At a time when America is facing more than a few social and political challenges, it’s good to know that civic engagement is alive and certainly flourishing on college campuses across the country, thanks, in large part, to AASCU’s ever-popular American Democracy Project (ADP).

This innovative, non-partisan initiative grew out of the organization’s strong support for civic education as a vehicle for empowering active citizens armed with the requisite knowledge and skills to make a difference in their communities. Working in partnership with The New York Times, AASCU launched ADP in 2003, attracting over 100 participating campuses right off the bat.

Although originally conceived as a three-year project, ADP is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year at more than 250 AASCU institutions in 48 states. In that time, it has hosted 10 national and 17 regional meetings; developed 11 national initiatives; and spawned hundreds of campus activities, from voter registration to curriculum revision projects. ADP also laid the groundwork for The Democracy Commitment, a similar civic engagement effort for community college students.

According to the project’s national manager, Jennifer Domagal-Goldman, ADP is a natural fit for the regional public colleges and universities AASCU was created to serve. “We think of our schools as stewards of place, because they are essential resources to, and partners in, the communities where they are located. In fact, most of their students come from within a 100-mile radius. By engaging them in civic learning, we are actually training the next generation of community stewards.”

A Nexus for Transformation

Of course, AASCU institutions have always encouraged their faculty, staff and students to get involved in community life by supporting a variety of civic programs and organizations on campus. But as Chancellor Mel Netzhammer at Washington State University Vancouver points out,
“ADP provides a framework for creating a powerful alliance among all of these entities, which then gives everybody one voice for civic participation.”

This framework is especially important for non-residential urban institutions like Metropolitan State University of Denver (Colo.). Located in the heart of the city, MSU Denver is, for the most part, a commuter school that caters primarily to non-traditional students. And while they are serious about their studies, MSU students are also busy with work and family responsibilities, which leaves less time for civic engagement. So for the university’s provost, Vicki Golich, ADP offers two distinct advantages.

“For one thing, it captures what's already going on, by allowing us to identify and celebrate faculty, staff and students who are involved in the community. It also serves as a launching point for new opportunities by encouraging us to be more intentional in our efforts as a university. For instance, we are making it easier for our students to get involved by embedding service-learning into the coursework.”

Like any project of this size and scope, ADP has evolved over the years. Domagal-Goldman explains that in the beginning, civic engagement was “episodic, in that it was mostly driven by ADP-sponsored events like Constitution Day. But as the initiative grew, so did the continuum of campus involvement, from volunteerism on one end to political action on the other. Whereas students used to work around the political process, they are now learning to work through it.”

To maximize project impact, Domagal-Goldman and ADP campuses regularly conduct outcomes assessments, including the use of a set of ADP designed National Survey on Student Engagement questions. There is also a growing emphasis on social media as an engagement tool. In addition to having its own Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn accounts,

American Democracy Project

As part of the national work of the American Democracy Project, AASCU has created the Civic Engagement in Action Series, which provides an opportunity for students to become deeply involved in substantive citizenship issues. Below is a snapshot of each initiative.

★ Common Ground: The Stewardship of Public Lands
Faculty representatives from participating AASCU institutions spend a week in Yellowstone National Park with the Yellowstone Association studying public controversies about wolves, bison, snowmobiles and grizzlies. Faculty participants interview local citizens on both sides of the issues and then return to their campuses to design programs for students focused on the controversies in the Yellowstone ecosystem or on local public land and resource issues.

★ Global Engagement: Educating Globally Competent Citizens
The Global Engagement Initiative emerged from ADP’s five-year Seven Revolutions Initiative, a partnership between the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), The New York Times and 10 AASCU member institutions. The initiative originally translated CSIS’s Seven Revolutions into curricular/co-curricular programs for undergraduates. The Global Engagement Initiative continues this work, developing strategies, materials and programs with which to educate undergraduates about world issues and prepare them to make informed judgments about pressing global challenges.

★ America’s Future: Protecting the Fiscal Health of Our Democracy
This initiative seeks to educate students about the looming national debt and deficits while exploring ways in which they can interact with policymakers to end this era of financial irresponsibility. Faculty members assist students in exploring this issue, as well as in developing potential solutions and ways of addressing the risks posed by both national debt and deficit.


Weber State University’s (Utah) Chalk Wall encourages students to join the conversation by responding to a posted question.
ADP collaborates with Missouri State University to publish the *eJournal of Public Affairs*.

Likewise, the project recently unveiled an eCitizenship initiative, working with 37 ADP campuses to explore how emerging technologies can facilitate civic and political participation. In one such effort, Tweet-ups proved effective in stimulating a national discussion around last year’s presidential debates. In another, Fort Hays State University in Kansas is engaging a greater number of its virtual students by livestreaming campus-based ADP activities like Times Talk, a weekly current events discussion.

The civic engagement mission is also gaining momentum among faculty members when it comes to infusing their curricula with civic learning outcomes and activities. Mark Potter, MSU Denver’s assistant vice president for academic and civic collaboration, sees ADP initiatives like Stewardship of Public Lands at Yellowstone Park as a big boon to building problem-solving skills across disciplines, an approach he believes is essential for addressing society’s many complex challenges.

“Experiential and interdisciplinary learning are very much on our scope these days. So we’re sending three of our faculty to Yellowstone this summer—one from recreation, one from business, and one from earth and atmospheric science. We want them to come back with new models and pedagogies that will greatly enhance what we’re doing from an academic perspective, while also helping us realign the curriculum to better reflect the civic engagement mission.”

**Lasting Rewards**

All of these efforts are definitely paying off, with campus coordinators, such as Gregg Kaufman at Georgia College and State University (GCSU), reporting big dividends for students who take part in ADP activities, both in and out of class.

“In addition to becoming much better listeners and collaborative problem solvers, they have developed a sincere appreciation for public work, which is certainly evident in the career...
choices they make,” Kaufman explains. “For example, a number of students have gone on to teach in public schools here or pursue graduate degrees in education, after volunteering in local afterschool programs through our Public Achievement project.”

ADP has also inspired a surge in student research among humanities majors at GSU. “We created a ‘citizen scholar’ category for our annual student research conference, to expand the body of knowledge around civic engagement and service-learning,” Kaufman says. “In fact, I’m working with a group of freshman students on a citizen scholar presentation they are making this year here on campus, as well as at the University System of Georgia’s High Impact Teaching Conference and [this year’s] ADP national conference in Denver.”

Regardless of how ADP plays out on individual campuses, one thing is certain. Its ranks continue to grow among students of all backgrounds and in every field of study. Kelly Nuckolls, ADP student coordinator at Fort Hays State University, says that close to 5,000 of the school’s 12,000 students were involved in project activities last year. Even more impressive, she expects the numbers to be higher this year.

“It’s really a big accomplishment.

The American Democracy Project: Lessons Learned and the Road Ahead

A commentary by George L. Mehaffy

Ten years ago we began the American Democracy Project with boundless optimism, if little experience. Today, with the wisdom of a decade of experience, we’ve tempered optimism with some hard lessons, five of which seem most significant.

First, definitions of citizenship are broad, varied, sometimes contested and often unexamined, despite how this definition shapes the educational activities we design to produce civic outcomes. Civic engagement is often represented along a continuum from traditional citizenship activities (e.g., voting and volunteering) to political activism. Based on these observations, we’ve done two things: We defined citizenship as involving four key educational elements (knowledge, skills, experiences and reflection), and we decided early on to have a big tent, welcoming campuses that define citizenship and civic engagement in many different ways. As we advance our work, however, we focus more attention now on how citizenship can be defined in ways that recognize citizens as actors, rather than those acted upon.

Our second insight is that despite all of the enthusiasm and excitement, a review of the first few years ADP revealed that most of our activities were not permeating campuses in intentional ways—they simply added to the cacophony of campus programs and projects. Too often, our campus activities were largely celebratory, episodic and marginal. Therefore, we worked to drive civic learning and engagement deeply into the curriculum, where faculty work and students are engaged. We began a series of national initiatives, the Civic Engagement in Action Series (see sidebar, page 12), designed to be laboratories of democracy, incubating new models and approaches to the education of citizens.

The third lesson learned was that while we worked to build civic engagement into the curriculum, it still didn’t appear frequently enough in many individual courses. Despite numerous efforts to identify civic dimensions in all disciplines, there continues to be too few examples of civic learning and engagement in many traditional parts of the curriculum. Similarly, there exists too often a false distinction between career and citizenship. Most of the 21st
...century career skills sought by businesses don’t involve as much emphasis on technical skills as emphasis on the development of the so-called “soft” skills: working with people who are different, communicating effectively, thinking critically, and organizing to accomplish a task. We must figure out powerful and effective ways to integrate career and civic preparation across the curriculum and co-curriculum on our campuses.

Fourthly, despite widespread attention to civic engagement, there has not been adequate attention to civic learning outcomes—specifically, there are not enough tools to adequately measure these outcomes. Recognizing that such measurement is still in its infancy, we must continue to focus on assessment of civic outcomes. Learning outcomes are the gold standard, particularly in a world in which courses are available everywhere. The courses (and experiences) that count will be those that demonstrably produce powerful learning.

Finally, despite our efforts to work more closely with faculty, faculty commitments to civic engagement do not automatically translate into institutional commitments. We concluded that making civic engagement a critical part of the mission of our institutions required deep commitment and creative programming by faculty and staff, but also required insightful and inspired leadership. So we began refocusing on the critical role that provosts and presidents play and, in that spirit, created the William Plater Award for Leadership in Civic Engagement. Co-sponsored by Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), the award calls attention to the leadership role that provosts play in institutionalization.

And yet, for all that we have learned, we are as optimistic today as we were when we began a decade ago. In the rapid transformation of higher education and the introduction of a hyper-competitive environment, our institutions must decide what they do best, and what can be better left to other providers. Many of the courses that we used to teach will be provided in the future by Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), for-profit companies or some other entity. But we have the competitive advantage of place. We can make our communities and regions our classrooms, strengthening our connections and relationships to these places as we serve as stewards of place. We can design academic and co-curricular programs to provide experiences, not just classes, to prepare students better than ever before for both careers and for roles as informed, engaged citizens. Our initial and sometimes simplistic ideas about civic engagement have been replaced by a deeper understanding of the vital work of citizenship education. The road ahead points us to a brighter future.

George L. Mehaffy is vice president for academic leadership and change, AASCU.

Even though they all speak English well, they’re usually hesitant about speaking up in class or on campus. But they were very vocal at the summit from the moment they got there, and when it was over, really excited about doing something similar on their campuses in China. I can’t help but believe that experiences like this one can truly change the world.”

Kathy Harvatt is an independent writer from Lewes, Del., who has spent more than two decades working in the education field.

Lessons Learned and the Road Ahead

Left: Participants at the 2009 American Democracy Project National Meeting, held in Baltimore, Md.
Below: Indiana State University’s ADP sponsored three Pizza and Politics Debate Watch sessions during the 2012 presidential elections.

considering our campus diversity. We have students from very small towns and students from big cities like Denver. There are also about 600 residential exchange students from our two sister schools in China. So we have to work hard to make ADP relevant for all of them, especially our Chinese students, who have a hard time grasping the concept of democracy.”

In making civic engagement more inclusive at Fort Hays, Nuckolls is successfully leading efforts to infuse global leadership into the ADP mission, while also highlighting issues like hunger and poverty that are more universal in nature.

“We took three Chinese students to the Universities Fighting World Hunger Summit, which was in Kansas this year.

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