

# Educating citizens, supporting students' political engagement, and getting out the



*Lawrence University President Jill Beck welcomed students back to campus September 27, 2007, with her fourth matriculation convocation address. An advocate for civic engagement, she challenged students to become more informed and involved in the 2008 presidential election process. Written with students in mind, President Beck's remarks are also a call to action for Lawrence alumni and the entire Lawrence University community.*

In recent years, I've become increasingly concerned about the lack of political participation among many college students. This lack is by no means restricted to Lawrence, but appears to be a national phenomenon. In fact, participation among the general public has dropped as well. Because my concern is shared by many faculty members and college and university presidents, I've decided to speak on that issue today. It has never been more important.

The education of citizens is both a founding tradition and a recent concern in higher education. One shared goal of liberal education is to prepare students to promote the common good. Alan Ryan, Warden of New College, Oxford, who spoke at Lawrence earlier this year, views promotion of the common good as the responsibility of the individual: "The liberal ideal is political; it looks to the creation of good citizens and, in embracing liberal education as a means to an end, it looks to the education of autonomous, argumentative, and tough-minded individuals as the safest and best way of creating good citizens."

As Christina Elliott Sorum points out in her scholarly review of the origins of liberal arts education in America from classical roots through the foundation of Harvard College, the mission of liberal education was always linked to the support

of democratic political institutions. The early Sophists, for example, "taught models of argument, the origin and structure of language, and oratory, skills necessary...to lead in the assembly." As we know, and as Lawrence freshmen will soon learn, in the *Republic*, Plato's educational mission was designed to "create and maintain the state through educating useful and just citizens." Later, Cicero was also concerned with educating political leaders and informed citizens. When Harvard was founded in 1636, its mission followed the Ciceronian ideal of training leaders and shaping character.

But has liberal education in the United States continued to live up to this ideal of creating good citizens? Has Lawrence University?

There are several studies that report a decline in civic engagement and a loss of trust in politics by young people. Quoting Anne Colby, while "...the rates of political participation among college-educated Americans are higher than those without a degree, only one third follow public affairs regularly and less than two thirds vote in both national and local elections."

It may be surprising to learn that students (ages 18-24) have a relatively lower participation rate in the political process than older voters. Historical comparisons of this age group with the aggregate voting age public indicate that young adults are 16 percentage points below the rest of the voting age population in registration and nearly 18 points below in voting. A Harvard study in 2000 concluded that many young voters have a "perceived lack of knowledge about the issues." Colby, et al. suggest, although I do not necessarily agree, that young people may not yet have developed "the capacity to interpret, judge, acquire knowledge of, and understand complex issues and institutions."

We should ask ourselves whether students at Lawrence are immune, either to this lack of in-depth knowledge of complex social and political issues or to this comparatively low voter participation rate.

If we were to follow our liberal arts educational goal, our purpose would be to reconnect college students with political affairs and traditional forms of political involvement. As Colby says, it is important that we “build bridges to students’ own conceptions of appropriate political analysis and action.” This aspect of civic responsibility is least attended to in higher education, even among schools with strong commitments to moral and civic learning.

I’m going to use two terms in the next few minutes: “political awareness” and “political engagement.” Political awareness includes being informed about issues and adopting political opinions. Political engagement means doing something about our opinions, and includes, according to Colby, “activities intended to influence social and political institutions, beliefs, and practices and to affect processes and policies relating to community welfare, whether that community is local, state, national, or international.” Political engagement, Colby says, may include working in “political interest groups, or political organizations, participation in public forums on social issues, discussing political issues with family and friends and trying to influence others’ political opinions; working on a campaign for a candidate or issue...and of course voting in local or national elections.”

Colby cited developmental factors that contribute to students’ relatively weak political awareness. She argued that to take full advantage of political systems, “this involves knowing how things work, including...which issues and actions are appropriate to address at which level of government.” But, she says, moral and political concepts are developed and applied “in the context of social interactions.” Because peer participation is relatively weak in colleges these days, even budding activists may find an infertile climate for developing their political awareness.

While there is consensus that there is lack of political awareness and engagement among many students, the impulse to contribute to the common good has been served by volunteering in the community. While it is clear that there is political apathy, this does not mean students in American colleges are not engaged, but they tend to devote their time and energy to the local community, an activity to be commended. Perhaps this is because they can see tangible benefits of their contributions in the local community, but perceive government as broken, political parties as polarized, television campaigns as inane and trivial, and therefore a poor investment for their time and energy. Perhaps it is very understandable why researchers have found that students’ community service in such places as women’s

shelters is perceived as making a more tangible difference than political action. Community service is vital, but it is not sufficient. We cannot let our commitment as citizens languish.

Why don’t we include more civic learning in liberal arts education? One answer may be that although the education of citizens was a primary goal in the founding of liberal arts colleges, the rise of the research university and individual disciplines has tended to concentrate academic activity in the *departments*. As Sorum concluded before her untimely death, “in the name of depth and in recognition of our own disciplinary professionalism, we have made the major the center of a college education. We have also largely abandoned the goal — in fact, questioned the propriety — of shaping character even in the benign form of a capstone seminar on moral philosophy or ethics.... It is no longer clear to our students — I fear, in part, because it is not clear to us — that the liberal arts prepare us to be better persons and better citizens and leaders in today’s world.”

With the increasing move to departmental specializations, moral and civic education has become relegated to extra-curricular activities. What other factors may be at work?

Civic education is interdisciplinary by nature, and there is little room in the curriculum for it. Typically, members of college faculties receive few, if any, incentives to act outside their departments. Research productivity in one’s specialization is the passport to promotion and tenure. Also, there has been a demise of core courses in many schools, in favor of distribution requirements. Indeed, Lawrence’s signature Freshman Studies program is an exception in liberal arts institutions. How do we fit the education of citizens into our programs?

**T**oday I will share with you some recent ideas, proposed at Lawrence, about the kind of learning outcomes that would contribute to the development of students’ political awareness and engagement. Last year was a significant one for Lawrence. We carried out a theme year emphasizing individualized learning, led by Professor Beth De Stasio and the members of her committee. While the achievements of the year included a conference involving the University of Oxford and Williams College, among others, and a new Senior Experience requirement for all students, another noteworthy result that emerged via the faculty, the provost, and student consultation was a clarification of our educational philosophy.

I’ll begin with the De Stasio report. “Traditional college age students in the U.S. need mentors as they mature from receivers of knowledge to synthesizers and, eventually, creators of new knowledge. It is our responsibility to devise curricula that help our students develop the characteristics of intellectual indepen-



**Jill Beck** (center) is the 15th president of Lawrence University and the first female president in the college's 160-year history. Under her direction and leadership, Lawrence's post-doctoral teaching fellowship program was created, a Collaborative Conference on Individualized Learning was held on campus, and the ArtsBridge America program she founded, placing college students in K-12 classrooms for hands-on arts experiences, has expanded to 22 colleges in the United States and Ireland. She endorses individualized instruction, community engagement, and collaboration between the arts and sciences as key components of a liberal arts education.

Pictured with President Beck are Provost and Dean of the Faculty **David Burrows**, and Associate Professor of Biology and Raymond H. Herzog Professor in Science **Beth De Stasio**. Their recent work cites the importance of developing individuals who are intellectually independent, self-directed, and citizen-leaders with a strong sense of connection to the world they live in.

dence as well as the skills of disciplinary scholars.”

In Provost Burrows’ essay on our educational philosophy, which recently appeared in *Lawrence Today*, he describes one goal as a “commitment to helping students develop as individuals who are intellectually and personally autonomous — to becoming self-directed persons” who “develop as citizen-leaders with a strong sense of connection to the world they live in, combined with the courage and skill to make responsible changes to that world.”

The faculty of Lawrence University last year approved a Senior Experience program that will begin with the class entering in fall 2008. The program emphasizes the development of each student as an individual who has the cognitive skill, sense of self, and commitment to being a citizen-leader that together lead to a life of fulfillment and excellence. At the heart of the program is Lawrence’s philosophy that approaches liberal education as the transformation of the individual, leading to the emergence of autonomous persons, capable of generating new ideas and making informed, responsible decisions.

**S**o, as we approach a profound teachable moment on the horizon — the coming presidential election — what kind of political engagement should we expect from students who are independent thinkers and citizen leaders? We know that political apathy characterizes young people generally — can this be overcome? How should we encourage students to approach their decisions on the candidates they wish to support? We know that young voters, like older voters, may be confused by all the candidates and issues, and take shortcuts in making up their minds. Is this what independent thinkers do?

Several studies of political decision-making have concluded that most voters consider candidates’ positions on the issues, their personal qualities, and party affiliation as key determinants of their choices. Voters vary in how much information they are willing to weigh in making their decision. There is a school of thought that most voters are “cognitive misers” in the face of complexity and seek shortcuts and reduced information on which to make their decisions. Lau and Redlawsk conducted experimental studies of voter decision-making and modeled four kinds of voters. The Model 1 voter (a type that I think Lawrence should support) “actively seeks out as much information as possible, about every available alternative....” This voter makes rational decisions “under conditions of full information.” Model 2 voters rely disproportionately on party identification to influence their decisions. The Model 3 voter reduces information search to a few key attributes and tends to ignore everything else. The Model 4 voter is largely intuitive and relies on stereotypes.



Given this range of models, it is clear that the Model 1 voter is an optimal type from an educational standpoint. How do we support the development of Model 1 issues-oriented voters at Lawrence?

The principal problem facing voters in primaries, particularly, is sorting through their positions on the issues. The complexity for voters consists in knowing where a large number of candidates stand, and determining which issues the voters themselves think are the most important. With the ideal of the Model 1 voter in mind, it is incumbent upon us to develop methods that will enable voters to cope with heavy information demands and to identify those candidates whose positions on the issues most closely match their own preferences.

To address the problem of the informed student voter, a number of Web-based initiatives have been created to increase student engagement in the political process and voting in particular, such as Rock the Vote, MoveOn.org, Declare Yourself, League of Women Voters, On the Issues, Vote Match, Citizen Change, Citizen Lab, and many others.

Political party leaders agree that Internet-centered activities are necessary to reach young voters. In a recent study, three student groups and a control group were offered different kinds of information to determine the ideal conditions that predict the likelihood of voting. Students in the group with most contact with the instructor were more likely to vote than the control group. However, the group with the highest voter turnout was the one that received only information on “cool Web sites” to visit.

Also, an investigation of student voting patterns has shown that “the more college students discuss politics and current events outside of class, the more likely they are to vote.” In 2002, it was found that 88 percent of students who discussed politics on a near-daily basis voted on election day, whereas 66 percent voted if they had discussions only a few times a month.

What’s the way forward at Lawrence? Over the past summer, a team on the Lawrence campus led by David Berk, Gregory Blike, and Arno Damerow, with Robert Beck and Ted Gaulin collaborating from the University of California,

Irvine, began to design and build an interactive Web site, MyElectionDecision.org, as a two-campus project between Lawrence and UCI. MyElectionDecision.org will help prospective student voters develop a deeper understanding of candidates' positions on the issues that will be useful to them for making informed voting decisions in the primary and presidential elections. Commencing this fall, the Web site will use a series of interactive questionnaires and electronic discussions to obtain students' ratings on critical issues in the coming campaigns, as well as forums to develop their arguments about their preferred candidate(s) in discussions with other voters. On MyElectionDecision.org, you will rate which issues are most important to you, take a blind test without knowing which candidate said what, judge which issue statements you support, and then, with computer assistance weighing your preferences, find out who your candidate is. After that, if you wish, you can be randomly placed in an electronic discussion group to debate your choice with other student voters.

In the words of *USA Today*, "The 2008 Presidential Election has the potential to become one of the most historic elections in U.S. history. This will be the first election without a presidential or vice presidential incumbent candidate since 1928." What then should we aim to do this year at Lawrence in preparation for the upcoming presidential primaries and the November 2008 election?

First, we should commit to as complete a voter turn-out as possible. Some Lawrentians may not be eligible to vote, because of age or status as international students. However, students not eligible to vote can still commit to more political awareness and to learning and understanding more about social and political issues in order to discuss and debate them from a more sophisticated and well-reasoned knowledge base.

Suppose the percentage of eligible voters at Lawrence may be around 80 percent. Then we should aim this year for 80 percent voter turn-out. Please note that I am not interested in your choice of candidate, but in setting the goal that we all exercise our vote.

We should also commit to becoming Model 1 voters who decide to support candidates based on the issues. I am certain that the faculty and students will have many ideas about how to accomplish this. One key thing I would like to suggest is that Lawrence get on board with our own Web site initiative, MyElectionDecision.org. This interactive, unbiased Web site will be part of an exhibit on the electoral process that opens in November at the Freedom Museum in Chicago. There is a link to the Web site from [www.lawrence.edu](http://www.lawrence.edu).

**A**s president, I will personally become more politically engaged and contribute to the development of Model 1 voters by offering a seminar in both the winter and spring terms featuring discussions of issues of national importance that will be selected in coordination with students and student groups and organizations. The seminar will be open to 12 students each term.

I recommend that as a campus, then, we set the dual goals of increased political awareness and increased active political engagement. We need as a university to say no to apathy, no to cynicism, and yes to participatory democracy. If we do not say yes to the working ideal of participatory democracy, what basis for the future of our country do we imagine in its place?

I look forward to seeing many of you participate on MyElectionDecision.org, some of you in my seminars, and all of you committed to increased political awareness and, if eligible, voting. Remember Alan Ryan's clarion call: "The liberal ideal is political; it looks to the creation of good citizens, and in embracing liberal education as a means to an end, it looks to the education of autonomous, argumentative, and tough-minded individuals as the safest and best way" (and I insert some of my own words here) of ensuring the future of democracy. I urge each of you to find ways to make this period of critical decisions for our country and the world a part of your education at Lawrence.

*Jill Beck*

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