Democracy’s Graduates: Reimagining Alumnihood
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

3 | From the Editor

Democracy’s Graduates: Reimagining Alumnihood

4 | New Legacies for Alumnihood
   JULIE ELLISON, University of Michigan and Citizen Alum

7 | Building It Forward at Community Colleges: Staying Connected to Alumni through Civic Engagement
   JOHN J. THEIS, Lone Star College–Kingwood

8 | Showing Up: Transforming into a Civic Actor
   LINDA S. GOOD, Lone Star College

10 | “Fair Hope”: Places, Stories, and Education for Life with Alabama Towns
   MARK WILSON and NAN FAIRLEY, Auburn University

11 | Coming Full Circle: The Life Cycle of Living Democracy
   MARIAN ROYSTON, Auburn University

**Perspective**

13 | Processing Trauma as an Activist Alumna: A Conversation with Mica Grimm
   PETER ERLIKILA, Community Organizer

15 | The View from Alumni Relations: Creating a Culture of Giving and Engagement
   NINI POORE, University of Michigan

**Research and Evaluation**

17 | Civic Identity and Agency after College: Alumni Voices from Three Academic Civic Engagement Programs
   RICHARD M. BATTISTONI, Providence College, and TANIA D. MITCHELL, University of Minnesota

20 | Life Outside the Bubble: Reflections from Wake Forest University Alumni
   JILL J. McMILLAN, KATY J. HARRIGER, CHRISTY M. BUCHANAN, and STEPHANIE K. GUSLER, Wake Forest University

**Campus Practice**

23 | The Legacy of an Anchor Institution: Reclaiming the University of Newark
   QUINTUS R. JETT, Rutgers University–Newark

25 | Learning to Ask: College Experiences and the Public Work of Arts and Humanities Alumni
   LEEANN LANDS, KRISTEN WALKER, and CHRISTINE DEBORD, Kennesaw State University

27 | The Ripple Effect: Returning Adult Students Learning with Alumni
   DANIELLE HINRICH, Metropolitan State University

29 | Curating Career Success for First-Generation College Alumni
   GEORGE J. SANCHEZ, University of Southern California

**For More...**

31 | Resources and Opportunities

AAC&U and the Kettering Foundation partnered to produce this issue and shared the production costs. The Kettering Foundation, established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, is a nonprofit operating foundation that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. Kettering’s primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering’s research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The interpretations and conclusions contained in this volume represent the views of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, its directors, or its officers.

Cover photo: In 2015, Joy Porter, a recent Auburn University graduate, worked closely with Cotina Terry (then director of the Randolph County Economic Development Authority) and fellow alumna Marian Royston as a Living Democracy Fellow in Roanoke, Alabama. (See pages 10–12.) Here, Porter (left) and Terry tour Roanoke’s restored Main Street Theatre. (Photo by Nan Fairley)
FROM THE EDITOR

A New Vision of Alumnihood

I recently returned to my alma mater for a college reunion. My visit was marked by all the typical surges of nostalgia as I traversed the quads, traded memories with friends, and lamented a narrowly lost homecoming game. But it was a chance meeting with a student that would be my most memorable experience.

Outside the student newspaper office where I had my first role as an editor, I met a student editor who offered to unlock the door. Inside, he brought out archived issues and proudly showed me the latest edition. It featured an impressive array of articles—stories about survivors of sexual violence on campus, an examination of city police reform efforts, and three columns on student activism.

My host coauthored one of those columns. He wrote that he believes he has a responsibility to elevate marginalized voices and create a more equitable world—a conviction I share. His column is one way he tries to accomplish this. I thought about how my student newspaper experience marked the convergence for me of what Harry Boyte calls “the three C’s”—college, career, and citizenship—and how that experience may be similarly meaningful for today’s student editors. As I left, the student asked me to keep in touch. I began to reflect on my journey and wonder what I might contribute to students just beginning theirs.

In 2012, spurred by the publication of A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future, the Association of American Colleges and Universities convened twelve other organizations to form the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Action Network, dedicated to making civic inquiry and engagement part of every student’s college education. As more students graduate having pursued civic engagement, it makes sense to involve alumni in the movement for civic learning and to consider how civic engagement might define one way that colleges and universities relate to their former students.

Many CLDE Action Network members (including the Kettering Foundation, which partnered to produce this issue of Diversity & Democracy) have supported the work of reimagining alumnihood—one in which colleges and universities enlist alumni as allies in improving civic education and in advancing the institutions’ public missions in the places where alumni are situated as professionals and community members. This approach to alumnihood forges lasting connections among alumni, students, faculty, and staff while building strong communities and a vital democracy.

A major part of reimagining alumnihood involves listening to diverse groups of alumni. In this issue, we amplify the voices of alumni and the faculty and staff that work with them.

—Emily Schuster
Editor, Diversity & Democracy
[DEMOCRACY’S GRADUATES: REIMAGINING ALUMNIHOOD]

New Legacies for Alumnihood

Julie Ellison, Professor of American Culture and English at the University of Michigan, Lead Organizer of Citizen Alum

Alumnihood has been construed as a personal bond, a professional boon, an intellectual credential, an economic marker, a social affirmation. But it is also—in ways that both align with and disrupt these other meanings—a public good.

This issue of Diversity & Democracy examines a growing counterculture of civic alumnihood animated by recent graduates, like the ones whose reflections and personal narratives appear in its pages. Citizen Alum launched in 2012, under the auspices of the American Commonwealth Project, as a national network of campus teams and initiatives to “counter the image of alumni as primarily ‘donors’ with a vision of them as also ‘doers’” (http://www.citizenalum.org). It was followed in 2013 by the Kettering Foundation’s two-year Learning Exchange on Civically Engaged Alumni. These developments made possible the first explicit framing of publicly engaged alumnihood as an organized endeavor within the civic learning and democratic renewal movement in US higher education. Ours was a community-wide effort, nurtured by supportive colleagues in the offices of the American Democracy Project, The Democracy Commitment, Imagining America, the Bonner Leadership Program, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and these organizations’ member campuses.

These organizations were together at the 2012 White House meeting “For Democracy’s Future,” where A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future, commissioned by the Obama Administration, was released and the sesquicentennial of the Morrill Act was noted. That event generated a flurry of civic activity, including Shaping Our Future: How Should Higher Education Help Us Create the Society We Want? (the National Issues Forum deliberation guide) and start-ups like Citizen Alum and the Civic Science Initiative. (See https://democracyu.wordpress.com/about.)

The simple act of announcing civically engaged alumnihood as a new meme made a palpable difference. For example, Rutgers University–Newark introduced Citizen Alum Newark in the spring 2017 update to its strategic plan as an initiative grounded in “a theory of change where alumni are included in the transitions and transformations taking place in higher education” (57). This document speaks to alumni as collaborators in “brining to life the spirit of citizenship felt among people in this city and this academic institution” (57).

Rutgers University–Newark, like other campuses that are exploring cooperative models of alumnihood, seeks to recover a legacy of place-based engagement. As Quintus R. Jett explains in this issue, Citizen Alum Newark began its work by reclaiming the history and mission of the University of Newark (1936–46), its precursor institution. Efforts to include alumni and acknowledge them as coauthors of history mark a real change—and variations on that change form the main storyline of this issue.

Full-Participation Alumnihood

These developments did not come out of nowhere. Civically engaged alumnihood as a purpose, practice, and subject of inquiry was already with us. First, it was manifest in “learning legacies” jointly built by colleges and localities over time and now freshly asserted and valued (Robbins 2017). For example, we can trace the connection at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) between civic engagement now and in the past thanks to Marybeth Gasman, Dorsei Spencer, and Cecilia Orphan. They challenge how historically white institutions have constructed origin stories for higher education’s public mission that erase the robust programmatic ties between HBCUs and neighboring communities. In fact, the documents they examine place HBCUs “at the forefront of the civic engagement movement” and position their alumni as agents of that legacy (Gasman, Spencer, and Orphan 2013, 356).

Second, campuses with a strong public mission have effectively imagined a legacy embodied in the “civic-minded graduate” (Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis) and “the active citizen” (Tufts University). Assessment efforts looking at alumni characteristics have been one measure of educational opportunity, real-world learning, and the cocreation of public goods. At the same time, civic-minded former students have pushed back vigorously against inequities. Peter Erkkila’s piece here, based on an interview with Mica Grimm, is a case study on how activist alumni—particularly alumni of color—balance a desire for progress on the one hand and resistance to legacies of marginalization and trauma on the other.

Finally, the challenge to the norms of alumnihood is being driven by “marginalized majority” alumni (Scobey 2016). Several articles here foreground first-generation, underrepresented, and working adult alumni and their advocates and teachers. As a useful accountability rubric, “full participation” is “a democratic process” that looks at “who joins institutions,” “whether they feel respected and valued,” and
“what kinds of activities count as important work” (Sturm et al. 2011, 3). Applying this to alumni, we can ask: Have these graduates been respected and valued? Do their post-college lives “count” (and do they “have capital”) in the college’s story (Yosso 2005)?

Given these past and present developments, how do we discover how civic learning and democratic engagement matter to alumni, and how alumni matter to civic learning and democratic engagement? We listen to what alumni have to say about their experiences in college, the terms on which they engage with public life, and the kinds of connections they want with their alma maters.

Looping Back While Learning Forward

President Richard Guarasci of Wagner College has asked, “What structures are in place to support young people as they transition from life as students to professionals and leaders in their communities?” (2015).

An emerging best practice in post-baccalaureate support takes the form of what I call “looping back while learning forward.” This starts with student aspiration, learning forward toward anticipated transitions from one educational and life phase into another, while drawing on experiences of previous changes. It continues after students graduate, when they trace feedback loops to cohorts of students in their former programs. As the articles in this issue by George J. Sanchez and Danielle Hinrichs show, direct contact with first-generation alumni can help students imagine not just a generic future but a specific professional location.

Many college programs are constructing feedback loops that link academic generations through learning partnerships that center on alumni stories, told through video, performance, community journalism, and course papers. Several Citizen Alum campus teams—like Hinrichs and her colleagues at Metropolitan State University—focus on new pedagogies. Metropolitan State’s course module rests on a set of questions that students ask as they interview civically engaged alumni, including “How do you address community issues through your work?” and “What have you gained from being a civic actor?”

As they report in this issue, LeeAnn Lands and her colleagues at Kennesaw State University “sought to learn about how arts and humanities graduates have realized their role as civic agents.” The generative public work framework has emphasized public goods cocreated by students and civically engaged alumni in settings outside the classroom, as John J. Theis, Mark Wilson, and Nan Fairley describe in their articles.

But alumni experiences and insights are not easy to pin down. In this issue, Jill J. McMillan and her collaborators look at how students skilled in community deliberation become alumni who look back on college and see “the bubble” that separates students from the world beyond campus. Richard M. Battistoni and Tania D. Mitchell parse research findings on highly engaged civic learning graduates who grapple with two themes: the desire for a vital connection to place and the desire for work that pays and matters. Graduates are sorting out mixed feelings about what active citizenship looks like.

The New Alumni Relations

Civically engaged alumnihood is opening a new zone of demonetized, ad hoc alumni relations, often allied with equity and inclusion efforts and intergenerational learning programs.

Civically engaged alumnihood is opening a new zone of demonetized, ad hoc alumni relations, often allied with equity and inclusion efforts and intergenerational learning programs. What are the implications for alumni relations professionals?

People who work in alumni relations and advancement offices were not in the room when the idea of civically engaged alumnihood emerged. They were early adopters as members of college teams, however, and in several cases are leading campus efforts. This is not easy. Many Americans question the meaning-making and money-making encounters that typically connect colleges to alumni. Educator Harold O. Levy urges
Going forward, reimagining alumnihood with alumni themselves should be a learning goal of democracy education.

impact. At Rutgers University–Newark, Citizen Alum reports to Vice Chancellor for Development Irene O’Brien. Poore, O’Brien, and other advancement and alumni relations staff—including at Metropolitan State, Kennesaw State, and Wagner College—have been collaborators and sharers of knowledge in Citizen Alum efforts. Divorcing civically engaged alumnihood from all other forms of alumnihood is a no-win proposition.

Reimagining with Alumni

Recent Auburn University graduate Marian Royston suggested in a Kettering Learning Exchange that “the definition of success will have to be altered” for alumni like her. Listening to the stories of civic-minded graduates, she proposed, “might attract [alumni] to the university who aren’t currently seeing themselves there,” which precisely captures the process of looping back while learning forward.

Linda S. Good tells a story in this issue about success that was a long time coming. She weaves together a narrative of self-authorship and a career that powerfully unfolded its civic dimensions. There will be more stories like hers as more colleges ask, “In what ways do alumni enact and voice our public mission?” Going forward, reimagining alumnihood with alumni themselves should be a learning goal of democracy education. New majority, first-generation, and “traditional” alumni are looking for work that pays and matters in the places where they live or to which they will move. They are figuring out how the work partnerships locally and regionally that invite into their process working adult students and recent graduates of any college—bringing them to the public table, not one by one, but continuously, as civic actors and allies in education.

With this article, the author wishes to honor the life of Marc Cooper, an early proponent of Citizen Alum, a participant in the Kettering Learning Exchange on Civically Engaged Alumni, and a close colleague in Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life. He believed that recent graduates “can give my students a model of how they can both be in the world of work and create a more democratic, transparent, diverse society.” Cooper was emeritus professor of Ancient Near Eastern Studies at Missouri State University at the time of his tragic death in 2016.

REFERENCES


Community colleges are the institutions of higher education most firmly rooted in their communities. We draw most of our students from our local communities, and the vast majority of our graduates stay in the community to live and work. Yet in community colleges across the country, alumni are an underutilized resource. We seldom have alumni associations, alumni rarely come back to our campuses to mentor and advise students, and without alumni offices to track and compile data, we often do not even know who our alumni are.

In addition, we don’t conduct alumni relations as conventionally understood. Alumni relations efforts in other types of colleges typically revolve around sports and capital campaigns—but community colleges don’t have high-profile sports teams and, because our colleges have grown considerably in the last few decades, our alumni often have not yet reached their peak earning years.

For their part, community college graduates often do not even think of themselves as alumni. Many alumni who feel close to their campuses attribute this connection to curricular activities they engaged in and social relationships they developed during their educational experience. But community colleges often do not have dorms, fraternities, or sororities, and they offer little in the way of curricular life, preferring instead to spend resources on “job training.”

When Citizen Alum first began in 2011 as an initiative to involve alumni in educating future active citizens, Lone Star College–Kingwood (LSC–K) saw immediate potential and a natural fit, as our alumni have such strong ties to our local community north of Houston, Texas. Yet as we began to think about building an alumni program, we realized that working within the community college context would require us to create a different kind of model. We’ve found that civic engagement activities are the link that can keep alumni connected to LSC–K. Students who participate in civic engagement activities at LSC–K tend to form close relationships with faculty and with one another through powerful experiences in the community, and those relationships can stay strong through continued engagement after graduation.

LSC–K’s Citizen Alum initiative started as a “build it forward” model. Because many of our former students did not think of themselves as alumni, we could not easily motivate them to engage with the college. Instead, we focused on current LSC–K students involved in the public work of Lone Star College’s nonpartisan Center for Civic Engagement. We saw this as a way to build a future network of alumni dedicated to civic work. As I discuss in this article, our alumni work has centered around former students who were (1) Public Achievement program coaches who worked with K–12 students to solve community issues or (2) deliberative dialogue moderators who helped community members with differing viewpoints find common ground and consider productive ways to address problems.

The Public Achievement Program
Public Achievement is a youth engagement initiative developed at the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg University in Minneapolis, Minnesota. According to Augsburg University (n.d.), “The Public Achievement organizing model recognizes that people of every age have skills, talents, and ideas, and that by learning to work strategically with others, they can solve problems and build sustainable democratic societies.”

In the Public Achievement model at LSC–K, college students coach teams of K–12 students who research, develop, and carry out action plans to address issues that they care about in their communities. The issues range from school-focused ones such as improving lunches or addressing bullying to broader issues like building a community teen center, stopping animal abuse, or saving the rainforest.

Regardless of the issues they address, college coaches and K–12 students craft appeals to those in power, modify their proposals based on the feedback and interests of decision makers, and develop public skills and confidence. In other words, they learn to be political and develop a sense of agency.

The Public Achievement program at LSC–K has grown since its inception, when eight coaches worked in a single high school with twenty-six students in five issue groups. Over the seven years of the program, two hundred college students have coached hundreds of K–12 students working in dozens of issue groups in four schools.

In 2015, coaches from the first year of Public Achievement began graduating from four-year colleges. LSC–K’s Citizen Alum program moved in a new direction as we partnered with these alumni...
to expand Public Achievement in our community.

**Partnering with an Alumna**

Cleveland, Texas, is a small town northeast of Houston that exemplifies the new reality of disappearing blue-collar jobs in the United States. The median household income is $35,791—less than two-thirds of the median income of the state ($54,727)—and 26.7 percent of Cleveland residents live below the poverty level, compared with 15.6 percent of Texas residents. In addition, Cleveland is a diverse community with a population that is 46 percent non-Hispanic white, 28.9 percent Hispanic, and 23.5 percent black. Less than 10 percent of Cleveland residents over the age of 25 have graduated from college (US Census Bureau 2016a, 2016b). The district’s schools are beset with problems and perennially fail to meet annual academic progress goals. Danielle Thorp, an LSC–K alumna and second-grade teacher at Cleveland ISD’s Southside Primary School, said, “Living in a community with high poverty, you are often surrounded by a sense of helplessness. This is a community where things happen to people rather than people making things happen.”

As an LSC–K Public Achievement coach during the program’s inaugural year, Thorp worked with students at Splendora High School’s Early College Program who, she recalled, “often picked big issues to attempt to solve such as hunger or drop-out rates. Teenagers, often labeled as self-absorbed, wanted to impact change to improve the lives of others. They saw big problems and they wanted to tackle them head-on.”

The impact on Thorp was profound. “As a coach, I was inspired by working with teens as they turned the impossible into something that was possible,” she said. “My group faced many challenges but they worked through these challenges.” She reflected,

I see the need for a civic engagement program in our classrooms. My students are considered to be highest poverty. The vast majority receives free or reduced-[price] school lunch. Many of my eight-year-olds feel that college is out of the question because they are not smart enough.

A program like Public Achievement would provide my kids with an opportunity to meet people other than teachers who have college degrees. Positive interactions with adults would build [their] confidence. The problem-solving model in Public Achievement would strengthen [their] critical thinking skills.

Thorp’s experience as a Public Achievement coach helped shape her perceptions of education and her bond with LSC–K. When asked why she wanted to work with current LSC–K students to create a Public Achievement program at Southside Primary, she said,

Our kids need to feel they are able to impact their fate. Public Achievement provides that type of opportunity. Intervening early with programs like Public Achievement could help break the cycle of poverty and learned helplessness within this community. Fortunately, my exposure to Public Achievement in college provided me with an enormous tool to inspire my students.

**Showing Up:**

**Transforming into a Civic Actor**

* LINDA S. GOOD, Board of Trustees at Lone Star College

When people ask me why I support community colleges, I answer, ”Because they are transformative.” Good community colleges change the lives of their students.

Entering Temple Community College in Temple, Texas, at age thirty-two as a divorced mother of two and a survivor of an abusive marriage, I began my transformation into a civic actor. A speech professor, whose class I had hoped to avoid because of my fear of public speaking, inspired me to win national speaking awards, and a history professor motivated me to major in history. After earning an associate of arts degree, I transferred to Baylor University, where I met a graduate student who wholeheartedly supported my goal to become an attorney. That student and I married three and a half hours after I graduated Phi Beta Kappa. After taking a year off for the birth of our child, I began law school at age thirty-six and graduated three years later.

I chose to specialize in poverty law, centering on family law and Social Security disability claims. For more than twenty years, I have addressed the legal needs of the most vulnerable members of our communities.

While I engaged in public service one client at a time, my husband pursued an academic career at Lone Star College in the Houston metropolitan area. His campus, Lone Star College–North Harris, is the most ethnically diverse of Lone Star’s six campuses and serves the highest concentration of first-generation, limited-English-proficiency, and low-income students. At times, he referred students to me whose legal needs threatened their college success. I also took every opportunity to direct my clients to community college programs.
During the 2015–16 school year, Thorp worked with LSC–K to introduce the Public Achievement program to Southside Primary, where she now serves as the program’s site coordinator. Over the past three school years, 145 first- and second-grade students have worked with more than sixty college coaches in two teachers’ classrooms.

Deliberative Dialogue and Alumni
LSC–K has been working to build a robust deliberative dialogue program for five years (Theis and Forhan 2017). The goal of the program is to develop students’ skills in moderating difficult conversations on controversial issues. Deliberative dialogue is a key democratic skill and is often used together with public work approaches to problem solving such as Public Achievement. By facilitating regular dialogues on campus and in the community, LSC–K students learn the skills that will carry them forward as they engage in their communities as alumni. As trained moderators fan out into the local communities after they graduate, we hope to turn to them to lead discussions that provide residents with productive ways to deal with controversial issues, while keeping these alumni engaged with LSC–K. This approach is already paying dividends, as I recently recruited an LSC–K graduate as my copresenter for a speech I gave about deliberative dialogue at Texas State University.

Building Alumni Networks
Community colleges will have to be creative in building networks of civically engaged alumni. LSC–K will continue to grow its Citizen Alum program by keeping recent graduates who participated in civic engagement programs involved and by highlighting their civic work on our website and in publications. We will draw on former Public Achievement coaches and deliberative dialogue moderators to create a civic network of alumni that will strengthen democratic practices in communities, mentor current LSC–K students, and take the skills they learned at LSC–K with them as they move forward in life.

REFERENCES
In November 2010, we met with a small group of citizens from seven Alabama communities and our colleagues from Auburn University in Fairhope, Alabama, to plan a new venture. Fairhope, which overlooks the Eastern Shore of Mobile Bay, was particularly inspirational for our purpose. In 1894, another small group of citizens from Des Moines, Iowa—followers of the economic theories of Henry George—began a colony based on cooperative individualism and a “single tax,” which allowed individuals to become shareholders of the cooperation that owned the land. They chose the Eastern shore, according to legend, because they saw a “fair hope of success.”

Our venture would not be quite so bold as that of the original Fairhope residents, but we would launch it in the same spirit of cooperation and with the realization that the experiment might fail. The Auburn University team wanted to see if the citizens were interested in collaborating on a new project named Living Democracy, where undergraduate students would embark on living-learning experiences in communities and develop skills to become committed citizens in a democratic society.

Rather than ask about community needs, we asked for community stories, tales of service that shaped the lives of those around the table—a schoolteacher/mayor, a director of a health-related nonprofit organization, a city clerk, a historic site director, a minister, an artist, and others. Through Living Democracy, students and communities would create new stories related to civic engagement, community assets, personal growth, and adventure.

We asked our friends what they thought their communities could contribute to an undergraduate’s “education for life.” The common refrain related to working with diverse (and sometimes ornery) people, experimenting with new ideas, and learning from things that do not work out as planned. The project we were creating together would be the real-world experience that students need and deserve, an opportunity to experience how citizens come together (or not) for the common good.

The Living Democracy Experience
Over the last six summers, thirty students have helped create many stories. A few are told here and on the next two pages, and many more are available at http://www.auburn.edu/livingdemocracy. We never intended to build a large program, and the longer we organize the venture, the more we realize that the experience is not one that should be scaled up. With between three and seven students each summer, we believe we are providing communities in our state with the best thing a university can offer: a curious student who wants to grapple with the opportunities and challenges of active citizenship. Students usually take the courses Community Journalism and Introduction to Community and Civic Engagement, which give students context and help them develop skills for the work. But the actual ten-week summer experience, and the ability to persevere and develop backup plans. Students write an article each week on a civic topic, such as a third space (outside of the home and workplace); a “wicked problem” (Rittel and Webber 1973); a city council meeting; or individuals and organizations who embody civic engagement.

Students often call the experience an internship, as that’s the primary mental model for a practical experience in college. We remind them that in internships, students usually learn an institutional culture from the bottom up. Instead, Living Democracy is a living-learning experience that is more horizontal in nature, where students discover the web of relationships that make a community thrive—and they identify the relationships that should be there. As one student stated, “It’s not an internship where you make coffee; it’s an experience where you have coffee . . . with lots of people.”

Alumni Perspectives
Since Auburn University joined the Citizen Alum network, students in the Introduction to Community and Civic Engagement course have interviewed recent alumni—including former Living Democracy Fellows—about their civic identities and actions.

One of those alumni was Mary Beth Snow, who graduated in 2014 and who
described her Living Democracy experience as “the most important thing I did in college.” As an undergraduate, she spent ten weeks in Collinsville, Alabama, where the population is more than 40 percent Hispanic. She established a reading program for immigrant children in a trailer park, among other projects. As she began her career as a bilingual teacher in a Houston elementary school, Snow said she felt better prepared than other recent graduates might because “there’s less fear of the grittiness of real life.” She explained, “I think we’re often shortchanged as undergraduates. We are offered consumer-based, polished study abroad and types of service experiences [that] are just about what you can get out of it.” In contrast, she said, Living Democracy “was the real world. We were given tools and then told to go out and make something working with local citizens.”

Our Living Democracy program connected us to Laurie Chapman, a 1998 Auburn University graduate who is now executive director of Restoration 154, a nonprofit in the rural community of Elba, Alabama. Named for the 154-mile-long Pea River that runs through Elba, the organization ultimately aims to complete 154 projects to improve the community’s quality of life. Six Living Democracy Fellows have since worked with Restoration 154 on projects including a community mural and the Giving Garden, which provides fresh produce to be distributed through the local food bank. Chapman observed, “I really like how Living Democracy brings in young people with outside opinions and energy.”

Perhaps the intersection of Living Democracy and Citizen Alum is the focus on networks. The development of networks and collaborative work around issues of democracy will help us answer the charge that Marietta Johnson, founder of the revolutionary Organic School of Education in Fairhope, Alabama, set forth at the beginning of the twentieth century. “Education must come into its own,” she said. “It must become the conscious agent for building a better world. It must be true to its high mission” (1996, 95).

I entered Auburn University in 2009 with a surface-level understanding of community service and engagement. Through family example and school and community expectations, I had become hardwired to volunteer. I participated in every organization possible and volunteered in the community because I could leave those activities feeling “good.” By my freshman year of college, however, such a feel-good lifestyle felt exhausting and empty. I wanted authentic experiences that would lead me to something deeper.

At Auburn, I found what I was looking for and more as a Community and Civic Engagement (CCE) minor. Of all the CCE opportunities I participated in, Living Democracy was by far the most authentic. I first learned of it in an Appalachian Community Development class with Dr. Mark Wilson. That class, coupled with a course I had taken on the Civil Rights Movement, made me to want understand what can happen when citizens gather around a common cause. Living Democracy was too good an opportunity to pass up. Then Dr. Wilson told me about a placement in Hobson City, the first municipality in Alabama to be founded entirely by African Americans. It married my two loves, of history and community development. I was in.

Hard-Learned Lessons
Dr. Wilson and Professor Nan Fairley assembled an amazing group of Living Democracy Fellows. We all had different reasons for participating, but we shared a desire for an authentic experience.

Continued on page 12
We threw ourselves into the task of preparing for our individual summer 2012 placements. We researched our sites by speaking with our community partners, visiting the towns, and reading everything we could. In addition, we read literature on democracy, civic engagement, community development, and grassroots organizing. Most beneficially, in my opinion, we were required to take a class in community journalism. Although I told myself that I was not going to Hobson City to save the world, consuming so much theoretical knowledge without testing it through application gave me a false bravado. I was ready to go to Hobson City and interact with the community the right way.

In reality, no amount of theoretical knowledge or prior warning can prepare an individual to experience civic life in a new community. I’m thankful for the preparation I received, but the beauty of Living Democracy is that it allows naive, idealistic students like me to get their hands dirty and find out what happens when academia hits the streets.

Living Democracy in Hobson City was the most challenging ten weeks of my life. My original project—to complete a comprehensive community needs assessment with a group of youth volunteers (lofty, I know)—fell flat. I knew the project was failing long before I would admit it, but it was what the community wanted and, steeped in literature about pushy academics foisting their ideas on community partners, I did not speak up. In adopting such a mindset, even with noble intentions, I undermined the purpose of the program. Listening to the community is important, but speaking up is important, too. Eventually, we landed on a backup plan: collecting oral histories and creating an exhibition with historic photos. The new project maximized the town’s historical assets while developing my talents.

The lessons I learned in Hobson City were hard, but they were worth it. I learned that any population, no matter how small, reflects a diversity of perspectives. Prioritizing one group over another is risky, no matter how legitimate we feel their concerns are. Community partnerships mean that all present should be able to use their gifts for the benefit of the community. By skewing my role into that of a “community servant,” I failed to take ownership of the town and its issues as I should have. My unique perspective on the community was almost lost.

Through Living Democracy, both students and citizens should gain new knowledge. But the servant mindset was hard to break. Above all, I learned that in civic life, relationships matter the most, and I left Hobson City with many relationships that continue to be meaningful to me.

The Living Democracy Mindset
After Living Democracy, I was named a George J. Mitchell Scholar, and I spent a year in Northern Ireland (NI) obtaining a master’s degree in leadership for sustainable rural development from Queen’s University Belfast. I took the Living Democracy mindset with me. Although I knew my time in NI was finite, I still dug into the community, built relationships, and searched for the heartbeat of my temporary home.

As a degree requirement, I spent four months working for the NI Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, consulting with stakeholders and drafting a funding program for rural social enterprises. The Living Democracy mentality made the project personal for me. It wasn’t about a passing grade; it was about building a program that would benefit rural citizens. It felt like a continuation of my fellowship in a different place. I realized that no matter how long or short my time is in a community, people will feel the impact of my presence—positive or negative—long after my departure.

Now I’m back home in Randolph County, Alabama, teaching social studies at Handley Middle School, which I attended as a student. Before that, I spent two years as program director of the Randolph County Youth Development Initiative, where I worked closely with another Living Democracy Fellow, Joy Porter, in 2015. My home county will soon have a deficit of leadership, business development, and workers unless we can plug the brain drain that we have been experiencing. Through my work with youth, I hope to equip our next generation of leaders.

Living Democracy left me with a mentality that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. To be engaged in community life, listening and doing are important, but so is speaking. I am no longer afraid to do any of those things.
When a college or university’s public face is marred by scandals or criticism, former students may find it difficult to be enthusiastic “boosters” that fit the mold of engaged alumni. This tension is even more pronounced for alumni who faced negative experiences or even trauma during their time on campus. How do they process the effects of these experiences on themselves and their work?

As a professional community organizer working for social change, these issues have weighed on my mind since I left my alma mater. To explore these questions, I sat down with Mica Grimm, a fellow community organizer I worked with at Minnesota Public Interest Research Group (MPIRG) in Minneapolis. Grimm is one of the founders of Black Lives Matter Minneapolis. In her role at MPIRG, she worked with college students across the state around racial justice issues.

Editor’s note: This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Erkkila: What was your entrance into college like?

Grimm: I was recruited to [a small college in eastern Minnesota]. When I got to campus, I would get asked, “How do I talk to black people?” and not know what to say. . . . You’re talking to me now! It was really a challenge. I had faced racism [back home] in Minneapolis but I didn’t realize that people could be so ignorant and unknowing to talk to me like that.

As a freshman, [my class saw] a play where a woman says these racially charged things—microaggressions—to this black man. After the play was over, no one in the class got it. And no wonder, because they didn’t even have a basic understanding of what racism is. So if you don’t have that basic foundation, how are you supposed to understand the nuances of microaggressions, right?

During the discussion of the play, most people were making fun of what they saw and cracking jokes about racism. There were probably only seven kids of color, and we were all sitting together. It was just really hurtful to be in that space. And someone asked, “Why can black people say ‘the n-word’ and white people can’t?” In my mind, this was such an easy answer, so I volunteered to respond, and I said, “White people can’t say ‘the n-word’ because of slavery.” And then people started to boo me. I was so confused, so baffled. Did they not understand what I was saying? So I tried to talk about the history of the word and I ended up getting booed even more. And I wondered if any of these educators, or my professors, or any of the people putting this [play] on were going to say anything. And they didn’t, so I thought I had done something wrong.

Afterward, I actually apologized to my classmates because I felt that it was my fault. That I had tried to put too much information onto them. And I didn’t want to be ostracized.

Erkkila: You felt like it was your fault for not getting the message across?

Grimm: Yes, or like they weren’t ready and I should have known that. Or maybe even that I was wrong. My professor told me not to apologize. But she also was someone that was in the room when it happened. College never felt safe to me after that. After it happened, I had to get off campus for a while. It [took] me a couple days to realize that they were just going to keep bringing black kids up here into these spaces, and I had to do something about it.

Erkkila: And that’s when you started to organize around some of the issues you and other students were facing?

Grimm: Some friends and I started a group on campus, and we ended up getting a new vice president position for institutional diversity—a woman of color—[and] several staff hired. Suddenly the school made a recommitment to diversity that became one of their pillars of education. They instituted an anonymous incident reporting system. A lot of students hadn’t felt safe reporting a race-related incident in a majority-white school. But for me, it was too little, too late.

I look back and I am really proud of the accomplishments and how much the campus shifted while I was there. It did help me realize that any space I was in, I could shift it and bend it. That was really encouraging.

Erkkila: You left college without graduating and started working as a community organizer. Despite your experience at college, you kept higher education and college students at the center of your work and activism. How do you understand your transition from school to your professional life?

Grimm: Knowing that there were still students going through what I went through, I felt obligated to take some of the weight off their backs. It’s not
fair what queer students, or trans students, or students of color have to go through on campus... The fact that they graduate in the numbers that they do and show that resiliency amazes me on a regular basis. However, how many of those amazing, bright minds do we lose because no one is paying attention to them?

If academic institutions want their students to thrive, then they need a student body that reflects the population of the world they live in. If you don’t teach your students how to live in a multicultural community, they won’t be able to function in the real world. They’re still trying to reflect a homogenous society that doesn’t exist. If an educational institution or a business or nonprofit cannot learn to work with “minority” groups of people, they are going to go extinct. Those “minority” groups will not be in the minority for very much longer.

Erkkila: What kind of work have you done since college, both professionally and in your activism?

Grimm: The basis of what I [did as the racial justice coordinator at MPIRG was] creating spaces where people felt free to be themselves. Students can affect how campuses work. They just need someone to give them the push and the encouragement to get it done.

I am also one of the cofounders of Black Lives Matter Minneapolis. We passed a city ordinance repealing the city laws against lurking and spitting, which police used to target people of color and homeless people.

Erkkila: What role do college students play both in the movement for racial justice and more generally as civic agents?

Grimm: Young people’s energy and resilience is something to be admired. We were at a rally after the protests in Ferguson[,] Missouri[,] with about three hundred people. Someone was hit by a car, an ambulance came, and we were ready to shut it down and not do the planned takeover of the freeway. And right at that moment, all of these college students, hundreds chanting and cheering, walked up the street. And we immediately knew we were going to be fine. They literally brought life to something that was so terrifying and allowed people to be courageous.

I do not know if we would have done that action, which made national news, without them.

Erkkila: Are there lessons to learn from even the most negative experiences with a college institution?

Grimm: I look back on my experience, and I think it shaped me. My mentor told me that you cannot let these traumatizing events define you. [You] shouldn’t negate the effect [they have on] you, but you have to find something positive to do with that negativity. I think of it as alchemy: it’s negative stuff that you turn into gold. You pull what you can from those experiences, the traits that help you go through them in the first place, and you start to figure out who you are and what makes you.

I believe that if I had stayed at my school for another year, I would not have survived. Students have to take care of themselves first. But also realize [that when you’re in college], you’re in a microcosm of society, and you have a lot more weight than in the “real world.” Your voice is amplified, so you have this opportunity to leverage that. ☑
Rather than approaching graduates solely as potential donors, what if alumni relations and development professionals asked alumni of all ages a set of open-ended questions unrelated to giving, and listened closely to their responses? What would colleges and universities learn that they could apply to the educational experience for current students? What if administrators and faculty welcomed development staff as partners in the educational process? What if development professionals understood themselves as helping to improve the educational experience and prepare the next generation of civically engaged citizens?

As director of external relations and annual giving programs at the University of Michigan College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA), I oversee College Connections, a program in which we listen to graduates’ stories of their experiences both during and after college and use their insights and recommendations to better the university. We hire new graduates as College Connections coordinators, who share college updates and conduct listening visits with alumni. At no point do they ask participants for money.

College Connections has revolutionized the way we think about development and alumni relations. We think that a “both/and” culture of giving and engagement has emerged: alumni are inclined both to give financially to their alma mater—often in modest ways—and to act as advocates for and even coeducators in implementing socially responsive, real-world learning that grew from their own college-to-life experience.

A Different Kind of Gift
The LSA College Connections program came out of a traditional advancement model that positioned alumni as donors, not partners or coeducators. College leadership thought that interviewing graduates would help us identify donors for our capital campaign. Initially, we targeted alumni with major gift potential, but the more we dug into the information alumni shared with us, the more we realized the value of the program beyond a fiscal pipeline strategy.

We opened our interviews to former students of all ages regardless of giving history and looked beyond the scope of advancement, shifting our focus to evaluating the entire University of Michigan experience and trying to understand its effect on graduates’ lives and work. We began to gather information about our alumni’s time as students (including their community involvement), their engagement with the college and their communities today, and their hopes for the college in the future. We documented the conversations as oral history projects and tracked opportunities for improvement.

College Connections had as many detractors as supporters in its infancy. Administrators questioned how LSA could justify the return on investment of sending College Connections coordinators to talk to people without returning with money. Some alumni were wary of visiting with the coordinators, fearing the appointments were just a ploy to ask for gifts. Faculty and staff were not always receptive to acting on alumni’s feedback about undergraduate education.

Once administrators and advancement professionals saw how many alumni were participating, however, they reevaluated.

After eight thousand interviews, we can say that alumni enjoy the experience, appreciate being asked for feedback, and feel like partners in addressing important issues at their alma mater. They like being reconnected to their former programs and faculty, and they step up to help current students.

We discovered that College Connections was a good resource for identifying donors and improving annual fund retention, but it was a great resource for gathering ideas to strengthen our academic offerings and for giving former students intellectually stimulating and professionally beneficial opportunities to engage with current students. The college has used findings to improve the curriculum, advising process, and student programs. Through the interviews, the college has also identified graduates to serve as mentors and internship sponsors, teach classes, speak as experts on current issues, and collaborate on faculty initiatives. Because College Connections invites all alumni to participate, the program gives groups that are normally underrepresented opportunities to be heard, to volunteer, and to provide guidance to the college.

Civic Connections
Through the College Connections interview process, we are also learning more about how alumni understand themselves as civic actors. Some of what we have learned relates to differences in generational attitudes. For example,
while most alumni agree that colleges and universities have a responsibility to serve society, we found that older alumni often view civic engagement as a personal choice rather than a curricular priority, and middle-aged alumni speak of it as a high school requirement. However, our recent graduates often talk about civic engagement as a social or moral responsibility. Feedback from recent graduates is particularly valuable because it allows us to provide a more relevant educational experience for current students and more useful services to help our graduates succeed.

Our former students told us that being exposed to diverse views and problem-solving skills during college strongly influenced how they thought about the world and interacted with it after graduation. Now, as they mentor current students or bring their life lessons back into our classrooms as speakers, alumni are becoming coeducators. Faculty have invited alumni to help them teach topics as disparate as marketing yourself with a liberal arts degree, breaking down barriers to bipartisanship, and stopping human trafficking. We are in the early stages of understanding what it means to engage with alumni as coeducators, but ten years ago, we would not even have thought to use this term or wonder where it’s taking us.

Can Alumni Relations Staff Become Civic Professionals?

I love my job in advancement, but the kind of opportunity I had in launching College Connections was rare. It was dependent on an unusually innovative office culture and a supportive dean. In fact, over the past thirty years working in the alumni relations and development fields at private and public institutions, independent schools, and flagship universities, I have had only a few opportunities to deviate from traditional advancement practices.

Changing the professional culture of higher education philanthropy presents real challenges. The costs to run universities are beyond what students can pay in tuition, and we must make up the difference somewhere, often through private donations in an increasingly competitive philanthropic arena. The advancement field has high turnover due to the pressures of trying to meet goals, burnout from the pace, and low-paying entry-level salaries. Many institutions do not provide adequate training for development staff who come from a variety of backgrounds. With these pressures, advancement professionals primarily focus on the business of building relationships to raise money to address needs and priorities, not on how to develop a civically engaged alumni base.

But I do see signs of change. Thirty years ago, no one went to college saying they wanted to become a fundraiser. Today, I see students go into advancement because it appeals to their desire to make a difference in society. More schools are offering philanthropy internships, classes, and degrees. The field is becoming more sophisticated as the art and science of fundraising evolves. Young advancement professionals are enthusiastic about their work and willing to try new ideas.

Yet even under the best conditions, it is difficult to foster a common culture between advancement and academia. We have no platform for a conversation about how advancement professionals might reimagine our jobs as people who build relationships with civically engaged alumni. This is the case even as we are asked to raise funds for things like experiential learning, which lay the groundwork for the civic-minded graduates we work with every day.

Even though changing the field is problematic, it is not impossible. Some presidents and deans are shifting the paradigm. Higher education associations that support community-based learning and the model of the “engaged institution” can reach out to alumni relations professionals as key allies in alumni listening projects. Gatherings like Citizen Alum institutes and the Kettering Foundation’s Learning Exchange on Civically Engaged Alumni workshops are invaluable as they bring people in diverse institutional roles together around the challenges of building ties with former students who identify as civic actors. Along with the work I do with College Connections, these trends and opportunities make me persistently hopeful.
A few years ago, we worked with a team of colleagues to undertake a study of the civic identity and agency of alumni from three longstanding, developmental, curricular civic engagement programs: the one-year Public Service Scholars Program at Stanford University, the two-year Citizen Scholars Program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and the four-year Public and Community Service Studies major at Providence College. (See Mitchell et al. 2011 for more information on these programs.)

Although the programs differ in length, all three are cohort based and have a shared mission to build civic agency and encourage students to view themselves as scholars engaged in creating a better world. All of the programs require students to work in the community and complete a capstone experience (either research or projects addressing a public issue). The programs also provide opportunities for students to work in the same community setting over multiple semesters. We offered some preliminary results from this research project in an earlier article (Mitchell et al. 2013).

During the summer of 2012, we conducted in-depth interviews with a purposefully selected, representative sample (by race, gender, and cohort) of eleven graduates of each program, all of whom had graduated at least five years previously. We then distributed an online survey to almost four hundred people, who had graduated as many as fifteen years earlier, and received responses from 192 alumni. Eager to understand how alumni interpreted what we learned from those interventions, we conducted a series of focus groups at each campus with fifty-six program alumni during reunion events at all three campuses in 2014 and 2015. We present some of the results from our interviews, survey, and focus groups in this article.

Conflicting Views of Self as Civic Actor

The survey results suggested a highly engaged alumni group. More than 97 percent of respondents reported they were registered to vote, and political efficacy among the graduates responding to the survey was also quite high. The mean response to the item “I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the political issues facing our country” was 4.72 on a six-point Likert-type scale (with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.931), and alumni believed they had “a role to play in the political process” (mean = 4.63; SD = 1.188). Alumni also demonstrated that they had acted on this belief in the last twelve months, with 99 percent reporting that they had discussed political issues with friends, 53 percent noting that they had worked with a group to solve community problems, and 40 percent stating that they had reached out to a public official to express their opinions about policy issues. More than 82 percent of respondents reported volunteering or participating in community service in the last year, compared with 25 percent of the national population and 39 percent of the nation’s college graduates with a bachelor’s degree or higher (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016).

Yet in interviews and focus groups, when we asked graduates about their current civic participation, their personal reflections did not show the same confidence that our survey results suggested. A Providence College alumnus (class of 2006) seemed to be struggling to understand how he should be engaged as he asked, “Is engagement something [a] volunteer [opportunity] and then you do it in your extra time . . . or is it something that’s critical and that challenges you and should be discomforting and should be a responsibility?” A Stanford University alumna (class of 2002) asked, “[Am I] doing enough?” and “Where do I feel like I can make a difference?” as she sought to find the best way to live her civic commitments. She believed that she might never stop questioning whether she was contributing in all the ways that she could, and she said this was “hard . . . because you don’t want to have complacency but you don’t want to also just be constantly downing yourself.”
Similarly, many of our respondents faulted themselves for not doing enough politically. An alumna of Stanford University (class of 1995) expressed this conflict:

Bare minimum, I vote. Bare minimum, I volunteer with my children’s school. Bare minimum, I watch out for my neighbor next door. . . . To me that’s just what you do as a good citizen. I think if I were more of an active civic and community participant I would do more. . . . Do I care about it? Do I want the right things to happen? Yes. Do I teach my children? Yes. Do I actually do more to advocate for social justice on a local arena level to national level? Not so much.

This alumna’s dilemma reflected what we heard from many of those we interviewed. Because of work and/or family obligations, they felt unable to be involved in community and politics at the level they had been as undergraduate students. Time and place constraints prevented them from seeing themselves as the kind of civic actors they aspired to be.

An Integrated Civic Self
As the conversations continued, many of the graduates articulated ways they did see themselves acting on their civic and political commitments. Their political identities took on a more local focus as alumni worked to build communities where they live. A University of Massachusetts alumna (class of 2009) shared her work to enact her vision of social change:

One of the primary ways I engage civically [is] fighting tooth and nail to make sure that I continue to have really connected relationships with people in my life. I see it as . . . one of the hugest ways that . . . this society is . . . hurtful to me and the people around me. . . . Day by day. . . . building a community that’s really reflective of what I see around me. [Connecting] with folks that . . . I’m not supposed to be connected to as a middle-class white girl . . . so that they [can] accomplish their goals [is] the number one way that I see myself engaging in social change.

Graduates suggested that they saw civic action as a way of life, something many attributed to the lessons learned in their undergraduate civic engagement programs. Alumni viewed their civic and political identities as integrated in their professional, social, and family circles. An alumna of Providence College (class of 2000) reflected this perspective:

I’m heavily involved in this sort of shared community gardening experience now, [which] feels like a civic action. Helping to open this birth center feels like a civic action. Teaching therapists to use nonviolence in their practice feels like a civic action. Boycotting Walmart feels like a civic action. . . . I think that’s why it’s hard to answer the question like, “Well, I go to my 9:00 to 5:00 job and then I go perform my civic actions.” It’s like they have to be the same thing for me. . . . I think that was the part that drew me to [the Providence College] program because I . . . needed for those two things to be intertwined.

Alumni worked to avoid the bifurcation of their civic and professional selves and sought to engage socially and professionally in ways that reflected the civic aims they identified for themselves and their communities. This was best demonstrated as alumni spoke about their careers.

Weaving Civic Practice into the Workplace
Graduates from these programs seemed to weave civic theory and practice into their workplaces. An alumna of Providence College (class of 2000) explained,

We’re not here at a school anymore where you’re able to have a clear cause of an injustice that you can really get at. It’s so much bigger out in the world that we enact civic engagement
through our jobs in looking at the systems and how they work and at the workplace and how to make things more just.

The civic lessons of the Providence College program inspired another graduate (class of 1998) to prioritize relationships and community building in the workplace:

One of the best strengths I feel that I learned from this program and that continues to serve me in my work... is the importance of being part of a community. And so, the decisions that I make aren’t just mine to make. They’re in consultation with the people that I work with. . . . There’s lots of disagreement and there’s lots of conversation. But it’s important to me, having come from this program, to think in relationship with people, to act in relationship to people.

We witnessed graduates grapple with what these undergraduate programs taught them about being a civic actor and how to apply that in their daily lives. Fifty-seven percent of respondents strongly agreed that their undergraduate civic engagement program influenced their choice of career, and only 8 percent reported that the program had no influence on their choice of career. One alumna of the University of Massachusetts (class of 2002) remarked,

At one point I had the opportunity to work in marketing for a property management company and . . . I could stay there or I could start a job where I was going to be teaching adults workplace math. And the marketing job was making triple what the workplace math job was going to be. . . . I was in grad school, you know it would really help but at the end it was living with myself and knowing that my actions mattered. . . . That was where it clicked that it’s going to be more than just putting food on a plate.

Developing Agency after College
We heard alumni discuss how they and their understanding of themselves had changed since they had completed their programs. As one graduate of Providence College (class of 2009) put it,

I think about who I was when I came as a freshman and how I talked about service. I talked about working at Special Olympics. That’s what I did on Saturdays. . . . And I think what the difference was, through this program, I really understood my values and what motivated me to do these things. And then it became, “This isn’t what I do. It’s who I am and how I see the world and how I live those values.” So, once I graduated, I couldn’t not work on a campaign. I couldn’t not be involved.

As she described how her understandings of her civic responsibility had expanded, a University of Massachusetts alumna (class of 2008) also explained how she is “really trying to bring that energy and that light into all these things that I do.” She talked about her engagement with those from whom she has “a completely different religious, political, geographic” perspective, emphasizing that the lessons of the civic engagement program—that “the personal is political”—encouraged her efforts “to live that out in all different things that I do.”

Concluding Thoughts
What emerged from the interviews and focus group sessions is a picture of civic identity and action that is rich but attempting to translate the ideas of citizenship and social justice they learned in college to key elements of their everyday lives. More specifically, we see graduates incorporating civic identities and values into their workplaces, both in terms of their actions and the processes by which they arrive at workplace decisions. And more than anything else, we see graduates who are questioning and complicating notions of what it means to be engaged, to be of “service” to others and the public.

What is most interesting in the context of a national conversation on reimagining alumnihood is the way these alumni grapple with questions of civic identity and action after college. Interviews and focus groups show alumni who attribute a set of civic value commitments to their undergraduate programs and who aspire to live up to these commitments. The time and place constraints of life after college make it difficult for them to be engaged in the same ways they were in college. They seem always to be questioning the balance between work, family and personal life, and civic action. But they also seem to find civic purpose through connecting their identities at work, within their families, and as consumers to their civic identities, particularly within their local contexts.

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How can colleges and universities better prepare students to be civically engaged after they graduate? At Wake Forest University, we asked alumni how well the university had equipped them for their civic and political roles in society and how it might do this more effectively in the future. We wanted to know how the process of learning to deliberate might affect alumni’s civic engagement in the “real world.” Deliberative dialogue provides a forum for people to debate complex issues productively and respectfully, find common ground, build the critical thinking skills required to see issues from different perspectives, and recognize their roles as citizens capable of creating change (Harriger and McMillan 2007).

In a study on the long-term impact of learning to deliberate (Harriger et al. 2017, 2015), we interviewed forty alumni, all of whom graduated from Wake Forest in 2005. Half of the alumni had participated in a four-year program called Democracy Fellows, where they learned the theory and practice of deliberative dialogue. The other half were alumni from a class cohort selected to match the demographics of the Democracy Fellows group in terms of college major, race, and gender. (In this article, we refer to the Democracy Fellows alumni as DFs and the class cohort alumni as CCs.)

We interviewed the alumni by video conference in 2014 and 2015, and they responded to an online survey following the interview.

When we asked participants how Wake Forest could better prepare students for future civic engagement, their suggestions coalesced around what both DFs and CCs called “bursting the Wake Forest bubble.” Specifically, they recommended cultivating a more proactive connection with their community in Winston-Salem, North Carolina; a greater appreciation for diversity; and a heightened ability and motivation to speak to others across difference.

Understanding the Bubble

Most respondents praised their college education, yet most interviewees (DFs and CCs alike) also criticized what they termed “the Wake Forest bubble,” an invisible barrier that “protects” students from the realities of life beyond campus. One respondent stated,

I think Wake Forest is really kind of in a bubble, right? We are a closed off campus from the rest of the community, and I feel like when I was a student that the relationship between the students at Wake Forest and the people who lived in town was kind of nonexistent. We weren’t necessarily giving back to the community, and the community wasn’t necessarily wanting to get involved with us.

After years of round-the-clock community access, Wake Forest installed gates at three campus entrances in 1996, limiting access to campus between 10:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. Despite legitimate safety concerns, students, faculty, administrators, and staff worried even then that “Wake Fortress” might further contribute to the sense that students resided in a “rarefied bubble” (McMillan 2004, 195).

However, the bubble to which both DFs and CCs referred is more metaphorical than material; one respondent described it as “a huge, symbolic wall” surrounding the campus. Some alumni attributed this barrier to institutional policies, but most respondents pointed to students’ “fear of the unknown” and a reluctance to “get outside their comfort zones.” A community deliberative dialogue that DFs planned and executed during their junior year might...
have raised their consciousness, as DFs described the bubble as a barrier to students’ political and social awareness twice as often as did CCs. Not only did the experience force DFs from the bubble but also exposed tensions between “town and gown” of which CCs may have been unaware.

Alumni from both groups, many of whom professed love for their alma mater, in retrospect saw it, in the words of one respondent, as a place of “privilege” that shielded many “children of affluence,” including themselves, from political and social engagement. One CC opined that although he understood the need for safety, the school was “missing opportunities” beyond its walls. The recommendations that our alumni, DFs and CCs alike, proposed fall into three broad categories: connect with the community, enhance awareness of diversity, and increase opportunities for discussion and dialogue.

Connect with the Community
Our alumni expressed a profound, even wistful, sense that they had spent their college years in a town they hardly knew. One DF remarked, “Winston-Salem is an incredibly dynamic community that I discovered probably the last eight months I lived there. There’s a whole lot of things going on and there needs to be a push to get students out of the classroom and into the community.” Another DF admonished Wake Forest to look close to home for social and political issues to examine in the classroom:

There’s homeless people in Winston-Salem and . . . there’s poverty. . . . I feel that there needs to be more of an attitude from the administration . . . that the school really values social awareness.

Suggested remedies, especially from CCs, leaned heavily toward academic reforms, such as offering more classes that explore social and political problems, more service learning, and more local internships. One CC suggested “some requirement for students to attend town hall meetings, city council meetings, and school board meetings.” The DFs outpaced the CCs in suggesting that citizenship extends beyond traditional notions of service such as volunteering in a soup kitchen. The DFs more often wove a subtle counternarrative that featured actions such as being knowledgeable about current issues and engaging in political talk as integral parts of civic engagement. Training in deliberative dialogue seemed to generate more awareness of the importance of civic and political involvement.

Some respondents reflected the opinion of democracy and higher education researcher Nancy L. Thomas (1998) when she argued that colleges and universities have too long played the role of “expert” to their neighbors, resisting the more egalitarian posture of “partner,” and that they often have not “listened” well to community needs. The alumni we studied, perhaps informed by their experiences since college, seemed to regard the ideal relationship as a two-way street with opportunities to learn from the community as well as to instruct it. One DF described a reciprocal relationship with his community after graduation:

I feel like I am a citizen of my town . . . that I live here, I need to contribute here. So I guess [I would like] for Wake [Forest] to feel more like . . . we’re trying to have an impact on Winston-Salem, and Winston-Salem has impact on us.

Enhance Awareness of Diversity
Political theorist Iris Marion Young (1999) has argued that one of democracy’s greatest challenges is navigating difference: different people, ideas, language, races, and cultures. Members of the class of ’05 recognized that they were schooled in a homogeneous, majority white, affluent environment. Although they examined diverse ideas in class, they recalled an ethnic and cultural sameness that had not prepared them for the diversity they encountered after college. They criticized themselves and Wake Forest for not engaging more with people in the more racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse Winston-Salem.

Twice as many DFs as CCs mentioned the importance of developing understanding of difference, perhaps because DFs’ deliberative dialogue training taught them to look for it—in the personal stories they heard, the examination of the values that people held dear, and the common ground they sought to establish (Diebel 2016). One poignant example came from a DF who cited the 1960 sit-ins to desegregate lunch counters, which began at the Woolworth’s in nearby Greensboro, North Carolina, and even involved Wake Forest students at the Winston-Salem Woolworth’s weeks later:

The whole [civil] rights movement I think is really important. . . . You know we (the college) were like 30 miles from the Woolworth’s in Greensboro. . . . There are so many children of affluence [who] probably have no idea about some of the struggles. . . . They’re not bad people; they just don’t know about it. And I think it’s something worth thinking about what that struggle meant to so many different people.

Alumni suggested ways to promote the examination of difference, privilege, and systemic inequality, including bringing provocative speakers to campus, encouraging more study abroad experiences, and urging professors to be fearless about allowing controversial subjects to be aired in their classrooms.
because, as one DF argued, “you just might learn something from even those with whom you disagree.”

Increase Opportunities for Discussion and Dialogue
All interviewees favored widespread discussion and dialogue as the best solution for bursting the bubble. Respondents from both groups offered ideas about how that might be accomplished, including a CC who recommended fostering “an open environment to appreciate different points of view and active listening on both sides” and a DF who suggested finding “a way to make sure their students are prepared to be engaged in . . . the conversation” [emphasis added]. Still, DFs, such as the one below, were more adamant than CCs about the value of dialogue and quicker to recommend deliberative training:

A lot of stuff we talked about in Democracy Fellows was teaching people how to talk to folks who don’t have the same beliefs as they do. And I’m not talking about sitting down and just having a conversation. I mean like let’s get out the marker board, what can we actually . . . solve? . . . You can find some common ground with everyone.

CCs recognized discussion and dialogue as important components missing from their college experience. One CC proposed a curricular change that would establish the value of deliberative dialogue:

Instead of [first-year seminars focused on] individual professors’ niche interests, have classes that [are] geared more towards being civic where you . . . learn how to have discussions with other people about ideas that [don’t devolve] into all the pitfalls of . . . straw man arguments. Instead, . . . learning how to have civic discussion in a civilized and calm, respectful way would be a good use of time.

Conclusion
When these members of the class of ’05 evaluated their civic preparation at Wake Forest, their assessment was mixed. Although they praised much of their college education, these alumni had learned from the “real world” that the life of a citizen is not as comfortable as living in the bubble might have led them to believe. Rather, it is messy, frustrating, and sometimes disappointing. Still, these young adults offered remedies to that discomfort: engage in your community; grapple with people and ideas that challenge your own; and talk, talk, talk to discover what unites, not divides, you from others.

Wake Forest has taken steps in response to these and other findings in two published studies of the DF program (Harriger and McMillan 2007; Harriger et al. 2017). Since 2012, Wake Forest has held three campus-wide deliberative dialogues with a focus on inclusivity. After the 2014 dialogue, the university formed action teams to investigate ways to implement the outcomes of these deliberative dialogues (http://community.wfu.edu/).

A recent pilot for a first-year experience course, which supports first-year students’ transition to college, incorporated deliberative principles and skills. Initial assessments indicate the course has a positive impact on curiosity about and comfort with differences. The university is considering how to integrate deliberative dialogue and community involvement more consistently for more students, which might help address the prevailing climate of division that plagues our nation. Wake Forest also recently opened a downtown campus that, by both design and accident, is literally and figuratively doing exactly as its alumni advised: taking students outside of the bubble.

REFERENCES


The Legacy of an Anchor Institution: Reclaiming the University of Newark

QUINTUS R. JETT, Citizen Alum Director at Rutgers University–Newark

“Our alumni are testimony to [Rutgers University–Newark’s] legacy and strength as a gateway to opportunity and excellence for our graduates, and we seek them as collaborators to further manifest RU–N’s longstanding identity as a university that is of Newark (not simply ‘in’ Newark).”

—Rutgers University–Newark: Where Opportunity Meets Excellence, Spring 2017 Update to the university’s 2014 strategic plan

In 2014, following the arrival of Chancellor Nancy Cantor, Rutgers University–Newark (RU–N) publicly embraced our role as an anchor institution—one with deep connections to our city. We enshrined this anchor institution identity, as well as our commitment to providing educational access to a diverse student body, in our 2014 strategic plan, developed through an expansive listening and visioning process that included the full spectrum of RU–N stakeholder groups (students, staff, faculty, alumni, neighbors, and community partners).

Our campus is one of several in the Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey system. RU–N is located in Newark, a city that presents opportunities for engaged learning and scholarship. The university is directing its resources toward place-based initiatives—including research, teaching, student projects, service learning, and cocurricular activities—that will help us listen and contribute to the aspirations of those living and working in Newark. The fact that many of our students come from the city of Newark and the surrounding areas further underscores our shared destiny with our community.

Over the past two years, we have started to explore ways to transform our relationship with alumni, inspired by the national Citizen Alum movement. In the process, we have discovered that our efforts to engage our alumni and community rest on telling the RU–N story and reclaiming our institution’s forgotten legacies. As we claim our institutional identity as a university that is of Newark, not simply in it, we are examining the roots of our institutional culture by tracing our university’s history back to the days when it was called the University of Newark, before it joined the Rutgers system in 1946.

A Vision for Alumni Engagement

In 2016, RU–N began deliberately examining our engagement with alumni through Citizen Alum Newark. Our senior leadership—specifically Chancellor Cantor, Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost Jerome D. Williams, and Vice Chancellor for Development Irene O’Brien—has invested in exploring Citizen Alum as a theory of change for higher education that aligns with our institution’s priorities outlined in our strategic plan (Rutgers University–Newark 2014). Citizen Alum presents a vision in which alumni help fulfill the democratic purpose of their alma maters, join in transforming higher education, and participate as engaged citizens in the public work of a democratic society within their occupations and communities. This vision gave RU–N new perspectives on the alumni relationship, which have helped us reflect on our identity as an anchor institution.

My role since 2016 has been to investigate and recommend strategies for transforming our institution’s relationship with alumni. I work through the Office of the Chancellor, supported by a graduate fellow and in partnership with the RU–N advancement team. Our goal is to engage alumni as allies as we reenergize our public mission and prepare our students to become engaged citizens. We have incorporated this alumni engagement approach into the spring 2017 update to our strategic plan (Rutgers University–Newark 2017).

RU–N is emphasizing our anchor institution identity as we build relationships with and tell our story to current and future alumni. Four years ago, RU–N created commencement exercises more aligned with our identity by including more schools and programs, illustrating our anchor institution mission through video stories of graduating students, and selecting commencement speakers that reflect RU–N’s identity (such as 2018 speaker Queen Latifah, known professionally as Dana Owens, known professionally as Queen Latifah, who grew up in the Newark area).

In addition, RU–N held its first annual convocation to welcome incoming students in fall 2017. This new tradition presents an opportunity for RU–N to introduce future alumni to our identity and history.

In fall 2018, RU–N will formally open its Alumni House, located a block from the main campus. The center is RU–N’s concrete pledge to maintain relationships with our students after graduation. It provides spaces for alumni living in, working in, or visiting the Newark/New York City area to reconnect and participate in advancing the RU–N story and legacies.
Reclaiming Our History
Recognizing our institution’s pre-Rutgers history and identity as the University of Newark provides relevance to the transformations Citizen Alum aims to spark. We are reclaiming the University of Newark’s legacy of serving nontraditional students from the city and preparing students for civic life after graduation. Connecting this legacy to RU–N’s current mission and identity inspires public dialogue about RU–N as a space where academic and city life intersect intellectually, practically, and aspirationally.

The early twentieth century was a bustling period for industry, art, and culture in Newark, and new colleges and professional schools emerged to serve its local populations. Five of these institutions combined to form the University of Newark in 1936. The university aimed to develop an active citizenry and educated electorate for the state of New Jersey, create civic leaders and professionals for the city of Newark from its own population, and supply “opportunity, without regard to race, creed, or color, for young men and women from the lower and middle income levels” (Women’s Committee of the University of Newark Development Fund Campaign 1938, 14).

Education historian Harold S. Wechsler (2010) depicted the University of Newark as an institution where academic life regularly intersected with the life of the city, through its students, faculty, and administrators. Students were predominantly from Newark and surrounding areas in northern New Jersey, including students that some even today would call “nontraditional.” Many held jobs and paid for their own education while supporting themselves or their families. Students traveled to their day or evening classes from work or home. Many were children of immigrants. The student population was religiously diverse; about 40 percent were Jewish, with the balance being Protestant and Catholic (Wechsler 2010).

Most of today’s Newark residents and Rutgers University students, faculty, staff, and alumni have never heard of the University of Newark, yet seven decades after its merger with Rutgers, its successor institution Rutgers University–Newark continues to emphasize educational access in its mission. The RU–N student population is nontraditional for a research university. More than 80 percent of students are commuters, and only about half of undergraduates are first-time, full-time students. Being a first-generation American or a first-generation college student is common across our student body. RU-N has no racial-ethnic majority; Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and non-Hispanic White students each make up less than 30 percent of the student population. U.S. News and World Report (2018) has ranked our university as the nation’s most ethnically diverse for many years.

RU–N’s fundamental identity—as an anchor institution of Newark, committed to educating a diverse student population—has deeper historical roots than is commonly known. This identity was forged decades ago; it is not a new branding strategy. These legacies have nearly faded from public memory, due to lapses in reintroducing the complete RU–N origin story to successive generations. Remarkably, the ethos of the University of Newark’s identity endures in RU–N’s culture of educational access. RU–N will include future, new, and existing alumni in rediscovering the university’s “lost” legacy and will collaborate with them to transform the alumni culture of our anchor institution.

REFERENCES


Learning to Ask: College Experiences and the Public Work of Arts and Humanities Alumni

[Campus Practice]

Elizabeth Jarrett is a curator, artist, designer, and Kennesaw State University (KSU) alumna committed to listening to community needs and collaborating to create positive change. Based in Atlanta, she has cofounded a local theater company and is now executive director of Deer Bear Wolf, a nonprofit organization that supports Atlanta artists.

Jarrett was already a go-getter when she enrolled at KSU in Kennesaw, Georgia. But KSU and the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies helped her expand her vision and talents, increase her network, and hone her presentation and collaboration skills.

To Jarrett, college was a creative opportunity. “You’re on a campus with all of these people who have such different ideas and such different concentrations. . . . It’s like an incubator,” she said. “You never know if you go in a coffee shop and you sit down next to somebody, they could be working in a completely different sector than you, like food sustainability or something. But if you spark a conversation . . . you might find, well, hey, we can work together on this.”

Jarrett was one of eighteen publicly minded KSU arts and humanities alumni we interviewed as part of a “listening project” between 2012 and 2015. Their stories help reveal what alumni value about their college experiences and what led to their success after graduation. In listening closely to our civic professionals, we better understand the university’s role in promoting civic dispositions and democratic practices, and how, collectively, we can better realize higher education’s public mission.

A Focus on Arts and Humanities

The listening project’s focus on arts and humanities grew, in part, from KSU’s membership in Imagining America (IA). A consortium of colleges and universities advocating for the role of arts, humanities, and design in public life, IA works to revitalize the democratic mission of higher education. As a member of both IA and Citizen Alum, KSU was inspired by both networks’ goals as we sought to learn about how arts and humanities graduates have realized their role as civic agents, how they use their education in their public work, and how the university could continue to partner with alumni to improve civic life.

Conversations with KSU’s arts and humanities alumni confirmed that KSU faculty and students are doing remarkable work addressing public issues, often in collaboration with outside agencies. Students are developing skills to cross disciplinary boundaries, apply theory to practical issues, build teams, and use democratic practices. As artists and humanists, they think creatively and are open to new ideas and the unexpected. Through exposure to different experiences and active membership in a growing network of relationships, many arts and humanities students have developed an ability to see community needs and opportunities.

The listening project was a partnership among the American Studies Program, the Department of Alumni Affairs, and the Department of Museums, Archives, and Rare Books. The KSU Archives and the Digital Public Libraries of America will facilitate access to the alumni project interviews.

Critical Thinking and New Ideas

Despite popular notions that the university is not the “real world,” many alumni we spoke with experienced higher education as a microcosm of public life after graduation. To English and American studies alumna Janie Mardis, critical analysis of texts exposed power relations that she now confronts as a social worker and counselor at Hospice of Northeast Georgia Medical Center.

“I never felt like at any time I was just reading the trusty old classics . . . with absolutely no reflection on what they were as objects of power in the culture,” she explained. “They were living works, and they were works to be complicated and problematized.”

In addition to fostering critical thinking skills, KSU provided students space to innovate and make their own opportunities, according to English education and American studies alumnus Yen Rodriguez. Modern language alumna and American studies graduate student Nikkeshia Wilson invited Rodriguez, then an undergraduate student, to collaborate on a forum titled “Black and Brown: Divided We Fall.” The forum convened university students, faculty, and staff and local community leaders of color to build bridges between marginalized communities. Rodriguez said that the project “opened an entirely new door for me.” Now as KSU’s assistant director of multicultural student affairs for race, culture, and ethnicity programs,
Rodriguez incorporates the skills he acquired through that project into his daily responsibilities.

Alumna Jessica Duvall also remarked on KSU’s openness to student ideas. She began a conversation with the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies about bringing *The Coming Out Monologues* to campus, which eventually resulted in a chance for her to codirect the production. “KSU has worked to create a space for students to feel empowered to ask,” she stated. Now Duvall is assistant director of multicultural affairs for gender and sexuality programs in LGBTQ Student Programs at KSU, an office she pushed for the university to create when she was a student.

Duvall uses the lessons she learned in organizing for social change at KSU to encourage public-mindedness are robust. For example, under the leadership of Department of Dance chair Ivan Pulinkala in 2008, KSU’s Dance program began collaborating with the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre to promote arts education. In 2014, the center’s arts and education arm, ArtsBridge, strengthened its formal partnership with the university’s College of the Arts. KSU faculty teach master classes and support the partnership between ArtsBridge and the local Boys and Girls Club. In addition, ArtsBridge provides internship opportunities for KSU students. KSU alumna Natalie Barrow spent three years as the foundation’s director of arts education and community outreach, where she supported a reciprocal relationship between the center and KSU’s faculty and students. “I wanted to work in my community to make a difference,” Barrow explained.

Active Involvement
KSU alumna Annie Moye pointed out that democratic practices of involvement—in decision making, implementation, and the day-to-day work of getting projects done—increases participants’ commitment to public resources. She discovered this as she participated in a university partnership (fostered by Visual Arts professor Diana McClintock) to document and preserve Paradise Garden, created by folk artist and minister Howard Finster. Moye, who remains involved in historic preservation efforts in Georgia, observed,

“When you’ve got a group of people who were just, like, “Hey Paradise Garden is kind of cool,” once . . . they are studying it and they’re hands-on—they’re pulling out the weeds and they’re doing the oral histories—all of a sudden everybody has got a sense of ownership, and they care about it . . . on a much more deep level.

Moye’s analysis might prove useful in designing future university relationships with publicly engaged alumni from the arts and humanities. Fostering productive, reciprocal relationships between our alumni and the university may not only directly benefit students and other participants but may also strengthen the university’s long-term commitment to its civic mission.

We have already taken steps in this direction, creating an Office of Community Engagement in 2013 to deepen the ways KSU stakeholders, including alumni, connect with the community. In 2015, the Carnegie Foundation recognized KSU with its prestigious Community Engagement Classification.

As KSU alumni remind us, successful collaborations and public engagement often begin by sparking a conversation.

The authors wish to thank Annie Moye for her suggestions on earlier versions of this article.
"A good citizen is conscious of and makes efforts to think beyond themselves and to think about the community."

—Mary Vang, Metropolitan State University alumna

On September 23, 2013, alumna Mary Vang sat down with two students from a required writing course at Metropolitan State University, a midsize urban public university in Saint Paul, Minnesota, with a growing immigrant population and an average student age of thirty-two. After graduating from Metropolitan State University’s master’s program in Public and Nonprofit Administration, Vang became director of a college readiness program called GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs). Today, she is program director of TRIO Student Support Services at Saint Paul College.

The students conducting the interview, Myrna Abrego and Kei Tilander, were transfer students just beginning an undergraduate Urban Teacher Program. Both were typical Metropolitan State University students: adults with families, careers, and higher education experiences characterized by hardship and discontinuity. They chose to work together and to interview Vang due to their mutual interest in education.

With inspiration and guidance from the national Citizen Alum initiative, I worked with Jodi Bantley from Metropolitan State University’s Institute for Community Engagement and Scholarship to develop a Citizen Alum course module for my general education writing class. Through this module, students worked in pairs to interview alumni involved in solving problems in their communities.

Metropolitan State University is not a residential college; most students are firmly rooted in local communities before attending the university, and they take their college experiences, ideas, and skills back to those communities.

The interview project was meant to help students practice conducting original research; it also provided mentorship for students striving to balance college demands, professional goals, and investment in local communities. As a civically engaged alumna, Vang could give advice and inspiration to students contemplating how to finish college and pursue meaningful careers.

The Conversation

When Abrego and Tilander asked Vang how her college education influenced her civic engagement, she replied, "[After] being a student here, I feel like I care about what’s going on beyond myself. . . I see how whatever I do is going to impact the world. It’s those drops in the bucket that I’m very conscious of now, and even if I’m just working with one school and [a small group of] students, I know that someday it’s going to have a ripple effect."

Vang emphasized qualities of a liberal education that encourage students to become engaged community members. "Every single faculty member [at Metropolitan State University] incorporated some kind of project where we had to do something with the community, or somebody from the community was a speaker for the class," she said. "A liberal arts education . . . gives you the ability and the knowledge to want to do something for your community and a desire to contribute to the common good."

Although Vang admitted to not feeling destined to do community engagement work, she attributed her interest in public problem solving to her role models and mentors, in addition to her liberal arts education. She explained her desire to provide the same kind of support she received as a first-generation college student:

There was this high school counselor who held my hand and really walked me through everything. . . . She even supplied me with all the stuff I needed for my first year of dorm life, like the shower [caddy], because my mom didn’t know what it would take to live [on] campus. So it really started there. . . . You see the need and you want to be that person for all those students.

Vang’s identity as a Hmong woman is an important aspect of her role as an agent of change for students in the GEAR UP program and in the Hmong community. "That’s part of my life: being, knowing, and growing up in this community that is so rich and beautiful..."
and, at the same time, has so much need,” she said.

During their interview, Vang also spoke honestly with Abrego and Tilander about the challenges of learning how to dedicate her time and energy to her career, family, profession, and community: “[I]t has been a hard balancing act because the more I’m asked to give at work to my community, the more I’m needed at church, too, [and] the more my family [relies] on me.”

The Students’ Journeys

Like many of her fellow students, Abrego arrived at Metropolitan State University after several educational setbacks. She grew up in the Twin Cities and attended a university in northern Minnesota just after high school. She recalled her experience in a class on race and gender:

The topic, of course, was immigration, and everybody was against it. I don’t think what the professor understood was you’re talking about my parents. You’re talking about my uncle, my mom, my grandma. It’s personal. And actually, that was the last day I attended that class. I dropped. I just stopped going. I lost my scholarship.

After having two children and spending seventeen years working at the Saint Paul School District Bilingual Education Office and several years as an administrator for the Saint Paul Public Schools, Abrego enrolled in the Urban Teacher Program at Metropolitan State University:

At Metro, I feel like I’m not the only one. I’m not the youngest, I’m not the oldest, I’m not the only Latina voice that the professors have heard, I’m not the only mother, I’m not the only wife, I’m not the only divorcée. It’s so liberating. . . . I really like participating [in class] and showing what I’ve learned throughout my life.

For Abrego, interviewing Vang was an opportunity to celebrate both cultural difference and shared civic goals:

I remember thinking about how she really connects to Hmong culture and brings in her community. She connects to it through her own experience, which is similar to mine. I think that because of our experiences we maybe put a little bit more power or effort into it, knowing that if those [services] are not in place, if they don’t happen, then more people will live what we did. We don’t want someone else to suffer like that.

Abrego identified with Vang and found needed inspiration in her college journey. “It definitely was reassuring. It was inspirational,” she said. “To know that she had [grown up] like me, and she was able to work and come to school, and now she’s done. . . . I thought, okay, I can do this.” The theme that has emerged most powerfully from the Citizen Alum interview project is the impact of intergenerational mentorship (among students who are at different points in their educational or professional lives) on student success.

Tilander also took inspiration from the interview with Vang. Like many students at our nontraditional university, Tilander wanted to attend college right after high school, but financial and familial obstacles stood in the way. After getting married, having two children, and helping her husband to complete his degree, she enrolled and completed an associate’s degree at a community college before applying to the Urban Teacher Program at Metropolitan State University. She worked as a teaching assistant with middle school students in the Saint Paul Public Schools during her time at the university and is now a student intervention teacher in California’s San Juan Unified School District.

When, several years after the Citizen Alum interview, I asked Abrego and Tilander to tell me what most influenced them about their conversation with Vang, Tilander immediately replied, “I still think about her quote that I loved. A drop in the bucket. The ripples. It always stuck with me. Our small actions matter. Our actions do have a ripple effect.”

Our conversation was interrupted as a former student of Abrego’s from Saint Paul Public Schools, sixteen or seventeen years old, walked by. He and Abrego greeted each other in Spanish. Abrego returned to our conversation concerned and a bit distracted. “He told me his sister has a baby,” she said. “She’s younger than him. Had she been in my school, we would have helped somehow.”

In this moment, I realized the power of our students’ deep, unwavering connections to and investment in their communities. Their evolving relationships are enhanced by and contribute to the educational experience at Metropolitan State University. With a new appreciation and understanding of civic engagement, our students and alumni will continue to have an impact on their communities.
Mitzi Gaitan-Najero, a sophomore communications major at the University of Southern California (USC), faced a critical dilemma in her career trajectory in 2013. Though interested in a career in media, as a product of a tight-knit Latino immigrant family, Gaitan-Najero had been returning home to northern California every summer to work in her dad’s gardening business. As the first in her family to go to college, she had become critical in her parents’ struggle to become legal US residents, but these family commitments did not allow her time to pursue internships to explore her intended career, putting her farther behind her peers every semester.

Gaitan-Najero decided to take my two-unit course, Pathways to Career Success for First-Generation College Students, which helped her land an internship for the Spanish-language television station Univision. The course explained the concept of unpaid internships, which can be difficult to fathom for someone who had worked for pay since a young age. From there, Gaitan-Najero secured paid internships with a variety of Latino media and general media companies during the rest of her time at USC. Upon graduation, she accepted a job at Facebook working on a new Latino business operation, a stunning opportunity for a first-generation college graduate. Gaitan-Najero juggled her role helping her undocumented parents obtain legal status with her need to create opportunities for herself during college and her years as a recent graduate.

**Career Challenges**

I began offering this elective course because I was frustrated with my meetings with college seniors who were heading toward graduation without concrete career plans. I also found myself counseling alumni years after graduation, helping them navigate job possibilities or graduate school options they did not know about as undergraduates.

In working with low-income, first-generation college students, most from racial minority backgrounds, I had learned how they struggled with finding ways to turn their academic majors into meaningful careers. Unlike most students whose parents went to college, these first-generation students had very limited ideas about the range of professions that a college degree could open for them and even less knowledge about how to get there.

USC employs only nine career counselors for eighteen thousand undergraduates at our Office of Career Advising, a relic from the days when few students came to USC from low-income and first-generation backgrounds. Now with more than three thousand first-generation college students, many having arrived as transfer students from community colleges, USC has an alumni crisis that it barely recognizes. Most faculty and staff are not prepared to offer career advice that is not dependent on students having previous exposure to professional careers, typically provided through family connections. Even though first-generation college students graduate from USC at the same rate as other students, they are often woefully unprepared for the job market.

**A Safe and Supportive Community**

Each fall for the past five years, my course has regularly enrolled between forty and fifty students from all majors, including students in their second and third years of college as well as new transfer students.

The course begins by creating a safe community for students to discuss their first-generation status. We watch video recordings of first-generation students discussing the challenges they faced when they arrived on campus. This often provides the first opportunity at USC for the enrolled students to talk about social class inequities. They discuss the wealth and privilege they see around them, their academic and personal adjustments to college, and the challenges they face because of expectations from their families and communities.

We read parts of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor’s 2013 autobiography, focusing on how she transitioned from the South Bronx to Princeton University, which makes them feel part of a larger movement of students and helps them find role models.

We next read a series of articles that spark discussion on the issue of family...
obligations, concentrating on how to process students’ own feelings of guilt resulting from being away, as well as the obligations placed on them to guide their families out of poverty (Espinoza 2010; Aguis Vallejo and Lee 2012; Kwon 2014). This is usually when some students come to my office hours to admit that they spend some of their financial aid home each month and others reveal that they spend hours each week translating for their immigrant parents rather than doing homework or obtaining an on-campus job.

Next we discuss how students’ college degrees can lead to professional salaries and how students can set realistic financial goals for themselves and their families. Rather than focusing on trying to buy a home for their parents, for example, students may need to make sure their parents have health insurance in their older years.

The course introduces students to resources they can access at USC to become successful as students and as budding professionals. For example, I require that they visit the office hours of one of their current instructors. We role-play this encounter in my class so they can overcome their fears. Most report positive outcomes, and some visits even lead to jobs, research opportunities, or internships.

Many students admit that they are unhappy with their choice of major, often because they feel pressure from home, or have pressured themselves, to select a major they perceive will lead to a high-paying career. I discuss with them the importance of high-impact practices no matter what their major (Kuh 2008), and the skills that employers seek from recent graduates (Hart Research Associates 2013). I talk with them about the value of the liberal arts and critical thinking skills, along with the desire of employers for employees who can write clearly and speak publicly. I help them as they pick courses for the next semester, emphasizing skill building across the curriculum and developing meaningful relationships with faculty members who can become mentors and write letters of recommendation.

Connecting with Alumni

All students in the course develop their own plans to explore careers, including through courses, internships, study abroad possibilities, civic engagement, and special campus programs—all of which they learn about in the course itself. Many students from low-income, racial minority backgrounds are involved in civic engagement work in local communities. I ask them to think through how their extracurricular or community-based work can translate into long-term job opportunities, often indicating more about their potential career trajectories than their academic studies. Job site visits are also a key part of the course. They allow students to see a wide range of places of employment and ask first-generation alumni about their career paths.

Students can also apply for funds I have secured from various companies to support them financially during internship opportunities. They learn about the power of internship experiences from former students (including Gaitan-Najero) who took the course and are now either graduating seniors with job prospects or recent graduates who can talk about their experiences in graduate school or the work sector. I have learned that first-generation college students tend to learn best when they hear lessons reinforced by alumni who were once in their position as students.

Changing the culture of an elite research university is a long and difficult process but one that is critical if we are to bridge the gap between community and college life for a more equitable future for all alumni.

REFERENCES


Resources and Opportunities

The Kettering Foundation
The Kettering Foundation’s primary research question is: what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering shares its research through publications including books, brochures, papers, reports, and three periodicals (Connections, Higher Education Exchange, and Kettering Review), available at https://www.kettering.org/library.


Citizen Alum
Citizen Alum works to promote the engagement of alumni as “doers, not (just) donors.” Citizen Alum's website (http://www.citizenalum.org) includes guidance for conducting alumni listening projects, information about the work of Citizen Alum member institutions, presentations, publications, and additional resources.

REGISTER NOW: AAC&U Network for Academic Renewal Conference
Global Engagement and Spaces of Practice: Exploring Global Challenges across Disciplinary Boundaries
October 11–13, 2018  |  Seattle, Washington
“Global Engagement and Spaces of Practice: Exploring Global Challenges across Disciplinary Boundaries” will consider how educators are using place-based disciplinary and interdisciplinary inquiry to focus and integrate learning across a variety of geographic, cultural, and philosophical domains to engage students in issues that matter to them and to society. Participants will share how they are connecting institutional leadership with curricular and cocurricular options to ensure that all students experience global learning, using place as a lens through which to understand the world. They will examine how these campus-wide approaches can become part of the institutional fabric, and how faculty and staff are prepared, supported, and incentivized to provide students with opportunities to apply their skills in a variety of settings, at increasingly challenging levels. For more information and to register, visit https://www.aacu.org/global.

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
- Institute for Democracy and Higher Education
- Interfaith Youth Core
- The Kettering Foundation
- NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
Upcoming AAC&U Meetings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEETING</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>DATES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Network for Academic Renewal Conference</td>
<td>Seattle,</td>
<td>October 11-13, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Engagement and Spaces of Practice:</td>
<td>Washington</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Exploring Global Challenges across Disciplinary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Boundaries</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Network for Academic Renewal Conference</td>
<td>Atlanta,</td>
<td>November 8-10, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transforming STEM Higher Education:</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Confirming the Authority of Evidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>AAC&amp;U Annual Meeting</td>
<td>Atlanta,</td>
<td>January 23-26, 2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising Our Voices: Reclaiming the Narrative on</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>the Value of 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 dedicated to advancing the vitality and public standing of liberal education by making quality and equity the foundations for excellence in undergraduate education in service to democracy. 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, faculty, and staff engaged in institutional and curricular planning. Through a broad range of activities, AAC&U reinforces the collective commitment to liberal education at the national, local, and global levels. Its high-quality programs, publications, research, meetings, institutes, public outreach efforts, and campus-based projects help individual institutions ensure that the quality of student learning is central to their work as they evolve to meet new economic and social challenges. Information about AAC&U can be found at www.aacu.org.