

2020 Year End Update for the Growing Democracy Project

Report produced by David Jirsa, MPA, Growing Democracy Project Manager
with co-PIs, Dr. Casey Boyd-Swan & Dr. Ashley Nickels

The following report is an update concerning the work of the Growing Democracy Project for 2020.

Goals

As outlined in our grant application, our primary goals are to: 1. Bridge the boundaries between academia and the community and to break down barriers between community members and political institutions by providing a unique approach to civic and political engagement; and, 2. Create a space for critical discussions and meaningful learning that takes place in the community and not in the classroom.

Our goals for this year were to:

- Continue to host our Growing Democracy workshop series
- Further develop our Growing Democracy curriculum and online toolkit
- Strengthen our relationship with community stakeholders.

I. Workshops

The Growing Democracy Project workshops series tackles some of the toughest issues facing Northeast Ohio. Our workshop series is intended to be community-based, focusing on civic leadership, community politics, political engagement, social activism, and community engagement. Our goal is to bring together often disconnected groups to facilitate network building, the formation of long-term relationships, and to encourage participation from community residents, civic leaders, students, and academic experts. This year we hosted 1 in-person workshop and 3 virtual workshops:

Winter/Spring 2020. We started out the year with five in-person workshops planned for Winter/Spring 2020. The COVID-19 Pandemic led to the cancellation of four of these workshops as we, like so many others, had to shift focus away from in-person activities.

We were able to hold our first workshop, *The Self-Aware Civic Leader: "Queering the City,"* on February 12th and 13th in Cleveland and Kent, respectively. Facilitated by Sean McCandless, Ph.D., this workshop focused on promoting intersectional action to address LGBTQ+ inequities within communities. The focus was on addressing inequity at the system, institutional, group, and individual level. We had an estimated 30 participants at our Cleveland event, hosted at the Cleveland Public Library, and 10 participants at the Kent event, which was hosted at the university Women's Center. (Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 and the university shut down, we do not have evaluation data for this event).



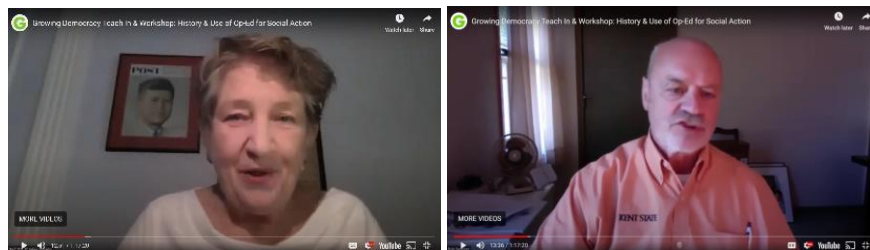
Dr. Sean McCandless facilitates the discussion about addressing LGBTQ+ inequities at the system, institutional, group, and individual level at the Cleveland Public Library.

Fall 2020 Workshop Series (Virtual). We were encouraged by our advisory collective to continue the workshops series for Fall 2020. The COVID-19 Pandemic necessitated that we switch to a Virtual Workshop Series. We held three virtual workshops.

1. *History and Use of the Op-Ed for Social Action*, October 23, 2020.

Facilitated by Barb Hipsman Springer and Bob Springer, this workshop sought to explore the history and use of the Op-Ed for social action and how the changing media landscape has affected these efforts. It also explored strategies for successfully pitching and crafting an Op-Ed or editorial article. There were 31 registrations for this event and 22 participants attended. 20 people have viewed the event on YouTube. [Available online.](#)

We received positive feedback from the 4 individuals who filled out our post-event evaluation. Three were very or extremely satisfied with the event and one was neutral. All replied that they would likely attend a future event. When asked what they liked more about the event, two liked the social aspect of the event while one found the information provided fascinating.

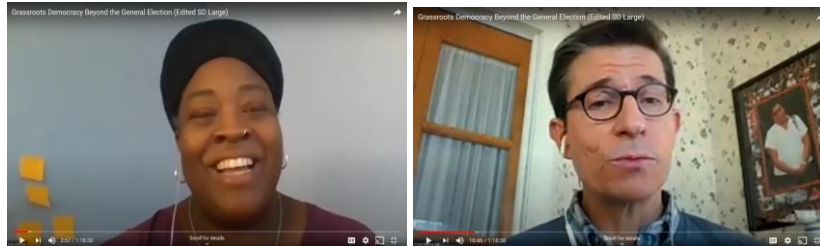


Barb Hipsman Springer and Bob Springer facilitate the workshop detailing the history and use of the Op-Ed for Social Action. Watch Here: [History and Use of Op-Ed](#)

2. *Grassroots Democracy: Beyond the General Election*, November 20, 2020.

Facilitated by Erica Brown and Tony Vento, this workshop looked to explore what democracy can and does look like beyond the general election. It also discussed the power of democratizing space rooted in the traditions of popular education for social action and community network building. The workshop discussed how to practice strategies for fostering grassroots democracy through shared power rooted in “love made public”, which is social justice. There were 23 registrations for this event and 15 attended. Eight people have viewed the event on YouTube. [Available online](#)

We received positive feedback from the 6 individuals who filled out the survey (5 attended the event and 1 watched online). All six were satisfied with the event, with all of the respondents indicating that they were extremely or very likely to attend a future event. When asked what participants liked most about the event there were five replies, one person noted, “interactive, not just talking-heads, and it was nice to meet with “like-minded” friends” and another said, ““Newbie” friendly and all opinions were welcome.”



Erica Brown and Tony Vento lead the discussion on exploring what democracy looks like beyond the general election and the power of democratizing space. Watch Here: [Grassroots Democracy: Beyond the General Election](#)

3. *Organizers Organize Organizations*, December 18, 2020.

Facilitated by Phyllis Harris, this workshop will look to explore the tensions, opportunities, and challenges of being activists within organizations. It will look to answer what it means to be an “activist-manager” and how organizational leaders meet the needs of their organization, from fundraising to service delivery, while staying true to their activist roots. 11 people registered for the event and 9 attended. We only received two evaluation surveys from participants, both were very positive.

II. Growing Democracy Podcast

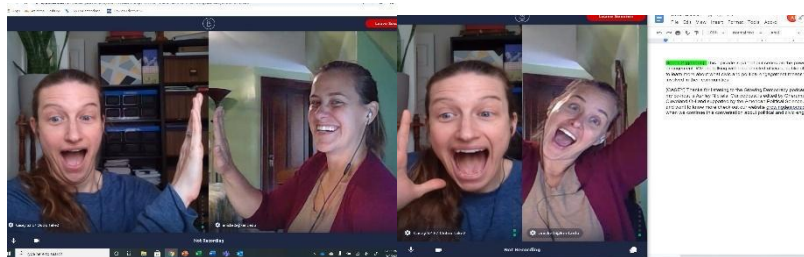
In response to the pandemic, the Growing Democracy Project looked for alternative ways to continue civic engagement and fulfill its mission. Launched in June of 2020, the Growing Democracy Podcast is focused on civic and political engagement through weekly interviews with community leaders and area experts. The podcast has four different series that seek to increase civic engagement and has a total of 32 published episodes with two finished and ready to be posted in January 2021. The podcast currently has 2,225 listens. The most up-to-date [episode listing](#) is available on our website (www.growingdemocracyOH.org)

Series 1 – *Governing During Pandemic*. This series introduces listeners to local and public officials, along with community activists, who are adapting and responding to the shifting needs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This series currently has 13 episodes. Examples of different topics include how a local mayor is dealing with the challenges of the pandemic while trying to run a suburban city, how a local health department is dealing with the pandemic through contact tracing, and how a regional food bank is handling the increased demand caused by the pandemic. [Available here](#)

Series 2 – *The Power of Civic and Political Engagement*. This series introduces listeners to local elected officials, public officials, and community activists who discuss what civic and political engagement means to them. The series currently has 11 episodes. Examples of some of the guests include the undergraduate student body president of Kent State University, a veteran community organizer, and an Assistant Professor of American Indian History, who all give their definitions of what civic engagement means to them. [Available here](#)

Series 3 – Gap Filling. This series introduces listeners to organizations that are filling the gaps when government and governmental institutions fail. This series has 6 episodes. Examples of some of the topics include criminal justice reform, homeless outreach, and a program for citizens to document their local governments official meetings to help provide transparency for the community. [Available here](#)

Series 4 – Serving the Public Interest. Our latest series introduces listeners to elected officials and public administrators who are serving the public interest for their communities. This series currently has 2 finished episodes and 2 in the editing process. Guests include a local county commissioner, a former state representative, and a county treasurer. [Available here](#)



Ashley and Casey celebrate the successful recording of another growing democracy podcast episode. Catch up on the podcast by visiting www.growingdemocracyOH.org/podcasts. New episodes every Monday.

III. Growing Democracy Website & Online Toolkit

We launched the Growing Democracy [website](#) in June 2020. The website is a landing page for people interested in our work, in the podcast, as well as a site for the Growing Democracy online toolkit. While our curriculum and online toolkit continue to be a work in progress, our intention is to provide free, accessible, and educational materials on issues important to our stakeholders and community partners. Our goal from the beginning was to co-create a civic and political engagement curriculum with residents of Northeast Ohio.

At our December 2019 advisory collective meeting, we revised the 5 themes of the curriculum. Now, they include: 1. Self-Aware Civic Leader; 2. Problem Definition and Goal Setting; 3. Democracy 101 (understanding systems and structures of government and politics); 4. Organizing 101 (principles of collective social action); and, 5. Skills, Tactics, and Tools of Civic Engagement. We have used these revised themes to structure our workshop series and structure the online toolkit. While the online toolkit is still under construction, we currently have a range of multimedia materials available for people to access as we develop and refine:

- 5 recorded workshops and/presentations
- 32 podcast episodes (and counting)
- 76 concept pages identified; and 20 complete by the end of 2020. [Example here](#)
- Forthcoming Blog (examples and/or case studies of grassroots activist, local politics, and civic engagement in Northeast Ohio, written by community members).

Of particular importance to this project is that the concept pages and Blog are authored by students and community partners and edited by Casey and Ashley. This is another way they are attempting to build bridges and amplify community voices.

IV. Stakeholder Engagement and Outreach

The project looked to make sure we were engaging with and learning from our community partners and stakeholders, even in the midst of the pandemic. To do so, we did the following:

Advisory Collective Meetings. We hosted two advisory collective meetings; one in December 2019, as we planned for the 2020 year; and another (virtually) in June as we planned for our new reality. We had 11 in attendance at our December meeting (1 faculty; 2 staff; 4 students (grad and undergrad); 4 community members) The feedback from our June meeting led us to launch Series 3 of the podcast, Gap Filling.

Stakeholder Interviews. Through a series of interviews and meetings, the project identified key issues and concerns of our stakeholders and used this valuable feedback to help better address our outreach.

When defining the goals of the project, one respondent replied the project “blurs the line between the university and community through interaction and participation”. One response when describing the objective was that it “examines the ins and outs concerning democracy”. The website was described as “pretty slick” and “robust”. When describing the strengths of the project one reply was “they practice what they preach” and they “walk the walk”. Another strength was that the project was “comparable to infrastructure building.” The podcasts were described as “conversational, real, and authentic”. One reply to the workshops was “it was one of the greatest discussions I have had in an academic setting”.

Newsletter & Social Media. In October 2020 we introduced our monthly newsletter, per a recommendation from our stakeholder interviews. The newsletter includes information and links to our workshops, links to new podcast episodes, and a spotlight of an organization working to increase civic engagement within the community.

- [Growing Democracy December Newsletter](#)
- [Growing Democracy November Newsletter](#)
- [Growing Democracy October Newsletter](#)

We continue to reach out to the community through social media including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, along with our website. Our Facebook page has 140 likes with 145 followers while our Twitter page has 96 followers and 122 following.

Thank You!

The Growing Democracy Project would like to thank APSA for its support in our efforts to foster civic engagement and amplify the amazing work already being done in Northeast Ohio. The conditions of 2020 created a unique set of challenges and forced us to adapt, which in the end has allowed the project to reach an even wider audience.

Looking forward, we intend to continue our work of amplifying local elected officials, public servants, activists, and organizers. With your continued support (via roll-over funding), we will continue to host our weekly podcast and distribute our monthly newsletter. we will continue to develop the growing democracy curriculum in collaboration with our community partners and continue to provide resources on our online toolkit. In the future, we hope to build on our success and launch a Growing Democracy Research and Learning Lab to compliment our current efforts.