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# International Political Science

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## Civic Education, Political Science, and Education Reform in Central Europe

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A dilemma of political science today is how to raise the status of the profession and reverse the trend of dwindling student numbers. This concern dominated a long discussion among department chairs at the last APSA annual meeting and was featured in Sheilah Mann's article in the September 1996 *PS*. One suggested way of raising our profile is what has become known as "civic education"—essentially the idea that instruction in the basics of the social sciences can contribute to healthy civil societies, rich civic cultures, and strong democracies. It provides an obvious practical application to the social sciences in general and political science in particular. Moreover, it can be used to persuade not only potential political science majors but also legislators and other funders of the tangible social benefits of our work.

The theory is being applied especially in parts of the world where democracy is currently tenuous or non-existent, such as South Africa or China. But its stronghold today is the former communist countries of East-Central Europe. Here, civic education has been the rage for several years. A conference last year in Prague, entitled "Civitas", called attention to the movement. Many groups such as the Center for Civic Education, the Civic Education Project, and others with less obvious names have been dedicated to spreading civic education here. As an example, our university, Palacký University, is currently operating a program in cooperation with Charles University in Prague (sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts and American Council of Learned Societies) dedicated to providing instruction to some 200 secondary school

teachers from throughout the Czech Republic. The same program operates in neighboring countries. Subjects include modern political thought, the politics of western Europe and the USA, nationalism, and European Community politics. Foundations such as Mellon, Ford, Soros, and PHARE (sponsored by the European Union) have created similar ventures. A new anthology entitled *Democracy is a Discussion*, containing readings from writers such as Erazim Kohak, Benjamin Barber, Adam Michnik, and Robert Bellah, is one of the better examples of the

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kind of materials now being developed. As in any such trend, there are bound to be a number of charlatans and frauds. But on the whole, the benefits have been substantial. Students in host countries respond enthusiastically, to the point where the demand far outstrips the supply.

By getting involved in this movement, political scientists and their institutions can not only do much of good, they can also help justify their own existence, demonstrate the tangible value of their work, and show their students interesting work opportunities abroad.

One of the advantages of civic education is that it is non-controversial. As both an antidote and an alternative to violent mass movements such as communism and nationalism, it is one of the few areas of political work that has largely succeeded in attracting bi-partisan governmental support. (Civitas was sponsored in part by USIS, which has sponsored other similar endeavors.) Though the left and right may define it differently, it is generally endorsed by both. In the US, however, congressional support has been reduced recently (USIS has been cut), but it is still more difficult for budget-cutters to justify their actions in this instance, so pressure can still be effective. Moreover, the more political scientists are involved, the more pressure could be placed on legislators to practice (and fund) at home what we are preaching abroad. One of the ironic and sad experiences of anyone who has taught here is the look on students faces when we, the "missionaries of democracy", tell them how it is all supposed to work, and they know full well it does not always work that way in our own lands.

Involvement in civic education can have more direct and tangible benefits for American political scientists, while at the same time addressing basic and fundamental needs abroad. Former communist universities today need many things, but their two greatest needs are the most basic needs of any educational institution: books and teachers. The second is actually the less addressed problem, but perhaps the more difficult problem to solve. The universities of East-Central Europe today are crying out for qualified teachers. At the same time, one of the great problems of their American counterparts

is finding teaching experience for their graduate students and positions for their new Ph.D.s. The two problems could hardly be more complementary. For relatively little money, young American scholars could be acting as visiting lecturers throughout the region. In a few instances they already are. A number have come through projects such as the Peace Corps or Fulbright, though these programs were not really designed for this purpose. The Civic Education Project has had substantial success in placing American Ph.D.s, despite limited resources and other problems.

Relatively few direct bilateral exchanges have been arranged between eastern and western universities, though this is perhaps the greatest untapped potential. Those I have seen have been largely successful. This year our department is hosting a visiting graduate student from Miami University teaching international relations and a young scholar from Michigan State University teaching U.S. and European politics. In some instances the host school provides accommodation, while the lecturer's home school provides airfare and salary. Even where outside supplemental funds are not available, home universities find that they can keep a scholar abroad for a year cheaper than at home. If necessary, a graduate student with accommodation can usually live on a local salary for the nine-month academic year without serious hardship. A further benefit all around is that the visitor can also act as a kind of "advance man" for more extensive forms of cooperation

such as exchanges on the senior level or undergraduate study-abroad programs.

This leads to another very tangible benefit. Many American schools have found that they can send their students on junior-year-abroad programs in East-Central Europe for a fraction of what they would pay in Western Europe. Many of these schools are in attractive, historic settings and have rich cultures within the Western tradition. By the same token, they can also provide interesting (and generally more relaxed) settings for senior scholars on sabbatical or semi-retirement.

It would be wrong to assume that such arrangements are without problems. As one who has worked in the region for years, I have seen difficulties when different cultures come into contact. This is especially acute when one of the cultures has been through the devastating experience of forty years of communism.

Yet even here the frictions usually reflect some deeper underlying dysfunction, which the presence of foreigners can help rectify. This means that working to solve the specific logistical problem also means attacking some fundamental problem in the society or the educational system. For example, when a foreign lecturer cannot get a classroom or enough books or access to a computer, it probably means others are experiencing the same difficulty. Others may not complain about it, since they are used to it. The students too may feel the need, and they may be more ready than their instructors to do something about it.

In this respect a foreign lecturer may serve as a catalyst for mobilizing action for reform. A more serious example occurred earlier this year in our faculty when a lecturing post was about to be offered to a member of the former communist government with connections to the secret police. An alliance of foreign and younger Czech lecturers objected and effectively blocked the appointment. Neither group would have prevailed without the other. In this way, overcoming problems cements bonds, building trust and goodwill between cultures.

There is a real crisis in the educational systems of East-Central Europe, at least as acute as during the initial changes of 1989. The initial interest of foundations and charitable donors is now subsiding, and unilateral assistance is harder to get. This means there is increasing need for bilateral agreements which can help put institutions here on their own feet. At a time when western universities are themselves in a less-than-healthy state and face many uncertainties, the universities of this region have much to offer them in return. American and other western universities have an increasingly important role to play. If they are to thrive in their own land a wise strategy might well be to spread the benefits of their achievement as widely as possible.

*Editor's Note: A list of civic education organizations working toward educational reform can be found on the APSA web site at [www.apsanet.org/civics](http://www.apsanet.org/civics).*

## International Political Science Association News

**M**embers of IPSA and members of national political science associations affiliated to IPSA are invited to participate in IPSA's Seventeenth World Congress, which will be held in Seoul, Korea, August 17–21, 1997.

The main part of the Congress program, sessions on the central theme of "Conflict and Order", has been drawn up by the program chair and the program committee on the

basis of invitations to individual convenors. In addition, panels have been offered by convenors of IPSA's research committees and study groups, and special sessions on particular topics have been organized on the basis of responses to earlier advertisements in the IPSA bulletin, *Participation*, and in the newsletters of national political science associations affiliated to IPSA and of

IPSA's research committees and study groups. The program is completed by a set of sessions assessing the state of the discipline and a set of regional panels. Full information on the program is contained in a special issue of *Participation*, which has been circulated to all IPSA members.

Although the outlines of the program have been finalized, members