

Civic Learning



THE CHALLENGE OF THE BICENTENNIAL DECADE

*“I know no safe depository
of the ultimate powers of society
but the people themselves;
and if we think them not enlightened enough
to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion,
the remedy is not to take it from them,
but to inform their discretion.”*

Thomas Jefferson (1890)

By CAROL J. BURR

Aducate the people, Mr. Jefferson had admonished, that they might govern themselves wisely. The founding father's prescription for the preservation of a fledgling democracy was nearly two centuries old. Yet there they sat in the fall of 1983, a group of the University of Oklahoma's most able faculty members confronting the disturbing prospect that perhaps the complexities of self-governance had outstripped the average citizen's willingness and ability to comprehend.

The faculty group had assembled to implement an adult education program in civic learning. Their purpose was to provide the citizens of communities throughout the state with the political, philosophical and cultural grounding to enable them to participate intelligently and effectively in the affairs of local, state and national government. To accomplish this lofty goal, the educators put together an academic roadshow of five-week, non-credit courses to be taught wherever they could secure a meeting room and enough interested parties to form a class.

The organizers of this project, principally David Ross Boyd Professor of Political Science Richard S. Wells and Vice Provost for Continuing Education William H. Maehl, had sold their idea to the National Endowment for the Humanities, whose \$134,554 grant would finance a two-year pilot program. They had enlisted the participation of a blue-ribbon advisory committee, and some of the University's best classroom teachers had agreed to design and conduct the courses.

Now all the educators had to do was sell after-hours learning in a market dominated by entertainment for entertainment's sake. They did not delude themselves; when it comes to mass appeal, Plato doesn't stand much of a chance against "Magnum P.I."

In part, the impetus for the OU Civic Learning Program came from a 1981 study by the Carnegie Foundation, which came to the alarming conclusion that "as a nation, we are becoming civically illiterate. Unless we find better ways to educate ourselves as citizens, we run the risk of drifting unwittingly into a new kind of Dark

Age—a time when small cadres of specialists will control knowledge and thus control the decision-making process."

While calling on schools and colleges to attack the problem within the classroom, the Carnegie report warned that "*civic education is not just a one-shot affair. If Americans are to be more adequately informed, education for citizenship must become a lifelong process.*" The challenge to continuing education programs was inescapable.

To University of Oklahoma adult education specialists, the 200th anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution of the United States—the Bicentennial Decade—seemed the ideal opportunity to promote civic learning. Maehl, in consultation with various members of the faculty, formulated a general plan of short-term, non-credit courses (with a credit option available) designed for thoughtful, active citizens who wish to gain a better understanding of the funda-

the civic learning directorship.

"This was too tempting," he admits. "I try to teach politics as if it were a humanity, where that is possible. The problem is that the practice of politics has become so subject to a set of skills, to cause and effect, that the substance of politics is lost. Your purposes—what politics traditionally was to accomplish—tend to become a function of your skills rather than the reverse."

Political science, however, was but one aspect of the interdisciplinary approach the civic learning planners took in designing the initial series of courses for 1983-84. The first advisory committee included OU President Emeritus Paul F. Sharp and George Lynn Cross Research Professor Arrell M. Gibson, both historians; Director of the Women's Studies Program Barbara Davis, professor of English; Chairman John Catlin of the department of classics; Director of the Scholar-Leadership Enrichment Program J. Clayton Feaver, David Ross Boyd professor emeritus of philosophy;

They had a sizable grant, a blue-ribbon panel of advisors and a distinguished faculty. Now they had to sell civic learning courses in a market dominated by "Magnum P.I."

mental issues confronting contemporary society.

The primary responsibility for course content was assigned to Wells, who agreed to devote half time to directing the civic learning project, which would be housed administratively in the College of Liberal Studies under the supervision of Associate Dean Dan Davis. Michael Masopust, whose teaching specialty was freshman English, was recruited to assist with the preparation of the successful NEH proposal, then to assume a quarter-time role as the program's assistant director in charge of sites, scheduling, sponsors and promotion.

As a political scientist long concerned with the perception of his academic specialty, Wells had been too intrigued with possibilities of the new program to turn down Maehl's offer of

and Law Professor Drew Kershen.

The selection of the first six courses to be offered reflected the diversity of interests which would continue to characterize the program. In keeping with the Bicentennial Decade emphasis, Wells led off with "The Power of Constitutions." The course focused on the purposes of constitutions, an interpretation of the U.S. Constitution, the problems of maintaining a balance of power between the major branches of government, and American constitutional crises as illustrated by landmark Supreme Court decisions.

Historian David Levy's "The Idea of America" examined the differing ideas held by various factions throughout U.S. history, such as native-born Americans, immigrants, blacks, women, businessmen and workers.

of our political and governmental system at the expense of political dynamics," Wells explains. "One result—painfully felt by any program with the word 'civic' in it—is a national distaste for the subject."

In the 1960s a "new social science" curriculum was developed to cure the blight of "civics" with an emphasis on inquiry skills and attention to political systems, an approach Wells characterizes as producing "better political scientists than citizens."

The adult education mode of promoting civic literacy—no educational prerequisites, basically non-credit, the only reward being self-improvement, meeting after hours in home communities—is designed to help the participants serve as their own sources of information. Through the assigned readings and class presentations, the faculty sought to foster understanding of the basic concepts of citizenship, encouraging their classes to question and discuss, thereby developing the critical skills necessary for effective participation in civic affairs and politics.

"In a sense," Wells says, "the civic learning courses teach participants how to become their own teachers."

Surprisingly, developing a sound program, obtaining NEH sponsorship as a national pilot project, recruiting a faculty and designing the individual courses proved to be the easy part of the civic learning enterprise. Placing the program in communities throughout the state, publicizing, underwriting, and attracting enrollments called upon the academicians to develop new areas of expertise.

The first year of the NEH two-year grant was devoted to development, trying out two free courses in Norman and offering the full schedule of six fee-charging courses in Oklahoma City. The results were mixed. Response to courses in Norman, where the population is keyed to fringe benefits of a University community, was extremely encouraging, both in numbers and enthusiasm—and the price was right.

In Oklahoma City, free publicity was more difficult to obtain; the fee of \$40 per five-session course for instruction and study materials seemed to

discourage participation; class locations in the OU Health Sciences Center may have been intimidating. The advisory committee and faculty regrouped and adopted some new tactics for the program's second year.

Unqualified encouragement from the program's outside evaluator, whose annual visit was a condition of the NEH grant, also served to spur the OU group to refine and intensify their efforts. Catherine Bedell, former congresswoman from the state of Washington, came to the campus in April 1984 and enthusiastically endorsed the project as "a civic literacy program far more creative and imaginative than any I have ever known."



Some of the best advice in developing the civic learning program came from participants like John Faught of Oklahoma City, right, with William Maehl.

"In one of our discussions," Bedell reported, "I said I thought this Civic Learning Program ought to be made mandatory before any citizen ran for public office. I was only half joking. When I first ran for public office, I was in many ways a civic illiterate. There were gaps in my knowledge of what the system was and how it worked. A couple of years and I had those civic facts pretty well in hand, but I still lacked the basic understanding of the roots and ideas that were so necessary

to good thinking and intelligent decision making."

The base of operations for the program was broadened with the addition of four new sites, Tulsa, Ardmore, Duncan and Woodward. A return to Oklahoma City also was scheduled. The faculty diversified by inviting several of their teaching colleagues from other Oklahoma institutions to develop new courses.

Tim Mauldin of the Oklahoma City University political science department joined Wells in a revised and renamed constitutional offering, "The Authority of Constitutions." Lloyd Musselman, an OCU historian, presented a new view of Abraham Lincoln

and Theodore Roosevelt in "Venturous Conservatives." John Feaver, from the department of humanities at the University of Arts and Sciences of Oklahoma at Chickasha, offered his version of Levy's course, "The Idea of America," while Danney Goble, a Tulsa Junior College historian, introduced "Oklahoma and the U.S. Constitution."

Local sponsorship to defray enrollment fees and the involvement of local civic leaders proved keys to success for

We the People

domestic Tranquility, provide for
and establish this CONSTITUTION

Common Defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of
the United States of America.

of the United States, in Order to form a more

perfect Union, establish Justice, insure dom-
est peace, and bind our Posterity, do ordain



the second year. Chambers of commerce, local and state arts and humanities councils and libraries became involved. The Oklahoma City course was held at the State Capitol with the endorsement of Speaker of the House Jim Barker and Senate President Pro Tem Rodger Randle.

Particularly beneficial to the program in Tulsa was the sponsorship of *The Tulsa World* and the Williams Companies. For "The Problems of Technology," Lancaster enrolled 55; a few were married couples, 10 were senior citizens, 5 to 10 of those attending regularly were educators and the balance came from the business community. All were non-specialists whose interests were in the problems that science presents rather than in science itself.

Levy's "Idea of America" was likewise popular in Tulsa, where two of his participants were state representatives Don McCorkle and Penny Williams. For his first course in Duncan, which had no local sponsor to alleviate the cost, Levy drew only 10, but he found them to be a cohesive, eager group, very involved in the community and a good basis on which to build for future civic learning courses. Similarly Wells was impressed with the 14 who turned out in faraway Woodward.

Traveling to various types of com-

munities throughout the state on a regular basis proved nearly as instructive for the faculty as for their students. Accustomed to somewhat younger groups over whom they had power of pass or fail, the professors found their "volunteer" students stimulating.

"I've never had such discussion or such an unusual sense of commitment," Goble says. "In one case they stayed 40 minutes after class to continue the discussion."

Musselman was somewhat startled when his Ardmore enrollees informed him at the first class session that they were the best Ardmore had to offer. "They told me that they were sure I was going to enjoy the course," he laughs, "and I did."

Wells and Masopust felt that the classes were enhanced by participants who already knew each other, as in the smaller communities or employees of the same firm. "It's gratifying when they feel the course has ended too soon," Masopust admits.

Venturing beyond the campus also can be a humbling experience, as Thompson discovered when a scheduling oversight left him with a layover in Woodward. Staying overnight in a motel room supplied by an accommodating Chamber of Commerce, Thompson was awakened at 7 a.m. by

a teenage maid banging on his door.

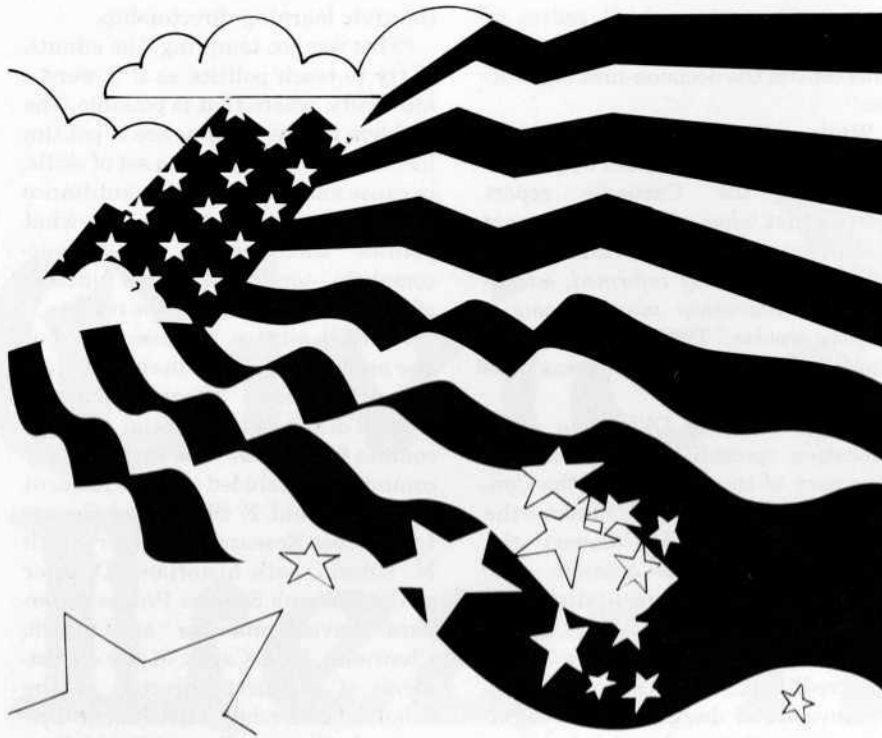
"Are you a coach?" she asked the visitor from the University of Oklahoma.

"I'm afraid not," Thompson confessed.

"Oh, I thought I was going to meet somebody important," the disappointed maid replied.

Ironically, just as the civic learning experiment was beginning to take hold, the two-year NEH grant was about to expire. The prospect of abandoning the program was particularly distressing to the second outside evaluator, Phyllis O'Callaghan, assistant dean of the School for Summer and Continuing Education at Georgetown University in Washington, D. C., who visited Norman in April 1985. After reviewing course content, conferring with faculty and advisors and monitoring a class in Tulsa, O'Callaghan interviewed a cross section of civic learning students—a medical doctor and his wife, a Ph.D., a newspaperman, a librarian, an assistant school principal, an employment counselor and a staff assistant at the state capitol.

"I heard comments like, 'stimulated my brain,' 'helped me spiritually and mentally,' 'enjoyed the course 100 percent,' 'would take more,'" O'Callaghan reported. "Students praised the teachers as outstanding and



The five-session course concluded with an analysis of the forces that keep the country unified, even in the face of profound and persistent divisions.

Levy's historical approach to diversity led naturally into another Wells course, "The One and the Many," a discussion of whether consensus is possible in an increasingly pluralistic society. The course also examined the social and personal difficulty of being simultaneously a part of and apart from society.

"To realize themselves fully, members of the many diverse and individual strains that have been combined to form our society need to preserve, protect and express their special character while at the same time participating in and gaining the benefits of membership in the larger group," Wells says of the course.

As an example, Wells alluded to the American Western hero as illustrative of an individual-group relationship. The hero is uncomfortable among the "settlers," those who prefer to live in groups, while they likewise often are fearful or suspicious of the one who deviates from the norms of the group.

"The relationship between the one and the many is fundamental to any political society," Wells explains. For

example, tax dollars often support activities that certain individuals do not support, and conscience may call us to make choices that are inconvenient or even painful. Individual members of minority groups often must deal with the fact that they may be seen as "different" by the majority. It is often difficult to conceive of "different" people as being equal; the one seems to preclude the other.

For the fourth course in the series, the civic learning committee went to the sciences, enlisting John H. Lancaster, an associate professor of microbiology, to address "The Problem of Technology." Lancaster began with the peculiar reverence Americans have for the technology that has brought their society unparalleled economic and political success. He then addressed the growing public concern that the complexities of technology have gone beyond common understanding. Out of such discussion, Lancaster sought to develop awareness of the need for citizens to educate themselves sufficiently to keep technology under prudent democratic control, as illustrated by one of the course readings, a recent Supreme Court decision involving genetic engineering.

"The Politics of Scarcity," the fifth civic learning offering, gave the faculty a unique opportunity to demonstrate the program's versatility. The course was initiated by a political scientist, George Lynn Cross Research Professor Don Kash, who formerly headed OU's Science and Public Policy Program. As his focus, Kash used the arrival of the oil glut on the heels of the world energy crisis precipitated by the Arab oil embargo and the Iranian revolution.

When geographer Gary Thompson took over Kash's course during civic learning's second year, he concentrated on the conflict of the prudent use and sharing of resources with America's past tradition of plenty, which always had assumed a limitless expansion of resources. Thompson also dealt with the chaotic energy market, but the famine in Africa soon brought the issue of food scarcity to the public's attention, lending even more credence to the course's content. In several sessions Thompson was able to involve former U.S. Senator Henry Bellmon, an expert on world food supply.

The wrap-up course of the series, "The Paradox of Freedom," was a team effort using the talents of Wells, Feaver, Levy, Lancaster, Catlin, Ker-shen, Thompson, Kash and Masopust, with added input from then state representative Cleta Deatherage Mitchell, who at the time also was teaching political science courses at OU.

Together the team led class participants in exploring the contradictory or paradoxical qualities of freedom: How much is too much freedom? Are we free in spite of—or because of—society? What are the contradictions between freedom and authority? Can inequalities result from the pursuit of equality? What are the burdens each individual assumes in order to be free?

Throughout the first year of the civic learning project, the faculty continued to stress the theme of class participation, practical application and bringing theory into the marketplace of citizenship. The Carnegie study had made it clear that the traditional public school approaches to civic education had failed.

"The so-called 'civics' approach emphasized the learning of the structure

applauded their expertise at moderating — a significant and important talent, especially when teaching adults. The faculty seemed enthusiastic about the quality of the students, their intelligence, their persistence, their dedication to class preparation and participation.”

While acknowledging the problems in marketing and financing, O’Callaghan concluded, “It would be a shame to have to abandon this program just as we approach the Bicentennial of the Constitution and the Congress. If not now, when can we test the public’s interest in American history and constitutional issues?”

Although running out of time on the original grant, the civic learning project was not completely out of funds. Prudent use of the grant money in anticipation of needing a third year to complete their task and help from local sponsors and the Oklahoma Foundation for the Humanities enabled the educators to stretch the courses over another season. NEH approved a time extension with the knowledge that the OU planners intended to apply for a new three-year grant in the spring of 1986 to institu-

tionalize civic learning as an ongoing adult education project in Oklahoma.

Chickasha, Bartlesville and McAlester were added to the schedule, and historians Norman Crockett from OU and Joe Blackman from Tulsa Junior College joined the faculty. Enrollments were up; by spring 1986, 757 had enrolled in the 11 different courses that had been offered 36 times over the three-year period.

Return visits to Tulsa, Duncan and Ardmore bore out the advice which former class participant John Faught of Oklahoma City had given O’Callaghan, i.e., the best vehicle for promoting the program is the people who already have taken part. When Wells introduced his new course in Tulsa on the founders of the constitution, “John Adams: the Man Who Wasn’t There,” he found that nearly half of those who completed the sessions had taken previous civic learning offerings.

One of the most gratifying by-products of the University’s civic learning program has been the establishment of Project 200 as the city of Tulsa’s official bicentennial organization. Originally the result of informal discussions between the OU group, the Arts

and Humanities Council of Tulsa and key civic, cultural and educational leaders, Project 200 since has become CONSTITUTION 200, designated by the Oklahoma legislature to promote the statewide observance of the 200th birthday of the U.S. Constitution.

Wells contends that Oklahoma has a historical connection to the development of the Constitution that few of its citizens realize. “We tend to think that our state is too young to be involved in this phase of American his-

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tory—that it is an eastern interest—but that is simply not true. This state and its policies have been more heavily involved in significant constitutional questions than any other state, with the possible exception of Louisiana.”

One of the great constitutional crises Wells cites as impacting directly on Oklahoma was the 1832 confrontation between Georgia and the Cherokee Indians, which led Chief Justice John Marshall to doubt that the Constitution was working.

“The Supreme Court said Georgia must honor its commitments to the Cherokees,” Wells explains. “But President Andrew Jackson refused to enforce the decision, which meant that the Cherokees and other Indian tribes were going to move to Oklahoma. In a sense the state’s origins are to be found in a constitutional crisis.”

With such a constitutional precedent in the state’s history, it is appropriate that the University of Oklahoma should have accepted the academic challenge of the Bicentennial Decade. If the Carnegie study is correct, if democracy is endangered by the inability of citizens to comprehend the complexities of their government, then education must provide the enlightenment.

Mr. Jefferson would be pleased. ☞



Civic learning director Richard Wells, right, confers with Danney Goble, Tulsa Junior College historian who joined the teaching staff during the second year.