

Democratic and Political Learning

A discussion guide for *Peer Review's* special issue
on Student Political Engagement¹ (Spring/Summer 2008)

by Nancy L. Thomas²
The Democracy Imperative, University of New Hampshire

Introduction

For many years, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has been the vanguard of emerging trends in liberal education: general education, diversity, integrative and interdisciplinary studies, learning communities, civic engagement, and learning that connects liberal and professional studies. In the Spring/Summer 2008 issue of *Peer Review*, AACU draws attention to student *political engagement*, distinguishable from other forms of civic engagement. Like the Democracy Imperative, AACU advocates for student engagement in the democratic process—defined as much more than voting—as a learning experience. Political education and engagement, states *Peer Review* editor Shelley Johnson Carey, “prepare(s) students for their roles as leaders in a world of complex challenges and unlimited possibilities.”

We at the Democracy Imperative and at AAC&U understand the pressures on educators to incorporate myriad reforms in their courses and programs. We can imagine the concerns: Is political engagement just “one more thing” required of faculty or student affairs staff? How important is political engagement to student learning and, more broadly, to democracy itself?

The Democracy Imperative wants to be transparent about our motives for writing this discussion guide and for highlighting this particular edition of *Peer Review*. We believe that educating students to be informed about and participate in democracy is central to higher education’s academic mission. In our view, it is not an add-on. It is *what we do*.

That said, we also know how difficult it might be to imagine this work as anything but “more work,” particularly because it’s hard work. We know, for example, that language can be a barrier and that

¹ Vol. 10, no. 2/3, Spring/Summer 2008. Readers can purchase single or multiple copies of this issue at <http://www.aacu.org/peerreview/index.cfm>. Several articles can also be downloaded without charge at the same link. The three lead articles (under the header “Analysis”) by Anne Colby, Nancy Thomas, and Ira Harkavy and Matthew Hartley, can be downloaded at the Democracy Imperative website: <http://www.unh.edu/democracy/>.

² ©2008, Nancy L. Thomas, the Democracy Imperative at the University of New Hampshire. The Democracy Imperative is a national network of diverse scholars, campus leaders, and civic leaders who work to strengthen public life and advance deliberative democracy in and through higher education. Note: Readers are welcome to reprint or take excerpts from this guide, but please include the following language: “Reprinted with permission from the Democracy Imperative at the University of New Hampshire, a national network of scholars, academic leaders, and practitioners dedicated to strengthening public life and advancing deliberative democracy in and through higher education. Learn more at <http://www.unh.edu/democracy/>.”

academics can get stuck just trying to frame or define an issue—a pattern that can prevent both learning and productive problem solving. We also know that educating for democracy by definition includes educating students to talk about things that seem to divide us as a nation: race, gender, ethnicity, class, and individual values and ideology. We know these difficult dialogues involve wrestling with deeply personal matters of power and privilege, exclusion and justice, fear and anger, and structural discrimination and preference. And we are sensitive to the delicate balance between free speech and civil discourse. While dialogue governed by ground rules of respect, active listening, openness, and sensitivity to cross-cultural dynamics can encourage honest exchanges of ideas, those who are familiar with discussions filled with debate and advocacy are sometimes frustrated by this style of discourse.

Higher education’s responsibility in a democracy is a concept that dates back to the creation of the earliest colleges. Nearly all colleges and universities are attentive, in at least some courses, to teaching and learning democracy’s ideals of freedom, equity, and justice. Some institutions engage students in the democratic process by creating learning experiences that emphasize the arts of democracy: inclusive dialogue, public reasoning and deliberation, collaborative leadership and decision and policy making, and social movements and change. And when they do, they do far more than help people get along. Teaching democracy’s ideals and practices strengthens public life, fulfilling higher education’s original mission.

About this Guide

We hope this guide will help your campus community engage in its own democratic dialogue on the issues raised in *Peer Review*—issues that we must continue to address long after November’s election. We encourage campuses to bring faculty from across the disciplines, staff responsible for co-curricular learning, institutional leaders, and students together to reflect, discuss, and collaboratively consider whether and how your institution prepares students for engaged citizenship in a diverse democracy and global society. We can also imagine ways to use this guide as a classroom teaching tool, a faculty development instrument, in strategic planning processes, and as a way to engage trustees in a discussion about the aims of higher education (for more specific tips, see pages 11-12).

Section 1. Making connections and setting the stage for this dialogue

- I. Exchange brief introductions: who you are and what you do on campus
- II. Get a sense of expectations: What do participants hope will happen as a result of this dialogue?

Some probes to consider:

- Why are you here?
- What about this topic interests you?
- What are you hoping will happen as a result of this conversation?

- What concerns brought you here today?

III. Making connections: What do participants have in common?

Some probes to consider:

- Talk for a minute or two about your assessment of the strength or health of American democracy. What is going well? What needs to improve?
- To what extent, if any, does your work involve educating students about core Constitutional or democratic values of freedom, equity and equal opportunity, and/or just and fair social, economic, and political systems?
- Have you been involved in the “civic engagement” movement in higher education? What has been your involvement?

Section 2. Understanding the language and scope of this topic

I. Some key words: Let’s talk about words used by the authors in this edition of *Peer Review*. What do these words mean to you?

- Civic learning
- Civic engagement
- Political engagement and learning
- Democratic education and engagement
- Civic life and public life

II. Some definitions to consider:

- Author Ann Colby defines political engagement “broadly enough to include the wide range of ways that people, especially young people, participate in American democracy, without making the definition so broad that it includes all of civic voluntarism. Political engagement, therefore, includes community and civic involvement that has a systemic dimension and various forms of engagement with public policy issues... political activities are driven by systemic-level goals, a desire to affect the shared values, practices, and policies that shape collective life” (p. 4).
- Author Nancy Thomas advocates for a form of public participation essential to a just and *deliberative democracy*, a democracy “in which citizens are actively engaged in public affairs in ways that are meaningful and that influence policy choices” (p. 10). Meaningful citizen engagement has several characteristics: Citizens are informed. They are skilled in democratic processes of dialogue and deliberation. They engage in a process of public

reasoning and are able to navigate conflict, particularly polarization based on political ideology, cultural identity, and personal perspective. Policy and decision making is shared, and ordinary citizens play an active role in improving society. And, she notes, citizens “work toward a common vision for American society, one that promises justice, equity, and freedom” (p. 10).

- Tracing the history of the civic engagement movement in higher education, authors Ira Harkavy and Matthew Hartley argue that “preparing a moral, engaged democratic citizenry cannot be fulfilled with a set of programs.... It must become a central organizing principal of the institution, embedded in its DNA” (p. 17).

Section 3. What is the scope of this work? How broad is this call to action?

- In nearly all of the articles, the authors seem to advocate for learning in the following: democratic ideals and constitutional principles, education in social and political change and policy making, democratic dialogue and deliberation, civic and community involvement at the systemic level, and democratic leadership. Is this the scope of the work from your perspective? What’s missing? What can be eliminated?
- How is diversity education and programming related to political or democratic education?
- To what extent do campuses need to teach about racism, sexism, stereotyping, and prejudice as part of an effort to educate for democracy?
- To what extent is this work moral education? What constitutes moral education on your campus?
- Some campuses offer programs in community organizing. How would a program in community organizing be relevant to this work?
- How is political engagement related to and distinguishable from civic engagement as it has been practiced over the past 15 to 20 years?
- Where do voting, lobbying, advocacy, protesting, campaigning, and other forms of political engagement fall in this work? Are there some forms of engagement that are outside the scope of political or democratic education and engagement?
- Many campuses offer for-credit courses in leadership or co-curricular leadership development programs. What is the connection, if any, between leadership education and development and educating for democracy?
- What counts the most? Consider learning in civic life, diversity, constitutional ideals, community organizing, leadership, dialogue and deliberation, and the like. Are some more important than others? How would you rank them?

Section 4. What in public life is higher education being challenged to address?

The diversity movement in higher education addressed concerns over equity and access to higher education, campus climate, and cultural literacy. The civic engagement movement sought to strengthen this nation's social capital and restore active citizen volunteerism and work with civic groups and communities, activities viewed as critical to the success of a democracy. People may have many ideas about why higher education needs to focus more broadly on democracy.

Consider the following viewpoints and think about and discuss these questions:

- Which view comes closest to your own way of thinking?
- Is there a missing viewpoint?
- Is there a perspective with which you disagree?
- How important is it to reach some level of agreement on the nature of the problem colleges and universities address educationally?

Viewpoint 1. Americans are fed up with politics and a widening partisan divide. They are turning away rather than working to fix the system.

Viewpoint 2. Our political leaders are too distant from the lives of everyday citizens to represent them well. They can't be trusted. They don't consult with the public or even listen to the voices of people. They just decide and announce.

Viewpoint 3. As our nation's becomes more diverse, Americans are finding it more and more difficult to interact and solve problems collaboratively. The image of everyone pulling together, participating in town meetings, barn raising, and taking care of each other is no longer "the American way" worked because communities were relatively homogeneous.

Viewpoint 4. Americans are civically illiterate. They don't know how bills become laws. They don't understand the separation of powers. They can't name the five freedoms in the First Amendment. If they don't understand how democracy works, they won't understand the need to active citizen involvement in the political process.

Viewpoint 5. Our civil society is anything but civil. The culture of public life is dominated by disrespect, point-counterpoint exchanges and pit-bull arguments. It's simply too unpleasant.

Viewpoint 6. People who become active politically are hounded by the media, bloggers, and their opponents. No one in public life has any privacy. Words are taken out of context and viewpoints misrepresented. It's simply not worth it.

Viewpoint 7. The problems we face as a nation – global climate change, terrorism, poverty, economic crises, among others – are too daunting and complex and sophisticated to be managed by ordinary citizens. Problems in public life are best left to experts.

Viewpoint 8. Citizens are uninformed. They are more interested in the antics of movie stars than pressing social, economic, and political problems. There's a lot of information available to them. They just don't bother to read and study it.

Viewpoint 9. Americans are apathetic. They care about their individual rights and their personal economic gain, but they have little interest in social problems.

Section 5. What's being done? How does our institution stack up?

All of the articles in this edition of *Peer Review* contain concrete approaches to teaching and learning for democracy and political engagement. Review the following approaches and consider,

- Which approaches do we like best? Why?
- Where on this campus does democratic learning happen?
- How do these programs and activities compare with those offered on our campus?
- Have we already tried the approaches listed below? If so, what happened?
- Do we offer programs, courses, or activities that reach most of our students or just a few predisposed to this work?
- What approaches won't work here, and why?
- What other approaches can we imagine?

Approaches

From "The Place of Political Learning in College" (p.6):

- Summer institutes
- Semester-in-Washington programs
- Summer and academic-year internships
- Academic courses in various departments
- Co-curricular programs
- Multiyear living learning programs
- Active pedagogies
- Invited speakers and mentors
- Deliberation about politics

- Political research and action projects
- Structured reflection on political experiences
- Active pedagogies

From “Reframing and Reclaiming Democracy” (p. 11 -12): Courses and programming in

- Constitutional principles and core values in American democracy, freedom, equity, and justice
- Inclusive dialogue
- Public reasoning
- Public deliberation, including issue framing for public discourse/critical analysis of political framings
- Conflict management in a public context
- Democratic leadership, collaborative policy and decision making and shared governance
- Community-based learning and community building

From “Pursuing Franklin’s Democratic Vision for Higher Education” (p. 16):

- Community partnership
- Community-based research
- They write, “Helping someone eligible for food stamps enroll is a worthwhile service... but collaborating with community members and local agencies across the Philadelphia are in conducting research and using the resulting new knowledge to challenge and change public policy is exemplary democratic civic engagement” (p. 16)

From “Educating Students to Foster Active Citizenship” (p. 19-20):

- “Integrate education for political participation across the curriculum. Involve all disciplines, not only the social sciences... We need... future engineers, natural scientists, business people, doctors, journalists, and artists who are both competent in the professional roles and also are active, effective citizens.”
- “Stop relegating civic engagement to the co-curriculum. Actualize the rich synergies between students’ curricular and co-curricular experiences.”
- “Strengthen research about youth civic engagement.”

- A peer-leadership program – 80 students who receive civic leadership training and function as ambassadors and organizers to elevate the civic development of their fellow students.
- An informed-voter registration program

From “Promoting Student Political Engagement and Awareness at the University of South Dakota” (p. 23-24):

- Active institutional support of student political party organizations (College Democrats and College Republican)
- Political science department “political engagement course learning outcomes”
- Action research
- Exit poll studies
- Required (of all students) six-credit course on community, sustainability, and justice, with a community service component
- Faculty community engagement and engaged scholarship

From “Prairie View A &M Students Walk the Walk of Political Engagement” (p. 25):

- Voter registration and rights research
- Interdisciplinary study of civil rights, with a focus on regional history and struggles

From “Democracy Matters at Colgate University” (p. 28-30):

- Establishing a Democracy Matters chapter, a nonpartisan organization of students and professors (founding institute at Colgate University) to educate people about the role of private money in politics and its negative impact on democracy

From “Promoting Political Engagement through American Government Classes” (p. 31-33):

- Requiring all graduates to take a course in American government and structuring the course to draw from “daily political experiences”
- “Political Awareness Day,” a voter education activity: students select from the community candidates, interest groups and political parties willing to participate in a political “fair”

Other learning experiences to consider:

- An intergroup or sustained dialogue program

- National Issue Forums
- First-year experiences on key public issues
- Constitution Day activities
- Democratic leadership training for student leaders
- For links to national democracy-building organizations, relevant campus centers and institutes, Constitution Day activities, course syllabi, or information about a student leadership workshop, visit the Democracy Imperative web site, www.unh.edu/democracy/

Section 6. What needs to happen on our campus?

Consider starting by identifying your institution's assets. Assets can be people, departments, administrative units, or organizations. Consider:

- Who on campus is already involved in democratic education and engagement?
- Which departments are already teaching for public participation?
- What good things are already in place?
- Which administrators or administrative units will support this work?
- Which student organizations are already publicly engaged?

Then consider: how can these institutional assets help us carry out any action we decide is needed?

Brainstorm action: Action ideas are the things we can do. It's important to be specific. So, for example, instead of suggesting "More politicians need to visit campus during the election season," try, "So-n-so will meet with local party offices to arrange for visits from candidate visits between now and November 5."

Actions fall into three categories, institutional, group, and individual. Brainstorm answers to these questions:

- What can others (including the institution broadly, institutional leaders, political officials, civic organizations, etc.) do?
- What can we do as a group?
- What can I do as an individual?
- What barriers or challenges do we face? How can we overcome them?

- What next? Who will take responsibility for a task?
- Where do we go from here?

Conclusion

Teaching and learning for democracy, inspiring political engagement, and aligning an institution's mission with its historic and intended role in American democracy are all too everybody's business and nobody's job. When that's the case, efforts to implement those goals are frustrating or, worse, destructive. (A project like this can erode trust on campus if there are no identifiable results.) Unfortunately there is no magic bullet; campuses need a champion (or two or three...) skilled in community organizing and social and policy change. In this effort, participants will practice what they aspire to teach.

The Democracy Imperative simply doesn't believe that campuses should settle for graduating students who then settle for a disengaged community life and a distant government of and by those who happen to be in the majority. Every generation of Americans faces new challenges that prompt questions about how best to achieve a just society. It's time to reverse measurable declines in citizen-driven political and social change. The responsibility for educating the next generation of politically engaged citizens in a diverse democracy belongs to our schools, colleges, and universities.

Tips for Organizing Campus Dialogues and Using this Guide

On convening groups and using this guide: This guide is a tool to help facilitators guide campus-wide dialogues that lead to meaningful change. We recommend that campuses involve a diverse group of people from the campus community and that groups, comprised of faculty, staff, administrators, and students, talk together without attention to positional authority, seniority, or expertise. When groups mix or when topics are complex, balanced discussion materials can help. That isn't to say you can't or shouldn't deviate from this guide and make this conversation your own, and certainly the conversation should be placed in the context of your own campus and community. We do hope, however, that in addition to reading this guide, you'll use it.

On facilitators: We're biased. We at the Democracy Imperative always assign someone the role of facilitator when we meet because when we do, we're more productive. We recommend that campus dialogues be guided by a trained facilitator. But we also know that this is sometimes met with resistance, or that the facilitator role is often delegated to someone who is not trained. At least try it both ways and see what happens. Our guess is that you have several trained facilitators on your campus already.

On establishing ground rules: We've found that for dialogues to work well, everyone in the room needs to have an understanding of how they will interact. We also find that establishing ground rules prevents problems or makes addressing problems easier. A common challenge in campus dialogues, for example, is the hierarchical nature of higher education. Will students really speak up if their professors or president are in the group? By stating up front that every voice matters equally, a group is more likely to take that seriously.

You can create your own ground rules, but for the sake of expediency, here are some typical ones:

- Every voice matters—everyone should participate and offer ideas
- All perspectives count equally —check your title or position at the door
- Seek first to understand, then be understood
- Ask clarifying questions
- Disagree, but don't personalize
- Challenge ideas but respect viewpoints
- If you are offended, say so and say why
- Share air time
- Stay with the conversation start to finish

- Respect confidentiality³

On the progression of this dialogue: We have yet to work with a group on campus (or in public life, for that matter) that does not want to jump to action strategies immediately. It's human nature. None of us has time to process, process, process. All we can say is, process matters. The relationships that you build in this process will strengthen your campus community. If you leap to action, you run the risk of addressing problems that each person defines (in their head) differently or that are not on the radar screen of everyone in the group. The progression we outline is closely aligned with that of Everyday Democracy (formerly Study Circles Resource Center) (www.everyday-democracy.org/en/index.aspx). Everyday Democracy has been doing this for a long time. We trust them.

On time: We can't predict how much time this will take, but there are several ways to do this. You could organize, for example, a community forum that will take place over several hours, divide people into small groups, and have the groups go through the discussion guide. Groups should create newsprint listing action strategies, and someone should be responsible for synthesizing the strategies.

OR you can organize brown bag lunches or ongoing evening dialogues over a period of time. We like this approach because it allows for reflection. It means that groups can spend a lot of time, for example, on the challenges to doing democratic education or of effectuating change on your campus.

Either way, you should have multiple groups meeting and discussing these ideas, and you should bring the groups together after the ideas have been synthesized so that they can be shared.

On action: While it's common to create a long list of what others can do to address an issue (e.g., "The Faculty Senate curriculum committee will..."), try to resist that inclination. Most of the real action will be individual. An individual faculty member will incorporate active pedagogies and democratic learning opportunities into her existing courses. An individual faculty member will take the lead within his departments to explore ways to add a course for all majors on the public relevance of their discipline or field. The assistant director of diversity will explore and create a program on intergroup dialogue. A faculty and student committee will develop Constitution Day activities.

For assistance with organizing campus dialogues or carrying out action ideas and maintaining momentum, contact the Democracy Imperative at democracy.imperative@unh.edu or visit Everyday Democracy's web site at www.everyday-democracy.org/en/index.aspx.

Please keep us posted on how your campus uses this guide; we'd like to hear about it.

³ The group should agree to a confidentiality rule that suits the groups' needs. For some dialogues, the topic is sensitive and the group might want to adopt a "what is said in this room stays in this room" rule. In other cases, the topic is of great interest beyond the group, so the ground rule might be, "Discuss what's said here freely, but without attribution to an individual participant."