

Civic engagement in academic libraries

Encouraging active citizenship

by Nancy Kranich, Michele Reid, and Taylor Willingham

This country cannot afford to educate a generation that acquires knowledge without ever understanding how that knowledge can benefit society or how to influence democratic decision making. We must teach the skills and values of democracy, creating innumerable opportunities for our students to practice and reap the results of the real, hard work of citizenship. . . . We believe that now and through the next century, our institutions must be vital agents and architects of a flourishing democracy. We urge all of higher education to join us.¹

Fifty-one college presidents signed this declaration in July 1999, articulating their commitment to take action against a trend toward civic disengagement. To date, another 450 presidents have joined this effort to educate students as active and knowledgeable citizens.² Why? Because they believe that colleges and universities have a crucial role to play in reinvigorating the democratic spirit of this country. While college presidents credit today's students with their dedication to com-

munity service, they are seriously concerned that young people remain disconnected and disenchanting with public life. This essay will describe some exciting ways that academic libraries can collaborate with their institutions to engage young people in the issues of the day and align themselves closer with campuses and communities.

Renewing the civic education tradition

In recent years, the academic world has rediscovered the once vital tradition of civic education.³ Many colleges now actively promote such public engagement as a critical part of their overall institutional mission with faculty incorporating civic content into their curricula and encouraging students to participate in socially responsible extracurricular activities. Eager to connect liberal learning more directly with service and civic responsibility, the Association of American Colleges and Universities and Campus Compact launched the Center for Liberal Education and Civic Engagement in 2003.⁴ Recognizing that a robust democracy and the public welfare depend on an engaged

About the authors

Nancy Kranich is an ALA past president and served as associate dean of libraries at New York University, e-mail: nancy.kranich@nyu.edu; Michele Reid is library director at McDaniel College, Westminster, Maryland, and is an NIF convener and moderator, e-mail: mreid@mcDaniel.edu; Taylor Willingham is an NIF Board member, a consultant who works with communities to identify issues, conduct citizen research, frame issues for public deliberation and convene, moderate deliberative forums, and educate students, e-mail: taylor@austin-pacific.com.

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and informed citizenry, campuses are now willing and eager to strengthen the study and practice of civic engagement in a diverse democracy and interdependent world.

New civic engagement initiatives on campuses offer a perfect opportunity for libraries to fulfill their traditional roles of promoting civic literacy and ensuring an informed citizenry. Many academic libraries already present thoughtful, engaging, and enlightening programs about problems facing our democratic way of life—programs that encourage more active citizenship. Academic libraries also help students learn how to identify, evaluate, and use information essential for making decisions about the way we live, work, learn, and govern ourselves.

Beyond serving individuals, academic libraries also provide real and virtual spaces to which faculty and students can turn to solve pressing problems. In short, libraries are ideally suited to play a critical role in rekindling civic spirit by providing not only information, but also expanded opportunities for dialogue and deliberation that are essential to making decisions about common concerns.

Over the last two decades, social scientists have proposed new models to invigorate a weakened democracy and to encourage more active citizen involvement with governance. More recently, a number of librarians have also published texts underscoring the key role that libraries play in building civil society.⁵ These writers urge libraries to reclaim their civic mission by helping constituents learn about complex public issues and practice deliberative democracy, and by providing safe spaces, or commons, where students can discuss issues in a non-confrontational, nonpartisan, and deliberative manner. Creating civic space through a formal process of deliberation reinforces the academic library's essential position as the intellectual heart of the campus.

Deliberative democracy in practice

. . . deliberative forums are acts of discovery. They enable us to examine our own thinking more deeply and to open ourselves to different perspectives. They help us generate, individually and collectively, new ways of thinking about public problems and how we might work through them together.⁶

At the heart of deliberative democracy is the belief that citizens can seek out solutions and common ground on complex issues that affect their everyday lives. When citizens deliberate together, they surface assumptions, learn about the costs and consequences of public policy alternatives, move from I to we language, and define their shared interests and values. Unlike many public forums where citizens are invited to advocate a position in three-minute rantorous debates and sound bites, deliberative forums are places where participants strive to listen to each other for deeper understanding, often discovering that their personal values and concerns can overlap with those who hold a very different perception of the issue and what should be done. Through these forums, participants often see new possibilities as well as potential trade-offs and consequences for different courses of action, prompting them to think and act in ways that consider the larger public interest.

For more than 20 years, citizens have gathered in kitchens, churches, community centers, classrooms, and libraries to deliberate using discussion guides developed by the National Issues Forums Institute (NIF) in conjunction with the Ohio-based Kettering Foundation,⁷ a nonprofit research institute dedicated to the study, evaluation, and promotion of participatory democracy. Citizens have used NIF discussion guides to tackle topics such as the environment, economy, crime, public education, health care, and the Internet. The most recent guides explore concerns over bio-engineered foods, the role of the news media, terrorism, immigration, and America's place in world affairs.⁸

More than 30 institutions across America, including colleges and universities and civic and other grass-roots organizations, conduct NIF Public Policy Institutes to train citizens to convene and moderate forums and to frame issues of local concern. Those conducting local forums are encouraged to submit their results to the NIF network, thus connecting the participants in a national conversation. The results of these conversations are shared with the NIF network, the public, and policymakers. Annually, policymakers, journalists, subject experts, and citizens gather at the National Press Club to reflect on the findings. Their commentary

becomes a documentary called *Public Voice* and is broadcast on public television stations throughout the country. Recently, the results of forums discussing Americans' role in the world became part of a series of broadcasts entitled *By the People*, moderated by the PBS *NewsHour's* Jim Lehrer.⁹

The NIF network publishes reports on forums that take place throughout the year. Unlike opinion polls that dominate the media and policymakers' conversations, these reports paint a deeper and more thoughtful picture of the public's thinking. They provide more than a snapshot of a knee-jerk response to a pollster's question; they reflect what people think when they have had time to wrestle with each other's and their own conflicting emotions about what should be done about complex public issues.

For example, a recent report describing citizen forums about terrorism found that participants' turn[ed] conventional wisdom almost completely on its head . . . In spite of the alleged widespread public support for military action so often cited by journalists and policy makers, forum participants declared that the war on terrorism should include military action only as a last resort and then only in conjunction with a broad coalition of allies.¹⁰

Deeply concerned about the country's mood and a national climate of suspicion, participants felt a critical need to come together in deliberative forums, to build relationships, to seek understanding, and to find hope, reinforcing the idea that . . . community ends can only be defined through deliberation—public talk about our values and common needs.¹¹

Libraries across the country and abroad often serve as vital partners in convening deliberative forums. ALA began encouraging libraries to host these forums in the 1980s. As President of ALA in 2000–2001, Nancy Kranich launched a program to expand involvement by training librarians to organize, convene, and moderate forums and partner with other community groups to promote civic engagement and community building.¹² For academic libraries, the NIF approach can enhance a library's teaching, programming, and networking in and beyond the college community.

Academic libraries and deliberative democracy

We believe that our institutions serve not only as agents of this democracy, but also as its architects—providing bridges between the aims and aspirations of individuals and the public work of the larger world. To that end, we commit our institutions to wide-ranging examinations of our civic and democratic purposes through curricula and extracurricular activities, socially engaged scholarship, civic partnerships, and community-based learning and research.¹³

At the dawn of the new century, state and land-grant universities committed themselves to this charge. Today, academic libraries must embrace a similar charge, not only as agents of democracy, but as architects and bridge builders. With renewed interest in promoting civic literacy and engagement around the country, academic librarians are well poised to grasp this noble cause, transcending their traditional role of providing research materials by building civic space that connects academe with community and global issues. At the nexus of multiple academic disciplines, the library can prepare future generations as leaders of an increasingly complex and divided world.

To begin, academic libraries can sponsor deliberative forums that teach students how to make public choices together and demonstrate the value of the deliberative process as a curricular tool. Librarians can also teach the theory and scholarship behind public politics as well as the methods of convening and moderating deliberative discussions.

Another role librarians can assume is to guide the research and participatory action of students seeking to frame their own issues for deliberative forums, following the model developed by the New England Diversity Project. This partnership between the New England Center for Civic Literacy and Vermont Campus Compact is spearheading an inter-institutional learning community that will teach the practices of deliberative and sustained dialogue at several Vermont colleges. The project will help participating campuses use civic dialogue to address diversity, build community, learn techniques to deal with public issues, and model a form of civic leadership.¹⁴

As moderators, librarians may structure a forum as a standard two-hour session or as a more thoughtful study circle, with one choice or viewpoint covered per week.

Another approach is to offer short, hour-long mini-forums at lunchtime with further discussion later in the classroom. Librarians can supplement deliberative forums with guest speakers or panels, and with Web sites, bibliographies, and online discussions, as in a recent Pennsylvania initiative. And librarians can create additional public space by holding forums elsewhere on campus and preparing displays of relevant library materials and handouts.

Deliberative forums offer academic librarians new opportunities to form alliances and partnerships on campus and beyond. By establishing a steering committee of influential faculty, administrators, and community leaders, librarians can strengthen outreach and expand participation. They can also enlist academic departments, administrators, development officers, Friends groups, alumni, and trustees for fundraising and promotion. Involvement by community members, nonprofit organizations, businesses, school and public libraries, local government, and schools can result in welcome occasions for citizens to join a local college in promoting civic engagement.

ALA hosts preconference workshops to train librarians as forum moderators at both the Midwinter Meetings and Annual Conferences. Beyond training, these workshops allow ALA conference attendees to experience an open forum. Librarians that attend network with colleagues, and participate in additional training and related events in their regions.¹⁶

Conclusion

With colleges initiating exciting new programs to enhance participation in our democracy, librarians have an unprecedented opportunity to collaborate with their campus colleagues to strengthen the ability of tomorrow's leaders to practice civic engagement and participate in our democracy.

By sponsoring and promoting deliberative forums, librarians can foster student learning and faculty research while expanding linkages between the campus and its various communities. They can also deepen under-

standing of the relationship between liberal education and civic responsibility, helping students to look beyond the classroom to the world's major questions and encouraging them to apply their analytical skills and ethical judgment to significant problems around them.

As John Dewey once wrote, democracy needs to be reborn in each generation and education is its midwife.¹⁷ Now is the time for academic libraries to assume their rightful role in creating a new generation of informed citizens capable of acting to address complex, urgent social problems. By committing themselves to joining the civic mission of higher education, academic librarians will become leaders and catalysts for renewing liberal education that prepares students to build civic capacity so vital to a flourishing democracy.

Notes

1. Center for Liberal Education and Civic Engagement, Presidential Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education, (Providence, RI: Campus Compact, July 1999). www.compact.org/presidential/plc/declaration.html.

2. An up-to-date list of signatories to the Declaration is available at www.compact.org/presidential/plc/signatories.html.

3. Harry C. Boyte, The Struggle Against Positivism, *Academe* 86, no.4 (July/August 2000): 46.

4. For more information about Center for Liberal Education and Civic Engagement, see: www.aacu.org/civic_engagement/objectives.cfm.

5. Examples include: Redmond Kathleen Molz and Phyllis Dain, *Civic Space/Cyberspace: The American Public Library in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Kathleen de la Pena McCook, *A Place at the Table: Participating in Community Building* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2000); Ronald McCabe, *Civic Librarianship: Renewing the Social Mission of the Public Library* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2001); Joan Durrance, et.al., Libraries and Civil Society, in *Libraries and Democracy: the Cornerstones of Liberty* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2001): 49-59; and, Nancy

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Kranich (ed.), *Libraries and Democracy: The Cornerstones of Liberty* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2001).

6. Julie Pratt, "Capturing Public Thinking: Authentic Reporting on Public Forums" (Charleston WV: West Virginia Center for Civic Life, n.d.): 3. www.nifi.org/CapturPubThink.pdf.

7. More information about the Kettering Foundation is available at www.kettering.org.

8. For a complete listing of available discussion guides as well as recent network news, events and other information, see the NIF Web site at www.nifi.org/.

9. See the "By the People" Web site at www.pbs.org/newshour/btp.

10. Doble Research Associates, "Terrorism: What Should We Do Now? Results from Citizens Forums" (Dayton, OH: National Issues Forums Institute, 2003). www.nifi.org/terrorism_03.pdf.

11. Frances Moore Lappe, "Diet for a Small Planet" (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971).

12. Nancy Kranich, Anne Heanue and Taylor Willingham, "Libraries—Public Forums for Today's Critical Issues," *American Libraries*, 34, #1 (January 2003): 68–70.

13. Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land Grant Universities, "Renewing the Covenant: Learning, Discovery, and Engagement in a New Age and Different World" (Washington D.C.: National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, 2000): 24. www.nasulgc.org/publications/Kellogg/Kellogg2000_covenant.pdf.

14. New England Center for Civic Life, "The Northern New England Diversity and Community Project," www.fpc.edu/neccl/nnedivcomm.htm.

15. See the "Teaching Democracy" Web site at www.teachingdemocracy.org.

16. For more information concerning the moderator training programs, contact ALA Member Programs and Services, (800) 454-2433, ext. 2518; dponton@ala.org. Information about the NIF network and other partnership and training possibilities in your own community is available at www.nifi.org/ppi.html.

17. As quoted in Elizabeth L. Hollander and John Saltmarsh, "The Engaged University," 86, # 4 (July/August 2000): 30.