Educational attainment is a powerful predictor of civic engagement. The more education people have, the more likely it is that they will participate in civic affairs. This has been a widespread belief among political scientists since at least the end of World War II. In 1995 three distinguished professors of political science, Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, provided convincing empirical evidence for this belief in their book *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. They surveyed some 15,000 individuals and conducted 2,500 personal interviews as the basis for their analyses of which Americans become active in civic affairs and how they do so.

The authors were concerned with civic involvement generally, but they focused especially on political engagement. For America, politics is a crucially important dimension of civic life. Our democracy depends on an informed and engaged citizenry, one that acquires the knowledge and skills needed to become politically involved and then participates actively. *Voice and Equality* analyzed nine types of political activity: voting, campaign work, campaign contributions, contacting an official, protests, informal community work, membership on a local board, affiliation with a political organization, and contribution to a political cause. One could debate the presence or absence of one or more categories on this list, but in sum they reflect the range of activities that make our democracy work.

Unfortunately, the "civic returns" category in *Measuring Up 2000* includes information on only one of those political activities, voting, because state-by-state
democracy. But unless voting is accompanied by the other political activities, it reduces citizenship to a superficial and relatively passive activity. We can hope that a broader range of political and civic activities will be sampled in subsequent editions of *Measuring Up*. In particular, we can hope that the connections between higher education and civic engagement will become clearer on a state-by-state comparative basis. This will require gathering much more information than is now available.

In the interim, it is well past time to have a sustained national dialogue about the public purposes of higher education. Education for civic responsibility is not the only public purpose that should be promoted, but it is an especially important one these days because the current data on civic life in this country are devastating, particularly the data tracking the decline in political participation by young people. We need extended public discussions about the roles and responsibilities of higher education in helping to reverse these dangerous trends. *Measuring Up 2000* should be a sharp prod to provoke those discussions.

Given the compelling evidence presented in *Voice and Equality* and other studies that education enhances civic participation in general, and political participation in particular, we might expect that political participation would have steadily increased over the past decades, as Americans became increasingly better educated. On any scale, the expansion of higher education in the United States has been remarkable. Starting with the GI Bill at the end of World War II, increasing numbers of students have gone from high school straight to college, and expanding numbers have chosen college later in life. Today about 3,800 colleges and universities serve some 14.3 million students across the country.

In the face of this boom in higher education, it is all the more disturbing that civic participation is actually declining—not expanding—in America, and that political participation is falling off precipitously. The most recent addition to a lengthy series of studies to confirm this grim reality is also the most extensive, *Bowling Alone*, by Professor Robert Putnam of Harvard. Putnam chronicles a pattern of declining civic participation in America and concludes that this trend has accelerated since 1985. Using data from Roper surveys, he examines 12 civic activities, similar to those considered in *Voice and Equality*. Across the 12, participation declined by an average of 10% between 1973-74 and 1983-84, and by 24% between 1983-84 and 1993-94. Putnam also reports that the share of the American public totally uninvolved in any of the 12 civic activities rose by nearly one-third over those 20 years.

In absolute terms, Putnam found that the declines were greatest among the better educated. Among those who had attended college, participation in public meetings fell from 34% to 18%. Because the less educated were less involved to begin with, their participation dropped even lower, from 20% to 8% among those who had a high school education, and from 7% to 3% among those who had not attended high school. Thus despite the rapid rise in educational attainment, Americans have steadily become less and less likely to participate in civic affairs.

This is bad news. But the most disturbing trend of all...
is that each succeeding generation shows less interest and involvement in political activities. Political disaffection is especially pronounced among young adults. Younger Americans vote less often than their elders do, show lower levels of social trust and have less knowledge of politics.

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Disdain for politics does not mean lack of civic concern, however. A recent study by the Panetta Institute at California State University at Monterey Bay, for example, indicates that nearly three-quarters of college students (73%) have done volunteer work in the past two years, and most (62%) more than once. Those students understand that their communities face real needs and that they can help meet those needs. But they do not see politics as an effective means for change, according to studies by Professor Linda Sax of UCLA. They may well believe strongly in a cause such as improving the environment, but they are skeptical that politics and politicians can further that cause. Too often they fail to understand that if they want not only to assist at a community kitchen but also to help eliminate the need for that kitchen, then they must work to change public policy, and that politics—in one form or another—is the primary vehicle in American democracy for effecting public policy.

On college campuses, political discussion has declined sharply. Annual surveys indicate that the percentage of college freshmen who report frequently discussing politics dropped from a high of 30% in 1968 to 15% in 1995. Similar decreases are revealed in the percentage of those who believe it is important to keep up-to-date with political affairs or those who have worked on a political campaign. This mounting political apathy bodes ill for the future of American democracy.

What can be done by colleges and universities to reverse these disturbing trends and to help generations of young people appreciate the value of and necessity for political participation? And how might future editions of Measuring Up best highlight statewide successes when they do occur? Campuses should not be expected to promote a single type of civic or political engagement, but they should prepare their graduates to become engaged citizens who provide the time, attention, understanding, and action to further collective civic goals. Institutions of higher education should help students to recognize themselves as members of a larger social fabric, to consider social problems to be at least partly their own, to see the civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate. At the same time, Measuring Up needs better, stronger indicators of civic and political engagement for every state, so that we can better understand what is and is not happening in these realms.

There is some good news. The presidents of some 300 campuses, under the aegis of Campus Compact, have signed a "Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher
Education," a pledge to strengthen civic learning on their campuses. A recent study sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching offers evidence that some American colleges and universities do take seriously the civic education of their students. For a relatively small number of campuses, this commitment shapes many or most aspects of undergraduate life and constitutes an institution-wide approach to civic learning. For many others, strong programs designed to encourage civic development exist within campus environments that do not have a comprehensive emphasis on that goal.

Service learning—academic study closely tied to community service through structured reflection—is a particularly important pedagogy for promoting civic responsibility, especially when used with collaborative learning and problem-based learning, two other modes of active learning. Service learning connects thought and feeling in a deliberate way, creating a context in which students can explore how they feel about what they are thinking and what they think about how they feel; through guided reflection, it offers students opportunities to explore the relationship between their academic learning and their civic values and commitments.

The Department of Political Science at Swarthmore, for example, sponsors the Democracy Project, which is organized to deepen students' understanding of and commitment to democratic citizenship in a multicultural society through participation in community activities. The Democracy Project has a three-course core and focuses on case studies of democracy in practice, and the integration of theory and practice through internships, community service and simulation. A course on the nature of politics, taught regularly at Rutgers University for large numbers of students, also combines readings in political theory and action, community service in political settings, and structured reflection to link the two.

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An experiment at the University of Michigan underscores the importance of actively engaging students in the civic processes that they are studying. In a course on contemporary issues in American politics, the faculty randomly selected one group of students and asked them to become involved in community service related to local politics, in addition to doing the reading and written assignments for the course; the other students were asked to complete only the traditional assignments. The students in the service-learning sections not only earned better grades (by blind grading) and reported that they enjoyed the class more but they also became much more aware of political and social problems and more interested in acting on their heightened awareness. Several national studies about service learning have supported these findings.
America, particularly among young people, and to urge increased attention to civic education at every level. If the issue is viewed solely as proselytizing students to vote and pay attention to politics, the role of higher education is inevitably a modest one. But John Dewey, the preeminent American public philosopher of the 20th century, taught us that much more is at stake. Dewey viewed American democracy and education as inexorably intertwined. The issue for Dewey was not simply that our citizenry must be educated in order to choose political leaders responsibly and to hold those leaders accountable. Much more important, he conceived of our democratic society as one in which citizens should interact with each other, learn from each other, grow with each other, and together make their communities more than the sum of their parts.

It is these dimensions of American democracy and civic life that are in danger. If American democracy is to live up to its ideals, we must have a sustained public dialogue on the public purposes of higher education, particularly on how best to educate future generations of responsible and engaged citizens. This will not happen unless business and civic leaders, policymakers, and concerned citizens from every sector speak out about what they expect from our institutions of higher education. If they view those institutions as having important public purposes, including educating students for lives of civic responsibility, they must join in public discourse about how to make that goal a reality.

The adage that democracy is not a spectator sport has long been a cliché, but many young people today are not even watching from the sidelines. We must direct public attention to what higher education can do to change that.

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