



# Democracy Inventory Case Study

## Kingsborough Community College

Jason Leggett

## Part One: What was the motivation for the inventory?

In March of 2023, Provost Joanne Russell asked Jason Leggett to serve as the Inaugural Faculty Director of the Kingsborough Community College (KCC) Center for Civic Engagement. The Center was explicitly referenced in a KCC College Council Resolution in 2011 to administer a Civic Engagement Graduation Requirement but had yet to materialize over the next decade. Over the summer of 2023, six overlapping institution-wide priorities converged that created the need for a broad, landscape view of civic learning and democratic engagement offerings at KCC within the following areas:

1. **General Education and Liberal Arts Reform.** The civic engagement graduation requirement was incorporated into the general education learning outcomes reflecting the College's belief that civic engagement plays a crucial role in the past, present, and future lives of our students and thus their education should both connect with and contribute to their role as civically engaged citizens of their community. As Liberal Arts serves the majority of our student population, there was an effort to take an integrative approach to reform both the curriculum and professional development of civic engagement within that program.
2. **Assessment.** The Provost had initiated a common reflective assignment for all certified civic engagement courses in order to ascertain how we might improve assessment of the civic engagement process.
3. **Professional Development.** The pandemic radically altered how professional development was organized at the college. The Provost saw civic engagement as one possible way to bring faculty together to discuss equity and social justice. As faculty began to meet, it became clear that many were operating in silos and faculty and administrators did not share a common understanding of what civic engagement meant.
4. **Community-Based Opportunities.** Service learning, internship, and volunteer opportunities were being offered throughout the pandemic, however, very few students were expressing an interest.

5. **Research.** Although a community college, faculty are expected to meet the same research and publishing requirements as four-year institutions within the CUNY system. Civic engagement was seen to offer an untapped field of scholarly interest that could also count toward tenure and promotion because it has been integrated into our guidelines and faculty handbook.
6. **Student Showcase and Signature Projects.** There were no physical or digital spaces for student work in civic engagement to be presented or shared. A showcase of signature projects was seen to be one way of bringing student civic engagement work into the college conversation.

## Part Two: Who was involved, in what ways?

Jason Leggett, Inaugural Faculty Director of the (KCC) Center for Civic Engagement, and Helen-Margaret Nasser, Inaugural Staff Director of the KCC Student Union and Intercultural Center (SU&IC) were asked to review what the college was already doing for civic engagement and to construct an action plan. The form of the broad survey of what was happening at the college took the form of an institutional ethnography<sup>1</sup>. The process of inquiry is “rather like grabbing a ball of string, finding a thread, and then pulling it out... only step by step does she know...what texts and discourses she needs to examine.”<sup>2</sup> While much more comprehensive and more focused on equitable social relations than a democracy inventory, the data collected are similarly drawn from the same sources. In addition, Jason Leggett had previously conducted a brief history of civic engagement at KCC from 2012–2014 and conducted research of equitable civic learning and democratic engagement as a 2023–2024 Campus Compact Fellow.

The democracy inventory served as a vehicle to make sense of the drift that occurred in the ten years following the implementation of a civic engagement graduation requirement that had been agreed upon in 2011. Over the spring and summer of 2024, Jason Leggett used the Democracy Inventory Design Guide to look specifically for democracy efforts across the college. He worked with Helen-Margaret Nasser of the SU&IC, where nearly all of the co-curricular civic engagement opportunities are offered, to code and quantify the more than 50 offerings during the 2023 fall term and the 2024 spring term.

He also reviewed all the certified civic engagement courses and coded them according to the typology offered in the democracy tool. Course descriptions were categorized into Democratic Institutions and Processes, Democracy Adjacent (civil society, social issues that impact democratic processes and institutions) or Democratic Values, Civic Ethos, Values and Skills (pluralism, tolerance, freedom, critical reasoning, and constructive deliberation). Jason also reviewed the Faculty

---

<sup>1</sup> DeVault, M. and McCoy, L. (2002) Institutional Ethnography: Using Interviews to Investigate Ruling Relations. In: Gubrium, J. and Holstein, J., Eds., *Handbook of Interview Research: Context & Method*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 751–776.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, D. (2005). *Institutional ethnography: A sociology for people*. Rowman and Littlefield

Achievements & Awards Program from 2023 and coded research and grant related accomplishments using the same typology. Finally, a survey was offered college-wide that solicited civic engagement efforts and multiple reminder emails were sent to Program Coordinators, college Vice Presidents, Department Chairs, and mid-level administrative staff involved in civic engagement.

## Part Three: What were some of the challenges along the way and key lessons learned?

### Takeaway One

#### **Clarifying concepts is really important.**

Throughout the inventory process there was a constant need to both expand and clarify the narrative of what civic engagement meant. Although the graduation requirement formation documents referenced political activity, the overwhelming majority of faculty and staff viewed civic engagement as social responsibility, or the ability of students to actively participate in their communities.

### Takeaway Two

#### **Overcoming silos is fundamental.**

Two themes emerged from faculty and staff who sought to implement either course work or co-curricular activities: 1) what I do is “not political”; and 2) this is “not my job” or “I thought civic engagement was good.” In these responses, I found that most people were not really paying attention to what was being done and did not see this as their responsibility. They assumed someone else was attending to the implementation, oversight, and assessment process. These two typical responses were evident across all six administrative priorities, evidencing entrenched silos. Staff responsible for assessment rarely interacted with faculty working on a student showcase or signature projects; those responsible for professional development were not in conversation with those offering co-curricular and community-based opportunities. Each silo had embraced a disposition centered around assessment first and were not involved in the general education & liberal arts reform.

## Takeaway Three

### **Robust social responsibility and public service dispositions but very thin on civic education in the form of democratic process and theory.**

In the Spring of 2024, KCC offered 49 different civically engaged certified courses, including a total of 275 sections, across disciplines. However, only 4 of those courses explicitly sought to teach democratic processes or democratic theory. 45 courses could be included in Democratic and Civic Ethos, Values, and Skills but after a review of the assessment materials, none of the courses made references to implications for civic, political, and democratic processes. At most, students were asked to write an essay reflecting on their “experience” or “assignment” and were judged as to whether they committed to exhibit the learning outcomes above in the future in their “community.”

Similarly, a review of research and grant-related activities of faculty and staff for 2022–2023 revealed a similar pattern. While 18 activities focused on social responsibility as an abstract concept, only 5 mentioned civic learning & democratic engagement with concrete activities, and were initiated by Jason or Helen.

## Takeaway Four

### **There is opportunity to connect students to democracy through the social issues they care most about.**

Again, a similar pattern was found when examining co-curricular events. Of the 53 events offered by the SU&IC, only 8 were directed at Democratic Institutions and Processes, 16 Democratic and Civic Ethos, Values, and Skills with a weak or nebulous connection to implications for civic, political, and democratic processes. Instead, these events focused on social issues important to our diverse student population and sought to establish a foundation for additional democratic engagement. For example, Helen uses voter registration as a vehicle to learn more about what students care about and connects them to government internships or volunteer opportunities with community-based organizations. They have also been successful using voting as an entry point with faculty and then supporting those faculty, particularly in STEM, to integrate assignment sheets. One example included Citizen Science with Biologists that pairs student interest with tools in field research.

## Takeaway Five

### **Administrative turnover necessitates institutional memory in multiple places, especially to safeguard more vulnerable/marginalized democracy-advancing efforts.**

A final lesson included the need for institutional memory and resources (human and financial) to protect against administrative turnover. Not all members of the college community hold equal power.

These unequal social relations influence what narratives of civic engagement get prioritized, and which are excluded. For example, the college has cut funding for Salzburg Global Seminar, Model United Nations, Eco-Festival and a Common Reading program. These previous democratic activities are not mentioned on the college website nor in marketing materials. In addition, Jason's research found that most often those faculty and staff who were excluded were those working on equity issues that provide structural support for students who can not engage in democratic activities otherwise. For example, the Access Resource Center, which is understaffed, has not been included in upper-level decision making processes about what democratic activities we intend to offer in the future.

## Part Four: What did it produce or lead to?

The Democracy Inventory Tool helped us think about how to re-frame civic engagement as political activity and experience with democratic processes. In the fall of 2024, while writing this case study, another major administrative turnover process is underway. This presented the opportunity to revisit the institutional commitment to civic engagement and to explicitly relate it to democracy. Two paths have opened in light of the democracy inventory.

The first involves using the Student Union & Intercultural Center to explicitly focus on co-curricular participatory projects that allow students and faculty to engage with how democratic theories and processes relate to civic engagement. By allowing flexibility in the co-creation of the experiences, we are learning how to better make the connections explicit. Through co-curricular programming, Helen has designed learning activities around the themes of Constitution Day, We the People, More Perfect Union, and Voting and Participatory Budgeting. She has also outlined a plan to build from the focus on social issues that impact democratic processes and institutions to draw students into political learning based on their myriad identities (and values/social commitments), so they might see themselves more in the democratic process. These can easily be integrated into any course or can serve as stand-alone activities.

The second involves examining candidate courses. A review of Pathways Courses revealed 39 potential courses that could be vehicles for the integration of more explicit education relating to formal democratic institutions and processes. Pathways is a required system of general education requirements and transfer guidelines across the University—and by doing so has reinforced CUNY's educational excellence while easing student transfer between CUNY colleges. Two of the Pathways categories are relevant to a democracy inventory:

- U.S. Experience in its Diversity: 12 courses – 79 Sections offered in Fall 24
- World Cultures & Global Issues: 27 courses, 96 class sections in Fall 24

By focusing our professional development opportunities on these courses, in conversation with Helen's democracy identity building efforts, we believe we can leverage the Democracy Inventory Tool

with faculty, staff, students, and community partners to increase engagement with democratic knowledge and participation.