

2019 Annual Report

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The Growing Democracy Project, housed at Kent State University, offers a unique approach to civic and political engagement pedagogy. In fact, the Growing Democracy Project emerged from an observation—in academia and political science departments, in particular—that value is placed on both civic learning and community engaged scholarship, yet there are few resources available for co-creating civic and political educational tools along-side community members. Nine months in, the project has succeeded in its efforts to create collaborative spaces and generate new conversations related to some of the most significant political and policy related concerns of our time.

The Growing Democracy project aims to bring together community members, scholars, and practitioners to share information, experiences, and insights on issues of democracy and civic engagement. Since March 2019, when the Growing Democracy Project launched—with the support of the APSA New Partnerships grant—we have hosted five series consisting of nine events, as well as a community planning session. Below is a snapshot of our events:

March 2019: Difficult Dialogues, with Dr. Brandi Blessett and Professor Jacquelyn Bleak, moderated by Dr. Ashley Nickels

To assist us with crafting and facilitating the March events, we invited Dr. Brandi Blessett, co-founder of Praxis Matters and associate professor at University of Cincinnati, to Northeast Ohio. The first event was a panel question-and-answer session with Jacquelyn Bleak, Ashley Nickels, and Brandi Blessett, which focused on engaging in difficult dialogues. The second event was a workshop in Cleveland.

Our first event was centered on the value of the individual and their potential to create and sustain vibrant communities, through critical reflection and human-centric, interpersonal skills. The skeletal curriculum we developed starts at the individual level, focusing on critically examining one's own identity (or what Dr. Brandi Blessett refers to as "identity work") and building interpersonal skills specific to engaging in difficult conversations around identity and social justice.

Engaging in difficult dialogues is not the same as "call out culture," nor is it a call for "civil disagreement." While the first is a powerful strategy for calling out inappropriate actions, it does not open up space for deeper dialogue. On the other hand, difficult dialogues also rest on the normative values of social equity and, most importantly, centering marginalized voices to share

power. As such, it challenges people with power and privilege to lean into uncomfortable spaces, while recognizing and honoring the emotional labor invested when marginalized voices are centered.

April 2019: Democracy 101—“Backyard Civics” with Alicia Robinson, Shannon Garrett, and Thalia Anguiano, moderated by Anna Hutcheson



The next series moved from identity work and interpersonal relationships to civic education. Our aim was to examine the multitude of ways residents can get involved in government and governing, from serving on neighborhood boards to running for elected office. For this event, we brought in Shannon Garret, of SMG Strategies. Shannon helped us build the initial structure for both events, serving first as a discussant on a panel, after an on-campus showing of [Councilwoman](#). Alongside Thalia Anguiano, Alicia Robinson, and Anna Hutcheson, the panelists discussed the film and fielded questions from students and faculty in the audience focused on overcoming barriers (personal and systemic) to engaging in local democracy—whether as activists, organizers, or future elected leaders.

The film, which tracks the story of hotel-worker and labor organizer turned local elected official, offered a great foundation for discussing the multiple ways individuals engage civically and politically in their communities. The conversation offered insights on how we might shape trainings and resources for future Growing Democracy series, focused specifically on overcoming barriers to participation for women and people of color.

May 2019: Navigating Government- Overcoming Burdens and Accessing Information, led by Dr. Casey Boyd-Swan and Professor Joseph Mead, J.D.

For many residents, governmental agencies can appear to be black boxes— information exists, yet it can seem almost impossible to know what to look for or how to retrieve it. Even when residents and community members are aware of the specific information they would like to know, it can be difficult to extract it from public agencies. In this event, attendees learned the skills necessary to access important public information. Session leaders Dr. Casey Boyd-Swan and Professor Joseph Mead— assistant professors at Kent State University and Cleveland State University, respectively— led the participants through the process of requesting and receiving information from local governmental agencies.

Participants shared real-world challenges they have met with regard to securing public data and gaining access to public hearings. Session leaders walked participants through locating publicly available data on topics of interest, identifying elected representatives in their city and districts and their contact information, and locating public hearing announcements and archived videos of previously held meetings. The discussion led to a deeper understanding on behalf of the organizers regarding what community members wished to know regarding their local governmental bodies and our own critical engagement with our goals as organizers of Growing Democracy.

September 2019: Power of the Media, with Dr. Meghan Rubado

Following the summer break, we met once again at the Kent State campus to hear about the impact that media outlets can have on civic participation and democracy. Dr. Meghan Rubado, an assistant professor at Cleveland State University who previously worked as a journalist, discussed her academic and personal insight into the power of the media. Rubado spoke about her recent *Urban Affairs Review* article on local news coverage and the impact that dying newsrooms can have on local political activity. Participants enjoyed the dialogue and shared thoughtful questions about how individuals outside of the media can add their voices and viewpoints.

Through the conversation, we identified the value of local media outlets, especially “turn of the screw” political process coverage, and the potential for local media to amplify community issues. From this discussion, we collectively identified the need to further discussions on 1. How to engage with the media, e.g. how to write an op-ed and/or pitch a story; and 2. Ways to support local journalism.

October 2019: Mobilizing through Storytelling, with Jerry Peña



Our final event of the year centered on the use of storytelling to organize and mobilize communities into action. The event included two sessions, one at Kent State and another at a local ice cream shop. Building on the topics covered at our gatherings earlier in the year, this event focused on how individuals and communities can utilize personal narratives, anecdotes and historical accounts to generate interest and, ultimately, action. Both workshops were facilitated by Jerry Peña, a long-time community organizer and currently the Midwest Regional Manager for the Alliance for Safety and Justice. Attendees enjoyed hearing from the experienced practitioner and left with a strong sense of specific ways they can organize and mobilize their communities through storytelling.

During our first year, we learned a lot. While we are, academically, considered “experts” in civic and political participation, we sought out opportunities to learn from the communities in which we operate. We wanted to hear from non-academics about what they see as important and valuable topics for discussion. A few common themes arose. First, we found that while many organizations in Northeast Ohio discuss equity and inclusion in a number of conversations and workshops, there are few opportunities to practice and measure these skills. Moreover, we found that people value the role of external accountability mechanisms, such as local media outlets, and would like to more about how they can harness this power at the individual level, namely through op-eds and direct conversations with journalists.

But we’re not done. We have some lofty plans for the future—we’d like to maximize the potential of the program and achieve our stated goals through a multi-pronged approach:

1. We will continue to offer community-based workshops covering a series of topics related to community politics, political engagement, social activism, and community organizing. These programs—hosted at Kent State University (Kent, Ohio) and in downtown Cleveland, Ohio—are free and open to the public.
2. In addition to the face-to-face workshops, we are developing a website (www.growingdemocracyNEO.org) to increase access to the experts and resources made available through our workshop series. Undergraduate and graduate students from Kent State University, guest speakers, and community partners are developing content for the interactive website—this content will both mirror and complement information offered during the workshop series. The website is intended to meet the needs of students, community members, and other scholars.
3. Together with workshop participants and other community stakeholders, we are co-developing an adaptable [customizable] curriculum. The curriculum will be available, for free, on the Growing Democracy website and will be interdisciplinary in nature.

We're well on our way to developing a program that will continue to be successful in our present form and sustainable as an independent model that anyone can adopt and adapt. But we're always looking to learn more! Let us know if you've been engaged in this work and have new ideas or insight to add. We will always make more room for inclusion at every point in the process.