

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



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The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND CIVIC LEARNING

An Interview with Bernie Ronan

*David Brown, coeditor of the Higher Education Exchange, spoke with Bernie Ronan, who directs the Division of Public Affairs of Maricopa Community College, which includes the Center for Civic Participation. Brown was interested in learning more about Ronan's views as expressed in his study, *The Civic Spectrum: How Students Become Engaged Citizens*, and his work with a new national undertaking of community colleges—*The Democracy Commitment*—which he has helped launch.*

Brown: In Derek Barker's preface to your study for the Kettering Foundation, *The Civic Spectrum: How Students Become Engaged Citizens*, Barker characterized it as "a theory of change for civic learning." Could you say more about how such a theory enables community colleges to play a more significant role in helping students become engaged citizens?

Ronan: The theory underlying the current paradigm of civic education would seem to be based on content, on a body of knowledge that students are supposed to have, which arguably enables them to engage as informed citizens. *The Civic Spectrum* argues for a different theory underlying civic education—a developmental frame in which "civics" implies skills or habits (what the ancients called virtues), and that these are built up over time and acquired through experience. To the extent that this is a change from the current paradigm of civic education, it also represents a theory of change for civic learning.

Brown: I find your three dimensions of civic learning—"head," "heart," and "hands,"—to be useful prompts for what educators should include. With a bit of explanation about each, could you tell me what more needs to be done by community colleges to incorporate each of them?

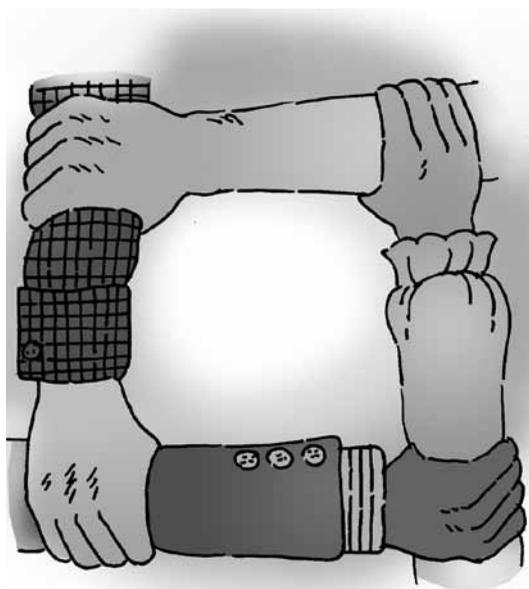
Ronan: In my view, learning to be a citizen takes time; it unfolds over the course of a student's academic career and continues to develop through a lifetime of citizenship. Therefore, schools and colleges have a responsibility to actively structure and encourage a

range of civic experiences for students that unfold over the course of their time in these institutions. Colleges must “walk the talk of citizenship” so that students see reflected in their educational experiences the values of democratic life that the institution stands for. They do this through the creation and nurturing of the *polis*, the “space of appearance” that citizens create to speak and act together.

In terms of what is at stake in this civic education, I argue that it has three dimensions. Intellectual formation hinges on the growth of practical wisdom, which I term as “savvy.” While the intellectual content of civics courses remains important, educational institutions must focus far more of their attention on how savvy is built up, how students have the experiences they need to learn how to do things in the world. The linchpin of this practical wisdom is deliberation—the learned ability to balance trade-offs and explore underlying values that has long characterized the best of democratic life in our modern systems.

The second dimension of civic education concerns the affective or emotional, which I frame as “friendship,” following the ancient theme of Aristotle that “friendship holds cities together.” As Robert Sokolowski puts it, friendship implies mutual benefit, mutually recognized. Arguably, this dimension of civic education—the bonds that form among those who pursue some civic purpose together, and how they discover through their civic work that their own good is actually the good of others—is the least explored in our schools and colleges.

The savvy acquired through deliberation and the bond that forms through civic friendship get instantiated in public action, the third dimension of the civic spectrum. I posit that this dimension issues forth in the world through the flourishing of freedom, not freedom of movement or free will, but the power that comes about when citizens act together. “Freedom” is the power



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to act together, and it is the essence of politics, of civics. So savvy, friendship, and freedom are what are at stake in civic education. Our colleges need a more robust sense of civic learning, and that would then drive enhancements of curricula and the creation of new opportunities for developing the intellectual, affective, and political skills to be acquired by students.

Brown: Are community college students learning the art of deliberation in their classrooms?

Ronan: The short answer is no. Not surprisingly, the pedagogy of the community college classroom is often not that different from the university. This is especially unfortunate since our classrooms are typically much smaller, certainly smaller than the university lecture hall. There is clearly more chance for deliberation in a classroom of 30 than there is in a lecture hall of 300. The paradigm in our colleges is still principally that the professor is the expert who lectures, and the student takes in the content. I am hoping to help educators see that this skill of deliberation (as key to the growth of savvy in students) must be fostered, and that opportunities for students to deliberate about issues must be built into the fabric of college instruction. Obviously, many faculty are already doing this. But I seek to help faculty see that deliberation in the classroom, as well as the opportunity for deliberation in the many informal settings in which students find themselves in college life, are a pivotal means of building practical wisdom.

Brown: Is deliberation being used when it comes to service-learning?

Ronan: Rarely. In my opinion, deliberation offers a vastly enhanced means of reflection on service, but the reflection needs to occur in a policy, or civic, context. This is why some are critical of service-learning as it is currently practiced in colleges. The reflection may turn the student inward to reflect on what they have learned, to assess how they feel as a result of their service. But it is critically important that it also engage the student in reflecting on the policy issues at stake in the service. It is not enough to just work in a soup kitchen. It is also imperative that a student reflect on why there are soup kitchens, why there is homelessness and poverty, and what role beyond service (such as research, advocacy, or political action) a student should undertake to address the policy issues

associated with working in a soup kitchen. To the extent that service is a refuge from politics, to the extent that students seek service instead of engaging in the hurly-burly of political action, then such apolitical reflection does a disservice to the cause of civic education. If students, for example, were engaged in deliberating with each other about the policy implications of their service, they would acquire the civic skill of deliberation, which Aristotle found so key to the building up of practical wisdom—again, what I have termed “savvy.” Students would also discover dimensions of their common service that would likely not occur to them if they were just writing in their journal or doing their individual reflection. This obviously reveals a bias of mine, namely that service done by an individual, without engaging others, is a relatively low-level civic activity.

Brown: In a question related to deliberation, what is being done in community college classrooms or elsewhere on campus to “walk the talk” about students learning to act democratically?

Ronan: I love a term coined by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities in their American Democracy Project: institutional intentionality. Colleges must be intentionally democratic; it is not something that happens by chance. This intentionality must be evidenced in how student government runs, in the way clubs operate on a campus, in how students are treated by their faculty, in how faculty engage with each other as colleagues, in how administration runs the school, and so forth. It is what we hope to instill through The Democracy Commitment: not just better civic experiences for students, but also an enhanced sense of the college as a civic agent that embodies in its practices the values and principles we as democratic citizens profess.

Much of the traction that we have gained through The Democracy Commitment has been by leveraging a “push back” against the vocational focus of so much of the current national discussion about the role of community colleges. Faculty in our colleges see themselves as being about more than skill training for the workplace. Having said that, it is also imperative that we as educators see that the civic skills we seek to educe from our students have significant similarities and overlap with the kinds of skills which employers need in the 21st century worker.

Brown: How will community colleges, in practical terms, distinguish between “service-learning” and “civic learning”?

Ronan: This is crucial. Certainly the paradigmatic civic experience currently extant in our colleges is service-learning. So there is a natural tendency when we talk about The Democracy Commitment to look first, and finally, at what a college is doing in service-learning. However, there are two challenges which we hope to pose to this paradigm through The Democracy Commitment. First, what other civic practices can (and do!) colleges encourage and practice besides service-learning? Our goal is to have an eminently “catholic” (small c) initiative, with a broad range of civic experiences and opportunities offered for students, so that colleges can pick and choose what practices they wish to undertake without valuing any given practice as better or worse than any other. Secondly, many service-learning practitioners lament the fact that their students’ service is all too frequently apolitical, that it stops short of policy implications and does not lead to further engagement in political work. So, we are hoping to move students through our initiative along what George Mehaffy from AASCU posits as a continuum from service to political engagement and advocacy resulting from their service. How can we make our service more civic, as it were.

Brown: Could you give me some examples of what is being done, or could be done, by those community colleges that are part of The Democracy Commitment?

Ronan: At a recent gathering of colleges involved in The Democracy Commitment, hosted by the Kettering Foundation, there was a rich spectrum of civic activity represented:

- Miami Dade College has offered almost a million hours of service-learning to its community, and is now hoping to enhance this activity with “civic learning modules” for faculty who are offering service-learning in their courses, as well as for other faculty interested in civic applications for their courses.
- Maricopa Community Colleges provide a variety of deliberative opportunities to engage their community, and offer a Student Public Policy Forum to train students in advocacy.
- Wayne County Community College District is actively involved in seeking to remediate the resegregation of schools in Detroit through civic engagement.

- Minneapolis Community and Technical College is partnering with Native American nonprofits in their city through community organizing, driven by credit courses the college offers on organizing and community development.
- Cuyahoga Community College offers students the opportunity to be trained in and facilitate Sustained Dialogue with other students, over an extended period, on issues of diversity and student success. This is part of a more comprehensive program of conflict mediation and peace studies that has national and international reach.
- Skyline College trains students in how to dialogue with others, and has held forums that utilize both dialogue and deliberation as techniques to address issues of concern to students on the campus.
- Macomb Community College trains students in how to utilize media for engagement and advocacy on issues of concern to them.
- Green River Community College addresses human rights issues in humanities courses to teach empathy.
- Gulf Coast College engages community and business leaders through forums to address regional issues and needs.
- Lone Star College—Kingwood engages college students in organizing with high school counterparts through Public Achievement to engage in civic activities designed by the students themselves.
- DeAnza College undertakes a wide range of campus and community organizing activities, ranging from political advocacy to diversity projects.

This snapshot represents the variety of civic work underway at community colleges, and likewise speaks to the need for a “big tent” approach to civic work in our colleges; one which does not prescribe any activities, but rather encourages a broad spectrum of civic work that colleges and their faculty can opt for based on their own interests and capacities.



Brown: Please go on.

Ronan: Community colleges are “tweeners”—they stand “between” K12 and the university in our P-20 education system. They have a stake in both sectors, since students come to them from high school, and many then transfer to complete bachelor’s degrees at the university. This argues for greater congruence between curricula in the civic realm, and

for greater collaboration among faculty in high school, community college, and university. Further, community colleges can be especially fertile terrain for the growth of citizenship if they leverage their rootedness in their communities and proliferate the experiences of service and engagement that should typify their activities as community colleges. Finally, in terms of undergraduate education, the lower division is typically when most students experience the humanities and get their grounding in General Education. And this is critically important subject matter for the development of citizenship, as Martha Nussbaum argues so persuasively in her book *Not for Profit*. So, this means that community colleges are a fulcrum for citizenship development, as students pivot between high school and university, and as they cycle through the core educational experiences that have long been seen as essential to a liberal arts education. I love the phrase “civic arts” since it speaks to the artistry that is involved in developing citizens and to the overlay between what we have always known as liberal arts education and the growth of citizens.

Community colleges can be especially fertile terrain for the growth of citizenship.

Brown: You have also noted that civic skills and work skills are not that different. Does that mean that when a community college prepares students for the workplace, it is already providing a form of civic learning?

Ronan: Bluntly, yes! Civic skills and workplace skills are congruent with each other. Here, I don’t mean the technical skills—how to run a lathe, or program a silicon wafer. Rather, I see the congruence in what have come to be called “soft skills”—the

ability to problem-solve as a team, to work together with others from diverse backgrounds, to negotiate conflicts and solve problems, to come together around shared values. And this congruence creates exciting synergies between occupational training and civic education. However, it also suggests that whenever academic instruction is developing the savvy, empathy, and political skills needed to exercise citizenship, a faculty member is teaching a student critically important employability skills as well.

To my mind, a student can gain as much savvy and learn as much about civic friendship in an internship in a company as they can by working on a community service project; it all depends on the quality of the experience and how truly “worldly” that experience is. If a student is engaged in a rote function, no matter the setting, civic skills are rarely produced.

Brown: Coming back to the classroom, you have argued that political science and education, in general, have become “sanitized of morality” with the consideration of values “marginalized in the classroom.” What is being done, or can be done, in community college classrooms to counter this trend?

Ronan: I think wherever our colleges actively engage students in grappling with the real issues of the day, whether those issues are local, community issues, or global issues, they are on the path toward a moral life; they are on the road to pursuing the “good.” This is not automatic by any means, and there are many obstacles that can dissuade a student from addressing the morality at stake in issues-based education. But, at least the possibility exists for a student to ask the big questions, the important questions: What is the right thing to do in this circumstance? How should we address this issue? What is at stake for my community in this issue? So, I don’t argue that this marginalization of morality can be corrected only in active service; it can also be countered through enlightened, engaged instruction that helps students grapple with the real trade-offs and consequences of addressing the issues that confront us as a society. Right and wrong is all around us, every day. And regrettably, it is so often actualized through evangelical harangues and adversarial politics, and so rarely through the rigorous and passionate exchange of ideas that political life until the modern age was characterized by.

Brown: Do those who teach at Maricopa provide the classroom support for such a shared, issue-based education?

Ronan: Increasingly, yes. Our younger faculty have a real sense of civic commitment, and are open to ways to employ issues-based education in their courses. Our adjunct faculty often do the majority of our teaching, and they come from our communities and our businesses, with expertise in local issues and a sense of commitment to the community and its problems. Efforts to teach about sustainability, for example, which are proliferating across community college (and university) campuses, are an illustration of a natural, almost organic response on the part of faculty and students to a civic issue of literally global importance. The challenge is how to do it, how to incorporate civic themes in our instruction in a way that enhances the teaching and learning, but does not detract from the learning objectives of the course. This challenge needs to be embraced by the professional development programs at our colleges, which exist to help our faculty improve their courses with new techniques and emphases.

Brown: You have said that more has to be done to nurture the politics of everyday life. But just how does that nurturing come about?

Ronan: Thomas Jefferson would say that educators are the ones to nurture. He argued that it was the role of education to inform young people with the skills they needed for a life of democratic citizenship. So in that sense, new efforts such as The Democracy Commitment among community colleges are a more recent revisiting of the age-old destiny of American education: to educate for citizenship. I love the metaphor that David Mathews has been using lately of the political “wetlands”—those rich associational spaces that are densely political, but most often are informal and very distant from our state capitols or our more “official” political spaces. Politics is everywhere. In our community colleges, the work of nurturing civic skills must reach beyond the classroom to clubs, athletic fields, student governments, honors societies—the wetlands of higher education where students come together. As Mary Kirlin, associate professor in the department of Public Policy and Administration at California State University Sacramento, says, this nurturance must be ongoing and consequential; it must be about things that

matter to students and the world, not activities contrived or artificial. Faith-based settings are also key to the building of citizenship, since students gravitate to these settings because their faith impels them, and this provides a ready rationale for civic education and the development of the virtues of citizenship. Cities, schools, non-profits, libraries—all of these settings are fertile ground for developing civic skills. I am clearly speaking here for a revivification of the ancient purpose of politics, to engage citizens in the work of the public worlds in which they live and work.

Brown: You argue that citizenship and politics involve complex problems. Isn't that one big reason why so many complex problems have been delegated to professional problem-solvers in government and NGOs? Can citizens take back what they have delegated for almost a century now?

Ronan: With tongue in cheek, I am inclined to ask those who routinely delegate our complex problems to professionals, in the words of TV's Dr. Phil, "So, how is that working for you?" The complexity of the world's problems outstrips the skills and expertise of professionals. We see this again and again in countless policy settings, and yet we continue to delegate these problems to the administrative elite. And how is that working? It is not that professional expertise has no role in the solution of today's problems, but rather that the role of the public administrator today must be to engage citizens in cocreating the solutions to these problems, working side by side with citizens. Here the language of the National Issues Forums is helpful, which refers to these as "wicked" problems—problems which defy simple, elegant solutions, but which require political answers, hammered out through the give-and-take of deliberation and the iterative process through which citizens have always collaborated and compromised to address thorny issues that confront them. This suggests that we need a new compact between public administrators and citizens, one that sees the work of citizens as the work of democracy. This is what the term "civic agency" implies that Harry Boyte has written about—that citizens are agents of democracy to the extent that they are empowered to take on the work of political action in their communities. And this in turn suggests a different, more partner-like role for public administrators, one which works side by side with citizens in doing public work.

The complexity of the world's problems outstrips the skills and expertise of professionals.

Brown: You served as Deputy Director of the Arizona Department of Commerce and as Deputy Associate Superintendent of the Arizona Department of Education. What did you learn from your government experience that informs your work now?

Ronan: My graduate education is in public administration. My time in state government taught me the value of public service, and this theme undergirds *The Civic Spectrum*. I would earnestly hope that these themes of civic work resonate with the public work of other administrators. Terry Cooper's work has been instrumental in my formation, especially his seminal work, *An Ethic of Citizenship for Public Administration*. Cooper argues persuasively that public work is the work of citizens, and administrators are partners with citizens in doing this work. The ethic of our profession is one of service to the citizens with whom we engage in public administration rather than as the objects of our administering. I have been actively thinking about the themes of public life and civic education throughout my professional life, and my time as a public administrator in state government helped to jump start this investigation. I see my transition to community college administration as fully congruent with that—colleges are, after all, public institutions too. Though we don't usually view administration of a college as similar to administration of a state agency, the issues at stake are remarkably similar: ensuring public stewardship, defining what a public good actually is and who has ownership of it, defining public service rather than private employment, and policymaking in public service. I must admit I am proud to be a public administrator, serving now in the administration of a community college.

Brown: Thank you, Bernie. Your example and leadership in the community college world is most important.