

When the Founding Fathers were drawing up the most impressive living document ever to be written; and they were forming the tenets of representative democracy, civic duty was imperative to the survival of this experimental form of government. Ben Franklin, in particular, advocated the position that this new form of government wouldn't be helped by, but was entirely dependent on the citizen's sense of civic engagement. However, is this sense of civic engagement that Franklin talks about the same today as it was in his time? Is this sense of civic engagement the same as it was in the 1960's? The answer is no; an entirely new form of civic engagement has been developing over the last three decades, and it does not hold as much promise and hope as the facets of the American Revolution or the peace and love movement of the 1960's. This new system is not based on a sense of pride, nor is it based on a sense of serving democracy through action and passion. Instead, a system has emerged where money is now the most essential key to affecting social, political, and cultural change.

If one wants to promote change in this country, access to money is the fastest and most effective way to get the attention of those in power. There are two sides to this coin. If one works hard and increases their earning power, he or she can easily affect the change they wish to see; whether it be donating to a candidate who promotes equality and acceptance, or giving money to local students or the underprivileged. However, this system also promotes a diminishing sense of action. In a political campaign, the \$500,000 donor is going to have much more say than the college kid knocking on doors. This new system of civic engagement can make those without access to money feel alienated and powerless. This is why more and more students at universities are ignoring civic duty in favor of working hard to increase their monetary rewards once they graduate. Under the assumption that money is the quickest and most effective cause of social change, should colleges sit back and actively promote a student's

earning potential and hope that the he or she uses it for good once they graduate? Can a college even have a say in spurring civic engagement beyond monetary concerns? Should they?

The answer to the previous question is undoubtedly yes, although with some important caveats. The notion that civic duty can be taught in a classroom like when we are in elementary school must be thrown out the window. Civic duty does not exist merely in textbooks; it is a living, breathing entity that only takes place in the real world. Civic engagement is not driven by a sense of duty or seen as a requirement for democracy; it is fueled by passion, and that is what many students lack today. Until an individual draws up enough emotions to be passionate about an issue or passionate about spurring change or passionate about helping others, civic engagement will be nothing more than two words strewn together in the English language that represent a time long since past. But can a college promote passion? The answer to that question is also yes, and there are two important ways that a college can effectively promote passion and caring within its student body.

E. Gordon Gee, the current president of Vanderbilt College and a man who has held more university presidencies than any other American once said, “When the fabric of society has become frayed, it is the role of the university to develop weavers.” It is to this end that colleges do not merely play the role of textbook education and monetary promotion; they have a duty to their students to promote civic involvement as well. One way that this can be done is by promoting the discussion of controversial issues on campus. Too often, modern day colleges shy away from contentious political and social issues for fear of repercussion or anger. However, in order to promote passion among its students, a college must display the issues that are most ripe for civic engagement. Indeed, the discussions will be heated and not much change will occur on either side of the aisle. However, these public displays will help educate the student body about

both sides of the issue and help to inspire them to take action for their side. Sweeping controversial topics under the rug is akin to ignoring the eight hundred pound gorilla in the room. It may temporarily alleviate tension, but its long term detrimental effects on passion are not worth the gamble.

Another way colleges can promote a sense of civic duty is through the phenomenon known as volunteering. Volunteering inherently separates civic engagement from monetary status. Volunteering is a direct way to civically engage where the effects are usually seen immediately. The feeling of helping someone without any monetary interest is unrivaled anywhere else in the world. In a world where most everything has become measured by dollars and cents, volunteering provides an increase in the immeasurable emotion known as passion. Whether it be helping the young, the less fortunate, the handicapped, the old, or any other conceivable person; volunteering provides a sense of self and community that no textbook can procure. Volunteering is also often seen as reserved for churches and community organizers, not universities and liberal institutions. The paradoxical dilemma for colleges in requiring volunteering is that volunteering is inherently supposed to be voluntary. But for those who have never experienced the sense of pride and passion that comes with volunteering and who may see it as a waste of time, a community service requirement would be useful in exposing them to a world they may not have known before. This is why colleges can require a volunteering component as a part of experiential learning or as a requirement to graduate. This would expose students to a concept they may be unfamiliar with: affecting others and civically engaging in society with no promise of monetary reward.

Civic engagement need not promote sweeping social change as drastic as Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mahatma Gandhi. It is also not merely a word, but a concept that demands action

and passion. Civic duty, civic engagement, civic responsibility; they are all concepts which are necessary not only for sustaining democracy, but for promoting societal development and a strong sense of community. They are also not easy to ascertain. They require inspiration, dedication, and persistence. As the famous Chicago Sun-Times columnist Sydney Harris once wrote, "It is easier to be a 'humanitarian' than to render your own country its proper due; it is easier to be a 'patriot' than to make your community a better place to live in; it is easier to be a 'civic leader' than to treat your own family with loving understanding; for the smaller the focus of attention, the harder the task." Civic duty is not something out of a textbook; it is an important concept which we should all be judged by both as citizens of this country and as citizens of this planet. However, just because it cannot be taught in a classroom does not exclude liberal arts institutions and universities from its promotion; it just means that they have to work harder to promote passion and caring, and that it is not an impossible task.