

**PRESIDENTIAL  
PERSPECTIVES**



a higher education presidential thought leadership series

2009/2010 SERIES: **LEADERSHIP IN THE GREAT RECESSION**

CHAPTER SEVEN

# **INSPIRING TODAY'S STUDENTS TOWARD PUBLIC SERVICE**

# Inspiring Today's Students Toward Public Service

Dr. Thomas V. Chema: President, Hiram College

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When I attended my first Senior Dinner as president of Hiram College, I asked our soon-to-be graduates how many of them were pursuing a career in public service. I was totally taken aback when not one student raised his or her hand. As a lawyer, I was trained to never ask a question—especially in front of a jury—if I didn't already know the answer. But, in 2003, when I polled the group about their plans, I naively assumed that at least a half dozen of the 200 in attendance had found jobs in the government. No, not one of our graduates was headed to Washington, D.C.

I asked a lot of questions that first year, and many of the answers surprised me. This one was different. My heart—not my head—told me that getting our best and brightest enthused about participating in our democracy had to be one of my top priorities. Like so many of my generation, I was inspired by the words of John F. Kennedy to find ways to serve my country.

This is not the case these days, although the 2008 presidential race did rekindle some interest and enthusiasm for public service. I'm convinced that ongoing scandals involving our elected officials and the "professionalization" of public office have dramatically changed the state of our democracy. Many of our young people hold the government and our country's leaders in low esteem. What is even more upsetting to me is that students are just not interested in politics, government, or public service.

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We are encouraging our students to devote a portion of their professional or academic careers to "true" public service.

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## Easy Ways to Change a Mindset

Sometimes small colleges like ours (Hiram has 1,200 undergraduates with 40 percent first-generation college students.) can make simple and inexpensive changes that have a big impact. Here are three ideas we implemented quickly to get our students more focused on public service.

- **Encouraged voter registration**—If casting a ballot is at the crux of our democracy, then getting our students registered to vote was the first step. We made it easy by giving all our first-year students voter registration packets on move-in day. We encouraged them to register to vote in our little village of 1,200, and more than 370 students have registered. Our students tend to vote as a block in local races, favoring village officials who keep the best interests of the college in mind.
- **Brought politicians to campus**—I wanted our Hiram students to have the chance to be exposed to good people who are involved in public service. The longer I'm in education, the more I'm convinced that the way you get kids engaged in any subject is by getting them involved with people and in building relationships. By providing opportunities to meet and interact with those who work for the government and lead our state and nation, we show our students the good in the public sector—and the wonderful careers open to them. We hosted congressional candidates, folks running for the state legislature, and even the village mayoral candidates.
- **Encouraged the reading old-fashioned newspapers**—Sure, the pundits say today's kids don't read newspapers; however, the free issues of the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* fly off the racks by noon in our administrative/classroom building, dining hall, and dormitories. Thanks to a grant from a local philanthropist whose family publishes area newspapers, we also offer the local *Record-Courier* and *Akron Beacon Journal*. National educational discounts help lower the cost of this popular program, now in its fourth year. I believe access to newspapers helps our students critically analyze issues of the day and serves as a focal point for discussions in and out of the classroom.

## Incorporating a New Academic Structure

As part of a campus-wide initiative to re-energize our interdisciplinary approach, Hiram created six distinct Centers of Excellence in which teaching and learning occur collaboratively. One of these, the Garfield Institute for Public Leadership, provides the structure, support, and guidance to create the synergies to make public leadership a real possibility for our students. It honors James A. Garfield, a student, teacher, and then president of Hiram College who became an incorruptible icon of American statesmanship.

We are proud of the fact that Hiram holds the unusual distinction of being only one of three colleges or universities once led by a president of the United States. The Garfield Institute was not designed to groom professional politicians, but we certainly hope that many of our students will devote a part of their careers to public service.

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Here's how we structured the Garfield Institute in order to inspire our students towards public service.

- **Put good leaders in place**—Working from within the College, I asked one of our respected political science professors to lead the initiative and then hired an associate director to oversee the day-to-day administration.
  - **Added a minor in public leadership**—The Garfield Institute offers an interdisciplinary minor, with tracks in domestic public leadership, foreign policy, and international leadership. Core requirements include a public leadership course and internship.
  - **Organized a scholars program**—Twenty-four selected students actively participate in seminars, engage public leaders on and off campus, and demonstrate scholarship. This prestigious group of Garfield Scholars helps plan and host our quarterly seminar series, which features leading public service scholars and government officials. In addition, they take part in a fall field trip to New York City and Washington, D.C. and present a research project or formal essay in the spring. Each receives a Scholar Award and a check for \$500.
  - **Implemented an internship program**—Internship opportunities are available through our Washington semester and a variety of other organizations. Last summer, four Hiram students took part in a paid Internship Fellows Program through the U.S. Department of State. We encourage—and try to help—students to find internships with members of Congress, the White House, and a variety of federal agencies, including the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO).
  - **Started a professional-in-residence program**—This is a great way to have new blood on campus, provide a role model for students, and get someone to teach for less money. Some professionals have spent just two or three days or a weekend giving talks and seminars on campus, while others have made a semester-long commitment. One former congressman spent the semester after he was voted out of office teaching a class for us before he started a new campaign.
  - **Called on alumni and trustees for help**—Thanks to the generosity of one of our Hiram trustees, we have a new home for the Garfield Institute on campus. An 1842 church where James A. Garfield once preached was dismantled and reassembled on our campus, which is already filled with nineteenth century brick buildings. This fabulous example of Greek Revival architecture was reconfigured to hold classrooms and offices for the Institute. I find it interesting that the idea of encouraging students to consider a life of public service appeals to an entirely different group of potential donors. Getting support for the Garfield Institute and these other projects has been challenging but certainly doable.
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## Witnessing Change

Are these ideas making a difference? I believe they are, but we don't have solid data yet. However, it is clear that more of our students are expressing interest in public service than they did in the past. Let me reiterate that we're not trying to turn our students into professional politicians. To the contrary, we are encouraging our students to devote a portion of their professional or academic careers to "true" public service.

In these difficult times, I believe we all are all painfully aware of the lack of civility in public discourse. By giving up our own roles in public service, we've allowed too many noncritical thinkers control of the airways and domination of the printed word. Anything we can do to foster meaningful dialogue and teach our students to be problem solvers is critical to our own colleges and universities—and to our country. As I look back on my first five years as president of Hiram College, I am proud that we are engaging our students in the democratic process. And I'm happy I asked those seniors that question.



### About the Author

**Dr. Thomas V. Chema** was named president of Hiram College in Hiram, Ohio in 2004, after more than 30 years of leadership experience in business, government, and the law. For 11 years, he served as a member of Hiram's Board of Trustees.

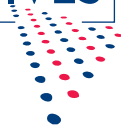
During his presidency, enrollment in Hiram's undergraduate programs has increased by more than 50 percent, and the campus has been transformed with the addition of new buildings. Increased corporate, government, and foundation support has contributed to a positive financial picture, allowing for new academic programs and other initiatives. Dr. Chema has increased Hiram's visibility by serving in a leadership role in a number of national and Ohio-based higher education associations.

Dr. Chema has consulted across the country on sports and entertainment-related economic development projects and is recognized as an expert on energy and telecommunications economics and regulation, infrastructure planning, and public/private partnerships.

Dr. Chema is a 1968 Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of Notre Dame and a 1971 Cum Laude graduate of the Harvard Law School.

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