



# EJOURNAL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

VOLUME 10 | ISSUE 3

## Assessing and Improving Political Learning and Engagement on College Campuses

**Nancy Thomas**  
Tufts University

**Leah A. Murray**  
Weber State University

**Kyle Upchurch**  
Tufts University

**Catherine A. Copeland**  
American Association of State Colleges  
and Universities

### Author Note

Nancy Thomas, Institute for Democracy and Higher Education, Tufts University; Leah A. Murray, Political Science and Philosophy, and Walker Institute of Politics and Public Service, Weber State University; Kyle Upchurch, Institute for Democracy and Higher Education, Tufts University; Catherine A. Copeland, American Democracy Project, American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Cathy Copeland, Director, American Democracy Project, American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1717 Rhode Island Avenue NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036. Phone: (202) 478-7833. Email: [copelandc@aascu.org](mailto:copelandc@aascu.org)

The authors would like to acknowledge the substantial contributions of the following co-authors and project contributors (listed alphabetically):

- Co-authors: Jodi Benenson, School of Public Communication, University of Nebraska–Omaha; Jennifer Boehm, Office of Community Engagement, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis; Lori Britt, School of Communication, James Madison University; Stephen K. Hunt, School of Communication, Illinois State University; Steven Koether, Biology Department, Sam Houston State University; Lance Lippert, School of Communication, Illinois State University; Barbara Pickering, College of Communication, University of Nebraska–Omaha; Kim Schmidl-Gagne, Institutional Research and Assessment, Keene State College; Jennifer Shea, School of Public Affairs and Civic Engagement, San Francisco State University; Anthony M. Starke, Jr., School of Public Affairs, University of Colorado Denver; Angela Taylor, Rutgers School of Criminal Justice, Fayetteville State University; Andrea M. Weare, School of Communication, University of Nebraska–Omaha; Sidney Williams, Health and Legal Pre-Professional Program, Central State University.
- Project contributors: George Arasimowicz, Central State University (formerly; now Provost’s Office, Emporia State University); Anthony Baker, Ferris State University; Stacye Blount, Department of Sociology and Interdisciplinary Studies, Fayetteville State University; Stephanie J. Bluth, The Graduate School, Sam Houston State University; Mary Catherine Nino Breen, Academic Success Center, Sam Houston State University; Sherree Davis, Office of Civic Engagement and Service Learning, Fayetteville State University; Paul W. Eaton, Department of Educational Leadership, Sam Houston State University; Abraham Goldberg, Center for Civic Engagement, James Madison University; Russell Jeung, Asian American Studies Department, San Francisco State University; Michael Klein, Cohen Center for the Humanities, James Madison University; Melissa Lyon, Office of Civic Engagement and Service Learning, Fayetteville State University; Teresa Martinez, Center for Community Engaged Learning, Weber State University; Lee Miller, Department of Sociology, Sam Houston State University; Erin O’Hanlon, Office of Service-Learning, Stockton University; Dakota Horn, Illinois State University (formerly; now Bradley University); Dena Pastor, Center for Assessment and Research Studies, James Madison University; Maricel G. Santos, Department of English Language and Literature, San Francisco State University; Lisa C. Shen, College of Business Administration, Sam Houston State University; Kristen Shuyler, Libraries Communications and Outreach, James Madison University; Ashly L. Smith, College of Business, Sam Houston State University; Deborah Smith-Howell, Academic Affairs, University of Nebraska–Omaha; Emma Thacker, Early, Elementary, and Reading Education Department, James Madison University; Daniel Fidalgo Tome, Stockton University (formerly; now Rutgers University Camden); Carah Ong Whaley, Center for Civic Engagement, James Madison University; Jamie Williams, Community Service-Learning, James Madison University.

### **Abstract**

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities' American Democracy Project (ADP) and the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE), located at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, formed a 3-year partnership to pilot a process for fostering institutional change in order to advance political learning and engagement on college campuses. The project's multidimensional approach to collecting information, deploying dialogues, and crafting interventions provided insight into the necessity of generating institutional support for civic engagement initiatives.

This report reviews the goals, plan, and process of the 3-year, multi-phased initiative. Throughout the report, the authors weave the results of multi-stage evaluations of the project's successes, challenges, and lessons learned; evaluations drawn from a mid-term survey and focus groups; and evaluations of exit focus groups upon the completion of the project. The report also includes testimonials from campus teams which offer direct insight on a range of project stages. In addition, the authors offer a meta-analysis of the reports each campus team produced from its own focus groups and interviews, identifying common themes and overarching findings.

The authors found that qualitative methods, followed by dialogue, represented an effective approach to assessing and shifting campus climates for political learning and engagement. Not only did this approach produce compelling insights and influence campus structures and culture, but it also catalyzed change. Campuses reported that the dialogic approach used in the focus groups during the assessment phase fostered discussion, raised awareness, and generated interest in political learning and democracy.

The authors also found that a cohort model and the multi-campus community of practice strengthened both the project and the participating representatives from the campuses. The importance of the community of practice speaks to the broader ethos of conversation, collaboration, and community in the project.

*Keywords:* American Democracy Project, ADP, IDHE, Institute for Democracy, campus climate, political engagement, higher education

## Introduction

by Cathy Copeland, Director of the American Democracy Project

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities' American Democracy Project (ADP) and the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE), located at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life, formed a 3-year partnership to pilot a process for fostering institutional change in order to advance political learning and engagement on college campuses. The project's multidimensional approach to collecting information, deploying dialogues, and crafting interventions provided insight into the necessity of generating institutional support for civic engagement initiatives. The following report encompasses strategies and recommendations for future projects.

In 2017, in collaboration with the community created at the annual Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) Meeting, ADP created and disseminated a [Theory of Change](#) that is organized around [four guiding questions](#) and that highlights the importance of fully integrating civic engagement work throughout curricular and co-curricular programming and across a campus. The CLDE Theory of Change also stresses the value of moving beyond episodic interventions so students can build the habit of informed engagement. In an effort to understand how to build generative and relational civic-engagement campus climates, the ADP-IDHE team qualitatively assessed campuses through focus groups and campus-wide dialogues. Strategically, for ADP, the results of this work provided critical insight into the value of communities of practice (CoPs) within the realm of civic engagement and how deliberative dialogues can be strategically deployed on campuses. Thanks to this report, ADP recognized the value of creating CoPs that connect on specific topics, generate useful outcomes, and continue to build community, and ADP built a strong foundation for COP- and dialogue-based work. For this reason, and many others, I appreciate the report, and I hope readers will find it of value as they think about how to create engaged campus climates.

All of ADP's work, including this report, brings me hope during this time of upheaval and fear. The ADP-IDHE project started pre-pandemic and before my tenure at ADP, and the project concluded just a few months into the pandemic. The ongoing thread within this work is how direct action on the part of close-knit communities that care about the strength and well-being of their institutions can effect remarkable change. As the pandemic lingers in the world, this work—and the work produced by multiple CoPs at ADP institutions—demonstrates the sustainability of civic engagement.

## Project Overview

In the fall of 2017, ADP and IDHE formed a partnership to pilot a process for fostering institutional change in order to advance political learning and engagement in democracy in higher education. Working with 12 ADP institutions nationwide, IDHE designed and coached campuses through an iterative change process of planning, assessment, and campus-wide dialogue to identify interventions.

The ADP-IDHE project was designed with the overarching goal of improving student political learning and participation in democracy, with targeted interests in the state of political discourse and equitable political participation. It was also designed to test a methodology for institutional self-assessment and institutional change. Specifically, the goals and deliverables were to:

- form a multi-campus learning community for exchanging ideas and support;
- explore the possibility of developing a reliable and replicable approach to assessing and improving campus climates for political learning and engagement;
- identify interventions for other campuses' consideration and use;
- produce presentations and scholarly and practice-oriented publications;
- identify model institutions from which others can learn; and,
- identify individuals at participating campuses who can guide new cohorts of campuses pursuing the same process and goals.

Through this collaboration, project coordinators wanted to learn whether campuses could work with a set of instructions from and coaching by IDHE to engage in a process of self-assessment that would lead to institutional change. Could individuals at the participating campuses develop the expertise to serve on a research team to conduct climate studies at other institutions or, alternatively, coach new cohorts of campuses through the process? What tools and support are needed? And perhaps most importantly, how can climate studies result in institutional change, not just a report, as is the case with many other campus-climate efforts?

### **Project Design and Goals**

The project design incorporated several phases over the 3-year period:

1. **Planning:** Forming a strategic, diverse coalition, articulating goals, tailoring messaging, studying institutional change processes, learning to conduct qualitative climate assessments, conducting dialogues, and identifying interventions.
2. **Assessment:** There were two approaches used in this project: assessment done by an independent, external research team (two campuses) and an internal self-assessment process with coaching by IDHE (10 campuses). All assessments included focus groups from all constituencies on campus using a common analytic framework, protocol, coding scheme, and reporting outline. The process included obtaining permission from each institution's institutional review board (IRB).
3. **Dialogue:** Planned and facilitated campus-wide discussions about the report results, designed to lead to interventions and change.
4. **Implementation:** A plan, beyond the anticipated 2-year timeframe of the project, for implementing the interventions.

The project faced several unforeseen challenges that interrupted momentum, caused delays, and extended the original 2-year timeline to 3 years. The most significant were (1) obtaining IRB approval from each campus, (2) completing the self-assessment phase, and (3) completing campus-wide dialogues in the wake of COVID-19.

We secured the resources for two climate studies to be conducted by an independent (external) research team consisting of four experienced qualitative researchers from IDHE, ADP,

and participating campuses.<sup>1</sup> For these two external studies, the research team visited each campus, collected and analyzed data, and wrote draft reports. The other 10 campuses went through a process of self-assessment, under guidance from IDHE. At the end of the assessment phase, the campuses or external research team reported on the findings from the assessments. While individual reports are confidential, all institutions agreed to share aggregated findings without attribution to an individual campus.<sup>2</sup>

The 12 campuses<sup>3</sup> selected for this project included the following:

- University of Nebraska–Omaha (UNO); Omaha, NE
- Keene State College (KSC); Keene, NH
- James Madison University (JMU); Harrisonburg, VA
- Illinois State University (ISU); Normal, IL
- Stockton University (SU); Galloway Township, NJ
- Ferris State University (Ferris); Big Rapids, MI
- Weber State University (WSU); Ogden, UT
- Central State University (CSU); Wilberforce, OH
- Sam Houston State University (SHSU); Huntsville, TX
- Fayetteville State University (FSU); Fayetteville, NC
- San Francisco State University (SFSU); San Francisco, CA
- Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI); Indianapolis, IN

A crucial aspect of the project involved the development of a community of practice among representatives of the campus teams. Through this CoP, the campuses shared experiences and learning, with a goal of improving results and building long-term partnerships and relationships. The community was built through regular gatherings, both virtual and in-person. Campus teams shared their successes and challenges, and discussed all aspects of the project. The CoP met face-to-face at three conferences where project organizers ran workshops and exchanged ideas. The importance of the CoP speaks to the project’s broader ethos of conversation, collaboration, and community.

---

<sup>1</sup> This team included Nancy Thomas, Jennifer Domagal-Goldman, Ishara Casellas Connors, and Stephen Hunt.

<sup>2</sup> For the original climate studies conducted by IDHE, researchers obtained “exempt status” approval from Tufts’ IRB based on a review concluding that the study would cause no “harm” to any human subjects; the 10 original campuses then submitted Tufts’ exemption to their own IRBs for a simple and quick approval. However, in this case, unfortunately, because the 10 campuses were conducting the focus groups and collecting the data on their own, each had to seek individual IRB approval from its respective institution. IDHE produced a model application for the institutions to use, but different IRBs required unique materials. Ultimately, securing IRB approval at the 10 campuses delayed the project more than 6 months.

<sup>3</sup> Campuses are generally anonymized in this report, in the interest of confidentiality; however, campus stories feature identified authors.

## Process and Reflections

To provide a clear picture of how the pilot progressed through its phases, this section details four aspects of the project structure—building and managing on-campus coalitions, assessment, reporting, and dialogues—and presents both reflections from project coordinators and campus-authored stories.

### Building and Managing On-Campus Coalitions

As a means of securing buy-in from leadership, guaranteeing sustainability, and generating support for the project across campus, participating institutions were asked to build coalitions. Ideally, these coalitions would include people with diverse positional authority, relevant skills and knowledge, and influence. Project organizers guided campus teams through coalition selection with these goals in mind, and campus teams in turn did substantial work to strategically build their coalitions. Given the scope of the project, with a 3-year timeline that included intensive research and eventual interventions, the construction of strong coalitions was vital. Furthermore, coalition building was itself a kind of intervention; by requiring this step, the project helped campuses build connections and interest that will benefit future work on political learning and engagement. Indeed, in the evaluations, participants indicated that one of the notable benefits of their participation was the connections they made in doing the work.

Generally, participants also reported that the coalition-building process went well, at least initially. Most coalitions comprised 10 or more members, ranging from students to faculty and staff to community members, and included leaders such as deans, a vice president for advancement, the director of a center for community engagement, and an associate vice chancellor of student affairs. The offices that participated most frequently in the project were student affairs, community or civic engagement, academic affairs, institutional research, and specific academic departments such as communication and political science. The variety of positions and offices represented on coalitions paints an encouraging picture of diverse and substantial support for the work at participating campuses to start the project. As mentioned, however, several campuses reported significant turnover and/or disengagement over time in their coalitions. Some campuses rebuilt their coalitions, but many simply had to complete the project with dwindling numbers of personnel.

Reflecting on the project design, project coordinators were confident in the decision to include this step as a prerequisite for project participation. Campus coalition members were instrumental in the planning and implementation of all steps of the process, and the connections made through the coalitions continue to benefit those working on political learning and engagement at participating institutions. However, any future iteration of the project should build in mechanisms and strategies for maintaining coalitions or rebuilding them when turnover occurs.

### **Reflection on Coalition Building**

by Leah Murray, Weber State University

Weber State University understood that coalition building was integral to the implementation of the ADP-IDHE project. We understood that the better put together the coalition, the better the entire project would run. To a certain extent, the WSU experience bears that out. Early on, we put in quite a bit of work coalition building, and this work allowed us to negotiate the obstacles that proved insurmountable on some other campuses. First, WSU has conducted its ADP campus work as a partnership between academic affairs and student affairs since 2005. We recognized early that the work of engaging the next generation of citizens could not just happen in a curricular space since our students spend so much of their time in co-curricular worlds. We built a partnership between the two divisions to foster democratic engagement on our campus. When we began the ADP-IDHE project, we built our coalition on that core partnership.

The two co-chairs of the project were a faculty and a staff member, laying the foundation for a strong project because it had the support of two administrators. Because we intentionally engaged more than one division from the beginning, the work was less vulnerable to leadership changes. Furthermore, having a faculty member as a co-chair gave credibility to the project among other faculty. They were willing to send students to focus groups because they understood the scholarly worth of the project. Faculty were also willing to respond to invitations and queries for information from another faculty member. Having a staff member as a co-chair lent logistical support to the project, as people in student affairs are generally better at mobilizing students. Since the project had many moving parts, having planning support was critical. When one of the co-chairs left the university, the project did not halt because the other co-chair was still responsible for the work. Again, having this balance protected us from that vulnerability.

The ADP-IDHE campus-climate project was about the entire climate and as such could not be siloed in one area. WSU used a snowball method to find people who cared about the work and were committed. We then met regularly, engaging every member of the coalition in the project. First, we expected every member to find students, faculty, and staff to attend the focus groups. Second, whenever we met, we revisited the importance of the work and what we were learning. Sometimes people proved not as committed or cycled off due to other obligations, but our snowball method meant we kept finding new people to replace them. Over time we created a core group of people who are still working on our campus climate. The project's ending did not end the coalition's presence on campus. Because we expected members of the coalition to fully engage in the work, most felt ownership of the result. They felt pride in what we learned and remained committed throughout the project.

Currently, the ADP-IDHE project coalition has evolved into a permanent presence on campus: the Political Engagement Coalition (<https://www.weber.edu/pec/>), tasked with conducting dialogues, known as campus-climate conversations, as a complement to human resources training. The PEC has been mentioned in campus-wide town halls by the university president as well as the vice presidents. Again, because more than one division was invested in the work, we were able to institutionalize campus-climate work for democracy.



### **Reflection on Coalition Building**

by Jennifer Shea, San Francisco State University

The San Francisco State University coalition was built and led by two faculty members who got involved with the project by invitation from the university provost. The provost provided modest summer stipends for the faculty members and funding for a work-study student to assist with coalition management. The faculty co-leaders consulted with the provost to develop a list of potential coalition members which would capture a cross-section of faculty, staff, and students, reflecting a diversity of social and political identities on campus. The faculty co-leaders sent email invitations to individuals on the list and followed up with phone or in-person conversations as needed to confirm participation. This process resulted in a coalition of 21 members of the campus community, including faculty from each of the six academic colleges and the library, staff from targeted student-serving units, and a mix of undergraduate and graduate students. The coalition included a six-member research team of three faculty and three students who served as the coalition nucleus. While this process worked well for forming a diverse coalition and garnering their participation in the first few meetings, the research team struggled to sustain widespread engagement among coalition members even through the first year of the project.

There are several overlapping explanations for these challenges. One explanation is that there was a mismatch between the time and resources the research team and other coalition members had to dedicate to the project and the time and resources needed to effectively manage it. Those constraints were exacerbated by the fact that SFSU got involved in the project a few months later than most of the other university partners, so we were “running to catch up” in the spring 2018 semester. As a result, we did not take enough time to cement coalition members’ deep commitment to active participation for the duration of the project. Another related explanation is that we underestimated the time and administrative support resources needed to sustain those commitments and manage active participation in the coalition over time. The faculty co-leaders had other substantial leadership roles on campus, and it is widely recognized that many members of the campus community are overburdened with meetings and service responsibilities, forcing them to prioritize the ones deemed most urgent at any given time. A third explanation is that the campus was undergoing another campus-climate study spearheaded by the university’s recently created Division of Equity and Inclusion; that study was being conducted by an external group and enjoyed substantial financial support. Finally, and related to a few of our findings, many members of the campus community are tentative in the degree to which they trust that the university’s commitment to civic and political engagement is reflected in bureaucratic policies and practices.

## Assessment

As the core of the project, assessment was necessarily the longest and most intensive part of the process. The qualitative research methods—including focus groups and interviews with participants from all sectors of a campus—were developed by IDHE researchers as an evolution of previous campus-climate studies on political learning and engagement. In 2014, IDHE launched its initial studies, which eventually encompassed 10 colleges and universities. The theoretical framework for the research comprised an augmented version Bolman and Deal’s (2003) organizational study framework and was the first of its kind for campus-climate studies specific to political learning and engagement. The framework consisted of four focal areas: structural, political, human, and cultural. The codebook was also structured according to the framework and refined over the course of the initial studies. In 2017, IDHE published the methodologies (Thomas & Brower, 2018) and findings of those initial campus-climate studies, referred to as Politics 365 (Thomas & Brower, 2017). That same year, IDHE and ADP launched the pilot project using and adapting IDHE’s research design.

IDHE created protocols for interviews and focus groups (specific to students, faculty, staff, and administrators), developed a codebook that was refined with the help of project participants, and produced guidance and materials for facilitating the analysis process. Campuses charged with completing a self-study formed research teams to complete the assessment process, while the two external-study campuses received visits from IDHE researchers assisted by ADP and other project personnel. These external teams conducted the focus groups and interviews, and coded and analyzed the

### **Sidebar: Seeking Participants: Coalitions and Focus Groups**

by Steven Koether, Sam Houston State University

We made every effort to engage participation from a variety of campus stakeholders. Even with methodical, intentional, full-effort, purposive sampling and requests for participation, we found it difficult to engage demographics with positional power and privilege; in our context and area, these individuals are typically male, White, and/or ideologically right-leaning. It took extra care, time, and intentionality to include these individuals in coalition work and in focus groups. The coalition found this discrepancy to be both a finding and a variable worth addressing in future endeavors. Such an absence can lead to siloed thinking, limit perspective, and hinder the potential success of campus initiatives. Navigating how we increase participation from these demographics will be difficult. Asking minoritized campus stakeholders with less positional power and privilege to put greater effort and energy into engaging this demographic could exacerbate underlying inequalities.

**Sidebar: Interviews Versus Focus Groups**

by Steven Koether, Sam Houston State University

When conducting focus groups, the coalition realized quickly that it needed to separate participants with varying degrees of power within the institution. For instance, supervisors participated in different focus groups than their direct reports. Many participants requested this arrangement so they could maintain anonymity and speak freely. During focus groups with high-ranking participants, we found that many engaged in nothing but praise for the institution and institutional processes. The contrast between the levels of reflection and insight into challenges and areas for growth, between employees with greater power and privilege and those with less was quite disparate. This realization indicated a need for greater dialogue, collaboration, and shared governance. The one exception arose with the inclusion of a particularly thoughtful and healthfully critical administrator. The individual's presence and words engaged the entire group in deeper discussion. To attain greater insight and reflection, the intentional inclusion of more thoughtful individuals may be required in future investigative endeavors. Per request, the coalition engaged some upper-level administrators using interviews rather than focus groups. While this eased the coalition's ability to schedule the meeting and create more anonymity for the individual, it resulted in minimal data collection and reflection. Expertise in qualitative inquiry was not enough to garner meaningful data collection. It also required practice, failure, and knowledge of the participants themselves. Singular, planned attempts to collect data will never suffice; intentional, persistent inquiry is key.

data before producing reports. The self-study campuses took responsibility for all parts of the assessment process, with ongoing coaching from IDHE researchers in both group webinars and, for some, individual sessions. Furthermore, because the 10 self-study campuses conducted the focus groups and collected the data on their own, they each had to seek individual IRB approval from their institutions, which often proved a lengthy process.

Qualitative research methods in campus-climate studies can offer numerous benefits, including the ability to investigate with greater nuance and to build connections and elevate voices in a campus environment. The methods, in a sense, can become the means. By bringing people into the conversation and building relationships, several campuses reported that doing the research itself was akin to an intervention for improving the climate around political learning and engagement. Campus teams reported widely that the findings they produced were valuable in attracting the attention of administrators, starting conversations, and providing the substantive backbone to argue for improvements to political learning and engagement.

The benefits of the qualitative methods are significant and speak to the power of the project, though the resources and assets required to successfully complete this process were extensive. Two

campuses from the original 10 self-study campuses were unable to complete the assessment phase. For both, turnover and insufficient resources of personnel, time, and money proved insurmountable. Project participants reported some measure of difficulty, variously, with recruiting students for focus groups, the length of the question protocols, and the complexity of the codebook. There was variance across teams in both the levels of experience with qualitative research and the number of people to help with the research process; both factors were important to campus teams' experience with the assessment phase.

Those campuses that brought in external researchers had the benefit of an external team conducting the focus groups, coding and analyzing data, and producing reports. This reduced personnel and time demands, directly involved researchers with a mastery of IDHE's methods, and forced campuses to organize focus groups and interviews in the short time when teams could be on campus, expediting the process relative to the self-study campuses. Some project participants also discussed the potential benefit of legitimacy and accountability when an external team conducts the research, though some acknowledged that an internal research team has the benefit of local knowledge and relationships. Regardless, the external studies were notably efficient, suggesting a potential project model in the future.

Overall, the project coordinators were impressed with the strength of the assessment method but also aware that the method is resource intensive. Almost universally, project participants praised the ability of the qualitative method to produce insights that could start conversations, involve key decisionmakers, and facilitate change around political learning and engagement—all while elevating voices in the campus community and building relationships.

### **Planning for Focus Groups**

by Jodi Benenson, Barbara Pickering, Andrea M. Weare (University of Nebraska Omaha), and Anthony M. Starke, Jr. (University of Colorado Denver)

Planning for focus groups in a university setting requires focused and strategic planning, especially when involving a diverse set of stakeholders in a project. Our research team spent considerable time strategizing and cultivating campus connections to meet and achieve our goals. First, we learned that the academic calendar would likely influence participation. For example, we found that while staff and a small group of students were available during the summer months to participate in the focus groups, the majority of faculty and student focus groups needed to take place in the spring and fall 2018 semesters to accommodate schedules. Second, we needed to consider the time of day the focus groups took place. For example, because student government meetings took place in the evenings, we coordinated with student government representatives to hold the focus groups for these participants in the evenings. All staff focus groups took place over the lunch hour, while faculty focus groups were spread out during different times of day. Third, as a mixed/residential commuter university split into two campuses, focus groups took place in buildings on both campuses to increase representation in and access to participation. We also made sure, when possible, that each room had movable desks and chairs to create a comfortable and accessible focus-group environment. Finally, our coalition, which consisted of diverse representatives from across campus, ensured that we had the support needed during the planning phase of the focus groups.

## Reporting

Representing the culmination of the assessment phase, reports on findings that emerged from the coding and analysis process were intended to help campuses share their results with the campus community. IDHE produced the first two reports for the external-study campuses; these reports were intentionally structured in two different ways to offer templates for the self-study participants. The first report presented findings under the framework of strengths of and challenges to the institution's climate for political learning and engagement. The second organized findings according to the theoretical framework's political, structural, human, and cultural components. Self-study campuses chose from these templates and modified as needed.

Of the original 12 campuses, two could not complete the assessment process, and a third did not finish its report, though it did complete its assessment. As mentioned, the project evaluations revealed that reports were considered valuable in the insights they produced and their usefulness as tools for starting conversations and securing buy-in for further work on political learning. The written reports helped campus teams communicate their findings and the value of the project. They were also intended to inform dialogues, as described in the following section.

Conclusions about the superiority of one report template over the other were ambiguous. The template organized according to the theoretical framework had the potential to appear more rigorous and, because of its structure, reflected the coding and analysis process better. Reports organized by strengths and challenges, however, were potentially more accessible for campus audiences pursuing tangible interventions to improve the campus climate. Furthermore, a third option for reporting emerged, with at least one campus choosing to simply list key findings from

### Sidebar: Reporting

by Leah Murray, Weber State University

As one of the campuses that received a report from IDHE rather than creating our own, WSU did not have a choice in its reporting approach. We were given the strengths and challenges reporting structure, for which we were grateful. The conceptual framework approach is excellent for those who understand the nature of qualitative research; the strengths and challenges framework works for everyone else, and when we used our results to inform campus-climate work moving forward, it was very accessible to all stakeholders. As we presented the results, whether in town hall or dialogue settings or in one-on-one meetings, we were able to point to the strengths and challenges table in the report and move immediately to next steps. We did not spend time explaining the rubric, the concept definitions, or the coding process; we just addressed what had to be done. We used the report findings to target specific people. For example, we learned that our campus climate had allowed conflict to develop between students who are members of the Church of Latter-Day Saints and those who are not. In light of that finding, one of the first report conversations was with the director of the LDS Institute on campus. That conversation has led to a strong relationship, and the director is very supportive of resolving that conflict over time. The report itself became a very powerful catalyst for change on our campus because we were able to point to its findings and then fine-tune our response. For instance, we received support to host the campus-climate work in the Office of Diversity since our report indicated that WSU's campus climate was not inclusive of political diversity.

the analysis process. This type of report had the benefit of simplicity and flexibility. The project

### **Reflection on Assessment/Reporting**

by Jennifer Shea, San Francisco State University

The six-member research team was especially helpful for organizing and administering 11 focus groups and two individual interviews between June and October 2018. Three members of the research team attended most focus groups—with faculty administering the questions and students taking notes (sessions were also recorded)—and completed the rubric together immediately after each focus group’s conclusion. This process helped ensure that we captured the main takeaways from each focus group robustly and in the moment, while also allowing us to examine the notes and recordings more systematically when analyzing the data and writing the report. One of the faculty co-leaders and a student research team member led the qualitative data coding and preliminary analysis. The entire research team reviewed the preliminary analysis and worked collectively to identify and prioritize themes in order to highlight the most salient findings and contextualize them for the campus. The research team invited input from the coalition on preliminary findings and solicited ideas for recommendations. Together, they identified six key findings, several of which expressed contradictions between dominant narratives and perceived realities, such as:

The urban context of San Francisco, including its demographic diversity and political progressivism, lends to and supports the campus commitment to diversity, liberalism, and activism. However, this de facto diversity does not always result in inclusion for all groups on campus. In addition, that context limits diversity of political thought and expression.

We then identified a set of seven broad recommendations intended to shape campus dialogues around the findings and inform more specific actionable recommendations. For example:

Recommendation #5. Celebrate Campus Diversity and Promote Inclusion. Given our finding that while diversity on campus is valued by students, staff, faculty, and administrators, many feel that it is a de facto result of being located in the Bay Area and lacks effective strategies to promote inclusion (Finding #2), we recommend the campus develop a process for identifying strategies to implement. This could present a good opportunity to engage in a campus wide discussion about the other persistent question (Finding #6a) we identify in our findings, about SF State’s campus identity and its relationship to the shared history and sense of values on campus.

Before finalizing and distributing the report, we shared the final draft with the provost, who provided valuable suggestions for adding data from other sources to supplement the analysis. We distributed the final report broadly across campus.

was designed so that self-study campuses could take ownership of the process, and the variation in report types speaks to the agency that campus teams had in shaping their outputs. Although the assessment phase overall was delayed, the quality of reports produced was notable, and campus teams found the reporting process helpful.

## Dialogues

Drawing on a structure developed by Everyday Democracy,<sup>4</sup> IDHE included in the project a plan for campuses to host dialogues that would offer their communities an opportunity to discuss the report conclusions and devise recommended interventions. IDHE envisioned dialogues that were framed, planned, facilitated, and action-oriented. They could be conducted with small or large groups, but the hope was that the dialogues would be attended well enough to offer the campus community a chance to provide input on the report findings and to impact subsequent actions. At the conclusion of the pilot, the results of the dialogue phase were mixed. This was partially due to the delays already mentioned; several campuses needed almost the full 3 years to complete the assessment and, paired with the interruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were unable to plan and execute dialogues before the writing of this report.

That said, six campus teams did host dialogues, though the structure of these dialogues varied. One campus used initial dialogues, while a member investigated conclusions of the report, tweaked their findings to incorporate that input, and then moved to action-oriented dialogues. Other campuses centered multiple dialogues on key findings from the reports with an eye toward potential interventions; another held one extended dialogue with key stakeholders to identify next steps; and others used their report to frame issue-based discussions. Participant numbers varied from 30–40 to upwards of 200, and included students, faculty, staff, and administrators. The campuses that hosted dialogues reported that they went well, with some dialogues leading to ideas for interventions.

### Sidebar: Dialogues

by Lori Britt, James Madison University

A key finding from JMU’s climate study was that our “culture of niceness” presents a challenge to political learning and engagement. Separate dialogues for faculty/staff and students were designed and led by trained graduate and undergraduate students. In several faculty/staff dialogues, the challenge of how to develop a both–and culture was explored: “How can the university continue being a friendly and welcoming campus while also promoting rigorous discussions and active engagement on challenging public issues?” Participants generated ideas and, to ensure that the talk would lead to action on a variety of levels, participants were asked to complete a 5/5/5 reflection: What could they do in the next 5 minutes and the next 5 days to make a connection or develop an idea, and what did they want to have underway in 5 months? This 5/5/5 tool encourages accountability and action, and highlights issues that need to be addressed by individuals and at the system level.

<sup>4</sup> Everyday Democracy (<https://www.everyday-democracy.org/>) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that works with communities to solve problems through dialogues that lead to action and change.

Project coordinators felt that the dialogue process could have been more successful if the timeline for project completion had been streamlined and campus facilitators had been able to participate in a thorough training on facilitating difficult dialogues, along with the always present need for more resources for campus teams. Some teams had the benefit of established dialogue

**Project Reflection: Engaging Students in Talk About “Talking About Politics”: Modeling Possibility**

by Lori Britt, James Madison University

When you learn that many students on your campus don't feel comfortable talking about politics and in fact claim that they came to your university because they thought it would be a place they could avoid such discomfort, what do you do? Well, you bring them together to talk about politics and public issues, of course.

We suggest bringing them together to talk not about politics and public issues directly, but about why they are so hesitant and wary of engaging in such talk in the first place. You engage them in dialogue that seeks to gain new perspectives and vantages to more fully understand an issue in all its complexity. You engage with a spirit of curiosity and extend empathy to better understand their concerns and fears. You have it led by other students who have some training in facilitation and in creating a space where they can be brave enough to be vulnerable, honest, and self-reflective.

In talking about their concerns, they raise political and public issues as examples and begin to explore them. What emerges is a conversation that helps students learn from one another and a place where students recognize that, although this kind of talk is difficult, it can also be rewarding. They learn that they can talk with people who hold different views, and they start to ask each other questions that seek to understand another's perspective, rather than requiring someone to defend their ideas.

When you offer students a view onto the possibilities that a true dialogue offers, they end up wondering why they can't do this more often. They muse about what it would be like if these kinds of discussions happened in more of their classes. They learn that, although they may have been taught that talking about politics in “mixed company” is not polite, it is crucial and can be productive. In short, they leave wanting more.

centers or teams working on the project; thus, these campuses had an easier time planning and executing facilitated dialogues. Given that the disparity in expertise directly affected campus capacity on this project, we recommend facilitator training.

Notably, one campus suggested collapsing the assessment and dialogue phases into one. Dialogues could be considered part of the research process and conducted concurrently with focus groups. While project coordinators understood the difficulties inherent in the project and the desire to combine those phases, the dialogues must follow the assessment process and use the findings as the backbone for discussions that spur action. Nevertheless, work could be done during the assessment process to generate more successful dialogues. Overall, robust dialogues produced impressive results, and campuses attested to their benefits, but, due to the pandemic, too few campuses were able to host dialogues, and the translation from dialogues to identified and operationalized interventions was lacking. Tweaks to the timeline, a more concrete

structure for dialogues, and increased resources could alleviate these shortcomings.



### **Project Reflection**

by Jodi Benenson, Barbara Pickering, Andrea M. Weare (University of Nebraska Omaha), and Anthony M. Starke, Jr. (University of Colorado Denver)

Managing expectations influenced the project's success, particularly because roles and leadership on the project varied across campuses. For instance, at UNO, the project was housed within Academic Affairs but was coordinated, planned, and implemented by two faculty members on a 9-month contract in the public administration and communication departments. At other institutions, project leaders were staff members or held administrative roles centered on civic or community engagement. We learned quickly that this variation in project leadership had implications for the time individuals could commit to the project and how effectively a project could be implemented.

When inviting institutions to participate in a large-scale project such as this, the institutions leading the initiative must clearly articulate project expectations and identify resources that can be provided. It is crucial to consider elements such as time for training and availability of financial and human resources.

To ensure that we were managing overall project expectations, project leaders met regularly for reflection on and conversation about the project. These regular meetings, which took place virtually, offered opportunities to check in with each other, troubleshoot, and brainstorm ways to manage project requirements. Being clear and upfront about project expectations and providing space for reflection during the project itself contributed to the success of this national endeavor.

### **Project Reflection**

by Jennifer Boehm, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis

When I heard about the ADP-IDHE pilot project, which offered us an opportunity to assess our campus climate for political learning and democratic engagement, I jumped at the chance to participate. Our ADP group had languished over the years, and without involvement in particular programs, we were losing reasons to meet. Through the ADP-IDHE project, we had time to reflect and to engage with people across campus about how we could improve our ability to graduate students who are active and contributing members of their communities. This opportunity has revived and expanded our ADP group, giving us a slew of new ideas to pursue.

There was no shortage of students, faculty, and staff interested in the topic of political learning and democratic engagement, but the hardest part was finding times when an adequate number of them were available to participate in focus groups and dialogue sessions. After sending out broad invites to audiences we thought would be interested, we eventually learned that a personalized, targeted approach was more effective. Once the sessions started, there was often not enough time for everyone to share their thoughts within the allotted time. The conversations were often lively, and many creative approaches and ideas were generated. A focus group with six participants was about the maximum we could accommodate in 90 minutes.

Some of the highlights of this process included finding new allies across campus interested in supporting the work, strengthening our ADP committee, generating many new ideas and projects, making connections between focus group and dialogue participants (which have continued on), and broadening the scope of our ADP committee to include more curricular and systemic approaches that will reach more students.

**Project Reflection**

by Sidney Williams, Central State University

As students return to their respective campuses across the country, they bring a host of emotions—happiness, excitement, fear, and anxiety. At CSU, Ohio's only public historically Black college/university (HBCU), many of our students also bring the mental and emotional burdens that their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents carried and carry today resulting from overt, micro, and systemic racism. As such, the ADP-IDHE pilot project was especially meaningful for our participating students as it gave them an opportunity to voice their concerns and frustrations about the campus community, the nearest city to the university, and the surrounding cities that comprise the region. For some, the killing of John Crawford by a police officer at a nearby Walmart in 2014 was not a distant memory but a reminder going forward. Nevertheless, students were enthusiastic to offer ideas for positive change and eagerly engaged in the project. They were thankful to be heard and hopeful for change.

### **Project Reflection**

by Lance R. Lippert & Stephen K. Hunt, Illinois State University

In many ways, ISU is like many other Midwestern public universities, but it certainly has its own identity and unique culture, complete with a rich tradition, a hearty commitment to teaching and learning, and many dedicated individuals who live our institutional culture. There are many institutional representations of our cultural values, and a growing commitment to diversity, inclusion, and cultural sensitivity is chief among them. Regarding ISU's political learning climate, there is significant potential, but our findings demonstrated a lack of sustainability, education, support, relevancy, and awareness for efficient and successful collaboration among ISU stakeholders to achieve positive political learning outcomes across the curriculum and co-curriculum. Overall, our findings indicated a lack of political engagement and political learning at ISU. Colloquially, as one participant voiced, ISU has both the "rubber" and the "road," but the "rubber does not hit the road often enough."

Reflecting on our project assessment, the process seemed to parallel our findings: individuals cautious to commit; espoused values but minimal active examples of artifacts and practices; often overworked individuals; and a lack of dynamic collaboration. In general, the climate for political learning was often difficult to capture and frequently held different connotations for participants. As with any field work, garnering representative participation as well as developing truthful, accurate analysis was challenging.

The original goal of building an inclusive coalition and recruiting focus-group participants from students, faculty, staff, and administrators from across all six colleges and multiple hierarchal layers was tempered due to: participants' inability to grasp the concept of "political learning," paranoia or risk aversion to the politics of the word "political," the claim of "being too busy" by ISU stakeholders, a lack of buy-in or belief due to the lack of follow-through after the previous study, the "timing" of the project creating a general fatigue given a recent campus-climate survey, personnel issues across campus including a changing staff in the provost's office, and a general apathy due to political weariness, lack of ownership, or just not caring enough to get involved. Overcoming these challenges to completing the assessment took persistence and a reliance on a collection of very dedicated individuals at the core of the coalition team. Because of given limitations, this type of research can never be perfect, but it can be authentic and meaningful, producing an accurate portrait of the political-learning landscape on our campus. The team often paused to replace or widen the participatory circle for the exact combination of participants—which never happened—rather than keep moving forward. This "pause" created other issues in this fluid process, preventing the assessment from ending.

Although our findings are not generalizable, our research process is repeatable and our findings truthful. One caveat regarding the overall project is to adequately adapt the protocol and larger project instructions to the culture and context of each unique campus. Fortunately, our team made this an iterative process and learned as we progressed, setting the stage for our campus dialogues and action plans. We have established partnerships and aligned with other campus initiatives to avoid duplication and work toward larger university goals consistent with our individual and institutional values to deepen ISU's commitment to political learning.

**Project Reflection: Administrative Support Matters**

by Kim Schmidt-Gagne, Keene State College

KSC has a remarkable history of entrepreneurship and an impressive track record of leveraging “volunteerism” into something more. We make big things happen with very few resources. What started as a faculty member’s book collection has now become the only undergraduate major in Holocaust and Genocide Studies. Without civic engagement appearing officially in anyone’s position description or an assigned budget, KSC has been recognized as a Carnegie Engaged Campus and has been honored with three nationally recognized awards for our work, and civic engagement is one of our College-Wide Learning Outcomes, so our involvement in this project seemed like the next logical step.

Like many higher education institutions, KSC has seen our fair share of turmoil. Over the course of this project, we have had four different leaders of academic affairs, seen our enrollment shrink by 27%, and experienced the loss of all but three of the original 15-member coalition through various employee-separation programs put forth by the institution. Release time was not available for faculty to work on the project, nor was compensation for coalition staff or administrative support. Volunteerism is a part of our history, so these challenges did not initially seem like causes for concern.

Given the enrollment decrease and resulting fiscal challenges, various academic leaders had differing levels of understanding, commitment, and bandwidth for civic engagement projects. Even with a dwindling coalition, we completed our interviews; however, the time and expertise needed to code and analyze the documents was elusive. Several attempts to analyze the data were launched, but none was completed, leaving a single staff member to finish the data processing and summary portions of the project, which was not able to move to the dialogues. Our initial observations of the transcripts showed patterns similar to our NSSE results. During focus groups, our first-year students did not share experiences or language associated with civic engagement. Their responses tended to focus on their involvement in campus tradition, while our seniors were able to articulate classroom and co-curricular discussions and events. Several seniors commented that civic engagement, particularly political engagement, was in KSC’s “DNA.” This may be the result of the number of political visitors who came to our campus over the previous 18 months.

Correspondingly, NSSE found that, on the civic engagement module, while our first-year students scored below our comparators, our seniors scored significantly higher than other seniors nationally on 17 of 24 NSSE measures of civic engagement ( $p < .05$  for all comparisons; and  $p < .001$  and effect size  $> .30$  for the following: college emphasizes voting; college encourages free speech and expression; and feeling encouraged to address important social, economic, or political issues in course discussions). KSC seniors scored significantly higher than their peers nationally on reflective and integrative learning, student–faculty interaction, and experience with effective teaching practices, and also higher than their regional peers on experience with a supportive campus environment ( $p < .05$  and effect size  $> .30$  for all comparisons). These NSSE findings are similar to results from previous NSSE surveys.

In debriefs on our involvement with this project, several takeaways emerged. In the absence of full-time faculty and/or staff dedicated to civic engagement work, the current self-reflection model is challenging and would recommend that a visiting-team option be developed.

### Thematic Findings: Meta-Analysis of Campus Reports

ADP and IDHE researchers conducted an analysis of all completed reports,<sup>5</sup> from which some prominent themes emerged. As mentioned previously, the assessment process was based on a series of 10 campus-climate studies conducted by IDHE from 2014–2016. These studies were designed around a theoretical framework that examined institutions in relation to the following four components:

1. **Structural:** policies, departments, programs, and physical spaces.
2. **Political:** internal and external factors that shape institutional governance and decision making.
3. **Cultural:** shared norms, values and principles, history, symbols, and symbolic events.
4. **Human:** composition, behaviors, competencies, and knowledge.

In Table 1 and in the following section, project coordinators present brief summaries of the conclusions under each of the four frames and an overarching analysis of the findings. Importantly, the campuses varied greatly and, predictably, their findings varied as well. Despite some commonalities, all campuses that produced reports had substantial variance in their salient findings; this suggests remarkable nuance in campus political climates and highlights the importance of using qualitative methods to identify those nuances. Nevertheless, common themes speak to the state of political discourse and engagement in higher education more broadly.

---

<sup>5</sup> For this analysis, two researchers examined each report and independently drew out the major themes, both developing a synthesis of the reports' findings. We then cross-checked our conclusions. Then, a third researcher worked with their analyses to identify themes and findings that crosscut campus reports. We also sent a list of the emerging themes to the remaining nine campuses to collect feedback. This resulted in some changes in language and framing, but the general themes remained the same.

**Table 1***Findings From Campus Reports*

<b>Frame</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Structural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While most campuses reported having an institutionalized commitment (e.g., statements and infrastructure) to civic engagement, these commitments were usually apolitical.</li> <li>• Most campuses reported that political learning and participation were not embedded across the curriculum or campus.</li> <li>• While most of the campuses specified a growing or established commitment to diversity and inclusion, the commitment was described as “shallow” or “slow,” or characterized by gaps (e.g., faculty hiring).</li> <li>• Four of the nine campuses said they lacked an infrastructure for dialogue or political discussions.</li> </ul>
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many campuses reported being hierarchical and “rule-bound” in institutional governance.</li> <li>• Many reported facing pressures from local or state politicians or religious organizations.</li> <li>• Some reported that student activism was met with reticence or resistance, largely due to concerns over the institution’s image.</li> <li>• Many campuses expressed the view that the national political scene and the tone of the 2016 election had a lasting effect, and that these conditions made talking politics more difficult.</li> </ul>
Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent with IDHE’s other research, two groups of students complained that they felt unwelcome on campus and/or that they could not express their opinions freely due to the campus culture, comprising politically conservative students and historically marginalized groups.</li> <li>• Faculty avoided talking politics on many of these campuses.</li> <li>• Many campuses also reported either a culture of politeness or an underlying aversion to risk, both affecting the climate for political discussions and participation.</li> <li>• Many campuses felt deep ties to the local community and a strong sense of stewardship. This played out in reciprocal relationships and partnerships.</li> <li>• The perception of the level of political engagement varied across the campuses; some reported robust electoral and other political engagement from students, while others reported a culture of avoidance of anything political.</li> </ul>
Human	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Across campuses, faculty expressed that they were ill-equipped to navigate political topics or to facilitate political discussions in the classroom. Students agreed with this perception, confirming that too many professors were unprepared to lead discussions involving politically charged topics.</li> <li>• At four campuses, students were apprehensive or insecure about expressing their viewpoints in class.</li> </ul>

## Analysis

### *Synthesizing Findings*

There are several encouraging signs in these emerging themes. Many campuses identified an institutionalized commitment, including statements and infrastructure, to civic engagement or a campus-wide commitment to service and community engagement. This was reinforced by strong ties between the institution and the community. Commitment to civic and community engagement, however, does not necessarily come with a commitment to political learning, and indeed several campuses found that service was valued but political learning was either feared or avoided. Thus, turning civic and community engagement into political learning is an important area of opportunity. Despite the gaps identified earlier in curricular political learning, many campus teams reported a strong tradition of teaching and learning. This can be an important asset when trying to improve political learning. Importantly, three campuses reported infrastructure for political learning across disciplines. Also, many campus teams reported an established or growing commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

These assets are important if institutions wish to tackle difficult cultural barriers to political learning and participation, such as hesitance to talk politics for various reasons; insufficient or slow support for and engagement with marginalized groups; structural deficiencies in political learning and engagement, including lack of preparedness to handle political discussions and dialogue; and rigid decision-making structures that exclude key groups and discourage democratic participation.

One dynamic that must be mentioned in connection to the suppression or avoidance of political speech is the treatment of marginalized students. This emerged as a theme itself, with many campus teams reporting a perception that historically marginalized students feel oppressed or unwelcome, and/or that the campus has not made enough progress on diversity and inclusion. Six teams reported shallow or slow commitment or gaps (e.g., faculty hiring) to diversity and inclusion. Robust political learning and engagement cannot happen in a climate that marginalizes certain students, does not hear their voices, or discourages their participation on campus.

#### **Sidebar: Findings**

by Angela Taylor, Fayetteville State University

Many ideas about enhancing political participation on campuses presuppose a traditional college environment—that is, one consisting of students who are largely young adults (18–24) and who are just becoming aware of and engaged in political matters. However, fewer college students fit into this mold. They are older and tend to have work and life experiences that have exposed them to political ideas and activities. Also, their lives do not revolve around campus. Finally, as in our institution, there is an increased online presence, whereby students may not even live in the general vicinity of the college campus.

These new facets of the college student experience pose challenges to efforts to engage in information gathering about political engagement and to devising methods for increasing such engagement. We must find ways to bridge or adjust for these diverse student life experiences if we want to increase their skills, aptitude, and willingness to engage in civic pursuits.

Importantly, many teams indicated that either faculty felt ill-equipped to navigate political topics/political discussions in the classroom or students perceived that many professors are unprepared to lead discussions about politics. This reflects a structural deficiency in the preparation of people on campus to promote political learning and engagement. Many teams said there was a lack of infrastructure for dialogue and discussion, specifically trained facilitators. Despite support from institutional leaders, political learning and engagement were not embedded across the curriculum or campus and political learning was not pervasive. Many of these institutions felt pressured to be apolitical, stifling political learning; this came from state or community political pressures. While others reported a presence of infrastructure, like centers and programs, campuses are not reaching their full potential for political learning.

Bureaucratic, top-down decision making that is not inclusive of student and faculty voice was a challenge at many campuses, with several campus teams saying there is a lack of encouragement for student efficacy and even efforts to mute student activism. Paired with the slow progress on engaging and supporting marginalized students, this paints a picture of rigid decision making that is not as responsive to the needs of campus communities as it should be.

### ***Conclusions From Report Analysis***

First, it should be restated that the campus reports reflected a range of findings. Themes that crosscut campuses were necessarily general; even within some of the findings discussed earlier, campus reports included nuance that differentiated their phenomena from those of other campuses. Still, given the current hot-button issues of free speech, hate speech, and college student political engagement, the findings offer significant insights. The participants in the pilot project undertook an intentionally inclusive and discussion-centric assessment process, and many found underlying issues around the treatment of, preparation for, and culture of political discourse on their campuses. Nationally recognized issues like the tension between hate speech and free speech, and the lack of tangible progress on the treatment of students from historically marginalized groups manifested on several of the campuses. Many professors reported being unprepared to handle fraught political discussions, and students expressed hesitation to engage in the discourse, both resulting in the avoidance of conversations around controversial issues. If there is a single thematic takeaway from these findings, it is that the navigation of sociopolitical discussions on campuses requires attention, investment, and interventions. The reports these campus teams produced offered a ground-level look at how these issues manifest. This project offered one way to reveal the specific issues campuses face in this area and provided a template for how to begin to address those issues.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

### **Project Structure, Replication, and Next Steps**

This project proposed a unique method for assessing and improving campus climate for political learning and engagement: a combination of robust qualitative assessment with dialogues



that lead to action. We conclude that qualitative methods are a powerful tool in climate assessment because they:

- give focus-group participants a chance to talk and reflect;
- offer people who do not necessarily work together a chance to collaborate;
- uncover things people often leave unsaid; and,
- are highly interactive.

The point is that the medium is the message: In this project, change started to happen through the focus groups and the CoPs themselves.

When considering replication and scalability, any replication of this project would have to include substantial resource provision and guarantees of institutional support. In addition, participants often mentioned the need to streamline the project around content and duration. In line with the conclusions in this report, especially regarding the challenges of the timeline and resource burdens, project coordinators propose the following guidelines for replication:

1. Where there are resources available, provisions should be made for the use of an external research team to conduct focus groups and interviews, code and analyze data, and produce reports for campuses in the first half of the project year.
2. The assessment phase should be limited to as short a time period as possible, and focus group participants should be recruited in advance. We also recommend that the focus group meetings be recorded and transcribed, and that data result from an analysis of the transcripts.
3. Any institution undertaking this project should procure a commitment from presidents/chancellors, chief academic affairs officers, deans and department chairs, and student affairs leaders to see it through, from the assessment to the dialogue, and the intervention phases. Senior leaders should commit to identifying project leaders, coordinators, and a coalition. Project coordinators should ensure that there is a full understanding of the scope of the project and the resources needed to complete it.
4. The construction of coalitions with diverse skills, knowledge, and institutional responsibilities, as well as identity and ideology, is crucial to the success of the project and sustainability of the work.
5. The project itself should be streamlined in the following ways:
  - a. The protocol and codebook should be modified so that the operational difficulties of project participants are significantly lessened. Campus teams should plan for dialogues during the assessment phase.
  - b. The IRB process should begin as soon as possible since this was a substantial source of delay for many project participants.
6. Overall, an honest assessment of funds, personnel, and political will is needed upfront to complete the project.

Participants generally attested to the importance of this work and reported a multitude of benefits from the process. The coalitions, reports, and dialogues at these campuses will continue

to have impacts going forward. The project was a successful experiment that showed both the promise of this model of assessment and the obstacles that future attempts would need to clear to be successful.

### **Continued Work and Outcomes**

Campus teams did extraordinary work under extremely challenging circumstances to progress on this project. That work, according to project evaluations, will continue to bear fruit for participants working on political learning and engagement; many participants spoke to the power of the connections they built and relationships they formed working on the project. In one case, a vice president who was interviewed as part of the assessment phase later became president of the university; that president took an interest in the work, and the campus team has considerable space to pursue interventions. At other institutions, coalitions have stayed in contact, benefiting from collaborations on and contributions to each other's work. With the information from this project, stakeholders interested in improving the campus climate for political learning and engagement have a tool for soliciting buy-in and informing interventions.

Nonetheless, some campuses unfortunately reported an erosion of the support and infrastructure needed to improve their political climate. The project coordinators hope that this process has at least given stakeholders what they need to argue for continued or increased focus on political learning and engagement. The existing structural barriers speak to some areas for improvement should this project be replicated in the future. We acknowledge that this process is time- and resource-intensive for all campuses. Without support from external researchers, successful replication is unlikely. To continue, participating campuses will need to work with external researchers to expedite the data-collection and analysis phases. Robust support from institutional leaders, as well as centralized support from a national association, will also improve the likelihood of success. We envision a successful hybrid model combining on- and off-campus expertise for qualitative data collection and analysis, with follow-through at the campus level.

We conclude that qualitative methods, followed by dialogue, provide an effective approach to assessing and shifting campus climates for political learning and engagement. Not only does this approach produce compelling insights and influence campus structures and culture, but it also catalyzes change. Campuses reported that the dialogic approach used in the focus groups during the assessment phase itself fostered discussion, raised awareness, and generated interest in political learning and democracy.

An unexpected but gratifying finding from this work was the critical importance that the community of practice played in strengthening the campus climate to advance political learning and engagement. Indeed, we found that a cohort model and the multi-campus CoP strengthened both the project and the participating representatives from the campuses. The project structure was demanding, and CoPs as well as coaching were crucial to campus teams' success in coalition building, assessment, and dialogues-to-interventions. The importance of the CoP speaks to the project's broader ethos of conversation, collaboration, and community.

### References

- Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T. E. (2003). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Jossey Bass.
- Thomas, N., & Brower, M. (2017). Politics 365: Fostering campus climates for student political learning and engagement. In E. Matto, A. R. M. McCartney, E. Bennion, & Simpson, D. (Eds.), *Teaching civic engagement across the disciplines* (pp. 362–374). American Political Science Association.
- Thomas, N., & Brower, M. (2018). Conceptualizing and assessing campus climates for political learning and engagement in democracy. *Journal of College and Character*, 19(4), 247–263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2018.1517651>

### Authors



Dr. Nancy Thomas directs the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE) at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life, an applied research center on student political learning and participation in democracy. Her work and scholarship center on higher education's democratic mission, college student political participation and voting, campus climates for democratic learning, inclusion, and engagement, and dialogue, free speech, inclusion, and academic freedom. She is the author or editor of multiple book chapters, papers, articles, and collections on higher education's role in democracy, including the monograph, *Educating for Deliberative Democracy*. Dr. Thomas holds a law degree from Case Western Reserve University School of Law and a doctorate from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.



Kyle Upchurch is a former Associate Researcher for the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education. He received his Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, with concentrations in Political Systems & Theories and Human Security. Kyle is a nonprofit professional with substantial research experience in democracy and elections.



Leah Murray is the Brady Presidential Distinguished Professor in the Department of Political Science and Philosophy at Weber State University and currently serves as the Academic Director of the Walker Institute of Politics & Public Service, which is focused on increasing civic engagement at Weber State University and in the surrounding community. She was recognized as the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences Endowed Professor for 2017 - 2020. Her primary research interests are in American politics, specifically youth political engagement. Murray received a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Syracuse University and a Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science from the University of Albany.



Cathy Copeland is the director of the American Democracy Project, which supports AASCU member campuses in programming to encourage students to be informed, engaged citizens for our democracy. Prior to AASCU, Copeland taught for more than 15 years at various institutions of higher education where she taught rhetoric, communication, and a series of transdisciplinary courses that encouraged students to use innovative research methods to tackle real-world problems such as the 2020 Census; human trafficking; the 2020 elections; food insecurity; and local, state, and national diplomatic and

defense issues. She earned an M.A. in English Literature from Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis and a B.A. in biology from Hanover College. She also completed doctoral coursework in Renaissance Literature at the University of Alabama.