

# **Pace University's Presidential Convention 2004: Teaching Political Literacy and Civic Engagement in the Urban University Setting**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper explores how large-scale simulations at urban universities can promote political literacy and civic engagement in their communities. It also suggests that, through these large-scale simulations, educators at urban universities can help to promote political participation among youth and reverse the effects of low voter turnout in that demographic group.*

The last vote has been counted in the 2004 presidential election and old debates have begun anew about the causes of low turnout of those between the ages of 18 and 25. Despite an unprecedented amount of time and effort spent on turning out the youth vote, early data suggested that less than four in 10 of the eligible voters between the ages of 18 and 24 cast a vote for president – slightly higher than four years ago. The good news is that, indeed, this year's figures reverse a downward trend in voter turnout among the youth; the bad news is that these figures still lag well behind the average of other age groups. Scholars will cite evidence of political apathy and alienation among young people; they will refer to studies that reveal widespread ignorance of American politics and history in our nation's high schools and colleges. Dire predictions will no doubt follow about the bleak future of American democracy due to the ostensible lack of knowledge and interest in the American political system among our newest voters.

The concern about young voter's apathy is well founded for some very good reasons. Many posit voting as the essential responsibility of citizenship in a democracy. As such, voting is a necessity and good in and of itself — a measure of one's commitment to civic duty. Yet, while voter turnout is an important indicator of both individual commitment to, and collective health of any democratic society, there is more to consider. Studies have shown a strong correlation between low political participation, high literacy inequality, and the unequal distribution of material resources (Milner 2002). Societies which have high levels of voter turnout and a relatively equal distribution of intellectual resources will, over time, tend to distribute material resources more equally as well. More procedural democracy (higher voter turnout) may lead to more substantive democracy (socioeconomic equality).

So why don't the young vote? We might characterize two main explanations as the alarmist point of view and the pragmatic perspective. The alarmists say that political participation is inextricably tied to political knowledge. As Popkin and Dimcock (1999) put it, "The dominant feature of nonvoting in America is a lack of knowledge about government." Study after study has bemoaned the youth's lack of knowledge about our political system (Lutkus, et. al. 1999; Morin 2000; Gallup and Gallup 2000; Sax et. al. 1999; Vanishing Voter 2000). Raise civic competency, according to this view, and you will raise voter turnout. On the other side, there are the pragmatists who look to the weight of history and suggest that the most important indicator of political participation is simply getting older (Coulson 1999). Young people who do not vote now will more than likely become voters once they progress through the life cycle (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). The alarmists speak about a sense of dire urgency; the pragmatists advise us that simply time and maturity will increase participation in a generational cohort.

If forced to choose which camp we would join, we'd throw our hat into the alarmist ring simply because doing so would force us to confront the problem of a lack of political knowledge among youth today, rather than waiting for them to acquire it tomorrow. As we look around the landscape of American society, we see unprecedented campaigns being launched across the nation to engage young people in not only registering to vote, but in becoming more informed about the issues that affect them. Music may be the way to sooth the soul, but it is fast becoming the favorite way to light the spark of political involvement among the youth culture. Popular music celebrities extolled young people to "Rock the Vote," "Rap the Vote," or "Vote or Die." Similar messages were delivered by sports figures and TV commercials. Even hamburgers were served with a call to exercise the right to vote.

If in fact political knowledge is an indicator of political participation, then as political scientists we need to do all we can to raise political knowledge among our youth. At Pace University, we found that large-scale simulations can be used in the urban university setting to achieve that goal. In this paper, we describe Presidential Convention 2004 (PC2004) – a mock presidential convention attended by 650 high school students in the New York metropolitan region who were taught the process of presidential selection by 75 Pace students. Projects such as PC2004 promote what we would call Democratic Action Research (DARE). We first want to define DARE, explaining its constituent parts and formulating how teaching about democracy itself has to be democratic. We then discuss PC2004, with an eye to how the project embraces the fundamental principles of DARE. We close by suggesting ways in which similar projects such as PC2004 can stimulate a democratic pedagogy in urban universities, at the same time serving to increase democratic participation among youth.

## **Nature of the Problem**

Voter turnout is one way to measure the health and legitimacy of any democratic society. Simply put, voting is a means by which a citizenry tacitly consents to be governed by its leaders, whether the candidate one chooses wins or loses. In the

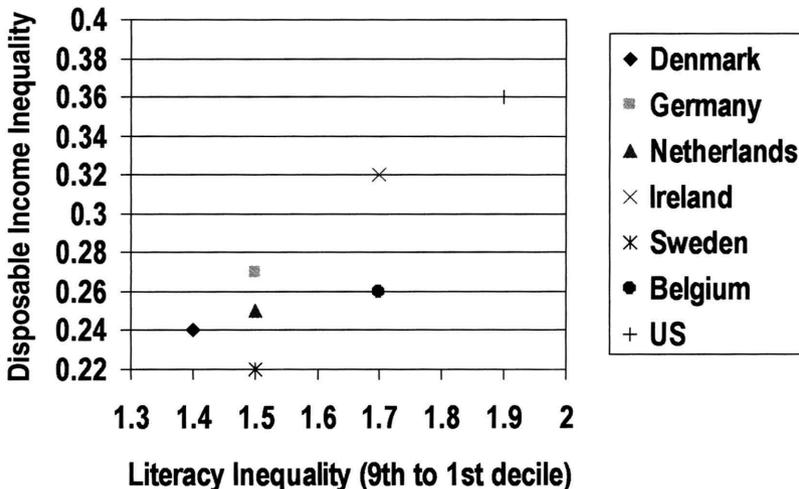
United States, voter turnout in presidential elections peaked in 1960 at about 64% and has since declined, with the exception of the 1992 election, to roughly 50% (Maisel and Buckley 2004). In midterm elections turnout has dropped in the same period from nearly 50% to 35%. In 2004, voter turnout was close to 60%, the highest since 1968. By all accounts, this is a positive sign.

But further consideration of voter turnout by age reveals other disturbing trends. In 2000, 67% of those over the age of 65 voted. Voter turnout for those between the ages of 45 and 64 was just slightly lower at 64%. By contrast, just over a third of those between the ages of 18 and 24 went to the polls in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, Voting and Registration Reports), and nearly 40% went to the polls in 2004.

Statistics also show voter turnout is correlated to socioeconomic factors: the affluent tend to vote in higher proportions than the poor and uneducated. Given these findings, we can posit several conclusions about the state of American democracy: first, that our political system is more responsive to the wealthy and the educated, and second, that our political system is more responsive to middle age and elderly voters than to young voters.

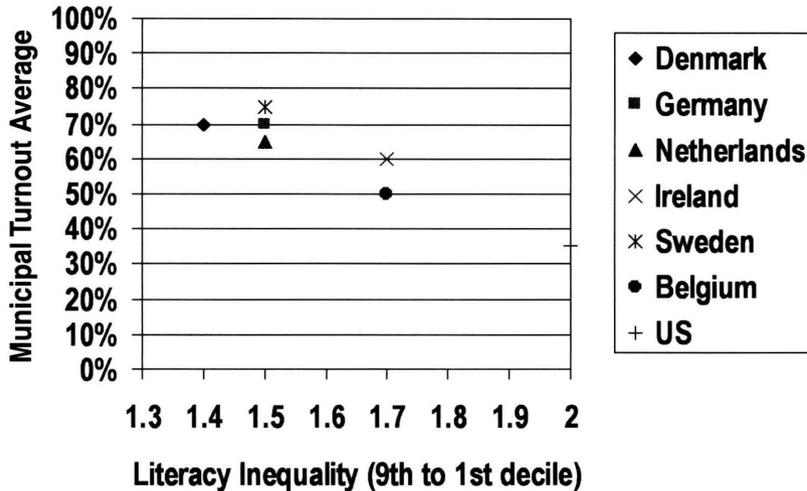
Debates rage over why the young or the less affluent tend not to vote. Partisanship, navigating the “rules of the game,” socioeconomic status, political knowledge and participation are all important variables in distinguishing the voter from the nonvoter. Yet, whatever the causes, identifying the effects of voting and nonvoting are perhaps just as important if not more so. Henry Milner (2002) postulated a direct correlation between levels of political participation and the distribution of material resources in a democratic society. Figure 1 below suggests that higher income disparities lead to a higher level of literacy inequality. As compared to other western democracies, we see that the United States lags far behind in this category.

**Figure 1: Literacy and Income Inequality, Select Countries**



As we see in Figure 2 below, the higher the voter turnout, the less literacy inequality there is in society. Once again, the United States lags behind its counterparts. Put these two figures together and a disturbing pattern emerges: societies that promote higher levels of political participation will distribute more equally both intellectual resources and, more importantly, material resources.

**Figure 2: Voter Turnout and Literacy Inequality**



If voter turnout is tied to the material health of a democratic society as the above data suggests, then we believe that as educators and political scientists we have a duty to promote democracy and the equal distribution of material resources by teaching our students about the value of political participation. We also believe that other urban universities across the country can also play a transformational role in the increase of political participation among our youth.

## **DARE and Democratic Education**

Democratic Action Research is the name we have given to participatory action research that is focused specifically on expanding political consciousness. Rooted in anthropology and development, participatory action research “goes beyond usual institutional boundaries in development by activity involving the people in generating knowledge about their own condition and how it can be changed” (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991). Jose Ortega y Gasset claimed “through the actual experience of something, we intuitively apprehend its essence; we feel, enjoy, and understand it as reality, and we thereby place our own being in a wider, more fulfilling context” (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991, 11). Habermas’ use of the term “life-world” as authentic commitment to a holistic understanding of everyday life within a freely chosen value system inspired investigation into the context of political action that is liberating and emancipating. (Habermas 1985).

DARE seeks to “harmoniously reconcile the normative, empirical and the prudential components of political life” (Riemer 1962). This process needs to begin in the classroom but it does not end there. Indeed, our courses should be laboratories for democracy (Becker & Couto 1965), where we teach the political knowledge associated with democracies at the same time we are democratic in our pedagogy. This immediately raises an important question: Can we serve two masters – “What Is” and “What Ought — at once? DARE demands we bridge the two. We have found this is best done through large-scale simulations that engage young people in synthesizing facts, analysis, evaluation, communication, negotiation, and creation. In the process, DARE confronts the radical paradox that gaining knowledge of the political system leads to a powerlessness to change the system (Clecak 1974).

As political science professors we accept the tension that comes when we find ourselves with one foot in the classroom and one foot in the political world. Henry Nelson Wieman (1990) characterized creativity as living in the interchange between these two worlds. As the mentor to Martin Luther King, his legacy has proven to be at the crux of the debate between thought and action. For the student, engaging both thought and action in and out of the classroom is fundamental in DARE as we seek to increase political participation and enlighten the student in civic duty. For us, the creativity established bridges the distance between the dual responsibilities of active practitioner of civic engagement and professional political scientist.

“Embracing this dual role forces upon us a dual purpose. As educators, our responsibility is to see to it that our students become politically literate: that is, they acquire objective knowledge about the political world that will allow them to comprehend, evaluate, and analyze the political world around them. As professors of politics, we believe we also have a responsibility to see to it that our students consider and learn the values of good citizenship – and to engage that political world in a meaningful way. Our courses are successful, then, when they promote political literacy on the one hand and increase civic engagement on the other. We must, in other words, create an interaction between the objective knowledge required of a successful student and the subjective development required of a well-rounded citizen” — (Putnam 2001).

How is this to be done? Richard Guarasci (1997) offered some necessary criteria for “democratic education.” Now president of Wagner College, Guarasci joined David Caputo, president of Pace University, in calling for a new era in which higher education is in part measured by its success in promoting civic engagement. Both political scientists, Guarasci and Caputo have taken the route of college administration to forge a growing interdependency between democratic governance in education and meaningful civic engagement outside the walls of academia.

Building upon their example, we believe the concept of DARE needs to include four aspects of “democratic education” in and out of the classroom, which is captured in large-scale simulations such as PC2004. They are: political literacy, active learning, civic engagement, and an ethic of professionalism.

## **Political Literacy**

As the term suggests, political literacy is the ability to “read politics.” Like “reading” literacy, political literacy is a developmental process that ranges from facts, data, and history to higher levels of understanding. The reality is that some individuals in society become more politically “literate” than others. The process begins with acquiring objective knowledge about politics but it does not end there. It includes the ability to comprehend, conceptualize, navigate, and critically evaluate the political world around us. Students who are politically literate have moved beyond the mere facts of politics (e.g., the number of senators and number of electoral votes) and are able to analyze the political system for its strengths and weaknesses (e.g., how the number of senators or the number of electoral votes enhances or diminishes the democratic experience). Our emphasis on political literacy revolves around the belief that politically literate individuals are knowledgeable about, and interested in, the political world. The more knowledge they obtain, the more interested they become and vice versa. Literacy is cumulative and the cost of time and effort to participate in politics becomes more manageable. Thus, students who take our courses are more likely to engage in political participation (e.g., vote) because they understand political candidates and issues more readily than students who are less politically literate. The pedagogy of democratic decision-making in the classroom, combined with real world activities like teaching high school students, writing instructional material, and running a large conference, are exercises in developing political literacy.

## **Active Learning**

It is a fundamental fact that individuals learn best by doing. Years of graduate school prepare political scientists to consume knowledge but not necessarily to produce knowledge in the form of pedagogy. Confronted with the responsibility of teaching college students, we learn material in a completely different way in order to put it into our own thoughts and words as we seek to present it in a clear and accessible format to college age students who come to the class with different levels of preparation and understanding. The same can be said of students; they learn best when they transcend the consumption of knowledge (or the banking principle of education) and put thoughts into action and become producers of knowledge in their own right (Freire 1971). In our classes, students are asked to become producers of knowledge and “teach” other students, be it through sharing their work in group projects, delivering class presentations, working in real-life situations outside of class and sharing those experiences in the class, or assuming a certain role in a large-scale simulation. Active learning allows students to develop marketable skills, including analytical reading, critical writing, clear communication and negotiating and compromising, and the value of collaboratively working in groups.

## **Civic Engagement**

Civic engagement exists on a continuum from students “shadowing” engaged people as they do their work to volunteering, from committing to community service projects to system-transforming actions taken by heroic individuals and non-governmental organizations. Civic engagement informs political consciousness by connecting the

everyday experiences of individuals and communities with whom they come in contact to the larger, structural problems of society. Higher levels of understanding evolve as participation positively influences self-esteem and confidence, and students become increasingly willing to challenge the larger, structural problems that society faces over a long period of time. For example, students join community leaders to paint a public school in the neighborhood. While the students are engaged in a community activity, that activity should lead to a discussion of larger questions, such as: Why is there not enough funding for the school to get painted in the first place? Where does the funding for education come from? Who controls the funding? How might it be increased to allow for things like painting in the budget? An unpainted school building should thus open a window on to larger, structural issues of education. Civic engagement must pay equal attention to both the immediate and “everydayness” of social and political issues, along with the structural causes that lie at the root of persistent problems. Civic engagement allows a student to move beyond the banking theory of knowledge that lies at the core of traditional methods of pedagogy (Freire 1971). Students in a civic engagement course are confronted with the reality of issues and must respond to them to the best of their ability with imperfect knowledge and incomplete information. They must think on their feet. Back in class, students are able to reflect upon their experiences by coupling thought and action. The classroom becomes the venue for a discussion of the “structural” problems they witnessed firsthand. It is the place for critical reflection about causes to the problems they faced and solutions that they may offer. Our roles in the process of civic engagement is thus as facilitators as the student travels along the road from the everydayness of social issues to the larger, underlying causes to problems, and back again to the potential solutions that citizens face daily.

### **An Ethic of Professionalism**

Today many students fail to see the relationship between the material covered in a college course and the “real world” outside the classroom. Some openly wonder what good this knowledge will do them once they graduate. Many times they are right: the material covered on this or that test will not factor into whether they get this or that job. Yet, focusing entirely on the knowledge they acquire in a class misses the point. As educators we must try to instill in our students the notion that the work habits they build in college will follow them around for the rest of their lives. Bad habits now will be hard to break in the future. So will good habits. An ethic of professionalism focuses not so much on what is learned in the classroom but how a student conducts himself or herself from day to day in the classroom. Is the student attentive? Courteous? Is he or she respectful to other students? Are assignments handed in on time? Were they done without outside assistance? Has he or she interacted with group members in a professional manner? Was the student able to adapt to circumstances? Our belief is that students will be able to adapt to the professional world after college if they experience it while in college. (Bellah, et. al. 1996)

# **Presidential Convention 2004 and Democratic Education**

One way to accomplish the goals of DARE and democratic education is through large-scale simulations. In this section, we describe the mock presidential convention we conducted with more than 650 high school students at Pace University in New York City in January 2004. We hope to encourage political scientists to incorporate DARE and democratic education in their own courses thereby advancing the complementary objectives of political literacy and civic engagement. We called our mock convention Presidential Convention 2004 (PC2004).

PC2004 was held January 7-9 at the Pace New York campus. It was attended by students from 13 high schools in New York City and 12 high schools in Westchester County. The students convened at Pace in downtown New York City for three days and assumed the role of “delegates” to the mock presidential convention of one of the two major political parties. The student delegates performed two of the most important activities of a real political party convention: building and proposing “planks” in the national party platform, and nominating presidential candidates for the general election. Both the Democratic and Republican delegations drafted national party platforms on a set of eight issues of importance in the 2004 presidential election. The issues were abortion, foreign policy and the war on terrorism; the federal budget, Social Security, race and affirmative action; education, healthcare, and environment. The model party platforms can be viewed at <http://webpage.pace.edu/cmalone/pc2004.htm>.

Pace University students were responsible for teaching the high school students about party convention politics in preparation for PC2004. In the fall 2003, Pace students on both the New York City and Pleasantville campuses took a course in presidential politics, which Malone called “Road to the White House.” While the course focused primarily on presidential campaigns and elections, much class time was spent on preparing the Pace students for their visits to the high schools. The visits began in early October 2003, and continued beyond the end of the semester. About 75 Pace students from both campuses were broken down into groups of three and assigned a school – New York students in New York City, Pleasantville students in Westchester. The Pace groups visited the schools to work with the high school teachers and students preparing them using the many facets of understanding mentioned above. The Pace student leaders and the high school teachers worked together to devise their own schedules for meetings at the high schools.

The high school students were divided into two groups of roughly 325 each, representing a Democratic delegation and a Republican delegation. Each of these party delegations was further divided into 50 state party delegations, meaning that there were approximately six students per state delegation. With 25 high schools participating, each school was assigned two states and four state party delegations.

One of the most unique aspects of PC2004, and one of which we were perhaps most proud, was the 450-page book the Pace students co-wrote with Malone titled *PC2004: Delegate Almanac of Presidential Politics*. The entire almanac can also be viewed at <http://webpage.pace.edu/cmalone/pc2004.htm>. The book is an extraordinary collaborative effort between the Pace students and the high school teachers and students. The Pace students worked with each high school/party delegation to draft a state party platform on the eight issues the delegates debated at PC2004. For example, students playing the role of Mississippi Republicans researched and wrote platforms on the eight issues from the perspective of Mississippi Republicans. Each state delegation did the same, and all 100 state party platforms (50 Democratic, 50 Republican) were compiled in the almanac, which also included:

- Background material on the eight issues (written by Pace students who did independent studies in the summer 2003),
- Background on the presidential and vice presidential candidates (also researched and written by Pace students),
- All of Malone's course lecture notes on presidential campaigns and elections (roughly 80 pages in nine lecture outlines),
- Edited versions of the 2000 Democratic and Republican Party Platforms.

Producing a book from which to teach others allowed the Pace students to highlight their roles as “producers” of knowledge. Further, knowing that this publication was handed out to every delegate, along with being placed on the PC2004 website, gave the Pace students the incentive to improve and refine their work considerably.

Completion of the delegate almanac also was crucial to the educational experience of both the Pace students and the high school students. It allowed all the students to grasp the three elements required to perform their roles properly in the large-scale simulation. Those elements were: a basic understanding of the issues; an understanding of their state parties' stances on the issues and an understanding of the positions of the candidates they were to choose for president.

Just as important, the “division of labor” that culminated in the drafting of the almanac allowed the students to comprehend the very thing this exercise was intended to highlight: the highly decentralized and complex political process of nominating candidates for the office of the President and drafting national party platforms. By breaking the students into state party delegations and asking them to understand issues from the perspective of the state parties rather than their own, students began to comprehend the essence of the two-party system in the United States, how the parties function on the state and national levels, and how each states' interests are voiced in the nominating process for President. Ultimately, our goal was to give the students an experience in American democracy – the good, the bad, and the ugly – and to do it in a way that allowed them to learn by doing.

Pace University provided the high school teachers with materials that served as a substitute or supplement to the curriculum for the high school teachers in return for

their participation. We provided every high school student with a copy of Stephen Wayne's *Road to the White House 2004* (Wadsworth, 2004), which is a very readable college text on presidential elections. Malone also provided the high school teachers with his extended lecture notes on the text and on the process of presidential selection that he had developed over the last five years. Many of the high school teachers built the content of the project into their curriculum for the fall semester. Teachers met regularly with us in the fall 2003. Establishing trust with the high school educators through these regular meetings was a fundamental element to the success of the PC2004.

Pace students coordinated the convention based on a model created by Gregory Julian, the Pace Pleasantville Model UN advisor, to conduct large-scale high school model UN conferences. The group worked to draft convention rules and procedures for committee chairs, ran mock committee hearings for the committee chairs in the weeks leading up to the convention, and generally prepared all the documentation and scheduling for the three-day event.

On the first full day of the convention, the Democrats and Republicans set to work on their respective party platforms. The first meetings of the day consisted of joint platform committee hearings, which consisted of eight meetings on issues the delegates were to debate and ultimately on which to draft platforms. The party platform committees then met separately to draft their respective planks in the platforms. Each committee would present their plank before the entire caucus on the morning of the 9th, so having a finished draft by the end of the first full day of the convention was crucial.

The morning of the second day the delegates finalized their national party platforms. The Democratic and Republican delegations met simultaneously in separate venues. Each platform committee elected two high school delegates to present their plank to the entire caucus. Convention rules allowed for 15 minutes to discuss the plank. Two amendments to each plank were entertained. The entire draft was voted up or down, and the two amendments were then voted on separately. By lunch each delegation had drafted their party platforms

The afternoon of the 9th was the finale: the nomination and election of the candidates. The Republican convention offered less excitement, since George Bush ran unopposed in this year's Republican primary. Yet, uncertainty prevailed when Dick Cheney's heart problem caused the delegates to seek to remove him from the ticket and replace him with other candidates. Colin Powell was eventually nominated to be the Republican vice presidential candidate in 2004 in a contest that included New York Governor George Pataki, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and Senator John McCain of Arizona.

The Democratic nomination proved raucous, as are most real Democratic conventions. The convention rules were similar to those of an actual convention. A nominee had to get a clear majority of the voting delegation. With nine Democratic candidates, that

proved impossible on the first balloting. After the first ballot, Dennis Kucinich, Howard Dean, and John Kerry were the top three vote-getters and made it into the second round of balloting.

On the second ballot, Dean came in first and Kucinich came in second. But neither received a clear majority. The convention went to a third ballot, this time between Kucinich and Dean only. To the surprise of many, Kucinich won the Democratic nomination. Reports from the floor of the convention indicated a strong antiwar constituency among the Democrats.

## **Conclusion**

In our view, large-scale simulations such as PC2004 serve many objectives that urban universities need to focus on:

First, exposing both college and high school students to the political system through role-playing increases their knowledge of, and interest in, the political system. Anecdotal evidence from the convention indicated that the high school students who would turn 18 by election time intended to vote in the 2004 presidential election. Similarly, most of the Pace students reported the same. Future projects such as PC2004 need to be followed up with survey data that tracks the participants through a series of elections to see if their participation rates are higher than the overall cohort.

Second, simulations such as PC2004 allow political scientists to serve two masters at once. On one hand, they allow us to remain true to the demands and necessities of our academic discipline by teaching material that is required of us in the classroom. On the other hand, such simulations allow us to engage in the democratic experience by connecting our students to the realities of the social and political world outside of the classroom. In the process, we combine thought and action in our own pedagogy.

Third, these types of projects promote what we have called DARE through the process of “democratic education” both in and out of the classroom. The high school and Pace students who participated in PC2004 were exposed to the four requisites of democratic education as we see them. The students became more politically literate about the process of presidential selection, given that they were asked to learn the material and then turn around and teach their peers about it. In the process, the students engaged in active learning through role-playing and simulation. They gained a deeper understanding of the real workings of politics, the fragmented structure of our federalist political system, the nature of the two-party system, the importance of division of labor through committee systems and the art of compromise and negotiation. In traveling to the high schools to teach high school students, the Pace students saw the importance of civic engagement as they came across some of the fundamental problems in our educational system firsthand. In the process, they connected the everyday problems of the high school students to some of the larger structural issues facing our education system. And finally, the students learned what it means to act professionally toward one another as they came into contact with others outside of their immediate community.

They were faced with the realities of diversity and difference, thus the need for mutual respect became much more pronounced.

## **Acknowledgement**

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