

THE ROLE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN KENYAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *The Kenyan higher education seems to have failed in helping the country to realize its aspirations. The successive governments' failure to alleviate abject poverty, ignorance and diseases is shocking given that the country's universities continue to churn out graduates every year. Half a century since the independence, negative ethnicity and corruption have also successfully claimed their prominence among the myriad challenges that continue to bedevil the country. The political environment is always charged and tense with the political leaders whipping up their supporters' emotions with reckless abandon. Consequently, the country's socio-economic and political environment is evidently toxic and constricts the realization of both its past and current aspirations. However, one comprehends this stark reality upon analyzing the country's higher education objectives. A mismatch between what is taught and how it is taught in the universities and the reality on the ground might have led to this failure. For a long time, Kenyan higher education, just like its basic education, has focused more on students passing written exams at the expense of preparing them to accelerate the realization of the country's aspirations. It is against this background that I examine the role of civic engagement, in Kenyan higher education. The paper is based on critical analysis of literature on the role of civic engagement in American higher education. I conclude by arguing that civic education, if incorporated into Kenyan higher education has the potential of addressing the existing mismatch between theory and practice. This way, the Kenyan higher education's role will shift from teaching for exams to equipping students with the necessary skills needed to confront myriad socio-economic and political challenges in their immediate communities and the whole country at large.*

Key words: Higher education, civic engagement, socio-economic and political development.

Introduction

The demand for higher education in Kenya has been accelerating at an unprecedented rate in the recent past. The rise in demand is evident both in terms of increased enrollment rates and the number of universities mushrooming across the country (Kalai, 2010; Kiamba, 2003; Yakoboski & Nolan, 2011). However, despite this impressive perceived attainment of higher education, some Kenyans continue to languish in abject poverty, ignorance, diseases, negative ethnicity and rampant corruption half a century after independence. On the other hand, a good number of employees are disgruntled with the incompetence demonstrated by the graduates in the labor market (Daily Nation, 2013; Magutu, 2013). Thus, many Kenyans' determination to acquire higher education is proving counterproductive and it is imperative to explore ways of making it more meaningful to the country's socio-economic and political situation. It is against this backdrop I argue that it is vital to incorporate civic engagement into Kenyan's institutions of higher learning in order to mobilize their stakeholders to address local challenges comprehensively.

Unfulfilled Promises

Despite the rise in demand for higher education, the Kenyan socio-economic and political situation has almost remained unchanged since independence in 1963. At the time of independence, the Kenya set out to address three major challenges that bedeviled the country: poverty, ignorance and diseases. These aspirations were mirrored in such blueprints as the objectives of the country's higher education. Regrettably, none of the country's seven objectives of higher education has been addressed comprehensively (Kalai, 2010).

Civic Engagement

Civic engagement means different things to different people, colleges and universities (Jacoby, 2009). Jacoby clarifies that some of the challenges in deriving a common understanding of

civic engagement emanate from the differences in political ideologies among scholars with some of them holding the view that it is a form of indoctrination while others see it as activism. In addition, confusion arises from what civic engagement aims to achieve, bettering the society, without defining what a good society entails. Questions have also been raised regarding how similar or different it is from community service. However, despite the fuzziness in its definition, scholars agree on the need to prepare and equip students with necessary skills in order to become responsible members of both their immediate as well as the global community at large (Jacoby, 2009; Lopez & Kiesa, 2009). Underscoring the role of civic engagement, Jacoby (2009) advises institutions of higher learning to adopt the definition that best suits their philosophies, visions and missions.

Civic engagement in American institutions of higher learning has a long history which dates as far back as 16th Century at Harvard University. Over the years, civic engagement has been striving to sensitize students on the need to be responsive to the needs within their communities and the country at large with a view of nurturing and enhancing the American democracy (Jacoby, 2009). A paradigm shift from the traditional to an action-based teaching was imperative in colleges to ensure success of civic engagement. John Dewey, an early advocate of civic engagement, singled out three pillars that were vital in forming the basis of the new way of teaching in colleges and universities. According to Lawry et al., (as cited in Jacoby, 2009, p. 11), these pillars included the following. First, an approach that would facilitate interaction between students and local communities. Second, an approach based on problem-solving rather than on mastery of the course content and third, one that was student centered. Consequently, historical catastrophes such as the great depression in the US were largely solved through civic engagement. In addition, other initiatives such as the Peace Corp in 1961 and the Volunteers in Service to America in 1965 were launched with the intention of devising solutions to real challenges affecting people. The latter

resembles the Kenyan Graduate Volunteer Program recently launched (DPPS, 2014).

Civic Engagement Initiatives in Colleges

Research findings show that there exists a positive correlation between American college students and civic engagement both while in college and after college (Lopez & Kiesa, 2009). Factors attributed to this positive correlation include availability of opportunities to engage in civic activities backed with sound pedagogical foundations, selection to college criterion which cherishes volunteer work and the fact that college students are able to interact with people from diverse backgrounds who have different views regarding socio-economic and political issues. On the other hand, students participate in civic engagement activities for a number of reasons including the need to gain informed insights regarding social issues, as a way of helping others who might be in situations similar to the ones they might have gone through in the past and for self-fulfillment from their accomplishments (Dunlap & Webster, 2009; Lopez & Kiesa, 2009).

To demonstrate the pivotal role that colleges play in instilling desirable behaviors among their students, AAC&U 2007, (as cited in Musil, 2009, p. 51) outlines important learning outcomes that are crucial in equipping students with the necessary skills needed in solving today's socio-economic and political global challenges. These outcomes relate to the knowledge of world cultures and the world in general, need to be knowledgeable about their respective courses and how to apply this knowledge, self and public responsibility and need to have substantial knowledge of other disciplines apart from their majors. To achieve these outcomes, deliberate efforts are needed in repackaging the curriculum to accommodate courses and approaches necessary to bring these outcomes to fruition (Spiezio, 2009; Welch, 2009).

The fact that students will have to deal with complex global challenges after college makes urgent the realization of these outcomes. One way of realizing them is having a culture that introduces and prepares college students to civic engagement activities immediately they enroll in college (Hunter & Moody, 2009; Musil, 2009; Spiezio, 2009). Scholars note that while students' success largely depends on their personal input, the extent to which the administration provides necessary resources, facilities and crafts the curriculum also plays a significant role. With regard to civic engagement, scholars argue that colleges and universities must necessarily provide adequate opportunities that will lead to adequate exposure to civic engagement activities (Hunter & Moody, 2009; Spiezio, 2009). Among the approaches that different universities in America have adopted to introduce

and prepare their freshmen for civic engagement include summer camps and retreats, orientations, day long community services, first year seminars, and issue-specific multi-disciplinary courses. However, despite all these efforts that different colleges and universities have adopted to civically engage their students, Spiezio (2009) argues that democratization of classrooms is the single most important factor needed in order to nurture the ideals of civic engagement. Democratizing classrooms in Kenyan universities would be an important starting point in demystifying higher education which is characterized by elitism (Lutta, 2012; Ooro, 2009; Wright, 2000).

Civic Engagement and National Unity

Apart from adding rigor to degree programs offered in Kenyan higher education, civic education would go a long way in addressing the vice of negative ethnicity in Kenya. Kenyan ethnic diversity has been a tool for division for a long time. Hatred emanating from this vice manifested itself in the 2007/2008 disputed presidential elections and on social media in the 2013 presidential elections (Mutiga, 2013). Since collaboration among people of diverse cultural backgrounds is the hall mark of civic engagement (Dunlap & Webster, 2009; Paul, 2009), I am convinced that civic engagement would play a vital role in healing the country. Kenyan colleges and universities stand a good chance of bringing people together by the virtue of them being cosmopolitan. Scholars in civic engagement have cited mutual respect among the partners in any civic engagement projects as the pillar on which they thrive (Paul, 2009; Jacoby & Brown, 2009). This would mean that rival ethnic groups would have to put aside their perceived political differences for them to pull together. In addition, since Paul (2009) argues on the need for students and local communities to get into projects as equal partners, collaboration emanating from such partnership would go a long way toward fostering national unity. In addition, research emanating from their collaboration might culminate in promoting social justice through influencing government policies (Paul, 2009).

Conclusion

The demand for higher education in Kenya has been accelerating at unprecedented rates since independence. However, the challenges bedeviling Kenyans have increased since then despite the increased number of graduates in the country. Civic engagement, if incorporated into Kenyan higher education may help to reform it. Among the many achievements it would bring to Kenyan higher education and the country at large include adding rigor through practical skills, demystifying it by eradicating elitism, democratization, and national unity.

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