

## LA INFLUENCIA DEL CONTEXTO INSTITUCIONAL EN LA FORMACIÓN CÍVICO-POLÍTICA DE LOS ESTUDIANTES DEL NIVEL DE LICENCIATURA

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**RESUMEN:** México requiere de jóvenes involucrados, capaces de ejercer su liderazgo a través de una participación activa que contribuya a la mejora de la sociedad. ¿Cómo pueden las universidades en México promover la formación de estudiantes social y políticamente participativos? ¿Qué recursos estratégicos tienen las instituciones de educación superior para desarrollar el sentido de responsabilidad social y el involucramiento de los estudiantes? ¿Qué factores de la vida universitaria influyen, de manera positiva y negativa, en el deseo del estudiante para involucrarse? ¿Qué pro-

gramas universitarios coadyuvan a la formación más efectiva de ciudadanos? Estas preguntas constituyen la base de un estudio de investigación a través del método cualitativo de la teoría fundada, que permitió la construcción de un modelo que explica cómo se involucra el estudiante en actividades de participación cívico-política durante su experiencia de vida universitaria.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Educación Superior, Educación Cívica, Participación Social, Participación Política.

### Introduction

The citizen's participation in their community is a fundamental component of a democratic society (Barber, 1984; Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2007; Boyte & Kari, 1996; Dewey, 1916); where democracy is not only a form of government but a way of living; where the citizens engage for the construction and transformation of the social and political life of the community (Dewey, 1916, 1927). The purpose of every university is to contribute to the public good by educating socially responsible, civically minded, engaged citizens. In the context of a developing country such as Mexico, with multiple challenges of social, political and economic order, the role of universities in preparing future leaders and civically engaged citizens is fundamental. Some indicators of engagement in Mexico from the 2008 National Survey on Political Culture (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2009) show that 59% of the citizens voted in the presidential election of 2006 yet an 88% of the citizens have not been involved in solving problems of their community and a 92% have never been in-

volved in a political party. Education becomes the critical factor for the country's improvement as a better-educated population contributes to the country's growth, to its economic development, and to strengthening the voice and participation of civil society in the promotion of reforms and changes that might lead to change. Educational attainment studies from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development show that in Mexico, only 13% of adults between 35 and 64 hold an associate's degree or higher (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2008) so students who successfully complete a college education are truly privileged and can be considered an elite minority.

In Mexico, those professionals who achieve an undergraduate education from public and private universities represent the future generations of businessmen, politicians, entrepreneurs, managers, teachers, technicians and other professionals who will join the workforce, in different sectors of the economy, with new methods and attitudes. These professionals can help fuel the country's economy. They also represent hope for the more than fifty million Mexicans who currently live in poverty, with limited access to education and health care, in dramatically deprived living conditions, and without the means to strive for a better future.

Higher education can promote the development of strong and participatory citizens who can contribute to serve a democratic society. Hartley and Hollander (2005) stated that this has been the higher purpose of American colleges and universities since they were founded in the 1700's; however, in the last decades civic education has been eclipsed by other priorities such as vocational training, economic development, research and the need to survive market forces. By enhancing the intellectual, moral, physical and social development of their students, universities contribute to the betterment of society. Higher education provides numerous individual benefits to those who acquire a degree such as better employment opportunities, access to higher salaries and savings levels, and overall an improved quality of life; but in addition to individual gains, society benefits from the knowledge and expertise of university graduates who contribute to their communities by paying taxes, raising productivity, increasing consumption, reducing crime and increasing the quality of civic life (Bloom, Hartley, & Rosovsky, 2007). Therefore, colleges and universities are considered a mean to improve the social, political and economic conditions of a region, by contributing to the education of present and future generations. Higher education institutions foster the intellectual, social and civic development of their students in order that they become outstanding professionals and socially responsible, engaged citizens

who can lead social change (Astin, 1993; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, Rosner, & Stephens, 2000; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003).

Given the multiple challenges of the country, Mexican higher education institutions should focus not only on educating outstanding professionals, but also on promoting a strong civic education that would contribute to strengthening society and making it more engaged and active in the everyday problems that the country faces.

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry based on grounded theory was to determine how undergraduate students at three universities in Mexico become civically and politically engaged during their university years; and to understand how the institutional context influences the student's interest and disposition to participate.

The sites of the study included one public research institution, one private technical research university and one private faith-based university. The study provides an understanding of the student's engagement process: his motivations, the factors that enhance or mitigate his interest, and the benefits he receives from participating.

## **An Explanation of Civic and Political Engagement for Undergraduate Students enrolled at Mexican universities**

The purpose of a grounded theory study is to develop a theoretical or explanatory model of a social phenomenon. In the case of this study, the method was used to derive an explanation on how students become engaged during university. Strauss and Corbin's (1998) paradigm was used to identify and organize the data. This study generated data from the student's experiences and was organized into categories that provided the framework to construct the story of how students became civically and politically engaged at a Mexican university. Figure 1 is the graphic representation for the six phases or stages in the process, and it explains how students become involved in civic and political activities during college.

### **Stage 1: Factors that influence the student's disposition to participate**

In the initial stage three factors are strong forces that influence the student's disposition towards taking an active role during university: the student's personality and traits, his previous participation either during high school or childhood in civic or leadership activities, and the family context.

### **Stage 2: The need to inform the student about the alternatives he has to participate**

A second stage introduces the importance of having the student discover the alternatives he has to participate and the benefits of joining the activities. Many students advance through college not knowing about the civic groups, the student government or the many activities that the university offers them to engage; or they have a misconception of what the activities are and their goal.

### **Stage 3: The different motivating factors that trigger the student's interest and desire to engage**

A third stage in the process of engaging has to do with the motivating factors that trigger the student's interest and desire to participate. The drivers for the student's participation are: (a) confronting reality and bursting the bubble they live in, (b) believing in the cause, (c) joining to connect with other students, (d) facing the need to change the current status of things and to act, (e) feeling pride or love for their institution or for the country, and (f) acknowledging they must engage to produce change.

### **Stage 4: The key strategic programs that universities have at reach to promote the student's civic and political participation during college**

From the data analysis three key strategic programs to engage students at the university were identified. These programs are explained in stage four of the model.

## **The curriculum**

The first resource that universities have to engage the student intellectually and practically is the curriculum. Participants explained how their academic courses served as opportunities to learn about the world around them. The student's moral development and social responsibility were enhanced by class dialogue and discussion. The curriculum represents a valuable resource for students to learn and research about society and their community. They can debate and discuss on the crucial problems, apply their skills and knowledge to solve problems and become civically involved in the day to day issues that affect the community. In similar way professors who encourage students to research and to analyze, not only the problems but the causes, enhance the student's learning.

## The student government and other groups

The second strategic action that universities have to foster civic and political engagement during the university are student life activities, particularly the student government, the student organizations and the different social groups. These groups are extracurricular activities that encourage the student's political association and involvement (Larson, 1994; Stolle & Rochon, 2001). Through participating in student organizations students develop a sense of agency and preparation for the workplace, they take on responsibilities that imply they have to plan, prioritize and organize the different academic and formative things they need to accomplish. By participating in the groups, students expanded their social capital because the tasks associated with the student organization force them to relate with to politicians, businessmen, contractors, social leaders and the media among other groups. The planning and organization of events contributes to the student's development of leadership skills (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998). By participating in the groups students learned how real organizations are structured and what are the different processes they operate; they learned to understand their university and external organizations.

## The community service experience

The third strategic program or action that universities have to foster participation is the community service experience. Universities have in the community service experience a powerful resource to engage undergraduates in socially and civically oriented activities. Students value the opportunity to do community service and they recognize it as a good experience. Participants reported how through the community service component they found an alternative to "burst the bubble" and leave their safe and known world to help others with their talents and capabilities. Participants agree with the service being a mandatory component and recognize that otherwise students would fail to perform the hours. According to students they learned from well designed community service experiences that favored their confrontation with reality and the creation of solutions by connecting their skills and knowledge to solve real problems affecting the community. Research has shown that high-quality community service experiences provide powerful opportunities to foster civic engagement (Gallant, Smale, & Arai, 2010). Students shared how they began the community service with a preconception of what it would be like, and how many times they felt disappointed when they found that the experience was not what they expected.

### **Stage 5: The Factors that Act as Catalysts and Restraints of the Student's Interest to Participate**

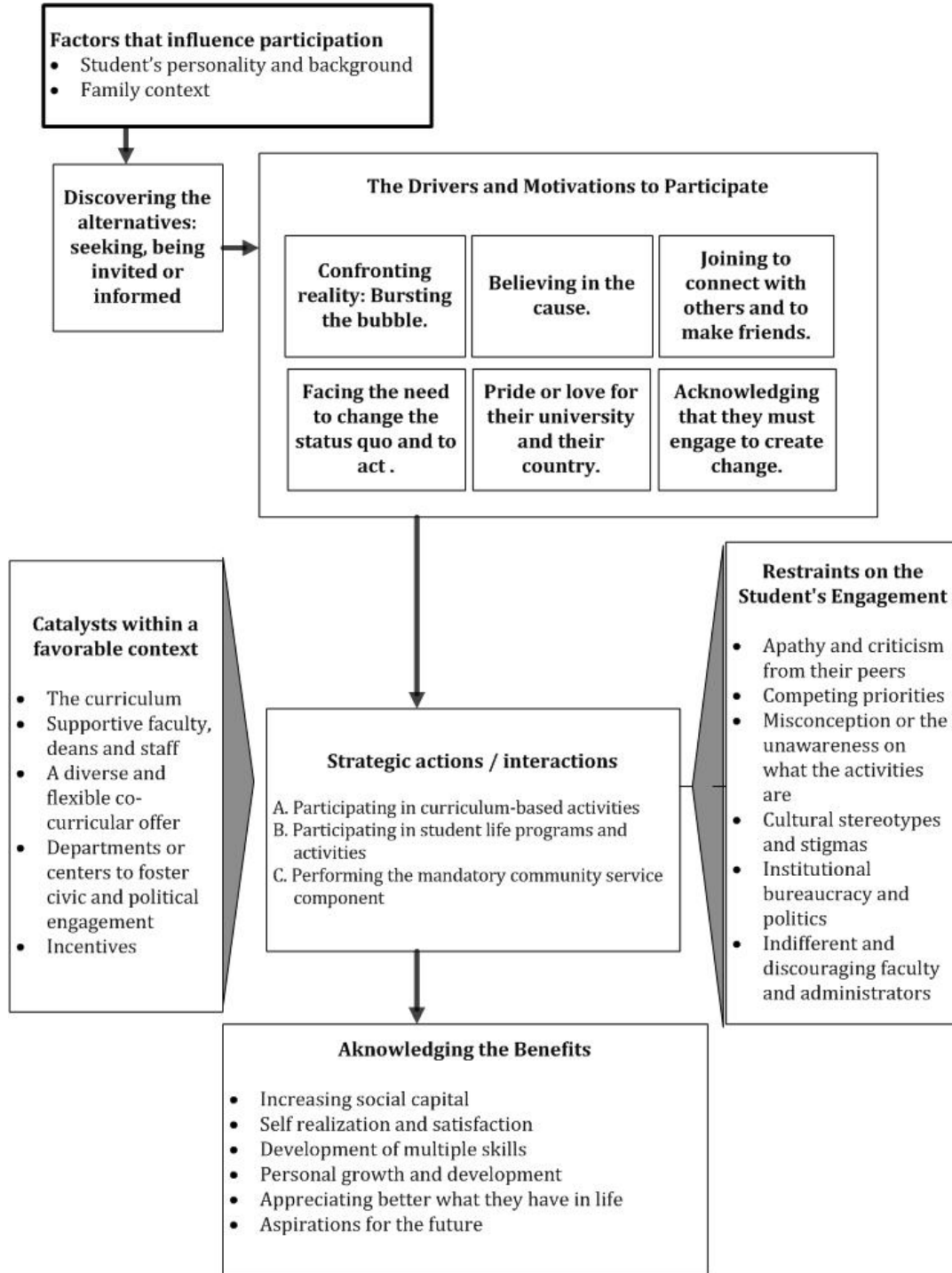
The fifth phase of the process describes the different factors that influence the student's interest in become engaged. The factors that enhance and motivate the student were labeled catalysts and the factors that diminish the student's interest or mitigate it were identified as restraints.

The catalysts identified were: (a) the curriculum, particularly in courses when there are clear connections from academic contents to activities related to service, research or the practice of knowledge, (b) supportive faculty, deans and staff—professors who model by engaging themselves or who promote engagement through their courses—and deans who encourage students to be informed of the alternatives to participate and who offer them their support, (c) a diverse and flexible co-curricular offer, including the possibility to create community service programs or student organizations for a particular interest, among others, (d) the departments or centers created for students to find support and the processes and protocols to engage; the departments that foster multiple opportunities to engage, the staff who guides the student through the different activities are key factors, and (e) a series of incentives.

The restraints for participation found in the study were: (a) apathy and criticism of students, (b) the competing priorities that students face during university, (c) the student's misconception or unawareness of what the activities are, (d) the cultural stereotypes and stigmas that permeate the Mexican culture, (e) the institutional bureaucracy they encounter and the institution's political environment that may impede participation, and (f) indifferent and discouraging faculty and administrators who criticize the activities or the institutions and diminish the student's interest and disposition to engage.

### **Stage 6: The Outcomes the Students Get from Participating in these Activities.**

In the final stage the outcomes or benefits that students receive from engaging in civic and political activities are presented. The outcomes are synthesized as: (a) participants increase their social capital both at the university and with other institutions outside it, (b) self realization and satisfaction, (c) the development of multiple skills, (d) personal growth and development, (e) appreciating better what they have in life, and (f) a new set of aspirations for the future.



**Figure 1. An Explanatory Model of Civic and Political Engagement for Undergraduate Students Enrolled at Mexican Universities.**

It is important for Mexico's future development, and for the strengthening of its democracy, to encourage civic and political participation and to educate the civic minds of higher education students. Findings from this study have important implications for higher education institutions that wish to intentionally foster the student's civic and political engagement.

Recommendations for Mexican Higher Education Institutions:

1. Embrace the purpose of educating citizens who can responsibly engage in the betterment of society.
2. Introduce service learning in the curriculum.
3. Revitalize the community service component to make it a meaningful and effective experience.
4. Acknowledge the power of student life activities as resources to develop more civically and politically engaged students.
5. Create incentives to promote a culture that fosters civic engagement.

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