Citizenship Under Siege
Humanities in the Public Square
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About Diversity & Democracy
Diversity & Democracy supports higher education faculty and leaders as they design and implement programs that advance civic learning and democratic engagement, global learning, and engagement with diversity to prepare students for socially responsible action in today’s interdependent but unequal world. The publication features evidence, research, and exemplary practices to assist practitioners in creating learning opportunities that realize this vision. To access Diversity & Democracy online, visit www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy.
FROM THE EDITOR

Exploring Key Questions of Citizenship through the Humanities

Before delivering the 2015 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, Anna Deavere Smith spoke with National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Chairman William Adams about the role the humanities play in building “empathic imagination” and the specific role of theatrical performance in instilling empathy. In Smith’s own renowned dramatic monologues, through which she embodies the individuals she has interviewed, the project of empathy building has taken a specific form: “My lofty goal,” she said, “has been to try to become America word for word” (Smith 2015).

Gathering the words of others and translating them through performance, Smith has told intensely moving stories about the individuals who constitute America in all its diversity, person by person. The stories she tells connect with, and borrow context from, the narrative we as a nation often tell ourselves: a story of collective striving, of opportunity shared by those born within and beyond the borders of the United States. But that narrative is hotly contested—and temperatures have risen recently as the national dialogue intensifies around competing claims about America’s enduring or expired “greatness.” Beneath these claims are implied and explicit questions about citizenship—including its connection to America in all its diversity, person by person. The stories she tells connect with, and borrow context from, the narrative we as a nation often tell ourselves: a story of collective striving, of opportunity shared by those born within and beyond the borders of the United States.

In this issue of Diversity & Democracy, project participants describe their experiences and share models for engagement developed through Citizenship Under Siege. Providing context for this campus- and community-based work, Adams reflects on the role of diversity in American democracy, and on the need for an educational agenda that involves honest—and difficult—conversations across differences. Contributing authors also describe their efforts to help their students become “artivists” (John Frazier, page 19); practice “an ethics of reading” (Peter Brooks, page 22); experience the liberating potential of humanities education (Vivé Griffith, page 26); and interrogate pressing societal inequities, including those represented by the prison-industrial complex (Liz Ševčenko, page 28).

This last topic has resonated with Smith, too, and she has focused her energies in recent years on a theater project examining the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Describing that project to Adams, she said, “The kids that I’m interested in are the ones who aren’t getting a chance,” and she referred to what Lyndon B. Johnson called “the ‘fifth freedom’ … the freedom from ignorance”—an addition to Franklin Roosevelt’s original list of four. The humanities offer one of the first lines of defense in deflecting the violence that ignorance can inflict on individuals and society.

The humanities offer one of the first lines of defense in deflecting the violence that ignorance can inflict on individuals and society.

Indeed, if citizenship is under siege, a key force behind that attack is ignorance—about others, and about our own shared and individual histories. The humanities offer one of the first lines of defense in deflecting the violence that ignorance can inflict on individuals and society. Anna Deavere Smith is realizing that potential by turning the theater into “a new type of civic center”; this issue’s authors are playing their part by creating new epicenters of civic engagement and humanities-based questioning in their own contexts.

—Kathryn Peltier Campbell
Editor, Diversity & Democracy

REFERENCE

Diversity and the Future of American Democracy

WILLIAM D. ADAMS, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities

“We are large, containing multitudes.”
—Walt Whitman

“We are polyglot, a stew.”
—Barack Obama

Diversity is hardly a new term in the lexicon of contemporary thinking about democracy, but recent events, including the astonishing 2016 presidential election campaign and outcome, remind us of its central importance. Indeed, American democracy is at an inflection point. How—and how well—we cope with the shifting meanings and demands of diversity in our politics and daily lives will shape our country’s future in ways we are only beginning to grasp.

We are awash in both hopeful and worrisome reminders of this basic truth. Last fall, the National Museum of African American History and Culture opened to great fanfare and acclaim at its stunning site on the National Mall, a few paces from the Washington Monument. In the opening ceremony, standing at the symbolic heart of the country, our first African American president addressed an enormous crowd. He did not mince words regarding the significance of the event. “The very fact of this day,” he said, “does not prove that this museum will be deeply inspired and filled with a greater respect for the worth and dignity of every human being and a stronger commitment to justice, equality, and true democracy” (2016). The opening ceremony and early reports of visitors’ experiences give me cause to hope that Lewis’s vision could come to pass.

A week before that opening in Washington, the University of Virginia concluded a three-day celebration of the National Endowment for the Humanities’ fiftieth anniversary with a summit, “Memory, Mourning and Mobilization: The Legacy of Slavery and Freedom in America,” at Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. The audience was large, some two thousand people, and impressively diverse, including dozens of descendants of Monticello’s slaves. The summit program—including music, dramatic performances, and remarks from historians and activists—suggested that this iconic place in American history is owning the legacy of slavery in a new and powerful way—not as a sideshow, or history at the margins, but at the very core of its identity and legacy.

“The Great Force of History”

The continuing evolution of the founding narrative at Monticello and the opening of the new museum in Washington signify something profoundly important about our democracy and its relationship to diversity. If one of the great tests of American democracy is the progressively fuller recognition and inclusion of the African American experience in the nation’s story, then it is not at all fanciful to suggest, and to feel, that something important and hopeful is happening in the country, that our democracy is becoming fuller and truer: “I, too, am America.”

But at the very moment the “arc of progress” seemed to rise in Washington and Virginia, something else entirely was taking place in Charlotte and Tulsa, where two more African American men were shot and killed by police. And we can now add to the list of troubled cities San Diego and Los Angeles, where similar incidents have more recently occurred. How do we square the evidence of progress with these reminders that in cities across the country, equality before the law remains fugitive? Nearly as worrisome as the events themselves are the wildly discordant public reactions that have materialized in their wake. The cry of “black lives matter” has been met by the defensive retorts “all lives matter” and “law and order,” underscoring the deep divisions in how Americans are reading the troubled state of race relations in the country as a whole.

Complicating the mood in the wake of Tulsa, Charlotte, San Diego, and Los Angeles was the unprecedented spectacle of the presidential election campaign, in which diversity figured so prominently in the form of arguments, especially, about immigration. Here, too, we find stubborn divisions in the ways Americans perceive and respond to the shifting demography of our country.

The virulence of the xenophobic energy released in the presidential campaign, and the swiftness with which chants such as “build that wall” swept across the political landscape, confounded many people. After all, just a few years ago it seemed likely that Congress would agree to comprehensive
immigration reform, including a path to citizenship for the millions of people residing illegally in the United States.

But should we have been surprised? Shortly after the opening of the new museum, I visited the Textile Museum at George Washington University, which was hosting an exhibition of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century presidential campaign flags. A flag from the election of 1844 caught my eye. Using the nativist language of the day, it read, “21 Years to Naturalization: Native Americans on to Victory,” promoting the idea that a “not so fast” approach to citizenship for immigrants was deeply American. The role of the Know Nothing Party in the elections of the 1840s and 1850s reminds us that nativism has a long history in the United States, as old as the republic itself. Combined with the deep economic changes occurring in the country, especially those affecting traditional manufacturing communities in places like Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New England, and the escalation of terrorist attacks worldwide, it’s really not so surprising after all that the old nativist strain is loosed anew in a country still reeling from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

In a similar way, the eruption of racial tensions around law enforcement practices in African American neighborhoods in St. Louis, New York, and Baltimore forces us to reconsider the long, persistent toll of segregation and the powerful economic, educational, and housing disparities that have shaped African American communities in most of our cities since shortly after the Civil War. President Obama put it well in his address at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. The museum reminds us, he said, “that routine discrimination and Jim Crow aren’t ancient history, it’s just a blink in the eye of history. It was just yesterday. And so, we should not be surprised that not all the healing is done” (2016).

James Baldwin famously said that “the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations” (1985, 410). Our current struggles with the shifting meanings and realities of diversity are painful reminders of the truth of Baldwin’s words. But understanding the “force of history” in immigration and race relations is not by itself sufficient. We also have to try to understand how history’s legacies—our “identities and aspirations”—are taking on new shapes right now, right before our eyes.

And in this respect, many, perhaps most, of our communities seem ill-equipped to cope. We have not made much of an effort to promote the kind of cultural literacy that would help us. As immigration pressures persist, and as the United States and other countries face urgent calls to respond to refugee crises around the world, we should be trying much harder to know more and teach more about the cultural complexity of the country and how it is changing. We also should be looking beyond our borders to the extraordinary migrations that are occurring around the globe and that ultimately will arrive at our doorstep in the form of new Americans.

It also seems clear that we do not know nearly enough about differences now thanks to the digital technology that envelopes us. But in terms of the concrete understanding of our cultural differences, we are often utterly disconnected from individuals and experiences fundamentally different from our own.

We like to talk about how connected the country is thanks to the digital technology that envelopes us. But in terms of the concrete understanding of our cultural differences, we are often utterly disconnected from individuals and experiences fundamentally different from our own. If the presidential election proved anything at all, it is that we live more than ever in cultural enclaves in which our own assumptions and worldviews are constantly reinforced.

An Educational Agenda
The progress of American democracy depends on the inclusion of diverse populations and cultures at the crux of social opportunities and political power. So the current moment is especially fraught. Race relations are as charged as they have been at any time in the past several decades, and the exclusionary, xenophobic strains of the presidential
An educational agenda emerges from the conflicting impulses of the moment, and we must pursue it. The agenda involves revisiting the history of race relations in the United States as well as the effort to acquaint our young people fully with the shifting cultural topography of the country and the global forces that drive it. But the educational changes we need in our schools and colleges must also be accompanied by something at once more diffuse and difficult—meetings and conversations across the fault lines of difference. Orchestrating such conversations will be enormously difficult, but it’s hard to see a way through the current situation without them. We shouldn’t underestimate the degree to which students, and particularly students in higher education, are ready and willing to have such conversations. We need to harness and guide their energy, inside and outside the classroom.

And that’s exactly what’s happening in a new partnership between the Association of American Colleges and Universities and The Democracy Commitment. The Citizenship Under Siege initiative, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, is bringing students, faculty, and members of the public together in conversations beyond college campuses and the classroom. In the wake of Colin Kaepernick’s dramatic refusal to stand during the playing of the national anthem before San Francisco 49ers games, the New York Giants invited New Jersey Senator Cory Booker to attend a locker room conversation about race relations. The meeting lasted more than an hour and included roughly half of the team’s players and a good part of its coaching and front office staff. “There was conversation,” the story notes, “about differing backgrounds and childhood environments, with both African American and white players participating.”

One of those participating was Giants coach Ben McAdoo. McAdoo was born in Homer City, Pennsylvania, about sixty miles east of Pittsburgh, and he played football at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, a few miles to the north. Well into the middle of the twentieth century, Homer City’s economy was dependent on the nearby Lucerne coal mines and power plant. The power plant lives on, but the mines closed decades ago. Today, the median annual household income in Homer City is $45,590, about $10,100 less than Pennsylvania as a whole.

Running back Rashad Jennings was a key participant in the Giants’ locker room conversation. Jennings grew up in Forest, Virginia, and graduated from Liberty University. Following the locker room meeting, Jennings praised the Giants and McAdoo in particular for encouraging the players to pursue things outside of football. Jennings recalled another occasion on which his coach had mentioned diversity: “McAdoo stood up in front of us on the first day of training camp and told us that he will never know what it’s like to be a black man or woman. He said; ‘I’m a blue-collar man from Pennsylvania, and football is all I know.’”

I’m betting that McAdoo now knows something more about his African American players than just football. And I’m guessing that Jennings knows something more about McAdoo, too. It’s a small thing in many ways, but it’s a sign of what’s required if we hope to sustain the inclusive promise of democracy in America, from Forest to Homer City and all points beyond. ☺
Clashes Over Citizenship: Lady Liberty, Under Construction or On the Run?

CARYN MCTIGHE MUSIL, Project Director for Citizenship Under Siege at the Association of American Colleges and Universities

St. Cloud, Minnesota: Population 190,000. Ninety percent white; majority Catholic or Lutheran. Five percent are Somali Americans, a population that first settled here as refugees after a twenty-five-year civil war. In 2015, some citizens pressed their Republican Congressman Tom Emmer for “a ban on Muslims.” “We did not ask for those Somalis,” one person said. Others supporting the ban insisted that “it’s not about race” and “we like [our city] the way it is” (This American Life 2016).

New York City: Having just left a church service, a group of Asian Americans were deciding where to go for lunch when a well-dressed woman, frustrated that the group was slowing her pace, shouted angrily as she passed, “Go back to China!” Among the group, Michael Luo—American-born Harvard graduate and New York Times editor—responded to this verbal assault. “It’s this persistent sense of otherness that a lot of us [Asian Americans] struggle with every day. That no matter what we do, how successful we are, what friends we make, we don’t belong. We’re foreign. We’re not American” (Luo 2016).

By contrast, in Healing the Heart of Democracy, author Parker Palmer offers a confession from the perspective of an entitled citizen:

As a white, male American who has always been well-off—the kind of person for whom this nation has always worked best—the gift of full citizenship, unquestioned and unchallenged, came to me as an accident of birth. Today I realize the magnitude of that gift. But for years I was an unconscious and ungrateful recipient because attaining citizenship required no effort from me. (2011, 29)

Palmer’s experience of entitlement is not the norm. For vast numbers of people historically, and for many college students today, citizenship is neither unquestioned nor a gift of birth. Instead, it has varying gradations: full, partial, stratified, postponed, or denied.

Our National Narrative

Exploring citizenship as a touchstone for many of the divisive issues that are fracturing America today—as they have throughout our nation’s history—was the focal point of Citizenship Under Siege, a project I directed in 2016 for the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) in cooperation with The Democracy Commitment, a community college initiative. Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, Citizenship Under Siege posited that the humanities could be used as an ameliorating force to enhance learning, listening, and engagement, both in and out of the classroom and on and off campus. The project proposed that by conducting historical investigations; raising ethical and moral questions; listening to or reading stories of people’s journeys, aspirations, and humiliations; or surrendering to the power of dance, theater, and film, participants could tackle volatile issues affecting citizenship rights such as economic inequality, immigration, racial discrimination, the relationship between gender and political power, religious pluralism, and massive cultural transitions. Our argument was that the humanities can grease the intellectual and emotional gears to contribute to constructive and respectful, if demanding, processes through which people holding varying viewpoints can examine the contentious question of who counts—and who should count—as American citizens.

Citizenship in the United States, like democracy itself, is always under construction—provisional until new approaches displace the old.

For college students and others, an essential discovery is what can be gleaned about today’s struggles by studying earlier periods in US history. A snapshot of who over time has been deemed worthy of American citizenship—and who has not—provides ample proof that clashes over citizenship are as much a part of our national narrative as the Preamble to our Constitution. Enslaved people were once deemed chattel in the US Constitution. All women were once entirely denied citizenship rights. The Naturalization Act of 1790 extended citizenship to immigrants, but restricted the privilege to people who were white. Patterns. Sorting. Stratifications. Their rhythms are familiar. Similar struggles for full and equal rights as Americans continued in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for Native Americans, African Americans, and women, each group subjected to status designations deeming them as unworthy of citizenship.

The angry New Yorker in the opening vignette above echoes an earlier...
FIGURE 1


America in which the Immigration Act of 1924 (including a provision known as the Asian Exclusion Act) eliminated a pathway to citizenship for all those born in Asia, setting restrictions that would not be fully abolished until the elimination of the quota system in 1965. By contrast, especially between 1892 and 1924, immigrants flooded through Ellis Island, so that at one point nearly “half of all living Americans [could] trace their heritage to one or more family members who first stepped onto American soil” there, where the iconic Statue of Liberty welcomed them (AAC&U [1995] 2011, xxii). But the welcome was not universal, not even for European whites. Nativism, racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Catholicism in the first decades of the twentieth century served as catalysts for the reappearance and resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan.

Today, two images sum up the internal tensions in the nation’s immigration narrative. One depicts the modern restoration of the Statue of Liberty, whose pedestal features Emma Lazarus’s poem referring to Lady Liberty as the “Mother of Exiles” and describing her as lighting the way for “homeless” and “tempest-tost” (1883) (see fig. 1). Another image of Lady Liberty, by political cartoonist Lalo Alcaraz, depicts Lady Liberty on the run, family in tow, not welcomed but chased down as “illegal aliens”—a situation faced by many Latinos in contemporary Arizona and elsewhere (see fig. 2). The construction and deconstruction of citizenship continues.

The Value of the Humanities
In a toxic presidential campaign in which immigrants (both legal and undocumented) and Muslims (globally and locally) were singled out with special venom, and where after the election white supremacists in Durham, North Carolina, spray painted on two walls “black lives don’t matter and neither does your vote [sic]” (Candace 2016), conversations about who counts as American and attempts to find a common way forward are both arduous and urgent. College campuses—as precious, if charged, sites for contentious investigations held in the privacy of dorms, the intimate spaces of the classroom, and the larger public squares where campus and community converge—offer opportunities for students, educators, and community members to make thoughtful decisions about what it means to act collectively with others to enact democracy’s core aspirations of equality, dignity, and opportunity for all.

But such thoughtful, collaborative work is not easy, especially when fierce, emotional, and divisive debates about citizenship are at a boiling point. In the face of seemingly intractable divisions, how can higher education prompt people to move from the corners of the combative ring to seats around a shared table where they can engage in thoughtful exchange? Even more importantly, how can education become a vehicle for interrogating the frames of mind that feed conflict and allow one group to define another as foreign, undeserving, or less than human and their own group as superior and worthy of all the privileges of citizenship?

The Citizenship Under Siege project proposed that the humanities offer key answers to these questions, challenging the lapses in clear thinking and human empathy that combine to sustain bigotry and intolerance.

In a climate marked by stereotyping, misinformation, historical amnesia, demagoguery, fear, and social isolationism, the humanities need to be visible everywhere, their engagement adopted strategically rather than left to happenstance. Below are four major educational approaches to consider.

1. Deploy the power of the humanities across curricula and in the public square. Imaginative storytelling, and empathy offer windows into people’s lives, their dreams, their anguish. Historical contexts help us understand the origins of the present. Ethical, philosophical, and moral lenses prompt us to question, reflect, and care. Expressions of delight in human variety introduce us to cultures beyond our own. Creativity engenders the power to reimagine what might otherwise seem intractable and inevitable. Combining these practices and qualities, the humanities generate representations of individual humans that help intrude upon unexamined, generalized abstractions.

2. Design curricula to include a focus on citizenship. As A Crucible Moment (National Task Force 2012) argued, the very content of curricula needs to include, across disciplines, routine and widespread interrogations about multiple aspects of democracy and citizenship.
Curricular opportunities could prompt students to explore such concepts by examining legislated and experienced differentials; the daily and long-term consequences of being marked as either belonging or alien; past and current processes for becoming a citizen; the knowledge and political processes required for informed participation in democratic society, whether related to scientific, media, health, or business issues; the histories of social and cultural movements to correct or enforce exclusion; and the levers for effecting citizen-driven change in a modern democracy. These investigations should be designed to expand knowledge, surface contentious issues, and foster careful examination of these issues through differing perspectives.

3. Adopt pedagogies of democratic engagement. AAC&U has long promoted engaged student learning and high-impact practices as educationally valuable. But some of those practices and pedagogies rely more than others on democratic processes and result more commonly in democratic outcomes. For example, service learning can disrupt usual patterns of thought and association and, when practiced well, connects students with others from disparate backgrounds and perspectives to address common concerns. Community-based research is another option made democratic when its focus and methods are collaborative, responsive to community needs, and shaped by multiple stakeholders. Some educators have turned to different modes of dialogue—intergroup, deliberative, structured, or action-driven. Additional stereotype-shattering pedagogies include interviewing, filming, recording, and documenting others; reflecting and journaling; role-playing; writing ethnic autobiographies or collecting oral histories of families and communities; and participating in immersive study both abroad and at home.

4. Carry investigations about clashes over citizenship into multiple arenas of campus and community life through varying formats.

As described in several articles included in this issue of Diversity & Democracy, Citizenship Under Siege challenged participating teams at seven community colleges to break out of the containment of the classroom. Participating campuses found myriad ways to create new venues beyond the classroom to interrogate questions about citizenship, including public forums, discussions, and dialogues; experiential opportunities connected with resident life; programming within student organizations; yearlong themes for campus-wide exploration; film series and art exhibits; digital formats; codesigned events by the campus and community; and human “library” programs through which “readers” can “check out” “books” by asking real people from marginalized groups questions.

Citizenship in the United States, like democracy itself, is always under construction—provisional until new approaches displace the old. That is why students, educators, and community members must explore questions of citizenship and practice democratic values, habits, and skills—and not assume that democratic citizenship is granted as an incontrovertible gift. If Lady Liberty is to avoid being on the run rather than under construction, students and others will need to study, refine values, and hone skills so they are prepared to act in collaboration to protect her. She welcomes “your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” She stands beside a “golden door” (Lazarus 1883), not a wall guarded by armed US border patrols and anti-immigrant vigilante militias bearing semiautomatic weapons.

REFERENCES


To meet the needs of a pluralistic democratic society, the undergraduate experience must expand students’ abilities to learn about and reconcile diverse perspectives. Sarah Churchwell (2014) reminds us that the humanities are particularly powerful in this regard: “We understand ourselves and our world through the telling of stories. Visual dramas teach us sympathy, empathy, [and] pity, encouraging us to break out of our solipsistic shells. They explore ethical issues, ask challenging questions, [and] inform the way we view each other.” As we learn about each other, so we learn about ourselves, making possible the work toward shared goals that is so necessary to a functioning democratic society.

Middlesex Community College in Lowell, Massachusetts, and Santa Fe College in Gainesville, Florida, have leveraged the power of the humanities in general—and of personal narrative expressed through performance in particular—to build empathy and break down misconceptions across racial and cultural divides. Both colleges have convened faculty, staff, students, and community members to view, discuss, and participate in performances based on personal narrative, believing that such engagement will lay the groundwork for building strong communities.

**Shared Performance at Middlesex Community College**
Performance as an expression of personal and cultural experience has a unique power to transform people’s understandings of complex issues, giving challenging and divisive topics such as immigration a human face and connecting experiences shared across humanity. Through its participation in Citizenship Under Siege, an initiative funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and organized by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and The Democracy Commitment, Middlesex Community College used the arts to create powerful moments shared by faculty, staff, students, and community members across distinct cultural identities.

Since its establishment by venture capitalists seeking to build new factories at the dawn of the American Industrial Revolution, Lowell has been a city of immigrants. The city has always drawn economic strength and cultural vitality from its immigrant groups, from the original Irish canal diggers to the Greek and French settlers to later Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Cambodians, Brazilians, and West Africans. In a pluralistic democracy composed of such different groups, good citizenship requires an understanding of cultural diversity, global self-awareness, and personal and social responsibility. Pride in one’s own culture is a cornerstone for feeling the support and empowerment necessary to participate with confidence in the broader community.

In April 2016, in an effort to celebrate cultural pride and promote cross-cultural understanding, Middlesex sponsored a public forum on immigration at the Lowell National Historical Park. The program of speakers, moderated by Middlesex faculty member and historian David M. Kalivas, featured historians and representatives from community agencies and provided cultural and historical context related to the topic of immigration, an issue steeped in controversy in the current political climate. The highly successful event was attended by over 120 community members and students. It not only offered information about the important role immigration has played in Lowell’s economic and cultural development, but also provided a forum for community discussion about the needs and concerns of overlapping immigrant communities. At the forum, members of different cultural groups expressed ethnic pride, kinship, and validation gained through knowledge of their shared experiences, and it was apparent that building connections across these groups was important to developing a healthy community.

To build on the forum’s conversations, Middlesex opened to the public certain events at its Interdisciplinary Studies (IDS) Weekend, held each semester since spring 2010. This thematic one-credit course, which has featured the cultures of Asia, South America, Africa, and the Middle East, addresses issues of global importance and provides information, skills, and perspectives necessary to help students more fully engage in a globally connected world. In 2016, approximately 120 Middlesex students, joined by over one hundred community members, registered for the spring semester’s IDS Weekend on Southeast Asia.

Middlesex launched the IDS Weekend on Friday, April 29 with an event focused on the cultural
contributions of Cambodians. Students and community members gathered at Sompao Meas Hall in Little Cambodia to experience and participate in an interactive and informative performance and discussion led by the Angkor Dance Troupe (www.angkordance.org), a non-profit cultural group based in Lowell. The Angkor Dance Troupe was created by Master Dancer Tim Chan Thou and a small group of committed Cambodians who learned traditional dance in refugee camps; it was founded on the principle that dance and other cultural rituals are essential for Cambodians to reestablish a sense of cultural identity and community in their new countries and that these practices are particularly positive outlets for youth. At this event, Cambodians and non-Cambodians alike shared in a participatory experience as they learned dance and rhythmic movements together—reimagining traditional culture for a new generation of citizens.

Throughout the following day, registered students attended a series of lectures on historical, cultural, economic, and scientific topics related to Southeast Asia, exploring concurrent sessions in a conference-like atmosphere. There was even an opportunity to work directly with Yari Livan, Cambodian Master Ceramicist and National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellow, in an introduction to traditional pottery forms at a Cambodian brick kiln located on Lowell National Historical Park land. At lunchtime, participants came together to share a Southeast Asian banquet.

The weekend ended with a concert open to the public. Two Cambodian Master Musicians, Song Heng and Sovann Kohn, shared their immigration stories and talked about how music not only kept them alive through dark times, but also helped them acclimate and thrive. Their work to preserve traditional musical forms helped them gain acceptance in their new community.

Moreover, the reinterpretation of those forms within a new context—as when the Angkor Dance Troupe combines the traditional Monkey Dance with hip hop to appeal to a new generation of Cambodians—produces new American cultures based on shared aesthetic experiences.

The dance and music performances that bookended the IDS Weekend complemented the historical knowledge offered at the public forum by providing something fundamental to the human condition: a visual expression of the intersection between cultural self-awareness and shared narrative. Connections made through rhythm, movement, and melody bind people across cultures and teach us that we are the same in our differences, seeking a common good. Reflecting afterward on the power of the performances, Middlesex students and community members realized the need for understanding across cultures. Such understanding is the foundation of the immigrant experience in any generation and the basis for cultural competency in a pluralistic society.

**Dramatic Engagement at Santa Fe College**

Two of the most effective programs from Santa Fe College’s Citizenship Under Siege project were an interactive simulation of voting processes and a performance of a collaborative work by journalist Bill Maxwell and author Beverly Coyle. These events illustrate how effective dramatic performances and programs that emphasize student participation can be in addressing key questions about citizenship and belonging.

To an outsider, Gainesville might appear to be an idyllic college town with prospering and innovative health care and technology sectors. A closer examination, however, reveals patterns of poverty and racial tensions lying just below the surface, poised to burst forth and expose cleavages as old as the country itself. Although Gainesville has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the state and a thriving high-tech sector, over one-third of Gainesville residents live below the poverty line, according to the American Community Survey (United States Census Bureau 2014). This poverty is not uniform across the community. It is concentrated in neighborhoods with higher minority populations, which are also plagued by problems such as food deserts and disproportionate police contact. The persistence of these divisions and the tensions they create prompted the city to commission a racial inequity study to be completed in 2017.

Santa Fe’s Citizenship Under Siege activities aimed to engage students in examining the implications of these inequities and divisions. The voting simulation, which one student likened to “a really interactive board game,”
walked students from several history, political science, and sociology classes through all of the stages of voting, from registration to casting one’s vote on Election Day. At the beginning of the exercise, each student received a profile with demographic, family, and employment information. As they attempted to register to vote, students received cards stating whether they were successful. They were then instructed either to try again if their registration had failed or to proceed to the next step: voting on Election Day. After following those instructions, students received cards that explained whether they were able to vote. The simulation was designed to allow only about 30 percent of students to vote; those who were unsuccessful received explanations corresponding to common obstacles to voting and registration. The event concluded with a discussion involving all participants.

The simulation opened students’ eyes to several dynamics that affect the voting ability of Americans of various backgrounds and life circumstances. Several students were disappointed that work schedules or transportation problems kept them from voting and were pleased to learn about early voting, mail-in ballots, and other options that could help overcome those obstacles. Students realized that voter ID requirements can pose significant barriers to members of particular groups. Many students had never given much thought to the fact that some people with felony records are not able to vote; the simulation made them consider whether that practice is just. In later class discussions, students who participated in the simulations expressed near-unanimous support for a proposed Florida ballot initiative that would automatically restore voting rights to most people convicted of a felony upon completion of their probation.

Parallel Lives is a collaborative work in which Bill Maxwell and Beverly Coyle recount their experiences coming of age in Florida as an African American male and white female in the waning days of Jim Crow. For the performance at Santa Fe, which was open to the public, the writers updated the work to include a postscript in which they discussed their experiences working together to demonstrate that many aspects of racism and misogyny persist today. Their performance was followed by a discussion with the audience about issues the performance raised about the contemporary state of race and gender relations.

Students who attended the performance gained tremendous insight into the state of race relations in America, both past and present. As one instructor who required her students to attend noted, the performance “provided a curricular space for the students to openly and safely discuss race and give voice to their own thoughts about the racial divide in our country.” This outcome was evident both in the discussion after the performance and in later classroom debriefings and assignments, in which instructors built on the themes that emerged to begin discussions of the origins of contemporary racism and illustrate concepts such as moral community.

Maxwell’s description of the humiliation he felt after being struck in the face by a urine-filled balloon thrown by a group of white people driving through his neighborhood was so shocking that it made an impression on everyone present. Coyle’s statement that she believed when she was growing up that African Americans wanted segregation as much as whites, and was confused by feelings that African Americans seemed to hate her, helped students understand how racist attitudes and behavior became self-perpetuating.

The authors’ contemporary experiences also struck a chord with many audience members. Maxwell’s account of store employees following him when he shopped while Coyle shopped uninterrupted resonated with African Americans in the audience. Coyle’s account of people continually assuming because of her gender that she was Maxwell’s romantic partner instead of his professional collaborator helped several female students reinterpret some of their own experiences. Students not only learned about the history of racism and misogyny in America, but also saw how it continues to play out in microaggressions that many of them experience in their daily lives.

Conclusion
Democratic society requires us to work together toward a common good. To do that effectively, we first need to understand each other. Colleges and universities that prepare the next generation of leaders are obligated to develop the foundations for mutual understanding by promoting intercultural competence, global and historical knowledge building, social responsibility, and respect for difference. The humanities, particularly personal narrative and performance, serve as a powerful means to develop those foundations. Through shared stories and ideas, we express our humanity. Through participatory experiences such as simulations or interactive drama, music, or dance performances, we create bridges of empathy and understanding that allow us to see ourselves in a broader context and to understand that “they” are really “us.”

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“Of all the animosities which have existed among mankind those which are caused by a difference of sentiment in Religion appear to be the most ineradicable and distressing,” wrote George Washington in 1792, articulating a challenge still facing our country (1792b). Yet that same year Washington also wrote a letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Rhode Island assuring congregants that the new government would guarantee freedom of religious expression and would give “to bigotry no sanction” (1792a).

George Washington’s promise inspired a workshop led by Michael Feldberg of the George Washington Institute for Religious Freedom as part of Kingsborough Community College’s (KCC’s) Interfaith Forum held in Brooklyn, New York, on November 14, 2016. Participants read and analyzed Washington’s letter to the Hebrew Congregation, underscoring key principles of First Amendment rights, freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and immunity from religious citizenship tests. Our students, who represent 142 countries of origin and speak seventy-three languages, seemed both reassured and empowered by reviewing these core commitments.

In welcoming forum participants, KCC President Farley Herzek described a meeting he convened the day after the country’s divisive presidential election with student leaders from all faiths and cultural backgrounds. The students were determined, he said proudly, to “watch each other’s backs.” This requires truly listening to and directly engaging with “the other,” a message that resonated with many of the over five hundred students, faculty, administrators, and community members who grappled with the forum’s theme, Promoting Religious Pluralism and Inclusive Citizenship.

The US presidential election clearly demonstrated the country’s ambivalence about who may be included as a citizen. Just one week after the election, numerous bias incidents on campuses around the country had already been reported. Can the humanities help address such rising tensions?

They can, argued Caryn McTighe Musil, senior scholar and director of civic learning and democracy initiatives at the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and director of Citizenship Under Siege, a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) in which KCC participated. The humanities use imagination and storytelling to “offer windows into people’s lives, dreams, and anguish,” Musil said at the forum, and can generate empathy and prompt people to “question, reflect, and care.”

An Ethics of Care

The idea of an “ethics of care,” originally a feminist studies concept, framed KCC’s interfaith work throughout 2016. Our focus on religious pluralism arose from our student body’s unique—and cherished—diversity, as well as the college’s institutional and academic commitment to giving meaning to that diversity. Our commitment included participation in the NEH curriculum development project, Bridging Cultures to Form a Nation, as well as the establishment of a civic engagement graduation requirement—the first at a community college.

As part of a faculty group involved in developing civic engagement courses directly relevant to students’ lives, I have written elsewhere about teaching civil rights as civic engagement. In 2016, the faculty group published a book, edited by Emily Schnee, Alison Better, and Martha Clark Cummings, that we believe was the first volume on civic engagement by community college faculty. There, I described teaching a course that addressed the centrality of African American churches in the movement, including the tragic Birmingham church bombing that killed four girls in 1963—but I later realized that the course provided no opportunities for students to discuss their own deep religious commitments, which might inspire contemporary forms of student activism. Despite many years of work on diversity in higher education, I had managed to sidestep religious diversity—and much of the progressive academy has done the same. The topic makes educators uncomfortable both because of the incorrect belief that separation of church and state precludes discussion of religion and a fear that such discussion will engender classroom conflict. Yet looking
out at my classrooms, I saw young Muslim women wearing hijabs chatting amiably with Orthodox Jewish women. What made this possible on our campus, and what could we learn about directly engaging religious identities that were obviously profoundly important to our students—especially at a moment when the national political dialogue makes this work particularly urgent?

When the opportunity arose to join AAC&U and The Democracy Commitment’s Citizenship Under Siege project, KCC decided to take on the challenge of looking at religious diversity. Each facet of our interfaith programming demonstrated that students, faculty, administrators, and community members were willing to step outside their comfort zones to engage this timely topic.

**Demonstrating Interfaith Empathy**

What started from a desire for my own history class to hear first-hand testimony from a Holocaust survivor will become an annual event each spring reaching over two hundred students. On April 6, 2016, in collaboration with Self-Help, an organization that serves thirty thousand survivors living in Brooklyn, KCC hosted keynote speaker and Auschwitz survivor Sonia Klein and ten other Holocaust survivors from surrounding communities. At each of ten roundtables of ten participants, one survivor shared her story with nine students and then invited questions and discussion. Standing by to prompt dialogue were ten facilitators—but they were not needed. The moment survivors ended their stories, students eagerly asked questions, made comments, and articulated connections between these past traumatic events and current issues concerning immigration, war, and refugees. The survivors said they valued the experience as much as the students did; it gave them a sense of connection and of passing on the story to a new generation of those who were predominantly non-Jewish, thus expanding responsibility for the cultural and moral imperative to never forget the lessons of the Holocaust.

One key lesson that emerged for the roundtable organizers was to trust our students—their willingness to listen, their empathy, and their openness to sharing their own stories. These habits of heart and mind were highlighted by Jennifer Peace in her keynote address to the November 14 Interfaith Forum, entitled “We Need Each Other: What Interfaith Work Teaches Us about Civic Life.” An associate professor of interfaith studies at Andover Newton Theological School and visiting associate professor on religious pluralism at the Harvard Divinity School and Harvard’s Pluralism Project, Peace modeled her belief that “storytelling as a means of getting to know each other is the first essential step in interfaith work.”

Peace shared four deceptively simple accounts of her own interfaith encounters, each illustrating a disposition vital to dialogue across religious difference. After each story, she posed a question for participants to ponder—though indeed these questions were invitations to reflect and share. Arguing that religious commitments tend to narrow our field of vision and that we need each other to liberate us from our own stories, Peace asked if we were willing to share something that is often quite intimate—our practice and feelings about our religion or lack thereof. She concluded with a challenge that captures the spirit of KCC’s interfaith initiatives as they proceed into relatively uncharted waters: “Do you have the courage to add your voice to this messy and complex conversation we call democracy?”

As if answering this call immediately, Rabbi Yehuda Sarna and Imam Khalid Latif took the stage with a sense of urgency after Peace’s address. New York University chaplains and friends whose families live in the same faculty housing facility, they modeled a conversation and partnership in which individuals acknowledge their differences of belief yet stand up for one another’s communities. This dynamic has informed their shared work cofounding New York University’s OM (Of Many) Institute and helping to institute the first academic minor in Multifaith Leadership. (For more information about the university’s interfaith work, see http://www.nyu.edu/students/communities-and-groups/student-diversity/spiritual-life/of-many-institute-for-multifaith-leadership.)
Both Rabbi Sarna and Imam Latif told moving personal stories of the impact of 9/11 on their lives and professional practice. Students later said that they were particularly affected by Imam Latif’s account of attending a 9/11 memorial ceremony in his New York City Police Department uniform (as the youngest chaplain in the department’s history) and being questioned by the FBI while there about his visibility as a Muslim leader. Despite the fact that he has spoken on stages with the Dalai Lama and the Pope, such questioning continues to happen.

Translating Theory into Practice
Invoking the presidential election, Rabbi Sarna said that interfaith work must now move from “kumbaya moments to active resistance, a more grassroots, face-to-face, action-oriented movement.” Imam Latif called for reflection on higher education’s mission: “We’re learning specific skills to pursue a career and to make money but we’re not learning how to ask real questions. This allows others to capitalize on fear.” Addressing our students directly, he said, “Your voices as young people are pivotal. We’ve seen where indifference and passivity have taken the US. Are young people going to stand by and watch it?”

Imam Latif’s remarks riveted the audience, including students in my civil rights history class. Responding to a writing prompt after the forum, one Latino young man wrote, “What stood out to me was when he talked about us as minorities—our greatest strength is when we come together.” Students’ comments showed that they value the campus as a place where they can learn and pursue their goals safely, collaborating and communicating with students across many types of difference. Yet they are realistic about the fact that the campus does not fully reflect the larger society. One young Muslim woman wrote, “Living in a city like NYC with so many backgrounds and cultures you would expect people to be so diverse but in reality if you see where people live you will see that NYC is in fact segregated. It might not be legally segregated but if you took a train to any area, you will see the same type of people who look the same get on and off at the same areas.”

A young religiously observant Jewish woman indicated, “It was surprising to me to see the close friendship that the Rabbi and Imam had and that their children play together. I think it’s great what they are able to accomplish on the NYU campus but I don’t think the NYU campus is an accurate representation of the country at large.”

It’s true that campuses are, to some degree, their own unique ecosystems. But at Kingsborough, our hope is that what happens on campus can influence broader communities—and we are already seeing evidence that the campus community will come together to give “to bigotry no sanction.” Students, faculty, and administrators organized a petition campaign calling upon the college to become a sanctuary campus protecting students with undocumented immigration status. In two weeks, the petition garnered 1,400 signatures, joining a national movement on college campuses (Najmabadi 2016). At the end of November, the college broke ground for a new Student Union and Intercultural Center (http://www.kcc-suic.org), a place for the kind of democratic dialogue envisioned by our country’s founders—where we hope that students’ face-to-face encounters across many kinds of difference will further inspire them to “watch each other’s backs.”

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Addressing Wicked Problems through Deliberative Dialogue

John J. Theis, Executive Director of the Center for Civic Engagement for the Lone Star College System

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During the recent election year, the American public expressed unease not only with both candidates running for president, but also with our political institutions. According to surveys conducted by Gallup in June, just 36 percent of respondents had “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the institutions of the presidency and the Supreme Court, while only 9 percent thought similarly about Congress (Norman 2016). These figures contrast markedly with respondents’ opinions when the question was asked in 1975. At that time, respondents’ confidence in the presidency stood at 52 percent, in the Supreme Court at 49 percent, and in Congress at 40 percent (Gallup 2016). In other words, even in the aftermath of Watergate and Vietnam, American political institutions fared better than they do now, some forty years later.

Not only are we losing confidence in our political institutions; we also are losing confidence in each other. Gallup poll results show that Americans have the lowest levels of trust in their fellow citizens since polling on this issue began in the 1970s, and these levels have been declining precipitously, dropping 30 percentage points since 1974 (Jones 2016). The American public has become increasingly disillusioned, cynical, and apathetic, while problems continue to fester and grow. Meanwhile, many voters feel that elected officials are either incompetent, impotent, ignorant, or in someone’s pocket. Sound bites and thirty-second ads reign supreme, and the twenty-four-hour news cycle magnifies the immediacy of issues while failing to provide those issues with background and depth.

Community Colleges as Democracy Colleges
Community colleges have a special role to play in educating for democracy. On December 5, 2016, community college leaders affirmed this role when they met to celebrate the fifth anniversary of The Democracy Commitment, a national initiative focused on restoring the civic mission of community colleges. The initiative was born as a recommitment to the recommendations of President Truman’s Commission on Higher Education that “the first and most essential charge upon higher education is that at all levels and in all its fields of specialization, it shall be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and process” (1947, 102). Joining together around the central theme of “working across differences,” community college presidents, campus leaders, students, and media professionals gathered on the fifth anniversary to reflect on the role of community colleges in bridging the chasm of politics that has come to separate Americans.

Community colleges are truly democracy colleges, reflecting our country’s democratic values by opening the possibility of a college education to members of groups that, for most of the country’s history, have been excluded from college. More importantly, community colleges serve democracy because they educate large numbers of students who come from and remain within the communities where these colleges exist. In that sense, they are stewards of place and uniquely able to influence the way democratic politics play out in their communities.

Grappling with Wicked Problems
Because of their role as democracy colleges, community colleges are uniquely positioned to help shape a different approach to the challenges facing society, including seemingly intractable differences among individuals. Bridging these differences means grappling with fundamental questions about how democracy functions. The problems we see in our democracy are most likely problems of rather than problems in democracy—that is, problems with how democracy is currently functioning rather than with the specific policy issues that democracy addresses (Thomas 2015). Partisan posturing, party gridlock, and a lack of civility in Washington among representatives from different parties reflect an adversarial style of politics, wherein politicians and members of the public alike seek to be right rather than to achieve understanding. They talk rather than listen.

This kind of politics is ill-suited for the problems contemporary America faces. In their seminal work, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” Rittel and Webber argue that “the professional’s job was once seen as solving an assortment of problems that appeared to be definable, understandable, and consensual” (1973, 156). While America once faced a variety of technical problems that could be solved by experts in public policy and engineering, today’s problems have become what Rittel and Weber call “wicked problems” (160). Wicked problems are those that are difficult or impossible to solve for as many as four reasons: (1) incomplete or contradictory knowledge; (2) the number of people and opinions involved; (3) the large costs of solutions; and (4)
interconnected nature of any individual problem with other problems. Wicked problems have no definitive solutions by standard technocratic measures of success, because their solutions cannot be measured in terms of efficiency. The problems themselves do not have any definitive definition, and their solutions are neither good nor bad, true nor false, but instead give rise to spillover effects in other areas (Theis 2016).

Drawing from Rittel and Weber’s work, Carcasson notes that although “wicked problems cannot be ‘solved,’” “the tensions inherent in wicked problems can certainly be addressed in ways that are better or worse” (2013, 38). Because wicked problems are value laden, tackling them requires adaptive changes rather than technical solutions; adaptive changes require much higher levels of buy-in than technical changes, and thus must be approached differently. Wicked problems therefore reflect a basic reality of modern democracies: the need to involve a broad range of people and perspectives (Carcasson 2013). Addressing these problems will require shifting from the current partisan approach to an approach rooted in deliberation.

Benefits of Deliberative Dialogue
Deliberative dialogue offers a means of addressing the problems of democracy. In deliberative dialogue, “citizens come together and consider the relevant facts and values from multiple points of view, listen and react to one another in order to think critically about the various options before them, and ultimately attempt to work through the underlying tensions and tough choices inherent to wicked problems” (Carcasson 2013, 41). Deliberative dialogues allow people to address wicked problems productively, working across their differences to find mutually satisfactory approaches to policy issues. Among the results is an improved political discourse.

The National Issues Forums offer issue guides for deliberation; these guides can help dialogue moderators frame the issues at stake using multiple perspectives and encourage participants to discuss associated trade-offs before moving toward action. Each issue guide frames a problem from at least three perspectives. A trained moderator helps participants look at the various perspectives with a special focus on underlying values and the tradeoffs involved in related potential actions. Participants examine areas of agreement and divergence in these perspectives in order to find common ground.

Deliberation allows individuals to truly hear others’ concerns, worries, and perspectives. It provides a way for people to begin talking through difficult issues without the assumption of a win/lose scenario. Deliberative dialogue organizers hope that participants will leave a dialogue with a greater understanding of the ways in which they agree or disagree with others, having identified areas that bode well for cooperation, as citizens seeking to tackle the problems confronting their communities.

Dialogue moderators, too, experience important benefits from participating, despite their difficult job. They must guide the conversation in a way that allows all voices to be heard but also allows all participants to feel safe expressing their perspectives. They must ensure that multiple sides of an issue are represented, frequently by asking questions that probe the root of an issue and why a speaker feels strongly about it. They also strive to move discussion along, and to refocus conversation and address misinformation without coming across as taking a side. As students develop their moderating skills, they experience robust opportunities for learning and skill development that tend not to be part of traditional classrooms.

Dialogues at Community Colleges
With support from the Citizenship Under Siege program—organized by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and The Democracy Commitment as part of the Humanities in the Public Square initiative sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)—several community colleges have begun hosting dialogues and forums focused on wicked problems. Describing the Humanities in the
Lone Star and MWCC are participating in Citizenship Under Siege and in the Economic Inequality Initiative organized by the American Democracy Project and The Democracy Commitment; both intentionally focused their deliberative dialogues on wicked problems with underlying, if not overt, relationships to economic inequality. Indeed, economic inequality is a thread that runs through many wicked problems—from voter participation to the opioid crisis, from immigration reform to education reform.

Lone Star and MWCC have implemented a train-the-trainer approach to dialogue moderation, ensuring the sustainability of these kinds of conversations both on and off campus. Over one or two days, potential moderators are trained at the colleges and learn about the differences between dialogue and debate; what wicked problems are; what effective public engagement looks like; how to convene the public in an inclusive and strategic way; how to moderate and record public forums; and, finally, how to move a group from discussion to action. After moderators are trained, the sponsoring organization selects a wicked problem with current relevancy for discussion within the greater community.

In fall 2016, MWCC student moderators coordinated two of four dialogues focused specifically on voting and the election. These student leaders, feeling discouraged by the apathy of their peers about the US presidential election, decided that opportunities to engage in dialogue about the issues would allow different voices from the college and greater community to be heard and would ultimately move people to action. The October 5 forum, “Why Vote,” engaged participants in conversations about barriers to voting, the electoral system, and election issue awareness. Conversations bridged political viewpoints, differences in age, and cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, and allowed participants to think about the implications of voting using information beyond their own experiences.

At Lone Star, different campuses have hosted forums on economic inequality, immigration reform, mental illness, and campus carry of firearms. Despite holding divergent perspectives regarding how to solve various problems, participants have come to realize that they are all concerned about the issues and could address problems by working together. When reflecting on the experience, most participants recognized that participants shared many areas of common concern even if they did not always completely agree on the best means of having an impact on an issue.

**Changing Conversations**

The conscious move to create opportunities for deliberative dialogue on community college campuses has opened up conversations among students, staff, faculty, and members of the greater community. By providing opportunities for students in particular to be trained as moderators, our colleges have begun to change how conversations about wicked problems happen in our communities. By providing similar opportunities to community partners, we have begun to partner with community organizations in very different ways. Students, nonprofit organization staff, and community members—some from disenfranchised populations—are now working side by side to engage in dialogue and move toward solutions together. Faculty have also begun to use facilitation skills in the classroom, engaging students in dialogues that are active, respectful, and solution oriented.

It takes a community whose members are open to hearing dissenting voices and finding common ground to begin addressing wicked problems, including the incredible stratification that economic inequality has created within our regions. Ensuring that community college students, staff, faculty, and community partners are skilled in the techniques of deliberative dialogue can lead to more open and transparent conversations in our communities while helping students gain the agency to create change. Community colleges can play a pivotal role in shaping the future landscape of politics, as our students live, work, and raise families in the communities where their colleges are located. The long-term impacts of positive political experiences through deliberation cannot be underestimated. As attitudes from the 2016 election show, partisan politics reinforce the divisions that make it difficult to constructively deal with wicked problems. Deliberation promises an avenue toward fixing the problems of democracy by addressing the problems in democracy.

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“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” So begins the founding document of our nation, perhaps the greatest political experiment in the history of humankind. Before the Federalist Papers were prepared by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay, world history was dominated by powerful monarchies, dictatorships, and military empires. But the newly formed United States set upon a remarkable course of action toward equal rights for all citizens—a philosophy that we are still trying, unsuccessfully, to embody today, even as other nations try to emulate our political experiment.

Who are “We the People of the United States”? What cultures, languages, and identities are represented? Who enjoys the privilege of participating in the “general Welfare”? And who is secure in their liberties? To answer these questions, we need look no further than current events that reveal an epidemic of mistrust. Why are our students so politically detached? When I survey my students about politics and the national debt, their responses are nearly always pessimistic: “We know the debt is huge. It doesn’t affect us, so why care? There is nothing we can do, so why bother?”

Our republic is at a pivotal crossroads. Our form of government demands that citizens be knowledgeable about the issues; yet, as a whole, we are at best negligent, and at worst blissfully ignorant. In every one of the one hundred college classes I have taught during the last twenty years in Miami and Chicago, my students have been able to list fifteen to twenty Simpson’s characters or Pokémon within seconds—but only three to four Supreme Court justices or Senators within minutes, if we are lucky. When I survey my students about politics and the national debt, their responses are nearly always pessimistic: “We know the debt is huge. It doesn’t affect us, so why care? There is nothing we can do, so why bother?”

The 2012 report from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democratic Engagement, entitled The Demography of Wealth and Demographic Principle, details the need for a new, more engaged generation of citizens.

A Crucial Role for the Humanities

In the context of such a civics conundrum, the humanities can and must play an essential role. As described eloquently in The Heart of the Matter, “The humanities remind us where we have been and help us envision where we are going” (American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2013, 9). The arts, literature, music, theater, history, and dance challenge us to confront, embrace, express, and really understand what it means to be human—reflective, future-oriented, interconnected, inquisitive, creative, spiritual, and ethical. James Madison’s opening words in the Constitution and Thomas Jefferson’s first sentences in the Declaration of Independence are reminders of the basic humanities principles that informed these founding documents. Madison studied Greek, Latin, and philosophy; Jefferson studied philosophy, Latin, and law.

Within the broader humanities, art history and art appreciation—the subjects I teach—must play a role in our republic. Every successful company in the world employs artists—graphic designers, advertisers, interior decorators, writers, visual artists—to help it succeed. Florida has become a world-class tourist destination thanks in part to the artistic genius of Walt Disney; Disney World claims to generate nearly $18.2 billion annually, provide one of every fifty jobs in Florida’s tourism-related industries, and hold responsibility for 2.5 percent of Florida’s GDP (Garcia 2011). And yet, when state legislatures need to balance a budget, they defund the arts. I wonder, what would Madison, Hamilton, and Jefferson think of their own well-rounded liberal educations if they were governing today?

Despite challenges from state legislatures, higher education is one of the last bastions for public civic discourse in the United States. In almost no other public arena are citizens encouraged, and in fact required, to engage in discourse, to listen with an open mind, to offer constructive criticism, and to reevaluate their values and priorities. Nonetheless, even higher education has witnessed efforts by liberal-leaning faculty and students to silence more conservative voices, denying the mission and vision...
of higher education to foster critical thinking and an engaged citizenry of multiple perspectives. Upholding a shared democratic vision—like that which the Constitution provides for our nation’s citizens—is both complicated and contentious.

Creating Student Artivists

Five years ago, in connection with Miami Dade College’s participation in Bridging Cultures to Form a Nation: Difference, Community, and Democratic Thinking, a project coordinated by AAC&U and TDC with funding from

Gentle People

Christian Carmelino and Sabrina Mendoza, Students at Miami Dade College

“Stereotypes are powerful because they affect our expectations.”
—Sam Femiano and Mark Nickerson, “How Do Media Images of Men Affect Our Lives?”

Within our society, gender stereotypes exist because of gender roles rigidly established by previous civilizations like ancient Greece and Rome or during periods like the Victorian era. These rigid gender roles led to a modern society dominated by men, with discrimination against women in the workplace and at home. Our passion for understanding modern gender roles led us to create the Gentle People art series as our social issues project in Professor Frazier’s art history class.

Throughout history, a highly respectable identity was that of a gentleman: a male figure who is overtly respectful and chivalrous. Today, such chivalry and deference to women often are considered sexist rather than flattering. We believe that respectful behavior should not be attached to any gender but embraced by all people.

In our art project, we referenced ancient Greek and Victorian images as well as the work of modern artists such as Andy Warhol and Cindy Sherman. Andy Warhol’s Marilyn Diptych (1962) challenges viewers to consider a highly reproduced celebrity photograph as art; in it, the idea is more important than the overall design. Cindy Sherman’s series of photographs Untitled Film Stills (1977–1980) communicates Sherman’s ideas about feminism. In Untitled Film Still #15 and Untitled Film Still #84, Sherman used herself as a model, challenging stereotypical gender roles by portraying strong female personas. References to these specific pieces of art are central to Gentle People. Posing as models, we used black-and-white imagery and natural lighting to convey chivalry in our photographs.

In Head of Household, we challenged the idea that the icon of a well-dressed, well-put-together man symbolizes the organization of his family. Poses were inspired by ancient Greece’s contrapposto, where the model’s pose suggests balance and controlled emotion. In this image, there is a palpable stage tension between the man and the woman. The man stands tall and strong behind the woman as though he wishes to help her, but his public display is for the viewer, not his wife. The woman is portrayed as submissive, suggesting representations from ancient Greek culture.

Throughout our work on the project, Professor Frazier challenged us to rethink our understanding of gender roles and to revise our photographs. We made a dozen recreations to capture a Victorian understanding of gender, illustrating the power dynamics between the male head of household and the traditional housewife. We dramatized the tension between the models by dressing the actors in formal, upper-class fashion.

Many in our millennial generation are pushing for gender equality, but there are still issues to be resolved in order to reach this goal. Our Gentle People series is a historical analysis of gender roles and the attempt to promote the promise of equality for all.
NEH, I redesigned my art classes (Art Appreciation, Art History 1 and 2, and Cinema Appreciation) as miniature democracy-in-action experiments. Instead of writing research papers, my students now design their own arts-based, semester-long projects around social issues and publicly present their projects (for example, lectures, art exhibits, YouTube videos, gallery shows, public forums, museum or dance club events). I demand that they maximize their untapped potential and make their voices heard. The results have been quite remarkable: students are more engaged and more diligent, within-course retention rates have increased by nearly 20 percent, and numerical grades have increased by nearly 15 percent.

My students engage in ongoing dialogue about social issues that they have identified as interesting, critical, and urgent. If they aren’t passionate about these issues at the beginning of the semester, they certainly are by the end. Last semester, students created children’s books, cartoons, illustrated poetry, pamphlets, and photojournalist essays; they composed socially conscious songs and produced or directed music videos, short animations, documentary films, and spoof trailers; they partnered with nonprofit community-based organizations to design websites and advertising campaigns. Their work explored such topics as euthanasia, why people should vote, the importance of nutrition, the disappearance of the bee population, immigration policy, guns on college campuses, separation of church and state—and these are just a few examples. Through their projects, Miami Dade College art activists—artivists—have helped to raise more than $18,000 for local, national, and international causes, have provided nearly 12,500 hours of community service, and have presented their artworks to an estimated 350,000 viewers, all while combining their passions and interests with the content of our arts courses.

Students want, and they deserve, an educational experience that is relevant, fun, challenging, and rewarding. The social issues project provides this framework. Before the semester begins, I email students about the exciting challenge the class presents for them to use their education to influence their community and, in turn, to make the world a better place. In the opening days of class, I invite students to talk about their interests, talents, and passions. Most have wide-ranging interests, but few have identified the one they are the most passionate about. Throughout the first month, we talk at length and over time about their passions. During this time, I also require all students to visit me for individual Advising and Passions Meetings, during which we identify their interests and how to channel those interests toward social good through arts-based projects. These meetings represent my opportunity to express confidence in each student, to highlight the importance of each student’s issue, and to offer my help even if I don’t agree with a student’s beliefs. My goal cannot be to create a group of students who share my own philosophies (or even worse, who create work that represents my beliefs but not theirs). As a public authority figure, I never reveal my own leanings; rather, when we explore controversial issues during class, I present multiple viewpoints and their respective advantages and disadvantages, and I encourage students to justify their own well-informed opinions. I deviate from this approach only when a student presents an argument with no merit and no evidence (for example, Holocaust denial).

During the sixth week of the semester, students summarize the research on their social problems, citing peer-reviewed sources to demonstrate comprehensive understanding of the facts, causes, and controversies. Two weeks later, students submit rough sketches or drafts of their projects for me to critique based upon the messages that they are trying to convey. Students continue to iteratively revise their work weekly, until we both are satisfied that their social issues have been effectively integrated and articulated to raise awareness, reduce biases, attract attention, influence perspective taking and decision making, and/or raise funds. All student works must be completed and publicly displayed by the end of the term. The public display represents the culmination of our semester-long process, through which students have transformed their interests—their ideas—into meaningful, engaging, and influential works of art.

Igniting Students’ Passions

Over and over again, I watch my students marvel at their accomplishments and realize what the semester was all about. They have learned that their voices—and their art—have power. If we can ignite students’ passions to solve our most urgent and critical issues—crises related to human rights, the environment, and government mistrust—perhaps we can finally fulfill the promise of America for all Americans. I suspect that our founding fathers Madison, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Jay would be proud of my students’ pursuits.

REFERENCES


For the past several years, I have been teaching a graduate seminar I call “The Ethics of Reading and the Cultures of Professionalism.” That title has led to misunderstandings, especially since I offer the course within an academic unit focused mainly on moral philosophy. Many have assumed that I propound the notion that reading great books makes you a moral person (I don’t); or, in a more nuanced variant, that I use great books as a vehicle for teaching the ethical life. But I am not a philosopher, and I don’t deal in virtue or even morality in any direct way.

What I mean by “the ethics of reading” is simpler, more basic, perhaps more radical. I believe that careful, detailed, close analytic reading of texts of all sorts, rightly understood and practiced, can itself be an ethical activity.

The Risks of Bad-Faith Interpretation

I think I have long believed that reading was an ethical activity, but my explicit moment of conversion came when the so-called Torture Memos were released starting in 2004. Those memos were written in the Department of Justice’s Office of Legal Counsel—considered the source of principled legal advice to the Executive Branch—and used ingenious, baroque, and twisted interpretations to claim that the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, and Degrading Treatment or Punishment, as incorporated in the United States Code, permits a range of “enhanced interrogation techniques” that all reasonable people now recognize to be torture—and indeed many so recognized at the time.

I won’t reprise analysis of the Torture Memos here—they have taken their place in a history of infamy that will be on our collective conscience forever. My reaction to them was to think that no one trained in the analytic reading of poetry could ever indulge in such bad-faith, distorted interpretation of a text. I am not claiming any special moral virtue for my peers in the interpretive humanities. Rather, I am suggesting that professional training in careful attention to what texts say and how they say it; to the words chosen and their interanimation; to the connotations of images and figures of speech; to the argument advanced, including its force and its possible failings, and the ways in which it is modified by the very form it takes—such training makes one attentive to the kinds of interpretation that are not justified.

In other words, close reading is like any other professional disciplining, whether ballet, sculpture, photography, or lawyering: the feet, hand, eye, or brain know what feels right, what is on target, and what is out of line. Anyone who has explicated a Shakespearean sonnet with a class of students simply comes to know what qualifies as interpretation—wrongheaded and refutable, perhaps, but nonetheless a genuine response to the text—and what is unrelated to the task at hand.

The Rigors of Close Reading

We who spend our lives in the apparently arcane business of interpreting literary texts (or philosophical ones, or paintings, or string quartets) have a certain expertise and knowledge that might actually be valuable to the professions and professional schools—law, business, medicine, and others.

What has most often been called “close reading,” and sometimes by what I think is the better name, “slow reading,” teaches us to bring our full attention to what is before us on the page, to explore its ways of making meaning as well as what we may ultimately see as its messages. In practicing close reading, we learn to stay within the world of the text without foreclosing its possible implications. Ideally, we exchange our understandings of what and how the text means with others, in a collective interpretive enterprise that is largely self-correcting, by which I mean that it prevents aberrant understandings.
from gaining traction. A community of interpretation won’t always agree on a single meaning—literary texts, at least, are rarely univocal—but it can generally reach consensus on what counts as valid or not.

The great Canadian critic Northrop Frye claimed in his Anatomy of Criticism that “everyone who has seriously studied literature knows that the mental process involved is as coherent and progressive as the study of science” (1957, 10–11). I’m not sure I would go that far, but I know what Frye means. Interpretation is a disciplined activity. In the literature classroom of the American university, the rigor necessary to support such discipline was, for a time, largely supplied by the New Criticism, starting in the 1940s and gaining momentum following World War II. Though its origins lie in I. A. Richards’s work in practical criticism at Cambridge in the United Kingdom (see his Practical Criticism, 1929), New Criticism was particularly well adapted to the United States because it presumed and created a kind of democratic classroom, where everyone participated in the explication of the text. It did not claim that all interpretations were equal, but rather that all could be expressed and then, through discussion led by the teacher, the invalid could be discarded to arrive at some sort of consensual truth. There were experienced and expert interpreters, to be sure, but there was no canonical interpretation imposed ex cathedra.

A Trans-Subjective Enterprise
What is strange about the literature classroom is the central place it gives to the text. Art history, musicology, and philosophy are close neighbors in their attention to the art object, the piece of music, or the texture of philosophical argument. These fields in the interpretative humanities—and perhaps literary study more than any of the others—give an unusual place to this thing, this artifact, which is animated only through reading and interpretation. Like a potsherd or a sculpture by Brancusi, the text may appear mute and inaccessible at first. It comes alive only as readers attempt to say what it means, what they like about it, how it gives order and significance to what they have thought and felt.

In the literature classroom, personal responses to the text are disciplined by voices from the past that are not our own. Teachers of literature often are not speaking in their own voices, but are letting the voice of another speak through them, prompting their students to try to understand another idiom—both what it has to say to us, and how it differs from our assumptions. We teachers of literature ventriloquize voices, from the past and from other cultures. T. S. Eliot said that all great literature is impersonal (see “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 1920). I would reinterpret that to mean that reading literature in a rigorous way becomes a trans-personal and trans-subjective enterprise, one that teaches you about your own condition only if you are willing to allow yourself to be temporarily alienated in otherness.

The professions, and especially professional education, need this kind of attention to reading and interpretation. Teaching professional ethics to lawyers and doctors is not enough. In learning to become professionals, lawyers and doctors also need to engage in versions of slow reading that let them sift through the implications of the analysis they perform. They should not simply be learning a competence, but also, at the same time, questioning its premises. The kind of reading I have described may lie at the very heart of professional responsibility. It makes us more skeptical and self-aware. It might prevent us from falling into the moral abyss of the Torture Memos.

REFERENCES

This new publication highlights thirteen institutions with guided learning pathways that prepare students for inquiry-based signature work. Through signature work, students integrate and apply their learning to address complex questions that are meaningful to them and to society. To order, visit www.aacu.org.
Citizenship in the republic is key to full participation in American democracy. However, the meaning of citizenship is not static, as the term has become more or less inclusive during different periods in American history. Throughout the history of the republic, citizenship has often been stratified. The rights and privileges of American life have not been granted fully to all groups in society; many groups have struggled for inclusion and enfranchisement; and inequalities based on race, class, ethnicity, and gender have excluded large numbers of people from full participation in the political process.

The current challenges to full citizenship are not new. Women, for example, have long struggled to gain full inclusion in the citizenry. Through long and arduous collective action and popular protest, women have won greater citizenship rights. An exploration of issues surrounding women’s right to vote can advance our understanding of how democracy both expanded and contracted during the late nineteenth century. An analysis of historical documents from this period clarifies the ways in which the fight for women’s inclusion continues to result in substantive changes.

Examining Primary Documents
The fight for women’s suffrage provided the central topic for a six-month program of lectures and discussions hosted by the County College of Morris (CCM) in 2016. CCM’s Division of Liberal Arts organized these events in connection with Citizenship Under Siege, a project coordinated by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and The Democracy Commitment with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities in the Public Square initiative. CCM faculty, staff, and students joined members of the broader community to investigate how American democracy has expanded as well as the exclusionary backlash that has occurred following periods of greater inclusion. Prior to the April 21 forum, the CCM faculty and Gordon had met on April 7 to discuss the documents. At that meeting, the faculty had teased out arguments and counterarguments for and against women’s suffrage, focusing on questions such as Who is a “natural-born” citizen?; What is the contrast between serf and citizen?; and Who are “we the people—not we white male citizens—but we the whole people”? (Anthony 1873) 1997, 556). This meeting prepared those who participated in the later public forum for a challenging post-talk dialogue.

D. Gordon, retired research professor of history at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, was our keynote speaker for this initial event on April 21. Gordon, who edited the six-volume compendium Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, chose for distribution to the audience key primary documents illustrating inconsistencies within the argument for women’s suffrage, including an excerpt from Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s 1878 speech “National Protection for National Citizens” and a letter written to the National Woman Suffrage Association by Mrs. L. M. Stephenson. (Editor’s note: See sidebar on page 25 for the complete reading list.)

Gordon selected these documents for the insight they provided into experiences of women who had been consistently excluded from citizenship and into the contradictions in arguments for and against enfranchisement. We hoped to use these documents to more fully explore contemporary neoliberal disenfranchisements along lines of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. For example, aggressive voting laws enacted since the 2010 midterm election have disenfranchised hundreds of thousands of working-class Americans and citizens of color (Weiser 2014).

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Exploring Meanings of Citizenship
Following the public event, Ann Gordon joined us on May 2 for a smaller public forum for interested students, faculty members, and leaders of community organizations. At this third event, we further investigated a challenge Gordon had posed at the larger forum, where she encouraged participants to think about citizenship in a variety of ways: as standing (a sense of one’s place in a hierarchical society), as nationality, as active participation or good citizenship, and as the ideal republican citizenship. Together, participants also asked how they could understand regimes of citizenship that are changing as society moves from an industrial to a postindustrial order. How have notions of the corporate citizen and the consumer citizen become dominant models of citizenship in the contemporary United States? We expanded our concept of citizenship from encompassing rights and responsibilities associated with voting to something much broader.

As organizers, we wanted the forums to highlight that women were not merely latecomers to citizenship. Citizenship is expansionary—based in founding documents that laid the ideological groundwork for social movements to demand increasingly inclusionary access to civil, political, and social rights. But, as in the contemporary United States, this evolutionary model of an ever-expanding citizenry does not always hold. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, women’s exclusion from full citizenship was necessary for men’s political participation. Women’s exclusion and subordination were predicated on a sexual division of labor associated with the public/private divide. This division freed men to participate in public life and the paid labor force even as women, as financial dependents, were expected to provide unwaged labor in the private household. Meanwhile, liberal citizenship is rooted in the separation between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere where political participation and the vote take place.

Historically, the separation between public and private spheres rendered women’s oppression both legitimate and invisible. Indeed, even after women attained the right to vote in 1920, they still struggled with discrimination in many spheres of civil, political, economic, and social life. It took the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Movement to push for more meaningful citizenship rights for women, including public policies that supported reproductive rights, parental leave, and childcare; addressed domestic violence; and expanded job and educational opportunities. Through ongoing efforts to mobilize voters, advocate through organizations, marshal popular protest, and gain substantive representation in formal politics, women’s rights advocates continue to push for expanded citizenship rights for women.

Probing Contemporary Challenges
To build on our discussions about contemporary experiences of stratified citizenship, CCM invited sociologist Brian McCabe to campus this fall to speak about the relationship between homeownership and the rights and understandings of full citizenship. McCabe challenged the dichotomy wherein renters are understood to be less responsible and less worthy of enfranchisement than homeowners, and showed how this understanding, bolstered by state supports such as the home mortgage interest deduction, has contributed to the construction of a lesser citizenry along lines of race, class, and gender. We hope to continue these discussions at CCM to establish a broader understanding of discourses around citizenship, of the ways state policies shape citizenship, and of how these factors affect people’s active participation in democracy.

Readings for Discussion: Gender and Citizenship
Participants in an April 21 forum at County College of Morris read and discussed historical documents focused on women’s voting rights. The reading list included the following texts:


REFERENCES


Free Minds, Empowered Citizens: Changing Lives with the Humanities in Austin

VIVE GRIFFITH, Director of Free Minds from 2007 to 2016

Swing by the community room at M Station apartments in East Austin one Monday or Thursday evening, and you will find a class full of adults deep in discussion. They might be considering Socrates’s theories on the best way to raise children, or the irresistible villainy of Richard III, or how education shaped the life of Frederick Douglass. For more than a decade, these conversations have been ongoing at Free Minds, a program offering free college humanities classes to adults living on low incomes.

With books, tuition, child care, and meals on class nights all provided at no charge, Free Minds takes care of many logistics that keep people from returning to school. But the program also aims to do something more radical. It offers a space for reflection, something sorely missing in our culture and particularly for those students whose lives are stretched by financial and social burdens.

Free Minds is built on the premise that engaging with the humanities offers a unique opportunity to place our lives in a larger context. We ask the big questions—What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be American? How do we create meaningful lives?—and explore the ways people have answered them over millennia. The very act of grappling with those questions can empower people to create change in their own lives and in the world.

Taking a Different Approach
Founded in 2006 at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin), Free Minds is now a program of Foundation Communities, an affordable housing nonprofit. Classes are held on housing sites, removing the challenges of getting onto a college campus. UT Austin and Austin Community College (ACC) contribute faculty and academic resources, and students earn college credit through ACC.

The students we serve are smart and motivated but have faced real barriers to the classroom. They may have experienced homelessness or incarceration, or come from families where higher education was not considered or was even discouraged. They may have families and jobs and may be navigating public transportation or uncertain housing. And they are eager to learn. Too often, that desire finds them shuttled into vocational education—great for people who want that training, but limiting to those who want more—or into developmental education, where less than 25 percent of students earn a degree in eight years (Bailey and Cho 2010).

Free Minds takes a different approach. Students engage with a range of humanities texts in a lively seminar. The professors, tops in their fields, approach the seminar as facilitators, not lecturers. Over nine months the seminars go deep, beginning in ancient Greece and ending with Sandra Cisneros. The classroom is an exhilarating place, as students claim their own intelligence and voice.

Cultivating Individual Agency
Humanities education is under fire everywhere, so it’s surprising to find it alive and well on a Thursday evening in East Austin. But Free Minds is not alone. We are an affiliate of the Clemente Course in the Humanities, which was awarded the 2014 National Humanities Medal by President Obama. The idea of bringing humanities to those living in poverty began at the Roberto Clemente Center in Lower Manhattan in 1995, and today there are about thirty Clemente Courses in the United States alone, with courses in Canada and Australia as well.

For founder Earl Shorris, Clemente wasn’t about college access and success. Shorris was interested in cultivating individual agency—what he called “becoming political.” Studying the humanities was the path to action—a path away from being acted upon—and Shorris believed this would make the critical difference for those experiencing poverty.

“You’ve been cheated,” Shorris told potential applicants to the first Clemente class. In a 1997 essay in Harper’s Magazine, he recalled saying, “Rich people learn the humanities; you didn’t. The humanities are a foundation for getting along in the world, for thinking, for learning to reflect on the world instead of just reacting to whatever force is turned against you…. Rich people know politics in that sense. They know how to negotiate instead of using force. They know how to use politics to get along, to get power.”

The students Shorris encountered in 1995 and the ones we encounter in Free Minds today understand that. Sure, some come to the class simply to get some college credits under their belts, but more often they see education as a path to a different kind of life. Being educated isn’t just a credential but a way of moving in the world. They want connections to intellectual community, to civic organizations, to the processes that make a democracy work. They want to be part of the conversation.
Encouraging Civic Engagement

Creating a course that offers all of this is complicated. Covering six disciplines—literature, philosophy, US history, art history, creative writing, and analytical writing—we can only teach a slice of what we would hope to include. Thus, the curriculum is idiosyncratic, but includes what each professor finds most critical in his or her area. We also choose a theme, a question that connects the texts. One year that question was, “How do we tell our stories?” and another “What does it mean to belong?” In 2012–13, during a contentious election year, faculty built the curriculum around the question, “What are the rights and responsibilities of citizenship?” That lens allowed us to explore the treatment of Shylock in The Merchant of Venice as well as civil rights texts.

Students had powerful responses. For Catrina Williams, that meant going to the polls for the first time in her forty-one years. After reading Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in which King talks about methods used to prevent African Americans from registering to vote, Williams decided she needed to make her voice heard. “It made me realize it’s my responsibility to vote as a citizen,” she said. “I’ve been letting people who fought for these rights down. I have the freedom to vote, and now I have exercised my right.”

Yet the theme needn’t be so explicit to connect the classroom to civic engagement. Last year’s theme focused on realities and perspectives, and when the spring semester arrived, students began exploring the second half of Plato’s Republic with our electrifying philosophy professor, Matthew Daude Laurents. They had read the first half of the Republic in the fall, and we thought returning to Plato after months away might be tricky. Instead, students dove in head first to respond to Daude Laurents’s question, “Why do we read the Republic?”

“Delving into Plato has made me think about constructing new ways to run a society,” said one student. “Especially when we are electing a new president.” A second chimed in: “We are still run by kings and not philosophers.”

Finding a Place in the World

Our students often go on to complete degrees, earn promotions, and encourage their children toward education. They build their confidence as well as their skills. But just as important, they come to think more deeply and consider their place in the world in new ways.

No one typifies this more than 2008 graduate Kellee Coleman, who has since earned an associate’s as well as a bachelor’s degree. When in Free Minds, she sometimes found herself nursing her infant son during class, walking in circles to keep him quiet while she participated in discussion. “I was so committed to being there,” she said, “and it was one of the most beautiful communal experiences of my life.” But it also made her think about her life and community differently.

As a mother of three, Coleman found herself asking about the maternal needs of women of color. Racial health inequities are a real problem in Austin, so she helped found Mama Sana/Vibrant Woman, a collective committed to improving pregnancy and birth outcomes. Today she is working on developing community-driven solutions to address health disparities in underserved populations. She traces her work back to her ability to ask questions and think critically, skills she honed in a humanities classroom.

“There’s a difference between acquiring knowledge and being educated,” she said. “Free Minds offers the space to think intentionally and dig deep into ideas. Once I turned this on, I couldn’t turn it off.”

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Two days after taking office in January 2009, President Barack Obama “closed Guantánamo” with the stroke of a pen. Four senators saw an opportunity to help Americans come to terms with what had happened there, as governments from South Africa to South America had done with their own countries’ contested histories. “Justice also means to look into the past,” affirmed the United Nations’ torture investigator, Manfred Nowak, in response to Obama’s declaration (Tran 2009). In March of that year, the senators proposed a hearing with an extremely clumsy title, “Getting to the Truth Through a Nonpartisan Commission of Inquiry,” that would focus on post-9/11 counterterrorism practices. But Obama had made it clear he believed “we need to look forward as opposed to looking backwards” (Johnston and Savage 2009). The proposal met with a swift and silent death.

In the absence of official government inquiry, other sectors have a particular societal obligation—and opportunity—to foster a reckoning with the past, and to make such practice a feature of democratic citizenship. To fulfill this obligation regarding Guantánamo, in 2011, nine universities came together to launch the Guantánamo Public Memory Project, in which over three hundred humanities students and people with direct experience at the US naval base at Guantánamo Bay explored how the base had been opened, closed, and opened again from the Spanish-American-Cuban War through the War on Terror. Together, participants conducted over one hundred interviews and created a website, a curriculum, and a traveling exhibit. The exhibit visited twenty-two cities and reached an audience of more than 500 thousand people. As the project traveled around the country, organizers hosted public dialogues on why “remembering” Guantánamo matters in participants’ local communities today. Participants connected Guantánamo’s history to a host of other local concerns, such as immigrant detention and mass incarceration.

For participating universities, the project suggested new possibilities for the role university-based humanities projects—and specifically, public memory projects—can play in fostering civic engagement around urgent but contested issues. These nine universities came together with several other institutions, now totaling twenty colleges and universities, to form the Humanities Action Lab (HAL). HAL faculty and students work with local issue organizations in public spaces to create national public memory projects around contested social issues, taking on one focal issue for each three-year project. Through these shared projects, the collective explores and evaluates the power of public humanities for public engagement.

**States of Incarceration**

As the Humanities Action Lab was forming in 2014, the United States stood at the apex of the age of mass incarceration. After four decades of feverish imprisonment, a remarkable bipartisan consensus had emerged that mass incarceration had failed and must be dismantled (Chettiar and Waldman 2015). But growing numbers of people demanded that before planning a new future, leaders should account for the past. For example, protestors called on both Bill and Hillary Clinton to reckon with their role in constructing the carceral state before proposing new reforms.

In this context, HAL partners decided that the first HAL project would invite as many Americans as possible to confront the memory of mass incarceration and the questions it poses for the future. In the fall of 2015, over six hundred students and scholars from twenty campuses in seventeen states collaborated with nearly thirty community organizations to create States of Incarceration: A National Dialogue of Local Histories (http://statesofincarceration.org/). Project elements included curricula, a digital platform, and a national traveling exhibit exploring the evolution and impact of the US correctional system. Partner colleges and universities simultaneously offered courses in which students worked with others directly affected by incarceration to curate a history of a local site of incarceration. All the pieces—each featuring combinations of historic images, audio interviews, videos, and artwork—were compiled by a designer into a single national physical and digital exhibit that launched in New York City in April 2016 and is traveling to each of the communities that contributed to it, accompanied by public dialogues at each stop, through at least early 2019.

This first national exhibit on the history of incarceration in America was thus created by the widest cross section of the incarceration generation we could manage: people directly involved in the criminal justice system, people who had never thought about it before, and everyone in between. Giving amateurs the responsibility for communicating such a serious—and
seriously misunderstood—subject was tremendously risky. “I never thought much about this issue before,” admitted hundreds of participating students at the beginning of the three-month process. The project’s main experiment involved determining whether confronting the past, and then having the responsibility to help others confront it, could itself become a process of civic engagement for participants, while also catalyzing engagement among members of a larger public.

**National Questions, Local Contexts**

At the outset, HAL partners defined four goals for the process: development of knowledge, development of new perspectives and relationships, development of civic capacity, and development of action-orientation. Each local team was invited to identify one site or story of incarceration in the team’s state, and then explore that site’s history and memory from multiple perspectives. For the final project, each team identified one big question and provided a variety of “responses” from the past and the present. For instance, a team of University of Massachusetts Amherst students and formerly incarcerated women asked “What are women’s prisons for?” and explored women’s penitentiaries in the area from the nineteenth century to the present. Students at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis partnered with the National Alliance of Mental Illness to ask, “Why are prisons the nation’s mental hospitals?” and then explore women’s penitentiaries in the area from the nineteenth century to the present. Students at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis partnered with the National Alliance of Mental Illness to ask, “Why are prisons the nation’s mental hospitals?” and then explore women’s penitentiaries in the area from the nineteenth century to the present.

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Each team traced and shared distinct paths that different states took to mass incarceration. For example, examining the legacies of racial slavery, students in New Orleans traced the evolution of the Louisiana State Penitentiary (“Angola”) from plantation to prison farm; students at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro mapped the post-Reconstruction criminalization of black men onto the state’s convict-built roads. Woven in with these stories were others with very different roots: to understand high rates of incarceration in Indian Country today, the University of Minnesota team started with the Dakota Wars and the ideologies and technologies of settler colonialism. Four local teams—in New Jersey, Arizona, Florida, and Texas—focused on immigrant detention, as a new approach to criminalizing immigration has produced a massive detention apparatus. Looking at how local histories of incarceration intertwine and diverge over time suggests new national frameworks and solutions.

**An Open Invitation**

The map of States of Incarceration is missing huge swaths. It is meant as an invitation to add new stories, perspectives, questions, and conversations. The project offers a tool kit for colleges and universities wishing to engage their students and communities. Using our curricular resources, curatorial guidelines, exhibit design template, community collaboration models, and public program designs, your students and communities can conduct their own explorations of the era of mass incarceration to discover how it has shaped your community and how universities and communities can come together to address its legacies. For more information on how to participate, contact humanitiesactionlab@newschool.edu.

**REFERENCES**


Citizenship Under Siege: Promoting Listening, Learning, and Engagement

The US Constitution’s preamble speaks of “We the People”—but who is considered part of that sacred circle, and how has this group varied over time? When national identity is hotly contested, what does it mean to experience citizenship as partial, denied, or fully acknowledged? How can the humanities illuminate differing narratives and open up space for understanding, connections, and shared visions of the future?

In Fall 2016, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and The Democracy Commitment invited faculty, staff, students, and campus community partners to join in one or all of three free webinars. These events were designed to expand campus expertise on how to hold constructive conversations about contentious issues and how to institute practices in and out of the classroom that foster engagement across differences. Topics included:

From Fractious Differences to Engaged Dialogues
How can texts and techniques from the humanities disrupt unexamined positions, put human faces to abstract ideas, and help open up spaces where dialogue and consensus might emerge on historic and contemporary questions about citizenship and who deserves it? What models exist for training dialogue facilitators who can help encourage listening and perspective taking across seemingly intractable positions?

Income Inequality and the Cost of Citizenship
When economic disparities—often intertwined with ethnic, racial, and religious differences—impose real limitations on public participation, how can the humanities provide insights into the historic and persistent reality of differential access to full citizenship rights? Participants learned how several campuses have engaged their students and communities in examining this issue.

I Want My Country Back: Immigration, Race, and Citizenship
In the midst of sometimes-dramatic demographic and cultural shifts, how have the humanities served to illuminate felt experiences, historical contexts, and ethical issues as the rich mosaic of people in the United States fluctuates? What approaches, courses, and public events lead to shared ends rather than perpetual conflict or feelings of displacement?

These webinars were funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and hosted by AAC&U and The Democracy Commitment. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in these webinars do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Recordings of the webinar series and related resources are now available at https://www.aacu.org/citizenship/events-resources.
AAC&U and the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Action Network

As part of its commitment to preparing all students for civic, ethical, and social responsibility in US and global contexts, AAC&U has formed the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Action Network. The CLDE Action Network builds on the momentum generated by the 2012 White House release of the report A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future. Coordinated by Caryn McTighe Musil, AAC&U senior scholar and director of civic learning and democracy initiatives, the network includes thirteen leading civic learning organizations that are committed to making civic inquiry and engagement expected rather than elective for all college students. Diversity & Democracy regularly features research and exemplary practices developed and advanced by these partner organizations and their members:

American Association of State Colleges and Universities
Anchor Institutions Task Force
Association of American Colleges and Universities
The Bonner Foundation
Bringing Theory to Practice
Campus Compact
Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement
The Democracy Commitment
Imagining America
The Interfaith Youth Core
Kettering Foundation
NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
New England Resource Center for Higher Education

Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Calendar

The following calendar features events on civic learning sponsored by members of the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Action Network and others focused on education for democracy. For more information, please visit AAC&U’s CLDE Calendar online at http://www.aacu.org/clde/calendar/.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MONTH</th>
<th>DATES</th>
<th>CLDE EVENT</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FEBRUARY</td>
<td>8-12</td>
<td>Florida Campus Compact Winter Institute</td>
<td>Daytona Beach, Florida</td>
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<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>North Carolina Campus Compact Social Change Forum</td>
<td>Durham, North Carolina</td>
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<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>William and Mary Active Citizens Conference</td>
<td>Williamsburg, Virginia</td>
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<td></td>
<td>27-28</td>
<td>Indiana Campus Compact 7th Annual Service Engagement Summit</td>
<td>Indianapolis, Indiana</td>
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<tr>
<td>MARCH</td>
<td>15-16</td>
<td>Eastern Region Campus Compact Conference</td>
<td>New York, New York</td>
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<td></td>
<td>22-24</td>
<td>North Carolina-Gulf South Summit</td>
<td>Greensboro, North Carolina</td>
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<td></td>
<td>24-25</td>
<td>Citizen University National Conference</td>
<td>Seattle, Washington</td>
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<tr>
<td>APRIL</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>The Service-Learning &amp; Civic Engagement Conference (SLCE)</td>
<td>Towson, Maryland</td>
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<tr>
<td>MAY</td>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>Indiana Campus Compact Connecting Campuses with Communities</td>
<td>Indianapolis, Indiana</td>
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<td></td>
<td>24-26</td>
<td>Bringing Theory to Practice Conference: The Whole Student—Intersectionality and Well-being</td>
<td>Chicago, Illinois</td>
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<tr>
<td>JUNE</td>
<td>7-10</td>
<td>Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2017 (American Democracy Project, The Democracy Commitment, and NASPA)</td>
<td>Baltimore, Maryland</td>
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### Upcoming AAC&U Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEETING</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>DATES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Network for Academic Renewal</td>
<td>Jacksonville, Florida</td>
<td>March 16–18, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diversity, Learning, and Student Success: Voices Leading Change</td>
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<tr>
<td>Network for Academic Renewal</td>
<td>New Orleans, Louisiana</td>
<td>October 12–14, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Global Engagement and Social Responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Network for Academic Renewal</td>
<td>San Francisco, California</td>
<td>November 2–4, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transforming STEM Higher Education</td>
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### About Diversity & Democracy

Diversity & Democracy supports higher education faculty and leaders as they design and implement programs that advance civic learning and democratic engagement, global learning, and engagement with diversity to prepare students for socially responsible action in today’s interdependent but unequal world. According to AAC&U’s Statement on Liberal Learning, “By its nature... liberal learning is global and pluralistic. It embraces the diversity of ideas and experiences that characterize the social, natural, and intellectual world. To acknowledge such diversity in all its forms is both an intellectual commitment and a social responsibility, for nothing less will equip us to understand our world and to pursue fruitful lives.” Diversity & Democracy features evidence, research, and exemplary practices to assist practitioners in creating learning opportunities that realize this vision. To access Diversity & Democracy online, visit www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/.

### About AAC&U

AAC&U is the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantages of a liberal education to all students, regardless of academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915, AAC&U now comprises nearly 1,400 member institutions—including accredited public and private colleges, community colleges, research universities, and comprehensive universities of every type and size. AAC&U functions as a catalyst and facilitator, forging links among presidents, administrators, and faculty members who are engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Information about AAC&U membership, programs, and publications can be found at www.aacu.org.

### AAC&U Membership 2017

- Masters: 30%
- Baccalaureate: 24%
- Associates: 12%
- Res & Doc: 17%
- Other*: 17%

*Specialized schools, state systems and agencies, and international affiliates