Civic and political learning is an often-cited desired learning outcome for college and university students, but how is it achieved? Many factors impact student political learning, and research from the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE) at Tufts University indicates that the structures and practices that affect campus climate are excellent starting points. There is one guiding question that student affairs leaders at every college or university should ask: Are students collaborators who are part of the processes that guide the direction of the institution?
In recognition of well-publicized declines in the civic health of the United States throughout the 1990s, higher education devoted new energy to student–citizen development. Colleges and universities have addressed this challenge in a variety of ways, most notably with an increased focus on the creation of service-based programs and opportunities for students. While the current generation of college students is increasingly engaged with social and some civic issues, when it comes to issues and institutions that are expressly political, student attitudes are characterized by distrust and cynicism. This disconnect between the issues that students care about and student ambivalence toward the political structures and practices that directly impact these issues is indicative of the civic role that higher education should be playing in American democracy.

The United States needs skilled citizens who understand their responsibilities to work together for the common good and for the strength and future of democracy, particularly in times of polarization and disengagement from political life. University and college students need to develop knowledge, skills, agency, and interest in political areas. Higher education institutions offer the ideal environment for students to practice the art of democracy.

Political Learning Can Be Cultivated

Work is political. Education is political. Life is political. In order to fully engage with political life, individuals must develop the skills to navigate structures, foster an intrinsic commitment to their roles as positive civic actors, and gain political knowledge. Student affairs is a well-suited space for students to develop these competencies, particularly when it comes to political skill building. As students are brought into the processes of college and university decision making, they begin to engage with, and learn through, political structures. This active participation, occurring in an environment that holds actors accountable but often with lower stakes than many other environments, can serve as a profound learning lab for students. True “preparation” of college and university students is incomplete without the development of student competencies that prepare students for the world they will encounter when they graduate.

Student affairs professionals can serve dual roles as both mentors and supervisors to students, many of whom may be new to hierarchical and bureaucratic structures. In order to effectively promote student political learning within governance structures, vice presidents for student affairs (VPSAs) and other administrators need to see students as colleagues who are worthy of seats at the table. VPSAs can serve as the champions of this cause on individual campuses and collectively can lead the way for a national paradigm shift.

Campus Climate Research

As part of ongoing research on student political learning and engagement in democracy, the IDHE research team conducted a nine-campus qualitative study on institutional climates. Campuses were selected for their unpredicted high (and low) voting rates based on the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) and for institutional diversity characteristics such as location, student populations, and institution type. Individual respondent and focus groups were also intentionally stratified across various criteria, including community status (student, faculty, staff), level, discipline, and leadership roles as described by Nancy Thomas and Margaret Brower in Politics 365: Fostering Campus Climates for Student Political Learning and Engagement (American Political Science Association, 2017). The goal was to identify attributes of those institutions that may support conditions for student political learning and engagement.

Student collaboration was a central theme emerging from the study. At these institutions, students were included broadly in decision making, and they were given tangible responsibilities that varied among institutions, but included authority over budgets, physical spaces, and policy matters. Student input was not a secondary consideration for administrators; it was an important and necessary component in campus processes. Formal structures established on these campuses ensured long-term student involvement in decision making, and processes were created to train student leaders in deliberative governance and policy creation. Students at these institutions expressed a sense of ownership over the direction of their institutions, recognized the importance of varied student populations, and felt able to share in institutional decision making.

A Necessary Paradigm Shift

Among higher education professionals, there is a long-standing notion of collegiality—a shared responsibility for the campus community and its ongoing culture and activities. Traditionally, this notion has included primarily faculty and staff. Bringing students into this practice elevates their status on campus and allows them to serve true leadership roles within a college or university. With this paradigm shift, students are no longer passive members of a campus community, but become co-creators of campus climate.

Perhaps through tradition or convenience, students have not been treated as equal stakeholders in the operation of colleges or universities. The transient nature of students, who eventually graduate or leave, makes it easy to dismiss the notion of students as colleagues of faculty, and staff, who remain on campus. Higher education must fight this instinct to shield students from decision making. An effective democracy is built on many pillars, including deliberative dialogue, conflict resolution, participatory structures, and ethical decision making and management. As part of campus governance structures, students will encounter many situations that will prepare them for engaged citizenship during their college years and beyond.

The shift in thinking among higher education professionals must be fundamental—not merely rhetorical. The notion of collegiality between staff and students is a powerful concept that speaks to the values of an institution. The priorities of a college or university can often be discerned by looking at the systems of power that govern them. Structures of budgeting, decision making, and agenda setting all establish implicit and explicit values. These cultural indicators factor
into perceptions of campus climate, and emerging findings of IDHE support the premise that students are aware of these power structures.

**Representation Matters**

Inequitable hiring at colleges and universities is yet another reason to value student participation in governance. The current student population nationally is significantly more diverse than most full-time leadership on campuses, and higher education overall remains stratified in terms of opportunities afforded to students. Given current demographics, the perspectives and biases brought into institutional decision making should be held under great scrutiny. For the same reason, student voices are integral to campus decision making as they are more representative of the broader campus community.

The act of bringing a diversity of voices to campus governance conversations is not merely symbolic; a range of perspectives means that blind spots in leadership will be reduced, and institutions will be more likely to meet the needs of all members of their respective communities. By valuing diverse perspectives, colleges and universities can begin to counter the perpetuation of systemic inequities. As institutions seek to strengthen democracy, they must constantly strive to bring as many voices as possible to matters of governance.

**Placing Practice in Context**

The efforts of any one institution are not prescriptive for all of higher education. Resource and capacity concerns along with particular student and staff characteristics and other specific institutional contexts may dictate policy at each campus. As a starting point, consider these broad considerations to foster a campus climate that promotes student political learning:

- **Make space at the table for students.** To begin this process, take a step back and look critically at decision making across campus. Who leads and attends committee meetings, and who is impacted by the decisions made at these meetings? Let students know that their opinions matter, that they share responsibility for the institution, and that they can be present for these deliberations from beginning to end.

- **Recognize and adapt to the varying needs of individual students.** One of the central challenges to any set of “best practices” within higher education is that much of the work is context-dependent. The realities and student populations can differ vastly from one campus to the next. This diversity makes U.S. colleges and universities globally respected, but it also means that VPSAs and other administrators cannot settle for one-size-fits-all solutions. The time commitment required for a campuswide community may be no issue for a residential student who does not work, but this form of involvement for commuters, adult learners, students with families, and students with financial demands may be impossible. Because of the individual burdens, abilities, and life situations of students, it is vital that VPSAs think beyond traditional avenues of involvement when crafting the right student leadership opportunities for institutions. For effective institutional governance, perspectives on nontraditional students are critical as well.

- **Teach the art of collaborative leadership.** Collaborative leadership can take many forms, including dialogue and budget training; see the Participatory Budgeting Project at participatorybudgeting.org.

- **Understand the benefits of student participation.** Student input is a powerful tool for administrators. Students respond well to messages from their peers, and peer-to-peer interaction has already been leveraged in many digital communications offices across higher education. As professionals seek to understand the needs of a campus community, having direct dialogue with and messaging from students can inform practice. Observations from faculty and staff only provide a partial read on campus

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**ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge**

The ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge believes that more young people need to participate in the electoral process. Recognizing colleges and universities for their commitment to increasing student voting rates, this national awards program encourages institutions to help students form the habits of active and informed citizenship.

Hundreds of colleges and universities have joined the Challenge and have committed to making democratic participation a core value on their campuses. Together, they are cultivating generations of engaged citizens, which is essential to a healthy democracy.

To learn more or to sign up, visit allinchallenge.org.

Participation is open to all accredited, degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States.
climate; the student voice is required to accurately gauge student sentiments around the most important issues.

- **Develop buy-in from student affairs staff.** A mandate from the VPSA may force some structural changes within the leadership structure, but sustained, meaningful transformation is only possible if current leaders across the hierarchy believe in and support this paradigm shift. Opportunities for collaborative governance exist not only on campuswide committees, but also within the day-to-day operations of every office. A campus climate in which students feel a sense of responsibility and agency over the direction of an institution begins with a culture of respect for students among staff and a willingness to share power. In some cases, this may begin with a mid-level “champion,” who advocates for student empowerment. These leaders can serve as powerful evangelists for a new campus culture.

- **Institutionalize change.** It is important to codify changes that empower student leadership to ensure that these roles endure beyond the tenure of individual students. Every VPSA recognizes a set of current students who seem irreplaceable, but each year should bring opportunities for incoming students. Leadership roles extend beyond any one student.

- **Listen to students who make suggestions or even protest about institutional policy.** Have students work to fix the problems they raise. Encouraging students to move beyond simple critiques and into actual decision-making roles allows them to more fully understand the limits and opportunities that come with governance.

- **Accept risk as part of the process.** Opening up dialogue with students on tough management issues is a challenge. Meaningful student participation within areas like budget planning, event management, facility development, and institutional messaging can be uncomfortable for VPSAs and other administrators. It is up to VPSAs and their divisions to decide how much risk is acceptable and how fast change can reasonably be implemented. Working in partnership is a professional development experience for both students and staff.

Adam Gismondi works on qualitative research, communications, and resources at the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education in the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

### Become a Voter Friendly Campus

The Voter Friendly Campus designation program began in 2016 through a partnership between the Campus Vote Project and NASPA. The goal of the program is to help institutions develop plans to coordinate administrators, faculty, and student organizations in civic and electoral engagement.

The Voter Friendly Campus designation helps administrators develop a strategy to engage students, set clear goals, and create a path in advance of upcoming elections. These activities can be institutionalized for years to come, keeping students engaged as they enter and move through their college careers.

After a college or university executes its plan to help students register and vote, the campus will be evaluated and designated as an official Voter Friendly Campus. This program is endorsed by the American Democracy Project, The Democracy Commitment, and Young Invincibles.

To learn more about how your campus can be designated as voter friendly, visit voterfriendlycampus.org.

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### Institute for Democracy & Higher Education

The Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE), which is dedicated to shifting college and university priorities, practices, and culture to strengthen democracy and advance social and political equity, produces a number of resources for educators, in addition to its ongoing research work. Find all of the resources below and more on the IDHE website, activecitizen.tufts.edu/idhe.

- A training guide for facilitators, “Facilitating Political Discussions”
- An IDHE Report, “Politics 365: Fostering Campus Climates for Student Political Learning & Engagement”
- A new series of “In the News” discussion guides for timely political conversations
- An IDHE newsletter providing news, resources, and updates