Democratic Citizenship and Student Activism

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Elements of democratic political theory are presented to advance an interpretation of principled student activism on campuses as citizen-engagement and an opportunity for hands-on citizenship education. A brief scenario of campus dissent is described as an illustration of democratic aims, processes, and underlying principles. Finally, implications for student affairs practice are offered.

College and university campuses increasingly reflect the racial, cultural, and socioeconomic heterogeneity of American society. For example, the proportion of college students from minority backgrounds grew from 18.9% to 23.4% between 1991 and 1995, and the proportion of women college students increased from 54.3% to 55.1% (“The Nation,” 1991, 1995). At many campuses, increased diversity has coincided with bold and vocal student challenges to institutional policies and decisions identified as indifferent or hostile to underrepresented students. Underrepresented students and coalitions formed by these students are certainly not the first or only student groups to challenge administrative decisions, but such challenges publicly call into question the genuineness of higher education’s espoused welcome for those with diverse voices and perspectives (Hill, 1991). As dissenting students identify and frame issues for public deliberation and compel attention to their concerns, they assume vital citizenship roles through their engagement in principled dissent.

Conditions that surround students’ efforts to effect change on campuses may provide educational and empowering citizenship experiences or may serve to frustrate and further marginalize student citizens. The purpose of this discussion is to add to the theory base in student affairs by presenting selected features of democratic political theory and examine its usefulness in helping student affairs professionals develop and sustain a campus environment that facilitates student exercise of democratic citizenship.

EDUCATING FOR CITIZENSHIP

Preparing students for mature participation in the civic life of a democracy is consistently cited as a primary purpose of higher education. In a recently commissioned American Council on Education study, over 90% of Americans surveyed believed that a central task of colleges and universities is to develop contributing citizens (Harvey & Immerwahr, 1995). Additionally, three major statements that specify assumptions, values, and purposes of student affairs work over 50 years (“National Association,” 1989) display a marked consistency on this issue as illustrated by the passages below:

This conference also wishes to emphasize the necessity for conceiving of after-college adjustment as comprehending the total living of college graduates, including not only their occupational success but their active concern with the social, recreational, and cultural interests of the community. Such concern implies their willingness to assume those individual and social responsibilities which are essential to the common good. (1937 statement; “National Association,” 1989, p. 58)

As a responsible participant in the societal processes of our American democracy, his focus full and balanced maturity is viewed as a major end-goal of education and, as well, a necessary means to the fullest development of his socially fellow citizens. From the personnel point of view any lesser goals fall short of the desired

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objectives of democratic educational processes and is a real drain and strain upon the self-realization of other developing individuals in our society. (1949 statement; “National Association,” 1989, p. 22)

A democracy requires the informed involvement of citizens. Citizenship is complex; thus, students benefit from a practical as well as an academic understanding of civic responsibilities. Active participation in institutional governance, community service, and collective management of their own affairs contributes significantly to students’ understanding and appreciation of civic responsibilities. (1987 statement; “National Association,” 1989, p. 14)

Additionally, the preamble of the Student Learning Imperative (American College Personnel Association, 1994) included an expectation that college graduates be able to “deal effectively with such major societal challenges as poverty, illiteracy, crime, and environmental exploitation” (p. 1). These calls for civic commitment and action suggest that social problems cannot be addressed merely by applying academic knowledge of, for example, criminal justice, sociology, law, or biological sciences. Following the excerpts above, graduates must also be able to apprehend a problem as a social one, situate themselves as citizens with attendant responsibilities to identify and deal with social problems, and marshal attention and resources to address problems. Such engagement draws on leadership skills, social and political expertise, rhetorical persuasion, and perhaps most importantly on an inclination and commitment to use one’s energies and abilities in service to a collective society. Finally, a shared assumption in the statements above is that students develop—or should have opportunities to develop—these skills and commitments during college.

At most colleges and universities, opportunities are provided for students to participate in the organized public life of the campus. On macro levels, students are elected to representative governance bodies or chosen to serve as student representatives to campus committees or advisory groups. In these capacities, students help determine funding priorities, make budgetary allocations to various campus units or organizations, review conduct codes and often preside over hearings, and review or propose institutional policies. At micro levels, students often collectively negotiate shared living arrangements on residence hall floors that reflect agreed-upon values (e.g., tolerance, respect) and operationalize these values into mutually binding agreements (e.g., guidelines for use of common spaces, suite-mate contracts, quiet hour policies). In each of these instances, students participate as citizens engaged in the shared governance of collectives of which they are a part.

A variety of positive outcomes from student citizenship experiences has been studied. Ignelzi (1990) focused on the moral growth potentials for students participating in self-governing collectives, and Terenzini (1994) described a range of developmental domains that relate to maturity as citizens. Community service and volunteer programs are often structured to place students in leadership or service roles in economically or socially disadvantaged settings with the intention of encouraging a citizen-leader disposition in those participating students (e.g., Astin, 1995; Perreault, 1997; Whipple, 1996). These programs offer powerful experiences to students and encourage their development into responsible, concerned, and engaged citizens. In similar ways, students who engage in principled dissent and active protest on campus are participating in a different, yet equally valuable, democratic citizenship experience that is worthy of our attention and appreciation.

Chambers and Phelps (1993) provided a comprehensive discussion of the developmental impact of student activism. Although information on permissible legal parameters in dealing with student activism (e.g., Paterson, 1994) is certainly important, student affairs professionals should also be prepared to appreciate the exercise of citizenship that is increasingly occurring on campuses and work to ensure that these experiences are educationally meaningful with respect to democratic citizenship. To this end, political theories that describe collective political deter-
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mination and action can complement the pre-
dominant theoretical literature on students’
development as individuals. Specifically, atten-
tion to democratic political theory and practices
can inform programmatic attempts to educate
students for democratic citizenship as well as
assist student affairs administrators to appreciate
and discern the democratic actions already
occurring on numerous campuses.

DEMOCRATIC THEORY AND DIVERSITY

In speaking of ethnic and cultural diversity in the
United States, political theorist Benjamin Barber
(1992) asserted that “diversity remains America’s
most prominent virtue and its most unsettling
problem. . . . E pluribus unum is our brave boast,
but we are neither very united nor very comfort-
able with our diversity” (p. 42). Furthermore,
he noted that cultural and ethnic diversity is not
a recent phenomenon:

[A]s any careful reader of American his-
tory cannot help but notice, America has
always been a tale of peoples trying to be
a People, a tale of diversity and plurality
in search of unity. . . . The purist view of a
WASP nation was never more than the
peremptory hope of one part of America’s
immigrant population. (p. 41)

Not surprisingly, then, our political legacy is a
continuing search for “unity in diversity” (Bull,
Fruehling, & Chattery, 1992, p. 1), where respect
for individual rights, including freedoms to pursue
and honor various cultural traditions, shares
center stage with collective social determination
through democratic governance. This legacy of
tension or balance is readily characterized by
American political traditions of liberalism and
democracy with emphases on, respectively,
protection of individual freedoms and provisions
for collective decision-making. Current develop-
ments on college campuses such as more
frequent demonstrations and activist leadership
among students of traditionally underrepresented
groups suggest the need for a greater under-
standing of how autonomous and increasingly
diverse individuals can and often do productively
engage in collective deliberation and action.

The promise of such engagement, however,
has not been consistently realized. Almost a
century ago, W. E. B. DuBois (1903) presented
his perspective on the American social and
political climate of the time:

[The African American] realizes at last that
silently, resistlessly, the world about flows
by him [sic] in two great streams: they
ripple on in the same sunshine, they
approach and mingle their waters in
seeming carelessness—then they divide
and flow wide apart. . . . Now if one notices
carefully one will see that between these
two worlds, despite much physical contact
and daily intermingling, there is almost no
community of intellectual life or point of
transference where the thoughts and
feelings of one race can come into direct
contact and sympathy with the thoughts
and feelings of the other. (p. 128)

Aims of Democracy

According to Dewey (1926), democracy is “more
than a form of government; it is primarily a mode
of associated living” (p. 101). In a democracy,
individuals relinquish some measure of self-
determination in favor of societal determination
that will restrict, but presumably also enhance,
individual well-being through social well-being
(Dewey, 1926). Critically, democracy is self-
governance. Authority in a democracy is vested
not in an external power but in the same citizens
who have relinquished individual authority.
According to Gutmann (1987), democracy “au-
thorizes citizens to influence how their society
reproduces itself” (p. 15). Democracy allows for
a society’s “change in social habit—its con-
tinuous readjustment through meeting the new
situations produced by various intercourse”
(Dewey, 1926, p. 100). Education for democratic
citizenship focuses on enabling students’ parti-
cipation in the democratic process of “conscious
social reproduction” (Gutmann, 1987, p. 14), but
this does not mean that students learn only to
identify a preference, cast a ballot, and count yeas
and nays. To ensure the fairness and continuity
of democracy, democratic principles as well as
processes must be safeguarded.

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Principles of democracy: Nonrepression and Nondiscrimination

Gutmann (1987) identified two principles essential to democracy: nonrepression and nondiscrimination. Nonrepression deals with ideas; specifically, the conceivable range of ideas and opinions must not be repressed or stifled. Nondiscrimination provides for individuals' equal access to democratic deliberations and processes unrestricted by bias or prejudice.

Further, a democratic society cannot support policies or decisions that are themselves repressive or discriminatory (Gutmann, 1987). The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963) evoked both principles in his eloquent "Letter from the Birmingham Jail":

A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up that state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there are some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured?

Sometimes a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I have been arrested on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong in having an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade. But such an ordinance becomes unjust when it is used to maintain segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and protest. (unpaged)

In the first paragraph, King pointed out that decisions that will bind all members of a society cannot themselves be products of deliberations undertaken by only a subset of that society. Such a practice violates the democratic principle of nondiscrimination. In the second paragraph, King asserted that benign laws or regulations had been selectively applied to prevent the airing of unpopular ideas. Such a practice is illegitimate because it violates the principle of nonrepression. As King so clearly comprehended, democratic process in the absence of democratic principles had in effect curtailed democracy. To the extent that the presence of either repression or discrimination renders democratic process as well as decisions illegitimate, these two principles serve to enable democracy as well as provide grounds for contesting current practices.

Democracy and Dissent

The democratic aim of conscious social reproduction is accomplished through processes to determine the will of the majority. Citizens in a democracy are assumed to be participants in these processes through directly voicing input or preference (e.g., Barber, 1984) or through opportunities to influence representative bodies. The will of the majority is considered binding on all citizens within the collective, even on dissenters and nonparticipants.

However, principled dissenters play an especially critical role in a democracy. As Flacks (1996) concluded: "[M]ovements are inherently the primary framework for direct democracy, providing the moments in which ordinary people directly and consciously participate in the exercise of voice rather than allowing others to speak for them" (p. 104). In the absence of direct participation, Fraser (1989) warned of "passive citizenship" (p. 156) in a society that identifies needs, offers programs to address the identified needs, and evaluates client (not citizen) success through measures of conformity or compliance. Dissenting citizens form opposing forces in democratic societies that preserve ranges of opinions and commitments and provide bellwethers to herald changes in sentiment or collective will. For example, numerous participants in the civil rights movement of this century engaged in acts of civil disobedience, demonstrating their commitment to democracy through their disobedience of unjust laws. In this way, principled dissent serves to highlight aspects of a society and its governance that are falsely democratic. Principled dissent is a form of
democratic citizenship at least as critical to democracies as citizens’ routine, faithful participation in established processes. Indeed, Giroux (1987, 1996) cautioned against confusing patriotism—which he considered largely unexamined chauvinism—with citizenship, which is instead exemplified by critique and monitoring of the presumed democratic system and processes.

Democratic aims and principles are in all likelihood familiar notions in student affairs, since the above discussion evokes the professional values of autonomy, justice, and fidelity (Kitchener, 1985) and Boyer’s (1990) descriptions of open and just campus communities. The two democratic principles are also consistent with widely espoused academic values of academic freedom and nondiscrimination in terms of admissions, access to services, and employment. Interpretations of repression and discrimination, however, differ widely on campuses and in society, as currently evidenced through dialogues on affirmative action programs, ethnic and cultural studies programs, and other issues recently accompanied by dissent and protest.

NARRATIVE

The following narrative and analysis will demonstrate the application of democratic theory and principles to one episode of dissent. Although the facts in the narrative are based on occurrences over the past 3 years at Iowa State University, only selected elements that are most relevant to democratic theory and principles are summarized here. The comments following the narrative are not intended in any way to solve complex developments which continue to unfold. The analysis is offered instead to illustrate some practical insights that can be gained through application of democratic theoretical perspectives.

One of the aging buildings at Iowa State University, a public land-grant university, was recently renovated. The building and a center housed there (designed for the study of women and politics) were named in honor of a 19th century alumna whose work on behalf of women’s suffrage is widely known. Extensive fund-raising secured major gifts as well as numerous small contributions from alumni and other sources. A well-attended week-long celebration featured historic reenactments, panel presentations, and speeches and ended with the formal rededication ceremony.

The distribution of a newsletter published by an African American student group coincided with the dedication ceremonies. An article in the newsletter denounced the naming decision, charging that the honored alumna had made racist and xenophobic remarks during her suffrage work. A groundswell of concerned students and others coalesced into a movement aimed at changing the building’s name. Movement members communicated their dissent through speeches as well as editorials and letters to the editor in the campus newspaper, maintaining that the honor was not deserved and that university officials had made the naming decision despite early knowledge of the questionable remarks. Further, they charged that educational presentations and dialogues about the honoree’s career and legacy that were held as part of the dedication celebration had omitted or minimized public discussion of the honoree’s controversial remarks.

Editorials and responses quickly appeared in campus and statewide media, and the movement’s efforts attracted some national notice as well. Two controversies emerged from this dialogue. One question was whether the alumna’s remarks—considering the context in which they were made—could defensibly or conclusively label her as racist or xenophobic. A second controversy was whether the university had attempted to orchestrate the event so that only remarks favorable to the honoree were aired. The building name controversy was a popular topic of informal discussion on campus, and a silent protest march sponsored by the movement attracted more than 100 students, faculty, and staff. Movement members subsequently revealed plans to write donors with appeals to withdraw their contributions to the building and the center.

Over the course of several weeks, the student senate hotly debated legislation calling on the university to reverse the naming decision. The bill passed but was vetoed by the student body president. Throughout the controversy, the university president publicly maintained that, although he heard and understood the move-
ment’s concerns, he would not support the name change. The student group announced plans for a weekday rally at the administration building, but were denied a permit on the grounds that their meeting would disrupt university functioning. The rally went on as planned, and organizers were informed that they would be charged with violating the student code of conduct.

DISCUSSION

The above narrative provides much grist for discussion and could easily be analyzed using an assortment of conceptual lenses because developmental, administrative, legal, and other issues are evident. However, in this discussion, aspects of the narrative that are related to democratic aims, principles, and processes will be highlighted.

One may first question to what extent democratic notions should influence deliberation or decision-making at an institution that is not itself a democracy. Although the formal college or university is not typically organized as a representative or participatory democracy, colleges nonetheless are sites for learning about and experiencing democratic citizenship. Furthermore, exercises of citizenship can and sometimes do influence the formal organization through the attention or pressure brought about by dissenting opinions and actions. As Gutmann and Thompson (1996) clearly stated, educational institutions, interest groups, and civic associations comprise a valuable “middle democracy,” (p. 12). That is,

[In] the land of everyday politics... legislators, executives, administrators, and judges make and apply policies and laws, sometimes arguing among themselves, sometimes explaining themselves and listening to citizens, other times not... [This is also where] adults and children develop political understandings, sometimes arguing among themselves and listening to people with differing points of view, other times not. (1996, p. 40)

Colleges and universities represent institutions within which decisions are made by some established institutional processes. Those decisions as well as the manner in which decisions are reached subsequently become text for collective deliberations and evaluation in the campus’s accompanying political arena.

Democratic Aims

As discussed earlier, democracy provides a means for conscious social reproduction. Through their focus on the controversial legacy of the honoree, the dissenting students contested what was being reproduced through the naming decision; they also questioned the level of consciousness employed by the makers of this particular decision.

Aims and symbols of aims are often interpreted in different ways. For example, selecting a woman—and one who was militant and radical in her time—may symbolize a progressive and enlightened university. Yet, because of the honoree’s questionable remarks, the naming can also symbolize and tacitly affirm a climate of indifference or hostility to minority students. Through opening a public dialogue to air an alternate interpretation of the honoree’s legacy, movement students sought to highlight the values (i.e., racism, xenophobia) that they felt the university was implicitly honoring through honoring this alumna. For many students in the movement, the naming decision provided tangible evidence of the ongoing racially indifferent campus climate. For these students, the building became a manifestation of minority students’ perceptions of continuing marginalization, and the naming decision symbolized unexamined social reproduction—in other words, perpetuation of a racist climate on campus.

The cultural properties of symbols and heroes and heroines, and their importance for administrative leaders in invoking institutional priorities and values, have been widely discussed (Birnbaum, 1990; Tierney, 1988). An examination of democratic political theory adds an additional property of symbols as affirmation of the tacit values that are esteemed on a campus. In the above narrative, the same symbol may for some denote conscious social reproduction that is adaptive and pioneering and for others denote a largely unexamined perpetuation of negative or bigoted values.
Principles of Democracy

According to Gutmann (1987), nondiscrimination and nonrepression must be preserved to ensure the possibility of continuing democracy. Yet, because discussions leading to and surrounding administrative decisions are often not publicized, those not privy to the discussions can only infer rationales after decisions are made. However, attention to democratic principles helps to identify appropriate questions to ask about the case and about the climate for democracy on campus.

The naming of the building. The selection of the honoree was an administrative decision made by the university's governing board using administrative processes and procedures in which democratic processes may or may not have been modeled. However, the narrative demonstrates that administrators might be wise to adopt democratic values in their deliberations even if they are not formally required. In this case, broad participation at early deliberation stages and airing a wide range of opinions would have alerted administrative decision-makers to the range of opinions on this matter. In terms of nonrepression of ideas, at least one set of unpopular ideas for early airing would be the honoree's controversial remarks. However, even if the honoree's questionable remarks had been known, as student activists suspected, this knowledge may not have been suppressed during official discussions leading to the decision. Decision-makers may indeed have been satisfied, for example, that the remarks were less troubling because of the historical context in which they were made. However, if public suppression efforts had been undertaken, this action would violate the principle of nonrepression.

The student protest. The student-led dissent emerged at the time of the building's dedication. In terms of nondiscrimination of participation, students employed a broad range of tactics to communicate their objections publicly. As long as student efforts to be heard publicly were not unjustly blocked, the principle of nondiscrimination was maintained. Although few of the initial decision-makers chose to respond publicly to the movement's charges and counterarguments, students apparently were not impeded in employing a variety of efforts at fostering public dialogue. As King (1963) discerned, otherwise impartial laws or policies can be discriminatory if they are applied selectively to block certain groups or unpopular opinions. The decision to deny a rally permit might have been the same, or perhaps had been the same in the past, regardless of the group requesting the permit. The decision to charge rally organizers with conduct code violations may have reflected an impartial policy that would be applied, or had been applied previously, in similar circumstances. Observers often do not have this type of information on which to base their analyses. Although universities can legally block protests that violate time, place, and manner restrictions (Healy v. James, 1972), administrators must take care that rules are not selectively enforced, for such enforcement would violate the principle of nondiscrimination. For example, if rallies by minority group students are judged to be disruptive of university business whereas similarly situated rallies by majority group students are not, minority students' participation in the campus political arena is selectively curtailed through what amounts to discrimination.

In terms of nonrepression of ideas, movement members aired a wide variety of opinions and used multiple outlets to articulate their positions and demands. In this sense, movement members' efforts to educate and persuade community members were not prohibited. However, members also charged that the educational presentations on the honoree's legacy, held during the dedication celebration, had not included multiple perspectives on her controversial remarks. Substituting celebration for an opportunity to dialogue is problematic with respect to nonrepression; in this case, movement members charged that only an officially sanctioned version of the honoree's legacy was aired. Indeed, Giroux (1987) views such events as serious threats to democracy, charging they represent a form of political illiteracy that "abandon[s] substantive information and debate for the glitter of the spectacle" (p. 109) and in a sense, substitutes unexamined patriotism for considered citizenship. Similar conclusions were reached, in fact, when television commentators described both the Democratic and Republican
1996 national political conventions as orchestrated “infomercials” rather than occasions for public debate and exchange of views. To uphold nonrepression of ideas, programmed celebrations should not be substituted for opportunities for dialogue. If dialogue is planned to accompany a celebration but time for such is compromised, scheduling a continuation of the event with sole emphasis on dialogue would appear to strengthen the university’s commitment to open dialogue and nonrepression of ideas.

The student government actions. In terms of formal democratic action, the will of the student majority was determined by vote of the representative student government, which was in turn rejected by presidential veto. Since the student government president acted within constitutional powers, the veto did not subvert democracy but instead engaged and encouraged democratic mechanisms for redress. For example, the dissent may well serve as rationale for a recall election or appear as a campaign issue in the next election. Critically, democracy progresses through engagement of these formal mechanisms as well as through the monitoring and challenge from citizen-dissenters.

The unauthorized rally. Civil disobedience is a long and honored tradition in democracies, and movement members sustained this tradition by holding the unauthorized rally. However, university officials were not necessarily wrong to deny a permit. To honor the principle of nondiscrimination, dissenters should be accorded the same treatment as any other student group. Additionally, dissenting students should be subject to equal treatment under the conduct code that applies to all students. University representatives, through sharing information with students about rationales for policies and potential ranges of sanctions can, in a sense, partner with the dissenting students to ensure that students not only are able to disobey administrative policies but also are informed of the potential consequences of their planned disobedience. To uphold nondiscrimination, administrative representatives must ensure policies are impartially applied. Dissenters must not be subject to additional or more energetic scrutiny than is applied to students in general. Also to uphold nonrepression of ideas, administrative decisions and possible sanctions must not preclude the students’ continued airing of their ideas. One critical policy question to ask is whether the sanctions may curtail or prohibit students’ subsequent freedom to participate in dissenting acts or to voice their ideas. Sanctions that compromise students’ participation or expression are inconsistent with the democratic principles of nondiscrimination and nonrepression.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Gutmann (1987) cautioned that conflict, as the matter for democratic deliberations, is not something that a democratic society should seek to avoid. Indeed, minimizing conflict may serve to further marginalize those raising principled objections to decisions and processes. The goal of democracy is not the creation of artificial homogenization or false harmony, and movements play an important role through fostering dissent and conflict. As Jane Smiley remarked: “I used to think that conflict leads to violence as pink shades into red. . . . Now I think that violence occurs as an attempt to stop conflict, a stab at silencing the cacophony of differing opinions and divergent values” (“Melange,” 1996, p. B3). Additionally, Fraser (1989) described the desirability of an “arena of conflict among rival interpretations of needs” (p. 170) as a way to better comprehend ranges of needs and strategies to meet these various needs. Thus, campus dialogue and disagreement can be interpreted as indicators of a vital and engaged community in which democratic learning and exercise of citizenship is not only permissible but nurtured.

At its best, democracy ensures that a common ground of deliberative processes and principles of fairness underpins the articulation, clarification, and dispute of controversial issues. Providing this common ground, as well as respect for deliberation, can foster students’ development as democratic citizens. Parks Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Daloz Parks (1996) asserted: “The act of setting norms, tone, and boundaries that can hold conflicted discourse creates a shared culture with a teaching power of its own” (p. 15). In accor-
dance, three conclusions regarding democratic education and student activism are offered, each with implications for student affairs practice.

Dissenters as Campus Citizens
Not all, but many dissenting students are from minority and traditionally underrepresented groups on predominantly white campuses that have been characterized as hostile or, perhaps worse, indifferent to their needs. In a sense, one might have difficulty imagining minority group students as desirous of citizenship in such communities. Yet as dissenters, these same students are willing to take risks of further marginalization or dismissal as “troublemakers” or “extremists” precisely to assume a citizenship role on campus. Interpreted within a democratic citizenship framework, principled dissenters are loyal citizens who make a supreme act of commitment to the campus and to its democratic arena. Instead of downplaying their concerns or quietly leaving the campus, dissenting students engage their concerns as democratic citizens who seek to participate in democratic self-determination. Although dealing with the discomforts surrounding campus dissent presents concerns for student affairs and other university administrators, students’ unwillingness to commit to a community or to help shape and realize the public good of the community is indicative of citizen apathy—a far more threatening problem for democracies.

In many ways, campus dissent can be seen as service-learning or community improvement work. However, dissenting students have identified their own campuses as the underserved or underprivileged settings that warrant their leadership and attention. As service-learning participants engage in projects to better the selected programs or sites, improve their leadership skills, and commit to addressing problems of the broader society, activism offers dissenting students opportunities to hone a similar and equally necessary set of citizenship dispositions and skills. Student affairs administrators and counselors work to place students in service learning programs, and dissenting student-citizens are no less deserving of assistance and respect for their endeavors. Although student affairs administrators’ dual roles as institutional representatives and educators sometimes present problems in dealing with campus dissent, the roles need not be unreconciled or unreconcilable. As campuses continue to frame diversity as an institutional priority and the fostering of multiculturalism as a responsibility of all (Stage & Hamrick, 1994), these dual roles will continue. As avowed proponents of democratic citizenship development, student affairs administrators may have much to learn from staff and faculty members who serve as formally appointed advocates for minority students and often find themselves balancing their responsibilities for supporting and encouraging students with their responsibilities as institutional representatives.

Campuses and Change
In many ways, dissenting students call institutional attention to discrepancies in intent and practice with respect to multiculturalism. Further, dissenting students often question if a campus is committed to change, if a campus is open to the possibility of change, and what is necessary to fulfill institutional promises or goals. Hill (1991) asserted that multiculturalism is achieved when a community can’t imagine existing without everyone’s presence and contributions. Through their resistance, dissenting students insist on contributing. They are unwilling to serve only as docile presences or as only recipients of the campus’s offerings, thus rejecting Fraser’s (1989) role of passive client in predetermined programs.

Dissenting students offer alternate opinions, conclusions, and judgments, allowing a broader range of perspectives and enriching subsequent dialogue. In terms of democratic political theory, the challenges to extant assumptions represented by this broader range of perspectives increases the potential that a campus can make considered, conscious decisions about what multiculturalism will mean on the campus. According to Dewey (1926), this potential represents the promise of democracy for an increasingly diverse society:

The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his [sic] own action to that of others, and to consider
the action of others to give point and
direction to his [sic] own, is equivalent to
the breaking down of those barriers of
class, race, and national territory which
kept men [sic] from perceiving the full
import of their activity. . . . They secure a
liberation of powers which remain sup-
pressed as long as the invitations to action
are partial, as they must be in a group which
in its exclusiveness shuts out many inter-
ests. (p. 101)

Honoring the principles of democracy does
not require capitulation to dissenters, but dissent
must not be suppressed. Campuses committed
to democratic education therefore welcome oppor-
tunities for dialogue and debate as signs that
conditions for democratic education are present.
In an interview, the award-winning jazz trumpeter
and composer Wynton Marsalis offered a con-
temporary echo of Dewey when he characterized
jazz performance as part and parcel of the
democratic ideals of the nation from which jazz
emerged:

[In playing jazz,] you and I, we come
together and have a conversation. I con-
sider what you’re saying. And I come away
thinking “It could be true” or “It’s defi-
nitely not true.” Playing jazz means learn-
ing how to reconcile differences, even
when they’re opposites. . . . Jazz is a music
of conversation, and that’s what you need
in a democracy. You have to be willing to
hear another person’s point of view and
respond to it. Also, jazz requires that you
have a lot of on-your-feet information, just
like a democracy does. There are a lot
of things you simply have to know.
(Scherman, 1996, pp. 30, 35)

“Civic Life” on Campus

As the discussion above makes clear, con-
ceptions of what makes up the civic life of
students and the appropriate campus environ-
ments for learning democracy and citizenship must
not be limited only to formal student governance
bodies. However, in their work with elected
student leaders, advisors must be careful to
ensure that technical procedural tools intended
to, for example, assure orderly meetings, are not
selectively applied to avoid or preclude open
participation or the expression of unpopular ideas.
For many students, and particularly for minority
group students, issues that subsequently emerge
as political concerns may well have germinated
elsewhere on the campus where support for and
validation of student involvement (e.g., Rendon,
1994) already exist. Professionals concerned with
educating for citizenship and supporting citizen
participants should acknowledge the educational
value of these alternate campus settings for
citizen involvement and work to support students
and advisors as they seek to engage the campus
community as citizens. Administrators and
advisors should also ensure that nonrepression
and nondiscrimination are preserved for students
who engage in institutionalized political expres-
sion as well as in public campus dissent.

In summary, the student affairs profession
has consistently espoused via its major public
statements a commitment to preparing students
for democratic citizenship. Dissent, when inter-
preted as citizen involvement and a source of
democratic learning experience, advances a
community’s search for mutual agreements while
preserving and legitimating the expression of a
broad range of perspectives and judgments.
Although public campus dissent presents legal
and administrative challenges for student affairs
and other campus staff, dissent is also citizenship
in action— worthy not only of tolerance but
respect and support. Steiner (1994) emphasized
the empowering potential of democratic
education:

Rather than trying to find a lowest common
denominator on which to build consensus,
democratic education should offer citizens
a chance to wrestle with the complex and
multifarious issues that confront their
polity. Opposed to the assumptions that
the majority are suited best for mindless
productivity or a life of politically acqui-
escent technological contributions, an
authentic democratic education implies
that schooling provides citizens with the
skills to question the basic assumptions

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of their society . . . . Rather than chasing a downward spiral toward ensuring that citizens are equipped to follow instructions, it points to an ascending set of challenges that assume a high potential to negotiate and shape a considered life. (pp. 23-24)

In the end, educating for democratic citizenship may not be an optional undertaking on campus. As members of Gutmann and Thompson’s (1996) “middle democracy,” student affairs staff educate through the principles and values they convey or fail to convey in policies and practices. Citizenship and civic education take many forms on campus, and campuses and democracies are each enriched by respecting dissent as a legitimate and necessary manifestation of democratic citizenship.

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