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**THE CIVIC AGENCY INITIATIVE
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**A Partnership of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities
(AASCU) and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship (CDC)**

Preface: The emergence of a global, interdisciplinary civic field

In contrast to the mood of critique and frequent despair that is widely reported in the press and often heard among some academics, leading theorists and practitioners of civic change in the early years of the 21st century are more hopeful, pointing in particular to an emerging, global, interdisciplinary civic field based on the rapid growth of knowledge about “what works” to build civic agency. Civic agency involves capacities of communities and societies to work collaboratively across differences like partisan ideology, faith traditions, income, geography and ethnicity to address common challenges, solve problems, and create common goods. Civic agency requires individual skills, knowledge, and predispositions. Civic agency also involves questions of institutional design, particularly how to constitute groups and institutions for sustainable collective action. Civic agency can be seen from a cultural vantage as the practices, habits, norms, symbols, and ways of life that enhance or diminish capacities for collective action. Knowledge about building capacities for collaborative action is developing in multiple domains including community organizing and community development; public health; resource management; environmental sustainability; education and civic learning; agriculture; community safety and conflict resolution; and public space design (see attached bibliography). This emerging body of knowledge and set of collective practices provide models for a major higher education initiative that will transform previous sources of civic decline into wellsprings of civic renewal and regeneration.

Overview

The Civic Agency Initiative is a partnership between the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the Humphrey Institute’s Center for Democracy and Citizenship. The project seeks to further develop and operationalize the concept of civic agency. The product of this partnership will be a series of national models for creating civic agency among undergraduates, and to disseminate those models broadly throughout American higher education. The goal of the initiative is to create widespread knowledge about “what works,” to build civic agency, and to strengthen civic identity and practices of AASCU schools, including civic learning and public scholarship. The project combines the strategic and leadership position of AASCU schools in civic engagement – with more than 50% of the nation’s public four year college students, a strong track record of educating local and regional leaders, and a flourishing network of schools in the American Democracy Project -- with the pioneering theoretical and

practical work of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota's Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs.

The Civic Agency Initiative will create a network of partnering AASCU institutions that will:

- ◆ generate new knowledge about the ecology of civic learning and civic education, institutional change, and civic agency
- ◆ stimulate, evaluate, and share lessons from efforts to make civic and cultural change in institutions
- ◆ support faculty members and community partners who are interested in becoming intellectual leaders in the emerging interdisciplinary civic field.
- ◆ create curricular and co-curricular programs to prepare undergraduates as powerful and effective civic agents...community leaders who are citizen professionals rather than detached experts, able to work collaboratively across differences, attentive to the living cultures of the places where they reside

Problem statement: Detaching from places, narrowing professional identities

To use an ecological analogy, just as sustainable environments depend on healthy ecological systems -- wetlands, habitats, old growth forests, prairies and diverse flora and fauna -- local civic ecologies depend upon a rich array of civic groups and networks that develop civic identities, accumulate civic learning, and promote civic practices.

Higher education is crucial to developing the civic agency of community leaders and institutions that sustain local civic ecologies. Yet here in the United States, some higher education institutions, shaped by the models of detached pedagogy and research which have come to dominate in research universities, have functioned in counterproductive ways, in addition to their positive impacts.

In a recent issue of *Change* magazine, Parker Palmer described the weak sense of civic agency and the posture of “value free” practice that often results from experiences in higher education. “The hidden curriculum of our culture portrays institutions as powers *other* than us, over which we have marginal control at best.” Palmer continues,

We turn our graduates loose on the world as people who *know* but do not *recognize* that our justice system often fails the poor...that practical politics is more about manipulating public opinion than discerning the will of the people...that science and technology are not neutral but rather means to social ends. 1[ii]

An eroding connection to place and the development of detached scholarship results in narrow professional practices – what can be called technocracy – which are significant factors in causing a weakened sense of agency and “value free” practice.

Over the last fifty years, much of higher education has effected what the historian Donald Bender calls a shift from “civic professionalism” to “disciplinary professionalism.”2[iii]

The civic practices and identities of the citizen teacher or citizen pharmacist or citizen politician or citizen doctor or citizen clergy once lent democracy larger public meaning and rooted democracy in local cultures. In recent decades, as the normative cultures of research universities became increasingly detached, much of higher education often lost connections to the real life, history, and cultures of actual places.

In higher education, this produces patterns of professional education that are narrowly disciplinary. For instance, in seminaries and divinity schools, according to Mary Fulkerson, a professor at Duke Divinity School who studies theological education, the “practice courses” typically pertain to matters internal to the life of a congregation, such as preaching, counseling, and church organization. The skills, knowledge, and habits needed to engage with places where congregations are located are missing.^{3[iv]} Similarly, Joe Nathan, director of the Center for School Change at the Humphrey Institute, observes that teacher education curriculums typically includes little or nothing on learning to work collaboratively with parents and other stakeholders, who have often far different backgrounds and interests.^{4[v]} When such learning is absent, graduates come to understand themselves as detached experts providing service *for* people, not as citizens working *with* fellow citizens on public problems, from the education of young people to sustainable local development and global warming.

The eroding ties to place among higher education graduates is linked to detached scholarship in research universities, a pattern noted by many scholars.^{5[vi]} Patterns of detachment in professional training and scholarship produce “technocracy,” or domination of many problem solving processes and institutions by experts removed from the common civic life. Technocracy is normally invisible, presenting itself as “objective” knowledge and methods. The effects of technocracy are clear, however. For instance, beginning in the 1960s, formal education increasingly pushed parents and residents of local communities to the sidelines of schools. David Mathews, president of the Kettering Foundation, has argued that “the public as a real force in the life of schools was deliberately and systematically rooted out. Citizens were replaced with a new group of professionals, true guardians of the public interest, there to do what it was assumed citizens couldn’t or wouldn’t do.” In his book *The Future of Democracy*, Peter Levine documents the effects of technocracy. For example, in 1960, membership in PTAs was 45 percent of all families in school. Today it is less than half that figure. Today, as a result, conventional programs and pedagogies designed to achieve educational excellence neglect civic dimensions of “accountability.”^{6[vii]}

Technocracy weakens civic agency, the capacities of human communities and groups to act cooperatively and collectively across differences on common problems and challenges. It undermines the standing and devalues the knowledge of those without credentials, degrees, and university training, shaping a citizenry who are more spectators, clients and consumers than problem solvers and co-producers. Technocracy has transformed mediating institutions which once served as civic meeting grounds – locally grounded schools, congregations, businesses, nonprofits, government agencies – into service delivery operations, redefining citizens as clients and customers and professionals as narrow experts.

To continue with ecological analogies, just as environmental work involves restorations of wetlands and other habitats, the long range task of civic renewal involves not only addressing the symptoms of civic decline, such as new methods of deliberation that teach skills of listening to others of different views. It also means going upstream to renew the wellsprings of civic life in an information age, professional practices and identities stripped of their civic dimensions. This is the only way to re-grow mediating institutions and civic cultures hollowed out over the last century through specialization and expert service delivery. There is a growing body of knowledge about what works to accomplish this civic restoration, within professions and fields as well as institutions as a whole.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), an organization of 400 public colleges and universities, seems to defy that trend of greater aloofness and detachment. In 2002, a task force of AASCU leaders identified a key characteristic of AASCU institutions as “Stewards of Place.”

http://www.aascu.org/pdf/stewardsofplace_02.pdf The report described the “inextricable linkages” between these institutions and their communities. It argued that these linkages provide a constant challenge for institutions to serve as “learners as well as teachers in tackling the myriad of opportunities and issues facing our communities and regions.” That call to be “Stewards of Place” has been actively embraced, spawning a host of projects and initiatives, including the American Democracy Project (ADP), a civic engagement initiative now involving 228 AASCU institutions. The American Democracy Project seeks to focus attention on the role of higher education in preparing the next generation of citizens. Through a series of national events and meetings, as well as projects and programs on many American Democracy Project campuses, the initiative has linked intellectual and classroom activities with experiential learning in local communities, increasingly focused on creating civic agency by encouraging political instead of voluntary engagement. This network of public colleges and universities, explicitly committed to be “stewards of place,” holds potential for intellectual and pedagogical leadership in incorporating this knowledge into its teaching and research agendas and in helping create new knowledge in this area. AASCU, especially the American Democracy Project, can change the very definition of the mission and purpose of higher education in the 21st century, adapting America’s higher education deepest democratic mission to a new age.

Project concept: Learning and scholarship for building civic agency

The Civic Agency Initiative uses the definition of civic engagement that Tom Ehrlich proposed:

“Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference.”

Citizen learning in these terms means developing students' skills and abilities to engage with others across lines of racial, cultural, economic, or ideological differences to identify and take action on public issues. It means helping them to develop the skills and learning habits needed to understand the communities in which they will work. It means deepening their abilities to understand the public and civic contributions they can make through their paid employment as teachers, business people, nurses, computer programmers, civil servants, politicians and many other roles, not simply through off hours voluntary activities. A focus on developing citizen capacity highlights democracy not only as elections but also as a way of life. To date, the growing body of knowledge about how to accomplish such civic capacity development is not widely known or incorporated into pedagogies, disciplines, and research methods.

Developing students' capacities for robust understanding and practices of civic learning and civic action will necessitate incorporating new civic knowledge and also culture change in higher education institutions. This capacity development will also require institutions of higher education, in collaboration with community partners, to develop new knowledge about what makes for culture change and civic agency.

Institutional Capacities

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship are uniquely positioned to undertake a project to operationalize and to strengthen the civic field.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities: AASCU represents over 400 public colleges, universities and systems of higher education throughout the United States and its territories. Its member institutions enroll 3.6 million students, 56% of all students in four-year public higher education. To take teachers as a case in point of AASCU's formative influence on the life of communities, AASCU institutions prepare nearly 60% of all teachers licensed to teach each year in the United States, and teacher education continues to be a critical concern for member institutions and the Association. Among the five Washington-based associations that represent university presidents across the spectrum of 4,000 higher education institutions, AASCU is the only one that has a staff position designated for a Director of Teacher Education. It works closely with member presidents at two annual national conferences, with member chief academic officers at two other annual national conferences, and with those administrators and others in a variety of other settings and circumstances. It also hosts an annual meeting of the American Democracy Project schools.

The Division of Academic Leadership and Change addresses critical academic and program issues, among them teacher preparation. One of the major projects of the Division is the American Democracy Project, a civic engagement initiative now involving 228 member institutions and working with college and university provosts as key leaders. The project, a partnership with the *New York Times*, is a multi-campus initiative that seeks to create an intellectual and experiential understanding of civic engagement for undergraduates enrolled at institutions that are members of AASCU. The

goal of the project is to produce graduates who understand and are committed to engaging in meaningful actions as citizens in a democracy. The project grows out of a concern about decreasing rates of participation in the civic life of America in voting, in advocacy, in local grassroots associations, and in other forms of civic engagement that are necessary for the vitality of our democracy. . The project also builds on recent studies (Millennials Talk Politics: A Study of College Student Political Engagement, Levine et. al. 2007) that show today’s students want to be engaged in a richer civic life. “College students are hungry for a particular kind of conversation that is serious and authentic, involves diverse views, but is free of manipulation and ‘spin.’” AASCU, in cooperation with AAC&U and the NASALGUC schools, has recently received a FIPSE grant for developing new outcome measures for student learning; it plans to make civic engagement outcomes central to its own efforts.

AASCU’s on-going work with presidents and chief academic officers and its program commitment to several initiatives which focus on teaching skills and developing capacities for collaborative action make the association uniquely situated to design and execute this project.

The Center for Democracy and Citizenship (CDC)

The Center for Democracy and Citizenship (CDC) is a research and outreach center at the University of Minnesota that undertakes a variety of civic engagement partnerships. These partnerships are aimed at developing grounded theory for what works to strengthen civic engagement. For the last 20 years, the CDC has sought to develop an adequate framework for building civic agency that addresses public problems while also taking up the long-term goals of transforming technocratic cultures, re-growing mediating institutions, and developing sustainable civic agency. The center’s framework, based on the theory of public work, has focused on concepts and practices that cultivate respect for the talents, intelligence, and creativity of groups generally considered to be on the margins of public life such as young people, low-income communities, racial minorities, and new immigrants, while also unleashing new catalytic and organizing practices and identities among professionals. The CDC defines public work as sustained, visible effort by a mix of people that creates things – material or cultural – of lasting civic impact, while developing civic learning and capacity in the process.

Public work shifts from the paradigm that now dominates most professional systems and many institutions—which is centered on one-way expert interventions—to a citizen-centered approach that taps and develops people’s diverse talents while growing locally grounded institutions that are more open and civically-oriented.

The CDC does most of its work through partnerships. These include the international civic engagement and education initiative Public Achievement, an organizing model developed by the CDC and named one of 15 finalists worldwide for the 2007 Carl Bertelsmann award for best youth civic education initiative. Public Achievement is now used in 12 nations and many hundreds of schools and community sites.

The CDC has also worked with foundations, colleges and universities, and higher education associations on issues of civic professionalism and culture change to deepen public engagement. These include the Kettering Foundation, AASCU, Imagining America, and schools including the College of St. Catherine, Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC), Mankato State University, St. Cloud State University, Metropolitan State University, the University of Denver, Naropa University, and Colgate University. The Urban Teacher Program at MCTC, for example, includes public skills practice as part of its core curriculum, with the goal of developing teachers who are change agents as well as effective classroom instructors. William Doherty and his colleagues at the Department of Family Social Science in the University of Minnesota College of Education are also close working partners of the CDC, and have pioneered new approaches to citizen professionalism that cultivate respect for the talents and capacities of families in public problem solving, from parent education to health.

New approaches to education for democratic professional practice have also been fostered through work with new immigrants. The Jane Addams School for Democracy, a learning and public work partnership coordinated by the CDC on the West Side of St. Paul, Minnesota, brings together members of Hmong, Latino, and East African communities with area colleges and university students for co-learning and co-creating in an environment that explicitly challenges the service project model.

Jane Addams School has helped to generate a neighborhood-wide initiative, the Neighborhood Learning Community, in which a community and its institutions – including parents, schools, libraries, businesses, community groups, and nonprofits – have claimed authority for the education of children. The successes of the Neighborhood Learning Community has led to its approach being championed in other neighborhoods by the mayor of St. Paul and his staff.

The Civic Agency Initiative

The Civic Agency Initiative is envisioned as a three-year partnership between AASCU/ADP and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship to deepen the civic identities of higher education, including new approaches to learning and associated engaged scholarship focused on questions of civic agency.

Project Goals

Through a collaboration between AAASCU/ADP, the Center for democracy and Citizenship, and 8-12 ADP institutions:

- ◆ Define the characteristics of civic agency
- ◆ Develop strategies and programs on university campuses and in surrounding communities to develop civic agency in undergraduates
- ◆ Design instruments and processes for measuring civic agency
- ◆ Support the growth of faculty and staff in AASCU schools, as well as local and regional community leaders, who can be leaders in the new focus on civic agency

- ◆ Generate new knowledge about civic agency, civic learning, and institutional change
- ◆ Disseminate knowledge of civic agency and how to teach it to other AASCU/ADP institutions and broadly across American higher education
- ◆ Create campus-wide cultural change, deepening community partnerships, civic learning, and public scholarship.

Methods

- ◆ Form a group of 8-12 partner AASCU institutions with a strong emphasis on educating students as powerful and effective civic agents.
- ◆ Formulate a set of core ideas and beliefs about the civic field, using both theoreticians and practitioners
- ◆ Stimulate and share lessons from efforts to make civic and cultural change in institutions;
- ◆ Create and implement a variety of strategies such as campus audits, campus wide conversations, seminars convened on participating campuses, exchanges of “civic teams” among participating schools, and pilot initiatives that can be studied and spread.
- ◆ Evaluate the effectiveness of individual strategies and approaches. Evaluate the effectiveness of the project to help create and sustain a civic field.

First Year Activities:

- ◆ **Identification of partner schools:** The project will begin with the identification of 8-12 partner schools in American Democracy Project universities committed to developing robust, campus-wide civic learning practices that cultivate strong civic agency. Each partnering ADP institution will create a team made up of faculty, staff, and community members, designated by the university president and lead by the chief academic officer.
- ◆ **Organizational meeting and creation of a plan for organizing training, information and discussion:** The project will bring together a cohort of leaders for an organizational meeting in Fall 2008 to plan an ongoing series of meetings, trainings, and learning activities.
- ◆ **Development of pilot initiatives at partner schools.** Each institution will serve as a “laboratory for democracy,” designing and testing programs, strategies, projects, and approaches that produce a greater capacity for civic agency among undergraduate students. For example, at one school, an interdisciplinary program may be created. At another, a certificate program in civic leadership may be developed. At another of the schools, the traditional service-learning program may be transformed into a civic leadership program. And at yet another school, internships may be re-designed to focus on a new form of civic engagement.
- ◆ **Learning seminars and other activities to incorporate and build the field:** Regular learning seminars, combining strong experiential dimensions with theory, will be led by a team including staff of the CDC and AASCU faculty, staff, and community members. Activities will be designed in consultation with

participating teams from ADP partner institutions. Some of these seminars may be face-to-face events but they will be augmented by cost-effective electronic webinars and webcasts.

- ◆ **Management of the civic field network:** The Project will create and manage a network of educators and learners across different AASCU institutions. The network will create a culture of continuous learning and organizing about strategies for cultural and institutional change. The network will have the overall aim of enhancing the civic mission of education and the deepening of civic learning in AASCU schools and associated communities.
- ◆ **Creation of a dissemination plan:** The project will develop programs for disseminating successful practices and strategies using the annual national American Democracy Project conference, regional ADP conferences, and regular AASCU meetings of chief academic officers. Additionally, we will share the results broadly both in written publications, direct email, and at presidential and chief academic officer meetings. One form of likely dissemination may be accreditation-like teams. AASCU has used that concept with great success in trying to study and disseminate promising practices in other areas. For example, recently AASCU conducted two national studies, one focused on graduation success and a second on Hispanic student success. In both studies, AASCU created accreditation-like teams that visited high performing institutions to understand their strategies and programs that yielded such success. Following that work, other institutions have begun asking AASCU to form teams to study their campuses and suggest strategies for improvement. That model of campuses learning from one another could be a low-cost strategy for dissemination and improvement for campuses interested in improving their civic outcomes.

Appendix: Bibliography on civic agency/civic field resources

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3[iv] Harry Boyte, *Civic Engagement News* #11 2004.

4[v] The US Department of Education, *Strong Families, Strong Schools* 1994, details the survey findings of Nathan and Betty Radcliffe, that of 1823 elementary and secondary school educators surveyed only 21% rated their preparation for working with parents effective or very effective. Recent research by Nathan's Center for School Change (2007), interviewing minority groups, the MN State PTA and others, found 91 % said recent teacher graduates are not very prepared or not at all prepared to involve parents and families.

5[vi] See Thomas Bender and Carl Schorske, Editors, *Academic Cultures in Transformation: Fifty Years and Four Disciplines* (Princeton University: 1998); Craig Calhoun, "Social Theory and the Public Sphere," in Bryan Turner, ed *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 510.

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