



Democracy Inventory Guide

Guidance for colleges &
universities in inventorying
democratic engagement efforts



Campus Compact

AAC&U

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Introduction

Colleges and universities have developed increasingly sophisticated strategies for advancing civic and community engagement focused on student learning, social impact, and creating healthy and just communities. However, these strategies often remain siloed within institutions. For this reason, Campus Compact and the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) have organized these collective efforts nationally to enable higher education institutions to support and advance democracy.

The Democracy Inventory Guide and accompanying Activity Rubric support colleges and universities in inventorying their activities and programming related to democracy. The Inventory and Rubric are designed to facilitate a comprehensive aggregation of activities and outputs, encompassing a broad range of civic efforts. At the national level, the inventory process will, in time, provide insight into the landscape of democratic efforts happening across colleges and universities.

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Motivation & conceptual guidance

“[A] healthy constitutional democracy depends on a virtuous cycle in which responsive political institutions foster a healthy civic culture of participation and responsibility, while a healthy civic culture—a combination of values, norms, and narratives—keeps our political institutions responsive and inclusive. Institutions and culture intersect in the realm of civil society: the ecosystem of associations and groups in which people practice habits of participation and self-rule and reinforce norms of mutual obligation.”

—Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century

The Democracy Inventory Guide aims to support the roles and responsibilities of higher education in fulfilling its civic purpose of strengthening our democratic societies.

One normative assumption motivating this guide is, therefore, that institutions of higher education do play a role in democratic societies. While each postsecondary institution may have specific and context-relevant goals related to its own civic and democratic purposes, we generally assume that colleges and universities share a common responsibility to contribute to the public good.

This common goal may involve leveraging their numerous resources and competencies to address problems in the public sphere, whether locally, nationally, or globally, related to the weakening and fragmentation of democracies. They may deploy various forms of engagement, including public service and civic and community engagement, to strengthen democratic norms, practices, and institutions.

Second, we recognize that a primary objective shared across colleges and universities is to educate. More specifically, many institutions were founded upon and are guided by principles that promote civic education, preparing students to become informed, ethical, and engaged participants in our communities. Such an education can be achieved through a wide range of opportunities, including educating students about democratic norms, practices, and institutions—as well as alternative forms of governance—through broader curricular, co-curricular, and skills-building opportunities.

Finally, regardless of their governance structures, a third normative assumption is that colleges and universities can model and cultivate a culture where the habits of critical inquiry and open, inclusive, and constructive dialogue can be practiced. Simultaneously, they should be places where trust is built and strengthened. These are places where students can experiment with agency, leadership, and responsibility; and where democratic values can be instilled and nurtured.

Inventory process

The process of undertaking a Democracy Inventory matters greatly for ensuring the levels of collaboration and inclusivity necessary to achieve comprehensive results. Colleges and universities are encouraged to build widespread institutional support and involvement to obtain useful feedback, accurate information, and foster engagement across strategic coalitions needed to actualize recommendations from inventory findings.

Given the unique culture and context of each campus, there is no one way to lead an inventory process. Moreover, the prioritization of process elements will undoubtedly look different and need to be tailored to fit each institution's needs and strategic objectives. Nevertheless, several parameters, detailed below, offer guidance for any institution seeking to implement an effective process for conducting a Democracy Inventory. This guidance is intended to enable inventories to be endeavors that are responsive to the particular environment, sustainable, dynamic, and subject to regular review.

a.

Clarify the institution's civic purpose and rationale for conducting the inventory

b.

Identify stakeholders to lead and actively participate in the inventory process

c.

Scope the relevant activities to be inventoried

d.

Determine the methods used to gather information

a.

Clarify the institution's civic purpose and intended outcomes in conducting the inventory

Each institution will likely have unique goals related to its civic purpose. For example, while regional or community colleges might place more emphasis on place-based civic or community engagement activities, a research-intensive university might place high emphasis on scholarship that advances our understanding of democracy.

A key starting point in the inventory process is, therefore, engaging stakeholders in discussions on the civic purpose of the institution, including reflection on its historical foundations, its founding mission, and current priorities and strategic vision.

Part of this process may also involve defining or refining the meanings among institutional stakeholders of concepts such as democracy, civic education, civic learning, public service, community engagement, or civic and democratic engagement.

Next, it is essential to clarify the desired outcomes of the inventory. These might include:

- Sparking an internal campus dialogue on the subject of democracy and democratic engagement.
- More explicitly articulating an institution's civic purpose and assessing how well it is fulfilling this purpose.
- Mapping faculty and other educators' development needs around how they can fulfill the college's civic mission in their classrooms, departments, and centers;
- Exploring where future prioritization on the campus should occur to elevate civic and democratic engagement.
- Beginning to create the infrastructure for a sustainable initiative focused on elevating civic and democratic purposes.

b.

Identify stakeholders to lead and actively participate in the inventory process

Leadership

When conducting a campus-wide inventory, it is essential to collaborate with a diverse range of stakeholders, as outlined below. It is also crucial to identify a select group of individuals or departments that will lead and implement the actual process.

Leading the inventory process encompasses several key components. These might include:

- Ability to invest substantial time and resources to plan and carry out a holistic and inclusive process.
- Knowledge of the broader institution, including its organizational culture, key players, and institutional history.
- Recognition and understanding of why the inventory process is important to the institution and contributes to its strategic goals.
- Substantive knowledge around democracy and civic engagement.

Potential stakeholders who may be appropriate to lead the inventory process might include:

(this list is in alphabetical order and does not indicate prioritization)

- Campus voting initiative
- Civic engagement office
- Cross-campus committee appointed by campus leadership
- Executive leadership for Student Affairs (e.g., vice president/chancellor or Dean of Students)
- Intercultural center
- Institutional research office
- President/Chancellor or Provost's office
- Public information office
- Student leaders/student government (as part of the overall inventory leadership team)

Whatever the approach, it is beneficial to have at least one campus unit and one or two (or more) dedicated individuals with a clear remit and sufficient resources (including funding and time) to carry out the inventory. Still, as the nature of the inventory is holistic, the full process should not be limited to one part of the institution (e.g., academic affairs vs. student services). Finally, depending on the institution, it may be useful or necessary to ensure that there is support from the highest levels of the college or university (e.g., the President's/Chancellor's Office, Office of the Provost, Board of Trustees) to endorse and give visibility to the inventory.

Participating Divisions, Units, and Individuals

Once a small leadership team has been identified, a broader advisory committee can contribute additional perspectives, as well as help socialize and create buy-in for the inventory process and its outcomes.

The advisory committee could include a diverse array of divisions, units, and individuals across the institution who represent different interests and perspectives, including those who are predisposed to engagement—politically, civically, and in the community—as well as those who may not already participate in such efforts.

Potential stakeholders to engage in this process might include:

(this list is in alphabetical order and does not indicate prioritization)

- Academic advising
- Academic senate or curriculum committee
- Alumni groups
- Athletic department/teams
- Campus allies
- Center for teaching and learning
- College chancellor or deputy chancellor
- College librarians
- Communications office (campus-wide publications/newsletters)
- College/University board of trustees/regents members
- Department chairs or deans
- Executive cabinet members
- Faculty in relevant departments/roles
- Greek life organizations
- Health/medical systems
- Honors committee
- Housing/Residential life
- Intercultural centers
- Institutional research office
- Local voter registrars, community partners, city/local government resources
- Office of diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Office of governmental affairs
- Registrar
- Staff council
- Student organizations
- Student government
- Student affairs representatives
- Student vote coalitions
- Teaching and learning centers/offices

C.

Scope the relevant activities to be inventoried

The next step in the inventory process is determining what to inventory. Deciding which efforts will populate the inventory should ultimately reflect the understood civic purpose of the institution, its conceptual meanings, and the aims of the inventory.

The framework below is based on four areas where colleges and universities often actualize their civic purpose. These areas are not intended to be prescriptive or exhaustive, but rather to offer a conceptual starting point that can be adapted and customized.

1. Civic Learning

How colleges and universities support the acquisition of the knowledge, intellectual skills, and applied competencies that students need for informed and effective participation in civic and democratic life

- Curricular design and high-impact practices
- Coursework
- Convenings and symposia (e.g., conferences, speaker series)
- Skills development (e.g., constructive dialogue and civic leadership development)
- Co-curricular (e.g., student government and student groups, fellowships, and internships)

2. Civic and Democratic Engagement

How colleges and universities support direct opportunities for civic and democratic engagement with communities and institutions beyond campus, demonstrating a commitment to advancing the public good

- Civic participation, e.g., voter registration, get-out-the-vote efforts, participation in community forums and town halls
- Community partnership, convening, coalition building
- Volunteerism, community service, and public service
- Advocacy and organizing
- Public policy

3. Research

How colleges and universities support the creation of knowledge about democracy, and other forms of governance

- Research centers, institutes, departments, labs
- Research projects and grants
- Scholarship/publications
- People (e.g., faculty, scholars, fellows, dedicated research positions)

4. Campus Culture

How the institutional culture, structures, and resources contribute to and reinforce (or diminish/constrain) the value and efficacy of democracy-related activities

- Alignment and articulation of civic purposes (e.g., reflection of institutional history and context, and mission, vision, and strategy; clear campus communications)
- Operationalization and integration of civic purposes (e.g., clear policies and practices of academic freedom and free speech; opportunities for participatory leadership)
- Resource allocation (e.g., support for relevant administrative roles, fellowships, research grants, awards, and other forms of recognition)
- Ongoing assessment of civic and democratic outcomes at the institutional level (e.g., tracking changes in civic attitudes and behaviors through regular campus climate surveys, alumni surveys, campus voting rates)



What might constitute a “civic” or “democratic” educational, engagement, or research activity?

See page 6 of the Stanford University case study for a sample framework.



Inventory tool

Self-assessment rubric

As part of the inventory process, campuses are encouraged to complete a self-assessment rubric. This rubric serves as a starting point for internal campus conversations and as an inventory of democracy-related activities.

[Link →](#)

d.

Determine the methods used to gather information

After determining whom to engage and what should be captured in the inventory process, the next step is to decide how the information will be obtained. Potential ways to gather data and information include:

Engagement Roundtables and Focus Groups

Bringing in stakeholders, or groups, to have a focus group to determine their opinions surrounding democratic engagement and to catalog information.

Surveys

Engaging in surveys across the institution, especially if permitted to do a full student, faculty, and/or staff survey to assess perspectives on democratic engagement. This may also be possible with the stakeholders identified above.

Class Audits

Working with the registrar's office to determine which courses should be highlighted as "democracy courses", using a specific typology. It may also be possible to determine which types of students (majors, year) are taking each of these courses.

Review of Campus Calendars

Reviewing campus calendars to identify democracy-relevant events and programs over time and/or connect with individuals, centers, and offices.

Review of Campus Organizations

Examining which campus organizations are democracy-focused by reviewing organizational descriptions.

Marketing and Communications

Tracking university publications, stories, campus-wide emails, and analyzing their content

Institutional Research

Reviewing existing data or surveys related to civic or community engagement as part of regularly administered national surveys (e.g., NSSE, CCSSE, alumni surveys).

There may also be opportunities to review and utilize existing data collection efforts, such as:

Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education is the nation's leading framework for categorizing diverse U.S. higher education institutions. Updated every three years, this classification framework provides an opportunity to explore community engagement at universities. Due to the significant effort required to pursue this classification—and relevant to the collaborative, multi-stakeholder process of conducting the inventory—this may be an effective source of data for institutions that are already pursuing, or have already received, the Community Engagement designation.

Community/civic/volunteering platforms

Institutions may use platforms designed to connect and track students' civic and community engagement, such as GivePulse

NSLVE Reports

The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, based at Tufts University, enables institutions to track their student voting and voter registration rates longitudinally.

Concluding the inventory process

Considerations for Action Planning

“As a system of decision-making, all democracy means is the people decide... [and] the most important thing in making democracy work is responsibility.”

–Eric Liu, Citizen University

Part of the inventory process should include developing an action plan to communicate the results that emerge from the inventory, identify and integrate actionable steps, and facilitate the continuation of the conversation. Suggestions for action planning include:

Publicly distribute the inventory findings

Institutions should consider which, if any, strategic communications would be valuable when releasing the inventory, including having university administrators disseminate the results to the broader campus, working to place a story in campus newspapers, and/or sharing the findings with the alumni community. Strategic communications include the distribution of a formal press release on conclusions and recommendations from the inventory. The inventory could be promoted in relevant newsletters of civic centers and institutes. A permanent institutional webpage, which is either internally or externally accessible, may also be used to make inventory findings broadly available. Targeted communications to those who have participated in focus groups, interviews, and surveys are also valuable for showing stakeholders the results of their contributions and encouraging the promotion of findings within their networks and communities.

Host listening sessions:

There is an opportunity to further explore the inventory findings by hosting informal sessions with small groups of diverse stakeholders (e.g., students, community members, and faculty) to review the inventory results and discuss next steps. This could take place in the form of lunches or dinners throughout the semester or year. There may be an opportunity to lead a special briefing to senior administrators, including the President or Chancellor. This could also include a self-reflection on the process and inventory itself, noting strengths, frustrations, challenges, and areas for further improvement.

Identify and integrate actionable steps into existing or emerging institutional reports or strategic documents

There may be an opportunity to utilize the inventory to integrate learnings and recommendations into existing institutional priorities. This could include using this work to assist in the accreditation process or using the data to apply for relevant grants.

Launch a broader and sustained initiative focused on democratic and civic engagement

The completed inventory could provide the impetus to launch a more comprehensive initiative aimed at promoting democratic and civic engagement. This initiative could further explore the inventory findings and update and monitor the inventory status on an annual or recurring basis. This could include developing a documented action plan with specific goals and timelines as a result of the inventory. The inventory can inform the development of strategic plans and/or institutional priorities. To launch an initiative, it is necessary to identify potential personnel to lead this ongoing process and ensure that sustained funding is available.

Looking forward

Higher Education Democracy Exchange (HEDx)

Advancing higher education's public purposes to support democracy through national collaboration, campus action, and increased visibility for pluralism and unity.

Campus Compact and AAC&U, in collaboration with More Perfect and the Karsh Institute of Democracy at the University of Virginia, are embarking on a joint collaboration for a new platform, HEDx. The platform is intended to enable access to data, validate civic skills, share and acquire resources and best practices, crowdsource ideas to scale initiatives across institutions, and access a diverse network of civic experts to support campus and community engagement and advance civic efforts. It will empower higher education institutions, individually and collectively, to promote democratic engagement and advance civic and community learning.

Inventory Case Studies

The following four case studies offer insight into how the Democracy Inventory process was applied in different institutional contexts, including challenges, key insights, and outcomes.



Case study

Johns Hopkins University

[Link →](#)



Case study

Kingsborough Community College

[Link →](#)



Case study

Lafayette College

[Link →](#)



Case study

Stanford University

[Link →](#)

Democracy Profiles

Efforts to identify and provide case studies yielded only four examples, reinforcing the opportunity for more campuses to engage with Campus Compact and AAC&U's ongoing efforts to support colleges and universities in strengthening their civic purpose and help them tell their story through a lens of rich data insights and narratives.

Still, we offer several "democracy profiles" below, which take a slightly different approach but serve to illustrate efforts to amplify the civic purpose of higher education.

Profile

American Association of State Colleges & Universities

[Link →](#)

Profile

Independent Arts Institutions

[Link →](#)

Profile

Massachusetts: A Constellation of Commonwealth Campuses

[Link →](#)

Profile

University of Notre Dame Democracy Initiative

[Link →](#)

Profile

University of Wyoming Democracy Lab

[Link →](#)

Profile

Howard University

[Link →](#)

We hope this Guide, along with these case studies and profiles, provides inspiration and insights into how efforts to understand and strengthen democracy can flourish in a wide variety of postsecondary environments.

Democracy Inventory Project

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