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Civic Professionalism: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Liberal Arts Education

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Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life
Engaged Undergraduate Education Collaboratory Concept Paper

Civic Professionalism:
A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Liberal Arts Education

Problem/Issue: For decades, accumulating data points to the decreasing stature and centrality of the arts and humanities in much baccalaureate education. Numbers of majors are static or decreasing;¹ career paths in the academy for those with graduate degrees in these disciplines are shrinking; yet undergraduates often feel compelled to pursue professional or graduate training to prepare to enter the workforce in a professional career.² At the same time, the curricular structure in these disciplines—particularly in liberal arts programs—and the preparation of faculty members for careers in academia have not effectively addressed these challenges.

In contrast, those with narrowly defined professional training at the baccalaureate level may be ill-equipped to tackle imprecisely defined problems, ambiguous texts, or culturally dissonant perspectives. In consequence, students both in the IA disciplines (the arts and the humanities) and in the world of professional education fail to develop the skills needed by an increasingly complex social, civic, and professional environment.

Working Hypothesis:

Civic Engagement serves as a fusing mechanism for meshing the traditional strengths of the liberal arts with the practical work of sustaining and supporting ourselves and our communities. It synthesizes the needs and goals of a vocational path with the skills of being effective citizens in a democracy by creating an ethos of “civic professionalism.” John Saltmarsh has argued that “‘civic professionalism’ points to the public purposes and social responsibilities of professional education and practice.” According to Scott J. Peters, civic professionalism “casts professionals’ identities, roles, and expertise around a public mission. [It] places scholars inside civic life rather than apart from or above it, working alongside their fellow citizens on questions and issues of public importance.”³ As a bridge between intellectual and practical learning, and between

¹ See, for example, William M. Chace, “The Decline of the English Department,” American Scholar (Autumn 2009) and The National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Educational Statistics, 2003-2004 (Available on-line at <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/index.asp>). An exception to this trend may have been uncovered by the Curriculum Project, which found an increase in Community Cultural Development programs (see the IA website for this report: <http://www.imaginingamerica.org/reports.html>).

² See “Humanities Majors Face Dismal Job Outlook,” Edu in Review Blog (<http://www.eduinreview.com/blog/2009/12/humanities-majors-face-dismal-job-outlook/>) accessed 11/30/10.

³ John Saltmarsh, “The Civic Promise of Service Learning,” Liberal Education (2005); Scott J. Peters, “Reconstructing Civic Professionalism in Academic Life: A Response to Mark Wood’s Paper, ‘From Service to Solidarity,’ Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement, 8:2 (2003); and William M. Sullivan, “Can Professionalism Still be a Viable Ethic,” The Good Society 13:1 (2004).

individual goals and the common good, civic professionalism offers a new language for thinking about IA disciplines.

Assumptions:

- 1) Arts & Humanities are uniquely suited to educating students who can act with empathy and imagination across multiple knowledge and cultural domains.
- 2) Individual students, particularly those majoring in IA disciplines (the arts and humanities), need more intentional direction in discovering their vocations and career paths.
- 3) Students have difficulty translating skill sets acquired in the arts and humanities into workforce/professional contexts.

Obstacles:

- 1) Most faculty members have relatively narrow workforce experience.
- 2) The culture of the university over-values autonomy and individual achievement at the expense of teamwork and collaborative skills needed by civic professionals.
- 3) The differences in scale and mission of the higher eds where IA disciplines are taught makes one-size-fits-all solutions impossible.

Goals:

- 1) Complete environmental scan and “needs assessment” of civic engagement in IA discipline undergraduate programs
- 2) Articulate conceptual frameworks underpinning new paradigms for civically engaged undergraduate programs in IA disciplines
- 3) Create a work plan for a research project on civic professionalism and the liberal arts that could be the basis for a grant application for the collaboratory
- 4) Explore potential funding sources
- 5) Develop a conference session or pre-conference session on the subject at the IA national conference in the Twin Cities, September 2011