

Democracy Inventory Profile

A Constellation of Commonwealth Campuses

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“That’s where I caught the bug,” observed Lt. Governor Kim Driscoll, as she reflected on her time as an intern in local government, an opportunity Salem State University (SSU) made possible to her—and to thousands of other students who want to “better their communities.” Proud of its moniker as the “Commonwealth’s Civic Engagement University,” SSU sees its pro–democracy work as essential to its efforts in becoming a Hispanic–Serving Institution (HSI). External influences, like the changing demographics of our Commonwealth, have an influence on campus culture. With the growing Hispanic and Latino population in Massachusetts (at 13.5% in 2023, U.S. Census), the imperative exists to ensure higher education is ready to serve the changing student body. Massachusetts is home to five community colleges that are HSIs. SSU just became the first public comprehensive university in Massachusetts to become an HSI. The University, in collaboration with Holyoke Community College (HCC), Bunker Hill Community College, and MassBay Community College formed a consortium of campuses whose work through a Higher Education Innovation Fund grant has shown the depth, breadth, and impact of what is possible when funding is tied to equity–based initiatives. The consortium’s sold–out 2024 Inaugural New England Hispanic (HSI) and Minority Serving Institution (MSI) Conference was held at SSU. It brought leaders across the region together to catalyze ways campuses can be ready to serve current and future Hispanic and Latino students. Civic engagement was threaded throughout the conference to show the synergies between being prepared to serve Hispanic and Latino students and working equitably with local Latino communities while valuing communities’ and students’ cultural wealth. In a Commonwealth with many higher education institutions, collaboration between regional state universities and community colleges around a series of initiatives and events is making their work shine. It began with close examination of what higher education was doing to engage students’ civic learning. We profile this unique model as a way to show what is possible when policy and funding set the context for creative collaborations, when institutions have tools that support civic learning, and when higher education ecosystems use data in decision making.

Impetus

The consortium’s impetus was over a decade in development. Massachusetts’ Vision Project, a dialogue across campus leaders and system leaders that began in 2010, was designed to “produce the best–educated citizenry and workforce in the nation” (MDHE “Preparing Citizens”). Spurred by President Obama’s American Graduation Initiative, the Vision Project started by assessing where the Commonwealth stood, publishing that data, and annually reviewing progress. It addressed five

elements: improving rates of college enrollment, graduation and student success, developing assessments of student learning, aligning our programs with workforce needs, and all the while eliminating educational disparities. Director of Civic Learning and Engagement Dr. John Reiff explained that “A sixth element was added when participants reflected on the central assessment question (How do we know?): How do we know we are preparing citizens? If we are not setting out a goal and assessing it, it becomes hard to confirm whether changes were made in the direction we wish to go.” The Study Group on Civic Learning and Engagement (2014) Report provided the rationale for a policy proposal and included rubrics to conduct institutional assessments. Drawing from that Report, in 2014, the Board of Higher Education adopted “civic learning” as an expected outcome for all Massachusetts public higher education institutions. It thereby initiated what would be a rolling set of inventories (or assessments) in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts’ colleges and universities.

In a subsequent development in 2018, BHE began to consider civic learning through a lens of racial equity and made racial equity its top priority for Massachusetts public higher education. A pair of documents (MDHE 2022, 2023) laid out a plan to achieve it (see also Corbin et al, 2023), with [targets](#) based in “targeted universalism” (powell, Mendendian, & Ake, 2019), and [dashboards](#) to measure progress. The “New Undergraduate Experience” report argues that “critically engaged civic participation must be realized through a commitment to advancing racial equity and justice in higher education” (p. 17). By inventorying and tracking what public higher education institutions are doing, making dashboards public, using this data to inform decisions, colleges and universities—and the system more broadly—can “improve economic and social mobility for all citizens through the Massachusetts public higher education system, specifically focusing on historically underserved and underrepresented groups, particularly students of color at all levels of education” (MDHE “Equity Agenda”). Through data collection, analysis, and funded collaboration across colleges and universities, the creation of initiatives that have multiple benefits is possible. The Consortium made use of data on both the changing demographics of the region with growing Latinx or Hispanic populations, and the data the DHE Data Center (Performance Measurement Tracking System) tracks, like the disparities in outcomes achievement, to identify a need for greater exploration. The Consortium authors were also inspired by the concept of “servingness” (Garcia, Núñez, and Sansone, 2019), that catalyzes intentional activities designed to ensure Latinx students thrive with an asset-based model of learning and integration of high-impact practices. Those practices are “anti-racist civic engagement and experiential learning,” Dr. Elisa Castillo explained in the proposal. Civic learning and engagement have meaningful impacts on student success (Salem State 2023; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). The work involved identifying courses and opportunities for students that meet civic learning outcomes, for example, using the 2014 rubric for assessing institutional and faculty capacity, student support and community participation and partnerships.

Participants

The funding that makes possible innovative consortia like this one is impossible without political leadership from the Governor’s office to municipal levels. Massachusetts has an executive branch leader with a vision sharpened by experience seeing what’s possible at the municipal level. A state

university president, a first-generation college student himself, who served in both municipal government and the state legislature, understands how public policy and funding affects people's civic capacity. Colleagues at the DHE who see the possibilities of an education system that connects students and campuses are integral. Michael Dannenberg, Deputy Commissioner for Policy, Richard Riccardi, Deputy Commissioner for Academic Policy and Student Success, and John Reiff, Director of Civic Learning and Engagement collaborated to ensure that the goals of democracy were supported by structures and systems. They understand the spirit of past endeavors can be improved. Dr. Reiff explained that campuses and the DHE should work together to "identify the knowledge and skills students need to be effective citizens in a multi-racial democracy." He convened a group to inquire what that should look like. He explains that this "starts with civic identity. Folks need to see themselves as having a civic identity." This includes "claim[ing] one's agency to address and respond to injustices in communities." The ["Framework for Civic Learning Through a Lens of Racial Equity"](#) defines this and the skills, knowledge, and experiences that help achieve it (Burns et al, 2023). He played a key role convening civic engagement leaders in Massachusetts campuses.

Local campus administrators have a key role to play in the consortium. In Salem, Dr. Elisa Castillo, Assistant Vice President for HSI-MSI Initiatives, and Cynthia Lynch, Assistant Vice Provost for Civic Engagement and Academic Strategic Support, connected based on priorities set in their most recent campus strategic plan that focused heavily on being the Commonwealth's Civic Engagement University and an HSI/MSI. The 2020 Carnegie Elective Classification provided an opportunity for the Salem State Community to reflect on the civically engaged work it was doing. AVP Lynch observed that in that process, "we recognized that while civic engagement has always been part of the DNA of Salem State education, it is explicitly embedded in all academic departments, our co-curricular activities and our administrative units. From top down, bottom up, and middle out, the campus community values democratic engagement." Students have the ability to achieve the [Public Engagement Seal](#) on their transcripts, engage in a Civic Fellowship, complete a Civic Engagement minor, or address social issues in every program (all departments offer courses in community-engaged learning). Also at this time, the campus knew they were an emerging HSI and developed a Roadmap to make sure that Salem State was intentional in its planning, policy creation, and program development. When Dr. Castillo was in place, she and Lynch began to collaborate to see how Salem State's dual identities could be "woven together." Lynch added, "You cannot be an HSI if you are not embedded in the community and advocating for a political engagement agenda that supports improving outcomes for Latino students and communities."

To the west of Salem, in another old mill city, Holyoke Community College's (HCC) leaders like Director of Integrative Learning Irma Medina and El Centro Director Julissa Colon, both HCC alumnae, collaborated with Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Strategic Analytics's (OIESA) Executive Director, Dr. Veena Dhankher, Registrar Allison Wrobel, and Dr. Alan Bloomgarden, in the grants office, to develop the research supporting the proposal. Colon and Castillo met in New Mexico at the Alliance for Hispanic Serving Institution Educators (AHSIE) conference aimed at improving outcomes for Latino students. They brought their scholarship and internal and external research to Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs Dr. Sharale Mathis, enabling the cross-Commonwealth consortium to form. The DHE required collaboration. Medina explicitly connects the BHE [policy on civic learning](#) to initiatives at HCC. She observed how "with the OIESA and registrar's offices, we began tracking,

designating, and reporting service-learning courses to the DHE to show how our institution addresses the policy. It was recommended that college staff work with divisions and departments to identify which courses meet the MA DHE definitions of Civic Learning, Civic Learning Engagement Required, and Civic Learning Engagement Optional.”

Collaborating with administrators in researching pro-democracy civic engagement efforts—and teaching the courses and developing new certificates are faculty dedicated to improving their communities. Professor Raul Gutierrez at HCC researched another part of the changing demographics in the Holyoke region: aging of many civic leaders. He participated in the convening that Reiff organized. He shepherded the Commonwealth’s first [Community Leadership Certificate](#) through shared governance and got it up and running, prior to funds becoming available to support the paid internships for students engaged with leadership in local nonprofits and local government. Based in Gutierrez’s home department in Languages and Latinx Studies, this stackable certificate supports students and community-based organizations who want that program.

A final kind of participant in this process is students. Massachusetts public higher education has put in policies that are premised on the notion that students can—and should—play a role in identifying needs for civic engagement and development of skills. They are at the center of education, and should play a role in helping to shape their own future. HCC students, for example, have been playing a role in articulating future opportunities for civic growth. Faculty, staff, and administrators are listening to students’ voices, and working toward improvement in supporting student civic learning.

Challenges and Lessons

Challenges include time, commitment of faculty, and willingness to collaborate with institutional research/effectiveness offices for creating a system of tracking civic-engagement or service-learning courses. HCC created a Tableau dashboard for tracking success of students participating in service-learning courses. This data is disaggregated by full-time or part-time status, race, gender, Pell-eligibility, age, and first-generation student demographics. If a college has not yet adopted a civic learning outcome, the ability to track and understand what courses are available for students to engage in civic learning depends on collaboration among people on campus who have the expertise to assist each other in creating this inventory. HCC in its partnership with SSU and other schools, is developing its institutional understanding of civic learning for the new generation of students.

Given the timing of the funding, the Consortium was able to accomplish much—but not all—of its plans in the time allotted. However the main two events, the July conference and the fall Student Leadership Summit, were highly successful. The conference featured keynote speakers including Lt. Governor Driscoll, who spoke from her experience as an alum and now in the executive branch. In a conversation about the work, she explained that the combination of the HSI designation with Civic Engagement offices is a “force multiplier” when it comes to civic engagement. The challenge is creating pathways, like what HCC did, to those nonprofits and local governments. So many first generation students can become active in local government through this work. “Every dollar we invest, we are strengthening

Massachusetts,” Lt. Governor Driscoll observed. She began to think about the opportunities the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution affords us in terms of both celebration and policy making, serving communities and engaging with them. Speakers included other local political and education leaders, from campus administrations, Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) and Excelencia in Education, to the Commissioner Dr. Noe Ortega and colleagues from DHE, to faculty and students from consortium institutions. Students who went to the Leadership Summit returned to their campuses energized by the event and looking to lead on their campuses.

Results

The results of the inventory and related research leading to the development of the consortium had tangible results for civic engagement right away. The partnerships that resulted from chance meetings, as Colon described, and the impulse to “say yes” and collaborate across campuses can spur the investigations necessary for promoting civic engagement in ways that start from recognizing the cultural wealth students bring to their campuses. Dr. Castillo observes that “the conference and the student summit both included an off-campus activity in collaboration with a community partner that is dedicated to serving Latinx communities or immigrant communities.” Conference organizers partnered with the House of the Seven Gables, a historic location and non-profit focused on supporting immigrant communities, and the Welcome Immigrant Network to inform participants about their interwoven efforts. Dr. Castillo explained that the Student Leadership Summit involved the students visiting the North Shore Community Development Coalition’s [Punto Urban Art Museum](#) and the Patio de Abuela exhibit, which included a replica of a rural off-grid home, commonly found in rural Caribbean communities, furnished with items donated by Dominican grandmothers.

These institutions, in responding to demographic shifts in a way that ensures civic participation, are what it means to be “a public good,” explained DHE’s Assistant Commissioner for Academic Policy & Student Success Elena Quiroz-Livanis, also a speaker at the conference. The faculty, staff, and administrators on campuses can collaborate across campuses through system support for this kind of constellation to form. These stars on campuses aligned with the supports in the system. Jessicalee Heredia, HCC’s student senate president who participated in the HSI consortium student leadership summit and the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Ithaca Initiative National Student Dialogue at the University of Delaware with HCC’s Campus Compact Newman Civic Fellow Joe Black are developing forums at HCC for deeper student engagement with civic discourse and engagement. They are building what they want to see as a “legacy” of pro-democracy civic learning and civic engagement.

The collaborative work is also expanding nationally, as the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), Campus Compact, Complete College America, College Promise, and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association created Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement (CLDE), “a new coalition of higher education and student success organizations committed to ensuring that civic learning is both expected and experienced equitably across postsecondary education in the United States” (MDHE, Civic Learning).

This long-term effort in researching what is going on in local communities, local campuses, and across the Commonwealth and the region more broadly, has focused on learning what is happening and what is possible. Organizations like the New England Equity and Engagement Consortium (N3EC) participants collaborate to support this work at individual campuses, statewide, and nationwide, in collaboration with [Campus Compact](#). Connecting the cultural richness of its population with civic engagement and opportunities for democratic practice is something that a cohort of higher education institutions in Massachusetts has accomplished through its collaboration, funded by a higher education innovation fund. This collaboration has come about through regular assessment of the strengths and opportunities in these institutions with a culture focused on continuous improvement. Like our revolutionary impulse to form a more perfect union, Massachusetts higher education has been working toward improvements in the systems and structures that colleges co-create for students and communities, so that the citizens can truly shape their worlds for the better.

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