



# Higher Education's Role in Enacting a Thriving Democracy

Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Theory of Change

David Hoffman, Jennifer Domagal-Goldman,  
Stephanie King, and Verdis Robinson

JUNE 2018



# Introduction

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The essays in this collection reflect the collaborative work and thoughts of participants in three national higher education networks focused on civic learning and democratic engagement. The three networks, the American Association of State College and Universities' American Democracy Project, the NASPA LEAD Initiative, and The Democracy Commitment, first convened together in New Orleans for the inaugural Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Meeting in 2015. Since then, the three organizations have convened the annual CLDE conference and worked with colleagues to envision the thriving democracy toward which our work is directed, aligning learning outcomes, pedagogies, and strategies with this vision.

The five essays in this collection were originally published on the Forbes platform from November 2017 to April 2018. The emergent CLDE Theory of Change described in these essays remains a work in progress. While we believe that the theory in its current iteration offers a rich framework for building the democratic contexts and cultures necessary for advancing a thriving democracy, we recognize that colleagues like you will be able to expand on this work and apply it in powerful ways. We hope that you'll share your insights and applications with us.

Thank you to our partners and colleagues for being sources of inspiration for this work. Together we will enact the thriving democracy we have yet to actualize.

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Published November 3, 2017

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Published December 1, 2017

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*Despite being sobered by the magnitude of the challenge, the four of us are optimistic about the possibility of initiating meaningful changes in and through institutions of higher education. Our hope is grounded in experiences with community organizing and long-term change strategies, and in the recognition that champions of the democratic values and practices described in our previous essays in this series have extraordinary assets on which to build.*

Too often civic learning and democratic engagement can be categorized as celebratory, episodic, marginal and scripted.

## The best civic learning and democratic engagement efforts are likely to be:

**Integral:** Woven into the fabric of the institution and reflected in all of its activities, including research, teaching and learning in every discipline and across disciplines; student affairs programs and services; and campus cultural practices.

**Relational:** Involving opportunities to build authentic connections across difference, and not just complete tasks or study people and problems from a distance.

**Organic:** Involving unscripted opportunities to imagine, create, and grow together with partners in public work, and to choose or forge new paths.

**Generative:** Directed at continually improving conditions and relationships, and so opening up even more powerful possibilities for collective action.

*Hoffman, D. (2015). Describing Transformative Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Practices. AASCU's American Democracy Project blog.*

The CLDE theory of change builds on threads of the 2012 *A Crucible Moment* report's figure asking What Would a Civic-Minded Campus Look Like?. Both the report and the theory in its current form argue that higher education must cultivate campus environments (civic ethos) as well as individuals are collective capacities (civic literacy & skill building; civic inquiry, civic action, and civic agency) to advance civic learning and democratic engagement:

Language in italics denote additions/changes to *A Crucible Moment*'s Figure 4: What Would a Civic-Minded Campus Look Like

### Cultivating Campus Environments:

- **Civic Ethos of campus** - The infusion of democratic values into the customs and habits of everyday practices, structures, and interactions; the defining character of the institution and those in it that emphasizes open-mindedness, civility, the worth of each person, ethical behaviors, and concern for the well-being of others; a spirit of public-mindedness that influences the goals of the institution and its engagement with local and global communities.

### Cultivating Collective (and Individual) Capacities:

- **Civic Literacy & Skill Building as a goal for every student** - The cultivation of foundational knowledge about fundamental principles and debates about democracy expressed over time, both within the United States and in other countries; familiarity with several key historical struggles, campaigns, and social movements undertaken to achieve the full promise of democracy; the ability to think

critically about complex issues and to seek and evaluate information about issues that have public consequences.

- **Civic Inquiry integrated within the majors and general education-** The practice of inquiring about the civic dimensions and public consequences of a subject of study; the exploration of the impact of choices on different constituencies and entities, including the planet; the deliberate consideration of differing points of views; the ability to describe and analyze civic intellectual debates within one's major or areas of study.
- **Civic Action as lifelong practice** - The capacity and commitment both to participate constructively with diverse others and to work collectively to address common problems; the practice of working in a pluralistic society and world to improve the quality of people's lives and the sustainability of the planet; the ability to analyze systems in order to plan and engage in public action; the moral and political courage to take risks to achieve a greater public good.
- **Civic Agency** - Involves the capacities of citizens to work collaboratively across differences like partisan ideology, faith traditions, income, geography, race, and ethnicity to address common challenges, solve problems and create common ground; requires a set of individual skills, knowledge, and predispositions; also involves questions of institutional design, particularly how to constitute groups and institutions for sustainable collective action.

# Essay 1: Hope And Strategy For A Thriving Democracy

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Let America be the dream that dreamers dreamed--

Let it be that great strong land of love  
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme

That any man be crushed by one above.

...

O, let America be America again--  
The land that never has been yet--  
And yet must be--the land where every man is free.

**Langston Hughes**

*Let America Be America Again (1935)*

**I**t has been a challenging couple of years for people in higher education working to fulfill the promise of American democracy.

Most of us have chosen our careers and commitments in part because of our profound optimism about the American experiment in self-governance. Our work with students in communities on campus and beyond reflects our belief that We, the People, appropriately oriented to our collective power, can work together across differences in background, experience, and perspective to promote the general welfare wisely and justly.



Participants in the 2017 Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Meeting grapple with higher education's role in contributing to a thriving democracy. Photo credit: Gregg Dohler

Yet today our democracy is in crisis. New hostilities and old prejudices seem to be consuming the body politic. Confidence in our collective institutions and the nation's overall direction has fallen precipitously. Higher education is under pressure to do more with less, and to focus student learning on workforce development and career preparation, potentially at the expense of civic learning and democratic engagement.

In the face of these pressures, it is tempting to yearn for simpler times, and to direct our work toward restoring what we sense has been lost. For decades, much civic learning and democratic engagement work in higher education, even the most innovative, has embedded a subtle retrospectivity: a longing for aspects of a partly mythic collective past. Higher education's service-learning and nonpartisan political engagement initiatives have harkened back to a time when people spent more of their lives engaged in common activities rather than consuming content, and seemingly each other, through electronic screens. They have grasped for an elusive yesteryear of communal investments in projects and people, for the public good. With considerable success, educators supporting civic learning and democratic engagement have endeavored to regenerate the sense of empathy, shared responsibility, initiative, and courage celebrated in some Norman Rockwell paintings and in tales from the freedom movements of bygone days.

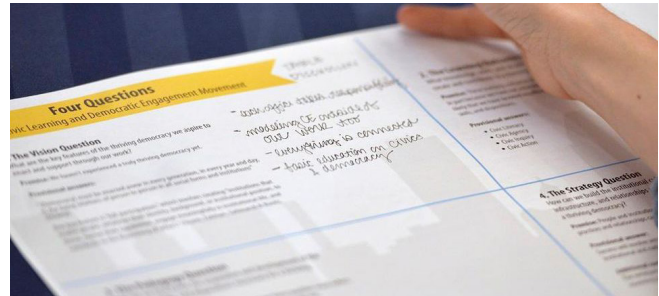
The four of us also feel that tug of nostalgia. Furthermore, we know that stories of democracy and civic agency from our collective past are vital cultural resources for anyone hoping to foster civic learning and democratic engagement today. Yet like one of the narrators of Langston Hughes' *Let America Be America Again*, we recognize that even in better times, the promise of American democracy has never been completely fulfilled. Too many Americans have been kept at the margins. Even people not excluded from formal civic power by discriminatory laws and practices have been reduced to consumers and spectators of democracy by cultural conventions that have defined

citizens simply as voters and volunteers, but only rarely as potential community-builders, civic professionals, innovators, and problem-solvers.

We believe higher education and its partners in communities across America need a vision of civic learning and democratic engagement for our time: oriented to the thriving democracy we have not yet achieved, but can build together. The influential 2012 report *A Crucible Moment* expressed such a vision in its call for weaving civic learning and democratic engagement into all of higher education's work involving students. That call conceptualizes democratic engagement as a central practice in everyday life and relationships, not a particular set of activities undertaken on special occasions. It evokes John Dewey's (1937) framing of democracy as a way of life that must be "enacted anew in every generation, in every year and day, in the living relations of person to person in all social forms and institutions."

At the 2017 Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Meeting in Baltimore, Maryland, participants worked together to begin developing shared answers to four central questions facing higher education's civic learning and democratic engagement movement:

1. **The Vision Question:** What are the key features of the thriving democracy we aspire to enact and support through our work?
2. **The Learning Outcomes Question:** What knowledge, skills, and dispositions do people need in order to help create and contribute to a thriving democracy?
3. **The Pedagogy Question:** How can we best foster the acquisition and development of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for a thriving democracy?
4. **The Strategy Question:** How can we build the institutional culture, infrastructure, and relationships needed to support learning that enables a thriving democracy?



Answering the four central questions facing higher education's civic learning and democratic engagement movement. Photo credit: Gregg Dohler

Those energetic conversations, and the ideas they generated, are a very promising early step in an inclusive process of reimagining our collective work to meet democracy's needs. In the coming months, we will share thinking emerging from within our networks and invite broad participation in refining tentative answers to the four key questions. At the 2018 CLDE meeting in Anaheim, California from June 6-9, participants will continue to shape and begin to apply our shared answers.

Langston Hughes concluded *Let America Be America Again* with this injunction:

We, the people, must redeem  
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.  
The mountains and the endless plain --  
All, all the stretch of these great green  
states --  
And make America again!

We believe higher education is well-positioned to contribute to the fulfillment of this charge by extending and deepening our support for students as co-creators of a thriving democracy.

## Essay 2: Civic Learning And Democratic Engagement For What? Envisioning A Thriving Democracy

In recent decades, higher education's civic learning and democratic engagement (CLDE) efforts have encouraged students to view themselves as having a significant stake in government, politics, and the welfare of people beyond their immediate social circles. As we have described, this focus has reflected a subtle retrospectivity, harkening to a partly mythic past of deeper affiliations within communities and with public institutions. Yet there have always been visionary elements in this work as well, directed at fulfilling, at long last, democratic possibilities to which Abraham Lincoln (1863), John Dewey (1937), Langston Hughes (1936/1994), and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963) famously alluded: government of the people, by the people, and for the people; democracy enacted through empowering relationships in every social institution; America as "that great strong land of love," with opportunity for all; and freedom ringing from every mountainside, respectively.

In these challenging times for U.S. democracy, when the only sentiments that seem to unite people across party lines are feelings of powerlessness and alienation, higher education must lift up the visionary elements of its civic learning and democratic engagement work and give them renewed creative attention. With new clarity about our highest aspirations, we must develop strategies that can empower everyone as co-creators and co-producers of the thriving democracy we hope to enact and support through our work.

This new clarity can emerge in part from what Walter Brueggemann (2001) has called prophetic criticism: critical analysis of our everyday world that liberates our imaginations, enabling us to develop an energizing vision of an alternative future. What do you see when you examine our political culture, beyond a coarsening of public discourse and hardening of partisan positions?

Like some participants who shared their insights at the 2017 Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement

Meeting, the four of us see how advances in technology have fueled the rapid adoption of the values and perspectives subtly encouraged by our apps and devices: blurring boundaries between reality and fiction; substituting status updates for deeper relationships; and conditioning us to expect infinite customization and instant gratification. Ironically, partly as a consequence of the ways in which we have become more thoroughly networked, Americans seem to be living increasingly as isolated, frustrated, individual consumers of civic life.



Participants at the 2017 Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Meeting grapple with higher education's role in contributing to a thriving democracy. Photo credit: Gregg Dohler

This pattern is compounded by sometimes-dehumanizing norms and practices that have become pervasive features of our everyday world. Our national culture valorizes individual achievement, mastery, and command. Institutional cultures within U.S. higher education often reproduce and enact these values, in part by rendering knowledge into content, holistic learning into transactions, and people into objects to be shaped, managed, and measured through the application of context-independent "best practices." In a time of scarcity within and beyond higher education, the imperatives of control and efficiency threaten to displace organic, relational, inclusive, and contextual approaches to knowledge creation, teaching and learning, problem-solving, and collective decision-making.

Most fundamentally of all, our failure as a society to embrace every person as fully human, morally equal, and entitled to full participation (Strum, Eatman, Saltmarsh & Bush, 2011) in civic life regardless of race,



religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, and other aspects of identity prevents us from pooling and leveraging all of our talents so we can thrive together.

There can be no single, simple antidote to the frustration and fatalism engendered by these features of our common world. Yet we can imagine a new era in which higher education's civic learning and democratic engagement work helps to unleash the latent energy of Americans yearning for inclusion, connection, and collective agency.

Drawing from ideas shared by participants at the 2017 Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Meeting, we envision that future, thriving democracy foregrounding interrelated values we have yet to fully enact collectively in our lives and institutions. Among them:

- **Dignity** - respect for the intrinsic moral equality of all persons
- **Humanity** - embracing environments and interactions that are generative and organic; rejecting objectification, and the marginalization of people based on aspects of their identities
- **Decency** - acting with humility and graciousness; rejecting domination for its own sake
- **Honesty** - frankness with civility; congruence between stated values and actions; avoidance of deceit, evasions, and manipulative conduct
- **Curiosity** - eagerness to learn, have new experiences, and tap the wisdom of other people
- **Imagination** - creativity and vision, including with respect to possible futures in which all of these values have become more central to our society and institutions
- **Wisdom** - discernment; comfort with complexity; non-manipulability
- **Courage** - fortitude to act with integrity even when there is a cost; capacity to thrive in the midst of ambiguity, uncertainty, and change; willingness to acknowledge vulnerability
- **Community** - belief that advancing the general welfare requires organized, collective work, enacted through relationships, partnerships, and networks, leveraging the diverse perspectives and talents of many people in order to produce benefits greater than the sum of their individual contributions
- **Participation** - action with other people to develop and achieve shared visions of the common good
- **Stewardship** - responsibility to act individually and collectively in ways that support others' well-being, and the preservation and cultivation of resources, including norms and processes, necessary for all to thrive

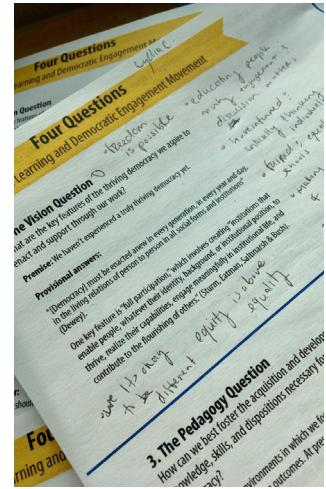
- **Resourcefulness** - capacity to improvise, seek and gain knowledge, solve problems, and develop productive public relationships and partnerships
- **Hope** - belief in the power of people to bring about desired transformations; tenacity

In that new era, ordinary people will experience and expect full participation, not just in elections but in dialogue, problem-solving, organizing, and the creation of new laws, policies, and social resources for their communities, nation, and world. Rather than conceptualizing civics as confined in particular activities such as voting or providing voluntary service, Americans will build empowering democratic relationships and understand themselves

to be potential civic co-creators in their workplaces, on their campuses, and in the everyday interactions that give meaning to their lives. In every institution, leaders will devote time and care to fostering environments and practices conducive to the fulfillment of core democratic values.

We believe higher education's civic learning and democratic engagement work should be directed at enacting those values within our institutions, in our work with partners addressing community challenges and opportunities, and through the lifelong engagement of our graduates.

What thoughts does this tentative vision spark for you? We know there are already initiatives in higher education designed to fulfill aspects of the vision we have described. How does your work do so? How could it go further? How can all of us grow and connect our work to refine, communicate and enact this vision?



Responding to the vision prompt: what are the key features of the thriving democracy we aspire to enact and support? Photo credit: David Hoffman

# Essay 3: Civics Unbound: Knowledge, Skills, And Dispositions For A Thriving Democracy

**H**igher education institutions across the United States are doing creative, painstaking, hopeful work to prepare students for lives of meaningful engagement in their communities and democracy. Typically the focus of these efforts is on developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions students need to cast informed votes, deliberate about public issues, appreciate perspectives and experiences they may not share, and serve as responsible stewards and change-agents.



Live illustrator Ellen Lovelidge illustrates a plenary discussion about higher education's role in contributing to a thriving democracy at the 2017 Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Meeting. Photo credit: Gregg Dohler

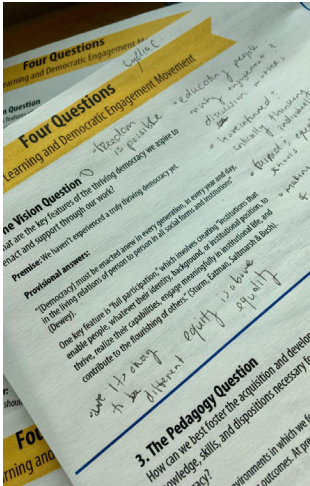
Yet if the collective goal of the CLDE movement in higher education is to support a thriving democracy grounded in values (dignity, humanity, decency, honesty, curiosity, imagination, wisdom, courage, community, participation, stewardship, resourcefulness, and hope) that support all of us in being fully human in all of our relationships and institutions, then we also must prepare students to attend to issues closer to home. Educating for engaged participation in our democracy must mean, in part, preparing and equipping people to recognize, navigate, address, and transform common, everyday cultural practices, in higher education and elsewhere that inhibit us from adopting and enacting these values.

While institutions of higher education can be forums for learning and discovery that open new possibilities for human development and progress, they also

can reproduce and amplify some of our national culture's least democratic features, reducing students to consumers and objects to be manipulated and managed. Especially in this era of big data, on-demand services offering instant gratification, resource scarcity, and increasing student debt, colleges and universities are under pressure to deliver immediate, quantifiable results. Responding to this pressure, institutions may favor carefully designed and bounded learning experiences and disfavor organic, improvisational learning, which can get messy and produce unexpected outcomes. Yet the more they stick to scripts and constrain the scope of students' agency, the less educational experiences can embody and communicate many of the core values of a thriving democracy.

Even beyond the boundaries of designed learning experiences, students may experience familiar, everyday aspects of campus culture as subtly restricting their sense of power, agency, and connection—as may we all. Students, faculty, and staff alike accept the constraints and demarcations imposed by the built environment, academic calendar, schedule of classes, the need to represent students' achievements with scores and grades, the division of knowledge and exploration into disciplines, and all the hierarchies and ritualized interactions that are commonplace features of institutional life. We may also take for granted distinctions between campus and community, service provider and service recipient, citizen and professional, civic activity and everyday life, that are so deeply embedded in our culture that they seem given and eternal, as opposed to having been constructed by people. By us.

Some of this design work and boundary-creation is necessary: In order to foster learning, educators must gather students and create contexts for focused exploration. Doing so requires planning, coordination, and infrastructure. Yet in order to foster the values we believe are central to a thriving democracy, institutions also must embody the civic ethos we hope will ultimately prevail in our society (Hoffman, 2016). Doing so is likely



Responding to the vision prompt: what are the key features of the thriving democracy we aspire to enact and support? Photo credit: David Hoffman

to involve relaxing our expectations relating to control and quantitative measurement, as well as intentionally eliminating some of the boundaries we have placed around our imaginations, relationships and learning processes.

At the 2017 Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Meeting in Baltimore, Maryland, participants discussed a list of individual and collective capacities that could serve

as a guide for higher education in preparing students for lives of active, engaged citizenship. That list, drawn mostly from the influential 2012 report *A Crucible Moment*, included:

- **Civic Literacy and Skill Building** (emphasizing historical knowledge and critical thinking);
- **Civic Inquiry** (the practice of inquiring about and considering civic dimensions, public consequences, and different points of view);
- **Civic Action** (the capacity and commitment to work together across difference to solve problems); and
- **Civic Agency** (emphasizing vision and strategy, including with respect to institutional arrangements that can support collective action).

Based on feedback from conference participants, as well as our own reflections on the importance of “close to home” capacities needed to engage cultures and practices that inhibit personal agency and democratic relationships, we would rework and expand this list. We believe that the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for contributing to a thriving democracy can be expressed as the following civic capacities:

- **Civic Literacy and Discernment** - encompassing individual and collective knowledge of democracy's principles, contested features, history, and expressions in the U.S. and around the world; knowledge of the philosophical and practical dimensions of public policy issues, and understanding of different perspectives on those issues; and the capacity to distinguish factual claims made credibly and in good faith from error and propaganda.

- **Civic Agency** - encompassing individuals' self-conception as active agents shaping their world, as well as their capacities to recognize cultural practices, navigate complex institutions and undemocratic environments, imagine alternative arrangements and futures, and develop strategies for effective individual and collective action; and the collective capacities to develop a vision for our common life, recognize and respond to problems, make decisions generally accepted as legitimate, and foster the ongoing development of all of these capacities.
- **Real Communication** - encompassing individual and collective capacities to engage in civil, unscripted, honest communication grounded in our common humanity, including about issues in connection with which individuals disagree based on their different stakes, life experiences, values, and aspirations; and the sensitivity and situational awareness to listen well and communicate authentically and effectively with different audiences.
- **Critical Solidarity** - encompassing individual and collective recognition of the intrinsic worth and equality of all human beings, capacity to envision and identify with each other's journeys and struggles, and disposition to work for the full participation (Strum, Eatman, Saltmarsh & Bush, 2011) of all Americans in our democratic life and against violations of people's agency and equality.
- **Civic Courage** - encompassing individuals' willingness to risk position, reputation, and the comforts of stability in order to pursue justice and remove barriers to full participation in democratic life, openness to learning from others, including people with less formal training, positional power, and social status, and resilience in the face of adversity; and the collective capacity to embrace changes in cultural practices and institutional arrangements when such changes promote the general welfare and full participation in democratic life.
- **Integrity and Congruence** - encompassing individual and collective capacities and commitments to enact democratic values in our everyday interactions, professional roles, cultural practices, institutional arrangements, public decisions, policies, and laws.

What do you think of this revised list, and the idea of focusing in part on “close to home” civic capacities like navigating and engaging institutional cultures and practices? How would adopting and pursuing the objectives on this list impact your work?

# Essay 4: Integral, Relational, Organic, And Generative: Pedagogy For A Thriving Democracy

Previously we sketched a [vision of a thriving democracy](#) in which people would work together to nurture and express values such as courage, honesty, wisdom, and stewardship, not just as voters on Election Day or in episodic service projects, but in every relationship and institution. We asserted that preparing students to create and contribute to that thriving democracy would involve cultivating knowledge, skills, and dispositions not always nurtured by our current approaches to civic learning and democratic engagement. We proposed that such knowledge, skills, and dispositions would include civic literacy and discernment, civic agency, real communication, critical solidarity, civic courage, integrity, and congruence.



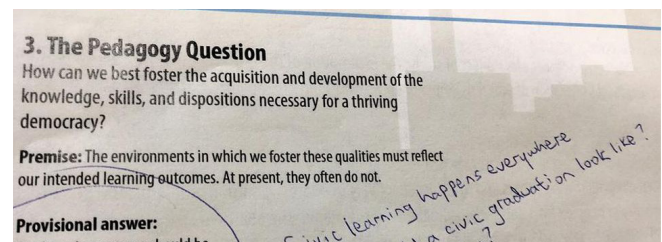
Passing the Gavel at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC). Photo credit: David Hoffman

In this essay, we ask: What approaches to teaching and learning can succeed in achieving these profoundly ambitious learning outcomes? In particular, we must grapple with the question of how to educate in ways that do not subtly reproduce the dehumanizing, disempowering aspects of our broader culture. Within the academy, these cultural conventions can take the form of boundaries, hierarchies, and protocols that isolate faculty and staff members and reduce them to content transmitters and service providers. Those same conventions can undermine students' agency and sense of connection to each other and to their communities.

For inspiration, we can look at spaces in which students have developed approaches to cultivating their own responsible, hopeful, and empowering civic mindsets.

As an example, at the conclusion of each University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) Student Government Association (SGA) meeting, the chair initiates a time-honored ritual of reflection called "Passing the Gavel." It begins with the chair passing the wooden gavel they've used during the meeting to the left or right. The person receiving the gavel offers thoughts about the process of the meeting: Did participants have productive discussions, or did they get bogged down in minutia and distracted by petty squabbles? What behaviors were helpful and should be reinforced at future meetings? What changes in facilitation or communication strategies would produce greater inclusion, productivity, and collective wisdom? The gavel travels from person to person around the room, with each participant offering perspectives. When a meeting has been particularly awkward or contentious, these post-adjourment reflections can take up to an hour.

Passing the Gavel encourages participants to take responsibility for the performance and health of the group. It encourages the silent to speak, and the talkative to listen. The ritual also embeds and enacts the UMBC SGA's values of inclusion and reflection. While there is a danger that, as with any ritual, familiarity and repetition could hollow out its meaning, Passing the Gavel has served as an important vehicle for transmitting ideals from person to person and across generations of leaders, both at UMBC and at other institutions where student governments employ the practice.



Responding to the pedagogy prompt: How can we best foster the acquisition and development of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for a thriving democracy? Photo credit: David Hoffman

Every pedagogy enacts a philosophy about learning and learners. Passing the Gavel enacts a philosophy of knowledge as constructed by members of a community, and of learners in that community as active agents and co-creators. In contrast, when an educator reads prepared lecture notes to an auditorium full of silent students, or directs students through a heavily scripted activity, the pedagogy prizes expertise and authority, casts knowledge as information and teaching as content transmission, and regards students as objects: empty vessels to be filled, or clay to be sculpted. The philosophy behind a lecture from a prepared text or a heavily scripted activity favors certainty and quality control, and abhors spontaneity and the risk that information will be distorted or changed in transmission.

The practical challenge for civic educators is to strike an appropriate balance: neither waiting passively and wishfully for students to make the imaginative leaps that lead to spontaneous learning, nor so enclosing and dominating their experience that they internalize unintended lessons about their own powerlessness and isolation. The UMBC student government's Passing the Gavel tradition would not have emerged more than a decade ago without some gentle coaching, over a period of years, by a staff advisor. But had the ritual been imposed as a civic duty or dictated as the one right way to conclude a public meeting, its meaning for students would have been distorted and diminished.

Probably none of us involved with civic learning and democratic engagement in higher education view ourselves as authoritarian content-disseminators or script managers. However, it is well worth asking whether our current practices are striking the right balances, and whether there is more room than we have sometimes recognized to model and enact the values that are central to our emergent, collective vision of a thriving democracy. Specifically, can we achieve our ambitious civic learning outcomes more effectively by planting more seeds and imposing less structure?

We can begin answering that broad question by interrogating our current practices and considering some new possibilities:

- **Sharing Responsibility and Control** - Is there room within courses and programs to shift some responsibility and control from educators to students?
- **Enabling Spontaneity** - To the extent that courses and programs involve scripted content-delivery, directed behaviors, or rote learning, is there room to afford students more flexibility and space for spontaneity?

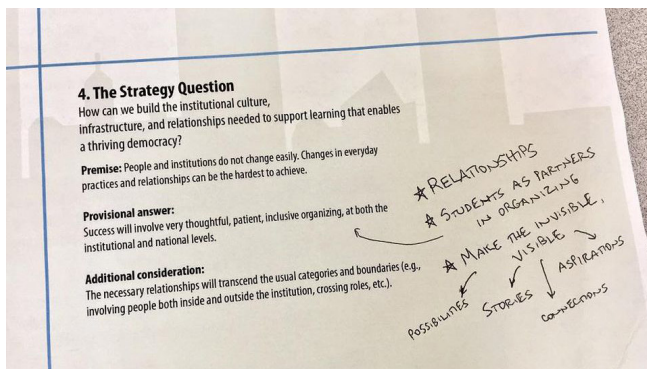
- **Embracing Vulnerability** - Can we approach courses, programs, and everyday campus interactions with more humility and a greater willingness to be vulnerable, so that students are more likely to experience faculty, staff, themselves, and each other as human beings who are fully present and engaged in collective work within a community of learners?
- **Fostering Relationships** - Can we do more, both within and beyond courses and programs, to create opportunities for students to build authentic, mutual, and reciprocal relationships with each other, with faculty and staff members, and with community partners?
- **Building Collective Capacities** - Can we do more to support students in activities that both enrich individual students and help them build collective civic capacity over time (as in the Passing the Gavel ritual), in forums that can evolve as their collective capacity grows?
- **Choosing Empowering Language** - Both within our courses and programs and in our everyday relationships and communications, can we do more to choose inclusive and empowering language? Among other things, this would entail avoiding some very common uses of "institution voice," as when "we" or "us" (meaning, the institution) shares information with "you" (students, who are symbolically reduced to customers, implicitly excluded from "we" and "us").
- **Providing Support for Learning from Everyday Interactions** - Can we do more to support students in learning from their unstructured experiences of navigating everyday politics, on campus and beyond, so that they become increasingly resilient and sophisticated? Can we do so without disrupting the organic character of those experiences or undermining students' agency?
- **Transcending Categories and Boundaries** - Can we ask ourselves all of the foregoing questions, not just about courses, programs, and other settings with obvious civic dimensions (service-learning, explorations of public policy or public opinion, deliberative dialogues, voter engagement programs) but about every learning context at our institutions: orientation sessions, student organization meetings, faculty office hours, commencement exercises? Can our entire institutions become teeming civic ecosystems in which students experience and develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions useful to a thriving democracy in many settings?

As American Democracy Project founder George Mehaffy has observed about that initiative's early work, too often higher education's civic learning and democratic engagement efforts have been marginal, episodic, and celebratory: too shallow to fulfill our purposes. Taking a candid look at our current practices and considering new possibilities, using the questions listed above as a guide, is likely to reveal opportunities to make our civic learning and democratic engagement work more integral, relational, organic, and generative (Hoffman, 2015), and so congruent with our aspirations for a thriving democracy..

What pedagogies do you believe would support the vision and learning outcomes described in previous essays in this series? What questions do you think people in higher education should be asking about our current civic pedagogies?

# Essay 5: A Gathering Of Hopes And Stories: Organizing For A Thriving Democracy

The vision animating this series of essays on higher education's role in supporting a thriving democracy is fundamentally about culture. What would a thriving civic culture look like, and be like? How would it feel to live and learn in that culture? How would people interact, support each other's growth, work through and across differences, make collective decisions, and pursue life, liberty, and happiness together? How can colleges and universities support the development of that culture through both structured and unstructured learning experiences, and through campus practices that embody the thriving democracy to which we aspire?



How can we build the institutional culture, infrastructure, and relationships needed to support learning that enables a thriving democracy? Photo credit: David Hoffman

Cultures are notoriously difficult to change. From the vantage of a person immersed in any particular culture, alternative aspirations, arrangements and practices can appear irrational and impractical if not outright threatening. People working to support a thriving democracy by changing higher education from within have to contend with narratives, relationships, decision processes, reward structures, and communication practices rooted in the values and assumptions of the status quo.

Many also have to contend with a sense of isolation. We have spoken with any number of colleagues and students who harbor deep democratic aspirations for their institutions but feel misunderstood, marginalized,

and unable to gain real traction. So many of us were inspired by *A Crucible Moment*, the influential 2012 report from the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement that called for moving teaching and learning for democracy from the margins to the core of our institutions' work. We want to see colleges and universities respond to that call by enacting the values and practices of a thriving democracy in every department and program. Yet we live in a time of scarcity, in which institutions of higher education have increasingly defined their value proposition to students in terms of customer service, career preparation, and future monetary compensation. It can be difficult just to secure colleagues' understanding and support for preserving existing spaces in which students have opportunities to experience and enact democracy.

Despite being sobered by the magnitude of the challenge, the four of us are optimistic about the possibility of initiating meaningful changes in and through institutions of higher education. Our hope is grounded in experiences with community organizing and long-term change strategies, and in the recognition that champions of the democratic values and practices described in our previous essays in this series (links provided in the opening paragraph, above) have extraordinary assets on which to build. Successful strategies for institutional change are likely to hinge on recognizing, cultivating, and leveraging the following assets, among others:

- **Civic work that is not (yet) named as such, and the people who do that work.** Notwithstanding the myriad challenges of the present day, the work of building a thriving democracy is happening all around us, though it can be hard to see. It takes place in departments, centers, programs, organizations, committees, and physical locations across our institutions. The difficulty is that it goes by names other than "civics" or "democracy," or by no name at all. It occurs outside the lines often drawn around recognized "civic" activities such as voting or providing voluntary service, including in classrooms where

faculty members show up as vulnerable human beings rather than dispassionate conveyors of expertise and analysis; in the modeling, advocacy, and mentoring done by members of marginalized populations in non-traditional roles; and in forums where students, faculty, and staff work in genuine collaboration to create institutions' policies and programs. Even the people engaged in such important work may dismiss or devalue its civic dimensions, believing that they are simply being helpful, acting in accordance with their values, or making stylistic choices. What changes could those people produce if their civic skills, commitments, and contributions were appropriately illuminated and organized?

➤ **Democratic threads in institutions' stories.** The stories colleges and universities tell about themselves often depict linear ascensions from humble beginnings, accomplished largely through the contributions of heroic, visionary individuals in formal leadership positions. Such stories can obscure the messy, grassroots, collaborative, and contested work behind many aspects of institutions' built environments, programs, cultures, and practices. Those messier stories may be hiding in plain view, disconnected from the larger campus narrative. For example, stories from the time of UMBC's opening in 1966 often reference the fact that campus planners waited to install sidewalks until people's footsteps had created paths across the grounds. Understood in one way, this anecdote makes vivid the institution's humble origins, and attests to the resilience of the campus pioneers: they pressed onward with dirty shoes. Yet the story is also about democracy: students, faculty, and staff collectively chose the pathways and created them with their feet, literally making the roads by walking. When the paving story and other democratic aspects of campus history are assembled and linked to campus attributes that already inspire pride, they become a powerful cultural resource: a way of opening new ground for collective path-making in the present day. What will our assembled stories empower us to create together?

➤ **The widely felt yearning for consequentiality and connectedness.** People are not merely the roles they play within institutions. Nor can they be reduced to the accommodations they have made to fit comfortably within cultures that valorize individual achievement, technical rationality and expertise, control, and efficiency. Behind a student's seemingly narrow careerism may be a partially suppressed, hard-to-name wish to do something that truly matters to others. Behind a faculty member's professional distance and adherence to protocol may be feelings of vulnerability and the hope of being valued by students and colleagues. The challenge for an organizer of cultural change is to make these aspirations to consequentiality and connectedness safely visible, link them with the values of a thriving democracy, and help people to act on them together. What new relationships can emerge when people in different roles connect around their common desire to live with purpose and matter to their communities?

Beyond these important assets, the sheer boldness of *A Crucible Moment's* vision, encompassing changes in purposes and practices throughout higher education, makes almost every resource at institutions' disposal a potential source of support for a thriving democracy. While it will take time and work to bring about the changes, in the long run it should not cost extra for faculty, staff, and students to pursue more inclusive approaches to fulfilling their current responsibilities, relate to each other in more democratic ways, and tell new stories about the meaning of affiliation with their institutions.



Intersecting walkways on the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) campus. Photo credit: David Hoffman

Utilizing and leveraging these assets will involve applying tools long used by community organizers. These include asset maps, one-to-one relational meetings, and story circles. In addition, we will need to develop some new tools, building on promising work already underway, to help assess current practices and enact the values of a thriving democracy in everyday settings (course syllabi, advising appointments, student orientations, hiring processes, and many more). Those new tools will help identify and link hidden democratic aspects of institutions' stories, and help institutions develop powerful local languages to support a thriving democracy in terms that resonate with their constituents. Adapting and creating the tools together will be among the most important next steps for our collective work.

When added to those taken by creative, caring people over decades to align higher education's practices with its public purposes, those steps will create promising new paths to the thriving democracy we envision but have not yet achieved.

What other assets would you add to our list? What thoughts has this series of essays sparked for you, and how would you like to be involved in the work ahead.

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## Authors:

**David Hoffman** is Assistant Director of Student Life for Civic Agency at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), and in July 2018 will become Director of UMBC's new Institute for Democracy and Civic Life. His work is directed at fostering civic agency and democratic engagement through courses, co-curricular experiences and cultural practices on campus. His research explores students' development as civic agents, highlighting the crucial role of experiences, environments, and relationships students perceive as "real" rather than synthetic or scripted. David is a member of Steering Committee for the American Democracy Project and the National Advisory Board for Imagining America. He is an alum of UCLA (BA), Harvard (JD, MPP) and UMBC (PhD).

**Jennifer Domagal-Goldman** is the national manager of AASCU's American Democracy Project (ADP). She earned her doctorate in higher education from the Pennsylvania State University. She received her master's degree in higher education and student affairs administration from the University of Vermont and a bachelor's degree from the University of Rochester. Jennifer's dissertation focused on how faculty learn to incorporate civic learning and engagement in their undergraduate teaching within their academic discipline. Jennifer holds an ex-officio position on the *eJournal of Public Affairs'* editorial board and sits on the advisory board of the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. She has contributed to a number of civic engagement publications including co-authoring chapters in *Reimagining Democratic Societies: A New Era of Personal and Social Responsibility* (2013), *Becoming a Steward of Place: Four Areas of Institutional Focus* (2014), and a chapter on institutional characteristics and student civic outcomes in *Research on Student Civic Outcomes in Service Learning: Conceptual Frameworks and Methods* (2017).

**Stephanie King** is the Assistant Director for Civic Engagement, Knowledge Community, and Social Justice Initiatives, formerly the Assistant Director for Knowledge Communities and Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Initiatives at NASPA where she directs the NASPA LEAD Initiative and co-manages the Voter Friendly Campus program. She has worked in higher education since 2009 in the areas of student activities, orientation, residence life, and civic learning and democratic engagement. Stephanie earned her Master of Arts in Psychology at Chatham University and her B.S. in Biology from Walsh University. She has contributed to a few publications including *Effective Strategies for Supporting Student Civic Engagement*.



## Higher Education's Role in Enacting a Thriving Democracy

**Verdis L. Robinson** is the National Director of The Democracy Commitment after serving as a tenured Assistant Professor of History and African-American Studies at Monroe Community College (NY). Professionally, Verdis 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. Additionally, Verdis is the founder of the Rochester Neighborhood Oral History Project that with his service-learning students created a walking tour of the community most impacted by the 1964 Race Riots, which has engaged over 400 members of Rochester community in dialogue and learning. Currently, Verdis serves on the editorial board for Rochester History journal and on the advisory boards of the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge and the Students Learn Students Vote coalition. He holds a B.M. in Voice Performance from Boston University, a B.S. and an M.A. in History from SUNY College at Brockport, and an M.A. in African-American Studies from SUNY University at Buffalo.

### Organizations:

The **American Democracy Project (ADP)** is a multi-campus initiative focused on public higher education's role in preparing the next generation of informed, engaged citizens for our democracy. The project began in 2003 as an initiative of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), in partnership with The New York Times. The more than 260 AASCU member campuses in this network advance the civic learning and democratic engagement of their students, campuses and communities. These institutions act as "Stewards of Place" and engage in curricular and co-curricular efforts to deepen campus cultures of democratic engagement, to ensure that all students are prepared with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and experiences that will help them flourish in the personal, professional and public spheres of their lives. ADP engages campuses and their stakeholders in a variety of professional and leadership development opportunities as well as research, assessment and programmatic activities intended to advance our collective civic work. Learn more here: <http://www.aascu.org/programs/ADP/>



For more information on AASCU's American Democracy Project or to get involved, contact: Jennifer Domagal-Goldman, National Manager, American Democracy Project, AASCU at [adp@aascu.org](mailto:adp@aascu.org) or 202.478.7833

The **NASPA LEAD Initiative on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (Lead Initiative)** comprises a network of NASPA member colleges and universities committed to encouraging and highlighting the work of student affairs in making civic learning and democratic engagement a part of every student's college education. Selected institutions, representing public and private four-year and two-year colleges and universities, have committed to a series of strategies to work in partnership with on and off campus constituents to influence students' ongoing commitment to civic learning and democratic engagement. The NASPA Lead Initiative offers unique professional development opportunities, targeted resources, networking, and recognition for its Lead Institutions. For more information: <https://www.naspa.org/constituent-groups/groups/lead-initiative>



For more information on how your institution can get involved contact, Stephanie King, Assistant Director for Civic Engagement, Knowledge Community and Social Justice Initiatives, NASPA at [sking@naspa.org](mailto:sking@naspa.org) or 202.719.1193.

The **Democracy Commitment (TDC)** is a national coalition of American community colleges dedicated to advancing democracy, and to make democratic skills more available to all community college students who desire a voice and a seat at the table of local, state, and national discourse and action. To such end, TDC provides a platform for the development and expansion of community college programs, projects, and curricula aimed at engaging students in civic and democratic learning and engagement. TDC was launched on November 11, 2011, at The New York Times and was modeled after AASCU's American Democracy Project where it is housed in their offices in Washington, D.C. With a network of over 100 community colleges in 25 states, TDC's goal is to ensure that every community college student graduates with an education in civic responsibility and democracy. This includes all of democracy's students whether they aim to transfer to university, achieve an associate degree, and/or obtain a certificate. Learn more here: <http://thedemocracycommitment.org/>.



For more information on The Democracy Commitment or to get involved, contact: Verdis L. Robinson, National Director, The Democracy Commitment, at [tdc@aascu.org](mailto:tdc@aascu.org) or 202.478.4656.

## CLDE Theory of Change: A Framework of Four Questions

### 1. **The Vision Question:** What are the key features of the thriving democracy we aspire to enact and support through our work?

**Premise:** We haven't experienced a truly thriving democracy yet.

**Emergent Answer:** In a thriving democracy, the following interrelated values would be enacted collectively in our lives and institutions:

- Dignity
- Humanity
- Decency
- Honesty
- Curiosity
- Imagination
- Wisdom
- Courage
- Community
- Participation
- Stewardship
- Resourcefulness
- Hope

### 2. **The Learning Outcomes Question:** What knowledge, skills, and dispositions do people need in order to help create and contribute to a thriving democracy?

**Premise:** These learning outcomes include both individual and collective capacities. In part because we have not achieved clarity in our answer to the first question, it is likely that we have devoted insufficient attention to some important knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

**Emergent Answer:** In a thriving democracy, people need the following civic capacities:

- Civic Literacy and Discernment
- Civic Agency
- Real Communication
- Critical Solidarity
- Civic Courage
- Integrity and Congruence

### 3. **The Pedagogy Question:** How can we best foster the acquisition and development of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for a thriving democracy?

**Premise:** The environments in which we foster these qualities must reflect our intended learning outcomes. At present, they often do not.

**Emergent Answer:** To foster the development of the necessary civic capacities, we can embrace the following pedagogical strategies:

- Sharing Responsibility and Control
- Enabling Spontaneity
- Embracing Vulnerability
- Fostering Relationships
- Building Collective Capacities
- Choosing Empowering Language
- Providing Support for Learning from Everyday Interactions
- Transcending Categories and Boundaries

### 4. **The Strategy Question:** How can we build the institutional culture, infrastructure, and relationships needed to support learning that enables a thriving democracy?

**Premise:** People and institutions do not change easily. Changes in everyday practices and relationships can be the hardest to achieve.

**Emergent Answer:** To build the needed institutional culture, infrastructure and relationships, we can recognize, cultivate and leverage the following assets, among others:

- Civic work that is not (yet) named as such, and the people who do that work.
- Democratic threads in institutions' stories.
- The widely felt yearning for consequentiality and connectedness.



**Higher Education’s Role in Enacting a Thriving Democracy  
Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Theory of Change**

JUNE 2018

