

Courage, Commitment and a Little Humility: The Path to Civic Engagement

Jennifer J. Kidd, Old Dominion University

A few years ago I served as a graduate assistant in an experimental course for freshmen at Old Dominion University (ODU) in Norfolk, Virginia. New Portals to Appreciating our Global Environment (NewPAGE) united faculty and graduate students across disciplines to tackle instruction on pressing global issues such as climate change, health, sustainable development, and environmental resources. The issues were timely: Hurricane Katrina struck in the first few months of the course, and the content, including a five-hour community service component, had potential to spark social and civic responsibility among the 1800 students enrolled. There was just one problem: students hated it.

Expecting to have a choice of electives, students resented being told what to take. NewPAGE wasn't related to their major, wasn't something they were interested in, was too early in the morning, wasn't going to be recognized if they wanted to transfer. There were a host of reasons, but by and large, students were set against the course before it even started. Perhaps due to this initial distaste, students found the course of little benefit (Morrow 17), ineffective in changing their beliefs or habits about the environment (Morrow 9) and less relevant to their careers. They also expressed lower interest in the content of the course as compared to other general education courses (Morrow 18).

Adding salt to the wound was the community service assignment. According to the NewPAGE syllabus, students were encouraged to select activities that "contributed to the health of the local environment" (3). They were given the option of choosing a pre-set activity such as stenciling "drains to bay" next to storm drains or researching an opportunity related to their major. However, many students expressed resentment at being forced to serve. "I am already paying for this course and the books, and now u are asking me to do free labor on top on that" (Morrow 220). "That is not the job of the university to obligate someone to serve the community," another said (Morrow 220). Roughly equal numbers of students made positive comments as made negative ones, but the negative comments prompted action. After the first semester and an unfavorable evaluation overall, the community service component was canceled and NewPAGE was scheduled to be phased out in two years.

Adding to students' perceptions of injustice, a group of vocal students labeled the course liberal and attempting to promote an activist agenda. Students claimed the faculty and guest speakers represented only one perspective, citing the current administration's refutation of global warming as evidence. Some found the text, which was compiled by the instructors, to be biased and alarmist: "There is an incredible amount of biasism in the book, specifically with the statistics. I'm not exactly sure why this is, but it is possible this is a scaring tactic i.e. trying to scare us with inflated statistics so that we pay attention," one student explained (Morrow 151). It is true, the text focused more on problems than solutions, perhaps inspiring disillusionment rather than motivation for change. Some NewPAGE instructors were quick to deny the activist charges and recruited conservative speakers to provide a more "balanced" perspective. I also found it easy to drop my investment in the course. "You have to be here, so let's make the best of it" was an easier sell than "this is likely to be the most important course you'll take."

Why were we defensive and why was I so quick to shirk my own responsibility? Shouldn't we affirm the students' charge proudly? Yes, we are promoting activism; we want you to make the world a better place. The students' sharp criticisms made me doubtful. Was it really "not our job" to lead students to serve?

From an institutional perspective, I understood. Today's students have many options for how they'll earn a degree. Institutions struggle to meet the demands of these "consumer" students, nearly 25% of whom leave their chosen institutions after only one year (ACT). It is risky for colleges and universities to emphasize students' contributions to, rather than extractions from, society.

But, why did *I* feel the need to tiptoe around the activist agenda? Certainly I embraced the cause. In practice though, I had no experience. How could I tell students they needed to get involved, when I wasn't involved myself? Prior to NewPAGE, I hadn't done any community service. I doubted my own credibility. Reflecting on my own education, I realized that no one had ever tried to convince me that I had a duty to my community. I couldn't help but wonder: if I had taken a course like NewPAGE, would I be a different person today?

NewPAGE was dropped from ODU's requirements, but the concept clearly had merit. Where did we go wrong? To be successful, we needed student buy-in. Mandating environmental stewardship clearly was not the answer. If students are to see civic involvement as their responsibility, we must convince them of this, through both our rhetoric and our actions. Initiating a university-wide campaign promoting environmentally responsible behavior at all levels would be a start. And to its credit, ODU is taking many steps toward becoming a "green" university, but the effort and message need to be pervasive. Students, faculty and staff need to be shown how to do their part—and held accountable.

Novices like me shouldn't hide our inexperience, but should exercise humility and commit to learning *alongside* students to act as responsible citizens. Students are likely to be more responsive to a course of joint discovery than to mandates.

Finally, we need the courage to stand our ground. If we are going to promote responsibility and activism, we can't back down when it gets unpopular or shrug it off as someone else's agenda. The path to civic engagement and social responsibility, our own and our students', is a rocky one, bringing repercussions before rewards. But, inspiring commitment and responsibility *requires* commitment and responsibility. It's no easy task, but it's our job.

Works Cited

- ACT. "National collegiate retention and persistence to degree rates." [www.act.org](http://www.act.org/path/policy/reports/retain.html). 16 Oct. 2005
<<http://www.act.org/path/policy/reports/retain.html>>
- Morrow, Jennifer et al. "Evaluation of the New Portals to Appreciating our Global Environment course (NewPAGE: Gen 101) at Old Dominion University." Norfolk, VA: Old Dominion University, 2005.
- NewPAGE Syllabus. "GEN 101 – NewPAGE: New Portals for Appreciating our Global Environment Course Syllabus – Spring 2005." Norfolk, VA: Old Dominion University, 2005.