

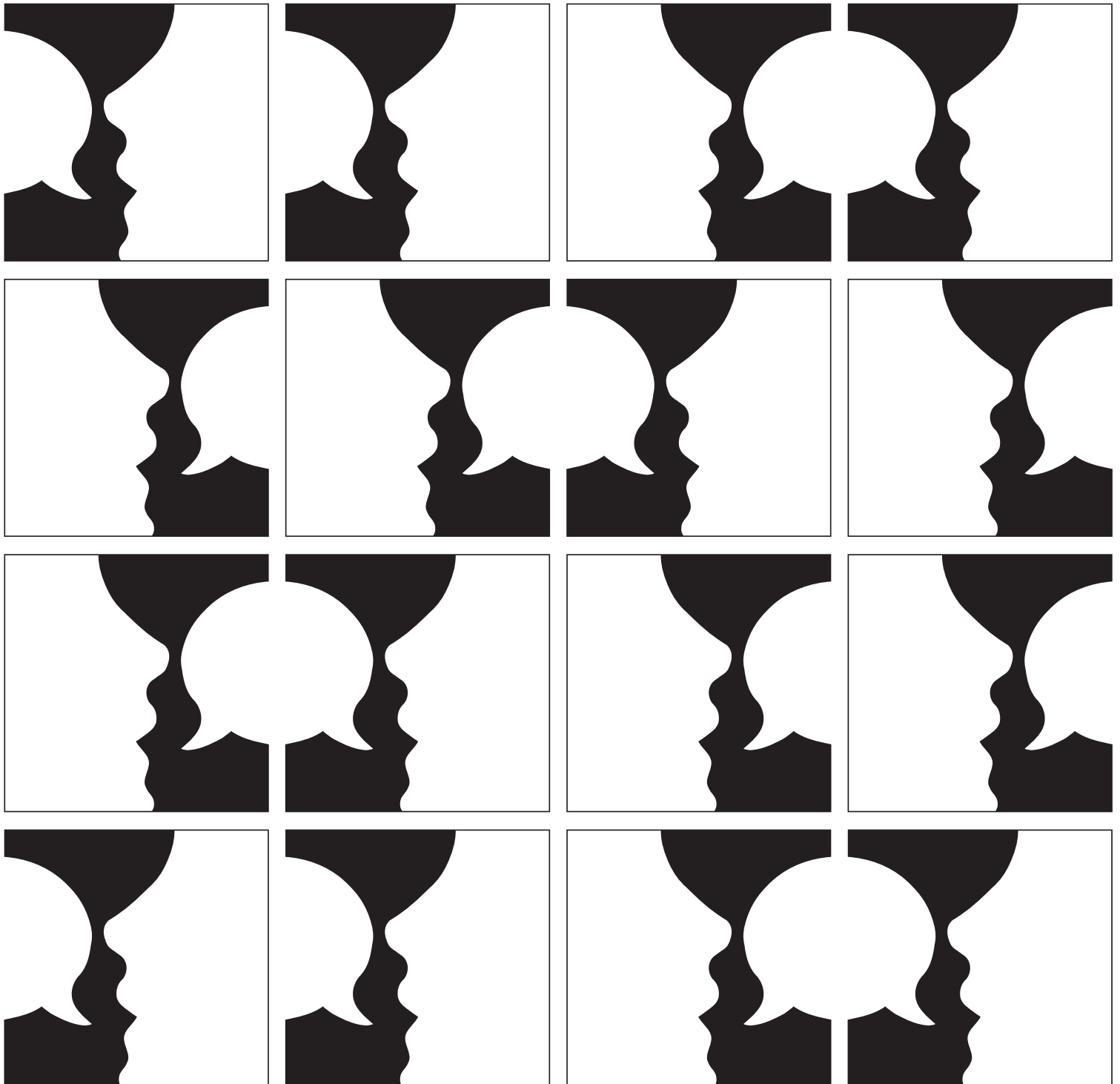
November 2005

# Toward a Theory of Civic Engagement

*Jerzy Hauptmann*

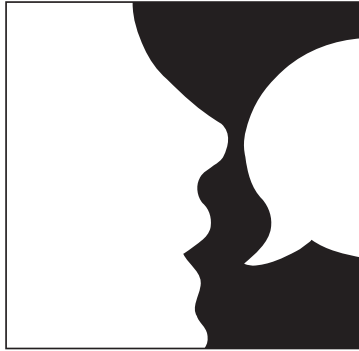
*Professor Emeritus of Political Science and Public Administration*

Park University International Center for Civic Engagement



# Toward a Theory of Civic Engagement

Attractively sounding words as democracy, freedom, peaceful change, free markets and human rights seem to dominate our times. Current events bring specific evidence to the realization of these ideas, but at the same time evidence to the contrary demonstrates their violation.



*It is the objective of civic engagement to look at...great ideas from the micro level and to suggest approaches which might ameliorate the contradictions evidenced in the macro analysis of these ideas.*

As proof of the forward march of democracy and freedom, happenings like the Ukrainian Orange Revolution, the Syrian forces evacuating Lebanon and the government change in Kyrgyzstan are mentioned. Yet the Islamist jihad, the war in Iraq and continued problems in Afghanistan together with the continuing Israel-Palestinian stalemate point in a different direction.

Peaceful change seems to be occurring in parts of Sudan, in Northern Ireland and in many elections, as in Poland or Bulgaria. Yet at the same time authoritarian developments appear in Russia, in Uzbekistan, and in many African countries.

Free markets have brought positive developments in many countries of Asia and East Europe for instance, while many others still cling to economic planning and governmental controls.

The human rights scene points to manifold favorable changes in Latin America, even in China and other East Asian countries. Day by day, however, violations of human rights worldwide are recorded by such nongovernmental organizations as Amnesty International.

The above descriptions have one factor in common. By and large they look at the world scene from a macro point of view, from top to bottom. This results in a clear picture of generalities while specifics on the micro level are not noticed.

It is the objective of civic engagement to look at the mentioned great ideas from the micro level and to suggest approaches which might ameliorate the contradictions evidenced in the macro analysis of these ideas.

## The Predecessors of Civic Engagement

The micro analysis has an ancient origin in the Athenian democracy, yet in the past the relationship between rulers and ruled resulted in regarding the population as subjects to the ruler who had specific rights over them, frequently attributed to a divine source.

Participation of the ruled in the political process slowly gathered weight in the Western world, for instance in the Magna Carta. Later, the writings of Locke and Montesquieu, the social contract ideas, the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution began to emphasize a different relationship-making approach by citizens (no longer subjects) and elections of the rulers more and more widespread.

The extension of voting rights to previously excluded groups, the introduction of proportional representation, growing participation in elections, and increasing numbers of candidates for offices all were evidence of a developing more active role of citizens and of closing the gap between rulers and ruled.

Still a gap remained, although in the cases of the New England town meetings or the Swiss cantons, for instance, the resurrection of the Athenian democracy began to find expression. The concept of "grassroots" became more and more prevalent in discussions of political affairs.

## Expanding Role of the Academy

Attempts to close the gap found special expression in the introduction of forms of direct democracy, such as initiative, referendum and recall. They met, however, with mixed acceptance.

A special way of attempting to close the gap was the idea of civic or citizenship education gaining familiarity and becoming a common feature of secondary education.

In addition, widening involvement of governments extending beyond the traditional spheres into environment, health and resources resulted in the emergence of many interest groups, frequently emphasizing single issues, which brought their concerns to government attention.

This increasing concern for the public for affairs of the country was not limited to government only. It found also expression in the areas of business and even other social organizations. In all of the areas, the demand to listen to the participants as consumers became widely heard resulting in wider participation in their governance, in labor unions, and in involvement in governmental affairs.

Corresponding to this we find also in public administration increasing acceptance of the involvement of public management employees. In this way, together with such ideas as the emergence of ombudsmen, the role of citizen in governmental affairs has expanded. To complete this picture, the appearance of a variety of nonprofit organizations has to be mentioned, which by their activities contributed to the closing of the gap mentioned above.

The typical role of the higher learning institutions in the United States of the 18th and 19th centuries was to be isolated from the communities, concentrating only on the personal developments of the students. The academy was located on a hill looking down on its environment from a superior position. As a result a town-gown conflict developed with the academy satisfied to remain in its ivy-covered building and preaching morality to the town.

In such a situation, there was not much room for an academic consideration of politics and government. Courses related to these areas, if at all present, considered classical writings and constitutional arrangements. In time this began to change and more courses developed resulting ultimately in the creation of departments of government and political science. Coverage in those departments began to expand by adding different courses and stressing the actual conduct of public affairs.

The development of progressivism and good government ideas obviously could not have these departments immune of them. They became frequently sources of ideas and moral concerns closely related to the real political scene, obviously maintaining some form of neutrality.

This appearing closeness brought also students into contact with the world of politics. Political and governmental speakers began to appear for guest lectures in classes and students visited political events and offices. Following that, internships in offices and political campaigns became a standard feature.

Encouragement of such closer relationships became in the 1950s a concern of the Citizenship Clearing House financed by the Pew Foundation. These activities penetrated institutions and teaching.

They were quite successful and, after several years, ceased operations.

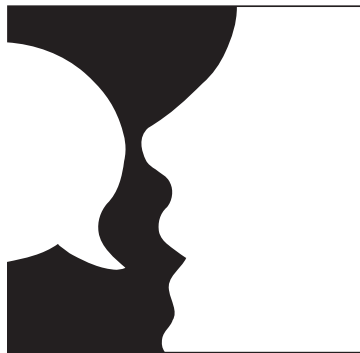
The introduction of different model programs, such as model legislatures, Model United Nations, or Model Organization of American States attracted wide attention in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Programs like the Washington, United Nations or London Semester allowing students to spend a semester away from the home campus in real political situations were very popular.

The idea of political participation of students and faculty gained wider acceptance beginning in the 1960s. This brought some closeness to the teaching, but at the same time created the danger of limiting neutrality and objectivity while allowing personal views to enter into teaching.

In time, similar developments penetrated departments of economics, sociology and psychology. Areas of study and departments very closely related to actual life began to be established as “public administration,” “business administration” or “social work.” Fields like journalism or education always had a close relationship to actual life. Even some of the natural sciences developed specific interests and involvement in such areas as environment, health or hazards.

The institutions of higher learning began to recognize also the need for a closer relationship to secondary schools. And so, for instance, colleges and universities began to conduct workshops for teachers of specific fields such as social studies and offer programs for high school students such as model legislatures or Model United Nations. These programs brought hundreds of high school students to the campuses making them aware of problems faced by American states and by the world’s countries.

*Civic engagement is not restricted or related to politics only. The reference to “civic” suggests that any kind of involvement in the affairs of government, politics, administration, or organizations could be regarded as civic engagement.*



## Achieving High Goals

The discussion of public affairs and the academy above showed a clear preponderance of macro approaches. Surely enough it was announced that a proper macro performance ultimately will bring about favorable micro changes. This did not necessarily happen and so the gulf between the two levels continued.

Emphasis on the macro level involved a setting of high sounding goals – a free society, higher standards of living, involvement of citizens and better prepared students. These goals and others similar to them obviously were quite desirable, but they were never clearly identified and their achievement because of the impossible measurability was difficult to ascertain.

This kind of approach was best described by Max Weber’s ethics of ultimate ends. He analyzed the effects of working toward high sounding, generally moral goals which gave motivation to efforts, pointed out directions and presented an idealized ultimate end. Such an approach could certainly bring with it great efforts and in many cases approximations of the desired goals. Yet it was never quite sure whether the ultimate ends were achieved, since all too often they were relegated to a future continuously moving away.

This obviously meant that the ultimate ends acquired a form of doubtful reality. One was working toward the high goals which were steadily moving away. With such movement also the initial motivation was weakening. Certainly there were some highly desirable results of the goal-directed activities, such as in missionary work or in improvements of municipal government, yet by and large the ethics of ultimate ends did not bring about the expected and desired results.

However, there was an important side effect of these efforts. They resulted in an increased participation of the affected

people and groups. One could with pride point out, for instance, increased participation in elections, greater membership of organizations and so on. Establishment of correlation between higher participation and goal achievement was never clearly evident.

In addition, these kinds of activities brought also about an increase of easily available information on the state of affairs in communities and organizations. It is, however, again difficult to prove that such an increase resulted in the achievement of the set goals.

To state it generally, the ethics of ultimate ends with its emphasis on high sounding goals despite of the increases in participation and information does not bring about the desired effects. Some of the very desirable changes on the macro level do not transmit to the micro level in any expected manner.

## The Effects of Current Challenges

Our critical analysis of the macro approach to high sounding goals showed that they have substantial shortcomings. This does not imply, however, any disregard for goal setting and planning to achieve them. It rather becomes necessary to consider how proper goal setting and planning may play a role in solving the problems we are facing.

These problems are evident in any kind of observation. They were very well described by Madeleine Albright, former US Secretary of State, during celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the Solidarity movement in Poland. She stated them as coercion, corruption and complacency, the three Cs (Warsaw *Polityka*, September 10, 2005, p. 22).

During a September 2005 speech at the University of Kansas, Lech Walesa, the former President of Poland, discussing the current situation in the world pointed out two issues we are facing. One is globalization which according to him “must be based on a value system ... that gives all people an equal chance to achieve success.” The second is that “today you can still find a lot of people who are not satisfied with things” (*The Kansas City Star*, September 23, 2005).

These current problems cannot be solved by the macro approach alone, since they have existed for a long time and their solution has been frequently attempted by this kind of an approach. Their situation today becomes increasingly difficult as a result of spreading violence, such as used by Islamic fundamentalism and of a very high incidence of natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods and earthquakes.

It becomes, therefore, necessary to try a different approach which could be based substantially on Max Weber’s ethics of responsibility.

How would this be different from the macro approach? Weber points out that the achievement of any goals at any institution depends on individual actions of the people involved in the institutions concerned. They have to be motivated to act and more than that they have to be responsible for the results and consequences of their activities.

## The Difference of Civic Engagement

It needs to be stated, first, that civic engagement is not restricted or related to politics only. The reference to “civic” suggests that any kind of involvement in the affairs of government, politics, administration, or organizations could be regard-

ed as civic engagement.

Secondly, engagement is much more than participation, even observant participation. It goes further than that since it demands more than membership in an organization, paying dues, occasional attendance of meetings and reading the materials provided by the institution or organization.

This wider understanding of the term involving not only public affairs and going beyond participation is increasingly needed today because of the problems discussed in the previous section. These important problems continue to demand attention because their common solutions have not produced results.

Calling for a different approach, does not, as indicated, show a disregard for governmental or organizational goal setting and planning of goal achievement. They all are still important and demand continuous use.

It is also basic to recognize that we live in an organizational society and, therefore, individual activities to be effective are to be conducted within organizational frameworks. Yet effectiveness of organizations always depends on individual actions. Individual goals within organizations are central for the organizational activities. Surely enough there may be discrepancies between organizational and personal goals, yet the organizational goals may be difficult to achieve if they disregard personal goals.

The issue of goal achievement in our times has also to take into account the problems created by globalization. Therefore civic engagement has to be approached always within the globalization context.

And here Max Weber’s ethics of responsibility enters. The individual has to pro-

ceed toward goal achievement with a specific understanding of the expected results and assume responsibility for them. Only then, if the results are identifiable and measurable may it be possible to ascertain whether they have been effective. What is true for personal goal achievement is obviously also true for organizational goal achievement. This makes it now possible for us to attempt an operational definition of civic engagement:

*“Active involvement in the affairs of an organization including setting (if at all possible) and working toward the achievement of organizational goals, while clearly expressing personal goals and striving for identifiable results of the activities for which and for their consequences one is responsible.”*

## The Demands of Civic Engagement

Civic engagement to be effective requires first and foremost an understanding of and information about current problems. Depending on the area of expected involvement this means exact, and, as much possible, complete data on the respective community or institution.

What is needed next is the recognition that the elites have not been able to solve the manifold problems facing communities and organizations. Surely enough, they have been constantly approaching solutions, but their efforts did not always produce the desired results. High sounding goals have been attractive, but all too frequently they remained in the verbal realm involving only some of the affected groups and individuals.

Involvement of as many groups and individuals as possible is a demand of civic engagement. This kind of involvement is based on the recognition that not only the elites, but everybody is responsible

## Civic Engagement in Action

for the failing accomplishment of the goals. This failure is to a large extent due to the previously discussed setting of high sounding goals and looking for perfection, leaving out more pragmatic solutions related to the ways of goal achievement. What is also missing is the specific description and assignment of responsibilities of the affected individuals and groups.

What has been said is related not only to areas of politics and government as consistently was stated above. Also affected are all social and economic areas together with all organizations operating in them. This is important to mention again since we are facing interconnections of all areas of life. Any activity in one area will have an impact on others. Reference to chaos theory makes this evident.

In addition to that we again have to refer to global interconnections which make any activity on the local or organizational level important because of its worldwide implications.

Responsibility for the results and their consequences plays a central role in civic engagement. It is essential to keep in mind that it is not only institutional responsibility within the existing frameworks, but first and foremost individual responsibility related to one's goals and values.



The previous considerations clearly imply that civic engagement is more than membership in an organization and participation in it, even if it were involving some activity. Civic engagement goes beyond such focus of involvement looking for more effective activities.

What makes civic engagement different is, as indicated, the emphasis on responsibility for individual actions and this means responsibility for results and for their consequences. Such an understanding obviously places individual actions within an organization in a focal position. Connected with it is also the awareness that one's activities and their results have an impact on the activities of others. We have here, therefore, a system of interrelationships.

To make the activities of an individual and his responsibilities more meaningful, the concept of vocation is central. One is called to do a certain work. This understanding of vocation may have a religious foundation (as discussed by Max Weber), but makes sense also with a secular base, such as "professional," "issue related," and so on.

It becomes now necessary to show how civic engagement can actually operate in different settings. Let us start with a community. Here the individual before becoming engaged has to learn about the community, then indicate one or a few areas of community concern affecting him or her, learn more about them and finally become involved in them by joining committees, forming groups of people with similar interests and so on. Here it is essential that the expected results should be definite, their consequences recognized, and also these results being periodically evaluated.

What has been said about communities refers similarly to political activities and nongovernmental organizations. The

steps of involvement are essentially the same.

Of special concern is the work in administrative positions. Here there are no problems if there is no conflict between organizational and personal goals. If, however, a discrepancy arises then civic engagement demands that this conflict be clearly expressed. The differences should be pursued within the organizational limits. An administrator, therefore, committed to civic engagement cannot in a covert way act against organizational goals, but has to state his or her position clearly. If this is impossible then civic engagement requires a separation from the organization and pursuit of one's goals within the indicated community procedures.

Even in the area of business and economics such engagement is possible by paying attention to the activities of owners or managers. We know of such engagements in the field of labor relations or consumer relations. What is missing in many cases and falling short of civic engagement is the recognition of responsibilities and results. An interesting example on a large scale is developing in Germany with nationwide protest activities against high natural gas prices. The results of these activities are clearly expected in lower prices and the leading people accept their responsibilities in case of failure.

In a representative governmental system, civic engagement becomes more difficult. Yet even here an individual and any group may find problem areas affecting them and proceed in ways similar to community activities. Ultimately also candidacy for elected office is possible, with both individual candidates and electoral campaign groups following the patterns of civic engagement.

Any discussion of civic engagement has

to take into account the necessity of assessing and evaluating their activities. Only if the results and consequences of the engagement are evaluated and a positive correlation with the intentions is evident may we regard civic engagement as effective. Obviously in a case of lacking correlation the entire involvement has to be reconsidered.

A word of caution is also necessary. All civic engagement activities due to their nature have to be non-violent. This establishes a clear limitation for any kind of civic engagement

Finally civic engagement has nothing to do with mass activities which always are definitely emotional and do not view possible results and their consequences at all. Mass activities emphasize the protest activities, such as the French Revolution or the intifada, with the protestation having priority over the envisaged results. Civic engagement is not only peaceful, but essentially also individualistic and goal rational.

## The Role of the Academy

The academy has to decide what role civic education will play in it making education its focal point, since the academy's purpose is education. This means first and foremost creating a climate for teaching which would place civic engagement in a central position.

Civic education has to find a place in any academic area, on both the undergraduate and graduate levels, with political science as a core. Due to globalization realities, courses in international relations and foreign governments are essential.

The form civic education will take in any discipline goes beyond such standard forms as guest lectures, visits, internships, and model programs depending substantially on the imagination of the involved faculty. For any such effort to be effective, knowledge of American government is indispensable.

Of special concern here are international

students. They have to be made aware of the American system and led to a recognition that civic engagement can play a great role in the development of their native countries. The global implications of any civic engagement activities need also specific consideration.

The involvement of faculty in civic engagement has to be clearly stressed and recognized by assigning to it a place in any assessment of evaluation activities.

The academic institution as such has also to be involved in civic engagement which requires involvement of the administrative personnel in community affairs. Academic personnel should be expected to play a central, but by no means authoritative role, in their communities. Similar involvement is expected from the faculty in their communities and also in their professional associations.

The academy is expected to play a model role in civic engagement. As stated, this involves a role for students, faculty, and administrative personnel. Their involvement should provide a model for the role of similar institutions. This also means that the institution itself should practice civic education. Ways have to be found to make it an open institution and that the civic engagement climate created finds also expression in the administrative conduct of the academy. Only if this is the case can the model role be realized. A discrepancy between the teaching of civic education and the internal lack of it being practiced would make the entire prospect of civic education questionable.

Civic education, especially in its global elements, provides means to address the many problems we are facing. It is the academy's role to take a leading position. Lech Walesa, who was quoted above, at the same September 2005 lecture stated: "If you fail to get involved ... others will do it for you." We know very well what the involvement of others has brought about in communities, in social life, in economic concerns, in public affairs, in the world and in the academy. The call for civic engagement has, therefore, a special urgency.

## Central Points of Civic Engagement

Our discussions of civic engagement makes it possible now to state in a concise form the elements required for any kind of civic engagement activity.

- Civic engagement is a rational goal-centered activity, sharing responsibility for its actions and concentrating on its results and consequences.
- Civic engagement is an individual non-violent voluntary action, generally within an organizational framework, but possibly also an individual pursuit.
- Civic engagement emphasizes the interrelationships of all its activity areas, since effects in any of them may influence others as well.
- Civic engagement has to place its activities in the global framework, since all its activities may have global effects and consequences.
- Civic engagement expects organizations, including the academy, to be models in its administration and activities, which assigns a special function to the academy's teaching concerns.
- Civic engagement recognizes the existence of value frameworks, in which organizations and individuals operate. These frameworks may provide motivations and an understanding of vocation for individuals affected.
- Civic engagement necessitates periodic assessment and evaluation of its activities, going beyond quantitative forms, and implying the possibility of modification and even abandonment of its goals and activities.

Instances of actual civic engagement after some time will provide opportunities for examining not only these actual cases, but also the validity of the central points stated above.

The problems we are facing today in our communities, in all our lives and in the world at large demand consideration of an alternative to standard goal setting, based on striving for perfection and ultimate ends. Civic engagement based on rational goal setting as well as considering results and consequences of activities undertaken *may* be this kind of an alternative.



P A R K U N I V E R S I T Y  
INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR  
**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

**International Center for Civic Engagement**  
**Park University**  
**8700 River Park Drive**  
**Parkville, MO 64152 USA**

Phone: +1-816-584-6412  
Fax: +1-816-741-5812  
E-mail: [erik.bergrud@park.edu](mailto:erik.bergrud@park.edu)  
Web: <http://www.park.edu/icce>