

Empowerment in Student Government: The Realization of a Liberal Education

Ryan Specht

Major in History, Political Science, and Broadfield Social Science with minors in Anthropology and Art History at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, College of Letters and Sciences

M309 County Rd. E
Marshfield, WI 54449
rspec566@uwsp.edu
715.305.6739

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One can find it difficult to navigate the labyrinth of information (and misinformation) that has enveloped the Wisconsin political landscape in the past two years. A gubernatorial recall election that forced the state into a yearlong period of intense self-reflection and value questioning, followed by an equally long and entrenched national level election, has led many citizens to not only be discouraged by their political system, but also disinterested. Despite this political burnout, the state and nation fulfilled one of the critical tenets of a representative democracy – that being engaged within a civic discourse about governance. Today’s academic institutions seek to provide students with the toolkit to be more than just an informed bystander, but to be involved as a knowledgeable participant with civic society. In this paper, I will illustrate how my experiences of being involved with my student government, while at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, have taken the goals of a liberal education and helped me understand what I believe to be the most important pillar of a liberal education: empowerment.

Before discussing my experiences, I will first address the phrase ‘liberal education.’ The term is so often used, it is easy to become numb to it, or to assume it is just another phrase the university uses among their dictionary of ivory tower self-descriptors. Scholars are not all quite convinced as to a standard of what it means to be liberally educated, and what that means for political engagement. This paper and my reactions to a liberal education draw heavily from two highly esteemed scholars in the field: William Cronon, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Liz Coleman, the retiring president of Bennington College. Cronon lays out 10 characteristics of liberally educated people in his influential article, “Only Connect,” which has the obvious elements such as writing clearly and persuasively, connects with the

people around them, and can solve a variety of puzzles and problems.¹ But it also lists qualities of a liberally educated person that often go overlooked: they can listen and they hear, they can talk with anyone, they understand how to get things done in the world, and they practice humility, tolerance, and

¹ William Cronon, “Only Connect,” *The American Scholar* 67 no. 4 (Autumn 1998).

self-criticism.² These elements speak to what I believe are essential qualities of a successfully educated person, someone who cannot just critically think about issues, but who has the skill set to interact and connect with others, empowering them to do the same. The second key influence, Liz Coleman, is credited for reinventing one of the most innovative colleges based off of liberal education and civic engagement. She criticizes America's current educational system for failing to prepare citizens to be engaged participants in democracy. Coleman writes, "Beyond elections there is close to zero evidence of participation in public life, and we rank 114th in the world in our level of participation in elections. In Hannah Arendt's eloquent and succinct words: Citizenship is 'the lost treasure' of American political life."³ She continues to remark that "insofar as citizenship is taught in elementary and secondary schools, the student's relationship to government is reduced to that of being a passive spectator, learning the workings of its machinery."⁴ Coleman believes that universities however, if they employ a conscientious and persistent dedication to a liberal education throughout the fabric of the university, can be fertile grounds to grow engaged citizens.

This leads back to my own experience at an institution that follows a liberal education framework and how that has impacted my engagement with civic society. I believe strongly that the classroom itself is only a component of a much larger total education experience. The classroom is a sterile, controlled environment, where one can learn the theories and histories of civic engagement. However until one applies this (either extra-curricular or co-curricular) within a landscape external to the classroom, the true principles of a liberal education are not fully realized. My sophomore year, I had the privilege of joining my student government. Student government, by its very nature, is positioned to develop more explicitly the tools of civic engagement than other opportunities (though not to discredit

² *Ibid*

³ Liz Coleman, "The Bennington Curriculum: A New Liberal Arts." Speech, Celebration of Bennington's 75th Anniversary, Bennington, VT (October 6th, 2007).

⁴ *Ibid*

other organizations or departments). Languages are discourse specific, and being able to speak and understand the language that is spoken on the contemporary political landscape lends a distinct advantage. Knowing the language of governance though is only a part of the battle: one must have the skill set of processing that information, develop informed opinions, and then ultimately make decisions based off the available information synthesized with your core belief structure.

Wisconsin has a strong tradition of empowering student leaders by elevating the student from a consumer of the university to a producer of the university, and by giving them the responsibility to be a shareholder in creating the campus climate students desire. In the classroom, it is easy to take an introductory level on political science and be nominally aware of the state or national political landscape. It is an entirely different scenario when you find yourself testifying before lawmakers about the direct impact a certain bill will have on your school, your professors, or your peers' pocketbooks. This is where I think a liberal education is so important: there is a symbiotic relationship between the skill set as described by the learning objectives and the real world applications of that skill set. It is worth mentioning a second time that Cronon lists his first quality of a liberally educated person as the ability to listen and to hear. This is essential for dealing with individuals who may have differing views than my own, an occurrence often found in the day to day interactions in student governance. If, when interacting, we both can listen wholly to the other person, to respect and understand their view, and to be willing change your own view in light of a superior argument, then we have fulfilled our purpose as educated citizens and have connected.

The culmination of all my experiences in student governance hinge on one word: empowerment. Cronon and Coleman both devote time to this word as well, because it is essential to giving individuals voice to participate in the broader civic discourse. But if our institutions fail at this, then I fear that the negative effects of failing to empower a generation will be wide reaching. Coleman delivers that "when

the impulse is to change the world, the academy is more likely to engender a learned helplessness, than to create a sense of empowerment.”⁵ I have had the privilege of being empowered to fulfill my liberal education and engage meaningfully within the broader political landscape. But Coleman’s fears are my fears. The past two years of elections have ostracized the uninformed to the point where they become the uncaring and our civic landscape has become an arena of the few, while the “government by the people” merely watches the arena for entertainment.

Though, I will not give in to the learned helplessness. As Cronon writes, “learning how to get things done in the world in order to leave it a better place is surely one of the most practical and important lessons we can take from our education.”⁶ My own personal transformation as I went from being a passive to an active individual helping shape my university is arguably the most valuable thing I will take from my undergraduate experience. People turn to individuals who have traversed the university to be leaders in civic society, and that was cultivated in me through my involvement, and that being an opportunity granted by my liberal education. This empowerment is the greatest lesson I have learned in my experiences, that is the purpose of a liberal education, and that is the vision I will leave this institution with in order to connect and empower my peers, colleagues, and fellow citizens to do the same.

⁵ Liz Coleman, “A Call to Reinvent Liberal Arts Education” Speech, TED2009 (Februrary 2009)

⁶ Cronon