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Transformation Through Civic Learning & Democratic
Engagement's Theory**

Molly Kerby

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**“Change is the Essential Process of all
Existence:” Transformation through Civic
Learning and Democratic Engagement’s Theory**

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Introduction

During the early years of the American Association of State Colleges & Universities' (AASCU) American Democracy Project (ADP), a handful of civic-minded leaders in higher education began to grapple with what it meant to teach students to be engaged citizens. The project began with seven initiatives focusing on efforts such as voting, stewardship of land, political engagement, and citizenship to build a foundation for increasing civic literacy, democratic agency, and community engagement among college students (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2019). Membership and participation in ADP grew quickly and it seemed an organic revolution of sorts was building in higher education. Across the country, centers focusing on engaged democracy gained popularity among public institutions, and efforts to develop programs focusing on community engagement became commonplace.

Historically, higher education has provided students with the skills to successfully engage in philosophical debates, defend democratic values, and gain a *spirit of public mindedness*. These are the foundations that set our institutions apart from vocational training and job-skills instruction. In light of the current climate and relentless attacks on higher education, colleges and universities need to remain steadfast in their common goal of creating democratically engaged citizens who are proficient in the areas of civic dialogue, ethical practices, and moral problem-solving even in work-force development curricula. Unfortunately, college and university administrators find themselves in a quagmire when forced to close liberal arts programs responsible for teaching civic skills due to state and federal budget cuts that have left institutions with little funds to thrive.

As education professionals report, enrollment in traditional higher education institutions has continued to drop over the last six years (Fain, 2017; Green, 2018; Vedder, 2018). While some cite the improved economy and availability of jobs, others argue the price of higher education and the daunting nature student loan debt repayment have deterred enrollment. No matter what experts cite as the main culprit, most agree public opinion and disdain for higher education plays at least a small role in declining numbers of incoming students. There is growing opinion that only STEM+H degrees provide students with the necessary training to do tasks needed for skilled jobs (for example, engineering and nursing). This ideology represents a paradigm or cultural shift in the public's view on the nature and value of post-secondary education and the college degree. Some critics believe colleges harm our country and provide slanted views that disrupt our communities and political system. Unfortunately, this opinion has permeated our national climate and added to the devaluing of educational programming aimed at critical thinking, civic engagement, and diversity.

Higher education is undergoing monumental change. So, what happens to these departments and colleges when budgets get tight and critical decisions to fold academic programs must be made? How do faculty, staff, and students survive when faced with defending their existence and forced to come up with creative ways to maintain resilient departments, programs, and centers focusing on civic engagement, social justice, and diversity? How do we embed our valuable work into changing social expectations of workforce development and education? In short, how do we change effectively and responsibly? Developing theoretical foundations from which to build social action for the next few decades is imperative.

Origins of Social Change Theory

To fully understand the origin of social change theories, it is necessary to examine the works of Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin's and their writings on the nature of evolution. Spencer and Darwin both hypothesized about evolutionary change in nature and the similarities between the biological and social sciences (Freeman, Bajema, Blacking, Carneiro, Cowgill, Genovés, ... & Heyduk, D., 1974). Darwin's most prominent premise, grounded in the natural and biological sciences, was the notion of natural selection. In his seminal works, Darwin noted that a) all organisms display and share diverse yet common traits, b) all organisms change over time, c) all organisms exhibit high growth rates (more than can survive), and d) those organisms with the greatest survival traits will dominate in the next generation (Darwin, 2004/1859). Spencer, while fascinated with Darwin's theories of evolution, saw social evolution as related but unique. Juxtaposed to Darwin, Spencer posits that a) social evolution is the natural tendency of society to create an "ideal state" in which rules and norms control individuals and abate conflict, b) social evolution is functional and, by nature, aides in the development of differentiating subsystems, c) social evolution is marked by an increase of individuals in the workforce and division of labor, and d) most closely related to Darwin, is Spencer's imperative that societies with the most control over resources have the greatest probability of surviving (survival of the fittest) (Perrin, 1976). In short, Darwin and Spencer both reasoned that diversity, evolution, and resilience are the impetus for change in the order of things, whether they are biological or sociological.

While it can be argued that functionalists, like Emile Durkheim, were attempting to move away from evolutionary social change theory, it is clear from his translated work like the *Division of Labor in Society* (Durkheim, 1997) and *Suicide* (Durkheim, 1951) that Durkheim's premises were grounded in the notions of systematic, comprehensive social change (Merton, 1934; Hinkle, 1976). It is apparent in his conception of *sui generis* that he agrees with Spencer's premise of the ideal state. Durkheim's *sui generis* grappled with the origin of ways of thinking and collective thoughts – where they came from, how they changed, and how they were different among societies. In this sense, Durkheim, like Spencer, believed internalized constructs become a part of the public reality and these authenticities vary among subgroups and gradually change over time (Hinke, 1976). Similarly, in his well-known work the Communist Manifesto, Marx encourages minority classes to expose the relationship of power and dominance from the majority and to move toward a balance of power or equilibrium (Chrysochoou & Volpato, 2004). Second, Marx makes it clear that declarations from the minority classes must be cohesive and consistent and create a widely known, distinguishable, and resilient identity (for example, *Black Lives Matter*). Ultimately, Marx's manifesto created a roadmap for the minority class to influence social change.

These are merely a handful of the theorist who believed social change is a natural process with ebbs and flows. Like nature, the constructs of social life are in constant motion, continually moving toward homeostasis. The goal of social homeostasis, then, would be to create the *ideal state* and sustain effective, resilient *subsystems*. In the same sense, this is what all organisms do until met with some sort of "conflict" that disrupts the current environment – the conflict then precipitates movement toward a new state or paradigm. Though the origins of social change have been studied at length, more contemporary theorist built upon the works of these classic theories. Some lean toward a *planned* notion of social change, while others argue that an organic, *emergent* change creates sustainable systems. Either way, theories build from one and another over time

although applications may vary under different circumstances. The current state of higher education and student learning serves as a prime example of complex social change. The external and internal forces pushing for transformation are often in conflict and threaten the survival of traditional institutions and the conventional delivery of education.

Practical Applications

Each semester, faculty at a public four-year university teach an undergraduate, general education *public problem-solving* course developed from the roots of the American Democracy Project (ADP). For this course, *public problems* refer to a range of multifaceted challenges with shifting conditions and complex interdependencies that integrate the natural and social systems. Students explore ways to include diverse voices in strategic plans, identify important stakeholders when working toward community change, and mediate/moderate risk factors to create community resilience. For example, students wrestle with questions like “How and why do systems change?” “What role does citizenship play in community change?” “How do we create resilient and sustainable change within a system?” “How do we build protective factors in communities to mediate and/or moderate risk and resilience?” And, “Why are effective change agents in systems important?” Armed with the principles of systems theory and a thorough understanding of the conceptions underlying complex civic struggles, students participate in a project-based learning experience designed to reinforce the principles of systematic change.

The roots of the public problem-solving course are embedded in the works of Kurt Lewin (1947). Lewin, considered the father of action research, or community-based participatory research, is best known for his development of a planned approach to social change. In addition to field theory and action research, the planned model of organizational change includes steps to “...unfreeze, move, and refreeze” previous conceptions to create positive change at the group, organization, or community level (Burns, 2004, pp. 985 – 986). This concept suggests the process of change begins with someone or something that creates instability (*unfreezes*), motivates a shift toward a new norm through planned behavior modification (*moves*), then establishes a transformed culture or norm (*refreezes*). For example, Figure 1 is an illustration of traditional linear, or event-oriented, thinking. Using Lewin’s logic, the root causes (both A and B) are the current behaviors (*Note: A and B are often in conflict with one another*). The arrows pointing to C represent movement toward a change in behaviors A and B. The path leading from C to D then represents refreezing and D becomes the “new norm.”

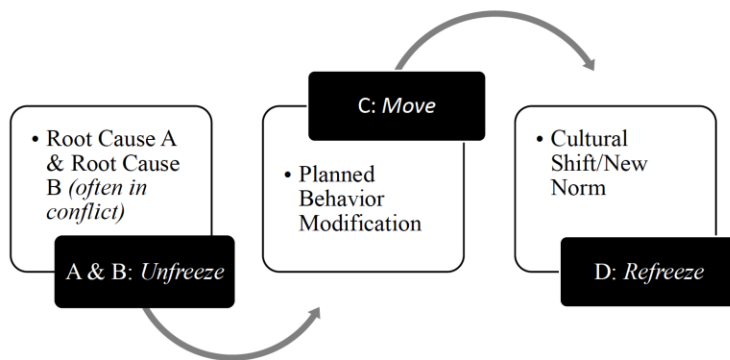


Figure 1. Traditional or Event Oriented Thinking

Many modern scholars, however, criticize the scripted notion of planned change theory and favor fluid, organic change that *emerges* naturally and focuses on continuous transformation. In his influential work, Peter Senge (1990) argues that systems thinking is key to understand why some “fixes” work and others do not or often backfire.

Systems thinking recognizes that all things are interconnected and problems are often extremely complex and not easily solved by linear reasoning. Figure 2 represents a visualization of systems

thinking. In the systems model, root causes do not exist in a vacuum; thus, identifying one single problem is not necessary or even practical. Instead, systems thinking focuses on how components interact and function as a whole with change emerging as a result of complex interactions. Also, the cyclical diagram in Figure 2 indicates that change is also dependent on other forces (E), often unknown, complex, and external to the problem. And, finally, the model in Figure 2 allows for feedback and continual improvement. The question then is what is the most effective way to create change within a complex system; planned, emergent, or, perhaps, both.

While there is historical merit in planned and emergent change, Figure 3 offers a different approach that combines both theories. From the left, the model indicates the need for change, or shifting, is constantly pushed by the national climate, or factors external to institutions, organizations, and communities. The national climate, in this case, refers to the social, economic, political, and ecological systems that drive the collective forces in our culture. These influences often impact people differently and challenge social, economic, and ecological equity and directly pressure, in the case of higher education, the internal climate and

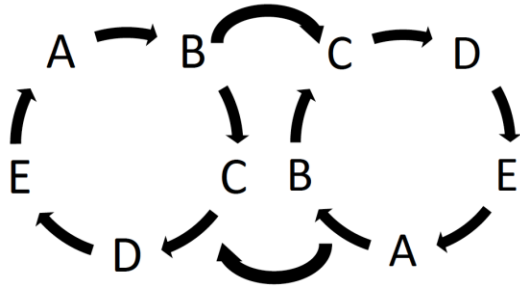


Figure 2. Systems Thinking

culture of colleges and universities. The arrows leading to the outcomes take two paths: risks and/or protective factors.

When external forces begin to shift, the internal culture and climate (emerge), the risks of organizational failure are significant and the probability of collapse is heightened. Strategically adding protective factors, however, can mediate or moderate the risk and increase the chances of resilience.

Protective factors in the model create an environment in which *planned* positive changes can occur and mitigate or eliminate a crisis. For example, Vincent Tinto (1975) began using classical theoretical analogies when researching declining retention rates in higher education by drawing parallels between what he called the *dropout process* and Durkheim's notion of suicide. In other words, Tinto believed dropping out of college was not just something students decide all of a sudden but is a process caused by multiple mitigating factors and circumstances, many of which are external to the institution itself. The challenge then became creating ways (*protective factors*) to mitigate risks beyond grade attainment and evaluation of academic performance. Based on the theoretical work of Tinto and others (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; Bean, 1985; and Cabrera, Nora, & Castañeda, 1993), researchers began to identify protective factors that led to persistence in higher education; among the most powerful indicators was student engagement.

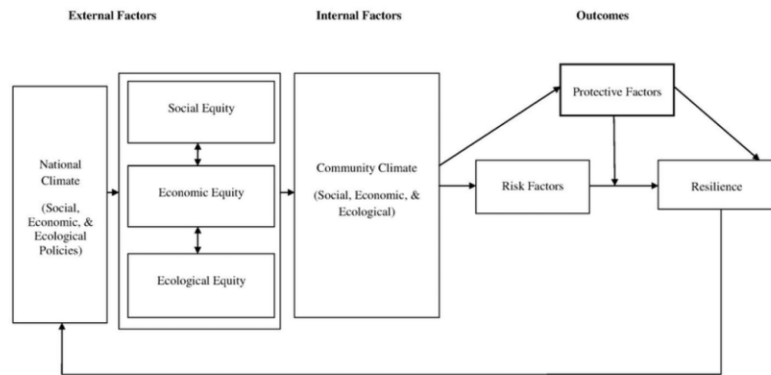


Figure 3. Model of Organizational Resilience (Kerby & Mallinger, 2015)

By the mid to late 1990s, most colleges and universities were concerned more with what students *did* while they were in college than what degrees they sought or where they would work after graduation. Results of national studies and surveys like the National Student Engagement Survey (NSSE) (2018) concluded that for students to persist and thrive in school, they must practice critical thinking, problem-solving, civic communication, and engaged democracy in courses and programs. To achieve these goals, colleges and universities developed programs aimed at creating planned change (Figure 4. Lewin's Model).

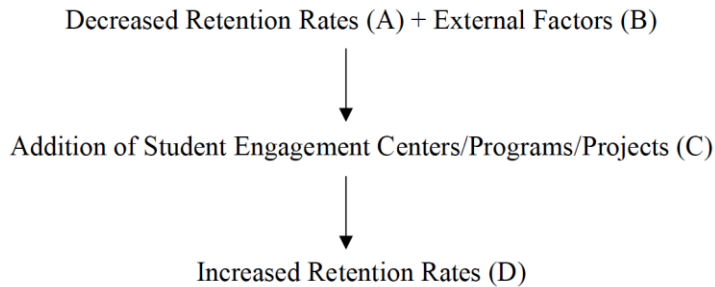


Figure 4. Retention and Lewin's Model

While this is a simple application, it is a good illustration of how quick fixes can work well in the short run but might have trouble standing the test of time. The model in Figure 4 neglects to articulate the wide range of external factors involved (B), the complexity of solutions necessary for change (C), or the varying degrees of retention, which include transferring to another institution, *stop out* (taking time off), dismissal due to insufficient academic performance (D/F/W rates), and dropout (A & D).

The work done in the last 20 years or so employed the notions of planned change; a) we needed something new to transpire to encourage students to persist (unfreeze), b) we developed centers and programs to increase students engagement (move), and, most importantly, c) we shifted the paradigm of the student college/university experience (refreeze). While *unfreezing* and *moving* are normally introduced through the Theory of Planned Change or Reason Action (Falko, Presseau, & Araújo-Soares, 2014; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), the aftermath of “refreezing” is where we begin to see Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement’s (CLDE) Theory of Emergent Change blossom (Hoffman, Domagal-Goldman, King, & Robinson, 2018). Hoffman (2015) fashioned four concepts vital to the natural work of civic learning and engaged democracy: a) integral, b) relational, c) organic, and d) generative. According to Hoffman, civic engagement should be fully embedded in our institutional practices, curriculum, and campus culture. Institutions should provide faculty, staff, and students with the opportunities to build relationships that are authentic, flexible, and continually regenerating.

In the example of retention and persistence, higher education administrators, faculty, and student affairs personnel created programs and initiatives that grew through multiple networks. Building on CLDE’s Theory of Emergent Change, civic-minded institutions have shifted and engrained the ideas of visionary work, engaged pedagogy, purposeful learning outcomes, and strategic planning in every fiber of the work they do. Higher education, like many organizations, is both a social and economic institution. On the one hand, colleges and universities exist to serve the public good by educating and preparing students to be engaged citizens who make thoughtful decisions in their communities. On the other hand, colleges and universities must generate revenue to, proverbially, *keep the lights on*. When federal and state higher education funds are plentiful, the latter is less important. In the last several years, however, funding has been slashed at most schools causing some to close their doors and others to consolidate (Educational Dive, 2019). So,

While this is a simple application, it is a good illustration of how quick fixes can work well in the short run but might have trouble standing the test of time. The model in Figure 4 neglects to articulate the wide range of external factors involved (B), the

what happens *now*? What do we do when funding runs out for student engagement centers and programs? What makes the CLDE Theory of Emergent Change relevant here?

Going back to the earlier example of the public-problem solving class, many of the answers to our dilemma are products of embedded continuing feedback loops. Emergent change is not a prescribed process like planned change; it is messy and unpredictable. Using this theoretical framework, it is crucial to infuse student and civic engagement throughout the entire curriculum, major fields as well as general education, so the principles survive with or without institutional support of centers, programs, and special initiatives. CLDE's Theory of Emergent Change addresses this in the five concepts of cultivating campus change (Hoffman, Domagal-Goldman, King, & Robinson, 2018):

1. The ideologies of ethical reasoning, moral decision-making, and global and cultural awareness are not, nor should they be, bound by disciplinary structures – they should exist inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinary. Also, these principles should be practiced in all interactions and structures within the institution (*Civic Ethos*).
2. All students should be allowed to practice democratic engagement and debate and taught to think critically about current and historical complex issues that have public consequences (*Civic Literacy & Skill Building*).
3. The art of engagement should not be reserved for students who major in certain fields or take the few general education courses where civic inquiry is explored. The ideas of deliberation, historical reasoning, and deliberative dialogue should be included in all general *and* major-specific courses (*Civic Inquiry integrated within the majors and general education*).
4. Through community engagement projects and collaborative projects, students learn to work with diverse groups, promote sustainability, and work toward the public good – again, no matter what field of study (*Civic Action*).
5. And, finally, institutions must imbed educational practices that teach students to work across lines of race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender expression, political ideology, income, ability, geography, etc. (*Civic Agency*).

As budget cuts force colleges and universities to cut programs, especially in the humanities and social sciences, it is imperative that the work done in the area of civic and democratic engagement over the past 20+ years take root in the curriculum as a whole – this is the underpinning of the CLDE Theory of Emergent Change. While emergent change seems less forced and flexible, it is important to note that seeds of change are most often planted purposely; hence, planned versus emergent change is, in principle, a false dichotomy. For civic-minded education to grow and flourish organically, the seeds must be planted in the right places, at the right time and given the nourishment needed for growth. In any case, planned and emergent change work better hand in hand rather than in opposition – it's not all or nothing.

The model in Figure 3 acknowledges the influence of the national and state climate on the internal structure of the institution. The national push toward anti-intellectualism, the disdain for liberal arts, and the push for STEM+H degrees and job-readiness programs have affected the way state governments appropriate funds for higher education. Performance-based funding models in many states have altered internal resource allocation and management resulting in smaller operating budgets and cuts to programs deemed unnecessary for workforce development by

governing bodies and state officials. Consequently, the public problem-solving course detailed as an example in this paper was part of a program dog-eared for transformation because the interdisciplinary department in which it was housed dissolved due to financial hardship and reorganization. Fortunately, this course as well as others like it were purposely purposed as general education courses early on and will remain part of that curriculum as long as faculty exist to teach the material. In other words, though the department is gone, the seeds were sown, their roots grew and developed, and the courses will continue to be offered. This example combines the notions of emergent and planned change. While external forces have resulted in emerging changes within internal structures, protective factors, like embedding courses in general education, allow the content of these essential civic engagement programs to continue thriving despite external forces. Students who elect to take these courses and participate in civic engagement programs and initiatives, in turn, are more likely to engage in democratic actions, therefore, impacting organizational and national climates. In this case, the protective factors serve as a planned action that nurtures emergent social change.

Implications for Further Research

Measuring student learning in terms of civic engagement can be a daunting task. Assessment, however, is crucial for determining what programs, initiatives, and projects are successful in affecting change and meeting student learning outcomes. Further investigation and data collection are necessary to determine what pedagogical methods are effective in teaching students to be engaged global citizens. In the age of digital media, part of efficacious democratic citizenship hinges on the consumers' ability to differentiate between fact and fiction in popular media. Teaching students to intellectually discern among reputable news sources is critical in civic education as well. Finally, it is vital for higher education professionals to assess civic programs, projects, and initiatives beyond the scope of mandatory course evaluations and accreditation efforts. Assessment provides information necessary to improve program delivery and determine if student learning outcomes are being achieved, thus creating a culture of on-going civic learning and education.

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CHANGE IS THE ESSENTIAL PROCESS OF ALL EXISTENCE

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