

# EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

PREPARING UNDERGRADUATES  
FOR RESPONSIBLE POLITICAL  
ENGAGEMENT

BY ANNE COLBY, ELIZABETH BEAUMONT, THOMAS EHRLICH, JOSH CORNGOLD



BOOK  
HIGHLIGHTS

# Educating for Democracy

## Preparing Undergraduates for Responsible Political Engagement

For more than a century, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has been dedicated to promoting the profession of teaching and the improvement of teaching and learning in the nation's colleges and schools. The Foundation has demonstrated that the role of educational leaders is to define the impact of education on students intellectually, practically and morally, and to develop new ideas and tools to foster positive change.

### **The Authors**

#### **ANNE COLBY**

Senior Scholar, Carnegie Foundation

#### **ELIZABETH BEAUMONT**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Minnesota

#### **THOMAS EHRlich**

Senior Scholar, Carnegie Foundation

#### **JOSH CORNGOLD**

Research Assistant, Carnegie Foundation

**These highlights are based on the Carnegie/Jossey-Bass publication of the same title, *Educating for Democracy: Preparing Undergraduates for Responsible Political Engagement* (November 2007). To order, visit the Jossey-Bass Web site at [www.jbp.com](http://www.jbp.com).**

The Political Engagement Project was funded by the Atlantic Philanthropies, Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Maryland, the Ford Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, as well as The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM

# EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

PREPARING UNDERGRADUATES  
FOR RESPONSIBLE POLITICAL  
ENGAGEMENT

Anne Colby  
Elizabeth Beaumont  
Thomas Ehrlich  
Josh Corngold

A PUBLICATION OF

 THE CARNEGIE FOUNDATION  
*for the* ADVANCEMENT *of* TEACHING



## Introduction

Many Americans, especially young people, have little political knowledge, weak political skills, and rarely engage in political activities. In a 2006 survey of California high school graduates who had recently completed a course in U.S. government, half could not correctly identify the function of the Supreme Court, a third could not name either of California's two U.S. senators, and 41 percent did not know whether the Republican or Democratic party is more conservative. And a recent national study showed that 56 percent of young people did not know that only citizens can vote in the United States. For the sake of these individuals and for the health of our democracy, it is critical to strengthen their understanding of political institutions, issues and events.

Not only do most young Americans lack basic political knowledge, most are not interested in politics, do not feel motivated to participate, and do not know how to participate should they want to do so. Recent studies show that only about a third of college students believe it is important to stay current with political issues and events. While this is the highest percentage in more than 10 years, it is still distressingly low.

More than 15 million Americans from increasingly diverse backgrounds are enrolled as undergraduates in our nation's colleges and universities. The authors have found that when undergraduates have the understanding and skills to be politically engaged, many are motivated to do so. Research suggests that colleges are well positioned to promote democratic competencies and participation, and to prepare students to be thoughtful,

**RECENT STUDIES SHOW THAT ONLY ABOUT A THIRD OF COLLEGE STUDENTS BELIEVE IT IS IMPORTANT TO STAY CURRENT WITH POLITICAL ISSUES AND EVENTS.**

responsible, creative citizens. However, U.S. colleges and universities pay too little attention to their students' political education and engagement, losing the opportunities of both time and access during this formative period of young adulthood. While many of these students are engaged in individual civic service in their communities and

frequently their service is connected to the curriculum through service-learning courses, most volunteer community activities do not offer students opportunities to be politically engaged.

Colleges and universities do not have to sacrifice attention to other important goals of academic learning to increase student political engagement, since high-quality education for political understanding and engagement does not conflict with those goals. In a recent statement about pressing challenges for American higher education, the American Council on Education and four other influential national education associations pointed to "some fundamental aspects of higher education" that "do not and should not change." Those are: "The most basic goals of an undergraduate education remain the ability to think, write, and speak clearly; to reason critically; to solve problems; to work collaboratively; to acquire field-specific knowledge; and to acquire the judgment, analytic capacity, and independence of thought to support continued, self-driven, lifelong learning and engaged citizenship." As *Educating for Democracy* illustrates, education for political development contributes to each of these outcomes.

*Educating for Democracy* articulates the conditions under which political teaching and learning in college is and is not legitimate, making the case that education for political development can and must be conducted in a manner that is consistent with the core values of higher education institutions. These values include intellectual pluralism, rational discourse, intellectual autonomy, open-mindedness and civility. The authors also suggest ways to ensure that educational programs are firmly grounded in these values. *Educating for Democracy* rebuts the claim that education for political development will inevitably indoctrinate students with the political views of faculty, and, in fact, offers evidence that concerns about political indoctrination are largely unfounded.

## A Practical Book for Educators

*Educating for Democracy* is written for educators who want to help undergraduates become knowledgeable and engaged participants in many arenas of American democracy and public life. It is also written for those intrigued by the idea of educating for political development but not quite sure what this means in practice or whether it is reliably smart, effective and unbiased. This practical book is built on the insights and experience of people who have been deeply involved in promoting undergraduates' political understanding and engagement and shares specific strategies for use in courses, in the co-curriculum, and in other campus activities.

To that end, *Educating for Democracy* describes high-quality teaching for college-level political learning, which reflects basic principles that are evident in good teaching more generally. It articulates in detail what it means to teach effectively for a complex and interconnected array of outcomes using pedagogical strategies that engage students actively in political learning.

## The Political Engagement Project

*Educating for Democracy* is based on the Carnegie Foundation’s Political Engagement Project (PEP), a study of 21 college and university courses and co-curricular programs that address students’ preparation for democratic participation. These courses and programs range from single-semester courses and summer programs to one- and two-year programs involving clusters of courses and other activities. Chosen for their direct focus on political learning, they include at least one active pedagogy, have established a strong track record over a period of several years, and represent a wide range of institutional types and student body characteristics. The courses and programs are located at elite universities like Harvard and Brown, open-access universities such as Portland State, liberal arts colleges including Colgate University, faith-based campuses like Providence College, and a two-year institution, Dutchess Community College in Poughkeepsie, New York. Participating students from all ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds enter the courses and programs at all levels of interest in politics, from disengagement to intense prior involvement. *Educating for Democracy* examines course and program goals, approaches to teaching and learning, student perspectives on their experiences, and the impact of these experiences on student learning.

Despite great diversity in the types of courses and programs included in the PEP, all 21 share key goals for college-level political learning. These goals can be described in three clusters of developmental outcomes:

**EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY PROVIDES COMPELLING EVIDENCE ABOUT TEACHING STRATEGIES THAT ARE EFFECTIVE IN ACCOMPLISHING A WIDE RANGE OF STUDENT LEARNING GOALS.**

political knowledge and understanding; political motivation, including interest in politics and a sense of political efficacy and identity; and a wide array of practical skills of democratic participation.

*Educating for Democracy* describes each cluster of goals, providing theoretical and research background on specific learning outcomes, with

lessons drawn from PEP faculty and students about how best to support learning in that area. The section of the book on sense of political efficacy, for example, addresses questions like: How can we foster students’ sense that their thoughts and actions matter politically? How can we engage students directly in politics without increasing their cynicism and leaving them overwhelmed and discouraged? The answers include insights drawn from the research literature and from “the wisdom of practice” articulated by the PEP faculty and their students.

The book then turns to five powerful educational strategies or pedagogies that support the development of students’ political understanding, motivation, skills and engagement. These include: (1) political discussion and deliberation; (2) political action and research projects; (3) invited speakers who represent political engagement of various sorts or aspects of policy formulation and implementation; (4) internships or placements in government agencies, non-profits and other organizations dealing with political and policy issues; and (5) structured reflection on readings, placements, political action or other experiences. Extensive case material from the PEP courses and programs animates these important teaching strategies and helps readers learn to use them effectively in curricular and extra-curricular programs.

*Educating for Democracy* provides compelling evidence that these teaching strategies are effective in accomplishing a wide range of student learning goals. The authors show that high-quality education for political development increases students’ political understanding, skill, motivation and involvement while contributing to many aspects of general academic learning.

**Major findings include:**

1. The PEP courses and programs resulted in political learning. Evidence shows that participating in courses and programs with a political focus results in greater political understanding, skills, motivation and expectations for future political action. Students gained a stronger sense of politically engaged identity, internal political efficacy, and interest in reading about politics in newspapers, as well as several types of political knowledge, skills of political influence and action, and intentions to participate politically in the future.
2. Increased political learning does not change party identification or political ideology. Students entered these courses and programs with a broad spectrum of political beliefs. Although some individuals shifted direction, the overall distribution of party identification and ideology did not change as a result of participation. This important finding indicates that these kinds of efforts to teach for political development do not guide students toward a particular party affiliation or ideological viewpoint. Thus, fears of political indoctrination need not obstruct support for students' political learning.
3. Students with little initial interest in political issues made especially substantial learning gains. Students participated in these courses and programs for different reasons. About half were already interested in politics, which was an important motivation for joining the course or program. The others took part in order to meet graduation requirements, they had heard the professor was lively or interesting, or they wanted to spend a semester away from their home campus.

Both groups of students—those who entered with high levels of interest in politics and those less interested at the outset—gained significantly in a number of areas, including foundational knowledge of political institutions and theories, knowledge regarding current events, internal political efficacy, and diverse politically relevant skills. Moreover, the group with low initial political interest experienced significant increases along more dimensions of political engagement than their more politically interested classmates and showed larger gains on many outcomes. These results are particularly promising because low-interest students often mirror the general undergraduate population, which tends to be politically disengaged.

For students entering with higher levels of political interest, these courses and programs further boosted political knowledge and skill. Interviews with high initial-interest students indicate that many felt the course or program reinforced and encouraged their political interests and inclinations and helped them further develop strong intentions to be political leaders, innovators and activists.

## An Invitation to Colleges and Universities

Each college and university is different, with a unique mission and student population. These differences influence institutions' beliefs about what kind of political education is appropriate and how that education should occur. Not every campus needs to have similar or similarly extensive efforts to promote students' political development, nor must every faculty member or program leader be involved in education for political learning. One goal of the formative college experience, however, should be to help students become more politically knowledgeable and involved. All campuses should think about the best, most legitimate and most effective way to support that development. *Educating for Democracy* provides the basis for colleges and universities to do so.

## Table of Contents

### **EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY**

#### **Preparing Undergraduates for Responsible Political Engagement**

- Chapter One **Citizens, Politics and Civic Engagement**
- Chapter Two **Higher Education's Role in Preparing Citizens**
- Chapter Three **The Imperative of Open Inquiry**
- Chapter Four **Creating Environments of Open Inquiry**
- Chapter Five **Teaching for Political Knowledge and Understanding**
- Chapter Six **Teaching Skills of Democratic Participation**
- Chapter Seven **Fostering Motivation for Political Engagement**
- Chapter Eight **Political Learning Through Discussion and Deliberation**
- Chapter Nine **Political Learning Through Research and Action Projects**
- Chapter Ten **Political Learning Through Speakers and Mentors**
- Chapter Eleven **Political Learning Through Placements, Internships and Service Learning**
- Chapter Twelve **Political Learning Through Structured Reflection**
- Chapter Thirteen **Educating for Political Engagement: Putting the Pieces Together**
- Appendix A **The Political Engagement Project: Course and Program Summaries**
- Appendix B **Survey Data Analyses**
- References

The book will be available in November 2007 by Jossey-Bass.  
[www.jbp.com](http://www.jbp.com)

# The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

## Board of Trustees

**DAVID S. TATEL**

Board Chair  
U. S. Circuit Judge  
U. S. Court of Appeals for D.C. Circuit

**REBECCA S. CHOPP**

Board Vice Chair  
President  
Colgate University

**RICHARD C. ATKINSON**

President Emeritus  
University of California System

**JÜRGEN BAUMERT**

Director  
Max Planck Institute for  
Human Development

**YEHUDA ELKANA**

President and Rector  
Central European University

**BERNADINE CHUCK FONG**

President Emerita  
Foothill College

**SUSAN H. FUHRMAN**

President  
Teachers College, Columbia University

**LOUIS M. GOMEZ**

Aon Professor of Learning Sciences  
and Professor of Computer Science  
Northwestern University

**KATI HAYCOCK**

Director  
The Education Trust

**JANET L. HOLMGREN**

Former Board Chair  
President and Susan Mills Professor  
Mills College

**FREEMAN A. HRABOWSKI III**

President  
University of Maryland, Baltimore County

**JASON KAMRAS**

2005 National Teacher of the Year

**RICHARD A. MIDDLETON**

Superintendent  
San Antonio North East Independent  
School District

**RENÉE A. MOORE**

English Instructor  
Mississippi Delta Community College

**LYNN OLSON**

Managing Editor  
Education Week

**EDUARDO J. PADRÓN**

President  
Miami Dade College

**THOMAS PAYZANT**

Senior Lecturer  
Harvard Graduate School of Education

**LEE S. SHULMAN**

President  
The Carnegie Foundation for  
the Advancement of Teaching

**CATHARINE R. STIMPSON**

Dean of the Graduate School  
of Arts & Science  
New York University

**NINA ZOLT**

Co-Chair, Co-Founder and  
Chief Program Architect  
ePALS, Inc.



THE CARNEGIE FOUNDATION  
*for the* ADVANCEMENT *of* TEACHING

51 VISTA LANE

STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 94305-8703

650 566 5100 TEL

650 326 0278 FAX

[WWW.CARNEGIEFOUNDATION.ORG](http://WWW.CARNEGIEFOUNDATION.ORG)