

**EMPOWERED STUDENTS TRANSFORMING COLLEGES: CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT AS AN EQUITY STRATEGY**

Cynthia Kaufman
De Anza College

Abstract

This paper argues that students can be key actors in work done to promote institutional equity. It explores work done at De Anza College, a community College in California, to promote student voice in its work toward institutional transformation. Grounded in the work of Paolo Freire, the paper argues that students have a unique ability to diagnose the barriers they face in trying to flourish at colleges and universities. Further, having students engaged in this work can help with a key goal of many institutions: developing their civic capacity. With a move from a traditional to a transformative model of civic engagement in higher education, students can become co-owners of the educational process. Instead of treating students as oppressed people needing colonization (Freire, 1973), higher education can decolonize by supporting the development of students' sense of self, as well as the skills necessary to be agents charting their own destinies (Espinoza-Gonzalez, French, Gallardo, Glemaker, Marsura, & Thaw, 2014). It raises questions about what would be needed for students to be powerful members of our shared governance processes, and shows how at De Anza College an outsider approach to social transformation has proven to be more effective than an insider approach that is based in shared governance.

Introduction

Colleges all across the country are working to close their racial achievement gaps. “Equity” is emerging as a core concept in that work. Rather than trying to treat all students equally, the focus is increasingly on identifying the specific needs of different sub-groups of students, and transforming colleges and universities to meet those needs. Much important work is being done as colleges get clear on which interventions are the most helpful for meeting those needs (Witham, Malcom-Piqueux, Dowd, & Bensimon, 2015; McNair, 2016).

This paper explores work done at De Anza College to introduce an often underutilized resource in that transformation: students. It explores the difference that can come to an institution from treating students as subjects rather than as objects (Freire, 1973). It also explores two distinct pathways students can use when they act as subjects of their own educational transformation: inside versus outside forms of engagement (Moyer, 2002; Mitra, 2006). Finally, it explores the metaphor that Jeff Duncan-Andrade uses, that when educating people from hard circumstances, we are trying to grow roses in concrete. Following Duncan-Andrade, it asks what it takes for an institution to actually remove some of the concrete to make it easier for the roses to grow (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). It explores ways that as students are treated as subjects of their own education at De Anza College, and they have been successful at using outsider strategies of engagement, they can create fertile ground in which to achieve their own educational goals and transform the institution to improve educational outcomes for others.

This work is based on my experience as director of the Vasconcellos Institute for Democracy in Action (VIDA), a civic engagement program at De Anza College. I have taught Philosophy at De Anza College since 1991, and in 2011 became the director of what is now called VIDA. This paper is a philosophical reflection on my lived experience and my observations of students, faculty, and staff at De Anza College over many years. I have also incorporated some case study methods into this analysis, and have synthesized some theoretical and empirical work of others pertaining to this area of study. This essay explores how one college has begun to use civic engagement as an equity strategy for empowering students, and transforming the institution. It is my hope that the examples I provide, and their echoes in the literature, will be helpful for others desiring to understand how we can engage students in processes of institutional transformation.

Context

Beginning in 2013, the California Community Colleges system became engaged in a serious attempt to close the racial achievement gap so that students from all demographic groups would be achieving at high levels. The system is using an equity-based approach that tries to identify the interventions that will lead to progress for specific sub-groups; and it asks colleges to track the progress being made by those sub-groups. The state chancellor’s office requires colleges to report on “success indicators” to “identify and measure areas for which disadvantaged populations may be impacted by issues of equal opportunity” (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, n.d.). De Anza College, like many community colleges in California, has focused much attention on meeting state mandates to close the racial achievement gap.

De Anza College is a large regional Community College in Cupertino, California, a suburb of San José. It is a very racially and socioeconomically diverse college, with a student population that is 35% Asian-American, 4% African-American, 27% Latino, 7% Filipino, and 20% white (De Anza College Office of Institutional Research, n.d.). De Anza College has been a leader in including students in its work of institutional transformation. We have robust programs for developing student voice and supporting their efforts at institutional transformation. This has been supported by a college-wide approach to equity that argues that:

power differentials exist that disenfranchise some and enfranchise others. To this end, we believe that by shifting the discourse, supporting diverse learning cohorts, creating allies, integrating the practices of multicultural education throughout the curriculum and learning community and cultivating equity champions and practitioners across the campus, our vision of a fully inclusive and high performing community will continue to shape the culture of De Anza (Office of Equity, n.d.).

De Anza College is using an institutional transformation model that includes students as important members of our community, and not just as recipients of the good intentions of professionals.

While there is still a long way to go in closing the achievement gap at De Anza, a look at the statewide Student Success Scorecard shows that some progress has been made. The state has tracked completers over a six year period beginning in 2010-2011 and ending with those who completed in 2015-2016. De Anza aggregates data from its targeted ethnic groups. As a result of aggressive recruitment of students from our targeted categories, as well as regional demographic changes, the enrollment rate of targeted students at De Anza increased from 24%-32%. Meanwhile, the college's overall completion rate went from 67% to 64%. When disaggregated, the completion rate for targeted students went up from 47% to 51%, compared with the completion rate for non-targeted students, which is 71%. Thus, it is clear that De Anza College has a very long way to go. And yet it is also true that the success rate is moving in the right direction. It should also be noted that the success rate for targeted students at De Anza College is better than the completion rate for all students statewide, which has gone from 49% to 48% over the same period (De Anza College Office of Institutional Research, 2017).

De Anza College benefited from years of grassroots support for “diversity and multicultural inclusion” going back to work in ethnic studies in the 1980s. In the 1990s that work came to be focused on *diversity* and included important initiatives in multicultural curricular infusion across the curriculum, the development of supportive cohort programs for underserved target groups, faculty training on diversity and acceptance, as well as strong affirmative action hiring processes. These practices were anchored in an Office of Diversity that had a full-time director, and for some years, one full-time classified professional. That work was supported by a network of committed people who helped strategize about what changes were needed and how to move the institution to adopt proposed changes.

In 2005 Dr. Brian Murphy was hired as president. Dr. Murphy brought to the college a strong commitment to civic engagement, having run the Urban Institute at San Francisco State, as well as serving for many years as chief of staff for State Senator John Vasconcellos, for whom our institute is named.

In 2012 De Anza College changed the position of “Director of Diversity” to “Director of Equity, Social Justice, and Multicultural Education.” Dr. Veronica Neal, the person hired into that job, was a strong supporter of an institutional transformation approach to equity.

Since Dr. Murphy was hired, people engaged in institutional transformation at De Anza College have been working at the intersection of the *civic engagement* paradigm and the *diversity* (followed by *equity*) paradigms. The civic engagement paradigm promotes student engagement and the development of student voice, but it has traditionally focused the impact of that engagement on off-campus community transformation. The diversity paradigm focused on respect for all of our students and a transformation of our institution to serve our diverse student population well. The equity paradigm has allowed a stronger blending of these approaches. Diversity mostly focuses on having the right people represented in positions of power and among our student population. Equity is more focused on the dynamics of institutional power, and the tools used to transform institutions for increased equity are very similar to the tool used in civic engagement (Stewart, 2017). It has become increasingly common for people on campus to understand that amplifying student voices is an important part of improving our ability to help students achieve in school, and thus for our campus to close the racial achievement gap as well as other achievement gaps.

Theoretical Framework

The great philosopher of education and liberation, Paulo Freire argues that liberation must be done *by* the oppressed rather than *for* them. Freire offers two different reasons why this is true. First, the oppressed, once they have come to have liberated consciousness, know better than anyone else what it is that they need (Freire 1973). Second, and far deeper, is that according to Freire *liberation is a praxis*. In the very process of coming to decolonize their minds and have a sense of themselves as agents, the oppressed become the shapers of society and therefore the makers of history. They become fully humanized subjects and not just objects. For Freire one of the most damaging features of a capitalist society is that it turns people into objects, into the means of production for someone else’s project of obtaining wealth, rather than subjects who help co-create the world according to their desires.

Paulo Freire’s work was in the area of adult literacy in rural Latin America. He found that treating adults who were learning to read like children, by having them read standard early reading books, was so degrading that it was hard for them to learn how to read. When he introduced a new model that treated the adult learner as a person with dignity, and turned the process of learning to read into a process of inquiry into the conditions of their existence, his students were highly motivated, learned how to read, and also learned how to see themselves as agents of their own destinies.

Our own students who come from marginalized communities face a similar problem. The dominant culture has told many of them that they are not worthy of education; that their voices do not matter in society; and that their communities are deficient. If we educate them from a perspective that sees them as needing to be assimilated into middle class culture they will feel alienated from school and will feel tremendous sense of conflict as they give up on their supposedly negative home culture and assimilate to the supposedly functional school culture (Diemer, Voight, & Mark, 2011; Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

If we want our students to do well in school, we need to treat them with respect as adult learners who come to us with culture, with opinions, and with capacities. Our job is to cultivate

those capacities. We can work to develop our students as citizens, in the broad sense of that term, and help them to be participants in the social project of making and remaking the world (Yosso, 2006).

And if we want that, then we need to engage them in the process of their education. A deeply liberating education would involve students at all levels in questions of curriculum, pedagogy, support services, and institutional functioning. It would include them in discussions about how to deploy resources, and what kinds of support services are most needed to help students meet their needs. Moving from a traditional to a transformative model of higher education would ask us to see students as the co-owners of the educational process (Diemer, Voight, & Mark, 2011).

Instead of treating students as oppressed people needing colonization (Freire, 1973), higher education can decolonize by supporting the development of each student's sense of self, as well as the skills necessary to be agents charting their own destinies (Espinoza-Gonzalez, French, Gallardo, Glemaker, Marsura, & Thaw, 2014). Anyone working at an institution with shared governance knows that having students at the table where decisions are being made can be an empty gesture. Often it falls into what Roger Hart calls tokenism, a lower rung in his typology, "the ladder of youth participation" (Hart, 1992). Students will not be empowered nor transform institutions merely by sitting on committees where they may not understand what is happening, or where their ideas fall flat because their contributions do not fit the narrative structures being used by the professionals at the table. Similarly, it won't happen if students are asked their opinion in a survey but do not understand the context of the questions or if they are asked about things they've never thought about before (Carlile 2012; Kater, 2017; Lucey, 2002; Zevallos, 2015). And it won't happen if students feel disempowered and have not gone through a process of developing their voice and internal compass about what they want from school and indeed, from life. Rather, real, meaningful participation happens when students are put into situations where they can practice taking leadership and are affirmed and encouraged along the way; where they are given the tools to engage in meaningful social action; and where they can feel the transformative power of their actions and ideas. Real, meaningful engagement takes a big investment, but the result you get is students who are in a position to remake an institution so that it works for them and for future students like them.

Service Learning v. Civic Education

For many years, the primary mode of fostering student engagement at colleges and universities was service learning, which focused on serving communities external to a college. Traditional service learning is built upon the idea that students should learn to be concerned for others and develop their empathic abilities, as well as a sense of a larger world, by providing services to those in need. Many have criticized that model as built upon a presumption that students come from relatively privileged backgrounds and need to learn about poverty. It also presumes that the role of engaged students is to ameliorate the worst impacts of poverty rather than to impact the deep roots of social problems. As students in higher education increasingly are coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the limits of the service model are becoming increasingly apparent (Diemer, Voight, & Mark, 2011).

On the other hand, a model of civic engagement begins with the premise that students are members of societies that have not always served them, their families, or their communities well, and that the purpose of civic education is to help them find ways to change those social

realities (Kaufman, 2016; Kisker & Ronan, 2016). Transforming the institutions of higher education where they study and spend much of their time, is a sensible place for them to do civic engagement work.

Theorists of social change focus on two broad approaches to that work: inside and outside strategies (Mitra, 2006; Burstein 1999; Katzenstein 1998). Outside strategies position the social change agent as living outside the seats of power. They suppose that the role of the social change agent is to identify social change needs, put forth proposals for a transformation, and apply pressure as needed to get those changes to be made. Inside strategies suppose that the social change agent has institutional power and is located at the sites of institutional decision making and has a legitimated voice at those sites of power. Whether using an inside or an outside strategy, students can be engaged as important agents, identifying barriers to student success and working to remove them.

Toward Institutional Transformation

Most colleges in the US evolved to most adequately meet the needs of white middle-class students. As our student populations change, the ways our institutions function, and the things that are seen as core to their functioning, need to be transformed as well. Students can be tremendous assets in helping us to see what aspects of colleges and universities they experience as if they were concrete that gets in the way of their flourishing. In “Youth Development in Traditional and Transformational Service-Learning Programs,” the authors make a distinction between student action that is aimed at addressing community needs, versus transformational approaches which “foster youth’s capacity to participate in changing inequitable social structures that produce community needs” (Diemer, Voight, & Mark, 2011). By helping our students develop their capacity to be agents of social transformation, colleges and universities can be much more effective at meeting the needs of our emerging student populations.

Much work in educational transformation takes students to be passive recipients of services. That work supposes that expert administrators can develop programs and processes to better serve our students. Students often benefit from programs developed without their input. For example, an institution that offers strong tutorial services is better than one that does not; an institution that has culturally relevant curriculum is better than one that does not; an institution that offers deeply supportive math programs is better than one that does not, in spite of the fact that students may not have helped identify problems and solutions.

But our efforts at institutional transformation could be both more effective and more profound if they were to engage students as agents helping to drive the work of the institutions that exist to serve them. More effective because students often have better insight into what they need and how the institutions are not serving them than those who try to work in their interests. And more profound, because as students work to transform institutions, they develop their civic capacity. They become more than cogs in the machinery of life; they become active subjects shaping the world in which they live (A Promising Connection, n.d.; Boyte 2010; Kisker and Ronan, 2016).

Student Engagement At De Anza College

At De Anza College, the idea that students should learn to be agents of social change is built into the college's academic goals. Along with goals such as being critical thinkers and having information literacy, our students are expected to leave our college with "civic capacity for global, cultural, social and environmental justice" (De Anza College Mission and Values, n.d.).

To help our students achieve this goal, VIDA provides classes in community organizing, leading to a certificate in *Leadership and Social Change*. We also offer a number of paid internships and a robust intern support program, to help students work on projects in areas of concern to them. Additionally, up to 10 students are selected each year to learn how to advocate for policy change at weekly workshops and trainings in our Public Policy School.

When our students see a problem that affects themselves and others, they work to implement policies to solve that problem. They have chosen to work on a variety of projects that have made a real difference in the college's ability to serve their needs.

Advocating for Their Needs From Outside the Seats of Power

De Anza College is located in a large and sprawling metropolitan area, and our students come from all parts of the region. A bus pass costs \$70 per month, and was a significant barrier to success for many of our students. There were also problems with infrequent and slow bus service, causing students to spend significant time commuting. Starting in 2008, several students decided to work on getting a transit pass for our students. They were concerned about the cost of a bus pass, the amount of time it took to get to school, as well as the climate impact of so many students driving alone in cars.

That group of students worked for 3 years negotiating between our college's administration, the Valley Transit Authority (VTA), and student government. They finally achieved their dream, when in 2011 the student government passed a \$5 per quarter fee for all students in exchange for every student receiving a free bus pass. The program has had a tremendous impact on bus ridership, with the VTA offering much more frequent and express service to our campus; it has made college much more affordable for thousands of our students; and it has cut the greenhouse gas impact of our college significantly. The main student who worked on this project was one of our paid interns and she received mentoring and support for her work.

Our students also advocated for a resource center for undocumented students. In 2009 several undocumented students who were studying in a program called LEAD (Latino Empowerment at De Anza), began to speak openly about their status. They formed a club for undocumented students. And then, with support from our internship program, several of them took the lead in a project to get space, staff, and paid internships for a resource center for undocumented students, Higher Education for A.B.540/Undocumented Student (HEFAS).

HEFAS is now open and serving the campus' approximately 1000 undocumented students. They frequently reach out to high schools, and students will tell us that they came to De Anza College specifically because we had HEFAS. HEFAS has a part time grant funded staff person, and internships paid for by an outside grant as well as with student government funds, and so it has not yet achieved full institutionalization. Presently the students are working to obtain full institutional support for HEFAS.

Students in our office also saw a need for free food for hungry students. In 2012, they worked with student government and founded a food pantry that got donations from the local food bank and distributed food twice a week to students who qualified for financial aid. That food pantry has now become institutionalized as a part of the college's Office of Outreach.

Off campus, our students worked hard in the successful campaign to raise the minimum wage in San José, where many live and work; to pass Proposition 30, a major education funding measure for the state of California; and to improve San José's rent control law.

Presently we have students working to encourage the faculty to adopt more open educational resources to cut the cost of text books. We have students advocating for a change in the California tax code, so that more funding will flow to higher education. They are also working to have the campus improve the bus stop so that more and larger busses can serve the campus. And we are just initiating a project to create a supportive program for formerly incarcerated students.

Education for Social Transformation

Our students have gotten to the place where they can achieve these things through a variety of mechanisms. In programs such as LEAD, they practice civic engagement as a part of their classes. They learn about the history of struggles of others and how with good organizing one can make a difference. Students come to join in an activist culture where they are a part of a community of people who have the skills and orientation to make a difference.

The broader student activist community is enriched by those students who do intensive training on how to be a social change agent. We offer a certificate in *Leadership and Social Change*. This is an 18 unit program where students learn about the history of struggles for social change, they read Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and reflect on their own place in the world and their own agency. They take a class in community organizing skills, and they take a class in the history of power and politics in our region. That class also helps student understand the career paths open to them as agents of social change. They also complete a 200 hour internship working on issues of concern to them, and as part of that internship learn the principles of nonviolent communication. This program is part of *Community Learning Partnership*, a national initiative to develop community organizers who come from low-income communities of color at the community colleges (Community Learning Partnership, n.d.).

In these classes, students practice speaking from their hearts in front of class; they practice reflection on what they care about and what they see as problems facing them. They come to have a sense of themselves as agents of social transformation and they end up with a strong set of skills for negotiating institutions and relations of power. They learn how to analyze a situation and develop a strategic plan. And they learn the skills of emotionally intelligent leadership and non-violent communication so that they can be as effective as possible (Rosenberg, 2015; Shankman, Allen, Haber-Curran, & Komives, 2015). Important in this work is that students, even when they are employing outsider strategies, see themselves as members of a community where respectful forms of pressure are employed, and where negative forms of conflict are kept to a minimum.

The most advanced students in our program leave with a tremendous set of skills for advocacy. And perhaps more importantly, they leave with a strong sense of themselves as people who are able to make a difference in the world. They also leave with a deep

understanding of how institutions function and what are the means by which unjust relations of power can be challenged and institutions can be transformed.

When our students work on a social change project, they begin with a deep process of empowerment that helps them see themselves as leaders and not just as passive followers. That process leads them to take on all sorts of issues that they faculty and staff mentors could never predict. For students to be empowered they need to go through a fairly deep process of decolonizing their minds, so that they come to see themselves as agents of change and people whose voice really matters (Johnson, 2015; Zimmerman 2000).

The Need for an Insider Strategy

Like all California Community Colleges, De Anza has shared governance. Students are included on all major governance committees. But at De Anza, like at most colleges, these students tend to sit politely at committee meetings and say almost nothing. When that happens their participation is actually counter to the development of their civic capacity. They learn to be quiet and compliant, and to sit back while others make important decisions (Carlile, 2012; Lucey, 2002; Zevallos, 2015).

The students I work with have tended to take a community organizing or an outsider approach to institutional transformation. They see themselves as putting pressure on systems to get those systems to change (Mitra, 2006; Moyer, 2002). In my organizing skills class “Grassroots Democracy: Leadership and Power,” I teach students about the advantages and disadvantages of using an insider versus and outsider approach to institutional transformation. With an outsiders approach, one does not need to attend tedious meetings. One does not need to develop long term relationships with the targets one’s actions. One decides what one wants to see change, analyzes the obstacles, and applies pressure, in as kind a way as possible.

Katzenstein (1999) argues that insider status provides close access to decision makers, and thus can lead to greater success. And yet Mitra (2006) argues that group positioning is a strategic choice that must be made with care. In her work with high school transformation efforts, Mitra (2006) found that by choosing an outsider strategy, one of the organizations she studied,

provided ideological separation from the institution and allowed them to keep a clearer focus on the change work that they want to accomplish. By not being accountable to the school [the organization] had greater ability to pressure the institution to make structural changes. Nevertheless, the group faced a more challenging path toward seeking normative change within the school because the group was not viewed as having insider status. (Mitra 2006, 11)

Mitra argues that group positioning requires strategic tradeoffs that change agents must evaluate on a case by case basis. At present most of the students active in social change work at De Anza have found an outsider strategy more fruitful, precisely because of the way it allows them to maintain a clear focus on their own goals.

The advantage of insider politics is that one has a seat at the table, and a vote in formal decision making processes. When students are members of committees, by virtue of their position they have a vote and they are more likely to be heard with respect. I have seen this kind of insider role work. Our present Student Trustee on our District governing board has used his position to get our board of trustees to write to VTA, our local transit agency, to ask for better bus service between the two colleges in our district.

But generally, while our students have been very successful at picking a few areas of concern and transforming policies to get their needs met, they have been less successful at transforming the governance structure of our college. I believe that this is for two reasons. One is that as students have tried to do that work they have found themselves unable to penetrate the inside language and cultures of practice that govern those meetings. They have not been able to crack the code and know what effective action looks like in those places. Secondly, often shared governance committees are not actually the places where important decisions are made. So students who go into the work of shared governance often leave with a sense that participating in shared governance is often not a productive use of their time dedicated to making a difference.

In order to have students be effective parts of shared governance processes, they would need to see those committees as places worth spending their time. If a curriculum committee is only, or mostly, a place where courses are reviewed for compliance with technical requirements, then it is unlikely that students will want to spend their scarce time in those meetings.

If we want students to engage in the official parts of our colleges, as insiders, then those committees need to be places where issues of significance are discussed and decided. And, the students would need to go through some process of development such that they trust their instincts about when to speak up and when to hold strong; they would also need training and mentoring such that they would know what the explicit conversation was about, what was at stake, the meaning of the words used, and they would need help understanding the cultural norms governing the committees they were on.

When students who have not grown up seeing themselves as having power sit with experienced professionals, they spend most of their time trying to decode, understand, and follow the rules of the game. If students are to be active participants in making a campus more equitable using an inside strategy, they would need to know the rules and have a clear sense of themselves as full players.

From anecdotal conversations I understand that there are colleges that have been more successful than ours at integrating students into their governance processes. A search of the literature finds a huge gap in this area. One of the goals of VIDA in the coming period is to begin to work seriously to support our students in developing their ability to work as inside players. This is expected to include outreach to the colleges and universities that have made progress in this area, providing improved training for students who serve on committees, and investigation into which shared governance committees are the most worthwhile for students to serve on.

Conclusion

Many colleges and universities were designed to meet the needs of students who come academically well-prepared for the things we have traditionally been teaching, and they had cultural capital that was valued by those institutions. Students who come from our underserved demographic groups come to us with different cultural capital, different strengths, and different needs than we may be used to. Historically underserved students often experience higher education institutions, which were not originally designed to meet their needs, as if there were a series of brick walls in their way. Since they are the people who encounter these brick walls every day, they are in the best position to tell us what those barriers are.

The goal of equity is to transform our colleges and universities so that they serve the needs of a changing demographic of students. When our campuses use traditional methods to improve the ways we serve our students, we miss out on their insights into what they need, and we miss an opportunity to develop their civic capacities. We are much more likely to achieve our equity goals and close our achievement gaps if we see our students as agents of their own academic destinies. Students can be subjects-rather than passive objects-of educational practices.

If they are able to responsibly and thoughtfully engage in outsider practices to transform their institutions, they can make real differences in the ability of those institutions to serve their needs.

Perhaps the future will include more processes of college governance where students are prepared to be at the table as legitimated participants in the processes that govern colleges and universities. That would require shared governance processes that students perceived as worth their time, and it would require students to have gone through a significant process of empowerment, where they felt confident to participate meaningfully, and where they were mentored in the issues as well as in the hidden rules and vocabularies that govern those spaces.

The people who experience the barriers that limit their growth on a daily basis are the students themselves. And when our students know that they and other students have removed the barriers that have limited their success, they begin to see the power that they have and the difference they can make. Getting them to a place where they can understand the root causes of barriers they face, and the processes that are needed to overcome them, is a long and complex process. But one that is worth the effort.

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