**Civic Engagement Conference 2000**

Kathleen Hall Jamieson Group
March 2 - 6, 2000

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I. The Conference

From March 2-6, 2000, scholars from around the country met to discuss issues revolving around civic education in the United States. Discussions lead to the following conclusion.

**The Problem**

In recent years, there has been growing concern over declining civic involvement among the nation's young people. Voter turnout among people aged 18 to 24 was estimated at between 29 and 32 percent in the 1996 presidential election, compared with 50 percent of the same age group voting in 1972. A recent survey of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24, conducted for the National Association of Secretaries of State, found that less than 20 percent voted in the 1998 congressional elections. Many of these young respondents cited a lack of information about the candidates and their stands on issues as their major reason for not voting. The young people also noted that they received little civic education in school and rarely discussed politics with their parents.

Young people are less involved in public life than are those who are older. They are also less involved than younger people were in previous generations. Where today 19% of college freshman think that public life is important, in 1966 50% held that view. In 1996, the young were less likely to read a newspaper, watch television news or vote, than they had been in the past.

Civics courses have not produced demonstrable higher levels of political knowledge or understanding among high school students.

However, volunteerism is up, with 70% of the college freshman reporting that they have volunteered. Whereas in the past, volunteering was positively associated with other forms of public participation, now the relationship is largely negative. Nonetheless, those who volunteer are more likely than non-volunteers to say that promoting tolerance is important.

**What Do We Know?**

**Cognition**

We know that information affects participation. It is possible that knowledge matters because it enhances both self-efficacy and the capacity to develop opinions, which in turn may increase connectedness and with that increase the ability and disposition to get involved.

Scholars of mass communication tell us that viewing television news is positively related to the amount of civics knowledge that adolescents and young people posses. Although most people report that television is their major source of political information, the reading of public affairs reporting in newspapers has a stronger relationship to civic knowledge than does the viewing of television news. In other words, it would be desirable to increase news consumption about public affairs among the young.

As adolescents age from 12-18, they watch and read somewhat more public affairs content. Nonetheless, the youngest groups report the most dramatic decline in newspaper readership over the past thirty years. This drop is a function of those who once reported regular readership now reporting that they read only sometimes.

Additionally, we know that some form of Internet use is related to civic engagement. However not all of the effects of the mass media are constructive. Evidence from studies of adults suggests that although individuals do learn from news, the tendency of journalists to frame politics from a tactical or strategic perspective can over time activate cynicism and depress learning. Indeed some believe that watching politics on television creates feelings conducive to cynicism. Hart argues that it feels good to feel bad about politics. Cynical speech for example, becomes a code that creates a sense of inclusion, knowledge, contemporaneity, superiority and a false sense that one has accomplished something. Some also express the concern that the popular culture in general treats both politics and political activism with disdain. And there are those who believe that the model of political engagement typically found in news and news-like programming is one that tacitly argues that political discussion is unpleasant and ought to be avoided.

Parental norms matter but as research on Kids Voting indicates increased political engagement among kids can influence the level of parental engagement as well.

Political talk is desirable. Among adults, the diversity of the individual's discussion partners has a positive effect on civic engagement. At the same time, the frequency and openness with which local issues are discussed are strongly related to civic engagement. It is important to note that these findings are drawn from studies of adults.

Political psychologists tell us that facts are better learned when the process entails reaching an evaluation or a judgment. This suggests that the acquisition of knowledge should be embedded in a project involving opinion formation. Adolescents, for example, should determine where they stand in relationship to the candidates' stand.

The reason that opinion formation is important is that those who hold political opinions are more likely to care about public affairs and to become politically involved. Political opinion formation is important as well because structuring political knowledge in a coherent fashion makes it both easier to make sense of new information and more likely that it will be retained.

**Affect**

Attachment to a community has an affective dimension. Although "patriotism" is a word that has lost some currency, it remains important that individuals feel pride in their identity, in the groups to which they belong and in the nation of which they are apart. In a desire to ensure that the injustices in our country's past are recognized, we should not underplay the strengths of our system. Democracy is an unrealized but not an unrealizable ideal. When dealing with the young, it may be important to impart a pride in the country and its history before exploring its failings.

Cognition and affect both matter in the inculcation of an ethic of civic engagement. Interest can be catalyzed by both positive and negative feelings. In other words, to encourage the interest of adolescents, encourage them to feel something. Positive feeling are equalizers, negative feelings intensify differences. Depending on one's prior level of self-efficacy, negative feeling can either mobilize or demobilize. Those with lower self- efficacy are de-mobilized by the negative feeling, where those with high self -efficacy are mobilized.

**Flow**

Although there is evidence that material things have an increasingly high value in US culture, scholars have found, consistent with the truism, that money does not produce happiness. One of the questions raised by this project is can engagement become a self-motivating process? Motivation can be seen as intrinsic or extrinsic. Some things are done for their own sake. Doing them makes life fuller. Some things are done for extrinsic reasons, to accomplish something else, to attain some sort of reward. We are interested in creating a project capable of producing intrinsic motivation, or Flow. Flow is a state characterized by full concentration and involvement in which one's goal is simply to have the experience. Flow is a function of the intersection between challenge and skills. It is an active not a passive state.

**Developing a Civic Identity**

It is important that adolescents develop a political identity early. Those who leave high school with a fairly well developed sense of where they stand politically are more politically engaged throughout their lives than are those who find politics later. Studies of adults suggest that such core political concepts as democrat, republican, liberal, and conservative, are vital to organizing political discussion. Level of knowledge also matters in so far as it produces a feeling that one can master politics. Those with this sort of internal efficacy are more likely to be politically engaged. It is important that any intervention increase the likelihood that individuals believe that they can understand and make sense of public affairs.

Developmental psychologists focus on identity, asking who does the young person think she is and who does she want to be? Moral identity is built on the assumptions that an individual has obligations to society, and, as a member of society, embraces a core of common values. A person with a civic identity cares what is happening to her society and believes that she has a duty to do something about it. Use of exemplars may be one way of enhancing civic identity.

One might see identity as an answer to the questions: what do I owe society, what does society owe me, and what do we owe each other. We know that early in life, children acquire a sense of membership and exclusion. We also know that teachers who communicate that tolerance and respect for others are valued in the classroom convey at the same time that these are socially held values. When a teacher is perceived to be acting in a just and fair manner, the children in the class are more likely to believe that American is a just and fair place.

**The Skills and Capacities of the Good Citizen**

There is widespread agreement that adolescence is a critical period in the development of a good citizen. By adolescence, students have in the U.S. reached a high level of literacy and numeracy. While necessary for citizenship, these skills are not sufficient. Citizens also need to know about the constitution and its mechanisms, the ways in which government works and the levers that can be applied to act on it. The citizen must also be prepared to engage in political argument and take political action. Among other things, engaging in deliberation enhances the ability of student to see a diversity of viewpoints. The deliberative process also demonstrates that an individual's views are worthy of respect whether one agrees with them or not. The focus on argument also inculcates basic civic virtues such as honesty, tolerance, reciprocity, nonviolence and trust. Citizenship is not being passive in the face of injustice, instead it presupposes that in the normal course of democracy, individuals can engage to affect outcomes.

II. The Agenda.

**Thursday, March 2 - Monday, March 6, 2000**

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| **Thursday, March 2** |  |
| 6:00 pm | Dinner |
| 7:00-9:00pm | An overview of the project, introduction of participants, and a chance to amend the agenda.Leaders: Jamieson |
| **Friday, March 3** |  |
| 8:00 am | Breakfast |
| 9:00-10:00am | Bringing communication in socializationLeader: McLeod, BeckFacilitator: Pfau |
| 10:00-11:00am | What do adolescents know and how do they know it?Leaders: Junn, Delli CarpiniFacilitator: Stoker |
| 11:00-12:00 | Affect, Motivation: Do they matter? If so how? Is there an affective equivalent of civic literacy? Can positive affect drive socialization?Leaders: Rahn, Monaco, HaidtFacilitator: Cappella |
| 12:00pm | Informal discussion over lunch |
| 6:00-7:00pm | Dinner |
| 7:00-8:00pm | How do we foster civic identity in youth?Leaders: Damon and ColbyFacilitator: Czikszentmihalyi |
| 8:00-9:00pm | What can we learn from other efforts?Leader: FlanaganFacilitator: Price |
| **Saturday, March 4** |  |
| 8:00-9:00am | Breakfast |
| 9:00 -10:00am | Democratic norms and expectations: What do adolescents need to know to be/become "good citizens"?Leaders: GutmannFacilitator: Hart |
| 10:00-11:00am | Moving beyond a model that tries to improve democracy one citizen at a time-the role of the pressLeaders: Jamieson, HartFacilitator: Rahn |
| 11:00-12:00 | Can this project produce flow? If so, how?Leader: CzikszentmihalyiFacilitator: Damon |
| 12:00-1:00pm | Informal Discussion at Lunch: Kathryn Kolbert: Teaching civics through issues confronting the legal system. Discussion of Justice Talking Program |
| 6:00-7:00pm | Dinner |
| 7:00-8:00pm | Challenges this project will face; barriers to be overcomeOpen discussion. Uses of the Internet to enhance the impact of the project on adolescents and the wider public |
| 8:00-9:00pm | Specific cognitive, affective developmental goals we hope that students will achieve? |

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| **Sunday, March 5** |  |
| 8:00-9:00am | Breakfast |
| 9:00-10:00am | Developmental goals and constraints. e.g. Should we wait for a developmental stage or try to 'drive' toward a higher level of development?Leaders: SelmanFacilitator: Damon |
| 10:00 -11:00am | Open discussion: What can we learn about adolescents, civic engagement and anything else worth knowing from this project? What important unanswered research questions can we address? |
| 11:00-12:00 | How should the project be evaluated? Can we standardize an evaluation instrument for use across sites? |
| 12:00-1:00pm | Informal discussion over lunch |
| 6:00-7:00pm | Dinner |
| 7:00-9:00pm | The nuts and bolts. Criteria to be employed in awarding funding to a university, constitution of an advisory board. Does the university have to be in the city whose schools are the focus of the project? |
| **Monday, March 6** | Breakfast & Depart |

III. The Participants

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