

Anne Colby, Elizabeth Beaumont, Thomas Ehrlich, and Josh Corngold.
Educating for Democracy: Preparing Undergraduates for Responsible Political Engagement. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007.

Review by Raymond D. Vlasin

We have just participated in a national election. It was characterized by much negativism, attacks between and among opposing candidates and political parties, superficial and degrading advertisements, misleading sound bites and spins, much shallow reporting, and a very high social cost. What seemed in very short supply was respectful political discussions and deliberations, substantive policy analysis, deliberate efforts to clarify important issues and political positions, open-mindedness and objectivity, respect for divergent views, and civility.

Thus, the book *Educating for Democracy* by Anne Colby and coauthors could not have come at a better time. It centers on the urgent need for “responsible citizenship” in which our political choices and participation should be informed by knowledge, supported by skills, and guided by well-considered political values and commitments. For the authors, “political engagement” is multidimensional, and responsible democratic citizenship should be understood and studied as involving more than regular or rote participation in basic electoral or partisan activities.

In *Educating for Democracy* the authors address the question, what kinds of learning experiences and educational practices might best promote key aspects of high-quality political engagement? A central purpose of their studies, the Political Engagement Project supported by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, was to investigate and document the impact of a range of promising educational efforts on college students’ political development. They were particularly interested in the students’ development of political knowledge, skills, motivation, and participation, the sum and integration of which they term “responsible political engagement.” Further, they viewed the term “political” broadly to include deliberations about political values, collaborative public works, community and civic involvement that has a systemic dimension, and various forms of engagement with public policy issues, as well as electoral politics at all levels.

In their book they share the results of the Political Engagement Project, and describe and document educational practices at the college level that prepare students for responsible democratic participation, from local to national levels. They document the goals and strategies of twenty-one of the courses and programs that they

studied. They obtained and share students' perspectives on their experiences in these courses and programs and the impact of those experiences on the students' political development. Their research shows that high-quality education for political development can contribute to many aspects of general academic learning as well as increase students' political understanding, skill, motivation, and involvement. Their work reflects careful research, thorough analysis, documentation of results, and a synthesis of lessons learned.

The book is superbly designed and organized, and very well written. It is scholarly, examining the foundational, theoretical, and conceptual issues surrounding college-level education for political learning. It is challenging, discussing central goals in political development that higher education administrators and faculty should address. It is helpful to scholarly practitioners, focusing on key pedagogical strategies of teaching for political learning. And it provides a treasure of lessons learned, both in the narrative chapters and in the appendix of creatively designed courses and programs.

In earlier works the authors have argued persuasively that moral and civic learning are important in undergraduate education and that they are achievable without sacrificing other academic goals in the education process. In this book, the authors elaborate on that position, focusing specifically on political learning that supports engaged citizenship in a pluralist democracy. They provide convincing evidence that the teaching and experiential learning processes that yield enhanced "responsible political engagement" can complement and enhance other academic goals and objectives, without competing with them. They also provide many examples of creatively designed courses and programs for such learning.

The authors hold that American higher education pays relatively little attention to undergraduate students' political learning. Too few colleges invite students—or even most faculty or staff—to consider seriously the multiple purposes of higher education, including its public and democratic purposes. Further, they hold that institutions of higher education have critical roles to play in helping to ensure the vitality and evolution of our culture and democratic system, and that preparing students as thoughtful, responsible, creative citizens is an essential element in these roles.

From this reviewer's perspective, *faculty commitment* to "responsible citizenship" and "responsible political engagement" appears to be growing in higher education institutions as a result of various individual courses and individual programs. This growth is vital and should be strongly encouraged. However, *institutional*

commitment to educating students for responsible citizenship and skilled political engagement and *institutional change to provide it* require champions at the top of institutions as well—presidents, chancellors, academic vice presidents and provosts, councils of deans, and college, institute, and department heads. Leadership from the top is vital if we are to increase nationally the proportion of our college graduates who can be models of responsible citizenship. Such graduates could lead respectful political discussions and deliberations, encourage and conduct substantive policy analysis, aid in clarifying important issues and political positions, foster open-mindedness and objectivity, seek as well as respect divergent views, and foster a climate of openness and civility wherever they can.

The leaders of educational institutions and others of us in the educational arena have crucial roles in helping ensure the vitality and evolution of our culture and democratic system. Therefore, I urge educators to obtain and read *Educating for Democracy* and share copies with colleagues in positions of institutional leadership. The book is a superb document that has vital lessons now for college faculty, administrators, and educational practitioners of all types. It is a “must read.”

About the Reviewer

- Dr. Raymond D. Vlasin previously served as assistant chancellor for outreach and research at the University of Wisconsin Green Bay, later as chairperson of the Department of Resource Development and as dean of Lifelong Education Programs at Michigan State University, and is now Distinguished Professor Emeritus.

