

Upcoming Graduates a Class Unto Themselves

8/3/2009

By DANIEL J.B. MITCHELL

Every winter quarter at UCLA, I have co-taught a course on California policy issues with Michael Dukakis, the 1988 presidential candidate and former Massachusetts governor. We take up a vast array of issues: crime control, water supply, air quality, transportation, fiscal affairs, business development, immigration, education, etc. Since no one can be expert in all of these areas, we depend heavily on guest speakers.

Over the years, we have had high-profile guests, such as Los Angeles Police Chief Bill Bratton. But we also have had many officials whose names you wouldn't know. Nonetheless, these are folks who ultimately make decisions and administer programs that affect everyone's well-being in Southern California. Our speakers have come from local city councils, planning agencies, water and transit districts, the seaports and airports, even the local FBI office.

However, our guests are not confined just to the public sector. We have had a variety of folks from the private sector and the non-profit sector who speak to the class on their concerns and responsibilities. Students have learned about business improvement districts and chambers of commerce from our guests. In addition, we ask our students to form teams and to make reports on industries important to California. Our goal in assigning that task is to emphasize that the well-being of the state ultimately depends on the strength of its economy and business activity. But we also use the written and oral reports assigned in the course to teach students the effective presentation skills that will be important in the job market.

Demographic diversity

So what have we learned in teaching the course? Not surprisingly, the students enrolled represent our local demographic diversity. The class roster each year looks like a virtual United Nations and constitutes the future of California and Los Angeles. Many enrollees are first-generation college students or have immigrant backgrounds. Despite the evident dysfunctions of California at present, they are anxious to be involved in making improvements.

In addition, our guest speakers travel to UCLA, despite the notorious Westside traffic congestion, with no recompense other than a parking pass for the day. They seem eager to explain what they do to an attentive audience. They often have interesting career paths, starting out in various fields and not infrequently coming to their present jobs from outside the local area. And they seem dedicated to doing a good job, whatever their positions. We don't have difficulty in obtaining guest speakers; they are generally happy to accept our invitations.

There is no denying that California and Los Angeles are in the midst of a severe recession. Major structural adjustments lie ahead for both the private and public sectors. But there are also many young people anxious to make improvements that will be entering the local labor market. And there are many folks in mid- or late career eager to make it possible for them to do just that.

Bottom line: The partisan impasses that regularly emanate from Sacramento tend to obscure our local strengths.

Daniel J.B. Mitchell is professor emeritus at UCLA.

