

Innovative Ideas in Civic Engagement across Two-Year and Four-Year Colleges

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Abstract

While civic engagement continues to be a buzzword in political science, there is still a lack of discussion about what practices work, and in what context. In particular, are there certain initiatives to engage that do particularly well at two-year colleges versus larger universities? What about colleges with diverse student populations? At the 2014 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, seven scholar-teachers came together to discuss civic engagement at their respective institutions and to share ideas about what worked. Collectively, we represented a diverse group of institutions, including teaching and research universities as well as multi-campus community colleges. All of us, however, were focused on implementing practices that ameliorated American civic knowledge among students, faculty, staff, and universities as a whole. While some of us focused on global civic engagement and giving students the skills to succeed after graduation, others tailored projects on media literacy, public policy, humanitarian law, poverty, and citizenship.

Keywords: civic engagement, service learning, community college, university, global literacy, global engagement, citizenship, media literacy, public policy

Innovative Ideas in Civic Engagement across Two-Year and Four-Year Colleges

At the 2014 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, seven faculty members¹ came together to discuss civic engagement at their respective institutions and to share ideas about what worked. Collectively, we represented a diverse group of institutions, including teaching and research universities as well as multi-campus community colleges. Some of us were actively involved with [The Democracy Commitment](#) (TDC) and the [American Democracy Project](#) (ADP), while others had created and sustained their own independent civic engagement efforts (with varying degrees of institutional support). All of us, however, were committed to enhancing civic knowledge, engagement, and learning, and we had, through trial and error, arrived at core practices that had been successful at our individual institutions.

This article focuses on these “best practices” and offers practical ideas for other political scientists who are interested in adapting the related programs, ventures, and events for their own campuses. Each of the six authors briefly discusses a facet of civic engagement education that is most important to him or her, followed by a description of the specific practices he or she highlighted during the panel discussion at the 2014 annual meeting.

Shyam K. Sriram, Georgia Perimeter College

Of the five campuses comprising [Georgia Perimeter College](#) (GPC), the Clarkston campus, about 15 miles east of Atlanta, may be the most unique in terms of cultural capital. Clarkston has been the resettlement point for the vast majority of refugees arriving in Georgia since the 1980s, and this rich local population has led to a very diverse student population. Consequently, it has also created some unique challenges for GPC’s political science faculty. The first challenge was encouraging native-born American students to care about government and instilling in them a belief in their own political efficacy. The second challenge was arming international students, non-native English speakers (NNESs), and other “new Americans” with the tools not only to understand how the American political process works, but to inspire them to think about how the same ideas could be replicated in their own communities and, possibly, exported back to their home countries. This is one definition of “global civic engagement.”

¹ Peter Levine from Tufts University was also part of the original panel.

One project that achieved both of these aims was the fall 2012 Clarkston Public Service Announcement (PSA) Project. Inspired by a similar undertaking at [De Anza College](#), I created an assignment to teach students the basics of videography, film editing, and using Flip cameras and iMovie in conjunction with the MediaSpot, GPC's media literacy center. The goal was for my students to create short, one-minute-long video PSAs to encourage voter registration in as many languages as possible. I chose two back-to-back sections of an American Government course and, after asking students about their language fluencies, created "language teams" of four to seven students each, with at least two native-English speakers and one student fluent in another language. I also used a college-wide faculty email server to solicit guidance from faculty and staff who would serve as "language consultants." Ultimately, students would submit videos in eight languages: Tigrinya, Somali, Spanish, Ogoni, French, Amharic, German, and Vietnamese. All of the videos are available through the College's [YouTube channel](#) assignment worked very well for the students and allowed both native-born and immigrant students to collaborate in a multicultural environment to learn about political participation and voting in a hands-on way.

The second civic engagement "best practice" was a unique opportunity for students to learn about lobbying during [Stop Violence Against Women Day](#) (SVAWD). Held every January during the Georgia legislative session, SVAWD brings together activists from across the state to learn about bills under consideration in the Georgia General Assembly and then to meet with state senators and representatives. Between 2010 and 2012, I accompanied over 100 students to the state capitol to participate in this experience. SVAWD offered students a chance to see how politics worked in practice and learn about the legislative process, lobbying, representation, the basics of deliberative democracy, role playing, and getting to know ones elected officials in person. What made the event extraordinary, however, was the students' sheer interest and dedication, especially since so many were newly arrived immigrants and thus non-U.S. citizens; yet, as many shared with me in the post-exercise reflection, they felt that the experience had prepared them for citizenship by showing them that they had a role in the state political process. According to one student, a former Iraqi refugee, "I do feel that what we were lobbying for was important because it is my right to do so; I come from a land where tyrants would snatch your rights away if you have any to start with."

Amy Atchison, Valparaiso University

In the not-too-distant past, citizens only needed an understanding of how their own societies worked. Today, the complexities of international interdependence demand that people gain at least some understanding of how global society functions. Therefore, civic education must expand to include global governance and explore what it means to be a member of a global community. At [Valparaiso University](#), internationalization of the curriculum is one of the campus' primary goals as faculty, staff, and administrators work to achieve the [university's mission](#) students to lead in church and society. Faculty are encouraged to try new ways to bring international perspectives to the campus community. In response, a group of faculty members have started an international humanitarian law (IHL) peer-education program in partnership with the American Red Cross and its [International Humanitarian Law Action Campaign](#) (IHLAC) program.

The IHLAC is based on the premise that peer-led education is an effective method of reaching young people. Each participating Red Cross chapter recruits team leaders who are responsible, in turn, for recruiting and training an Action Campaign team. The team develops an interactive program to educate their peers about IHL. The team then presents its program on campus and in the community. Valparaiso University joined the IHLAC in its second year, 2013.

The project began with the recruitment of team leaders, followed by a training in IHL using [Raid Cross](#), an experiential curriculum initially developed by the Belgian and French Red Cross societies. Through the six Raid Cross simulations, students were introduced to the four main principles of IHL: distinction, military necessity, proportionality, and avoiding unnecessary suffering. Each simulation presents a different aspect of war, such as internment in a prisoner of war camp, evacuating wounded soldiers from a battlefield, the difficulties of delivering humanitarian aid, the challenges soldiers face in distinguishing between military and civilian objects, the decisions military commanders face during war, and the prosecution of war criminals in the aftermath of war. Team leaders then recruited their teams and worked with them to develop action campaigns.

One team developed an [interactive video/game](#) that forced players to decide whether or not they would recruit, train, and use child soldiers in warfare;

the other developed a Monopoly™-style board game called [Consecuencia](#), in which the warlord who is given the lightest sentence at The Hague wins the game. The outcomes have been remarkable on a number of levels. First, the two teams reached more than 300 people through these campaigns, educating them about both illegal use of child soldiers and the international criminal justice system. Second, given the success in the first year, we successfully partnered with the local Red Cross chapter to secure a grant to continue the program in the 2014-2015 academic year. During the 2014-2015 campaign, the students formed only one team and chose to educate peers about refugee law and the plight of refugees by building a [simulated refugee camp](#) and by [interviewing](#) Valparaiso University students who were once refugees. This campaign reached more than 600 people. Finally, on a more individual level, many of the participants have pursued IHL research projects in their capstone classes, and two students are applying to graduate schools in which they plan to continue their IHL studies.

Elizabeth Bennion, Indiana University South Bend

Recent developments in neuroscience and the scholarship of teaching and learning demonstrate the value of experiential learning. Civic engagement is both an end and a means. Students in the community are engaged to develop the knowledge, skills, and values required to remain actively engaged beyond graduation. [Indiana University \(IU\) South Bend](#), a regional, comprehensive university with over 7,000 students, has accomplished this in numerous ways, including training students to become door-to-door canvassers for a non-partisan voter registration drive, training students to register voters in college classrooms, working with students to host public forums and candidate debates on campus, and matching students with community partners for a wide variety of service-learning projects.

One unique project at IU South Bend that has successfully created real and sustained change in student-citizen efficacy is a weekly public affairs program called [Politically Speaking](#), which is broadcast live each Sunday to a 22-county area containing 1.2 million viewers. As part of the program, interviews are conducted with national and state legislators, along with local politicians, academics, practitioners, and political activists, on topics as diverse as the [Indiana General Assembly](#), the [Michigan Legislature](#), and contemporary policy issues such as education reform, drug policy, school safety, gun control, immigration policy, health-care reform, same-sex marriage, and domestic violence.

This high visibility partnership between IU South Bend and the [local public television](#) station includes the creation of a political science research team as part of a three-credit applied research seminar. Employing students as researchers, call screeners, episode critics, and amateur videographers, my work on the TV show is a way to further the civic education and engagement mission of [IU South Bend's Department of Political Science](#), the [American Democracy Project](#), and the campus, while increasing the university's visibility of the, promoting student learning, and strengthening campus-community partnerships. Students research featured topics, write episode reviews, produce "fast facts," screen viewer calls, and produce short videos featuring area residents.

The seminar offers students a rich hands-on experience creating a live public affairs program, and relies upon students for ideas, research, and feedback as they learn about a wide variety of policy issues they may have never considered, gain tangible research and media production skills, and experience the joy of seeing the results of their efforts aired live each week. This approach to learning uses the experience of civic engagement to promote lifelong civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions among students.

Students in the "Politically Speaking: Make Live TV" course illustrate the value of this approach to learning. Post-course reflections indicate students' satisfaction with being able to share their learning with others. Students appreciate the ability to "learn about the newest and most current issues that are happening in [their lives], state, and city," noting that course topics were "relevant" enough to provoke out-of-class conversations and even to "go home and discuss with family." They have also raved about the opportunity to develop "research skills that cannot be simulated by other courses" and to conduct research that "directly impact[s] the real life public policy debate." In sum, students appreciate the value of this learning experience both because of the skills they gain and because these skills can be documented, utilized, and appreciated by people outside the academy. Moreover, as a result of their participation, they often express their intention of following policy debates more closely and becoming more actively engaged in the political process in the future.

John Forren, Miami University Hamilton

Consistent with its identity as an "open admission" commuter campus, [Miami University Hamilton](#) (MUH) has maintained an especially robust

commitment to civic engagement throughout its 47-year history. Two factors in particular have tended to reinforce MUH's emphasis on faculty involvement with the broader community. One is the campus' somewhat unique faculty workload policy—entitled “Service as Second”—which explicitly elevates the importance of community-based work in faculty performance evaluations. The other factor is the university administration's vigorous support for MUH's [Center for Civic Engagement](#) (CCE)—a unit established in 2008 with [a charge](#) to “build the will and capacity to solve public problems through civic education, service, advocacy and civic research.”

Even with these institutional supports, however, MUH struggled for years to fully integrate its civic engagement mission into the day-to-day work of its faculty and students. One clear reason was faculty workload, but others included the tendency for MUH faculty and staff, as elsewhere, to work within separate institutional “silos” despite their common interests in civic engagement, and the practical difficulty faced by faculty in documenting significant civic engagement work for purposes of promotion and tenure. Simply put, innovative civic engagement programs often fail, at least initially, and unlike traditional disciplinary scholarship, they often lack measurable outcomes and tangible “final products” that can be quantified and assessed by university administrators.

Acutely aware of these institutional impediments, representatives of the faculty and staff began meeting regularly in the summer of 2012 to explore ways in which they might jointly promote civic engagement on campus. Such extensive joint faculty-staff program planning was quite new to the MUH campus—and from the outset, conversations focused explicitly on the institutional barriers to be overcome as well as the individual resources that each representative would bring to the joint effort.

Over the past two-plus years, this faculty-staff partnership has happily produced an array of meaningful civic engagement programs both on the MUH campus and in the broader Hamilton community. Among other things, the CCE and the [Department of Political Science](#) have jointly developed (1) new semester-long, election-themed public programs (in 2012 and 2014) that featured a range of expert speakers, voter registration, and voter mobilization efforts in the Hamilton area; (2) several new [Constitution and Citizenship Day programs](#), including public readings of the U.S. Constitution and faculty-led discussions of controversial issues of public law; (3) new university-sponsored field trips for

students to Washington, DC, and to the Ohio state capitol; (4) periodic lunch-time “brown bag” talks by faculty experts and community leaders on public policy issues of broad public concern; (5) a new monthly “current events roundtable” series—held at a university-owned [downtown Hamilton site](#), adjacent to a popular coffee shop—at which local residents engage in a faculty-facilitated discussion of politics and public affairs; and (6) a new on-campus student organization—the [Student Association for Law and Politics](#)—which is now active on several fronts to enhance student awareness of and engagement with civic affairs and community action.

What basic lessons can be derived for others from this ongoing work? First, political scientists who are interested in civic engagement work should make concerted efforts whenever possible to reach out to find willing on-campus partners—not only among faculty colleagues but also among campus staff who can bring both tangible resources and valuable non-faculty perspectives to bear on their joint efforts. Second, collaborators in this kind of work, especially when working across institutional faculty-staff lines, should be very open with one another about both their common civic engagement goals and the individual professional incentives and constraints within which each partner operates. An explicitly shared understanding of how collaborative work “fits” within each person’s broader professional responsibilities will prevent misunderstandings and broaden opportunities for mutually beneficial teamwork. Finally, faculty should approach this kind of work not only as a means for enhancing civic health—which is a good in itself—but as a source of valuable teaching and research opportunities as well. Community-based service work, we have found, can yield significant and sometimes unplanned connections to the other tasks that college faculty carry out as part of their daily professional lives.

Arthur Sanders, Drake University

As part of its mission, [Drake University](#), a small, private comprehensive university, is dedicated to the preparation of students for a lifetime of “engaged global citizenship.” Two specific practices are designed to boost this preparation. First, each student must take at least one class at the sophomore level or above that meets the university’s [“Engaged Citizen” Area of Inquiry \(AOI\) requirement](#). Second, every spring semester, Drake sponsors [a series of co-curricular events focused on a particular theme](#). The theme is chosen based on a survey of first-

year students about the areas they would like to explore in their sophomore year, the modal year for taking Engaged Citizen AOI classes.

For the past four years, the central co-curricular event has been a half-day conference focused on some aspect of the chosen theme. The university also sponsors a documentary film series and partners with other campus organizations or groups that often take the theme into account as they plan events. In addition, Drake has a program that allows student groups to apply for grants to help defray the costs associated with sponsoring their own engaged-citizen events. We begin the planning process early in the fall semester, so as to build programming that can involve both university and Des Moines constituencies. In addition, we keep those teaching spring semester courses in the Engaged Citizen AOI apprised of plans so that they can (if desired) build the theme and associated events into their courses—which many do on a regular basis.

In 2014, the conference theme was “Economic Inequality and Social Responsibility,” and the event consisted of a series of afternoon breakout sessions in which attendees (comprising students, faculty, staff, and community members) participated in either a poverty simulation or a series of two activities focused on different aspects of social change. All sessions were designed as interactive role-playing or other participatory activities and were facilitated by students, faculty, and community partners. For example, a session focused on advocacy for social change was organized by the person who runs advocacy workshops for non-profits for the local United Way. The conference also allowed time for people to eat and visit information tables represented by local non-profits that work on issues related to the theme. Nine groups signed up for tables. The evening session of the conference consisted of a panel of experts who discussed issues of food security, with wide and contrasting views on these topics.

Our assessment data indicate that this practical model for social consciousness education provides students with a meaningful experience, while at the same time strengthening Drake’s relationships with local non-profit organizations and government agencies.

John Theis, Lone Star College

Civic education in most of America’s colleges and universities has essentially been relegated to one of three paths: political science classes in which one learns about institutions, parties, and voting; student clubs and extra-

curricular activities that focus on citizenship and leadership; or volunteerism and service-learning. Consequently, students rarely see themselves as creators of their civic life.

A centerpiece of the [Center for Civic Engagement](#) at [Lone Star College \(LSC\) Kingwood](#) has been the development of programs to teach students deliberative democratic strategies and organizing skills. This area of civic education has been largely ignored in the current civic education milieu. Since college students, as stakeholders, are relatively resource-poor participants in the political process, collaborative skills are essential in developing their civic capacity. Powerless actors need to develop coalitions and find shared interests in order to advance their agendas. The Center for Civic Engagement at LSC-Kingwood has implemented two signature programs: Public Achievement and Deliberative Dialogues.

[Public Achievement](#) is a youth engagement initiative developed at the [Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship](#) at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In the Public Achievement model, college and K-12 students partner in teams to research and develop action plans in an effort to impact issues in their community. College students serve as coaches and help the groups to develop and implement their plans. LSC-Kingwood students currently work with Splendora High School and Humble Independent School District students with special needs in the northeastern suburbs of Houston, Texas. In the 2014 fall semester, 26 college students and over 100 high school students worked within 12 issue groups. In the Public Achievement program, high school students choose issues and form action groups around these issues, while college students serve as coaches to the action groups as they research the issues, develop action plans, and carry out their plans. The issues range from parochial ones, such as improving school lunches and addressing bullying, to larger community-wide issues like building a community teen center and stopping animal abuse. Regardless of the issues, however, college coaches and high school students must learn to access power by discovering who has it and what their interests are. The participants must learn to craft appeals, listen to feedback, and modify proposals based on stakeholder interests.

[Deliberative Dialogues](#) are developed by the [National Issues Forums](#) and the [Kettering Foundation](#), and LSC-Kingwood has begun to incorporate them into CCE activities. Deliberative Dialogues provide a framework for citizens to

discuss controversial and often polarizing issues in a civil and productive manner. The 2012-2013 school year saw the inauguration of Deliberative Dialogues on the LSC-Kingwood campus. Trainings were held each semester, and 18 students and faculty were trained as moderators for Deliberative Dialogues. During the 2013-2014 academic year, 40 students were involved in moderator trainings, with 12 students then going on to moderate dialogues on campus. LSC-Kingwood is now hosting Deliberative Dialogues each semester, bringing together students, faculty, and community members around issues of national importance. The Center has developed a “moderator corps” made up of students who are available to lead Deliberative Dialogues across the campus and the community. In addition, the LSC-Kingwood faculty are incorporating Deliberative Dialogues into their course requirements in a variety of classes, including college success, ESOL, developmental English, communications, sociology, psychology, and government classes.

It is the hope that teaching students democratic skills across the curriculum through programs such as Public Achievement and Deliberative Dialogues will develop not only the civic capacities that students need in order to be effective citizens, but also skills that reinforce two guiding tenets—that civically involved students are more likely to be successful students, and that civic skills provide students with a set of tools that are desperately needed in today’s workforce.

Conclusion

The focus of this collaborative article was on innovative designs, methods, and practices in the flourishing area of political science civic engagement. While service learning and civic engagement are well suited for most academic disciplines, there is a natural “fit” with political science, which is only enforced by the seven experiences of the faculty highlighted in this article. While each of these innovative ideas worked well on each campus, their implementation was not overnight; some of them were years in the making through the steady and persistent effort of these seven faculty members, and many more administrative and support staff, as well as institutional buy-in as a whole. Ultimately, we believe that these programs, while often time-consuming to implement and oversee, engendered generous rewards through the increased civic consciousness of the students whom we had the pleasure to teach. We look forward to hearing how other political scientists and social science faculty can replicate these

methods in creating a stronger civic engagement culture at many more colleges and universities.

Author Biographies



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Dr. John J. Theis is Director of the Lone Star College System Center for Civic Engagement and Professor of Political Science at Lone Star College-Kingwood (Texas). He serves on the National Council of the American Commonwealth Partnership and the Steering Committee of The Democracy Commitment. He started the LSC-Kingwood Public Achievement program in 2010 and was one of the founders of the Kingwood College “Center for Civic Engagement”. He has recently been named to head up a system level civic engagement initiative across the 6 Lone Star College system campuses by the chancellor. He has received numerous awards and honors including Professor of the Year and the Governor’s Award for Excellence in Teaching.



Dr. Amy L. Atchison is an assistant professor of Political Science and International Relations at Valparaiso University. She received her PhD in Political Science from the University of Tennessee in 2010 with concentrations in Comparative Politics and Public Administration. Dr. Atchison's work has appeared in *PS: Political Science & Politics*, *Politics & Gender*, the *National Social Science Journal*, and the *Journal of Women, Politics, and Policy*. Her main research interests are in women and politics, executive/legislative relations, and social welfare policy in advanced industrial democracies.



Dr. Elizabeth A. Bennion is Professor of Political Science and Campus Director of the American Democracy Project at Indiana University South Bend. Bennion teaches courses in American politics with an emphasis on political behavior. She has received numerous teaching and service awards, and her scholarship has been published in multiple books and journals. Bennion is co-editor of the book *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen* and co-founder of the Intercampus Consortium for SoTL Research. She conducts large-scale, national field experiments testing innovative approaches to civic education and engagement. Bennion hosts *Politically Speaking*, a live weekly public affairs program on PBS/WNIT.



Dr. Arthur Sanders is the Ellis and Nelle Levitt Distinguished Professor of Politics and Associate Provost for Curriculum and Assessment at Drake University where he has been a member of the faculty since 1990. He received his BA from Franklin and Marshall College in 1978 and his PhD from Harvard University in 1982. His research has focused on citizen politics in the United States including examinations of public opinion, the impact of mass media, and campaign finance. His most recent book, *Losing Control: Presidential Elections and the Decline of Democracy*, was published in 2007 by Peter Lange Publishers.



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