

Civic Learning in Community Colleges

Brian Murphy

IN THE FALL OF 2013, students at De Anza College succeeded in two campaigns they had begun a year before. First, they reached an entirely friendly accord with the college bookstore not to sell clothing produced with sweatshop labor. Second, they persuaded the Foothill-De Anza Community College Foundation to divest itself of investments in fossil fuel companies as part of a campaign aligned with a national 350.org campaign targeting top corporate polluters.¹

In both instances, the student groups marshaled evidence, made powerful arguments based on that evidence, and demonstrated that they represented a significant swath of student opinion. They were careful and deliberate, creating alliances with faculty and staff, listening to counter arguments, and seeking more data when required. They stood for clear principles of social justice, equity, and environmental sustainability. As they mobilized, and amended their positions as needed, they taught us—their faculty and staff allies. They did not back off; they did not back down; they did not quit. And they won.

Their victory was ours as a campus community. As one of the Foothills-De Anza College Foundation board members told the students before the final, unanimous vote, “We learned from you. We would not have brought this up ourselves, or known what our options were. Thank you.” There was a sense of solidarity and connection between the student organizers and the community leaders who volunteer their time for the foundation, a sense that they stood together and stood for something. And there was also appreciation on both sides: that the foundation would be so open to the divestment argument, and that the students would be so thoughtful in their campaign.

The divestment was the first by any community college foundation in the country, and symbolized a connection between community college organizers and their university counterparts that took everyone by surprise. The 350.org campaign on fossil fuel divestment had focused on major universities with enormous endowments, as well as on state universities. The anti-sweatshop movement is similarly well established in American universities, with a variety of protocols banning sweatshop goods. In neither instance were community colleges or their students envisioned as part of the movement, or as a source of leadership.

Yet activism is deeply embedded in the culture at De Anza College. Undocumented students and their allies were deeply involved in the fight for the DREAM Act,² students organized for the living wage in San José, and still others participated in annual budget fights in the state capitol. These movements and mobilizations reflect a much deeper cultural element of the college: a shared commitment to the idea of civic identity. Our students want, need, and demand an education into their social and civic environments, and the tools to change both.

In this orientation, De Anza stands against the dominant narrative in American higher education, and has sister community colleges across the country committed to the idea that our students deserve more than to be treated as if they have no civic life and do not need to understand how power works.

THE CIVIC NARRATIVE AT DE ANZA

De Anza College is one of California's top community colleges. The California Community College System includes 112 colleges,³ all publicly funded. De Anza is a large and complex institution, with 23,000 students, dozens of degree and certificate programs, and a reputation for successful transfer to universities. The college understands itself as a regional institution serving the multiple communities of San José and Silicon Valley. Our student body is extraordinarily diverse, with no racial or ethnic "majority." Our students are 42 percent Asian (Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipino, Korean, and Indo-Americans), 23 percent Latino, 20 percent white, and 5 percent African American. Nine percent are international students.

Our students are diverse in all ways. The student body includes very well prepared recent high school graduates as well as those who have dropped out and never graduated, workers returning for retraining, and recent immigrants learning English. Thousands of our students view De Anza as the first and best step in a long educational passage. They are most often the first in their families to go to college. A key question we at De Anza Community College ask ourselves is this: what narrative do we build not for them, but with them, to frame what we do?

Let's start here. Eighty-five percent of our students do not test at college level in math or reading, so one approach could be to focus on their needs, or deficits. Our narrative would then be about opportunity and about offering each underprepared student the chance to overcome their deficits and become skilled and employable. But there is an alternative approach: to start with the manifest strengths of our students. We begin our narrative with this: 70 percent speak at least two languages, many have navigated the social and linguistic transitions of immigration, and both documented and undocumented students have managed their way through the public and private bureaucracies seemingly designed to make life difficult for them. They get up each morning, by the thousands, and get themselves to school. They have skills and capacities, in short, well beyond their test scores and their nominal "deficits."

Most critically, they are not alone in their passage. Most come from communities, families, and networks of extended relations that are interdependent and that require responsibility and agency. They come with rich social identities that frame their expectations and hopes and dreams.

De Anza sees its students through this alternative lens. They are talented and capable, able to act on their own behalf—especially when they act with each other. They come to a college without adequate state-funded resources or staff, but one that asks them to step up and help each other. They come to a commuter college, but one with vibrant student extracurricular programs and clubs, a student government with an independent budget of more than \$1.5 million, and an athletic program that demands excellence in academics as well as athletics. The campus is alive with activity and energy; it's a place to hang out and talk and see your friends—despite the fact that most students work, many full time.

We start our story with the talents and capacity of our students. Then our narrative is framed by the grace and skill they bring to building a respectful campus environment in which diversity is genuinely appreciated. They come from a multicultural environment new in the United States, one in which they have to navigate their differences of perception and presumption in virtually every daily encounter, every class, and every social gathering. They are building a community among themselves that will be of great significance for their later lives in the new California and the changing United States.

Do they get it right all the time? No. Do they—and we—trip and make mistakes that force us all to confront contradictions we had never thought about before? You bet. Are there moments of tension and struggle and fear and rejection and doubt? Yes. But through it all there is a faculty and a staff deeply committed to the newly emerging community and to the idea that the college is about the development of a civic personality among our students, in addition to the mastery of their disciplines and their fields of study. Only when they have developed this wider range of skills will they be able to navigate the social complexities of their demography, the region's economy, and the nation's politics.

How does this actually work? We have created institutional structures explicitly devoted to the civic dimension of our community, and we integrate civic work into the curriculum. The college supports the autonomous agency of our students, whether it is exercised through student government, student clubs and organizations, student organizing, or the spontaneous occupation of public spaces for poetry, music, and hip-hop. The physical design of the campus emphasizes free and open public spaces for students to work, play, pause and reflect, organize. The college leadership—both administrative and faculty—is explicit about its conviction that our students will play a public and civic role in their communities and that the college seeks to engage them in this dimension of their lives.

A key example of this conviction is the De Anza College Institute for Community and Civic Engagement (ICCE), which is home to both curricular and extracurricular civic projects. ICCE sponsors a robust and ongoing conversation among faculty, staff, and students about how to engage more students in community-based work, political and social movements, and course projects that integrate current economic and social issues. In the fall of 2013, ICCE sponsored a Public Policy School that brought local leaders to campus in order to teach about advocacy and political change. The college offers a certificate in social change leadership, and it graduates students who have been formally trained as organizers. Our transcripts

clearly note community service courses taken; we provide support and public recognition for student leadership.

The goal of developing the civic identity of our students is embedded in program design and curricula across the campus. Our increasing use of learning communities reflects the work of many faculty to design courses around students' capacity to responsibly help each other, work together, and make sure others learn. One example of such a learning community is LEAD (Latina/o Empowerment at De Anza), a program that enrolls more than 450 students each quarter in English, Sociology, and other courses where all students work in small groups called *familia*—each with a peer mentor, each with a community-based project, and in which each member of the *familia* takes responsibility to ensure that every other member fully engages in the work.⁴ The success rate in these courses (passing with an A, B, or C) is 92 percent.

LEAD courses focus on topics related to the Latino experience; but enrollment is open, and Latinos account for only roughly half of all enrollees. The program has been so successful that it has been used as the model for IMPACT AAPI (Initiatives to Maximize Positive Academic Achievement and Cultural Thriving focusing on Asian American and Pacific Islander students at De Anza College), a similar five-year program for underserved Asian students funded by an AANAPISI (Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions) grant from the US Department of Education.⁵ Both programs have developed cohort models that depend on the capacity of our students to work collaboratively, across differences of language, history and culture. The cohort model is also used in our auto tech program, which has long been known for its quality and now for new curricula in electric and hybrid design. Beyond technical certifications, the auto tech program prepares students for leadership in their communities. The students work as integrated teams, learning with and supporting each other, and asking how they can serve the broader community. They see their work itself as a civic act, helping people make the transition to alternative fuels. And each year, the Auto Tech Club is the single largest donor to the area food bank in a region that celebrates its innovation and wealth and does too little to help the one in four families who are hungry.

These are examples of a college devoted to an alternative view of its students, and to an alternative narrative about education. In this narrative, students come with robust social identities, however uneven their formal educational backgrounds may be. They seek transfer and certification and employable skills in a regional economy in which 40 percent of the jobs require a bachelor's degree. But they know that their families and their communities will need more than employment; the students will need to know how to work across the divisions of class, race, and language that fracture the region, and they will have to understand how public and private power works. An education that fails to prepare them for these questions is one designed to marginalize them. An education that includes civic learning gives students the tools to discover and develop their own agency and power.

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT: A MOVEMENT AND A CHALLENGE

De Anza College is not alone among America's community colleges in this view of students and their education. Indeed, we are now part of a national community

college movement explicitly devoted to the development of the democratic capacity of our students. The Democracy Commitment (TDC), founded only in 2010, now has more than 130 community college campuses in its national network, enrolling over 2,300,000 students. They range in size from small regional colleges like Allegany College of Maryland to large urban districts like Maricopa in Arizona and Miami Dade in Florida. There are TDC colleges across the country, in Texas, Ohio, Oregon, California, New York, and more than fifteen other states.

The Democracy Commitment is just that: a commitment by community colleges that their students will receive an education in the practical skills of democracy, and the civic knowledge with which citizens (and non-citizens) can navigate the institutions of public life. There is no one template for this work; it can range from community service learning to the civic activism of community organizing. It can be deeply rooted in degree and certificate programs that aim to transfer students to four-year universities or embedded in career and technical programs that aim to move students into the workforce. It can involve student clubs, extracurricular programs, and student government. It can mean partnerships between colleges and local nonprofit and community groups.

But whatever form it takes, a commitment to the democratic capacity of our students requires institutional intentionality and public conversation about this dimension of the work. It must be part of the college mission and strategic planning. It must be part of institutional life, embedded in faculty conversation and openly acknowledged as contested terrain, not settled doctrine. What does “civic agency” mean in career/technical programs? What is the civic dimension of a discipline? What are alternative views regarding the practical knowledge our graduates need to navigate ever-changing economic and political environments? In other words, we must have the conversations we want our students to have, and with the same openness to difference and debate.

A commitment to the democratic capacity of our students requires institutional intentionality and public conversation

The Democracy Commitment brings this work into a national conversation, and it provides a space where those committed to civic engagement can meet each other and reach out to their counterparts. For De Anza College, TDC offers support and affiliation as well as a place where our people can talk with others who reject the deficit model so prevalent in the national narrative about our students. And, finally, TDC connects community college work with the universities where so many of our students transfer. TDC lives in a partnership with the American Democracy Project, the now ten-year-old coalition of 242 universities sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU). It is not lost on our colleagues at AASCU institutions that more than half of their graduates are transfers from community colleges. Our students are their students.

Our challenge is to expand our coalition of institutions further, to bring more community colleges and four-year colleges into partnerships that reinforce the value and power of civic work. De Anza College and other TDC

members are working to ensure that any movement aiming to retrieve the “civic” from the margins must include the nation’s community colleges and our students.

NOTES

1. The mission of the Foothill-De Anza Foundation is to change student lives by raising and investing funds to support the educational excellence of Foothill and De Anza Colleges. See <http://www.foundation.fhda.edu>. 350.org was founded in 2008 as a global climate movement to link climate-focused campaigns, projects, and actions by people from 188 countries who lead from the bottom up. See <http://www.350.org>.
2. The DREAM Act is a piece of bipartisan legislation designed to provide qualified undocumented immigrant youth eligibility for a six year long conditional path to citizenship. At the time of this publication, the DREAM Act legislation has not been passed into law. See <http://www.dreamact.info>.
3. For further details about the California Community College System, see <http://www.cccco.edu>.
4. For further details about LEAD, see <http://www.deanze.edu/lead>.
5. For further details about IMPACT AAPI, see <http://www.deanza.edu/impact-aapi>.