

Democracy Inventory Profile

University of Wyoming's Democracy Laboratory

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Part One: What was the context for this profile?

The founding of the [Democracy Laboratory](#) in the Wyoming Institute for the Humanities was initially conceived through UW's Grand Challenges Initiative (GCI), launched in 2019 by then Vice President for Research and Economic Development Ed Synakowski and led by a team of transdisciplinary faculty and civic leaders. This initiative's goal was to put the University more directly in contact with community members to both understand the challenges facing Wyomingites in their daily lives and how the university should marshal its resources around these issues. After two and half years of listening sessions, town hall meetings, and an overall mapping of Wyoming's civic landscape, five themes were identified: biodiversity and Earth system change; energy transition and economic diversification; rural health issues; public trust in research and information; and finally, quality of democracy and equality.

With these themes identified, the Grand Challenges Initiative culminated in a seed grant program for each focus area. Dr. Scott Henkel, Director of the [Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research](#) and member of the Grand Challenges Team, was tasked with leading the quality of democracy and equality theme. Given the unique landscape of WY's relatively small and dispersed population, they wanted to avoid duplicative efforts and seek to partner with civically-oriented initiatives and organizations across the state, particularly seeking to complement the work of the [Center for a Vital Community](#) (CVC) at Sheridan College and UW's own [Service, Leadership and Community Engagement \(SLCE\) Office](#). In their planning, they realized that efforts specifically around democratic education and research were quite modest at UW, and no other projects existed on- or off-campus that focused specifically on cultivating public-facing ideas, writing, and research around the quality of democracy in WY. The Democracy Laboratory (DL) has thus focused on bringing together students, faculty and civic leaders around community-based research on democratic health.

Out of the seed grant from the GCI, the Democracy Laboratory formally launched its programming in 2022. With a focus on community-engaged research and writing, The Democracy Lab seeks to "empower students, faculty and the public using interdisciplinary methods in order to connect our communities and to strengthen the quality of our democracy," specifically referencing projects like the

National Endowment for the Humanities' [A More Perfect Union](#) Initiative and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences [Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship](#) as models for their work.

Part Two: Who was involved, in what ways?

Along with Ed Synakowski's leadership in the GCI and Dr. Scott Henkel serving as PI, the seed grant funded stipends for 12 other faculty and other WY leaders to form a design team for the Democracy Laboratory that has remained its current Advisory Committee. Alongside faculty and staff across disciplines (History, Public Affairs, Gender Studies, Consumer Sciences, UWY's Elbogen Center for Teaching and Learning) and students, the team included a number of other civic leaders like the former mayor of Jackson, the current director for the Center For a Vital Community at Sheridan College, a director at Wyoming's GIS Center, and a current member of the WY House of Representatives (full committee listed below). Additionally, as the DL is housed in the [Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research](#), staff from the Institute assist with program coordination, and other community leaders are often relied on for cohort facilitation (as described below).

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

Specific challenges came from administrative turnover during the Grand Challenges Initiative, which led to some projects and further community-focused research efforts being sidelined and prematurely ended. Another challenge specific to WY's context, stated above, was the need to avoid duplicative efforts given the limited human resources available to pursue projects – this led to the specific focus on democratically-engaged research rather than a broader based inventory effort or initiative.

Additionally, the initiative has sought to maintain a rigorously non-partisan approach, particularly in light of increasing scrutiny and criticism of higher education and its role in the democratic process. The university's funding for the Humanities Institute where the Democracy Lab is housed comes directly through an endowment established by the WY state legislature.

Part Four: What did it produce or lead to?

Each academic year, The Democracy Lab forms interdisciplinary and intergenerational cohorts of faculty, students, and members of the public who apply with projects focused on understanding and improving the democratic and civic health of Wyoming and the broader public. These cohorts receive project stipends and meet bi-weekly through the Fall and Spring semesters for curriculum focused on community-engaged research and civic engagement facilitated by faculty and WY civic leaders. The year culminates with a symposium where cohort members present the outcomes of their research to the public. They have just accepted their third cohort in Fall 2024.

The Democracy Lab has also launched an open-access journal, [Experiments in Democracy](#), where each year's cohort members publish their research. The inaugural 2024 issue reflects the diversity of the projects supported, from "WyHOMEing: Wyoming's Landscape for the Homeless," an ethnography of Wyoming's homeless services, to "Democracy at Work," a multimedia arts project that highlights the experience of WY's service workers, along with essays on youth advocacy and seeking understanding in a polarized political climate. This project highlights their specific focus on public-facing research on civic health and is unique among campus democratic engagement efforts.

Future potential projects for the Democracy Lab include launching a Civic Health Assessment with the Wyoming Humanities Council – a long-term, longitudinal study of Wyoming citizens' attitudes and practices of community engagement – along with expanding into curricular opportunities in the Public Humanities for UW students. In their own words, the Laboratory is formed "in the best spirit of the Land Grant University" to be "an incubator where researchers, students, and the public can gather, discuss issues, discover and experiment with new ideas, and learn from one another."