
Politics 365: Fostering Campus Climates for Student Political Learning and Engagement

23

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All college level teaching for political knowledge and engagement happens in the context of a campus climate, a combination of the norms, behaviors, attitudes, structures, and external influences that shape the student experience. In this chapter, the authors argue for attention to improving the campus environment as a means to increasing the pervasiveness and effectiveness of student development for civic engagement, political activism, and social action. This chapter reviews the findings from a nine-campus qualitative study of institutional climates for political learning and engagement in democracy, and the essential role faculty members, particularly political science professors, play in fostering a robust climate for learning for democracy.

Over the last 20 years, colleges and universities have exponentially increased their commitment to providing students with a wide range of civic experiences, from community service to nonprofit leadership education. Unfortunately, that commitment has fallen short of educating students across disciplines for the participation needed to ensure the future and health of democracy. By “democracy” we not only are referencing a form of government, but also a culture, a set of principles and practices that provide the context for shared governance in the United States. The 2016 presidential election season and outcome may have awakened the academy to ongoing global challenges to democratic principles: freedom of the press and speech, the right to dissent, equal opportunity, respect for new populations, public reason, and the rule of law. It may also have drawn attention to challenges in democratic culture: the declining ability of Americans to live and work together due to entrenched feelings of fear, hatred, entitlement, anger, and, what University of Wisconsin political scientist Kathy Cramer calls, the *politics of resentment*.¹ In these unsettled political times, colleges and universities need to seize this teachable moment, reexamine student civic learning, and educate for democratic culture and systems that are participatory, equitable, educated and informed, and ethically governed.

Earlier chapters in this book focus on teaching practices that effectively increase students’ civic and political knowledge, agency, and interest. Indeed, in our previous chapter, “The Politically Engaged Classroom” in this volume, we suggested that quality classroom discussions, characterized by norms of free expression, skilled facilitation, attentiveness to the discussion process, and high standards for multiple, evidence-based viewpoints, contribute to a broader, vibrant campus learning environment for political engagement. Yet, will better teaching alone prepare students for public problem solving and policy making, particularly among students who are not already politically attentive? We do not think so. Like societies, colleges and universities are complex organizations with people, systems, norms, traditions, and societal contexts that

interact to form the context for student development. Change to any one of these characteristics alone, including improved teaching, is unlikely to transform adequate numbers of disinterested students into committed political actors. Instead, institutions need to assess and improve their campus climates for political learning and engagement as a means to improving effectiveness and pervasiveness.

In this chapter, we present findings from our nine-campus qualitative study of institutional climates—specifically our analysis of the norms, behaviors, attitudes, and structures—for political learning and engagement in democracy.² We also provide evidence of the essential role faculty members, particularly political science professors, have as an integral part of fostering a robust climate for political learning. We conclude by making the case that colleges and universities should be viewed as a collection of minipublics in which people with diverse social identities, ideologies, perspectives, and interests associate, coalesce, discuss problems, and share authority in decision making.

METHODS

In 2014 and 2015, a team of researchers at Tufts University's [Institute for Democracy and Higher Education](#) visited nine colleges and universities nationwide to conduct studies of their campus climates for political learning and engagement in democracy. The nine campuses were selected based on their geographic locations, size, institutional type, students served, and results from the [National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement \(NSLVE\)](#). Launched in 2013, NSLVE is both a service to US colleges and universities—providing participating institutions with their aggregate student voter registration and voting rates—and a large database of individual student records. The database is created through a merging of student enrollment and publicly available voting records from federal elections. Colleges and universities must opt into the study. Currently, more than 1,000 US colleges and universities nationwide participate in NSLVE. In addition to representing all 50 states, the participating NSLVE institutions reflect a proportionate number of four-year public and private research and masters-granting institutions and liberal arts colleges, as well as and more than 300 community colleges.

The NSLVE database was created by combining college student enrollment lists with publicly available voting records. NSLVE data currently includes voting records from 2012 and 2014. (Data from 2016 will be available in the summer 2017.) Student-level data includes the institution attended, age on the date of the election, and in many cases, demographic data and class level. Half of the students in the database have identified a field of study. And for about half of the student records, the database also includes voting method (e.g., in person, by mail).

Adding institution-level data collected by the US Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDs) and civic conditions surrounding each institution, we used quantitative methods to identify indicators for voting. In February 2014, the NSLVE database represented 219 colleges and universities. In March 2015, 473 colleges and universities had joined the study. And in September 2016, the number of NSLVE institution was 696 colleges and universities. We then calculated for each institution both a predicted and an actual voting rate from the 2012 presidential election. From this list, we focused on colleges and universities with voting rates between five and 20 percentage points higher than predicted ("positive outliers"), as well as lists of institutions with voting at rates seven or greater percent points lower than predicted ("negative outliers"). We sought diversity in institutional type, the student populations served, and geographic location; we selected seven institutions with voting rates that were higher than predicted and two with rates lower than predicted. From 2014 to 2016, we visited the following nine institutions, seven positive outliers and two negative outliers, identified by pseudonyms:³

- **Northeast State College:** Four-year public located in a suburb of a large city in the Northeast; enrollment of approximately 4,000; residual 13.3 percentage points **above** the predicted voting rate
- **Eastern Liberal Arts College:** Four-year private located in a small city in the East; enrollment of approximately 2,200; residual 5.5 percentage points **above** the predicted voting rate
- **Midwest Community College:** Two-year public located in a mid-sized city in the Midwest; enrollment of approximately 19,500; residual 7.9 percentage points **above** the predicted voting rate
- **Southwest Urban University:** Four-year public located in a large city in the Southwest; enrollment of approximately 13,000; residual 5.2 percentage points **above** the predicted voting rate
- **Southeast Public University:** Four-year public located in a suburb of a midsized city in the Southeast; enrollment of approximately 5,500; residual 10.2 percentage points **above** the predicted voting rate
- **Midwest Public University:** Four-year public located in a suburb of a large city in the Midwest; enrollment of approximately 16,500; residual 9.5 percentage points **above** the predicted voting rate
- **West Coast Community College:** Two-year public located in a small city in the West; enrollment of approximately 19,000; residual 8.8 percentage points **above** the predicted voting rate
- **Northeast Rural State College:** Four-year public located in a rural town the Northeast; enrollment of approximately 6,000; residual 11.9 percentage points **below** the predicted voting rate
- **Southwest Liberal Arts College:** Four-year private located in a large city in the Southwest; enrollment of approximately 2,100; residual 11.5 percentage points **below** the predicted voting rate

A team of three to four researchers visited each campus for several days and collected data via interviews and focus groups. We visited these institutions between national elections to avoid having to distinguish between situational election-related activities and embedded norms and practices. To ensure our sample was diverse and representative of the campus, participants were selected to represent students and faculty members from different disciplines, racial backgrounds, genders, leadership and authority positions, and years of experiences on the campus. Ultimately, the research team interviewed 59 people and conducted 65 focus groups of students and faculty, in total involving nearly 500 people. All of the interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed.⁴

RESULTS

The college experience provides an ideal opportunity for students to develop knowledge and interest in political affairs and public policy and to learn and practice democratic skills. The positive outlier institutions, when analyzed for this study, manifested remarkable consistency in the political attributes of their campus climates. We share five specific *attributes* in this chapter. People on these campuses experienced strong *social cohesion*, as they repeatedly pointed to strong interpersonal relationships between faculty and students, institutional concern for student well-being, peer-to-peer support, as well as local community support for the institution and students. Social cohesion emerged as a complimentary feature of compositional *diversity* in the student population, as well as a strong commitment on the part of the institution to promote social mobility and equal opportunity as an aim of the college student experience. Engaging in a diversity of

perspectives among students then allowed for political discussions to flourish, especially around policy questions and political issues. These types of *pervasive habits of political discussion* both in and beyond the classroom were common to all of the positive outlier campuses. We also found that attitudes toward *students as colleagues* mattered, and at the positive outlier institutions, students had authentic decision-making authority on campus and were told their voices mattered. Finally, support for *student political actions*, during and between elections, mattered. At the negative outlier institutions, most of these attributes either did not exist or were problematic. Our analysis of the negative outlier institutions provides a deeper understanding of how attributes of a campus can result in different levels of student political learning and engagement.

SOCIAL COHESION

On the positive outlier campuses we visited, students developed trusting relationships with their professors and with each other, which we identify as a “social cohesion” attribute. Social cohesion was not an outcome that happened serendipitously. Rather, social cohesion was carefully cultivated by the institution through traditions, events, expectations of faculty, and messaging to students.

At Southeast Public University, students were welcomed at convocation with faculty in full robes and much fanfare; similarly, graduation was a community affair, with thousands of people from the local community attending, bringing lawn chairs and picnics to celebrate the 600 or so students receiving degrees. During orientation, students learn about R.U.O.K., a program advertised on most doorways and even a highway billboard. Students learn that they share responsibility for each other’s living and learning experiences. Students who are experiencing emotional, physical, or academic distress can be identified to the institution’s counselling center through a hotline. Serving a predominantly low-income population, the institution has set aside dormitory rooms in case a student becomes homeless. The students and faculty also jointly support a food pantry at this university. Students can obtain canned goods, diapers, toiletries, and other essentials from a room that is stocked entirely from faculty and community donations. We regularly heard statements like, “this place takes care of me” and “we take care of each other here.”

One administrator explained that students receive a strong “student-first, student-focused” message. Faculty, we were told, chose Southeast Public University because faculty and staff “really care about teaching, and they really care about students.”

At many of the other positive outlier institutions, students are advised on the first day to take advantage of faculty office hours and to reach out to individual faculty. At these institutions, faculty and staff were expected to reach out to and encourage students, not just when a situation called for an intervention, but as a daily part of faculty life. The expectation regarding taking the initiative to connect began with faculty establishing flexible office hours and going the extra mile to help students. At Midwest Community College, one student shared the nature of her relationship with a particular professor, “I’ve spent a lot of time with my professors. And the professors at [Midwest Community College] are one of the best, that’s very undeniable. I think all of you that know, you have to know one particular professor that has changed your life.” Another student from this same college shared his experience with another professor, saying, “He opened up a lot of opportunities for me. And I think I’m very proud to say that I am the way I am today and the way I do things. It’s mainly because of him.” Students also appreciated their professors for maintaining an open-door policy, for being willing to work with them on assignments, and for being open to discussing not just the course materials but also, as one student explained, “any and every thing under the sun.” At the positive outlier institutions, students view these relationships as powerful opportunities for networking and mentorship, but the relationships also build trust among students of faculty and loyalty to the institution more broadly. A student summarized, “Faculty is what makes this campus. I love the people here.”

Administrative structures also matter. Most of the positive outlier institutions, particularly the public community colleges and four-year publics, support pipeline programs for nontraditional students (single parents, veterans, individuals who were formerly incarcerated, people with mental and physical disabilities, and undocumented students) and offer personal and academic support when they arrive. Both faculty members and students at West Coast Community College spoke highly of the institution's equal opportunity (EO) department. Described as unique to this college and "probably one of the most resourceful and supportive departments of probably all of the community colleges in [the system,]" the EO department oversees pipeline programs in addition to paying for faculty childcare and books. A student told us, "I was kind of one of those people. Like they said, EOPS, they really helped me out. I had no idea what I was doing when I got here. I was scared and intimidated, and I felt like I didn't belong, I wasn't smart enough. ... But they really made me feel like I belong."

Similarly, peer relationships were strong at the positive outlier institutions. At Eastern Liberal Arts College, students pointed to an ethos of cooperation and support. One student told us, "It's not really competitive. We challenge each other, but it's not like a competition where you're trying to always be better than someone else. It's really, like we said earlier, supporting and support of one another's accomplishments and successes." At West Coast Community College, students pointed to the EO program as a place where nontraditional students met and provided support to each other.

The combination of structures to ensure student well-being, faculty and staff attitudes that students come first, and the emphasis on shared responsibility for peer learning, health, and happiness contributed to an overall campus climate that valued community, associations, and collaboration.

DIVERSITY AS REALIZED PRACTICE

At the positive outlier institutions, diversity was viewed as an educational asset both in the classroom and beyond, but at the negative outlier institutions, students experienced diversity differently. Of the nine institutions we visited, students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds accounted for 40% of the student populations, and on average 28% of the students were Pell grant recipients. But at the positive outlier institutions, diversity was viewed as more than something the institution "had." Rather, it was institutionalized as part of student learning priorities, academic programs, and institutional identity. Diversity was understood as a social perspective through which students learned. Compositional diversity also challenged the patterns in public life, where Americans sort into social and economic groups and find themselves with others who share their views and values.⁵ At these institutions, the breaking down of exclusionary or discriminatory practices was viewed as part of the institution's democratic mission.

At the campuses we visited, social group representation improved the quality of the educational programming. For example, Eastern Liberal Arts College lacked compositional racial/ethnic diversity, but the institution nonetheless identified social justice as a core outcome of student learning there. To achieve that goal, 100% of the students studied abroad at some point over their time as undergraduates. And prior to any study abroad experience, students studied the cultures, histories, and values of that nation or community. This learning experience included training in intercultural norms and relationships. An administrator shared:

I think it's the students. I think it's the faculty, and I think it's the staff, too. I mean, I'm just going to throw out some examples to you. Our Chaplain is openly a lesbian and that, at some institutions around America, would not set well with a lot of people but that's [the college]. We're cool with it. We have a tennis coach who has one arm, and he has been incredibly successful. He's an amazing athlete, but I think a lot of schools may have been like, ugh, you know what I mean. But that's not [the college]. [The College] is accepting of this difference and really looking past labels and disabilities.

Even at diverse institutions, professors might teach a homogeneous group of students (drawn to a class, for example, by the subject matter). In those cases, the professors played devil's advocate to introduce perspectives missing from the room. Institutional leaders on the positive outlier institutions often developed programs and practices according to the diversity of their student body. On one positive outlier institution, the president requested a scatter plot diagram showing the addresses of the students so that the university could match internships with home addresses. On a few case-study campuses, administrators and faculty specifically recruited a diverse group of students to select speakers and plan events. Students took this role very seriously and asked their peers to vote democratically to ensure a cultural event represented all of the students attending the university. At another institution, a dean played the role of checking proposals for events or activities by students, asking students to identify whether that event would appeal to some students more than others, and why, and then having the students rethink their choices, if needed. At these positive outlier institutions, these were intentional and structural approaches to ensuring that inclusion shaped programs and practices.

Faculty took seriously their role as educators of diverse student populations. At Midwest Community College, a small group of faculty members (led by a political science and an English professor) launched a grassroots effort out of concern that the faculty was predominantly white and straight, and the students increasingly diverse by race, sexual orientation, and gender. They spent a year studying diversity and working with outside diversity trainers. At the end of a year, the group self-identified as "Agents of Change" and loosely affiliated with the institution's faculty development center. Their work became more formal—meeting six times a year, bringing in speakers and trainers. They bring in one trainer annually—someone who assesses where the institution is regarding diversity—developing a plan of action for the following year, and then returning to check progress. These faculty members placed "Agents of Change" stickers on their office doors to signal to students that they were trained and open to talking candidly about diversity. Now, more than 80 faculty members have joined the group. We were told in a focus group that no committee or task force is convened on campus now without someone asking, "Wait, how many Agents of Change are in this group?"

Attention to and value for the ways in which their students differed by race, ethnicity, ideology, age, income, and sexuality established an inclusive culture of politics at these positive outlier institutions. Students, faculty, and administrators all adopted an inclusive orientation to politics as they thought critically about power dynamics, privileges, and disadvantages interwoven into the structures of the institution. It was this attention to these structures that appeared to foster and cultivate the attribute, diversity as realized practice.

PERVASIVE POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS

Pervasive political discussions emerged as an important finding for all the positive outlier campuses. As reported in our previous chapter "The Politically Engaged Classroom," the classroom was an important venue for political discussions, and professors required students to support their opinions with evidence. Professors also set the right tone of respect and listening. And in the classroom, the facilitation skills of the professor made a difference. Some of the critical ingredients for a skillfully moderated discussion included professors playing devil's advocate to elicit unpopular or unrepresented perspectives. A student told us, "And I love, I love that. I love it whenever I can learn and someone can learn from both the students and the professors themselves." Students felt respected for their ideas and respected their peers and professors in return. A faculty member at Eastern Liberal Arts College said:

I feel as faculty we have to be very intentional about introducing those perspectives because otherwise you can have a conversation that you sort of know what everyone's going to say or where they're leaning and it requires either a faculty member or a student in the class to, you'll occasionally hear someone say, well I'll play devil's advocate you know?

On these campuses, students were prepared to engage in discussions. We were surprised to learn that of the seven high outlier campuses we visited, several taught the arts of discussion in first-year English classes, and at least one had developed a first-year experience in intergroup relations. In one of these classes, the students examined one political issue, such as healthcare in the United States, for the entire semester. In the other, they used current events, covering many topics over the term. In these classes, students learned to frame issues, identify many perspectives, discuss, deliberate, and write about the issues, and, in some cases, debate or advocate for a particular stance. In some cases, students wrote mock letters to elected officials. In others, they also learned to lead discussions and manage any conflict that might occur.

Engaging in dialogue was also embedded in other student experiences. A student at Eastern Liberal Arts College told us, “We are constantly schooled in how to have discussions with people.” There, students frequently participate in open forums and fish bowl conversations (a small group discussion that others observe). Institution-wide, students receive training in privilege and power disparities and in conflict resolution (separate programs), experiences that are required of students before they can study abroad. The president taught a first-year course on the First Amendment and free speech. Students, faculty, and administrators mentioned the importance of the college’s “community principles” and that they are discussed and revised regularly.

Other institutions embedded discussion into the student experience as well. At Southeast Public University, students received training on intercultural and intergroup relations before going into the community to engage in service. Students working in area high school book clubs were trained to facilitate book discussions. At Southwest Urban University, the student government ran workshops year-round on facilitating dialogues and managing conflict as part of student leadership programs that they managed for leaders of student clubs and new student government leaders. Both Midwest Community College and Southwest Urban University worked with the [Kettering Foundation](#) to teach students to organize and facilitate National Issue Forums on topics of national and local concern.

Free expression was identified at all of the positive outlier institutions as a strong normative value for discussions alongside values of respect and civility. A public statement at Southeast Public University reads:

While the First Amendment does give you the right to free speech, it does not entitle you to harass, intimidate, or bully others. So before you post nasty comments about someone else, review the law and remember what your mother said, “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.”

Similarly, the provost at Eastern Liberal Arts College said, “There are no codes other than our community principles, and those include respect and inclusion.” Students, not faculty or staff, were identified as the primary enforcers against degrading speech aimed at one social group. As one student at Eastern Liberal Arts College explained, “I just feel like people here . . . will not tolerate certain things . . . you can’t go around wearing KKK masks here . . . that’s not going to work.”

Nationally, critics argue colleges and universities are places of liberal indoctrination, but we saw no evidence of that, even at the most liberal-leaning institutions we visited. As public institutions, several of the institutions we visited were subject to visits and protests by outside groups with conservative political views, particularly on abortion, and those groups visit the campus at least annually. An administrator at Northeast State College told us this story:

[We] have, every year a group, a religious group that comes on campus and . . . students are always questioning why I let them do it . . . but I said look, it’s their First Amendment right to do that, and I said, you can choose not to listen to this. . . . So it’s always, every year they show up, and they do it, and it’s always this kind of give and take, I’m answering questions about First Amendment rights, and the whole bit. I think that’s probably one of the best examples of, you know, the freedom that people should have.

Although students may protest or express frustration about an unpopular speaker, administrations and faculty saw a value in, as one faculty member explained, inviting speakers who “go against the grain.” However, disruptive hecklers were asked to leave because these institutions valued having exposure to different perspectives, even if they disagreed with them. Both faculty and staff confirmed what one president told us:

I had Newt Gingrich here, I had Karl Rove less than a year after the '08 election, I think, and you know there were people who tried to shout him down and prevent him from speaking. I think there was a powerful lesson to be had in my throwing those people out of the auditorium who were trying to prevent him from speaking.

Many of the institutions we visited supported physical spaces for political expression. Midwest Public University reserved a hall in a heavily trafficked area for political posters and tables. Southwest Urban University identified a wall where members of the campus community recorded experiences showing their privilege. West Coast Community College, Midwest Community College, and Northeast State College established free speech zones. Southeast Public University also supported a free speech zone, but no one knew where it was located. In one student focus group, when asked where the free speech zone was located, a student responded, “I think it’s all campus.” And on many of these campuses, students could point to lounges or other common areas where political conversations were common. These walls, zones, and common areas were not the only places on campus where people could express their political views. They were simply places where students, faculty, and staff could spark political conversation or find other people interested in a particular political topic. Reflecting a theme we heard at all of the positive outlier institutions, a faculty member at Southwest Urban University told us, “Anywhere on campus is a safe space to speak about politics.”

Political discussions were the most pervasive feature of the politically engaged institutions we visited, but it was important that these discussions take place in an environment that valued free expression and dissenting viewpoints.

STUDENTS AS COLLEAGUES WITH SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

At the politically engaged institutions we visited, students had real decision-making authority. Governance in higher education usually entails a system in which administrators and trustees or governing boards make management and financial decisions, and the faculty controls academic/curricular decisions. Ideally, it is often argued, the faculty, administration, and trustees share responsibility for decision making and the institution’s future.⁶ Yet shared governance has been criticized as outdated and unresponsive to the current fiscal concerns and the needs of new populations of students from disadvantaged backgrounds or underrepresented groups.⁷

At the politically engaged institutions we visited, students shared decision-making responsibilities within a more collaborative, horizontal decision-making structure. The locus of authority still rested with institutional leaders and faculty, but students played significant formal and informal roles.

Colleges and universities are notorious for their committees, and the committee structure lent itself well to student involvement. We saw examples of students working with the president to create a local wind farm near campus and students working with faculty, local experts, and government authorities to draft antifracking policies. When issues regarding the campus climate for different groups of students arose, the institutional leaders turned to the students to administer a climate survey to faculty and staff and to develop appropriate policies for improving those campus conditions. When students raised concerns about sexual assault on campus, students formed a committee to develop antiharassment and discrimination institutional policy. A student at Southeast Public University explained:

I'm pretty sure everybody has sat on a board, a task force, a committee, if something's not working they're going to pull [students] together and it's normally student-focused. ... [They will say] we see that it doesn't work, what can we do to make it better, and they'll implement those changes. And there's at least a student sitting on just about every committee that affects students. [If the] outcome will affect students, students sit on it.

By respecting student viewpoints, the administration built trust and commitment among students which would then serve the administration well when faced with an institution-wide conflict. And for institutions serving large numbers of historically marginalized groups of students, including their voice in decision making can prevent mistakes. An administrator from the Midwest Public University explained, "I don't pick carpet without student input. I don't paint a wall color without, 'Hey, which color do you like?' Not that I ask 150 people, but we have infrastructures and advisory boards where we live off of student input." At these positive outlier institutions, student perspectives, opinions, and voices were central to decision making.

Committee structures were not the only way institutions shared power with students. At Northeast State College, students operated a building that houses the cafeteria, the bookstore, student common areas, classrooms, and office spaces. The student government association managed the 450 or so students employed there each semester. An administrator explained how students shared this responsibility stating,

No administrators have the keys. [Students] staff it completely with just students. They hire students from their own student body to run the student center and create the budget and events and the hours of the student center from 4PM until 2AM. You know, it's really on their terms and that in and of itself is political engagement.

Similarly, at Southwest Urban University, students were responsible for event planning. Because the standing committee responsible for events consisted of representation by students of all backgrounds, the events generally appealed to diverse groups of students. One student leader said,

You'll find that a lot of the active students here are very interested in catering to every demographic type you can find, be it racial, religion, you know, being smart, educational. We're not looking for the most popular or most likely to be successful. We want everyone to be successful. We like to give everyone opportunities and open their eyes to things they never knew before which, once you give someone the chance to speak, an opportunity, you'd be surprised at what they can say.

Similarly, at both Eastern Liberal Arts College and Midwest Public University, the student government managed a large pool of money that was available to other student groups for competitive minigrants for community innovation.

Sometimes students were not handed power; they seized it. At Southwest Urban University, students wanted more say in institutional choices, so they formed a group they called the Empower Party and laid out a platform with a goal of not only shared decision making but more equitable and inclusive decision making. At Eastern Liberal Arts College, the student government was accused of being unresponsive to the entire student body, so they convened a group, rewrote the student government constitution, and then put it to a vote among the entire student body. At Southwest Urban University, a student told us that the student government was "a positive outlet for us to express our opinion" and a place "where stuff actually gets done."

The student government at Southwest Urban University exemplifies this ideal of seized authority. They wear suits or business attire to school every day because, as they explained, one never knows when the media or a political leader will be on campus. When Nelson Mandela lay on his deathbed, students decided to hold a candlelight vigil in his honor. One group bought candles and started notifying others on social media. Another group contacted the media to say

that political leaders would be there, holding candles. A third group contacted political leaders and told them to come and hold candles because the media would be there. Both the politicians and the media joined the vigil, which was then reported on national news. At most institutions, students would be reticent to bypass institutional offices of public relations by contacting the media and inviting them to campus. At this institution, the student leaders had both the media and politicians among their contacts on their phones.

Finally, students actively shaped institutional policy, sometimes through protest but also through visible advocacy and campus-community organizing. We were actually on one campus when the students began a protest over the termination of a faculty member. The president left his office and met with the protesters to explain the process for hiring and firing decisions. The students left satisfied, assured that the process had now (as a result of the protest) been transparent. On several of the other positive outlier campuses, when students protest, the administrations respond by authorizing them to study the subject and draft an institutional policy for consideration. Students on these campuses wrote or influenced institutional policies concerning sexual harassment, student conduct codes, gender-neutral bathrooms, location of cameras on campus, inclusion of sexual orientation to the nondiscrimination policy, installation of more bike racks on campus, revision of food choices in the cafeteria, permission for nude modeling in art classes, procurement of a particular water pump, establishment of a food pantry on campus, including negotiating with local groceries for donations, changes in amount undocumented workers are paid, construction of a meditation room on campus, revision of maternity and paternity leave policies, and budget decisions.

The majority of students and faculty in our focus groups expressed satisfaction with how their voice and interests were received. One student at Southeast Public University explained,

We learn how to express our voice at our university and are encouraged to stand up for our rights. If you are used to talking to your chancellor and then your governor and so forth then it has the ripple effect so I think [my campus] is a really good starting point for understanding how a democracy is supposed to work.

A faculty member from Southwest Urban University echoed a similar sentiment, stating, “From a social change standpoint, it’s like [students] challenge the status quo. They’re not afraid to challenge the status quo.” Student leaders there had a reputation as the movers and shakers. One student explained, “Our student government president, he is very influential to the administration. He has built a very good connection with them. ... If the students come to him, he can really get it done.”

In contrast, the institutional leaders and the faculty members we met at the negative outlier institutions were skeptical of the role of students in governance beyond the usual nonvoting membership on large committees or boards. At Northeast Rural State College, student leaders were mainly selected by the president or because they knew another student on the committee. At Southwest Liberal Arts College, faculty alone selected students to work with the first-year experience, overruling student and administrator efforts to democratize the process. Interestingly, on one of the two campuses, the division between the faculty and the administration was so difficult that they often clashed over institutional decisions publicly. Both institutions held onto a lot of centralized control of the institution, at Southwest, by the faculty and at Northeast Rural, by the administration.

POLITICAL ACTION

We define political action to include voting, campaigning, running for office, attending a town meeting, lobbying, and other forms of engagement with government as well as activism such as community organizing, public deliberation, and protest. At the positive outlier institutions, students acted out of interest for a political issue both within and beyond formal government

structures. Engaging in activism was a frequent political action. Students utilized protests, demonstrations, and sit-ins to bring attention to national and local political problems. At West Coast Community College, there was a small population of homeless students enrolled in the college. One of the students, who had been formerly homeless, was determined to make the campus a more supportive environment for these students. He and others working with him experienced political barriers, but ultimately they negotiated these politics to achieve an institutional change. A student recounts the experience:

Well, just to point out how active the students have been [here]. We have had a student by the [name.] He has been fighting I think for over a year to provide shower access for homeless students. I think the first time he was shot down. His idea was shot down and the whole proposition was shot down. But because of his activeness in campaigning and talking to students and the [state] student community college student senate, it's finally been passed in [West Coast Community College] so now homeless students can have a shower in the gym...

This example illustrates how students attending these institutions learn critical political skills, navigating, negotiating, and confronting institutional structures. In this case, the institutional change occurred as a result of visible campaigning with other students around this issue in connection to activism at the student senate level.

At Midwest Public University, students often engaged in visual demonstrations to express political issues such as racism, intolerance, and oppression. For example, students organized together to display pieces of red papers with descriptions of their experienced oppression and taped these pieces of paper to the glass of a walking bridge between academic buildings. Hundreds of students participated in this demonstration; a student explains the event, "That's Wall of Intolerance...where you write down about moments of oppression...on the walkway bridge... we had over, uh, over a thousand people participate, which for a commuter campus is not bad."

At this institution, students also organized a "Day of Silence." During this day students did not speak until the end of the day. At the end of the day there was an open mic organized for students to then speak out about issues that typically silence others. The positive outlier institutions leverage activism as a political tool for achieving institutional changes, for demonstrating political issues, and for creating coalitions or support groups around issues that were marginalized particular groups on campus and nationwide.

At most of the positive outlier institutions, election seasons were characterized by gatherings, celebrations, discussions, high emotions, and excitement. Voter registration involved many faculty and students. At Southwest Urban University, faculty members told us that there is not one week over the course of a year (not just election season) when he is not asked, "Are you registered to vote?" At Southeast Public University, all clubs and sororities/fraternities can fulfill part of their student government imposed community service requirement by tabling to register voters. At Southwest Urban University, students recruited nonpartisan representatives from the local community such as the League of Women Voters and others to serve as advisors to Walk2Vote. A student described it:

So one day, we had a rally essentially where we told students, "We're excited about the fact that we can vote early" and "You should take advantage of that opportunity." ... We had, it was like a big pep rally [in the main common area of the campus.] We had food there, and we told students, "these are where your voting locations are." We told them what the calendar was to vote. SGA gave out little pom poms and American flags and little stickers and stuff like ... We had guest speakers, and then afterwards, anybody who wanted to could walk down and cast an early vote.

Others agreed. One student added, "We put flyers everywhere. We chalked up the sidewalks, Walk2Vote, Walk2Vote. ..."

Similarly, a student at Midwest Community College reported:

There was a lot of political talk during the presidential—during the 2012 election. You could sit in the library and listen to people talk. And they're like, have you voted yet? Did you go across the street and vote yet. ... Everyone was, like, way hyped about it. The [school newspaper] did a lot on it, but not where you would think the school, I mean, it never felt like the school was into one party over another.

On nearly all of the positive outlier campuses, the political science faculty played a significant role in increasing interest in elections and in influencing the political climate on campus beyond an election season. During election seasons, they participated in voter mobilization drives. They hosted voter education sessions and advised the student Democrats and Republicans on registering voters or on hosting political debates. Faculty invited political speakers to campus, both liberal and conservative. They used class time to encourage students to register to vote. A PIRG (Public Interest Research Group) representative at Northeast State College told us that the faculty were amenable to “give her the spotlight,” meaning class time, to pass out voter registration forms, to help students fill out the forms, to solicit volunteers for lobbying on behalf of the institution’s financial needs at the state capital, or to let students know about food drives and other community work.

Faculty political engagement goes beyond the election season. At Midwest Community College, the faculty promotion and tenure requirements include a mandate that faculty engage with the local community, including serving on local commissions, running for an elected position, and working with the local city to tackle sticky public issues, particularly about racial divides and disparities. These faculty members worked annually to organize a march in the city to draw attention to racial divides in the community.

At these positive outlier institutions, faculty, particularly political science faculty, worked with students across disciplines by partnering with faculty members to offer interdisciplinary experiences, hosting speakers and panels on political issues, partnering with offices such as the interfaith chaplain to teach democratic skills of deliberation, advising student governments, and working with centers for teaching and learning (faculty development centers) on discussion-based pedagogies. In these and other ways, individual faculty members played a significant role in fostering the kind of campus climate conducive to political learning for all students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We share these findings, which we call “Politics 365,” to emphasize that pervasive political learning and engagement is not something connected to a single structure, one individual, the work of one department, or even an event, like an election. It is something that is practiced and modeled year round and is deeply embedded into institutional norms, behaviors, and, as several participants on the positive outlier campuses told us, “the way things are done around here.” We offer these Politics 365 characteristics—social cohesion, diversity, pervasive political discussions, students as colleagues, and excitement around elections, and other political efforts—as a composite, a complex and intersecting set of norms, structures, activities, and behaviors. We suspect that no single characteristic will work in isolation. All of these findings suggest a need for additional study, such as controlled experiments and targeted interventions.

These qualitative case studies are valuable because they offer examples against which other professors and institutions can compare their own practices. But we cannot and do not claim causation—that if you do these things, your students will vote. We used voting rates as a sampling tool to identify places where students might be engaging politically at higher levels, but, as with any case study research, generalizability requires more study.

Campus climates reflect widely shared sets of norms, patterns of behaviors, and attitudes as well as structures and programs that manifest or reinforce those institutional attributes. Together, these attributes represent values and practices that are widely accepted and shared. This does not mean that everyone thinks or acts the same way, nor does it mean that the institution faces no conflicts or tensions. At the positive outlier institutions we visited, dissenting perspectives were welcome and managed constructively.

Fostering the kinds of learning environments described in this chapter will require a combination of institutional, collective, and individual action. Institutional leaders can initiate an assessment of the institution's political climate through a campus-wide reflection effort using dialogues or focus groups.⁸ They can review written policies and procedures, particularly those concerning the intersection between free expression and inclusion and the role of academic freedom on campus. Based on the results of these assessments, institutional leaders can channel financial resources to efforts by individuals and groups, such as departments, student organizations, or the faculty development center.

Groups of faculty, however, need not wait for institutional approval. Grass-roots efforts involving faculty, such as the Agents of Change initiative described earlier, may be more effective than top-down action. Faculty may want to consider surveying faculty on their perceptions about the political landscape for teaching and whether that landscape has changed during and since the 2016 presidential election.⁹ A tool for these discussions is the institution's NSLVE report, which provides individual colleges and universities tailored student voting data.

Action can and should be at the individual level, and there, it is a matter of making a personal commitment to making some changes. Our findings suggest that professors have a special role in the lives of students and are critical to in- and beyond-the-classroom experiences and that political science professors play a unique role in creating campus-wide conditions for political learning and engagement. In the classroom, professors can work with the teachable moments in public life—elections, policy debates, data, and events. Students can learn the arts of discussion, critical inquiry, collective reasoning, and compromise. Beyond the classroom, professors play a significant role in creating the levels of trust and cohesion essential to conditions for political discourse and engagement. One place to do that is through advising. Another is through disciplinary clubs (e.g., the Political Science Club, the International House), which are ideal structures for talking about political issues that may be extraneous to a particular course but are nonetheless important for students to examine.

Professors of political science, government, American studies, justice studies, ethnic studies, international studies, and other related fields are on the front line of policy debates on college campuses and often in the United States. By nature of the courses taught and the scope of these fields, politically charged discussions are central to their teaching. This experience needs to be shared with other disciplines, particularly those where the faculty members are less skilled at facilitating difficult dialogues or less informed about social change movements, structural inequalities and power dynamics underlying public issues, sources of information, and knowledge of political systems. Sharing expertise can be formal (team teaching, workshops for other faculty) or informal (brown bags, interdisciplinary coalitions of professors). Other chapters in this book provide additional valuable approaches to teaching democratic principles, practices, and issues. The goal should be to make student political learning more pervasive on campus and to shift institutional priorities and practices toward this type of learning and engagement. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

2. Our previous chapter, “The Politically Engaged Classroom,” examined classroom pedagogy and the role of discussion-based teaching. It was written earlier when we had only examined five of the nine institutions we visited. This current chapter is based on the analysis from the data from all nine institutions.
3. The first four institutions were selected using the February 2014 model (N=219) and the fifth institution was selected using the March 2015 model (N=468). For the last four institutions, we used a model from September 2015 (N=679). For all institutions, we rounded the enrollment numbers to preserve their anonymity.
4. For a more comprehensive review of the research methods, see “The Politically Engaged Classroom.”
5. Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2009).
6. William G. Bowen and Eugene M. Tobin, *Locus of Authority: The Evolution of Faculty Roles in the Governance of Higher Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).
7. Ibid.
8. The Institute for Democracy and Higher Education is happy to share a rubric developed as a result of these case studies, discussion guides on the NSLVE voting report, and/or the interview guides from these qualitative case studies. Contact IDHE@Tufts.edu.
9. IDHE has also developed a survey on faculty academic freedom and free expression on campus. Contact IDHE@Tufts.edu.