Leadership and Democracy

Articles
Maura Casey
Michaela Grenier
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William V. Muse and Carol Farquhar Nugent
Mark Wilson

Interviews
Dennis Donovan and Harry C. Boyte
Katrina S. Rogers and Keith Melville

Afterword
David Mathews
The Higher Education Exchange is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the 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 by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the Higher Education Exchange agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The Higher Education Exchange is part of a movement to strengthen higher education’s democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the Higher Education Exchange publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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RALPH NADER’S CALL TO CITIZENSHIP

Maura Casey

American colleges and universities have never been fully insulated from the political culture of the larger country, yet they struggle to prepare students to become civic leaders. During the 1970s, intense political debates over Vietnam, civil rights, feminism, and other topics played out on college campuses. It was in this context that Ralph Nader, who had already gained national prominence as a consumer-protection advocate, recognized the potential importance of higher education in teaching young people the skills of politics. Nader created an innovation in higher education’s approach to preparing students for civic leadership: Public Interest Research Groups, which became a national network with a distinctive approach to civic leadership education. We asked Nader to tell his story to Maura Casey, a former editorial writer for the New York Times and a senior associate of the Kettering Foundation.

The small city of Winsted, Connecticut, is known for the Mad and Still Rivers that lap its boundaries; the looming mills lining Main Street that once produced textiles and clocks; and the Nader family, including its most famous son, Ralph: lawyer, consumer advocate, sometime presidential candidate, and above all, citizen.

Nader gained a worldwide reputation for his challenges to corporate power. Yet his impact on the civic activism of students, while lesser known, cannot be underestimated. It began nearly 50 years ago when Nader first established Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) on college campuses as a training ground for students to organize, research, petition, and lobby around a wide variety of causes. Over the years, the issues have changed, but the passion of students in PIRGs—still going strong in more than 20 states—has not diminished.

Walking the streets of Winsted helps one understand the origins of Nader’s thinking and activism that has, in turn, influenced so many students. You can see the impact of the family everywhere in this leafy corner of Connecticut, close to the Massachusetts border. There is the American Museum of Tort Law, which Nader opened in 2015, housed within the neoclassical stone structure of a former savings bank. The museum tells the story of the evolution of torts, which provide legal recourse for wrongful injury to persons and damage to property. In a building on Main Street that once housed the Highland Arms restaurant owned by Nader’s parents is a community book store established by Ralph Nader. It is fitting that the building is still in use by the family long after the restaurant closed for good. The eatery took the pulse of the town every day for nearly 50 years, and it was one of the businesses that Ralph’s father,
Nathra Nader, an immigrant from Lebanon, established soon after he moved to the area in the 1920s.

A Dollar’s Worth of Conversation

The restaurant was where the four Nader children first learned civic lessons. When Nathra died in 1991 at the age of 98, his obituary in the Hartford Courant quoted a shoe store owner saying, “Go into Nader’s restaurant for a 10-cent cup of coffee, and you’ll get a dollar’s worth of conversation.”

“These were the days with no fast food chains,” Nader said. “People weren’t sitting in the restaurant looking at their phones or listening to things in their ear, they spoke to one another.” The conversations involved expansive topics like international affairs but included small talk, too: “There was a lot of self-government,” said Nader. “They would talk about parking problems, whether we had enough police or too many police, and argue about everything, including the Yankees and Red Sox.”

The restaurant was located across the street from the factories. Workers would swarm in after their shifts; traveling salesmen would arrive on one of the seven trains that ran daily to and from New York City, a little over 100 miles away; politicians running for office would introduce themselves to people at the long counter, and, of course, Nathra, who would meet them at the coffee urn, shake their hands, and not let go until he knew what they were thinking. Nader remembered:

You could walk the whole town in 25 minutes. The schools, the stores, the library, the dentist and doctor’s office, everything was here. We could see the horizon; we could see the sun go down and come up. We would walk about a mile to the high school. It was all reduced to human scale. At that time, we took it all for granted, and now when you look back, it has an idyllic aspect to it.

Nader learned about citizen power from the town-meeting tradition of New England and from his parents’ restaurant and their encouragement to get involved and to make the community better.
get involved and to make the community better. “Learn to listen,” Nader’s mother, Rose, frequently advised her children. Hands-on lessons—talking to people, attending meetings, both listening and speaking out—later influenced his approach.

It is no surprise, then, that Nader believes too many school experiences are a waste of time and our democracy is the poorer for it. “Students could learn more if they got out of the classroom once in a while and connected the classroom with the community and actually studied things,” he said. “They could ask questions, such as ’What’s going on in town hall? Where’s the drinking water coming from?’”

In Nader’s view, schools and the resources within them are underutilized. He believes civic lessons and questions should be folded into every curriculum:

Too often, K through 12 is a huge waste. I mean, what do we remember from these classes? Most of it is memorization, regurgitation, and vegetation. Most of it is a type of education that tells us “believe, don’t think. Obey, don’t dissent,” even though we study American history and almost all the things we aspire to, such as the Bill of Rights, originally came from dissenters.

One of the reasons the political system is not functioning well, Nader said, is due to a lack of civic preparedness that schools should be addressing more completely:

When students come out of high school, are they ready for sweet-talking politicians? Are they ready for advertisements that deceive them and lie to them about products, say “these drugs are safe,” when they’re not safe, “these credit cards are a good deal,” when they’re not? As it is, the students are not ready; they’re straight-out sitting ducks for corporate and political manipulation that destroys our democratic society. We don’t have to look around for much evidence to prove that these days. It’s good to get started early so the students have civic skills. They learn how to do their homework.

Nader learned those civic skills from his childhood, but he learned darker lessons as well.

**Citizen Power vs. Corporate Power**

The Mad and Still Rivers were used to power factories but were also the mills’ dumping grounds, the water stained with whatever dye was used in production. “We never had the sense that they were our rivers and that we could fish and wade in them,” Nader said. “They were just sewers with colored dyes going down from the plants.”
In his book *The Seventeen Traditions: Tales from an American Childhood*, Nader expands on those recollections, writing:

The town’s givers were matched, of course, by its takers—led by the industrial factories, which were low-paying and vigorously anti-union. The older companies were always vigilant about keeping new union factories out of the area. They seemed equally determined to keep fresh air and water at bay, using those two resources as their pollution sinks and sewers.¹

If the town meeting was the pulsing, civic heart of Winsted, the place every person could have his or her say, corporate ownership seemed its antithesis, with profit paramount and human concerns rarely softening the dictates of the bottom line. The factories that once made Winsted famous for clocks and clothing are all closed now. The trains that rumbled through town, taking Nader as a teenager to New York City to cheer at a Yankees game and depositing him back home the same day, don’t wind their way through Winsted anymore.

The lesson would seem to be that some things are beyond the people’s will, that diner-fueled debates are all well and good but talk rarely changes much of anything beyond zoning regulations and the town’s education budget.

Except that’s not the lesson that Ralph Nader learned. He internalized the opposite: that talk matters, people matter, and corporations not only could be challenged, they should be, by ordinary citizens, particularly students, poised to first question, then act, honing civic skills along the way.

Written while enrolled in Harvard Law School, Nader’s book *Unsafe at Any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile* was published in 1965. It used the Chevrolet Corvair as a powerful example of the auto industry’s general indifference to safety. The car was small and sporty—indeed, a shiny red Corvair is at the very center of the Tort Museum’s exhibits—but had a dangerous tendency to roll over. The book made it clear that the Corvair’s steering and mechanical problems were just a few of a litany of safety defects plaguing American cars at the time, including a lack of seat belts, steering wheels that became spears during crashes, and windows that became razor-like when broken in a collision.

**Engaging a Student Army**

*Unsafe at Any Speed* became a best seller and goaded a reluctant Congress into action. General Motors was so incensed that the company hired private detectives to follow Nader. If company officials expected to intimidate him, they were seriously misguided. Not only did Nader sue for invasion of privacy
and win, recalled his associate, Donald Ross, that same year, Nader developed
the idea of forming what he initially called “a student action army.”

“I told him, what with Vietnam, it didn’t make sense to have that name.
Finally, we hit on calling it the Public Interest Research Group,” Ross said.
The nonprofit organization, staffed with lawyers and scientists, and dedicated
to seeking creative solutions to public problems, was meant to counter the
well-financed special interests that dominate Washington, DC.

But what to do about funding? And how to start citizen-led Public Interest
Action Groups across the country? College students were the answer. For
one, they had the time,

Belief in the power of ordinary citizens to change public priorities is a theme that Nader returns to again and again.

passion, and energy to
help a myriad of public
causes. They would also
gain valuable experience
researching issues, con-
ducting public campaigns,
working on legislation, and marshalling arguments to persuade others to join
the cause. Along the way, they would learn about their own rights and how to
exercise them in a democracy, lasting lessons that, Nader hoped, would create
life-long citizen activists.

That belief in the power of ordinary citizens to change public priorities
is a theme that Nader returns to again and again:

The lesson of American history, which we never learn, is that it’s easier than
we think to overcome power and break through. Three things are needed:
[first] a tiny number of committed citizens who roll up their sleeves and
say, “This is what we’re going to do; we’re not going to bird-watch or collect
coins or collect stamps. This is our hobby.” The second is they know what
they are talking about. The third is to have the majority public opinion
behind them. It never takes more than one percent or less of engaged citi-
zenry to turn around the most powerful corporate forces.

In the fall of 1970, Nader and Ross visited dozens of campuses, propos-
ing a student-centered plan, a task Ross would continue unabated for the next
three years. Those who wanted to set up a PIRG at their college would collect
student signatures on petitions to approve a “tax” of sorts. Every student would
pay a small sum each semester, such as $6 or $10, as part of the college activity
fee to support PIRG activities and enable PIRGs to hire professional state
staff. Individual students who didn’t want to support the PIRG would be
guaranteed a way of opting out of the fee.
All seven public universities in Oregon’s state college system voted to form a PIRG. Minnesota universities were next; then those in Vermont gave the thumbs up. By spring of 1971, students across the country began to back the idea of student-led organizations, choosing, researching, and rallying behind issues they considered important. By the end of 1972, students had organized on campuses in 16 states.

Founding the PIRGs

Students formed a few PIRGs at high schools, but while the numerical advantages were obvious, there being millions more high school students compared to the number enrolled in college, Nader recognized early on that organizing at high schools presented special challenges. The inflexibility of the school year, jam-packed curriculum, lack of continuity, and the students’ relative youth all created barriers to forming an active high school PIRG. Their young age didn’t mean they were less capable but, too often, adults automatically accorded teenagers less respect, making the formation of such organizations difficult: “Teachers and administrators often view 15-, 16-, and 17-year-olds as mere children, ‘too young to understand what it’s really all about’ and certainly too young to do anything about it,” Nader wrote.

What helped the PIRGs across the country was the sense of change roiling the US nearly 50 years ago. Nader recalled the public fervor of the era:

It was just the right time. There was the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, women’s rights movement. I don’t think we could have done it today. So, you take advantage of these abbreviated surges of civic engagement and add to them.

Protest was in the air, but the PIRG model would take students beyond chanting at a march and put them on the front lines of lobbying, researching, and proposing policy. Each campus would engage issues and become, collectively, a laboratory of democracy.

The model stood the test of time. Today, there are PIRGs in 23 states and every region. Nearly 50 years later, Nader is still enthusiastic—particularly about the skills students are capable of learning and refining during their experience working with PIRGs:

They don’t just learn the physical skills of canvassing or how to do a referendum, but with the PIRGs, they learn personality skills. They learn how to develop a civic personality where they refine their sense of injustice, without which you cannot have a sense of justice. They learn how to research. They learn how to motivate people. They don’t just stay at home and read
books, they get out there where the action is. You want to be a basketball player, you’ve got to practice. You want to be an artist, you’ve got to practice. You want to be a citizen action expert, you’ve got to practice.

Issues have changed in the years since the organizations began, said Janet Domenitz, executive director of MassPIRG, a PIRG chapter located in Massachusetts. “But it is like that French saying, ‘Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose,’ for all that changes, everything is the same,” she said.

Domenitz should know. She started with MassPIRG in 1980 as a campus organizer and became executive director of the state PIRG office in Massachusetts in 1990. Her office in Boston coordinates activities with the 12 campus chapters in the state. “We’ve been working on waste, toxins, and transportation for 45 years,” Domenitz said. “When I came on, it was only recently that students were not treated like kindergarteners, with dorm curfews and other rules. That students have rights is still a recent phenomenon.”

**Technology and Its Impact**

The biggest changes, Domenitz said, involve technology. When she began nearly 40 years ago, communication was far more time-consuming and done most effectively face to face. “As an organizer, you picked up your rotary phone and dialed it. If you wanted to get information out in the world, you stuffed envelopes and mailed them. The method and the medium have changed in terms of organizing a group,” she recalled.

Yet there are drawbacks that come with today’s ease of communication. “The ability to communicate more quickly to vastly larger numbers of people is fantastic. But the fundamental person-to-person ways of communicating that people should start with is becoming a lost art.”

Forty years ago, students at PIRGs organized to protest the number of US stockpiled nuclear weapons. They collected signatures on petitions to reduce the possibility of nuclear war and worked on improving the environment. Today, degradation of the environment is still a dominant student concern, but the issues within that cause have changed.

For example, MassPIRG students are currently working to try to bring about a statewide ban on the herbicide Roundup. They are calling for bans on
chemicals used in homes and gardens that are implicated in bee colony collapse disorder, which is vastly reducing the number of bees. And above every environmental concern the students work on, looms the threat of climate change, said Domenitz:

Twenty somethings literally don’t know if the planet will survive. This level of existential threat is hard. Somehow, [the battle over reducing] nukes seemed more isolated. Climate change seems vaster and that’s a big burden. It is different, the way music has changed. Kids are as idealistic as students were years ago, with an added edge.

Like those of yesteryear, students have been involved in any number of campaigns to change corporate behavior, Domenitz said. A big recent victory took place in March 2015 when, after intense student protests over the overuse of antibiotics in animals, McDonalds announced it would phase out the use of chickens that had been routinely fed the infection-fighting drugs. Feeding farm animals antibiotics is partially blamed for the rise of drug-resistant bacteria, leaving people vulnerable to life-threatening infections. Domenitz credited the students’ use of technology—in particular, one hour on Valentine’s Day 2015 when students used social media to send 300,000 messages to McDonalds—to pressure the company to make its decision. Late last year, McDonalds said it would also set reduction targets in the amount of antibiotic-fed beef it uses in its products.

Students come together on issues, but the degree of activism can reflect the differences of individual student situations, Domenitz said. “There is always a good core group of activists. But some students are attending community colleges, and they may be going to school while holding down a job and raising a family. They don’t have the luxury of being full-time activists the way others do.” Then there are differences among the campuses themselves. Fitchburg State University has a total of 7,000 students; UMass Amherst has 30,000. “If we get you as a freshman, you will probably stick with us,” Domenitz said.

“When asked what do [young people] want to do in life—be an engineer, a doctor, or a teacher—I want people to say ‘I want to be a full-time citizen . . . putting forward new ideas and applying old ideas that make life better for people.’”
The Moral Compass of the Young

If Nader had his way, of course, civic activism would start much younger than college. Elementary school students, he said, are more than ready to be citizens, to roll up their sleeves and take their place in democracy. They, too, can learn to be citizens—the younger, the better:

Studies have shown that kids are able to distinguish right from wrong when they are three, four, and five years old. You start in stages. You don’t overload them, but you start. But the real mobilizing starts in middle school. That’s when they realize that the world isn’t all that it could be.

To Nader, the young are ready to confront issues head on:

First of all, nobody can ask a more piercing moral question better than a nine- or ten-year-old. They’re not inhibited; they go right to the core. They are more idealistic at that age than they are likely ever to be, and that drives them to ask tough questions. And that is where they can begin to develop leadership capacity. Also, it’s their country. They have the biggest stake, and they can learn by doing. The best way to learn politics is citizen engagement with politicians, with elections, with what happens between elections and with neighborhood organizing.

When asked whether the PIRGs are meant to change events or people, Nader replied, “All of the above.” To him, the highest calling is that of citizen. To change the world, all you need is a committed, passionate, one percent.

“When asked what do [young people] want to do in life—be an engineer, a doctor, or a teacher—I want people to say ‘I want to be a full-time citizen . . . putting forward new ideas and applying old ideas that make life better for people,’” Nader said.

It’s a lesson he sometimes illustrates by giving out $2 bills:

I like to pass out $2 bills because on the back of the bill is [an illustration of] a big table with the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and I say, “Aren’t you glad these people showed up? Yeah, some of them were slave owners and they were all white males, but it’s pretty good they showed up, right?”

That’s the crux of civic activity, the central lesson he learned at his father’s restaurant, attending town meetings, challenging authority, and organizing students: You have to show up.

“The biggest obstacle to democratic activity in this country, small ‘d,’ is people not showing up. They have to show up at town meetings, show up to
vote, show up to march, show up for rallies, show up in courtrooms, show up at neighborhood gatherings,” he said.

“If they don’t do that, it’s over.”

NOTES

REFERENCES
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RALPH NADER is one of America’s most effective social critics. His analyses and advocacy have enhanced public awareness and increased government and corporate accountability. His book Unsafe at Any Speed led to the passage of a series of automobile safety laws. Nader founded or inspired a wide variety of organizations, including the Princeton Alumni Corps and the Appleseed Foundation, a nonprofit network of 17 public-interest justice centers. An author, lecturer, attorney, and political activist, Nader’s life-long work and advocacy has led to safer cars, healthier food, safer drugs, cleaner air and drinking water, and safer work environments. In 2006, the Atlantic named him one of the hundred most influential figures in American history. Nader continues his work to advance meaningful civic institutions and citizen participation.
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