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Why College Students Matter

By ABRAHAM UNGER

Sometimes what falls under the radar is where the real change is happening. While America has expressed a clear yearning for social change since the recession began in 2008, the focus of that change has been both divisively partisan and elusive. Is it the Tea Party or Occupy Wall Street, and what do each of these protest movements actually claim as a detailed policy platform? Is it a vague sense of moderately progressive legislation as in President Obama's healthcare plan, or an increasingly rigid rightism in the current Republican stance on just about anything, both of which result somehow, Democrat and Republican alike, in closed door negotiated deals, with lots of pork between the lines, foisted upon the American people.

The bottom line is that change is not happening in Washington no matter the seeming urgency of our never-ending news cycle or a presidential campaign getting into full gear. Real change is happening on the ground in a place ironically considered by much of America to be a universe apart: college.

In tangible ways, the American university is challenging the social selfishness that has come to dominate our civic life. While it is well documented that Americans have become increasingly apathetic toward community involvement, a quiet but steady national movement is underway to send armies of undergraduate students out into the fields of their colleges' neighborhoods to volunteer and create social change based on local needs. This is bipartisan, it is on the street, and it is happening in practical ways every single day.

Almost 1,200 American colleges and universities are members of Campus Compact, a national organization driving our higher education institutions to organize student participation in local civic life. Students are strategically being placed in community organizations to fill traditional volunteer roles or collect data in behalf of local social service and economic development agencies.

Why is this important? Just think about the implications. More than a thousand colleges across the country are sending their enthusiastic, energetic, committed young people into the field to staff our local civic institutions such as food pantries or youth organizations. Or maybe, these young people are conducting surveys of local business districts to measure their interest in going green or developing a public private partnership. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of our next generation of taxpayers are being trained in citizenship, the kind of active, experienced, participatory citizenship of which our Founding Fathers dreamt.

These same young people are also staffing desperate non-profits seeking extra hands or providing data for strapped agencies. It's a win-win on the institutional level.

But something deeper is going on too. A diverse array of neighborhood leaders, residents and students often arriving at college from someplace else are all working organically in teams to uncover and recover local assets in their universities' communal backyards. Executive Director

Dr. Laurie Worrall of the New York branch of Campus Compact says, “Community involvement is not just transforming higher education; it’s vital for the future of our democracy.”

Here’s an example: At Wagner College in New York City where I teach, students are sent to a neighboring immigrant community called Port Richmond to volunteer and fulfill community service requirements embedded into their coursework over the four years of their college education. Port Richmond is a disadvantaged community redeveloping its commercial strip with Mom and Pop businesses while fighting historic inner city challenges in the arenas of education, crime and healthcare.

Our students are making a genuine difference. They and the neighborhood together are becoming a seamless force for social change block by block, issue by issue. On top of this people-driven force area agencies are meeting regularly to think through Port Richmond’s basic needs and develop synergistic agendas for implementation of their own programs. An emergent “Port Richmond Partnership” is now a coalition that can, in a strategically unified way, speak to local government and foundations.

This is how smart, long term policy gets generated, and this kind of activity, under the radar of much of America, is getting noticed by Washington. Wagner College President Dr. Richard Guarasci recently talked about the Port Richmond Partnership at The White House. The idea that our youngest voters can make a change on the ground has caught the ear of our most influential political decision makers. The U.S. Department of Education even supported a major study on university student civic engagement that came out this year. This report, called “A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future,” encourages American institutions of higher education to keep on developing local community involvement by their students, not just because it’s good for students, but because it’s good for American democracy.

Eboo Patel and Mary Gross of Interfaith Youth Core write that “Americans are living in a civic recession.” We are a fragmented, uninvolved nation. What’s the cure? Caring, involved citizens working on political, social and economic problems collaboratively. How do we do that? By immersing our young in the American tradition of an engaged civic life as they embark upon their own independent citizenship. And by having them help to realize the ambitions and needs of their communities’ own neighborhood assets.

This is not about ideology. It is about democracy being lived out on our sidewalks. It is about the great project of American citizenship that fundamentally speaks out against institutionalized influence and stands up for local empowerment.

So change is underfoot but it is not happening far away in the halls of power. It is happening in our towns and cities, here and there, more and more. It is a constant and it is growing in volume and impact. This is a story of social change that deserves to be known, offering hope the American project can be constantly renewed and retooled for our children’s present and future.