CCSU: Educating Civic Agents
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CCSU’s mission statement proclaims that “We prepare students to be thoughtful, responsible and successful citizens.” Whereas such a mission certainly seems appropriate and worthy of a public institution in a democratic society, the statement begs the question of what it means to “prepare . . . citizens.” Prepare them in what way? Prepare them to do what? These are neither frivolous nor trivial questions. How we answer those questions not only influences how we fulfill our mission but also determines what kind of citizens some of our students will be when they graduate.

Since 2008, a dedicated group of faculty and staff at CCSU has participated in a nationwide initiative to promote a more engaged model of citizenship, one in which informed citizens play an active role in their communities. This initiative, the “Civic Agency Initiative,” represents a partnership between 16 public universities, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota. The goal of this partnership is to explore ways for universities “to produce graduates who can be agents and architects of positive change in local and regional communities.” Through the regular exchange of information among the partner institutions, the Initiative aims to identify national models for developing “civic agency” among undergraduates and to disseminate those models broadly throughout American higher education.

“Civic agency” is understood to be the combination of skills, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes that are necessary for citizens to be effective agents of change in their communities. For example, citizens must understand their communities and how they work in order to help improve them. Citizens who want to bring about positive change must know how to work collaboratively and communicate effectively with people who may not share their heritage, their beliefs, or their values. Civic agents must also believe that they have a responsibility to help their communities prosper and have confidence in their ability to make a difference.

The faculty and staff at CCSU engaged in this initiative have been experimenting with and studying which kinds of curricular and co-curricular experiences and projects with community partners will help students develop civic agency. To mention only a few, one faculty member facilitated an Anti-Truancy Project with students in the Naylor Middle School, a political scientist worked with fifth graders in West Hartford who conducted a successful campaign to revise an unfair school policy, and a third faculty member involved her students in a project to raise awareness of the plight of the homeless in New Britain.

This initiative encourages our students to rethink their relation to their communities. Instead of promoting a detached model of service as doing something for the community, civic agency envisions working with fellow citizens to solve shared problems. As Harry Boyte, an organizer of the Civic Agency Initiative puts it, “A focus on developing citizen capacity highlights democracy not only as elections but also as a way of life.”