

# Higher Education: The Difference Maker in Social Behavior

Teaching Statement  
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Over 50 years of research by political scientists,<sup>1</sup> corroborated by about a decade of research by economists,<sup>2</sup> has uncovered that education is one of the top two factors that shapes a person's social behavior, rivaling the influence of one's early family environment (Campbell et al 1960: 146-148). As Robert D. Putnam puts it "education is by far the strongest correlate that I have discovered of civic engagement in all its forms ... mostly because of the skills, resources, and inclinations that were imparted" (1995: 667)<sup>3</sup>. I believe that what makes education so impactful on a person's social behavior is the extent to which education expands a person's horizons, makes them confront a diversity of thought, and trains their analytical and technical skills. I design my courses to accomplish these tasks.

First, instruction should present students with the opportunity to figuratively lift their eyes up to possibilities that they have yet to imagine or envision. For example, when teaching political economy, I like to challenge students towards entrepreneurship rather than mere wage earning (not that there's anything wrong with that) since the director of a commercial enterprise typically has a greater impact on society (for good or bad) than any individual employee of the enterprise. As an undergraduate student, I twice supervised high-school juniors in a week-long, residential, government and civics simulation experience called Operation Bentley. We regularly challenged participants to think about the possible political goals and strategies for tackling the social problems that were part of the simulation.

Expanding horizons is related to the second higher education task, confronting a diversity of thought. The knowledge that professors have amassed perhaps has no greater utility than in ensuring that each student is exposed to other ideas, opinions, beliefs, and values than the ones the student already holds. To me this requires something more, something other than playing devil's advocate during discussions. Instead, I attempt to make sure all possible perspectives on a phenomenon, issue or point of history are voiced and considered. Two documentaries I typically use when teaching American politics—*The Century: America's Time (with Peter Jennings)* and *News War: What's Happening to the News*—engagingly depict the many perspectives and arguments surrounding the expansion of Presidential politics during the New Deal and the corporate takeover of newspapers and TV news, respectively. The documentaries present positions that will please and anger both liberal and conservative students. My presentation on the historic and political reasons for why African Americans vote Democrat has proven to be eye-opening even for my African American students.

An interesting counterpoint to presenting a diversity of thought is to engage students where they are. Thus, in passing along information, I emphasize what is relevant, especially in my examples and illustrations. For example, the actions of Rick Perry and anything related to Big Oil are very relevant to Houstonians, while immigration and law enforcement are often discussed when I teach in Spanish. Plus, the documentary of the Houston civil rights struggle—*The Strange*

*Demise of Jim Crow*—is especially affecting for older, African American students, though I also use it for its excellent illustration of the pluralistic nature of urban politics. I try to make my presentations high energy, interactive, and involving multiple media, for I am convinced that passing along information successfully requires a bit of showmanship.

The job of improving students analytical and technical abilities is probably the most recognized and yet taken-for-granted task of higher education. In my courses, I use lots of smaller assignments like short quizzes, presentations, and term paper drafts as well as capstone assignments like a final exam and the final term paper. The shorter assignments afford lots of instances for me to give feedback and instruction to students on their writing, speaking and higher-order thinking—course management software is very helpful in this regard—, while the capstone assignments are to provide direct measures of the student outcomes against which the course and program will be assessed. To train their research skills, I include a class session with one of the school librarians to tutor students on searching for the composition and activity of federal, state and local government institutions.

My research compliments what I want to accomplish in my teaching. Over the course of my career, I hope to uncover more about how the policymaking properties and tendencies of political institutions advantage or disadvantage competing political actors, especially at the U.S. state and local level. There are many opportunities for students to participate with me in this research. Students can exercise their analytical and technical skills by assisting with interviewing stakeholders, collecting data, and performing descriptive, quantitative analysis. Students will confront a diversity of thought since the research question requires a non-normative evaluation of how many different political settings affect many different types of organizations. Lastly, the focus of most political scientists, the media and the public typically is on national and international politics. By focusing my research on the myriad of state and local governments, students' horizons will be expanded towards those governments whose decisions comprehensively and more immediately affect our lives.

In the end, the goal of my instruction is that students will be more personally efficacious. I want that graduates be able to imagine means and ends that presently are not, that they may pioneer to actually pursue these means and ends; and that they lead—not coerce, which is to domineer—but rather that they persuade others (Neustadt 1960, *Presidential Power, the Politics of Leadership*) to adopt their suggestions and follow their example.

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell, Angus, Phillip E. Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes. 1966. *The American Voter*. New York, N.Y.: Wiley. Wolfinger, Raymond E, and Steven J Rosenstone. 1980. *Who Votes?* New Haven: Yale University Press. Niemi, Richard G., and Herbert F. Weisberg. 2001. *Controversies in Voting Behavior*. 4th ed. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press.

<sup>2</sup> Gibson, John. 2001. "Unobservable Family Effects and the Apparent External Benefits of Education." *Economics of Education Review* 20(3): 225–33. Dee, Thomas S. 2004. "Are There Civic Returns to Education?" *Journal of Public Economics* 88(9–10): 1697–1720.

<sup>3</sup> Putnam, Robert D. 1995. "Tuning in, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28(4): 664–83.