

*Civic Engagement is Not Just Another Tea Party*  
*Remarks for the Fulbright Visiting Scholar Enrichment Conference*  
*April 25, 2010*

*President Patricia McGuire*  
*Trinity Washington University*

Many thanks to friends and colleagues at the Fulbright Program for inviting me to share some thoughts with you this evening, and welcome to all of our Fulbright Scholars visiting from so many nations. Thanks also to the U.S. Department of State and the Institute for International Education for including me and Trinity in this program.

The program planners asked me to address the ways in which American colleges and universities promote civic engagement in our curricula and programs. But this is not about some generic idea of teaching civics. The title of my talk tonight sets the tone: “Civic Engagement is Not Just Another Tea Party.”

A visitor from another planet passing through the United States these days will behold some fairly remarkable sights: a land of vast physical beauty that is largely unseen by most of the people who squeeze into a few metropolitan areas; a vibrant society whose standard of living is remarkably high even in times of economic downturn, allowing everyone to purchase flat screen TVs during a recession; an advanced intellectual culture where technological innovation has made it possible for every citizen to wear a device in their ears that makes them appear to be walking around talking to themselves, often while intensely focused on some little glowing thing in their hands.

The visitor will observe that everyone in this land not only has an opinion but also a blog, and that rather than talking to someone sitting next to them they simply peck at that glowing thing in an activity called “tweeting” that lets others know their opinions. Talk seems limited to beautiful people on those gigantic flat TV screens, except for those times called football season when everyone is allowed to talk about why the Redskins keep losing.

This is called advanced civilization.

The visitor will also observe that, as a famous French visitor named Alexis deTocqueville noted two centuries ago when he toured this then-new nation, the people of this land are fiercely independent but love to gather in groups to promote their various interests, living by the “habits of the heart” to address communal needs while arming themselves with many guns as an expression of their individual rights. Like deTocqueville, the visitor will also observe that these citizens don’t much like anyone to be in charge, and while they do come together every so often to choose their leaders, they seem to do so mostly to have an object of scorn.

The visitor will observe that this nation does have a written Constitution and many laws about which the interest groups seem to argue incessantly on their blogs, and sometimes in great group swarms on the streets of the capital city, with the groups either demanding more laws to prevent

others from doing whatever they want, or demanding fewer laws to allow people to do whatever they want. Sometimes, the same groups will argue both positions in the same demonstration. The arguments will, almost always, refer to the venerable Founding Fathers, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and Bill of Rights as the basis for whatever position the group demands the government to follow or abandon. The visitor will observe the people gathered at something called tea parties that seem to be opportunities for frenetic sign-waving and much shouting; the visitor wonders if they know about decaf.

The visitor will wonder how long this thing called democracy can possibly last. It seems like a somewhat messy experiment with everyone claiming the right to make the rules for how the experiment will be conducted. Fortunately, the Founding Fathers were wise enough to create an experiment in which the cacophony is actually essential to the success of the polity. The fact that, on any given day in the nation's capital, tens of thousands of people will march in many different interest groups demonstrating for their disparate beliefs, all waving American flags, tells us that freedom is alive and well and the experiment in self-government is working thus far.

Civic engagement thrives in America today, but not all forms of civic engagement lead to productive results for the community or nation. Our task in education is to teach new generations of citizens and future citizen leaders how to participate well and purposefully in this ongoing experiment in democracy.

Building the knowledge base for effective civic engagement runs up against some deep-seated tendencies of American culture. We Americans have two very bad habits when it comes to telling the stories of American History. We mythologize those parts of our history that suit our political views. And we tend to have amnesia about those parts of our history that do not support the mythology. So it is that the original Boston Tea Party was an expression of the desire of an oppressed people --- the colonial Americans who were subject to a monarch and British Parliament whom they did not elect --- to be able to elect their own government. The insurrection was not a rejection of government at all, but rather, a demand for government, albeit one freely elected by the people in the colonies. It wasn't the idea of taxation itself that the colonials threw overboard metaphorically, but rather, taxation without representation elected by the people so taxed.

Taking matters into our own hands, expressing disagreements with government, indeed, engaging in raucous debate about government is an American trait as old as --- well, as old as the Boston Tea Party. But in fact, the contemporary American grassroots political movement that calls itself the TEA Party bears little resemblance to the contretemps in Boston Harbor that led to the American Revolution, except, perhaps, for the outlandish costumes (historians tell us that the original tea party gang disguised themselves as Mohawk Indians; today's tea partiers seem to prefer garish red, white and blue getups.) Whereas the original tea party was about the right to elect a government, today's tea partiers seem to be in a permanent state of rejecting the legitimately elected government entirely. Indeed, some of them even admit to having voted for the current administration, only to have buyer's regret.

The TEA Party movement at present certainly is an example of citizen activism. Whether it is true civic engagement or civil anarchy remains to be seen. But the presence of this movement in

American political life today sets the stage quite well for our discussion this evening about the importance of higher education's role in teaching students about civic engagement. Real civic engagement is about far more than noise, disruption and contrarianism for its own sake. Genuine civic engagement arises from a well-formed personal philosophy not only of government and society --- our ideology --- but also of the individual's relationship to and responsibility for the community; the ethics of our social responsibility to work for the common good; and our long-term stewardship of the most precious asset we share in common, our free society, to ensure its durability for succeeding generations.

Education's primary role in any society is to confront mythology with truth, to heal amnesia with knowledge. In this country, our work in education for civic engagement must challenge those crusty old American mythologies that are, too often, thinly veiled excuses for oppressive behaviors that are quite the opposite of freedom. For example, we hear a mythology embodied in the phrase that America was "founded as a Christian nation" --- a claim too often used to disparage or even oppress other religions --- when, in fact, the founders were exceedingly clear and insistent that the secular state must be religiously neutral, separate from the establishment and practice of religion which is an individual right. The founders were, to be sure, mostly white Protestant males, but they knew too well the danger of religious oppression when threaded through government mandates. Their forbears came to these shores so that they could practice the religions they chose in freedom and safety, having experienced great religious intolerance in old Europe.

Our work in education for civic engagement must also challenge the occasional American amnesia about the fact that we are a profoundly pluralistic nation, with much of our diversity shaped by parts of our history we'd rather forget. We cannot afford amnesia about the centuries-old legacy of slavery in our still-unresolved racial tensions and deep pockets of urban poverty and illiteracy in the wealthiest, most well educated nation in history. (A recent stunning example of this amnesia came when the Governor of Virginia declared that it was time to celebrate "Confederate History Month" without making any reference to slavery --- an omission he later corrected, but still!) We cannot afford amnesia about the fact that we are a nation of immigrants, that immigrant labor built this nation's infrastructure and still does most of the hardest and dirtiest manual labor, even as we build fences and enact laws to keep 'those people' out, at least on the south border. We cannot afford amnesia about the debt we will forever owe to the original owners of this ground, the Native Americans whose land and culture were plundered by the immigrants whose heirs now seek to keep others out. We cannot afford amnesia about the fact that women only became full citizens with full voting rights in this nation within the lifetime of my mother now approaching her 90<sup>th</sup> year.

An effective civic education curriculum throws sunshine into the dark corners of lost social memory to teach new generations of citizen leaders about the human conditions that must become a more urgent part of the agenda for collective action throughout the nation, an agenda for justice and equality for all -- just as our Founding Fathers imagined.

Civic engagement is far more than just another tea party.

American colleges and universities have long had a disposition toward developing leaders for our society, but today's intentional work in education for civic engagement has a far different bent than the historic cultivation of an educated elite for public service. The shift in emphases around civic engagement parallels, to a large extent, the profound shift in the purpose and population of collegiate education in this country in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The first G.I. Bill in 1944, President Franklin Roosevelt's initiative to open collegiate gateways for soldiers returning from World War II, signified the beginning of the shift in the purpose of higher education from a largely private pursuit of the leisure class to a broad public mandate for postsecondary education as part of a national drive for economic and competitive progress. When the Soviet Union beat the United States to outer space with Sputnik in 1957, the Cold War grew more intense, and the U.S. cranked up its emphasis on higher education as a vital part of national defense, pouring billions into universities for scientific research and production of new generations of scientists through the National Science Foundation. In the 1960's, as the civil rights movement grew in intensity and more and more citizens demanded equal educational opportunity, Congress expanded the reach of the G.I. Bill to encourage millions more citizens to go to college with the first Higher Education Act authorizing massive federal financial aid, completing the shift in higher education's purpose and population from elite to egalitarian.

Today, the United States annually invests more than \$80 billion in college students. This investment is an intentional national strategy to promote economic progress, with an ancillary expectation that such an investment will also produce effective citizens and leaders.

Colleges and universities throughout the United States have enthusiastically embraced the idea of civic engagement as an integral part of curricula and co-curricular activities. Examples abound of remarkable initiatives that educate students for civic responsibility while contributing significantly to the improvement of communities. Georgetown University, where we gather this evening, has long been one of the national powerhouses for this movement, claiming presidents, members of Congress and many political and civic leaders among its graduates. Bolstered by the university's presence in the nation's capital and its ethical and moral roots in the Jesuit and Catholic tradition of social justice, the university expects its students and faculty to manifest a strong sense of responsibility for continuous civic engagement. From representing low income clients through the law school's numerous clinics, to programs for tutoring children in some of the city's most at-risk neighborhoods, to providing mobile health care clinics, to direct university investment in low income neighborhoods, to the International Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Georgetown's leadership in civic engagement is a remarkable example for other universities.

I experienced the transformative opportunities of Georgetown's work in civic engagement when, as a Georgetown law student, I had the remarkable opportunity to work in a clinical program called Street Law, teaching law to high school students in the D.C. Public Schools. That clinic was my first real exposure to public education; I then chose to devote the first part of my career after law school to this program, and learned so much about the educational challenges of our public schools during my five years as the Street Law project director. That experience galvanized my attention on the educational needs of our city in ways that helped me to shape Trinity's philosophy of service to the District of Columbia when I became Trinity's president 21 years ago. At Trinity, founded by religious women with a passion for justice, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, we have lived the idea of civic engagement each day in the

transformation of our entire curricula and academic programs to focus on empowering our students, predominantly low income women of color, to gain the educational levels necessary to ensure greater economic security for their families. The education of women and girls is one of the most powerful drivers a society can have to ensure peace and economic stability. The education of mothers ensures greater educational attainment for children.

Now, you might be thinking at this point: civic engagement is certainly a nice value, and encouraging students to do service in the community is surely a good way for them to spend some time, but is civic engagement truly a central component of the mission of a university? Isn't the real purpose of a university to emphasize the production and transmission of knowledge through excellence in research, scholarship and teaching? Does an emphasis on civic engagement detract from the university's primary responsibility in exalting knowledge and intellectual attainment?

Absolutely not. The essential purposes and work of the university in the discovery of knowledge, the pursuit of truth, the development of the student's ability to engage the habit of philosophizing are all essential to sustain a truly free society. Students certainly can and do learn some good civic manners in lower education. However, true civic engagement requires advanced learning, the synthesis of knowledge to shape the agenda for action, the intellectual freedom to create and advance transformative ideas for the future shape of our society. Universities are the great counterweights to government in a free society, and we must be jealous of this role, advocates and activists for our academic freedom as essential to sustain society's freedom of thought, belief, speech and action.

The curriculum of civic engagement must embrace this idea as an activist agenda, not simply a passive study. The great educational leader Johnetta Cole once said, "*An education that teaches you to understand something about the world has done only half of the assignment. The other half is to teach you to do something about making the world a better place.*" That's the call to civic action.

Educating students for civic engagement is incomplete if it only encourages students to engage in activities of *noblesse oblige*, kindly but ultimately inconsequential forms of community service that make the students feel good but do nothing to transform the conditions of life for those served. Real education for civic engagement will make the student stand in the shoes of the Brazilian Archbishop, Dom Hélder Câmara, once famously said: "*When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.*" We must teach students to accept the necessary risks of civic activism. It's not enough to alleviate one day's worth of hunger; we must eradicate hunger from the face of the earth. One is about handouts; the other is about transformation. Such is the true calling of civic engagement.

Education for civic engagement must be a core purpose of the general education curriculum, building in students the knowledge, skills and values necessary to be effective stewards of our freedoms. It is a proper and necessary role of the university to confront the fondness for American Mythology with the truth of our history, to remediate the ignorance of American Amnesia with knowledge about the human conditions and social structures and legal frameworks

that gave birth to this grand experiment in democracy and that will continue to incite and inspire our quest for justice and equality, for freedom.

The real curriculum of civic engagement is transformative, both for the student and for the community. The goals of such a curriculum must include:

1. To teach all students, regardless of their specific major program, how to employ their newly acquired knowledge and skills not simply for their own gain, but for the larger purposes of civic engagement and social transformation; whether the student aspires to be a doctor or poet or financier or basketball coach, the future professional must have the knowledge base and values necessary to serve and sustain the public good;
2. To enlarge student understanding of the whole of the human condition, lifting them out of their own parochial frames of reference to know and appreciate the full range of the human experience, so that the future professional and citizen leader will be able to serve the community broadly, not simply concerned about narrow personal interests but able to think about the construction of society more completely;
3. To inspire students to make civic engagement and citizen leadership their life's work.

True social transformation must start with personal conversion. A university that truly understands its responsibility to educate students for civic engagement will ensure that its students embrace transformative opportunities, testing and challenging preconceived notions of career pathways and acceptable forms of work against opportunities for large paradigm shifts heading in directions previously unknown: the aspiring surgeon who realizes her call to do surgery in communities of great need; the journalist-turned-advocate for children deprived of educational opportunity; the young lawyer who realizes that a lifetime engaged with advocacy for justice for those who have none is far more rewarding than a million dollar paycheck.

Universities that are serious about civic engagement will exalt the alumni role models of such citizen leadership as much as the franchise quarterback or corporate titan or media star. They will care less about such ephemera as media-fueled rankings of institutional popularity and wealth, and they will care far more about educational outcomes that have a direct impact on improving communities. They will ask others to share their wealth with the university not to gratify the edifice complex but to ensure that every student has the means necessary to engage this education completely. Such universities will become models of civic engagement, themselves, showing restraint in pricing and expenditures, improving environmental practices, ensuring justice in personnel policies, enlarging pathways for more diverse students to gain admission, and contributing even more to the development of their neighborhoods, cities and communities in both tangible and spiritual ways.

American educational philosopher John Dewey once said, "*Democracy... has to be enacted anew in each generation.*" The civic engagement curricula of colleges and universities are the means by which we ensure that the succeeding generations can keep this grand experiment alive, re-imagining democracy continuously to sustain freedom, justice and equality for the future

citizens of this planet whom we will never meet, but whose welfare must be as urgent as our own.

Thanks for listening.