Focused Engagement: Lessons Learned from a Study Assessing Campus Climates for Political Learning and Engagement in Democracy

Jodi Benenson, Barbara Pickering, and Andrea M. Weare

University of Nebraska Omaha

Anthony M. Starke, Jr.

University of Colorado Denver

ABSTRACT

Over the past 20 years, colleges and universities have committed to providing students with a wide range of civic and community engagement experiences, but little is known about campus climate for political learning and engagement at higher education institutions. This article examines the key opportunities and challenges associated with planning, recruiting, and conducting focus groups as part of a national project focused on political learning and engagement in democracy at one public Midwestern metropolitan university.

Keywords: focus groups, political engagement, civic engagement

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 20 years, colleges and universities have committed to providing students with a wide range of civic experiences. Research has focused on the need for curricular and co-curricular civically focused, high-impact practices that are beneficial for college students from all backgrounds, such as collaborative assignments, learning communities, and internships (Ehrlich, 2000; Kilgo, Ezell Sheets, & Pascarella, 2015; Kuh, 2008). These practices—when structured in meaningful ways—have been shown to have a positive impact on outcomes such as academic achievement, attitudes, civic engagement, critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and a sense of social responsibility (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Myers, Myers, & Peters, 2019).

While many of these civic experiences exclusively focus on community engagement and service learning, there are also opportunities to increase political engagement in classrooms and educate for democracy. According to Thomas and Brower (2017), democracy not only refers to a form of government, but also a culture, a set of principles, and practices that provide the context for shared governance in the United States. Viewing these practices within the context of higher education provides a space to extend community and civic engagement conversations toward political learning and engagement. Political engagement can be defined as both engagement with formal government structures or processes (e.g., running for office, voting) and more alternative, participatory, and citizen-driven action with or without government involvement (e.g., deliberative democracy,

activism) (Thomas & Brower, 2018). Political learning refers to classroom and co-curricular experiences that increase student knowledge of the history, principles, and practices of democratic governance and the ability to navigate and shape communities and systems for policymaking and resource distribution (Thomas & Brower, 2018).

Campus climate—the underlying environment for learning—has historically been used as a framework to understand various problems on college campuses (e.g., sexual misconduct, alcohol use) or to learn about social identities of students (e.g., historically marginalized groups) (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005). Campus climate has also been used to examine civic values and activities. For example, Billings and Terkla (2014) found that student self-efficacy, leadership ability, and community connectedness are positively related to student civic engagement activities. As a result of this research, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) introduced a set of learning outcomes for personal and social responsibility, and researchers then created a survey instrument to assess the general climate for each outcome (Reason, 2013).

Most recently, the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education (IDHE) at Tufts University visited nine colleges and universities nationwide for an initial study of campus climates for political learning and engagement in democracy. The purpose of this work was to assess trends in political learning and engagement on college campuses, and identify strategies to improve and increase student learning for democracy. A research team conducted a series of interviews and focus groups at each institution to develop a set of recommendations for how colleges and universities can improve their campus climates for political learning and engagement. These recommendations included strengthening social cohesion; incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion as a realized practice; institutionalizing pervasive, high-quality political discussions; inviting student agency and voice; and embedding active political engagement on campus (Thomas & Brower, 2017, 2018).

Because these recommendations were preliminary, IDHE—in partnership with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the American Democracy Project (ADP)—sought to replicate this study to test these findings through a large-scale study. To do so, they invited 12 additional colleges and universities in the United States to conduct their own self-study to assess campus climates for political learning and engagement. The goal of this study was to: 1) understand whether the use of focus groups was a reliable method for assessing campus climate for political learning and engagement, and 2) use outcomes associated with this assessment to create a set of interventions that could be adopted by institutions to improve political learning and engagement. This article examines the process of conducting focus groups to uncover these findings at one participating institution. The questions we explore in this article include: What are the benefits of using focus groups to understand the campus climate around political learning and engagement on a college campus? What should other institutions consider when moving forward with this type of research model?

Why Focus Groups?

The merits of focus groups are well documented for conducting needs assessments of civic cultures (Kellogg, O'Brien, & Toth, 2006; Kern & Just, 1995; Mihailidis, Fincham, & Cohen, 2014; Nisbett & Childs Dewalt, 2016). Though originating in market research in the 1920s, focus groups have been used expansively in social science research since the 1940s (Merton & Kendall, 1946) to gain in-depth understandings of social issues (Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, & Mukherjee, 2018). By creating atmospheres that solicit group interaction, focus groups collect data surrounding group opinions and attitudes on a particular issue (Tonkiss, 2018). Because the

unit of analysis is the group (rather than the individual), focus groups deliver data of interaction, specifically *how* people articulate and justify issues (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Data can showcase group formations and negotiations since opinions, attitudes, and accounts are socially produced (Lunt & Livingston, 1996).

Focus groups serve as contexts for sensemaking and public deliberation. Because focus groups "involve a stronger methodological assertion that the group context is important," they are useful in creating forms of deliberative democracy (Tonkiss, 2018, p. 238). Group interaction can allow participants to make connections to discussion topics through each other, which may not necessarily occur in individual interviews (Nagle & Williams, 2013). When trying to assess campus climate for political learning and engagement, the use of focus groups presents a unique context due to their open but defined space on campus for the collaborative, synergetic, and spontaneous pursuit of sensemaking (Johnson, 1996; Southwell, Blake, & Torres, 2005). Because valuable insights and outcomes may emerge from focus groups as a form of deliberative engagement, focus group discussions offer a unique format for deliberative engagement that can be used as a tool for teaching and learning within a university setting (Drury, Andrew, Goddard, & Wentzel, 2016; Longo, 2013). Collaborative, discursive engagement through focus groups provides a defined space to share perspectives and opinions around campus climates for political learning and engagement. More specifically, these group interactions can help explore meaning-making processes behind democratic participation through participants' own accounts of events and terminology.

Largely utilizing convenience sampling, focus groups are composed of participants who share characteristics with a larger population, such as students, faculty, and staff at higher education institutions (Nagle & Williams, 2013). These groups are key stakeholders—both on campus and in their surrounding communities. Focus groups with these study populations can garner local understandings of political learning by reproducing the interactive nature of democratic participation. Collecting group attitudes from these stakeholders is certainly useful at a national level considering the polarized political climate surrounding the 2016 presidential election. But these insights are also necessary for implementing internal university communication efforts to *improve* civic culture in classrooms and on campus generally.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, focus groups took place between May and October 2018 at the University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO). UNO is a public metropolitan university located in Omaha, Nebraska. According to Fall 2018 enrollment data from the institution's Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 12,430 undergraduate students and 3,001 graduate students were enrolled at UNO, totaling 15,431 students (University of Nebraska Omaha, 2019). The UNO study body is notable in the percentage of students who are the first in their family to attend college. Thirty-seven percent of students are first generation students. The average age of students is 24, a factor that reflects the mix of traditional and non-traditional college students.

A total of 10 focus groups were conducted with faculty, students, staff, and administrators, totaling 79 participants. Each focus group lasted 90 minutes and began with an overview of definitions of four core terms: campus climate, political engagement, political learning, and democracy. Focus group facilitators also discussed the concept of democratic learning and engagement in democracy, making it clear that while educating for democracy has no partisan leaning or ideology, the process and goals are clearly political.

A focus group protocol was designed by IDHE based on a conceptual model for how campus climate affects political learning and engagement in democracy. The model, outlined in Thomas and Brower (2018), is influenced by Bolman and Deal's 1991 influential work, which suggests that an environment for working or learning should be gauged and/or improved through an examination of organizational conditions in four frames and that all individuals within an organization (e.g., students, faculty, staff) shape each frame. The frames for this study include structural (e.g., formal roles, organizational charts and hierarchies, policies, physical spaces), human (e.g., needs, feelings, skills, limitations, attitudes, and beliefs), political (e.g., resource allocation, power sharing and decision-making), and symbolic (e.g., norms, symbols, history) (Bolman & Deal, 1991).

For the purposes of this study, the framework guiding the focus group questions included sub-dimensions for each frame that reflect the complexity of higher education institutions. For the structural frame, IDHE included four sub-dimensions: 1) organizational, 2) curricular, 3) co-curricular, and 4) spatial. The interview protocol explored structures such as mission statement, fields of study, the existence of political organizations on campus, and formal and informal spaces for political discussions and actions. The human frame focused on the relationship between the needs of the organization and those of the individuals operating within it. The human frame was organized into four core dimensions: compositional (social identity and lived experiences), competencies (knowledge and skills), attitudinal (beliefs and opinions), and behavioral (individual behaviors and how people interact with others). The political frame focused on two sub-dimensions: how internal decisions are made (e.g., who has power, voice, authority) and external influences (e.g., state legislators, electoral conditions) and questions were included about how decisions are made, perceptions of shared governance, town-gown relations, and

electoral activities. The protocol adjusted Bolman and Deal's (1991) symbolic frame by renaming it cultural, focusing on institutional features such as widely accepted norms stemming from the institution's history, symbols, and traditions. The facets of the historic, symbolic, and normative sub-dimensions are therefore explored through questions about rituals, stories, and shared values.

The focus groups were conducted by a small research team of eight people. Two individuals were designated facilitators and six as notetakers. At the end of each focus group, members of the research team completed a rubric that examined researchers' perceptions about the institution's structures, norms and culture, decision-making and leadership practices, and attitudes and behaviors that collectively shape the environment for political learning and engagement in democracy. The project also included a team of 17 coalition members made up of administrators, faculty, and staff who are key leaders in civic and community engagement initiatives at the university.

LESSONS LEARNED:
OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Below, we outline four key lessons learned from conducting the focus groups. Specifically, we highlight key opportunities and challenges associated with planning, recruitment, and conducting focus groups as part of a large-scale project focused on political learning and engagement.

Lesson 1: Planning the Focus Groups
Scheduling and timing are key to success of any focus group research, and this project was no exception. The initial launch of the nationwide project was February 2018 with the goal of completing focus groups by May 2018. It became apparent early on that this goal would not be viable, and upon receiving approval by UNO's Institutional Review Board (IRB), our group set the goal to

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complete focus groups by Fall 2018. Because the campus is a mixed residential/commuter campus, the coalition team recognized the need to strategically schedule the groups. For instance, faculty groups were conducted in late April, early May, and in September and October once faculty had returned to campus. Students also posed a similar challenge, and targeting specific student groups (e.g., residence hall assistants, campus ambassadors) who were available during the summer allowed us to complete one focus group in early summer. Similarly, student government groups who were active beginning in Fall 2018 agreed to participate in focus groups to round out our student participation. An additional student group, identified through the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and personal outreach, participated in a focus group in August. Overall, in planning an initiative based on university campus participation, recognizing the role that the academic calendar plays in carrying out focus groups on a compacted timeline is an important consideration.

In addition to overall timing, the group recognized the need to accommodate groups based on the time of day participants were available. For example, the staff focus groups and residence hall groups were successful by scheduling them over the lunch hour. For student government, a similar situation presented itself. Student government meetings are held in the evening, and the group agreed to participate following their monthly evening meeting.

A final consideration in planning was the availability of campus facilities and space configuration. UNO is split into two campuses, which are close together but separated by a public park. In order to attract students and faculty from across campus, we used buildings on both parts of campus. As has been suggested (Nyumba et al., 2018), the comfort of the focus group setting is important both for participant comfort and ease of facilitation. In all but one focus group, the rooms had movable desks and chairs, which helped create a comfortable and accessible

focus group environment. We would recommend previewing the room arrangement of the focus group, as the space configuration can have implications for focus group dynamics and ultimate research outcomes.

Lesson 2: Focus Group Recruitment

Members of the research team strategized how to best recruit participants for the 10 focus groups. The categories of focus groups included campus coalition team, faculty, students, student leaders, and staff. UNO has a history of leadership commitment to issues it deems mission-relevant (Dodge, Starke, Smith-Howell, & Woods, 2019). Campus leaders, including the senior vice chancellor, associate and assistant vice chancellors, deans, and other campus administrators were members of the coalition of campus stakeholders supervising the project. Leadership's support of the campus climate assessment both legitimized the study as an institutional priority and assured the necessary resources were made available to successfully plan and implement the project. Funding for graduate assistant hours were dedicated to overseeing logistics such as scheduling rooms, ordering food and beverage for focus groups, coordinating participant recruitment, managing data collection, and assisting with data analysis. Additionally, an administrative faculty fellow oversaw campus work and served as the campus liaison to the national coordinating institutions, participating in discussions of the project's progress and planning. Projects such as this are successful when they have financial and human capital to support them. These resources are often under the purview of campus leaders. Thus, it is imperative that leadership is committed to the ideals and work of the campus climate assessment.

Leveraging existing institutional resources, systems, and structures became a very useful practice for successful implementation of the project. As noted earlier, the institution's Office of Institutional Effectiveness helped recruit student participants. Their staff played a vital role in

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considering sampling methods, identifying potential focus group participants that met the study's criteria, and disseminating recruitment materials. Likewise, the Center for Faculty Excellence and the Service Learning Academy supported faculty recruitment efforts.

Partnering with units that had access to potential participants served as a launchpad for recruitment, but a more direct strategy using snowball sampling proved to be the most effective method. The team reached out to colleagues and campus leaders who could connect us to interested student groups and used word of mouth with students in classes to garner interest in the project. While we recognize the inherent selection bias in this strategy, this was our most effective mechanism for obtaining the established number of groups/participants requested by the coordinating institutions. Casting a wide net to gather as many participants as possible is advisable; however, because the initial interest in participating was marginal, most of the focus groups consisted of individuals who were personally invited by the project team or other participants.

Recruiting for the focus groups is equally as telling as the study findings. In recruiting, we discovered that there are disparate levels of interest in political learning and engagement. While faculty and staff whose work is centered on civic/political engagement and service learning were most interested in participation, this interest was not shared across all academic units, which created a selection bias in our results. The aforementioned challenges with timing of the project and the focus groups also influenced recruitment challenges. Future project designs should consider a mixture of recruitment methods, those that seek to inform as many individuals as possible about the study and those that build on existing relationships and connections.

Lesson 3: Conducting Focus Groups and Analyses

The facilitator and observing notetakers (2) arrived to rooms early to ensure the set-up of catering, audio recorders, and informed consent documents were in place. Tables and chairs were arranged to bring the group into a circular shape adjacent to food and drink. The facilitator briefly reviewed the protocol (i.e. a student, faculty, or administrator protocol) with observing notetakers who received a copy to aid their notes. Observing notetakers sat near the back and sides of the room with laptops to capture main topics, commonalities, events, and language used by participants. Observation notes varied in specificity but having two notetakers strengthened the validity of the discussion and provided a "thick[er] description" of each unique group (Geertz, 1973).

Upon arrival, participants were welcomed, thanked for their participation, and invited to share refreshments. The facilitator presented the introductory script provided by the coordinating institutions that included introductions of those in the room, AASCU, IDHE, and ADP, as well as the purpose of the focus group and what would be done with the data. At that time, the facilitator proceeded through the four-page protocol and participants answered questions and interacted with their peers' insights. Throughout, the facilitator used probing questions to confirm points of view and elicit the necessary data for each section of the protocol. Focus groups concluded with two final questions asking if any topics had been missed and to grade their campus experience with political issues, learning, and participation on a scale of A to F.

As participants answered anticipated questions located later in the protocol, the facilitator remained nimble moving from

question to question as needed. Yet, we realized upon reflection that the protocol was too long for a 90-minute interview as advertised in our recruitment. Because we were sensitive to participant fatigue which sets in between one and two hours (Nyumba et al., 2018), facilitators, at times, skipped questions, combined questions, and/or asked questions out of order to capture the data. The protocol also included a wide range of questions which felt ambitious, leaving facilitators to make off-the-cuff decisions about which questions would elicit the richest data. This may have implications for the findings of the study. Since focus groups can help operationalize core concepts (Tonkiss, 2018) and ought to ask a maximum of approximately five questions (Nagle & Williams, 2013), perhaps this first round of focus groups in the project can tighten key aims for future ones.

After thanking participants and answering follow-up questions about the larger study, the facilitator and notetakers completed a debriefing rubric provided by the coordinating institutions before leaving the room. The rubric consisted of five categories of 54 Likert-scale prompts about the participants' consensus on political learning and civic engagement and took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The rubric, audio recording, and observation notes were then uploaded to a secure university cloud server to be shared with the coordinating institutions.

Upon completing the first focus group, the facilitator and observing notetakers determined during the debriefing that some of the measurement tools provided by the coordinating institutions were misaligned with each other. The interview protocol and debriefing rubric measured different variables, which may have implications for the findings of the study. For example, the debriefing rubric assessed climate with prompts about faculty-student advising, an understanding of academic freedom, and candidate visits on campus, none of which were questions on the student interview protocol. Since there were three interview protocols (student, faculty, and administration), we recommend having three

debriefing rubrics so that all tools measure the same variables.

After all 10 focus groups were concluded, coding of 20 observation notes began by two additional graduate students using a three-page codebook provided by the coordinating institutions. Analysis of the observation notes was done by broadly categorizing the strengths and challenges of the campus' political climate. Doing so provided an overview of the context, resources, and areas for improvement for a wider campus discussion and local action plan of next steps.

Lesson 4: Managing Changes and Expectations

Several changes were made by the lead institutions over time during the duration of the study. As noted in Lesson 1, we extended the timeline to allow time to plan, recruit, conduct, and analyze the focus groups. Additionally, regular turnover occurred at the institutions leading this initiative, which influenced project capacity and, ultimately, timeline and ownership of different tasks. While our institution did not experience turnover, it is important to recognize that such transitions do occur regularly at higher education institutions, and we recommend having a plan for staffing transitions at all levels of the project.

Because this was a national project, the research teams across the country had varying backgrounds and responsibilities within their universities. At some institutions, project leads were staff members or held administrative roles within a civic engagement or service-learning center. At other institutions, project leads were faculty members housed in a range of departments, including communication, public administration, and education. Such variance influenced the amount of time that staff, faculty, and other project leads at each institution were able to commit to the project. At UNO, the project was housed within Academic Affairs, and two project leads were faculty members on a nine-month contract,

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which had implications for working on this project during the summer months.

To manage expectations, it is important for larger institutions leading these initiatives to be clear and upfront about all project expectations and the resources that can be provided to a university implementing the project. Factors such as built-in time for training, ensuring financial and human resources align with an institution's needs, and, importantly, understanding threshold capacities are important and must be considered when inviting institutions to participate in these types of large-scale projects. The systematic nature of this project and its focus on political learning and engagement will provide great value to colleges and universities across the country, and keeping processes uniform across institutions is necessary for the study's validity.

However, it is also important for individuals and groups leading large-scale efforts to consider the resource constraints, variation, and uniqueness of institutions across the country and to build this into the initial research design. For example, for some institutions, including ours, the initial timeline was not feasible. In addition, while we were fortunate to have members of the research team who were trained in qualitative research methods and had experience conducting and analyzing focus groups, such was not the case at all institutions. The lead institutions held regular check-in calls and trainings to support each institution's project leads, which served as a helpful space to answer questions and create a community focused on this work. When moving forward with this kind of project, we recommend a consistent point of contact (at both the lead institution level and at each institution) and that expectations are realistic and clear.

CONCLUSION

This article explored a national research-to-practice initiative supported by AASCU's American Democracy Project and the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at Tufts University. The goal of the initiative was to assess and improve campus climates for political learning and participation in democracy. Campuses nationwide are struggling to find ways to improve political learning, civil dialogue, and participation in divisive and polarized political contexts. The 2016 election season and its aftermath reflected extreme polarization, divisive rhetoric, disagreement about what constitutes facts and truth, and has led to frustration within American society. Universities are ideally situated to identify and model a better approach to educating for robust political learning and democratic engagement, and cultivating more sophisticated forms of political discourse, dialogue, and deliberation can provide greater civic benefits to students, faculty, staff, and communities.

Taking part in this nationwide project was an exciting but challenging feat. We gathered important data from our institution about its campus climate for political learning and engagement, but experienced a variety of hurdles in executing the 10 focus groups. But contributing to the grander AASCU aim to better understand how campus climate affects student nonpartisan political engagement was meaningful and deeply important work. Speaking with students, faculty, and administrators throughout the focus groups was vital in understanding *how* the five preliminary findings entering the project intersected, whether they applied to all student populations, whether one characteristic was more significant than others, and whether they could work independently. With our local campus findings, we helped hone an assessment tool for colleges and universities to test and strengthen their *own* campus climate. On our own campus, we have since shared the findings with our civic engagement coalition and will be creating further campus dialogues in the coming semesters.

For campuses interested in participating in similar nationwide collaborations, we stress the importance of ensuring that

realistic expectations are set both on campus but also between the campus and coordinating institutions. This helps with executing the logistics of a large-scope project but also aids the usefulness of the study results and its expansion to other colleges and universities in the future. Considering the rise of social media platforms serving as prominent spaces for civic learning and engagement (Milhailidis, Fincham, & Cohen, 2014), it is vital that universities return to their mission statements as institutions invested in the education and socialization of the next generation of leaders locally, nationally, and globally.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Jodi Benenson is an Assistant Professor in the School of Public Administration at the University of Nebraska Omaha. Her primary research interests include civic engagement, nonprofit organizations, social policy, and social equity. She earned her Ph.D. in social policy from Brandeis University. She may be reached at jbenenson@unomaha.edu.

Barbara Pickering earned her Ph.D. in Communication at the University of Southern California. Her teaching and research interests include: Civic/Political Engagement, Media & Politics, Gender and Rhetorical Criticism. She may be reached at bpickering@unomaha.edu.

Andrea M. Weare is an Assistant Professor in the School of Communication at the University of Nebraska Omaha. Her research interests include strategic / digital communication, nonprofit organizations, media literacy, and gender. She earned her Ph.D. in mass communication and graduate certificate in gender, women's, and sexuality studies from the University of Iowa. She may be reached at aweare@unomaha.edu.

Anthony M. Starke, Jr. is an Assistant Professor in the School of Public Affairs at the University of Colorado-Denver. His teaching and research interests include public service education, social equity, citizenship, and identity. He earned his Ph.D. in Public Administration at the University of Nebraska Omaha. He may be reached at anthony.starke@ucdenver.edu.

AUTHOR NOTE

Jodi Benenson, School of Public Administration, University of Nebraska Omaha; Barbara Pickering, Andrea M. Weare, School of Communication, University of Nebraska Omaha; Anthony M. Starke, Jr., School of Public Affairs, University of Colorado Denver.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jodi Benenson, School of Public Administration, University of Nebraska Omaha, Omaha, NE 68182. E-mail: jbenenson@unomaha.edu