

Perspectives

Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

JANUARY 2019

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One crucial path to overcoming polarization and fostering a healthy democracy is to do a better job of preparing college and university students to be engaged citizens, guiding them to productive discourse, rather than ugly rancor.

- Andrew J. Seligsohn and Thomas Ehrlich

We need a greater emphasis on civic education to ensure an informed, knowledgeable and responsible citizenry that understands the origins, impact, importance—and fragility—of democracy.

- Robert L. Caret

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A Special Role for “Democracy’s College?”

Charles R. Dassance, PhD

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Opening the door to higher education for millions of Americans who lacked that opportunity is one of the great achievements of community colleges. In a 2010 paper prepared for the White House Conference on Community Colleges, then president of American Association of Community Colleges George Boggs traced the democratization of higher education to the 1947 Truman Commission report. In that report, community colleges were proposed as the means by which all citizens would have the opportunity to pursue higher learning. As Boggs made clear in his report, “Democracy’s College: The Evolution of the Community College in America,” community colleges were clearly “Democracy’s Colleges” (Boggs, G.R., 2010).

And that trust in the community college that continues to endure places community colleges in a unique position to contribute positively to the greater threat to American democracy.

The rapid growth of community colleges, especially in the 1960s and 70s, corresponded with a time in American history in which expanding opportunity was a dominant societal theme. The Voting Rights Act, the War on Poverty, and other major legislative initiatives helped create the perfect milieu for community colleges to grow and prosper. And few would argue that community colleges have not been a powerful force in democratizing higher education. Today, enrolling nearly half of all students in American higher education, community colleges are also the most demographically diverse of the higher education sector.

For at least the past three decades, however, a very different societal landscape from that of the 1960s has become pervasive. A strong counter-reaction to what were seen as the excesses of “rampant liberalism,” along with wage stagnation among the middle class and lower classes among other things, led to deep divisions in the country about the very efficacy of democracy itself.

A recent Freedom House report documented a twelve year decline in global freedom and noted a rapid decline in civil and political rights in the United States (Freedom in the World, 2018). As “Democracy’s College”, it appears to be a critical time to reconsider what that term means in our current political/cultural environment.

There is considerable speculation about what are the causes of the weakening of our democracy. Trust in basically all institutions – congress, the media, education, government – are at very low levels. The political divisions within the

country and massive income inequality, among other factors, are eroding our faith in the American dream. A recent national survey concluded that most Americans think higher education is headed in the wrong direction, with deep divisions along political lines as to how strongly that wrong direction opinion is held (Pew Research Center, 2018)

Community colleges have been “above the fray,” among the higher education sector, in terms of being attacked as ineffective or, worse, unnecessary. In all likelihood that is because of the local nature of community colleges, a similar phenomenon to not trusting Congress generally but feeling positively toward one’s local congressperson. And that trust in the community college that continues to endure places community colleges in a unique position to contribute positively to the greater threat to American democracy.

If there is one sector of education that straddles the divisions in the United States, it is the community college. Whether it is the liberal/conservative divide, the urban/rural divide, or the various racial, ethnic, and religious divides, it is the community college that is most likely to contain all of those elements among its students. The fact that community colleges are the most ethnically diverse institutions in higher education, and are located in every part of the American landscape, argues strongly for community colleges being positioned to address some of the threats to democracy.

Community colleges should look closely at what role they can play in preparing students with the knowledge, skills, and motivation they need to fulfill their roles as citizens. This traditionally has been one of the major roles of public education, but it appears that role has been neglected. One need not look far to see evidence that many citizens lack a basic understanding of how our American democratic system works.

[C]ommunity colleges are perfectly positioned to provide leadership and support for enhancing civic engagement in the communities they serve.

Survey after survey of civic literacy demonstrate ignorance on the part of many college graduates about the most basic concepts that undergird the American system of governance, including the Constitution. In the most recent presidential election, only 55% of registered voters voted. The inability of many citizens to understand how to determine the accuracy of information increases their vulnerability to those who want to undermine democracy. Attacks on the “main-stream” media further undermine the foundations of democracy and the results of the 2018 mid-term elections seem to reinforce the political divisions in the nation.

There is no quick fix for the ailing state of American democracy. Beyond the noise about who is to blame for

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EMERGING LEADER PERSPECTIVES

In recent years it has become abundantly clear that serious challenges are threatening our national democracy. Historically, community colleges have focused on preparing students for transfer to a four-year university or for 21st-century careers. However today, it is critical that community colleges also help to prepare students for life as active, informed, and engaged citizens, capable of engaging effectively in a democratic society. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

Brandon Anderson, MFA

English instructor and Instructional Coach
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A common exercise I do with composition students is to have them think about the communities to which they belong and make a list of the challenges those communities face. This past spring, I was struck by the responses this exercise generated in one class. The candidness with which these students discussed mental health and a variety of issues that impact their families, friends, and themselves made it clear to me that the issues students care about and face aren't simply left outside the door of the classroom.

Empowering students to achieve the education and training needed for a rewarding career certainly is the purpose of the American community college; but part of that purpose should also include empowering students to be mindful, proactive citizens of the communities and larger democracy in which they live. Community college leaders can take proactive steps to help ensure that civic engagement becomes a part of the learning experience. One preliminary step would be to work with faculty to identify what's already being done on campus to promote democratic and civic learning. Leaders should also make sure that civic engagement becomes a focus topic for professional development.

Supporting faculty promotion of civic engagement is one way to begin to place a focus on democratic learning, and community college leaders should also consider including civic participation and engagement as a core institutional ideal. Such a focus seems especially necessarily given that a 2014 study found two-year students are less likely to be engaged in their community than peers attending four-year institutions (Newell). Including civic engagement as a part of the college's stated values would be an appropriate step in that direction.

A report released by the U.S. Department of Education makes the case that higher education's investment in civic engagement would benefit more than just students themselves. "The more civic-oriented colleges and universities become, the greater their overall capacity to spur local and global economic vitality, social and political well-being, and collective action to address public problems" (2012, p. 6).

Today, many colleges and universities have begun emphasizing civic engagement. Campuses across the California State University system, for instance, have noted some of the observed benefits of promoting democratic learning experiences. "Civic engagement influences students as emerging adults during their first year of college. The experience fosters skills and habits that promote student success, leading to improved performance in their courses" (Salvador, 2017, para. 18).

The benefit, then, of embracing civic engagement and democratic learning may very well be two-fold. At a time in which the challenges facing America are plentiful, community colleges should place an emphasis on citizenship and democratic learning in order to both more wholly engage students and more completely support their own mission.

QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

What steps should community college leaders take to ensure civic engagement and democratic learning for all students?

David McCall, MEd, CDF

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As the political sphere of the world continues to wobble on its axis, it is more imperative than ever for students to become engaged in the civic and democratic process. Institutions of higher education

must ensure that they continue to prepare students to become productive and engaged members of society. While in the past this statement may have simply applied to workforce readiness, today it must take on a much larger and more complex meaning that also includes preparing students to be civically engaged.

However, community college leaders must do more than just encourage civic engagement, they must develop ways to embrace it within their campuses. They must begin to affirm the civic mindedness of today's generation and create a platform where issues and topics of debate can be discussed in a positive and constructive manner. One such approach is to facilitate deliberate dialogue events with students, faculty, and staff. These events bring individuals together to converse and learn about controversial issues affecting the community, the country, and the world, all while encouraging active listening and discourse. When done properly, the dialogue surrounding these tough topics allow us to teach students how to think critically about issues that are not easy to solve. Sheltering students from the realities of these tough questions does not allow us to strengthen and grow as a nation.

College leaders should also encourage and support the development of committees and workgroups to spearhead political engagement activities on campus and within the community, and faculty should be encouraged to incorporate civic and political engagement and discussion. However, it is imperative that such initiatives remain non-partisan in their efforts. In fact, both leaders and faculty alike must ensure that they do not become biased political pundits who attempt to force their views onto students through subjective and impartial opinions. Instead we must encourage students to look at each issue through a lens of critical analysis and an open mind.

The longstanding role of higher education to help instill in students a sense of respect for others and the value of maintaining an open mind is perhaps more crucial today than at any time in history. All too often, it appears as though the erosion of respectful discourse has faded as one of the defining characteristics of democracy. Our forefathers certainly did not agree on every aspect of how this country would be formed, but they certainly did not stoop to the disrespectful rhetoric that is abundant today. Sadly, much of the erosion of respectful discourse has been led by those with the highest stages of influence. To combat this, institutional leaders must find new ways to embrace civic discourse with a generation of students who appear to becoming more engaged, involved, and passionate about the political process.

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NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

In recent years it has become abundantly clear that serious challenges are threatening our national democracy. Historically, community colleges have focused on preparing students for transfer to a four-year university or for 21st-century careers. However today, it is critical that community colleges also help to prepare students for life as active, informed, and engaged citizens, capable of engaging effectively in a democratic society. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

The Community College Commitment to Democracy: Aligning Civic Engagement and Institutional Priorities

Verdis L. Robinson, MA

Director for Community College Engagement
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Community colleges as “Democracy’s Colleges” is a notion that is very common in the community college civic engagement world, but it echoes back to the 1947 Truman Commission Report on Higher Education for Democracy, which argued for the creation of a national system of community colleges. What developed since then are local institutions that have become important in the American landscape of higher education, playing key roles to democratize it and to give more people access to the “American Dream.” With affordability, accessibility, and open-access admission practices, community colleges have higher enrollments of lower-income, non-traditional students and students of color, with a high percentage of immigrants and English as a second language students.

Most community colleges have issues with sustaining a holistic campus life for students due to their function as commuter schools, enrolling students who spend the majority of their time in the community rather than on campus, working, taking care of families, and other responsibilities outside of their education. Additionally, the issues with four-year college assessment models for student success and the elitist regard of being “junior colleges” tend to make community colleges virtually invisible when compared to their four-year public and private sister colleges and universities. This invisibility is unfortunate because of the significant access to higher education that community colleges provide as the embodiment of a democratic society.

How do we make the invisible visible? How do we get everyone to take notice of the wealth and worth of community colleges? How do we take back the regard of community colleges as democracy’s colleges and their students, in turn, as democracy’s students? This article argues that it is through civic engagement and learning. Civic engagement and learning should be an institutional priority, but for the majority of community colleges, it is not, or is in name only.

Yet, community colleges are especially well positioned to harness the need and desire to develop ways to benefit their communities and, at the same time, deepen the educational experience of their students. With decreasing budgets and, in most cases, decreasing enrollments, we are seeing priorities limited only to those initiatives that would appear most obvious in their ability to advance institutional success and effectiveness. And unfortunately, civic engagement still is not well understood to be an effective strategy, particularly given what many would regard as its impact assessment challenges.

With these issues in mind, how do we ensure that community college students graduate as civically engaged, informed, and active agents of change? How do we make civic engagement and learning a priority in community colleges for the future of our democracy? How do we show that, in fact, civic engagement and learning strategies can be leveraged in very powerful ways to advance priorities related to institutional effectiveness, college completion, and student success?

The work of civic engagement and democratic learning is often seen as a separate effort without realizing and making apparent the interconnectedness of this work with institutional priorities such as

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workforce/economic development, completion/pathways, access/equity/inclusion, and assessment/accreditation. To ensure civic engagement and democratic learning for all community college students, community college leaders should intentionally align and infuse civic engagement and democratic learning with these institutional priorities and make their connections apparent and measurable. This is one way of educating community college students for democracy while advancing

student and institutional success.

There are many examples of these alignments and the impact that making them apparent has created for the sustainability of civic engagement efforts on community college campuses, as well as the effect on the college’s relationship to community and students’ experience with community engagement and leadership. The use of civic engagement and democratic learning programs, initiatives, and pedagogies like deliberative dialogues, service learning, community-based learning, electoral engagement, and student organizing/leadership training must not be segregated from the efforts advancing institutional priorities or our commitment to the public purposes of higher education will never be realized.

To ensure civic engagement and democratic learning for all community college students, community college leaders should intentionally align and infuse civic engagement and democratic learning with these institutional priorities...

Campus Compact’s new network for community colleges, Community College Commitment, signifies our national commitment to community colleges, to civic engagement, and to our democracy. As a national network of community college members committed to preparing students to be informed, active, and mobilized leaders in their communities, states, and the world, in addition to preparing them for the workforce and careers, we are creating toolkits, training materials, resources, and convening opportunities to advance this theory of change and become a national clearinghouse for this work. As community college leaders, we must seek to empower our students and educate them for our democracy. Only with their success will our institutions be successful and the future of our communities bright.

Verdis L. Robinson is the Director for Community College Engagement at Campus Compact. As an advocate of community college civic education, Robinson directs The Democracy Commitment (TDC) initiative as part of his portfolio, and continues the work he began as the national director of TDC, expanding membership, resources, and programming opportunities for community colleges. Previously, Robinson was a tenured Assistant Professor of History and African-American Studies at Monroe Community College (MCC) in Rochester, NY. Additionally, Robinson is a fellow of the Aspen Institute’s Faculty Seminar on Citizenship and the American and Global Polity, and the National Endowment for the Humanities’ Faculty Seminar on Rethinking Black Freedom Studies: The Jim Crow North and West. Robinson is the author or co-author of a number of publications and also contributed to *Higher Education’s Role in Enacting a Thriving Democracy: Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Theory of Change* (2018). He holds an MA in History from SUNY College at Brockport, and an MA in African-American Studies from SUNY University at Buffalo.



QUICK TAKES
Highlights
from the Field

The Civic Role of Community Colleges: Preparing Students for the Work of Democracy
 by Robert W. Franco

This article explores the development of America's community colleges, questions whether the dream was diverted, and attempts to clarify the future civic role of America's community colleges in preparing students for transfer to universities, mid-level careers, and the work of democracy. These efforts require the commitment of two-year colleges to become engaged in addressing and solving the problems of the communities that support them, coupled with the development of effective service-learning initiatives.
<https://bit.ly/2VMh5zG>

Engaging Students in Democracy
 by Andrew J. Seligsohn and Thomas Ehrlich

With our democracy facing major challenges, it has become increasingly clear that colleges should focus on preparing students to be good citizens. Toward that end, Campus Compact, a national coalition of 1,000 colleges and universities committed to the public purposes of higher education, is launching Education for Democracy, to support the expectation that every student will engage in courses, programs, and activities aimed at preparing them for effective participation in democracy.
<https://bit.ly/2JMYdte>



Published by the Alliance for Community College Excellence in Practice, Ferris State University, Doctorate in Community College Leadership Big Rapids, Michigan

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A Special Role for "Democracy's College?" *(continued from page 1)*

our apparent inability to heal our political divisions and find a way forward is a basic question that has always been at the heart of the American experiment in representative government: Can individual citizens be knowledgeable enough, and responsible enough, to support the basic values that are the fundamental elements of the republic.

For community colleges, does being "Democracy's College" only mean providing opportunity for all, or is there a greater responsibility that must be assumed? Through the curriculum, the co-curriculum, and community engagement there are indeed avenues for community colleges to fulfill its mission as "Democracy's College."

The Curriculum: General Education. The idea of a common core of general education passed from the higher education scene decades ago and all colleges should seriously consider if what constitutes general education today is serving students or society well. It is also possible that a single-minded emphasis on preparing students for jobs has detracted attention from responsibility for the broader purposes of higher education. This is not to suggest a return to a rigid common core of courses focused on Western civilization only, but to consider whether the wide variety of course options that constitute general education at most colleges has promoted individualism at the expense of the common good. It is time for a meaningful conversation about the purposes of general education and what should be part of the general education curriculum. Moreover, this conversation must include how to assure that all students possess the knowledge and skill necessary to be truly informed citizens.

The Co-Curriculum: Student Engagement in Democracy. In a recent article, "Engaging Students in Democracy," Andrew J. Seligsohn and Thomas Ehrlich present a compelling case for actively engaging students in learning about politics (Inside Higher Education, July 23, 2018). Research shows that students who participate in such courses and/or experiences become more personally engaged in politics and public policy issues. Moreover, such experiences did not change the political orientation of students, but just the likelihood of political involvement.

A most timely initiative by Campus Compact is Education for Democracy. Campus Compact, a long-time leader in promoting the value of service-learning throughout its 1000 college network, provides a framework for engaging all students in active participation in democracy. The core components of the Education for Democracy program include increasing the proportion of students who vote, learning the basics of democracy, developing skills to promote meaningful discussion, applying critical thinking skills to analyzing political information, encouraging leadership development, and enhancing the skills of faculty to develop and teach democratic engagement courses.

The Community: Learning and Engagement. Community colleges often assert, "community is our middle name." And it is certainly true that community colleges are often at the center of their community's economic, social and cultural life. Thus, community colleges are perfectly positioned to provide leadership and support for enhancing civic engagement in the communities they serve. And it is at the community level, as James and Debra Fallows describe in their book, *Our Town*, where creative approaches to many of the issues that escape remedy at the national level are being found in towns across the country. In their list of the conditions that support creative solutions for community problems at the local level, the Fallows list the presence of a community college as a very important one. They go so

far as to say that, "The more often and more specifically we heard people talking about the community college, the better we ended up feeling about the direction of the town" (Fallows, James and Deborah, 2018, p. 405).

Partnerships with other community groups with similar concerns about the future of American democracy should be fertile ground for community colleges to help address this issue. Community colleges could host community conversations and take the lead in helping their communities create a sense of pride in civic participation. In addition to tracking rates of student success/completion, community colleges should consider tracking the percentage of their students who vote. As community colleges strive to address achievement gaps among various demographic groups, why not also address the gap between students who carry out their civil responsibilities and those who do not?

What could be more important than a national dialogue for community colleges about their role in strengthening American democracy?

Some Thoughts for Moving Forward. Individual colleges and state community college systems can certainly begin now to address issues relating to the role of community colleges in preparing students for the important role of being engaged, well informed, responsible citizens. The American Association of Community Colleges, with a proud history of addressing issues important to community colleges, can once again step forward to provide national leadership on addressing threats to American democracy. What could be more important than a national dialogue for community colleges about their role in strengthening American democracy?

There is no shortage of issues facing community colleges, and how can they possibly find time for another issue? But if the community college is truly "Democracy's College," what could be more important for community colleges to do than prepare students to engage in assuring a vibrant American democracy.

Dr. Charles Dassance served as President of the College of Central Florida from 1996 to 2011 and was named President Emeritus upon his retirement. He previously served as President of Ashland Community College (Now Ashland Community and Technical College) and as the Interim President of Colorado Mountain College. Since 2016, Dr. Dassance has been a Mentor in the Aspen Institute's fellowship program for aspiring community college presidents. He has served as President of the Florida Association of Colleges and Universities, Chair of the Florida College System's Council of Presidents, the Board of Directors of the Commission of Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and the Board of the American Association of Community Colleges.



Immediately following his retirement, Dr. Dassance was appointed as Governmental Affairs Liaison for the Florida College System Council of Presidents. Recognition has included numerous state and national awards including the Distinguished Service Award from the Florida Association of Colleges and Universities, the "President's Award for Professional Excellence" from the Florida Association of Community Colleges, the Southern Region Chief Executive Officer Award from the Association of Community Colleges Trustees, the Michael Bennett Lifetime Achievement Award from Phi Theta Kappa, and more. Dr. Dassance holds an MA from Michigan State University and a PhD from the University of Virginia.