Celebrating Citizenship
How Public Universities Can Strengthen Citizenship and Democracy

By William V. Flores and Noël Bezette-Flores

Public universities have a special mission. We not only educate tomorrow’s leaders in society and prepare students for future careers, we create citizens who are educated and engaged.

Indeed, the founders of our nation, including Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, felt that an educated and engaged citizenry is essential to the preservation of the fragile fabric of democracy. So, how can we engage students to participate in the broader society as we educate them?

We can begin with the foundation of service as espoused by historian William Cronon, who said that education should "aspire to nurture the growth of human talent in the service of human freedom." Cities are best served when their residents actively participate in issues that affect their lives, improve living conditions and build connections with others. Individuals gain by volunteerism—by helping others, we help ourselves.

At the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD), we take a collaborative approach through service learning to demonstrate the great rewards of uniting the whole to benefit the individual, as well as the community at large.

One of our most rewarding and successful efforts is Citizenship Month, a citywide initiative that has grown from two events with 100 participants five years ago, to hundreds of organizations and thousands of participants with activities and events held all over the Greater Houston metropolitan region.

Since the inception of Citizenship Month in 2009, UHD has served as a partner with the City of Houston to organize the initiative. In the words of Houston Mayor Annise Parker, Citizenship Month represents “a celebration of our city’s strong commitment to civic leadership, good citizenship and community engagements.”

Events are organized by a broad-based committee of volunteers from the Houston Public Library, every higher education institution in Houston, community-based organizations, public charter schools, faith-based organizations, and several major corporations. Activities include art exhibits, voter registration and get-out-the-vote efforts, tree plantings, bayou clean-up events, food and clothing collections, neighborhood improvement projects, cultural festivals, and dance and theater performances, just to name a few. Each event underscores the broad diversity of Houston and allows multicultural groups to work with and learn from each other.

To build on Houston’s commitment to community engagement, UHD created the Center for Public Service and Family Strengths. The center incorporates ideas from community-minded faculty and students and Houston-area thought leaders to provide high-impact learning for undergraduates and life-changing service to Houstonians. It serves as a catalyst to gather best practices in civic engagement and unite our city’s many community-focused champions.

Citizenship Month opens the door for UHD to forge stronger partnerships with the city, Houston Consular Corps, elected officials, corporations and nonprofits. As a student commented during the Aga Kahn Foundation’s Walk for Global Peace, an event held during Citizenship Month, “I am walking with other UHD students because I believe in changing the world and I’m changing myself and my understanding of the world in the process. I learned that citizenship isn’t just about voting, it’s about making a difference one step at a time.”

This experiential learning creates tomorrow’s civic leaders and transforms higher education—one student and one community engagement initiative at a time.

William V. Flores, Ph.D. is president of the University of Houston-Downtown and serves as honorary co-chair of Citizenship Month. Noël Bezette-Flores, Ph.D., is executive director of the Center for Public Service and Family Strengths at the University of Houston-Downtown and has served as co-chair of Citizenship Month since its inception.