



Campus Compact

As The Dust Settles

A Snapshot of Civic and Community Engagement at Community Colleges

Introduction

What is the state of civic and community engagement at community colleges? This report is part of Campus Compact's efforts to dig deeper into the challenges and opportunities faced by those of us engaged in civic and community engagement work at these institutions at this historical moment. It is also part of Campus Compact's efforts to deepen resources, programming, and fieldwork specifically focused on community colleges.

The idea for this report emerged during a Campus Compact planning retreat for community college civic and community engagement practitioners in May 2022.¹ During this gathering, we realized that despite the differences in the contexts within which we worked, we all found ourselves in the process of orienting ourselves within the dust cloud stirred up by the COVID-19 pandemic. We also recognized that the situations we faced as community college practitioners were unique.

¹ From May 11-23, 2022, Campus Compact held a Community Colleges for Democracy Affinity Network Planning Retreat at Red Rocks Community College in Lakewood, CO, attended by over 20 civic and community engagement practitioners from 19 institutions and 16 states.



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The content of this report is based on insights garnered from that May 2022 gathering and through interviews and surveys I conducted as a Campus Compact Community College Fellow during the 2022–23 academic year.² Additional insights were gathered during monthly meetings of the Campus Compact Community College Practitioner Network (facilitated by Campus Compact Community College Fellow Deanna Villanueva–Saucedo) and a variety of spaces that opened up to me as a result of my fellowship. This report also includes a few of my own reflections on trends, challenges, and opportunities at community colleges as a practitioner of over 20 years.

I've titled this report a "snapshot" because it focuses on a specific period of time and it does not claim to be a comprehensive research report. However, my hope is that the observations presented here will serve as a catalyst for further research on and support for present and future work at these institutions.

Community Colleges and Their Unique Role in U.S. Higher Education

In conversation after conversation, my colleagues expressed appreciation for the specific attention that this project was placing on civic and community engagement at community colleges. There was a common sentiment that while they appreciate the work and insights of their colleagues at 4-year colleges and universities, the nature of our work and context was different.

According to the American Association of Community Colleges, there are 1038 Community Colleges in the United States in 2023, and out of those, 932 are public, 35 are tribal, and 71 are independent.³ In Fall 2021, 30% of undergraduates in the US were enrolled at 2-year institutions (4.7 million).⁴ What are some of the common characteristics that make the nature of civic and community engagement at these institutions distinct? Here are several that were frequently noted in my discussions with community college practitioners.⁵

- Most community colleges are open-enrollment/open-access higher education institutions that accept any students with a high school degree or equivalent.
- The student populations at community colleges are often extremely diverse as far as race, nationality, citizenship status, and academic preparation.⁶
- A significant portion of community college students attend part-time, are older, and carry work and family obligations.⁷

² Between May 2022 and July 2023, I interviewed and/or received written responses to questions from 22 practitioners from 13 institutions in 11 states. Interviewees occupied a variety of roles with more than half being directors or coordinators of centers, and the remaining participants being faculty, student life directors and administrators.

³ aacc.nche.edu/research-trends/fast-facts

⁴ nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/2023/CSB_508c.pdf

⁵ I share this list recognizing that every characteristic listed below does not apply to every community college and that there are 4-year colleges or universities that possess some of these characteristics.

⁶ In Fall 2020, 35% of all first-time freshmen; 52% of Native American students; 48% of Hispanic students; 39% of Black students, 34% of Asian Pacific Islander students attended community colleges. (aacc.nche.edu/research-trends/fast-facts)

⁷ aacc.nche.edu/research-trends/fast-facts

- Most community colleges are commuter campuses that do not have residence halls.⁸ Related to this, students often come from and are rooted in communities that are in close proximity to their colleges.
- A significant number of community college students face challenges meeting basic needs (Ex: housing, food).⁹
- Many institutions have liberal arts and career and technical programs with histories, funding streams, degree requirements, and ways of conceptualizing experiential learning that are distinct from one another.
- The teaching load of full-time community college faculty is typically five classes or 15 credits per semester, which is higher than the typical teaching load for full-time faculty at 4-year colleges and universities.¹⁰
- A significant proportion of faculty at community colleges are part-time/adjunct/contingent.¹¹

There was a sense amongst practitioners, even those with well-resourced programs, that, in general, community colleges tend to have less infrastructure and fewer monetary and human resources available for civic and community engagement work, compared to their 4-year college and university colleagues. This is often the case, even at institutions that have actual “centers,” and/or long-standing community and civic engagement programs.

Given these characteristics, how do we surface, highlight, and create models of civic and community engagement uniquely suited to community colleges— models that recognize the challenges and embrace the unique assets of our institutions and students? The next few pages begin to explore those questions by noting the broad trends that emerged in my conversations with community college practitioners.

The emerging terrain as the dust settles...

There was widespread consensus that the COVID-19 pandemic changed the nature of their work in significant ways, and many of those changes persisted during the 2022-23 academic year. Of course, not every institution was affected in the same way. The new terrain that is emerging as the dust settles looks different from place to place due to complex and context-specific power dynamics between the needs and preferences of students, faculty, staff, and administrators at each institution. However, there are a few broad trends that are worth noting.

The decline of traditional service-learning and the re-imagining curriculum-based civic and community engagement:

The shutdown of campuses and shift to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 dramatically affected the work of everyone I spoke to in some way. This was especially the case for practitioners who administered service-learning programs at their colleges. Every practitioner from an

⁸ According to Community College review, about 25% of community colleges have on-campus housing. (communitycollegereview.com/blog/the-pros-and-cons-of-on-campus-housing-for-community-college Accessed June 1, 2023).

⁹ insidehighered.com/news/2022/10/21/high-food-and-housing-insecurity-community-colleges

¹⁰ chronicle.com/article/community-college-faq-you-teach-how-many-classes

¹¹ According to AAUP, more than 65% of faculty positions at two year colleges are part time, in comparison to less than 50% at bachelor’s and master’s degree granting institutions (aaup.org/sites/default/files/10112018%20Data%20Snapshot%20Tenure.pdf)

institution that had a robust service-learning program experienced dramatic decreases in the number of faculty and courses that incorporated service-learning components.¹²

What were some of the reasons that were shared by community college practitioners for this decrease and its persistence? The most obvious reasons were the logistical challenges posed by shifts to mostly online learning and operations after March 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak. As a result, some colleges suspended their service-learning programs during 2020, while others developed ways for students to work with community partners or do campus-based service projects remotely. Several practitioners also noted the challenges posed by the loss of significant numbers of faculty who regularly incorporated service-learning into their courses due to retirement, resignation, and retrenchment. Faculty and community partner overwhelm, as well as expanded job descriptions and resulting reduced capacity of those who support service-learning on campuses, also contributed to these reductions.

Regarding service-learning, the language of “starting over,” “rebuilding,” “rethinking,” and “reimagining” were words that were frequently used by practitioners. What does this mean on the ground? For some, this means focusing efforts on the slow process of rebuilding programs through re-establishing relationships with community partners and professional development for faculty. At several institutions, turnover amongst faculty has led to a new wave of instructors who are not familiar with the support resources offered by their colleges for civic and community-based learning or who may be aware and interested but do not have the capacity to engage.

Practitioners at some institutions are also using this moment as an opportunity to critically reflect upon their work as an individual and/or an office. For colleges that had robust service-learning programs prior to the pandemic, this reflection often included questions about the suitability of traditional service-learning programs to their student populations and the need for modes of community-engaged learning that allowed more flexibility for overwhelmed faculty and students than traditional service-learning models. The reimagining process at many institutions also included shifting the focus to addressing the needs of their own campus communities. This shift is addressed in the section below, which focuses on community engagement through addressing the basic needs of students.

Addressing the basic needs of students

As widely reported by the news media, community colleges were particularly affected by the economic and social challenges posed by the pandemic due to their student populations, which are disproportionately low-income and students of color.¹³ The reflections of community college practitioners echoed reports of significant enrollment declines along with the increased visibility and magnitude of food and housing insecurity and mental health struggles experienced by our students. After March 2020, many institutions devoted more resources to addressing student basic needs, such as food access and mental health support, in part due to an influx of federal money for higher education institutions to engage in this work. Several community college practitioners noted a shift in the focus of their work towards addressing these

¹² The most dramatic change shared with me was a decrease from over 100 service-learning courses prior to March 2020 to three during fall semester 2022 at a midwestern community college.

¹³ As reported by NPR, community colleges, which often enroll more low-income students and students of color, saw an average decline in enrollment of 9.5% (476,000 students) making up more than 65% of the total undergraduate enrollment losses during the spring of 2021 ([npr.org/2021/06/10/1005177324/spring-numbers-show-dramatic-drop-in-college-enrollment](https://www.npr.org/2021/06/10/1005177324/spring-numbers-show-dramatic-drop-in-college-enrollment))

basic needs through creating and/or coordinating campus food pantries and creating or connecting students with internal and external resources that could help with needs such as housing and mental health services. This shift signaled an implicit or explicit broadening of “community” at many institutions and a challenge to the notion that issues faced by “the community” outside of campus boundaries are somehow different than those faced by community members who happen to be students. This trend was noted by practitioners in all regions of the country and in urban, suburban, and rural settings. While many recognized the importance of addressing these needs, several of the community college practitioners who participated in this project noted a lack of preparation and/or support for taking on such roles. Some also expressed concern about whether or not their institutions would continue to support this work with resources if federal funds were reduced or eliminated.

Civic and Community Engagement in Increasingly Complex and Polarized Political Environments

Several practitioners shared stories of the innovative ways they adapted civic and election engagement work to mostly online environments, particularly between 2020 and 2022. Several practitioners noted the need to quickly become experts in facilitating online forums and discussions related to elections, voter engagement, and other issues in the absence of physical spaces to engage students. Since getting students to attend events on Zoom was a challenge in many places, creating and packaging voter education materials and activities in ways that faculty could easily incorporate into their curriculum and course learning management systems (Ex: D2L, Blackboard) was also an important part of the work at many institutions.

In addition, the murder of George Floyd and the global racial justice movement sparked by his death led to an increased focus on racial equity issues inside and outside of the classroom on many campuses. In several institutions, the responsibility for creating spaces to address George Floyd’s murder and the myriad of local and national issues related to racial justice that it surfaced was in the hands of civic and community engagement practitioners.

The divisive aspects of our federal, state, and local political climates and their effects on civic and community engagement work were also frequently noted in interviews and surveys. Across institutions, fear amongst faculty and civic engagement campus leaders of appearing partisan and being targeted by internal (Ex: students, administrators) and external actors (Ex: local politicians, legislators) was present, if not widespread. On some campuses, this had a chilling effect on the willingness of faculty, staff, and students to engage in dialogue and activities that might be considered “controversial” or “biased.”¹⁴ In addition, several practitioners reported feeling pressured to take on a more active role in facilitating civic dialogues, at times without adequate training or support from their institutions.

Purpose, adaptation, and capacity

Frequently, practitioners noted being “pulled in many directions” or “stretched thin” and filling in other institutional gaps without necessarily having the support, bandwidth, and/or training to fill those roles. Having to do work that was not in their primary areas of expertise (Ex: organizing food pantries, data

¹⁴ As noted in The Chronicle of Higher Education, 40 bills in 22 states have been introduced to limit “diversity, equity, and inclusion offices or staff; ban mandatory diversity training; prohibit institutions from using diversity statements in hiring and promotion; or prohibit colleges from using race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in admissions or employment.” ([chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts](https://www.chronicle.com/article/here-are-the-states-where-lawmakers-are-seeking-to-ban-colleges-dei-efforts))

collection and analysis, organizing web-based events), seeing needs but not having the human and/or monetary resources to address them, and filling multiple roles after staff positions were not refilled were common sources of frustration shared in interviews and surveys. Perceptions of the precariousness of their positions and funding, as well as the belief that the important work wouldn't get done if they didn't do it, were often factors that discouraged practitioners from resisting the expansion of their positions.

At the same time, there was recognition amongst many practitioners that the survival of their positions, offices, and/or programs, even more than in the past, depends on one's ability to adapt to changing circumstances (Ex: funding, leadership, campus climate, rules, community partners) and capture opportunities that align with the values and purpose of their work. Several shared the desire for a space to address the existential questions about their roles and purposes in their institutions and think strategically about ways to more effectively tell their stories and integrate civic and community engagement work into other strategic areas on their campuses (Ex: basic needs, diversity and inclusion, career services, and economic development efforts).

Conclusion: Some Key Themes for 2024 and beyond

I end this paper with a summary of themes, questions, and needs that emerged frequently during interviews and discussions with community college practitioners. This certainly is not an exhaustive list, but hopefully, addressing these questions will help seed and feed efforts to raise up, support, and build community and civic engagement work in this important, yet sometimes overlooked, sector of higher education.

Institutional models specifically for community colleges

How do community colleges organize their civic and community engagement work? What are the advantages and disadvantages of various models? (Ex: Centralized or decentralized; funding sources; location in the college's budget; staffing (Ex: FT or PT staff; faculty release time); location (Ex: academic vs student affairs)). How can community colleges with limited human and monetary resources do meaningful work?

Re-imagining curriculum around civic and community-based learning

How is this happening in light of the shifting terrain within our institutions and communities and the changing circumstances faced by students? What are some practical tools for community colleges engaged in the re-imagining process?

Civic/Community engagement and the basic needs of students

What are some stories of community colleges that have shifted (or are in the process of shifting) the focus of community engagement offices towards the basic needs of students and/or community members? What are some of the lessons learned from their experiences and practical tools for institutions that are making this shift? Also, how can community colleges address the challenges of loneliness, trauma, addiction, and mental illness among students and community members through community engagement efforts?

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Civic/Community Engagement

How are community colleges making deeper and more direct connections between DEI and civic/community engagement work? What resources are available for colleges engaged in this work? How can community colleges find support for this work from one another and other actors, particularly in environments where such work is under attack?

Civic and Community Engagement work in challenging political climates

What political pressures are community college practitioners facing from internal and external sources? How can we continue to engage students, faculty, and our communities at large while addressing and navigating these challenges?

The civic and workforce missions of community colleges

How can civic and community engagement practitioners at community colleges challenge the bifurcation of “civic” education and career/workforce preparation?

Engaging Students and Community Partners

How can community colleges engage community college students and community partners in shaping community engagement at their institutions in this new terrain?

These questions will help shape Campus Compact’s efforts to highlight and support the critical role that community colleges play in advancing the public purpose of higher education.

During the 2023–24 academic year, Campus Compact is bringing on four additional Community College Research Fellows, whose work will engage many of the themes and questions noted above. Our team of fellows will also plan and facilitate a Community College Pre-Conference Institute at Campus Compact’s 2024 National Conference ([Compact24](#)) with content shaped by the themes and questions noted in this paper.

Lastly, I extend a thank you to my community college colleagues who generously shared their time and experiences during Community College Network meetings, in interviews with me, and in written responses to my survey. This paper doesn’t come close to reflecting the wisdom, passion, depth and dedication that you bring to this work.



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