

Educating Citizens: Preparing AUC Students for the New Egypt

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A classic and honourable tradition of American educational and political thought is the manner in which it endeavours to combine intellectual and moral virtues and in particular the integration of civic responsibility into the classic academic objectives of higher education. This has also been reflected in the century-long mission of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and constitutes the key focus of a nation-wide project carried out by the Foundation at the turn of the century. Preoccupied by the nature of the moral and civic character of Americans in the 21st century, which the Foundation saw as being central to democracy's future in the USA, they commissioned a project whose key research questions were: "*How can higher education contribute to developing these qualities in sustained and effective ways? What problems do institutions face when they seriously and intentionally undertake moral and civic education? What strategies do they employ to overcome them?*" (Colby et al, 2003: ix) As such the results of the project which were published in 2003 in a book entitled, **Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility**, are most pertinent to AUC at this key juncture of modern Egyptian history.¹

A key conclusion reached by the authors is "*that higher education has a critical role to play in shaping character and a sense of social responsibility in the U.S. citizenry because such a large share of the population attends college for at least some period of time*" (Colby, et al, 2003: xii). It is for this reason that the authors argue forcefully that "*if it is to be most effective, moral and civic learning should be integrated into both curricular and extracurricular programs and that it does not require a trade-off with more narrowly academic goals*" (Colby, et al, 2003: xii-xiii). Of course neither of these two conclusions are new or revolutionary. A brief examination of higher education will highlight immediately that the concern with moral and civic education for college students has been around for some time and especially in liberal arts colleges. Nevertheless, recent concerns with achieving higher standards of professional education and preparing students for the global market have pushed moral and civic education to the margin even in colleges which espouse a liberal education mission. Let me elaborate.

Liberal education has been forced to adapt and develop in order to meet the emerging challenges of globalisation, competitive labour markets, new skill requirements and major technological innovations. Many of these challenges have made the classical goals of moral and civic values harder to achieve within the curriculum. In some respects the changing nature of the higher education landscape presents some serious impediments to maintaining moral and civic education alongside professional academic objectives. For example the strong departmental focus in most colleges, faculty reward systems that privilege research over teaching, the excessively technical (disciplinary) structures of many curricula with built-in disciplinary requirements and of course the forced accommodation to market forces which have resulted in a higher degree of commodification of higher education (Colby, et.al., 2003: 25). These resulting changes experienced by higher education had profound effects on moral and civic education. Given the increased disciplinary specialisation of departments many colleges introduced core curricula which all students were expected to take and thus it was hoped sustain moral and civic education. Nevertheless, this segregation of moral and civic education to the margin of disciplinary-based departments failed to achieve its objectives. Required Western civilization and great books courses lost popularity and students only attended them *pro forma*. Furthermore, most colleges found it difficult to staff such courses as increased disciplinary and specialized research priorities, given the reward systems prevailing, prevented faculty from devoting appropriate time and effort to such core curricula courses. Colleges then turned to extracurricular activities as a way of fulfilling their stated mission goals of providing moral and civic education. The effect was to marginalize moral and civic education even further and move it out of the classroom altogether.

The developments highlighted above paint a dark landscape within which moral and civic education has been pushed to the margin at a time when democratic endeavours require citizens to be even more aware and active.

With the sustainability of moral and civic education. During the last few decades the wide recognition that conventional pedagogy of lectures and class-room discussion are inadequate has led to the emergence of new inter-active and dynamic pedagogies on the landscape of higher education. As the authors note, “*despite the relative lack of institutional rewards for teaching innovation, faculty from all kinds of institutions have been developing teaching strategies that engage students actively in their own learning and provide experiences with complex capacities that go well beyond absorption of new information. These strategies include project-based and problem-based learning, collaborative learning, service learning and other forms of experiential learning*” (Colby, et.al. 2003: 45). These new pedagogies, of course contribute to students gaining a part of a holistic approach intellectual as well as moral and civic education within their own disciplinary-based departments. As such the process of reintegrating moral and civic learning at the core of the new discipline-based curricula in higher education has started to gain momentum.

The significance of experiential learning for moral and civic education derives from the very fact that democracies require citizens who are educated in order to be able to take on the complexities of modern life and resolve complex issues based on actual knowledge and not be guided by elites in power. “*Conventional modes of instruction, especially listening to lectures and reading textbooks, are especially vulnerable to producing fragile and superficial understanding. As a result students forget much of what they have learned, are unable to use in a new context what they do remember, and retain fundamental misconceptions that are inconsistent with what they seemed to have learned...Lecture courses often do not support deep and enduring understandings of ideas and are even less suited to developing the range of problem-solving, communication and interpersonal skills towards which moral and civic education (an liberal education more generally) aspire* (Colby, et.al., 2003: 133). Extracurricular activities do, of course, also make a contribution to moral and civic education, but it must be noted that not all students engage in such activities and not all that do engage necessarily gain. On the other hand the academic curriculum “*is central to educating college students as citizens because so many key dimensions of moral and civic maturity are fundamentally cognitive or intellectual – rooted in understanding, interpretation and judgement. In fact, by drawing on a wide range of pedagogies, academic coursework can support not only the most clearly intellectual dimensions of moral and civic development but the full range of capacities and inclinations that make up moral and civic understanding, skills, motivation, and ultimately, action*” (Colby, et.al. 2003: 168)

It goes without saying that a dynamic curriculum which makes use of the new interactive pedagogies noted above also requires considerable investment of effort and time by faculty. Nevertheless, given the urgency to educate citizens it is incumbent upon educational leaders to grasp the challenge and provide such faculty with the support needed. In particular educational leaders need to re-evaluate traditional faculty roles and recognize, assess, and reward the considerable intellectual effort involved in curriculum and pedagogic reform. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has led the way in this direction, and AUC can benefit greatly by following its advice and recommendations with regard to the introduction of new pedagogies and the recognition of faculty efforts in this direction.

N.B. For further discussion of the above issues attend the CLT workshop on “Educating Citizens” to be held on May 2nd from 2.15 to 3.45 pm, Room 1021, Library Building.

Sources

Colby, Anne; Beaumont, Elizabeth; Ehrlich, Thomas; Stephens, Jason (2003), **Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility**, Hoboken, N.J., Jossey-Bass.

ⁱ Throughout this essay “moral and civic education” are used in the broad sense of their implied meaning and not in the strict sense of pertaining to service learning as such.