

[CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AT THE MACRO LEVEL]

Maryland's Formula: Civic Education and Engagement Drive Democratic Culture

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A generation ago, we took for granted that the American experiment—a Constitution-based civil society—was *self-sustaining*. Recent events, however, remind us that, as the expression goes, “the price of liberty is eternal vigilance.” At a time when our democracy is being tested by attacks from foreign powers intent on undermining democratic elections, awakened by public outrage at systemic race-based inequities, and challenged by the dual forces of a global pandemic and economic downturn, education—and particularly post-secondary education—must reaffirm its mission of educating for democracy. Given the current cultural landscape of divisiveness and polarization, and the troubling trends in America’s overall civic health, we face a “crucible moment” that demands action from the higher education community (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2012). Because approximately 75 percent of students in college attend a state college or university, public higher education will need to drive this effort with a nationwide, state-by-state commitment.

The University System of Maryland (USM)—composed of twelve diverse institutions including research universities, comprehensive universities, and Historically Black Universities—has actively reaffirmed this mission through system-wide and institution-specific activities. In April 2017, the USM convened a symposium on “Civic Education, Civic Engagement, and Civic Responsibility: Foundations of a

Democratic Society” to advance civic education as a system-wide priority. The Honorable Barbara Mikulski, the longest-serving female United States Senator (1987–2017) and a Baltimore native, presented the keynote lecture and challenged the USM to ensure that all 176,000 students enrolled in the public university system would graduate with the civic knowledge and skills to assume responsibility for sustaining US democracy and civil society. (See <http://www.usmd.edu/usm/academicaffairs/civic-engagement> to learn more.)

Over the past few decades, post-secondary education has become increasingly focused on goals defined in terms of workforce and economic development. But the symposium on civic education sent a clear signal to all USM institutions that our mission is much broader and must include setting system-wide expectations for student learning in such critical areas as US history and government; global, cultural, and environmental awareness; information technology literacy; open discussions of complex issues that are inclusive of a diversity of perspectives and opinions; and the exercise of civic responsibility and ethical leadership.

In June 2018, the USM Board of Regents charged a task force to survey the system’s institutions about their current civic education and engagement practices and make recommendations to support and enhance student learning outcomes to fulfill the mission of educating for democracy. The USM set up three working groups to serve as hubs

for communication and coordination across all the campuses, aligned with the key recommendations of the task force’s report: (1) Voting and Census Engagement; (2) Carnegie Community Engagement Classification; and (3) Integration of Civic Engagement and Education into the Curriculum. With representatives from each USM institution in each working group, we have established an effective and efficient way to share information, resources, and expertise as individual campuses pursue targeted goals.

Nancy Shapiro, USM associate vice chancellor for education and outreach and coauthor of this article, chaired the Voting and Census Engagement working group. Since all the universities in the USM participate in the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), this working group agreed to compare results from institutional reports and share strategies for encouraging voter registration and voter turnout. The 2020 Census has created an urgent need for infusing civic education and engagement across all USM institutions, because everyone needs to be counted and understand why it is so important.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic upended our original plans for voter registration in fall 2020, we have reinvented the work in our new reality. We still plan to focus on student-to-student connections, understanding that virtual outreach will be as important—if not more important—than campus activities. What began as a working group focused on voting and the Census has evolved to address structural racism, civility, and civic responsibility both on and off campus.

The second working group, led by Deb Moriarty, former vice president for student affairs at Towson University, served as an incubator for campus applications to the Carnegie Foundation for the coveted Community Engagement

Classification (see <https://www.brown.edu/swearer/carnegie/about>). At the time, Towson University was the only USM institution with the Community Engagement Classification, and this working group was charged with helping other USM institutions to prepare their applications. As a result of the working group's collaboration, three additional USM institutions prepared full applications for submission in April 2019, and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) and Salisbury University (SU) were designated as Community Engaged campuses in 2020. The USM Board of Regents encouraged other USM institutions to apply in the next call for applications.

The third working group, Integration of Civic Engagement and Education into the Curriculum, shares resources and best practices across campuses. SU had a head start in this area with their Institute for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement (PACE), established in 1999 to “reinvigorate the idea of a state university as a place where civic and political involvement could be developed and where students’ spirits of generosity and intellectual curiosity could foster engagement” (Salisbury University 2018). SU Provost Karen Olmstead, coauthor of this article, chairs USM’s curriculum integration working group and describes the multifaceted civic engagement work taking place at her university in the following section.

How One USM Campus Integrates Civic Learning

Salisbury University is a mid-sized public comprehensive institution with a mission to connect students to the community and to contribute to the “educational, economic, cultural, and social needs of the local region, the State of Maryland, and the nation” (Salisbury University 2019). SU is committed to graduating informed, engaged community builders and future leaders,

and the university has intentionally shaped its academic programs, faculty development, and cocurricular programs to serve that mission.

SU’s academic programming includes academic majors and minors like social justice, social work, health humanities, conflict analysis and dispute resolution, and law, justice, and advocacy, as well as noncredit activities designed to support civic education and engagement. For example, in the Presidential Citizen Scholar (PCS) program, students spend three semesters building skills for future careers and community service and leadership. In 2018, SU used World Café–style dialogues (World Café Community Foundation, n.d.) to engage students from all majors in roundtable discussions about homelessness in the community and raised student awareness of food insecurity on campus. As a result of that project, students created a campus food pantry, which has maintained operating hours throughout the COVID-19 closures and summer break. A small cadre of faculty and student volunteers, coordinated by PACE, have continued receiving and distributing donations, and volunteers have distributed food, hygiene items, and activity packets to local schools and religious groups. They distributed some 750 meals and 200 activity sets in the first weeks of COVID-19 closures.

In addition, SU’s Honors College has developed a “civic learning spiral” for its students. In their first-year seminar and cocurricular activities, Honors students engage in community service with partners like Habitat for Humanity, the Humane Society, the public library,



Salisbury University students partnered with community organizations to host a Haitian Community Event in April 2019 with activities for families and children, food, music, voter registration, and more. (Photo courtesy of Salisbury University/Megan Raymond)

and community gardens. In 2018 and 2019, hundreds of students volunteered at the National Folk Festival held in Salisbury. Upper-division students have the opportunity to work with mentors to identify their own projects. As a result of this intentional spiral of experiences, students gain confidence, and some have even received community recognition such as the Friends of Wicomico Public Libraries Light of Literacy Award.

PACE is a third example of SU’s integrated approach to civic education. PACE promotes voter registration and fosters public awareness and discussion of contemporary issues, but its real innovation has been in curriculum development. As SU reframed many of its undergraduate courses, it created space for integrating significant community projects into a four-credit course model. Maarten Pereboom, dean of SU’s Fulton School of Liberal Arts, challenged the campus to explore what civic engagement looks like across disciplines and programs. Recognizing the need for faculty development to achieve this, Pereboom worked with faculty members and PACE codirectors Sarah Surak and Alexander Pope to launch a faculty development seminar

in 2014 called Civic Engagement across the Curriculum (CEAC) that has been transformative for the campus.

Guided by the American Democracy Project's framing of civic engagement as "working to make a difference in the civic life of the communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference" (Ehrlich 2000), CEAC leaders recognized the complex challenge of authentically engaging faculty in this work. They created a ten-week seminar in which forty faculty participants over the last five years have explored a conceptual framework and compiled practical tools to incorporate and assess civic engagement in new or existing courses from the introductory to graduate level. (Some of these tools are available on CEAC's National Civic Engagement Resources list at <https://www.salisbury.edu/academic-offices/liberal-arts/pace/ceac/civic-engagement.aspx>.) This is difficult and complex intellectual work, but the faculty participants were excited by the challenge. A sample of the faculty seminar projects suggest the scope and scale of their work:

- a series of Holocaust remembrance events reaching more than five thousand members of the local community
- a student-facilitated informational forum on the Maryland General Assembly's proposed animal rights legislation
- a highly successful Philosophy in Schools program developed in partnership with the local school district

With support from the USM Wilson H. Elkins Professorship, Surak and Pope are developing an online module of the program, which will be available for all faculty in the USM system by fall 2020. The research that Surak and Pope have conducted on community-engaged teaching and learning, and CEAC more specifically, is a significant contribution to understanding this important pedagogy and its future potential (Surak et al. 2017).

CEAC's efforts have driven current conversations about general education revision at SU. A proposed model would require students to complete a civic and community engagement course component that could be met through the very courses redesigned under CEAC. The PACE rubric for CEAC courses, developed from suggestions in Welch (2016) and from AASCU's American Democracy Project, would serve as a tool to review potential courses in the proposed general education model.

In addition to the CEAC program, SU established a robust Faculty Learning Community (FLC) program, which grew out of an initial faculty-driven book group on disparities in higher education. The FLCs have often focused

on issues and opportunities in the community, including food insecurity, collaborative educational programming with the local zoo, women's leadership, and social justice. The Social Justice, Equity, and Teaching Transformation FLC created a robust library guide for students, faculty, and staff across campus, which provides important resources on topics including gender, race, social class, disability, nationality, indigeneity, and intersectionality. (The library guide is available at <https://libraryguides.salisbury.edu/DIRC.>)

Recognizing that incoming students need better models for addressing the deep divisions that exist in society, the campus launched a New Student Reflection (NSR) program in 2018, drawing on the methods pioneered at the Center for Civic Reflection, which was established in 1998 at Valparaiso University with support from the Lilly Endowment. Unlike some orientation programs that use a first-year book to initiate campus-wide discussions and inquiry, NSR uses short texts (including poems, prose, and nonfiction articles) introduced in orientation seminars to stimulate thinking and reflection about students' shared world and differing values and perspectives. These focused, moderated discussions model the type of dialogue sought in SU's classrooms. In the inaugural year of this program, and thanks to effective collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs, 125 trained facilitators composed of SU faculty, staff, and returning students worked with more than 1,350 first-year students. A survey conducted after these sessions indicated that 87 percent of first-year students felt engaged during the discussion, and 92 percent agreed that the NSR helped them feel more welcome at the university. In 2019, SU became the new home for the Center for Civic Reflection and its online resources, offering low-cost training for campuses and organizations across



Salisbury University's Organization of Latin American Students screened *A Bridge Apart*, a 2014 documentary about migrants coming to the United States from Central America and Mexico. A discussion followed with the coproducer and immigration experts. (Photo courtesy of Salisbury University/Megan Raymond)

the country that are interested in using this powerful methodology (see <https://civicreflection.org>).

Important conversations should not stop because work and courses move online. In fact, fostering civic awareness takes on even more urgency at a time when “community” is being redefined by COVID-19 guidelines. SU will again welcome new students to campus with the NSR experience. Fully online for the first time in fall 2020, the program will facilitate open dialogue about issues of diversity and inclusion, social justice, and individual and collective action. Using a half dozen “objects”—mostly images and video—facilitators will help new students practice the kinds of conversations that happen in college classrooms while also exploring challenging problems that matter across our communities.

The fall semester will also find PACE promoting political awareness and action across the state. Entering its fourth year, the special topics course Democracy across the Disciplines will explore the political climate in the context of the 2020 general election. A dozen faculty from all six SU schools and colleges as well as the Department of Political Science will present weekly lectures as part of the team-taught course, offered remotely for the first time. SU students can opt to take the course for one pass/fail credit or may audit the course. PACE will support high school government teachers and students who wish to integrate the course with existing K–12 requirements or explore dual-credit options. PACE is also opening the course to faculty, students, and staff at other USM schools and, as in past versions, there will be an option for the general public to participate, helping to bring the breadth and depth of the course to people across Maryland.

With programming for students and faculty in place, SU recognized the need for greater communication with

community partners, seeking to better establish the mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationships that are the hallmark of engaged campuses. PACE’s annual spring Community Engagement Showcase invites agencies, employers, internship partners, and other partners to a workshop to facilitate dialogue about community needs and opportunities for collaboration. The 2019 showcase was cosponsored by a regional nonprofit community foundation. Although COVID-19 prevented a 2020 showcase, campus and community leaders continue to collaborate to keep their long-term partnerships strong. Now more than ever, the health of the community—town and gown—depends on respect and shared responsibility for mutual well-being. SU will continue to ask students to explore what civic engagement looks like for them as individuals, professionals, and community members.

The SU example illustrates how a university system can tap into academic programming at one campus for the benefit of all of the system’s institutions. The USM working groups provide a forum for sharing curricular innovations and civic engagement practices for the benefit of the entire system.

Lessons Learned and Looking Forward

The USM Board of Regents is acutely aware of public postsecondary education’s obligation to promote, preserve, and protect the civic culture that is the foundation of democracy. Educating students to fully participate in democratic



Salisbury University’s Food for the Flock student food pantry helped the Maryland Food Bank kick off its It Takes More than Food to End Hunger campaign in April 2019. (Photo courtesy of Salisbury University/Kathy Pusey)

ideals, values, and processes must be at the center of what we do. By launching the system-wide task force and working groups, including representatives from all twelve USM institutions in the work, and providing reports and updates to the regents, the USM has raised the visibility and recognition of civic activities on the campuses. Through reports to the regents, institutions get credit for their efforts, and the sharing of information becomes a multiplier for the USM’s civic education mission.

At his first meeting with the USM Board of Regents in January 2020, Jay Perman, the newly appointed chancellor, invited a panel of students from several USM institutions to offer their perspectives on civic education and engagement in higher education, making his priorities clear from day one. When asked about how he sees the role of civic education in higher education, Chancellor Perman frames the issue like this:

Colleges and universities—especially *public* universities—have a responsibility to educate students for ethical citizenship. In turn, citizens in a democracy have a responsibility to help construct and sustain a just society through voting and public

service. We cannot look at the fraught political and civic landscape in America and not feel a sense of urgency around fulfilling this most basic contract. Preparing students to protect—and perfect—American democracy was *always* a central mission of US higher education, and it remains a central mission today. As deep divisions and political polarization threaten our national unity, as our founding norms and values are increasingly eroded, we must recommit to high-quality, integrated civic education as the way forward.

Below are a few lessons the USM has learned so far:

- **Institutional leadership comes from many sources on a campus as well as from the system headquarters.** From the top, the USM Board of Regents established and then endorsed the recommendations of the initial task force on civic engagement and education and now requires an annual report from each campus.
- **Academic affairs and student affairs are equal partners in this work.** Indeed, through close collaboration, these partners can form effective networks that support community-based learning, students' professional and civic formation, and the connection of academic content to student passions.
- **Fostering collaborations across institutions allows campuses to learn from each other and share innovative approaches.** The USM boasts numerous national experts in both student affairs and academic affairs who serve as resources across institutions through system-wide summits, networks, and shared projects.
- **Various departments and units can make contributions across a university through research, community**

engagement, collective action, and modeling tolerance and respect.

- **Reflection—in both academic and student affairs settings—is a key component of the civic maturing process.** From new student orientation to senior capstone projects, faculty and staff across the system create opportunities for civic reflection to engage students, faculty, staff, and community members.
- **The most effective strategies involve student-to-student interactions.** Research confirms that student-driven efforts allow participants to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively channel their energy, expertise, and education to address important challenges in their communities. Supporting student leadership has a multiplier effect on civility across campuses.
- **Challenging problems provide the topics for robust discussion.** Discussions about complex issues—like inequitable access to health care, structural racism, globalization, climate change and environmental sustainability, freedom of expression, public understanding of science, and cybersecurity—are and always have been central to the mission of a university.

The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement report, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*—prepared at the invitation of the US Department of Education under the leadership of the Global Perspective Institute and the Association of American Colleges and Universities—described what a civic-minded institution should look and act like in the twenty-first century:

Colleges and universities need to expand education for democracy, so it reaches all students in ever more

challenging ways. . . . This is the crucible moment as the United States faces major challenges at home and abroad. Let us pledge to make it a transformative one that advances democratic values of liberty, justice, domestic tranquility, and the general welfare of the people and the planet. (2012, 69)

COVID-19 created a new context for a “crucible moment.” Black Lives Matter created a new definition of a “crucible moment.” Yet the centrality of “democratic values of liberty, justice, domestic tranquility, and the general welfare of the people and the planet” could not be more relevant. The University System of Maryland has embraced the urgency of this challenge and has a structure in place to hold itself accountable to this public mission. ☐

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