

Metropolitan State University
American Democracy Project Campus Conversation
Fall Semester 2003

Introduction and Context

By

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Metropolitan State University is the multi-campus state university for the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul) service region of Minnesota. The University was founded in 1971 and, from its beginning, has placed civic engagement at the core of its mission, recognizing it as one of five guiding Educational Tenets. The University's academic vision states "an unwavering commitment to civic engagement." Metropolitan State began as a university that served adult learners and other underserved student populations through courses and responsive alternative learning strategies. The commitment to adults and the underserved remains central to our mission, but we have experienced rapid growth in the last decade that has brought more enrollments by younger (though still working) adults whose academic interests have more similarities with students who attend other comprehensive state colleges and universities.

The University established the Center for Community-Based Learning in 1996 and, in the months before joining the American Democracy Project in 2002 - 2003, commissioned a consultant to conduct a formal, survey-based audit of civic engagement at the University, which focused on community engagements among faculty members, administrators and staff, as well as students (although the return among students was considered too small to produce useful or reliable data). The audit also included information about courses that include civic engagement. The University participated in the National Survey of Student Engagement for the first time in 2003, which provides some insight (particularly the adjusted benchmark data) about students' experiences of civic engagement in the academic context. The University's new state-of-the-art library that opens in 2004 is also a community partnership that incorporates a branch of the St. Paul Public Library.

The Provost joined the University in mid-July 2003 and, in the third week on the job, attended the AASCU Summer Chief Academic Officers' meeting.

The task for the 2003 – 2004 academic year is to use a campus conversation under the auspices of participation in the American Democracy Project to build on the results of the civic engagement audit and focus renewed attention on how the “unwavering commitment to civic engagement” is integrated in students’ academic experiences. By approaching knowledgeable colleagues (e.g., the Center for Community-Based Learning), talking-up the campus conversation in meetings, asking for recommendations, and collecting volunteers who betrayed interest or experience, an *ad hoc* group of stakeholders was assembled to begin our campus conversation. The notes from the first meeting follow. The discussions continue and include student participation (two Minnesota Campus Compact Fellows have joined the group). The objective is to plan an activity during Spring Semester 2004 that triggers a University-wide discussion of the future and academic significance of civic engagement at Metropolitan State University.

**Notes: American Democracy Project Campus Conversation Meeting
1 October 2003**

Participants: M. Bute, R. Israel, T. O’Connell, G. Lane, V. Gaither, C. Coballes-Vega, C. Meyers, D. Barton, S. Giguere, S. Hunt, D. Abebe, B. Fox, W. Lowe

Themes

Broader engagement across sectors and perspectives to connect with more diverse range of involvements and problems.

- encourage wider community involvement by holding University-sponsored events at off-campus locations
- many people are engaged, but in narrowly-focused, perhaps too-familiar ways
- Metropolitan State University as a potential point of contact for wider range of connections
- make relationships/connections to the larger community and world a structural feature of civic engagement at Metropolitan State University

Advance the scholarly discourse about civic engagement and its role in teaching and learning to a more mature level

- influence the level and sophistication of scholarly discussion of civic engagement (too one-dimensional)
- explore the foundation of ideas about civic engagement (e.g., time to move beyond Dewey as a [century-old] reference point?)
- tradition of faculty teaching seminars to examine what civic engagement means for our students in their academic experience in a reflective setting
- applied/action student/faculty research (supported by small research grants and with an annual presentation of research projects and findings)
- connect with a wider movement among those thinking about intellectual content of civic engagement

Common language/terminology about civic engagement and its academic dimension at Metropolitan State University.

- functional definitions must be broadly meaningful but adaptable at discipline/program level
- important to make participation in conversation as broad and inclusive as possible across University constituencies (definitions as a trigger?)
- tradition of faculty teaching seminars; engagement with reflection that is more enjoyable than “one more thing”

Connection with general education

- connection with General Education/Liberal Studies (e.g., embedded skills [writing, critical thinking, ethical perspective] and potential source of assessment data)
- community-based learning as alternative to explore and reflect on ethical perspective (e.g., students use reflection about encounters with real-life, day-to-day problems and dilemmas to deepen both engagement and understanding)

Metropolitan State University students as a primary civic resource in teaching and learning

- students challenged to apply critical reflection to current involvements and other community-based experiences (e.g., through a course); means to finding new, more diverse engagements
- emphasis on reflection and intellectual experience to complement experiential commitments
- applied/action student/faculty research (supported by small research grants and with an annual presentation of research projects and findings)
- AASCU American Democracy project focuses on the undergraduate experience, but graduate students should be included at Metropolitan State
- more active recognition that community-based experience that our students bring to the classroom is a legitimate part of civic engagement
- Irony: Demands of student status compete with students' active civic engagement

Current commitments at Metropolitan State University

- 2002 – 2003 audit as starting point for critical review
- basis for whatever comes next

Importance of assessment

- measures both impacts in the larger community and student academic achievement
- informs discussion of civic engagement and provides data that strengthens University's public and political voice
- audit, for example, points out need for more complete information about the numbers and extent of community engagements, from both the University/academic and community standpoints

Next steps for Conversation group

- Meet again: **Wednesday, 12 November 2003, 9:00 am** to think in concrete terms about how to bring the conversation to the larger University community
- 2002 – 2003 audit as starting point for critical review

- create University community “flashpoint” (e.g., definitions/terminology concerning civic engagement; critique of “Bowling Alone” thesis; critique of Dewey)
- retreats as established practice that crosses constituency boundaries
- retreat on general education and assessment (24 October 2003) has connection to civic engagement discussion (all group members urged to participate)

Nota Bene

- ADP emphasizes a strong element of continuity with the University’s founding principles, principles and values that are still active. Even as the University has changed, civic and community engagement has remained a constant.
- recent book *Educating Citizens* as convenient, pretty practical resource (Library has six copies)
- engagement on basis of mutuality with the community at progressively more profound level
- *New York Times* (American Democracy project partner) as a part of the pedagogy of civic engagement (a democratic approach that relies on an increasingly uncommon media resource for current events reporting and analysis)

Late-breaking Information received this week

- Metropolitan State participated in 2002 – 2003 in the National Survey of Student Engagement (www.iub.edu/~nsse) for the first time. NSSE is designed to “assess the extent to which students engage in a variety of effective educational practices” and is a survey of first-year and senior students. Four hundred thirty-seven colleges and universities participated last year, including nearly 200 Master’s-level colleges and universities (Metropolitan State’s category). The average student response rate nationally was about 42%. The response rate at Metropolitan State was 52%, which means these are pretty good data.

Several of the questions about their academic experiences to which our students responded have a bearing on our conversation about

the future of civic engagement at Metropolitan State and produced interesting results.

Compared to the responses of students at other Master's-level colleges and universities, Metropolitan State University students were:

Less likely to have tutored or taught other students.

Less likely to participate in a community-based project.

Less likely to participate in a practicum or internship experience.

Less likely to be involved in community service or volunteer work.

Less likely to have participated in study abroad.

Less likely to report developing a personal code of values or ethics.

Less likely to report an effect on their voting behavior if they were seniors, but somewhat more likely to report it if they were first-year students.

Less likely to have been called upon to solve complex, real-world problems if they were seniors, but somewhat more likely to report this experience if they were first-year students.

The full report is available for reference from Ed Mack in the Institutional Research Office.

WJL
7 October 2003