The power of
‘We, the people...’
Professor leads Cal U initiatives that promote political engagement

W hen the Founding Fathers penned the Constitution of the United States, they issued a mandate for civic engagement. In paragraph after paragraph they remind us that the right to vote and the privilege of being represented in Congress should never be taken lightly.

Today, the American Democracy Project (ADP) reignites the flame that was ignited 234 years ago. Sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) in collaboration with The New York Times, the ADP is a national program that seeks to foster a greater understanding and commitment in the civic life of our government among a network of 220 public colleges and universities.

Dr. Melanie Blumberg, professor of political science and campus director of Cal U’s ADP, champions the organization because it excites students about becoming active citizens in their community.

“Cal U was one of the first colleges to pilot the American Democracy Project back in 2003,” Blumberg explains. “Since day one, we’ve been extremely active.”

Discussion and dialogue

Cecilia Orphan, national project manager for the American Democracy Project, AASCU, says “active” doesn’t begin to describe the ADP at California University.

“Dr. Blumberg has been an indispensable collaborator on the national ADP and has shown brilliant organizing skills at Cal U, institutionalizing the program and invigorating the Cal U students to become politically and civically engaged.”

Among other things, the ADP has brought prominent speakers to campus, sponsored candidate and issue forums, conducted a Debate Watch and Election Analysis Forum before and after the 2008 presidential elections, and made it possible for two students to attend the national Democratic and Republican conventions.

Dr. Gary J. Delorenzo, assistant professor of computer information systems and a member of Cal U’s ADP Advisory Board, notes another benefit. “ADP reaches across all disciplines to expose the University community to interesting topics that generally do not fit in our respective disciplines. It provides an open dialogue and multiple viewpoints on important issues, and gives us all a more well-rounded knowledge base.”

Advisory board member Dr. David G. Argent agrees. As chair of the Department of Biological and Environmental Sciences and associate professor of Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences, Argent was especially excited when the ADP brought environmental activist Dianne Wilson to campus last November.

“You don’t have to be a biologist to know that clean drinking water is important,” he says, “but after Wilson’s presentation everyone understood the relevance of public policy and how it affects our future.”

One of the most high-profile events sponsored by ADP was the 2007 Deliberative Polling® Initiative on the topic of river health. Cal U was one of 16 colleges and universities selected to survey opinions before and after informed discussion.

Student opinion shifted significantly after the events.

“Our hope was to educate future community leaders about the importance of listening to others and making informed judgments,” says Blumberg. “I believe we accomplished that goal.”

Campaign consultants

A self-proclaimed workaholic, Blumberg never tires of discussing issues and the politics that fuel them.

She recently designed a survey for the “Electoral Voices” monograph, which the national ADP used to determine what various colleges and universities do to encourage citizenship.

Closer to home, she utilized her experience as a political campaign consultant to create one of the most innovative organizations on campus — Cal Campaign Consultants, or CCC.

This interdisciplinary group — the only one of its kind in the country — provides students with practical experience in designing and managing political campaigns. Interested students develop political strategies, organize debates, write news releases and mobilize voters for both campus and local elections.

Communications and graphic design majors, as well as those from theater arts, psychology and political science, all bring different skills to the organization.

“It’s a melting-pot experience,” explains Dr. Emily M. Sweitzer, associate professor of justice and behavior crime and a CCC faculty adviser.

“Students by nature are interdisciplinary,” says fellow advisor Greg Harrison, chair of the Department of Art and Design. “Unfortunately, most of their course work is not. The club allows faculty and students to discuss common issues from different points of view.”

Lauren G. Snyder, current president of CCC, is most proud of the analysis forums sponsored by the group.

“We recently hosted a reality check on the Obama presidency — is he doing what he promised? Turnout was absolutely wonderful. The students asked thoughtful questions and really got involved.”

“CCC is a really wonderful organization,” says Blumberg. “I am so proud of the work they do. When universities hear about this organization, they always want to know more.”

To that end, Snyder will present a paper, “Getting Students Into The Political Trenches,” at the ADP conference in June.

Many CCC alumni go on to graduate programs in politics or start careers in related fields. Shandy Hensfield, a December 2009 graduate and former CCC president, now works as a community engagement production assistant for Fox News Channel in New York.

“A lot of students don’t realize the importance of campaigning and how it can influence the outcome of an election,” she says. “CCC is a great way for students to get involved in a different aspect of politics.”

“The American Democracy Project helps to build students’ character by helping them make more informed decisions,” adds Dr. Mary A. O’Connor, a professor in the Department of Nursing and another member of the ADP Advisory Board.

“It is an intelligent, innovative and interesting multi-dimensional method of exposing students to everything that is happening in the world around them.”

By Linda Kivoc, a Peters Township-based writer

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Dr. Melanie Blumberg

Cal U faculty panel discusses the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti at a special convocation sponsored by the American Democracy Project.

KDKA-TV political analyst Jon Delano (inset) serves as moderator for a panel of political experts who hosted a reality check on the Obama presidency at the ADP conference in June.