PENN STATE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Practicing What We Teach and Teaching What We Practice: A Town Hall Model as Curricular Component and Tool for Curricular Reform

Author(s): Amy Sarch

Source: *The Journal of General Education*, Vol. 68, No. 1-2 (2019), pp. 104-117

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jgeneeduc.68.1-2.0104

REFERENCES
Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:
https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jgeneeduc.68.1-2.0104?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents
You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Penn State University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of General Education*

JSTOR

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Practicing What We Teach and Teaching What We Practice: A Town Hall Model as Curricular Component and Tool for Curricular Reform

AMY SARCH

ABSTRACT | Issues in society such as immigration and racial inequality threaten to derail classroom discussions. Likewise, issues in higher education such as general education (GE) reform threaten to obstruct faculty committee discussions. We want students to engage in classroom discussions through a comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, and events before accepting or formulating opinions or conclusions. How can we expect this of students if we cannot expect this of ourselves? Shenandoah University (SU) adapted California State University-Chico's Town Hall Public Sphere Pedagogy model to incorporate role play and deliberative dialogue into its GE reform discussions and then adapted the model further to become a signature program in its revised GE curriculum. SU Town Hall classes require students to explore a social issue from the lens of their GE class and share that informed perspective with peers, faculty, and community consultants at a convening Town Hall event. While GE reform and issues such as immigration seemingly have little in common, discussions of both require participants to transcend individual biases, to find commonalties, and, one hopes, to discover new possibilities or solutions. This article describes how SU embedded civic engagement into GE curriculum after modeling the process in GE reform discussions.

KEYWORDS | civic engagement, general education reform, town hall, public sphere, pedagogy, multiple perspectives

There were perspectives from different parts of the university that I did not think about . . .although I don't necessarily agree with completely—but still important to hear.

—(Faculty GE Town Hall 2015)

DOI: 10.5325/jgeneeduc.68.1-2.0104
Journal of General Education: A Curricular Commons of the Humanities and Sciences, Vol. 68, Nos. 1–2, 2019
Copyright © 2020 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

It was challenging listening to people talk who had different opinions than me. I did not agree completely with their statements but I tried to listen and offer my research as a way to back up my statements.

–(Student GE Town Hall 2018)

It all started with a text message. In January 2015, a colleague at the Association for American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) annual conference contacted me about a fascinating presentation she had just seen on California State University—Chico's Town Hall. I clicked on the university's web site to learn more and instantly was hooked. I then emailed the presenter, Thia Wolf (who was still standing in the hallway outside her presentation room), and within a few months, we were on a plane to Chico. That visit lay the groundwork for an exciting and transformative innovation to not only our general education (GE) program, but also how we approached GE curriculum reform at Shenandoah University (SU).

Town Hall Beginnings

Town Hall originated at CSU-Chico in 2006 as part of their first-year experience political science curriculum. Since then it has expanded to include 1,000 students each year and is one of a number of public sphere pedagogy (PSP) events hosted at CSU-Chico. Town Hall provides students with a public arena for discussing current policy issues with other students, faculty, administrators, and community members. Our visit that spring semester allowed us to experience the entire event. After opening remarks, students participated in a moderated break-out session where they shared research on social issues, including gun control, homelessness, and immigration. Students concluded the evening with an action-planning session, with members of the campus and community serving as consultants to assist with next steps in research and the development of a plan for civic action. The student energy and commitment we experienced at Town Hall was palpable. But how could we package this dynamic, immersive exercise in civic engagement for our campus? We wondered if such a program might work beyond the first-year experience and be integrated into our entire GE curriculum. While we were prepared for lengthy discussions as to the applicability of Town Hall to our curriculum, we were not aware that such discussion would lead to an entire rethinking of our GE program.

GE, simply put, was not a priority at Shenandoah University. Rumors abounded that advisors had at times actually recommended students take their GE classes elsewhere—online or at a community college over the summer. As Director of General Education this was *not* music to my ears. SU has approximately 2,000 undergraduate students in four undergraduate schools: a College

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

of Arts & Sciences, a Conservatory, a School of Nursing, and a Business school. Our existing GE program was more than fifteen years old; to call it a "program" would be generous. Students (and faculty) did not seem to understand how GE classes related to one another or what unifying goals brought the curriculum together. Efforts to revise GE came in waves, but such discussions tended to create deeper rifts and to bolster existing silos. A Teagle Foundation Consortium grant, secured in 2015, offered a vehicle to focus on creating a more coherent and intentional curriculum, and also provided a timely incentive to consider innovations such as CSU-Chico's Town Hall. The more we learned, the more we were convinced that the Town Hall model could be key in revising our GE curriculum. What we did not realize, however, was that the model might also be helpful in reopening discussions about the process of GE curriculum reform.

We adapted CSU-Chico's Town Hall model two different ways to achieve related but distinct goals focused on GE. We found the Town Hall model as (1) a powerful *process* for productive conversations among *faculty* about *GE curricular reform* decisions; and (2) as an effective *GE curricular component* that brings the *students* and community leaders together. Two town halls emerged and both preserved the main elements that make CSU-Chico's Town Hall a successful exercise in civic engagement:

- shared focus on improving a community issue
- informed perspectives
- moderated small discussion groups

In our Faculty Town Hall, "general education" was the community issue that needed improving and we provided faculty members with different perspectives on GE's purpose to discuss in moderated small groups. The Student Town Hall is comprised of students grouped together from multiple GE classes discussing a complex social issue with a community member facilitating the conversation. While chronologically the faculty town hall occurred before the student one, this article alters that timeline to explain fully the Town Hall as a curricular *component* (Student Town Hall) before launching into details about the Town Hall as a curricular reform *process* (Faculty Town Hall).

Student Town Hall

GE Town Hall classes have come from a range of disciplines, including Biology, Dance, English, Gender Studies, Kinesiology, Statistics, Economics, Hispanic Studies, Political Science, Public Health, Public Speaking, and Religious Studies. Town Hall classes are existing classes with a "TH" designation, and for now, only offer Spring semester at SU. There are different sections of the same course

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

where some sections are designated as "TH" and some are not (for example, Statistics and Public Speaking have TH and non-TH classes running the same semester). Classes designated as Town Hall include the same content as non-Town Hall classes, but Town Hall classes include assignments that challenge students individually to approach one social issue through the lens of the particular class. We found, in fact, that any class might work if a faculty member is willing to include scaffolded town hall assignments in his or her existing class, and if the class lends itself to approaching social issues through a particular lens. The Town Hall event is required in all TH classes and framed as a formal, professional event. Students receive a printed invitation and are instructed to dress as if going out to dinner with a grandparent or going on a job interview.

We piloted the first GE Town Hall in Spring 2016 with faculty from our GE committee and also handpicked a few others to represent all learning domains in the GE curriculum. Now going into our fifth year, most of the original Town Hall faculty have returned and others have joined willingly after getting involved as facilitators. We hold information sessions each Fall semester, and, once committed, faculty meet regularly for workshops and informal meetings to share successes (i.e., my students are so engaged in their topics) and challenges (how do I get my students to narrow their topics?).

Town Hall Classes: Shared Focus on Community Issues

Planning for the student GE Town Hall begins each year with a survey given to our First Year Seminar students at the beginning of Fall semester (a required course for all first-year students) asking what community issues most concern them. We use that list to choose the Spring GE Town Hall topics. While there is some variation each year, a few issues appear consistently (such as addiction, mental health, and racial inequality), and some that students suggest in response to recent events (climate change, gun control and immigration). Students in a Town Hall class choose one issue from the entire list of issues at the beginning of their class and focus individually on that one issue from the perspective of their GE class throughout the semester. In one class then, students will be working on the *same assignment* but on *different issues*; a public health class had a student researching *mental health* education, another looking at the lack of healthcare for *immigrants*, and another focused on health effects of *climate change*. The Town Hall class provides a lens or an approach to issues, but the issue typically is not the topic of the class. Faculty shape Town Hall assignments to fit their disciplines. (The only standardized assignment is a "talking point" sheet that students bring with them to Town Hall night.) The final assignment occurs after Town Hall and addresses the four shared Town Hall learning outcomes: multiple perspectives, written communication,

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

information literacy, and critical thinking. Faculty then apply a common rubric to assess this final paper or project.

Town Hall Class Assignments: Informed Perspectives

Class assignments vary. For example, a dance professor has required students to choose an object relevant to a Town Hall issue, then research and choreograph a dance focused on that object. A statistics professor required students to survey a chosen population to determine the awareness of a particular issue. The assignments engage students with their issues; and for some, these issues inspire students to engage with their GE classes. Examples emerge every year. The dance student who conducted research on homelessness found that addiction is a prevalent problem and choreographed a dance performance around a pill bottle. The statistics student who conducted research on homelessness developed a survey to reveal college students' perceptions of homelessness in the local community. An economics student looked at microfinance as a means of fighting poverty. A Hispanic Studies student focused on the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico.

At the Town Hall event, students share their research with their peers from other GE classes focused on the same issue. Town Hall night allows students to recognize their GE classes as integrated and relevant to the world outside their classroom.

> Never before had I experienced such an applied test of knowledge, plus it was interesting to hear others topics and ideas, and their varying interpretations (Student Survey, 2017)

> It enriched my learning experience by allowing me to use the information I learned within the class and intertwine it with a topic that pertains to the real world (Student Survey, 2017)

The Town Hall event is organized so that students hear multiple perspectives on an issue and grapple with ways they can make an impact.

Town Hall Event: Plenary, Moderated Small Groups, and Closing

The Town Hall begins with check-in, where students receive a badge with their name, topic, and location for the evening sessions. We divide the evening into four sessions, with a brief cookie break between moderated sessions 2 and 3.

1. a plenary
2. roundtable session

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

3. action-planning session
4. closing session

The moderated groups are organized by topic, with typically no more than 2 or 3 students from the same class in the same group. For example, an immigration group may have two students from a religious studies class, one from public health, three from dance, and two from statistics. Faculty members facilitate the first roundtable session while the community consultant, with expertise in the specific issue, takes notes. The goal of the roundtable session is for students to hear perspectives from the lens of multiple GE classes.

> Since people had different views on the same topic . . . . it helped make the evening more interesting. We were forced to think deeply about our topic and consider other perspectives that are different (Student Survey, 2018)

> The town hall opened up my perspective to multiple points of view other than my own. Many kids in my group talked about the same issue but had different solutions than I did, and had different arguments than I did. (Student Survey, 2017)

Students primarily share what they learned about their topic in the first session without delving too deeply into next steps.

After a short break, students reconvene in the same groups for the action-planning session where the community consultant takes center stage facilitating the discussion. The community consultant is a key feature to Town Hall's success. (Most live locally, although some travel a few hours to participate.) Their experiences align with the issues: a Domestic Relations District Court Judge advises the drug control and regulation group; immigration lawyers work with the immigration group; the president of our local NAACP facilitates a racial inequality group; the Executive Director of the Northern Shenandoah Valley Substance Abuse Coalition mediates the alcohol and drug addiction group. The consultants push students to dig deeper into their issues and focus more intently on an action-plan, specific ways they can make a difference. For students, community consultants add a layer of professionalism and relevancy to the event:

> Town Hall gave me an opportunity to discuss a very real topic in a very professional environment with community members who provided "real" information. It helped prepare me for any similar job situation I might experience and I would recommend that all students have the chance to be a part of Shenandoah's Town Hall. (Student Survey, 2018)

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> Town Hall was my best experience for my first year, as a freshman. This event was unlike other classes because professionals were able to give us first hand examples that then led to stronger thoughts and ideas about the topic (Student Survey, 2017).

> The consultants were very helpful with developing our solutions more and providing extra resources to look at and use to find more information in which over the summer I'll be working on looking into helping create organizations at schools in my hometown, Richmond, VA (Student Survey, 2016).

Yet another benefit of Town Hall is that it provides opportunities for students to network, and it has opened doors to internships and volunteer experiences.

All the consultants volunteer (we do provide them with a free campus meal) and *all* have asked to return the following years. We solicit feedback from our community consultants also through a survey following the event, often with comments that indicate a high level of enthusiasm:

> I was so jazzed up when I left at 10:00 (our group went a half hour over the time allotted!) that I couldn't sleep that night. There was so much more I wanted to talk about with the students…I thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to meet the students, faculty and other consultants from the community. This is a great program and I hope it will continue! (Consultant Survey, 2016).

> This is my third year of participating as a consultant. Each year the process improves. This year was the best. I was impressed by the students' preparation, their research which they referred to during the sessions and the addition of name tags for the students which helped with establishing a better rapport with them. Also, their ideas for solutions were inspiring so much so that I would consider some of them in our efforts to build awareness and educate . . .These students brought passion, creativity, determination, and their own research to the table. Their behavior and how they handled questions and spoke about their own research was thoughtful and considerate to the group as a whole (Consultant Survey, 2018).

Consultants follow up with students after the event and in many cases, provided further opportunities and resources. For instance, a racial inequality consultant runs a mentorship program for at-risk youth and started a student internship program for Shenandoah students after our first Town Hall. Another consultant invited a dance student to perform a piece inspired by her human trafficking research at a women's shelter event.

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

The Student Town Hall demonstrates the impact of an integrated GE curriculum where GE classes became relevant to one another, and relevant to the outside world. The Town Hall model is now a signature feature of our GE program with approximately 300 students participating every year.

The Faculty Town Hall

The Faculty Town Hall follows the same basic structure as the student town hall: a plenary, two break-out sessions, and a closing.[1] We held our Faculty Town Hall in May 2015, one month after visiting CSU-Chico's Town Hall. The event opened with a plenary led by Thia Wolf from CSU-Chico and Lee Knefelcamp, AAC&U's senior scholar, and ended with the opportunity for each group to share their visions. The two break-out sessions were moderated by GE faculty committee members. Just over 100 participated, mostly faculty but a few administrators, staff, and a handful of students. The core Town Hall elements guided the event: a shared focus on improving a community issue, informed perspectives, and moderated small groups.

General Education as the Shared "community issue"

The Town Hall model provides a forum for "dialogic participation in which citizens engage in the interpersonal construction of knowledge and the sharing of diverse perspectives through reciprocal exchanges" (McDevit and Kiousis 2006, 248). While faculty generally supported such a goal, several questions arose as we began exploring the viability of our own Town Hall program. Among these were: How do we create dialogue on GE reform on a campus where the purpose of GE is not clear? How do we equip faculty who may in fact have diverse perspectives on GE to agree on foundational goals (rather than invite criticism)? How do we construct a space that prioritizes informed perspectives on GE over narrow, discipline-based concerns? Town Hall sets the stage for "members [to] work together on [a] shared endeavor . . .using, negotiating, or creating practices that all agree are valuable in achieving the community's purposes . . ." (Wolf 2014, p. 11). Yet SU faculty did not recognize GE's purpose, let alone its value. We decided to organize the GE Faculty Town Hall generally around discussions of GE's purpose and value, specifically focusing on three questions: What purpose does GE play in higher education? What role should GE play on our campus? What is possible?

Generating Informed Perspectives in Moderated Small Groups

One of the many reasons CSU-Chico's Town Hall model succeeds in generating productive discussions is because students rely on their semester-long research,

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

sharing informed perspectives and not personal opinion, and they refer to a uniform "talking point" template completed prior to the event. At SU, we also intentionally disperse students from the same GE class to different moderated groups to encourage multiple perspectives. To mimic this set-up at the Faculty Town Hall, we pre-assigned participants one of five GE perspectives and we dispersed faculty from the same department to different discussion groups for the first round-table session. We used the first 20 minutes of the round-table for participants to review their assigned perspective and complete a uniform set of questions that served as their "talking points." The goal was for participants to engage in dialogue and debate from their *assigned* GE perspective and not necessarily their own viewpoint. Such role-playing gave participants freedom to remove their personal opinions about GE and experiment with a new GE lens. After reviewing their assigned perspective (listed below), each participant was asked to respond to two prompts on their talking point sheet:

1. List two reasons why you agree with this perspective for general education at Shenandoah University.
2. List two reasons why you disagree with this perspective for general education at Shenandoah University

- **Perspective 1: When discussing the future of general education at SU, our focus should be on the question— what should all students know or be able to do upon graduation?**
  I feel that we need to ask—"what should all undergraduate students—irrespective of their majors and career aspirations—know or be able to do upon graduation?" We need to stick to this question and look forward to where the general education program should go to avoid backward-looking debates about the merits and faults of where we have been. We should strive for an outcomes-based program so that the question is not about where students sit in classes but what they can do. So perhaps our general education outcomes do not specify disciplines [or future professions], rather they focus on what students should be able to demonstrate about what they learn (Fuess & Mitchell, 2011)

- **Perspective 2: An "effective citizen" model of general education should be the focus of our curriculum reform**
  I feel that general education change is not just a task of curricular change: it is also cultural change. I think the "effective citizen" model of general education closely aligns with our SU mission statement and one we should pursue. An ideally educated person in the effective citizen model of general education is someone who is familiar with

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the important ideas and discoveries of the disciplines and who also understands their relationship to and implications for society. The effective citizen model focuses on the student and what the student should learn in order to live well and engage fully in society. Its major advantage is the combined focus on understanding important ideas and approaches of the disciplines and their social implications. This model makes relevancy pivotal. (Awbrey 2005)

- **Perspective 3: General education should not be a survey of foundational ideas rather it should be a set of techniques, perspectives, and generalizable skills**
  I believe that general education is not about delivering a corpus of knowledge or even a survey of foundational ideas [in a] general education curriculum. Rather, it is to illustrate for students how a physicist asks questions about the world and then goes about trying to answer them—and how a philosopher does this, how a mathematician does this, how an economist does this, and how a poet does this. The point is to add the techniques and perspectives of many disciplines to the students' intellectual arsenals, as well as to hone the generalizable skills of effective and persuasive writing and public speaking (all classes have papers, and all classes have oral presentations), of quantitative reasoning, and of analytical thinking. (Helfand 2013, p. 49)

- **Perspective 4: The distinction between liberal education (aka liberal learning) and liberal arts**
  The phrase *liberal arts* today does not refer to The Arts, or even the humanities; it is a broader concept. In fact, in phrases like *liberal arts core*, or *liberal arts education*, the word *arts* is meant to encompass the humanities, and the social sciences, and the natural and physical sciences, including mathematics. The phrase *liberal education* does not refer to a curriculum that contrasts with a *conservative education*; it refers to a curriculum designed to provide students with the knowledge and abilities to become successful, productive members of a free society. It provides them the opportunity to practice free-thinking. (Remember, *liberal* as in *free*, as opposed to *constrained* or *subjugated*.) It teaches them how to think critically, communicate clearly, analyze and solve complex problems, appreciate others, understand the physical world, and be prepared to learn continuously so they can work with others and on their own to meet the challenges of the future." (Strauss 2015).

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

- **Perspective 5: The relationship between liberal learning and professional skills**
  "We believe that to achieve one's full musical [or professional] potential, a musician [or any professional] needs to go beyond the practice room and nurture the intellectual growth offered through the breadth and depth of a liberal arts education. We also believe that in this exciting, ever-changing world we live in, consummate musicianship [or professionalism] needs to be paired with intellectual agility, cross-disciplinary problem solving, bold creativity, and an entrepreneurial mindset." [Lawrence Conservatory of Music, http://www.lawrence.edu/academics]

Participants role-played from their assigned perspective in the first small group discussion session.

The next session, the action planning session, required participants to choose one of the five perspectives they would like to explore further and spend an hour delving more deeply into that perspective. Once the participants settled into their new groups, GE committee members distributed another worksheet that asked the following:

1. What changes would we need to make to our general education program to reflect this perspective?
2. What would have to be invented/included in this program for students to look forward to and want to engage in it?

The goal of the action planning session was to formulate ways to implement a new GE program with their chosen perspectives driving the way (comparable to the Student Town Hall action planning session). Some perspectives proved more popular, but the purpose was not to arrive at conclusions or to determine one direction for action. Rather, it was to generate conversation about possibilities that crossed disciplinary boundaries and for the entire group to feel engaged in the process. Discussion of these perspectives provided a lens for understanding the "tacit underlying assumptions that shape the values and beliefs of academic culture" unique to Shenandoah University (Awbry 2005, 13) and allowed groups to transcend personal experience, a common "pothole" when revising GE programs (Gaston and Gaff 2009, 20).

The Faculty Town Hall proved highly successful. Over half of the participants rated the experience as "excellent" while another forty percent rated it as "good." (No one reported "fair" and only two percent rated it "poor.") Participants reported finding commonalities with one another and appreciated

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

hearing different, informed perspectives. Among the comments made by participants were:

> Very valuable experience to hear other points of view on all 5 perspectives and the Town Hall Meeting format was enjoyable and helpful which could be employed for other topics applicable across SU community.

> I have more in common with folks on campus than I thought disagreed with me.

> There was shared mutual respect and desire to collaborate . . . hope was high and cynicism low. It seems we may have reached a tipping point (or at least critical mass) moving in a forward-thinking direction.

The Town Hall model opened a window of possibilities, and faculty were able to envision using the model not only to reimagine the overarching goals of our GE curriculum but also to imagine the possibility of incorporating a student Town Hall into our GE experience. "I feel it encourages everyone to listen even if they don't agree and it gives an avenue for discussing all sides of an issue," one faculty member expressed. Another stated, "I think a town hall meeting would be a better way to engage student voices on issues that are important to them. We currently don't have an easy forum for them to speak about issues like the earthquake in Nepal, or police brutality." While the model held promise, faculty believed logistics would prevent a student GE town hall from succeeding. "Benefits—students would be able to discuss their projects with students from other disciplines and acquire new perspectives related to their projects; Challenges—time commitment and scheduling, funding, space."

Overwhelmingly positive reactions to the Town Hall model itself convinced us to move ahead. The GE committee predicted faculty buy-in as the insurmountable hurdle, but with the faculty now on board, we quickly started the wheels turning for our first Student GE Town Hall in April 2016. We since have hosted four student Town Hall events and now include classes from a local community college. Plans are underway for our fifth Town Hall in April 2020. Indeed, the SU General Education Town Hall has now become a signature feature of our newly integrated, newly approved, and newly named, "ShenEd" curriculum.

Town Hall as a Space for Civic Engagement

Public Sphere Pedagogy (PSP) moves students into a public arena for dialogue and action planning with the assumption that learning takes place through

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

situated participation in communities of practice (Wolf 2014). When I asked one student how to best sum up the 2018 Town Hall experience, she replied, "to me, it seemed as if we were a group of experts with diverse perspectives attempting to solve a complex issue. It was like a puzzle and each one of us had a piece to it. We couldn't solve the problem, but it gave us a glimpse into the difficult nature of policymaking and reform."

When faculty members were asked to best sum up their Faculty Town Hall Summit experience, one wrote,

> [R]ather than learning something new, the process confirmed a few things for me: (1) We all, as faculty, care about general education, but we have distinctly different ideas about how important it is or what shape it should take. (2) Finding ways to make gen ed become a strength and foundation (whether based on skills, or knowledge, or both, or whatever) that programs (especially the professional, intensive programs) can build on, be proud of, and sell to students as a strength of SU rather than a burden on students' dreams, is crucial. (3) We were very collegial and positive and pleasant for the Summit, but I suspect we have a lot of work cut out for us if we are going to do this right. We didn't have to actually commit ourselves to anything yet, or make any compromises.

Neither the Faculty Town Hall or Student Town Hall solved problems, but rather they opened conversations on issues that previously seemed to close doors and solidify silos. The Town Hall creates "avenues for heightened interest, direct participation, and deliberative discussion" (Wolf 2014, p. 12). The Faculty Town Hall provided room for faculty to "try on" GE perspectives, while the student GE Town Hall provided space for students to "try on" the perspective of their GE class and to speak on behalf of their research. "Imagine if a college was so bold as to remain wholly dedicated to its civic mission to really prepare students to be dedicated civic leaders, equipped with skill set to engage in thoughtful dialogue across differences, with compromise the shared goal and solutions the standard. How could higher education be most thoughtful about getting closer to this aim for the benefit of the next generation of engaged citizens and public servants?" (Stelljes, 2014). Imagine, too, if a college was so bold as to expect its faculty to model what it hopes to achieve with students and approached GE curriculum as an exercise in civic engagement. Civic engagement does not just "happen"—it is "often described by . . . collective action conducted with a systematic approach" (Stelljes, 2014). The Town Hall model provides a structured, systematic approach to address issues of social concern, or even general education reform.

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

AMY SARCH spearheaded the revitalization of Shenandoah University's general education curriculum, ShenEd, and has served as a consultant for colleges and universities across the United States on curriculum reform and overcoming organizational resistance to change. She's passionate about linking learning experiences with civic engagement in innovative ways; she started Shenandoah's [Not Just] Women's Center and serves on the board of the Nyaka AIDS Orphans Project. For more than 20 years, Amy has held administrative posts as a program coordinator, department chair, director, and associate provost. Her interests include curriculum development and implementation, pedagogical innovation, integrative learning, co-curricular and curricular programming, and academic program assessment. She also teaches in the areas of communications and gender studies.

NOTE

1. I adapted this same basic model to work with other campuses interested in a large-scale discussion on GE reform and modified the content to fit the campus needs, specifically University of Tennessee at Knoxville, Randolph Macon College, and Virginia Wesleyan University. About 100 participants attended each of these Faculty Town Halls.

REFERENCES

Awbrey, A.M. (2005). General Education reform as organizational change: The importance of integrating cultural and structural change. *The Journal of General Education*, 54(1), 1–21. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27798003

Fuess, A.M.; & Mitchell, N.D. (2011). General education reform: Opportunities for institutional alignment. *The Journal of General Education*, 60(1), 1–15. DOI: 10.5325/jgeneeduc.60.1.0001

Helfand, D.J. (2013). The social conquest of general education. *The Journal of General Education,* 62, 43–51. DOI: 10.5325/jgeneeduc.62.1.0043

Stelljes, Drew. (2014). US Colleges and Universities Earn a Poor Grade for Civic Engagement. *HuffPost Education*. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/drew-stelljes/us-civic-engagement_b_6127608.html

Strauss, Valerie. "What the 'liberal' in 'liberal arts' actually means." *Washington Post* (April 2, 2015), http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answersheet/wp/2015/04/02/what-the-liberal-in-liberal-arts-actually-means/ (accessed 4/5/15).

This content downloaded from
128.59.222.107 on Tue, 17 Mar 2020 20:00:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms