

An Active and Well-Informed Citizenry

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Something amazing happened in Gibraltar early this spring. Twenty-four thousand people took to the streets to protest discussions between Great Britain and Spain over sovereignty of the British colony.

What's amazing about that? Gibraltar has only 30,000 residents; more than 80 percent of the population turned out for political action. Chief Minister Peter Caruana declared the demonstration "democratic history."

Contrast that with the turnout for last year's U.S. presidential election, in which only half of eligible voters found their way to the polls. Surprisingly, that represented a slight improvement over the 1996 presidential vote. That, too, is democratic history, though not nearly so uplifting. Some argue that weak voter turnout in U.S. elections of all sorts, not just presidential contests, signals a broader decline in civic engagement in our country. I disagree. In and of itself, voter turnout should not be automatically linked with the fraying of civic society. Many possible causes have been identified for the nation's declining sense of community, such as the number of hours Americans devote to watching television or the isolation of individuals made possible in the typical suburb.

Democracy depends upon an active and well-informed citizenry. My own research into the struggle of Blacks and Hispanics for equality in urban politics has consistently underscored the importance of active citizenship as has my own activities on women's issues, particularly in the world of higher education. Yet I don't mean to suggest that only political activism counts. There are many avenues to making a contribution to the world, or our own small corner of it, and all of them are worth exploring.

While no one can be certain of the underlying causes for declining civic involvement, I am convinced of the solution: education. It can make an enormous difference. We need to demonstrate for students the value and rewards of service, and, most importantly, provide the opportunities for exploring the power of community action for themselves.

At Wheaton, students do experience community service and engagement. The goal is to help future leaders understand their world and improve it; the education begins when first-year students arrive for orientation. The entire first-year class, upper-class student mentors, faculty and some administrators participate in a day of service with nonprofit and human service organizations. That emphasis on involvement contin-



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ues throughout our students' college careers in myriad ways, from the freedom students enjoy to create and direct co-curricular programs to the internships and fieldwork experiences that are a key part of the academic program.

By giving students the freedom and responsibility to directly guide campus life, Wheaton serves as a laboratory for learning about community building. This spring, for instance, students provided the spark in organizing our first Otis Social Justice Week, a series of events aimed at raising awareness about issues of race and class in America. The events, which were highlighted by Beverly Daniel Tatum's Tropp Lecture and Barbara Ehrenreich's Otis Social Justice Award, attracted huge audiences and generated extremely thoughtful dialogues across campus.

Thanks to student leadership, the college opened its new Dorothy Littlefield Weber '38 Theatre with a first-class production of Eve Ensler's controversial *The Vagina Monologues*. Senior Elizabeth Hess directed the show, which filled the theatre every night of its three-performance run. Not only was the acting excellent, but the production will touch the lives of many women and children who need support because the proceeds from the \$12 admission were donated to a women's shelter and other local organizations.

Other examples abound, from the students who spent their Spring Break building a house in Miami for Habitat for Humanity to the students in history professor Dolita Cathcart's class who are campaigning to create a national holiday in honor of Rosa Parks.

Even at Wheaton, however, talking about activism does not mean simply relating stories of success. Not every student embraces the idea of engagement, to be sure. As a college, we need to explore new ways for reaching students with ideas and activities that motivate them to make a commitment to their world. This semester we debuted a faculty-in-residence program in our new Beard Hall as a way to promote intellectual exchange and vitality in the residences.

The example of community involvement can be powerful. Faculty members' commitment to living these ideals will undoubtedly influence our students. And, of course, we all can be leaders, too. When we join together to advance the Wheaton community as well as our local communities, we demonstrate the power that each individual has to make a difference. And that is the essence of democracy.