

# **Civic Engagement in Community Colleges**

## **Mission, Institutionalization, and Future Prospects**

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Research conducted through a cooperative agreement with the Kettering Foundation

Community colleges, based in and serving our nation's diverse communities, are uniquely suited to civic engagement and the work of democracy. Our country urgently needs those attending these institutions—forty percent of all college students—to be informed and engaged citizens, skilled in democratic practices, knowledgeable about the policy issues their communities confront, and committed to lifelong engagement. And yet civic engagement is often marginal to the work of community colleges, despite the fact that the diversity of their student body is an incredible asset in carrying out the work of democracy. It was to frontally address this fact that in 2011 a group of community colleges launched The Democracy Commitment (TDC). TDC is a national initiative providing a platform for the development and expansion of community college programs, projects and curricula aiming at engaging students in civic learning and democratic practice across the country. TDC's Declaration, issued upon its founding, describes the historic challenge for community colleges:

American higher education has a long history of service to democracy. Our nation's colleges and universities have always had a mission to make education available to the many and not only the few, to insure that the benefits and obligations of education were a democratic opportunity. This is a proud history, but it is not enough. Beyond access to education itself, colleges and universities have an obligation to educate about democracy, to engage students in both an understanding of civic institutions and the practical experience of acting in the public arena. The American community colleges share this mission of educating about democracy, not least because we are the gateway to higher education for millions who might not otherwise get a post-secondary education. More critically, we are rooted deeply in local communities who badly need the civic leadership and practical democratic capacity of our students for their own political and social health.

The purpose of this research project, which was undertaken through a cooperative agreement with the Kettering Foundation, was to explore many of the important issues raised in TDC's Declaration. What are the connections between democracy and civic engagement on one hand, and the missions, values, and actions of community colleges on the other? Do community

colleges see themselves as agents of democracy in their communities, committed to educating their students to be active civic agents? How are colleges—specifically those colleges that are members of TDC—doing this work? How is it reflected in the organization and operation of the institutions?

This paper is organized around three themes central to our investigative process. The first centers on connections between civic engagement, democracy, and the community college’s historic and contemporary mission and values. The second digs deeper into the ways that community college *actions* reinforce principles of civic learning and democratic engagement, focusing in particular on the extent to which these ideals are institutionalized on two-year college campuses. Finally, we look to the future, and offer some ideas for how to both strengthen, and further investigate, the community college’s civic function.

Throughout this paper insights gleaned from the literature are woven with qualitative focus group data, which originated from a day-long pre-conference workshop hosted by the Kettering Foundation and held in conjunction with TDC’s annual conference in San Antonio, Texas in June 2012.<sup>1</sup> Participants in the pre-conference workshop (referred to in this paper as “the Kettering Workshop” or simply “the workshop”) hailed from TDC community colleges across the country. Although participants play various institutional roles (faculty, administrators, and so forth), they are all involved in promoting, providing, or facilitating civic learning and democratic engagement on their own campuses.

Throughout the day-long workshop, participants engaged in small- and large-group discussions, as well as individual and group brainstorming activities, centered on the three major research questions guiding the investigation: 1) How do community college educators understand their institutions’ civic mission? 2) To what extent are community colleges

institutionalizing their role as civic agents and inculcating in students the skills and capacities to become active and engaged in their communities? 3) What is the future of civic work in community colleges; how can a group of like-minded practitioners harness their energy, build capacity, share ideas, and move the work of democracy forward in community colleges? All conversations were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to inductive coding and analysis.

In addition to analysis of focus group data from the Kettering Workshop, this paper also includes insights that emerged from a subsequent Kettering Foundation workshop held in Dayton, Ohio in October 2012, as well as examples of civic learning and democratic engagement at community colleges across the country. These examples emerged from focus group data, are detailed in the literature, or were included in institutional responses to TDC's Civic Inventory, a survey of community college civic engagement programs and practices conducted in spring 2012. These examples are neither representative of nor generalizable to all community colleges, but together with focus group data and information from the Kettering Workshop in Dayton, they provide a sense of the current state of civic engagement in these institutions, as well as possibilities for the future.

### **Democracy, Civic Engagement, and “The People’s Colleges”**

At first blush, concepts of democracy and civic engagement seem central to the community college mission, which—according to the American Association of Community Colleges’ *The Community College Story*—is to provide educational programs and services that lead to stronger communities.<sup>ii</sup> Indeed, a cursory review of the literature reveals titles such as: “The Two-Year College as Democracy in Action,” “Laboratory for a New Form of Democracy,” and

“Democracy, Multiculturalism, and the Community College.” The term *community college* itself connotes the idea of an institution run by and for the people; this notion, as well as the colleges’ historic commitment to open access, has led authors of books on the origins of these institutions to refer to them as “Democracy’s Colleges” and “The People’s Colleges.”

These monikers, as well as the ideas behind them, are well ingrained in the minds of community college educators. When participants at the Kettering Workshop were asked to brainstorm terms or phrases that come to mind when they think about the missions of community colleges, the list included many ideas closely linked to notions of democracy and civic engagement: equal access, community engagement, egalitarianism, empowering the marginalized, social transformation, student engagement, better citizens. The connection between mission and democracy is clear, one participant stated, adding: “the civic work is sort of a strategy, a way of making the ideas of the mission tangible and actionable. Like theory to practice.”

Yet delving deeper into the literature, or into subsequent conversations among workshop participants, and it becomes clear that the links between democracy, civic engagement, and the community college mission are more nuanced than they appear on the surface. To fully understand the connects and disconnects, one must separate two related but quite distinct ideas: that community colleges were, as Franco states, “created to democratize both American higher education and the students who came through their open doors.”<sup>iii</sup> In other words, community colleges perform (or were intended to perform) both a democratizing role—they facilitate social mobility by admitting all comers regardless of race, religion, socioeconomic status, educational preparedness, and professional/vocational goals, allowing more selective colleges and universities to admit some and turn away others—and a civic function: they engage students in

preparing for life and work in their communities and in a democratic society. Ronan describes this duality in the community college mission, which is inherent in TDC's founding Declaration, as both "democratizing opportunity, and doing the work of democracy."<sup>iv</sup>

Much of the literature addressing the community college's democratic mission refers almost entirely to the first function: the institution's open door. By serving those who would otherwise not have access to higher education, community colleges are instruments of democracy, engines of egalitarianism and social transformation. In this capacity, they are the essential counterweights to an otherwise meritocratic or, depending upon one's point of view, elitist system of higher education. Even the most strident critics of community colleges do not challenge the value of the democratizing function; rather they question the extent to which the colleges are performing this function well or at all.<sup>v</sup>

Less-well understood, or at least less emphasized, is the community college's civic function. Early community college scholars and advocates considered this mission to be central to the new type of institutions. Hollinshead, for example, argued in 1936 that colleges "serve to promote a greater social and civic intelligence in the community."<sup>vi</sup> Yet a review of the literature suggests that the community college's original civic function—what Ronan calls "the work of democracy,"<sup>vii</sup> and what Peters defines as "public work... work that taps and engages and develops the civic agency, talents and capacities of everyone... where 'the world's problems' play out in ways that women and men can do something about"<sup>viii</sup>—has been redefined over time as more of a community service orientation, one which can be fulfilled through worker retraining, non-credit community education programs, and maybe, service-learning courses. This is not to say that community colleges never engage in democratic learning or civic engagement

programs or practices (they certainly do), but that the civic aspect of the community college mission may not be as explicit or as narrowly defined as it once was.

Indeed, recent attempts to describe the community college's civic mission have ranged from narrow definitions focusing on voting and electoral participation, to broader definitions. It is these broader definitions that have traction now among colleges participating in TDC; they include engagement in issues that matter to students and to the communities from which they come, serious work that truly impacts the campus and the community, doing "with" others rather than simply doing "for" others, and so forth. Participants at the Kettering Workshop accentuated the importance of refining these definitions, both in order to guide college civic engagement programs and practices, and to enable the colleges to better measure their impact.

Focus group data from the Kettering Workshop reinforce the notion that community colleges serve both democratizing and civic functions, as well as the sense that these missions may be, as one participant noted, aspirational, as opposed to "being the current state of what we do." Indeed there was widespread agreement that the colleges' democratic and civic missions are necessarily bounded by "the confines and constraints of charters and state regulations," as well as the support of communities and the availability of funding sources.

Nonetheless, participants saw the work their colleges do to facilitate civic engagement as central to the missions of their institutions, and furthermore, as a key way of operationalizing those missions. As one noted, "The civic work helps develop students' capacities to go back to their communities and be powerful members of their communities." Another participant touched on the notion that service learning and other such programs can bring students from diverse backgrounds together: "Civic engagement is unifying.... When you focus on civic engagement, then the wealthy privileged students and the struggling students can be gaining the same

experiences. They can have the unity of learning the skills to be a participant in a democratic society.” One participant extended the idea further—to much head nodding and murmurs of agreement—by arguing that civic engagement programs and practices also reinforce the academic mission of community colleges:

Students do best when they can see... the connection between their curriculum and what they care about in the real world... And to me that suggests civic issues and community engagement as a way to connect the dots between statistics and my social justice concerns, biology and my future career, basic math and my family paying the bills.

Without necessarily realizing it, workshop participants suggested that civic engagement programs may also extend the colleges’ democratizing function. As noted earlier, the community college’s open-door admissions policy is the cornerstone of the nation’s democratic system of higher education. Yet simply admitting all comers does not in itself ensure the academic success or social mobility of students, as numerous studies of cultural competency attest. Engaging students in, as Franco writes, “addressing and solving the problems that beset the communities that support them”<sup>ix</sup> may be one way to assist students for whom a college campus is a foreign or intimidating environment. In the words of one participant: “Traditionally there is... a cultural gap between the communities [students] came from and college. You have to sort of give up your community to succeed in college. The idea that you don’t have to have that gap [between college and community] is really important.”

As these sentiments illustrate, the notions of democratic learning and civic engagement are inextricably intertwined with the historic mission of the community college to democratize both its students and the American system of higher education. While reasonable people may disagree about how well contemporary community colleges are performing these functions, it is clear that civic engagement programs act in service to these ideals, and are therefore essential to



the community college enterprise. However, there may be a difference between centrality to mission *in theory* and centrality to the day-to-day functioning of the institutions. The following section explores the extent to which democratic learning and civic engagement are institutionalized on community college campuses.

### **Institutionalization of Civic Engagement in Community Colleges**

Around the country, community colleges are engaging in innovative and exciting programs and practices leading to civic engagement and the work of democracy. Some of these programs have been in existence for decades, and others are newly established. Some community colleges incorporate democratic learning and civic engagement into general education requirements, others utilize deliberative pedagogies, and still others engage students in active learning opportunities such as service learning, community organizing, campaign participation, or model legislatures.

The following examples from previous Kettering workshops in 2011 and 2012 illustrate the variety of approaches to civic engagement in community colleges: Miami Dade College (Florida) is building on its extensive service learning curriculum by developing “civic learning modules” that will help faculty incorporate or better support service learning activities in their classes. The Wayne County Community College District (Michigan) is attempting to remediate the resegregation of Detroit public schools by involving community college students in civic engagement opportunities in their communities. De Anza College (California) teaches students the skills of organizing, and LoneStar Kingwood (Texas) trains students in public achievement for engagement, as well as advocacy on issues of concern to their generation.

The Maricopa Community Colleges (Arizona) and Broome Community College (New York) conduct deliberative forums. Minneapolis Community and Technical College (Minnesota) offers college credit for organizing and community development, and Skyline College (California) holds forums where students utilize dialog and deliberation to address issues important to them and others on campus. Finally, Kingsborough Community College (New York) offers a wide variety of civic engagement options, requiring two such experiences from all students prior to graduation.<sup>x</sup> Yet while TDC's Civic Inventory and the education literature are replete with examples of innovative programs such as those listed above, there is little within the extant research base to suggest that these programs have been successfully institutionalized—in other words, fully incorporated into the culture and ethos of community colleges.

### ***The Importance of Institutionalization***

Community colleges are frequently hailed as nimble institutions, able and willing to incorporate new programs, practices, and ideas in response to changing community and stakeholder needs and expectations. Yet many curricular and co-curricular additions slip away as quickly as they came, never quite gaining a foothold in institutional practice or becoming accepted into the culture of the college. Program viability is not certain even when initiatives are closely tied to the founding principles of an institution. As Gumport writes, “Centrality to mission and quality” are not the only criteria used to determine program continuance, and even when they do come into consideration, they are often “loosely coupled to decisions about cuts.”<sup>xi</sup> To ensure long-term survival, then, programs must become institutionalized, a process which leads to a permanent change in “an institution’s program menu,” as well as acceptance by the wider college community that it provides something of value to its members.<sup>xii</sup>

The literature on organizational change in institutions of higher education offers some insight into what it means for a program or practice to become institutionalized.<sup>xiii</sup> First, and most importantly, it must be supported within the administration. Although interest groups are often the initial proponents of a program, administrative intervention is central to the institutionalization effort, as it confers legitimacy on the program and can help to sell its value to reluctant members of the campus community. As Everley writes, for a program to be institutionalized, at least one influential leader “must be willing to champion and fund [a] program that some faculty may view as counter to their primary role.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Second, the program or practice must receive the endorsement of a wide body of faculty, staff, and often, students. When college constituents feel a sense of pride or ownership in a program—when they feel that they, in some small way, have a stake in its success—they will be more likely to advocate for it in the future.<sup>xv</sup> Administrative and faculty support for a particular program, practice, or ideal is especially impactful if it is codified in college mission statements, strategic plans, and promotional materials.

A third method of institutionalizing community college programs involves integrating core ideas, methods of investigation, and effective practices into existing coursework and curricular programs.<sup>xvi</sup> A program has reached institutionalized status when its central tenants are evident across the curriculum and perhaps the co-curriculum. Finally, a key characteristic of an institutionalized program is that it is supported by “hard money”—money from the institution’s own budget—as opposed to the “soft money” contributed by philanthropic or other external organizations for limited periods of time.<sup>xvii</sup>

### ***Civic Engagement in Community Colleges: Institutionalized? Or Still Sidelined?***

The clear importance of institutionalization for the long-term viability of civic engagement programs and practices on community college campuses informed our second area of inquiry, namely: to what extent are these initiatives incorporated into the fabric of the institutions? And, if there is a gap between an ideal level of institutionalization and the current reality, what factors might account for it, and how might it be eliminated?

To investigate these questions, participants at the Kettering Workshop engaged in a series of activities and exercises related to the topic of institutionalization. To start, they brainstormed what a community college where democratic learning and civic engagement were institutionalized across campus might look like. Responses fell into four broad themes. First, participants agreed, civic engagement would have to be central to the college's organizational culture. There would be a commitment across campus to engaging students in the work of democracy; an "ethos of engagement that reflects our values as an institution." Efforts to engage students in the work of democracy would be "visible" across campus, and it would be known in the community that "this is what the school is all about." Furthermore, as one participant stated, for civic engagement to be "prioritized by the college as a philosophy, as an organizational culture, and as an organizational climate," it would ultimately have to "drive decision-making." In practice, this would mean that civic engagement programs and practices would receive stable funding and other material support, and it might also mean that institutional decisions would be made collaboratively or democratically, with clear acknowledgement of and respect for "a multiplicity of viewpoints."

Second, a community college where civic engagement was institutionalized would have a commitment to social responsibility and the work of democracy embedded in its mission and vision statements, strategic plan, and expectations for faculty, staff, and students. Participants

noted that new employee orientations might include a civic component, and that **all faculty—even those teaching online or on a part-time basis**—should be trained in how to incorporate democratic learning and engagement into their curricula. Faculty need to learn, one participant argued, that “civic engagement does not require extra work, it just requires the work that you do to be done in a certain different way.” Helping faculty come to this understanding will pave the way for civic work and democratic engagement to be incorporated into all types of disciplines, not just those that have traditionally been associated with service learning.

Third, many participants argued that if civic engagement is to truly be institutionalized on a campus, there must be some sort of requirement for students to participate. There was little agreement, however, on what this requirement should include. Some workshop participants felt that civic engagement ought to be an “institutional requirement for degree completion;” others felt it would be sufficient if students were simply required to take at least one course that incorporates democratic learning and/or civic engagement as a primary learning outcome. Others focused specifically on a singular approach to civic engagement, arguing that “inter-disciplinary or cross-curricular service learning” should be a prerequisite for graduation.

Finally, there was broad consensus among participants at the Kettering Workshop that for civic engagement to be institutionalized on a community college campus, it would have to be multi-disciplinary, spanning both the curriculum and the extra-curriculum. As one participant wrote, civic engagement efforts would “cross pollinate across disciplines, and the co-curricular as well.” It would be embedded across campus, so “if you’re not doing projects within the community... you’re asked to think about how what you’re learning impacts your world.” Another participant envisioned a college where “across all the disciplines, every department, every college, whatever, would claim that civic engagement was a part of what they did.” This

campus-wide, inter-disciplinary approach to civic engagement would necessarily include “collaboration between academic and student affairs,” as well as “a cadre of faculty and support staff.” Faculty and staff might also be asked to interrogate their disciplines to better understand the public relevance of their work: “What would/could civic engagement be in my discipline? What are the key civic issues confronting my discipline?” Participants also identified the need to clearly outline to students how the civic learning and agency they are developing might transfer to other disciplines or areas of the students’ lives, including job performance. Furthermore, the need to involve student affairs personnel and programs in civic engagement efforts was identified as pivotal, since their focus on student development and their responsibility for student extracurricular activities (and budget) are so related to the growth of student citizens.

After workshop participants shared their visions of a community college where civic engagement was institutionalized, they were asked to grade their own campus against the ideal. Many participants noted a large gap between their current reality and what they would ultimately like to see. For example, one person gave his college a D-, stating that “our mission and vision are words only. The president and the board are in control of the stated mission and vision— ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’ are not part of it. Our words don’t necessarily match our actions. What we say is not necessarily what we do.” Another gave her college a D+/C-, as “curricular experiences are isolated in multiple locations across the institution and remain the exception, not the norm. Institutional structure and practice is not fully reflective of the democratic skills and values we promote through civic engagement.”

A few participants graded their institution’s success in institutionalizing civic engagement a bit more positively. One woman gave her college a C-, writing: “We are doing all of these things, but it is happening in silos. We could be much more effective and impactful.”

Another stated: “We are just at the beginning. We have an office with stable funding. It’s in the mission. A small group of our students leave with increased civic capacity and knowledge. But it is still in a few small places in the college and not broadly embraced.” Despite the fact that no one awarded their college a grade higher than a B, many were hopeful about the prospect of institutionalizing civic engagement on their campus. For example, one woman noted that her college has “some momentum; there is a significant push to eliminate some of the silos. If this is successful the above dream could become more of a reality.” Another summed up what many in the room were feeling by saying: “I believe my campus does an okay job. But we tend to do only what is necessary or allowed.... We can do better.”

As is clear from the above sentiments, civic engagement in TDC community colleges represented at the Kettering Workshop—arguably those most engaged in civic and democratic learning—falls short of an ideal level of institutionalization. This may be cause for some concern, as it is perhaps an indication that—despite the close connection between civic engagement and community college missions and values—civically-oriented programs may ultimately struggle for long-term viability. This fear may be especially relevant given recent federal and philanthropic efforts to boost the community colleges’ economic and workforce training functions.

Yet there is also reason for hope. Workshop participants told numerous stories of their colleges (and college leaders) being willing to take significant risks in order to support faculty- and student-led projects in the community; of innovative ideas such as speakers’ corners, where any college or community member could speak at any time about any issue of concern to them; and of campus-wide efforts to connect the curriculum and co-curriculum around issues of civic engagement. Furthermore, Kettering Workshop participants have a strong vision of how a

commitment to civic engagement can be fully realized on their campuses, and together with colleagues across the country, are working hard to infuse the work of democracy into their college's organizational culture; incorporate civic engagement into expectations for faculty, staff, and students; and create co-curricular and multidisciplinary initiatives that can foster concepts of democracy and civic participation along with academic skills and technical expertise. All of these efforts are supported by the network of colleges created through TDC.

### **Future Possibilities for Civic Engagement in Community Colleges**

In the last hour of the Kettering Workshop, participants were invited to brainstorm innovative ideas for what could be called “growing the work”—in other words, moving the current state of civic engagement in community colleges closer to the ideal. In addition to ideas for innovative programs or experiences, many of their suggestions had to do with rebranding civic efforts, better defining or characterizing what it means to engage in the work of democracy. For example, one person noted that many community college programs include the word “citizen” or “citizenship” in the title; doing so, he argued, can limit a student's understanding of how he or she can become civically involved. This may be especially true for foreign or undocumented community college students. Helping students, faculty, and staff understand that “being a citizen is what you do, not where you're born” may be an effective way to engage more and different types of students in the work of democracy.

Similarly, some participants shared a desire to move beyond common terms such as social responsibility and service learning. As one stated, “My community college has had social responsibility as one of its learning outcomes for the past five years or something. I have found in implementation it's just really been a thing about guilt and doing good and ‘giving back’....



The problem with the notion of giving back is that it relies on the premise that you have to be successful in order to give back.” She continued in a similar vein: “Lots of the literature on service learning [comes from] four-year schools: privileged students doing service learning to see how the other half lived. Well, ours *are* the other half.” Instead of enrolling them in service learning courses “we should be giving them the skills—empowering them to change the situation.” Perhaps, then, a challenge for community colleges is to utilize existing service-learning infrastructure to build more robust civic engagement programs.

Other ideas for growing the work centered on better communication among colleagues engaged in civic work. In particular, participants supported the creation of open-source software or links to community college and civic engagement journals; a more systematized way to identify “issues we are all passionate about”; and opportunities to set up cross-institutional civic engagement teams. Several colleges have developed informal but regular structures for convening civic engagement practitioners on their campus in order to support each other in the work and to share insights about successful practices. Broadening this model to a larger community may be beneficial to spreading the work of democracy on community college campuses. Furthermore, participants agreed that a better understanding of how civic learning and engagement might be adopted in various disciplines—including occupational or workforce areas—would greatly improve the prospects of institutionalization. Perhaps most importantly, participants cited the need to learn about successful practices and program models, and to build the capacity to share these with colleagues at other institutions.

Participants also acknowledged the limited body of literature dealing with civic engagement in community colleges, and offered some directions for future research. One theme of particular resonance to participants was the relationship between community colleges’ civic

and economic missions, and the importance of investigating how the two can co-exist and possibly even complement each other. In the words of one workshop participant: “So often there is a tension between democracy and capitalism, you know. How do we promote democracy in the truest sense of quality and engagement while at the same time living within our capitalistic system?”

Other participants focused on the need to examine who engages in and benefits from community college civic engagement programs. For example, one woman noted that almost all service learning courses at her college were offered through its honors program, which necessarily excludes certain groups. And while others in the room shared how their college had incorporated civic engagement into remedial or distance education programs, the need for further investigation into programmatic areas or groups of people who do not yet have access to civically oriented programs and practices emerged as an important research question. Attention must also be directed to specifying how partners benefit from their collaboration with community colleges through civic engagement programs. As well, it may be useful to ask how the campus may benefit, as well as the process of teaching and learning?

Perhaps the most popular direction for future investigation cited by participants, however, centered on the need to better understand the link between civic engagement and student outcomes. While the literature suggests that exposure to civic engagement opportunities in college leads to, among other outcomes, a greater commitment to activism or service later in life, as well as to greater self-efficacy and leadership skills,<sup>xviii</sup> the vast majority of these studies are concerned primarily with students at four-year colleges and universities. Only a handful of investigations have been based in community colleges,<sup>xix</sup> and thus additional work examining the effects of civic engagement (including service learning, but also other forms of civic engagement

such as deliberative pedagogies) on community college students' short- and long-term civic outcomes would be a valuable addition to the literature base.

Community college faculty, administrators, and scholars at the Dayton workshop echoed this point. They suggested that it may be useful to convene a cross-disciplinary group of community college faculty and staff in order to identify 3-5 civic engagement learning outcomes that could apply across disciplines, in both academic and workforce-oriented courses, and regardless of pedagogical approach. Discussion focused on the importance of specifying outcomes that encompass the whole person: head, heart and hands. Skills must range from the ability to exercise public judgment and deliberate effectively about issues that matter, to caring for fellow citizens and empathy for those who engage in the common work, to developing agency and the ability to take public action together with others. Further investigation is needed in order to clarify the relation between these civic skills and the skills that employers identify as needed in 21<sup>st</sup> century workers. These “employability skills” are distinguished from the “placement skills” that are requisite for occupations. Yet developing cross-disciplinary and cross-pedagogical civic engagement outcomes may help to recruit faculty who have previously avoided incorporating the work of democracy into their classes, and may assist efforts to further institutionalize civic engagement on community college campuses. Perhaps most importantly, it would help to define what students gain from exposure to civic learning and engagement experiences, and may be the first step toward assessment of those gains over time.

Kettering workshop participants also described a related direction for further investigation: the relationship between civic engagement in college and students' educational outcomes. In the words of one participant: “We're used to talking about civic engagement, civic programs as a kind of moral imperative—we should, we ought to do this for the community, for

our students. But we're not used to talking about it in terms of how it answers a lot of our other concerns, our institutional concerns: increasing student success outcomes and increasing experience." An intriguing direction for future research on the civic function of community colleges, then, involves asking if civic engagement contributes to improved cognitive, affective, or educational outcomes among students, and if so, if the effects differ from or go beyond the well-documented effects of student involvement *in general*.<sup>xx</sup>

More broadly, research must be focused on the civic engagement "moment," specifying what "it" is, what civic engagement entails. How do students come to have a sense of agency? Do the skills acquired in civic practices truly "transfer" to other settings, are they lasting? How do different disciplines deliver or instantiate these civic skills? How do colleges scale up these civic practices? What is the "place" for civic engagement: the classroom, the campus, the community, or all of the above? The proliferation of terminology and notions about engagement represent the fluidity associated with the concept itself, and community college practitioners share a sense that spending more time and thought on these definitional issues can both help to rationalize their work to their colleagues as well as assist in quantifying the engagement outcomes.

These and other important research questions will be undertaken in the near future by some of the same participants whose voices are heard in this paper. Community college educators involved in civic engagement programs are uniquely situated to carry out these kinds of contextually-based inquiries, and as experts in their field, possess both the knowledge and the real-world experience to pose important and actionable research questions, and to speak authoritatively about the why their findings are important for students, and for the future of civic engagement in community colleges.

## **Conclusion**

Participants at the Kettering Workshop in San Antonio emerged from the day-long conversation with a feeling of hopefulness about the current state of civic engagement in community colleges, and in many ways, a shared sense of awe at the power these programs hold to inspire and engage students and communities. At some community colleges in our country, educators are reclaiming their institution’s civic function and demonstrating how civic engagement can—and must—be central to college operations. Yet institutions such as these remain in the minority and, conceivably, there are far more colleges whose personnel find it simpler or less time-consuming to define their civic mission in terms of services provided to the community, as opposed to engaging students in the hard work of democracy.

Nonetheless, community colleges were founded upon a commitment to social responsibility and civic involvement, and that historic mission is unlikely to be fully eclipsed by a spate of community service offerings nor extinguished by external pressures to prioritize the colleges’ economic and workforce training functions. And while there may be a long road between the status quo and a future where civic engagement is institutionalized and democracy fostered on every community college campus, the “People’s Colleges” are moving in the right direction.

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup> The Democracy Commitment is associated with—and holds its annual conference in partnership with—The American Democracy Project, a multi-campus initiative focused on higher education’s role in preparing the next generation of informed, engaged citizens for our democracy. The project began in 2003 as an initiative of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities in partnership with The New York Times.

<sup>ii</sup> Vaughan, G. B. (2006). *The Community College Story* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.

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- <sup>iii</sup> Franco, R. W. (n.d.). *The civic role of community colleges: preparing students for the work of democracy*. Boston: Campus Compact, p. 1.
- <sup>iv</sup> Ronan, B. (2012). Community colleges and the work of democracy. In *Connections: Educating for Democracy*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, p. 31.
- <sup>v</sup> See, for example: Brint, S., & Karabel, J. (1989). *The diverted dream: Community colleges and the promise of educational opportunity in America, 1900-1985*. New York: Oxford University Press; Clark, B. C. (1960). The cooling-out function in higher education. *American Journal of Sociology*, 65(6), 569-576; Dowd, A. C. (2003). From access to outcome equity: Revitalizing the democratic mission of the community college. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 586(March), 92-119.
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