Infusing CLDE Theory of Change into Student Affairs

New Thinking About Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement

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At a time when U.S. politics seem broken and people across the political spectrum feel marginalized, what can higher education leaders do to support students’ development as effective participants in civic life? How can we help students who are skeptical about the value of investing time and energy on politics discover that they can be agents and architects of a thriving democracy?

The answers to these questions involve integrating empowering practices and commitments into virtually every aspect of students’ collegiate experiences.
key to doing so is to reimagine civic life as taking place everywhere: not just in external communities or on election day, but in every relationship and setting.

**Democracy is a Way of Life**

The brokenness of national politics is not new. For decades, social scientists, educators, and the general public have bemoaned the fraying of social ties and the coarsening and fragmentation of U.S. civic life. Higher education institutions responded by developing community service programs and then service-learning initiatives as well as by registering students to vote and instilling a sense of duty to participate in democratic processes.

However, as the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement asserted in its influential report *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future* (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012), supporting students' voluntary community service and mobilizing them to participate in elections is not enough. While both are important, according to the report, "Even together they are insufficient to offset the civic erosion we are experiencing." We need new pedagogies matched to the scale and complexity of the challenges in civic life, and we need institutional strategies that support students across the breadth and diversity of their campus experiences and help them develop the capacity and motivation to create and sustain a healthier civic culture.

The Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Theory of Change, developed by the authors of this article along with leaders and affiliates of NASPA and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, identifies some of the necessary pedagogies and strategies, drawing on the experiences of institutions that have developed and experimented with them. The CLDE Theory of Change builds from the premise that democracy is not just government and elections, but a way of life that must be enacted.

*Higher Education’s Role in Enacting a Thriving Democracy* by Hoffman, Domagals-Goldman, King, and Robinson (American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ American Democracy Project, NASPA, and the Democracy
Commitment, 2018), a collection of essays about the CLDE Theory of Change, teases out the implications of this powerful premise. Among them: Ordinary people can work together within their communities and institutions, including neighborhoods and workplaces as well as colleges and universities, to create conditions that support a thriving democracy for all people. Students can transcend the role of spectator or consumer of public life right now by recognizing that their own institutions are part of the real world constantly shaped through collaborative processes.

How are leaders in higher education supposed to build the institutional culture, infrastructure, and relationships to support learning that enables students to create and contribute to a thriving democracy? The CLDE Theory of Change asserts that the starting point is to recognize civic work is often underway within institutions but not recognized as such. People in different divisions and departments may already have practices and aspirations that could be resources for students’ civic development, but they are isolated by organizational structures and differences in language. A leader hoping to leverage these often-hidden civic resources, along with more traditional resources, can transform student learning by identifying and forging new connections.

**Four Basic Questions of CLDE Theory of Change**
Uncovering Civic Resources

A voter registration drive is a civic resource. A service-learning program is a civic resource. Residence hall programs that encourage students to reflect together on the impact of their actions on their peers are all civic resources as are staff members who chose their career paths because they wanted to help students feel a sense of belonging they remember from their own educational experiences. Programs with no obvious civic content in which staff members create environments where students feel empowered and form communities are also civic resources.

Identifying such civic resources can be challenging because colleagues may use different language to describe their civic practices. The word "civic" may be nowhere in sight. To identify resources that support students across the range of their experiences, which may vary considerably from one institution to the next,
look for types of programs, cultural practices, structures, and informal networks that:

**Foster a humane, inclusive, connected community.** What are the forums in which people new to the campus community feel that they are valued and can make meaningful contributions? Where are people taking responsibility for fostering inclusive processes and appreciation for diversity?

**Support students as stewards and co-creators of the institution.** Where are students wholly or partly creating and sustaining campus spaces, programs, and traditions? How are staff and faculty members supporting them and acknowledging and sharing their contributions?

**Encourage collaboration across roles and diminish role distance.** Does the institution have a shared governance tradition and opportunities for students to serve on decision-making bodies? Where are people building and sustaining relationships across roles and hierarchies?

**Promote individual and collective reflection on experiences.** Where do students have structured opportunities to share their stories and draw lessons about themselves and the communities in which they thrive? Where are reflection experiences designed to encourage and support students in fostering welcoming and inclusive communities?

**Facilitate the mitigation and resolution of conflict.** Where do staff and students create environments in which trust, vulnerability, honesty, and reciprocal feedback are core values and practices? In what offices and programs is conflict addressed so that harm is corrected while not isolating any of the involved parties?

In addition, look for staff and faculty members who approach their professional roles with a sense of public purpose. Who are the staff and faculty members who are driven by personal or ethical visions of a more just, safe, sustainable, harmonious world? Where are staff and faculty members supporting students in helping to enact these visions?
These are not exhaustive categories, and some of them may overlap. Some of the efforts, cultural practices, and structures may be institutionally sanctioned; others may emerge from grassroots organizing and operate informally. The point of identifying civic resources is to cast the net more widely by recognizing the civic dimensions of people’s interactions, stories, and roles, and of the programs and activities already in place but called by other names.

**Building New Networks**

Another important step in initiating democratic culture-change work is to build a network through which diverse stakeholders within an institution can help each other recognize and reach for new possibilities. Connecting campus stakeholders who have become accustomed to enacting the civic dimensions of their work in isolation requires time, organization, and effective communication. Campus leaders, including vice presidents for student affairs (VPSAs), should adapt the following suggestions to the landscape, cultural contexts, and strategic priorities of their institutions.

**Identify a person, or a group of people, to lead the process of identifying and bridging isolated efforts.** The selected person or group need(s) to be savvy with respect to everyday institutional politics; able to engage effectively with faculty, staff, students, and administrators; and capable of entering conversations without causing people to become defensive. Who has the skills to help people feel comfortable speaking candidly about themselves and their work?

**Bringing Connections to the Surface**
An organizational chart of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) Division of Student Affairs from several years ago would have revealed traditional functional areas such as health and counseling, careers, student life, residential life, and more, united by a broad mission to facilitate learning and support student success. Behind the scenes, an exploration was underway: Staff from different departments were seeking to bring subterranean connections to the surface in their support of students’ development as civic agents and contributors to civic life. Student life ran a leadership retreat, STRiVE, in which students developed critical awareness of campus culture and practices and envisioned contributions they could make to their peers’ well-being. Residential life was implementing a restorative practices framework for its residential education and student conduct work.

As the colleagues discovered, the differences in language in their approaches to leadership development and restorative practices masked common commitments. Both departments worked with the same conviction: Everyday interactions have
civic dimensions. The relationships and the norms that frame these interactions can support or undermine inclusion, justice, and the recognition of common humanity. Democracy is a way of life, not merely a form of government. The height of good citizenship is not just voting but attending to the whole impact of individuals on their communities. Against the backdrop of an increasingly fraught U.S. political culture, those student life and residential life colleagues were enacting a shared philosophy and strategies that could help weave a stronger social fabric.

Collaboration ensued with residential life staff members serving as STRiVE coaches and learning language used in student life. Student life staff participated in restorative practices training and learned the language of residential life. The colleagues reached out to counterparts in student affairs and academic affairs, making connections among initiatives operating with their own languages. The Division of Student Affairs launched a new Center for Democracy and Civic Life to sustain and extend these collaborations and to help more students discover how their coursework and experiences can position them as agents of change and renewal in all of their communities.

**The UMBC Civic Learning Process Begins at Orientation**

When incoming students visit UMBC for their orientation, orientation peer advisors share stories, created in part by students, about sites and traditions on campus. This storytelling is a way of introducing the university’s culture of civic responsibility, empowerment, inclusion, and belonging. Among the stories shared is that of The Garden:

"It started as the dream of a group of students who wanted there to be a space where students, faculty, and staff could get together and grow vegetables and fruits. They envisioned student organizations claiming plots and having their members get together to work them. They imagined classes and research projects taking place there too. However, a community garden wasn’t in UMBC’s plans. So the students had
conversations with people to get them excited about their vision, and helped everyone see the value of what they had in mind. This group of students won a $10,000 Prove It! grant from the Student Government Association to get the project started with approval from campus leaders. Now, anyone in the UMBC community can apply for a garden plot. That is one of the beautiful things about The Garden. It is always unfinished and anyone within UMBC can contribute to it."

The civic features of UMBC’s new student orientation program exemplify what can happen when VPSAs and senior campus leaders identify people to lead a process that connects diverse stakeholders and bridges isolated efforts. Nancy Young, VPSA at UMBC, spearheaded the process of establishing a new Center for Democracy and Civic Life in part to infuse civic learning and democratic engagement in the Division of Student Affairs and to connect with efforts in academic affairs. The Office of Admissions and Orientation invited center staff to help enhance the civic aspects of an orientation program focused on building community and a sense of belonging among incoming students, and the civic tour stops were the result. Center for Democracy and Civic Life staff members trained orientation peer advisors on how to describe and celebrate aspects of UMBC’s history emphasizing students’ roles as co-creators. Orientation participants keep cards depicting the civic tour stops that most inspire them (see card illustrations below and adjacent). The cards also prompt reflection and offer ways to connect with campus community projects, and they send an implicit message: You, too, are capable of contributing to and co-creating the UMBC community.
In the center’s first year, it collaborated with eight other campus departments on programming to help students envision meaningful careers with civic dimensions. Through conversations center staff learned how colleagues thought about their
work and identified ways to connect their practices and aspirations with students' civic development. The director of a UMBC scholars program asked the center to help rethink Honors Orientation, a daylong program for 200-plus students in UMBC’s various honors and scholars programs. This design process connected center staff with more campus colleagues and illuminated the civic dimension of their work.

**Launch a process of gathering people’s reflections on their roles, careers, and passions.** This is qualitative research: Carefully ask thoughtful questions, listen to the responses, and identify patterns in the civic dimensions of individuals’ work and aspirations. Its purpose is to provide a basis for strategic planning and action.

**Approach the process of identifying civic resources as the first stage of connection-forging, not a precursor to connection-forging.** Approached correctly, the gathering of stories, aspirations, and information about initiatives and cultural practices from people campuswide will create or strengthen trusting relationships between those involved in the conversations. If someone from the career services team interviews someone from the health services team about the civic dimensions of their work, the two may discover common hopes and opportunities to provide mutual support. Their relationship can become part of the foundation to support the creation of a seamless, empowering student experience, along with other future connections based on information gathered in the process of identifying civic resources.

**Support colleagues and students in developing a shared language that links and promotes visibility of the civic dimensions of institutional commitments to student learning and success; curriculum and program design features; facilitation and teaching practices; campus traditions; and everyday interactions.** This language should resonate with institutional values and culture and must be broad enough to encompass diverse activities. The language might reference the ideas of community, collective creation and action, the institution as a site for social change, and the possibility of building a future in which everyone can thrive.
Consider establishing new curricular and programmatic linkages. Beyond illuminating hidden civic dimensions that are common across courses, programs, and services, this process will identify opportunities to develop new offerings and to enhance existing resources through new collaborations. VPSAs and other campus leaders will need to assess the practicality of seizing opportunities and aligning them with mission and priorities.

Reinforce connections through acknowledgement and celebration. Use your campus and public platforms to share and amplify this connective work and deepen its impact on institutional culture.

Benefits of an Integrated Approach

Surfacing, illuminating, and linking civic work that has not been integrated can help students develop a sense of agency and connection in every environment they enter. Programs and classrooms become civic spaces, fluid and open to being shaped by students as part of a collective. The campus emerges as a civic community, cocreated by all of its stakeholders. Meaningful civic engagement becomes an everyday experience, not the distant dream of frustrated spectators waiting for the next election.

Even more important, students encounter support for this empowering meaning-making from a variety of quarters. Instead of finding their identities as civic participants supported in one forum and their identities as residents or career-seekers supported in separate spaces, they discover that staff and faculty can help them integrate their civic selves in all areas of their lives. Moreover, instead of experiencing faculty and staff as mere facilitators or content-deliverers, students can experience them as human beings with whom they share a community in which everyone has a stake.

For faculty and staff, there can be significant benefits to illuminating the civic dimensions of their work and its relationships with other campus activities. Naming, recognizing, and linking civic contributions previously regarded as matters of personal style or strategy—the residence hall director’s subtle ways of empowering resident assistants to shape the environments on their floors or the
counseling services receptionist’s efforts to connect with students by remembering their names and details from previous conversations—can help faculty and staff develop a renewed sense of purpose and fulfillment. Working in concert with colleagues on a shared civic mission to enact democracy in everyday life can position faculty and staff to produce profoundly satisfying civic legacies. At UMBC, for example, an informal, cross-divisional team managing a small grants program to support learning that builds civic agency has helped to inspire the development or redesign of more than 40 courses and the creation of more than 30 campus and community initiatives.

NEW CIVIC LEARNING AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES

The authors of this article are members of the core team continuing to develop the CLDE Theory of Change. The team is creating tools that faculty, staff, and student leaders can use to put theory into practice, including options for facilitating reflection and dialogue, designing learning environments, and building communities in which people thrive together. The team is sharing these tools and the thinking behind them through webinars, national conference presentations, publications, and an institute to train campus leaders in their use. To learn more about the CLDE Theory of Change, contact CLDEtheory@UMBC.edu.

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