

## [CAMPUS PRACTICE]

### Global Issues, Local Concerns: A Community College Educates for Democracy

■ **PATTY ROBINSON**, Faculty Director, Civic and Community Engagement Initiatives at College of the Canyons

Although civic engagement is gaining momentum throughout the nation (Scobey 2012), colleges and universities continue to grapple with how to support democracy. This is especially true for the nation's 1,051 community colleges, sometimes known as “democracy's colleges.”

Community colleges serve students who have been the most excluded from participatory democracy and political decision making (American Association of Community Colleges 2020), including first-generation students, students from underserved racial and ethnic groups, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who experience the “civic empowerment gap” (Levinson 2010) that prevents these groups from engaging in civic learning and investing in change through participatory democracy.

Educators can narrow this gap by bringing together academic departments with civic, community, and political engagement programs to encourage stewardship for the public good. Given the unrest afflicting communities, apathy plaguing politics, and insecurity permeating the economy, community colleges must revitalize their long-standing commitment to aligning citizenship development with workforce readiness. This is even more essential given the changes affecting higher education as a result of COVID-19. It is time for democracy's colleges to reaffirm their role of educating for democracy.

#### Civic Learning by Design

At College of the Canyons (COC), a community college in Santa Clarita, California, department chairs from

four departments (Anthropology, Communication Studies, Culinary Arts, and Sociology) are incorporating civic design into their programs to foster a civic-minded campus culture and diminish the civic empowerment gap. Supported by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Civic Learning in the Major by Design initiative and guided by recommendations from *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* (2012) and *Civic Prompts: Making Civic Learning Routine across the Disciplines* (2015), these departments are addressing COC's civic and community engagement theme of “Making the Invisible, Visible.”

Students in these departments, detailed below, confront what Rittel and Webber (1973) call “wicked problems”—issues difficult or impossible to solve. These problems are the basis for the seventeen United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which identify world problems found in all countries (United Nations, n.d.). Many of these issues, like poverty and climate change, resonate with community college students, especially Generation Z students passionate to create social change (Seemiller and Grace 2018).

#### Integrating Civic Design

**Anthropology** embeds civic engagement in the department's mission statement, emphasizing local, national, or global problems while recognizing the intersection between species, populations, cultures, and environments. The department addresses each of the SDGs and

incorporates them in classes like Cultural Anthropology Honors and Physical Anthropology. SDGs like “Life on Land” complement the department's commitment to primate conservation. Working with the local Gibbon Conservation Center, students create dialogues to educate the public about gibbons, the world's most endangered primate species. Faculty also highlight SDGs through lectures, assignments, and projects, and they display multicolored icons representing the SDGs in their classrooms.

In the future, faculty will include SDG descriptions in course syllabi and connect SDG topics to faculty specializations. “Anthropology is committed to advancing global stewardship by encouraging students to tackle ‘wicked problems’ while contributing to the public good,” said department chair Lisa Malley. This civic initiative now drives the department.

**Communication Studies** embeds aspects of civic engagement in its most popular courses, including Introduction to Public Speaking and Small Group Communication. Together, these two courses enroll more than four thousand students per year. Department chair Tammera Stokes Rice believes that “community college students are searching for ways to connect academic knowledge to ‘real world’ situations, including the SDGs.”

Almost every student completing the associate of arts degree at COC must complete a public speaking requirement, and public speaking students are required to attend a civic engagement event and prepare a public policy speech. Events address issues like homelessness, food insecurity, and human trafficking (related to SDGs like “No Poverty,” “Zero Hunger,” “Gender Equality,” and “Decent Work and Economic Growth”) as well as voter education and civic participation.

In the Small Group Communication course, students collaborate with nonprofits to create long-term solutions, not

short-term responses. Rather than volunteer for a “clean-up day,” for example, teams design plans to reduce plastic waste (related to SDGs like “Responsible Consumption and Production.”) They operationalize their plans, analyze their data, and evaluate the benefits.

**Culinary Arts** infuses food insecurity into two of its most popular classes, Pastry Art and Catering, while addressing SDGs like “Zero Hunger.” Faculty incorporate discussions of food scarcity, food deserts, food sustainability, and healthy eating throughout their courses. Concerned about students who do not have access to nutritious meals, Culinary Arts created a Fuel Station in 2019 to provide COC students with free, healthy snacks. “The department [has worked] with local businesses to secure donations of fresh fruits and vegetables,” said chair Cindy Schwanke. Culinary Arts has also provided low-cost recipes and food preparation tips to students, as well as to community residents who frequent local food pantries.

**Sociology** promotes a culturally responsible, equity-minded learning perspective, using open educational resources (OER) to provide the highest level of education for the least amount of students’ money. According to department chair Katie Coleman, “Civic design is the first step in creating a long-term sustainable model for faculty . . . to embed specific civic engagement terminology, goals, and assessments into coursework.”

Faculty also address issues of civic engagement and social justice in their classes and incorporate “wicked problems” throughout courses, assignments, and learning outcomes. Criminology students focus on the “Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions” SDG as they propose ideas to decrease rates of recidivism, violence, and addiction among the nation’s incarcerated population. Instructors design and students modify projects to engage the campus community in

understanding the systemic challenges and failures of the justice system, including organizing letter-writing campaigns, fundraising for books for incarcerated individuals, and partnering with nonprofits to raise awareness of the inadequate rehabilitation of nonviolent drug offenders. As one student said, “I am now aware of the true realities that nonviolent drug offenders face in our prison system and will continue to speak out and inform others.”

In addition, students in Introduction to Women’s Studies examine the socially constructed meaning of the term “victim blaming” while researching the personal and societal impact of victim blaming in sexual assault cases. Transdisciplinary teams of students critically examine the laws, norms, and values that contribute to the “Gender Equality” SDG. Advocacy, activism, and social change drive students as they post stories of survival and recovery on their own personal websites.

### Civic Design Creates Change

Civic engagement at COC is aligned with project-based learning, which provides students more equitable chances to tackle contemporary issues. Civic design reduces the civic empowerment gap and emphasizes creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration—the “four Cs” of professional skills sought by employers. Within the context of self and society, students participating in Civic Learning in the Major by Design are practicing participatory democracy, building civic agency, and enhancing global citizenship. The time has come to engage a new generation in democracy. This is the moral obligation of “democracy’s

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



The seventeen United Nations Sustainable Development Goals icons. (Image courtesy of the United Nations)

colleges” to their students, community, and nation. 

### REFERENCES

- AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES.** 2020. “Fast Facts 2020.” [https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/AACC-2020-Fact-Sheet-Final-1\\_web.jpg](https://www.aacc.nche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/AACC-2020-Fact-Sheet-Final-1_web.jpg).
- LEVINSON, MEIRA.** 2010. “The Civic Empowerment Gap: Defining the Problem and Locating Solutions.” In *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement*, edited by Lonnie Sherrod, Judith Torney-Purta, and Constance A. Flanagan, 331–61. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- MUSIL, CARYN McTIGHE.** 2015. *Civic Prompts: Making Civic Learning Routine across the Disciplines*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. <https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/CLDE/CivicPrompts.pdf>.
- NATIONAL TASK FORCE ON CIVIC LEARNING AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT.** 2012. *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. [https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/crucible/Crucible\\_508F.pdf](https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/crucible/Crucible_508F.pdf).
- RITTEL, HORST W. J., and MELVIN M. WEBBER.** 1973. “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning.” *Policy Sciences* 4: 155–69.
- SCOBAY, DAVID M.** 2012. “A Copernican Moment: On the Revolutions in Higher Education.” In *Transforming Undergraduate Education: Theory That Compels and Practices That Succeed*, edited by Donald W. Harward, 37–50. New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield.
- SEEMILLER, COREY, and MEGHAN GRACE.** 2018. *Generation Z: A Century in the Making*. New York, NY: Routledge Press.
- UNITED NATIONS.** n.d. “About the Sustainable Development Goals.” <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>.