and “often involves a deliberate polarization of issues and demonization of the opposition,” they offer no real assurance that a social justice focus will not lead precisely to this kind of tyrannical political correctness.

Study of traditional debates concerning concepts of justice, morality, and civic responsibility could potentially offset an overemphasis on a particularized definition of “social justice.” (See Peter Wood’s discussion of “traditional” and “alternative” moralities in “Homicides in Higher Education: Some Reflections on the Moral Mission of the University,” in the Fall 2007 *AQ*.) Unfortunately, the authors choose a narrow approach and a very particular “party line” for these questions—the Kohlberg framework for justice

and human rights. The (Lawrence) Kohlberg moral reasoning framework places the highest priority on a concept of social justice associated with evolving theories exemplified in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The “Universal Ethical Principles” operating at the higher moral levels of Kohlberg’s abstract framework are only tangentially connected to the social and political principles contained in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Rather than utilizing the American founding tradition with its ties to both the classical liberalism of John Locke and the philosophy of Aristotle, Kohlberg’s civic education framework is more closely associated with Immanuel Kant, John Rawls, and Jurgen Habermas. In fact, Kohlberg’s Universal Ethical Principles are distinctly Kantian in nature, “categorical imperatives” that mandate that all human beings must follow these standards of universal human rights, notwithstanding their government’s policies, even if these policies were developed through a democratically deliberative process.

Such an abstract and generic approach can only be supplemental at best, and falls short as a comprehensive civic education program for American citizens. The authors do

acknowledge that most adults will not achieve the higher levels of moral judgment of the Kohlberg framework. They recognize that this “raises questions about their capacity to fully appreciate the foundations of American democracy.” So, how would most adults acquire this appreciation? With a limited grounding in the American political tradition and without a historical understanding of how effective or ineffective Americans have been in achieving their democratic goals and objectives, the authors’ approach would make it difficult to obtain the wisdom and virtue needed to preserve the rights and liberties of American citizens. The authors’ approach misses an opportunity to use American “habits of the heart” as a moral compass in evaluating political action.

The authors acknowledge that “people need to know a lot about how to negotiate their own political system, and they need to learn the particular mechanisms afforded by the various political and social structures and institutions of their local and national communities,” but settle for practical skills on “how to negotiate the system” with some minimal level of civics information. It is unlikely that any encounter with the “particular values” of the American system would occur in this

approach. This is probably the most significant deficit in the program for civic education contained in *Educating Citizens*.

The chapter on pedagogical strategies for moral and civic education heavily emphasizes such Deweyan concepts as service learning, internships, and other field experiences to “provide stronger support for moral and civic development than most lectures or seminars.” The authors maintain that “lectures do not support deep and enduring understanding or ideas,” “development of the motivational dimensions of moral and civic maturity,” “passion for social justice,” or “an enduring sense of empowerment.” The authors seem too rapidly to discount the ability of the lecture and discussion approach, especially in such core subjects as American history and government, to teach American democratic principles and American civic values. While “active learning” can be a supplement to the traditional lecture, students are not likely to develop a clear understanding of American democratic principles during service learning projects and even most internships. A student may develop useful skills of cooperation and management while working in the local soup kitchen, for example, but such skills, however civic-minded they seem, can also be learned by a

student living under a Taliban regime. Internships in legislative offices or at the local ACLU will only be effective as civic education if the student first has a foundation of knowledge on which to build.

Despite the authors' focus on influencing the greatest number of citizens through higher education, their civic education approach does not take into consideration the full potential of undergraduate general education liberal arts requirements. Required core courses in American history and government might very well provide students an understanding of basic political values. There is considerable evidence that entering freshman are entirely lacking in knowledge of American history and American political principles. With Harvard University recently adopting a variation of such a requirement, this appears to be an opportune time to renew the American civic education mission in higher education through such a general education core. Since multicultural and international awareness requirements are now common, an American foundations requirement of one American history course (preferably pre-1877) and an American government course would be an appropriate complement to these requirements. We would expect such courses to be non-dogmatic, with

thoughtful discussions of both the successes and failures of American democracy.

Despite higher education's potential to strengthen America's civic education, readers of *Educating Citizens* and other works of the higher education civic engagement movement will find this body of literature disappointing. In particular, the approach in *Educating Citizens* fails to provide a strong foundation upon which to build an American civic education program at the higher education level. A system aimed at providing generic "human rights" civic education with an emphasis on participatory skills is inadequate. The intention should be to provide citizenship education that preserves our American liberties and works to improve American democratic society. It is imperative that America's citizens should first know and understand their own system, its history and its foundational principles.

There is clearly a long tradition advancing the civic republican model with democratic participation by informed citizens. Higher education can play a role in moving us toward this objective. At the higher education level, citizens can acquire the knowledge that will encourage open debate of the critical issues facing a self-governing nation. They should

not, however, be indoctrinated or encouraged into political activism to achieve a specific “social justice” agenda. Higher education leadership must remember that even if they take on an increased responsibility for the education of citizens, America must

rely upon the workings of the entire civil society to educate its citizens, rather than solely on a self-appointed elite.

*Editor’s Note:* A version of this review, amplified with informative footnotes, is available on [www.nas.org](http://www.nas.org).