Promising Practices to Facilitate Politically Robust Campus Climates

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By Nancy Thomas and Margaret Brower

Higher education has long accepted its role in educating for the future and health of democracy, but how colleges and universities meet this responsibility changes based on the social context of the times. Recently the rationale for revitalizing this role is stronger. According to former Secretary of State Madeline Albright, authoritarian regimes are taking hold globally (Albright, 2018). In 2018, Freedom House reported that globally democracy is "in crisis" due to declines in free and fair elections, civil liberties, freedom of the press, and the rule of law.

Closer to home, Freedom House placed the U.S. on a "watch" list due to foreign intervention in elections, attacks on free press, paralyzing partisan divides, and questions about the objectivity of the judiciary (Abramowitz, 2018). Commitment to democracy and democratic norms is declining to the point where many Americans question the current political system as a form of democratic governance. Americans are deeply divided along lines of social identity, political preferences, and lived experiences (Pew Research Center, 2017a).

Not trusting institutions of government, the media, and higher education (Fingerhut, 2017; Gallup, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2017b), Americans seem angry, and some have fallen into the trap of anti-immigrant white nationalism.

They are susceptible to clever social media abuses threatening their ability to make political choices based on facts. The rhetoric and divisiveness of the 2016 election season and its aftermath mark a particularly low point in the history of American democracy.

Also telling are college student voting rates. According to the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE, see sidebar), fewer than half of college and university students vote in presidential elections, and only 18% voted in 2014 (Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, 2018). We believe that unacceptably low voting rates among college students result from a combination of frustration with, and alienation from, American political systems, logistical challenges to voting, and lack of political learning across disciplines.

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An initiative of the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE) at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life, the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement or NSLVE ("n-solve") is both a service to campuses and a large database for research. Campuses must opt-in to the study, and at this time, more than 1,100 U.S. colleges and universities participate. Following each federal election, IDHE sends each participating institution a tailored report containing their aggregated student voter registration and voting rates broken down by voting method, age, class level, field of study, gender, and race/ethnicity, if available. Colleges and universities use their NSLVE reports as a benchmark for student interest and participation in democracy. Because the data is broken down across many categories, campuses can identify groups of students who may be disengaged from the democratic process.

Consisting of approximately 10 million individual-level, de-identified student records that have been matched with publicly available voting records for the 2012, 2014, and 2016 federal elections, the database is also a significant resource for research on college student political participation.

Examining Campus Climates

We also believe that some college campuses have been better than others at fostering political engagement and learning among students. Starting in 2014, we embarked on an ambitious study of campus climates for political learning and engagement in democracy. Using NSLVE data, we identified colleges and universities with higher-than and lower-than predicted voting rates, which we refer to as "positive" and "negative" outliers respectively.

We then visited nine of them to conduct comprehensive qualitative case studies of their political climates. The colleges and universities that participated in the case studies represented multiple types of institutions (research universities, state colleges, community colleges, and liberal arts colleges) that served diverse student populations and were located in geographically distinct regions of the country. The findings were based on focus groups and interviews involving nearly 500 students, faculty, staff, and institutional leaders. (For more on the methodology, see Thomas & Brower, forthcoming).

Five broad themes emerged as institutional attributes that contributed to campus climates conducive to political learning and engagement in democracy. We call these "Politics 365," to underscore the need for year-round action:

1. **Social cohesion**—how an institution builds among students, faculty, and staff a sense of shared responsibility for the institution and for the campus community, student well-being, strong interpersonal relationships (particularly between faculty and students), and social networks for personal and collective engagement.

2. **Diversity, inclusion, and equity as realized practice**—how an institution uses diversity and equity—particularly based on social identity, political ideology, and lived experiences—as an educational goal and asset. Social cohesion and inclusion intersect; highly engaged institutions seem able to cultivate interpersonal relationships across difference of identity, ideology, and lived experiences.

3. **Pervasive, high-quality political discussions**—how an institution embeds controversial issue discussions across the curriculum and student experience, including promoting respect for the open exchange of ideas and consideration of dissenting or unpopular views.

4. **Activism, agency and decision-making**—how an institution responds to students as leaders and strong voices in addressing institutional and local community problems through collaborative governance and decision-making; this includes responsiveness to student activism about institutional or public policy matters.

5. **Active electoral engagement**—how an institution removes the technical barriers to voting, uses elections as teachable moments, encourages students to see themselves as voters (as opposed to voting as a one-time act), and creates a "buzz" over elections.

In Short

- Higher education institutions can do more to improve and expand opportunities for student political learning and engagement.
- Colleges need to focus on five attributes of politically engaged campus climates: social cohesion; diversity, inclusion and equity as realized practice; pervasive, political discussions; activism, agency and decision-making; and active electoral engagement.
- Colleges and universities need to take an integrated approach to change.
- Elections can provide opportunities for connecting educational goals of improved political learning, discourse, inclusion, and participation.

In this paper, we share real examples of promising practices on the positive outlier campuses—practices that were confirmed by what was missing at the negative outlier institutions. The examples are organized around the five Politics 365 categories. No single practice stands alone, and many are fundamentally tied to the strength of others. Some are relatively easy to implement; others call for a longer-term intentional process of organizational reflection, discussion, and experimentation.

Social Cohesion

At the positive outlier institutions, we found a strong commitment to student well-being and success, and a striking sense of shared responsibility people felt for each other and for the institution. This culture of caring worked across differences of social identity and political ideology. Faculty played a significant role in building social cohesion. Professors had a "students first" attitude and prioritized helping students with their studies and personal challenges.

Norms of Social Cohesion: Shared responsibility, well-being, student-centered attitudes among faculty, teaching as a priority, inclusion.

Practices

#1: **Effective and well-publicized student support and well-being programs** that ensure safety, health, and academic success for all students, and particularly for students who have been disadvantaged due to life circumstances.

Examples: A medium-sized state university with the potentially explosive mix of far-right and far-left leaning students had adapted a national suicide prevention program called "R.U.O.K" to include all aspects of the student

experience, not strictly mental health. Students learned in orientation that they shared responsibility for each other's learning and well-being. Stickers saying "R.U.O.K?" were placed near every doorknob and inside bathroom stalls. Also, the institution had a well-known, confidential hotline for reporting students in distress, a food pantry, and dormitory rooms set aside for homeless students. The combination of supportive structures and consistent messaging about collective responsibility improved student well-being and experience on campus.

#2: **Clear expectations and support for faculty beyond-the-classroom interactions with students**, particularly with nontraditional students and commuters.

Examples: Students relish relationships with their professors, and they need these relationships for academic success and career development. On several campuses, professors went the extra mile by offering flexible office hours to provide student assistance with assignments and by adjusting deadlines to accommodate students with families and jobs and other competing commitments. Professors also actively participated in student disciplinary clubs, or they formed faculty-student advocacy groups to address public policy issues, such as a world-wide day of peace or environmental stewardship. This recommendation requires clear expectations communicated by provosts, deans, and department chairs about faculty roles and responsibilities toward students.

#3: **Organic faculty development** in skill building to educate this generation's increasingly diverse student populations. Institutions can support these efforts by providing financial support for food, convening spaces, written materials, consultants, and workshops.

Examples: While variations on "diversity training" undoubtedly happened on the positive outlier campuses, no one spoke of them, much less spoke of them as transformative. On one campus, however, a small group of professors self-organized and created a community of practice to study, reflect upon, and learn intercultural competence and how to support nontraditional students. They read books and papers, shared insights, and worked with organizations dedicated to intercultural skill building such as the Sustained Dialogue Network. After 18 months, the participating faculty members went public as "Agents of Change," placing stickers on their office doors indicating that they welcomed working with students with diverse social identities and lived experiences. These faculty development efforts were adopted by the institution's teaching and learning center, and now more than 100 professors on campus have participated in similar learning exchanges. Now, all permanent and ad hoc administrative committees include at least two people identified as "Agents of Change."

Diversity as Realized Practice

Related to social cohesion, diversity is *practiced* on the positive outlier campuses, not just discussed as an aspiration or unenforced written statement. Not only did these institutions have compositional demographic (race, gender, class, and other forms of social identity), experiential (economic background and affiliations) and intellectual (disciplinary choices and cognitive abilities) diversity among students, they also had strong institutional commitment to social mobility as an outcome of the student learning experience. The campuses also set aside physical spaces where students who shared identities such as demographic, experiential, or intellectual characteristics could go to find others with common experiences.

Norms of Diversity as Realized Practice: Inclusion, equity and equal opportunity, openness, respect, shared responsibility

Practices

#1: **Safe spaces for affinity groups.**

Examples: Safe spaces are physical locations set aside for students to ensure that they feel secure and heard because they are with people who are similarly situated. And while these spaces may be established for students who feel marginalized because of their gender or race, for example, that is not always the case.

Many campuses supported women's centers, cultural houses, international residential communities, and disciplinary clubs, and students often formed groups around political issues, affiliations, or hobbies. The campuses we visited also offered programs and convening opportunities for commuters, single parents, formerly incarcerated students, first-generation college students, students for whom English is a second language, and adult learners. These institutions carefully tracked retention and graduation rates and implemented first-year or orientation programs and support services to ensure that nontraditional students graduated at rates commensurate with their peers.

#2: **Programs in conflict resolution and intergroup relations.**

Examples: These institutions took advantage of established programs at other campuses and adapted them for use. Some examples included traing with the Sustained Dialogue Campus Network, a Center for Public Deliberation (Kettering), and versions of an Intergroup Relations program (e.g., University of Michigan). One institution supported "Campus Talks," one hundred conversations each year about difficult topics using best practices in conflict resolution. At another, Muslim and Jewish students collaborated on campus-based projects with built-in facilitated interfaith discussions. On another campus, students were required to participate in an intercultural communication training before they could engage in any community-based service, service learning, or research.

#3: **Activism and expression in response to campus or public events.**

Examples: At the positive outlier campuses, faculty, students, and staff (not just students) would gather in response to public incidents, particularly those with racial dimensions (e.g., the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO). While such demonstrations might not be unique, at the positive outlier campuses students, faculty, and staff regularly participated. Campus security officers viewed their role as

protecting people gathering for these purposes, not preventing unrest or disruption, and they participated as well.

Students also recognized events or transitions important to diverse groups. On one campus, the student government purchased 400 candles for a vigil for President Mandela and called for a vigil in a common space. Faculty, staff, administrative leaders, community leaders, politicians, and the media joined. On another campus, students, faculty, and staff protested efforts by the state legislature to defund an all-campus discussion of a book on Muslim lifestyles and faith. Signs reading "Academic Freedom!" popped up across campus and on the lawns of people in the local community.

Pervasive Political Discussions

This finding was most robust, and thus we include many examples of practices that exemplify this theme. On the campuses we visited, finding political discussions was easy because they were valued, frequent, and held across campus and disciplines. What set these institutions apart was the level of training, skill, and preparation that went into ensuring that political discussions would be productive and educational. Campuses with robust climates for political learning supported opportunities for students both in and beyond the classroom to practice the arts of controversial issue discussions: examining multiple (including unpopular) perspectives, active listening, disagreeing with respect, managing conflict, and writing persuasive arguments. Students repeatedly told us that they could engage in difficult, intense conversations over polarizing political issues yet remain friends with people with whom they disagreed.

Norms of Pervasive Political Discussions: Free expression, inclusion, respect, good will, cooperation, shared responsibility

Practices

#1: **First-year experiences or common courses that build discussion skills.**

Examples: One campus required students to take a first-year course that examined one issue that changed annually. In the year we were there, the course focused on health care. On another campus, students took a required first-year English Composition class, where they learned rhetoric and writing by examining current events. Professors told us that the value of having these skills taught to all students in their first year was that when the students took upper-level classes, which are often discussion-based, the students were prepared for controversial discussions. Students appreciated and recognized professors who could manage conflict without shutting down ideas or the discussion. Students knew how to establish and reinforce "ground rules" or "agreements," including their shared responsibility for the success of intergroup dynamics in the classroom.

#2: **A center, hub, office, or program for campus and local community problem-solving.**

Examples: Two of the positive outlier campuses supported "centers for public deliberation." These began with support from the Kettering Foundation, using National Issues Forums as the model to convene forums for addressing pressing local issues in partnership with the local community. On one campus, leaders of the student government were trained to facilitate issue forums, and they then ran workshops on organizing and facilitating discussions for other students (e.g., new members of the student government or leaders of recognized clubs). They expanded the approaches to issue discussions to include other models like study circles, sustained dialogue, and appreciative inquiry.

#3: **Faculty development opportunities in discussion-based teaching.**

Examples: The positive outlier institutions supported centers for teaching and learning or periodic professional development opportunities where faculty learned skills to embed policy or controversial issue discussions in their classes. These development opportunities included guidance about what to put in the syllabus about possible controversial issue discussions, how to establish classroom agreements, how to defuse conflict without chilling speech, and other troubleshooting tips. They also taught professors how to elicit multiple perspectives on issues, for example, by requiring students to write a paper taking a political perspective different from their own or by asking provocative questions (which many called "playing devil's advocate") to force students to reconsider their positions.

#4: **Disciplinary clubs with both student and faculty involvement that discuss political issues.**

Examples: On one campus, the Engineering Society organized a series of brown bag lunches on the responsibility of engineers to address the nation's deteriorating infrastructure. On another campus, the Chemistry Club ran a biannual blood drive, and students and faculty worked together to convene campus discussions about stigmas associated with some blood diseases. These disciplinary clubs were used to increase awareness about political issues and to teach student community organizing skills. Clubs also serve commuters and students with rigorous jobs and/or children who may be too busy to engage in many extracurricular activities but will spend time engaging in club activities involving their professors, with whom they want strong relationships.

#5: **Physical spaces on campus for gathering and discussion.**

Examples: A café, a patio, a designated space in a student center, common spaces in the residence halls, a commuter lounge, a centrally located outdoor space (e.g., the quad) were conveniently located and welcoming spaces with comfortable seating, good lighting, Many spaces had televisions for viewing the news. Most campuses have physical spaces like this, but on the high outlier campuses, their central location and prevalence were striking.

Activism, Agency and Decision-making

Students at the positive outlier campuses often saw themselves as having the skills and agency to make change on campus and off. Students developed efficacy by participating in committees and boards on campus, by having a leadership role through student government or club leadership, by

organizing around issues and policies, and by organizing forums for problem solving in local communities. Students who engaged in activism about an institutional matter felt they were being heard and that their ideas and voices mattered. Institutional leaders treated students with respect and as colleagues in sharing responsibility for the institution. Institutional leaders used collaborative approaches to governing, and shared decision-making practices and collaborative governance was typical.

Norms of Agency, Activism, and Decision-making: Respect, collaboration, transparency, shared governance and responsibility

Practices

#1: **Nimble, open responsiveness to and support for student activism.**

Examples: On one campus we visited, a protest erupted over the termination of a faculty member, and the president dropped two hours of appointments to talk with the protesting students. At another campus, students organized a political event and independently reached out with savvy and politically-minded pitches to local and state politicians and to local media for participation. The politicians attended because they had been told the media would be present; the media attended because they were told that elected officials would be present. On many of the campuses we visited, students went to the state capital to lobby for educational funding. Administrators happily turned responsibility for solving campus challenges, such as same-sex bathrooms or diversity in invited speakers, back to the protesting students.

#2: **Programs that foster student agency and leadership skills.**

Examples: All the positive outlier campuses supported student leadership majors, minors, certificates, or experiences that emphasized collaborative leadership skills. In several cases, leadership training related to student government or was a prerequisite for community-based service or service learning. SGA leaders ran workshops for club leaders who received funding through the SGA. On another campus we visited, the SGA owned and independently managed a main building containing the cafeteria, bookstore, a café, meeting rooms, offices, and classroom space. Each semester, 450 students worked on some aspect of the building management, including personnel, purchasing, security, maintenance, hours, and budgeting.

#3: **Issue activism.**

Examples: On several campuses, student organizations played a key role in empowering students and developing agency. Many students organized clubs that combined social and political work, such as the Black Student Union or the women's center. At a large public university, one student organization successfully advocated for the establishment of an LGBTQ center; faculty and fellow students recognized this group as active and powerful on campus. Many of the positive outlier institutions recognized and established physical spaces for groups hosting meetings, forums, and sponsored events.

#4: **Habits of shared governance.**

Examples: On the positive outlier campuses we visited, students served and had voting power on standing and ad hoc committees on hiring, policy making, academic programs, speakers, budgets, and ad hoc issues. In contrast, at one of the negative outlier campuses, the concept of shared governance had broken down completely, and the faculty and the administration held palpable animosity toward each other. Students noticed the rift, and they seemed to replicate it by socializing in tight exclusionary cliques. When administrative or faculty leaders are viewed as autocratic, exclusionary, and unresponsive to each other, it was hard to create a campus climate that values collective action and compromise.

ACTIVE ELECTORAL ENGAGEMENT

The positive outlier institutions in our study were partly selected because of their high voting rates, yet not all of them rigorously supported electoral activities, and many people we interviewed were surprised that their institution voted at higher than predicted rates. That said, some supported electoral activities that we believe were significant both as stand-alone activities and complementing to the practices described above. Elections provide content for teaching critical policy questions and the public relevance of each discipline. Elections also offer students myriad organizing and leadership opportunities, from designing voter registration drives to organizing around critical issues. And those that supported traditional electoral engagement made the activities celebratory and fun.

Norms of Active Electoral Engagement: civic knowledge, inclusion, shared responsibility, leadership

Practices

#1: **Nuts and bolts voter training.**

Examples: Many students face barriers to voting such as inadequate forms of identification, misunderstanding about where to vote, and a lack of basic experience with the physical act of voting. Several of the positive outlier campuses had purchased or rented voting machines, placed them in central locations (e.g., the student center), and staffed them with volunteers who showed students how they worked. At the positive outlier campuses, students were trained to know what information is needed on the registration forms and to help others fill out their forms. These volunteers also helped peers understand what forms of identification would be acceptable to election officials.

#2: **Election issue activities.**

Examples: Administrations, student groups, and professors often organized debate watches, issue forums, and activism during an election season to ensure that students knew what's at stake. On one campus we visited, the faculty organized a "walk across the borough" before an election to draw attention to racial and economic inequality in the city. At others, as noted above, student disciplinary clubs served as places for election issue discussions. No discipline on campus is untouched by election outcomes, and each

discipline helped students explore the public relevance of their chosen field.

#3: Year-round civic, including voting, engagement.

Examples: On one campus, tables to register voters are set up and staffed year-round, and people walking by are asked, several times a month, "Are you registered to vote?" The institution also annually supports "Citizens Month" in which students and faculty showcase community service and advocacy work. Voter registration opportunities are available at almost every student-run event.

#4: **Fun during election season.**

Examples: Making elections fun increased visibility and drew crowds. Most of the activities were student-driven: parades to polling places, concerts with competitions between local bands, debate watch bingo, canvassing with peers, reaching out to family and friends. On several campuses, there was a definite buzz and energy around election season and electoral activities.

An Integrated Approach

The current political context provides both challenges and opportunities for educators who take seriously the task of educating students for stewardship of a strong and healthy democracy. Our research suggests that civic learning and democratic engagement will be easier if the campus climate reflects certain underlying norms, structures, habits, and behaviors. By looking to these promising practices at peer institutions, colleges and universities struggling with *how* to advance political learning and engagement can benefit.

None of the attributes described in Politics 365 work alone in fostering these climates. A strong sense of well-being, belonging, and social cohesion, particularly across social differences, fosters trust and a sense of shared responsibility among students (and faculty and staff) for each other's learning and well-being. This stronger underlying cohesion provides more opportunities for thoughtful controversial issue discussions, for engagement in political issues that connect people across different political ideologies, and for cultivating in students a sense of agency to address shared issues and concerns. Learning experiences that draw from policy debates and tensions prevalent during election seasons can jump start change (Thomas, et al. 2018).

The conditions for this work are in place—more and more diverse students are demonstrating an interest in political issues and action. More presidents and other institutional leaders express their viewpoints on sensitive, previously avoided issues. Many campuses are exploring curricular and co-curricular programs to improve student political discussions and faculty and staff facilitation of discussions across difference. While political tensions nationally and on campuses present challenges, those challenges can be leveraged into opportunities consistent with the practices described here to foster optimal and necessary campus climates for student political learning and engagement in democracy. Ⓒ

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