A Student Affairs Perspective on the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Theory of Change

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## 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

## 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 Disenrollment
- Civic Agency
- Real Communication
- Critical Solidarity
- Civic Courage
- Integrity and Congruence

## 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

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

Drawing on John Dewey’s (1937) premise that democracy 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,” the vision question is grounded in a commitment to full participation and continuous reinvention. A truly thriving democracy draws upon the foundation of history while remaining relevant to the lived experiences of our students today.

The underlying premise of the vision question is that we haven’t experienced a truly thriving democracy yet, which makes this task all the more challenging since there is no established roadmap or historic moment or place in time we can point to as the quintessential embodiment of the vision to which we aspire. This work is also occurring within a landscape that can juxtapose free speech and safe spaces in ways that create barriers instead of bridges.

Under a host of external, and sometimes internal, pressures, institutions may shy away from these difficult conversations to avoid the potential spotlight of scrutiny from those who misrepresent freedom of expression as solely promoting their viewpoints while engaging systemic attempts to silence others. It is because of these challenges that we are called to create a common vision for a thriving democracy, while simultaneously embracing the notion that there is no single right path.

One institutional example from Kennesaw State University is the newly created Creed Week. In 1998 during a particularly tumultuous time on a campus struggling with an infusion of diversity that forced students and employees alike to question their assumptions about inclusivity, KSU developed a Student Human Relations Task Force to guide and inform the transition of campus culture. To that end, The Owl Creed (so named for the institutional mascot) was born as an aspirational statement to define the character of the institution and establish a civic ethos for all future generations of students, their families, faculty, staff, and the greater local and global communities within which the members of the institution serve.

Both in light of our national climate and its residual impact upon our local and campus communities, and 2018 being the 20th anniversary of the creation of The Owl Creed, the Office of Student Advocacy within the Division of Student Affairs spearheaded KSU’s first ever “Creed Week.” This week-long celebration included programs, activities, competitions, as well as providing time and space for people to just ‘be’ with one another, in the true Deweyan sense of educative and civic engagement.

As a division of student affairs, we join our students in reflecting on our democratic values and the roles we play in reassessing and reconnecting the Creed anew to each generation, refreshing the spirit of the Creed in a tangible way.

The vision question embraces a core principle from Dewey’s Democracy and Education (1916), “education is not a preparation for life but is life itself.” Therefore, the premise that we haven’t experienced a truly thriving democracy yet is indicative of the very point Dewey is making – it is through the ever-evolving art of practice that we seek to form that “more perfect union.”
Responding to Question 2:
The Learning Outcomes Question - What knowledge, skills, and dispositions do people need in order to help create and contribute to thriving democracy?

Jane Addams, a contemporary of Dewey, took the idea of civic education a step farther and advocated for community interaction. Addams held dear that it was impossible for people of means to know the plight of those with less unless they knew them socially. She believed that one could read many texts about social issues, but until a person truly knew those who were affected, they could not understand the implications. This understanding was paramount to being a wise citizen in a democracy (Addams, 1921/2002). Jane Addams saw citizenship as a “multidimensional, embracing politics, economics, and social interaction” (Deegan, 2010, p. 232).

Our campuses are increasing isolating for students. Apps and devices are blurring the lines between reality and fiction. Many students are frustrated and anxiety ridden. It is our job to create and assess learning objectives that promote interaction. This idea is expressed through the phrase civic agency: students gaining the ability to work collaboratively across differences to address common challenges.

The University of Central Florida has a student-led community engagement board (Volunteer UCF) that works to create mini cultural immersions (some a few hours others a week) for other students. I am one of the student affairs professionals who advises this student group, and continually assesses the students' growth in areas they seek for them to grow. Last year we learned that students were obtaining civic literacy, and inquiry. Yet they were not meeting measures of civic agency. Specifically, “Working with Others” was the competency that was ranked lowest most frequently. This has led us to realize that we need to focus on training students about how to work with others. While we did a good job teaching about social justice, we did not help students learn the skills of working with others.

This year we are working more with skills development of empathy, perspective-taking, collaboration, appreciation of difference, self-awareness, openness, curiosity and questioning. The major disconnect in our curriculum is that students can articulate how to work with the mythical “community”, but are not demonstrating these skills within or outside of our campus community. We are using this knowledge to help students make the connection that working with others within their student group is the same as working with community partners. This assessment has led us to change our Volunteer UCF Training. We are focusing on working with others. We specifically break that competency down into four parts (collaboration, appreciation of difference, self-awareness, openness, and curiosity & questioning). Each of these is used as a concept that the students work to cultivate through experiential learning of working with others, including interventions by advisors during teachable moments or improvement.

This process helped us see that our strong focus on teaching the Volunteer UCF students about root causes of social issues, how to avoid toxic charity, and skills to participate in solutions was effective. This past year we implemented a course that focused on these topics.

This experience has taught me that we need to create environments where students are getting to know each other, but also community members socially. Providing space for interactions and relationship building is essential. And our learning outcomes should include the ability to gain these interaction skills. We should tell students which skills they need to successfully navigate these experiences. Then assess them on their ability to meet their objectives, and then help them grow in the areas that they are not succeeding.

The competencies of civic ethos, civic literacy & skill building, civic inquiry, civic action are all important. But in my experience civic agency has been the most difficult to impart to students. Therefore, I suggest that we keep it as a focus and strive to create learning environments where all students can obtain these skills.
Responding to Question 3:
Pedagogy - How can we best foster the acquisition and development of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for a thriving democracy?

Faculty focus heavily on disciplinary work in their graduate degrees, which means less time for professional development centered on best teaching practices, how to build learning outcomes, and how to handle difficult conversations in the classroom. Yet, when we reflect on places where dialogue is "well-suited", we lend ourselves often to educational classrooms. Classrooms are prime venues for exploring current topics, historical milestones and activism. Classrooms are also places for testing, memorization and ivory tower conversations. So, how do we build classrooms that encourage deliberative dialogue, civic learning, and consideration of others? How do we bring in learning outcomes that support departmental and class goals, while also encouraging active citizenship? How do we not rely only on student affairs silos to carry out work around civic learning and democratic engagement?

Some ideas from Weber State University’s work are shared below:

Weber State is actively working on building inclusive classrooms that include diverse opinions, material and authors. A scaffolding approach is being used to provide faculty with professional development opportunities through student success workshops, mini retreats and syllabus development. The same approach is being used for student success, which includes retention practices to help students get the support services they need while also feeling like the campus is welcoming. The student success workshop series held over Fall 2017-Spring 2018 was a strong partnership between academic and student affairs to explore several topics related to student retention and success.

Civility is engrained across the campus as the theme for the Engaged Learning Series. Events range from a talk by Cornel West, to a public forum on discussing politics with those who disagree with you, to the Marcus Roberts trio showcasing democratic engagement through jazz music. Event participation is sometimes required for classes, while other times it is optional or for extra credit. Faculty are bringing books that support the Engaged Learning series theme of Civility into classes, and the Honors Program and Teaching and Learning Forum are hosting book clubs focused on books related to civility. Student affairs staff are incorporating the theme into conferences, workshops and student trainings. Several events cross-over between both academic and student affairs, with the Engaged Learning Series planning committee comprised of representatives from both entities.

Additional thoughts:

Again, classroom settings are prime venues for developing civic mindedness but many learning outcomes are focused on disciplinary goals and departmental requirements. While student affairs professionals attend conferences that often encourage dialogue, explore diversity and examine critical student retention topics, faculty often attend conferences that are disciplinary specific. Some discipline-focused conferences drive civic learning, while others do not. This poses the question again of what learning opportunities are available, and missing, for faculty development on handling difficult conversations while encouraging civic mindedness and dialogue?

Additionally, we must also prepare students for democratic engagement and civil interaction outside of the higher ed bubble where co-workers may not have experienced deliberative dialogue workshops, inclusive classroom design and centers focused on supporting individual student success. Utilizing case study scenarios based on the “real world” examples, bringing in guest speakers, and providing experiential learning opportunities with student affairs partners on campus and community partners off campus are ways to foster civic learning into application.
Questions to consider:

1. What holds us back from engaging in deliberative conversations in the classroom?

2. Student affairs silos, support and is it enough? Why do SA staff get more training in driving community and democratic engagement than faculty?

3. Is teaching active citizenship enough, or do we need to provide experiential opportunities for students as well?
Responding to Question 4:
The Strategy Question - How can we build the institutional culture, infrastructure, and relationships needed to support learning that enables a thriving democracy?

CIVIC ETHOS governing campus life

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. (A Crucible Moment, 2012, p.15)

As institutions of higher learning we commit to preparing students to be active participants in our citizenry. We attest to doing so by providing opportunities for students to gain the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions by way of classes, experiential learning opportunities, co-curricular endeavors, and aspirationally, through the holistic collegiate experience.

With that being said, it’s difficult to fully map the experiences that shape our students into the persons they desire to be, the persons our nation needs them to be, and frankly, the persons we hope they will be.

Nonetheless, as student affairs practitioners it is our role to support the spaces and tactics in the college and university setting which afford our students the opportunity to learn, to grow, and to act in ways which enable a thriving democracy. Some ways in which we might explore enabling our students are:

1. **Supporting the places and spaces for which students want to and can have conversations** - It is our role to educate students about their first amendment rights. It is our role to teach students about communication strategies; dialogue and deliberation, writing, and so forth. It is not necessarily our role to stipulate when our students converse nor to decide which topics they should or not discuss with one another.

2. **Building creative infrastructure for students to capitalize on civic engagement** - It is our role to assist in providing opportunities for students to exercise in civic engagement. As student affairs practitioners we may choose to do so by developing peer educator programs that incorporate civic principles. For example, this could be creating peer voting programs, providing training for students to engage in difficult dialogues about current events, or connecting students with community partners and legislators to further programs and services that meet community needs.

3. **Modeling the way** - The most important personal quality people look for and admire in a leader is personal credibility. Credibility is the foundation of leadership (Kouzes and Posner, 2007). Be a good steward of your institutional community. Practice civility with your students, colleagues, community partners, and strangers. Show up to vote on Election Day. Be present when your students raise an issue, when they protest, when they take action.

4. **Letting students lead** - Historically student protests have been a leading source for change. Looking at the motivation of today’s students, college student protests are on the verge of re-configuring our nation. As practitioners it is our role to assist students in understanding the how-tos but then to provide adequate distance to allow student civic agency to flourish. Admittedly, this may be difficult, but it is necessary.

With this in mind, it’s important to remember that individuals do not change easily. Change is difficult. Giving up control is difficult. However, if we envision a thriving democracy, one that we have yet to actualize, we’ll need to change; we’ll need to be adaptable. As student affairs practitioners we are positioned within the institution in a unique capacity that enables us to build relationships within our institution and beyond. These relationships are essential in create a true civic ethos in higher education.

As student affairs practitioners we have a unique skill set that enables us to work with and for our students to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions they’ll need to contribute to our born anew democracy.
References


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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.

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 or 202.719.1193.
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