

Democracy Inventory Profile

American Association of State Colleges and Universities

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Part One: What was the context for this profile?

In the past 20 years, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' (AASCU's) American Democracy Project (ADP) has grown from a bootstrapped initiative to a robust linkage for hundreds of campuses doing the vital work of civic engagement. Participation in ADP is voluntary, though AASCU membership is required, but no expectations of specific programming or reporting to AASCU exist. Individual schools are free to establish their own pathways for civic engagement and to develop their work in ways that fit best within their institutions' cultures.

However, this structure provides a common thread (ADP participation) for regional public universities to explore how to institutionalize civic engagement. In 2021, Radford University professor and ADP Civic Fellow, Chapman Rackaway, applied for a two-year ADP Civic Fellowship built around a portfolio studying the institutionalization of American Democracy Project work on participating campuses. As part of the portfolio, ADP requested participating universities complete a survey to audit the civic work and its institutionalization on their campus.

The audit adapted the Furco (1999) model to ask campuses questions about (i) organization, budget, and administrative support; (ii) civic engagement activities in which the campus is involved; (iii) the level of curricular integration of civic work; and (iv) evaluation and assessment of civic engagement. Thirty-six institutions responded (a response rate of 40.4%) and the rest of this case study explores institutionalization involvement, challenges, and opportunities gleaned from this audit.

Part Two: Who was involved, in what ways?

Background on Regional Public Institutions

Across the United States, 517 higher education institutions serve their states and the nation as a whole as regional public universities (RPU). These institutions are often the most accessible to the widest range of prospective college students because of their proximity to their hometowns and their

affordability. RPUs are often situated in rural areas, and on average their tuition is approximately \$9,000 annually, nearly \$2,000 less than other public four-year institutions.

These institutions mostly operate under the aegis of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). AASCU institutions advance social mobility for students of all backgrounds, positively impacting them, their families, and their communities for generations to come. Offering more than 3 million students each year an affordable, high-quality college education—particularly those from lower-income families, first-generation college students, and students of color—AASCU institutions are stewards of their communities, powering economic growth and preparing graduates to be informed and engaged citizens who live by the values of a democratic society.

Nearly half of the 14 million degrees conferred each year are provided at RPUs. The mix of different populations means that the most economically and demographically representative student bodies will generally be found at RPU's (see <https://www.higheredvaluemetrics.org/blog/how-do-regional-public-colleges-fare-on-the-economic-mobility-index>). With rigorous curricula and relatively small class sizes, RPUs can offer students access to high-quality educational experiences that might otherwise be unavailable to them.

Not only do RPUs educate students for successful careers, but they also educate the whole person. Citizenship is an important skill set that RPUs provide in addition to career readiness. RPUs strive to build leadership skills in their students, focused on civic engagement, leadership, and a sense of agency in solving real-world problems. Since 2003, AASCU member institutions have participated in the civic engagement-centered American Democracy Project. Inspired by Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, ADP is a network of nearly 300 state colleges and universities collaborating to deepen the impact public higher education institutions have on preparing students who are empowered to be engaged and to lead in the future of our democracy, directly contribute to a more competitive workforce and a stronger local and national economy, have knowledge of the structures and processes of democracy and reflect on those processes, learn to develop civic skills of critical thinking, deliberation, thoughtful listening and dialogue, particularly with opposing views and perspectives, and engage with their community. Civic education is particularly valuable for non-traditional students and those who do not come from privileged backgrounds, including women, students of color, and economically disempowered students. ADP serves this new American majority.

ADP member institutions have focused efforts on enhancing civic learning and engagement opportunities for students in the two decades since. Participation in ADP requires an internal institutional commitment, and between institutions that commitment varies. ADP membership does not require any specific programming commitment, but rather expects the participating institutions to tailor civic work to their own unique campus culture.

All institutions involved in this project are regional public universities that have been involved with AASCU's American Democracy Project.

Table 1: Census Bureau–defined Region

Region	Frequency
Northeast	5
Midwest	11
South	16
West	4
Total	36

Table 2: Number of years involved in ADP

Years in ADP	Frequency
Less than 1 year	4
1-2 years	5
2-5 years	5
5-10 years	7
10-15 years	5
15 years or more	10
Total	36

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

Our study suggested that many regional public institutions exhibit a substantial gap between the level of institutionalization present and the work being done. Results of the audit suggest that individual faculty and members and/or groups of them are doing much of the civic work on campuses without a commensurate level of institutional grounding or support.

Institutionalization can and does include elements such as including "civic engagement" in a job title, the leaders of the civic work reporting directly to an Assistant Vice President or higher, and having a

stable budget. A number of anecdotal comments from respondents indicated that because of their personal interest in and passion for civic engagement they were tasked with doing all of their university's leadership in the area with no supervision, support, accountability, or strategic assistance. This haphazard method jeopardizes the long-term stability of civic work, indeed perhaps threatening its very existence. One retirement, institutional departure, or change in work status can functionally end a university's civic work owing to the over-reliance on one individual or a small group.

Universities have pushed the importance of civic engagement for some time, but generally speaking have not provided the supports needed to make civic work a robust part of the university environment. Numerous opportunities emerged from within this audit, from establishing leadership teams to support ADP campus directors, budgetary allocations, and help in assessing civic learning.

Through a series of follow-up conversations, issues explored were: what prompted the institution to begin ADP and civic work, how the ADP body was organized, how the administrative work of ADP is supported, what supports external to their university do schools have, the strategic alignment of ADP with other campus priorities, and whether or not ADP has a brand identity at their university. The most significant findings from the focused conversations were:

1. The centrality and necessity of executive leadership and commitment
2. Internal ADP leadership developed from a personal interest and work wasn't compensated appropriately or acknowledged in tenure and promotion
3. Lack of budget and little administrative support (university leadership provided no supervision, support, accountability, or strategic assistance)
4. Multidisciplinary and cross-campus ADP teams had more robust and stable structures
5. Universities with lower research profiles and significantly higher teaching expectations were unable to seek and manage grants infeasible
6. Uncertainty with defining "civic engagement" work by the institution Some institutions conflate civic engagement with voluntarism or other elements that do not align with the commonly used Ehrlich (2000) definition of civic engagement, "Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes."
7. Civic engagement had not been integrated into the university's strategic plan
8. Complicating factors such as political challenges, budget cuts, and large workloads that limited faculty involvement in this work

Part Four: What did it produce or lead to?

The institutional audit results were shared by Rackaway at the 2024 CLDE meeting, though the formal report has not yet been distributed to ADP coordinators. ADP leadership would like to prepare an executive summary for ADP coordinators to share with their institutional leaders, but we'd like to connect the results of this audit with deeper case studies about how institutional structures can be revamped or built anew to support civic engagement. The ADP coordinators have been clear that their institutional leaders need actionable, method-tested steps in order to approve structural changes. With the larger work of the Democracy Inventory Design team, we hope that this profile can propel more recommendations for actionable strategies to institutionalize civic engagement.