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### Becoming Politically Informed in the College Dorm: Fostering Political Engagement in Binghamton University Students

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**BECOMING POLITICALLY INFORMED IN THE COLLEGE DORM: FOSTERING  
POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN BINGHAMTON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

BY: ALISON E. O'BRIEN

BA, State University of New York at Geneseo, 2012

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Public  
Administration in the Graduate School of Binghamton University State University of  
New York 2014

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Accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Masters in Public Administration  
in the Graduate School of  
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### **Executive Summary**

Binghamton University's Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) is interested in developing programs to foster political engagement in Binghamton University students. The CCE provides students, faculty, and staff with a wide range of community service and volunteering opportunities but does not have a strategy to engage students in formal programs of political education. This capstone paper examines what programs CCE can implement to develop civic skills and foster political engagement in Binghamton University students.

I conducted a series of nine in-depth telephone interviews to determine what types of programs and strategies other colleges and universities have successfully used to promote political engagement on their campuses. Five findings emerged from the data: (1) academic institutions do not have standard definitions of political engagement; (2) institutional support is key for securing resources to establish political engagement; (3) colleges and universities employ a variety of methods, strategies, and programs to promote political engagement on campus; (4) political engagement leaders collaborate with a variety of groups, including faculty, student organizations, and outside organizations, and; (5) there remain significant institutional barriers to realize political engagement on campus.

Based on my research and findings, I believe the Center for Civic Engagement should consider the following recommendations : (1) clearly define the concept of "political engagement"; (2) work with faculty, student organizations, and outside groups on projects specific to political engagement; (3) focus on creating political dialogues and deliberation on campus; and (4) seek administrative support in order to secure resources and allay the fears and concerns of faculty and administrators of engaging in political discourse.

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### **Problem Definition**

Since its creation in 2010, Binghamton University's Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) has worked diligently to serve its mission of strengthening university-community relationships for positive public change and supporting the attainment of academic, personal, and professional growth to develop active and engaged citizens (Center for Civic Engagement, 2013). It has done so by providing students, student organizations, staff, and faculty with a wide range of community engagement opportunities, developing and organizing large-scale service activities, collaborating with Academic Affairs to integrate service and academics, and supporting the professional development and recognition of staff, faculty, and students (Center for Civic Engagement, 2013). Notable CCE initiatives include its web database of community service organizations and available volunteer opportunities, the development of Binghamton's first "Service-Learning and Language Immersion" study abroad program in Peru, coordination of BU's involvement in the United Way's Day of Caring, and sponsoring a statewide Faculty Institute conference that explores mutually beneficial engagement (Center for Civic Engagement, 2013).

One of CCE's goals is to "support the development of a deep sense of civic responsibility among students, staff, and faculty" (CCE, 2013). As CCE expands its programming and service opportunities, it is looking to new, creative ways to support its mission and meet its goals. Currently, the CCE pursues its mission largely through civic engagement *action*, including voluntary service, donation of goods, funds, and services, and other forms of actions. These forms of civic engagement complement, but should not be viewed as a substitute for political engagement. According to CCE's Director, Dr. Allison Alden, inherent in civic responsibility is a basic understanding of government processes required to be a competent democratic citizen.

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(Alden, personal communication, October 16, 2013). Currently, the Center for Civic Engagement does not have a strategy to engage students in formal programs of civic education and Binghamton University students have limited opportunities to develop and strengthen their political skills and responsibilities.

The CCE maintains an “event” calendar on its website to advertise volunteer opportunities and events available to students. From November 2012 to May 2013, there were over 75 events posted on the calendar. Of the 75 events, only 10 could be described as being political opportunities. Several of the “political” opportunities occurred in November 2012 and were related to the presidential election. The CCE sponsored a variety of political programs to coordinate voter registration efforts by various groups and organized Election Day activities on campus, including voter registration drives, political forums and roundtables, and an “Election Day Celebration” to encourage students to vote. Voter turnout of off-campus residents was 32% higher than turnout in 2008 (Krasno, 2012), demonstrating CCE’s ability to mobilize students. However, since November 2012, civic education opportunities have been limited, and less attention has been paid to political engagement. In the November 2013 state and local election, only 36 of 5,000 Binghamton University students living on campus voted on campus (Sinclair, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Students interviewed after the election said they had little concern for local elections, voting was inconvenient, or they had no interest (Sinclair, 2013).

This problem is a concern for CCE because it is unable to fully meet its mission of developing active and engaged citizens without providing students civic education. While support for student volunteerism and service learning initiatives has led to significant contributions to the local community, there is little evidence of wider political engagement among students. Students who volunteer are not necessarily politically engaged if they are

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<sup>1</sup> This figure does not reflect students who voted by absentee ballot.



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simply trying to provide community service or complete requirements for a service-learning course. Ideally, CCE should be offering opportunities that challenge students to develop the knowledge and skills to be politically responsible, engaged citizens, deeply connected to their communities.

Ensuring college students receive a robust political education also has important implications for the field of public administration. Greater understanding of political processes enables students to understand their interests as individuals and members of groups, promote their ability to connect personal concerns with specific public issues, increase public trust, and promote political participation and involvement in civic life (Galston, 2001). Public administrators are interested in increasing participation in public decisions to respond to the needs of the citizens they serve. Recently, there has been a trend towards “transparent government” with the public demanding access to government data and information (Box, 2004). Citizens have been encouraged to actively participate in the process of agenda-setting and decision-making. In order to effectively participate, young citizens need a basic understanding of how state and local government operate in the United States.

Civic education experiences should aim to improve knowledge and understanding, skills, motivation, action, and involvement in the political process without significantly affecting students’ partisan identification or political ideologies. Through this capstone, I hope to explore effective approaches and strategies for developing civic education on college and university campuses. The Center for Civic Engagement is well positioned to strengthen students’ civic education and encourage political engagement. I hope to assist CCE develop a civic education initiative specifically aimed to encourage student political participation and engagement. As such, my capstone project poses the following question:

- 1) What strategies can CCE use to develop civic skills and foster political engagement among Binghamton University students?

### **Literature Review**

Binghamton University's Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) has been a catalyst for student engagement in the local community. While the CCE has been very successful in promoting volunteerism and community engagement opportunities, it has been less successful in encouraging students to engage politically. To assist the CCE in expanding this aspect of its work, this literature review will focus on three areas of research: 1) the key differences between civic engagement and political engagement, 2) the varying approaches to political learning in colleges and universities, and 3) the challenges to political education.

### **Civic Engagement v. Political Engagement**

While often linked political and civic engagement are different in their purpose, goals, and effects. There is no universal definition for civic or political engagement within the literature. Political engagement has been defined as activities that aim to influence government action, either directly by affecting the development or implementation of public policy (Verba, Scholzman, and Brady, 1995). Others see political engagement as participation in deliberative or citizen-driven social change with or without government involvement (Thomas & Brower, 2014). Civic engagement involves voluntary work that focuses on helping others and working to solve community problems (Zukin, 2006). Civic engagement is often described as "apolitical" and may or may not concern systemic or structural problems, while political engagement seeks to understand and address the dynamics and effects of political power (Thomas & Brower, 2014). While both are viewed as important components of overall community engagement,

"neither alone is sufficient to address the myriad collective decisions that must be made in advanced democracies" (Zukin, 2006, p.51-2).

There is an widening gap between the levels of civic engagement and political engagement among today's youth (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich & Corngold, 2007; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Kiesa et al. 2007; Longo & Meyer, 2006; Pritzker, Springer & McBride, 2012; Walker, 2000). Young adults (ages 20-29) today lag behind their counterparts in the 1970s in exhibiting nine out ten important characteristics of citizenship: belonging to at least one group, attending religious services monthly, belonging to a union, reading newspapers at least one a week, voting, being contacted by a political party, working on a community project, attending club meetings, and believing that people are trustworthy (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). A notable exception for today's youth is their willingness to participate in the tenth characteristic of citizenship – volunteering (Colby et al., 2007; Galston, 2001; Galston, 2004; Flanagan, 2008; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Hollander, 2009). Colleges and universities have significantly increased their focus on community volunteerism with the creation of civic engagement offices, service-learning courses, and even majors and minors in public service (Colby et al., 2007; Hollander, 2009; Longo and Meyer, 2006; Zukin, 2006). Higher education's focus on volunteerism and community service has not resulted in greater political participation. Instead, many young people view public service and volunteering as a palatable alternative to politics (Galston, 2001; Galston, 2004; Kiesa et al., 2007; Walker, 2000; Zukin, 2006). Focusing exclusively on service opportunities fails to teach students how to effectively participate in and affect political change and to develop the political skills necessary to resolving society's problems (Galston, 2001; Galston, 2004; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; LaBare, 2008; Longo and Meyer, 2006; Kiesa et al., 2007; Walker, 2000).

### **Approaches to Political Learning**

Despite the recent focus on service opportunities, educating students in political affairs has long been identified as an essential goal of higher education (LaBare, 2008). Educational attainment is positively correlated with levels of political knowledge, civic values, and active engagement (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry, 1996). A student's academic experience should similarly nurture the development of cognitive skills to enable students to actively participate, understand, and analyze relevant political information (Colby et al., 2007; LaBare, 2008; Nie et al., 1996). Developmental psychologists report that civic habits and skills developed between the ages of 15-25 persists into adulthood, shaping behavior for many years to come (LaBare, 2008). With enrollment at an all-time high, colleges and universities are uniquely-positioned to prepare young citizens to actively participate in the political process (Colby et al., 2007; LaBare, 2008; Long & Meyer, 2007).

A number of approaches to fostering political learning have been introduced at the university level, including classroom-based civic instruction, deliberate course-based discussion about politics and current events, community service opportunities, and academic-based service learning (Pritzker et al., 2012). In addition, student organization efforts, such as voter registration drives, outside political speakers, or issue-driven demonstrations can expose students to the political process (Colby et al., 2007; LaBare, 2008). For example, Michigan University's *YouVote* initiative created a website that provided voter registration information and informed students on candidates and their policies. On November 7, 2006, Election Day, 1,699 students had visited the site (LaBare, 2008). There is mixed evidence on the effectiveness of each approaches' impact on political engagement (Pritzker et al., 2012)

While some research showed civic instruction courses did not contribute significantly to political knowledge, more recent studies find that deliberative-course based discussion can raise overall political knowledge (Campbell, 2005; Holland, 2009; Zukin 2006). Deliberative-course based discussion includes thoughtful discussion about political and current events and requires an environment of open inquiry, where students show mutual respect and tolerance and are willing to listen and consider the ideas of others (Campbell, 2005; Colby et al., 2007; Pritzker et al., 2012; Walker, 2000). If students feel encouraged to share their positions, classroom discussions of political issues can improve civic proficiency, as well as the ability to understand and analyze politically relevant information (Campbell, 2005; Colby et al., 2007; LaBare, 2008; Pritzker et al., 2012). Such discussion may be the first occasion that a student has to focus on an issue and crystalize his or her political position on the matter.

Evidence regarding whether community service and service-learning is positively correlated to improved political education is more mixed (Pritzker et al., 2012; Walker, 2000; Zukin, 2006). Community service refers to volunteer opportunities outside the classroom, while service-learning programs are classroom based and are combined with structured volunteer opportunities (Pritzker et al., 2012). Community service and service-learning projects have been shown to increase general civic responsibility, but it is less clear if they lead to wider political involvement (Walker, 2000; Zukin, 2006).

### **Challenges to Political Engagement**

Fostering political engagement in universities has been met with significant challenges. Critics believe that an emphasis on political learning could interfere with more important academic goals (Colby et al., 2007). However, evidence supports that incorporating political education in the curriculum can improve academic achievement, especially skills like critical

thinking and reflective judgment (Colby et al., 2007; Walker, 2000; Zukin, 2006). Others believe that teaching political education may lead to inevitable political bias and indoctrination (Colby et al., 2007). To avoid this, some have advocated for the creation of "open inquiry," that promotes openness to new ideas and a civil tone (Campbell, 2005; Colby et al., 2007). Faculty should provide several perspectives and allow students to evaluate the arguments and justifications for their own positions and positions of others. Despite disagreement over the role of universities in instilling political activism in students, researchers have had difficulty measuring a student's political participation. The most fundamental measure, voting, has even been identified as inconsistent, with actual student conduct often differing from self-reported behavior (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002; Pritzker et al., 2012). Opportunities to participate in the political process are infrequent, somewhat cyclical, socially desirable, and of low salience (Keeter et al., 2002).

The literature highlights potential strategies that CCE could use to develop political engagement programming. In an effort to learn more about what has been successful at other universities, I conducted interviews with staff and faculty from nine institutions.

### **Methodology**

This section describes my data collection and analysis procedures and identifies the strengths and weaknesses of my research methods. Data for my study was based on interviews conducted between March and April of 2014 with university and college staff from across the country.

I conducted my research in accordance with the core values governing the MPA program. The BU Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the methods as ethical and compliant with Binghamton University standards. The IRB process increases accountability by having outside

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experts review and approve the proposed research methods to make sure subjects' rights are protected. In addition, the IRB promotes transparency by requiring investigators to explain what the research project is, including the risks and benefits of participation and their rights as subjects. I was representing Binghamton University when I contacted outside offices and wanted to assure participants that my project was a credible and serious research effort.

I was interested in learning how other colleges and universities foster political engagement on campus. I used a mixed approach to identify my sample. Universities contacted had ongoing efforts to politically engage their students through the American Democracy Project (ADP), which was referenced in several academic articles regarding political engagement (LaBare, 2008; Mehaffy, 2008; Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009). The ADP is a multi-campus initiative of American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) focused on higher education's role in preparing informed, engaged citizens for democracy. There are currently 250 member colleges and universities that have committed to the American Democracy Project, which includes 14 members from New York State: 10 State University of New York institutions and 4 City University of New York institutions. SUNY institutions whose websites referenced the American Democracy Project were selected to increase the probability that the campuses were actively participating in the Project. Next, I selected colleges and institutions participating in the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) webinar, "Talking Politics." The webinar examined student political learning and engagement, both in theory and practice. Participants in the webinar included a mix of students, professors, and staff members from Student Engagement offices. Using Google search, I identified political engagement initiatives of different participants and selected the participants that were highlighted in academic journals and technical reports because of their innovative programming

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for political engagement. In all, a total of nineteen universities were contacted and nine agreed to participate in an interview.

Once my sample was identified, I found the contact information for the appropriate professor or staff member overseeing civic or political engagement initiatives by using the institution's name and "American Democracy Project." The contact information for schools participating in the NERCHE webinar was found in the "participation list" on NERCHE's website. I used a two-step process to determine which participants would agree to be interviewed. I e-mailed the nineteen colleges and universities in my sample and asked representatives from interested institutions to reply in one to three days to schedule the interview if they were willing to participate (see Appendix B). After waiting three days, I telephoned representatives from each school I had not heard from by e-mail to determine whether they would participate. Representatives of nine institutions agreed to participate, six public institutions and three private institutions. Six of the interviewees worked in a "civic engagement" office. Of these six, two taught classes in addition to their work in civic engagement. Two of the interviewees were professors who chaired the American Democracy Project on campus. The final interviewee was a professor who was formerly involved in ADP, but the campus no longer had funds to support its membership.

I began each interview by asking participants whether their institution had a standard definition for "political engagement." Because the term is often misunderstood or conflated with civic engagement, I then provided each interviewee with the definition of political engagement that I wanted them to use for the purpose of the interview. By providing this definition, I ensured each participant had a common understanding of the term political engagement. I asked questions about the methods, strategies, and programs used to foster political engagement and



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political education on their campus. I also queried participants about their goals, challenges, sources of funding, and institutional support. To encourage candid responses, I promised confidentiality to all participants. Each interview took approximately 30 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded, and I also took handwritten notes.

### **Data Analysis**

I used thematic coding to analyze the data from my interviews. Thematic coding is a form of qualitative data analysis which involves identifying passages of texts that are linked by a common theme or idea. This method helps researchers establish a framework of thematic ideas about the phenomena. During the thematic coding process, I looked for patterns in the kinds of programs implemented, the goals each participant was striving to achieve, and the resources available. Based on my analysis, I ascertained that universities used several strategies to foster political engagement.

### **Strengths**

My research approach had many strengths. First, using interviews allowed participants to provide in-depth and detailed answers. The study was exploring the types of programs used by other institutions and interviews allowed participants to raise issues I had not considered previously. By using “open-ended” questions, participants could elaborate and provide detailed and thorough responses. I was able to clarify anything the participants found to be confusing. Another strength of my study was including several SUNY institutions in my sample which are comparable to Binghamton University, increasing the generalizability of my study to Binghamton University. Because all of the participants were higher education staff or faculty who were supportive of my research, they were very willing to assist with the study. In other contexts, potential participants may be less interested in the research and the knowledge and

benefits gained through these types of projects. Finally, by promising confidentiality, I encouraged participants to provide candid answers.

### **Limitations**

While there are many strengths to my approach, there are also some limitations. First, I was not able to interview representatives from all nineteen institutions. There are potentially other types of programs and strategies used by other institutions that were not identified in my research. In addition, some of the schools listed as “American Democracy Project” members no longer were active participants, despite being listed as ADP members and promoting their campus’s connection with ADP on their own websites. While I was interested in finding schools with the most robust political engagement programs, some schools without programming provided examples of some of the challenges and limitations to political engagement. Every university has a unique “political culture” shaped by factors that may promote or hinder political engagement. It is difficult to determine how this “culture” influences programming without more extensive investigation. Another challenge was ensuring candid answers by participants. Some college administrators or staff may have characterized the school’s efforts at political engagement as being more successful than they actually were to make their school look better. They might have also been less forthcoming if they view Binghamton University as a competitor for funding for political engagement initiatives.

### **Findings**

I identified five findings through my data analysis. First, some academic institutions do not have standard definitions of political engagement. Second, institutional support is key for securing the necessary resources to establish political engagement on campus. Third, colleges and universities employ a variety of methods, strategies, and programs to promote political

engagement. Fourth, political engagement leaders collaborate with a variety of groups, including faculty, student organizations, and outside organizations. Finally, there remain significant institutional barriers to political engagement on campus.

### **Finding # 1: Institutions do not have standard definitions for political engagement.**

None of the nine institutions interviewed had a standard, institutional definition for political engagement. When asked "How do you define political engagement?" each interviewee had a different answer. Six of the interviewees, all staff members of Civic Engagement campus offices, saw political engagement as one component of civic engagement, while the remaining three, all professors involved with American Democracy Project, had their own, personal definitions they used when teaching courses. Only one interviewee, a professor, clearly distinguished between civic and political engagement and did so for the purposes of teaching. A few characterized political engagement as action that directly impacts government policies, while others defined it more as advocacy, which may or may not involve the government. One interviewee aptly framed the issue as follows,

We have to clearly define where political engagement falls within civic engagement and making sure others on campus understand and agree with that. Political engagement is not something communicated well in the field so students stumble with language and they aren't really sure what type of engagement leads to what kind of change.

### **Finding #2: Institutional support is a key component for establishing political engagement as a priority on campus.**

Six interviewees stressed institutional support as essential when establishing political engagement as a priority on campus. Interviewees described institutional support in terms of financial resources. One institution had a direct request from its board to develop a political presence on campus. That institution used its large endowment to create a new Center that focuses specifically on sustainable peace and justice. The Center makes curricular and co-

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curricular opportunities available to students that focus on various aspects of social change and political life. Four different interviewees credited the American Democracy Project (ADP) as helping to foster political engagement initiatives on their campus. However, administrative and institutional support is still important for the success of these types of programs. Of the four programs who referenced ADP, only two institutions were still active members. One interviewee explained:

We did not have institutional support, resources, or time to fulfill the requirements of ADP. We did not have a plan to make it happen. We have some pretty severe budget issues like a lot of other campuses. We need institutional support.

Another counseled, "One fundamental thing is to get your administration on board because they can give you some financial resources."

### **Finding #3: Campus leaders use a range of methods, strategies, and programs to promote political engagement.**

The methods institutions typically used to promote political engagement mirrored those highlighted by Colby et al. (2007) in Educating for Democracy. These include: political discussion and deliberation, political action and research projects, political speakers, and structured reflections on readings. Educating for Democracy also recommended universities offer internships or placements in government agencies, non-profits and other organizations dealing with political and policy issues. But, only one interviewee actually offered such internship opportunities.

**Electoral:** The most popular means to promote political engagement are electoral initiatives. Seven of the nine interviewees had voter turnout initiatives, which focused on registration drives and voter education efforts. During election years, institutions sponsor debate watching parties and engage in "poll monitoring" to inform students about relevant issues. Three

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institutions created websites with voting information, such as the location of polling sites, voter registration forms, information about candidates, and dates of elections and primaries (including local, state, and national). The focus on “get out the vote” initiative is unsurprising given the non-partisan nature of the issue.

**Political Speakers:** The second most popular strategy mentioned was bringing political speakers to campus. Six interviewees sponsored campus forums with political speakers or held lecture series on political issues. Faculty are often deeply involved in these efforts, either hosting lectures themselves or using their relationships to attract political figures to campus. The interviewees stressed the desirability of bringing in speakers from across the political spectrum. Another institution organized a “lecture series” that included faculty members who discussed controversial issues like hydraulic fracturing and gun control and how they relate to the political process.

**Political dialogues and deliberation:** While political speakers are used to inform students on political issues, some universities encourage students to be directly involved in the discussion. Four of the interviewees had opportunities for students to participate in civic dialogue. One interviewee stated,

I'm interested in deliberative democracy because I think that's the answer to the question of how to engage. The real question is how to find ways to engage in dialogue on ‘hot topics’ without killing each other.

The literature emphasizes creating an environment of “open inquiry” that encourages students to present and argue their position in a civil tone and tolerating opposing arguments with an open mind (Campbell, 2005; Colby et al., 2007). At one university, students enrolled in a civic engagement academic track are required to facilitate a “civic dialogue” on campus. The dialogue allows them to cultivate the same political discourse skills required for active

participation in a vibrant democracy. Another institution is in the process of planning a "World Café" for the spring semester, which will provide students with information about the current work on the Supreme Court. Student leaders will discuss five or six cases pending before the Court, giving students the information they need to be informed "court observers." Another popular method of generating civic dialogue is through screening of documentaries and films on political topics. Two interviewees mentioned activities where students watch such a film or read a book with political ramifications and then reflect on the topics covered.

**Curricular:** The three strategies discussed above, electoral initiatives, political speakers, and political dialogue, are all co-curricular programs. Two interviewees also highlighted course curriculum developed to promote political engagement. One interviewee described a course called "Foundations of Civic Engagement" where students are given a framework for political engagement. The interviewee explained,

One of the components is the theoretical structure of engagement where we discuss different forms of engagement - one being political. Students have the option to choose from the different spheres and design and implement a final project.

Another interviewee discussed a class called "Propaganda and Persuasion," where students have the choice to do a project that creates a political dialogue on campus. The remaining seven institutions did not have service learning classes that focus specifically on political engagement.

**Finding # 4: Political engagement leaders collaborate with a variety of groups, including faculty, student organizations, and outside organizations.**

Every interviewee collaborated with faculty, student organizations, or outside organizations to develop and implement political engagement programs. Seven interviewees developed relationships with faculty in the political science and international relations disciplines because of their interest in political engagement. Seven interviewees collaborated with student

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service or leadership offices. Three interviewees specifically discussed the benefits of working with student political organizations. One interviewee stated,

Much of the political work on campus is performed by "outlier" groups - LGBT and others - so it's important to reach out to those groups and partner with them and connect with them. I think that for a successful campaign to work on campus we need to think broadly about how non-traditional groups can be engaged.

Finally, three interviewees mentioned working with outside governmental agencies or "good government" organizations, such as the local City Clerk office, the local chapter of the public interest research group, and the local chapter of the Women's League. One interviewee identified their partnerships with others as essential to their success, stating:

We have a really robust staff and work well collaboratively. We work across campus with different administrative offices and work in support of students, provost office, and office of president. We also have a close relationship with faculty.

### **Finding #5: There are significant barriers to fostering political engagement on campus.**

The literature highlighted several challenges to political engagement in higher education, including interference with more important academic goals, student apathy, fear of political bias and indoctrination, and difficulty measuring political activity in students (Colby et al., 2007; Walker, 2000; Zukin, 2006). My findings were consistent with the literature. Interviewees discussed student apathy, fear of political bias and indoctrination, and difficulty measuring levels of student activity as their biggest challenges to political engagement.

**Student apathy towards politics:** Eight of the nine interviewees referred to student apathy as a perennial challenge. One interviewee explained,

I'm constantly battling apathy and small view of the world. For example, last night I was teaching a class in human rights and talking about the revolution in Ukraine and the students had no idea what I was talking about. There can be a revolution in Egypt and bunch of student have no idea it's going on. I have students who are very much into working at homeless shelters or raising money for food programs, but don't have any confidence in government.

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Another interviewee echoed a similar sentiment stating: "Kids are serving soup in the soup kitchen without understanding the basis for fixing world hunger." Two interviewees, both professors, offered examples where students were required to complete a project related to civic engagement. The students are given the opportunity to choose between civic and political type of projects and the overwhelming majority chose civic engagement. This finding is consistent with the literature that found that increased volunteering has not translated to increased political activity (Galston, 2001; Galston, 2004; Kiesa et al., 2007; Walker, 2000; Zukin, 2006).

**Faculty Hesitation:** Student apathy is compounded by faculty's hesitation to discuss political issues in the classroom. The literature emphasized a fear that political education may lead to accusations of inevitable political bias and indoctrination. Four interviewees explicitly noted that faculty is not comfortable discussing politics with students. One interviewee shared,

I know faculty who are deeply political people who don't bring it to their classrooms. It's everything from being cautious to fear of indoctrination and I think it's like religion because we're not comfortable talking about it with our students.

Another noted that faculty hesitation may stem from fear of administrative backlash. The interviewee observed,

Campuses are not comfortable with this. Administrators do not get excited about getting their students politically riled up. They are much more comfortable with funding service, talking about service, promoting service, not as comfortable with discussing how politically active students are.

**Resources:** Three institutions identified the lack of resources, including time, staff, and money, as the reason for their limited political engagement opportunities. One frustrated interviewee complained,

We were a part of ADP but haven't been actively involved in years. When we first joined, I attended conferences and that kind of thing but right now I'm focused on community service and volunteering. I'm the only person in the office. Political engagement is a priority but it's the last priority so I can't do it all. I agree that political engagement is part of civic responsibility but I just don't have the capacity.



**Barriers Related to State Government:** One surprising challenge highlighted by three interviewees was barriers related to state government. One interviewee, from a public institution, felt that the state government had not been supportive of higher education in general, prohibiting them from receiving the same type of resources as other private universities. Another interviewee described a state legislative proposal for a new voter ID law that was seen as an attempt to impede students from voting. Another expressed frustration, stating "structurally in the [State X], we have had a lot of barriers for participation in young people in electoral politics and we're not really interested in getting rid of those barriers." These three interviewees also commented that local boards of elections were not helpful in accommodating students during election time.

**Measurement political activity in students:** The literature underscored the difficulty in measuring the level of political engagement in students (Kiesa et al., 2007); however, only two interviewees specifically cited this as a concern. Six interviewees identified voter registration and voter turn-out rates as the primary measure of political activity at their universities. Five interviewees mentioned their participation in a Tufts University research project that provides institutions the most current data on what percentage of their students vote. One interviewee explained, "A broad goal is to have students engaging with the world around them in a variety of ways, but our only measures at the moment are broad attitude ones like specific voter turn outs."

### **Recommendations**

I make the following recommendations based on my findings. The Center of Civic Engagement should: 1) clearly define "political engagement," 2) work with faculty, student organizations, and outside groups on specific political engagement projects, 3) focus on creating political dialogues and deliberation on campus, and 4) seek administrative support to allay the fears and concerns of faculty and administrators of engaging in political discourse.

**Recommendation #1: Clearly define "political engagement."**

Finding #1 reflected that the majority of interviewees did not have a standard definition of political engagement. This is consistent with the existing literature that has identified multiple, conflicting definitions of what constitutes political engagement. Finding #5 also showed that eight of the nine interviewees cited "student apathy towards politics" as a significant challenge. Without clearly distinguishing between civic or political engagement, it will be difficult for universities to teach students how different types of engagement can lead to different types of change. The Center for Civic Engagement's definition of political engagement will shape the goals and types of programs they focus on developing for the future. For example, if they define political engagement in electoral terms, then there will be a continued emphasis to "get out the vote." programming. If political engagement is define more broadly as participation in formal or nongovernmental institutions, CCE might expand opportunities for students to be involved in solving community problems, serving on a board of a neighborhood organization, or participating in public forums on social issues.

**Recommendation #2: Work with other campus organizations to develop political engagement programs.**

Finding #3 and finding #4 emphasize the importance of collaborating with other people and organizations, including faculty, student organizations, student service offices, and outside groups.

**Student Organizations:** The Center for Civic Engagement should actively engage with established political organizations on campus and reach out to diverse constituencies on campus. Binghamton University has active College Democrats and College Republicans organizations

whose memberships are interested in political events. Interviewees also mentioned non-partisan student groups that focus on “get out the vote” events and creating civic dialogue.

**Outside Groups:** Finding #4 also noted how outside groups can foster political organization. The Center for Civic Engagement should reach out to local, non-partisan organizations. Interviewees discussed partnerships with The League of Women's Voter, New York State Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG), and the local City Clerk to discuss potential partnerships or resources that are available to assist in the development of political engagement on campus. In addition, the Center for Civic Engagement could consider joining the American Democracy Project (ADP) to take advantage of resources available to campuses. As indicated by Finding #2, it is critical that the CCE have the necessary institutional support and resources to become actively involved with ADP.

**Recommendation #3: Focus on creating political dialogues and deliberation on campus.**

Finding #3 revealed that electoral initiatives are most commonly used to promote political engagement. The Center for Civic Engagement already sponsors a variety of political programs and organized an “Election Day Celebration,” to encourage students to register and vote. While electoral initiatives are vitally important, political engagement should be emphasized throughout the year. The literature showed that deliberative discussions can raise overall political knowledge and raise awareness of political issues that can lead to effective change (Colby et al., 2007).

Finding #3 suggested potential methods that could be used to promote political engagement, including curricular projects where students facilitate discussion on a wide-range of political issues, structured reflections to political speakers, films, or readings, or hosting events such as “Constitution Day” or “Café Conversations,” where students can partake in face-to-face

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discussions on a relevant political issue. The goal of creating a political dialogue is to “engage different perspectives with civility and respect” (Colby et al. 2007, p.160).

### **Recommendation #4: Find a partner in administration.**

Finding #2 noted the importance of having sufficient financial and staffing resources to carry out these programs. It is unrealistic for the Center for Civic Engagement to expand its programming without additional funding. In the current budget climate it is unlikely that they will be able to secure additional funding from the university. Instead, the CCE should seek outside grants and focus on creating buy-in from administrative leaders.

Working with university administration could help create a more open environment where faculty are more comfortable addressing political issues in the classroom. As discussed in my findings, one interviewee specifically referred to faculty's fear of "administrative backlash," as a significant challenge in establishing political engagement. Having the support of an administrator could ease the fears and concerns of faculty and administrators of engaging in political discourse.

Community engagement and democratic process played an important role in the development of my recommendations. All four recommendations are intended to assist the CCE develop a new strategies to prepare students for responsible democratic participation. Higher education should prepare students to be informed and active citizens in democracy.

### **Conclusion**

College years are a critical time to shape students' habits and prepare students to become knowledgeable and responsible members of society. The findings and recommendations from this Capstone should be used to assist the Center for Civic Engagement as it begins to develop new programs to foster political engagement among Binghamton University students.

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## Appendix A

### Human Subjects Research Approval

Date: March 11, 2014

To: Alison O'Brien, CCPA

From: Anne M. Casella, CIP Administrator  
Human Subjects Research Review Committee

Subject: Human Subjects Research Approval  
Protocol Number: 3235-14  
Protocol title: *Higher Education Political Engagement Strategies*

Your project identified above was reviewed by the HSRRC and has received an Exempt approval pursuant to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) regulations, 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) .

An exempt status signifies that you will not be required to submit a Continuing Review application as long as your project involving human subjects remains unchanged. If your project undergoes any changes these changes must be reported to our office prior to implementation. Please complete the modification form found at the following link: [http://research.binghamton.edu/Compliance/humansubjects/COEUS\\_Docs.php](http://research.binghamton.edu/Compliance/humansubjects/COEUS_Docs.php)

Principal Investigators or any individual involved in the research must report any problems involving the conduct of the study or subject participation. Any problems involving recruitment and consent processes or any deviations from the approved protocol should be reported in writing within five (5) business days as outlined in Binghamton University, Human Subjects Research Review Office, Policy and Procedures IX.F.1 Unanticipated Problems/adverse events/complaints. We require that the Unanticipated Problems/adverse events/complaints form be submitted to our office, found at the following link: [http://research.binghamton.edu/Compliance/humansubjects/COEUS\\_Docs.php](http://research.binghamton.edu/Compliance/humansubjects/COEUS_Docs.php)

University policy requires you to maintain as a part of your records, any documents pertaining to the use of human subjects in your research. This includes any information or materials conveyed to, and received from, the subjects, as well as any executed consent forms, data and analysis results. These records must be maintained for at least six years after project completion or termination. If this is a funded project, you should be aware that these records are subject to inspection and review by authorized representative of the University, State and Federal governments.

Please notify this office when your project is complete by completing and forwarding to our office the Protocol closure form found at the following link: [http://research.binghamton.edu/Compliance/humansubjects/COEUS\\_Docs.php](http://research.binghamton.edu/Compliance/humansubjects/COEUS_Docs.php) Upon

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notification we will close the above referenced file. Any reactivation of the project will require a new application.

This documentation is being provided to you via email. A hard copy will not be mailed unless you request us to do so.

Thank you for your cooperation, I wish you success in your research, and please do not hesitate to contact our office if you have any questions or require further assistance.

cc: file  
Kristina Lambright

***Diane Bulizak, Secretary***  
*Human Subjects Research Review Office*  
*Biotechnology Building, Room 2205*  
*Binghamton University*  
*85 Murray Hill Rd.*  
*Vestal, NY 13850*  
[\*dbulizak@binghamton.edu\*](mailto:dbulizak@binghamton.edu)  
*Telephone: (607) 777-3818*  
*Fax: (607) 777-5025*



## Appendix B

### Initial Recruiting E-mail to Research Participants

To: [E-mail]  
From: [aobrien7@binghamton.edu](mailto:aobrien7@binghamton.edu)  
Subject: Political Engagement Student Research Project

Body:  
Dear [Name],

On behalf of Binghamton University's Center for Civic Engagement, I am conducting research about how colleges and universities can foster political engagement in students. I am conducting this research at Binghamton University, State University of New York. As part of my research, I would like to arrange a short interview with someone from your staff familiar with political engagement initiatives. The interview would last around 30 minutes and the data collected will be used to help Binghamton's Center for Civic Engagement develop new political engagement programs. The interview will be confidential.

If anyone from your staff is available to help, I would like to set up a time in the next two weeks (March 20 – March 31) to conduct the interview. Please inform me via e-mail or phone at [518-694-2052](tel:518-694-2052) of a time that works best for you. I will follow-up via phone if I do not hear from you in the next 2-3 days.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or need any additional information. Thank you so much for consideration of my request.

Sincerely,

Alison O'Brien  
Department of Public Administration  
Binghamton University  
[aobrien7@binghamton.edu](mailto:aobrien7@binghamton.edu)  
[\(518\) 694-2052](tel:518-694-2052)

## Appendix C

### Interview Oral Consent

HELLO-- I am a Alison O'Brien, a student at Binghamton University. I am conducting research on political engagement strategies at universities in colleges in the United States.

You are being contacted because I would like to ask about political engagement strategies at your campus.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relations with Binghamton University. If you decide to participate, you are not obligated to answer all questions, and may stop at any time.

If you agree, I would like to ask you some questions about political engagement strategies. The interview will take 30 minutes. Your responses are confidential and will be grouped with other people who are called.

If you have any additional questions later, Dr. Kristina Lambright ([klambrig@binghamton.edu](mailto:klambrig@binghamton.edu)) will be happy to answer them. If at any time you have questions concerning your rights as a research subject you may call Binghamton University's Human Subject's Research Review Committee at (607) 777-3818.

Do you have any questions about the research project? May I proceed with the first question?

## Appendix D

### Interview Questions

1. Does your institution use a generally agreed upon definition of political engagement?
  - a. For the purpose of this interview, this is how I'll define it: Political engagement is defined as activities that aim to influence government action, by affecting the making or implementation of public policy, as well as the elections of public officials.
2. What offices, centers or other entities on your campus are charged with supporting and advancing political engagement?
3. What methods, strategies, or programs are used to foster political engagement or political education on campus?
  - a. Who is responsible for 1) leading and carrying out these programs and 2) measuring their impact?
  - b. Who does your office collaborate with?
4. What are some of your goals for political engagement?
  - a. What challenges have you experienced in meeting your goals?
5. How is success measured?
6. What resources are provided to help you meet your goals?
  - a. What are the sources of funding?
7. What have you achieved and what evidence do you have of that?
8. What advice would you provide to others who are developing new initiatives and programs?