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From the Editors: Evolving Perspectives on Civic Engagement

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This is the culminating issue in a volume marking the 10th anniversary of the founding of the *eJournal of Public Affairs*. It is fitting, therefore, that the current issue gives renewed focus to our commitment to four pillars of content: civic engagement, education, research, and practice. Keeping with our traditional format, readers will find peer-reviewed research articles reporting on theoretical, quantitative, and qualitative efforts to help public-spirited academics and practitioners assess the impact of purposeful work in the world. The efforts captured by this transdisciplinary research represent community partnerships, state-level government, nationally oriented approaches, and global realities. Fine arts, humanities, and social and natural sciences each have a critical role in public life—and this is reflected in the connectivity of the work readers will encounter in this issue as a statement of our publishing mission.

In 10 years of bringing our readers research, reviews, and a diversity of story-driven content, the editorial guidance of the *eJournal* has responded to the depth and creativity of authors and guest editors. This issue has pushed us to allow more space for longer articles, so readers should be prepared to invest more of their own time and consideration of these ideas for use in their own work. It is worth noting that although this is an open submission issue, a common theme vitalizes each self-contained article: *Evolving perspectives of civic engagement*.

The problems of public life evolve. The work needed to address these problems democratically, through an informed and able citizenry, evolves. Research and reporting to present stories of success and setback evolve. Indeed, the *eJournal* has evolved throughout a decade of publication to meet those challenges. We believe readers will find this issue meaningful, and we look forward to the evolution that will sustain the life of this work. We thank readers for being part of the journey.

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Civic Engagement Through Theatre: Running a Brechtian Workshop in the Classroom

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This article presents an innovative active-learning technique for supporting the development of civic education: a theatrical workshop based on the dramaturgy of Bertolt Brecht. The author argues that the Brechtian workshop can develop three skills necessary for effective civic engagement—perspective taking, collaboration, and critical judgment/self-reflection—and that these skills are directly tied to the three civic values of pluralism, community, and civic responsibility. Using qualitative data gathered while teaching this workshop to two distinct student populations (i.e., a self-selecting group of students in a liberal arts environment and a group of students at a commuter campus taking a course required for their major), the author reflects on the workshop's varying levels of success in developing these skills and offers recommendations for future use of this learning technique.

Keywords: civic engagement, civic education, teaching and learning, active learning, theatre, Bertolt Brecht, drama, civic virtue, political science, social science, education, case study

Consensus has emerged among political science teaching and learning scholars that effective civic education involves more than educating students *about* community; rather, we need to provide students with opportunities to act within their communities as invested stakeholders, preparing them to *do* politics. Active learning techniques—including cooperative learning and simulations—are the most effective means of promoting civic engagement since they engage students with course material in a way lectures do not. By requiring students to create, analyze, problem solve, and reflect, these techniques transform students from passive spectators into actors. Within the discipline of political science, theatrical exercises are uniquely powerful ways to engage students in active learning within the mini public sphere of the classroom.

In this article, I introduce an innovative active learning technique: a theatrical workshop model based on the dramaturgy of Bertolt Brecht. The workshop is designed to develop three specific skills necessary for effective civic engagement, namely perspective taking, collaboration, and critical judgement/self-reflection. This workshop can be used in courses in multiple political science subfields such as political theory, international relations, and comparative politics. It can also be adapted for use in first-year seminar programs and in interdisciplinary courses.

I first discuss the literature on civic engagement and its connection to active learning. I then outline ways that teachers use theatre for civic education, proceeding to explain the Brechtian workshop and then offering an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. Drawing on students' pre- and post-self-assessments and my own observations, I demonstrate how the experience of the workshop cultivates civic skills and how that experience differs according to specific student populations. I conclude with a discussion of the workshop's usefulness as a mode of civic education.

Civic Engagement, Civic Education, and Active Learning

The decline in American civic engagement has led to renewed calls for civic education. The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement made an urgent plea in their 2012 report, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*, calling for

> visionary leadership that locates education for democracy as a focal point of educational study, reflection, and practice. This moment in history also calls on us to embrace a comprehensive and contemporary vision for civic learning that includes knowledge, skills, values, and the capacity to work with others on civic and societal challenges. (p. 6)

Political science departments are logical places for civic education to take place, and political science scholars of teaching and learning have focused on how to build civic education into the classroom.[1] The American Political Science Association (APSA) has devoted resources to promoting civic education, including a biennial Teaching and Learning Conference with multiple tracks on civic engagement.

[1] There are too many scholars to name here, but a good place to start when looking for political scientists interested in political engagement is Bennion and Laughlin's (2018) review of 51 articles in the *Journal of Political Science Education*. APSA's *Teaching Civic Engagement* books (Matto et al., 2017; McCartney et al., 2013) also include great overviews of the literature.

The term *civic engagement* has been defined in numerous ways. The working definition I employ in this article comes from APSA's *Teaching Civic Engagement* (McCartney et al., 2013), a guide for instructors seeking to identify best practices:

> an individual's activities, alone or as part of the group, that focus on developing knowledge about the community and its political system, identifying or seeking solutions to community problems, pursuing goals to benefit the community, and participating in constructive deliberation among community members about the community's political system and community issues, problems, or solutions. (p. 14)

Understood in this way, civic engagement includes not only acts related directly to politics, but all activities concerned with the life of the community in its broadest sense.[2] This Deweyan understanding expands the scope of civic education beyond a narrow concern with basic political competence (i.e., knowing how to vote; Cogan, 1999) to include not only a host of communication and problem-solving skills, but also civic virtue—the values and habits supporting democratic culture (Boyte, 2017).

Across disciplines and education levels, active learning—defined as activities that require students to engage in the learning process and to reflect on what they have learned—has been found to be incredibly effective pedagogy (Freeman et. al, 2014; Hagood et al., 2018; Prince, 2004). In particular, civic engagement scholars within the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) field have identified active learning methods as the most effective techniques for civic education (Matto et. al, 2017; McCartney, 2013). Active learning encompasses a range of methods, including class discussion, think-pair-share activities, presentations, role-playing games and simulations, problem-based learning activities, and many more. There is strong evidence suggesting that civic engagement programs have a lasting impact on students when integrated into the college experience both inside and outside the classroom (Bok, 2017; Lagemann & Lewis, 2012; Seligsohn & Grove, 2017; Thomas & Brower, 2017). Active learning techniques are ways of implementing civic engagement in both classroom settings and in co-curricular contexts; Model UN programs, voter drives, internships, and student newspapers are all examples of effective active learning co-curricular activities that promote civic engagement (Bennion & Laughlin, 2018).

Theatre as Active Learning

Since the 1990s, a growing number of teaching and learning scholars have written about the value of theatrical exercises, ranging from improvisational activities and theatre games to immersive role-playing and theater as representation (TAR) modalities, as forms of active learning. These scholars come from many disciplines, including medicine (Baerheim & Alraek, 2005; Berk & Trieber, 2009; Hoffman et al., 2008; Love, 2012; Shapiro & Hunt, 2003), education and administration (Meyer, 2004), business, management (Moshavi, 2001), sociology (Fried, 2002), and political science (Dacombe & Morrow, 2017; Gorham, 2000; Moravian College, 2010).

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[2] Thomas Ehrlich (as cited in Rogers, 2017) understood civic engagement in a similar manner when he wrote that civic engagement "means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes" (p. 95).

The potential of theatre as a means of civic education has been directly addressed by a growing body of SOTL scholars (Chilcoat & Ligon, 1998; Love, 2012; Sadler, 2010), including some in political science (Bray & Chappell, 2005). Notably, Sadler (2010) argued that theatrical exercises, specifically those arising from Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, provide students an opportunity to confront situations and institutions that disempower them. In doing so, the exercises allow them to rehearse acting as change agents: "By providing a space to synthesize their multiple identities and roles, students gain the agency to comment on and create change at their universities, in their communities, and on a personal level" (p. 85). The theatrical exercises strengthen students' self-efficacy while providing a rehearsal space for situations and challenges they will encounter outside the classroom.

Bray and Chappell (2005) argued that theatre is uniquely suited to teach what they referred to as "civic attention": listening and communicating with fellow citizens in the public sphere, paying attention to those who are excluded from the conversation, and advocating for their inclusion. For Bray and Chappell, theatre is inherently about critical reflexivity, both for the actors and the audience; that is, both groups serve as critics of the action portrayed on the stage, and as critics, participants use their imaginations to identify useful alternatives. Theatre "has the power, in all its forms to focus our attention, and attention is the key to civic respect" (p. 92).

In line with Sadler (2010) and Bray and Chappell (2005), I argue that theatrical active-learning activities are well suited to the demands of civic education and to the development of civic virtue. Structurally, theatre as an art form depends on social interaction. Theatrical performances connect otherwise isolated individuals through a singular shared experience. Further, theatrical exercises rely on the interaction of the participants through their physical action and/or through their speech. The political theorist Hannah Arendt (1958/1998) once wrote that "the theatre is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others" (p. 188). Theatrical exercises offer participants a means of isolating shared problems, scrutinizing them, and experimenting with solutions. Such exercises also allow participants to experience the world from another's viewpoint, developing empathy and promoting introspection.

Utilized in the classroom—a mini public sphere—theatrical exercises provide students with a safe space in which to develop the skills necessary for effective citizenship. For example, perspective taking (i.e., seeing through another's eyes) and self-reflection can be developed through character-based acting exercises that push participants to "act" in ways they would not embrace otherwise, to look at a situation from a view different from their own, and to reflect on the differences between their personal choices and those of their character.[3] Collaboration and open-discussion skills can be developed through improvisational work, as students must listen to one another, trust one another, and accept each other's contributions in order for an improv scene to be "successful."

[3] Compelling research is being conducted on the power of live-action role-playing games to fundamentally alter a player's perception of themselves and others through perspective taking. Extreme examples are found in Montola (2010) and Montola and Holopainen (2012).

The Brechtian theatrical workshop is an example of the ways theatre can be incorporated into the classroom in order to cultivate civic engagement. The skills it develops—critical judgment, perspective taking, collaboration, and self-reflection—are at the heart of democratic civic education. Further, through the development of these skills, students are able to develop an appreciation of pluralism, community, and civic responsibility as public goods.

Why Brechtian Theatre?

Bertolt Brecht was an innovative playwright who used theatre as a tool of civic education for the working class in Weimar Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. Inspired by Marxist social theory and the artistic elements of the agitprop (agitation propaganda) theatre of his day, Brecht sought to combine pedagogy with performance and to erase the divide between actor and spectator (Morgan, 2013a). He is perhaps best known for codifying what he called "the estrangement effect" (Verfremdungseffekt): drawing attention to something that has been naturalized—for instance, a fact or an event—so that it appears unfamiliar and open to question (Brecht, 1964). While most theatre directors were doing their best to create realistic, naturalist drama, Brecht produced the opposite. Using exposed sets, music that clashed with the mood of the scene, signs that narrated the action, and over-enunciated gestures on the part of his actors, Brecht sought to remind the audience at every turn that what they were watching was not real life. He felt that if he never allowed his audience or his actors to be "taken in" by the world on stage or to feel empathy for the characters portrayed, they would be compelled to rationally evaluate what they were being shown: the choices made by the characters and the actors, the consequences of their decisions, and the world in which the characters lived (Morgan, 2013a). He would teach the audience to think critically by pushing them to judge what they were seeing.[4] Further, Brecht believed that if his working-class audience could take a distanced, critical view of a play inside the theatre, they would be able to see the world outside the theatre in a critical light as well and would ultimately demand social change (Brecht, 1964, 1965; Morgan, 2013a).

Brecht's greatest pedagogical achievement was the performance workshops he organized in Weimar Germany. At these workshops, a group of ordinary people—students or workers with no expertise in theatre—performed one of his short Lehrstücke, or teaching plays. These plays centered on a moral dilemma that forced the characters to act. They also included juxtaposed principles—community versus individuality, idealism versus realism, and theory versus practice—that required the characters to make difficult choices about which value to privilege. These plays were written to be evaluated by both the actors reading the parts and the observers following along. After each reading, Brecht asked them all to critique the choices made by the characters in the play: Did the hero do the right thing? What else could he have done? The innovation here was having laymen participate in the production as actors, audience members, and critics (Morgan, 2013a). Brecht revised his plays based on the feedback he received during the workshops, thereby indirectly including the participants in the playwriting process as well. Brecht's workshops often involved the participants swapping roles during the readings so they could gain a different perspective on the action (Kellner, 1980). Arguably, the most effective

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[4] As Brecht (1965) wrote in the *Messingkauf Dialogues*, "[I]n this new theatre I shall be free to transform my audience into kings. Not only into the semblance of kings, but into the real thing. Into statesmen, thinkers, and engineers. What an audience I'll have! What goes on in the world I shall bring before their judgment seat" (p. 100).

Brechtian workshop is one in which each participant has a chance to read for every character, allowing the actors to subjectively experience the whole situation by way of its parts (Kellner, 1980).

Learning Objectives for the Brechtian Workshop

I am a political theorist who teaches a course of my own design titled "Politics and Theatre." The course illuminates the importance of theatre in the public sphere. While the students and I devote some attention to state-sponsored theatre designed to control the populace (e.g., Nazi theatre), most of the course focuses on theatre movements of political dissidents, especially those promoting democratic civic virtue and resistance to oppression; George Bernard Shaw, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean-Paul Sartre feature prominently in the syllabus. The Brechtian workshop is the centerpiece of the course—an opportunity for students to experience the power of theatre first hand.

The workshop, which occupies about 3 weeks of the semester, is designed to develop three specific skills necessary for effective civic engagement: perspective taking, collaboration, and critical judgement/self-reflection. When I first designed the course in 2011, I had hoped that, through the development of those skills, students would increase their appreciation for the values underlying democratic civic engagement. Specifically, I hypothesized that the workshop would positively affect students' perceptions of pluralism, community, and civic responsibility (see Table 1).

Table 1

Civic Skills and Their Corresponding Values

Skill	Value
Perspective taking	Pluralism
Collaboration	Community
Critical judgement/self-reflection	Civic responsibility

Social perspective taking is the ability to view and understand a situation from another's point of view (Johnson, 2015; Weinstein, 2004). Perspective taking is understood to be necessary for the appreciation of diversity, for the development of civic identity, and for productive debate and discussion (Johnson, 2015), all of which are essential for effective civic engagement. Pluralism—its corollary value—involves not only respect for the views of others, but also, more broadly, the valuation of debate and discussion as public goods. I hypothesized that the more students were able to see a situation from alternative points of view, the more they would value pluralism as a matter of principle. Similarly, I also hypothesized that the more experience students had with collaboration—a key component of civic life—the more they would value those with whom they were working as well as the notion of community in general.

A primary obligation of citizens is to make judgments about issues that affect their community, distinguishing among candidates, thinking through the causes of community problems, and working out potential solutions. As Arendt (1973/2003) wrote, "The faculty of judgment," understood as active reflection, is "the most political of man's mental abilities" (p. 188). The development of this kind of civic judgment is essential for effective citizenship. Without it, members of democratic societies risk becoming submissive subjects of bureaucratic dictates or angry tribalists treating others as dangers if not enemies (Arendt, 1971/2003; Berger, 2009). The Brechtian workshop is designed to help students use perspective taking and collaborative dialogue to develop the democratic skill of critical judgment. On this score, I hypothesized that the more students engaged in self-reflection and reasoned judgement, the more they would recognize the exercise of such judgment as a responsibility they have to their community. Like Brecht, I sought to use the workshop as a microcosm of the world outside it: Though the students' "community" was limited to fellow workshop participants, I hoped they would make the connection between their experience in the course and their lives outside the classroom.

The Workshop Process

I begin the workshop by assigning Brecht's most famous teaching play, *The Decision* (*Die Massnahme*).[5] The plot centers on a group of communist Agitators sent to China to covertly instill class-consciousness in the peasantry and to urge them to engage in revolution. A Young Comrade is sent with them to help them do this. At every turn, however, he makes decisions that go against the orders the group was given and that put the group—and the revolution—in danger. The moral dilemma of the play hinges on the question of what the agitators should do about their comrade. He openly says he will not cease his dissenting behavior, so they are left with a choice: They can kill him, sacrificing his life for the revolution that will save tens of thousands of people, or they can let him live, forfeit the revolution, and most likely die at the hands of the Chinese authorities. Their decision, which they agonize over both before and after the fact, is to kill their comrade. The action of the play takes place in the context of a trial: The four Agitators are explaining to the Control Chorus (i.e., the communist leadership) why they killed the Young Comrade. The Control Chorus has called them to account for their actions and, at the end of the play, decides in their favor.

My students' first assignment is to read the play as homework and to write a short reflection paper on the Agitators' decision to murder the Young Comrade. I ask them if the Agitators did "the right thing," if the Young Comrade deserved to die, if there was an alternative plan of action the group could have taken. This paper serves as a kind of pretest, allowing me to assess the level of complexity of each student's judgment of the case. I am not interested in whose side they take (i.e., the Agitators' or the Young Comrade's); rather, I am interested in assessing the kinds of reasons they provide for their judgment. Do they weigh both sides or discern other "sides"? Do they see the dilemma as simple or as complicated?

After the reflection papers are turned in, the actual workshop commences. For the next week or two of class meetings, we engage in one long, continuous reading of the play. After each scene, we pause to discuss the play's action. We discuss the moral dilemma the Agitators face and the merits of their decision to kill their comrade. Some questions I ask include: What does this scene reveal about the mission the group is on or about their understanding of communism?

[5] The title of the play is often translated as *The Measures Taken*.

Do you empathize with the Young Comrade here, or do his actions frustrate you? How does the action complicate your assessment of the situation?

The students trade parts after each scene, moving through the roles of the Control Chorus, the Agitators, and the Young Comrade until they end up with the role with which they began. Playing a character allows an actor to experience a scene through the eyes—or voice—of another. By having each student play each role, I complicate that experience. By the end, each student has seen the whole from three distinct points of view: the victim's, the killers', and the judge's. This exercise pushes students to engage in perspective taking, giving the students the experience of standing in another's shoes.

As we progress from scene to scene, I encourage the students to experiment with the way they read the lines. Though we begin with the Agitators speaking in unison, the students are free to change the presentation so that the Agitators take turns reading single sentences or whole speeches. Each change in presentation alters the mood of the piece and may affect students' assessment of the power dynamics involved in the relationships among the characters, as well as whether the Agitators acted correctly. I also encourage students to experiment with stage blocking and movement, and to think about the costumes, props, music, and other details they would use if they were to perform the play for an audience. (While not required, I give students the option of performing the play for an audience if they think it would be worthwhile.)

After the workshop ends, we have a debriefing session in which we return to the question of the Agitators' decision. I also ask students to reflect on the workshop experience—of reading the play aloud, of making choices regarding staging and tone, and of playing each part. In this session, I push students to engage in metacognition, to think about their own thinking and to judge their own judgements. Finally, I assign students another short paper, much like the first, asking them to reflect upon the Agitators' decision and to explain what they think they would have done in the same situation. This is the posttest of the workshop. In their final papers, I assess, through students' self-evaluations, whether the workshop was successful as a civic-education tool. Did the students broaden their views? Did their judgments become more complicated? Did playing the roles of the different characters affect their evaluation of the situation? Further, did the workshop alter their evaluation of the values I sought to cultivate: pluralism, community, and civic responsibility?

Workshop Results[6]

As part of my Politics and Theatre course, I have held the workshop three times: initially at the Collins Living and Learning Center at Indiana University (IU) Bloomington and twice later at IU Southeast, where I am currently an assistant professor. The student bodies at these two institutions are quite different. I hypothesize that these differences contributed greatly to the variance in workshop outcomes. The results presented here speak to which student populations would be best served by such a pedagogical intervention. In the following sections, I discuss the results of the workshop held at the Collins Living and Learning Center and then proceed to discuss how the workshop unfolded at IU Southeast.

[6] This research was exempted by the Indiana University Southeast's Institutional Review Board.

Collins Living and Learning Center[7]

The Collins Living and Learning Center (hereafter, Collins) is a residential unit on the IU Bloomington campus where self-selecting students choose to live and take courses together. Collins is a tight-knit community in which administrators, students, and faculty work closely together; it has the atmosphere of a small liberal arts college. Nearly all of the students at Collins come straight from high school, and all have committed to the liberal arts model of education, according to which the exploration of ideas is primary. The vast majority of Collins students have the luxury of not having to work full-time jobs while attending college, allowing them to focus exclusively on their studies and their social lives.

All the students in my 2011 Politics and Theatre seminar were traditional students, having enrolled in college right after high school, and with the exception of one sophomore, all were first-year students. Many of these students had had some experience with theatrical or vocal performance prior to taking the course. They were a self-selecting group, choosing my seminar from a list of options based on their interest in the subject matter.

For these students, the Brechtian theatrical workshop was more successful than I had hoped. Timid at first, the students in my class eventually warmed up to the assignment, developed a sense of camaraderie, and ultimately embraced the project with open minds, bringing creative staging options to the table. They even decided to perform *The Decision* for their peers, which they did on the Collins quad on the last day of the semester. In their reflection papers on the workshop (i.e., their posttests), they noted how much they enjoyed the experience, how it had helped them make friends, and how it had aided their personal growth as students and as human beings.

Moreover, their reflection papers indicated measurable growth in the three focal areas of civic engagement: perspective taking, cooperative engagement/collaboration, and critical judgement/self-reflection. I hypothesized that having the students play each role would expand their perspective on the decision made by the Agitators in a meaningful way, that is, that they would be able to respect conflicting points of view on the issue. Indeed, eight of the 11 students discussed this explicitly. One student wrote,

> I found that when I initially read the play by myself, I disliked the Agitators and sided more with the Young Comrade's decisions, but the first time I played an agitator I started to question why the young comrade was being so foolish and reckless.

Further, one student expressed an appreciation for perspective taking as a public good, revealing an appreciation for the principle of pluralism:

> I now realize it is essential for growth (as an actor and a human being) to assess situations from all points of view in order to gain a better understand [*sic*] of the situations we find ourselves in. This applies beyond the walls of the theatre, as many of these lessons apply to everyday life. As a member of the Control Chorus, I learned the importance of observation. As the Young Comrade, I learned the value of selflessness and allegiance to things you find important. And as an Agitator, I learned the benefits of adaptability and find the courage to speak out. The play taught me how even though it is

[7] I previously presented these findings at the 2013 APSA Teaching and Learning Conference (Morgan, 2013b).

> hard to put yourself in other people's shoes, doing so can open your eyes to an understand [*sic*] of why people do things—even in situations where their behavior seems immoral or wrong.

This student's comments highlight the workshop's success in developing the skill of perspective taking as well as instilling a positive view of pluralism. The student not only was able to see a situation from multiple points of view, but also was pushed to reflect on that experience, becoming aware of herself as capable of perspective taking and cognizant of its power to broaden her understanding of situations she thought she had understood.

Effective civic engagement also requires both the ability and the inclination to work with others to solve problems and create new alternatives. The workshop succeeded in each of these regards. Several students wrote about how much the workshop helped them get over their fear of speaking up in class and/or of performing in front of others. The workshop helped these students develop self-efficacy around working with others and in relation to their ability to contribute meaningfully to a group project. As one student wrote,

> I was very insecure about my lack of knowledge [of theatre], so I shut everyone out and kept to myself. When we were all put under the pressure of actually performing one of the plays, I came to realize that I was not as far behind as I had originally thought. I don't think I give myself enough credit for how much I've learned in the past few years. Everyone was dealing with various insecurities the entire time, and working through them together helped us bond.

Likewise, another student reflected,

> Working through the play in front of people I barely knew but knew that I would see on a near-daily basis was really discomforting. After I eventually got over both myself and whatever it was that made me uncomfortable, I came to find the experience quite enjoyable and began to look forward to it … [The workshop] got me out of my comfort zone for which I've come to be increasingly grateful.

Several students spoke of the confidence they gained working with others in a collaborative environment. The workshop was also successful in providing a positive experience of collaboration, a necessary element of civic engagement. Many students wrote about how the workshop connected them to their peers, as the following students' remarks indicate:

> I was surprised as to how fast we were all able to cooperate together as a team.

> The workshop had the class thoroughly engaged and gave us the power of deciding how every aspect of the play should be worked out. Thus, it enabled us to stamp the play with our own mark of identification and it our very own…. When the public performance was finished, I felt much closer to all my classmates, for I felt as if we accomplished something as a team.

Overall, seven of the 11 students spoke of the group's ability to collaborate well. Four of the 11 commented on the value of community as a good in and of itself, as the following comments reflect:

> Working together to reach a common goal brings people out of their shell and creates a close bond that extends outside of the context of the goal. Something similar happened with our class as we went through the workshop.

> We combined our thoughts and feelings in a giant melting pot, and we were able to create something that I found beautiful, even without all of the extra special effects, and lights, or even a stage. To me, that is the greatest thing I could have received—a completely unplanned and wonderful expression of the human condition…. All humans need to have the ability to communicate and learn from one another, and you allowed us to do just that.

These students were excited not only for the bond they felt with their classmates, but also for how well the public performance turned out. Through collaboration, they saw that they were able to create something none of them could have made on their own. The workshop expanded their view of the possible in terms of both what theatre can be and what cooperation can accomplish.

Critical judgment—the ability to make sophisticated, rational judgments and to reflect on one's process of judgement—is the final skill the workshop helped to develop. In their pre-workshop papers, many students made simplistic judgements of the moral dilemma at the center of the play. Almost all sided with the Young Comrade against the Agitators, on the grounds that he was "in the right" because he was pursuing individual liberty against communist conformism. However, in their post-workshop perspective papers, though many maintained their allegiance to the Young Comrade, their reasoning had become more complex, taking into account the Agitators' arguments in a serious way and siding with the Young Comrade in spite of his flaws. Others changed their allegiance to the Agitators—again, recognizing the complexity of the situation. Their reflections revealed that the workshop had not only enlarged their perspective of the Agitators' decision, but also led them to qualify their initial assessment of that decision.

Just as telling as their revised evaluations of the situation in the play were their reflections on their own judgments, on Brecht's judgement, and on the process of judgment itself. One student's final reflection paper was riddled with questions, including, "Why would Brecht do this here?," "What would we have done in the [Young Comrade's] place?," and "What makes me different from the Young Comrade?" Another student shared an insight about herself as a result of her participation in the workshop:

> I found that when I would play a different character I would automatically side with them and turn my decisions into theirs. It took about 3 classes before I made this realization and started to question the character I was playing. I believe that this instance showed me something about myself. I tend to be a person who just goes with the flow. I used to think that that was a good quality to have, but now I can see that sometimes one should be careful not to loose [*sic*] themselves in someone else's ideas.

For this student, practicing the skill of perspective taking in the context of the workshop led to deep self-reflection. This kind of reflection, or reflexivity, is essential for effective civic responsibility. Many students demonstrated the ability to make deliberate, reasoned judgements after weighing both sides of the argument; several others engaged in self-reflection. Overall, nine of the 11 students exercised some form of critical judgment.

In summary, the Brechtian workshop conducted at Collins succeeded in developing perspective taking, collaboration, and critical judgment. The students embraced the workshop's creative aspects (designing and producing their own production) and thought deeply about the moral dilemma at the heart of the story. Based on my experience at Collins, I believe the Brechtian workshop holds great potential as a tool for the civic education of young, self-selecting students committed to the liberal arts model of education.

Indiana University Southeast

When I taught a revised version of my Politics and Theatre course at IU Southeast in spring 2014 and spring 2016, the workshop went much differently than it had at Collins. I consider these workshops to have been mitigated successes in that student participants developed critical judgement and perspective-taking skills, but had mixed and, in some cases, negative experiences of collaboration, as I describe in this section.

IU Southeast is a commuter campus with a large population of nontraditional students and/or international students. Many are raising families and/or returning to school after years in the workforce or the military. Most students work at least part-time while attending school, and many work full-time. These students bring with them diverse life experiences and a practical view of education as a tool they need to succeed in the world outside the classroom. They are deeply concerned with the real-world relevance of the courses they take and the projects they are assigned, and many are skeptical of ideas that, to them, seem odd or unrealistic.

The 15 students who enrolled in my spring 2014 Politics and Theatre course were a mix of traditional and nontraditional students. While one or two were excited about the content of the course, the vast majority were taking it to fulfil a political theory requirement for the political science major. Since I am the only political theorist in my department, my course was the only upper-level theory course offered that semester. I was also a new professor, in my second semester at IU Southeast, so only a few of the students knew what to expect from my courses. The rest of the students were expecting a traditionally designed (i.e., lecture-based) course.

There was also an odd dynamic among the students in the spring 2014 course. The workshop fell in the middle of the semester, and even before it began, tension developed between two groups of students: the more traditional students interested in a liberal arts education and the nontraditional students who were older, generally more conservative politically, and focused on the practicality of their education. The workshop exacerbated this tension. A clear division emerged right away, as many of the younger students originally voiced their sympathy for the Young Comrade just as the older students argued that the Agitators had done the right thing.

All these factors—the larger number of students in the course, students' practical reasons for taking the course, their expectations for the course, and the tension between the two "factions," as one student described them—contributed to a different set of results relative to the 2011 Collins workshop.

Regarding perspective taking, none of the students in the 2014 workshop echoed the Collins students' reflections on the power of acting the different parts. Instead, many wrote that *listening* to the different ways a part was read helped expand their appreciation of a character and of the play. One student's comments exemplify this trend:

> After we got through a few people reading for the Young Comrade, I realized that we have no idea how he was actually supposed to sound. We had people with small voices playing him and he sounded helpless, then we had people with large voices playing him and he sounded completely different. Depending on the inflection we gave and how we each interpreted the text, the way that his messages came across changed from person to person. This was interesting for me, and helped me realize that I could've been looking at the Young Comrade all wrong.

As she and her peers noted, the way the Young Comrade sounded in their heads when they read the play alone was only one way he could have sounded, a realization that caused them to reconsider their judgment of him. Interestingly, however, no student commented on their experience acting the part of the Young Comrade. Overall, nine of the 13 discussed their experience of perspective taking, while two of the nine spoke of the importance of pluralism.

In terms of developing students' inclination and ability to collaborate, the workshop was a failure. Not only did none of the students develop self-efficacy, but their inclination toward collaboration with those different from themselves may actually have been harmed by the workshop. The tension between the two student factions increased throughout the workshop, leading to moments of barely repressed hostility on the part of a few students. One student, who had missed the first half of the workshop due to illness, arrived halfway through and made this observation:

> I immediately saw that there were factions of people within the class with very different opinions of the play. There were a few who felt that the agitators were completely in the wrong for killing the comrade, and I can safely assume that these were the more "liberal" classmates. There were others who were wholeheartedly in agreement with the killing of the young comrade, namely the more "conservative" classmates. Then there were others who were merely just going through the hoops of the workshop to get the grade.

This breakdown of those who supported the Young Comrade and those who supported the Agitators was not as clean as this student assumed, as there were a few liberals who backed the Agitators in the beginning. It is noteworthy that this student jumped to the conclusion he did, and I think this inference was not his alone. Students made assumptions about one another and often wrote each other off because of these assumptions, rather than engage in good-faith discussion.

As a result of the divisive nature of the ongoing conversation, "the factions in class were just talking past each other," as one student put it, and very little discussion took place about the creative aspects of the workshop; that is, very little experimentation went on with regard to line readings, blocking, or other artistic elements of production. When I brought up the possibility of a public reading or performance, the idea was immediately shot down. Only four of the 13 students spoke of the collaborative element of the workshop in a positive way; four others spoke of it in a decidedly negative way.

The most effective civic-education element of the workshop was the development of critical judgment. Despite the negative atmosphere of much of the discussion (or perhaps because of it), many students altered their judgments of the Agitators' decision to kill the Young Comrade. This occurred on both sides, with most students' ultimate judgment being that neither side had acted justly. Almost everyone's judgments became complicated, like those of the Collins students, and a few students engaged in reflection on their own process of judgment and on how they arrived at those judgements. Ultimately, eleven of the 13 students demonstrated the ability to engage in critical judgment.

When I held the workshop again in 2016, the factional dynamic of the previous cohort did not emerge. A small group of eight, comprising mostly introverted and mostly nontraditional students, took the workshop seriously and did their best to contribute. Similar to the 2014 group, this cohort did not find any great benefit to acting out the parts but gained from listening to the parts being read. Three students went so far as to suggest that in the future, having the class listen to a recorded reading would be more helpful than making them participate in the workshop. In fact, the performative perspective-taking aspect of the exercise was deemed useful by only one student, partly, I believe, because many students indicated their inability to read aloud without focus intensely on getting the words right. That said, six of the seven wrote in their reflection papers about their ability to see the events of the play from multiple perspectives, and one spoke of the value of pluralism as a public good.

Just as they felt uncomfortable with the acting aspect of the workshop, the group seemed uninterested and/or "out of their element" when asked to experiment with movement and intonation, leaving the creative elements of the workshop largely unexplored. The greatest success here, as with the 2014 group, related to their discussion of the moral dilemma at the heart of the play. All but two students sided with the Agitators in the beginning; yet, by the end, one Agitator-supporter had switched his allegiance to the Young Comrade, while the rest had qualified their judgments based on class discussion. This group took the issue of critical judgment seriously, pondering the ethical principles that could support or work against the Agitators' decision. Further, the group always engaged in respectful dialogue. One student was pleased that the workshop "helped [her] to connect with the class" by creating a friendly environment where she felt comfortable expressing her opinions. Many students reflected that listening to their colleagues' opinions helped them see the issues in ways they never would have otherwise and that it was a particular colleague's remarks that made them rethink their initial judgments. I consider these remarks indications that collaboration did take place, though not in the artistic way I had envisioned. This group worked together to think through the moral dilemma at hand and succeeded in maintaining an open and respectful discussion over several weeks. Four of the seven students wrote positively about their experience collaborating with their peers, while only one found the collaborative aspect of the workshop problematic.

Additionally, five of the seven students reflected on their own process of critical judgment. One wrote that listening to other students—especially younger ones—"made me realize that as I have gotten older I have gotten more cynical in how I view the world and made me find that [youthful perspective] again in myself." Others reflected on the ways judgments are arrived at in general, with several noting the importance of life experience in determining how one will see the world. One student noted that "what perspective you start from will define what you get out of the play," while another, the only vocal supporter of the Young Comrade, came to the following conclusion:

> In the end I realized, we made each of our decisions based on our personal experiences in life and we justified our decisions based on how we thought we might react or the options we would consider. It was scary to think I could literally be thrown into the plot of this play and be sitting next to my killers.

For her, the ultimate moral lesson of the play was that “people can be pressured into doing terrible things,” even good, rational people like her classmates.

Conclusion: Connecting Skills and Values in Civic Engagement

It is always tempting to focus on one’s successes, yet we can learn as much from our failures. In their review of 51 articles on civic education, Bennion and Laughlin (2018) argued for the importance of “negative” results: “We need to understand why” some tools of civic education work and others do not; further, “if specific pedagogical tools demonstrate positive learning outcomes in some areas, but not in others, it is important to understand why and adjust our tools and expectations accordingly” (p. 307). Regarding my Brechtian workshop, I have positive and negative results to report (see Table 2).

Table 2

Post-Workshop Assessment Results: Number of Students Who Demonstrated Skills/Values

Skill/Value	**2011 (n = 11)**	**2014 (n = 13*)**	**2016 (n = 7**)**
Skill: Perspective taking	8	9	6
Value: Pluralism	1	2	1
Skill: Collaboration	7	4+ / 4-	4+/ 1-
Value: Community	4	0	1

Note.

* Two students did not turn in a post-workshop paper.

** One student did not turn in a post-workshop paper.

While it is not possible to extrapolate based on three trials, I hypothesize that the variance in success relates to characteristics of each student population and their expectations around classroom instruction. I believe these varying conditions and outcomes speak to broader issues that effective civic education can and must address.

In my experience, the Brechtian workshop was most effective as an exercise in civic engagement when used with a traditional student population on a residential campus, in a course drawing students due to their interest in the subject matter and willingness to explore new learning techniques. The opportunity cost of the workshop—roughly 3 weeks of class time for seminar-sized groups—is well worth the result. In these contexts, self-selecting students can collaborate to create their own production, experiencing the play from multiple vantage points and reflecting on their experiences. The workshop offers students the experience of engaging in a micro-political world, with their choices, dialogues, and judgments determining the outcomes of the project.

When used with nontraditional students on a commuter campus in a course required for the major, the workshop was less effective in encouraging collaboration. That said, the workshop can still develop the skills of critical judgment and self-reflection. The exercise may be met with resistance by students who are reticent about moving out of their comfort zones; at worst, it can reinforce previous judgements, feed into stereotypes about those who think differently, and decrease the desire to work together with others different from oneself. Given the current adversarial political climate in the United States, teachers using the workshop in their classrooms may well encounter the emergence of political divides as I did. For this workshop to succeed as a civic engagement intervention in such a context, workshop facilitators should be prepared to intervene—to initiate meta-conversations about the tension in the room, the resistance to the activity, and the assumptions students make about one another. An intervention can redirect students' energies toward the workshop itself, leading to a better outcome. I recommend including some type of production at the end of the workshop. A required production, even if performed for a small group of invited guests, would require students to put their differences aside and work together, directing their energies towards collaboration.

Regardless of the student population, I believe that including an extra day or two of debriefing would greatly enhance the workshop's long-term impact on students.[8] In future iterations of the workshop, I plan to use debriefing days to draw direct connections between the skills students utilized in the workshop and the values that are at the heart of civic engagement. As evidenced in my results, a few students made the connection between perspective taking and pluralism on their own; further, several addressed the relationship between collaboration and their relationship with their fellow students. At the same time, I hypothesize that with a proper debriefing session focused on civic engagement, students could have a deeper conversation about the workshop and the ways it cultivates (or fails to cultivate) pluralism, community, and civic responsibility, as well as why those public goods matter.

I continue to use theatre in my teaching in order to offer students the opportunity to experience politics. In addition to the Brechtian workshop, I include Reacting to the Past role-playing games and simulations in my courses. Though not touted as theatre exercises, these learning tools have much in common with improvisational theatre, affording students the experience of acting in a microcosmic political world where their actions have consequences and relationships with others carry weight. Based on both my experience and the research of others,[9] I have come to appreciate that the most important aspect of such active learning exercise is the debrief. Establishing connections between skills and values in a clear, explicit manner could be central to making a lasting impression on students about the importance of civic engagement and their place in the community outside the classroom.

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[8] My workshops included only one day of debriefing.

[9] As Wedig (2010) pointed out, "The debriefing process is in many ways the key to the entire simulation process, as it is the piece that connects the student-driven, active-learning component back to the instructor-designed course content and learning objectives" (p. 553).

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Enhancing Civic Engagement Through Leadership Education

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Abstract

Many civic engagement courses within higher education require students to work with community members to make progress on complex problems, which in itself can comprise leadership practice. Yet, there is little evidence that leadership development is strategically incorporated into such civic engagement courses in general. The authors taught eight leadership sessions over two semesters in the Principled Problem Solving Scholars program at Guilford College. The study discussed in this article examined the perceived impact of a leadership curriculum on the personal leadership practices and the civic engagement of 14 undergraduate students. The authors present their findings in the context of three themes, highlighting (1) the shift in the students' philosophies of leadership from leader-centric to collective perspectives, (2) the value of civic leadership and democratic engagement praxis, and (3) salient leadership lessons. The authors also discuss implications of their study findings as well directions for future research, calling for greater integration of the fields of civic engagement and leadership studies and more research around the curricular integration of leadership education and civic education.

Keywords: civic engagement, leadership education, collective leadership, qualitative inquiry

Enhancing Civic Engagement Through Leadership Education

Civic engagement and leadership are two areas of study that have developed along parallel timelines. Emerging largely in the 1980s and proliferating in the 2000s (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Post et al., 2016), both are concerned with addressing wicked problems through collaboration, and both employ murky, malleable, and contested terminology. In this article, we conceptualize *leadership* as an activity, not a position (Chrislip & O'Malley, 2013), that engages others in making progress on addressing tough challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009). Leadership is a socially constructed process that requires collaboration among multiple stakeholders (Ospina & Foldy, 2016). While definitions of *civic engagement* also vary widely, we use the definition offered by the director of The Pew Charitable Trusts:

> Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern…. [Civic engagement] can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy. (Delli Carpini, 2009, para. 2)

When examining these definitions, one might conclude—as we have—that civic engagement is itself an act of leadership. Therefore, the parallel fields could more intentionally learn from and enhance one another, a notion we explored in this study. Specifically, we examined how leadership education has been or can be used to enhance civic education.

As educators interested in developing civic engagement and leadership in students, we have sought examples of how these fields have been integrated through educational practice. The literature makes clear that many leadership courses prepare students to be civically engaged members of society by integrating community-engaged learning, internships, and project-based collaborative learning into their curricula (Althaus, 1997; Arensdorf & Brungardt, 2017; Johnson & Woodward, 2014). There is less evidence, however, that civic engagement courses have made a similar move to systematically incorporate leadership development into their curricula. To investigate whether and how leadership education had been incorporated into civic engagement courses, we examined 100- and 200-level syllabi for leadership content in the list of readings, assignments, or learning outcomes to determine if the instructor had made connections for students between leadership and civic engagement work. Table 1 summarizes the 11 syllabi examined. While a more systematic review would likely have shown more nuance, this initial review of selected syllabi suggests generally that leadership content is underrepresented in civic engagement courses.

Table 1

Leadership Content Within Selected Civic Engagement Courses

Course Name	Institution	Year Offered	Did the Learning Objectives Include Leadership Development?
Introduction to Community and Civic Engagement	University of California, Irvine	2011	No
Introduction to Civic Engagement	San Diego State University	2013	No
Introduction to Civic Engagement	University of Houston	2013	No
Public Discourse	Gustavus Adolphus College	2014	No
Civic Engagement and Social Change	Hagerstown Community College	2015	No
Introduction to Civic Engagement	Drexel University	2015	No
Non-Profit Leadership and Community Engagement	Harvard Extension School	2015	Yes
Civic Engagement	University of Maryland, Baltimore	2016	No
Introduction to Civic Responsibility	Illinois State University	2017	No
Introduction to Community Engagement	Virginia Commonwealth University	2017	No
Introduction to Civic Studies	Tufts University	2019	No

Our study is significant because it investigated how incorporating leadership development into civic engagement courses enhanced the practice of civic engagement for undergraduate students (e.g., helping students name their strengths and assets in addition to the community's assets), filling a gap in the civic engagement and leadership literature.

Integrating Leadership Education Into a Civic Engagement Curriculum

In this section, we describe the civic engagement program and courses that served collectively as the site of the study. We then outline the leadership curriculum that was incorporated into the courses. Lastly, we provide a subjectivity statement describing how we aligned our backgrounds and roles in this teaching and research.

Principled Problem Solving Scholars Program

The courses and students involved in this study were part of the Center for Principled Problem Solving at Guilford College. Students selected as principled problem solving (PPS) scholars engage in a year-long, credit-bearing educational program, which consists of a fall and spring course. Through these classes, the students identify their core values and commitments, reflect upon how these values (and the core values of Guilford College) connect with their education and vocation, highlight capacities and strengths within local communities, examine particular problems that contradict students' and Guilford's core values, and research the intersecting root causes of these problems—as well as efforts already underway to address them. The PPS program is open to all students on campus who have earned a 3.0 GPA or higher. They must submit a written application and complete an oral interview in order to be selected for the program.

As a key feature of the program, students collaborate in groups, focusing on a social issue of their choice. The students work on their chosen project using the asset-based community development model (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) and determine collectively what action might be appropriate for that particular time and place. In the past, students have centered on wide-ranging topics such as food security on college campuses, sustainability education, and affordable housing and homelessness.

For example, one of these collaborative group projects comprises an ongoing mentoring program at a local area high school where minority students account for two thirds of the student body. The PPS students offer support to immigrant and refugee students and encourage them to pursue higher education by showing them available resources and helping them with the college application process if they decide they want to go to college. Four participants in the current study were part of this mentoring group, and each has undertaken their own journey to find belonging as the first American born in the family, the daughter of lesbian parents, an immigrant, and the child of refugees—experiences that have encouraged them to support immigrant and refugee students in discovering their own sense of belonging in higher education.

Leadership Curriculum

The leadership curriculum was introduced over eight sessions throughout the two semesters. The sessions were co-developed by both of us to integrate them into the overall course curriculum. From the beginning, we had a general idea of the topics to be incorporated, but the curriculum was refined as we gained more context about the students and previous class sessions.

The leadership topics were generated using a collective leadership paradigm (Ospina & Foldy, 2016). This paradigm—or philosophy of leadership—conceptualizes leadership as a "phenomenon that implicates all members of a group rather than one or several individual members" (Ospina & Foldy, 2016, p. 1), thus shifting the focus from the leader to leadership (Rost, 1993) and from leadership as a position to an activity (Chrislip & O'Malley, 2013). Therefore, topics such as strengths-based leadership (Clifton et al., 2001), which could be used to reinforce individual heroic views of leadership, were introduced as tools for understanding how to exercise leadership within teams.

Several emerging theories of leadership fall within the collective leadership umbrella, including distributed leadership, shared leadership, democratic leadership, and adaptive leadership (Kniffin & Patterson, 2019). For our study, we presented the conceptual thinking around the shift from leader-centric to collective perspectives of leadership, but we drew heavily on the framework of adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009) to organize and introduce the leadership sessions. Adaptive leadership is one of the most developed, practical frameworks under the collective leadership umbrella. The Kansas Leadership Center has built upon this framework to develop four competencies—diagnosing the situation, managing self, intervening skillfully, and energizing others (O'Malley & Cebula, 2015)—which were specifically used to frame our leadership sessions.

Since this course was rooted in public issues, we also included Ganz's (2010) work on developing public narratives so that students could practice connecting their individual stories to public issues. We also facilitated a deliberative civic engagement forum (Kliewer & Priest, 2016), again drawing from Ganz, to connect students' individual narratives into a shared story focused on collective action. Both of these sessions allowed students to learn skills in the classroom which are directly applicable to public work. Tables 2 and 3 summarize the leadership topics, offer brief descriptions of those topics, and list resources used in the sessions.

Table 2

Summary of Leadership Curriculum, Fall Semester

Topic	Description	Resource
Strengths-based leadership	Students took the StrengthsQuest inventory, explored their top five strengths, and learned about the strengths of their classmates.	Clifton et al. (2001)
Strengths-based leadership	Students analyzed the strengths of their civic engagement team using a team strengths grid.	Clifton et al. (2001)
Adaptive leadership: Diagnose the situation	Students diagnosed their civic engagement topic including distinguishing between adaptive and technical elements and naming factions.	Heifetz et al. (2009) O'Malley & Cebula (2015)
Adaptive leadership: Intervene skillfully	Students brainstormed how they could intervene in their civic engagement topic through the lenses of acting experimentally, holding multiple interpretations, and embracing conflict.	Heifetz et al. (2009)

Table 3

Summary of Leadership Curriculum, Spring Semester

Topic	Description	Resource
Public narrative	Students learned about Ganz's framework for telling a public narrative and then developed their own narratives.	Ganz (2010)
Deliberative civic engagement	Students participated in a deliberative civic engagement process, which included sharing individual stories, drawing themes from their stories, and determining action steps.	Kliewer & Priest (2016) Roadside Theatre (1999)
Adaptive leadership: Manage self	Students took an inventory assessing their mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional energy. They then engaged in self-reflection through writing about how to focus on managing their energy, not just their time.	Heifetz et al. (2009) O'Malley & Cebula (2015)
Ethical leadership	Students discussed a case study called *Cornea's in the Congo* by Joanne Ciulla to apply Kidder's framework for identifying ethical dilemmas.	Karim et al. (2012) Kidder (1995)

Subjectivity of the Teacher–Researchers

As faculty and community members, we both bring experience in teaching and community engagement. I, Sonalini, taught classes in civic engagement and politics at Guilford College, and supported faculty in their community-engaged teaching and scholarship. I also conduct my own community-engaged research. In January 2021, I moved to the Institute of Community and Economic Engagement at the University of North Carolina Greensboro (UNCG). There are various aspects of my identity that are central to understanding my embodied experience coordinating civic engagement and leadership development courses at a predominantly White institution. I am a young(ish) Punjabi-Sikh immigrant female born in Saudi Arabia into a low-caste/dalit family. I try to make these parts of my identity visible during the first week of classes to help students break down the stereotype of leadership as an activity confined to and exercised by dominant groups. As a feminist teacher–scholar, I believe it is my responsibility to expose students to pressing civic issues and equip them to think critically about hegemonic narratives and how to dismantle unjust power structures.

I, Lori, am a boundary spanner between leadership education and community engagement. First studying and teaching leadership with a civic orientation at the Staley School of Leadership Studies at Kansas State University, I was steeped in Heifetz et al.'s (2009) adaptive leadership framework and the Kansas Leadership Center's competencies and principles. As a White, cisgender, middle-class woman, I often taught students with similar perspectives as my own. Teaching in the PPS program allowed me to learn alongside more diverse students who demonstrated a passion for justice in their communities. During this study, I was a community-engaged professional at UNCG supporting faculty in doing community-engaged scholarship and conducting my own community-engaged research on civic leadership development as a doctoral student. As a learner, teacher, and scholar in Greensboro, my identities were more differentiated from those around me and were often more privileged, leading to my own learning and increased passion for teaching leadership from frameworks that recognize the assets of diverse stakeholders. In 2020, I transitioned back to a department of leadership studies as a faculty member at Fort Hays State University.

Research Design and Sampling

This qualitative study used a survey, focus groups, and document review to explore how 14 students in the PPS Scholars program perceived the impact of the leadership development curriculum on their personal leadership practices and their group civic engagement practices. Upon receiving institutional review board approval to conduct the study, we invited the PPS students to participate and provided them an alternative option for the class session. Data were not analyzed until the course was complete, to assure students that participation would not impact their course grade.

Some of the majors represented within the cohort we researched included art, biology, English, history, international studies, philosophy, psychology, and Spanish. The vast majority (13) of the students were traditionally aged college students; six identified as students of color, and 11 identified as female. For their community engagement projects, the student participants worked in four small teams. They first completed an online, eight-question survey, which we used to refine our focus group protocol. We simultaneously held two 45-minute focus groups, each of which included two civic engagement teams. The third data source consisted of an assignment on leadership from the students' e-portfolios. The assignment asked students to write a reflection, based on their experiences in the scholars program, describing how their definition of leadership had evolved throughout the academic year.

Analysis

The data were analyzed using an open-coding procedure that primarily applied in vivo codes (Saldaña, 2009). We began by each coding the data from the focus groups and conducting our own thematic analysis. We then met to discuss our themes, categories, and codes, which we found to be mostly convergent. After determining that our analysis methods were aligned, one of us coded the surveys using the same coding procedure and then merged the codes from both focus group transcripts and the surveys into common themes. We selected one assignment from the e-portfolio that spoke directly to our research question (described previously) as a way to crystalize—or open a more complex understanding of (Tracy, 2010)—our findings. Though this assignment was not coded, it was used to illustrate more contextual detail around themes that surfaced in the analysis of the survey and the focus groups. Ultimately, three themes emerged from the data, and in the following section we incorporate all three data sources in our discussion of the themes.

Findings

The first of the three themes that emerged from the data—shifting philosophies of leadership—is the broadest and describes the origins and influences of the students' philosophies of leadership and how they changed and expanded throughout their experience in the PPS Scholars program. The second theme—civic leadership and democratic engagement praxis—describes how students connected leadership theory to their practice of civic engagement. The third theme—salient meaningful leadership lessons—focuses on the specific lessons that students named as most meaningful in their experience of applying leadership to their civic engagement work. All three themes were supported by participants in all four civic engagement groups, and evidence from the survey and the focus groups from all four groups are included in this discussion of the findings. To provide a more contextual description of the themes, we highlight the mentoring group, using evidence from their leadership assignments.

Shifting Philosophies of Leadership

This theme illuminates the students' thinking about leadership, including how they viewed leadership prior to the course and how those views shifted. Additionally, we describe various ways that students defined leadership and the values they believed informed their philosophy of leadership.

The philosophy of leadership taught in the PPS courses maintains that leadership is an activity, not a position (Chrislip & O'Malley, 2013). This philosophy aligns with a collective paradigm of leadership (Ospina & Foldy, 2016) and contrasts with leader-centric perspectives (Rost, 1993). Early in the courses, it became apparent that many of the students had preconceived notions about leadership which aligned with a leader-centric perspective. The students reflected on this in the study. Deja (all participant names are pseudonyms) said, "I feel like [leadership] was kind of predetermined on me like this person's the leader [and you just have to] kind of look to them." Nahid indicated that she had "romanticized" the definition of leadership and thought "it had to be a certain type of somebody that could be a leader," naming very visible leaders such as Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, and Gandhi. Furthermore, Ashley, commenting on her high school leadership program, said, "They, like, have this very specific mold of what a leader is, [and if felt like], 'Okay well, we're going to shove you in this mold and you have to fit it or else like, you know, you don't fit up to the standard.'" This view of leadership as inaccessible and romanticized was representative of many of the students' perspectives prior to the course. Therefore, as instructors, we had to facilitate the unlearning of these ideas.

The study findings suggest that the curricular intervention shifted, albeit to varying degrees, the students' philosophies of leadership toward collective perspectives. One student explained, "I never really defined leadership as a team endeavor before this year. So, my whole philosophy has changed." A couple of students' definitions revealed a mix of leader-centric and collective leadership paradigms. For example, one student defined leadership as "an act where people take charge and know when and how to execute leading effectively. Knowing when to step back and when to be the driving force." While many students demonstrated a more collective or democratic philosophy of leadership, some still struggled to let go of the idea that a leader must take charge or have authority. Other students indicated that their philosophies already reflected a more collective paradigm but that the course helped them learn how to apply their leadership more and affirmed their perspective on leadership.

The students were also asked to reflect more broadly on their thoughts about and practices of leadership beyond their definitions, with some describing leadership as being smaller than they previously thought. For example, Andrew, who had been volunteering with an animal rights club on campus, said that he originally thought he needed to be an officer in order to lead. However, he explained a shift in his thinking:

> Now I feel like I can be in the club just as a member and sort of lead through myself and what I want to get from that club…. So I think that I understand that leadership can be a small thing. It's not always big.

Similarly, Mary described showing up consistently to club activities as a way to lead outside of an officer position. She said, "I feel like sometimes it's just by you committing to something and you actively showing [up] and being present in that space, you're able to exercise leadership even if you weren't given like … a position." In this way, leadership became more accessible to these students.

As suggested by the reflections of the PPS students, leader-centric perspectives of leadership may unnecessarily make leadership "big" and inaccessible. When students romanticize leadership, they may think they cannot lead or that they must wait to lead until they have more ideal characteristics or a formal title. Yet, when students realize that leadership is a process that they can participate in with the strengths they already possess, many possibilities for leadership open up for them. One of the most powerful realizations came from Gabi, a mentoring group member:

> I want to be a leader to show people from my community that it's possible. That any of them could be one too…. I've had so many opportunities that I've let slip out of my hands because I was too scared to lead and be the center of attention. I didn't want so much responsibility to rest on my shoulders. There are so many issues I am passionate about tackling. From immigration to prison reform to education. There's so much work to be done in our nation. We can be and do better, but sometimes it feels like no one is doing anything. I'm tired of waiting for someone else to do the work when I can do it.

Challenging the dominant narratives of leadership which students held was an important precursor to their leadership practice, and the data showed that the curricular intervention in the PPS course succeeded in encouraging students to shift their thinking about leadership to one that included themselves as potential leaders.

Civic Leadership and Democratic Engagement Praxis

As community engagement professionals, we understand that community–university partnerships ought to be mutually beneficial and reciprocal. This requires a commitment to working *with* communities to address public issues instead of fixing problems *for* the community. The PPS course included civic engagement content such as asset-based community development (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), which is a tool that helps map community assets. Introducing students to a collective paradigm of leadership was an additional way to teach them strategies for working with the community and their group mates. This theme highlights the value of collective leadership in practice as understood by the students. Some students provided examples of how collective leadership applied to settings beyond the PPS course, but here we focus primarily on its application to their civic engagement work. Our intent is to demonstrate how collective leadership can enhance the practice of civic engagement for students.

For their civic engagement projects, the PPS scholars worked in small peer groups and with community members. Collaborating within their small groups gave them multiple opportunities to integrate collective leadership into practice, and many students highlighted how they learned to lead with other classmates capable of leading. Several students described how they shared work, including comments such as, “We’ve split up responsibilities in a way where it’s best suited with our strengths” and “My group and I took turns following and leading for our group.” What seemed to be unique for this civic engagement project compared to other group projects was the students’ intention to share leadership and responsibility across the group. One student explained,

> I have learned to engage more in a collaborative decision-making process, and I have seen exactly how I act within a team of strong individuals. I used to be someone who would take charge of almost all of the workload in a group setting, but now I am more of a harmonizer and someone who gives insights when I feel it is needed.

Students described learning to lead from their strengths and realizing “others’ potential contributions,” resulting in more balanced leadership, as opposed to one person taking control.

While the students practiced their own leadership in the civic engagement project, they also had ah-ha moments about leading with, not *for*, communities in the context of strengths-based leadership. Spencer shared humbly,

> I remember, like, for a second I was like, “Wait, homeless people have jobs?”… and then I was like, “What a stupid thing to think,” but I thought it and, you know, to have to interact with that thought and confront your ignorance as opposed to just like letting them fester. That was, and like a more simple tiny thing was like, I know I’m good at art and stuff, and I think it was important for me to remember that just because you have a strength in something doesn’t mean that other people don’t.

Just as we talked about everyone in the classroom having strengths to bring to the table, it took Spencer time to realize that people experiencing homelessness also have strengths. Similarly, another student noted that, although they recognized that everyone in their group was “a leader in their own right,” it was still valuable to listen to “members of the homeless population tell us what’s wrong with the different systems” rather than trying to “tell them how we can ‘fix’ it.” An important element of teaching civic engagement courses is helping students realize they are not saviors who will come in and solve community problems.

Students in the mentoring group highlighted practices related to applying leadership within their community settings. One student explained that “knowledge of effective leadership, collaboration, and communication” helped ease the process of working with speakers, staff, and high school students. Another student identified the process of relationship building as a valuable aspect of working with communities: “I tend to focus more on community building rather than diving straight into tutoring or helping the community, since I understand the importance of trust before service.” Daxa took this a step further, blurring the line between student and community:

> I realized that instead of having it be a two-sided thing where the community and researchers are volunteers and stuff … it can be like a community and different researchers and volunteers in the community. And it made me think about how the most effective work that I can do is start from my own community. So instead of just having

> outsiders coming to my community to help out, I feel like it would be much more effective if I help my community.

While not all students achieved this deeper level of reciprocity with their community partners, many began to perceive the assets they brought to their group, the assets they could rely on from their group mates, and the assets within the community. This combination of collective leadership, strengths-based leadership, and asset-based, reciprocal civic engagement hold promise for civic leadership practices.

Salient Leadership Lessons

Regarding this final theme, we present findings related to the leadership lessons that students highlighted as most meaningful to their learning and practice of civic engagement. Overall, there were three major lessons that the students referenced repeatedly in the study: (a) strengths-based leadership, (b) public narrative, and (c) managing self.

By far the most frequently named leadership lesson was strengths-based leadership (Clifton et al., 2001). First, students appreciated that an external source, the StrengthsQuest inventory, provided them language for "qualities you have," which made it "easier to communicate those things with [their] peers." Second, it helped them see how they could contribute to teams without having a title; as Mary said, "You're still able to use your skills and combine with other people to fill a leadership role." Additionally, their ability to see diverse strengths of their teammates working together within their respective civic engagement project helped them "get a better understanding of how to interact with [others]," while also interacting with people who "had a lot of similar categories." Charlotte added, "Working on our projects really allowed me to see leadership in many different lights. After doing StrengthsQuest, my group was able to apply our skills in different areas, and we all became leaders in our own skills." This helped some students recognize when they could rely on other team members to lead. One student explained, "I was able to grow in that and then also look and see like, 'Okay, in this case, I need to step back because this isn't like my specialty and so I need to let somebody else take the reins.'" Gabi, from the mentoring group, explained,

> I realized that no one person really possessed an entire balance of strengths that would make them "perfect." This, in a way, made me feel good and better about the fact that I'm not "perfect" myself. It also made me feel like I could be of some use to my teammates.

The notion of strengths-based leadership resonated with students because it helped them understand their own leadership strengths and how to embrace the strengths of others.

The content on public narrative (Ganz, 2010) invited students to make themselves vulnerable by digging deeply into why they were leading. The students often related this learning back to strengths in recognizing that the ability to tell a compelling story about why one engages in leadership work is also a strength. For example, one student reflected on how she used to uphold leaders as "really strong voices in the community"; however, after learning about public narrative, she concluded that "when they're being remembered, it's their story of how they led … or what inspired them to lead" that should be remembered. Nahid shared that she cried during the public narrative session, during which she told a story about how her brother had been discriminated against. She said,

> I thought leaders were supposed to be strong, and therefore hard … suppress their emotions, lead by logic. And I was like, "That can't be me. I'm too emotional."… But

> then seeing everybody be vulnerable, and that's like part of the process of being a leader. And that's actually making me realize that [having] feelings is probably good for the issue that you're leading for or about. And it's also, like, good for humanity, because you obviously care.

Building on Nahid's comment, another student noted that asking for help requires a leader to risk vulnerability. Learning to rely on the strengths of others was hard for her because she had previously seen that as a weakness. Overall, the students held up vulnerability as a key aspect of learning to tell their public narratives and made them more willing to share with others their reasons for leading.

Self-care is important in community engagement work because making progress on community issues can be very personal and can appear never-ending. Students found the concept of managing self (Heifetz et al., 2009; O'Malley & Cebula, 2015) an important aspect of their civic work. One student explained, "Managing the self has been one leadership role that I did not know I needed to be partaking in; however, in order to be a good leader, you must first make sure you are mentally able to lead." Another student commented on the need to manage self for the sustainability of the work:

> It's not always about giving, giving, giving. In order for someone to continue giving, I believe they have to have something to give. Sometimes you run out of it because you need time to regenerate and take care of oneself.

Managing self is an important part of civic engagement work because the public issues individuals face are often ongoing. The work is long, personal, and taxing, and finding ways to sustain that work by taking care of the self throughout is critical.

In addition to strengths, public narrative, and managing self, the students highlighted other salient leadership lessons but not to the extent of these other three. These additional lessons included ethical dimensions of leadership, values-based leadership, and the social change model. We also recognized that the term adaptive leadership, which we used to frame multiple course sessions, was almost completely absent in the study. While students picked up the overarching collective paradigm of leadership and specific elements of adaptive leadership, such as managing self, they did not reference that framework when reflecting on their civic engagement work. The most frequent recommendations that students shared regarding future sessions was to implement the leadership content earlier in the semester and to provide even more resources that students could reference later.

Implications

Leadership is a process of engaging others to mobilize change. When we as educators ask students to engage with communities to effect change around complex challenges, such as access to higher education for immigrant/refugee students, we are asking them to practice leadership. As evidenced in this study, integrating leadership development curricula into civic engagement courses can provide students with knowledge, attitudes, and skills to more effectively lead alongside their community partners. This is particularly relevant for people with marginalized identities who are not often portrayed as "leaders," but who exercise leadership in numerous ways.

This research study has implications for educators who teach civic engagement courses, pointing to the value of integrating leadership curricula. It also has implications for students, particularly students with minoritized identities, who may benefit from leadership development as a means of shifting their perspectives on what type of people can engage in leadership. More broadly, community partners working with students through civic engagement projects may be able to support students in their leadership development by seeing how the community partners exercise leadership in their arena.

Strengths and Limitations

A strength of this study was that the participants represented all of the students in this PPS course, not just those who demonstrated higher aptitude for leadership. Additionally, the participants had diverse identities, including many that are not often represented in mainstream perspectives of leadership (e.g., immigrants, undocumented students, introverts). In hindsight, we wish the survey had gathered students' names so we could match their responses to their participation in the focus groups and their leadership assignments. As in most qualitative research, the deeply contextual nature of this study was an asset. However, it also limited our understanding of application beyond this set of students since we discovered that students in the following year engaged with the curriculum in different ways. Similarly, this scholars program was rooted in the Quaker ideas of discernment and ethical leadership. It is unclear to what extent this foundation impacted students' capacity to learn ideas related to civic leadership and how that may differ at other institution types.

Future Research

This study shows promise for the integration of leadership education into civic engagement, and more research should focus on this topic. We recommend: (a) expanding the analysis of existing civic engagement syllabi to discover other examples of courses—including non-credit bearing courses—that include leadership development in the curriculum; (b) studying this integration outside the private, Quaker institutional setting; (c) developing longitudinal studies to understand how the course outcomes persist or change over time; and (d) further developing collective leadership theories and translating them into frameworks for guiding educators.

Conclusion

Through our collaboration, we integrated a leadership development curriculum—from a collective perspective—into a civic engagement course. This qualitative study examined how the integration of this curriculum impacted the practice of leadership and civic engagement for the participating PPS students. We found that many students shifted their philosophies of leadership from leader-centric to collective paradigms and that they began to see themselves as individuals who could lead in communities now. We found that students incorporated their learning, such as in the area of strengths-based leadership, into both their small groups and in their civic engagement projects—which at times led to more asset-based and reciprocal practices. We learned that strengths-based leadership, public narrative, and managing self were three leadership lessons that were applicable to students within and beyond their civic engagement practice. We encourage more instructors of civic engagement courses to consider how the strategic incorporation of leadership development might enhance the practices of civic engagement and encourage additional research at this intersection.

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Accessibility as a Foundation for an Equitable Digital Civic Engagement Infrastructure

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Abstract

Individuals and organizations in both higher education and civic engagement have become increasingly aware of their obligation to foster a sense of belonging among students and to support historically underrepresented populations within their work. As part of this effort, the authors argue that the *civic engagement infrastructure* (CEI)—a term they use to capture the full range of organizations and associated resources directed toward improving civic engagement within higher education which stems from actors both on and off campus—must pay more attention to digital accessibility. The authors document this need by establishing the degree to which higher education institutions rely on off-campus organizations and resources in civic engagement programming, as well as campus's legal and ethical obligations to provide accessible digital content to students. To assess the current status of digital accessibility within the CEI, the authors performed accessibility audits on the websites of 11 organizations that contribute in various ways to voter mobilization efforts on college campuses. The findings revealed accessibility barriers embedded in the content and in the page templates used for these sites. The authors close with a discussion of the responsibility that content creators, content sharers, and decision makers have in meeting accessibility standards and how on- and off-campus actors fit into these roles. They also offer guidance on how to move forward with this work.

Keywords: civic engagement, accessibility, disability, digital

With the many challenges presented by the global COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting disruptions to elections and to traditional pathways on college campuses, those active in the field of youth civic engagement were elated to learn not only that approximately 50% of young people cast a ballot in 2020, but also that turnout among this demographic increased by 11 percentage points compared to the previous presidential election (CIRCLE, 2021). While elections themselves are won and lost according to hard number counts, campus-based civic engagement and democratic learning projects often emphasize an obligation to foster a sense of belonging among students. On- and off-campus actors dedicated to turning out the youth vote commit themselves to creating and running civic engagement and democratic learning projects that build connections with and among students, with particular emphasis on racial, ethnic, religious, and class diversity, and on reaching students in disciplines with traditionally low participation rates (e.g., STEM fields, business).

Given higher education institutions' stated commitment to inclusive practices and growing awareness of disability as an identity present in campus communities, we set out to determine the degree to which accessibility operates as a consideration within this field. To this end, we assessed the digital presence of 11 national organizations using the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C's) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0.[1] Our review revealed a variety of barriers across websites, videos, and PDFs. Organizations intend much of their online material to be shared with or accessed by the broader campus communities—comprising faculty, staff, and students—that adapt and distribute these materials. When these materials do not meet accessibility standards, however, campuses may inadvertently project the message that disabled citizens do not have a place in voter mobilization work, whether as nonprofit staffers, members of the campus community, or voters. Thus, actors working to mobilize the student vote must begin institutionalizing practices around creating, sharing, and producing accessible materials using accessible platforms. To facilitate this process, we offer specific guidance on addressing the barriers discovered on a variety of sites as well as recommendations for how individuals can prioritize accessibility in their work. Taking such steps will not only help meet a legal obligation, but also reflect a necessary extension of what constitutes inclusion within civic engagement circles.

We begin by establishing the parameters of what we refer to as the *civic engagement infrastructure* (CEI) in order to demonstrate how readers and their colleagues are situated in the landscape of digital accessibility. We then review both the history and contemporary models of disability and accessibility within higher education. Having laid this conceptual groundwork, we summarize the results of a digital accessibility audit of a selection of websites from a variety of organizations within the CEI. After reviewing the findings, we discuss the responsibility shared by those at all levels of the CEI to incorporate digital accessibility into their respective framework of inclusion, with specific recommendations for content creators, content sharers, and decision makers. We close by offering suggestions for specific steps individuals and

[1] When we consider digital environments—including apps, websites, electronic documents, and virtual events—we typically view the WCAG 2.0 AA as the standard to meet. Although the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not specify WCAG, the guidelines were adopted by the International Standardization Organization (ISO) in 2012 and represent the standard adopted in 2018 in the revised Section 508 of the Rehabilitation, which applies to federal agencies in the United States.

organizations can take as they move forward in this work, including information on resources available for supporting greater digital accessibility.

Civic Engagement Infrastructure

We use *civic engagement infrastructure* as an umbrella term capturing the full range of organizations and associated resources directed toward improving civic engagement within higher education which stems from actors on and off campus. Infrastructure refers to a framework—resources, staffing, materials—that supports a specific activity. Some individuals may leverage a small component of the infrastructure, with little concern for the range of resources provided, while others may actively engage with a wide range of resources. The aspects of the infrastructure each of us has experience with varies with our goals, geography, needs, and financial capacity, among other factors. In this article, we focus on the branch of the CEI dedicated to voter registration, education, and turnout which brings together a host of agents and resources. Off-campus groups dedicated to the campus vote offer support for strategic planning, social media posts, curricular materials, opportunities to present research, grant funding, and more. On-campus actors create their own materials, adapt and share materials provided by off-campus organizations, and refer students to specific websites to answer questions about making a voting plan or to find out what races will be on their ballot, among other actions.[2]

Though considerable diversity exists within this branch of the CEI, one organization operates as a hub within this space—the Students Learn Students Vote (SLSV) Coalition. As of the writing of this piece, the coalition includes over 400 partners and works with nearly 2,000 campuses out of the 3,982 degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States (Moody, 2021; SLSV, n.d.). In 2017, SLSV released *Strengthening American Democracy: A Guide for Developing an Action Plan to Increase Civic Learning, Political Engagement, and Voting Rates Among College Students*. Drafted by representatives of a variety of organizations, including the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, American Democracy Project, Campus Vote Project, NASPA Lead Initiative, The Democracy Commitment, and Young Invincibles, this text guides campuses in creating action plans from the ground up. According to the document, campus committees should strive to design plans that are comprehensive, continuous, integrated, intentional, pervasive, deep, and innovative. Two years later, SLSV (2019) released a second edition of *Strengthening American Democracy* which incorporates knowledge gained during the intervening years regarding best practices for curricular and co-curricular civic engagement and a self-assessment rubric to help planning teams assess their work. It also offers two new values to guide campus action planning: equity and inclusion. Inclusive plans "authentically bring traditionally excluded individuals and/or groups into processes, activities, and decision/policy making in a way that shares power," while equitable plans "focus efforts on and distribute resources to campus populations that have historically engaged in civic learning, democratic engagement, and voter participation at lower levels" (SLSV, 2019, p. 8).

The preceding definitions of inclusive and equitable plans recognize that all campus efforts benefit from having student leaders from a variety of backgrounds share in both the

[2] While a full typology of the actors, institutions, and resources present in the CEI is beyond the scope of this article, we encourage readers seeking a more detailed accounting of players within this space to start with the Student Learn Student Vote Coalition's "Decode the #StudentVote" site which offers an overview of the connections among various organizations, how they interact with campus partners, and the types of resources offered.

decision making as well as the implementation of any plans designed to improve engagement. The language of equity and inclusion readily communicates the need to consider identities such as race, class, and gender. Often absent from such discussion, however, is disability, despite one in five college students reporting having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). If the digital arm of the CEI dedicated to voter engagement offers inaccessible content, it restricts the ability of both on- and off-campus actors to create and implement plans that are inclusive and equitable, presumes disabled students are not student leaders in this space or on their campuses, and limits the ability of student leaders to reach their peers. In the next section, we offer a more detailed account of the legal and ethical obligations for and benefits of digital accessibility, and explain how an accessible digital environment can benefit students with disabilities and other under-resourced groups.

Accessibility

In their book *A Web for Everyone*, Horton and Quesenbery (2014) described disability as an equation: "Ability + Barrier = Disability" (p. 3). This equation highlights the social model of disability that describes a deficiency with the design of something rather than the person as deficient. The equation also helps us understand accessibility, the quality of being usable by people with disabilities because it adapts to individual ability and removes barriers. Accessibility can describe a wide variety of physical and virtual contexts, including spaces, technologies, events, and materials. Accessibility requires a proactive approach to design whereby people with disabilities are considered from the start. Remediation, or the practice of making something accessible that was not designed that way, is inefficient and much more expensive than getting the design right from the beginning. Accessibility is a legal right under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and a human right as outlined in Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Faculty, staff, and students may be more familiar with the concept of accommodations, such as extended time for tests, the allowance of emotional support animals in classrooms, or an alternative format of a textbook like an audiobook, braille book, or large-print. Accommodations are reactive measures to address needs that are not met otherwise. Generally, this means that a standard format is altered when the default excludes an individual (or makes something more labor-intensive) in order to provide equitable access. Typically, a person with a disability has the burden of needing to request an accommodation. Accommodations are not synonymous with accessibility, though the two do complement one another. Indeed, protecting and offering accommodations is critical because individuals may have a combination of multiple disabilities or unique circumstances that make something that meets accessibility guidelines inaccessible to them.

Digital accessibility in higher education first surfaced in 2015 when the National Association of the Deaf sued MIT and Harvard (Civil Rights Education and Enforcement Center, n.d.). In 2016, higher education institutions began to see a rise in Office for Civil Rights (OCR) complaints related to digital accessibility (over 300 cases), and these complaints only increased when, in 2018, OCR "launched [a] series of proactive investigations as part of a national initiative to increase online and website accessibility for students with disabilities" (OCR, 2020). In the first few years of these cases, campuses focused their resources on remediating public-facing content. As these initiatives have matured, greater attention has been given to establishing institutional policies that typically include procurement rules around digital platforms, software, and content, and that establish that individuals are responsible for creating and maintaining accessible content. Procurement policies should be of particular interest to the CEI because the third-party platforms that campuses rely on and that are integral to many campus voter mobilization programs will increasingly be held accountable to accessibility standards as contracts are negotiated and purchases are made.

In addition to legal and social justice arguments for accessibility, there are also business-related cases to be made, including improved usability for everyone. In their *Inclusive Design Toolkit*, Microsoft defines disability as “mismatched interactions” between a human and society, and suggests that sometimes disability is temporary (e.g., needing to wear a cast for a broken leg) or situational (e.g., being in a loud environment or trying to complete digital tasks in the car; Shum et al., 2016, pp. 20, 24). When we design with accessibility in mind, we address the needs of people with permanent disabilities as well as other, more temporary circumstances. During the pandemic, accessible materials have afforded people better experiences when working remotely. For example, accessible materials allow the user to employ a screen reader or read-aloud application, giving many people a break from their screens. Likewise, accessible materials are designed according to a set of standards, meaning they are “device-agnostic” and will work on mobile devices.

To demonstrate the power of accessibility, consider the different ways one accessibility feature—text equivalents for audio and visual materials (e.g., alternative text for images or captions and transcripts for videos)—can benefit different audiences. Text equivalents are imperative to providing equitable access to information for audiences who may be deaf, hard of hearing, blind, or visually impaired. Providing this critical access also serves many other people, situations, and circumstances. For example, captions on videos can be helpful for beginners or non-native speakers learning new vocabulary or concepts. Additionally, alternative text for photos and transcripts for audio/video files are less resource-intensive and serve as good options when reliable Wi-Fi is not available; a 2020 Educause report on the pandemic showed that “over a third of respondents reported that they always, very often, or sometimes struggled to find an internet connection that met their academic needs” (Gierdowski, 2021). Also, students using mobile phones often struggle “due to bandwidth limitations (e.g., slow connections, data limits) and may struggle to afford the cost of using mobile data” (Gierdowski, 2021). These same technology limitations impact student life, including civic engagement, in addition to academics. Providing less resource-intensive materials, such as text-based alternatives, may help more individuals access content. Likewise, these same text equivalents transform audio and visuals into indexable and searchable content, making it much easier for everyone to find what they are looking for.

As we think about access, we also need to ensure that we consider mobile devices like smartphones. According to the Pew Research Center (2021), 96% of 18- to -29-year-olds own a smartphone, and more than a quarter rely on their smartphone rather than “broadband at home” for Internet access. Mobile and touch accessibility was not explicitly included in the WCAG 2.0 release, but guidance was added in the 2.1 release and will be included in the forthcoming 2.2 update (Adams et al., 2021; Kirkpatrick et al., 2018). The current standard, introduced in 2010, is responsive design, a single code base and design that adapts to all devices and screen sizes from smartphones to large monitors.[3] This shift is important because it means that audiences using all sizes and types of screens can access the same information.

This section outlined the relationship between accessibility and accommodations, and their collective importance to providing inclusive and equitable experiences. We also highlighted accessibility as a human right and legal responsibility. Finally, using examples, we demonstrated that accessibility features are necessary for people with disabilities to obtain information and that those features can benefit much wider audiences. With this in mind, we examine how well the voter mobilization arm of the CEI currently meets the criteria of the WCAG.

Evaluating the Digital Civic Engagement Infrastructure

Given both the expansive nature of the CEI and the degree to which organizations within it host and share digital content, the remainder of this article focuses on the digital arm of the CEI, with specific attention to websites. Drawing on personal knowledge of the CEI developed through active participation in the voter engagement space during the last 5 years, we selected 11 organizations spread over five categories:[4]

- nationally coordinating organizations that serve campuses nationwide and connect students, faculty, and staff to resources created by organizations across the CEI (two websites);
- pedagogically focused organizations that support campus administrators, staff, and faculty in planning, implementing, and assessing civic engagement and democratic learning projects (two websites);
- research- and data-focused organizations that collect, analyze, and distribute data on youth civic engagement and democratic learning (two websites);
- campus organizing groups that support student leaders as well as administrators, staff, and faculty in developing and executing action plans focused on civic engagement and democratic learning (three websites); and,
- youth engagement organizations that allow individual students to join the organization and start a chapter on their respective campus (two websites).

We investigated these 11 sites to understand the extent organizations proactively publish accessible digital materials. As established previously, central actors within the CEI, through mission statements and strategic planning documents, have expressed concern for traditionally excluded and/or under-resourced populations—criteria met by disabled students. Auditing the websites of 11 organizations to answer these questions revealed the degree to which, on a material level, participants in the CEI recognize accessibility as an important standard for determining inclusivity and equity.

Digital Accessibility Data

We conducted accessibility audits on four separate pages of each of the selected websites. The homepage for each site was always one of the four pages reviewed; the three others reflected

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[3] Ethan Marcotte first introduced the idea of responsive web design in 2010 in the web design trade magazine *A List Apart*. A year later, only 35% of Americans owned a smartphone; however, that number has increased to 85% today (Pew Research Center, 2021). As smartphone adoption has increased, so has the demand for responsive design.

[4] We used a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that we considered organizations from a variety of categories.

the variety of content provided across the site and, when possible, included images, video, PDFs, forms, and tables. The audit focused on a subset (20 in total: 16 Level A and four Level AA) of the 61 success criteria of WCAG 2.0 AA, with an emphasis on Level A criteria, which are the most fundamental (Caldwell et al., 2008).[5] Reviews included a combination of manual tests, such as attempting to navigate the site using only the keyboard, in addition to automated tests. Tools used for the audit included the W3C Markup Validation Service, the WAVE Evaluation Tool for Chrome , axe DevTools - Web Accessibility Testing browser extension for Chrome, and the TPGi Colour Contrast Analyser.[6] In addition, we downloaded at least one PDF published and hyperlinked by the organization and reviewed it in Adobe Acrobat PRO DC using the software's built-in accessibility checker.[7]

We conducted the audits for this study in the most current Chrome browser on a 15" MacBook Pro and in the Safari browser on an iPhone 11 Pro. The same four pages of each site were tested twice, once between February 19, 2020, and March 11, 2020, and again a year later between July 8, 2021, and July 29, 2021.

Both the 2020 and 2021 audits revealed similar accessibility barriers and significant room for improvement. Websites housed within higher education institutions or governmental entities were—and continue to be—further ahead in this domain and include features that other sites do not (e.g., accessibility statements).

Trends we noted fell into two main categories: (1) accessibility barriers in the content and (2) accessibility barriers embedded in the templates used for the site. Separating these two categories helps to identify who needs to be involved in remediation or revision and what resources would be necessary.

Content Barriers

Issues that arise in the content should be addressed by content creators, managers, and editors (referred to as *content creators* for the remainder of this article), generally staffers of an organization. These barriers are the easiest to address in terms of needed skill, labor, and resources. We have identified two key areas in which content creators could improve accessibility: text alternatives and structured content—both detailed in the following sections.

Text Alternatives

One of the most common issues noted was a lack of useful text alternatives for images and video content. Alternative text, or alt text, is the text equivalent for static images and animated GIFs. Alternative text should communicate the same information to the audience that the image would—think of it as a replacement for the image rather than something to supplement the image. People who use screen readers or who have slow Internet connections often rely on alternative text for information. Ways that sites in the CEI could more effectively use alt text include:

[5] We specifically reviewed for 16 WCAG 2.0 A criteria (1.1.1, 1.2.1, 1.2.2, 1.2.3, 1.3.1, 1.3.2, 2.1.1, 2.1.2, 2.4.1, 2.4.2, 2.4.3, 2.4.4, 3.1.1, 3.3.2, 4.1.1, 4.1.2) and 4 WCAG 2.0 AA criteria (1.4.3, 1.4.4, 2.4.6, 2.4.7).

[6] These tools are all free, and organizations may consider using them to conduct their own audits periodically.

[7] Adobe Acrobat Reader, the free version of this software, does not include advanced tools like the accessibility checker.

- an organization's logo, which is meant to both identify the site and the organization publishing the material. For example, if the organization's name is Eagleton Votes, then the alt text for the logo would be "Eagleton Votes."
- an image used as a hyperlink that refers visitors to another part of the website or a different site entirely. For example, the Twitter logo might be used to direct a visitor to an organization's Twitter page, so appropriate alt text might be, "Follow us on Twitter" or "Engage with us on Twitter." Another example is an image of an arrow pointing up, functioning to bring a visitor to the top of the page; in this case, the alt text "Back to top" would be appropriate.
- an infographic, chart, or graph that visualizes data. In these cases, consider what is meant to be communicated by the graphic. If the image is meant to visualize data that is already provided within the text of a document, the best solution would likely be to leave the alt text blank to avoid redundant content. If the image is overly complicated but the point is to show a trend, then summarizing the trend seen in the alt text might be appropriate.
- a photograph of an event meant to set the mood or turnout of an event. In these cases, describe the content that is relevant to the purpose. For example, in some cases, it might be useful to describe the size of the crowd or actions taking place in the image. When the intent is to set a mood or tone, information about color, lighting, and/or emotions might be relevant.
- an image to provide visual interest. Sometimes we include images as decorations to make a page more appealing or interesting. In these cases, it might be most appropriate to leave the alt text blank, denoting that there is no relevant content. Use images like this sparingly, as they can be distracting to some audiences and may mislead audience members to think an element of the page is more important than it is.

There are, of course, other reasons to include images which are not outlined here.[8] One of the key things to remember in all cases is that you are sharing information with someone for whom the image is not available. One observation we made on multiple sites was that the file name was used as the alt text for images on the site, which is the default in some content management systems (CMSs; i.e., the environments we edit and upload web content through) if alternative text is not explicitly set. This is problematic for multiple reasons, including:

- A file name does not reveal the content or meaning of an image that is not seen, especially one with a default file name from a camera (e.g., "IMG_0789.jpg").
- Screen readers typically read file names letter by letter, so listening to that can be quite cumbersome and confusing.

Alt text does not take long to include and should be incorporated when the image is uploaded and added to a page of the site. The same image in different contexts may serve different purposes and communicate different information; therefore, it will likely require different alt text in each context.

[8] See WebAIM's article "Alternative Text" for detailed examples and tutorials.

Another common text alternative issue noted was the lack of useful captions, transcripts, and audio descriptions in videos.[9] Many organizations have chosen to use YouTube, which provides free automatic captioning, to host their video content. High-quality audio is important for the auto-captioning feature to work effectively. When using platforms like YouTube, content creators must ensure that captioning is turned on, and they should review captions in YouTube Studio for accuracy, especially for uncommon words like places or individuals' names. One deficiency we saw was a lack of audio description for content provided only as text on the screen (i.e., the content was not spoken). In these situations, the visual content would not be communicated to someone listening (e.g., with a screen reader) or reading the content (e.g., with a braille display) rather than watching it.

Structured Content

In addition to text alternatives, content creators are responsible for structured content, a critical accessibility feature—and an area where most of the sites reviewed needed improvement. It is likely that when the content was written, it was highly structured and based on an outline; however, issues often arise related to how that content is implemented when it is translated to the webpage and published online. In digital publishing, the role of the content creator is to not only provide content, but also identify what type of content is used so that the content can be properly indexed, searched, and browsed no matter what technology the audience uses. The content editor in a CMS will allow you to select pieces of content and assign a content type to it (see Figure 1). Most documents have a combination of the following content types:

- Paragraph, or p: This is the most common type of content on webpages and the way you would identify whole paragraphs, sentences, and phrases.
- Unordered List, or ul: This is an important content type for screens which most audiences skim rather than read. Unordered lists are what you might typically think of as a bulleted list (like this one). Use this list type when the order or sequence of the content does not change the meaning.
- Ordered List, or ol: This is a content type used for steps or a sequence. You might think of this as a numbered list, but it should only be used when the order or sequence matters.
- Heading Level 1, or h1: This is the primary heading of the page or what you might more typically think of as the title of the page. Generally, there should only be one heading per page. In most content editors, the page or post title field maps to the h1. Examples of common h1s include "About" and "Contact."
- Heading Level 2, or h2: These are the subheadings of the page. Complex pages may have many subheadings of equal importance which denote different sections of the page. For example, on the "About" page, the following h2s might appear: "Mission," "History," and "Staff."

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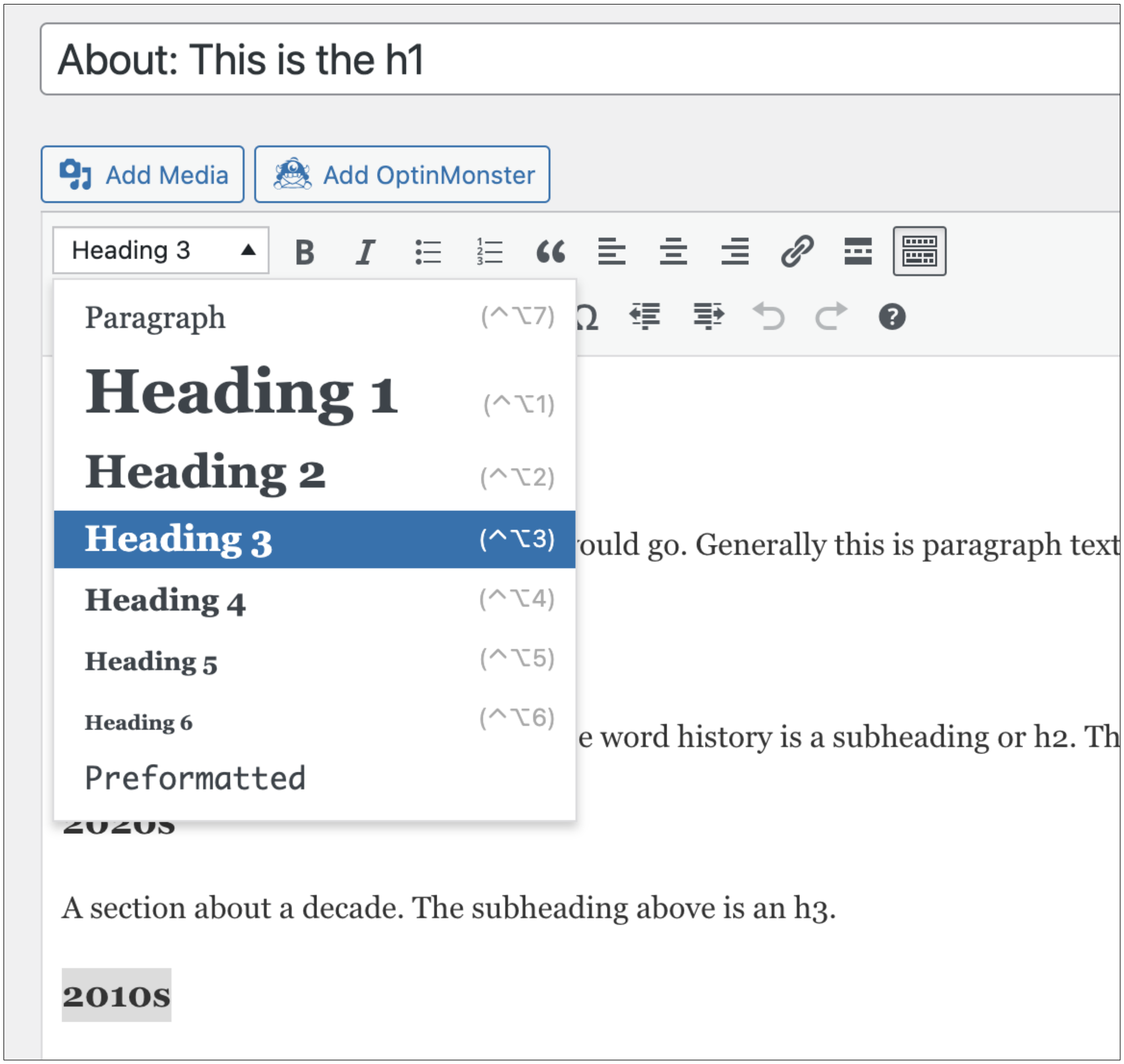
[9] Audio descriptions are used when the image or visual component of a video is not available. Audio description provides details about what is on the screen and the visual information displayed that is not stated in the dialog or general soundtrack of the video. For details, see the W3C's Understanding Success Criteria 1.2.5: Audio Description (Prerecorded).

- Heading Level 3, or h3: These are subheadings of a subheading (h2s) of the page. For example, in the "History" section of the "About" page, you might have h3s such as "2020s," "2010s," "2000s," and "1990s" organizing the section by decade.

Figure 1

Content Editor in WordPress



Note. This screenshot of the WordPress content editor demonstrates that the heading "2010s" has been highlighted and assigned the content type "Heading 3."

Identifying content types properly provides an accurate outline of the document. This is particularly important for screen reader users, for whom content types are critical to navigation and for individuals who may not utilize the provided visual styles, like those using a braille display or apps with "read modes" that strip away visual distractions and allow for customizations to make reading easier and more efficient.

One of the most frequent errors we identified was the inaccurate use of headings. In some cases, this meant that one or more heading levels were inadvertently skipped. In other cases, the content was mislabeled as a heading because of a desire for a different visual style (e.g., larger or bolder text). Inaccurate content identification creates confusing document outlines that are difficult to navigate. It is worth noting that content types can be styled to be larger, bolder, or a different color, although you may need a designer or developer to help implement that as part of the template. Accurate use of content types improves the consistency of a website which helps all users.

PDFs

Many of the sites we reviewed relied heavily on PDFs to deliver digital content to at least some of their audiences in the form of reports, toolkits, and guides. Like website content, these digital documents also need to be accessible. None of the PDFs we downloaded and tested was free of accessibility errors. Most of these errors fell into the categories noted earlier and should be addressed during the creation process (which can be done in software like Microsoft Word, Google Docs, or InDesign) and before they are exported to the PDF format and distributed on the web. When we put the effort into creating accessible content from the start, we can export to different formats, like PDFs, with those features intact.[10]

Template Barriers

Template barriers are built into the underlying code of your website and occur on every page of the site, or they are built into third-party plugins or add-ons that might be used on your site to increase functionality (e.g., an image slider or a contact form). Fixing the template files fixes the issues on all the site pages (unlike content errors, which need to be fixed page by page). Someone with web design or development expertise is needed to remove these barriers. The sites we reviewed were created on a wide variety of budgets, from free templates and themes that come with your CMS to fully customized sites built by large, well-known agencies, and we observed barriers across this spectrum. Historically, accessibility has not been included as a design requirement and has been treated more like an add-on rather than as a critical element of digital infrastructure, resulting in the need for remediation.

Parsing and Language

Markup languages, like HTML, that make a website work have standards that browsers (e.g., Chrome, Firefox, Safari) and other technologies read, interpret, and display. When these standards are not met, there is a risk that audiences will have inconsistent experiences or even be unable to access some of the content. When using the W3C Markup Validation Service to review the sites, we found many parsing errors in the code which are similar to syntax—organizational or grammatical issues you might find in non-code contexts like written English. Not every error caught by such a validation service causes an accessibility error, and some accessibility barriers appear as warnings rather than errors. One such warning, seen on the audits of multiple sites, is that the language of the page is not set. This means that one tiny attribute in the code is missing from the HTML element (e.g., <html lang="en">). This small missing code fragment helps browsers and other technologies determine the language of the content of the page, which is

[10] There are multiple ways to create PDFs using the previously noted software, though each way does not create an equally accessible PDF. For example, in Microsoft Word, content creators should use the Acrobat tab to "Create PDF" rather than print as a PDF. The tutorials on the SUNY Oswego Accessibility Website include details on the best way to export accessible PDFs.

critical for pronunciation in screen readers and audio browsers, and for translation services when the language of the content is not the primary language of the visitor to the site.

Inadequate color contrast also emerged as a common issue. The WCAG defines a minimum amount of contrast between text and the background color which should be met to support people with low vision or colorblindness, or who are in less-than-optimal lighting conditions. As we observed, failures to meet this criterion often occurred in navigational elements like links,[11] captions, helper text in forms, and attempts to call attention to a section of content. This particular issue likely arose because brand color palettes were not developed with accessibility in mind, and certain combinations of those colors do not meet standards. We have listed color contrast as a template issue because many of the issues we observed were in the template's default stylings of that content type. That said, color contrast should also be on the radar of content creators, especially if they can change the way particular elements are displayed on pages.

Navigation

Navigational barriers, especially for audiences who do not use a mouse or pointer device, were prevalent and of great concern during our 2020 review. In our 2021 review, we saw the most significant improvements on some sites in this category but continued to see substantial opportunities for improvement for keyboard users, screen reader users, and smartphone users.

The issues we identified that were related to keyboard navigation can be replicated by attempting to navigate your website using just a keyboard—move from element to element using tab or shift + tab to go backwards, select and submit elements by hitting enter or return, and use the arrow keys to access items in drop-down menus. Some errors were not detected on all screen sizes, so changing the browser window width and performing the same tasks is necessary to fully test keyboard navigation. Most issues arose in top-level site navigation (usually the navigation bar at the top of the page), especially if it included pull-down menus, and within the interactive content of pages in accordions, sliders, tabs, and maps. Some of these elements were not reachable by keyboard, and others were selectable by a keyboard but not visible to the keyboard user. For example, an audience member might tab through the primary navigation of the website and then completely lose track of where they are because what is in focus, or tabbed to, is not made visible. In some cases, this happens because a pull-down menu remains hidden even though elements within the pull-down are being tabbed through; in other cases, it means that the element currently selected is not visually denoted in any way (most browsers do this by default by surrounding the element with a blue rectangular outline, so when this is not present, a developer intentionally turned off this functionality; see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Default Focus State of Hypertext in Chrome Browser

[11] All states of hyperlinks must meet this criterion, including when a link has keyboard focus or when hovered over with a pointer device like a mouse.

Note. In this example, there is a navigation bar with four items: Home, About, Programs, and Blog. The Home link has a blue outline around it to signify that it has keyboard focus. This blue outline is the default browser style for the focus state in the Chrome browser. A live working demo is available (hit tab when the page loads to move keyboard focus to each item in the navigation).

The ability to easily "skim" a page and jump to relevant sections efficiently is necessary for equitable access. Sighted audience members might do this by visually scanning the primary content of the page, which involves skipping over the primary navigation bar of the page almost instantaneously and often unconsciously. They might continue skimming the page by looking at both headings and hypertext to find relevant information. If they have no mobility limitations, they can swiftly do this with a mouse. Without building in specific accessibility features, screen reader users, keyboard users, and other assistive technology users may find navigating a site to be particularly laborious. For example, if the page was just text (including hypertext) with no headings or other navigational aids, the site would always need to be read from top to bottom, with no ability to jump to specific sections of the page. Headings are one type of navigational aid that we discussed previously. Another common option is to provide a "Skip to main content" link at the top of the page which allows a user to skip over the primary navigation directly to the primary content of the page to avoid having to go through repetitive navigational content every time a page is loaded.[12] These are two examples of navigational aids but certainly not an exhaustive list of what is needed for an efficient experience.

Another issue we found that primarily impacts individuals who are not visually seeing the content was the lack of correctly linked labels for form elements, such as input boxes in a contact form. Often, visual labels are provided but are not linked in the code to the input boxes they are associated with, so when someone attempts to fill out the form with a screen reader, they do not know what content to put in what box. For example, when using VoiceOver, a text input box for a person's name that does not have a properly linked label would be introduced as "menu pop up, edit text with autofill menu."[13] This tells an audience member that it is an input box that can be auto-filled with items stored in the browser but does not help the person distinguish between the name, email, and message fields in a contact form, making it frustrating, even impossible, to fill out.

[12] You can see a "Skip to main content" implemented on the WebAIM website by loading the page and hitting tab. The hypertext becomes visible, and selecting that text, by hitting enter, moves you directly to the main content area of the page.

[13] VoiceOver is a screen reader built into the operating system of Mac computers and Apple phones. WebAim has a great practice form file that includes a form with appropriate labels and one without that you can try with the screen reader built into your operating system or with a free screen reader like NVDA.

In addition, although not a distinct part of the WCAG 2.0 AA criteria, we did examine how sites behaved on mobile devices, such as smartphones, given their heavy usage by college students. As noted earlier, guidelines specific to touch devices and small screens were introduced in the 2.1 and 2.2 releases of WCAG. In our review, we found that most sites implemented a responsive design that worked fairly well across screen sizes without the loss of content and functionality, but we did review two sites that did not. One site did have a separate mobile site implementation, and another had no small screen version available, making the experience far less than optimal on a phone. Optimizing for the mobile environment requires addressing the following observed issues:

- the default font size was too small;
- the "hit" areas of interactive elements were too small;
- transparent elements in the navigation made it difficult to read when scrolling through content;
- the layering of some interactive elements, like "Back to top" buttons, prevented those elements from functioning properly on a touch device; and,
- scrolling in two directions (horizontal and vertical) was detected on some sites.

When building and revising sites, it is critical to actually test and use the sites on mobile and touch devices. Smartphones will remain a critical touchpoint in the digital infrastructure and one that should not be overlooked heading into the next election cycle.

Finally, we did note some common readability issues associated with WCAG criteria 1.4.8 Visual Presentation. Level AAA criteria were not an official part of our audit, but it is worth noting that long (i.e., wide) lines of text larger than 80 characters and center-aligned text blocks are difficult to read and very easy to change in a template.

The access barriers we have outlined related to both content and templates all have solutions. If inclusion, and by extension accessibility, is a core value of the civic engagement infrastructure, then the organizations and people within the CEI have an obligation to provide content that is accessible to all consumers of the information we share. The work varies from quick and simple to more deliberate and intensive, but it is all core inclusive practice. In the next section, we describe ways to institutionalize these practices and leverage existing resources in order to achieve greater accessibility.

The Case for Responsibility

In large institutions or systems like the CEI, it can be easy to say that the content creator, editor, sharer, or manager is someone else—and that someone else is responsible for the missing alt text and headings, the shared PDFs, or the underlying code of a website. The reality is that all of us fall into this category: organization staffers, decision makers, college faculty, and student leadership. We either create original content for the organizations we work for or share the work of our colleagues with wider audiences on our websites, on social media, within college courses, at virtual events, and/or in emails. Therefore, we need to take responsibility for creating and distributing accessible content. This means that each of us must prioritize:

- creating accessible content;
- distributing and promoting accessible content;

- supporting student organizers in producing accessible content; and,
- procuring accessible platforms and designs.

These are not unachievable goals but do require that accessibility becomes the expectation—the minimum—and that these practices are built into workflows. In the following section we recommend strategies for each in turn.

Creating Accessible Content

Organizations are accountable for the materials they create and the information they disseminate. Lawsuits related to website accessibility have emerged in many different sectors beyond higher education, with over 2,250 cases in each of the last 3 years and a trend continuing upward (Shaw, 2021). Thus, in addition to improving accessibility because doing so aligns with organizational goals around equitable access, organizations should make these changes to reduce liability as well. Creating new materials with access in mind should be emphasized: It is much easier than remediating existing content. Therefore, to use resources effectively, accessibility should be a criterion for new work and new releases/revisions of publications moving forward.

Investing in Professional Development

All staffers should be involved with professional development around accessibility, although the level of training may vary depending on their role. Minimally, each staffer should understand the basic practices of accessibility and how to implement them in the platforms they work with most.

Professional development does not have to be expensive; there are existing free resources to leverage such as WebAim's detailed articles and tutorials, SUNY Oswego's accessibility website (and those of many other colleges and universities), and numerous webinars from companies that offer accessibility tools and services like Deque, which also hosts a free virtual conference each March called axe-con. In addition, some organizations offer courses by experts. Two options that we have experience with include synchronous trainings through WebAim and asynchronous training through Deque University. Both include in-depth accessibility training for the web, Microsoft Office, and PDFs. Sending every staffer to a training session by one of these experts may be unrealistic, but sending one staffer who can then share with the rest of the team might be reasonable.

Of course, there is no reason individual organizations and campuses within the CEI should tackle these issues on their own. Given the prevalence of joint working groups, webinars, and trainings that already exist in this space, the structural resources exist for professional development to be conducted jointly and cost effectively.

Style Guides

Organizations should consider putting together style or brand guides that provide consistent implementation of accessibility features relevant to content creators. One specific area to include that would be different for each organization is how to use brand colors for consistency and for color contrast.[14] This could include specifications about what combinations of colors can be used (including what color text can be used on what color background and at

[14] Vanderbilt's Brand Style Guide models one way this could be implemented.

what font size) and what other visual indicators should also be implemented (e.g., underlining to signify hyperlinks).

Distributing and Promoting Accessible Content

One of the primary benefits of participation with the CEI are the materials created and shared by various organizations. We direct student leaders to organization websites to find data on the youth vote, review guidelines for planning and strategy, participate in webinars, and download social media graphics. In turn, student leaders direct their peers to organization websites to complete pledge-to-vote forms, learn more about candidates, and share social media content. In our experience, rather than duplicate efforts, staffers readily direct individuals to refer to work produced by other organizations in the CEI when posed with a question outside the scope of their organization. Given the emphasis on building broad campus coalitions dedicated to this work, digital reports and planning guides (often PDFs) are and should be sent far and wide.

Those of us distributing and promoting content have a responsibility to ensure that the materials we share are accessible. Prior to sharing a PDF or slide deck, run an accessibility checker to make sure the content meets the criteria outlined here. Check promotional videos and webinars for subtitles/captions and photos/graphics for appropriate alternative text. Along with using the free resources outlined in the previous section for guidance on how to check a text or image, individuals can use accessibility checkers built into Microsoft Office products and Adobe Acrobat, as well as third-party checkers like the Grackle extension for Google Workspace.

When you encounter inaccessible content, alert the content creator and kindly request that the content meet accessibility standards. Actors and organizations in the CEI regularly push each other to meet best practices—accessibility is a best practice that will benefit from the same collaborative spirit permeating the CEI. When possible, help others within the CEI to level up their accessibility by sharing steps you or your team have used to achieve the standards you are requesting they also meet.

Supporting Student Organizers

Given the importance of student leadership to the CEI, any strategy that prioritizes accessibility must include strategies for helping student leaders value accessibility as central to the work and as an important inclusive practice and communication skillset. Beyond encouraging students who create materials to engage in the training options listed previously, on- and off-campus actors can encourage students in this work in several ways:

- Ensure that incentive programs evaluating civic engagement plans (e.g., competitions) include accessibility as a criterion to be scored.
- Share guidance on accessibility in the form of checklists.[15] Faculty, student affairs staff, and nonprofit staff overseeing student interns and fellows already ask students to create and implement plans that adhere to best practices and check their plans against a variety of criteria.
- Include training on these skills at student-focused events such as state and national voter engagement summits as well as webinar series.

[15] One example is the Social Media Accessibility Checklist by Alexa Heinrich.

In addition to encouraging and supporting students in their accessibility journeys related to student organizing, remind them how this work applies to other domains with which they might be engaged.

Procuring Accessible Platforms and Designs

The work of digital organizing relies on working with third parties in two main categories: those we contract with to design something on our behalf (e.g., hiring an agency to design a website or a publication) and platforms on which we might deploy content (e.g., social media). In either case, accessibility should be an essential criterion for selection and use.

Contracted Design

One key recommendation moving forward is to build accessibility into RFPs, design specifications, and contracts rather than assuming this will be included. Not all marketing and design firms have this expertise, and many consider accessibility an “add-on,” not a baseline requirement. Remember that these agencies are working on your behalf to create something in the name of your organization, so baking the organization’s values into the process is critical.

Platforms

There are a variety of platforms we might use in just the communication work we do: email campaigns, social media, texting, video conferencing, etc. When options are available, we should prioritize those with accessibility features. When evaluating platforms, you can request an Accessibility Conformance Report (ACR), sometimes referred to as a Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT), which is the name of the template before it is filled out.[16] These reports should identify known accessibility issues, workarounds, and roadmaps for resolving issues. Look for recent reports (generally within the last 12 months) and those created or reviewed by a third party.

It is not enough to know that accessibility features are available; once a platform is procured or a decision has been made to leverage it (as in the case of various social media platforms), staffers need to be trained on how to incorporate those accessibility practices into their workflows. For example, Facebook implements automated alt text that may work in some circumstances but likely needs to be edited so that the text provided serves the intended purpose of the image and communicates the same information.

In this section, we reviewed the responsibility of those within the CEI to distribute accessible content and ways to meet that responsibility, including the need to: provide all staffers with training and guidance on creating accessible content; hold ourselves and our peers accountable for the materials we generate and share; and prioritize adopting tools/platforms and contracting with tools that value accessibility. For these steps to be successful, they need to be incorporated into workflows, systems, and routines.

Conclusion

One of the greatest strengths of the civic engagement infrastructure is that it functions as a supportive and collaborative community with a strong commitment to data-driven action. We have identified significant room for improvement in the accessibility of the digital CEI and are

[16] Knowbility’s explainer, Checking 3rd Party Vendors’ Product Accessibility, is a good place to start for learning more about this.

hopeful that actors within the CEI will collaborate on a more accessible future. That said, introductions to digital accessibility can be both daunting and overwhelming, perhaps particularly so for a community as value-driven and Internet-reliant as this one. However, the skills are learnable and the barriers actionable. As with other skills, everyone starts as a beginner—practice and repetition make the process grow easier over time. Each commitment to make one improvement, however big or small at any given moment, is a step toward greater inclusivity. The CEI has, embedded within it, the means necessary (webinars, trainings, shared spaces, shared resources, expertise) to commit to greater accessibility and support participants at various skill levels.

Those dedicated to civic engagement on college campuses know that this work is not just about turning out voters. It is about supporting students as they become active citizens capable of effectively advocating for themselves and others in a plural society. Through the CEI's planning guides, summits, webinars, and more, students develop as campus leaders and learn skills and values they take into their communities beyond campus. Prioritizing accessibility as a component of civic engagement organizing can only benefit students as they develop their own sense of what it means to be an active citizen.

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Building Capacity to Alleviate Poverty Through National Service: An Evaluation Plan Guided by Community Partner Perspectives

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Abstract

This article explores how a national service program, the Mid-South VISTA Project (MSVP), has impacted community partner organizations through capacity-building activities. Housed at Mid-South University (MSU, a pseudonym), MSVP extends the community-engaged activities of campus units while building capacity at partner organizations. The project takes into account dimensions of nonprofit capacity building and how to navigate the community–campus partnership process in the context of the AmeriCorps VISTA program. The data presented in this article are part of a larger case study focusing on the impact of MSU's community engagement center programs on community partner organizations. Findings from interviews with 15 VISTA supervisors guided the development of an evaluation plan that uses logic model domains to center mission alignment and reciprocity as outcomes of the partnership process.

Keywords: community engagement, national service, capacity building, higher education, case study

As the community engagement field evolves, there remains a consensus around the importance of elevating community voices from the margins (Littlepage et al., 2012; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009), alongside an acknowledgment of the challenges inherent in assessing impact at the community level (Cruz & Giles, 2000). Researchers at the Urban Institute noted that "although enhancing the capacity of nonprofit groups is not synonymous with building healthy communities, there are important linkages that need to be explored" (De Vita et al., 2001, p. 5). The activities of nonprofit organizations—and the organizational capacity underpinning their ability to implement their missions—offer a framework for evaluating the impact of community engagement in higher education. This article explores how a national service program, the Mid-South VISTA Project (MSVP), has impacted community partner organizations through capacity-building activities. Findings from interviews with 15 VISTA supervisors guided the development of an evaluation plan that uses logic model domains to center mission alignment and reciprocity.

The Mid-South VISTA Project

MSVP is housed at the Center for Community Engagement at Mid-South University (MSU, a pseudonym). VISTA members complete full-time, yearlong terms of indirect national service during which they work to advance poverty alleviation, capacity building, sustainable solutions, and community empowerment (AmeriCorps, 2021). In contrast to direct service, or hands-on volunteer activities, indirect service builds capacity for host sites through activities such as volunteer management, partnership development, public communications, and fundraising.

MSVP partners with nonprofit organizations, Title I school districts, and community-engaged units on campus. The communities where VISTA members serve contend with persistent poverty, and disparities in income and educational attainment have resulted from centuries of disenfranchisement at the individual and structural levels; in these communities, legacies of racism and persistent underfunding for public education loom large (Duncan, 2014; Myers Asch, 2008). In the state, poverty and unequal access to resources and opportunities fall along racial lines, with power, resources, and influence being historically concentrated among White residents to the exclusion of Black residents (Duncan, 2014).

Many MSVP partner sites operate with very limited resources and staffing. It is imperative for MSVP to attend to the power asymmetries inherent in developing community–campus partnerships since the university can be perceived as a center of wealth, power, and influence (Dempsey, 2010). MSU also carries the burden of its legacy of forced integration (Cohodas, 1997; Eagles, 2009), which can create suspicion among prospective partners that have not historically felt welcome on campus.

Green (2013) conducted an initial program evaluation of MSVP in 2013, and researchers at the Center for Community Engagement completed a follow-up evaluation in 2017 using a survey and interviews. That process surfaced questions around mission alignment and how the university partnership could effectively guard against dependency. The interview data presented in this article were part of that larger study.

Literature Review

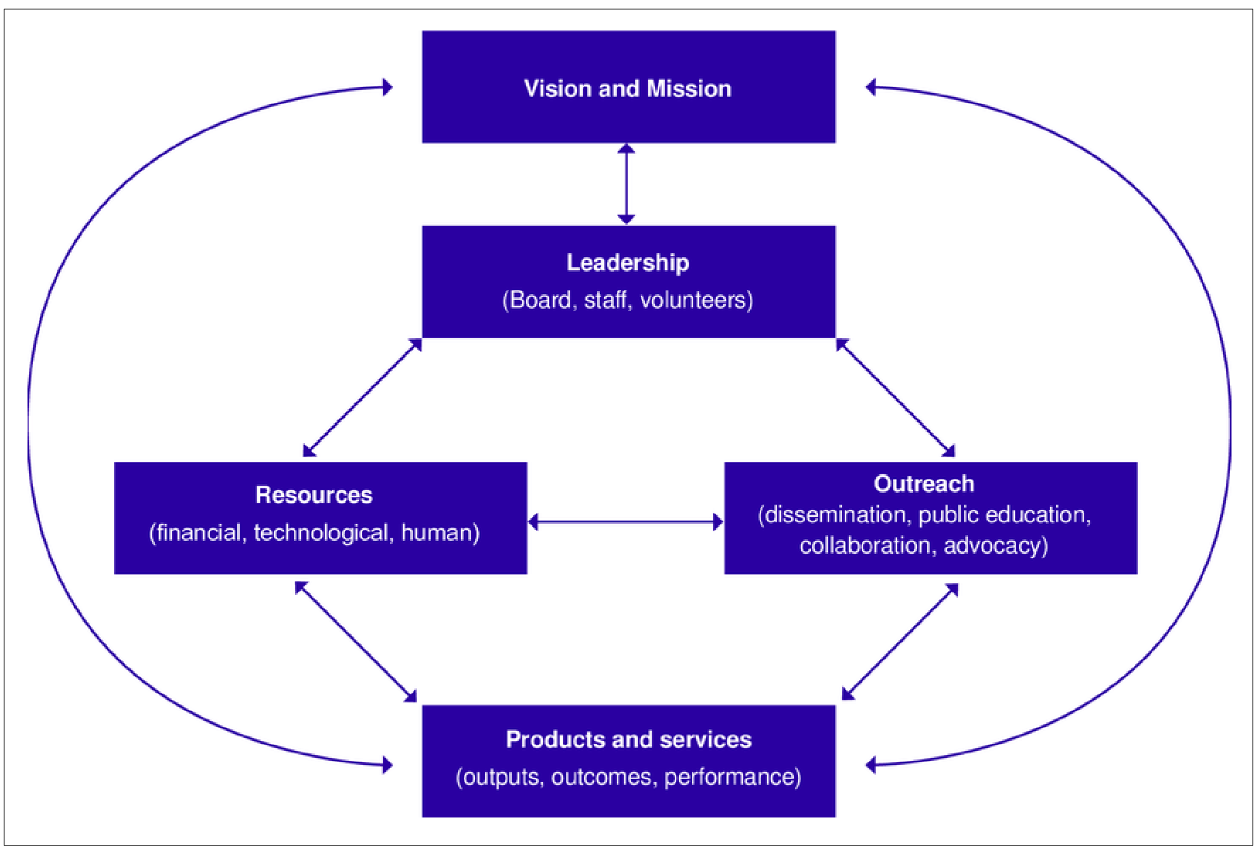
The VISTA program was initiated in 1964 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty (Bass, 2013). Unlike with highly visible public works projects, data for measuring the effectiveness of VISTA were more elusive (Bass, 2013). While it was possible to count the number of VISTA members and beneficiaries enrolled in related programs, there was no consistent benchmark or approach for measuring the changes in attitudes and motivations of those beneficiaries (Bass, 2013). At the organizational level, a 1976 VISTA project survey identified an intriguing paradox, in which community self-reliance had increased yet organizations remained dependent on VISTA members (Bass, 2013).

Asymmetrical power relationships and resource dependency are key concerns in the community engagement literature (Kindred & Petrescu, 2015), in addition to unmet expectations (Sandy & Holland, 2006), the need to provide cultural competency training for students (Srinivas et al., 2015), and confusion about how to navigate the complex bureaucracy of higher education (Enos & Morton, 2003; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). VISTA programs housed within higher education institutions can translate and bridge some of those divides, and building the capacity of community partners is one way to safeguard against power asymmetry and dependency.

The concept of *nonprofit capacity* encompasses vision and mission, leadership, resources, outreach, and products and services (De Vita et al., 2001). Figure 1 shows the interconnectedness of these dimensions of capacity. VISTA members are positioned to contribute to nearly all of these areas, including volunteer management, resource development, outreach, and performance evaluation.

Figure 1

A Framework for Addressing Nonprofit Capacity Building



Note. Source: De Vita et al. (2001, p. 17).

Partnerships are central to how VISTA members build capacity for their organizations; community–campus partnerships also underpin community engagement activities in higher education. One of the fundamental dialectics in community–campus partnerships is that the time required to invest in the partnership—frequently a limiting factor for under-resourced nonprofit organizations—can also be the critical element that leads to transformative and growth-oriented partnerships (Clayton et al., 2010; Littlepage et al., 2012). Partnerships that build organizational capacity, such as VISTA placements, can alleviate those time constraints.

Community engagement researchers have also been clear that community voices are underrepresented in the literature (Littlepage et al., 2012; Sandy & Holland, 2006; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009) and that there is a need for empirical evidence demonstrating how these partnerships benefit community organizations (McNall et al., 2009). Recently, scholars have also focused on partnership processes that most benefit community partners (Adams, 2014; Srinivas et al., 2015; Tinkler et al., 2014). For instance, community partners have suggested that campus partners "learn how to talk together about racial, ethnic, and economic inequities and their causes with candor, and incorporate those discussions into community/campus partnership-building work" (Leiderman et al., 2002, p. 17), underscoring the importance of relationship building and partnership process.

Cruz and Giles (2000) distinguished between the partnership process and its outcomes. Process considerations include the equitable distribution of power and decision-making authority (Schulz et al., 2003), which enhances a sense of reciprocity. Citing Henry and Breyfogle (2006), Petri (2015) defined reciprocity in this way:

> Two or more parties … take collective action toward a common purpose and in the process the parties are transformed in a way that allows for increased understanding of a full variety of life experiences, and over time works to alter rigid social systems. (p. 95)

Bringle et al. (2009) identified the importance of closeness, equity, and integrity in a partnership. Closeness involves the frequency of interactions, a range of collaborative activities, and mutual influence; equity ensures that outcomes are in proportion to investment; and integrity signals alignment between values and approaches. In the VISTA program, these process-oriented considerations must be balanced with performance measurements to justify grant funding and appropriations.

AmeriCorps (2019) currently assesses performance through capacity-building and poverty-alleviation metrics; the capacity-building measures presented in Table 1 were of particular interest in the present study.

Table 1

Capacity-Building Performance Measures

Strategic Plan Objective	Outputs	Outcomes	Interventions
	G3-3.4: Number of organizations that	G3-3.10A: Number of organizations that	Volunteer management

Capacity Building and Leverage	received capacity-building services G3-3.1A: Number of community volunteers recruited or managed G3-3.16A: Dollar value of cash or in-kind resources leveraged	increase their efficiency, effectiveness, and/or program reach	Training Resource development Systems development Donations management

The preceding performance measures connect to the leadership, resources, outreach, and products and services domains identified by De Vita et al. (2001), and they flow into a logic model framework for developing a plan for evaluating organizational capacity building through national service and community engagement.

Methods

A logic model is a framework for facilitating program planning, implementation, and evaluation (Kellogg Foundation, 2004). As shown in Table 2, components of a logic model include: resources, which are used to accomplish activities; activities, which are actions to address the problem or challenge of interest; outputs, which provide evidence of service delivery; outcomes, which are changes that result from activities in the short term (1 to 3 years) and long term (4 to 6 years); and impacts, which are changes resulting from program activities in 7 to 10 years (Kellogg Foundation 2004).

The qualitative data presented in this article are drawn from a convenience sample of 15 in-depth interviews with VISTA supervisors which took place as part of MSVP site visits. The interview data are part of a larger data collection effort that has been ongoing since 2017, which was approved as exempt by the Institutional Review Board at MSU. Site visit interviews are conducted annually to explore how VISTA members contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of operations at their host sites. The 13 interview questions probe areas such as expectations, successes, challenges, mission alignment, impact, workplace environment, and MSVP partnership (see Appendix for the interview protocol). Qualitative data were analyzed using a constructivist approach to understanding the Center for Community Engagement as a case study and MSVP as the data source for understanding dimensions of capacity building among community partners (Creswell, 2007).

Participants and Analytic Process

The supervisors who participated in the site visit interviews represented the plurality of MSVP project partners during the 2017–2018 program year. Four additional interviews from the 2019–2020 year are included as they reflect perspectives of newer partners. Interview participants represented the following organizations, which have been de-identified to preserve anonymity:

- MSU campus-based
    - School of Education
    - Community engagement office at the medical center
    - Residential college
    - Gender equity center
    - Material culture center
    - STEM education center
- Community-based
    - Afterschool and summer enrichment program in the Delta region
    - Arts organization
    - Boys and Girls Club in the Delta region
    - Coalition of nonprofit organizations
    - Community development office at a historically Black college
    - Community farmers market supporting local farmers and low-income consumers
    - Literacy-based organization
    - Nonprofit organization supporting homeless families

The interview findings were analyzed inductively, and the coding process sought to maintain fidelity to the words spoken by respondents (Hycner, 1985; Thomas, 2006). A total of 454 codes emerged across the 15 interviews which reached a saturation point to reveal 19 categories (Hycner, 1985). The categories were mapped onto a logic model framework, in which each domain served as a theme. An overarching theme of alignment highlighted process-based dimensions of reciprocity which can help strengthen the quality of MSVP placements and partnerships.

Findings

The themes included the following: High Potential Placements (Inputs), Indirect Service and Direct Supervision (Activities), Extending Reach and Organizational Change (Outputs), and Dimensions of Alignment, construed as an overarching theme of reciprocity. Themes, categories, and code totals are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

MSVP Supervisor Interview Categories and Themes

Inputs: High Potential Placements	**# of Codes**	**Activities: Indirect Service and**	**# of Codes**	**Outputs: Extending Reach and**	**# of Codes**	**Reciprocity: Dimensions of Alignment**	**# of Codes**

		Direct Supervision		Organizational Change			
Goals and expectations	15	Organization is doing more	49	Organizational partnerships and outreach	24	Host site mission alignment with MSVP	32
Scope of VISTA role	13	Volunteer engagement	9	Broader community reach	31	Supervisor investment in MSVP network	25
Staff of 1	12	Resource development	10	Validation of university partnership	10	Member connection to VISTA and MSVP	17
Qualities of a high-performing VISTA	49	Role and orientation of VISTA supervisor	40	Institutional change at MSU	20	Support from MSVP	21
Characteristics of a well-aligned VISTA placement	28	Challenges when VISTA placement is not going well	24			MSVP reporting and mechanics	25
Total Codes	**117**		**132**		**85**		**120**

Inputs: High Potential Placements

The High Potential Placements theme, construed as Inputs, frames how partner organizations can maximize a VISTA placement. Preparation for recruiting and placing a VISTA member requires the Center for Community Engagement and host site to identify common goals and shared resources, working toward partnership characterized by closeness, equity, and integrity (Bringle et al., 2009).

Supervisor interviewees shared a range of expectations for the VISTA term, from progress on specific tasks, such as volunteer management and issue research, to abstract contributions around program expansion and deepening partnerships. Some supervisors viewed capacity building through indirect service as a constraint for their understaffed organizations. One supervisor revealed that the VISTA had worked directly with third graders on test preparation, while another reflected that a previous VISTA probably would have preferred a direct service role.

Expansive expectations along with the narrowly tailored VISTA role can pose challenges for organizations that identify themselves as a “staff of one”—a frequent refrain among supervisors. A supervisor with the afterschool and summer enrichment program reflected that "at a small nonprofit, the expectation that each person does more than their job description is a given." As the first VISTA at this nonprofit supporting homeless families, the member quickly learned about the programs and clients, overhauled financial education resources, and assembled his own desk. A dedicated VISTA member can be transformative for organizational initiatives, as the residential college director reflected: "We are a small office, so there is less time to set up community partnerships. It is a big deal to have a representative who is the face of service and connecting with the community."

Multiple supervisors highlighted the ability of high-performing VISTA members to take direction and initiative, work independently, write well, communicate with supervisors, and stay organized. The director of the community engagement unit at the medical center reflected that a "VISTA needs baseline knowledge in order to know what questions to ask." Ultimately, a high-performing VISTA in the right placement will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of their projects and overall operations. A VISTA can assume responsibilities that other colleagues at the organization have not had the capacity to take on; in the best case scenario, this creates sustainable new initiatives.

The director of the coalition of nonprofit organizations shared that "the [local campaign for grade-level reading] is now sustainable" after the hire of a full-time executive director funded by the local school districts. VISTA members supported these efforts over multiple years, and the development of the grade-level reading campaign as a standalone 501(c)(3) is a significant success and demonstration of sustainability. This director also addressed the tension between fighting poverty—a sustained effort—and a 1-year term of service: "In 1 year we are not going to witness gains; we must support members to trust the foundation" that they are building.

Activities: Indirect Service and Direct Supervision

The theme of Indirect Service and Direct Supervision represents the Activities domain of the logic model. The tension that emerged relates to the volume of activity that VISTA members can generate alongside the active supervision required to maximize those efforts.

For instance, the supervisor of the farmers market described capacity building in this way: "Now that [the VISTA member] is here, it's not that I'm doing less work, it's that the market can do more." VISTA members drive organizational activity by developing new programs, events, partners, and beneficiaries; leading marketing and communications; collecting data; developing curriculum; conducting research; fundraising; and building systems to track donors and program participants. These activities align with several areas of nonprofit capacity identified by De Vita et al. (2001), such as resources, outreach, and products and services.

There is pressure to sustain initiatives created by VISTA members. Volunteer management and resource development can contribute to sustainability. The supervisor in the School of Education recognized the need for additional volunteers to support the expansion of a collegiate mentoring program started by a previous VISTA. While volunteer management is a very common activity for VISTA members, one supervisor noted the "challenging and sporadic" nature of volunteers in college towns. Other supervisors reported that VISTA members contributed to sustainability by conducting research to support fundraising; some had secured grants with minimal guidance.

Interviews revealed that the role of the VISTA supervisor influences success just as much as the qualities of the VISTA member. Many supervisors hold regular check-ins with VISTA members, generally on a weekly basis, to discuss progress. Beyond regular communication, many supervisors embraced a mentorship role, expressing sentiments such as, “VISTAs have given of their time to be part of the organization. We want to invest in them because they have invested in us,” and “I encourage the VISTA to ask more questions—to approach surface versus systemic fixes.” While MSVP asks supervisors to commit 5%–10% of their time to supervision, interview responses suggested that many supervisors invest far in excess of that benchmark.

The intensity of supervision was apparent for high-performing VISTA members and for those who needed more guidance. Multiple campus-based supervisors noted the challenge of VISTA start dates in September and January, introducing VISTA members at times in the academic calendar when supervisors are less available. Other supervisors addressed their own lack of availability (likely a function of expansive missions and small staff) as well as the need to intercede when VISTA members were “not as polished as the administration might have expected.” Multiple supervisors understood that the VISTA role was likely a first professional experience, and they shared processes they had developed to correct misspellings, grammatical errors, and other typos in emails. One supervisor noted the challenge of tracking performance measures when the VISTA member was not familiar with spreadsheets. Finally, the director of the community engagement unit at the medical center noted that the VISTA serving 2 hours from campus missed out on the camaraderie of other VISTAs serving on campus, signaling the importance of building rapport not only within placements, but also across the MSVP network.

Outputs: Extending Reach and Organizational Change

The Outputs theme of Extending Reach and Organizational Change reveals program expansion and a tangible increase in organizational capacity, which can be reinforced by the enhanced prestige of VISTA as a visible community–campus partnership.

The supervisor at the Boys and Girls Club shared that “there were no community events before the VISTA came on board.” The VISTA member increased parent engagement through a back-to-school night and a health fair. Similarly, the supervisor at the medical center noted that the VISTA member had taken leadership of a community health advocates program by featuring it at an engagement fair and developing a partnership with the K–12 school district to promote health careers among underrepresented groups. VISTA members also lead social media engagement, which was a focus of the VISTA member serving at the community development office at a historically Black college.

Increased outreach drives program engagement. The supervisor at the farmers market credited the VISTA member with “our best spring ever in terms of customer traffic, events, and social media.” Likewise, campus-based supervisors attested to an uptick in requests from local schools to provide enrichment programming, and credited the VISTA members with “allowing us to keep up with requests from teachers” and “allowing our center the opportunity to serve our state.” The director of the arts organization reflected that, historically, previous VISTA members had “launched programs and engaged new people,” and that now “people are reaching out to [us].” This director also shared their organization’s vision to “increase diverse artists and representation on the [organization’s] board.”

The topic of representation also surfaced in the discussion around partnerships and outreach. The VISTA member serving with the School of Education was a Black female who had graduated from a public school system in the Delta. In reflecting on efforts to build credibility at school districts where the majority of students are African American, the supervisor noted the positive impact of a "VISTA [who] looks like the people we are trying to impact." The supervisor recounted a story about the VISTA member running into a former teacher when visiting the partner district. These personal connections enhanced the credibility of the School of Education and its efforts to make inroads in the Delta, where they had previously "encountered pushback against White people from the university trying to 'save' a school." This account illustrates an opportunity to discuss racial inequity and power asymmetries while establishing new partnerships (Leiderman et al., 2002).

Community partners also referenced the credibility they had gained from aligning with MSVP. The farmers market director noted that "small nonprofits are regular people who want to do good, not survey methodologists." This statement highlights how academic partnerships can support program evaluation, among other areas. The nonprofit coalition also expressed an interest in tapping university awareness, charitable giving, and volunteerism. In a similar vein, the director of the afterschool enrichment program in the Delta noted that "VISTA and the Center for Community Engagement have been our 'in' and a connection that has helped to access educational opportunities on campus." This statement reinforces the role of MSVP as both a bridge and a conduit to forming additional partnerships on campus.

Other considerations relating to MSU were not always cast in a positive light. The nonprofit coalition receives many requests for financial assistance from MSU students who are not eligible for services at local agencies because they are not considered residents. Despite the organization's status as a VISTA partner, they had not advanced conversations on campus around the need for additional resources for students facing financial insecurity. Taking a more active role in advocating for students experiencing poverty would require institutional change and commitment beyond VISTA. On campus, some VISTA supervisors spoke of a move, albeit a halting one, to institutionalize community engagement.

One supervisor noted that "faculty love the idea [of VISTA], but they are not as supportive as they could be." This suggests that community engagement initiatives may be used for positive publicity rather than as instruments of institutional change. Another supervisor working to link a service-learning initiative across multiple schools at the medical center reflected on the importance of an "institutional understanding of how much work is required" to do effective community engagement, and that the "increased value-add to campus-based organizations was good for the administration to see." Finally, the supervisor at the afterschool enrichment program in the Delta shared an outside perspective on how VISTA was slowly effecting change at MSU:

> I am hopeful because this hasn't historically been the work of Mid-South University. It's great to partner with the Center for Community Engagement and VISTA. [The director of the Center for Community Engagement]'s connection to the Delta also strengthens the connection. The right people can institutionalize these structures.

Reciprocity: Dimensions of alignment

The overarching theme of Reciprocity encompasses Dimensions of Alignment, highlighting the partnership process. When mission alignment deepens to an integration of goals, partners move along the relationship continuum toward transformational partnerships by increasing closeness, equity, and integrity (Bringle et al., 2009).

Mission alignment resounded in the comments of many supervisors who identified education as a pathway out of poverty. As one community partner said, “We work to improve lives and meet needs by uniting people and resources—it’s an easy fit. VISTAs embody connection and a passion to make a difference.” Another commented, “It’s the same mission. [The VISTA host site] is focused on [Delta] county, while MSVP is a statewide partner in the work, doing the same work.”

Mission alignment also led to supervisor investment in the MSVP network. The interview with the farmers market director resulted in a potluck at the market to build relationships among VISTA members. Numerous supervisors expressed an interest in connecting with other VISTA partner sites, particularly those with similar focus areas. One supervisor addressed the “university and non-university divide,” and believed it would be “helpful to have working sessions with best practices, networking and an opportunity to plug in with other organizations.” These comments suggest that MSVP could operationalize as a network unto itself, providing a platform to transcend the community–campus divide under the auspices of national service.

During the interviews, supervisors requested resources from MSVP, such as model performance measures, survey templates, data collection tools, and technical assistance for VISTA members. This underscores the opportunity to leverage campus resources to support host sites. This became a two-way street when the supervisor at the afterschool program in the Delta offered to share readings the organization uses to orient new staff and volunteers about the history of civil rights struggles in Mississippi. Supervisors also provided feedback on reporting and aspects of the program prescribed by MSVP or AmeriCorps, and several campus-based supervisors emphasized the importance of aligning VISTA start dates with the academic calendar.

Discussion

Inputs, Activities, and Outputs

The initial section of the proposed VISTA supervisor survey will inquire about service areas and organizational dynamics, including staffing, volunteers, reach, and funding. These questions will indicate baseline capacity to maximize the role of a VISTA. The activities section will mirror the work of Green (2013), with supervisors rating VISTA contributions to research, volunteer engagement, planning events and programs, communications, resource development, program evaluation, and partnership development. The outputs will align with the AmeriCorps performance measurements for capacity building.

Outcomes

The outcomes section will help identify longer-term changes that result from VISTA member activities. The following statements are drawn from the interview findings and address organizational development, scope, and reach due to the VISTA partnership. Supervisors will indicate their agreement with a series of statements and provide optional supporting narratives:

- My organization is more visible to the community as a result of this partnership.
- My organization is more visible to the university as a result of this partnership.
- My organization has additional credibility as a result of this partnership.

- My organization has formalized processes and procedures as a result of this partnership.
- My organization has increased its ability to conduct research as a result of this partnership.
- My organization receives additional requests for service as a result of this partnership.
- My organization has expanded its fundraising base as a result of this partnership.
- My organization has created new programming as a result of this partnership.
- My organization has completed additional projects as a result of this partnership.
- The VISTA member has been able to learn and grow as a result of my supervision and my organization's role in this partnership.

These statements evoke an ideal scenario, in which an individual VISTA member's growth influences organizational development and supervisors serve as a gateway to unlocking this potential.

Process Dimensions

The dimensions of process are drawn from the literature on community–campus partnerships and the interview findings. The following statements were crafted to cohere with the final theme of Dimensions of Alignment, signaling partnership reciprocity. In this final section, supervisors will note their agreement with the following statements and provide an optional supporting explanation:

- My organization has strong mission alignment with our campus partner(s) (Bringle et al., 2009).
- My organization and our campus partner(s) have common goals (Bringle et al. 2009).
- I feel a sense of investment in the strength and success of the MSVP network.
- The support that my organization receives from MSVP makes a positive impact on our work.
- The amount of time invested in the community–campus partnership is worth the results (Gazley et al., 2013; Srinivas et al., 2015).
- My organization has developed additional connections on campus (Srinivas et al., 2015)
- Decision making is shared equitably between my organization and our campus partners (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Schulz et al., 2003; Sandmann et al., 2014).
- My organization and the campus partner are working with shared resources (Bringle et al., 2009).
- Sufficient planning has been devoted to this community–campus partnership (Bringle et al., 2009).
- I have the opportunity to evaluate the VISTA's work in a meaningful way (Gazley et al., 2013; Petri, 2015; Sandy & Holland, 2006).

- I believe that this community–campus partnership will be sustainable over time.
- If I had it to do all over again, I would pursue this community–university partnership (Srinivas et al., 2015).

These statements address process dimensions that reach for reciprocity, shared resources, and common goals. While there is power inherent in MSU sponsoring MSVP and selecting VISTA partner sites, eliciting supervisor feedback on the partnership process can shift the program toward greater equity by elevating supervisor concerns and perspectives.

Limitations

As a community engagement program housed at a university, MSVP offers lessons for higher education, with the caveat that VISTA members are not students. While some members of MSVP are recent college graduates, others are retirees or community members seeking a career change. The lessons from MSVP can be applied to community engagement insofar as they pertain to intensive capacity-building activities carried over a calendar year.

It is also important to note that nearly half of respondents represented campus-based supervisors extending community engagement activities through MSVP. These insights, however, illuminate an institutionalization process at MSU which contributed to a successful application for the 2020 Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, a competitive designation based on data collection and institutional practices that contribute to the public good (Public Purpose Institute, 2021).

Conclusion

A resource-scarcity mindset can pervade places that contend with persistent poverty. VISTA can help reframe that narrative by emphasizing capacity building—doing more in partnership than any organization can do in isolation. VISTA can be a powerful tool for colleges and universities working to institutionalize their community engagement missions while strengthening the operations of community partner organizations. Doing so while elevating the voice of community partners can ensure that these efforts attend to partnership process, mission alignment, and reciprocity.

MSVP uses VISTA supervisor interview findings to create an evaluation plan to understand dimensions of capacity building and partnership process through the project. A logic model provides a useful frame for organizing organizational resources, VISTA activities, and AmeriCorps performance measures with dimensions of partnership process and mission alignment. The data surface an important dialectic raised by VISTA supervisors: the promise of a new colleague at an understaffed organization versus the burden of actively supervising that VISTA member. This underscores the value of time as a precious commodity at nonprofit organizations and parallels findings around the burden of supervision for service-learning courses (Clayton et al., 2010; Littlepage et al., 2012). While a VISTA member can bring tremendous resources to an organization, sustaining a capacity boost remains a challenge.

MSVP holds great promise as a network: Supervisors on and off campus acknowledge the community–campus divide, despite their aligned missions. MSVP can help bridge that divide, both in the form of campus-based outreach driven by VISTA members as well as network facilitation by the Center for Community Engagement.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol for VISTA Supervisors and Members to Assess the Community Impact of MSVP

VISTA Supervisor Interview Questions

Introductory Questions / Checking In

1. What was your initial expectation of how a VISTA would contribute to your organization?
2. How is the VISTA term going so far? What are some successes you have had?
3. What are some challenges you have faced in working with a VISTA and/or MSVP? (Probes: time constraints of VISTA term, time commitment to VISTA, trust/confidence in VISTA, supervision challenges, resources required for VISTA, training/orientation of VISTA, communication with MSVP.)

Mission Alignment and Impact

4. To what extent does the VISTA member demonstrate a connection to the national service movement?
5. How does the Mid-South VISTA Project's mission align with your organization's mission? How does the VISTA's role impact that connection?
6. What benefits has the VISTA produced for your organization? (Probes: increased visibility/awareness, resource development, etc.)

Workplace

7. What challenges, if any, have you encountered in training and supervising the VISTA? (Probes: Is the expectation that supervisors devote 10% of their time to supervision too burdensome? Has the VISTA required additional training to fulfill the requirements of the VAD?)
8. How do you ensure that the VISTA member is staying focused on the VISTA Assignment Description (VAD) and not displacing the work of staff members?
9. How are you integrating the VISTA member into your staff?

MSVP Partnership

10. What improvements can be made to the reporting mechanisms for the VISTA (i.e. timesheets and monthly reporting)?
11. How would you characterize the support that you receive from MSVP? What additional support do you need?
12. How can the Center for Community Engagement improve partnerships and strengthen the MSVP network?

13. Have there been other outcomes of this partnership for your organization not captured in the questions above?

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Legislators' Perceptions of Public University Student Lobbying Efforts On Public Higher Education Legislation: A Case Study

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Abstract

College students have a legitimate interest in many policy issues that affect their campuses, but are they effective in lobbying their state representatives in support of their interests? In the study discussed in this article, the authors surveyed elected members of the Kansas state legislature to determine if student lobbyists were effective in influencing legislators' decision making around matters of public higher education policy in Kansas. The researchers applied interest group theory to analyze legislator perceptions. The study findings indicated that 70% of legislator participants did not alter their perception of an issue after meeting with a college student lobbyist. In addition, the results showed that legislator responses aligned with partisan politics, with Democrats more likely to understand and empathize with the perspectives of college students than their Republican colleagues.

Keywords: college students, lobbying, higher education policy, interest groups

Public higher education interest groups in many states are operating under increasingly constrained budgets. Moreover, many higher education lobbying professionals must contend with negative views of their institutions and increased pressure from legislators to justify the funds they receive from public coffers. In light of such complications, higher education governmental relations professionals in the state of Kansas are seeking to harness the enthusiasm and passion of students to help achieve their lobbying objectives. The formation of new advocacy groups and activism campaigns, the organization of student visits to the capitol and legislator visits to campuses, and efforts to match legislators with student constituents demonstrate a readiness to embrace student involvement in state politics. However, the question remains: How do legislators actually perceive these new student advocates? The purpose of this study was to understand legislators' perceptions of student lobbyists and to develop more effective strategies for students to influence public policy.

Theoretical Framework

Since this study drew heavily from the field of political science, it was only appropriate to use a theory from that field—interest group theory—as a framework. Interest group theory posits that individuals will coalesce around a shared cause with the goal of influencing legislators to enact their proposals (Cigler & Loomis, 2011). This is hardly a new concept. The first petitions seeking to influence legislation came from a variety of groups during the country's founding, including merchants, shipbuilders, clerks, and veterans (Byrd, 2006; Swanstrom, 1988).

Higher education can legitimately be considered an interest group within state policymaking (Thomas & Hrebenar, 2004), and higher education institutions and the professional in-house and contract lobbyists they employ are manifestations of interest group theory. These professionals, usually lobbying on behalf of public institutions for more state funds, work strategically in the institution's interest as well as the students'. The presence of professional higher education lobbyists has been shown to impact public policy (Tandberg, 2010). Tandberg (2010) also outlined that the increasing number of interest groups in political systems often lead to natural alliances and greater impact. Public universities are natural allies in their competition with other sectors for more public funding, especially when they share a governing structure, as is the case in Kansas and many other states with a central Board of Regents (Tandberg, 2010). Clearly, professional higher education lobbyists have the potential to play a significant role in shaping policy.

College students also have a long history of influencing public policy, although their methods have differed markedly from those of professional lobbyists. The civil unrest and protests on college campuses in the 1960s played a considerable role in the passage of the Civil Rights Act (Blumberg, 1991; Flacks, 1967). Today, in the vast, ever-changing world of professional politics, college students continue to drive change through organizing, while universities, corporations, nonprofit entities, and foreign interests influence public policymaking in unprecedented ways (Loomis & Cigler, 2011). Interest group theory contends that if college students want to have the same kind of outsize influence as the institutions they attend, they must find ways to gain legitimacy in the eyes of their conservative state legislators.

Review of Literature

The existing literature on public interest groups and their effectiveness in influencing public policy is extensive (Potter, 2003). However, the body of literature on lobbying in higher education is less well developed, and more limited still is the literature on student lobbyists in state legislatures (Benveniste, 1985; Burgess & Miller, 2009; Longo, 2004). As Cook and McLendon (1998) noted, the literature around the politics of higher education has suffered from "benign neglect" (p. 186).

Despite the relatively narrow body of literature on higher education lobbying, the scholarship on interest groups has overwhelmingly shown that state-level interest group activity impacts public policy in a variety of ways within a state (Tandberg, 2010). Additionally, although there is considerable debate about whether interest groups—and the outside or "dark" money some of them possess in abundance—help or hinder democracy, they are a natural occurrence when like-minded individuals or economic sectors share a common goal (Lowery, 2007). Higher education institutions are no exception. In-house lobbyists constantly initiate, cultivate, maintain, and monitor relationships in the interests of their institutions (Ferrin, 2005). Indeed, though recent literature has shown that the partisan divide has deepened so much that it seeks to draw higher education into its gaping maw, it is crucial that professional higher education lobbyists cultivate friendships in both partisan tribes (Burbridge, 2002).

Researchers have attempted to distinguish partisan views on higher education policy in what they see as two different philosophies on a crucial higher education issue: cost. According to Doyle (2007), Republicans in the U.S. Congress released a report in 2003 stating that the rise in college and university tuition could be directly attributed to bureaucratic inefficiencies on campuses, while Democrats laid the blame at the feet of state legislators diverting public resources away from higher education, leading the universities to increase tuition rather than cut services. Until recently, both parties viewed higher education as a sacred public good and held similar viewpoints on higher education policy (Doyle, 2007). Generally, Republicans want to make higher education institutions more accountable for how they spend taxpayer money and have published reports and authored bills to do so (Boehner & McKeon, 2003). Democrats, on the other hand, seem to be more concerned about how tuition increases affect the ability of different groups to access higher education, and they have introduced bills to require states to spend a certain portion of their budgets on higher education (S. Amendment 2725, 2014). While this previous research might help to highlight party and ideological divergences, it does not explain why conservative legislators seem to view college student lobbyists with disdain, nor does it address higher education policy or viewpoints at the state level, choosing instead to focus on federal representatives (Doyle, 2007). Also, Doyle's (2007) work does not explore the views of "moderate" Republicans on higher education, a group that has regained legitimacy in Kansas politics (Berman, 2016).

A small body of research has focused on best lobbying practices for higher education, yet it makes no mention of using organized student groups to lobby in any capacity, much less meet with legislators directly. Murphy (2001) found that best practices for lobbying for increased higher education appropriations comprises a two-pronged approach. The first approach involves getting organized and developing a comprehensive state relations plan and a grassroots network of the legislators' constituents who are alumni of the university and business groups in the legislators' districts (Murphy, 2001). The second best-practice approach that Murphy (2001) advocated relates to researching and presenting the university's economic impact in each legislative district, showcasing the jobs it has created and its overall fiscal impact. Ferrin (2005) described further strategies employed by higher education lobbyists, including contacting influential constituents who are alumni, engaging in letter-writing campaigns, publishing research results, and, in extreme cases, "open denunciation of opponents" (p. 182). It is also common for higher education lobbyists to mount inexpensive public relations campaigns through "beat" reporters assigned to cover their campuses (Ferrin, 2005). These strategies are employed in many states, including Kansas, where every dollar of public funds invested in higher education yields $11 in economic output (Kansas Board of Regents, 2011). However, as such strategies fail to curb funding cuts, higher education governmental relations professionals have begun appealing to students to serve as lobbyists in order to provide a fresh perspective and a human touch to efforts to increase funding.

As student lobbying for higher education issues continues its historic upward trend, there is a need to evaluate its effectiveness. Tankersley-Bankhead (2009) sought to measure student lobbyists' impact on state-level higher education public policy by surveying students, professional higher education lobbyists, and legislators in Missouri. She found that students employed many of the same techniques as professional lobbyists, such as relationship-building and providing information on higher education policy. However, there is a need to expand the field of inquiry beyond Missouri to other states and focus on legislators' perceptions of student lobbyists in order to determine their effectiveness.

A recent Pew Research Center study found that 58% of Republican voters had a negative view of higher education (Fingerhut, 2017). Similarly, in our study, Republican legislators who answered the survey were much more likely to view higher education as a private good, were more likely to have negative or neutral views of student lobbyists, and were much less likely to be influenced by a student's lobbying efforts.

There are several divisive issues facing U.S. higher education institutions, and Kansas has been at the forefront of at least two of these issues, leading students from the public universities to come together around several shared interests. For instance, Kansas is not immune to the trend of accelerating decline in state appropriations for higher education. Since 2008, states have reduced higher education appropriations by an average of 23%, with Kansas facing a 22.8% reduction (Mitchell et al., 2015). College students in Kansas have an interest in reversing this trend. Although affordability is among the most pressing issues for Kansas college students, students formed and joined various interest groups to lobby the Kansas Legislature in reaction to the passage of concealed-carry legislation in 2017 (Kansas Legislature, 2017). This legislation allowed persons over the age of 21 to carry a weapon on campus without a permit or training, despite overwhelming disapproval from a majority of surveyed students and faculty (Cagle, 2017). Student groups mobilized to lobby the legislature to repeal this legislation, joining groups such as Moms Demand Action and Students Against Campus Carry, and forming the Kansas State Legislative Advocates group. Within the context of lobbying for these issues, this study came to be.

Adopting an interest-group theoretical framework and drawing on partisan views on higher education and higher education policy initiatives in the state of Kansas, this study sought to determine legislators' perceptions of student interest groups. We use the term *student lobbyist* to refer to any student enrolled at a Kansas public higher education institution who calls, emails, or meets directly with a legislator in an effort to influence that legislator's vote on an issue pertaining to higher education. In addition, a *legislator* is any one of the 125 members of the

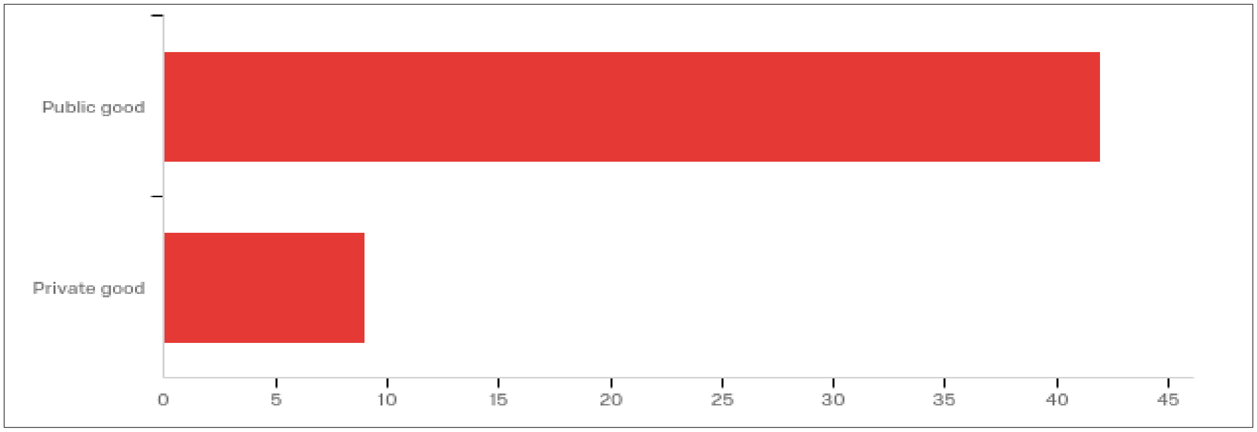
Kansas House of Representatives or the 40 members of the Kansas Senate.

Methodology

This study, which was approved by the Kansas State Institutional Review Board, set out to answer the following question: Are student lobbyists effective in influencing legislators' decision making on matters of public higher education policy in Kansas? To address this question, we distributed a 20-question qualitative survey—designed to capture information regarding modes of student contact with legislators, perceived effectiveness of student lobbyists, and legislators' perceptions of student lobbyists' familiarity with public higher education policy issues—to all 165 elected officials when the state legislature reconvened on May 1, 2017. Reminder emails were sent every Monday while the legislature was in session. The responses were analyzed by the first author and synthesized, cross-referenced, and analyzed by both authors.

Of the 51 respondents to the survey, 47 completed the survey in its entirety. Thirty-eight respondents were Republicans, and 13 were Democrats. Twenty-nine were Republican House members, 10 House Democrats, nine Senate Republicans, and three Senate Democrats. Thirty respondents were graduates of Kansas Board of Regents (KBOR) public universities. Regarding respondents' views on higher education, 82% saw higher education as a public good for Kansas, while 17% saw it as a private good (see Figure 1). One hundred percent of those respondents who saw higher education as a private good were Republicans; arguably, these individuals represented the most conservative survey respondents. The respondents were also confident in their own grasp of higher education issues in Kansas, with 95% indicating they were at least "moderately well informed" on such issues.

Figure 1



The 20 survey questions were categorized in five different sections, with each section a different variable (see Appendix). Questions 1–4 and 19 sought to identify the party affiliation of the respondents and their attendance at or exposure to KBOR schools, their overall perception of higher education in Kansas, and how well informed they believed themselves to be on higher education issues in Kansas. Questions 5–7 identified the frequency of contact between college students and legislators via email or phone, and/or in person. Questions 8–10, 15, 17, and 20 addressed the central focus of the study: the legislators' perceptions of the student lobbyists, such as their respectfulness of alternative viewpoints, the degree to which they were informed on the issues, and whether the student being a constituent was likely to alter their opinion of the student. Questions 13, 14, 16, and 18 had the strongest implications for future practice, as they sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the student lobbyists, asking if the legislator had ever altered their opinion or changed their vote based on testimony from a student lobbyist, and comparing the effectiveness of higher education governmental relations professionals to that of student lobbyists. Lastly, Questions 21 and 22 were purely qualitative, asking the legislators to share positive and negative interactions with student lobbyists.

Discussion of Findings

Adhering to our definition of student lobbyists for this study, interaction with legislators was not limited to organized efforts; college students who took it upon themselves to contact a legislator to give testimony or lobby that legislator in person, by email, or by phone were considered lobbyists. Therefore, one variable we addressed was the frequency of contact with students. The study data showed that students were more likely to email a legislator, and more frequently, than call them (see Figures 2 and 3). In fact, no student lobbyist contacted a legislator by phone more than three times a month (see Figure 3).

Figure 2

Frequency of Contact With Students by Email

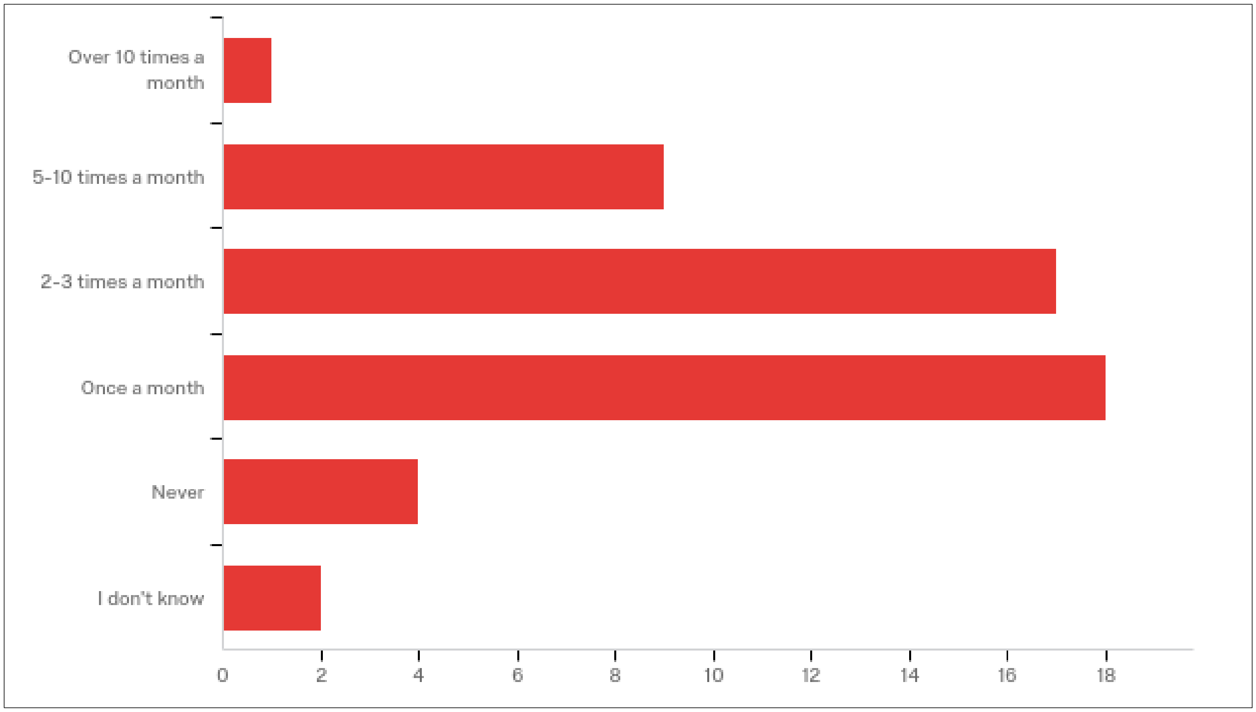
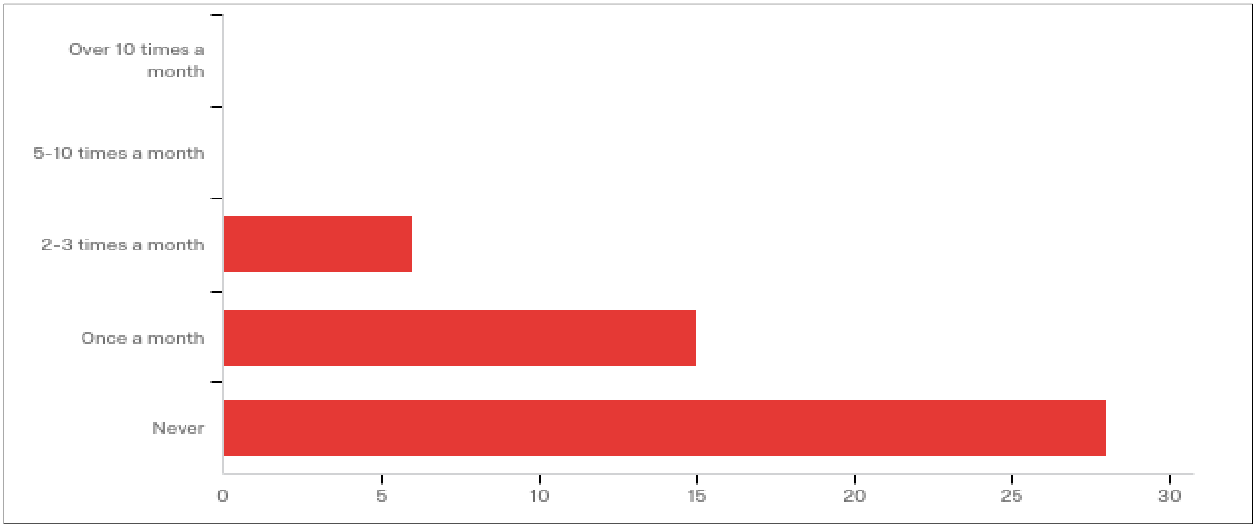


Figure 3

Frequency of Contact With Students by Phone



When we analyzed the data related to legislators' perceptions of the student lobbyists themselves, the partisan divide reared its head. Asked if the students who contacted them helped the legislators see issues from the students' viewpoint, nine of the 51 Republicans answered "No," while all but one Democrat answered "Yes" (see Figure 4). By this metric, students were much more effective at evoking empathy from Democrats than Republicans. When legislators were asked if the students who lobbied them possessed valuable insight into the issues facing Kansas higher education, the results were more mixed (see Figure 4). Again, students were more likely to have insights that resonated more with Democrats; though 16 Republicans answered "Maybe," nine Republicans answered flatly, "No." The third question in this section of the survey assumed that some Republicans would view college students as disrespectful of their views on higher education. While the variance in opinions on this question was an entirely Republican one—all 13 Democrat respondents answered in the affirmative—29 of the Republicans also answered in the affirmative (see Figure 4); only two Republicans answered "No," and seven answered "Maybe." Democrats were also much more likely to agree that student lobbyists were more informed on the issues. Nine out of 11 Democrats said students were "moderately," "very," or "extremely" well informed. Conversely, 15 Republicans saw the student lobbyists as "moderately well-informed," 11 viewed them as "slightly well-informed," and four perceived the students as "not well informed at all." This partisan disconnect is troubling, as it mirrors the Pew data suggesting strongly that Republicans are more likely to have hostile views of higher education (Fingerhut, 2017).

Figure 4

Partisan Perceptions of Student Lobbyists

		What is your political affiliation?		
		Republican	Democrat	Total
Do the students who come to lobby you help you to see higher education issues in Kansas from thei...	Yes	23	12	35
	No	9	0	9
	Not sure	6	1	7
	Total	38	13	51
Do the students who come to lobby you have valuable insight into issues pertaining to Kansas high...	Yes	13	10	23
	No	9	1	10
	Maybe	16	2	18
	Total	38	13	51
Do the students who come to lobby you come across as respectful of you views on higher education...	Yes	29	13	42
	No	2	0	2
	Maybe	7	0	7
	Total	38	13	51
Are you more likely to consider a college student's opinion if that student is a resident of your...	Yes	21	5	26
	No	5	4	9
	Maybe	10	2	12
	Total	36	11	47
Which of these groups is the most informed on issues pertaining to Kansas higher education?	Student	3	1	4
	Professional higher education lobbyists	25	9	34
	Non-higher education professional lobbyists	2	0	2
	Your constituents	6	1	7
	Total	36	11	47
How well-informed are Kansas college students on the issues facing higher education in Kansas?	Extremely well	0	1	1
	Very well	6	4	10
	Moderately well	15	4	19
	Slightly well	11	2	13
	Not well at all	4	0	4
	Total	36	11	47

When evaluating the effectiveness of the student lobbyists through the lens of outcomes—that is, influencing legislators to change their votes or alter their views on higher education issues, or to simply be seen as a legitimate lobbying force alongside professional higher education lobbyists—the results were disconcerting. An alarming 70% of legislators (29 of 36 of Republicans, versus four of 11 Democrats) said that a meeting with a college student lobbyist had never altered their view on an issue (see Figure 5). Though there was still a partisan slant to this data point, perhaps most interestingly, there was little partisan difference in the effectiveness of student lobbyists in changing votes. A total of 87% of the respondents—88% of Republicans and 81% of Democrats—indicated that they had never changed their vote on an issue based on the testimony of a college student (Figure 5). If the central goal of lobbying is to change minds on an issue (e.g., whether to cast a vote in favor of allowing guns on campus), then the student lobbyists in Kansas have suffered (and are suffering) a resounding defeat. However, all is not lost for these student advocates. Sixty-six percent of the respondents (64% of Republicans and 73% of Democrats) said they were "equally likely" to consider the opinion of students as the opinion of professional higher education lobbyists when voting on an issue (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Partisan Perceived Effectiveness of Student Lobbyists

		What is your political affiliation?		
		Republican	Democrat	Total
Has testimony or a meeting with a Kansas college student ever altered you view of an issue pertai...	Yes	7 19.44%	7 63.64%	14 29.79%
	No	29 80.56%	4 36.36%	33 70.21%
	Total	36 100.00%	11 100.00%	47 100.00%
Is a Kansas college student more likely or less likely to convince you to vote a certain way on a...	More likely	9 25.00%	2 18.18%	11 23.40%
	Equally likely	23 63.89%	8 72.73%	31 65.96%
	Less likely	4 11.11%	1 9.09%	5 10.64%
	Total	36 100.00%	11 100.00%	47 100.00%
Whose opinion carries the most weight on your decision when voting on a bill pertaining to Kansas...	Student's	2 5.56%	3 27.27%	5 10.64%
	Professional higher education lobbyist's	5 13.89%	1 9.09%	6 12.77%
	Non-higher education lobbyist's	1 2.78%	0 0.00%	1 2.13%
	Constituent's	28 77.78%	7 63.64%	35 74.47%
	Total	36 100.00%	11 100.00%	47 100.00%
Have you ever changed your vote on an issue pertaining to higher education due to testimony from...	Yes	2 5.56%	1 9.09%	3 6.38%
	No	32 88.89%	9 81.82%	41 87.23%
	Maybe	2 5.56%	1 9.09%	3 6.38%
	Total	36 100.00%	11 100.00%	47 100.00%

Such results highlight the challenges Kansas college students face in establishing themselves as a legitimate interest group commanding the attention and respect of many legislators. Other factions, such as professional higher education lobbyists, have the legislative clout to effect policy change and are therefore perceived as worthier of interest group status. While students have a legitimate interest in many policy issues that affect their campuses, the survey results send a clear message that they have not melded their interests into a faction that commands influence. Arguably, this is reflected in the lack of literature on students as lobbyists or advocates in public policy.

Much work remains for these students, and building bridges with legislators—namely more conservative legislators—should be of primary importance for student lobbyists and the higher education governmental relations professionals who advise them. The data gathered from this survey did not paint a particularly rosy picture; yet, considering that using students as effective lobbying tools is still a relatively new concept, there are few precedents. Creativity and innovation are needed, and what better environment for creativity and innovation than a college campus?

Implications for Practice

The results of this study will help public higher education interest groups, such as higher education lobbyists, student governing associations, and higher education administrators, to better understand legislators' perceptions of student lobbyists, more effectively train and prepare student lobbyists, and/or revise their lobbying strategies. This study also has implications for governmental relations or student interest groups seeking to more successfully engage and lobby members of their state legislatures. In times of constrained budgets, public higher education institutions should be looking for the most efficient ways to leverage their greatest resources: the students themselves.

More effective student lobbyists would likely translate to more votes in favor of increased resources for higher education, leading to reduced tuition and addressing socioeconomic inequity in higher education. With continued divestment of public funds for higher education in states that have factions of legislators that increasingly see higher education as a private good, the findings of this study will benefit students and lobbying professionals in many states.

Since the aim of this study was to inform higher education governmental relations practice, it is appropriate to analyze the data's implications for college student lobbyists and higher education governmental relations professionals. Previous literature has indicated that Republicans are adopting increasingly negative views of higher education, and the data gathered in this study reflect this finding. Conservative Republicans in the Kansas Legislature are more likely to view higher education as a private good, primarily benefitting the individual graduate, not the state as a whole. Conservatives are also more likely to listen to the counsel of professional lobbyists than students, have negative views of student lobbyists, and view students as not well-informed or uninformed about the issues, or not respectful of opposing views regarding issues facing Kansas higher education.

Finding alternative ways to reach conservatives would be a key component to more successful student lobbying outcomes. The literature around higher education and politics has supported this since conservatives control most state legislatures and are the prevailing force behind budget cuts to higher education, including in Kansas (Seltzer, 2016). The onus for altering these perceptions is on students and on higher education governmental relations professionals, who must put more effort into training student lobbyists, supplying them with information that will get through to conservatives (e.g., the economic impact universities have in their districts, the number of graduates in their districts, etc.), and being seen with students in order to give them more legitimacy. Some of the "soft skills" that professional lobbyists possess—such as the ability to tolerate opposing views, engage in respectful debate, eloquently express their point of view, and frame the narrative of their cause using concrete evidence—would be a logical focus in the training of student lobbyists. Making progress with this training could go a long way toward making inroads with the conservative factions of the Kansas Legislature, as supported by this study's survey results. Additionally, a "debate camp" prior to any visit to the capitol could help introduce students to views held by legislators and also reinforce the need to be respectful, to give legislators their undivided attention, and to rehearse their "pitch" for more funding. A "practice run" like this could give student lobbyists a more realistic glimpse of the lobbying profession, fostering an appreciation for how difficult their task is.

The assertion that constituents of legislators' districts are the most effective voices in policymaking was supported by our study findings. Drawing on the finding that legislators were much more likely to consider a student's opinion on an issue if the student was a resident of the legislator's district, we recommend that, when assigning legislators for students to talk to, efforts should be made to match constituents with their legislators. Not only will this help build a relationship between the student and the legislator, but it will also show the legislator that residents of their district care about higher education funding; potentially, this will be in their mind when they cast a vote. This also brings into account that the majority of legislators of both parties are the most likely to consider the views of their constituents over the views of students or professional lobbyists (who are not constituents). Therefore, a matching program would be effective when preparing for higher education lobbying efforts.

Lastly, as the study findings suggest, legislators from both parties see higher education governmental relations professionals as more informed on issues than students. Therefore, these professionals should lend their expertise and legitimacy to student lobbyists. Given that higher education governmental relations professionals devote considerable time and resource to building relationships with legislators, these professionals should consider helping the students they advise build similar relationships and gain greater legitimacy in the eyes of legislators. The qualitative answers to the study survey showed that many legislators wanted the students to be successful, and many had been continually impressed with the performance and conduct of the student lobbyists.

One legislator said, "I have met with numerous college students during the session and they have made a very positive impression on me." Another legislator stated, "All interactions have been positive and respectful." Building upon such positive impressions is paramount to the successful lobbying outcomes of students. Perception is critical when building a new program in the public sphere. If student lobbyists are not perceived as legitimate interest groups, they stand little chance of success.

Limitations of the Study

As with many qualitative surveys, the number of responses in this study was relatively small, though our survey did achieve a response rate of 31%, which, according to the Kansas State University Director of Government Relations, is well above average (S. Peterson, personal communication, April 28, 2017). Additionally, many members of the Kansas Legislature who did not respond could have provided a starker contrast between the parties on perceptions of student lobbyists and offered more qualitative testimony on their interactions with student lobbyists.

In our nuanced political society, "Republican" and "Democrat" are not neat identifiers of ideology. Lest we dissuade respondents from completing the survey, we did not use more specific identifiers such as "moderate Republican," "fiscal conservative," or "progressive vs. moderate Democrat." In particular, the "moderate" or "centrist" Republican faction in Kansas muddied the results concerning partisan views since these Republicans are overwhelmingly in favor of increased public funding for higher education and are much more likely to view students as effective advocates for their universities.

Suggestions for Further Inquiry

To enhance the success of future higher education lobbying efforts, it is vital that researchers continue to explore the reasons conservatives distrust higher education and continue to view it as a solely private good. Demanding fiscal accountability and good stewardship of public funds is a major reason why conservatives do not trust higher education; however, this does not explain why they choose to ignore higher education's public benefits, with graduates earning more, creating jobs, and conducting research in STEM, agriculture, and other areas that produce immeasurable economic output in their legislative districts. An inquiry into the growing number of conservatives who do not focus on such public goods is worth exploring.

Because students are a relatively new resource in higher education lobbying—and likely not one to fade any time soon—more research should be conducted on how involvement in the political process through lobbying helps students develop into informed and engaged members of civic life. The field of student development theory could be augmented significantly by a theory of student political identity development that complements sexual identity, racial identity, and social identity development.

In addition, since this study was limited to Kansas, further studies should be conducted in other states. The perceptions of student lobbyists in other states might vary greatly, especially in states with well-established and vocal student populations. Iowa State University, for instance, has a longstanding Alliance for Iowa State program (http://alliance.isualum.org/) through which university stakeholders, including students, lobby the legislature around a slate of issues pertinent to the university. The Legislative Advocates program at Kansas State University (https://www.k-state.edu/sga/executive/legislative-advocates/index.html), of which the first author serves as chair, was modeled after the Alliance for Iowa State. Tennessee, with its deep-red political leanings and well-established place as a leader in higher education innovation, would be a noteworthy case study in its use of student lobbyists. The political climate of Kansas is unique, and the results of this study should by no means be used to generalize the perceptions of student lobbyists in other states, especially more diverse and more Democratic states.

Additionally, higher education governmental relations professionals should be surveyed in order to capture their perceptions of student lobbyists and how effective the students are in achieving their lobbying outcomes. Conventional wisdom states that student testimony on how budget cuts affect their lives is an effective tool for lobbying, but perhaps, in the end, students are not the most effective "vehicle" for delivering that testimony. The results of a broad survey could help revise lobbying best practices for higher education governmental relations professionals.

Conclusion

Student lobbyists have seemingly been unable to change the minds, and by extension, the votes of legislators on higher education public policy issues in Kansas. These students are perceived by many conservative legislators as being uninformed on issues, disrespectful of opposing views, unable to add value to their conversations, and less informed on issues than professional higher education lobbyists. As one presumably ultra-conservative legislator said, in a particularly negative tone:

> Students have an idealist viewpoint that may not reflect my district constituents' values. Liberal professors have too much influence on basic values instilled by parents and family. That aspect makes me not want to send kids off to be brainwashed on liberal doctrine.

This was not an isolated comment. Today, student lobbyists and higher education governmental relations professionals must not only contend with declining funds, but also legislators who are hostile to the very idea of higher education, despite the evidence that it is an undeniable public good for their districts.

More positively, several of the survey respondents did see higher education as a public good, viewed the students as respectful of their opinions, and used adjectives like "genuine," "passionate," and "rational" to describe the students. A majority of Democrats held the student lobbyists in high regard on all metrics, except for altering their views or changing their votes. Using these data to inform their practice moving forward, student interest groups in Kansas can reevaluate their lobbying strategies, become more prepared in their interactions with legislators, and seek help, training, and legitimacy from professional lobbyists.

Many in the public sphere and in political circles lament that college students are not more involved in the policymaking process. Investing in higher education and curbing the growth of student debt is an unprecedented issue impacting millennials and now Generation Z. Getting students civically involved on their campuses, harnessing their passion and their frustration with elected officials, and ultimately helping legislators see the societal benefits of higher education as a worthwhile investment is a new and innovative approach for higher education governmental relations professionals to pursue. Actively involving college students in lobbying for higher education will hopefully yield dividends in the form of greater social equality, reduced student debt, higher middle-class wages, and, ultimately, a healthier democracy.

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Appendix: Legislator Survey

What is your political affiliation?

- Republican
- Democrat

Which chamber of the Legislature are you a part of?

- Senate
- House of Representatives

Are you a graduate of a Kansas Board of Regents university (Washburn, Fort Hays, Pittsburg, Wichita State, Emporia State, Kansas State or the University of Kansas)?

- Yes
- No

Do you see higher education in the state of Kansas as a public good (benefits all of Kansas) or a private good (primarily benefits the individual graduate)?

- Private good
- Public good

How often do Kansas college students email you to try to influence your vote on an issue pertaining to higher education?

- Over 10 times a month
- 5-10 times a month
- 2-3 times a month
- Once a month
- Never
- I don't know

How often do Kansas college students call you to try to influence your vote on an issue pertaining to higher education?

- Over 10 times a month

- 5-10 times a month
- 2-3 times a month
- Once a month
- Never
- I don't know

Have you ever had a Kansas college student meet you in your legislative office to try to lobby you on an issue?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Do the students who come to lobby you come across as respectful of your views on higher education?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Do the students who come to lobby you have valuable insight into issues pertaining to Kansas higher education?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Do the students who come to lobby you help you to see higher education issues in Kansas from their point of view?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Has testimony or a meeting with a Kansas college student ever altered your view of an issue pertaining to higher education?

- Yes
- No

Is a Kansas college student more likely or less likely to convince you to vote a certain way on a higher education bill than a professional higher education lobbyist?

- More likely
- Equally likely
- Less likely

Are you more likely to consider the opinion of a student who comes to lobby you if that student is a resident of your district?

- Yes
- No

Whose opinion carries the most weight on your decision when voting on a bill pertaining to Kansas higher education?

- Student's
- Higher education lobbyist's
- Non-higher education lobbyist's
- Constituent's

Which of these groups is the most informed on Kansas higher education issues?

- Student
- Higher education lobbyists
- Non-higher education lobbyists
- Your constituents

Have you ever changed your vote on an issue pertaining to higher education due to testimony from or a meeting with a Kansas college student?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

How well-informed are you regarding the issues facing higher education in Kansas?

- Extremely well
- Very well
- Moderately well
- Slightly well
- Not well at all

How well-informed are Kansas college students regarding the issues facing higher education in Kansas?

- Extremely well
- Very well
- Moderately well
- Slightly well
- Not well at all

Describe a positive experience you've had as a legislator when meeting with a college student who is trying to lobby you (if any).

- Open-ended

Describe a negative experience you've had as a legislator when meeting with a college student who is trying to lobby you (if any).

- Open-ended

Authors

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Dr. Lisa M. Rubin is an associate professor in the College of Education at Kansas State University. She serves as co-editor of the *NACADA Journal.* Dr. Rubin is a recipient of the National Association of Academic and Student-Athlete Development Professionals (N4A) 2020 Research Award, the 2019 Professional Excellence Award, and the 2009 Professional Promise Award. She received the Big 12 Faculty Fellowship and the NCAA Innovations in Research and Practice Grant in 2018. In 2017, she was named one of the Top 25 Woman Leaders in Higher Education and Beyond by *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*.

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Book Review: The World: A Brief Introduction, by Richard Haass

Steven Elliott-Gower
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Discussed in this review:
The World: A Brief Introduction. By Richard Haass. Penguin Press. May 2020. ISBN: 9780399562396. 400 pages. Paperback, $18.00.

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Richard Haass's latest book, *The World: A Brief Introduction*, is ambitious, and largely successful. The author's purpose is to "provide the basics of what you [the reader] need to know about the world, to make you more globally literate" (xvii). Central to the book's success are its organizing structure and principles, the author's vast foreign policy experience (and the perspective it lends), his lucid writing style, and, most importantly, his discipline in deciding what to include and what to leave out.

The book consists of four sections: "The Essential History," "Regions of the World," "The Global Era," and "Order and Disorder." The first section provides an overview of the history of international relations from the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) to the present—in an impressive 43 pages. This section offers some historical perspective on the book's later content and highlights, more than any other section, Haass's academic discipline. Some readers might wonder why, for example, Haass does not acknowledge debates about the evolution of national sovereignty or alternative theories about the origins of the Cold War. The answer is that the book is a *brief* introduction, and this section is an *essential* history. There is also the question of audience, which I will come back to later.

The second section, "Regions of the World," reviews the recent history, geopolitics, and defining economic and political challenges of the major regions of the world—Europe, East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Americas. Those defining challenges include an aging population and the rise of right-wing populism in Europe, the increasing influence of China in East Asia, and Indo-Pakistani tensions in South Asia. Africa and the Americas, however, get relatively short shrift in this section.

The first two sections, which comprise half of the book, provide the historical and regional contexts for the third section, "The Global Era." The section's first chapter, on globalization, is followed by chapters focusing on the causes, consequences, and prospects for cooperation in the arenas of terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, migration, cybersecurity, global health, trade, currency and monetary policy, and development. Here, Haass's key arguments are convincing because he uses globalization as the organizing principle, framing it primarily as an economic force, but then examines terrorism, migration, etc., as manifestations of globalization.

The author's aforementioned discipline notwithstanding, I found the chapter on nuclear proliferation to be a little narrow. The chapter might have dealt more broadly with weapons proliferation (including conventional weaponry) or weapons of mass destruction, or it might have included a paragraph or three (as opposed to a single sentence) on arms control. Of course, those with special interests in, say, international development or global health would no doubt have wanted to see more in those chapters as well.

The point is that this is a book for a general student audience, not for academic specialists. As someone who has spent his professional life writing about and practicing international relations, Haass (now the president of the Council on Foreign Relations) is concerned that, according to national surveys, many U.S. college students know next to nothing about the political-economic world that affects their lives.

This balanced, timely, clearly written, and neatly organized book would therefore be especially well suited to first- or second-year Introduction to Global Issues courses (or similar offerings). It would be less well suited to Introduction to International Relations (IR) courses since Haass eschews IR theory. However, having said that, there are plenty of references to IR concepts, such as sovereignty, deterrence, balance of power, and alliances (to name a few), throughout the book, especially in the "Order and Disorder" section, which details challenges to the post-war global order. Moreover, the book offers excellent suggestions for further reading and includes extensive endnotes.

By providing a foundation for global literacy (at least as defined by the author and his milieu), this book serves as a potential springboard for informed civic engagement with global issues—whether for citizens connecting the global to the local, voting in democratic elections, advocating for global causes, or decision making in globally connected organizations.

Finally, *The World* is part of an admirable and much-needed educational outreach effort by the Council on Foreign Relations which includes the World 101 and Model Diplomacy websites—valuable resources for students, educators, scholars, and practitioners alike.

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Dr. Steven Elliott-Gower is associate professor of political science at Georgia College. He is faculty advisor to the Honors Global Civic Literacy Residential Learning Community, and former faculty advisor to Model United Nations and Model Arab League. He teaches international relations, global issues, national security policy (using Model Diplomacy role-playing simulations), and U.S. foreign policy, and is the author and editor of numerous books, articles and book chapters on weapons proliferation, including International Cooperation on Nonproliferation Export Controls. He has also designed and led study abroad programs around the world.

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Book Review: Run: Book One, by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, L. Fury, and Nate Powell

Allison Bannister
Independent Scholar

Discussed in this review:
Run: Book One. By John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, L. Fury, and Nate Powell. Abrams ComicArts. August 2021. ISBN: 978-1419730696. 160 pages. Hardcover, $24.99.

March. By John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell. Top Shelf Productions. September 2016. ISBN: 978-1603093958. 560 pages. Trilogy Slipcase Edition, $49.99.

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"Everybody can read comics" (Lewis et. al., 2021, p. 82), a young John Lewis notes in the pages of his posthumous graphic novel *Run: Book One*. The comment refers ostensibly to the educational comics produced and distributed by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in Lowndes County in 1966, but ultimately it echoes, with self-reference, an acknowledgment of the rhetorical work Lewis hoped to complete, first with his award-winning graphic novel series *March* (2016) and then with the follow-up series *Run.* Both series are co-written by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin; Nate Powell, the cartoonist for *March*, returns to illustrate the prologue for *Run* before handing off the reins to L. Fury. *Run* is inextricably tied up with *March*; thus, this review reflects necessarily on the earlier series as well as the newest publication.

Run picks up where *March* left off, beginning with the aftermath of *March*'s major victory, the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. It introduces (or reintroduces) dozens of activists involved with the civil rights movement and touches on major events between August 1965 and July 1966. While *March* follows the action of John Lewis as a young activist at the heart of the civil rights movement, *Run* deals primarily with reaction—that is, with the fallout and transformation of the work depicted in the first series. Lewis is engaged with some of the protests and campaigns described in this volume but not all of them; he observes and comments on national and international events, painting a broader picture of the way different threads of activism, local elections, and larger issues around race and racism unfold in the year described. *Run* is a dense and sometimes dry book, laying the groundwork for additional installments of the series and, presumably, setting the stage for John Lewis's initial run for political office.

Despite the terrible and tragic acts of violence and racism depicted in *March,* that series is ultimately hopeful. It sets Lewis's reflection on his life and on his early work within the framing narrative of attending President Barack Obama's inauguration, a celebration of the changes occurring in Lewis's lifetime and the hard-won progress in the fight for racial equality. Read today, the victory of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, where *March* ends, feels less conclusively victorious. In 2021, challenges to voting rights have once again become a national crisis, with states across the country making voting more difficult in ways that actively disenfranchise communities of color, and with the U.S. Senate unable to agree to new federal protections, allowing a voting rights bill honoring the legacy of John Lewis to languish under threat of filibuster.

Within this political environment, the first installment of *Run* has been released, and it is bleaker than *March*. Written during the Trump presidency and completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Run* recognizes the complexities of victory and the necessity of continued, ongoing work. It expresses both frustration and determination, a willingness to get knocked down and show up again the next day, ready to do it all again. It highlights the pushback against progress, the insidious depths of racism, and the challenges of bringing people together, even when their goals are largely aligned. Over the course of the year depicted, Lewis becomes increasingly isolated as philosophical differences at SNCC fracture the organization's leadership, eventually leading to the end of his time as the chairman and of his involvement with the organization. Although it hints that new opportunities are just around the corner, the book ends on a down note, with Lewis alone and unmoored.

Throughout *March* and *Run*, Lewis-the-protagonist and Lewis-the-co-author demonstrate consistent attention to rhetoric—to the power of words, images, and actions—to shape minds and create change. The books are works of history and would be useful texts in courses focusing on the civil rights movement, but they are also rhetorical tools for the present, teaching readers the tenets of non-violent protest and laying uncomfortably bare how relevant the battles of the civil rights movement are to the politics of today.

In her work on the impact of television on the evolution of rhetoric, Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1988) noted that,

> The civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's was catalyzed not by eloquent words but by eloquent pictures. The most moving words of spring 1963 were written by Martin Luther King, Jr., from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama…. But pictures from Birmingham, not words, precipitated passage of the Civil Rights Act. (p. 58)

Lewis understood the power of those images: Repeatedly he went to jail as a non-violent protester, using his own body as a medium for visual rhetoric and protest (Haiman, 1967), and he was among those brutalized at Selma. Jamieson (1988) wrote that,

> ABC cut from its broadcast of the film *Judgement at Nuremberg* to carry the bloodbath [at Selma]…. Ten days later in a nationally broadcast address to a joint session of Congress, President Lyndon Johnson urged adoption of his Voting Rights Act. (p. 59)

Scholars such as Dale Jacobs (2007) have argued that comics can serve as valuable teaching tools, not only by making important topics more appealing and approachable to reluctant readers, but also through their complexity as multimodal texts requiring high levels of visual literacy. These graphic novels lend themselves particularly well to the classroom, offering powerfully resonant lessons on American history, civil rights, and civic engagement, as well as lessons in visual and multimodal rhetoric. John Lewis’s decision to spend his final years writing comic books was no impulsive whim: These books represent continued steps in a life committed to justice, non-violent protest, and the power of visual rhetoric.

Although *Run: Book One* provides an excellent overview and illustration of key events in 1965 and 1966, Lewis’s own disempowerment during that time, the frustrations and losses faced, and the broad but shallow detail of the historical account leave the book unsatisfying and the narrative arc incomplete. It is a useful follow up to *March* but does not yet stand up well on its own. Despite Lewis's death in 2020, the publisher has indicated that there will be future books, and hopefully the completed series will build upon the foundations established in *Run: Book One* and offer further insight into the political life of the Congressman. There is great potential here to illustrate the work of running for office and of serving a community and a nation in that way; however, *Book One* is transitional, building on the activism of *March* while still setting the stage for John Lewis to “run.” I look forward to future installments of the series and am eager to see where this builds. For now, I recommend *March* over *Run* as a more complete work on visual rhetoric and American history.

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Allison Bannister is a cartoonist and comics scholar, with an MFA from the Center for Cartoon Studies and a Ph.D. in Communication and Rhetoric from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. Her scholarship explores multimodal composition and design practices as well as multimodal rhetoric, with a focus on comics. As a cartoonist, she has published work in more than a dozen anthologies and literary journals in the US and Canada, and served as an editor on the anthology Who is the Silhouette?. In 2020, she was awarded a Swann Foundation Library of Congress Fellowship to perform archival research with comics artwork from across the last century. Her current work expands upon her doctoral research.

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Feature: The American Democracy Project

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The American Democracy Project (ADP), housed at the American Association of State College and Universities (AASCU), aims to help institutions produce college and university graduates who are equipped with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences they need to be informed and engaged members of their communities. ADP integrates reciprocity, co-design, attentive listening, and mutual respect into all of our programming thanks to the ongoing guidance and thought leadership provided by the ADP Steering Committee and Civic Fellows. Through programming that encourages professional development and collaboration, ADP focuses on integrating curricular and student life experiences, promoting civic agency, developing civic- and equity-minded pedagogies, and fostering experiential and community-based learning.

If you are looking to become involved in our work, join us at the annual Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Meeting, where faculty, staff, students, and administrators have opportunities to share civic engagement strategies and collaborate with colleagues. Our theme for the 2022 CLDE Meeting is "Equity and Democracy," and our in-person conference will be held in Minneapolis, Minnesota, from June 21–24, 2022. (Explore the call for proposals now; registration details and more information will be released on our website as it becomes available.)

Beyond CLDE, there are many ways to become involved in ADP. This year, we are hosting a series of Global Literacy Talks, allowing students and faculty to join in conversation about impactful topics. In addition, during these pandemic years, ADP has committed to developing, sustaining, and nurturing multiple communities of practice (CoPs) and ensuring that the valuable insights gleaned by CoPs are accessible to the wider community. The following are initiatives supported by ADP's use of CoPs:

- The Global Civic Literacy cohort project offers faculty and staff the unique opportunity to provide an engaging and accessible pathway for students to build global civic literacy using resources from World101 from the Council on Foreign Relations.
- **Re-Imagining Campus-Community Partnerships** gives institutions the unique opportunity to use tools provided by Collaboratory to collaborate and deepen their understanding of community engagement.
- The **Economic Literacy Project** is an ADP initiative in partnership with Up to Us, designed to help students increase their knowledge of the U.S. national debt, fiscal policy, and overall financial literacy.
- Faculty and staff launched the **Deliberative Dialogue Institute** to train ADP members in creating and deploying deliberative dialogues on their campuses. This year, the institute has trained over 70 ADP faculty, staff, and students.
- A group of faculty joined forces to create an **Educational Tech Showcase** to discuss strategies for navigating technology options, explore educational pedagogies, and share best practices.
- We look forward to re-launching **Stewardship of Public Lands** early next year as a virtual cohort experience and then meeting in person at a national park in 2023.

The World101 Toolkit demonstrates the impressive outcomes that can result from these focused and energized CoPs. The Georgia Caucus, too, collaborated and generated the practical

ADP Coordinators Guide for our campuses to use as they foster institutional support for civic engagement.

I look forward to continuing to share the work that our campuses are doing and to finding more ways to encourage civic engagement in higher education and beyond. Please reach out to me (Cathy Copeland, director of ADP) to be added to our ADP newsletter list or with any questions. You can schedule a meeting via Calendly or send me an email.

Author

Cathy Copeland is the director of the American Democracy Project, which supports AASCU member campuses in programming to encourage students to be informed, engaged citizens for our democracy. Prior to AASCU, Copeland taught for more than 15 years at various institutions of higher education where she taught rhetoric, communication, and a series of transdisciplinary courses that encouraged students to use innovative research methods to tackle real-world problems such as the 2020 Census; human trafficking; the 2020 elections; food insecurity; and local, state, and national diplomatic and defense issues. She earned an M.A. in English Literature from Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis and a B.A. in biology from Hanover College. She also completed doctoral coursework in Renaissance Literature at the University of Alabama.

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Assessing and Improving Political Learning and Engagement on College Campuses

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Abstract

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities' American Democracy Project (ADP) and the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE), located at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, formed a 3-year partnership to pilot a process for fostering institutional change in order to advance political learning and engagement on college campuses. The project's multidimensional approach to collecting information, deploying dialogues, and crafting interventions provided insight into the necessity of generating institutional support for civic engagement initiatives.

This report reviews the goals, plan, and process of the 3-year, multi-phased initiative. Throughout the report, the authors weave the results of multi-stage evaluations of the project's successes, challenges, and lessons learned; evaluations drawn from a mid-term survey and focus groups; and evaluations of exit focus groups upon the completion of the project. The report also includes testimonials from campus teams which offer direct insight on a range of project stages. In addition, the authors offer a meta-analysis of the reports each campus team produced from its own focus groups and interviews, identifying common themes and overarching findings.

The authors found that qualitative methods, followed by dialogue, represented an effective approach to assessing and shifting campus climates for political learning and engagement. Not only did this approach produce compelling insights and influence campus structures and culture, but it also catalyzed change. Campuses reported that the dialogic approach used in the focus groups during the assessment phase fostered discussion, raised awareness, and generated interest in political learning and democracy.

The authors also found that a cohort model and the multi-campus community of practice strengthened both the project and the participating representatives from the campuses. The importance of the community of practice speaks to the broader ethos of conversation, collaboration, and community in the project.

Keywords: American Democracy Project, ADP, IDHE, Institute for Democracy, campus climate, political engagement, higher education

Introduction
by Cathy Copeland, Director of the American Democracy Project

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities' American Democracy Project (ADP) and the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE), located at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, formed a 3-year partnership to pilot a process for fostering institutional change in order to advance political learning and engagement on college campuses. The project's multidimensional approach to collecting information, deploying dialogues, and crafting interventions provided insight into the necessity of generating institutional support for civic engagement initiatives. The following report encompasses strategies and recommendations for future projects.

In 2017, in collaboration with the community created at the annual Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Meeting, ADP created and disseminated a Theory of Change that is organized around four guiding questions and that highlights the importance of fully integrating civic engagement work throughout curricular and co-curricular programming and across a campus. The CLDE Theory of Change also stresses the value of moving beyond episodic interventions so students can build the habit of informed engagement. In an effort to understand how to build generative and relational civic-engagement campus climates, the ADP-IDHE team qualitatively assessed campuses through focus groups and campus-wide dialogues. Strategically, for ADP, the results of this work provided critical insight into the value of communities of practice (CoPs) within the realm of civic engagement and how deliberative dialogues can be strategically deployed on campuses. Thanks to this report, ADP recognized the value of creating CoPs that connect on specific topics, generate useful outcomes, and continue to build community, and ADP built a strong foundation for COP- and dialogue-based work. For this reason, and many others, I appreciate the report, and I hope readers will find it of value as they think about how to create engaged campus climates.

All of ADP's work, including this report, brings me hope during this time of upheaval and fear. The ADP-IDHE project started pre-pandemic and before my tenure at ADP, and the project concluded just a few months into the pandemic. The ongoing thread within this work is how direct action on the part of close-knit communities that care about the strength and well-being of their institutions can effect remarkable change. As the pandemic lingers in the world, this work—and the work produced by multiple CoPs at ADP institutions—demonstrates the sustainability of civic engagement.

Project Overview

In the fall of 2017, ADP and IDHE formed a partnership to pilot a process for fostering institutional change in order to advance political learning and engagement in democracy in higher education. Working with 12 ADP institutions nationwide, IDHE designed and coached campuses through an iterative change process of planning, assessment, and campus-wide dialogue to identify interventions.

The ADP-IDHE project was designed with the overarching goal of improving student political learning and participation in democracy, with targeted interests in the state of political discourse and equitable political participation. It was also designed to test a methodology for institutional self-assessment and institutional change. Specifically, the goals and deliverables were to:

- form a multi-campus learning community for exchanging ideas and support;
- explore the possibility of developing a reliable and replicable approach to assessing and improving campus climates for political learning and engagement;
- identify interventions for other campuses' consideration and use;
- produce presentations and scholarly and practice-oriented publications;
- identify model institutions from which others can learn; and,
- identify individuals at participating campuses who can guide new cohorts of campuses pursuing the same process and goals.

Through this collaboration, project coordinators wanted to learn whether campuses could work with a set of instructions from and coaching by IDHE to engage in a process of self-assessment that would lead to institutional change. Could individuals at the participating campuses develop the expertise to serve on a research team to conduct climate studies at other institutions or, alternatively, coach new cohorts of campuses through the process? What tools and support are needed? And perhaps most importantly, how can climate studies result in institutional change, not just a report, as is the case with many other campus-climate efforts?

Project Design and Goals

The project design incorporated several phases over the 3-year period:

1. Planning: Forming a strategic, diverse coalition, articulating goals, tailoring messaging, studying institutional change processes, learning to conduct qualitative climate assessments, conducting dialogues, and identifying interventions.
2. Assessment: There were two approaches used in this project: assessment done by an independent, external research team (two campuses) and an internal self-assessment process with coaching by IDHE (10 campuses). All assessments included focus groups from all constituencies on campus using a common analytic framework, protocol, coding scheme, and reporting outline. The process included obtaining permission from each institution's institutional review board (IRB).
3. Dialogue: Planned and facilitated campus-wide discussions about the report results, designed to lead to interventions and change.
4. Implementation: A plan, beyond the anticipated 2-year timeframe of the project, for implementing the interventions.

The project faced several unforeseen challenges that interrupted momentum, caused delays, and extended the original 2-year timeline to 3 years. The most significant were (1) obtaining IRB approval from each campus, (2) completing the self-assessment phase, and (3) completing campus-wide dialogues in the wake of COVID-19.

We secured the resources for two climate studies to be conducted by an independent (external) research team consisting of four experienced qualitative researchers from IDHE, ADP, and participating campuses.[1] For these two external studies, the research team visited each campus, collected and analyzed data, and wrote draft reports. The other 10 campuses went through a process of self-assessment, under guidance from IDHE. At the end of the assessment phase, the campuses or external research team reported on the findings from the assessments. While individual reports are confidential, all institutions agreed to share aggregated findings without attribution to an individual campus.[2]

The 12 campuses[3] selected for this project included the following:

- University of Nebraska–Omaha (UNO); Omaha, NE
- Keene State College (KSC); Keene, NH
- James Madison University (JMU); Harrisonburg, VA
- Illinois State University (ISU); Normal, IL
- Stockton University (SU); Galloway Township, NJ
- Ferris State University (Ferris); Big Rapids, MI
- Weber State University (WSU); Ogden, UT
- Central State University (CSU); Wilberforce, OH
- Sam Houston State University (SHSU); Huntsville, TX
- Fayetteville State University (FSU); Fayetteville, NC
- San Francisco State University (SFSU); San Francisco, CA
- Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI); Indianapolis, IN

A crucial aspect of the project involved the development of a community of practice among representatives of the campus teams. Through this CoP, the campuses shared experiences and learning, with a goal of improving results and building long-term partnerships and relationships. The community was built through regular gatherings, both virtual and in-person. Campus teams shared their successes and challenges, and discussed all aspects of the project. The CoP met face-to-face at three conferences where project organizers ran workshops and exchanged ideas. The importance of the CoP speaks to the project's broader ethos of conversation, collaboration, and community.

[1] This team included Nancy Thomas, Jennifer Domagal-Goldman, Ishara Casellas Connors, and Stephen Hunt.

[2] For the original climate studies conducted by IDHE, researchers obtained "exempt status" approval from Tufts' IRB based on a review concluding that the study would cause no "harm" to any human subjects; the 10 original campuses then submitted Tufts' exemption to their own IRBs for a simple and quick approval. However, in this case, unfortunately, because the 10 campuses were conducting the focus groups and collecting the data on their own, each had to seek individual IRB approval from its respective institution. IDHE produced a model application for the institutions to use, but different IRBs required unique materials. Ultimately, securing IRB approval at the 10 campuses delayed the project more than 6 months.

[3] Campuses are generally anonymized in this report, in the interest of confidentiality; however, campus stories feature identified authors.

Process and Reflections

To provide a clear picture of how the pilot progressed through its phases, this section details four aspects of the project structure—building and managing on-campus coalitions, assessment, reporting, and dialogues—and presents both reflections from project coordinators and campus-authored stories.

Building and Managing On-Campus Coalitions

As a means of securing buy-in from leadership, guaranteeing sustainability, and generating support for the project across campus, participating institutions were asked to build coalitions. Ideally, these coalitions would include people with diverse positional authority, relevant skills and knowledge, and influence. Project organizers guided campus teams through coalition selection with these goals in mind, and campus teams in turn did substantial work to strategically build their coalitions. Given the scope of the project, with a 3-year timeline that included intensive research and eventual interventions, the construction of strong coalitions was vital. Furthermore, coalition building was itself a kind of intervention; by requiring this step, the project helped campuses build connections and interest that will benefit future work on political learning and engagement. Indeed, in the evaluations, participants indicated that one of the notable benefits of their participation was the connections they made in doing the work.

Generally, participants also reported that the coalition-building process went well, at least initially. Most coalitions comprised 10 or more members, ranging from students to faculty and staff to community members, and included leaders such as deans, a vice president for advancement, the director of a center for community engagement, and an associate vice chancellor of student affairs. The offices that participated most frequently in the project were student affairs, community or civic engagement, academic affairs, institutional research, and specific academic departments such as communication and political science. The variety of positions and offices represented on coalitions paints an encouraging picture of diverse and substantial support for the work at participating campuses to start the project. As mentioned, however, several campuses reported significant turnover and/or disengagement over time in their coalitions. Some campuses rebuilt their coalitions, but many simply had to complete the project with dwindling numbers of personnel.

Reflecting on the project design, project coordinators were confident in the decision to include this step as a prerequisite for project participation. Campus coalition members were instrumental in the planning and implementation of all steps of the process, and the connections made through the coalitions continue to benefit those working on political learning and engagement at participating institutions. However, any future iteration of the project should build in mechanisms and strategies for maintaining coalitions or rebuilding them when turnover occurs.

Reflection on Coalition Building
by Leah Murray, Weber State University

Weber State University understood that coalition building was integral to the implementation of the ADP-IDHE project. We understood that the better put together the coalition, the better the entire project would run. To a certain extent, the WSU experience bears that out. Early on, we put in quite a bit of work coalition building, and this work allowed us to negotiate the obstacles that proved insurmountable on some other campuses. First, WSU has conducted its ADP campus work as a partnership between academic affairs and student affairs since 2005. We recognized early that the work of engaging the next generation of citizens could not just happen in a curricular space since our students spend so much of their time in co-curricular worlds. We built a partnership between the two divisions to foster democratic engagement on our campus. When we began the ADP-IDHE project, we built our coalition on that core partnership.

The two co-chairs of the project were a faculty and a staff member, laying the foundation for a strong project because it had the support of two administrators. Because we intentionally engaged more than one division from the beginning, the work was less vulnerable to leadership changes. Furthermore, having a faculty member as a co-chair gave credibility to the project among other faculty. They were willing to send students to focus groups because they understood the scholarly worth of the project. Faculty were also willing to respond to invitations and queries for information from another faculty member. Having a staff member as a co-chair lent logistical support to the project, as people in student affairs are generally better at mobilizing students. Since the project had many moving parts, having planning support was critical. When one of the co-chairs left the university, the project did not halt because the other co-chair was still responsible for the work. Again, having this balance protected us from that vulnerability.

The ADP-IDHE campus-climate project was about the entire climate and as such could not be siloed in one area. WSU used a snowball method to find people who cared about the work and were committed. We then met regularly, engaging every member of the coalition in the project. First, we expected every member to find students, faculty, and staff to attend the focus groups. Second, whenever we met, we revisited the importance of the work and what we were learning. Sometimes people proved not as committed or cycled off due to other obligations, but our snowball method meant we kept finding new people to replace them. Over time we created a core group of people who are still working on our campus climate. The project's ending did not end the coalition's presence on campus. Because we expected members of the coalition to fully engage in the work, most felt ownership of the result. They felt pride in what we learned and remained committed throughout the project.

Currently, the ADP-IDHE project coalition has evolved into a permanent presence on campus: the Political Engagement Coalition (https://www.weber.edu/pec/), tasked with conducting dialogues, known as campus-climate conversations, as a complement to human resources training. The PEC has been mentioned in campus-wide town halls by the university president as well as the vice presidents. Again, because more than one division was invested in the work, we were able to institutionalize campus-climate work for democracy.

Reflection on Coalition Building
by Jennifer Shea, San Francisco State University

The San Francisco State University coalition was built and led by two faculty members who got involved with the project by invitation from the university provost. The provost provided modest summer stipends for the faculty members and funding for a work-study student to assist with coalition management. The faculty co-leaders consulted with the provost to develop a list of potential coalition members which would capture a cross-section of faculty, staff, and students, reflecting a diversity of social and political identities on campus. The faculty co-leaders sent email invitations to individuals on the list and followed up with phone or in-person conversations as needed to confirm participation. This process resulted in a coalition of 21 members of the campus community, including faculty from each of the six academic colleges and the library, staff from targeted student-serving units, and a mix of undergraduate and graduate students. The coalition included a six-member research team of three faculty and three students who served as the coalition nucleus. While this process worked well for forming a diverse coalition and garnering their participation in the first few meetings, the research team struggled to sustain widespread engagement among coalition members even through the first year of the project.

There are several overlapping explanations for these challenges. One explanation is that there was a mismatch between the time and resources the research team and other coalition members had to dedicate to the project and the time and resources needed to effectively manage it. Those constraints were exacerbated by the fact that SFSU got involved in the project a few months later than most of the other university partners, so we were "running to catch up" in the spring 2018 semester. As a result, we did not take enough time to cement coalition members' deep commitment to active participation for the duration of the project. Another related explanation is that we underestimated the time and administrative support resources needed to sustain those commitments and manage active participation in the coalition over time. The faculty co-leaders had other substantial leadership roles on campus, and it is widely recognized that many members of the campus community are overburdened with meetings and service responsibilities, forcing them to prioritize the ones deemed most urgent at any given time. A third explanation is that the campus was undergoing another campus-climate study spearheaded by the university's recently created Division of Equity and Inclusion; that study was being conducted by an external group and enjoyed substantial financial support. Finally, and related to a few of our findings, many members of the campus community are tentative in the degree to which they trust that the university's commitment to civic and political engagement is reflected in bureaucratic policies and practices.

Assessment

As the core of the project, assessment was necessarily the longest and most intensive part of the process. The qualitative research methods—including focus groups and interviews with participants from all sectors of a campus—were developed by IDHE researchers as an evolution of previous campus-climate studies on political learning and engagement. In 2014, IDHE launched its initial studies, which eventually encompassed 10 colleges and universities. The theoretical framework for the research comprised an augmented version Bolman and Deal's (2003) organizational study framework and was the first of its kind for campus-climate studies specific to political learning and engagement. The framework consisted of four focal areas: structural, political, human, and cultural. The codebook was also structured according to the framework and refined over the course of the initial studies. In 2017, IDHE published the methodologies (Thomas & Brower, 2018) and findings of those initial campus-climate studies, referred to as Politics 365 (Thomas & Brower, 2017). That same year, IDHE and ADP launched the pilot project using and adapting IDHE's research design.

IDHE created protocols for interviews and focus groups (specific to students, faculty, staff, and administrators), developed a codebook that was refined with the help of project participants, and produced guidance and materials for facilitating the analysis process. Campuses charged with completing a self-study formed research teams to complete the assessment process, while the two external-study campuses received visits from IDHE researchers assisted by ADP and other project personnel. These external teams conducted the focus groups and interviews, and coded and analyzed the

Sidebar: Seeking Participants: Coalitions and Focus Groups
by Steven Koether, Sam Houston State University

We made every effort to engage participation from a variety of campus stakeholders. Even with methodical, intentional, full-effort, purposive sampling and requests for participation, we found it difficult to engage demographics with positional power and privilege; in our context and area, these individuals are typically male, White, and/or ideologically right-leaning. It took extra care, time, and intentionality to include these individuals in coalition work and in focus groups. The coalition found this discrepancy to be both a finding and a variable worth addressing in future endeavors. Such an absence can lead to siloed thinking, limit perspective, and hinder the potential success of campus initiatives. Navigating how we increase participation from these demographics will be difficult. Asking minoritized campus stakeholders with less positional power and privilege to put greater effort and energy into engaging this demographic could exacerbate underlying inequalities.

Sidebar: Interviews Versus Focus Groups
by Steven Koether, Sam Houston State University

When conducting focus groups, the coalition realized quickly that it needed to separate participants with varying degrees of power within the institution. For instance, supervisors participated in different focus groups than their direct reports. Many participants requested this arrangement so they could maintain anonymity and speak freely. During focus groups with high-ranking participants, we found that many engaged in nothing but praise for the institution and institutional processes. The contrast between the levels of reflection and insight into challenges and areas for growth, between employees with greater power and privilege and those with less was quite disparate. This realization indicated a need for greater dialogue, collaboration, and shared governance. The one exception arose with the inclusion of a particularly thoughtful and healthfully critical administrator. The individual's presence and words engaged the entire group in deeper discussion. To attain greater insight and reflection, the intentional inclusion of more thoughtful individuals may be required in future investigative endeavors. Per request, the coalition engaged some upper-level administrators using interviews rather than focus groups. While this eased the coalition's ability to schedule the meeting and create more anonymity for the individual, it resulted in minimal data collection and reflection. Expertise in qualitative inquiry was not enough to garner meaningful data collection. It also required practice, failure, and knowledge of the participants themselves. Singular, planned attempts to collect data will never suffice; intentional, persistent inquiry is key.

data before producing reports. The self-study campuses took responsibility for all parts of the assessment process, with ongoing coaching from IDHE researchers in both group webinars and, for some, individual sessions. Furthermore, because the 10 self-study campuses conducted the focus groups and collected the data on their own, they each had to seek individual IRB approval from their institutions, which often proved a lengthy process.

Qualitative research methods in campus-climate studies can offer numerous benefits, including the ability to investigate with greater nuance and to build connections and elevate voices in a campus environment. The methods, in a sense, can become the means. By bringing people into the conversation and building relationships, several campuses reported that doing the research itself was akin to an intervention for improving the climate around political learning and engagement. Campus teams reported widely that the findings they produced were valuable in attracting the attention of administrators, starting conversations, and providing the substantive backbone to argue for improvements to political learning and engagement.

The benefits of the qualitative methods are significant and speak to the power of the project, though the resources and assets required to successfully complete this process were extensive. Two campuses from the original 10 self-study campuses were unable to complete the assessment phase. For both, turnover and insufficient resources of personnel, time, and money proved insurmountable. Project participants reported some measure of difficulty, variously, with recruiting students for focus groups, the length of the question protocols, and the complexity of the codebook. There was variance across teams in both the levels of experience with qualitative research and the number of people to help with the research process; both factors were important to campus teams' experience with the assessment phase.

Those campuses that brought in external researchers had the benefit of an external team conducting the focus groups, coding and analyzing data, and producing reports. This reduced personnel and time demands, directly involved researchers with a mastery of IDHE's methods, and forced campuses to organize focus groups and interviews in the short time when teams could be on campus, expediting the process relative to the self-study campuses. Some project participants also discussed the potential benefit of legitimacy and accountability when an external team conducts the research, though some acknowledged that an internal research team has the benefit of local knowledge and relationships. Regardless, the external studies were notably efficient, suggesting a potential project model in the future.

Overall, the project coordinators were impressed with the strength of the assessment method but also aware that the method is resource intensive. Almost universally, project participants praised the ability of the qualitative method to produce insights that could start conversations, involve key decisionmakers, and facilitate change around political learning and engagement—all while elevating voices in the campus community and building relationships.

Planning for Focus Groups

by Jodi Benenson, Barbara Pickering, Andrea M. Weare (University of Nebraska Omaha), and Anthony M. Starke, Jr. (University of Colorado Denver)

Planning for focus groups in a university setting requires focused and strategic planning, especially when involving a diverse set of stakeholders in a project. Our research team spent considerable time strategizing and cultivating campus connections to meet and achieve our goals. First, we learned that the academic calendar would likely influence participation. For example, we found that while staff and a small group of students were available during the summer months to participate in the focus groups, the majority of faculty and student focus groups needed to take place in the spring and fall 2018 semesters to accommodate schedules. Second, we needed to consider the time of day the focus groups took place. For example, because student government meetings took place in the evenings, we coordinated with student government representatives to hold the focus groups for these participants in the evenings. All staff focus groups took place over the lunch hour, while faculty focus groups were spread out during different times of day. Third, as a mixed/residential commuter university split into two campuses, focus groups took place in buildings on both campuses to increase representation in and access to participation. We also made sure, when possible, that each room had movable desks and chairs to create a comfortable and accessible focus-group environment. Finally, our coalition, which consisted of diverse representatives from across campus, ensured that we had the support needed during the planning phase of the focus groups.

Reporting

Representing the culmination of the assessment phase, reports on findings that emerged from the coding and analysis process were intended to help campuses share their results with the campus community. IDHE produced the first two reports for the external-study campuses; these reports were intentionally structured in two different ways to offer templates for the self-study participants. The first report presented findings under the framework of strengths of and challenges to the institution's climate for political learning and engagement. The second organized findings according to the theoretical framework's political, structural, human, and cultural components. Self-study campuses chose from these templates and modified as needed.

Of the original 12 campuses, two could not complete the assessment process, and a third did not finish its report, though it did complete its assessment. As mentioned, the project evaluations revealed that reports were considered valuable in the insights they produced and their usefulness as tools for starting conversations and securing buy-in for further work on political learning. The written reports helped campus teams communicate their findings and the value of the project. They were also intended to inform dialogues, as described in the following section.

Sidebar: Reporting
by Leah Murray, Weber State University

As one of the campuses that received a report from IDHE rather than creating our own, WSU did not have a choice in its reporting approach. We were given the strengths and challenges reporting structure, for which we were grateful. The conceptual framework approach is excellent for those who understand the nature of qualitative research; the strengths and challenges framework works for everyone else, and when we used our results to inform campus-climate work moving forward, it was very accessible to all stakeholders. As we presented the results, whether in town hall or dialogue settings or in one-on-one meetings, we were able to point to the strengths and challenges table in the report and move immediately to next steps. We did not spend time explaining the rubric, the concept definitions, or the coding process; we just addressed what had to be done. We used the report findings to target specific people. For example, we learned that our campus climate had allowed conflict to develop between students who are members of the Church of Latter-Day Saints and those who are not. In light of that finding, one of the first report conversations was with the director of the LDS Institute on campus. That conversation has led to a strong relationship, and the director is very supportive of resolving that conflict over time. The report itself became a very powerful catalyst for change on our campus because we were able to point to its findings and then fine-tune our response. For instance, we received support to host the campus-climate work in the Office of Diversity since our report indicated that WSU's campus climate was not inclusive of political diversity.

Conclusions about the superiority of one report template over the other were ambiguous. The template organized according to the theoretical framework had the potential to appear more rigorous and, because of its structure, reflected the coding and analysis process better. Reports organized by strengths and challenges, however, were potentially more accessible for campus audiences pursuing tangible interventions to improve the campus climate. Furthermore, a third option for reporting emerged, with at least one campus choosing to simply list key findings from the analysis process. This type of report had the benefit of simplicity and flexibility. The project

Reflection on Assessment/Reporting
by Jennifer Shea, San Francisco State University

The six-member research team was especially helpful for organizing and administering 11 focus groups and two individual interviews between June and October 2018. Three members of the research team attended most focus groups—with faculty administering the questions and students taking notes (sessions were also recorded)—and completed the rubric together immediately after each focus group's conclusion. This process helped ensure that we captured the main takeaways from each focus group robustly and in the moment, while also allowing us to examine the notes and recordings more systematically when analyzing the data and writing the report. One of the faculty co-leaders and a student research team member led the qualitative data coding and preliminary analysis. The entire research team reviewed the preliminary analysis and worked collectively to identify and prioritize themes in order to highlight the most salient findings and contextualize them for the campus. The research team invited input from the coalition on preliminary findings and solicited ideas for recommendations. Together, they identified six key findings, several of which expressed contradictions between dominant narratives and perceived realities, such as:

> The urban context of San Francisco, including its demographic diversity and political progressivism, lends to and supports the campus commitment to diversity, liberalism, and activism. However, this de facto diversity does not always result in inclusion for all groups on campus. In addition, that context limits diversity of political thought and expression.

We then identified a set of seven broad recommendations intended to shape campus dialogues around the findings and inform more specific actionable recommendations. For example:

> Recommendation #5. Celebrate Campus Diversity and Promote Inclusion. Given our finding that while diversity on campus is valued by students, staff, faculty, and administrators, many feel that it is a de facto result of being located in the Bay Area and lacks effective strategies to promote inclusion (Finding #2), we recommend the campus develop a process for identifying strategies to implement. This could present a good opportunity to engage in a campus wide discussion about the other persistent question (Finding #6a) we identify in our findings, about SF State's campus identity and its relationship to the shared history and sense of values on campus.

Before finalizing and distributing the report, we shared the final draft with the provost, who provided valuable suggestions for adding data from other sources to supplement the analysis. We distributed the final report broadly across campus.

was designed so that self-study campuses could take ownership of the process, and the variation in report types speaks to the agency that campus teams had in shaping their outputs. Although the assessment phase overall was delayed, the quality of reports produced was notable, and campus teams found the reporting process helpful.

Dialogues

Drawing on a structure developed by Everyday Democracy,[4] IDHE included in the project a plan for campuses to host dialogues that would offer their communities an opportunity to discuss the report conclusions and devise recommended interventions. IDHE envisioned dialogues that were framed, planned, facilitated, and action-oriented. They could be conducted with small or large groups, but the hope was that the dialogues would be attended well enough to offer the campus community a chance to provide input on the report findings and to impact subsequent actions. At the conclusion of the pilot, the results of the dialogue phase were mixed. This was partially due to the delays already mentioned; several campuses needed almost the full 3 years to complete the assessment and, paired with the interruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were unable to plan and execute dialogues before the writing of this report.

That said, six campus teams did host dialogues, though the structure of these dialogues varied. One campus used initial dialogues, while a member investigated conclusions of the report, tweaked their findings to incorporate that input, and then moved to action-oriented dialogues. Other campuses centered multiple dialogues on key findings from the reports with an eye toward potential interventions; another held one extended dialogue with key stakeholders to identify next steps; and others used their report to frame issue-based discussions. Participant numbers varied from 30–40 to upwards of 200, and included students, faculty, staff, and administrators. The campuses that hosted dialogues reported that they went well, with some dialogues leading to ideas for interventions.

Sidebar: Dialogues
by Lori Britt, James Madison University

A key finding from JMU's climate study was that our "culture of niceness" presents a challenge to political learning and engagement. Separate dialogues for faculty/staff and students were designed and led by trained graduate and undergraduate students. In several faculty/staff dialogues, the challenge of how to develop a both–and culture was explored: "How can the university continue being a friendly and welcoming campus while also promoting rigorous discussions and active engagement on challenging public issues?" Participants generated ideas and, to ensure that the talk would lead to action on a variety of levels, participants were asked to complete a 5/5/5 reflection: What could they do in the next 5 minutes and the next 5 days to make a connection or develop an idea, and what did they want to have underway in 5 months? This 5/5/5 tool encourages accountability and action, and highlights issues that need to be addressed by individuals and at the system level.

[4] Everyday Democracy (https://www.everyday-democracy.org/) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that works with communities to solve problems through dialogues that lead to action and change.

Project coordinators felt that the dialogue process could have been more successful if the timeline for project completion had been streamlined and campus facilitators had been able to participate in a thorough training on facilitating difficult dialogues, along with the always present need for more resources for campus teams. Some teams had the benefit of established dialogue centers or teams working on the project; thus, these campuses had an easier time planning and executing facilitated dialogues. Given that the disparity in expertise directly affected campus capacity on this project, we recommend facilitator training.

Notably, one campus suggested collapsing the assessment and dialogue phases into one. Dialogues could be considered part of the research process and conducted concurrently with focus groups. While project coordinators understood the difficulties inherent in the project and the desire to combine those phases, the dialogues must follow the assessment process and use the findings as the backbone for discussions that spur action. Nevertheless, work could be done during the assessment process to generate more successful dialogues. Overall, robust dialogues produced impressive results, and campuses attested to their benefits, but, due to the pandemic, too few campuses were able to host dialogues, and the translation from dialogues to identified and operationalized interventions was lacking. Tweaks to the timeline, a more concrete structure for dialogues, and increased resources could alleviate these shortcomings.

Project Reflection: Engaging Students in Talk About "Talking About Politics": Modeling Possibility
by Lori Britt, James Madison University

When you learn that many students on your campus don't feel comfortable talking about politics and in fact claim that they came to your university because they thought it would be a place they could avoid such discomfort, what do you do? Well, you bring them together to talk about politics and public issues, of course.

We suggest bringing them together to talk not about politics and public issues directly, but about why they are so hesitant and wary of engaging in such talk in the first place. You engage them in dialogue that seeks to gain new perspectives and vantages to more fully understand an issue in all its complexity. You engage with a spirit of curiosity and extend empathy to better understand their concerns and fears. You have it led by other students who have some training in facilitation and in creating a space where they can be brave enough to be vulnerable, honest, and self-reflective.

In talking about their concerns, they raise political and public issues as examples and begin to explore them. What emerges is a conversation that helps students learn from one another and a place where students recognize that, although this kind of talk is difficult, it can also be rewarding. They learn that they can talk with people who hold different views, and they start to ask each other questions that seek to understand another's perspective, rather than requiring someone to defend their ideas.

When you offer students a view onto the possibilities that a true dialogue offers, they end up wondering why they can't do this more often. They muse about what it would be like if these kinds of discussions happened in more of their classes. They learn that, although they may have been taught that talking about politics in "mixed company" is not polite, it is crucial and can be productive. In short, they leave wanting more.

Project Reflection
by Jodi Benenson, Barbara Pickering, Andrea M. Weare (University of Nebraska Omaha), and Anthony M. Starke, Jr. (University of Colorado Denver)

Managing expectations influenced the project's success, particularly because roles and leadership on the project varied across campuses. For instance, at UNO, the project was housed within Academic Affairs but was coordinated, planned, and implemented by two faculty members on a 9-month contract in the public administration and communication departments. At other institutions, project leaders were staff members or held administrative roles centered on civic or community engagement. We learned quickly that this variation in project leadership had implications for the time individuals could commit to the project and how effectively a project could be implemented.

When inviting institutions to participate in a large-scale project such as this, the institutions leading the initiative must clearly articulate project expectations and identify resources that can be provided. It is crucial to consider elements such as time for training and availability of financial and human resources.

To ensure that we were managing overall project expectations, project leaders met regularly for reflection on and conversation about the project. These regular meetings, which took place virtually, offered opportunities to check in with each other, troubleshoot, and brainstorm ways to manage project requirements. Being clear and upfront about project expectations and providing space for reflection during the project itself contributed to the success of this national endeavor.

Project Reflection
by Jennifer Boehm, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis

When I heard about the ADP-IDHE pilot project, which offered us an opportunity to assess our campus climate for political learning and democratic engagement, I jumped at the chance to participate. Our ADP group had languished over the years, and without involvement in particular programs, we were losing reasons to meet. Through the ADP-IDHE project, we had time to reflect and to engage with people across campus about how we could improve our ability to graduate students who are active and contributing members of their communities. This opportunity has revived and expanded our ADP group, giving us a slew of new ideas to pursue.

There was no shortage of students, faculty, and staff interested in the topic of political learning and democratic engagement, but the hardest part was finding times when an adequate number of them were available to participate in focus groups and dialogue sessions. After sending out broad invites to audiences we thought would be interested, we eventually learned that a personalized, targeted approach was more effective. Once the sessions started, there was often not enough time for everyone to share their thoughts within the allotted time. The conversations were often lively, and many creative approaches and ideas were generated. A focus group with six participants was about the maximum we could accommodate in 90 minutes.

Some of the highlights of this process included finding new allies across campus interested in supporting the work, strengthening our ADP committee, generating many new ideas and projects, making connections between focus group and dialogue participants (which have continued on), and broadening the scope of our ADP committee to include more curricular and systemic approaches that will reach more students.

Project Reflection
by Sidney Williams, Central State University

As students return to their respective campuses across the country, they bring a host of emotions—happiness, excitement, fear, and anxiety. At CSU, Ohio's only public historically Black college/university (HBCU), many of our students also bring the mental and emotional burdens that their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents carried and carry today resulting from overt, micro, and systemic racism. As such, the ADP-IDHE pilot project was especially meaningful for our participating students as it gave them an opportunity to voice their concerns and frustrations about the campus community, the nearest city to the university, and the surrounding cities that comprise the region. For some, the killing of John Crawford by a police officer at a nearby Walmart in 2014 was not a distant memory but a reminder going forward. Nevertheless, students were enthusiastic to offer ideas for positive change and eagerly engaged in the project. They were thankful to be heard and hopeful for change.

Project Reflection
by Lance R. Lippert & Stephen K. Hunt, Illinois State University

In many ways, ISU is like many other Midwestern public universities, but it certainly has its own identity and unique culture, complete with a rich tradition, a hearty commitment to teaching and learning, and many dedicated individuals who live our institutional culture. There are many institutional representations of our cultural values, and a growing commitment to diversity, inclusion, and cultural sensitivity is chief among them. Regarding ISU's political learning climate, there is significant potential, but our findings demonstrated a lack of sustainability, education, support, relevancy, and awareness for efficient and successful collaboration among ISU stakeholders to achieve positive political learning outcomes across the curriculum and co-curriculum. Overall, our findings indicated a lack of political engagement and political learning at ISU. Colloquially, as one participant voiced, ISU has both the "rubber" and the "road," but the "rubber does not hit the road often enough."

Reflecting on our project assessment, the process seemed to parallel our findings: individuals cautious to commit; espoused values but minimal active examples of artifacts and practices; often overworked individuals; and a lack of dynamic collaboration. In general, the climate for political learning was often difficult to capture and frequently held different connotations for participants. As with any field work, garnering representative participation as well as developing truthful, accurate analysis was challenging.

The original goal of building an inclusive coalition and recruiting focus-group participants from students, faculty, staff, and administrators from across all six colleges and multiple hierarchal layers was tempered due to: participants' inability to grasp the concept of "political learning," paranoia or risk aversion to the politics of the word "political," the claim of "being too busy" by ISU stakeholders, a lack of buy-in or belief due to the lack of follow-through after the previous study, the "timing" of the project creating a general fatigue given a recent campus-climate survey, personnel issues across campus including a changing staff in the provost's office, and a general apathy due to political weariness, lack of ownership, or just not caring enough to get involved. Overcoming these challenges to completing the assessment took persistence and a reliance on a collection of very dedicated individuals at the core of the coalition team. Because of given limitations, this type of research can never be perfect, but it can be authentic and meaningful, producing an accurate portrait of the political-learning landscape on our campus. The team often paused to replace or widen the participatory circle for the exact combination of participants—which never happened—rather than keep moving forward. This "pause" created other issues in this fluid process, preventing the assessment from ending.

Although our findings are not generalizable, our research process is repeatable and our findings truthful. One caveat regarding the overall project is to adequately adapt the protocol and larger project instructions to the culture and context of each unique campus. Fortunately, our team made this an iterative process and learned as we progressed, setting the stage for our campus dialogues and action plans. We have established partnerships and aligned with other campus initiatives to avoid duplication and work toward larger university goals consistent with our individual and institutional values to deepen ISU's commitment to political learning.

Project Reflection: Administrative Support Matters
by Kim Schmidt-Gagne, Keene State College

KSC has a remarkable history of entrepreneurship and an impressive track record of leveraging “volunteerism” into something more. We make big things happen with very few resources. What started as a faculty member’s book collection has now become the only undergraduate major in Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Without civic engagement appearing officially in anyone’s position description or an assigned budget, KSC has been recognized as a Carnegie Engaged Campus and has been honored with three nationally recognized awards for our work, and civic engagement is one of our College-Wide Learning Outcomes, so our involvement in this project seemed like the next logical step.

Like many higher education institutions, KSC has seen our fair share of turmoil. Over the course of this project, we have had four different leaders of academic affairs, seen our enrollment shrink by 27%, and experienced the loss of all but three of the original 15-member coalition through various employee-separation programs put forth by the institution. Release time was not available for faculty to work on the project, nor was compensation for coalition staff or administrative support. Volunteerism is a part of our history, so these challenges did not initially seem like causes for concern.

Given the enrollment decrease and resulting fiscal challenges, various academic leaders had differing levels of understanding, commitment, and bandwidth for civic engagement projects. Even with a dwindling coalition, we completed our interviews; however, the time and expertise needed to code and analyze the documents was elusive. Several attempts to analyze the data were launched, but none was completed, leaving a single staff member to finish the data processing and summary portions of the project, which was not able to move to the dialogues. Our initial observations of the transcripts showed patterns similar to our NSSE results. During focus groups, our first-year students did not share experiences or language associated with civic engagement. Their responses tended to focus on their involvement in campus tradition, while our seniors were able to articulate classroom and co-curricular discussions and events. Several seniors commented that civic engagement, particularly political engagement, was in KSC’s “DNA.” This may be the result of the number of political visitors who came to our campus over the previous 18 months.

Correspondingly, NSSE found that, on the civic engagement module, while our first-year students scored below our comparators, our seniors scored significantly higher than other seniors nationally on 17 of 24 NSSE measures of civic engagement ($p < .05$ for all comparisons; and $p < .001$ and effect size > .30 for the following: college emphasizes voting; college encourages free speech and expression; and feeling encouraged to address important social, economic, or political issues in course discussions). KSC seniors scored significantly higher than their peers nationally on reflective and integrative learning, student–faculty interaction, and experience with effective teaching practices, and also higher than their regional peers on experience with a supportive campus environment ($p < .05$ and effect size > .30 for all comparisons). These NSSE findings are similar to results from previous NSSE surveys.

In debriefs on our involvement with this project, several takeaways emerged. In the absence of full-time faculty and/or staff dedicated to civic engagement work, the current self-reflection model is challenging and would recommend that a visiting-team option be developed.

Thematic Findings: Meta-Analysis of Campus Reports

ADP and IDHE researchers conducted an analysis of all completed reports,[5] from which some prominent themes emerged. As mentioned previously, the assessment process was based on a series of 10 campus-climate studies conducted by IDHE from 2014–2016. These studies were designed around a theoretical framework that examined institutions in relation to the following four components:

1. **Structural:** policies, departments, programs, and physical spaces.
2. **Political**: internal and external factors that shape institutional governance and decision making.
3. **Cultural:** shared norms, values and principles, history, symbols, and symbolic events.
4. **Human:** composition, behaviors, competencies, and knowledge.

In Table 1 and in the following section, project coordinators present brief summaries of the conclusions under each of the four frames and an overarching analysis of the findings. Importantly, the campuses varied greatly and, predictably, their findings varied as well. Despite some commonalities, all campuses that produced reports had substantial variance in their salient findings; this suggests remarkable nuance in campus political climates and highlights the importance of using qualitative methods to identify those nuances. Nevertheless, common themes speak to the state of political discourse and engagement in higher education more broadly.

[5] For this analysis, two researchers examined each report and independently drew out the major themes, both developing a synthesis of the reports' findings. We then cross-checked our conclusions. Then, a third researcher worked with their analyses to identify themes and findings that crosscut campus reports. We also sent a list of the emerging themes to the remaining nine campuses to collect feedback. This resulted in some changes in language and framing, but the general themes remained the same.

Table 1

Findings From Campus Reports

Frame	Findings
Structural	• While most campuses reported having an institutionalized commitment (e.g., statements and infrastructure) to civic engagement, these commitments were usually apolitical. • Most campuses reported that political learning and participation were not embedded across the curriculum or campus. • While most of the campuses specified a growing or established commitment to diversity and inclusion, the commitment was described as "shallow" or "slow," or characterized by gaps (e.g., faculty hiring). • Four of the nine campuses said they lacked an infrastructure for dialogue or political discussions.
Political	• Many campuses reported being hierarchical and "rule-bound" in institutional governance. • Many reported facing pressures from local or state politicians or religious organizations. • Some reported that student activism was met with reticence or resistance, largely due to concerns over the institution's image. • Many campuses expressed the view that the national political scene and the tone of the 2016 election had a lasting effect, and that these conditions made talking politics more difficult.
Cultural	• Consistent with IDHE's other research, two groups of students complained that they felt unwelcome on campus and/or that they could not express their opinions freely due to the campus culture, comprising politically conservative students and historically marginalized groups. • Faculty avoided talking politics on many of these campuses. • Many campuses also reported either a culture of politeness or an underlying aversion to risk, both affecting the climate for political discussions and participation. • Many campuses felt deep ties to the local community and a strong sense of stewardship. This played out in reciprocal relationships and partnerships. • The perception of the level of political engagement varied across the campuses; some reported robust electoral and other political engagement from students, while others reported a culture of avoidance of anything political.
Human	• Across campuses, faculty expressed that they were ill-equipped to navigate political topics or to facilitate political discussions in the classroom. Students agreed with this perception, confirming that too many professors were unprepared to lead discussions involving politically charged topics. • At four campuses, students were apprehensive or insecure about expressing their viewpoints in class.

Analysis

Synthesizing Findings

There are several encouraging signs in these emerging themes. Many campuses identified an institutionalized commitment, including statements and infrastructure, to civic engagement or a campus-wide commitment to service and community engagement. This was reinforced by strong ties between the institution and the community. Commitment to civic and community engagement, however, does not necessarily come with a commitment to political learning, and indeed several campuses found that service was valued but political learning was either feared or avoided. Thus, turning civic and community engagement into political learning is an important area of opportunity. Despite the gaps identified earlier in curricular political learning, many campus teams reported a strong tradition of teaching and learning. This can be an important asset when trying to improve political learning. Importantly, three campuses reported infrastructure for political learning across disciplines. Also, many campus teams reported an established or growing commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

These assets are important if institutions wish to tackle difficult cultural barriers to political learning and participation, such as hesitance to talk politics for various reasons; insufficient or slow support for and engagement with marginalized groups; structural deficiencies in political learning and engagement, including lack of preparedness to handle political discussions and dialogue; and rigid decision-making structures that exclude key groups and discourage democratic participation.

Sidebar: Findings
by Angela Taylor, Fayetteville State University

Many ideas about enhancing political participation on campuses presuppose a traditional college environment—that is, one consisting of students who are largely young adults (18–24) and who are just becoming aware of and engaged in political matters. However, fewer college students fit into this mold. They are older and tend to have work and life experiences that have exposed them to political ideas and activities. Also, their lives do not revolve around campus. Finally, as in our institution, there is an increased online presence, whereby students may not even live in the general vicinity of the college campus.

These new facets of the college student experience pose challenges to efforts to engage in information gathering about political engagement and to devising methods for increasing such engagement. We must find ways to bridge or adjust for these diverse student life experiences if we want to increase their skills, aptitude, and willingness to engage in civic pursuits.

One dynamic that must be mentioned in connection to the suppression or avoidance of political speech is the treatment of marginalized students. This emerged as a theme itself, with many campus teams reporting a perception that historically marginalized students feel oppressed or unwelcome, and/or that the campus has not made enough progress on diversity and inclusion. Six teams reported shallow or slow commitment or gaps (e.g., faculty hiring) to diversity and inclusion. Robust political learning and engagement cannot happen in a climate that marginalizes certain students, does not hear their voices, or discourages their participation on campus.

Importantly, many teams indicated that either faculty felt ill-equipped to navigate political topics/political discussions in the classroom or students perceived that many professors are unprepared to lead discussions about politics. This reflects a structural deficiency in the preparation of people on campus to promote political learning and engagement. Many teams said there was a lack of infrastructure for dialogue and discussion, specifically trained facilitators. Despite support from institutional leaders, political learning and engagement were not embedded across the curriculum or campus and political learning was not pervasive. Many of these institutions felt pressured to be apolitical, stifling political learning; this came from state or community political pressures. While others reported a presence of infrastructure, like centers and programs, campuses are not reaching their full potential for political learning.

Bureaucratic, top-down decision making that is not inclusive of student and faculty voice was a challenge at many campuses, with several campus teams saying there is a lack of encouragement for student efficacy and even efforts to mute student activism. Paired with the slow progress on engaging and supporting marginalized students, this paints a picture of rigid decision making that is not as responsive to the needs of campus communities as it should be.

Conclusions From Report Analysis

First, it should be restated that the campus reports reflected a range of findings. Themes that crosscut campuses were necessarily general; even within some of the findings discussed earlier, campus reports included nuance that differentiated their phenomena from those of other campuses. Still, given the current hot-button issues of free speech, hate speech, and college student political engagement, the findings offer significant insights. The participants in the pilot project undertook an intentionally inclusive and discussion-centric assessment process, and many found underlying issues around the treatment of, preparation for, and culture of political discourse on their campuses. Nationally recognized issues like the tension between hate speech and free speech, and the lack of tangible progress on the treatment of students from historically marginalized groups manifested on several of the campuses. Many professors reported being unprepared to handle fraught political discussions, and students expressed hesitation to engage in the discourse, both resulting in the avoidance of conversations around controversial issues. If there is a single thematic takeaway from these findings, it is that the navigation of sociopolitical discussions on campuses requires attention, investment, and interventions. The reports these campus teams produced offered a ground-level look at how these issues manifest. This project offered one way to reveal the specific issues campuses face in this area and provided a template for how to begin to address those issues.

Conclusion and Discussion

Project Structure, Replication, and Next Steps

This project proposed a unique method for assessing and improving campus climate for political learning and engagement: a combination of robust qualitative assessment with dialogues that lead to action. We conclude that qualitative methods are a powerful tool in climate assessment because they:

- give focus-group participants a chance to talk and reflect;
- offer people who do not necessarily work together a chance to collaborate;
- uncover things people often leave unsaid; and,
- are highly interactive.

The point is that the medium is the message: In this project, change started to happen through the focus groups and the CoPs themselves.

When considering replication and scalability, any replication of this project would have to include substantial resource provision and guarantees of institutional support. In addition, participants often mentioned the need to streamline the project around content and duration. In line with the conclusions in this report, especially regarding the challenges of the timeline and resource burdens, project coordinators propose the following guidelines for replication:

1. Where there are resources available, provisions should be made for the use of an external research team to conduct focus groups and interviews, code and analyze data, and produce reports for campuses in the first half of the project year.
2. The assessment phase should be limited to as short a time period as possible, and focus group participants should be recruited in advance. We also recommend that the focus group meetings be recorded and transcribed, and that data result from an analysis of the transcripts.
3. Any institution undertaking this project should procure a commitment from presidents/chancellors, chief academic affairs officers, deans and department chairs, and student affairs leaders to see it through, from the assessment to the dialogue, and the intervention phases. Senior leaders should commit to identifying project leaders, coordinators, and a coalition. Project coordinators should ensure that there is a full understanding of the scope of the project and the resources needed to complete it.
4. The construction of coalitions with diverse skills, knowledge, and institutional responsibilities, as well as identity and ideology, is crucial to the success of the project and sustainability of the work.
5. The project itself should be streamlined in the following ways:
   a. The protocol and codebook should be modified so that the operational difficulties of project participants are significantly lessened. Campus teams should plan for dialogues during the assessment phase.
   b. The IRB process should begin as soon as possible since this was a substantial source of delay for many project participants.
6. Overall, an honest assessment of funds, personnel, and political will is needed upfront to complete the project.

Participants generally attested to the importance of this work and reported a multitude of benefits from the process. The coalitions, reports, and dialogues at these campuses will continue to have impacts going forward. The project was a successful experiment that showed both the promise of this model of assessment and the obstacles that future attempts would need to clear to be successful.

Continued Work and Outcomes

Campus teams did extraordinary work under extremely challenging circumstances to progress on this project. That work, according to project evaluations, will continue to bear fruit for participants working on political learning and engagement; many participants spoke to the power of the connections they built and relationships they formed working on the project. In one case, a vice president who was interviewed as part of the assessment phase later became president of the university; that president took an interest in the work, and the campus team has considerable space to pursue interventions. At other institutions, coalitions have stayed in contact, benefiting from collaborations on and contributions to each other's work. With the information from this project, stakeholders interested in improving the campus climate for political learning and engagement have a tool for soliciting buy-in and informing interventions.

Nonetheless, some campuses unfortunately reported an erosion of the support and infrastructure needed to improve their political climate. The project coordinators hope that this process has at least given stakeholders what they need to argue for continued or increased focus on political learning and engagement. The existing structural barriers speak to some areas for improvement should this project be replicated in the future. We acknowledge that this process is time- and resource-intensive for all campuses. Without support from external researchers, successful replication is unlikely. To continue, participating campuses will need to work with external researchers to expedite the data-collection and analysis phases. Robust support from institutional leaders, as well as centralized support from a national association, will also improve the likelihood of success. We envision a successful hybrid model combining on- and off-campus expertise for qualitative data collection and analysis, with follow-through at the campus level.

We conclude that qualitative methods, followed by dialogue, provide an effective approach to assessing and shifting campus climates for political learning and engagement. Not only does this approach produce compelling insights and influence campus structures and culture, but it also catalyzes change. Campuses reported that the dialogic approach used in the focus groups during the assessment phase itself fostered discussion, raised awareness, and generated interest in political learning and democracy.

An unexpected but gratifying finding from this work was the critical importance that the community of practice played in strengthening the campus climate to advance political learning and engagement. Indeed, we found that a cohort model and the multi-campus CoP strengthened both the project and the participating representatives from the campuses. The project structure was demanding, and CoPs as well as coaching were crucial to campus teams' success in coalition building, assessment, and dialogues-to-interventions. The importance of the CoP speaks to the project's broader ethos of conversation, collaboration, and community.

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