

CIVIC LEARNING IN ONLINE COURSES:  
THE EXPERIENCE OF EMERGING ADULTS AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

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## ABSTRACT

GARY PAUL RITTER. Civic learning in online classes: The experience of emerging adults at the community college. (Under the direction of DR. LISA MERRIWEATHER.

Civic learning is an important part of the mission of higher learning. The community college is a unique and integral part of the system of higher education in the United States. Digital technology has increased the options for students to take classes at a distance in a fully online format. Many of the students in online classes at the community college are in a life stage known as emerging adulthood. While there has been considerable research on each of the four topics of civic learning, the community college, emerging adulthood, and online learning, there remains a substantial gap in the literature where these topics intersect. Instructors, administrators, and designers of online courses need more information with which to best plan and deliver civic learning opportunities to emerging adults in online classes at the public community college.

Qualitative research is an appropriate methodology for areas of study with little extant literature. This study used the phenomenological method in order to better understand how emerging adults enrolled in asynchronous online classes at the public community college perceive civic responsibility, civic engagement, and the experience of civic learning in their online classes. The study produced findings that highlighted the importance of respect for diversity, civil discourse, nurturing of a social learning community and instructor presence. Implications for an online pedagogy to promote civic learning are included.

## DEDICATION

For my family

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Higher education professionals work amidst several realities. The United States is a democracy that depends on engaged citizens who have an understanding of what it means to participate in civic life (Boyte, 2002; White, Van Scotter, Hartoonian, & Davis, 2007). College is one of the social institutions that offers preparation for engaged citizenship (Boyte, 2002; Harkavy, 2006; Kanter, 2012; Levine, 2014; Thomas, 2008). The community college system is an integral and large part of the American system of higher education (Boggs, 2010, 2012; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Dassance, 2011; Jurgens, 2010). Students entering college from high school are at the start of a life stage known as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson & Herzog, 2011). Increasing numbers of community college students are enrolling in online classes (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Cejda, 2011; Parsad & Lewis, 2008; Xu & Jaggars, 2013).

These facts represent four different and evolving areas: civic learning, the community college, emerging adulthood, and online learning. Civic learning has been a goal of the education system since colonial times (Boyer, 1996). Community colleges have been educating adults since the close of the 19th century (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Jurgens, 2010). The life-stage of emerging adulthood began to take shape in the 1970s (Arnett, 2004; Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson & Herzog, 2011). Online learning has been available since the mid-1990s (Perry & Pilati, 2010). The intersection of these areas



presents educators with a challenge and opportunity to effectively provide civic learning opportunities for emerging adult students in fully online classes at the public community college.

### Civic Learning

Democracy is the most popular form of government in the world (Diamond, 2011). It takes different forms and continues to evolve. The root word of democracy comes from the Greek demos, meaning "of the people" and therefore requires the participation of citizens (Scherz, 2013). It is important that the people are prepared for their responsibility. Thomas Paine understood the global historical significance of United States Declaration of Independence when he wrote the "the cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind" (Paine, 1776, p.3). Though slowly at first, democracy has spread throughout the world (Diamond, 2011), proving Paine's claim. Today, all but a few of the 193 members countries of the United Nations claim a democratic form of government. South Sudan became the newest democracy in 2011 (Salman, 2013). Recent history in countries such as Zimbabwe (Chemhuru, 2010) and Venezuela (Canache, 2012) suggest that there are different versions of democracy, and some nominal democracies are not very democratic (Crossette, 2001; White, Van Scotter, Hartoonian, & Davis, 2007).

Democracy in the United States has changed over the years, both in terms of practice and who was permitted to fully participate (Crenson, 2003; Schudson, 1998). The electorate has expanded to include more groups since the first election under the United States Constitution in 1788 (Burnham, 2007). Suffrage was extended to most white men by the 1820s (Ratcliffe, 2013), African American men in 1870 (Foner, 1787;

Wineapple, 2013), and to women in 1920 (Brauna & Kvasnicka, 2013). The legal right to vote has not always led to the effective ability to vote, demonstrated by the voter disenfranchisement efforts directed against African Americans and some others during the Jim Crow era (Harding, 1987). African Americans had to fight again for ballot access, leading to the Voting Rights Act of 1964 (Crowley, 2013) and these rights are still being contested (Wilson & Brewer, 2013). Citizens continue to push for more changes in democracy such as protection of voting rights for ex-convicts (Dawson-Edwards, 2008; King, 2006) and the disabled (Agran & Hughes, 2013).

A functioning democracy requires the participation of educated citizens (Levine, 2007). The skills needed for this participation are not innate; they must be taught (Parker, 2003). Public education has long had the mission of developing in students the civic skills they would need to be able to participate in civic life (Johanek, 2012; Jorgensen & Schwartz, 2012). The idea that higher education can be a place to prepare young citizens for democratic participation goes back to the early days of the Republic. Dr. Benjamin Rush wrote an *Address to the American People* in 1787 calling for the creation of a national university (Castel, 1964).

This idea was shared by other leaders of the early Republic such as James Madison, Charles Pinckney, James Wilson and George Washington. They recognized that their Republican Revolution was truly historic and would require diligent work from educated citizens. Rush's idea was to use the proposed national university as a place to educate citizens in the principles, morals and manners of the Republic. It would provide graduates with a degree in civic and public life (Koganzon, 2012). The efforts of Rush and the first four presidents to create a national university were never realized; however,

civic learning was part of the mission of many colleges of that era and into the future (Boyer, 1996; Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Scott, 2006).

The civic learning mission of higher education was re-emphasized in 1947 with the report from the President's Commission on Higher Education, commonly known as the Truman Commission. Chairman George Zook and the commissioners wrote:

It is a commonplace of the democratic faith that education is indispensable to the maintenance and growth of freedom of thought, faith, enterprise, and association. Thus the social role of education in a democratic society is at once to insure equal liberty and equal opportunity to differing individuals and groups, and to enable the citizens to understand, appraise, and redirect forces, men and events as these tend to strengthen or weaken their liberties. (President's Commission on Higher Education, 1947, p.5)

The number and diversity of those in need of civic education had grown along with democracy. As more people pursued higher education, the community college system became indispensable towards providing that opportunity to those whose circumstances prevented their attending a four-year college (Higginbottom & Romano, 2006).

### Community College

American community colleges are much like the nation that invented them. They offer an open door to opportunity for all who would come, are innovative and agile in meeting economic and workplace needs, and provide value and service to individuals and communities. Little wonder that they are increasingly emulated around the world and have become the fastest-growing segment of U.S. higher education. (Boggs, 2010)

The industrial revolution changed higher education in the 19th century (Jurgens, 2010). The first colonial colleges were primarily used to prepare ministers and civic leaders, but the transition to an industrial society created an economy in need research and a formally educated workforce. New universities were founded not only to meet the new demands of the market, but to be able to serve a growing population. The founding

of Johns Hopkins University in 1876 signaled a new direction for large universities to emphasize original research. It was the first to be organized to perform research. University leaders traveled to Europe and borrowed elements of the German model of the research centered institution pioneered by Wilhelm von Humboldt at the University of Berlin in 1810 (Ingrassia, 2010).

University leaders such as Henry Tappan began to see the growth in the number of undergraduates as a burden that took away resources from their research mission. Community colleges were seen as a way to provide more students with the first two years of a bachelors degree. Joliet Junior College in Chicago was organized in 1901 as a partnership between the University of Chicago and local public high schools. It is recognized as the first community college (Jurgens, 2010).

The community college system of the United States has become an integral component of the higher education landscape. They have been called democracy's colleges because they provide an opportunity to all students regardless of intellectual experience or ability and feature low tuition and convenient campus locations (Boggs, 2010). They have also been seen as institutions that have perpetuated social inequality through the unstated functions of screening, tracking, and sorting out certain students into particular career paths (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Reitz, 2002).

These schools offer both terminal vocational degrees and transfer programs to four-year colleges and universities. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), nearly half of all baccalaureate recipients had some experience at the community college level (2013). Community college enrollment across the nation surged in 2007 (Mullin, 2011) as the nation's unemployment rate rose and

tuition and space constraints at four-year institutions limited access.

There are now 1,132 institutions classified as community colleges, serving eight million degree seeking students plus five million non-credit students. Community college students comprise 45% of all U.S. undergraduates. (AACC, 2013). The growth in the numbers of students attending community college has changed the demographic of student bodies. The students coming to community colleges and taking online classes constitute very diverse demographics (Castillo, 2013; Smith Morest, 2013). Women and minority enrollments have increased. There are more women than men seeking higher education, including 57% of community college students (AACC, 2013). Globalization has furthered the increased in diversity among the students. Students often travel from different countries specifically for education, including to go to community college (West, 2012).

Recent years have seen more attention paid to community colleges and how to maximize their effectiveness (Boggs, 2011). *Reclaiming the Dream* (AACC, 2012), a report from the 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, claimed that the American Dream is at risk, and the community college system can help reclaim that dream by helping to produce an "educated population, fundamental economic growth, and a vibrant democracy" (p. viii).

The Lumina Foundation started a program called Achieving the Dream in 2004 (Rutschow, et al., 2011). This initiative focuses on using data to help prioritize objectives and reforms that will help boost graduation rates. Completion by Design was launched in 2010 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation "to enable groups of community college campuses within states to collaborate on the design and implementation of a model

pathway to completion" (Pennington & Milliron, 2010, p. 3). These initiatives and others are part of what has come to be known as the completion agenda (Humphreys, 2012; Rosenbaum, Redline, & Stephan, 2007). The AACC set a goal in 2011 of helping five million students earn a credential by 2020 (AACC, 2012). This same goal was supported by President Obama (2009) who proposed the American Graduation Initiative to provide funds and support to reach that goal and to help alleviate the high unemployment the country has suffered the last four years (White House, 2010).

Part of the reputation and strength of community colleges is their ability to be nimble and adjust to changing conditions. The best example of this is the close relationship with the business community to make sure they are providing the training and job skills needed for the workforce. Recent years have seen new or expanding initiatives to help increase the number of students who graduate or transfer to a four-year institution such as competency-based learning (Brigham & Klein-Collins, 2010; Neem, 2013), performance-based funding (D'Amico, Friedel, Katsinas, & Thornton, 2014), the offering of baccalaureate degrees (Levin, 2002) and the increased use of learning technology (Bajt, 2011; Diaz, 2010). Like democracy, the community college is a dynamic institution. The nation's system of community colleges does have a role to provide civic learning (Lee, 2000) while carrying out various missions and undergoing change.

### Emerging Adulthood

The average community college student is 28 years old (AACC, 2013). More traditional age students recently removed from high schools are attending as well. These traditional age students (18-22) are in a relatively new life stage that sociologists call

emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). It is a period of life characterized by identity exploration, instability, focus on the self, possibilities, and transition from adolescence to young adulthood (Arnett, 2004). This phase of life started to become part of American and western culture in the 1970s as young people postponed marriage and parenthood, attended college in increasing numbers, and developed a perspective on the stabilizing aspects of adulthood different from their parents. They wanted marriage, career, children, a stable home, just not yet. The historical context of the last 60 years helps to identify what has caused these changes and how today's young college-going generation are dealing with them. Smith et al. (2011) described six macrosocial changes since the 1940s: popular birth control, dramatic growth in higher education attendance, delay of marriage, economic turbulence, extended dependence on parents, and vulgar post-modernism.

Increased use of birth control (Ehrhard, 2012) and higher college enrollments are two important factors in the trend of young adults to delay marriage. Economic uncertainty in a changing global economy also has reduced the chances of college graduates to obtain a job. The progression from high school to the factory has largely gone away. Manufacturing companies search for the cheapest labor, and that pool of workers is now mostly found overseas. Adults are now reaching the median wage at age 30 instead of age 26 (Carnevale, Hanson, & Gulish, 2013). Despite their delayed entry into the workforce, the rate at which baby boomers will be retiring over the next decade will present a potential labor shortage. The success of today's emerging adults is critical for the future of the economy and social welfare programs. "Young people will need to be substantially more productive than the current workers for the United States to maintain its current levels of support for the Social Security and Medicare" (Carnevale,

Hanson, & Gulish, 2013, p. 48).

Many of these jobs will require education beyond the baccalaureate. The growth in the number of students pursuing advanced degrees is part of a general trend of higher enrollment. The number of students that attended college in 2010 was 21 million, a 46% increase from 1996 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). Around 13 million of those students attended a community college (AACC, 2012). Two important events from the 1940s helped increase the number of high school students going to college. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill, enabled over two million World War II veterans to go to college by covering tuition and living expenses. The college population jumped from a pre-war level of 1.3 million in 1939 to more than two million in 1946 (Bound & Turner, 2002). This decade also saw the publication of a report called Higher Education for American Democracy produced by the Truman Commission. It called for increased federal spending and the establishment of a nationwide public community college system.

The college student body has also grown more diverse. The Supreme Court in 1956 ruled that the Brown case (1954) banning separate but equal in schools extended to public higher education as well. The 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibited segregation throughout education, employment or public spaces. Women have outnumbered men at community colleges for thirty years (Townsend & Tombly, 2007). There has also been a growth in the number of immigrants coming to the United States to pursue their education at the community college (West, 2012).

Several different names have been suggested for today's generation of emerging adults: Millennials (DeBard, 2004; Howe & Strauss, 2000), Generation Y (Sternberg,



2012), Net Generation (Tapscott, 1998; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005), Digital Natives (Ng, 2012; Prensky, 2001), and Dot-Nets (Zukin, et al., 2006). The latter three refer to the fact that this generation was born during the digital age, but there has also been pushback against this idea due to the fact that some are caught on the other side of a digital divide and others may have technology, but are not digitally literate (boyd, 2014; Hargittai, 2010; Harlan, 2013).

Millennials has become the most popular term and will be used here. While different ranges have been offered, most consider those born between 1982 and 1994 to be part of this generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This digital revolution has occurred at the intersection of advances in three different, but related technologies: the internet, social networking and mobile (Rainey & Wellman, 2012). A 21 year old in 2014 was 15 when the iPhone was released, 11 when Facebook launched, and was barely walking when the World Wide Web made browsing the internet possible. An average 36 year old in 2014 is just a few years into a life stage similar to one their grandparents entered at nearly half their age. A law passed as part of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA, 2010) illustrated the idea that this new phase of life has been recognized by society as part of the reality of American culture: parents can continue to keep children on their health insurance plan until they reach age 26 (Slive, & Cramer, 2012).

Today's generation of emerging adults have a different outlook towards civic engagement (Zukin, et al., 2006). To be sure, the members of each generation engage in their community and politics in a variety of ways. Some evidence points to a declining interest in politics (Delli Carpini, 2000; Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson & Herzog, 2011; Snell, 2010) and an increased level of volunteerism (Levine, 2011; Pryor, et al., 2012).

The Millennials are the largest and most diverse generation in the history of the United States and demonstrate the greatest degree of respect for diversity (Pryor et al, 2012; Zogby, 2008). This respect for diversity and general familiarity with technology have been important factors in their experience in online classes.

### Online Learning

The digital age has had a remarkable effect on nearly every aspect of society, (Schmidt & Cohen, 2012), especially the revolutionary changes brought by the Internet, mobile technology, and social networking (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). The debut of the World Wide Web in 1990 (Pew Research Center, 2014) initiated a remarkable advance in the availability of information and general learning options (Davidson & Goldberg, 2010; Natriello, 2005). Colleges and universities soon began to consider web-based delivery of courses (Noor al-Deen, 1994; Perry & Pilati, 2011; Plater, 1995).

Experiments with web-based instruction have produced different models ranging from supplemental to immersive, classroom tool to fully online, synchronous to asynchronous. The various iterations have been given different names by practitioners and researchers, but no common terms or definitions (Cejda, 2010; Guri-Rosenblit, 2009). Distance learning, eLearning, computer-mediated instruction, hybrid, and blended learning are some of the terms that have been used to describe different forms of web-based instruction. This research examined online learning, defined as 100% fully online web-based instruction with no required or regular face to face sessions.

Online learning has become integral to the plans of many institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2014). The movement to online learning in higher education accelerated in the early 2000s, with community colleges leading the way. Allen and Seaman (2007) found

that community colleges had the highest growth rate of any sector of postsecondary education, accounting for half of all enrollments in the five year period ending in 2006. All of higher education had 6.14 million (31.3%) students enrolled in at least one online class in the fall of 2012 out of a total college population of 19.64 million students (Allen & Seaman, 2011). This was a large increase from the 1.6 million students taking at least one online class in the fall of 2002.

Increasing student access and saving money are important to students and institutions. Online learning can help alleviate the demands on physical classroom space while offering flexible options for busy students and those who may have trouble getting to campus (Jost, Rude-Parkins, & Githens, 2012). The number of students seeking higher education is expected to rise. The middle of the largest generation in history are now traditional aged undergraduates aged 18-24. Burian, et al. (2012) predicted that 80% of students will be enrolled in online classes in 10 years. These growing numbers present a challenge to efforts to promote civic learning at the community college.

### Problem Statement

Civic learning continues to be an important part of the mission and purpose of community colleges. Many community colleges have embraced online learning as a way to reach more students and help to fulfill the open access mission of community colleges (Beatty-Guenter, 2003; Cox, 2005). These online classes share the same goals as traditional seated classes regarding the content, assessments, and learning objectives, such as civic learning. The problem with this trend is that little is known about the nature of civic learning in these online courses nor emerging adults' perspectives concerning civic learning in online classes.

There are several concerns that give this problem urgency. 1) Civic and political engagement is low, especially for emerging adults (Smith, Christoffersen, Davidson, & Snell Herzog, 2011). 2) Community colleges are growing and face considerable challenges such as multiple mandates, overcrowding and reduced funding (Joch, 2011). 3) Online learning continues to grow at a high rate (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Research into the characteristics and civic participation habits of emerging adults have been mixed (Smith et al, 2011; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, and Delli Carpini, 2006). Educators will need to understand the attitudes and inclinations of this group in order to be able to meet the challenge of providing civic learning opportunities. These citizens are growing older and becoming official members of the political culture with the right to vote.

Institutions of higher education, including community colleges, have a traditional mission to offer an educational experience that will help students become more effective participants in civic and political life (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). College enrollment has risen remarkably over the last century, and now colleges are offering more courses online. Scholarship continues to address the varied subjects relevant to this topic including the political and civic knowledge, engagement, and attitudes of emerging adults, trends in higher education and community colleges, and the growth of online learning, but little research has been done where these themes converge. The research study serves as a starting point to develop a knowledge base about the experience of emerging adults regarding civic learning in online classes at the public community college.

### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this research study was to understand the ways in which emerging adult students enrolled in online classes at the public community college perceive civic learning and to understand the role of community college online courses in civic learning. Answers to several research questions related to emerging adults and online classes at public community colleges were pursued in order to develop this understanding:

1. How do emerging adult students define their civic responsibility?
2. How do emerging adult students participate in civic engagement?
3. What skills, values and/or knowledge do emerging adult students hope or expect to learn?
4. What is the significance of the characteristics of asynchronous online courses for potential civic learning?
5. How do online classes at the public community college contribute to the civic learning of emerging adults?

### Statement of Significance

There have been significant changes in the way young adults see themselves as part of a civic community, how they choose to be engaged, and the methods by which they actually do engage (Zukin, et al, 2006). The traditional measures of voting and consuming news may not be adequate to understand the full context. The past decade has seen remarkable advances in digital technologies such as social media as well as dramatic changes both domestically and internationally such as with the economy and increased globalization. This study will help researchers design studies of civic engagement using the metrics that are meaningful and significant to the population of emerging adults

taking online classes at the community college. The answers to the research questions may tell educators what emerging adults think about civic responsibility and their preferred methods of participation.

### Definitions of Key Terms

**Civic learning:** Educational opportunities that enhance the skills, knowledge and values helpful for informed, participatory citizenship

**Community college:** Two-year institutions of higher learning with open enrollment and low tuition and offer vocational training, remedial education and transfer assistance and confer associate degrees, diplomas and certificates

**Online learning:** College courses where 100% of the class interactions and activities take place over the internet

**Emerging adults:** People aged 18-24 in the United States as well as other cultures

**Millennials:** One of several monikers proposed for the generation born 1982-1994 currently in or soon to enter emerging adulthood. Generations are artificial constructs and do not have hard and fast start and finish dates. Other names used to describe this group have been Generation Y, Dot-Nets, Digital Natives and the Net Generation.

### Summary

Civic learning is important for citizens to become informed participants in a democratic culture. Community college faculty, instructional designers and administrators are facing significant challenges to the goal of providing civic learning opportunities for their diverse students. A significant portion of their student body are emerging adults who do not necessarily follow the civic engagement patterns of previous generations. They are being asked to fulfill this part of their institutional mission amidst

changing and uncertain times for higher education. Budgets are down and enrollments are up over the past decade. The data gathered as part of this research study may have implications for policy makers such as curriculum managers and service learning coordinators who design assessments of civic learning.

It is important that community colleges do not lose sight of their civic mission while also tending to these other responsibilities. This study can help by providing faculty, administrators and staff data to better understand the hopes, expectations and experiences of emerging adult students towards civic learning in online classes. The context for this research will be explored further in the literature review of chapter two.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This was a study of a four intersecting phenomena. Civic learning, community colleges, emerging adulthood and online learning each have considerable literature, some of which will be reviewed here.

### Civic Learning

The research purpose of this study was to better understand an activity, civic learning, as experienced by a particular group, emerging adults, in a defined format, online learning, at a certain type of institution, the community college. Civic learning has been defined for this study as those educational opportunities that enhance the skills, knowledge and values helpful for informed, participatory citizenship. This conception borrows from the definition of civic education offered by Campbell, Levinson and Hess (2012): "the knowledge, skills, attitudes and experience to prepare someone to be an active, informed participant in democratic life" (p. 1). The definition used for civic learning was chosen because it encouraged participants to think broadly as they described their experience from a student perspective. The term civic encourages consideration of experiences beyond the political and learning implies the perspective of the student, rather than education which implies the perspective of the institution.

Civic learning is a frequently used term in recent literature (Boyte; 2002; Checkoway; 2012; Geary Schneider, 2011; Kanter, 2012; Middaugh & Kahne, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary and Office of



Postsecondary Education, 2012). Kanter and Schneider (2013) use the category of 'civic learning and engagement' to refer to "educational experiences that prepare students for democracy by developing their civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions through learning and practice (p. 8).

Civic learning is one of several terms that have been used to describe education designed to prepare students for democratic life. Words such as civic, citizenship, community, democratic, education, engagement, learning, literacy, and political have been interchanged to produce a complex mix of terms and phrases. This variety has made it difficult for researchers and practitioners to find common terms and definitions (Berger, 2011; Lawry, Laurison & VanAntwerpen, 2006; Levine, 2007; Jacoby, 2009; Saltmarsh, 2005).

Civic education is one such popular term (Knight & Pearl, 2000; London, 2010; Neufeld & Davis, 2010). Butts (1975, 1980) argued that the political goal of education should be to motivate and prepare all citizens to participate in the political process. This should be done by cultivating the values, knowledge and participation required for citizens to make deliberate choices. Guttman (1993) argued that the end goal of civic education is to "create democratic citizens, people who are willing and able to govern their own lives and share in governing their society" (p. 1). She stated that civic education should work in opposition to the idea of blind allegiance to authority and that students should be prepared to recreate society rather than replicate it. Burch (2007) argued that civic education should be used to promote an inquiry into the nature of what society says about national identity. "Students must learn to identify and judge their history and civic

mythology: what is good, true and worth defending versus what may be false, deceptive and worthy of disavowal or condemnation" (p. 112).

Citizenship education is another commonly used term (Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Jamieson, 2013). Print and Coleman (2003) found this has evolved to produce a model distinct from earlier versions. They found citizenship education has come to involve the same three sets of learning used in the definition for this study: knowledge, skills, and values. The types of knowledge they cited include democratic processes, national identity, and systems of government. The skills included critical reflection and inquiry. They defined values as that "which underpin democratic citizenship and civil society including social justice, democratic processes, social cohesion, intercultural understanding, and ecological sustainability" (p. 131).

Milner (2002) used the term civic literacy to describe "the knowledge and ability capacity of citizens to make sense of their political world...manifesting itself in the form of political knowledge and willingness in the form of political participation" (p.1). These terms and definitions, while varied, tend to share an emphasis on the knowledge, experience and values needed for democratic participation.

## Democracy

This study works from an understanding that governments of the people, democracies, are a good idea and preferable to dictatorships and other totalitarian states. The most basic definition of a democracy is a system of government in which all citizens of voting age have equal political rights and can participate in elections (Huang, 2014). Sirianni and Friedland (2005) defined democracy as "the shared work of citizens acting pragmatically to solve public problems and to build a commonwealth" (p. 135). Dewey

(1916) asserted that "democracy is more than a form of government, it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 121). Democratic theory runs along a spectrum from elitist forms (Schumpeter, 1942 as cited in Teorell, 2006) at one end where citizens are merely required to vote for leaders who then make decisions independently to deliberative models (Guttman & Thompson, 2004; Mansbridge et al, 2010) that call on citizens to share their views and push for change.

If democracies are preferable to other options for governing society, what is required to make this form of government function best? Many political theorists find that a government of the people functions best when it has an educated citizenry able to participate in the political process (Hochschild, 2011; Levine, 2007). Delli Carpini & Keeter (1996) argue that "an informed citizenry is a common thread that implicitly ties together all theories of democracy" (p. xii). Musil and colleagues found that "as a democracy, the United States depends on a knowledgeable, public-spirited and engaged population" (AACU, 2012, p.2).

Others contended that democracies can indeed function with a citizenry that is not so well informed (Schattschneider, 1960). Schudson (1998) conducted an historical analysis of civic life and argued that it is a high bar that citizens are expected to clear to be truly informed, because there is so much information out there concerning many various issues affecting the country. He wrote: "I would propose that the obligation of citizens to know enough to participate intelligently in government affairs be understood as a monitorial obligation. Citizens can be monitorial rather than informed" (p. 310).

Schudson argued that only a superficial knowledge of issues is necessary for citizens to make decisions, which would reduce the need of the education system to help

students attain a strong knowledge of all the issues related to democratic society. This follows the assertion of Walter Lippman: "if democracy requires omnicompetence and omniscience from its citizens, it is a lost cause" (cited in Schudson, 1998, p. 310). These various scholars agreed that citizens need knowledge; they disagreed on how much. The level of education needed for citizenship has changed as the practices of participation have evolved and the amount and variety of citizens involved has increased over the history of the United States.

### History of Citizenship

Schudson (1998) also found that the participatory role of citizenry, and the degree to which they needed to be informed, has changed since the founding of the Republic. There are four different overlapping eras, with traces of each still at work today. The first era had a politics of assent where only the members of leading families stood for elections, and voters publicly announced their decisions with more regard to social alliances than political issues. This era was characterized by elections dominated by powerful, wealthy families. There was little formal education beyond the primary grades generally, and even less in some regions of the country. Civic learning took place in informal settings such as the home, church, workplace or tavern.

A shift to mass democracy began in the early 19th-century. Party loyalty counted for more than political issues and filling out ballots was still not always a private affair. This era was marked by a growth to near universal white male suffrage as property restrictions and literacy tests were removed in many places allowing landless white men to vote. Some of these restrictions returned to southern states during Reconstruction. The northern states began to grow the system of public education and more colleges were

formed, especially after the Morrill Land Grants of 1862 and 1890 set aside federal land for the creation of colleges to cater to rural areas (Gelber, 2011). Still, most of the civic learning was provided by political parties that were more involved in peoples' daily lives.

Schudson (1998) called the next era that of the “informed citizen” (p. 6) which began in the late-19th century as progressive reformers enacted new voting rules to stem what they saw as corruption from political parties. This was the time when voting became a private affair. Voters could cross party lines without fear of any adverse consequences, and their ideas about how candidates stood on political issues of the day became more important. Voters were now making private, individual decisions, so they needed a firmer grasp of the issues rather than relying on social elites or political parties. The progressive era also saw an emphasis on the importance of formal education in primary, secondary, and postsecondary schools to include civic education.

The latest era of the “rights bearing citizen” (Schudson, 1998, p. 8) began in the 1960s, but did not diminish the importance of the informed citizen. Schudson (1998) argued that the courts, beginning with the Palko case of 1935, determined that most of the Bill of Rights applied to state laws and created a new citizen type that had more rights, knew about those rights, and was prepared to defend those rights. Congress also helped to advance the rights movement by enacting new laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Civic Learning was becoming increasingly formalized as the percentage of Americans going to high school and beyond increased.

#### Education

The history and claims provided thus far provide a simple rationale for formal civic learning. Democracy is a preferred form of government, democracies work better

when the citizenry have enough knowledge to be effective participants, and an effective system of education can help citizens develop the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective participants. Democratic society will be improved as better decisions are made by informed voters who understand how the political system works, are aware of important issues, and recognize a responsibility to be engaged. The competencies necessary for engaged citizenship are not innate; they must be learned (Carpenter, 2013; Parker, 2003).

Government has historically assumed a responsibility for the provision of civic learning since the early years of the Republic (Jamieson, 2013). Thomas Jefferson wrote about this in a letter to William Jarvis:

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. (Jefferson, 1820)

John Adams also believed that the preservation of rights and liberties depended on an educated citizenry. He wrote into the Massachusetts state constitution that legislators had the duty to provide that system of education (Colby, et al. 2003). Neither Jefferson nor Adams, both of whom died on July 4, 1826, would see the creation of a universal system of public instruction in their lifetimes, but it did happen eventually.

Many scholars since Dewey have made their own arguments for the importance of civic learning to a democratic society and the most effective pedagogic strategy with which to undertake it. A common assertion is that knowledge is necessary for effective citizen participation, and that education is necessary to help people obtain it (Campbell, Levinson & Hess, 2012; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Levine, 2007; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). An informed citizenry depends on a system of education that includes a

curriculum for civic education. Colby, et al. (2003) argued that education should help students develop the ability to think clearly about issues, augment their sense of personal responsibility, and improve their civic knowledge.

This education takes place at all educational levels. Some have claimed civic learning to be the primary purpose of public schooling (Campbell, Levinson & Hess, 2012). Carpenter (2013) found that social studies instructors realize that the future of democracy depends on a well-informed citizenry and accept civic education as part of their mission. Helfenbein and Shudak (2009) argued that social studies teachers "carry a heavy and disturbing burden of intellectual and more responsibility concerning the instruction in and of democracy" (p. 8).

There have been disagreements about the nature and efficacy of civic education (Jamieson, 2013). Ross and Marker (2005) pointed to two areas of contention within the social studies reform movement: the emphasis on the cultural heritage of the dominant society versus the practice of critical thought and the conceptions of citizenship as either social reproduction or social reconstruction. Martens and Gainous (2013) wrote that political scientists had looked on civic education as ineffectual and largely ignored it in their research until the work Niemi and Junn (1998) encouraged them to take another look. Galston (2001) found that after decades of disagreement, a consensus was emerging that replaced this either/or dichotomy with both/and conceptions. Galston also wrote that another emerging consensus was that competent democratic citizenship did require a basic level of knowledge to make reasoned judgments which civic education can provide.

Cuenca (2011) found that "deliberative experiences are noticeably absent from the current practices and curricula of social studies classrooms" (p. 43). This follows a trend

of reduced focus on citizenship and social studies in general over the past few decades (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Jamieson, 2013), in part due to legislation emphasizing standardized testing in other disciplines such as math, reading and science. This perception of a declining emphasis is matched by the results from assessments such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that showed that a majority of elementary and secondary students are not proficient in civics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

The last few decades have seen several calls and suggestions to improve civic learning and civic education. The Carnegie Corporation created the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools to improve the quality of civic learning in schools (Jamieson, 2013). This group has released two reports: *The Civic Mission of Schools* (Carnegie Corporation of New York, CIRCLE, 2003) and *Guardian of Democracy: Civic Mission of Schools* (Gould, 2011). A more recent report highlighted the importance of civic learning at the college level (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, (2012). *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*. Washington DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities. The Department of Education (2012) also released a report called "Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy: A Road Map and Call to Action".

College is an important part of the system of formal education that can help prepare students for the responsibilities of citizenship. Higher education has long had the mission of educating students to be prepared for citizenship (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and CIRCLE, 2006; Lawry, Laurison & VanAntwerpen, 2006; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; Thomas &



Levine, 2011). Musil and the writers of a Crucible Moment (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012) found that higher education plays an important role in the U.S. democracy and "calls on the higher education community...to embrace civic learning and democratic engagement as an undisputed educational priority for all of higher education" (p. 2).

Geary Schneider (2011) was concerned about the future of US democracy and called on increased investment in and attention to civic learning to help sustain democracy into the future. Thomas (2008) wrote "it is now time for higher education to focus directly on democracy both as a form of government and as a set of principles and practices that guide how people interact and work together everyday to improve society" (p. 12). Levine (2014) claimed that colleges and universities can help address the nation's social problems by recalling its civic mission and help students develop the core elements of citizenship: deliberation, collaboration and relationship-building.

Several scholars found that colleges and universities have strayed from this original goal and should renew their efforts with civic learning (Boyte & Hollander, 1999; Jacoby, 2009). The movement to rejuvenate the democratic mission of higher education began in earnest in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1985, Newman called for "restoring higher education to its original purpose of preparing graduates for a life of involved and committed citizenship" (as cited in Saltmarsh and Hartley, 2011). The same year saw the formation of Campus Compact as an organization to assist colleges and universities with civic engagement efforts and now serves over 1,200 institutions. Boyer (1996) wrote that higher education should serve a larger purpose. Over 500 university

presidents signed the President's Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Education (Boyte & Hollander, 1999) to renew the civic mission of higher education.

While there is a broad consensus that civic learning should be part of the mission of higher education, some scholars dissent from this position. Bankston (2013) was concerned that the promotion of civic learning could potentially have the consequence of limiting free thought. "The all-encompassing nature of the contemporary civic engagement movement makes the threat to intellectual diversity especially alarming" (p. 633). Fish (2005) wrote that while it is fine for colleges to teach courses in subjects such as citizenship and government "I do not believe that we as instructors should be concerned with producing moralities, or civic responsibility, in our students" (p. 44).

The last two decades have also seen efforts to improve and vary the college experience to improve civic engagement. Two of the most prominent are diversity education and service learning. Service learning occurs when college students work with a community organization as part of the curriculum of a course. Carrington and Iyer (2011) defined it as "a pedagogy, a philosophy and a form of inquiry that integrates classroom instruction with community service activities" (p. 1). One of the goals of service learning is to further students' civic learning (Saltmarsh, 2005). Service learning is also growing at the secondary level, where Zaff & Lerner (2010) found "it has become an important strategy for positive youth development and civic contribution by young people" (p. 21).

While service learning has been around for decades and takes influence from the philosophy of John Dewey (Slavkin, 2007), Harkavy and Hartley (2010) traced its roots back to Benjamin Franklin. The movement to incorporate service learning into the

education of college students began in the 1980s and picked up in popularity in the 1990s when it was integrated more closely with academic study. Saltmarsh wrote in 2005 that "support for service learning and other civic engagement activities is stronger now than at another time in recent history (p. 52). Service learning can facilitate an engaged pedagogy where students can "connect to a particular community, and through those connections, students begin to identify their civic roles within that community" (Mayhew & Engberg, 2011).

Service learning can also be a way to encourage more awareness and respect for diversity (Desmond, Stahl & Graham, 2011). Diversity or multicultural education as a concept for higher education emerged from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and has the goal of teaching for a better understanding of different cultures and cultural perspectives (Petrova, 2012; Sobol, 1990). "Multicultural education in the United States has historically reflected particular commitments to democracy, equity and social justice" (Demerath & Mattheis, 2012, p. 2).

Dewey (1916) found that in a democracy, there are many individuals with varied interests and skills and that these people and the groups they represent should have the freedom to interact and learn from each other. This exposure to diversity is an important aspect of how people learn. "Diversity of stimulation means novelty, and novelty means challenge to thought" (p. 118). Having defined what constitutes a democratic society, Dewey went on to explain the kind of education necessary to sustain it: "Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder" (p. 137).

Parker (2003) agreed that civic learning works best when educators combine citizenship education with multicultural education. The cultural pluralism that exists in the United States is an beneficial asset, not a problem to be overcome. The specific teaching strategy Parker recommended as a way to best take advantage of cultural pluralism is deliberation. This process goes back at least as far as Socrates and involves people proposing, listening, considering several courses of action in relation to a certain situation and deciding what solution is best for all concerned (Michaels, O'Connor, & Resnick, 2008).

This kind of dialogue is helpful in two ways. First, participants can learn new knowledge and gain an understanding for the perspective of others, but second, they are able to practice the communication skills necessary to have an effective discussion about these kinds of issues. Parker (2003) goes on: "when a diverse group of people deliberate together, they create a new 'we' in which differences are regarded as an asset, listening as well as expressing occurs, stories and opinions are exchanged, and a decision is forged together. In this way deliberation is a public-building activity" (p. 80).

Civil discourse has been found to be an effective approach for promoting civic learning (Walsh, 2008). Herbst (2014) defined it as "the ability to have a conversation, not a one-sided soliloquy but an engagement of two or more people in the exchange of ideas, information, opinion, and/or positions" (p. 7). It builds on the concept of deliberative democracy, which Mansbridge, et al. (2010) described as decision making where all participants affected by the outcome have equal access to influence the process. Hess and Gatti (2010) found that the richness in the diversity of college classrooms make them ideal sites for deliberative discourse. They argued that diversity is important

because discussion of controversial issues leads to tolerance of diverse political perspectives, which is good for democracy.

Promoting civil discourse in the 2nd decade of the 21st century means educators will have to contend with a public discourse that is sometimes less than civil (Levine, 2014). McAvoy and Hess (2013) discussed this topic with high school teachers and found that many felt that the obligation to teach students the practice of civil discourse becomes even more critical when considering the vitriolic language and intense partisanship emerging adults witness outside the classroom.

Civic education can happen in the classroom in addition to campus and community. The content of the subject matter in disciplines like history, sociology and political science and several others can be useful for students to both build up their factual knowledge through the study of content, and practice analytical and critical thinking skills through assignments such as discussion board activities (Lane, 2014; Luckhardt, 2014; Peace, 2010; Rickles, et al., 2013). Lawry, Laurison & VanAntwerpen (2009) stated one of the best ways to provide civic education was to infuse it across the curriculum. Another technique that could be applied in any subject is the idea of the democratic classroom. Spiezio (2009) wrote that the first principle of this approach is to "create a social environment consistent with the principle of intrinsic equality" (p. 91). Here the running of the classroom becomes an exercise in democracy and engagement.

There are reasons to believe that education does increase engagement. The more education people have, the likelier they were to be involved civically (Millennials Civic Health Index, 2013). Brand (2010) found that students who choose to participate in campus engagement activities are positively affecting their long term engagement. Other

studies did not find such a correlation, and claim that the only measure of civic engagement shown to increase with college attendance is voting (ISI, 2006). A survey of 24,000 students showed only a third claiming they felt strongly that their civic awareness had expanded (DOE, 2012). While the literature is mixed, there are enough positive examples for educators to continue civic learning and to gauge its effectiveness on promoting civic engagement.

### Community College

The community college has become a unique and integral part of the United States' system of higher education, serving several important functions including college transfer, basic education, lifelong learning, and workforce development (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Higginbottom & Romano, 2006; Pusser & Levin, 2009). They are open access institutions that meet students wherever they are on their education pathway and are attractive to many because of their lower tuition and accessible campuses (Boggs, 2011; Smith Morest, 2013). The 13 million students who attended a community college in 2012 included 8 million degree seeking students (AACC, 2013).

These students constitute "the most diverse student body in history" (Boggs, 2011, p. 3). Saenz, et al. (2011) found that no other sector of postsecondary education has seen the rate of change and growth in student population that community colleges have experienced over the last 50 years. Students vary in age, academic ability, socioeconomic status, career goals, race, gender, religion, and family obligations (Hornak, 2009; Pusser & Levin, 2009). Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez-Orozco (2011) point to the increasing number of immigrant students attending community college, more than any

other type of postsecondary institution. Most community college students also work. The AACC (2013) reported that 21% of full time students also hold full time jobs and 59% have part time jobs. The students are able to attend school full time, but many attend part-time due to other commitments around work and family.

Smith Morest (2013) found that the variance in ability of incoming students makes it necessary for community colleges to offer a broad array of academic programs. Students are scattered across a continuum of progress from those seeking to learn to read and write English or earn their GED to professionals with degrees seeking to update or enhance their skillset. Barreno and Traut (2012) found that transferability of courses to four-year institutions and the quality and availability of academic programs were two of the primary factors for students who chose to attend the community college.

Haberler and Levin (2014) described four promising practices characteristic of successful programs at the community college: cohesion, connection, cooperation and consistency. Cohesion refers to the ability of a program and personnel to function as a rational unit. Connection refers to the relationships maintained both within college staff and external parties. Cooperation describes a culture of working together towards common goals. Consistency was defined as having a pattern of regular behaviors promoting consistent interaction and events.

Community colleges have been around since the start of the 20th century, undergoing major growth in the 1950s and especially the 1960s following the release of a report from a special taskforce on higher education called by President Truman (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). The Truman Commission stressed the need for colleges to not only meet the educational needs of returning G.I.s and other students, but to expand their civic

learning mission as well. "The first and most essential charge upon higher education is that at all its levels and in all its fields or specializations, it shall be the carrier of democratic values, ideals and processes" (The President's Commission on Higher Education, 1948).

Higginbottom & Romano (2006) believed that community colleges should provide civic learning and that this can be done primarily through the general education curriculum. They do point out that the mission of workforce development and the trend toward greater accountability and measured outcomes could prove to be obstacles. The National Task Force on Civic Engagement and Democratic Engagement (2012) advocated for civic learning at all levels of education and stressed that community colleges especially should not lose sight of this amidst trying to develop the workforce. "Many business leaders understand that education for the modern workforce should not displace education for citizenship" (p. 9).

Albert (2004) and Fonte (2009) are both former community college presidents who promoted civic learning and engagement. Franco (2002) wrote about the civic learning benefits of service learning at the community college. Harkavy (2006) claimed that "the goal for universities should be to contribute significantly to developing and sustaining democratic schools, communities and societies (p. 5). Harkavy wrote that liberal arts institutions, state colleges and community colleges share with research institutions the "noble purpose (p.6)" of education to improve society.

Workforce development is a major function of the community college and receives much attention (ACT, 2013; The White House, 2009). Some of these efforts have come as the unemployment rate rose after the recession of 2008 (D'Amico,



Katsinas, & Friedel, 2012). Higginbottom & Romano (2006) thought this trend towards emphasizing workforce development gained momentum during the economic turbulence of the late 1970s and were concerned that "the drive for accountability threatens to push liberal education into the background and substitute a narrow functionalist outlook" (p. 27). They found that a liberal or general education is an important way for community college students to have opportunities for civic learning. Battistoni & Longo (2005) believed that "workforce development and civic engagement can be complementary visions for the future of higher education" (p. 7). They offered three specific areas for this intersection to be both a private good and a public good: creating civic professionals, developing necessary skills, and recognizing the importance of place.

There are positive correlations between education level, income level, and civic involvement (Hillygus, 2005; National Conference on Citizenship, 2007). Those with some college or an associates degree are more likely to volunteer and have an understanding of political issues (Baum, Ma, Payea, 2013). Higher income has also been linked to greater levels of civic engagement (Coley & Sum, 2012). Belfield and Bailey (2011) looked at different studies and found there to be near universal agreement that there were positive financial gains for those with an Associates' degree: 13% for males and 22% for females.

Civic learning has been shown to be part of the student experience at the community college. Fiume (2009) gave several examples of how this can become part of what happens in the classroom, focusing on service learning and related skills/activities such as reflection and classroom discussion. Albert (2004) found that the nature of what a community college does makes it well suited for the kinds of civic learning that involve

engaging the community. "Given the already existing connections between community colleges and their local communities, community colleges represent a unique societal investment for renewing our nation's democratic foundations" (p. 46). This situation is further enhanced because of the ways in which students at the community college already live and work in their community.

### Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood refers to the life stage between adolescence and young adulthood and typically includes men and women from 18 through and sometimes beyond the late 20s. Arnett (2004) put forward the term to describe those who have more freedom than adolescents who still live with their parents, but not yet encumbered by the typical adult responsibilities of marriage, parenthood, career and home ownership. Emerging adults are using this period in their lives to explore different possibilities. This also entails having to cope with the instability that comes from low income and frequent change.

The civic and political engagement of emerging adults has been found to be different than other age groups, encouraging the use of different metrics to assess levels of participation (Zukin, et al., 2006). Political engagement includes running for office, voting, volunteering time or donating money to a campaign, and learning about the issues and discussing them with others (Zukin, et al.). Persuading others to adopt what you feel is the correct stance on a certain policy is another important kind of political engagement. Volunteering and educating are also important acts of civic engagement and involve a wide variety of community activities such as helping at a church, food drive or the local school.

A decline across all levels of civic and political engagement has become a concern in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 2003; Campbell, et al, 2012). The percentage of the eligible population that votes in presidential election years has fluctuated between a high of 64.8% in 1960 and a low of 51.4% in 1996 (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2012). Since 1945 the U.S. has ranked 120th in voter participation levels in a ranking of 167 countries (Pintor, Gratschew and Sullivan, 2002). Evidence points to lower participation at campaign rallies and other political events and public meetings (Putnam, 2000). There is also less involvement in community organizations.

Putnam (2000) derived the title of his influential book, *Bowling Alone*, from the diminishing participation in bowling league memberships, but not in bowling. He saw the shift from communal team bowling to individual bowling as a descriptor for a general decline in civic engagement. Putnam and Skocpol (2003) argued that this drop in membership in community organizations is indicative of diminished levels of civic engagement.

Another concern is the low level of political knowledge evident in society today. This is not a novel concern as historical figures as far back as Socrates bemoaned the political educational level of the citizens. Commentators in the United States have for years pointed to the overall population's low literacy levels regarding matters of politics and government (Schumpeter, 1942; Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, 1960 as cited in Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) looked at surveys of public political knowledge since the 1940s and found consistently low levels of political knowledge. For example 58% of Americans in 2004 wrongly connected Saddam

Hussein to the September 11 attacks and only 11% could name the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (Somin, 2004). The first is an example of a misinformed population and the second is an example of a gap of political knowledge.

Delli Carpini & Keeter (1996) argued that this is bad for democracy since "knowledge about politics is a critical component of citizenship" and is essential "for citizens to be able to identify their real interests and take effective advantage of the civic opportunities afforded to them" ( p. 3). Niemi (2012) warned of reading too much into survey results assessing political knowledge, claiming "experts often think people should know more than they do" (p. 21).

Many factors may be contributing to this apparent decline in the political literacy of the population. One of which may be the ways in which the political culture has changed over the past four decades and created disillusionment in the people in terms of their trust in politicians and their belief in the ability of government to operate effectively (Zukin, et al, 2006). For instance, when news of criminal actions Richard Nixon committed against political opponents came to light, he not only became the only U.S. President in history to resign, but his actions subsequently dampened public trust in politicians and enthusiasm for the political process.

Ronald Reagan was elected president in 1980 after campaigning on the idea that government was the problem and not the solution, further cementing the impression that government was flawed and should be viewed with skepticism. There have been numerous other actions that caused disillusionment and resulted in lack of trust for some citizens in both politics and business, namely Iran-Contra, S&L, Enron, the Clinton impeachment, weapons of mass destruction, Hurricane Katrina, outing of Valerie Plame,

enhanced interrogation techniques, Deepwater Horizon, Jack Abramoff, sub-prime mortgage, government shutdowns, congressional dysfunction, NSA wiretapping and the national debt.

Political participation and levels of knowledge; however, are not the only ways to assess engagement. Volunteering is one area that has seen positive gains in recent years. Nearly 27% of Americans reported having volunteered in 2009 (Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Conference on Citizenship, 2010). Another measure of civic engagement is social connectedness; 89.1% of Americans in 2009 reported having dinner with family members, and 45.8% talked to their neighbors (Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Conference on Citizenship, 2010). While social connectedness does not necessarily mean that civic or political matters are discussed, there is the opportunity for informal civic education or conversations about current events important to the community.

Opportunities for social connectedness have increased with the availability of the World Wide Web since 1993 and social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Google Plus that started to become popular around 2005. These networks provide opportunities for immediate interactions with others about politics and for the retrieval and sharing of news and information relevant to those political discussions. Rainie, Smith, Scholzman, Brady & Verba (2012) reported "66% of social media users have employed the platforms to post their thoughts about civic and political issues, react to others' postings, press friends to act on issues and vote, 'like' and link to others' content, and belong to groups formed on social networking sites" (p.1).

While social media and the internet do offer conveniences to those with broadband access and devices, others worry about the effects of a digital divide (Hindman, 2009; Putnam, 2000). The problem of the digital divide is exacerbated by a decline in the reach and resources of traditional media sources such as newspapers, magazines and local television news. The Times Picayune of New Orleans has decided to move to offer only three days a week of a printed paper. The Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy (2009) stated "in a democracy, the very idea of second-class citizenship is unacceptable; yet, for many, second-class information citizenship is looming (p. 1). The proliferation of digital news formats and social media and the decline of print media are changing the ways citizens, especially emerging adults, are choosing to stay informed, which may have implications for civic and political engagement.

Overall, there are reasons to believe that levels of political and civic participation in the United States are low and perhaps being constructed differently. Over 41% of citizens eligible to vote choose not to do so (Coley & Sum, 2012). Membership in community organizations is down. Citizens indicate having less trust in government and elected officials. In spite of these, there are bright spots, such as higher levels of volunteering and increasing conversations about politics and current affairs via the internet and social media.

The generation now in or entering emerging adulthood has been affected by the macrosocial changes explained above. So are the emerging adults of today different from those of past generations? Opinions vary as to the level of millennial engagement. Depending on what you read, the millennials are either the last best hope for democracy

(Greenburg & Weber, 2008; Levine, 2007) or the end of civic engagement (Bauerlein, 2008, Smith, et al, 2011). Putnam (2000) saw a general and significant decline in civic and community memberships not because members no longer wanted to participate, but because they were not replaced by younger members.

While voting turnout has trended upward the last two presidential election cycles, the 18-24 age group still votes at a lower rate than older Americans (CIRCLE, 2013). The story of volunteering and joining civic associations is also mixed. Some report that millennials are volunteering in larger numbers than older citizens (Levine, 2007), while other studies do not see such a trend (Smith, 2012).

Smith and colleagues (2010) conducted in depth interviews of 230 emerging adults. These discussions yielded qualitative data that painted a picture of what they call the darkside of emerging adulthood, characterized by moral illiteracy, excessive drinking, rampant consumerism, sexual promiscuity and political and civic disengagement. Based on the answers given to questions about political participation, the subjects were placed into one of six different categories: apathetic (27%), uninformed (13%), distrustful (19%), disempowered (10%), marginally political (27%) and genuinely political (4%).

The most basic measure of political engagement is voting, and the results are mixed. The good news is that the percentage of the youth vote has risen over the last 5 presidential elections from 35.6% in 1996 to around 50% for the 2012 election (CIRCLE, 2009, 2012). The bad news is that this is still the age group least likely to vote. Overall turnout of eligible voters in 2012 was 57.5%, down from 62.3 in 2008 (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2012).

Voting and running for office are two acts of political engagement that require meeting certain criteria. Participants must be a citizen and be old enough to vote or hold office. Other forms of engagement do not have such criteria, and, as Levine (2007) pointed out, one can be civically engaged without being a citizen. The actions of the Dreamers in recent years makes that clear (Engler, 2013). These are undocumented students brought to the United States as children who are fighting for the right to continue their education into college and be set on a path to citizenship. They would be considered political activists, which overall is not a popular form of engagement for millennials (Levine, 2007).

Another form of civic engagement available to most people is volunteering. Many scholars report that this is the kind of engagement that millennials find appealing (Levine, 2007; Lopez & Kiesa, 2009). The 2013 Millennials Civic Health Index, produced by the National Conference on Citizenship in partnership with CIRCLE, Mobilize.org and the Harvard University Institute of Politics, finds that "their rates of volunteering and community service are much higher than those of their parents in the 1970s and 1980s" (p. 4). Smith (2012) arrived at a different conclusion. He found that the subjects believe they do not have the time to volunteer or the money to give to charity. "What emerged from our interviews with emerging adults is their extremely low estimations of anyone's ability to make a positive impact in the world" (p. 211).

Smith, et al. (2011) offers some explanations for what may account for what he found to be millennials' disengagement from civic and public life. One reason may be that they see the world of politics and government as broken and not worth their participation. They also found that emerging adults exhibit certain characteristics that



may discourage participation. These include moral confusion and disorientation, mass consumer materialism, individualistic relativism and technological submersion in interpersonal relationships in private settings. Another consideration for levels of engagement is the life stage that young people are in when these measurements are made. Many metrics of civic and political engagement show gains as people get older, receive more education, and make more money.

More evidence of civic and political disengagement can be found in the low levels of political knowledge that millennials seem to have (Bauerlein, 2009). A 2006 survey of college students conducted by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute revealed some unsettling data. More than half of college seniors did not know that the "Bill of Rights explicitly prohibits the establishment of an official religion in the United States" (p.10). More than 75% could not explain the purpose of the Monroe Doctrine. Almost half did not know that the Federalist Papers were written in support of the ratification of the Constitution. Over half could not place the establishment of the Jamestown colony in the correct century. Overall, 53.2% of college seniors scored an F.

Testing of primary and secondary students also showed poor results. On the 2006 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in civics, roughly one-third of students in grades 4,8 and 12 scored below basic. What was especially worrying to Niemi (2012) is that knowledge levels seem to have declined relative to older people. Levine (2012) cautions against reading too much into the NAEP scores and the level required for proficiency, which he finds are arbitrary cut-offs, and that students perform better when ranked against students from other countries.

The literature reviewed here on the subject of millennials' level of engagement presents a mixed picture. Participation seems low when measured by traditional actions such as voting, but others see cause for optimism due to higher levels of volunteering and openness to diversity. While some see the situation as more dire than others, all believe there is room for improvement. College can be a place to address the need for improved engagement.

### Online Learning

Distance education defined as a separation of the members of a formal learning community is not a new practice (Cejda, 2010; Jones, 2011). Correspondence courses that used the postal service have been around since the 19th century and television became a medium for distance education by the middle of the 20th century (Noble, 2002). Today's online learners use the internet (Perry & Pilati, 2011).

The internet, mobile devices, and social networking are revolutionary cultural changes that have led to an explosion in the amount of information available to those with the means to access it (Rainnie & Wellman, 2012). This has greatly increased the opportunities students and people in general have to learn (Parsad & Lewis, 2008; Tuomi, 2013). These digital technologies have been used by some to create new environments. Zembylas and Vrasidas (2005) found that the internet affords people the chance to crisscross discourses and redefine one's identity. The internet allows for more diversity in online deliberation (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Delli Carpini, 2012).

Online learning comes in formal, nonformal, and informal modes (Heo & Lee, 2013). Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) defined informal learning as "the everyday experiences from which we learn something" (p. 24) and nonformal learning as

"organized activities outside educational institutions" (p. 24). Formal learning occurs at educational institutions leading to credits for degrees and diplomas.

Millions learn informally (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2013) and nonformally each day from websites such as Wikipedia (Baytiyeh & Pfaffman, 2010), YouTube (Tan, 2013), and social media networks (Chen & Bryer, 2012). Formal research universities such as M.I.T. have provided the public with informal learning opportunities through the OpenCourseWare movement (Abelson, 2008; Carson, 2009) and services such as iTunes U (Germany, 2011). Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, are free courses from leading research universities such as Stanford, Harvard, MIT, and dozens more through providers such as EDx, Udacity and Coursera (Flynn, 2013; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2013; Percy, 2014). Enrollment in these courses often surpass 100,000 students.

Higher education institutions have also used the internet to expand formal, credit earning course offerings through online learning with sustained growth over the last ten years. The number of students taking at least one online course has increased from 1.6 million in 2002 to 7.1 million in 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Nearly 70% of chief academic leaders said that online learning was an important part of their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Increasing access to higher education has been one reason for this growth (Jost, Rude-Parkins, & Githens, 2012).

Another reason colleges are interested in online learning is to help alleviate the cost problem affecting both students and institutions, especially the nation's public community colleges that have seen declining state support (Katsinas & Friedel, 2010; Mullin, 2010). College tuition has risen more than 100% above the Consumer Price Index since 1981 (Lillus & Tian, 2008). High tuition cost has received great attention in the

press and been the subject of a documentary film (Participant Media, 2014). Bowen (2013) proposed that online learning could be part of the solution for the cost disease of education, where productivity cannot be increased by substituting capital for labor. Christensen & Eyring (2011) claimed that colleges and universities must become more affordable, primarily by taking advantage of the cost saving potential online learning technology.

The evolving field of online learning has led to different practices. Classes may be fully online or blended with face to face instruction. The online portion of a blended class can be as basic as an electronic syllabus to a highly social multi-media space. Fully online classes may deploy both synchronous and asynchronous activities. Synchronous describes those activities that involve the participation of two or more people in real time. Conference calls and video chat are examples of synchronous learning.

More online learning occurs in asynchronous activities where each individual is acting and responding on their own schedule within a framework of deadlines and other policies. The most popular form is threaded discussion forums. Blogs, wikis, writing assignments, quizzes, watching videos and reading are also other examples of asynchronous activities. Certain activities may alternate between synchronous and asynchronous. These are semi-synchronous practices such as texting or instant messaging. Texting can occur in practical real time when each party responds right away, but interruption or distraction can cause delays in responses or dropped conversations. Moderating asynchronous discussion forums can be challenging (Browne, 2003). Most of the literature concerning online classes has been based on studies done in the setting of graduate school work (Cox, Carr, & Hall, 2004; Nagel, Blignaut, & Cronjé, 2009; Qiu,

Hewitt, & Brett, 2012). This is perhaps the result of convenience sampling where university researchers can use their own online classes to create certain environments and run experiments to collect useful data.

Community colleges have been very involved in online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2007), despite the limited attention paid to them within the scholarship of online learning. They are good sites for experimentation because their inherent adaptability helps them navigate change (Cejda, 2010). Class sizes are also usually smaller than those at a university, making it easier for instructors to engage each student. The diverse nature of the student body at community colleges holds positives for online learning in threaded discussions, but also presents a potential limit on access for students who can't access the technology or understand it, which is possible with a wide range in terms of age and socioeconomic status.

Meyer (2014) interviewed 11 community college faculty with experience in online learning to find out what they thought instructors could do to improve student learning productivity. Their responses focused on using different approaches to increase student engagement and attention on learning, using the right assessment techniques, and being passionate about teaching. Increasing student participation was seen as an important step towards improving the online experience. The participants also mentioned the usefulness of offering a wide variety of resources for engaging the content of the course. A unanimous response was the importance of communication between the instructor and students.

Cox (2005) and associates conducted a study of 15 community colleges between 2000 and 2002. They found that "the construction of 'online education' is integrally linked

to three other institutional myths: 'access', 'competition', and 'technological literacy'" (p. 1768). Access was a myth because of the lower retention rates in online courses. Competition was a myth because the for-profit schools' higher tuition rates dissuaded likely community college students from enrolling. Technological literacy was a myth because most of the online classes offered at that time essentially replicated the text-based nature of face-to-face courses and did not take advantage of the interactive opportunities of digital technology.

Cox (2005) found that the institutional imperative to offer online courses was more important than doing a thorough analysis of the quality of the teaching and learning. It is important to point out that data for this study was gathered from 2000-2002, when online learning was still in its early stages. Not only was the practice of online learning only a few years old, but many of the technologies important to successful practice were either immature or not yet created. Internet speeds were slower, computers were more expensive, tablets and smartphones did not exist, nor was social networking or web 2.0 technologies around to the extent that they are today. This study is helpful for understanding what motivated community colleges to launch online programs at the turn of the century even if the landscape has changed since then.

The assertion made by Cox (2005) concerning a lack of access because of high dropout rates has been explored in other studies concentrating on the community college. Jost, Rude-Parkins, & Githens (2012) noted that if a goal of community colleges' use of online classes was to increase access, then they must ensure that no particular demographic groups perform at lesser rates than others. They conducted a nonexperimental causal-comparative quantitative study of existing data compiled by the

Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS). They found that "after controlling for previous academic performance, the results indicated no significant differences in academic performance in online courses with respect to age, gender or ethnicity" p. 665).

Researchers have also looked at the specific experience of community college students in online classes. Bambara, Harbour, Davies, & Athey(2009) conducted a phenomenological qualitative study involving interviews of 13 students in high-risk online courses (HRCs). They found there to be common structural themes of isolation, academic challenge, ownership, and acquiescence that intermingled to produce a phenomenon of delicate engagement, which "speaks to the vulnerable threads of academic and social involvement that permeated the HRC student experience" (p. 219).

The most revealing aspect of this study came from the comments students gave to describe the lack of interaction with the instructor or other students. "It's not the same as being in a real class, you don't have a teacher" (p. 221). "I thought that it was a lot of teaching myself...I was by myself a lot. I remember feeling left out" (p. 221). "What class? What professor? What assignments?...The online classes seem almost surreal" (p. 221). Clearly some of the students in this HRC who had a bad experience traced part of their disappointment to the low level of interaction with the instructor.

The positive correlation between faculty interactions with students and student satisfaction has been a finding from several different studies, most looking at university or graduate students. Jackson, Jones & Rodriguez (2010) did looked at student opinion survey results from two community colleges in Texas from 2006 to try and isolate what specific actions of the instructor had the most effect on student satisfaction. The actions

of the instructor they found to most positively correlate to student satisfaction were timeliness/accessibility, clearly stated expectations, enthusiasm, and creating a comfortable climate.

### Gaps in the Literature

This chapter reviewed several areas of scholarship relevant to the research question, with most having seen much attention over the years. Scholars and thinkers have grappled with the meaning and practice of democracy for over 2,500 years, and were for much of the time concerned with the capacity of the people to make informed decisions. The creation of the United States as a democratic (somewhat at first) republic in 1776 made the question of citizen knowledge less of an abstract concern. Democracies started to emerge in other countries as the 19th century progressed and people thought about how best to educate citizens and voters. The case of the United States' efforts in civic education moved from looking to social elites, to the political parties and finally to the idea of educating individuals so they know how to collect information and make an individual choice.

The 20th century saw the growth of higher education, especially after World War II, and scholars have looked at the experience of these students. The increasingly diverse nature of the student body raised questions for scholars to answer about cultural awareness, equity, and respect for diversity. Scholars have also looked at the ways culture in general has changed over the last few decades. The effects of these macrosocial changes and their effects on today's emerging adults of the millennial generation. Finally scholars began to devote energy towards understanding the ways higher learning could facilitate civic learning in the 1980s.



Just as this attention on civic learning and engagement was picking up in the early 1990s, the World Wide Web was invented and within a few years the internet had exploded. Online education began to rise in popularity until it secured the important place in higher education landscape it still maintains. Many studies have been done about online learning and how the internet can promote civic learning, but there is surprisingly little done on civic learning in online classes, especially at the community college and focused on emerging adults. This research will help to fill that gap.

### Summary

This research helps fill the need for more information about civic learning and the growth in enrollment in online classes at the community college. The goal of this project is to help provide information about what emerging adult students want, expect and receive regarding civic learning. This information can help faculty, administrators, curriculum designers, eLearning specialists, student support professionals and policy makers have a better understanding of the student perspective, which is crucial to making quality, informed decisions.

## CHAPTER 3: METHOD

### Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to understand the ways in which emerging adult students enrolled in online classes at the public community college perceive civic learning and to understand the role of community college online courses in civic learning. Answers to several research questions related to emerging adults and online classes at public community colleges were pursued in order to develop this understanding:

1. How do emerging adult students define their civic responsibility?
2. How do emerging adult students participate in civic engagement?
3. What skills, values and/or knowledge do emerging adult students hope or expect to learn?
4. What is the significance of the characteristics of asynchronous online courses for potential civic learning?
5. How do online classes at the public community college contribute to the civic learning of emerging adults?

A qualitative interview study using phenomenological methodology was employed to answer these questions. This chapter defines the methodology including participant recruitment and selection, the interview process, data analysis, and limitations of the study.

## Design

The research questions were designed to gather information to help fill a gap in the literature. While there have been many studies about community college students, emerging adults, the experience of online learning, and civic learning in higher education, there has been little scholarship at the convergence of these subjects. Qualitative approaches using an exploratory design are useful for studies that look at a topic devoid of much literature, making it an appropriate choice to be used here. Qualitative research methods are useful for this type of study since they are inherently inductive, and ideas are generated up from the participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2011).

This study worked from an interpretivist theoretical perspective. Crotty (1998) described this as looking "for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (p. 67). This is an apt description for the research performed in this study. The goal of the study was to let the words of the participants drive the findings, not to impose ideas in a top-down manner. Interpretivism works from an understanding that notions of reality are constructed within individuals and their interactions with a historical social reality and that these meanings can be revealed through dialogue (Ponterotto, 2005; Scotland, 2012). It looks for lived experiences, and that is the essence of what this research aims to do.

Phenomenology was the specific methodology used. Phenomenology is concerned with "the essence and meaning of experience" (Cilesiz, 2011, p. 493). Getting to the lived experience of the students was central to this research, making the phenomenological method an appropriate choice. The interview questions were designed to have the participants reveal how their personally experienced civic learning in their

online classes at the community college. The areas of most interest were their ideas about civic responsibility, how they engaged in civic and public life, their experience taking online classes at the community college, and their thoughts on civic learning.

The method's use of bracketing of prior knowledge, or the phenomenological reduction (Giorgi, 2012), was another good reason to select it for this study. The reduction pushes the researcher to plan and conduct the research in such a way that assumptions are not made about how the participants might describe their experiences. Discovering the meaning of these experiences as described by the participants helped to generate themes that emerged to answer the research questions.

There are precedents for using the phenomenological method in studies that examine some aspect of online learning, computer-mediated communication or other situations where technology is being used to enhance learning. Crawley, Fewell & Sugar (2009) used this approach to study the transition made by a senior faculty member from classroom teaching to online teaching. Hsu, Ching, Mathews, & Carr-Chellman (2009) used the phenomenological method to explore the experiences of undergraduate students in web-based learning environments.

### Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was used to ensure that the participants meet certain criteria. A large, public, urban, comprehensive community college in the southeastern United States was chosen as the institution from which to recruit participants. It will be referred to as Southeastern Community College (SECC). This college first began experimenting with online classes in 1998 and enrolled 3,150 students in online classes for the Fall, 2013 semester. The prevailing practice of instruction in the fully online classes at the

institution involve asynchronous methods, especially discussion forums. The student body at SECC is very diverse with many online students also working and raising families. This makes it difficult to arrange times for students in a class to meet at the same time. And while there are some tools available to facilitate real-time interactions, these are still relatively new and not yet widely adopted.

Emerging adults were the participants of this research, and particularly those in the early stage of emerging adulthood, ages 18-23. The participants had to be enrolled in or have recently completed a fully online course at a community college. The discipline of the course was also important. The participants were asked about their expectations for civic learning in an online class, and while a strong case can be made that civic learning can occur in any course, some disciplines such as those in the humanities and social sciences lend themselves more naturally to civic learning.

The original intent was to recruit 18 participants for this study, including three females and three males from the following three social science disciplines: American history, political science, and sociology. The recruitment process involved the instructor of each fully online course in the summer and fall of 2013 in each discipline emailing a letter describing the study (Appendix A) to all students. Each participant was offered a \$10 gift card. No consideration was made for race, socioeconomic status, or any other demographic, but the selected participants were asked to disclose this information. This process yielded only 10 willing participants who are described in chapter four. The study was based on the data gathered in interviews from these 10 participants. Each participant signed an informed consent form (Appendix B). The form was completed electronically

using Google Forms. The form also asked each participant to give their age, gender, race and fully online classes they are taking.

#### Data Collection

Each participant was interviewed over the phone. The length of each varied, but most were around one hour. Telephone interviews were chosen over face to face, email, video conference, and IM (instant messaging or chat). Kazmer & Xie (2008) found that "contextual naturalness" (p. 259) should be considered when choosing a venue and medium of the interview. This means the interview should be conducted in a manner similar to the experience under investigation. Telephone interviewing most closely replicates this since it may allow participants to conduct the interview from the same place they would attend to the business of an online class, be it their home, workplace, cafe, etc. They also would not need to be in the physical presence of the interviewer, as they are not normally in the physical presence of their instructor.

Email and IM were not chosen for several reasons. Participant attrition is higher in email interviews (Kazmer & Xie, 2008), the short message format of IM does not lend itself to in depth answers, and neither allows for the transmission of non-linguistic verbal cues such as pauses, puzzlement and exclamations. Telephone and face to face interviews both offer the benefit of immediate follow up questions. Video conferencing was also considered as a medium for the interviews, but was not selected for several reasons. First there are more chances for technical problems. The participants may not have reliable internet, microphone or camera. They may have trouble configuring the required settings. They may even be compelled to open an account with a service provider in order to be able to connect.

Technical problems, even if solved, might leave too little time for the interview, or worse, the participant or researcher may become frustrated, and that could deprive the conversation from the most revealing experiences. There were also considerations of contextual naturalness that preclude video conferencing from being used. While videoconferencing is becoming more popular socially and in business, they are still not very widespread - yet - in online classes. Students who do attend may be uncomfortable in a learning environment they are not used to. Telephones offer familiarity, ubiquity, reliability and mobility.

Each interview was conducted using an interview guide following the semi-structured format (Appendix C). This allowed for follow up questions to get a richer description of their experiences. Eight of the participants also took part in a follow-up interview lasting around 25 minutes. Each interview was conducted over speaker phone and recorded using an audio application on the iPad. Each interview was transcribed onto a Google Doc using Dragon Dictation voice recognition software and then double checked for accuracy.

### Data Analysis

The analysis of the transcripts followed the model described by Moustakas (1994) and employed by Gibson et al. (2005). Moustakas (1994) claimed that the method of reflection "provides a logical, systematic, and coherent resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions of experience" (p. 47). This process depends on the researcher knowing himself or herself within the experience being investigated. Each transcript was analyzed and nonrepetitive significant statements were identified. These are what Gibson et al. (2005) referred to as "invariant horizons or

meaning units of the experience" (p. 654). Researcher voice is also an important factor in qualitative research. Rossman and Rallis (2011) found that "qualitative researchers use their experience and intuition as they make sense of the worlds they explore" (p. 6 ). The findings include my own interpretation of how the responses of the participants relate to the research purpose and questions.

#### Researcher Biases

The phenomenological method calls for researchers to suspend their assumptions or prior knowledge during the collection and analysis of the data, but this is difficult to do completely. I do have a bias in favor of democracy and public education with a mission of providing civic education of students for informed and engaged participation in civic and political life. I also hold a low opinion of the amount of political and historical information with which emerging adults enter the community college resulting from my experience teaching history to emerging adults for the past 10 years.

I was fully vested in this study because it deals directly with my career and life goals - helping students to discover or improve civic engagement and the knowledge, values and skills that go along with it. I teach online history classes at a community college. It was important that I did not slip into my teaching role during the interviews. I set aside my inclinations to correct mistaken assumptions. I was aware that I have acquired more knowledge about history and politics over the course of 20 plus years as a student and teacher of history. It was important not to judge the knowledge of others who are at the start of their own academic journey. Being cognizant of such biases helped to prevent myself from reacting based on assumptions and/or leading the participant in the



interview process. It was important that I refrained from trying to steer the interview to a predetermined path and instead let the experience of the participant reveal itself.

### Design Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. One limitation was that it only included 10 participants when the original research design called for 18. The nature of the telephone interviews presented some communication challenges in understanding participants who had strong accents or were soft spoken. Another limitation was the length of the interviews which did preclude at least one potential participant whose family commitments prevented her from participating. Community college students are often busy juggling family, work and school, potentially precluding those students who do not feel that they could commit to a 90 minute telephone interview. Another limitation could be that students who self-identify as being civically illiterate may not want to expose themselves to potential questions that reinforce that perceived deficiency. These two limitations may help to produce a sample that favors students who already have the time and inclination to be civically engaged.

The study purposely selected students who were enrolled in social science classes, which at the community college are often populated by students looking to transfer to four-year institutions (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Townsend, 2009). The fact that all the participants were in curriculum classes for college credit was another limitation. Most community colleges also offer developmental courses as well as corporate and continuing education. The courses were all asynchronous in nature and relatively small at 27 students per section as the start of the term.

### Member Check

The credibility of the data was verified by sending participants a brief summary of the findings. Nine of the participants responded in writing that the findings were correct and one responded verbally over the phone.

### Summary

This research study used the phenomenological qualitative method to understand the ways in which emerging adult students enrolled in online classes at the community college define their civic responsibility, engage in public life, and perceive civic learning in their online classes. Ten participants aged 18-23 in online social science classes at a large, public urban community college in the southeastern United States were recruited with the help and consent of faculty. The interviews used the semi-structured design to allow for follow up questions as needed. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed to create meaning units and define emergent themes.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this research study was to understand the ways in which emerging adult students enrolled in online classes at the public community college perceive civic learning and to understand the role of community college online courses in civic learning. Answers to several research questions related to emerging adults and online classes at public community colleges were pursued in order to develop this understanding:

1. How do emerging adult students define their civic responsibility?
2. How do emerging adult students participate in civic engagement?
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4. What is the significance of the characteristics of asynchronous online courses for potential civic learning?
5. How do online classes at the public community college contribute to the civic learning of emerging adults?

### Participants

Ten participants were interviewed for this study and discussed their experiences both with civic engagement and online classes. Eight of the ten participants were interviewed a second time, and pseudonyms have been used to identify each participant. All participants were enrolled in one or more online sections at the time of the interview, one of which was either in history, sociology or anthropology. These courses were all

conducted asynchronously and used weekly threaded discussion assignments of various types. Typically these assignments shared having to post an original writing of about 150 words by a certain time and then having to respond to one or two classmates.

#### Participant 1 (Mark)

Mark is a twenty year old white male. He was born and raised in the northeast and moved to North Carolina during high school, where he said he was not very motivated in class, but researched many subjects on his own. He intends to transfer to a university. He has taken a combination of face to face and online classes. He has taken both U.S. history and sociology in fully online classes. Mark is very interested in current affairs and seems like an enthusiastic learner. He does not like to speak up much when in a classroom with his peers, but does engage more in online classes. His parents took him to volunteer and have encouraged him to vote.

#### Participant 2 (Lois)

Lois is an 18 year old black female who would like to go into the field of broadcast journalism. She was quick and succinct with her answers. She has also taken a combination of face to face and online classes, and she finds herself more engaged in the physical classroom. She was in a fully online sociology class at the time of the interviews. She describes herself as a visual learner whose parents encouraged her to do well, follow the law and represent them. She does not talk about politics much.

#### Participant 3 (Tom)

At 23 years of age, Tom was the oldest participant. He is a white male who described his childhood upbringing as being lower class. He joined the navy out of high school, and his military career has had a big impact on his outlook on life. He does not see the point in

voting and has been disappointed in what he sees as a lazy attitude in his classmates. He said his parents have not had an impact on his civic values. He has taken both face to face and fully online classes, including American history and sociology.

Participant 4 (Maria)

Maria is a 21 year old Latina. She took some time off after high school before enrolling in a community college and then joined the military. After 8 months of active duty, she began reserve duty and again enrolled at the community college. She described her family as lower middle class. She enjoys learning, especially through discussion, not so much through reading. She has taken both face to face and fully online classes, including US history. She described herself as an audible learner, she likes to hear the tone of people's voices. She only participated in the first interview.

Participant 5 (Hank)

Hank is a 21 year old white male who grew up lower middle class in rural North Carolina. After high school, he earned a technical degree and returned to a different community college to earn credits to transfer to the university. He has taken both fully online classes such as sociology and face to face classes and describes himself as a driven to succeed. He works many hours a week at a full time job and enjoys the scheduling flexibility of online classes. He became interested in politics and current events after people he met working a part-time job in high school got him involved as a campaign volunteer.

Participant 6 (Monica)

Monica is a 22 year old Latina who came to the United States 12 years ago from South America. She had to take some time off after high school, but was able to enroll at the

community college after earning US citizenship made her eligible for financial aid. She comes from a lower middle class family and is motivated to attend college to make a better life for her two-year old daughter. She has taken both fully online classes such as sociology and face to face classes. She went on a high school trip to Washington DC to lobby for the Dream Act.

#### Participant 7 (Melissa)

Melissa is a 22 year old white female. She began her college career in a community college in the Great Lakes region before moving to North Carolina. She is very outspoken about her political views, describing herself as a radical tea-party feminist. She has received support and motivation from her parents to be successful and attend college and hopes to become the first woman in her family to graduate college. She has taken both face to face and online classes. She was enrolled in a fully online US history class when the interviews took place.

#### Participant 8 (Mai)

Mai is a 19 year old middle class Asian American who moved to the United States five years ago and is still trying to become a citizen. Her mother is her biggest motivator to go to college and do better. She was concerned about the effects of digital communication on society, and people not having enough intimate contact with each other. She has taken both face to face and online classes. She was enrolled in a fully online sociology class at the time of this interview.

#### Participant 9 (Anna)

Ann is a 22 year old Latina who grew up middle class. She has learned to appreciate the perspective of her mother who grew up in war-torn Central America and claims street

smarts from her white American father. She is an avid reader and is an advocate for certain political issues. She has taken both face to face and fully online classes, including sociology and anthropology. Anna participated in one interview.

#### Participant 10 (Wendy)

Wendy is a 20 year old white female from what she described as an upper class family, owing to the many relatives who have earned advanced academic degrees. She described her childhood as somewhat sheltered with little ethnic diversity in her town or high school. She has appreciated what she has been able to learn from people of different backgrounds at the community college. Wendy is the only participant to take only fully online classes. She has taken sociology and US history. She was on track to earn her Associate's Degree and attend a well respected university in the fall, where she tends to blend a schedule of online and traditional face to face classes. She is an active volunteer.

#### Themes

The participants were on the whole very forthcoming in their responses making for some interesting conversations. Participants spoke of the reasons they chose to enroll in online classes at the community college and what they thought of that experience. They described their understanding of civic responsibility and how they engage the community. They described their thoughts on civic learning and how it is conducted in online classes. The responses generated from these conversations were organized into three themes: Respect, connections, and social learning. Each will be described and interpreted based on the research purpose and questions.

## Respect

"Respect, honesty, trust, integrity - basic things everyone should possess."

"Honesty, integrity, respect - respect is a big one." This was how Anna and Hank respectively described important civic values each citizen should possess. The answers given by the participants spoke to the various ways that they believed in the idea of respect. Running throughout the theme of respect was high tolerance and acclaim for the rights of others to make their own individual decisions.

## Diversity

Emerging adult students respect diversity and see diversity awareness as a civic responsibility. They appreciated the opportunities to learn about diversity by engaging with others and learning from their varied experiences and perspectives of their classmates. Mark commented on engaging diverse classmates: "I think it really helps sink in the fact that there are a lot of different people...It was cool to hear from actual people rather than from a study or hearing it on the news." Textbooks can help students learn about diversity, but hearing classmates tell of their diverse experience and perspectives can be even more meaningful and engaging.

Wendy remarked about how much she had grown in her knowledge of other cultures and life experience because of college. She did not experience much diversity in high school, but came to appreciate the opportunities for a multicultural experience afforded in her online classes.

I think I came to the community college very close-minded, and kind of didn't really understand and didn't - I guess care is the right word, about other people's opinions. But taking some of these courses, in particular English or sociology, made me really take other people's opinions and thoughts into account...It's good to be around other races and learn that we're around people in



this society that stereotype based on race a lot, and I didn't want to become one of those people. (Wendy)

Wendy reinforced this desire by forming study groups that met in person. She also demonstrated it through the way she conducted herself in online discussion forums: "Often I pick a person to reply to that has a completely different opinion than mine...because I never thought to think of it this way". She intends to take a mix of online and face to face classes at university next year, and be proactive about being active and meeting people. Wendy's story is a great example of the potential for online community college courses to expand one's cultural horizons and appreciate the experiences of other people.

College is a place for students to expand their cultural horizons and grow in their moral development (Chickering & Gamson, 1999; Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977). Emerging adult first year students at four-year colleges and universities are meeting new people from a variety of backgrounds, but most are also traditional age students, 18-24. The setting at the public community college experience offers greater diversity and emerging adults are more likely to attend class with adult learners in later life stages. This is especially true in online learning, where the asynchronous mode of instruction and the scheduling flexibility it provides are popular with parents and working adults.

The idea of respect for diversity is central to the participants' concept of what it means to be a responsible citizen. It also informs their preference for the ideal online learning experience. Instructors and course designers can create an online learning culture that encourages students to share their experience and perspectives. The diverse nature of the students in online classes at the public community college can enrich the atmosphere

and provide greater opportunity for civic learning. This practice should be done with care, as the digital world does contain hazards such as threats to privacy.

### Privacy

Privacy is a concern in online classes (Anwar & Greer, 2012). While some online instructors are using web-conferencing which can cause students to be concerned that what they say could be captured in a recording, the adoption of this tool is not yet widespread, leaving text-based communication to be the primary mode of interaction at SECC. Most internet users know that whatever they put on the web can potentially be captured and saved, and not always for altruistic purposes. Although the virtual classrooms colleges use for online learning are password protected, security risks remain. Classmates can take screenshots of discussion posts and share them publicly.

Students are aware that what is written on the internet could become part of the permanent record, even if there are supposed privacy protections. Mark said: "you kind of want to be cognizant because when you post it online, it's there forever." Most students are also careful about not revealing personal information online. Some do not like to add an image to their online profile. Mai said "I'm not comfortable revealing myself in an online class to a certain extent." The recognition of the potential permanency of posts and the desire to protect their identity could make students apprehensive about what they write for an online class. There is little that an instructor can do in order to prevent this type of malicious sharing of student work other than to avoid having students interact with each other, but this course of action blocks the open exchange of ideas and critical analysis, which is an important skill for civic learning.

Students may not want to reveal certain information or how they feel about specific topics for fear of blowback or a missed opportunity in the future. Students know that it is common for employers to search the history of potential candidates on the internet (Simms, 2013). Some students are apprehensive about being wrong or looking less intelligent because of what they write. Others do not want to be known to hold an opposite opinion than the rest of the class on a sensitive issue. They may fear some type of negative repercussion. There also the concern of being misheard or misread, and therefore misinterpreted.

There are numerous stories of people running into trouble for posting something questionable on social media (Binder & Mansfield, 2013). Justine Sacco provides one example from late 2013. She was working as the communications director for a large internet company when she sent a Tweet that some took to be a racist joke just before getting on an international flight (Bercovici, 2013). Hours of protest and ridicule trended across the digital world as her plane made its way to its destination. She was fired soon after the plane touched down. This is an example of how a self-inflicted mistake cost this woman her job and possibly her career. It could also be the case that something a student writes that they don't intend to share outside the classroom could be distributed by a classmate without their knowledge or permission.

Instructors can encourage greater digital literacy by explaining the history of privacy and make students aware of the rules that protect their information (Junco & Chickering, 2010). The U.S. Supreme Court first found a right to privacy in the 1965 case of *Griswold v. Connecticut*. Justice Douglas authored the opinion of the court and said that "...specific guarantees in the Bill of Rights have penumbras, formed by emanations

from those guarantees that help give them life and substance...Various guarantees create zones of privacy..." (Griswold v. Connecticut, 1965).

A more recent law that may have more direct connection to the online classroom is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). This federal law passed in 1974 protects the privacy of student academic records such as discussion board postings, for which students retain copyright (Varvel, 2005). While there is no guarantee that a student will not violate the privacy of a classmate, referring to the policy guidelines may dissuade some as a respect for authority was another virtue of civic responsibility mentioned by several participants. This concern for privacy relates to the research purpose because it is a factor in how students monitor their activity in online classes and decide what they feel is appropriate and safe to make public. Teachers need to be aware of these privacy concerns their students might have and be considerate when asking or requiring students to reveal certain personal information they might deem sensitive.

#### Civil Discourse

Deliberation and discourse have been shown to be effective tools for facilitating civic learning (Dewey, 1916; Parker, 2003). It promotes the exchange of opinions with others who may have different experience and perspectives. Civility towards others is a fundamental cornerstone for engaging in dialogue others, especially those from different cultural backgrounds. Respect for others is compatible with asking questions or expressing doubt or disagreement.

Several participants were willing to engage with peers in a discussion form, and were willing to disagree, but to always be respectful and not raise offense. Wendy said: "I always try to put a positive statement in when I am disagreeing with them, that way I'm

not coming across as like you're completely wrong and I'm completely right." Melissa said she is never afraid to disagree with someone, and she often does, but politely. She described replying to a student who posted something she found rather odd: "So I kind of, in my own way, responded that were you really thinking when you answered this question? I'm trying to figure out where you're coming from. I didn't say it in a rude way." Monica wrote: "I just try to be polite and obviously not use any words that that might make the situation uncomfortable.

Those students who did disagree found that disagreements can be instructive. Mark said: "I feel like that's fine, if it's done respectfully. I think that's the most important thing where you're not personally attacking someone, but I think it's kind of natural to disagree with some people." Mai agreed: "it's just disagreements. It's not really negative, everybody thinks differently". These students were fortunate to be in courses that were designed to encourage debate and critical analysis where it was appropriate to voice disagreement.

The participants' aversion to saying or writing anything that might cause offense may be related to another theme that was found in their responses, a respect for rules and an appreciation for guidelines about process. Maria: "I think you should do everything you're supposed to do by law. If you are supposed to pay this, then go ahead and pay it. if you're supposed to not do this, then don't do it. Follow the rules." A fundamental aspect of that design is the expectation that students will conduct themselves in a civil manner so that all participants feel they are participating in a comfortable, safe environment.

Sometimes students can be worried that the way in which they question a student about his or her background could be a show of disrespect and cause offense. The desire

to avoid offending others was very strong with the participants, but taken to extremes can limit the amount of critical analysis the diverse experiences undergo as part of the learning experience. Critical thinking was another skill mentioned by the participants as being important for engaged citizenship. Instructors need to help students balance respect for diversity with the open inquiry necessary to practice critical thinking.

Students can be sensitive when someone else starts asking questions or criticizing their decisions or opinions, especially on sensitive issues such as politics or religion. Written electronic communication can compound the issue because of the limitations of the medium. Nuance and tone are harder to achieve when non-verbal communication and the sound of one's voice are removed. All of these considerations should be communicated to students.

These are genuine concerns as confrontations can escalate to the point where administrative actions such as deleting posts or muting individual students are warranted. Instructors need to understand that once these discussions commence, they will need to closely monitor them to ensure that all students are abiding by the discussion guidelines and that the online class remains a place for safe and open dialogue. Some participants could not recall a single exchange in a discussion forum they would consider as heated or argumentative, while others saw it happening more frequently.

It should not be hard for instructors to have students abide by discussion forum policy that promotes civility since respect for others was such a high response given by the participants as important for civic responsibility. This was true of the veteran online student like Wendy in her final semester of an all-online Associate's Degree and those like Lois taking her first online course. Although it doesn't happen often, it only takes one

problem student to ruin the mood for an entire semester by being too provocative, demeaning or intimidating. This can have a chilling effect on other students who prefer to stay out of the fray and not risk dealing with a bully or someone so unpredictable. The participants did say that most online instructors issued guidelines to keep conversations from escalating out of control, but some participants said they had seen some discussions devolve into a bad situation.

Overt regulations regarding the manner of posts can have a hostile chilling effect if students err on the side of caution by withholding comment. This does not always come to pass. Often the replies will be an enthusiastic affirmation, or quick explanation of why they agree. Some participants expressed frustration that their replies went unanswered:

You're not getting that immediate reaction necessarily. Like I've posted things on forums that were, I won't say personal, but something you actually put thought into it and involved your personal details, and I didn't get any response. So it's frustrating sometimes because you don't necessarily get the kind of feedback you would in a normal classroom situation. (Melissa)

There could be several reasons for students' disinclination to engage in academic debate. Perhaps they doubt their claims, or do not want to be seen as aggressive, or potentially hurting the grade of a classmate. Lois and Monica preferred to simply stay away from discussing certain topics like politics or religion so as to avoid any potential confrontation. Tom had seen online debates happening "all the time", but he really did not care too much about weighing in on something that did not involve him. If it was not for a grade or no one had engaged him, it was not worth the bother. Hank would also rather avoid confrontation: "for the most part, I don't really say a whole lot...I don't intend to offend anybody."

Once a student enters a well designed online course with clear navigation and expectations, she will feel more confident and can spend more of her time and energy on the content of the course. Monica explained that if she sees that the teacher is well prepared and has a clear schedule, then she is likely to be more successful. Well designed courses also help to raise the credibility of the instructor in the eyes of the students, who will then have more trust and confidence as they move forward to learn the content and complete the assignments of the course (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000).

Teachers can also promote civic learning in the design of their course by encouraging participation on the discussion forums. While there is the potential for each class to have students with the personality or inclination to be quite loquacious, most students will do just enough to meet the requirements. Participants recognized the need for instructors to be quite specific in explaining what is expected of the students. Melissa said: "You can't get away from having requirements in terms of how often a student responds and whatnot, because that's something that can force people to get the conversation going, and once the ball is rolling, you're good to go." Wendy: "The only class this past semester where people would go back and forth with my history class because we were required to post pretty much every day that the assignment was open."

The participants placed importance on respecting individual rights and decisions. When asked to define her own civic values, Melissa replied in a way that supports individualism:

It's kind of a gray area because it's not really something you can teach because it's very opinion based. What values are prioritized? What values are important and which ones aren't? I think it's very personal...is it right for me to instill my values on to you? (Melissa)



This respect for individual ideas is a concept with currency among emerging adults who have grown up in an age where the promotion of cultural diversity has gotten considerable attention. It also extends to how these participants think people should be engaged in society. Anna said: "I think to be an active member, you know, each person has their own idea of what that means, to be an active, you know, law-abiding citizen."

It does need to be noted that respect for opinions of others does not necessarily mean agreement with those ideas. Some participants spoke of how their exposure to new ideas could serve to reaffirm their own perspective. They were willing to consider other perspectives and reflect on their own views, but they were also ready to hear someone out yet reject those ideas in favor of keeping their own. Mark talked about how he is able to consider and respect other ways of thinking, and still hold onto his values:

...I don't think that necessarily weakens one values because there are a lot of people that believe something completely different from you. I think that has the ability to change your mind, which is good, but it also has the ability to well, I've thought about it, I can see that, but I like the way I live, I like my values, kind of deal. It can also reaffirm it. (Mark)

This emphasis that emerging adults place on individualism and the way some of them point to civic values being an individual choice follows the research of Smith, et al. (2011) who found that this population was highly individualistic in describing morality and what is right and wrong.

This also helps us realize the purpose of this research study in that it informs how emerging adults treat each other when exchanging ideas, telling us how they perceive civic learning in online classes. All of these areas of respect, diversity, privacy, and civil

discourse are important to consider as we move to the next major finding of how emerging adults view the importance of connected to each other and to society.

### Connections

"Be knowledgeable of your surroundings. Know what is going on around you politically in the government and all that. Know who's representing you. Know what you can do to change something when something's wrong and affecting you in a negative way. Know who to go to" (Maria). The participants in this study commented on the importance of being connected to what is going on around them. Participants connected by being aware of what is happening in society and helping out in their community, both behaviors which they found civic responsibilities. Connections were also important to learning in online classes. Participants spoke of the need to be self-directed learners, but would rather do so in a learning community where they can connect to classmates and have an instructor that is present and engaged.

### Awareness

"If you want to be engaged in society and any kind of politics, you've got to vote. And not just aimlessly vote, know what you're voting for, and who you're voting for" (Hank). The participants of this study commented on the importance of knowing what was going on around them in their community. This included knowledge of current events, knowing who represents them in government, and having an interest as to what makes society work. Interestingly, some participants also said that they don't like watching the news because it is so depressing. This attitude parallels the way some students choose to avoid certain topics on discussion forums.

Of course staying informed about current events is a matter of degree. There are countless topics to keep abreast of as things are changing all the time. There was a definite range regarding how closely participants followed the news. Mark and Melissa came across as very conversant on topics of the day and sought to engage others in conversation. Mark said he and his roommate would watch C-Span together. Melissa spoke of being engaged often in political discussions. On the other side of the spectrum was someone like Mai who does not pay as much attention to what is happening in the government. This is not to say that Mai does not care about the news, but she belongs to a group of students that instructors need to be aware of because of how it affects their civic engagement. Mai is not a U.S. citizen and cannot vote.

The online class can be a place to discuss current events when done in a way that connects to the curriculum of a course. Some subjects such as sociology or political science lend themselves more easily to this approach than others, but nearly all can connect to the content on some level. Students are not always expecting there to be discussions of current events in their classes, especially if they don't see any meaningful connections to what they have to study to pass the course.

These participants not only wanted to stay informed, they also felt an obligation to act where they saw a need. Volunteering was an important type of civic engagement. "I feel that we have a duty to help. It's not required, but everyone should be able to help one another" (Monica). Anna said the engagement meant "in essence help people, to build a better place a little bit at a time, mile at a time." Nearly all the participants have volunteered. Mark and Anna have worked at soup kitchens, and Hank volunteered for a political campaign. Mai and Wendy volunteer at various places on a regular basis. Even if

some did not specifically mention volunteering, they may have mentioned just helping out your neighbor as a civic responsibility. Mai said the most important thing an informed citizen should know is that anyone can make a difference in society.

As mentioned by Hank in the opening quote of this section, awareness was important for those participants who identified as regular voters. Mark, Melissa and Wendy also spoke of the need to be educated on the candidates and issues before casting a ballot. The value of voting was not shared by all the participants. Tom said he believed that voting does not make any difference and some of the other participants were immigrants still trying to gain citizenship and are not allowed to vote. Some voted in presidential elections, but not local ones. Several were unaware of the issues of the next election or even that there was one approaching.

The finding that students' value being informed on what is going on around them connects to the research purpose of determining the role of online classes at the community college. Thoughtful integration of activities that connect curriculum to current events can enrich the learning experience and promote civic learning outcomes. This is an area where teachers may have to be creative and get some ideas. However they are already proficient in another area useful for civic learning as subject matter experts of the courses they are teaching.

### Curriculum

Students have significant opportunities to learn from course materials. This is of course what these materials are designed to do. Civic learning can be a part of any online course at the community college. Skills the participants said were important for civic responsibility like communication, time management and critical thinking can be honed

in many different types of courses, as can civic values like respect. Certain courses are specifically designed to help in the areas of knowledge found by the participants to be important for civic responsibility: history, culture, society, government, law, economics, psychology and English. These are also the courses identified by some of the participants as the ones they would consider taking online, rather than courses like math and science labs where they would rather be able to see demonstrations of how to work problems or perform experiments in person.

Teaching history at the community college for 10 years has given me some perspective about how students approach the subject. While there are not too many community college students planning to major in history, most do express an interest in learning about history and value the importance of knowing history. Even so, students are sometimes apprehensive about taking the class, usually due to a poor experience in a previous history class or they are anxious about being prepared with the right foundational knowledge due to either not focusing on the subject before or the long time it has been since their history class. It is common to hear students returning to college after a number of years away speak about a new attitude and interest in history now that they are a bit older.

These participants, with an average age of just under 21, found history to be important knowledge for civic learning. Melissa: "It's fundamental to know a little bit about our history, enough to know the structure of our country, how we started, what values that it was founded on, even they're not your own values." Tom: "learning about history helps you become a better citizen, in my opinion, because no matter what you're

going to do, it's probably been done before by somebody, so you can go and see how they did it."

As discussed earlier, there was much talk about the importance of understanding different cultures. Courses in anthropology and sociology are excellent for learning this type of knowledge. Anna gave an example from her cultural anthropology class of the instructor posing a set of questions for the students to answer and how the ensuing discussions caused her to reexamine her assumptions of how people behaved in certain situations. Maria had a similar reaction to her experience in a different section of the same course, and said that she would often talk to her friends about what she has discussed in class. Wendy credited her sociology and English classes with helping to open her mind and appreciate the fact that people had different perspectives.

These courses in the social sciences and humanities are excellent places to engage students in civic learning because the subject matter follows the types of civic knowledge they found useful for engaged citizenship. These courses are an important resource for fulfilling the role of online classes with civic learning. Instructors already know the subject matter they need to cover. They just need to help students understand that this course is something that can help them with civic learning and get them to become self-aware of this as a learning objective. This message of civic learning as a learning objective can be supported by the presence of the instructor.

#### Instructor Presence

"Unfortunately, I've experienced situations where there's so little involvement that you almost get the vibe that the teacher made up a little syllabus, or a class plan, put it online and they've just been running this course over and over again without updating any of the course materials to reflect current events or things like that, and they're just doing the bare minimum." (Melissa)

Melissa's description of her experience in an online class was unfortunately a common theme from the students. Many reported that they do not see much engagement from their instructors. Since class engagement was found to be such an important method to achieve civic learning, this is a serious deficit in the realm of online classes. The participants spoke of teacher behavior in terms of presence and course design.

The desire for organization and clear expectations makes sense when considering the prospect of a new semester. Students always enter a new course with some degree of uncertainty or perhaps anxiety because they are not sure what to expect. This feeling can be more pronounced in online classes when the teacher is not live and in person to answer questions, and the students might not even know where to look to find out what to do next. They want and appreciate personal attention and to know that the teacher is available and has taken care to create a course that addresses their needs and helps them feel orientated.

Students want to know that their teacher is engaged and invested in the course. Presence calls to mind the ways in which a teacher can let the students know that she is involved and paying attention to what the students are doing. Participation in online discussion forums and effective feedback on student work are two of the ways instructors can demonstrate presence in online classes and help to promote civic learning by encouraging more engagement.

Mark spoke of how students were more engaged when the teacher was involved in the discussion. Most students desire clear structure and objectives in an online course. They prefer teachers who are prepared, organized, proficient with the tools of online learning and responsive. Monica wrote: "I think it's easy to understand if the instructor is

well-prepared. But if it's just that it's not well prepared and it's just giving you pages to read that won't make any sense later when you're given the test, that's a different story."

Active participation in conversations and offering opinions and suggestions help let students know that the instructor is paying attention. If an instructor is not seen on the forums or giving specific feedback, there is little evidence of teacher presence. Monica felt a teacher's involvement on the forums would encourage more student participation: "If the teacher is involved, the students will want to be involved and interacting with one another and confident with each other."

There was the sense among some of the participants that instructors treated the discussion forums as areas of student work only and therefore felt it was not their place to contribute. Melissa felt this attitude created a deficit and remarked that teachers do participate in discussions in a face to face environment, so it makes sense to do so online as well. However, there was also a concern of teachers dominating the forum, which could prevent students from being able to determine the direction of conversations. Mai felt that teachers should wait to weigh in until after students had a chance to comment so as not to influence their ideas.

Some participants felt that teachers could overdo it when it comes to contributing to the discussion forums, they found that the right amount of participation motivated students to become more engaged, and that students were more likely to do the bare minimum when teachers were absent from the forums. Wendy said: "if the teacher is not really involved then you're just going on and doing your work and that's really it. There is no further like engagement."



Increased student engagement and participation were seen as positives that could result from greater instructor participation in the forums, but there were other benefits as well. Some participants spoke of the ways instructors could help explain difficult to understand concepts. Teachers can also point out when students make incorrect claims so that student and others do not continue to believe something that is incorrect. Mark also gave an example of how his online sociology instructor helped push students to think critically: "if she saw a conversation going one direction, she would try to assert herself and play devil's advocate with it, and that really spurred on a conversation of let's think deeper about this issue."

Feedback was one another way that a teacher can demonstrate presence in a course and encourage further engagement. Effective feedback that is specific and prompt has a positive impact on student engagement. Mark noted that "the feedback that I received from the one teacher really encouraged me to go back and actually give even more..." Monica: "One of my instructors was very motivating. We would always get random emails from him saying keep up the good work and you guys are awesome."

On the other hand, a lack of effective feedback could have the same dampening effect on student participation that came from teachers not participating on the discussion forums. Melissa made the point that

If the teacher's not reading it and you're consistently just getting a grade, but no response or no feedback, you kind of get the idea that they don't really know what's going on, then I could see some people saying, well you know, I'll just pound out some silly little answer and call it good. (Melissa)

Of course this can be asking a lot of instructors, as Melissa said later in the interview. If a teacher has hundreds of students, it may not be sustainable to give consistent, critical and timely feedback amid all the other demands placed on teachers.

If a teacher is actively working to engage with students and encourage greater participation, there are more opportunities for civic learning. It goes back to the students' remarks that hearing about the diverse experiences of their classmates is a boon to their civic learning. If students are more encouraged to share and participate in their online discussion forums, then there is a greater likelihood that these experiential conversations are going to take place. As Lois said: "Well, if the teacher participates a lot and involves themselves, then I think there would be a lot more civil learning in the class."

Melissa gave an example of how meaningful teacher involvement gave her the sense that the instructor was putting forth great effort to provide a great learning experience: "the teacher would personally respond to things on the forum. It made it very obvious that this teacher was putting a lot of thought and effort into creating the best classroom environment you could have online." But even for those students fortunate enough to have an instructor who makes their presence known understands that the nature of online learning puts greater emphasis on what is true for most types of learning, that they need to take responsibility for their own education and behave as a self-directed learner.

Instructor presence is an important indicator of the research purpose of gauging how emerging adult students perceive civic learning in their online classes. It can really make or break an online course, and instructors should make every effort to establish and maintain presence. However, with the appropriate level of teacher presence, students in online classes will still need to have the skills and motivations of a successful self-directed learner.

Self-Directed Learning

"If a student is going to take an online class, he or she should know that of course she is responsible for teaching herself." Monica's quote is a common refrain from the interviewed participants who spoke of the need for students in online classes to be able to teach themselves in order to succeed in the class. They felt that the process of learning in online classes was different from face-to-face classes, with the principle difference being the amount of time spent with the instructor. Mai commented: "It's different (in face to face classes) because you can see the instructor. You just have a feel of who is teaching you." Melissa said: "At the end of the day, it's up to you. You're not getting to sit there for an hour and a half and listen to a lecture and take notes. You have to take a lot more initiative to process material and interpret it."

Knowles (1975) provides a good definition of self-directed learning:

It is a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating their own goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. (p.18)

Students' understanding of the importance of self-learning fuels their desire to become more proficient in the skills and attitudes that will help them to become more disciplined students. This emphasis on their understanding of the need to be self-reliant is a benefit not only to their performance in online classes, but to their academic career in general, and also to how they behave as contributing members of society. "If you see a problem with something that's going on, something that affects you I think you should act on it immediately, because if you procrastinate, then it will be something might go even further, worse or you won't be able to change it later." Here Maria is focusing on a skill

for self-learning that most of the participants said was very important for taking online classes: time management.

Time is important to online students in two regards: Taking classes online to fit their busy schedules and organizing their time effectively to make sure they meet all their class responsibilities. Time was the most cited reason why students chose to enroll in online courses. Many needed or wanted the flexible scheduling that comes from the mostly self-paced nature of online courses. Mai said: "It saves time, because I don't have to go to classes". Hank said: "with my work schedule, it's pretty hectic, so I could base it around my schedule."

Scheduling was also important to completing online courses with the skill of time management. Tom said: "It's self-paced, but if you don't keep up a good pace, then you're going to get behind, you're going to fail". Mark said: "Time management has been really key, because there's a lot of assignments on a week to week basis." Students found that by becoming good managers of their time, they were also building the academic skills they would need to be able to research and analyze issues on their own, which is important for citizenship. Melissa said: "You're learning how to allocate your resources in a way that's going to help you in the long run because not only are you learning your subject, you're also learning how to teach it to yourself."

Participants said the main reason that the need for good organizational skills was greater in online classes than face to face classes was because of the more limited interaction they had with the instructor. Although there are tools to facilitate a strong relationship between students and instructors, many students complained of a feeling of disconnected isolation in their online courses. Lois: "Well, from my experience, in most

of my online classes, all they really do is tell me what to read and tell me when my assignments are due. So really I just learn from my textbook. I really don't learn much from them to be honest." Students view a strong connection with their instructor as a positive development. The lack of this connection can encourage apathy or frustration and is not good for student success or civic learning. Connections are important for social learning, which in turn promotes civic learning.

The theme of connections helps us understand the perception students have of civic learning in their online classes and the role of online classes at the community college for civic learning. Integrating awareness of current events can help students relate course materials to civic life. Instructors who are present in their courses and facilitate self-directed learning are helping to mold students to become engaged in the course, their own learning and in society. And connections are a central element of the final theme, social pedagogy.

### Social Pedagogy

"It'd be really cool if a teacher was able to rile interest and participation and that kind of thing, because you can't get away from the fact that you definitely lack a lot of social interaction when you have an online class." Melissa's observations are representative of a common expression from students their experience taking online classes lacks social interaction. Anna found that her online classes were missing something: "I feel that it's lacking something online. I really can't pinpoint it...I think it would be more beneficial if you had more interaction online. I feel like all I do is read something online, read my assignment, do it, submit it, you know, and that's it...I don't

feel that there is a lot of participation." This is unfortunate because students in classes with limited social interaction are missing out on beneficial learning opportunities.

Social pedagogy is effective for bringing about civic learning. The values, knowledge and skills the participants named, such as communication, critical thinking, civil discourse and respect for diversity can all be achieved with classes conducted from a social pedagogy perspective. This comes with specific challenges and opportunities when conducted in an online environment. Social pedagogy has a long history. Schugurensky and Silver (2013) wrote that it is:

A holistic approach to learning that considers the whole person, an integrated approach that considers the interplay of individual and social dynamics, an interdisciplinary approach that brings together different theoretical and professional fields, and an overall interest in addressing social problems - and fostering social change - through educational and social interventions. (Schugurensky and Silver, 2013, p.8)

The participants remarked about how the social interaction with students helped them in regards to civic learning. Lois said it was normal practice for students to be asked to provide some basic information about themselves. This can be done most effectively on a profile page or in an introductions forum if a profile is not provided by the learning management system (LMS). For the most part, students will feel more comfortable sharing information when they feel like they know something about their teacher and other students. This was the opinion of most of the subjects of this study. Mark said: "I definitely think it makes the class more enjoyable when all the students kind of do share about themselves a little bit."

There are those who take exception to the idea that social pedagogy is beneficial or even appropriate. Tom said: "I don't really expect to have to do it very much. I would expect it to be more about what the class is about, not about the students taking the class

because it really doesn't matter to me. I don't care." Some students prefer classes that favor independent learning over learning in a community. They would rather remain disengaged and see discussions as unnecessary distractions from memorizing content.

The students that do believe it helps to know something about classmates they are expected to engage with find it awkward when they don't. Mai spoke of the frustration that comes with trying to communicate with students she doesn't know and missing out on the kinds of conversations more common in a face to face class when using electronic means of communication:

We don't talk about different stuff, and we don't have a conversation. We don't have a normal conversation like how are you, how's your day. No, we don't have that. And I just think that it's just a nice gesture. I think people should do that often, you know, just chitchat once in a while and ask how are you doing? Like all I know about students in my online classes is the work that has to be done and comment on the student posts. Like for example, if I read a student post, I sit there and read their post and I have to figure out, oh this is the way that person is thinking, so this person must be this type of person... (Mai)

Most fully online classes are conducted in an asynchronous format (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). There are opportunities for synchronous engagement via web conferencing or chat rooms, but the scheduling flexibility that draws most students to online learning in the first place usually precludes the opportunity to have a whole class online together at any given time. This means that asynchronous discussion forums are the most typical method of engagement in fully online classes. The participants listed a variety of reactions to this type of engagement, revealing the different ways students think about this kind of activity.

Several participants talked about their comfort in contributing to written discussion forums as opposed to being more apprehensive about speaking in front of

others in a face to face class. Mai talked about preferring to ask questions in an online forum rather than asking the same question in a room full of classmates. Anna remarked how in her experience, students seemed to say things online that they would not say in class. Monica said: "I'm a shy person, so I prefer to post online because I know they're not looking at me directly, whereas if I was in the classroom, I would probably not raise my hand to participate."

Other students found it better to participate in person. Some students such as Maria preferred oral to written communication. "I think explaining it in person is just so much easier. I think when I read it, I'm just like okay, but it's not going in my head." Others talked about the aspects of communication that are lost when participants are not able to see each other. Wendy said: "you can't hear the tone and you can't see facial expressions that are going on with the conversation, so all you're doing is reading." Tom thought that face to face conversations in real time produced genuine answers that revealed what a person really knew, otherwise he felt students all became Wikipedia experts with their online posts.

Providing a comfortable environment for shy students to participate is just one effect of the asynchronous nature of online discussion forums. The fact that these conversations occur across an extended range of time and space can give participants time to reflect and do research as they write their responses. This extra time can give students more confidence and therefore make it more likely for them to contribute. Mai appreciated having more time to organize her thoughts. The face to face environment can be stressful to some students. They don't feel comfortable give a spontaneous response



when they are unsure of the answer. Written responses give students a chance to be more deliberate and check their sources.

Whether it is justified or not, a person's formal writing is a big determinant in how others will perceive them. Writing that is too informal or full of grammatical and spelling errors may reflect poorly on a student. Some of the participants recognized this and understood that their reputation could be affected. Monica captured this idea: "people I think with the technology are slacking on writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation and those are things that make you intelligent and affect how people perceive you. It's how you write and how you spell. Especially when that's the only way to identify you, with email. Even your resume is how they're going to identify you."

Not all students are careful or able to produce good writing at the college level. There is a detectable trend towards more informal writing by a sizable portion of the student population with little regard for proofreading. Online discussion forums are excellent environments for students to hone their written communication skills, which was seen by the participants as important for both succeeding in online classes and for being an effective, engaged citizen. "I've learned skills that are important. It think it definitely helped me in my written skills" (Monica). The degree to which instructors will demand proper academic writing varies as much as the extent to which they provide meaningful assistance.

### Conclusion

Respect, connections and social pedagogy are the three themes that have emerged from this research study as being meaningful for the purpose of this study and in providing answers to the research questions. How do emerging adult students enrolled at

the community college define their civic responsibility? Having respect for diversity and awareness of community and world events are two of the ways. How do emerging adult students enrolled at the community college participate in civic engagement? Volunteering is important here, with a more mixed story on voting. What skills, values and/or knowledge do emerging adult students enrolled in online classes at the community college hope or expect to learn? Communication, time management, cultural awareness, history, and critical thinking were among these responses. What are the ways in which emerging adult students enrolled at the community college find the experience of asynchronous online classes provides opportunities for civic learning? Having more time to research and reflect before contributing to a discussion was important.. How do online classes at the community college contribute to the civic learning of emerging adults? The experience is effective, with room for improvement which this study helps to provide. The final chapter will analyze how these findings relate to the existing literature and suggest ways for this research to move forward.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This chapter will explore how the findings from this phenomenological study relate to the extant literature. It will offer implications for a pedagogy that promotes civic learning for emerging adults enrolled in online courses at the public community college, and conclude with recommendations for further research. The purpose of this research study was to understand the ways in which emerging adult students enrolled in online classes at the community college perceive civic learning and to understand the role of online courses at the community college in civic learning.

### Civic Responsibility

The themes that emerged from the responses of the participants related to civic responsibility included respecting diversity, engaging others with civility, and being aware of what is happening in the community, nation and world.

#### Respect for diversity

There is general agreement in the academic community that diversity education has positive outcomes for students while they are in school and as citizens. Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin (2002) found that diversity experiences helped improve both learning and citizen outcomes. Banks (2008) wrote that "citizens in the 21st century need the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to function in their cultural communities and beyond their cultural borders" (p. xii). Parker (2003) also found that multicultural education was important and should go hand in hand with citizenship education.

The task of including diversity education as a learning outcome is made easier when instructors have a receptive audience, and there is evidence that emerging adults favor learning about diversity and are respectful of other cultures (Zogby, 2008). Arnett (2013) said “emerging adults today show unprecedented acceptance for people who are different from themselves” (p. 8). Zogby (2008, 2013) called the current generation of emerging adults "First Globals" because of their international outlook. He found them to be the most accepting generation in American history. Pew (2007) conducted a poll of members of what they called "Generation Next" and found that “in their political outlook, they are the most tolerant of any generation on social issues such as immigration, race and homosexuality” (p. 1).

The responses of the participants led to the finding that emerging adults accept difference. They also shared the perspective that knowledge of diversity was an important aspect of civic learning and responsible citizenship. Online community college classes are by nature diverse and expose students to classmates with different backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, and objectives (Pusser & Levin, 2009). Interaction with these classmates can be just as effective as studying the content of courses such as anthropology and sociology when it comes to increasing knowledge of diversity.

Another impact on civility was the profound belief in individualism held by emerging adults. Smith, Christofferson, Davidson and Herzog (2011) found that emerging adults have such a strong belief in individualism and respect for people having the right to think and behave as they see fit, that there is no space to disagree or even to try to influence others. The opinion of the authors was that the strong individualist relativism displayed by the emerging adults they interviewed was actually a detriment to

their civic and political engagement because they felt it was wrong to try and influence others. "When it comes to participation in the civic, political and public realms, the view that 'everybody's different' exerts a strong debilitating effect" (p. 220).

### Awareness

Advocates of civic learning point to awareness as one of the indicators of civic competence (Delli Carpini, 2005). Galston (2001) found a consensus among the various scholars who tried to determine how much citizens needed to know: "competent democratic citizens need not be policy experts, but there is a basic knowledge below which the ability to make a full range of reasoned civic judgments is impaired" (p. 218). Civic competence is commonly found as an objective of campus-based organizations established to promote civic engagement (National Task Force on Civic Learning & Democratic Engagement, 2012). The organizations found on community college campuses face the challenge of trying to reach students who typically only have time to come to campus for classes. The challenge to reach online students is even greater. Although efforts should still be made to reach this population for co-curricular activities, there are also opportunities to help students raise their awareness of issues within the scope of a course.

The literature finds that emerging adults do not have a sufficient grasp on the important issues of the day (Bauerlein, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011; Niemi, 2012). It should be noted that while emerging adults lag behind other age cohorts, older adults are also not as informed as they should be in order to participate in civic life (Delli Carpini, 2005). The participants in this study reported varying degrees to

which they paid attention to the news, though most indicated that awareness of current events and what is happening in their community was a civic responsibility.

### Civic Engagement

Civic engagement refers to the ways in which citizens participate in public life (Zukin, et al., 2006). The participants in this study described several different ways to engage, but there were no dominant forms that held across the group. This is not surprising in light of the literature which describes today's emerging adults as being interested and concerned with civic affairs, but not necessarily demonstrating that interest in the traditional ways such as voting or reading the newspaper (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and CIRCLE; 2006; Zukin, et al., 2006).

The participants' comments on voting ran from the belief in the importance of informed voting to the idea that voting made no difference. Those who did comment on the importance of voting made sure to also qualify that endorsement by saying it was important that voters be informed. The absence of a unified reaction to the importance of voting is supported by data from recent elections that points to an ambivalence towards voting for emerging adults as a group. Only 45% of eligible citizens aged 18-29 voted in the 2012 election (CIRCLE, 2013). This is down from 51% in 2008 (Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009).

Scholars have not been able to point to any prominent reason that would explain why over half of today's emerging adults choose not to vote. Zukin et al (2006) argued that "it appears that the members of the youngest cohort have not rejected the political system so much as they are indifferent to it" (p. 93). Several of the participants had never voted because they were still working towards becoming United States citizens. The

inability to vote also had a negative impact on their inclination to pay attention to the news in a way that would make them an informed voter. They did not see the point.

Zukin, et al. (2006) put forward the idea that twentysomethings are not likely to follow the same traditional patterns of civic and political engagement as previous generations. Those interested in judging how they do participate need to do so with new metrics that take into account newer forms such as building awareness of issues through social media. The turn to using social media for civic participation was also a finding of Bennett, Wells and Freelon (2011). The meaning of these diffuse responses for instructors is not to assume anything regarding the civic behavior of emerging adults in their online classes.

#### Civic Skills, Knowledge and Values

Kirlin (2003) reported that the specific skills found to be important for civic engagement that appear in various theoretical and empirical studies can be grouped into four categories: organization, communication, collective decision-making and critical thinking. Only collective decision making was absent from the various skills mentioned by the participants in this study as being important for civic learning. The participants most often cited the subjects that are taught in the social sciences and humanities such as history, sociology, English and anthropology as being important categories of knowledge necessary for engaged citizenship. They believe that online classes at the community college provide opportunities for them to learn more about the skills, values and knowledge useful for civic learning.

#### Communication

There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have

in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. What they have in common in order to form a community or society are aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge - a common understanding. (Dewey, 1916)

Dewey believed that communication was central to education, and that education was central to democracy. Communication continues to be important to both education and democracy, a point underscored by the participants in this study. They recognized the importance and limitations of communication as it related to their success in online courses. They also said that communication was an important skill for being an engaged citizen.

Stotsky (1987) referred to three theories of what civic participation should be in her work on the importance of civic writing. In the "elitist" approach, citizens mainly just vote and observe, leaving a select few to do the work of governing. The second approach is "advocacy" where a select few govern to pursue special interests and the people seek to change the political system. Last is the "citizen" approach where people try to actively participate in bringing about effective policy. It is this third approach that Stotsky claimed was the essence of our political heritage, and it requires an ability to produce civic writing. According to Stotsky, "Civic writing is not distinguished by any specific set of language conventions, condition for authorship, or even literary forms but by its purposes and contexts. It is also distinguished by a moral element in the writer's motivation for writing" (p. 3).

Much has changed since 1987, but writing is still important. Today it may not be a mailed letter to the editor or congressperson, but rather a blog post, email or tweet that is the mark of civic participation. The age of the internet and social media has added digital literacy to the list of important communication skills for civic engagement.



Instructors should not assume that all emerging adults have the skills to communicate properly using digital media. Hargittai (2010) warns us that "While popular rhetoric would have us believe that young users are generally savvy with digital media, data clearly show that considerable variation exists among fully wired college students when it comes to understanding various aspects of Internet use" (p. 108). Digital media literacy instruction can help students learn to better communicate with these tools, and Kahne, Ullman, and Middaugh (2012) have demonstrated that this can improve civic engagement.

Most of the communication among the teacher and students in an online class is done through writing. Students are often writing emails, submitting papers, and contributing to discussion forums. Participants commented on the ways in which their writing improved by taking online classes. Teachers can provide feedback by responding to emails and forum posts and using annotation markup tools to offer detailed critiques of documents created on word processing software. The online discussion forum is a good place to practice the kinds of civic writing useful for the digital age. The learning management systems used by community colleges are increasingly adding social features such as notifications and tagging that are already commonly used in social media.

When it comes to civic knowledge, participants named subjects that are taught by community colleges. The courses most often named by the participants fall into the humanities and social sciences: English, history, sociology, political science and anthropology. Other courses were also mentioned, such as science, economics, law, finance and psychology. These are subjects that are especially useful for growth in the knowledge useful for democratic participation (Geary Schneider, Townsend, 2013).

These subjects are important to civic learning whether the classes are conducted in face-to-face classes or online.

### Asynchronous Learning

The participants agreed that engaging their classmates and instructor through asynchronous discussion forums was the most common form of interaction they experienced in their online classes. When done effectively, they were able to develop the skills, knowledge and values useful for engaged citizenship such as critical thinking and communication. The most popular mode for communication in online classes is the asynchronous discussion forum (Parsad & Lewis, 2008).

Most of the participants of this study had experienced this assignment type in their classes with varying degrees of satisfaction. One of the main factors in determining the existence of discussion forum activity was the subject matter of the course. Online math classes did not usually have a discussion forum assignment, but participants spoke of enriching experiences in classes like English, anthropology, sociology and history that they found increased their civic learning.

Asynchronous discussion forums offer advantages and disadvantages. Several of the participants said that they were more likely to participate in an online discussion forum than a face-to-face discussion because of the reduced pressure. They are not facing their classmates in real time, and therefore there is less concern of immediate negative feedback. They also enjoyed the time they had to contemplate their answers. They had time to revise their post and double check their facts. Zingaro and Oztok (2012) found that while asynchronous modes can support constructivist based learning, instructors had to make efforts to sustain the dialogue.

While the time delay gives students more time and less pressure to contribute to a discussion, it could also lead to orphaned conversations. Several participants expressed frustration at not getting anyone to reply to what they had written, especially after putting a lot of time and thought into their post, sometimes even including details of personal importance. Most, but not all, of the participants thought it was beneficial to know more about their classmates. They felt it helped to create an atmosphere where people were willing to share with each other. There were some who thought this was a waste of time and did not really care to tell about themselves or learn about other people. They felt this was a distraction that took time away from actually learning the content.

Classroom dialogue is different in several respects from what happens online. The most important characteristic separating the two approaches is the situation of having all of the students in the class at the same time. This rarely happens in the online environment. The main reason students choose online classes is because of the scheduling flexibility. This is what we find in the literature (Jaggers, Edgecombe & Stacey, 2013) and it is confirmed by the participants of this study. Technology does exist to support real time video conferencing, but the diverse nature of the students in online classes at the public community college often preclude the means to find a time at which the entire class can meet together over virtual tools such as video conferencing applications.

This current reality is not likely to change if scheduling flexibility remains a priority for students in online classes. Small group discussions do remain a possibility, but this could be a burden on instructors to have to be available at different times during the week. Teaching assistants are a potential answer, but these are not widely available in

community colleges except in very large classes, where the number of small group discussions would have to increase. Some of the students did express interest in a synchronous tool being used in an online class, but none of them had ever had that experience. Some were also a little apprehensive about the idea for the same reasons they were less likely to participate in their face to face classes. They were concerned not only about the technology working, but also having to speak and be seen by their classmates.

Another limit to online discourse is the natural inclination many people have to avoid embarrassment. This can discourage some to participate, especially if they are struggling with the material and feel that everyone else in the class is ahead of them. Brookfield (2005) calls this the imposter affect. While this is mitigated somewhat in the online asynchronous environment, it does not disappear, especially if there is a student who posts frequently in a way that may seem above other students intellectually. Some students might feel their own post is inadequate next to something they see as more polished and academic.

### Civil Discourse

Participants appreciated the opportunity to learn from other students using discursive methods. Many scholars recommended deliberation or dialogue as an effective strategy for facilitating civic learning (Dewey, 1916; Parker, 2003). Most of the literature on dialogue for civic learning centers on what happens on site in a face-to-face environment. This experience is different from the kinds of conversations that happen when individuals are separated by time and space. Instructors trying to motivate students in an asynchronous conversation need to know about the benefits of social pedagogy and

use different techniques to create the kind of online environment conducive to civic learning.

Parker (2003) claimed it was a good way for member of a diverse society to lead to enlightened action. Arend (2009) conducted qualitative research of an online course and found that discussion forums can lead to higher levels of critical thinking. Leskes (2013) stated that there are multiple benefits from civil discourse such as critical inquiry, analysis and reasoning, written communication, and the recognition of the limits of one's understanding. "Civic learning embodies the very values of civic learning: open-mindedness, compromise, and mutual respect" (p. 47). Kiriakidis (2008) found there to be a positive correlation between the level of instructor discourse and student discourse. Students enjoyed the experience of the discussion forums because of the prompt feedback of the instructor.

Learning about the diverse experience and perspectives from classmates in an online discussion forum is a good way to improve civic learning. Baek, Wojcieszak, and Delli Carpini (2012) explained how public online discussion had the potential to allow users greater opportunity to interact with diverse others who may hold different political views. It is common to see discussion of politics and current events on social media, issue forums, blogs and at the bottom of new stories where columnists like West (2014) encouraged their readers upon finishing a story to "now argue about it in the comments!" (p. 1).

Promotion of civil discourse has become an even more pressing issue for college classes given the rise of what commentators have called "the argument culture" or "rude democracy" (Smith & Bressler, 2013, p. 454). The last few decades have seen frequent

displays of name-calling, insulting and general incivility in the public discourse (Brooks & Geer, 2007; Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, & Collins, 2002; Leskes, 2013; Lindberg, 2012; Smith & Bressler, 2013). Leskes worried that this visceral public discourse threatens the core of US democracy. It was ironic, yet hopeful, that all of the participants emphasized the importance of not offending their classmates when engaging them on the discussion forums. Perhaps the millennial generation will not accept such a negative culture and help to transform it.

### Self-directed Learning

The participants felt that being a student in an online class required a certain degree of independent learning skill so they could teach themselves the content and succeed in the course. This perception stems in part from a feeling of isolation many students share. This a common finding from the literature (Bambara, et al., 2009; Capra, 2012; Jaggars, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013). Capra (2012) conducted a phenomenological study of community college students in online classes. She found that "overall, students did not describe their learning experience as social. Instead, participants described their learning experience as isolated and impersonal" (p. 78). The two themes that emerged from her coding of the data were "perfunctory discussion boards" and "impersonal relationship with classmates."

Yen and Lui (2009) claimed that "online learning is a highly learner-autonomous process in which the student accepts the responsibility to make learning decisions and maintain active control of the learning process" (p. 348). Johnson and Berge (2012) stated that adult learning characteristics of being autonomous, self directed and goal-oriented are the qualities of successful online students. This type of self-directed learning is

characteristic of adult learning (Knowles, 1975). The online classroom of the community college is a mix of older students who have long made the transition to an adult learning and emerging adults who are along that continuum. Emerging adults at the community college are in various stages of moving from a dependent learning process in high school to the adult learning style of the community college. Du (2013) believed that community college instructors should act as facilitators and help their students develop the appropriate skills of a self-directed learner such as being able to identify their learning needs, locate resources and be able to evaluate the learning process.

#### Instructor Presence

Most of the participants preferred to be in an online course where they could see evidence of meaningful engagement on the part of the instructor. They like to think that their instructor is interested in their success and will be available to guide them through the course. Instructor presence has been identified as one of the most critical elements of successful online learning. It has been shown to increase engagement and lead to greater student success (Jaggars, Edgecombe & Stacey, 2013; Liu, Gomez & Yen, 2009).

Unfortunately, many online classes suffer from insufficient teacher presence. Skramstad, Schlosser & Orellana (2012) subjected 59 online students to the Teacher Presence Survey (TPS). This is an instrument that can gauge the level of interaction in a course. Their results showed neutral levels of instructor presence in the courses. The participants who spoke of good online experiences said that meaningful interaction was the reason for their satisfaction.

Many scholars have commented on the importance of instructor presence. This has been recognized as important both for online classes and traditional face to face

classes. Chickering and Gamson (1999) listed student-faculty contact as one of their seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. Metro-Roland and Farber (2010) stated that the most compelling difference between teaching online versus teaching in a traditional classroom is the phenomenon of presence. Varieties of the former mode always include the physical presence of an instructor whereas in the virtual world, one must depend on technology to enable presence. This is possible to do. Hostetter and Busch (2006) have shown that online classes can be designed to facilitate students' perceptions of social presence at the same rate as traditional classroom settings.

Garrison and Vaughn (2008) defined three categories of online presence for what they called the community of inquiry model (CoI): social, cognitive, and teaching. Social presence is about building community, and cognitive presence relates to perceptions of learning. Ladyshevsky (2013) recommended that teacher presence, the design of the course and the manner in which it is facilitated, be used to strike a balance between social presence and cognitive presence to maintain the optimal learning environment.

Jones (2011) found that the exercise of teacher presence required instructors to assume three different roles. The first task is to design a meaningful and worthwhile educational experience based on clearly articulated student learning outcomes. Presence also requires instructors to use various pedagogical techniques to facilitate learning activities. The third role of instructors for achieving presence is as a subject-matter expert. Liu, Gomez & Yen (2009) have shown students' social presence to be a predictor of course retention and final grade. Unfortunately, while social pedagogy techniques can be beneficial to students, many online courses are not designed around this pedagogy (Bambara, et al., 2009).



Jaggars, Edgecombe and Stacey (2013) interviewed 46 first-year students at a community college to understand their experience in online courses. The participants expressed a feeling of isolation. Each of the 23 online courses examined in the study were categorized as having little, moderate or strong interpersonal interaction. Quantitative analysis revealed a positive correlation between the level of interpersonal interaction and student learning outcomes. Jaggars, Edgecombe, & Stacey recommended establishing a meaningful instructor presence as a strategy to improve student success (p. 6).

The presence of an instructor goes a long way towards defining the atmosphere of an online class. It has been commonly cited by both students and researchers as the primary determinant of satisfaction in online courses. Capra (2001) interviewed 15 community college students in online classes and found that the role of the instructor was the primary factor affecting the students' perception of the learning experience.

### Conclusion

All participants readily agreed that community colleges should provide opportunities for civic learning. Most of the participants wanted clarification on what was meant by the term “civic learning”, but after hearing an explanation, agreed that community colleges should provide opportunities for students to enhance the skills, values and knowledge helpful for becoming an engaged citizen. These findings show that students at community colleges agree with the majority of commentators who believe the community colleges should be places of civic learning.

This study tells us that students have experienced civic learning when they are engaged with their classmates and the instructor. They have more passion and enthusiasm for the class when they feel that they are not alone. When people respond to their ideas,

they want to share more. They will strive to produce higher quality work when they see that their instructor is not just going through the motions. This study tells us that emerging adult students are not monolithic. They are incredibly diverse and engage in different ways. They may not participate in the traditional ways, but most of them care about what is going on in their society. They want civic learning to be included in their online classes at the community college.

Though all of the participants agreed civic learning should take place at the community college, there was a slight difference of opinion as to how this objective should be achieved. Some participants felt that civic learning would happen no matter what the objectives of the college or teacher were for the class. The process of interacting with other students alone would be enough to at least provide some level of civic learning. Even if students were in a class with little interaction, some participants felt that dealing with this less than ideal learning environment could be an experience that helps them prepare for the challenges of engaged public life. This finding should provide hope for instructors and administrators who seek to infuse more strategies for civic learning into the programming and activities at the community college. It appears they will have a receptive audience.

This study represents important work that will be of value to those concerned with improving the civic competence of emerging adult students enrolled in online classes at the community college. There have not been any studies to look at the intersection of these four topics, and the recommendations for further research below illustrate how great the need is for further investigations. This is important work because a properly functioning democracy requires informed and engaged participants, and higher education

is one of the important social institutions that helps prepare citizens for public engagement. Many students choose to take some or all of their courses in higher education at the community college, and the number of those taking online classes has grown and will likely continue to grow.

This study provides useful information for continuing that work. It reinforces the idea that emerging adult students are accepting and respectful of diversity and see that as an important aspect of civic responsibility. It tells us that emerging adults in online classes see the importance of treating each other with civility in online discussion forums - perhaps to a fault. We can see that instructors need to continue to promote civility while simultaneously cultivating a spirit of respectful, yet critical debate that encourages students to challenge each other.

#### Implications for pedagogy

The combination of the findings from this study and the extant literature can help inform a pedagogy to promote civic learning in asynchronous online courses at the public community college. The purpose of this section is to offer community college faculty and instructional designers with some ideas on how to design and conduct online classes so as to maximize the latent potential in their classes for using diversity to enhance civic learning. This can be achieved by adopting a pedagogy that is student-centered and promotes the sharing of experience and perspective.

This social-constructivist approach has been gaining acceptance at many levels of education (Dobozy, 2013). Anderson and Dron (2011) define this pedagogy as when "each learner constructs means by which new knowledge is both created and integrated with existing knowledge" (p. 85). New information can come both from content materials

and from the experiences and perspectives of others in the learning community of the online class. Instructors should strive to create and sustain an inclusive learning community where students are encouraged to share their background, experience, and perspectives. This entails meaningful instructor presence, clear guidelines and expectations, and the promotion of a social atmosphere.

Instructors should prioritize efforts to promote a learning community from the start of class. The first week of a course is very important for setting a tone and communicating clearly the expectations for students. It is also the appropriate time to take steps to for the students and the instructor to get to know one another. This is important because familiarity tends to encourage greater participation. In fact, these efforts can begin even before the class starts. Instructors can send a welcome message to students a week or so prior to the first day of class in order to let them know what kind of experience to expect.

One simple yet effective technique to work towards the goal of creating a learning community appropriate for social pedagogy is to have students complete a simple, targeted profile upon entering the course that everyone can read. This is something most students will be familiar with from their experience in face-to-face classes and some online classes. The items in this profile can be reveal students' academic goals, career objectives, their interests in the course and their preparedness both for the content and the practice of being an online student.

Another suggestion is to include discussion board assignments that encourage students to say something about their background relates to the course. This can be a low-stakes assignment where each student publishes a 150-word post describing their goals

for the class and to ask questions of at least two of their classmates. Students should also be reminded to respond to questions asked of them. This will enable students to start to get to know each other and encourage back and forth dialogue. Later when discussions concern course content, students will already be familiar with the process and expectations, and know something about their classmates.

Instructors should encourage the respect students have for diversity and the value of what they can learn from their classmates. Civil discourse is an appropriate exercise to facilitate learning from diverse classmates. Most often, this is done through assignments that are carried out on the medium of web-based discussion forums. A typical assignment is for each student to submit a weekly post on some topic related to the content they are studying and to then reply to the posts of some number of their classmates. Advances in educational technology are opening up other venues such as video-conferencing, live chat, blogs, wikis and social media.

The instructor should strive to maintain a safe environment in which to have dialogue about potentially divisive issues. Students who feel that the shared environment has a code of civility that protects them from harassment or ridicule will have more confidence to share their perspective. A culture of openness and civility can be encouraged by communicating clear guidelines and rubrics. Fortunately, emerging adult students appreciate clear structures and expectations and seem disposed to stay within the parameters laid out for them.

Students should not ridicule classmates or use hateful or derogatory language. Teachers can refer students to their institution's student code of conduct and also add their own perspectives that will be germane to their course. The guidelines given to

students should also spell out what kinds of actions the teacher may take in cases where the policy is violated. When this does occur, teachers need to exercise appropriate classroom management techniques to get the situation under control. The first action should be to contact the offending student privately, explaining why their comment was inappropriate and where it violates the guidelines. Instructors should be aware of how to escalate cases of repeat offenders to the appropriate staff for classroom management and also be familiar with technical mechanisms to delete posts or mute individual students.

Managing questionable behavior in an online class can be delicate, as instructors need to balance the right of free speech and inquiry with the need to maintain a safe and encouraging learning community. It can be hard to tell where the rights of an individual student start to impede on the rights of other students to a safe learning environment. Teachers need to be careful not to have students so worried about saying the wrong thing that they remain quiet or avoid certain questions that are actually good for the learning community. Civility does not inoculate students from disagreement or criticism. Respectful challenge of what classmates write should be encouraged. Instructors should communicate to students what constitutes being offensive so they are not so quick to cry foul. Being questioned, challenged or rebutted provide grounds for further discussion, not grounds for complaints of injury. The millennials' aversion to offending others and respecting individual choice means that instructors will more often have to deal with discourse that is too cautious rather than discourse that is too caustic.

It is one thing for instructors to make a well-designed course and rubrics that will encourage sharing and critical thinking on discussion forums, but it is another thing to carry out in practice. Some students who are either new to online learning or who have

only experienced more passive time classes online may not be expecting to have to be part of a higher level of engagement. Instructors may have to provide scaffolding to help get students to be able to reach the type of engagement that will help produce more effective civic learning. This may require more instructor participation on the forums at the outset of the class to model the kinds of responses that can stimulate critical thinking and sustain conversations so that they enable deeper understanding of topics.

Having established guidelines and expectations and taken steps to promote a social learning community, instructors should encourage sustained discourse to facilitate civic learning. Here is where an assignment rubric can be very important. Rubrics can set clear expectations for the length, frequency and nature of posts. Chances are that not all students will fulfill these requirements on the first few assignments. Students' aversion to give offense can lead to posts that are more like pleasantries than examples of critical thinking that deepen a discussion. Prompt, constructive, formative feedback early on in the course can help students make adjustments to their practice. This will help reinforce expectations, guide students to help them produce more effective responses, and establish the presence that will let students know that they have an instructor committed to their education and dedicated to the idea of civic learning.

Instructor presence is perhaps the most important factor for promoting civic learning in online classes at the public community college. Much of the literature and the findings from this study point to instructor presence as an indicator of student engagement and satisfaction in online courses. Students want to know that their instructor has an interest in their learning and success. They want to feel that the instructor is actively involved and have not simply put the course on autopilot. Instructors need to do

enough to maintain presence without seeming to steer the discussion too far in any direction. There should be a space for teachers to promote active learning.

An openness to new forms of engagement can be an opportunity for instructors to let the students be the teachers. Students could participate in active learning exercises where they describe the different ways they would consider to engage the community or government in regard to the subjects taught in class. How would they use this knowledge to try and improve society? Or would they? What are some of the challenges and opportunities? The results of such an exercise could lead to a sharing of strategies and possibly some real live engagement. The teacher would also benefit and add new ideas to their growing knowledge of the diverse ways emerging adults think and behave.

Instructors need to recognize that students will need to have the skills of a self-directed learner, even with strong teacher presence. This is true in most modes of adult learning, but especially in asynchronous online learning. This does not have to result in the students having a feeling of isolation. One way to combat this is to address it. It is true that students in online classes will benefit from having the motivation, focus and organizational skills of successful self-directed learners, but it is possible to be a self-directed learner and also be a member of a learning community.

Students who have taken online classes before will come to a new online class with the expectation of having to be a self-directed learner. Instructors can send a message to students that speaks to the goal of cultivating a learning community composed of critical thinkers who challenge each other to probe deeper. This message should also convey the commitment the instructor has to being an active participant in the



course. Students who feel their instructor has purpose and is engaged will have the comfort and confidence to participate and ask for help.

These practices can help instructors and course designers create meaningful opportunities of civic learning for emerging adults in online courses at the public community college. Their approach should be centered on the concepts of clear guidelines and expectations, a social learning community, and the engaged presence of the instructor.

### Recommendations for Future Research

The field of how best to facilitate civic learning for emerging adult students in community college classes is in need of further study in order to help practitioners design courses and implement teaching strategies that will be most effective. In fact, several subsets of this topic have not received much attention. There is little research regarding civic learning at the community college, whether online or not. Similarly, there is little regarding civic learning in online classes, whether at the community college or at four-year colleges and universities. There is also a need for further study of civic learning in online classes offered by for-profit schools.

One of the limitations of the current study was that it focused on participants enrolled in general education courses, which are usually taken by students who plan to transfer to a four-year institution (Barreno & Traut, 2012). Future studies should include students from the technical and vocational classes that are part of terminal degrees. Similarly, most of the general education courses are taken by students who are in a program of study that will lead to an Associates' degree. This degree typically takes two years and covers a wider array of courses than the more specialized certificates and

diplomas. Further research can look at students who do not plan to stay at the community college for two years.

This research looked at the perspective of students. Similar qualitative approaches should be conducted with teachers, administrators, instructional developers and student service professionals. How do instructors feel about making civic learning a course objective? Do administrators encourage this? Is civic learning something instructional developers consider in the design of courses? What are professional development practitioners doing to help teachers provide opportunities for civic learning? Have student life staff considered online offerings of co-curricular programs and activities that can enhance civic learning?

Once sufficient exploratory research has been done with qualitative study to better illustrate the experience of the different groups involved, work should be done to craft a quantitative instrument that can be used to measure the efficacy of strategies and tactics to produce specific civic learning outcomes. This will also enable researchers to break down the results for emerging adult students into more specific categories such as gender, race, previous experience with online classes, high school GPA, disability, and socioeconomic status. And while this study focused on emerging adults, similar work can be done on other age cohorts as well.

Changes in the administration and delivery of online classes at the community college in the future may present further avenues of inquiry. Interested researchers of the community college should pay attention to what is happening with Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). These are tuition-free courses open to anyone with an internet connection that can reach numbers exceeding 100,000 students. Currently, these are only

being offered by the likes of Stanford, Harvard, and MIT, but should community college administrators begin to offer MOOCS, the question of civic learning in these courses will need to be investigated.

One of the interesting findings of this study was the attitude these millennial students had regarding how to behave in online discussion forums. Their concern to avoid offending others stands in contrast to the uncivil manner so prevalent in public discourse. It will be interesting to study whether millennials change the culture or if the culture changes them. Community colleges are also sometimes the only place undocumented students have to pursue higher learning. Their non-citizen status may affect their notions of civic engagement and are worthy of further study.

The growth in online learning, the continue concern of the civic abilities of emerging adults, the changes happening in higher education, and the manner in which the digital age has transformed our culture mean that civic learning in online classes at the public community college will continue to be important. Further research will help theorists and educators devise the most meaningful course design and pedagogy for continuing the important mission of civic learning.

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## APPENDIX A: PARTICPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear students,

My name is Gary Ritter and I am organizing a research study to investigate civic learning. More specifically, the purpose of this research study is understand the ways in which emerging adult students enrolled in online classes at the community college perceive civic learning and to understand the role of community college online courses in civic learning. I am looking for a total of 18 participants aged 18-24 to agree to one telephone interview lasting up to 90 minutes and a potential follow-up interview lasting up to 30 minutes. There will also be a follow up phone call to summarize what was said in the interview to verify that it matches what each participant said. This will also take up to 30 minutes. Each participant will receive a \$10 gift card. If you are interested, please contact me at 704-651-2400 or [gpritter@uncc.edu](mailto:gpritter@uncc.edu). The first three men and women each from online classes in American history, sociology and political science of the right age will be selected. Your instructor knows about the study and this recruitment letter. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Regards,

Gary Ritter  
Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership  
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

### Digital Civic Learning: The Community College Experience

Hello and thank you for agreeing to participate. The purpose of this research study is understand the ways in which emerging adult students enrolled in online classes at the community college perceive civic learning and the role online community college has in civic learning. Before taking part in this study, please read the consent form below. If you understand the statements and freely consent to participate in the study, please print and sign this form and send it to the researcher either through mail or email.

#### Consent Form

This is a qualitative study requiring 18 participants to agree to an individual semi-structured interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. There may be a follow up interview of up to 30 minutes. Participants will also be asked to check the research findings for a total time commitment of 2-3 hours. The identity of the participants will be kept strictly confidential. The interviews will be conducted over the telephone and will be recorded.

All responses are treated as confidential and your responses will not be linked to your identity. You are being asked to provide your email address and phone number purely for communication purposes. Be aware that confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible. There is always the risk of compromising privacy, confidentiality and/or anonymity when using email and the telephone. However, the risk to your physical, emotional, social, professional or financial well-being is considered to be less than minimal

There are no direct benefits to you as a result of participation. The research may result in better understanding of what students aged 18-24 enrolled in online classes at the community college perceive about student learning and an understanding of the role of online community college classes in civic learning. Participants will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card.

Participation is voluntary, refusal to take part in the study involves no penalty or loss of benefits to which participants are otherwise entitled, and participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which they are otherwise entitled.

If you have further questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, contact the Compliance Office at (704) 687-1871. If you have questions concerning the study, contact the principal investigator, doctoral candidate Gary Ritter, at (704) 651-2400 or by email at [gpritter@uncc.edu](mailto:gpritter@uncc.edu). The dissertation advisor is Dr. Lisa Merriweather: (704) 687-8740, [lmerriwe@uncc.edu](mailto:lmerriwe@uncc.edu).

CPCC is eager to ensure that all research participants are treated in a fair and respectful manner. If you have any concerns or questions about your treatment as a subject in this project, contact Dr. Terri Manning, Planning and Research, P.O. Box 35009, Charlotte, NC 28235 (704) 33-6597.

You may print a copy of this form.

Participant Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for participating. I see that you have agreed to the informed consent. and do you have any questions? In a moment I am going to start recording.

We are now being recorded.

I want to start by getting to know you and then we will get into your experiences at college.

Remember that I will not identify you with what we discuss today in any of the writings that result from this study. And there are no wrong answers. I want to understand your experience in your online sociology class.

1. I understand you are (confirm age, race, gender from informed consent)
2. How would you describe the socioeconomic class status of your family growing up? Such as low, middle or upper class.
3. I'd like to talk about your academic career since you completed high school.
  - a. Did you earn a diploma or GED? What year?
  - b. Did you earn any college credit while in high school?
  - c. What did you do after graduating high school?
  - d. Have you declared a major? Do you have any specific career intentions.
  - e. What are some of the classes you have had?
4. What motivated you to go to college?
  - a. are there any other motivations for going to college?
5. Has college has affected the way you think about society?
  - a. What are some of the course that made the most difference in the way you think about society?
6. What is the difference between a community college and a four year college?
7. Now I'd like to talk about your experience with online classes.
  - i. When was your first?
  - ii. How many have you taken?
  - iii. What ones?
  - iv. What are the reasons you enrolled in an online class at a community college?
  - v. Describe the experience of taking an online class.
  - vi. How did you perform?
  - vii. Why did you choose to take them?
8. Now I'd like to talk about citizenship in a civil society.
  - a. Are you familiar with the terms civic learning and civic engagement?

- b. How would you define them?
  - c. What is your responsibility as a citizen?
- 9. I define civic learning as the educational opportunities that can enhance the skills, knowledge and values helpful for informed, participatory citizenship. Given what you know about civics and what we have so far discussed...
  - a. What kinds of knowledge are necessary to be an informed citizen?
  - b. What skills are needed for participatory citizenship?
  - c. What are your values as a citizen?
- 10. I'd like to talk about the kinds of civic engagement you may have seen or done growing up.
  - a. Were your parents engaged citizens when you were growing up? Describe.
  - b. How did your parents actions or behavior affect your values of civic engagement?
  - c. Did you have family discussions about community issues, politics or other current events?
  - d. Are there any other childhood experiences or events that may have shaped your outlook or values regarding citizenship and civic engagement?
- 11. What are your experiences with civic engagement?
  - a. Do you talk politics with friends? family? in classes?
  - b. Do you have experience volunteering?
  - c. Describe your involvement with elections?
  - d. Do you contribute to philanthropic causes?
  - e. Are there issues that affect
  - f. Were you invited to participate? How?
  - g. How do you stay informed about civic related issues? About what issues in particular?
- 12. OK. We have talked about some different issues, and we are going to bring them together. I'd like to talk about how you may have experienced civic learning in your online coursework at the community college. Again, the definition for civic learning is the Educational opportunities that enhance the skills, knowledge and values helpful for informed, participatory citizenship
  - a. Describe a specific civic learning experience from your online class in (history/sociology/or political science)?
  - b. How does the culture of an online class lend itself to the potential for civic learning? (may need to give them an idea of what I mean by culture)
  - c. How did this course affect
    - i. skills
    - ii. knowledge
    - iii. values
  - d. How does the course in general affect your civic learning?

- i. design of the course - the layout
- ii. assessments
- iii. actions of the instructor

13. Do you feel that your online course at the community college have contributed to your personal civic learning?
14. Has your community college experience met with your expectations for civic learning?
15. What differences do you see between face to face classes and online classes regarding the potential for civic learning? Why?
16. Should both community college and 4 year colleges provide opportunities for civic learning?
17. Do you have any questions for me?
18. Thanks. I will be conducting more interviews. After reviewing the responses, I will create a series of questions for a shorter follow up interview. So I will be in touch over the next weeks or months. How would you like to receive the \$10 Amazon gift card?