

The Democracy Project: The Role of Higher Education in Developing Democratic Citizens

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Abstract

Alexis de Tocqueville, a keen observer of American society and institutions, once observed that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the rest. Democracy is certainly the form of government that makes the greatest demands on its citizenry. For a democracy to flourish, its citizens must be not just literate, but critical consumers of information. They must not seek to avoid controversy, but rather to address conflicting viewpoints through civil discourse. They must be willing not only to acknowledge diversity but to invite the voices and viewpoints of that diversity to the table.

James Hoffman points out "most of us live in a democracy like fish who live only in water and are therefore blinded to many of its qualities" (2000, p.618). As educators, we bear the responsibility for developing in our students the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will best prepare them for their role in protecting and maintaining our democracy, for, as Soder states, "If they are to rule wisely. . . then the people must understand and act upon their rights and responsibilities as citizens living and working in a democratic regime... the matter of self-governance is, for most people, too important to be left to chance or to casual observation" (1996, p. 244). It is crucial then, that we examine our notions of what it means to be democratic and how we will prepare students for their role as democratic citizens.

In addition to considering the what and how of education for democracy, we must also examine the who. Who is responsible for preparing the teachers who will in turn be responsible for developing democratic citizens? John Goodlad (1994) has identified three critical collaborators in the preparation of teachers: (1) Schools, colleges, and departments of Education; (2) college and university departments of Arts and Sciences; and (3) schools.

Working on a Well-Educated Teacher Initiative grant from the Institute for Educational Inquiry, the California State University, Chico, Department of Education initiated a series of leadership workshops for Education Department and Arts and Sciences faculty, as well as K-12 educators, to explore issues of education for democracy

and the preparation of teachers. The Education Department's interest in this area was fueled by the work of John Goodlad and the National Network for Educational Renewal and has led to the adoption of a driving departmental theme of "developing democratic citizens through public education." In support of this theme, the department states as its mission a commitment to "promote passion for learning, respect of the individual and service to society."

As an initial response to this theme and mission, the CSU, Chico Department of Education planned to create a foundational course for credential candidates called *Democracy and Public Schooling*. The enthusiasm among department faculty for this course and the need to respond to a new set of state standards for teacher preparation programs led the department to go beyond the creation of a single course and to undertake a major program renewal leading to the infusion of democratic connections in every course in the program.

To broaden the discussion beyond the confines of the Education Department and to include the three constituent groups responsible for the preparation of teachers, the three-part leadership workshop series was begun with the first cadre in the spring semester of 2001.

The goal of the first leadership workshop was to encourage participants to read and reflect about their own and others' views of democracy and of the historical and contemporary relationships between democracy and education. The second workshop guided participants in exploring how democratic principles can and do infuse their pedagogy and instructional practices. For the final workshop, the Democracy Project workshop participants were asked to share a course or an instructional activity or project that they had created or revised to better reflect the ideas about education for democracy that emerged from the readings, discussions and activities of the workshop series.

The interest in the Democracy Project has continued, with the result that a second cadre of participants has begun the series, and a third cadre will begin in the spring 2003 semester.