

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



Institutions and the Public: A Troubled Relationship

Articles

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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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CONTENTS

| | | |
|--|---|----|
| Derek W. M. Barker and Alex Lovit | Institutions and the Public: A Troubled Relationship? (Foreword) | 1 |
| Byron P. White | Toward the Community-Centric University | 6 |
| John J. Theis | Civic Engagement Contributes to Culture Change at a Community College | 22 |
| Katie Clark | Treating an Ailing Society: Citizen Nursing in an Era of Crisis | 36 |
| Jonathan Garlick | The Pandemic, Trustworthiness, and a Place for Civic Science in Higher Education | 50 |
| Timothy J. Shaffer and David E. Procter | Learning to Become a Civic Professional: Using Deliberation in Community Engagement | 64 |
| Chris Gilmer | “Attention, Attention Must Be Finally Paid”: A Case for Reinventing Liberal Arts Education | 75 |
| David Mathews | A Call for Academic Inventiveness (Afterword) | 86 |
| | Contributors | 92 |

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT CONTRIBUTES TO CULTURE CHANGE AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

John J. Theis

Democracy in the United States is facing a crisis—not from our recent experiences with the political ascendance of Donald Trump, but one that has been brewing for years. National polls consistently show that not a single national political leader is consistently viewed in a positive light, while confidence in our political institutions is at record lows. In June 2019 Gallup surveys, just 38 percent of respondents had “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the institutions of the presidency or the Supreme Court, while only 11 percent had confidence in Congress. This contrasts markedly with respondents’ opinions when the questions were first asked in 1975. At that time, the presidency stood at 52 percent, the Supreme Court at 49 percent and Congress at 42 percent. Even in the aftermath of Watergate, American political institutions fared better than they do now, some 40 years later.¹

Not only are we losing confidence in our political institutions, but we are also losing confidence in each other. Poll results show that the trust Americans have in their fellow citizens has been declining precipitously and has now reached the lowest level ever.² Regardless of whom we elect and which policies are implemented, the public has become increasingly disillusioned, cynical, and apathetic, while problems continue to fester and grow. It seems to many that those in charge are either incompetent, impotent, ignorant, in someone’s pocket, or all of the above. Partisan posturing and an often-noted decrease of civility among representatives from different parties reflect an adversarial, mobilizing politics that professor, author, and public scholar Harry Boyte sees as emerging from the ashes of the 1960s.³ This kind of politics is ill suited for the problems the US faces in the 21st century.

Education in general, and higher education in particular, have been historically seen as fundamental to preparing young citizens in the skills needed to make democracy function. From the Founders onward, education was regarded as a cornerstone of democratic society. According to Thomas Jefferson, “No

other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom and happiness. . . . We must establish and improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know that the people alone can protect us against these evils [of misgovernment].”⁴

We have forgotten John Adams’ advice to his son, “You will ever remember that all the end of study is to make you a good man and a useful citizen.”⁵

When the Constitution’s framers talked about education, they did not just mean vocational training or apprenticeships. “While this type of training was certainly important, they also

“The first and most essential charge upon higher education is that at all levels and in all its fields of specialization, it shall be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and process.”

wanted a citizenry trained in government, ethics (moral philosophy), history, rhetoric, science (natural philosophy), mathematics, logic, and classical languages for these subjects made people informed and civil participants in a democratic society.”⁶

Early educational reformers pursued this relationship between education and citizenship. Horace Mann, an early advocate for public education and the father of “Common Schools” explicitly contended that democracy required educated citizens. John Dewey, a leading reformer of public education said, “Democracy cannot flourish where the chief influences in selecting the subject matter of instruction are utilitarian ends narrowly conceived for the masses, and, for the higher education of the few, the traditions of a specialized cultivated class.”⁷ The Truman commission on higher education stressed the importance of educating for democracy when it reported, “The first and most essential charge upon higher education is that at all levels and in all its fields of specialization, it shall be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and process.”⁸ In many ways, college should help develop qualities of mind and heart that facilitate reflective citizenship. A fundamental irony of American colleges today is that as they have become more democratic and inclusive in recruitment, their curricula have become less concerned with democracy.

To change the type of politics currently practiced in the US and effectively deal with the problems we face, higher education must play a central role in educating our next generation of citizens. Ironically, it may not be particularly well suited for the task.

For one thing, higher education is rigidly hierarchical and becoming more so. Despite proclamations about shared governance, decisions are often made by administrators and then committees are formed to arrive at that end. Classrooms are hierarchically organized as well. A faculty member provides a list of expectations in the form of a syllabus and determines the criteria that constitute

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achievement in the form of grades. A teacher's time is traditionally spent lecturing to the students and making periodic assessments of how well they have "learned." Increasingly, outside powers—accrediting bodies or state agencies—impose metrics of mastery on both faculty and students.

In the face of perceptions that colleges and universities have become hotbeds of "liberal indoctrination," there is a general fear of politics on college campuses, according to Boyte. Fear of being accused of bias for pushing one's ideological agenda lead faculty members to eschew political action and to avoid encouraging their students to pursue it.⁹ Faculty and administrators have become sensitive to those critiques and have sought to minimize political action on college campuses. This problem is acute because politics has come to be narrowly defined as consisting of campaigns, elections, and voting. In this definition, citizens are consumers of politics and their participation is restricted to working on campaigns and voting for their candidates. These are necessarily partisan activities that occur only periodically, and yet, political education becomes defined by these activities. The result is a hollowed-out notion of citizenship and politics that minimizes the role of ordinary citizens in the everyday lives of their communities.¹⁰

Civic education in most US colleges and universities has essentially been confined to three areas: political science classes, service learning projects, and student life activities such as Democrat or Republican clubs, debate teams, student government, and volunteerism. These ways of learning civic engagement emphasize a view of government as the center of democracy and citizens filling prescribed roles away from the centers of power.

An alternative model of “politics” is essential to understanding how higher education can teach the civic and political skills badly needed in our current crisis. This model focuses not on the government and experts as the center and citizens at the periphery, but rather on citizens at the center and government and experts as partners in civic life. This happens only by building a sense of civic agency in students and providing the spaces for them to practice it deliberatively. As Boyte notes, “Civic agency involves people’s capacities to work collectively across differences to cope with common problems and build a democratic life together.”¹¹

Ultimately, for real civic education to occur, our centuries-old model of lecture-driven education will have to give way to a more holistic notion of education that seamlessly incorporates democratic practices across the entire scope of a student’s campus life. Civic engagement is about developing deliberative and public work skills to help students see themselves as active citizens. This “politics of the people” is political but not partisan. This is the notion of politics and engagement that has served as the foundation of the civic engagement work at Lone Star College-Kingwood (LSC-K).

Civic Engagement at Lone Star College

Efforts to create a Houston community college that served the needs of residents in the northern suburbs began in the post-World-War-II era. Like most community colleges, it was envisioned primarily as a “job training” institution. As John A. Winship, one of the early proponents of the community college said, they “are geared particularly to the needs of the community and that’s where . . . junior colleges have strength. It will be for this community, and it will offer courses in job training for the people of the community. The challenge of our junior colleges is to meet the needs of our new and complex society where more technicians are required.”¹²

For 17 years, leaders in three north Houston school districts worked to build community support for the creation of a new college, and on October 7, 1972, voters approved a bond issue to purchase land and create the North Harris County College. In the following years, North Harris County College grew to become an academic institution that serves residents in 11 school districts located in two major counties in Texas. Today, the renamed Lone Star College System boasts 7 campuses and 10 centers spanning the northern Houston suburbs. Lone Star College (LSC) serves an area of more than 1,400 square miles with a population of 2.1 million, including some of the fastest-growing communities in the state. With an enrollment of 99,000 students, it

has become the fastest-growing community college in Texas and is recognized as a Top 10 associate-degree-producing institution in the country.¹³ Like so many community colleges, despite the growth and the changes, Lone Star never lost its identity as a “job training college.”

Since LSC sees itself primarily as a workforce training school and is a nonresidential two-year college, building student civic programs and creating a culture for democracy education takes on a whole additional set of challenges. When I arrived on the LSC-K campus in the fall of 2008 as an associate professor of government, I quickly saw that this was not the type of college I had been used to as a student or faculty member. I had attended a four-year private school for my undergraduate degree, a four-year state college for my master’s degree, and a flagship state university for my doctorate. My fondest recollections of college were not the classes. Rather, they revolved around my campus life—the spaces where students of different majors and from different places got to know each other and worked together. It was in the library, the cafeterias, and the lounges in the dorms that communities were built each school year.

At LSC-K, there was a dearth of campus life. The location of the campus in a suburban area meant students were never far from home. Other faculty told me it was a “PCP” campus—a place where students went from the “parking lot to class and back to the parking lot” to go home. In addition, many students held jobs while they went to school part time. Many of them were

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under a constant time constraint as they sought to balance school, family, and work. It was not the ideal environment in which to develop a robust campus life or build civic engagement. Finally, the lack of residential facilities meant that the campus didn’t have

students who lived on campus as a built-in audience for evening events, so the campus shut down by late afternoon. There were attempts at engagement. Volunteerism was encouraged as faculty, staff, and students participated in holiday toy and food drives and the Heart Walk. A handful of faculty engaged students in service learning. The Office of Student Life celebrated Constitution Day with cake and free copies of the Constitution for the handful of students

who came. There was a speaker's bureau that engaged one or two speakers a year though the events were sparsely attended. And, while there was a student government, its members were not elected.

Two changes in the thinking of the LSC community had to happen in order to introduce civic education at Lone Star College. First, the ideas that faculty, staff, and students had about what political education is had to be reshaped. A key to success was

making civic engagement political, but it had to be done in such a way as not to be perceived as "liberal" in what is one of the most conservative

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environments in the country. Secondly, civic engagement needed to be crucial to the institution's self-interest. Community colleges struggle with student retention. Half of the students who enroll are gone by the following year. State funding has come to be tied to graduation and completion rates. Success is the operative word on community college campuses. To build administrative support, civic engagement had to be seen as improving student success.

Working with Phi Theta Kappa (the national community college honor society), I launched Public Achievement shortly after arriving at LSC-K. Public Achievement is a youth engagement initiative developed at the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In the Public Achievement model, college and K-12 students partner in teams to research and develop action plans to impact issues in their community. College students serve as coaches and help the groups develop and implement their plans.

LSC-K students have worked with students from four schools in three school districts in the northeastern suburbs of Houston since the program began in 2010. Students choose issues and form action groups around those issues. The issues range from parochial ones, such as improving school lunches and addressing bullying, to larger, communitywide issues, such as building a community teen center and stopping animal abuse. Regardless of the issue, the coaches and students must learn to access power by discovering who has it and what their interests are. They must learn to craft appeals, listen to feedback, and modify proposals based on stakeholder interests. Public Achievement participants need to adapt to be successful. They cannot count on pushing their proposals through based on expertise but must find ways to shape their ideas to satisfy multiple and often competing stakeholders and provide each with

some level of investment in a shared outcome. Public Achievement provided the organizing model for developing civic engagement programs at Lone Star College and broadening its impact across its campuses.

After taking an exploratory group of faculty, students, and administrators to the Sabo Center we began working with Splendora High School in the spring of 2010. This became the signature program of what would soon become the Center for Civic Engagement (CCE). Public Achievement also provided me with opportunities to present at national conferences, and in 2011, Dr. Bill Coppola and I attended the American Democracy Project meetings in Orlando where Brian Murphy and Bernie Ronan were organizing the Democracy Commitment, a national community college democracy education organization. I began to see the possibilities of the work beyond Public Achievement.

Free Spaces

Free spaces are settings between private lives and large-scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence, and vision. These are mainly voluntary forms of association, which are open and participatory and grounded in the fabric of community life. According to Evans and Boyte, “They are defined by their roots in the community; the dense, rich networks of daily life; by their autonomy; and by their public or quasi-public environments, which nurture values associated with citizenship and a vision of the common good.”¹⁴ Free spaces differ from volunteerism because the work its participants decide to do is chosen by the participants instead of by an organization and is arrived at through collective decision-making about priorities and values. Public Achievement became a program that provided a free space for students to act on problems they identify while teaching basic organizing skills. Students in Public Achievement with a taste for public work in free spaces went on to help launch a whole set of programs that became the backbone of the CCE. As the center began to grow, I envisioned it as a “free space” that would provide the students, faculty, and staff of LSC-K a place to work on issues they cared about.

Alternative Spring Break

In 2013, a faculty member approached me about starting an alternative spring break program. We began discussing the possibilities and, together, we developed the programming and funding to take a group of students to El Paso to look at border issues during spring break of 2014. Alternative spring break

became the second program born in the new CCE. We have since had 15 alternative spring breaks both locally and internationally.

As elections loomed in 2014, students decided to host voter education efforts by holding candidate forums. We invited candidates for all state, local, and national offices on the ballot from both Democrat, Republican, and third parties. Attendance at the forums varied from a dozen to over 100. We also invited state and local candidates to come and speak to students, held voter registration workshops, and registered voters at campus events.

All these activities were planned and organized by students and faculty working together. As the programming grew, faculty, staff, administrators, and students noticed a change on campus. Things were

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going on, and the CCE could help. Administrators saw the center as a place that could put on successful programs. When the chancellor wanted to host some campus forums on the topic of guns on campus, in anticipation of the upcoming state legislation that would allow conceal-carry on college campuses in Texas, the president of Kingwood came to me and said, “The chancellor wants to do some guns-on-campus forums, and so I volunteered us to do the first one. You can handle that, can’t you?” Yes, we could.

More than 300 people from the school and the community, including elected representatives, came to the gun forum. This was an event that would never have happened at Lone Star College before the CCE shifted the thinking about what community college could be. Training was provided to the Student Government Association so students could learn the deliberative skills to help guide deliberation at the forums. Senior college leadership participated in a dialogue about the purpose of higher education, after which, one vice president remarked, “You know, I don’t think we have ever had this conversation amongst ourselves.” Deliberation became more than a classroom activity; it became a method of problem solving.

The more I did the work, the more I noticed another outcome. I realized that our community college campus was losing some of its former “PCP” culture and gaining a more participatory, vibrant, democratic feel. Students were taking on projects and staying around campus; faculty were increasingly inclined

to engage in campus activities rather than just teach their classes and go home. And administrators were supporting the activities in both word and deed. The campus culture was changing. As the vice president of instruction at Kingwood Rebecca Riley said, “The work of the Center for Civic Engagement has almost single-handedly created the context for activism, engagement, and intellectual liveliness on our campus by being a consummate practitioner of grassroots organizing.”

Digging Deeper

In the spring and summer of 2016, we conducted 28 interviews with faculty, administrators, and staff involved with civic engagement on the Kingwood campus. I was particularly interested in what had brought them to civic engagement and how civic engagement activities had shifted the way in which they and the campus operated. One major point that jumped out in the interviews was that 70 percent of the faculty who were interviewed said they had become involved in civic engagement because they had backgrounds that led them toward activism and service. As one faculty member said, “In my personal life, I have worked with the Boy Scouts . . . and with the Red Cross as a trainer, so I want to get students thinking about how they can be part of the community.” Some faculty members were now bringing into their professional life the passions of their college days. As one respondent noted, “My undergraduate years were part of the change on college campuses, and as an African American student in a predominantly White university, I worked on efforts toward inclusion.” Most respondents had a personal connection to the work, and the civic engagement program at Lone Star College gave them an avenue to revitalize their interests and move to action in their professional careers in a way they had not before.

The success of civic engagement at Lone Star College opened a door that had been closed for many of them. Civic engagement provided permission (in a sense) to bring onto campus and into their classroom the issues that they cared deeply about and worked on outside of their professional lives. They began to see their jobs not just as teaching a skill set, but rather as teaching a way of thinking and acting in the world. For some faculty, the civic engagement activities created a safe space on campus for them to pursue their passions. As one faculty member said, “I have always had a deep commitment to social justice but was never involved as an undergraduate myself. Incorporating civic engagement at Lone Star allows me to give my students experiences that I missed.”

Faculty also found the great benefits that accrued to their teaching through their participation in civic engagement activities. As one adjunct faculty member put it, “I feel it enhances my ability to teach because I am getting the students involved in the process of acquiring knowledge.” Another faculty member put it this way: “Including civic engagement in my classes breaks up the monotony of teaching the same two classes over and over. The civic engagement work is ever-changing and keeps you on your toes.” Finally, one senior faculty member said, “Civic engagement enables me to experience the highs of teaching that come from an active classroom. Some of those less engaged are pulled along in the process and become better students.”

In addition to making teaching better and more interesting, civic engagement has helped create linkages between faculty in different fields. The tendency of faculty to stay within their subject areas is an issue that has plagued higher education for years. Civic engagement serves as a bridge that brings them together. As one faculty member put it, “Personally, it has helped me out tremendously by connecting me with various faculty members throughout the campus. This has, in turn, motivated me to include more civic engagement activities in my classes.” As another faculty member stated, “Civic engagement work has helped me reach out to professors in other disciplines.” The interdisciplinary nature of civic engagement cannot be underestimated in helping to bridge the divides that are so common in academia, whether those be discipline specific or organizationally driven differences between student services and academics.

An administrator put it this way: “Organizing efforts have produced a genuine sense of camaraderie and an increase in faculty morale for those faculty involved in the projects.” One faculty member found, “The collaboration with other faculty leads to friendships and a general increase in workplace satisfaction.” A final faculty benefit of civic engagement work seems to be the psychological benefits derived from participation

Faculty members believe that the things they care about make a difference in student learning. It is, therefore, not a surprise that in the interviews we conducted, faculty members talked about how important civic engagement was. One adjunct faculty member said, “The challenge for many FTIC [First Time in College] students is not knowing what abilities and behaviors are required for academic achievement, or personal success. Civic engagement activities offer an opportunity for students to explore their abilities and put them into action in a nonthreatening real-world situation.” Or as one professor put it: “General introductory classes tend to cover a breadth of information related

to the discipline. Working with community partners and organizations allows students to gain a deeper understanding of a particular issue. In political science, such singular experiences as working with a social service agency allows them to see how classroom knowledge is practiced and can unite discipline concepts into a shared experience among students and faculty.”

Every faculty member interviewed saw civic engagement activities as critical for student success. Most respondents believed that getting students involved meant they would be more socially connected, which would make them more successful, as evidenced by this adjunct’s comment that “the

Every faculty member interviewed saw civic engagement activities as critical for student success. Most believed that getting students involved meant they would be more socially connected, which would make them more successful.

essence of civic engagement promotes strategy-based thinking and social integration, which are two common predictors of academic success,” and by this faculty member who said, “Civic engagement activities allow students to integrate into the campus and form relationships with peers who are experiencing similar challenges.”

Ultimately, the value of civic engagement is of no importance if you can’t show that it matters. Much of the decision-making at colleges and universities revolves around data and analytics. If civic engagement is to have a firm foothold on a campus and build administration support, it is essential to demonstrate its efficacy in promoting student success and retention. One measure of whether a college is doing its job is fall-to-fall retention. This is a measure of students who enroll in the fall of a given year and reenroll the following fall.

The fall-to-fall retention rate for Lone Star College-Kingwood was 52.1 percent for the 2016-2017 school year. During that year, participation in civic engagement activities was tracked, and 1,873 students participated in at least one civic engagement event. An analysis of students who participated in civic engagement events found a 6.73 percent increase in retention because of participating in civic engagement. The retention rate for the college would have moved from 52.1 percent to 58.8 percent if civic engagement were part of every student’s educational journey. There are several reasons to think that this is a realistic outcome. As we have seen, faculty are more engaged in the

material at hand when they are involved with civic engagement. They have better morale, and, in general, are more excited about their professional role. Furthermore, there are reasons to believe that if students see how a history, political science, or humanities course is relevant to the real world, they would be more energized to complete the course and continue their education. Finally, and perhaps most important, by incorporating a broader definition of the importance and utility of a college degree at an earlier stage of a student's college experience and throughout its duration, students would find their college experiences more compelling. Those students would also be more likely to internalize those experiences and more likely to stay in school. If the only reason a student decides to attend college is to get a job and the only benefits he or she gets from a college education are utilitarian job skills, the student will be more likely to drop out when a job comes along. A year or five down the road, these students are more likely to find themselves right back in the position that brought them to college in the first place as the vagaries of the market lead to layoffs, bankruptcies, and unemployment. For our students, developing a sense of agency is crucial to their success as students. Civic engagement helps them do that.

The organizing framework that was used to develop civic engagement on the LSC-K campus led to the development of a wide variety of programming that brought students and faculty together. The "free space" of the center allowed faculty and students to bring ideas to life and create campus life. As one faculty member saw it, "By participating in civic engagement events, faculty and students develop relationships." The relational nature of civic engagement meant that participants would get out of the programming as much or more than they put into it. Another faculty member put it this way: "The energy you put in is paid back with the energy you get from working at a campus full of life and community." Over several years, people noticed the change across the campus. According to one administrator, "The energy and feeling of community are markedly different on our campus compared with campuses that don't do civic engagement. You can see it just walking around campus."

One long-term faculty member provided the following explanation for the changes: "Lone Star College-Kingwood has been transformed by some key hires of full-time faculty in the last decade. Two or three energetic and visionary people can affect a sea change in an institution's culture. I've seen it happen at Lone Star in recent years. That gives me the energy to keep innovating and teaching with commitment well beyond what some would consider retirement years." Another simply said, "I can say that our campus culture

has been transformed.” Civic engagement and the organizing surrounding it helped to create an atmosphere on the Kingwood campus that encouraged faculty and students to look at the possibilities and promises of a college not simply as job training, but in a much broader way. People began to see the possibilities of what they could do. Their interests and passions could be acted upon. Ideas could be brought to fruition. The campus was a place of activity and promise.

By the fall of 2016, rooms would have to be reserved before the semester started because most large spaces on campus were booked by faculty, students, and administrators who were holding nighttime events. Over the course of five years, a campus that had been largely closed at night had become a place to go, in the evening, for speakers, candidates, dialogues, and panel discussions.

The atmosphere had changed, and the campus felt like a four-year residential college campus where people and activities flourished.

Students who had previously come to campus for classes and then gone home stayed around. There was even a section of the cafeteria where gamers began to congregate to play after classes. The atmosphere had

changed, and the campus felt like a four-year residential college campus where people and activities flourished. While the civic engagement program was not responsible for all the programming, it was a catalyst for reshaping the mindset about what was possible. Through careful organizing of full-time and adjunct faculty and staff and providing administrators with evidence of how civic engagement tied to student success, the campus became a hub of activity. As one college president put it, “LSC-Kingwood is known as a place where difficult topics can be discussed in an atmosphere of civility and understanding. Students at the college are exposed early and often [to the idea] that their task in higher education is not simply to get through their coursework, but also to learn to become discerning, thoughtful citizens.”



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