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Wake Forest assistant professor Bryan Shelly reviews the research of Harvard Sociologist Robert Putnam, whose pioneering work, *Bowling Alone*, and follow-up work *Better Together*, with Lewis F. Feldsten, supports the value of student participation in cocurricular activities and the importance of strong activities programs.

Can Student Activities Save the United States? Robert Putnam and Social Capital

By Bryan Shelly, PhD

Harvard Sociologist Robert Putnam is one of the most influential social scientists of the past 20 years. Many may recognize the title of his pioneering work, *Bowling Alone*, in which Putnam explores the concept of "social capital." An individual's social capital develops from the extent and amount of participation she has in civic, associational, social, and political life. The more involved a person is in one or more groups, the more likely she is to become involved in additional groups. For example, if a person is a member of the YMCA and her school's PTA, she is more likely to become involved in any other activity (say, Habitat for Humanity) than a person who is not. Once a person falls into a pattern, she can find it very hard to break out of it. Those who participate extensively at one point in their life are likely to maintain a high level of participation throughout their lives, and nonparticipants are likely to continue not to participate.

Putnam identifies five ways in which social capital is indispensable to society. Social capital makes us understand that we share similarities with other groups in society and thus increases and broadens our sense of community. It makes cooperation between groups easier, because groups share members. It makes business transactions easier, because the parties involved trust each other and do not waste time and money with exhaustive contracts and legal fees. It allows information to flow more freely between individuals and groups. Finally, it makes us feel more happy and connected to others and less isolated and stressed. Thus social capital helps society further its social, economic, political, and health goals.

Given social capital's importance to the nation's future, Putnam is deeply concerned with decreasing levels of most indicators. Participation in clubs and civic organizations has been cut by more than

half over the last 25 years. Involvement in community life, such as public meetings, is down by 35 percent over the last 25 years. Church attendance is down by roughly one third since the 1960s. Philanthropy as a fraction of income is down by nearly one third since the 1960s (The Saguro Seminar 2007). Individuals have withdrawn from society, and our country is losing the benefits from social capital that we had right after World War II.

Putnam's project is to provide a roadmap towards revitalizing American civic life. In the follow up to *Bowling Alone* entitled *Better Together*, Putnam and co-author Lewis F. Feldstein identify young adults between the ages of 10 and 21 as the keys to restoring America's social capital, "because they are old enough to understand civic obligations but still young enough to be forming civic habits." Unfortunately, the indicators and trends for youth social capital are no better than those for society as a whole. According to an extensive UCLA survey, compared to the mid-1906s, today's college freshmen are less likely to trust other people, less likely to support charities, less likely to vote, less likely to attend community meetings, less likely to attend houses of worship, and less likely to keep up with public affairs. Such figures only begin to hint at the isolation and apathy that plagues today's youth.

Revitalizing Student Activities

How can participation trends be reversed, both among children and adults? How can society ensure that children develop positive participation habits that will allow them to lead the United States effectively? The answer should be obvious to members of the Alliance for Student Activities. One of the 13 steps Putnam and Feldstein recommend society take to correct the social capital decline is the revitalization of cocurricular activities.

"Besides providing the psychic benefits of solidarity and commitment, extracurricular activities

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teach valuable civic skills, such as public speaking, teamwork, and organization” (9). Empirical results confirm their theory that young adults who participate in cocurricular activities turn into adults who run for local office, join the JayCees, and participate in the thousands of local organizations that make American life great (Smith 1999). Especially important are activities involving “community service, representation, speaking in public forums, and generating a communal identity.” Sound like anything you advise? Even when factors such as family and social class are controlled, such activities have an independent effect on future adult participation (McFarland and Thomas 2006).

Better Together's other recommendations provide further justification for the existence of a strong cocurricular program in every school. Anyone who has seen a student council car show bring out students who would not dream of attending a dance could have predicted Putnam and Feldstein's finding that cocurriculars can knock down the barriers between groups. Putnam and Feldstein recommend students perform mandatory service each school year, because they “increase students' sense of social responsibility, compassion, tolerance, and belonging to a broader community” (8). The Alliance for Student Activities and its supporters know that student activities also further all of these things.

Putnam and Feldstein believe mentoring will help train students in civic skills and build trust. Cocurricular advisors mentor their students every day. Putnam and Feldstein call for community boards and councils to include young people so that they may learn how to affect government and work together. Cocurricular activities provide students with the opportunity to interact with the broader community and local leaders. For all of these reasons, the decrease in funding and emphasis of cocurricular activities upsets Putnam and Feldstein as much it upsets us.

Putnam and Feldstein warn that, in today's latchkey age, children are going to do *something* when they are not in class. “Young people want what everyone else wants: affiliation, community, solidarity, respect, success, and opportunity. Whether those needs are provided by gangs—or conversely by schools, houses of worship, and sports leagues—is up to us as a society” (1). If society does not want children to learn the lessons that gangs, video games, and other negative influences teach, it must provide more

constructive ways for children to spend out-of-class time. If this society values the ideals of participatory democracy—if society wants children to grow up to be active members of their community interested in making their world a better place—it must stop treating cocurricular activities as an unwanted, irrelevant stepchild and recognize their indispensable importance in children's education.

Bryan Shelly, PhD, (bsbelly24@yahoo.com) is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C. He also serves as assistant workshop director and Executive Board member for the Pennsylvania Association of Student Councils.

Further Reading

- McFarland, D. A. and R. J. Thomas (2006). “Bowling young: How youth voluntary associations influence adult political participation.” *American Sociological Review* 71(3): 401–425.
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