

**The American Democracy Project: Project Abstract**  
**Civic Engagement, Higher Education, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**  
**A Cooperative Project of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities**  
**(AASCU), *The New York Times*, and AASCU Member-Institutions**

**Need For the Project**

For some time now, commentators and critics have noted a decline in the degree of civic participation and engagement in American life. Decreased levels of voting and less time spent on activities with neighbors have been cited as examples of the decline in civic engagement in this new age. For example, in a 1987 poll of baby boomers, 77% said that the nation was worse off because of less involvement in community activities. Fifty percent of Americans in 1996 felt that we were becoming less trustworthy. In a 1999 survey conducted by Hart & Teeter, 68 percent of 18- to 34-year-olds reported that they felt disconnected from government. Ironically, in this age of hyper-connectivity, commentators and scholars lament the loss of a sense of community, a sense of connectedness. This new Age of Technology, despite its innovations in communications, is accompanied by a growing sense of disconnectedness. Robert Putnam, a key scholar on this issue, notes that far too often the old patterns of community and neighborhood have given way to separateness and isolation. Bridge clubs, community groups, and even casual neighborhood associations are all losing members. We are increasingly, in Putnam's memorable title, "bowling alone".

The danger is that our collective loss of association creates problems both for our society and for our democracy. At the precise moment in our history when immigration is swelling the number of Americans of different ethnicities and cultures, technology,

work and other factors are separating us as neighbors and citizens. Community and neighborhood groups, along with the public schools, used to serve as agents in inculcating democratic values and ideals. These organizations and associations linked citizens from different backgrounds and perspectives, creating a sense of collective commitment to one another in order that we as Americans could live together effectively as neighbors, and as participating citizens in a great democracy.

The concern about a decline in civic engagement is not simply a wistful look backwards, nor is it a nostalgic yearning for a simpler time. The loss of sense of community, and the accompanying commitment to act in support of that community, reduces the effectiveness of the community to accomplish collective goals. Furthermore, it creates a downward spiral of opportunity: a reduction in groups and organizations diminishes opportunities for citizens to act for the collective good. Putnam describes the loss of participation as a loss of “social capital,” a loss of the social networks that affect the productivity of individuals and groups. In the early years of our nation, an astute observer of America, Alexis de Tocqueville, noted that associations create positive effects on participants: “feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon another.” Organizations and groups become places where people who are different interact, where forums allow ideas to be discussed and debated, and where democratic skills - running meetings, speaking in public, writing letters, and taking a position on the issues of the day – are learned.

But perhaps the greatest loss our declining civic engagement poses is the threat to our democratic institutions. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, John Dewey wrote that

“democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.” Putnam argues that “the performance of our democratic institutions depends in measurable ways upon social capital.” His study of democratic government in Italy found that regions with high levels of social capital provided a very supportive environment for democratic institutions, while regions with less social capital fared less well. Similarly, Putnam found that in the United States, individual states with high levels of social capital developed more innovative public policy. “Politics in these states is more issue oriented, focused on social and educational services, and apparently less corrupt. Preliminary studies suggest that states high in social capital sustain governments that are more effective and innovative.” A task force of the American Political Science Association put it succinctly: “...current levels of political knowledge, political engagement, and political enthusiasm are so low as to threaten the vitality and stability of democratic politics in the United States” (APSA Task Force on Civic Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 1989). The American Democracy project rests on a core belief...that civic engagement is critical for the preservation and vitality of American democracy. Benjamin Franklin, more than 200 years ago, reminded us of democracy’s fragility. Upon exiting the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Franklin was approached by a group of citizens; they asked what sort of government the delegates had created. His answer: "A republic, if you can keep it."

### **Project Description**

The American Democracy Project is a non-partisan, multi-campus initiative that seeks to create an intellectual and experiential understanding of civic engagement in the

United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The project focuses on undergraduates enrolled at institutions that are members of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). 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 goals of the project are: 1.) to increase the number of undergraduate students who understand and are committed to engaging in meaningful civic actions by asking participating institutions to review and restructure academic programs and processes, extracurricular programs and activities, and the institutional culture; and 2.) to focus the attention of policy makers and opinion leaders on the civic value of the college experience. This project uses the definition of civic engagement proposed by Thomas Ehrlich and his colleagues in Civic Responsibility and Higher Education:

“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. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.” (Preface, page vi)

“A morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own; such an individual is willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate.” (Introduction, page xxvi).

The project seeks to 1.) create a national conversation among many campuses about the theory and practice of civic engagement; 2.) develop institutional commitment by involving senior administrators, faculty, staff and students; by addressing core institutional mission and purpose; and by focusing on civic engagement as a learning outcome for undergraduates; 3.) initiate new projects, courses and teaching strategies,

extracurricular programs, and other programs to increase civic engagement, supported by the national project office; 4.) measure the civic engagement outcomes of undergraduates on participating campuses, and assess the impact of this project in contributing to greater civic engagement outcomes; and; 5.) disseminate the models that result to a wide audience of higher education institutions, individuals, and policy makers.

The project initially will involve 146 member campuses of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). The national project structure will include a director from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and a co-director from *The New York Times*, direction and oversight from a group of AASCU presidents and chancellors, operational guidance from a group of chief academic officers, and program assistance from an advisory committee of colleagues that work in civic engagement and related fields.

#### Key Features of the Proposed Project:

- Leadership of the president or chancellor: For civic engagement to become established as a goal of an institution, the leadership of the president or chancellor is critical.
- Leadership of the chief academic officer: This project will ask the chief academic officer to establish civic engagement as a campus priority, creating an active faculty group to design and carry out local projects and programs. The project will also provide professional development and support, critical for many chief academic officers who do not have a background in this subject area.
- A focus on faculty: With the rapid retirement of the faculty workforce that was hired in the 1960s, many campuses are witnessing a substantial turnover, sometime as much as 50 to 60% of the faculty in five or six years. The new generation of faculty needs a theoretical and conceptual foundation to create civic engagement programs and activities.
- A unique set of institutions: This project will focus on public colleges and universities that belong to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). These institutions have been called the “American dream” institutions, for many of them educate less affluent students from families who have not had previous members going to college, recent immigrants, and students transferring from community colleges. In addition, AASCU institutions educate more than 50 percent of the new teachers hired in America’s public

schools each year, so this project will have an impact beyond the students themselves, as graduates from these institutions work with children in America's public schools.

- Coordination by a national presidential association: The project will be coordinated by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). Having a national association of university presidents and chancellors managing this project will ensure widespread campus involvement and multiple opportunities for dissemination of best practice.
- A unique national partner, a national newspaper: The project is being supported by a partnership with *The New York Times*. Students on participating campuses will read *The Times* as part of their activity in building an understanding of contemporary events. In addition, *The Times* will use its resources to link far-flung and sometimes remote campuses together in a national conversation, will provide journalists and commentators as part of that conversation, and will host a website for the project.
- Attention to assessment: Participating campuses will agree to measure their learning outcomes and share the results with others, so that the entire network of participating institutions can learn together.

If this nation is to continue to be successful as the world's oldest democracy, our colleges and universities must have, as one of their most important roles, the creation of informed, active citizens, as capable of participating in this democracy as in this economy. Only then we will be able to meet Franklin's challenge to preserve our republic.

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