

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2013

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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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TODAY'S CIVIC MISSION FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

By Sean Creighton

During the most recent global economic crisis, America's community colleges frequently gained the national and political spotlight as federal policymakers directed new levels of funding to them to address workforce development, skills retraining, and college attainment. Several major foundations, working alongside policymakers, also recognized the particular importance of community colleges' contributions to the country's workforce mission by making billions of new dollars available through direct and competitive grants. Policymakers and foundation leaders declared community colleges a major factor in transitioning displaced workers from America's manufacturing sector, as well as in giving first generation, traditional and nontraditional students a pathway to career and future. Community colleges may be better positioned than traditional universities to respond to the changing needs of industry and deliver educational programs aligned with industry demand. Also, these colleges remain comparatively affordable, as the cost of tuition and fees at public and private institutions has risen to record levels. Though community colleges were established in the 1920s—and flourished in the 1940s in response to the Truman Report—it was as if they had been newly discovered and deemed the ideal solution for addressing the nation's economic woes.

In fact, we have seen—and continue to see—an aggressive development of new initiatives fashioned around skills development. Understandably, community college leaders, who have experienced flat or declining state funding for instruction, are highly attracted to this labor-driven investment. However, the supply and demand approach to curricular development may lead to tunnel vision if industry needs *du jour* increasingly dominate the community college mission. In other words, community colleges could become pigeon-holed, supplanting a comprehensive educational mission with a strictly economic mission. Furthermore, this over-emphasis on the economic mission distracts from the conversation and attention on strengthening the civic mission of community colleges and building the civic agency of its students to address community

problems. Once referred to as *Democracy's College* and the *People's College*, the current trend is turning community college into the *Economy's College*. Hence, it is absolutely imperative that the pendulum swing back to create balance across the educational, economic, and civic missions of community colleges.

Among community college leaders and advocates, there has been a discussion on the relevance and critical importance of the civic mission of community colleges. Inspired by the American Democracy Project, *The Democracy Commitment: An American Community College Initiative*, launched in 2011, is giving rise to a renewed voice and commitment to the civic mission. The Democracy Commitment is a national initiative focused on the development and expansion of programs and projects aimed at engaging community college students in civic learning and democratic practice. The commitment puts the civic mission back at the center of the dialogue on the role of community colleges, stating:

We will provide a national platform for the development and expansion of programs and projects aiming at engaging community college students in civic learning and democratic practice. Our goal is that every graduate of an American community college shall have had an education in democracy. This includes all our students, whether they aim to transfer to university, gain a certificate, or obtain an associate degree (Democracy Commitment 2011).

The American Commonwealth Project, launched in 2012 by the U.S. Department of Education and the White House, also sparked renewed national attention to higher education's civic mission. Although these commitments to democracy and civic engagement did not receive as much attention in political rhetoric, they clearly signaled that national leaders maintain an interest in advancing the civic mission of higher education.

Higher Education's Contemporary Challenges

While the economic and civic missions may be gaining steam—the former faster than the latter—over the horizon is an accumulating set of internal and external contemporary challenges with no simple answers or quick solutions. While this list could be ten times longer based on whom you talk to, several pressing contemporary

challenges include, in no particular order

- the rising cost of tuition and fees;
- the challenge to provide increased security on campuses;
- increased scrutiny by policymakers and media on how public dollars are spent;
- questions about a college degree's return on investment;
- the influx of international students to generate revenues;
- launch of the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) initiative and its resistance to commodification, along with ongoing efforts to integrate MOOC learning;
- decline in federal and state support for instruction;
- pressures to increase retention, completion, and graduation rates;
- aging facilities and infrastructure across many campuses; and
- pressure to prepare graduates to work in the era of globalization.



This list is far from complete. We could conduct further inquiry with faculty, students, and community partners and the list would grow.

Community colleges and higher education in general are headed on a collision course with these challenges if not handled with strategic care, intelligent stewardship, and intuitive leadership. These challenges need to be resolved or they will remain an ongoing distraction that pulls and pushes the educational, economic, and especially civic missions off course, or simply prevents the civic mission from achieving a level of maturity that results in scalable community impact.

Challenges to Civic Work on Campus

In addition to the plethora of economic and structural challenges, there is another unique set of challenges community colleges face in embracing a civic mission and providing a civic education for their students. An unpredictable student population is a challenge when

attempting to generalize student engagement across a curriculum. A large percentage of community college students are managing jobs, families, and other community and life commitments, and that often makes it a challenge to engage them in co-curricular activities. Unless service activities are substituted for classroom seat time, civic activities pose a challenge for community college students since these activities are in direct competition with other life priorities.

An additional challenge is the substantially diverse educational goals of the community college population from semester to semester. Students attend community colleges for numerous reasons, including degree or license; ongoing professional development; lifelong learning for personal enrichment; workforce development and career change; and remedial education, just to name a few. Unlike traditional four-year institutions, where the majority of students are in pursuit of a degree, community colleges are far more complex in their design, purpose, course offerings, and student input and output. Because a large segment of the student population is transient, it is consequently a challenge to create ongoing civic engagement activities that link students with the surrounding community. Therefore, the bonds between students, the campus, and the surrounding community are difficult to establish or develop, much less sustain.

In listening to faculty and practitioners speak about issues, barriers, and challenges, other common themes emerge, such as civic engagement activity being politicized as liberal and partisan by conservative leadership, faculty, or trustees, and, therefore, discouraged or frowned upon. At first glance, this observation might seem isolated to campuses in conservative states. However, the truth is that campuses, regardless of the preferred politics of their locale, shy away from “civic work” that may appear political in nature.

There is also the longstanding and ongoing acknowledgement that community engagement, public scholarship, and service by faculty is not valued in the criteria for promotion and tenure. In the publication, *Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University* (J. Ellison and T. Eatman 2008), the culture of the academic workplace is investigated and confronted on this issue. The publication makes the case for academic work performed in connection with the public to be treated equally

with traditional types of research and to become a respected and acceptable form of scholarship. Despite scholarly efforts like this and other work on select campuses, gaining a broader acceptance and recognition of public scholarship has been an ongoing battle, dating back to the efforts of Eugene Rice and Ernest Boyer in the 1990s, who pioneered the scholarship of engagement.

There is also always the issue of poorly executed service learning programs that do a disservice to community partners and result in a divide between campus and community. The classic example is the one in which the campus still acts as if the community is a laboratory for student learning, and faculty and students fail to recognize the community's own assets, needs, and perspective in arranged learning agreements. In these cases, community members or organizations are often left with a feeling of being used and ignored in terms of having their own voice heard and their own needs met through civic engagement.



These ongoing challenges to practicing civic engagement, combined with the internal and external contemporary challenges facing community colleges, leave me far less optimistic about the future of today's civic mission at community colleges. It makes me wonder how a community college can genuinely embrace its civic mission and become a leader in civic engagement when faced with so many barriers. It makes me question whether the national civic conversation has a chance of advancement.

Fortunately, a glimmer of hope emerges—a hope that resides abundantly in academic idealism, and a hope that is at the foundation of democracy. Citizens band together during times of challenge, and have overcome hardships far greater than the ones facing higher education. Maybe these challenges present the whitewater conditions in which the civic mission will benefit because the challenges will best be resolved through democratic engagement. It is through the collective strength of the citizens working on these contemporary challenges to higher education that creative

resolutions will be found. Such a purposeful outcome stems from the power of collaborative thinking, the practice of enlightened civic engagement, and the ethos of our unwavering democracy.

Creating a Culture of Democracy

In creating a culture of democracy, community colleges need to take a major first step by adopting a clear commitment to democratic practices. Fortunately, the signatories of The Democracy Commitment have made such a pronouncement. The commitment asks the following of the signatories:

- a public commitment to the central role of civic education;
- intentional support for both curricular and extracurricular programs that build civic skills among students, especially focusing on projects that support students in doing public work;
- faculty and staff development in civic engagement;
- partnerships with local civic, nonprofit, and governmental agencies whose primary work is the social and economic development of local communities;
- participation in a national clearinghouse of program designs, curricula, and project development strategies for community colleges;
- participation in an annual meeting that brings together faculty, staff, administrators and partners;
- development of joint regional and national programs with partner universities, and with national higher education associations.

The Democracy Commitment frames the work to be done, providing a glossary of actions. It reflects various outputs toward the articulated outcomes of “preparing our students for their roles as citizens and engaged members of their communities” and ensuring that a “graduate of an American community college shall have had an education in democracy” (Democracy Commitment 2011).

Although the commitment fails to articulate the importance of addressing specifically the *contemporary challenges* facing higher

education and utilizing democratic practices to alleviate these challenges and future ones, the subtext to the commitment is to build a culture of democracy on campus that ultimately leads to this outcome. Further, the commitment has provided an opportunity for ongoing study. As these community colleges work toward creating that cultural change on campus, scholars and practitioners alike have a self-selected study group to watch and learn from, to follow closely and study the success of culture change, as well as the challenges and pitfalls.

In addition to The Democracy Commitment, various exemplar centers in civic engagement have arisen at community colleges. The exemplars demonstrate a deeper level of investment in building civic capacity. These centers provide insight into the current state of civic engagement at community colleges and serve to illustrate how civic engagement initiatives have been operationalized at these institutions. Several exemplars include

- the Institute of Community and Civic Engagement, De Anza College (CA), which “advances education for democracy with full participation of all of our communities as its core value”;
- the Center for Civic Engagement, Ivy Tech Community College (IN) that “works to promote service on the individual, academic, and institutional level”;
- the Center for Civic Participation, Maricopa Community College (AZ) that “seeks to enrich public life and public discourse on our Maricopa Community Colleges campuses and in our communities”; and
- the Center for Community Involvement, Miami Dade College (FL), which “enhances student learning, meets community needs, and fosters civic responsibility and a sense of caring for others.”

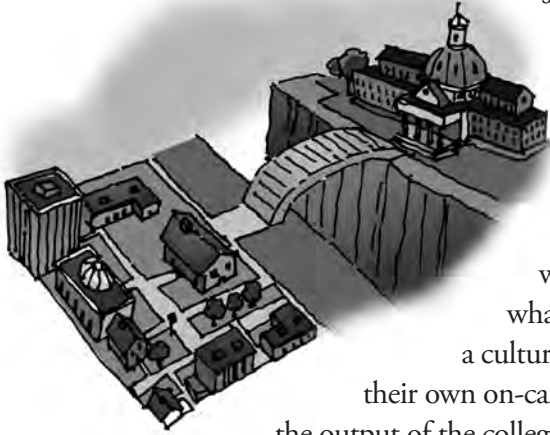
These notable centers work closely with the diverse communities served by their community college. Their programs and activities promote civic participation to faculty, staff, and students and connect with key community stakeholders. While by no means the only examples of civic activity occurring at our nation’s community colleges, they are standouts, having received national recognition for their leadership in promoting civic engagement and are illustrative

... various exemplar centers in civic engagement have arisen at community colleges.

of quality civic work occurring at community colleges. They demonstrate that community colleges can learn how to develop a mechanism that is institutionally supported and that serves as a bridge between campus and community. These centers demon-

strate that there are pockets of active leadership among community colleges that

promote civic engagement. From these centers, we can learn about new and innovative ways to institutionalize the practice of civic engagement at community colleges.



While these centers are leaders in working with the external community, what is still unclear is their role in developing a culture of democracy on campus that addresses their own on-campus challenges. These centers coordinate the output of the college's civic mission, if you will, so it makes it easy to describe a community college's civic mission by its programmatic output. Therefore, a civic center could readily deepen its focus on inward issues and work on institutionalizing democratic practices to address contemporary challenges on campus.

Conclusion

As I reflect on the many conversations with colleagues that have broadened my understanding of democracy and engagement, I realize that the idea of educating students to be engaged citizens is viewed favorably by a majority of educators. That said, the actual practice is limited to only a select faculty. Those select few are passionate and dedicated educators and administrators who are on a professional mission to incorporate civic learning into their own classrooms and/or make it a central part of the operations of their campuses. These efforts are admirable, to say the least, and are aimed at positively affecting student success. However, in the grand scope of higher education, civic education and civic engagement are not priorities, nor are they considered central to the learning experience.

Yet I am optimistic that community colleges hold the potential to lead the conversation and efforts on the civic mission of

higher education. There are important questions for community colleges to consider, which will involve a deeper reflection on their civic mission and their abilities to build a culture of democracy and engagement on campus. As much as there is a call for civic renewal, aside from the exemplars community colleges are not challenging themselves to pursue a civic mission. Community colleges prioritize their education and economic missions foremost and view democratic capacity building as secondary. Although community colleges affirm the key ingredients of a civic mission, this mission has been less important and less explicitly articulated than education and economic missions. For community colleges to become civic agents, much consideration needs to be given to building upon the best practices of existing efforts, and looking for innovative practices to bridge the educational, economic, and civic missions. In the end, the most viable effort to create and sustain a culture of democracy and civic engagement on campus is to engage students, faculty, administration, and staff as participatory citizens in addressing pressing challenges on campus first; that is the key to today's civic mission at community colleges. This is the honest crux of the matter for community colleges and other types of colleges or universities: to be genuine in its commitment to civic engagement, a campus needs to develop a culture of democracy and demonstrated democratic practices within the institution itself. This would be an intentional and internal understanding of democratic practice.

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