

ROB HOLLISTER

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Students lead the way on active citizenship

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A KEY MESSAGE from Deval Patrick's gubernatorial victory is that the people of Massachusetts want to be more than voters; we want to be active citizens. We want to work together to build healthy communities and to solve shared public problems.

On the campaign trail, Patrick called on us to take on the responsibilities of citizenship. "The task for you," he said, "is not the work of public leaders alone. It is the work -- if not also the duty -- of each of us. We need a new spirit of civic responsibility that is less about party politics and more about problem-solving."

Patrick tapped into a reservoir of latent idealism and a public yearning to reach beyond the limits of our self-interest and to look after one another. He was onto something when he said: "Community is more than a neighborhood. Community is about connection, about seeing our stake in each other's dreams and struggles, as well as our own."

An especially important realm of our citizenry's "hidden" idealism is in the minds and hearts of young people. A big myth is that young people are mostly cynical, apathetic, and disengaged from public life. Of course today's teenagers are self-involved. But their innate idealism is huge and as a society we continue to underestimate their burning desire to make a positive difference with their lives. Indeed, many colleges and universities are recognizing this fact, developing innovative public-service programs that reach far beyond the traditional volunteer service center approach.

This movement to teach values and skills of community leadership is far more pervasive than many realize. Campus Compact, the national higher-education association dedicated to campus-based civic engagement, has grown to more than 1,000 college and university presidents representing more than 5 million college students. Colleges and universities across the country -- from the University of Pennsylvania to the University of Southern California, from Tufts University to the University of Minnesota -- are building much more substantial undergraduate public-service programs not just to address the urgent need for more effective community leaders. A second and equally powerful influence is student demand -- increasing numbers of college students expect community service to be part of their college experience.

Students and others who cast their ballots for Patrick heard his call to action and welcome the challenge. They're prepared to be active citizens. They want a state government that embraces its fundamental responsibilities, and meets them more effectively. They don't think government alone can solve community problems. And they want a state government that facilitates and supports voluntary citizen action, not one that treats it as a substitute for public investment.

Active citizenship is about investing our personal time and energy in working for change, not leaving it to elected representatives or someone else. It's about each of us sharing responsibility for everybody's well-being. It's about volunteering to tutor in public schools and serving on nonprofit boards. It's about businessmen and women who are building a campaign to develop early childhood education for all. And it's about grandparents who advocate successfully for legislation to combat drunken driving.

Across our nation, college students are showing they understand that government is more effective when it engages the full power of individuals and groups to take on and to solve public problems. In Massachusetts, Patrick has mobilized them in ways that delight some of us for sure, but shock all of us, because we are seeing an activism that has been dormant for decades.

Our communities are desperate for our collective engagement. If we're smart, we will learn from our students and follow their lead.

Rob Hollister is dean of the Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University. ■