Leading for Democracy
at America's State Colleges and Universities

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In recent years, the world has grappled with rising levels of misinformation and disinformation as well as heightened inequality within democratic institutions amid a surge of authoritarian movements and leaders. This situation has played no small part in the increasing levels of political polarization in the United States, but institutions of higher education are uniquely positioned to address the challenges facing democracy today. They equip students with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate effectively in democratic processes by providing spaces for students to explore civic engagement. They also play a crucial role in defending free speech and encouraging open dialogue, fostering an environment where diverse perspectives can be shared and debated through unstructured "free-expression spaces" as well as through public demonstrations. By creating spaces for dialogue across political, social, and cultural differences, colleges and universities help bridge divides and promote understanding. All of this taken together makes college and university campuses proving grounds, where the next generation of leaders can develop and refine the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they'll need to uphold democratic principles.

Colleges and universities play an important role in supporting democracy through civic education, free speech, and fostering civic engagement; these efforts largely depend on the leadership at these campuses. Campus leaders are instrumental in creating and sustaining environments where democratic principles can thrive. They set the tone for open dialogue, encourage student participation in civic activities, and ensure that the institution's policies and practices reflect a commitment to democratic values. It is their vision and guidance that ultimately shape the institution's impact on democracy.

Leading for Democracy

In 2023, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) launched *Leading for Democracy* to prepare higher education leaders to create the conditions for democracy to thrive—on campus, in communities, and across the nation. Funded by Lumina Foundation, *Leading for Democracy* sought to support leaders develop and foster a civic-minded campus; design curriculum to build the capacity of leaders in the identified areas; and develop a reflective self-assessment for leaders to assess their current capacity in those areas.

Leading for Democracy sits at the intersection of AASCU's long-standing commitment to civic and global engagement, leadership development, and student success. The American Democracy Project (ADP) has concentrated on the grassroots efforts of students, faculty, and administrators to build civic learning and democratic engagement on campus. With *Leading for Democracy,* AASCU has expanded the work of ADP by emphasizing the critical role of leaders in facilitating conditions for institutional transformation.

"College and university leaders play a critical role in ensuring that higher education remains one of the vital pillars of American democracy. Now more than ever they need to cultivate the knowledge and skills necessary to lead their campuses at a moment when that role is being questioned by a skeptical public."

— Terry Brown, Vice President of Academic Innovation and Transformation, AASCU

While existing frameworks define general leadership knowledge, skills, and dispositions, *Leading for Democracy* identified those necessary to promote civic learning and democratic engagement. AASCU prioritized thorough analysis and consultation with partners from a variety of perspectives to ensure that the resulting framework is both relevant and actionable. By incorporating diverse perspectives and expert insights, AASCU developed a framework that outlines the core mindsets and skill sets required for impactful civic leadership.

Data Collection

AASCU engaged 115 people to identify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions. These people were from 78 universities and 19 partner organizations, representing the perspectives of presidents, provosts, vice presidents, deans, ADP coordinators, students, community leaders, and subject matter experts.

Sensemaking

The curriculum design team included 14 higher education leaders, who engaged in reflective dialogue about the findings from data collection and refined, prioritized, and curated the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to inform curriculum and tool development.

Design

Stemming from the identified knowledge and skills, the curriculum design team engaged in development of a set of learning modules, and the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) worked on the development of a companion self-reflection tool.

Framework for Leading for Democracy

"AASCU's nonpartisan model integrates knowledge, skills and dispositions resonating with both those who lead civic work in higher education and the students we educate. This framework provides a comprehensive, future-facing approach to cultivating civic-mindedness. It creates new possibilities for an intentional re-integration of a civic mindset into curricular and co-curricular activities."

— Mel Netzhammer, Chancellor, Washington State University Vancouver

Key priorities that emerged from AASCU's data collection activities revealed that **knowledge** related to content (specific subjects), context (culture, social factors), and process (procedures supporting democratic engagement) were important for leaders to develop alongside a set of essential **skills** and **dispositions.** Together, these knowledge, skills, and dispositions reflect the integrated mindsets (personal knowledge and growth) and skill sets (professional avenues to strategically build civic engagement on campus) required to lead for democracy.

Developing a Civic-Focused Mindset

Building Human Capacity for Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement
Cultivating a profound understanding of core values and biases, along with the ability to clearly articulate guiding principles, is essential for promoting civic learning and democratic engagement. This involves not only recognizing and embracing one's own values but also being open to the diverse ideas present on campus. Developing effective personal strategies for managing conflicting ideas in alignment with these values is crucial. By positioning oneself within this spectrum of diverse perspectives, individuals can foster a more inclusive and dynamic educational environment.

Defining and Contextualizing Democracy
Understanding democracy within its historical and contextual frameworks, along with recognizing its critiques, is fundamental to appreciating higher education's role in supporting democratic principles. This involves exploring the connections between democracy, civic learning, social mobility, and the goals we have for graduates. Additionally, it's important to understand and acknowledge how campus civic engagement is influenced by local, national, and international events.

Understanding the Relationship of Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom
Fundamental to civic leadership on campus is the development of a strong understanding of the historical and legal foundations of free speech and academic freedom. This includes balancing these freedoms with values like inclusion and security, staying informed on current debates, and promoting free expression while fostering inclusivity. Additionally, it requires upholding ethical responsibilities and navigating the challenges of aligning academic freedom with institutional and societal interests.

Encouraging Participation Among Diverse Perspectives
Recognizing the broad potential definitions of diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, belonging, and accessibility within professional, academic, and regional contexts forms the foundation for meaningful civic engagement. This involves acknowledging historical and contemporary barriers and understanding the importance of building alliances across differences to enhance civic learning for all students. By generating ideas and assessing structures to include and amplify diverse perspectives in civic work, engaging in meaningful discussions, and building networks to sustain these efforts, leaders can foster an inclusive and dynamic educational environment.

Developing a Civic-Focused Skill Set

Making the Case for Civic Learning

Defining civic learning, assessing its importance, and committing to it personally are foundational steps for promoting democratic engagement. This involves using one's role to advocate for democratic principles, tailoring messages for different audiences, and developing effective advocacy strategies. Additionally, engaging in structured decision-making supports informed and consistent decisions about engagement initiatives. Aligning community engagement approaches with roles, strategies, and goals further strengthens these efforts.

Nurturing Relationships

Enhancing the ability to lead with an equity-focused and student-centered mindset involves creating value propositions and envisioning strategic, scalable relationships with campus and community stakeholders. Encouraging dialogue that bridges differences, reduces polarization, and reframes issues in a nonpartisan manner promotes shared values and investment in the greater good. By fostering relationship-building practices and enhancing communication skills across campus, we can guide campus communities toward the concept of "conscious citizenship" to engage all community members.

Building Organizational Capacity

Understanding an institution's history and context is essential for informing civic learning efforts. This involves identifying key players, silent voices, staff strengths, and any blind spots. Familiarity with different options for designing and organizing civic learning work is also important as is outlining desired outcomes and developing strategies to ensure these outcomes persist beyond one's tenure. Supporting civic learning through actions, not just words, is vital and creating a customized plan with specific strategies and steps to advance civic learning initiatives helps ensure sustained progress.

Supporting Curricular and Co-Curricular Structures

To institutionalize civic learning, defining a vision that integrates civic literacy with student life is essential. This vision should align with the campus mission and community. Seizing opportunities to democratize campus systems and regularly assessing goals and the effectiveness of shared governance are important steps. By applying systems design principles and liberatory design concepts, leaders can foster a sustainable, inclusive, and equitable campus environment. This approach ensures that civic learning is deeply embedded in the fabric of the institution, promoting long-term engagement and inclusivity.

The Civic Leadership Difference

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Call to Action

Higher education leaders can take actionable steps to develop the mindsets and skill sets to lead for democracy and foster civic engagement on their campus and in their community.

Individual Reflection

Self-reflection helps leaders identify areas for growth and better align their actions with democratic principles. Individual higher education leaders can assess their own understanding of civic learning and democratic engagement along with their core values and prejudices through:

Thinking about one's own understanding of the connections between democracy, civic learning, and related concepts— as well as one's own core values and prejudices to establish where one is positioned in this work.

- *How often do I think about the courage and empathy involved in some of the decisions I make in establishing my vision for my institution?*
- *Are there ways I can communicate that thinking more clearly with the members of my campus and community?*

Making the case for civic learning by leveraging the power and resources available in one's own role and building relationships with campus and community stakeholders to foster trust and build coalitions invested in creating an engaged campus environment.

- *In what ways do I build and maintain relationships with my campus and community, while being mindful of my own influence and building mutual trust?*
- *How do I invite campus and community stakeholders to participate in discussions about civic responsibility?*

Navigating diverse perspectives and honoring freedom of speech and academic freedom by developing an understanding of the historical and present context of engaged participation.

- *How am I communicating the connection between civic responsibility, diverse perspectives, academic freedom, and higher education?*
- *How effectively am I connecting that communication to my institution's mission and my leadership vision for my institution?*

Translating these concepts from personal strengths to institutional actions by integrating them into instruction and co-curricular activities through a redirection of resources at the institution and a leadership vision that prioritizes shared leadership.

- *What resources have I made available for those seeking to integrate civic engagement and democratic learning into their instructional and co-curricular activities?*
- *How do I ensure that those resources are being distributed in an equitable and sustainable way?*

Institutional Support

Leaders can also actively involve their institutions in initiatives that support democratic engagement to create a culture of participation and collaboration that extends beyond the campus, strengthening the broader community's commitment to democratic principles. For individual leaders who seek institutional support, AASCU is well positioned to help them through the American Democracy Project, which provides robust programming and timely resources, as well as a portfolio of leadership development programs that encourages civic-focused mindsets and skill sets. This portfolio includes the Emerging Leaders Program, the Millennium Leadership Initiative, the Academy for New Provosts, and the New Presidents Academy.

Resources

Books

Longo, N. V., & Shaffer, T. J. (Eds.). (2019). *Creating space for democracy: A primer on dialogue and deliberation in higher education.* Stylus Publishing.

Kezar, A. J., & Lester, J. (2011). *Organizing for collaboration in higher education: A guide for campus leaders.* Jossey-Bass.

Daniels, R. J. (2021). *What universities owe democracy.* Johns Hopkins University Press.

Journal Articles and Reports

Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2012). *A crucible moment: College learning & democracy's future.* Association of American Colleges and Universities. https://www.aacu.org/publication/a-crucible-moment-college-learning-democracys-future

American Association of State Colleges and Universities & Ithaka S+R. (2024). *Assessing the civic campus: The link between higher education and democracy.* https://aascu.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/assessing_the_civic_campus_excutive_summary-.pdf

American Society for Public Administration (ASPA). (n.d.). *Civil discourse: Helping students to become conversation partners.* https://educate.apsanet.org/civil-discourse-helping-students-to-become-conversation-partners

Perrin, A. J., & Gillis, A. (2021). *How college makes citizens: Higher education experiences and political engagement.* University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119859708

Toolkits and Guides

Peril Research. (n.d.). *BRICK: Building resilient inclusive communities of knowledge.* https://perilresearch.com/resource/brick-building-resilient-inclusive-communities-of-knowledge/

PEN America. (n.d.). *Campus free speech guide.* https://campusfreespeechguide.pen.org/

ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. (n.d.). *Strengthening American democracy guide: Volume 4.* https://allinchallenge.org/wp-content/uploads/StrengtheningAmericanDemocracyGuideVOL4.pdf

U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Student voter toolkit.* https://www.ed.gov/sites/ed/files/documents/press-releases/student-voter-toolkit.pdf

Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. (n.d.). *Civic engagement.* https://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/ki-civic-engagement.pdf

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