Developing and Assessing Personal and Social Responsibility in College

Robert D. Reason
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In an open letter to her students, Melissa Harris-Perry, MSNBC television host and Tulane University professor of political science, suggested that voting was “the citizenship equivalent of brushing your teeth: I am glad you do it regularly, but I am hardly going to applaud you for achieving such a minimal responsibility” (2011, para. 1). Unfortunately, voting behavior is often the primary outcome in research and writing related to civic learning and democratic engagement. This attention on voting casts an overly narrow scope on what it means to be an active and engaged member of a democracy.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) began the Core Commitments Initiative in 2007, long before Dr. Harris-Perry likened voting to toothbrushing but for similar reasons: AAC&U saw the need to expand the conversation among higher educators to include more than simply voting behaviors. The Core Commitments Initiative focused the discussion on the broader concept of personal and social responsibility (PSR) with the understanding that such a focus would not only be more inclusive but also return higher education in the United States to its historical roots. Expanding the conversation to emphasize PSR leaves room for behavioral measures, like voting or hours spent in community service, and also opens our understanding of citizenship to include issues of civic identity, civic attitudes, personal integrity, and ethics. This broader conceptualization is the focus of this volume.

This volume explores the research and practice related to PSR as an outcome of college, focusing intentionally on how institutions can facilitate the development of PSR in the students enrolled in their institutions. After this short introductory preface, the first four chapters lay the foundation upon which the good practice chapters that follow are built. These chapters address the theoretical rationales for including PSR as an intentional outcome of college, the existing empirical research that suggests good practices, and the issues associated with assessing PSR. This initial section focuses on creating a sense of institutional pervasiveness (a campus climate) that encourages student development of PSR.

Caryn McTighe Musil, a senior scholar and director of Civic Learning and Democracy Initiatives at AAC&U, provides a theoretical and philosophical justification for AAC&U’s focus on personal and social responsibility.

In Chapter 2, Robert D. Reason, Andrew J. Ryder, and Chad Kee review the existing empirical literature related to PSR, answering two broad questions: why educate for PSR and what are the challenges to educating for PSR. The authors also use the existing empirical research to link education...
for PSR to other important outcomes of higher education, making the case for the importance of studying PSR. This literature review lays the foundation for a greater understanding of how colleges and universities can influence the development of PSR among their students—the themes of the final three chapters in this volume.

In Chapter 3, Carol Trosset, of Bennington College, challenges higher educators and higher education researchers to think more broadly about PSR. Trosset argues that even with AAC&U’s broad definition of PSR, the existing literature is overly focused on those behaviors that most logically would be categorized as social responsibility, practically ignoring more personal forms of responsibility. Trosset calls on researchers to include more emphasis on academic integrity and fulfilling one’s personal responsibilities in family and work situations to our research agendas.

Chapter 4, by Andrew J. Ryder and Joshua J. Mitchell, moves the conversation to focus on issues of assessment related to PSR, specifically emphasizing issues related to assessing learning climates but including other outcome measures. This chapter introduces the Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI) and serves as a bridge to focusing on what has been learned from the work of the Core Commitments Initiative. The PSRI is a climate assessment that emerged from the work of the Core Commitments Initiative and is available for institutional use through Iowa State University’s Research Institute for Studies in Education.

The succeeding chapters build upon the work of higher education institutions that participated in the AAC&U’s Core Commitments Initiative. These chapters interweave examples drawn from the experiences of these institutions to address good practices meant to intentionally infuse PSR in coursework and the cocurriculum. Each chapter highlights those practices that integrate curricular and cocurricular experiences in a holistic approach to the development of PSR. A final chapter in this section addresses how administrators can remove institutional obstacles to the infusion of PSR into the institutional ethos.

Nancy O’Neill, who served at AAC&U during the Core Commitments Initiative and now works at the University of Baltimore, focuses on good practices for infusing personal responsibility into the curriculum and cocurriculum. O’Neill draws examples from Core Commitments institutions that focused specifically on issues of academic integrity and ethical behavior. Robert D. Reason, director of the PSRI and a faculty member at Iowa State University, focuses the next chapter on institutional initiatives related to infusing social responsibility into students’ experiences.

The final chapter, written by Chris R. Glass, assistant professor at Old Dominion University, draws upon a qualitative research project to identify good practices for the institutionalization of PSR as essential foci of the college experience. Glass draws upon interviews and seven institutional case studies to provide readers with a road map to begin to infuse PSR into their
curriculum and cocurriculum. Glass builds upon the previous two chapters and integrates an understanding of organizational behavior to highlight strategies that begin to make permanent the focus on PSR.

The work of this volume and the reinvigorated emphasis on PSR would not have been possible without AAC&U’s ongoing commitment to liberal education for college students in the United States, particularly the work of those associated with the Core Commitments Initiative. The Core Commitments staff included leadership by Caryn McTighe Musil, L. Lee Knefelkamp, Nancy O’Neill, and Michele Leaman. The PSRI was originally created by L. Lee Knefelkamp, Lauren Ruff, and Richard Hersh, and ultimately refined by the late Eric Dey and the graduate students from the University of Michigan: Mary Antonaros, Cassie Barnhardt, Matthew A. Holsapple, and Molly C. Ott.

Most important, this volume would not have been possible without the energy of the 23 Core Commitment Leadership Consortium institutions who participated in the yearlong dialogue on their campuses. We drew upon the work of these institutions and the lessons learned to inform the final chapters of this volume. We owe a debt of gratitude to those higher educators who spoke with us and shared their learning.

Robert D. Reason
Editor

Reference

ROBERT D. REASON is associate professor of higher education at Iowa State University and director of the Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory.
This chapter provides an overview of the Core Commitments Initiative conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Core Commitments was intended to reinvigorate the conversation about personal and social responsibility within higher education, and served as the impetus for this New Directions volume.

Overview of the Core Commitments Initiative

Caryn McTighe Musil

“It isn’t so much a certain type of program that I have in mind, but an entire ethos of ethical responsibility for the nation’s greater good that ought to be pervasive in the atmosphere of learning at every college and university in this land. … Societal responsibility, as opposed to purely mercenary individual self-interest, ought to be part of the curriculum itself—and more than the curriculum, it ought to be part of the milieu … of academic education.”

Jonathan Kozol (as cited in Carlson, 2009, “A Question for the President,” para. 4)

Jonathan Kozol’s civic vision of higher education offers a stark contrast to the reductionist view of colleges as employment training schools whose curriculum should be tied only to preparing students to fill immediate job vacancies in a given state. It is also a stark contrast to the conversation in which some research centers and governors are recommending tracking and rewarding universities and colleges that secure graduates high-paying jobs. One governor even proposed penalizing low-paying majors by charging students higher tuition for specializing in, say, religion or English or social work. Such narrow preparation, driven disproportionately by jobs and salaries, risks stripping students of a powerful liberal education that evidence suggests will serve both them and the public well over a lifetime. The Core Commitments Initiative, and this edited volume that arose from the work of Core Commitments, is an antidote to educating students for narrow self-interest. Instead, it reminds readers why education for social responsibility should be at the epicenter of every student’s college education.