



Democracy Inventory Case Study Lafayette College

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Part One: What was the motivation for the inventory?

In Spring 2024, Caroline Lee, Faculty Director of the Landis Center for Community Engagement, and Chelsea Morrese, Executive Director of Community Engagement, discussed not renewing our Carnegie ECCE application and instead, conducting a deeper assessment/institutional self-study process of our democratic engagement activities on the Lafayette College campus, as a complement to strategic planning conversations around democracy promotion as core to the Lafayette student experience.

This included planning for the College to [host the Vice Presidential Debate](#), which at the time was organized by the Commission on Presidential Debates for September 2024. Northampton County, Pennsylvania, where Lafayette College is located, is well-known as a “bellwether” county and “the ultimate swing county,” leading to extensive canvassing, campaign, and media attention to Lafayette College during the 2024 election season.

In May 2024, the College had adopted a [new mission statement](#) proclaiming that “Lafayette students become critical thinkers, creative problem-solvers, and responsible citizens of the world.” “Responsible Citizenship” was identified as one of five core values: “We are thoughtful members of the global community, educating our students to be compassionate, ethical leaders who constructively participate in society—from Easton and the Lehigh Valley, to the Commonwealth, the nation, and the world.”

As part of those discussions, they applied for and were selected for the Democracy Inventory team and began meeting with the case study group, intending to conduct a case study of our democratic engagement efforts. Support from campus leadership was important, and we received enthusiastic endorsements of this work from the College’s President and Chief of Staff. In the fall, the debut of the College’s draft Strategic Plan included a project area for “Democracy and Its Technologies: History, Design, and Civic Practice”:

Lafayette, as an institution committed to the liberal arts, has been deeply involved in scholarly and experiential explorations of democracy and the technologies that mediate it. The digital infrastructures and tools that shape our communities of civic practice, of dialogue, and of education

are crucial to understand, and Lafayette is at the forefront in its interdisciplinary approaches to ethical AI and critical information studies, administrative law & technology, media, organizational studies, and areas of engineering, design, and scientific research. These issues also undergird our campus understanding of how to foster student learning inside the classroom and out toward engaged and active global citizenship.

Building on campus momentum and investment in democracy-promoting activities, the project was motivated by the following three objectives, which evolved during the process. These objectives were driven by our understanding that building on existing efforts and further advancing democracy within a small, undergraduate-only, private liberal arts community would necessarily require different priorities than those at JHU and Stanford, the two sample institutional inventory efforts we were inspired by, given the differential in institutional resources and administrative staffing at our institution:

1. Use an empirical, critical approach to develop a comprehensive understanding of all of the various efforts, both organically emerging and encouraged from the top down, to advance democracy at Lafayette College.

Research Question: What shape does the democratic landscape at Lafayette take, who is involved in these activities, and how do they interact, complement, or conflict with each other?

2. Use a qualitative, autoethnographic approach to assess the democratic landscape at Lafayette and its impacts on student learning and experience around civic engagement, democratic practice, and emerging threats to democracy.

Research Question: How does the messy, multifaceted welter of democratic activities at Lafayette impact student learning and student experience, if at all? What does it feel like to be the subject of efforts to improve democratic understanding and activate citizenship habits?

3. a. Drawing on the findings of our inventory and qualitative research on experience, and the democratic mission of Lafayette College, provide both practical (low-hanging fruit) and ambitious recommendations for pathways forward that can make existing efforts more effective and more student-driven, in order to further advance the dynamic quality, depth, and breadth of democracy advancement at the institution.

Research Question: How can we share our findings from questions 1 and 2 above in ways that are productive and generative for further innovation at the grassroots level?

b. Use comparative case studies from our participation in the democracy inventory process to share alternative institutional models and best practice innovations that may enhance student learning and experience on our campus and others', while generating appreciation of how democratic landscapes vary throughout higher education.

Research Question: How can we turn self-reflection on institutional challenges outward toward democratic change in larger contexts?

During the summer of 2024, we systematically cataloged Lafayette College courses, research, engagement activities, and events that focused on advancing democracy in 2024, as well as the people behind those efforts, according to the guidelines set out in the Task Force's Scope and Definitions document, and the Codes and Coding Scheme document. This gave us a basic understanding that reinforced our sense of where the majority of activity was taking place at the institutional level in our small community, particularly inasmuch as the directors were involved in and aware of much of this activity.

It should also be noted that during the summer of 2024, the College's [plans to host the Vice Presidential Debate](#) were put on hold and then canceled by the Commission on Presidential Debates. Nevertheless, like other Pennsylvania colleges and universities, we had to manage external attention and organizing efforts at Lafayette College during the fall of 2024 that were more intensive than prior election year experiences.

Part Two: Who was involved, in what ways?

Under the assumption that democracy building occurs on campus both from the top down and bottom up, we reached out to a wide group of stakeholders on campus to catalog and better understand their efforts. Centers and labs (such as the [Landis Center for Community Engagement](#), the [Meyner Center for the Study of State and Local Government](#), and the [Gov Lab](#)), students, faculty and staff across the College, and departments and programs, including Government & Law, Policy Studies, International Affairs, Philosophy, and Anthropology & Sociology, all are involved in efforts to advance democratic learning for students and our broader community. This included: reaching out to faculty, staff, and centers engaged in such activities, comprehensively listing campus events and awards related to democracy promotion, and mapping courses offered in 2024 for democratic learning goals and topics.

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

Throughout the goal development process, we were aware of the dangers of focusing on institutionalizing democracy advancement more deeply as a priority in itself. At a place where resources like staff time are at a premium, more time assessing and coordinating activities necessarily means less time on the ground with students, who are at the heart of our institutional mission. We were also humble with respect to our expectations about what “good” democratic activities should look like, recognizing that democracy can be messy and frustrating, even when it is working as intended.

As the fall semester swung into action, despite our central role on campus in coordinating and communicating about democracy advancing activities, we were astonished at the wealth of democratic activities that had escaped our notice or bubbled up organically from student interests and outside stakeholders. With a collective thirty years on campus, we anticipated that democratic advancement activities might be more focused on the U.S., and might be more heavily located in [Lafayette Votes!](#), our nonpartisan student voter registration and education initiative, and in the Government & Law Department and its programs/centers. While these were certainly important to activities on campus, there was plenty of activity to address and debate threats to democracy globally.

Events did not just use local expertise, but frequently brought in Zoom or international voices that might not otherwise have been heard. For example, the Easton Book Festival proposed a [public event](#) on campus in which a pioneering Black anchorwoman who lives in the community interviewed Linsey Davis, a moderator of the presidential debate a few weeks before. Student organizations beyond the College Democrats and Republicans and Bipartisan Coalition organized events on their own; e.g. a Reproductive Justice advocacy group held a “spiral council” to reflect on how elections here and abroad affected their perspectives on reproductive justice. A local community organization for the elderly hosted a viewing and discussion of “A Face in the Crowd” in a campus auditorium at night. A senior student director’s one-act play, “[Lift Every Voice](#),” advertised as “speak[ing] to the current political moment,” was a sold-out hit and prompted discussions around campus.

In fact, there was so much explicitly democracy-focused activity emerging from courses and clubs and community members not explicitly connected to the election that we actually found ourselves scaling back programming in order to allow for attendance not to be spread too thin; even in the middle of October, the President’s Office and the Government & Law Department were announcing brand new events to be held within two weeks. Our surprise at these developments led us to ask new research questions. What was the impact of all this activity on ground-level student experience? Was it invigorating? Exhausting? As we worked with student leaders and students in our classes, we

wondered if the momentum of the election year would lead to more or less engagement after November. We became convinced that a democracy inventory that documented the landscape would not tell us everything we really wanted to know about student experience and learning that emerged from self-organizing and spontaneous or serendipitous events. Certainly, it would be hard to better organize or coordinate when so many efforts were pulled off quickly and without many resources beyond a space for people, some rudimentary a/v equipment, and hastily ordered pizza. But such events had a different kind of power to engage our community in democracy than those that were targeted to the “usual suspects” of campus activists, student journalists, Government professors, and politics junkies.

In addition, a listing of events and courses wouldn't capture the ways in which Lafayette actors were involved in democratic politics writ large, and at multiple scales. Campus administrators and public safety officers continually faced the challenge of paid partisan canvassers from national organizations trying to register students on campus in duplication (and even interference, in the case of improper or unsubmitted registrations) of efforts already made by Lafayette Votes. While they are welcome to do so off-campus property, even across the street, they were continually encouraged to register young people in less advantaged neighborhoods of Easton. Because of our context as a predominantly White institution in a county receiving tremendous investments from partisan organizations, we are acutely aware that it's easier to register students on a crowded quad, even when they are largely already registered, than it is to locate and register the working poor. Despite the incentives for campuses to compete to maximize their students' registration and voting rates, having privileged college students voting at maximum rates simply reinforces inequalities in political power.

The inventory listing democracy activities didn't capture very well more informal and contingent/impermanent aspects of current campus affairs; e.g. the fact that two out of ten members of the National Student Board of Every Vote Counts are current students at Lafayette, who bring back learning from those meetings and funding for our efforts, even while they connect with our recent alumni directing youth outreach in state and national organizations. Neither would a project-focused inventory capture the work that Chelsea Morrese did for weeks with other college administrators to get the Pennsylvania Department of State to apply a technical fix to the state's online voter registration application, once one of our student leaders identified issues with signature uploads on the online voter registration application in a registration workshop at a student club meeting. Additionally, on election day, despite all our planning, the need for additional voting machines and deploying our food service providers to the 4-6 hour line for student voters required interventions by our President and her team.

These types of less visible efforts absorb strategic resources and time, and feel critical and even urgent to securing both ordinary/expected and extraordinary opportunities for democratic engagement, but aren't planned for or part of expected institutional work around democracy, like action planning or social media and web communications strategies. Looking backwards, similar legal and political work to establish a voting site on campus, and at other liberal arts campuses to sue for the right for college students to register where they go to school, laid the groundwork for our efforts today, and was not so much institutional work as political advocacy. How could we better capture political or informal work to advance democracy that is not captured by cataloging official institutional

activities? Is it important to document or otherwise recognize or reward these forms of non-routinized work when they are not reproducible but important to achieving political equality?

Part Four: What did the effort ultimately produce or lead to?

To this point, our learning so far has led us to both a set of immediate goals, such as tagging courses, and a longer-term research interest in an ethnography of student democratic learning and attitudes in order to better gauge democracy advancing activities at the College. We plan on conducting that research in the Spring of 2025.