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“Citizens and Governance”: An Alternative Approach to American Government

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I taught “Citizens and Governance” in the Spring semester of 1996. The course was taught as a “pilot” course offering for a new undergraduate curriculum plan that the university was in the process of formulating. The course was intended to replace the department’s American Government courses. Once the new plan is implemented, “Citizens and Governance” will be a mandatory course for all undergraduates in order to graduate, except for certain transfer students. It is envisioned that students will take the course either in the second semester of their first year or in the first semester of their second year.

In the summer of 1995, I was a member of a multidisciplinary committee composed of select faculty from the departments of economics, philosophy, and political science. The mission of the committee was to develop the general goals, outline of topics, and pedagogical approach for the course. I was selected to teach the first offering of the course. Building on the committee’s efforts, I developed a working syllabus for the course during the fall semester of 1995.

I designed the class to fulfill the general criteria established for the course in the new curriculum plan. To satisfy these criteria, the class had to be fundamentally different than the standard American Government course. The class was quite multidisciplinary in its approach and materials, emphasized multiculturalism, and devoted considerable attention to comparative and normative aspects of citizenship and governance. Little discussion was given to particular governmental institutions and specific political processes.

In the spring semester, eighteen students enrolled in the class. The students ranged in college experience from a first-semester freshman to a graduate student. Most of the students were in their first or second year.

Given the timely and controversial nature of many of the topics covered in the class, I emphasized from the outset that students were expected to use constructive listening skills in responding to each other’s comments and oral presentations. I also emphasized the value of acknowledging and appreciating that multiple perspectives existed on these timely topics.

I reinforced these class priorities by using a “contending viewpoints” format for the oral presentations. Typically, two students would present articles representing very different perspectives on a particular issue. In a subsequent quiz or test, I would ask students in an essay question to identify the arguments and supporting evidence for the arguments, and then compare and contrast those arguments and evidence.

Given my interest in educational technology, I employed some computer-assisted instructional techniques while teaching the course. I used PowerPoint slides to supplement my lectures. Also, I required the students to use PowerPoint slides for their second oral presentation, which meant teaching them the basics of preparing a PowerPoint presentation. I also used some CD-ROMs for illustrative purposes, and exposed students to the Internet for locating course materials.

Overall, I was exceptionally pleased with the course. The level of students’ class participation exceeded any class that I had ever taught, including graduate and honors seminars. Also, I was able to successfully incorporate some of the materials from the course into a large-section American Government course that I taught the following semester. In addition, one of the students in the class was the president of the university’s student government association, and two other students were representatives in the Academic Senate. Those students all had votes on whether the new curriculum plan

would be adopted. They developed favorable attitudes toward the plan based on their positive feelings about this course. Finally, with the philosophic impetus provided by the last section of the course devoted to civic involvement, I decided to run for a local position in government, and was successful in my efforts.

Citizens and Governance

General Goals

This course will develop students’ awareness and understanding of their roles, rights, and responsibilities in dealing with others in society. It will explore how culture, class, race, and gender effect how people interact with each other and the political system. The knowledge and skills developed in the course will enhance students’ capacity for making informed and responsible choices when dealing with others in their private lives, in the workplace, and in the political system.

Specific Objectives

This course will attempt to accomplish several specific objectives. First, to prepare students for their roles in a pluralist democracy in an increasingly globally-connected world by making them aware of the wide array of social problems present in society and having them consider the numerous ways of approaching these problems to which there are no simple solutions. Second, to further develop students’ critical thinking by exposing them to different argument styles, different types of supporting arguments, and to various chains of reasoning used to arrive at specific conclusions following an argument. Students will be exposed to a variety of perspectives on different controversial issues and will comment on and evaluate the organization and content of contending arguments over these issues. Third, to further develop the communication skills of

students by enhancing their abilities to listen and respond to contending arguments, and to speak persuasively when presenting their own and others' arguments. To help them learn to present their own arguments persuasively, students will be exposed to the significance of listening to others and the importance of considering opposing viewpoints when framing their own views. Finally, students will be presented with viable alternatives to the "litany of complaint" mentality, the "fear induction" tactic, and the "scream but don't listen" response that are used by many in private and public spheres to deal with problems and controversies. Students will be exposed to these alternatives to dispel the notion that "an individual can do nothing" to address the pressing social, political, and economic problems of the times.

Course Format

The course is divided into four sections, each of which has several sub-topics that will receive extensive attention. The first section of the course addresses the individual and community. In general, this section will focus on three major areas: the nature of a community; the forms of diversity within a community; and, the impact of diversity on communi-

ties. The second section of the course will focus on a particular form of community, the state. It will examine the meanings and differences between certain critical concepts, such as state, nation, political system, and government. Then, the section will explore various types of governments and examine the differences among those types. Within the context of this discussion, the nature, possibilities, and limits of democracy will be analyzed in depth. The third section of the course will focus on the relationships between citizens and governments. The section will address the nature and interaction of rights, liberties, and responsibilities in society. This section will consider what should be the appropriate balance between individual rights and liberties and our obligations to different communities including the state. Also, the section will explore the proper role of the state in achieving this balance. Finally, the impact of diversity on this balance between rights and responsibilities will be examined. The fourth section of the course will consider civic involvement: traditional and non-traditional means of involving oneself in civic life; the costs and consequences of such involvement; and strategies that can improve one's influence on civic affairs. This section will conclude by

examining the question whether civic involvement should be a requirement of community life, e.g., whether it is a good idea to make a certain number of hours of community service a requirement for graduation from the university.

Grading Policy

There will be four tests during the semester, composed of short-answer and essay questions. The first three tests will cover the first three major sections of the course. There will be one test per section. The fourth examination will be a comprehensive final examination, covering the fourth section of the course and all the previous sections. In addition, students will be required to respond to a number of announced in-class assessments. The assessments will resemble mini-quizzes consisting of one or two questions on a particular reading. The primary purposes of these assessments are to gauge students' comprehension of the required readings and to reinforce the values of attending class and staying current with the assigned readings. Students will also be required to deliver oral presentations, participate in class discussions, and prepare various writing assignments.

COURSE OUTLINE

Topic

I. Introduction

Readings: Syllabus; instructional handouts on summaries, abstracts, and oral presentations.

II. Individual and Community

A. Important Definitions

1. Community
2. Citizenship
3. Civil Society
4. Culture

Reading: Don E. Eberly, "The Quest for a Civil Society" in *Building a Community of Citizens: Civil Society in the 21st Century*, edited by Don E. Eberly (University Press: Lanham, MD, 1994).

B. Challenges to community

1. General problems
2. Process of education
3. Politics, law, and public discourse
4. Civil structures
5. Global trends

Readings: Eric R. Ebeling, “Building Community Through Education” in *Building a Community of Citizens: Civil Society in the 21st Century*, edited by Don E. Eberly (University Press: Lanham, MD, 1994); William Van Dusen Wishard, “Global Trends Reshaping Civil Society” in *Building a Community of Citizens: Civil Society in the 21st Century*, edited by Don E. Eberly (University Press: Lanham, MD, 1994).

C. Diversity in community

1. Racial and ethnic minorities

Reading: Beth B. Hess, Elizabeth W. Markson, and Peter J. Stein, “Racial and Ethnic Minorities: An Overview” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 3rd ed., edited by Paula S. Rothenberg (St. Martin’s: New York, 1995).

2. Racial formations

a. Definition of race

Reading: Michael Omi and Harold Winant, “Racial Formations” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 3rd ed., edited by Paula S. Rothenberg (St. Martin’s: New York, 1995).

b. Recent developments

Readings: Sharon Begley, “Three is not Enough” in *Newsweek* (February 13, 1995); Ellis Cose, “One Drop of Bloody History” in *Newsweek* (February 13, 1995).

3. Social construction of gender

Reading: Judith Lorber, “The Social Construction of Gender” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 3rd ed., edited by Paula S. Rothenberg (St. Martin’s: New York, 1995).

4. Social class

Reading: Gregory Mantsios, “Class in America: Myths and Realities” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 3rd ed., edited by Paula S. Rothenberg (St. Martin’s: New York, 1995).

5. Multiple social identities

Reading: Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” in *Education for Democracy* edited by Benjamin R. Barber and Richard M. Battistoni (Kendall/Hunt: Dubuque, IA, 1993).

D. Impact of diversity

1. Japanese internment camps

Reading: Yuri Kochiyama, “Then Came the War” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 3rd ed., edited by Paula S. Rothenberg (St. Martin’s: New York: 1995).

2. Racism in language

Reading: Robert B. Moore, “Racism in the English Language” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 3rd ed., edited by Paula S. Rothenberg (St. Martin’s: New York, 1995).

3. Sexism in language

Reading: Haig Bosmajian, “The Language of Sexism” in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 3rd ed., edited by Paula S. Rothenberg (St. Martin’s: New York, 1995).

4. Inequalities in education

Reading: Jonathan Kozol, “The Savage Inequalities of Public Education in New York” in *Education for Democracy* edited by Benjamin R. Barber and Richard M. Battistoni (Kendall/Hunt: Dubuque, IA, 1993).

III. The Nature of Government

A. Historical treatments

Readings: Thomas Hobbes, “On the Natural Conditions of Mankind and the Rights of Sovereigns”; and John Locke, “Of the Beginnings of Political Societies” in *American Government: Readings and Cases* edited by Karen O’Connor (Allyn and Bacon: Needham Height, 1995).

B. Important Definitions

1. The state

2. The nation

3. The political system

Reading: James N. Danzinger, "States and Nations" in *Understanding the Political World* by James N. Danzinger (Longman: White Plains, NY, 1996).

4. The government

Reading: Edwin J. Feulner, "Government Systems Defined" in *The VOTE USA Democracy Owner's Manual*, edited by Kerry Power (VOTE USA: Washington, DC, 1994).

C. Types of Government

1. Democratic/non-democratic
2. Constitutional/non-constitutional
3. Distributions of power
4. Legislative-executive formations
5. Political party systems

Reading: James N. Danzinger, "Political Institutions II: Institutional Arrangements" in *Understanding the Political World* by James N. Danzinger (Longman: White Plains, NY, 1996).

D. Models of democracy

1. General considerations
2. Historical conceptions
3. Different models

Reading: William E. Hudson, "Models of Democracy" in *American Democracy in Peril* by William E. Hudson (Chatham House: Chatham, NJ, 1995).

4. Requirements for democracy

Reading: Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited" in *Comparing Nations and Cultures*, edited by Alex Inkeles and Masamichi Sasaki (Prentice-Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1996).

IV. Relationships between individuals and government

A. The notion of individualism

1. General considerations
2. Sources
3. "Habits of the Heart"
4. Libertarianism
5. Concern for rights

Readings: William E. Hudson, "The Second Challenge: Radical Individualism" in *American Democracy in Peril* by William E. Hudson (Chatham House: Chatham, 1995); Benjamin R. Barber, "The Reconstruction of Rights" in *Education for Democracy*, edited by Benjamin R. Barber and Richard M. Battistoni (Kendall/Hunt: Dubuque, IA, 1993); Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience" in *Education for Democracy*, edited by Benjamin R. Barber and Richard M. Battistoni (Kendall/Hunt: Dubuque, IA, 1993).

B. Addressing diversity

1. Race and the legal process

Reading: A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., "Race and the American Legal Process" in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 3rd ed., edited by Paula S. Rothenberg (St. Martin's: New York, 1995).

2. Indian tribal affairs

Reading: U.S. Commission on Human Rights, "Indian Tribes: A Continuing Quest for Survival" in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 3rd ed., edited by Paula S. Rothenberg (St. Martin's: New York, 1995).

3. Defining "underclass"

Reading: Herbert Gans, "Deconstructing the Underclass" in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 3rd ed., edited by Paula S. Rothenberg (St. Martin's: New York, 1995).

4. Law and the gay community

Reading: Paula L. Eitelbrick, "The Law and the Lesbian and Gay Community" in *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States*, 3rd ed., edited by Paula S. Rothenberg (St. Martin's: New York, 1995).

V. Civic Participation

- A. General considerations
- B. Democratic theory and participation
- C. Participation trends
- D. Challenge for democracy
- E. Ten habits of citizenship

Readings: William E. Hudson, "The Third Challenge: Citizen Participation" in *American Democracy in Peril* by William E. Hudson (Chatham House: Chatham, NJ, 1995); Rob Nelson and Jon Cowan, "The Top 10 Things You Can Do To Rescue Your Future" in *Revolution X: A Survival Guide For Our Generation* by Rob Nelson and Jon Cowan (Penguin: New York, 1994).