Expanding the Conversation: Perspective Taking as a Civic Outcome of College

Robert D Reason, Pennsylvania State University
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Robert D. Reason

Pennsylvania State University

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Expanding the Conversation: Perspective Taking as a Civic Outcome of College

Robert D. Reason, Pennsylvania State University

Abstract

The conversation about essential learning outcomes of college has never been more active or important. Although much of the attention on learning outcomes is narrowly focused on cognitive outcomes, especially critical thinking, the need to educate students for personal and social responsibility has never been clearer. In this article the author draws upon data from the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Core Commitments: Educating Students for Personal and Social Responsibility initiative to argue that one dimension of personal and social responsibility, taking seriously the perspectives of others, is essential to active citizenship in today’s diverse democracy and, therefore, an essential outcome of a college education.

In 2005, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) launched the Core Commitments: Educating Students for Personal and Social Responsibility initiative, which focused the attention of higher education on personal and social responsibility as an essential outcome of college (Dey & Associates, 2010). The Core Commitments initiative sought to define and study five dimensions of personal and social responsibility: striving for excellence, cultivating personal and academic integrity, contributing to a larger community, taking seriously the perspectives of others, and developing competence in moral and ethical reasoning and action. As I was putting the finishing touches on this article, two unrelated events caught my attention and reinforced to me the need for those of us in higher education to continue the conversation about these important outcomes. One event focused the nation’s attention on the importance of civility in public discourse; the other highlighted the importance of an intentional and broad-based conversation on what we expect students to gain from a college education.

On January 10, 2011, 22-year-old Jared Loughner killed 6 and wounded 14 people, including U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords, in Arizona. The mass shooting resulted in much discussion of political incivility, especially as pundits and politicians made statements linking political discourse to this horrifying act of violence. Although we will likely never be able definitively to connect political discourse to the gunman’s act, the perspective of such a connection drew me to reflect upon the importance of democratic outcomes, the ability to engage civilly across differences, and the ability to take seriously another’s perspective.

In a completely unrelated event 2 weeks after the Arizona shootings, the press release associated with Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s book Academically Adrift (2011) created an

1 The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the John Templeton Foundation and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). The author must also acknowledge the work of the late Eric L. Dey and his graduate assistants at the University of Michigan.

2 Robert D. Reason is associate professor in the college student affairs and higher education programs at Pennsylvania State University. He is also the director of research for AAC&U’s Core Commitments initiative.
uproar among higher education professionals. Reporting on the major findings of the study, Scott Jaschik (2011) included the provocative conclusion that 45% of students showed no significant increase in learning during the first 2 years of college. Similarly, 36% of students demonstrated no improvement in learning during 4 years of college. While these eye-raising conclusions certainly started people talking, and rightly raised alarm bells regarding academic rigor and the added value of higher education, they also raised concerns in me about the narrow definition of “learning.” They focused my attention on what we consider important outcomes of college education.

One must dig deeply into the methodological appendix of the brief report on findings from *Academically Adrift*, published by the Social Science Research Council (Arum, Roksa, & Cho, 2011), to move past the hyperbole of press releases and find the acknowledgment that the instrument used to measure learning by these authors actually “measures a select set of skills that represent a sub-set of skills taught in higher education” (p. 19). The authors go on to admit that “[although] virtually all faculty agree that [the subset of skills investigated in this study] is at the core of undergraduate education, these skills do not capture the totality of student experiences or learning” (Arum et al., 2011, p. 19). The inability of those of us in higher education to articulate a comprehensive definition of “learning” is as troubling to me as is the apparent willingness of many readers of Jaschik’s initial reporting on *Academically Adrift* to accept unquestioningly the conclusions about learning. Arum and colleagues are likely correct that critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and writing skills would be core components of virtually everyone’s definition of learning, but these cannot be the sole components.

Both events mentioned above inform the conversation about personal and social responsibility–related outcomes of college, in particular the dimension related to taking seriously the perspective of others. Dey and his colleagues (2010) defined this dimension of personal and social responsibility as

> the ability . . . to inform one’s own judgment by weighing multiple viewpoints, having respect for self and for others, being open-minded and inquisitive, engaging diverse and competing perspectives, and using all of these capacities as a resource for learning, citizenship, and work. (p. 1)

This understanding of perspective taking situates it directly in the center of the discussion of diversity, citizenship, and college outcomes. We have recently gone further, arguing that being open to and incorporating diverse perspectives are necessary precursors to participation in democratic action taking (Reason, Cox, McIntosh, & Terenzini, 2011), a stance we believe is supported by much of the existing empirical research.

We still need to educate ourselves and our faculty colleagues on the importance of democratic outcomes of college. I want to use this article as an opportunity to discuss one such democratic outcome as operationalized by the Core Commitment initiative: taking seriously the perspectives of others. I will argue that perspective taking is essential to active citizenship in today’s diverse and democratic society and, therefore, an equally important component of student learning in college. Further, I will share some results from research related to the Core Commitments initiative that suggest (a) students (and higher education professionals) believe this is an essential outcome of college and (b) there are ways that we as faculty members and student affairs professionals can assist students in achieving this outcome.

**Perspective Taking and Citizenship**

Carol Geary Schneider, president of the AAC&U, argues convincingly in the forward to a recent monograph on engaging diverse viewpoints (Dey & Associates, 2010) that the ability to
engage across difference is more important than ever before. Schneider concludes that “democracy depends on citizens’ willingness and capacity to work together—across differences—to tackle difficult challenges and create solutions” (Dey & Associates, 2010, p. xi), linking the civic mission of higher education with diversity-related student outcomes. Building upon previous calls for educating leaders for our multicultural society (Banks, 1987; Bok, 2006; Gutmann, 1987), Hurtado (2007) argued that preparing today’s civic leaders requires attention to a different set of leadership skills than previously taught, including “tolerance, recognition of cultural difference, deliberation, and modes of civil discourse” (p. 190). From a practical sense, then, the civic missions and purposes of higher education require that we prepare students to live and lead in a diverse society.

Effective citizenship in a diverse society requires that citizens—and particularly civic leaders—be open to, and skilled at, engaging across many forms of human difference (Banks, 1987; Gutmann, 1987; Hamrick, 1998). Those of us in higher education, therefore, must intentionally prepare students for the type of civic leadership that will be expected of them in a multicultural society; students must be encouraged to move beyond current ways of thinking and be open to a wide array of different perspectives if we are to take full advantage of the educational benefits of greater student diversity (Hurtado, Dey, Gurin, & Gurin, 2003).

Fortunately, for those of us concerned about active civic engagement in our society, higher education recently has engaged in what R. Claire Snyder (2009) called a “burgeoning movement towards resuscitating and reconfiguring the civic mission of higher education” (p. 69). Snyder situated this renewed interest in civic education in the so-called “culture wars” of the last decades, the great chasm caused by polarized political discourse in American society (of course, Snyder was writing before the recent events in Arizona). The resuscitation of civic education also is a result of public concern over the disengagement of youth in civic life, as evidenced by low voter turnout (prior to the 2010 election) and abysmal knowledge of how systems of government work (Lutkus & Weiss, 2007). The efforts of the AAC&U’s Core Commitments initiative, specifically the focus on personal and social responsibilities as outcomes of college, are leading the resuscitation of the focus on these democratic ideals.

Although we certainly need an educated citizenry who can think critically and analytically and express themselves verbally, these are not the sole essential outcomes of a college education. Critical thinking must be informed by multiple perspectives that have been analyzed based on the evidence. Citizens must have the skills to engage across differences, to really hear another’s perspective, and to communicate one’s own. Without a widespread development of the ability to take seriously the perspectives of others, we are left to wonder if and how divisive political discourse, an inability to take seriously the perspectives of others, and a lack of knowledge about how best to engage constructively in civic discourse could have influenced a mentally disturbed gunman last January.

**College Students Want Perspective Taking**

Dey and his colleagues (2010) at the University of Michigan performed a descriptive analysis of data collected at 23 schools in 2006 using the Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI). These authors accurately concluded that both students and college administrators believe that taking seriously the perspectives of others should be an essential outcome of college (see Figure 1); almost 80% of campus professionals (faculty members, academic administrators, and student affairs administrators) and 60% of students agreed strongly with such a statement. Unfortunately, only about one third of all respondents reported that perspective taking currently was an essential outcome of college.
Building on the work of Dey and his colleagues, I recently explored the relationship between students’ self-reported growth in perspective taking and a small set of activities believed to influence such growth. The outcome of interest was a scale from the PSRI comprised of students’ responses to three items: I have developed an increased ability to learn from diverse perspectives during the time I have been in college. I have developed an increased ability to gather and thoughtfully use evidence to support my own ideas during the time I have been in college; I have developed an increased ability during college to understand the evidence, analysis, and perspectives of others, even when I disagree with them. Students responded to each item on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Two pieces of good news for those of us concerned about increasing students’ perspective taking arise from this research. First, students believe that their ability to take seriously the perspectives of others increases over the course of their college careers (see Table 1). The overall mean for all students was 3.44, indicating that students generally agree to strongly agree that they developed perspective-taking skills in college. Table 1 also shows a positive relationship between year in school and developing perspective taking, providing some evidence to suggest that exposure to college over time increases students’ development of perspective taking.

The second piece of good news is that there appear to be multiple ways for higher education professionals to influence intentionally students’ development of perspective taking skills. Students who indicated participating in study abroad, student government, and community service/service learning, for example, reported greater gains in perspective taking than did students who did not participate in these activities.

Table 1. Average Score on Developing Perspective Taking Scale by Year in College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year in school</th>
<th>Average score</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>3.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>3.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall mean</td>
<td>3.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All differences are significant at $p < .001$. 
Qualitative data analysis also informs how college can affect students’ development of perspective-taking skills (Dey & Associates, 2010). Student comments on the PSRI coalesced around several themes. Importantly, and in keeping with current understanding of how diversity-related outcomes are affected in college, students reported that the compositional diversity of the students on a campus affects their development of perspective-taking skills. That is, the more diverse a college campus is, the more likely students are to engage with diverse others and be challenged to incorporate diverse perspectives into their worldviews. Students reported that engagement with diversity occurred both in class and out of class, through formal and informal interactions. Our own research on related outcomes for first-year students underscores the importance of course-based assignments and out-of-classroom opportunities for students to engage with diversity (broadly defined) in the development of openness to others’ perspectives (Reason, Cox, McIntosh, & Terenzini, 2010).

These findings should be interpreted with caution as no causal connection between participation in college or specific college activities can be determined by the data currently available. But these findings also provide some promise to higher education professionals who believe in the importance of developing perspective-taking skills in college students. Students appear to want a focus on perspective taking, even if they do not believe it is currently focused upon. Students also report greater gains the more time they spend in college and as they engage in specific experiences.

Conclusions

Students want to be challenged to develop their perspective-taking skills during college. A large majority of students and campus professionals strongly agreed that developing perspective-taking skills should be a focus of a college education. The burgeoning focus on social and personal responsibility and civic outcomes of college seems to be responding to this call. Importantly, recent research from the AAC&U Core Commitments initiative supports the belief that college can, and does, influence the development of perspective taking. This is good news.

I began this article reflecting on two distinct events: the emphasis on political discourse that followed the shooting in Tucson, Arizona, in January 2011 and the discussion of learning during college that preceded the release of Academically Adrift (Arum & Roksa, 2011). The latter focused our attention on important outcomes of college. Unfortunately, the publicity surrounding the book’s release centered on the lack of development of critical thinking and writing skills, equating those to learning broadly to the point of implying that they might be the only college outcomes of import. The former requires that we push back against such narrow focus—to include in our discussion of important college outcomes such things as the ability to engage in civil discourse and take seriously the perspectives of others. Higher education does have a civic responsibility to educate students to assume active roles as citizens in a larger society (Hurtado, 2007; Snyder, 2009). If we are to meet this responsibility, we cannot allow the discussion about college outcomes to become so narrow as to exclude democratic and civic-related outcomes.

References


