SYMPOSIUM

Teaching About America's Fiscal Future in the University's Core Curriculum

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Civic engagement is increasingly recognized as a significant function of public universities. The university provides a variety of opportunities for civic engagement, including co-curricular activities, service learning opportunities, and specific majors and minors. This article reviews the attempt to embed civic engagement and civic education about the national debt and budget deficit issues in a university core curriculum course at Stephen F. Austin State University. We focus on specific issues of curriculum instruction and assessment of student learning of knowledge regarding the debt and deficit issues.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

Civic engagement comes in a variety of forms for students to connect and analyze learned information with everyday actions. "Civic engagement creates opportunities for expanding political consciousness by connecting the everyday experiences of individuals and the communities with whom they come in contact to the larger, structural problems of society" (Malone and Julian 2005, 773). Universities and higher education in general have consistently served the purpose of promoting civic responsibility, civic engagement, and civic education. Snyder (2001) states that higher education in the United States should serve several civic functions, including the training of public leaders, the development of critical thinking to help prepare citizens for democratic governance, and the dissemination of knowledge to help solve problems. Teaching civic responsibility in the university classroom has become increasingly important (Branson 2005; Huerta and Jozwiak 2008; Hunter and Brisbin 2003; O'Connor 2006; Staub and Finley 2007). The renewed focus on civic engagement, civic responsibility, and civic education is partly a result of the growing body of literature pointing out that activity in civic life, especially among younger generations, has been on the decline (see Dubnick 2003; Flanagan 2003; Galston 2004).

One issue of concern in promoting civic engagement in today's classroom is how to interest the millennial generation in civic engagement. Traditional civic engagement opportunities such as voting drives and university political organizations may no longer be the best way to engage students to become active citizens who participate in the governance of their society. Gagnier (2008) discusses a national youth civic engagement organization called mobilize.org, which encourages the millennial generation to engage in dialogue to develop solutions to problems and institutionalize those solutions themselves. Mobilize.org provides an example of finding new ways to promote civic engagement and increase student civic responsibility in areas that contain complex and sometimes dry information that is essential to ensuring that students in the millennial generation become active citizens in their own governance.

To engage today's millennial generation to become active citizens, an array of forms of instruction and assessment must be used to fully engage students of this new generation. Omelicheva and Avdeyeva (2008) discuss the utility of using combined teaching methods. They examine whether the traditional form of teaching by lecture, which has come under attack in recent years for being ineffective in developing higher order thinking skills in students, is more or less effective than the use of debate as a teaching tool. They suggest that "a combination of both the conventional and active-learning curricula may provide the most effective training for undergraduate students" (2008, 606). Goldsmith (2008) notes that using technological tools of the millennial generation such as MySpace, YouTube, blogs, Wikipedia, and Twitter can help to ensure that programs that promote civic engagement do not become outdated. Tools such as wikis can allow folk knowledge to be brought into the mix, and can possibly provide better solutions to problems. Faculty can incorporate these new technologies into student instruction in the classroom as a way to promote civic engagement and civic responsibility in the millennial generation. Other technological tools, such as the use of electronic discussions, can encourage critical thinking skills in a variety of areas including economics (Deloach and Greenlaw 2005).

Civic engagement and civic responsibility have been elements of political science for some time. However, the seeming decline of civic engagement in the millennial generation has led some faculty to encourage the reinstitution and revitalization of programs that promote civic engagement and civic responsibility in the university classroom. Faculty need to be aware that new methods of instruction may need to be used in order to truly engage the millennial generation in civic responsibility and civic action.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE UNIVERSITY CORE CURRICULUM

To engage students in discussion of the national debt and budget deficit issues, the university core curriculum offers an

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important opportunity to encourage civic engagement. Kedrowski (2003) points out that although civic engagement is being promoted in universities, for students to experience civic engagement, they must be enrolled in courses that encourage engagement. Required general education courses become essential in the pursuit of civic engagement and teaching civic responsibility. For example, Kedrowski (2003) studied state requirements for civic education as part of states' core curriculum/general education at the university level. Kedrowski notes that nine states require some study of American government, the Constitution, or civics for students in higher education. Five of these states also require study of their respective state constitutions.

Texas is one state that mandates civic education in the core curriculum of state universities (*Texas Education Code* 2009). Specifically, the Texas Legislature mandates that students take at least six hours of political science coursework for any bachelor's degree in Texas. This coursework must include coverage of both the Texas and U.S. political systems. However, universities and university systems in Texas have the freedom to implement the six-hour requirement as they choose.

In addition, discussion of the national debt and budget deficit issues are compatible with the goals defined by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board 2009).[1] The THECB has adopted a set of guidelines for core curriculum classes required for all students to receive a particular degree (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board 1999). These standards, called Exemplary Education Objectives (EEOs), are specified based upon the broad area of instruction. For social and behavioral sciences, 12 specific guidelines exist. One of the guidelines involves developing and communicating explanations for social problems. Another specifically mentions public policy.[2]

To engage students in the national deficit and budget deficit issues, instructors of sections of Political Science 142 (PSC 142) at Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU) were invited to participate. PSC 142 is uniquely qualified to address the issues associated with national debt and budget deficit issues because the course covers topics in public policy such as finance and social services (Stephen F. Austin State University 2009). The course also examines topics such as the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of both the U.S. government and the Texas government. In the fall semester of 2008, one section of PSC 142 served as a pilot project for implementation of the discussion of the national debt and budget deficit. The results from the pilot project were examined. With some revision, the project was attempted for a larger number of sections of PSC 142 in the spring of 2009.

In adding the fiscal policy civic engagement project to core courses at SFASU, professors were asked to include particular methods of assessment, but were given the freedom to determine the manner in which the fiscal policy materials were presented in their classrooms. One of the more common methods of instruction was to include lecture materials on fiscal policy. Professors were given access to and provided with information created by Public Agenda for teaching fiscal policy (Public Agenda 2008). Professors could use the exact tools (e.g., sets of PowerPoint slides) provided by Public Agenda, or could modify the materials to coincide with individual teaching styles. The methods used by one professor directly involved with the implementation of the fiscal policy civic engagement project included traditional lectures, a short video regarding the history and current role of the Federal Reserve, Web sites such as those showing the debt clock and Bureau of Labor Statistics, and news clips on the state of the economy found on YouTube. Issues that seemed of particular interest to students in the classroom were the explanation of why the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) exists, the jobless rate and how it reflects on those people with whom students would be competing for jobs after graduation, the extent of the federal debt, and where federal money was or was not being spent. The use of multimedia formats in presenting information on fiscal policy in the classroom appeared to spark increased understanding and interest in students that fiscal policy is an important topic that can have a dramatic impact on their lives as citizens.

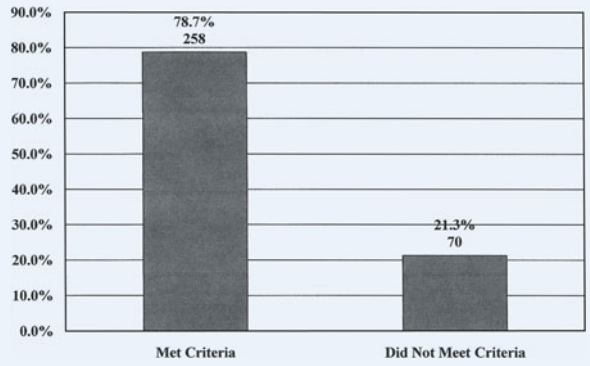
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Three methods of assessment were used in the fiscal policy civic engagement project at SFASU. The first method of evaluation included a series of questions designed to get students to think critically about the federal debt and deficit and determine ways to reduce them. Faculty used these questions as the basis of a writing assignment to supplement class discussions. The set of questions was based on Public Agenda materials provided for teaching fiscal policy.[3] These questions asked students to explain the causes of the national debt and budget deficit and to select one possible solution. Students were to examine the advantages and disadvantages of their selected

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Figure 1

Percentage of Students Meeting Assessment Criteria



solution. The second method of evaluation was the inclusion of a set of objective multiple choice or true/false questions in exams; again, faculty were free to use or not use these questions. The third method of evaluation was the assignment of a short research paper about whether U.S. economic policy is working and whether government spending should be curtailed.

Of the three methods of evaluation, the one most commonly used by faculty was the first method of the set of critical-thinking questions regarding the federal debt and deficit. Faculty were given a common rubric for the assignment and were offered the use of a graduate assistant to grade it. Figure 1 provides the results from the critical-thinking written assignment. The typical criteria used for core curriculum/general education assessment at SFASU are typically expressed in the form of a specific percentage of students who complete the assignment with a specific score. A typical result for PSC 142 is for 60% of students to receive a score of 60% or higher on the assignment. Using that criteria, a large majority of students, 78.7% (258 total students) met the assessment criteria. The criteria were reached regardless of the section of PSC 142 or the instructor of record.

An interesting side note is that one professor who used the short research paper assignment found that at least one student specifically referred to material taught in other courses, such as an economics course in which fiscal policy was also a topic of discussion.[4] The student's recognition of the connection between an introductory political science course and an introductory economics course appears to show that there is a possibility of continuing to use interdisciplinary approaches to promote fiscal policy civic engagement among the student body.

LESSONS LEARNED

Upon conclusion of the fiscal policy civic engagement project in the classroom, we identified five broad lessons. The first lesson deals with rhetorical issues. Students believe that certain issues are incredibly influential in fiscal policy, and they want to know and learn more about those particular topics. Two topics students seemed to think were especially important were the extent of government waste and the role of pork barrel spending in government waste, and whether a balanced budget amendment should be added to the United States Constitution. Many students assumed that these were two of the most important issues facing fiscal policy. In the future, discussion with students regarding how certain issues may appear to be important as a result of media hype or ideological presuppositions should be examined in light of other issues that are more essential to understanding the true nature of the fiscal policy crisis in the United States.

The second lesson we learned was how important it is to explain to students why federal debt matters to *them*. For example, the authors found that discussing how federal debt connects to personal loans, such as student loans and car loans, was helpful in showing students how fiscal policy connects to the students' daily lives. It is important to address how the federal debt affects the job market and potential job security in the future, and the impact that federal debt has on programs such as Social Security and Medicare. We find that personalizing the concept of social responsibility across generations to include each student's responsibility to their parents and grandparents helps students better understand the social contract nature of Social Security and Medicare. In order for students to become actively engaged with fiscal policy, faculty need to show students why fiscal policy matters, and why students should direct their time and attention to becoming engaged in such a complex topic.

The third lesson deals with the need to ensure that professors are providing the most accurate information available. Information needs to be updated most notably on issues such as the ongoing fiscal instability of the nation and government deficit spending. Although this lesson is important for many policy areas, the lesson appears especially pertinent today because of the rapid changes occurring in the economic system.

The fourth lesson was the importance of overcoming students' predispositions. For example, more conservative students assumed that the way to fix the debt problem was to cut spending and eliminate entitlement programs. Liberal students saw cutting spending on defense, which they assumed was the highest portion of the budget, to be the best way to fix the debt problem, and Libertarian-leaning students tended to want to "return" to a true free market system. To overcome these preconceptions, some professors discerned that providing information in multiple formats and focusing on facts related to budget and debt (rather than broader political arguments) was important. Another piece of information gleaned from this lesson was the need for faculty to be knowledgeable about the different political arguments that students might bring to the table. Faculty must be willing to listen to the student's argument and then play devil's advocate with the student, no matter the perspective that he or she brings.

The final lesson learned was that there are certain topics that should be expanded on or incorporated into classroom instruction. Expanded discussion of the complexity of a problem, such as the multitude of actors involved in the system (e.g., President, Congress), policy tradeoffs that may occur when changing the budget, and links between fiscal policy and social policy, are necessary. History of the regulatory

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environment for the financial system, differences between fiscal and monetary policy, and the role of federalism in taxation policy need to be addressed. An emphasis should be placed on interdisciplinary connections, and, lastly, on the position of the United States in the global economy. The main point of this final lesson is that students have the desire for more information on fiscal policy and how fiscal policy connects with other areas of governance and international relations.

In the future, continuation of the "America's Future Initiative" at SFASU rests upon two additional considerations. First, not all faculty chose to participate in the initiative. To encourage more faculty to participate, and to strengthen the quality of instruction, a workshop should be developed to introduce faculty to resources and techniques. This approach is consistent with Deardorff and Folger (2005), who find that such workshops provide faculty with "a strong foundation for their assessment program." In addition, Beaumont et al. (2006) find that a series of surveys over time analyzing the political engagement of students are useful. Such surveys of student knowledge and engagement regarding the national debt and budget deficit issues might provide followup later in students' academic careers and beyond.

Thus, SFASU embedded teaching about the national debt and budget deficit issues into a core curriculum/general education course required of all university students. Faculty who participated in the "America's Future Initiative" used a variety of instruction techniques suitable for the millennial generation. The initiative reflected the university and department's approach to core curriculum assessment and met education objectives for behavioral and social sciences courses. Successful completion of the initiative is leading to a continued effort in future semesters and years to educate students civically about the national debt and budget deficit issues. ■

NOTES

1. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) is an agency of the Texas state government created in 1965 to provide quality higher education in Texas and work with institutions of higher education to promote post-secondary education. The board is not a governing body or governing board (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board 2009).

2. Specifically, EEO #4 states, "To develop and communicate alternative explanations or solutions for contemporary social issues," and EEO #11 states, "To analyze, critically assess, and develop creative solutions to public policy problems" (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board 1999).

3. Source materials for the assignments are available from Public Agenda's "Students Face Up to the Nation's Finances," http://www.facingup.org/students/.

4. One section of Economics 232: Principles of Microeconomics also joined the "America's Future Initiative." The professor relied upon materials developed for PSC 142 for the initiative.

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