

Building a Healthy Democracy

By Karen Doss Bowman

As AASCU's American Democracy Project celebrates 15 years, higher education's role in preparing students for lives of civic engagement is more critical than ever.

The 2016 presidential election marked Brianna Dodson's first time voting. A senior at California State University San Marcos (CSUSM), she had missed out on earlier opportunities to vote in elections because she misunderstood the process and missed registration deadlines.

Now, as a student ambassador for the American Democracy Project at CSUSM, Dodson promotes awareness among her peers about the importance of voting and involvement in the democratic process. Often, she says, students are confused about voter registration—unsure whether they're supposed to vote in the county where they go to college or at their parents' addresses.

"Having a program [on campus] that's focused on where to register and how to register

is very important," says Dodson, a theatre major. "It's important to get students involved and to show them that voting is not as intimidating and difficult as it might seem. Most young people want to vote, but if they haven't done it before, they need resources to guide them [through the process]."

Dodson is one of the 2.3 million students across the country to be served by the American Democracy Project (ADP). The initiative was established in 2003 by AASCU, in partnership with *The New York Times*, to ensure that all students receive a quality civic education and that graduates leave their institution as informed, engaged members of their communities. ADP celebrates its 15th anniversary this year with a network of more than 250 participating state colleges and

CSUSM students, in collaboration with the American Democracy Project and the League of Women Voters, register people to vote on National Voter Registration Day (September 26, 2017).



universities in 46 states, with over 100 campus initiatives, and with \$1 million raised to enhance its impact. ADP staff hopes to garner enough funds to establish a permanent endowment for the program.

According to Jen Domagal-Goldman, ADP national manager, the program was established due to growing concerns about “the health of young people’s participation in our democracy.” Voter turnout for 18- to 29-year-olds was particularly low at the time, and there was a sense of urgency about the importance of encouraging them to engage in the public realm.

“We believe that public higher education has a role to play to ensure that students graduate equipped to be informed, engaged citizens in our democracy,” Domagal-Goldman says. “This belief is in keeping with historical roles of public colleges and universities as engines for democracy, as well as with AASCU’s focus on student success and an understanding of our institutions as stewards of the places and communities in which they are situated. We believe public higher education has an important role to play now, more than ever, given the increased partisanship and combative tenor of our political discourse.”

Civic Engagement in Action

There’s no question that American society today is dangerously polarized, and public discourse is increasingly uncivil. Among the general public, there’s a strong distrust of once-respected institutions, including government, education and the media. A 2012 report released by the U.S. Department of Education, “A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future,” called for higher education to renew its commitment to promoting “civic learning and democratic engagement.” Doing so will reap benefits that extend beyond the academy, the report concluded: “The more civic-oriented colleges and universities become, the greater their overall capacity to spur local and global economic vitality, social and

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political well-being, and collective action to address public problems.”

Exposing students to civic learning opportunities increases the likelihood that they will complete college and boosts their chances of success after graduation. They’ll also gain the motivation, skills and confidence to become involved in their communities to correct societal problems and injustices.

ADP curricular and co-curricular programs focus not only on educating students about civic responsibility, but also equip students with the skills they need to take action. These modules develop competencies in conflict resolution, problem solving and leadership by providing opportunities to apply concepts learned in the classroom to real-world challenges.

Amanda Antico, who joined AASCU in January as executive director of ADP, is focused on expanding direct outreach efforts to students—not just administrators and faculty.

“We believe the next election may be sharply influenced by the students at the campus communities we serve,” Antico says. “AASCU is the heartbeat of America. We have over 400 colleges and universities that are part of our organization. Our students, many of them first-generation

college students, are from communities that are affected by local, state and national politics. They represent half of America’s college-going population, so they have the numbers to make change happen in our society.”

ADP Initiatives and Programs

ADP supports a number of civic engagement in action initiatives designed to help students better understand critical issues that affect citizenship in today’s democracy. These include:

■ **Assessing Political Learning and Engagement On Campus.** This pilot project, launched in December with 12 ADP campuses, strives to advance the research and practice related to measuring the campus climate for nonpartisan political learning and engagement. Prompted by the recognition that the 2016 election season and the months following “reflect an acutely low moment in American public policy and politics,” the project is designed to improve political education for college students and find ways to encourage greater participation in the democratic process.

Visual journalist Ellen Lovelidge's rendering of the closing plenary session at the 2017 Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement meeting in Baltimore, Md.

"ADP is nonpartisan, but we do our students a disservice if we don't help them think about how our government works, what public policies are in place, and what their role is in shaping those policies," says George Mehaffy, AASCU's vice president for academic leadership and change. "In these very difficult times that America finds itself, now more than ever we need to help our students think about these issues and how they might increase thoughtful communication and decrease partisanship."

■ **Economic Inequality.** Focused on understanding how economic inequality impacts democracy, this initiative involves 21 ADP campuses, along with a number of community colleges through The Democracy Commitment—a sister civic engagement initiative housed at AASCU. Keene State College in New Hampshire has led the initiative and the creation of a blended learning curriculum through AASCU's grant from the Teagle Foundation. The courses explore inequality in the context of race, class, gender, health, education, political ideologies and other factors, says Kim Schmidl-Gagne, ADP campus coordinator.

Keene State has partnered with Mount Wachusett Community College in Massachusetts to offer activities for students from both institutions to come together for conversations about economic inequality and to participate together in activities that enhance understanding. Last spring, for example, the two institutions hosted an Economic Inequality Student Policy Summit, drawing students from six different institutions across the country. The summit focused on higher education funding—how it's changed over time and the impact of those changes. After learning about the issues, students created, discussed and voted on resolutions about funding for higher education. They took the agreed-upon resolutions back to their home communities with plans to take action.

While learning about public policy issues was valuable for the students involved with the summit, Schmidl-Gagne believes bringing

together students from a wide range of backgrounds helps to create greater understanding and tolerance.

"One of the things Keene State struggles with is diversity," Schmidl-Gagne says. "New Hampshire has the highest median income in the nation. So for our students, the world is pretty small. One of the biggest benefits of this event was that students were just talking to each other and coming to different understandings of a broader world."

■ **Digital Polarization.** Focused on the development and testing of course materials designed to improve students' online civic, information and web literacy, this pilot project launched in February 2017 with 10 participating campuses. The project, known as "DigiPo," is spearheaded by ADP's inaugural Civic Fellow Mike Caulfield of Washington State University Vancouver.

"As much of our civic engagement is moving online, mediated by the Internet, social media and so on, what skills do students need to both navigate those platforms as citizens and be effective in bettering the lives of others in their communities?" Caulfield says. "Our focus is 'how do students obtain and evaluate the information that they receive on the web in order to make good decisions? In what ways do these systems of distributing information and talking about that information pull us apart and polarize us?'"

Caulfield's work has been influenced by Wayne State University's E-Citizenship project, as well as the website "Civic Online Reasoning" by Stanford History Education Group. Their research has shown that students must be taught practical skills to discern credible online sources and effectively navigate the Internet. Caulfield is developing resources that faculty can incorporate in



the classroom to help students understand how social media can be distorted and manipulated.

"We use these materials to build a bigger discussion about the ways in which the headlines and unverified sources and rumors are eroding a lot of the trust in our society and contributing to increased polarization," Caulfield says.

Campus-Wide Efforts

ADP campuses offer a wide range of programming to encourage students to become engaged in civic and political activities—some of them falling under the umbrella of the main ADP initiatives, and others more general. At CSUCM, for example, the Speaking of Democracy series brings together students and community leaders for conversations on topics related to the health of American democracy. Participants are divided into groups and sit at a table for faculty-moderated discussions on topics such as "Does Your Vote Matter?"

"It was an interesting experience sitting at the table with community leaders and other students, knowing that we all might have different views," Dodson says. "It was nice to discuss and hear different perspectives to get the conversation going. I ended up talking to friends about it [after the event], so it was like a domino effect in getting that information out and making other students aware of certain issues. [Learning to] sit at a table and confront these issues in a respectable manner is very important."



Students host a voter registration table at James Madison University (Va.).

and the Institute for Constructive Advocacy and Dialogue, which trains students to facilitate conversations about issues that are complex—and sometimes divisive. The center also organizes Constitution Day activities to connect students with James and Dolley Madison’s legacy.

“Preparing students to become educated and enlightened citizens is embedded in our mission, and civic engagement has been a strength at the institution for a long time,” says Goldberg, who also is a political science professor. “Our faculty and students care very deeply about solving challenging contemporary problems and understand that to do so involves being active in our democracy. James Madison University is committed to the public purpose of higher education, and the James Madison Center for Civic Engagement advances the legacy of our namesake and our vision of becoming the national model for the engaged university.”

JMU president Jonathan Alger adds that AASCU institutions are uniquely poised to carry out the mission of the ADP.

“AASCU institutions are public-spirited and share a student-centered culture that encourages this kind of high-impact learning, and that is in turn built on a foundation of strong relationships among faculty, staff and students,” Alger says. “James Madison University and other AASCU institutions share ADP’s view that preparing students to be engaged citizens requires the development of skills and dispositions that equip and encourage students to make important contributions to community and societal problems. These commitments are underscored by our missions as public institutions.” **P**

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Millersville University’s (Penn.) Civic and Community Engagement and Research Project academic unit partners with Congress to Campus, a national initiative that sends former members of Congress to campuses across the country to promote civic literacy and engagement. The bipartisan team of two serve as guest classroom lecturers, interact with students at lunch or dinner meetings, and lead campus-wide open forums to discuss policy issues or explain the legislative process.

At Stockton University (N.J.), the Activist in Residence program is popular, bringing a community leader to the campus for an academic year to share information and insights on a particular local issue. The current Activist in Residence, for example, is focused on promoting understanding through the arts. He recently organized a “Story Slam” to allow participants to make connections with one another through their personal stories. The university also has been involved in ADP’s Political Engagement Project, with a heavy focus on registering students to vote.

“I’m really proud to say that between the 2012 and the 2016 general elections, our number of students who registered [to

vote] and participated in their own political process has gone up,” says Director of Service Learning Daniel Tomé, who currently chairs the ADP Steering Committee. “I don’t necessarily think that’s a common thing across the country.”

Honoring a Founding Father’s Legacy

James Madison University in Virginia—named for the “Father of the Constitution” and fourth U.S. president—recently launched the JMU Center for Civic Engagement. It was created to organize and support work already happening across campus that focuses on civic learning and engagement, according to Executive Director Abraham Goldberg. Much of that focus is connected to the university’s core curriculum, “The Human Community,” which requires students to take courses in U.S. history, U.S. government and justice in American society. The center sponsors programs such as Dukes Vote, the student-led voter education and engagement initiative; President Jonathan Alger’s Madison Vision Series, which brings together campus leaders in politics, business, health care, education and other areas to discuss society’s challenges;