

Understanding the civic role of community colleges: Assessing factors that influence leadership
decision-making

by

Deanna Villanueva-Saucedo

B.A., Arizona State University, 1991
M.P.A., Arizona State University, 2002

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Abstract

This study examines how community college leaders conceptualize and make decisions about their institution's civic role. Grounded in the sector's historic commitment to civic engagement, the study responds to concerns about declining civic literacy and increasing polarization. Using a quantitative-leading mixed methods design with an explanatory sequential approach, survey data from community college leaders in the Desert Southwest United States informed follow-up qualitative interviews.

Findings indicate that decision-making is shaped by a combination of institutional constraints, environmental pressures, and personal factors. Leaders balance competing priorities such as limited resources and public scrutiny, while also relying on personal values and experiences. Results further reveal variation in how leaders define and operationalize civic engagement, ranging from passive community access to more active, partnership-driven approaches. This study contributes to the literature by identifying key influences on leadership decision-making and highlighting the lack of a consistent framework for civic engagement in community colleges. Implications point to the need for clearer definitions, targeted leadership development, and stronger alignment between civic outcomes and institutional priorities.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Terry Calaway

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Civic engagement is inherent to the mission of community colleges. The Truman Commission Report (Zook, 1947), a seminal document in the evolution of the community college sector, emphasized the role of colleges in helping students develop “as an informed responsible citizen” (p. 51). The college itself is charged with a critical role in this civic mission of teaching about democracy and contributing to the public good. Community college leaders, including the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 1988, 2000) and Association of Community College trustees (ACCT, 2000), have continued to reinforce this civic mission.

Community college leaders play a vital role in executing this civic mission as they lead the development of priorities, policies, budget, and staffing for the institution (AACC, 2022). College leaders set a vision for their institution including how they perceive its role as a civic agent in their communities (Ronan, 2012).

The range of civic engagement programming available to community college leaders for advancing their institution’s civic mission is broad. Civic engagement activities and programming can vary widely from passive activities such as hosting meetings to proactive engagement involving economic revitalization (Guarasci, 2022; Schneider, 2000; Tierney, 2021; Yamamura & Koth, 2018). Yet civic literacy, a basic understanding of American government, is on the decline (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2024; US Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2024). At the same time, civil unrest is on the rise, evidenced by protests following the killing of George Floyd (Taylor, 2021), the attack on the United States Capitol (United States Attorney’s Office, 2024), and protests over the Israel-Hamas war (Blake & Palmer, 2024).

Higher education leaders are struggling to deal with this rising civil unrest and how to turn “terrible events into educational moments” (Flaherty, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

Preparing students for civic life is inherent in the mission of community colleges as is the civic role of the institution itself (Ronan, 2012; Zook, 1947). Community college leaders are called upon to lead their institutions including the fulfillment of this civic role (AACC, 1988, 2000, 2022). Yet civic literacy is on the decline (ACTA, 2024; US Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2024) and civil discourse has been overshadowed by civil disobedience on some college campuses (Blake & Palmer, 2024; Gretzinger, 2024a; Whittington, 2024).

Background of the Problem

Civil unrest is occurring on campuses across the nation (Gretzinger, 2024a; Taylor, 2021; Whittington, 2024). Higher education leaders have faced strong lines of questioning during congressional hearings regarding student protests (Gretzinger, 2024b). Civic literacy is on the decline and “significant numbers of college students graduate without even a rudimentary grasp of America’s history and political system” (ACTA, 2024, para 1).

Yet, community colleges are called upon to fulfill a civic mission, contribute to the public good, and provide “education for a fuller realization of democracy” (Zook, 1947, p. 8). There are extensive publications and research focused on the civic mission in higher education generally, community colleges specifically, and the role of the institution. The AACC 1988 *Building Communities* report called for colleges to ensure that students are “prepared to participate more effectively in civic life” (1988, p. 55). *The Knowledge Net*, a joint publication from AACC and the ACCT, explicitly urged community colleges to “provide learners with an array of

experiences to help them gain civic awareness and skills that will enhance their participation in a democracy” (2000, p. 4).

Despite the multiple calls for colleges to fulfill their civic mission, there are challenges in articulating a clear focus. There is a lack of a single, clear definition for civic engagement (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Hulbert & Harkins, 2024). Oftentimes definitions of civic engagement vary depending upon the type of civic activities or programs offered (Adler & Goggin).

At the passive end of the spectrum, an institution’s civic role can be as simple as “opening up the campus facilities” (Guarasci, 2022, p. 157) for community use. Allowing spaces at the college for the community is a perfunctory service that most colleges provide (Thomas, 2000, p. 86). This requires little effort, cost, or staffing on behalf of the institution.

A different level of institutional civic engagement is the “role as conveners of community members” (AACC, 2000, p. 4) by not just hosting events on college facilities but taking a lead role in convening. Examples include serving as a safe space for community discussions on critical issues, leading leadership development and public service programming, or offering youth engagement activities (AACC, 2000; Campus Compact, 2024). This is a higher level of active civic engagement by the institution requiring additional staffing and resources.

Service-learning, “first coined in 1967” (Kenny & Gallagher, 2002, p. 15) is another firsthand way in which students are actively engaged in their communities through their institutions of higher education. This direct service in the community has a rich history and is a traditional way in which higher education institutions execute their civic mission. The term service-learning is often used to capture other high impact civic engagement practices repeatedly encountered throughout the literature including experiential learning, volunteerism, project-based learning, and community-based learning (Guarasci, 2022; Schneider, 2000; Thomas, 2000).

These practices often require a higher level of budget and support staff to implement when compared to the more passive activities previously cited.

A purely academic view of civics and civic engagement aligns with a recommended practice of embedding civic learning outcomes across the curriculum (Flores & Rogers, 2019) and providing civics education programming (AACC, 1988). This goal is currently being championed by a new national coalition called Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE). The CLDE coalition is calling for democratic knowledge “in students’ majors, including career and technical fields” (n.d.a., para. 7).

Colleges serving as anchor institutions within their communities are at the highly engaged end of the civic engagement spectrum, requiring considerable commitment of resources to effectively execute. Colleges that serve as an anchor institution leverage social and economic impacts through a variety of ways, from assessing their purchasing and hiring practices to developing real estate “strategies to purchase and remediate blighted lots and buildings” (Harris, n.d., para. 11).

When reviewing the literature on civic engagement in higher education, it is difficult to overlook the disparities between four-year and two-year institutions, as well as the heavy focus on universities. The disparity in funding between the sectors (Kolbe & Baker, 2019) is well documented, noting that “community colleges operate with substantially fewer resources for core academic and student support functions than public four-year institutions” (Community College Research Center [CCRC], 2022, para. 3). Is it possible that this disparity is also reflected in how community college leaders think about the civic role of their institution? Carol Schneider, a leader in the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement national coalition, wrote that “many colleges and universities - but fewer community colleges - are raising core questions about

students' roles as citizens" (2022, para. 10). If civic engagement is central to the mission of community colleges, then why does this disparity exist?

Additionally, community colleges are not represented to the same degree as universities with national civic groups (Campus Compact, n.d.b.). Community colleges lag universities in providing centers for civic engagement (American Political Science Association, n.d.). Public institutions were more likely to emphasize civics in their mission but did not offer as many civic activities when compared to private institutions (Elfman, 2024).

Recent publications have called for higher education to save democracy (Bridgeland et al. 2024; Comerford, 2023; Daniels, 2021; de Groot, 2022; Guarasci, 2022; Richardson, 2023; Roth, 2023; Schneider, 2022; Tierney, 2022). This theme appears in books, scholarly publications, news outlets, and political publications. The concept throughout these readings is that "American democracy is frail and in jeopardy" (Guarasci, 2022, p. xv) and "under attack" (Comerford, 2023, para. 3). Higher education institutions are recognized as "integral to the democratic project" (Daniels, 2021, para. 6) and are called upon to increase their efforts to "address the crisis in democracy" (Richardson, 2023, para. 4), particularly considering rising authoritarianism (Daschle & Sullivan, 2023; Gibson, 2020; Schneider 2022).

Community colleges are embedded in the communities they serve and uniquely positioned to contribute to the public good. (Hall, 2024; Ronan, 2012). This includes the reinvigoration of civic life and the solving of social problems (Zook, 1947; Ronan, 2012):

The problems our communities face—homelessness and poverty, race and class, public health and neighborhood development—are grist for the democratic mill. Civic learning and democratic engagement in community colleges have as both their rationale and their focus the problems these communities face (Ronan, 2012, p. 33).

There is extensive literature on higher education and community college leadership and decision-making (Eddy, 2005; Hornak & Mitchell, 2016; Nevarez & Wood, 2012; Wood & Hilton, 2012). However, despite repeated calls for community colleges to fulfill their civic mission and the diverse range of civic engagement activities institutions may adopt to achieve this mission, how community college leaders make decisions about their institution's civic role remains unclear.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to assess the factors that influence community college leaders' decision-making about how to execute their institution's civic role. It also aimed to explore how community college leaders conceptualize and describe their institution's civic role.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What factors influence community college leaders' decision-making about how to execute their institution's civic role?

Research Question 2: How do community college leaders conceptualize and describe their institution's civic role?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Johnston's Theory of Social Engagement served as the theoretical framework of this study. In this theory, "engagement is represented as a dynamic social process involving influences and outcomes for stakeholders and organization alike" (Johnston, 2018, p. 18). In building this theory, Johnston describes engagement as both a process and a state that can exist at the individual or social level (2018). The theory also acknowledges individual behavioral and cognitive attributes contributing to engagement. This is reflective of civic engagement

programming and activities in higher education which can impact on the individual and societal level. Johnston writes that the theory is intended to “broaden the understanding of engagement beyond a binary process and reflect engagement as a socially situated phenomenon within a dynamic system” (2018, p. 30).

Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation, introduced in 1969, served as a conceptual framework for this study (Arnstein, 1969). The literature on civic engagement in higher education presents a spectrum of approaches, ranging from passive involvement to a high level of commitment and engagement by educational institutions. Similarly, Arnstein’s ladder outlines varying degrees of participation in decision-making, spanning from non-participatory to highly engaged forms of involvement. (Arnstein, 1969).

Applying this framework to the civic engagement role of community colleges aligns with the gradations in how colleges fulfill their civic role. The extent to which civic engagement activities and programming are non-participatory or highly engaged can be demonstrated.

Herbert Simon’s Choice Theory, borrowed from the field of economics (Simon, 1965), served as another conceptual framework. This theory posits that humans are not entirely rational and “do not have the arithmetic capabilities of computers” (Simon, 1978, p. 502). According to Simon, as much as decision-making should be based on rational calculations, factors can influence human decision-making resulting in “satisficing” (Simon, 1965, p. 186) rather than optimal behaviors. This theory explores *how* decisions are made, “procedural rationality” (Simon, 1978, p. 494), not just *what* decisions are made. If the civic mission is integral to the community college sector, as cited in the literature, factors influencing community college leaders’ decision-making about the execution of this mission were something to be assessed.

Methodology

This study utilized a quantitative-leading mixed-methods approach with an explanatory sequential design. This “pragmatic approach to educational research (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 213) blended two useful methodologies to understand the problem. Given that the study assessed the factors influencing leaders’ decision-making as well as understanding how leaders conceptualized their civic role, using different approaches had “the potential to provide a greater depth and breadth of information which is not possible utilizing singular approaches in isolation” (Almalki, 2016, p. 288).

A survey with both close-ended and open-ended questions was utilized to understand the factors that influence community colleges leaders’ decision-making about the civic role of their institution. Quantitative data underwent descriptive analysis and served as the foundation for the development of interview questions. The researcher conducted follow-up interviews to explore identified themes in greater depth.

Alignment Table

An alignment table was developed to demonstrate how the elements of this study were aligned including the literature findings, research questions, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and methodology. This table is in Appendix A.

Delimitations and Assumptions

This study was delimited to community college leaders – chancellors, presidents, and vice presidents - in the Desert Southwest United States. It was assumed that leaders were honest in their responses.

Significance of the Study

The study was designed to contribute to the literature regarding the civic mission of community colleges and the factors that influence community college leaders' decision-making about how this role will be executed. Understanding what factors influence community college leaders' decision-making about how the civic role of their institution will be executed could inform policies that support leaders in fulfilling their civic mission. Additionally, practices in civic engagement activities and leadership development may be identified and understood.

Definition of Terms

The terms essential to this research include:

Civic Literacy is a basic understanding of American government and history (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2024; US Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2024).

Collective Action “represents a shared consensus or agreed definition or salience of the topic” (Johnston, 2018, p. 23).

Community colleges refer to a “public institution of higher education at which the highest degree that is predominantly awarded to students is an associate's degree” (Commerce and Trade, 2024, para. 1).

Community college leaders refer to chancellors, vice-chancellors, presidents, and vice presidents.

Desert Southwest United States is defined by the Census Bureau as including Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, and West Texas (2019).

Engagement is defined as a “dynamic multidimensional relational concept featuring psychological and behavioral attributes of connection, interaction, participation, and

involvement, designed to achieve or elicit an outcome at individual, organization, or social levels” (Johnston, 2018, p. 2).

Satisficing is the process of decision-making that leads to solutions that are good enough rather than ideal and optimal (Simon, 1956).

Service Learning is an educational approach that integrates academics with community service, allowing students to apply what they learn in the classroom to real world issues while gaining hands-on experience (Kenny & Gallagher, 2002).

Shared Governance is the “appropriately shared responsibility and cooperative action among the components of the academic institution” (American Association of University Professors, 2015, p. 117).

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 is comprised of an introduction, the statement of the problem, the background of the problem, the purpose of the study, and research questions. This chapter also includes theoretical and conceptual frameworks, methodology, alignment table (see Appendix A), delimitations and assumptions, significance of the study, and definition of terms.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introduction and overview of the study. Chapter 2 provides a literature review of the civic mission of community colleges and the spectrum of activities that demonstrate that mission. Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the study including instrumentation and participants. Chapter 4 presents the findings from the research and data analysis. Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implications, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The chapter begins with an explanation of how the literature search was conducted. The theoretical and conceptual frameworks used in this study are reviewed. An overview of higher education leadership, civic engagement activities that leaders may choose to fulfill their institution's civic mission, higher education as contributing to the public good, a university focus in the literature, and how higher education is called upon to save democracy, are presented. The chapter ends with a conclusion.

Research Sources and Keywords

The Kansas State University library databases were the primary sources for the literature review. The Education Resource Information Center (ERIC) database was the primary search engine. While the focus of the review was on community colleges, the review also incorporated publications on the role of institutions as civic agents from fields such as public administration and public policy. The search included government publications and websites since they provided insights into the role of public agencies in the civic life of the communities they serve. Search keywords included community college*, civic*, community, leader*, engagement, decision, and making. Additionally, research papers and other publications from national civic organizations, such as Campus Compact, Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Coalition, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences were utilized.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This study utilized one theoretical framework and two conceptual frameworks to guide the research.

Theoretical - Social Engagement Theory

Kim Johnston is a professor of Marketing and Public Relations at the Queensland University of Technology and presented a new, multi-dimensional theory of social engagement in a 2018 publication. This theory posits that “in practical contexts, such as employee, consumer, stakeholder, community, and civic settings engagement describes attributes of connection, interaction, participation, and involvement” (Johnston, 2018, p. 17).

Johnston drew upon work from a variety of sources to develop this framework including Arnstein’s ladder of participation (1969), which was one of the conceptual frameworks for this study. Johnston also referenced the work of Robert Putnam in the development of this theory. Specifically, that engagement is critical to democracy (Putnam, 2002). Johnston drew links between Putnam and Arnstein in that engagement is central to democracy and government decision-making (2018).

Engagement levels, as described by Johnston, include both individual (student to professor) and social (participation by the group). In either case, social connections and communications are central to engagement. As Putnam stated “social networks matter” (2002, p. 6).

The multilevel model of engagement that Johnston created allows for interaction between individual and social levels of engagement as well as acknowledging the communication methods and engagement attributes that impact social engagement. Johnston described social engagement as a possible organizational strategy, a way for organizations to connect. “Engagement therefore is operationalized through organizational resources and decision-making conducive to synthesizing meaning and value that evolves from dialogue, interaction, and connection with diverse stakeholders and perspectives” (Johnston, 2018, p. 27). This description

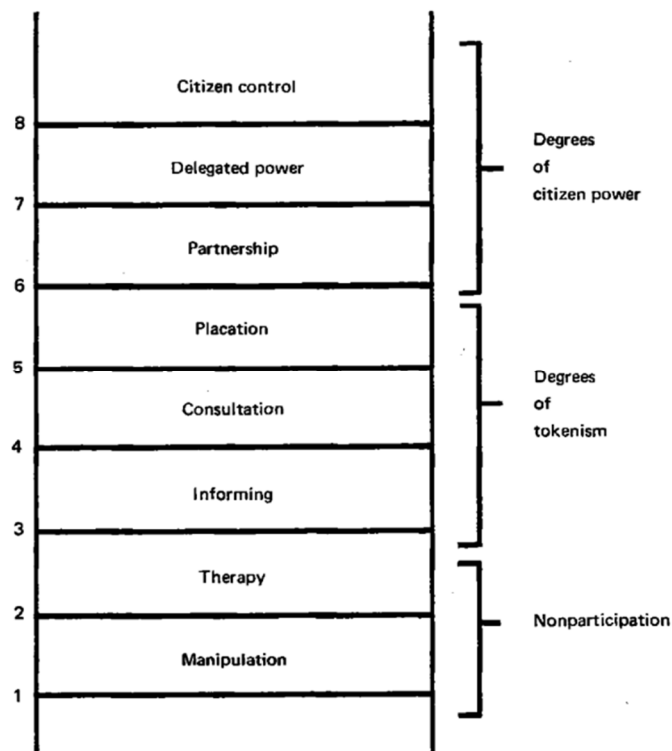
resonated with the literature review later in this chapter that describes the ways in which colleges fulfill their civic role.

Conceptual Framework I - Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

Arnstein's ladder of participation was introduced in 1969 as a tool for exploring how and to what degree citizens are involved in decision-making in their communities (Arnstein, 1969). Arnstein presented a ladder of eight rungs that represent eight degrees of participation ranging from non-participatory to "citizen control" with "full managerial power" (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217).

Figure 1

Arnstein's Ladder of Participation



Note: This figure demonstrates the eight rungs of Arnstein's Ladder of Participation. The rungs range from manipulation and nonparticipation to citizen control (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217).

While originally published in public administration and planning journals, this framework has been applied to other public sectors that engage with their communities, including community colleges. As an example, shared governance training with district leadership at the Maricopa Community Colleges in Phoenix, Arizona, utilizes Arnstein's ladder of participation (Genna, 2024).

Transportation planners used Arnstein's ladder of participation to assess "public participation in transportation planning processes" (Bailey & Grossardt, 2006, p. 338). Data were collected in Arizona and Kentucky during meetings involving "citizens, and State and private sector transportation professionals" (Bailey & Grossardt, 2006, p. 338). Findings indicated that perceptions of citizen participation in transportation planning were not at the lowest rung of the ladder and there was not a high desire for full citizen control.

A 2023 study utilized Arnstein's ladder of participation to "both guide and advance good practices in community engaged teaching and learning (CETL)" (Willness et al., p. 126). Collaboration between educators and the community is at the core of this educational approach. Researchers examined thirty cases and used the framework to "assess the current state of practice for community participation in CETL" (Willness et al., 2023, p. 113). Thus, Arnstein's ladder provided a tool for assessing participation in a higher education setting.

Another application of Arnstein's ladder of participation in a higher education setting comes from the University of Glasgow and the work of Bovill and Bulley. These educators used Arnstein's ladder as a template for creating a model exploring the "possibility of active student participation (ASP) in curriculum design" (Bovill & Bulley, 2011, p. 1). Arnstein's ladder provided these educators with a way to model participation of students in a specific higher education function – curriculum design. The ladder was modified to reflect various levels of

student influence, engagement, and control in the decision-making of curriculum design. Bovill and Bulley offer additional opportunities for the use of Arnstein's ladder:

The ladder of student participation in the curriculum is intended to facilitate discussion of the desirability and possibility of ASP in curriculum design. One of the authors has used the model to support tutors in discussing examples of ASP in curriculum design within research interviews and as a stimulus to eliciting examples of ASP in curriculum design from conference participants. It could be used within research into the curriculum or student voice (2011, p. 9).

Arnstein acknowledged that there are limitations to the framework and "in the real world of people and programs, there might be 150 rungs with less sharp and "pure" distinctions among them" (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217). In addition to Arnstein's own critique of the framework, health researchers in Finland cited that "its failure to consider the process as well as the outcome, or the impotence of methods and feedback systems, means that a more nuanced model is required" (Tritter & McCallum, 2005, p.158).

Despite the critiques, Arnstein's framework of participation provided a way to view the various civic engagement activities that leaders may choose to undertake in fulfilling the civic role of their institution. As demonstrated in this literature review, activities can range from perfunctory, non-participatory efforts to fully engaged involvement in the civic life of the community. This range of participation was a lens by which to view the factors that influence leaders' decision-making about their institution's civic role.

Arnstein's ladder of participation was particularly useful for this dissertation because it offered a clear framework for examining the varying degrees of civic engagement that community college leaders may adopt when making decisions about their institution's role. By

utilizing this lens, the study explored how leaders view the spectrum of participation - from minimal engagement to more extensive, collaborative involvement – thereby exploring the factors influencing their decision-making regarding their institution’s civic role.

Conceptual Framework II - Simon’s Choice Theory

Described by one author as a “Renaissance man” (Dasgupta, 2003, p. 683), Herbert Simon contributed to the fields of physics, administrative theory, sociology, cognitive psychology, and economics for sixty years. Simon won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 1978 (The Nobel Prize, para. 1).

Simon authored numerous articles on rational decision-making including *The Logic of Rational Decision* (1965) and *On How To Decide What To Do* (1978). His 1956 work, *Rational Choice and the Structure of the Environment*, introduced the term *satisficing*:

Evidently, organisms adapt well enough to "satisfice"; they do not, in general, "optimize." If this is the case, a great deal can be learned about rational decision making by taking into account, at the outset, the limitations upon the capacities and complexity of the organism, and by taking account of the fact that the environments to which it must adapt possess properties that permit further simplification of its choice mechanisms. (Simon, 1956, p. 129)

The idea that humans do not always make rational decisions but, rather, are influenced by any number of environmental factors offers additional ways of examining decision-making and how leaders made decisions that includes drawing upon “various aids to make decisions” (Dasgupta, 2003, p. 691). Simon acknowledges in future works that attention must be paid to not just “what decisions are made rather than with how they are made” (Simon, 1978, p. 494).

Applying Simon's theory in a higher education setting was undertaken by DesJardins and Toutkoushian in their analysis of student choice of educational options (2005). The authors use an example of a student being admitted to Harvard but choosing to attend a community college. Traditional thinking about choice and decision-making would argue that this is an irrational choice. However, looking at the notion of rationality from different lenses offers a distinct way of examining student choice.

By applying Simon's ideas of choice, one must consider that individuals do not make perfectly rational decisions but, rather, utilize "a version of rationality in which instead of trying to find the best course of action to achieve one's goals" (2005, p. 230) less than optimal decisions can be made that move toward the goal – Simon's term of "satisficing" (DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005, p. 230; Simon, 1956, p. 129). DesJardins and Toutkoushian recommended that "higher education researchers could take a page from behavioral economists and experimental psychologists by learning to apply their methods to study how students make choices" (2005, p. 233).

Higher Education Leadership

According to Yukl, "most definitions of leadership reflect the assumption that it involves a process whereby intentional influence is exerted over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships" (Yukl, 2013, p. 18). Leaders are tasked with setting goals and agendas, motivating others, and "affirming values" (Gardner, 1990, p. 13). Community college leaders have the additional responsibility of serving as "exemplary institutional citizens and leaders in their communities" (AACC and ACCT, 2000, p. 4). Community college leaders are expected to serve not just the college but on community boards and commissions. Colleges "must connect with communities" (AACC, 2000, p. 1) and presidents "must be able to

collaborate, bring together various constituencies, build consensus, and encourage others” (AACC, 1988, p. 41). Additionally, community college leaders make decisions about the budget, staffing, and organizational structure of their colleges (AACC, 2018).

Based on these definitions, community college leaders have a significant responsibility in determining how to execute their institution's civic role. Civic engagement is an essential element of the community colleges’ mission (Zook, 1947). The role of colleges is, in part, to help a student develop “as an informed responsible citizen” (Zook, 1947, p. 51). Community college leaders have continued to reinforce this civic mission including the AACC (1988, 2000) and ACCT (2000). However, leaders confront many complex challenges requiring strategic decision-making, including resource constraints, competing priorities, and heightened public scrutiny (Nevarez & Wood, 2012). Several frameworks in higher education leadership offer insights into how community college leaders make decisions.

Webber asserts that in a complex and challenging world, there is “a greater urgency for educational administrators in the postsecondary sector to focus on understanding the assumptions guiding their practice” (2016, p. 80). As leaders seek to fulfill their responsibilities, Webber (2016) posits that community engagement should be an underlying assumption with consideration given to how decisions impact communities. While this offers a guiding assumption and consideration for decision-making, it does not explain *how* community college leaders make decisions.

Eddy claims, “Presidents are one of the most studied of administrative roles, yet little research occurs on understanding how these leaders construct their own leadership” (2005, p. 705). Eddy found that community college presidents construct their leadership through “individual cognitive orientation, past experience, mentoring, situated cognition, feedback loops,

and social interaction” (2005, p. 724). Furthermore, leaders' mental frameworks and ongoing leadership development shape their decision-making (Eddy, 2005).

Nevarez and Wood propose a framework “for training leaders to consider a multiplicity of factors (e.g., leadership approaches, ethical frames, data-driven considerations) in decision making” (2012, p. 316). The framework includes a series of steps they encourage community college leaders to take to “facilitate making sound decisions” (Nevarez & Wood, 2012, p. 313). These steps include using multiple approaches to consider possible actions. One of the proposed approaches is the use of ethical frameworks.

Wood and Hilton (2012) encourage “community college leaders to employ ethical paradigms when constructing and considering alternative courses of action in decision-making processes” (p. 196). The authors offer an analysis of the five ethical paradigms that leaders are encouraged to utilize when making decisions and evaluating possible courses of action. Wood and Hilton assert that, by utilizing these ethical paradigms, “community college leaders may better serve” (2012, p. 210) their communities.

As much as the research offers different approaches, guiding assumptions, and frameworks for decision-making, Hornak and Mitchell found that community college leaders rely on personal factors. These included “emotion, experience, preference, and personal values” (2016, p. 131). Regardless of the college's mission or the decision-making approach of the leader, personal factors emerged as the primary influences on decision-making.

The idea that emotion and personal values are factors in decision-making is not a new concept. Flam, in analyzing corporate leaders and decision-making, referenced the role of emotions, not just rationality (Flam, 1992). Flam asserts “corporate actors are in fact emotion-

motivated” (1992, p. 129) which is something to consider when thinking of multi-dimensional leadership (Flam, 1992).

Civic Engagement Spectrum of Activities

There are extensive research and publications focused on the mission of civic engagement in higher education generally, community colleges specifically, and the role of the institution. *The Knowledge Net*, a joint publication from AACC and ACCT, explicitly calls for community colleges to “provide learners with an array of experiences to help them gain civic awareness and skills that will enhance their participation in a democracy” (2000, p. 4). Civic engagement throughout the literature has an extensive array of models and considerations for implementation that range from minimally to highly engaged. Several key themes emerge when examining higher education and the variety of civic engagement activities that leaders may choose to fulfill their institution's civic role.

Physical Spaces

Community colleges are embedded into the physical locations of communities across the country. The concept of “opening up the campus facilities” (Guarasci, 2022, p. 157) is a visible way for an institution to engage with their respective communities. Creating “formal and consistent” (Alcantar et al., 2024, p. 87) spaces for civic engagement is another way to formalize the work of a college. However, allowing spaces at the college for community use requires minimal engagement on behalf of the institution and is “an-almost-taken-for-granted service most colleges” (Thomas, 2000, p. 86) can provide.

Colleges as Convenors

Renting facilities to community groups or making space available for community use free of charge, while important as described by Guarasci (2002), is a passive role. Community

colleges can have a more intentional and active “role as conveners of community members” (AACC, 2000, p. 4) by moving from hosting events on college facilities to taking the lead on activities and programs. This could include serving as a safe space for community discussions on critical issues, leading leadership development and public service programming, and offering youth engagement activities (AACC, 2000; Campus Compact, 2024). Convenings for students, employees, and community members can take place in collaboration with local nonprofits, government, and civic groups.

This does require, however, staff with the appropriate skills to coordinate and lead engagement efforts (Kuttner et al., 2019; Shannon & Wong, 2010). Community colleges experiencing resource constraints and multiple challenges (Nevarez & Wood, 2012) may not have the staff to successfully serve as a community convenor.

Student Service

One traditional way in which higher education engages civically is through students. The idea of students deploying from the institution into the community to serve has a rich history. Service-learning, as a term, first appeared in 1967 (Kenny & Gallagher, 2002) and is one of many firsthand ways in which students are actively engaged in their communities through their institution of higher education (AACC 2000; Adler & Goggin, 2005; Brophy et al., 2009; Ronan, 2011).

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) describes high impact practices as those “teaching and learning practices” (Huk, 2008, p. 9) that have been demonstrated to benefit college students from diverse backgrounds. This includes service-learning, experiential learning, and community-based learning. “These programs model the idea that giving something back to the community is an important college outcome, and that working

with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life” (Huk, 2008, p. 11). These methods of civic engagement are repeatedly encountered throughout the literature (Thomas, 2000; Schneider, 2000; Gaurasci, 2022).

One consideration for college leaders regarding student service programming is the shift from service-learning to community-based learning or community-based engagement. This shift in thinking traces back to the late 1990s/early 2000s as practitioners began to assert that traditional service-learning views communities from a deficit approach, encouraging “simplistic understandings of social problems and ignores resources and strengths already in communities” (Eby, 1998, p. 3). As described in an earlier work from Westheimer and Kahne there is a need to “clarify the ideological, political and social goals and assumptions embedded in the policy and practice of service learning” (1994, p. 3).

The move from a deficit-based to an asset-based approach “recognizes that marginalized communities that are defined mostly by their very real problems -- poverty-stricken, crime ridden, violent, distressed -- are equally filled with talented residents and community assets, formal and informal, that are largely ignored” (White, 2016, para. 5). The Asset Based Community Development Institute at DePaul University champions this approach in their work with community groups across the nation and articulates a primary value of “assets and strengths, not deficits and needs, are the true building blocks of healthy communities” (n.d., para. 2).

According to Ward and Wolf-Wendel, a deficit-based, simplistic approach to student service prioritizes the needs of students or the institution over the complexities of the communities served (2000). It is increasingly seen as problematic to limit “exchanges with the community to works of random charity aimed at temporary relief, not the far-reaching alteration

of social structures” (DeBlasis, 2006, p. 36). The challenge then becomes how to ensure that “community members are not passive recipients of services but active participants in designing the blueprint for a more equitable system” (DeBlasis, 2006, p. 38).

Campus Compact, “the largest and oldest higher education association dedicated to higher education civic and community engagement” (n.d.a.), supports practitioners across the country with resources and best practices. A sample from one of the organization’s resource listings for practitioners includes topics such as “traditional v. critical service learning” and “service learning as a pedagogy of whiteness” (Campus Compact, 2022). Ward and Wolf-Wendel make the distinction between “doing for” and “doing with” a community with the former “more aligned with charity than social change” (2000, p. 769).

Institutions planning to fulfill their civic mission may consider what type of service learning or community-based programs they launch. “It appears that multiple programs and practices may foster civic engagement” (Howe & Fosnacht, 2017, p. 20) to a greater degree than traditional service-learning models. Additionally, while service-learning was found to “help improve undergraduates’ democratic engagement...it may be possible to improve the efficacy of service-learning” (Howe & Fosnacht, 2017, p. 165).

Civic Learning Outcomes

A recurring theme in the literature is the emphasis on teaching and learning not only for work skills or university transfer but also for providing “ways to think about what it means to be a citizen” (Tierney, 2021, p. 174). The idea is that “college students’ democracy learning is mission-critical for all forms of higher learning-including two-year, four-year, career and technical, and short-term training, too” (Schneider, 2022, para. 10). The 1988 Building Communities report from AACC, recommends “that community colleges lead the way in civic

literacy for adults” (p. 23) and should “consider introducing a new civic education program” (p. 23). This idea of civic education and civic learning outcomes across the curriculum is echoed in a recommendation from the 2012 *A Crucible Moment* report from the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement - civics is to be “expected student learning outcomes in public reporting frameworks—national, state or state system, and campus-specific” (p. 35).

Embedding civic learning outcomes across the curriculum is a recommended practice (Flores & Rogers, 2019) and one currently championed by a new national coalition called Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE, n.d.a.). The coalition is championing embedding democratic knowledge “in students’ majors, including career and technical fields” (n.d., para. 7). Additionally, “by integrating civic engagement and democratic learning across all areas of study, institutions can simultaneously advance their civic mission and improve key metrics such as retention and graduation rates” (Complete College America, 2024, p. 20).

There are challenges in developing robust civic learning outcomes starting with the lack of a single, clear definition for civic engagement (Adler & Goggin, 2005). “In fact, there are probably as many definitions of civic engagement as there are scholars and practitioners who are concerned with it” (Jacoby, 2009, p. 5). Oftentimes definitions of civic engagement vary depending upon the type of civic activities or programs offered (Adler & Goggin, 2005). Additionally, there is a “tendency toward conceptual fuzziness” (Beaumont, 2005, p. 291) among institutions of higher education and lack of clear, comprehensive assessment.

The challenge of defining and assessing civic engagement is reinforced by a recent research report sponsored by the American Association of State Colleges & Universities and Ithika S+R which states “there is no one clear definition of civic engagement” (Hulbert &

Harkins, 2024, para. 6). The complexity of active citizenship, the ability to move from knowledge to skills to action, poses yet another challenge in developing meaningful assessments for civic learning outcomes (Ronan, 2011).

Community Engaged Partnerships

Colleges and universities can engage and partner with their local communities in a multitude of ways to fulfill their civic mission. Community engaged partnerships can take a variety of forms, focusing on community issues and challenges such as health, food insecurity, the educational pipeline, and economic development. These partnerships are a visible way of demonstrating commitment to the local community while supporting student success. As an example, students increasingly face a multitude of basic needs (McKibben, et.al., 2023).

Partnerships can provide the necessary support in areas that colleges do not have the expertise or resources to provide but that prove critical in helping students persist and succeed on their educational journey. Similarly, partnerships between community colleges and K12 can “ensure students leave senior year ready to succeed both at college, and in careers that will set them and their families up for prosperity and also contribute to the local economy in positive ways” (Whissemore, 2025, para. 5).

Educational Pipeline Partnerships

Partnerships across the educational pipeline, from early learning through post-secondary, are referred to as P-20 (Education Forward Arizona, 2024) with the goal of improving the educational environment (Thomas, 2000; Yamamura & Koth, 2018). These partnerships can be similarly applied to civics and how students progress through their educational journey with increasing levels of civic knowledge and skills (Ronan, 2011). “The P-20 policy goal is to link

the sectors so that students advance along the educational pipeline as efficiently as possible, their knowledge and skills growing as they move along” (Ronan, 2011, p. 2).

One tangible example comes from a relationship between the University of Pennsylvania and West Philadelphia neighborhoods involving “undergraduates working with preadolescents in holding policy debates, introducing them to the concepts of classical and modern political theories” (Guarasci, 2022, p. 85). Another example is the Tri-C Cuyahoga Community College initiative from Ohio in which all Cleveland Metropolitan School District “seniors are automatically admitted to Tri-C without needing to complete an application, a move designed to simplify the path to college enrollment” (Wiggins, 2024, para. 2).

Another example of P-20 partnerships are P-20 councils, a formal way to bring together - at specific sector or state level - educational, workforce, and policymaking partners together to focus on improving outcomes from pre-school through post-secondary education (Rippner, 2013; Education Strategy Group [ESG], 2023). Sustained work, however, proved challenging without dedicated staffing and funding (Rippner, 2013; ESG, 2023). “In 2008, nearly 40 states had active P-20 councils” (ESG, 2023, p. 2) which dropped to less than 20 states by 2017. Additional barriers included bureaucracy, lack of communication, and lack of consensus on goals and priorities (Rippner, 2013; ESG, 2023).

Health Programs

The “most comprehensive form of civic learning occurs in the sustained work within campus and community partnerships” (Guarasci, 2022, p. 36). Higher education institutions with health programs partner with local community groups to improve physical health conditions (Yamamura & Koth, 2018; Elsner, 2000) while engaging in their civic mission. This can take many forms from college students promoting “nutrition information, food access, and physical

fitness” (Guarasci, 2022, p. 85) activities in local neighborhoods to health clinics in the community (Yamamura & Koth, 2018). More recently, many colleges across the country served as COVID-19 vaccination sites (American Council on Education, 2021; Maricopa Community Colleges, 2021a).

Basic Needs

Supporting students with basic needs, such as food and housing, is another way in which colleges engage with their local communities. National data on higher education students confirms that “more than 4 million students are food insecure” (McKibben, et.al., 2023, para. 2). Additionally, “eight percent of undergraduate and 5% of graduate students are experiencing homelessness, translating to more than 1.5 million students” (McKibben, et.al., 2023, para. 2). Higher education institutions have formed partnerships with food banks and other social service agencies (Lee & Drumm, 2019; Yamamura & Koth, 2018) to support students in need including the “close to 800 food pantries on college campuses across the country” (Preston, 2024, para. 4).

Establishing basic needs support, such as on-campus food pantries, is not without their challenges. Swipe Out Hunger, a national organization focused on food insecurity among college students, recently conducted a survey of college food pantries. “A look at the internal and systematic challenges unique to 355 college food pantries revealed that the top three challenges included funding, inventory, and staffing” (Nguyen, 2024, p. 3).

Additionally, colleges are challenged in providing food insecure students with the information and access necessary to fully utilize on-campus food pantries (El Zein et al., 2018). Students also express reluctance to seek out assistance due to the social stigma associated with using a food pantry. There are also issues with self-identity and students not viewing themselves as someone who needs food pantry support. “Students were explicit in their hesitance in

receiving charity and expressed that the pantry was meant to serve those with higher needs than their own” (El Zein et al., 2018, p. 11).

Workforce Preparation

Institutions of higher education are increasingly forming partnerships to promote workforce development opportunities. According to Jacobs and Worth (2019), “postsecondary workforce development is one of the major innovations of the modern community college” (p. 167). A 2024 report from The Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice outlines the following types of workforce partnerships:

1. Tuition-based partnerships in which business and industry pay all or part of the cost for employees to attend a specific institution. Examples include Starbucks paying tuition for employees attending Arizona State University as well as Amazon covering part of the cost for employees to attend Southern New Hampshire University.
2. Career pathway programs providing on-the-job training and apprenticeships.
3. Regional partnerships between government, education, and industry partners focused on meeting workforce needs of a region.
4. Custom training programs between industry and education focused on specific job skills.

Another aspect of workforce development involves community-engaged partnerships. Colleges collaborate directly with community-based organizations to provide employment support services, such as resume building and job fairs (Yamamura & Koth, 2018; Guarasci, 2022). As an example, the Puma Empowerment Center at Paradise Valley Community College (PVCC) in Arizona, was developed in collaboration with Dress for Success, a local nonprofit. Community members and students are provided with “professional attire, coaching, workshops on job procurement, resume writing, interview skills training, and more” (PVCC, n.d.).

However, developing successful workforce development partnerships can be challenging and “the formula for a successful partnership remains uncertain” (Domenech et al., 2023, p. 2). College leaders struggle to develop robust levels of collaboration and engagement with industry partners while industry leaders believe community college partnerships are not always efficient and college leaders are resistant to change (Fuller & Raman, 2022). Recommendations for improving workforce partnerships include the use of labor market data, increased communication between organizations, and partnering on a regional basis rather than relying on single points of contact (Domenech et al., 2023).

Public-Public Partnerships

According to Yamamura and Koth, colleges and universities partner with local governments to create place-based initiatives in local communities (2018). These collaborations with other public entities were found to be sources of new funding streams while contributing to the “civic renewal” of local communities (Jacoby, 2009, p. 25).

Drexel University, located in Philadelphia, has a long history of robust civic engagement activities. After focusing on specific renewal projects in Philadelphia neighborhoods, the University, and its partners (the city and school district of Philadelphia) were awarded a \$30 million federal grant to support their “cradle to career” (Yamamura & Koth, 2018, p. 34). The City of Phoenix awarded \$8.5 million in federal funds to Maricopa Community Colleges to “re-career and re-employ those disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic” (Maricopa, 2021b, para. 1). A recent article from the International City-County Management Association highlighted several other examples of public-public partnerships including *The Resilient Communities* project at the University of Minnesota. Through an application process, graduate students are matched with local governments to complete a project that advances

“community sustainability, equity, and resilience” (Berg et al., 2023, p. 3). Public-public partnerships are another way for institutions of higher education to engage with their local communities.

Partnership Challenges

Findings present many examples of colleges developing community engaged partnerships. However, it is the higher education staff members “who are tasked with administering, coordinating, supporting, and leading engagement efforts” (Kuttner et al., 2019, p. 132). Community colleges are not as well-resourced as four-year universities (CCRC, 2022; Kolbe & Baker, 2019) which could present challenges in providing the staffing infrastructure needed to create viable community engaged partnerships.

Assessing the value and success of these partnerships can be difficult; “although the field has a sense of the indicators of success, no one has quite figured out how to fairly and accurately assess the progress of these highly complicated efforts” (Maurrasse, 2002, p. 132). Whether it be from a funding and outcomes perspective (Maurrasse, 2022) or a filling workplace skills gap (Fuller & Raman, 2022), assessing effectiveness and success remains a challenge in partnership development.

Sustainable commitment is an additional challenge with community-based partnerships. Given the declining tenure of community college presidents (Jesse, 2023; Royal et al., 2023) there may be smaller windows of time to institutionalize community-based partnership. What may be fully supported under the tenure of one leader may not be with a new leader. Particularly when one considers that “culture is ultimately created, embedded, evolved, and ultimately manipulated by leaders” (Schein, 2010, p 3).

Fostering a culture of support for community partnerships and sustainable civic engagement, especially considering shrinking tenures of college presidents (Jesse, 2023), is another associated challenge. Additionally, a recent AACC survey reports that, among respondents, “more than half of the sitting community college CEOs indicated they planned to transition out of their current position within 5 years” (Royal et al., 2023, p. 6).

Anchor Institutions

Serving as an anchor institution is a highly engaged and distinct way in which higher education institutions fulfill their civic mission. “Anchor institutions’ engagement with their communities is seldom single purpose” (Harris, n.d., para. 10). Colleges that serve as anchor institutions in a community leverage social and economic impacts through a variety of ways, from assessing their purchasing and hiring practices to developing real estate “strategies to purchase and remediate blighted lots and buildings” (Harris, n.d., para. 11).

The idea of anchor institutions has a long history but gained greater visibility as a movement in the 1990s (Dever et al., 2014). Work by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 2009 referenced hospitals and educational institutions, “Eds and Meds” as “key to the revitalization of many of America’s communities, cities, and metropolitan areas” (Brophy & Godsil, 2009, p. 147). Along with social impacts, the economic impact of anchor institutions (O’Farrell, et. al., 2022) is a focus in many publications. In fact, “the anchor institution movement focuses on harnessing the economic power of large place-bound nonprofit institutions, particulate universities and hospitals” (Yamamura & Koth, 2018, p. 13):

Yet, while accepting that the economic impacts of the anchoring agenda are important, we contend that there is at present too little attention on the wider social impacts of

institutions that engage with and are open to their communities, which cannot be measured solely by economic return (O'Farrell et al., 2022, p. 2412)

These dual notions of economic investment and wide social impacts may be difficult for institutions to fulfill and assess (Maurasse, 2022; Fuller & Raman, 2022). Another challenge in assessing the success of an institution as an anchor in the community is that “differences arise in anchor strategies from institution to institution and community to community” (Dever et al., 2014, p. 1).

A key factor for institutions of higher education to consider in serving as an anchor institution is the focus on “helping to solve real-world problems” (Brophy & Godsil., 2009, p. 148). This requires institutions to move from theory and philosophy to action and “systems change” (Kuttner, et. al., 2018, p. 149). Critical community problems are often complex, have no easy solutions, and take time to understand (Kuttner, 2018; Rittel & Webber, 1973). Sometimes referred to as “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 160), these issues are not easily understood, have many possible resolutions, and are often interconnected with other societal issues.

Colleges serving as anchor institutions need to be clear on the extent of the commitment needed to adequately serve in this role:

For universities and colleges to fulfill their great potential and more effectively contribute to positive change in their communities, cities, and metropolitan areas, however, they will have to critically examine and change their organizational cultures and structures and embed civic engagement across all components of the institution. (Brophy & Godsil, p. 149)

Given the resource challenges of many community colleges, this form of civic engagement may be challenging to execute. Additionally, research to “uncover the cultural and institutional change required to enable universities to active their roles as just anchors, as well as how to build collaborative institutional partnerships” (O’Farrell et al., 2022, p. 2414) is needed. Organizational culture is a powerful force (Schein, 2004, p. 3) so creating and fostering a culture where civic engagement and community partnerships are valued is critical. Culture can be “the single most important factor standing between success and failure” (Morgan, 2006, p. 218).

Public Good

The roots of higher education in America include the notion of contributing to the public good with an expectation that, “in return for public support, colleges and universities will benefit all the citizenry, even if indirectly, irrespective of whether individuals actually attend the institution” (Tierney, 2021, p. 155). This includes “developing a strong democracy” (Musil, 2009, p. 49).

Critics contend that institutions of higher education have “stepped back from their commitment to educating citizens and seemingly showed more interest in providing material services and products for the American economy” (Guarasci, 2022, p. 23). Yet “developing a strong democracy, according to Jefferson, was inextricably linked to education” (Musil, 2009, p. 49). The implied question between these perspectives is how might colleges and universities find a balance between contributing to economic growth (both as a system and by preparing individuals for the workforce) with a return to the civic mission and public good? This is particularly compelling as higher education is facing a crisis as the public’s faith in the sector plummets. One recent report cites “just 36% of surveyed Americans reported they have a “great

deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in higher education, a sharp drop from five years ago” (Schwartz, 2023, para. 1).

University Focus

A review of the literature on civic engagement in higher education reveals significant disparities between the four-year and two-year sectors, with much of the focus placed on universities and their civic activities. Carol Schneider, a leader of the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement national coalition, recently expressed that while many universities are addressing questions about students' roles as citizens, fewer community colleges are engaging in this discussion. (2022). As one community college leader admitted:

Community colleges have nearly half of the undergraduates in America, but occupy nowhere near half of the policy discussion around higher ed. Some of that is historical habit and much of it is the distorting effect of wealth, but some of it may be at least partially self-inflicted. As a sector, we have not taken the lead in encouraging civic participation among students” (Reed, 2018, para. 4)

Research does not indicate why this disparity in civic activities and leadership exists but the disparity in funding between the sectors is well documented (Kolbe & Baker, 2019).

“Community colleges operate with substantially fewer resources for core academic and student support functions than public four-year institutions” (CCRC, 2022, para. 3). Given resource constraints and enrollment challenges in the community college sector, “continued support for civic engagement programming and activities has languished considerably or, in some cases, disappeared altogether” (Robinson & Hurd, 2020, p. 2).

While there is a difference in the number of two-year and four-year institutions across the nation, there is a greater difference when examining community college leadership in civic

spaces. For the 2020-21 academic year, The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) listed 2637 Title IV four-year degree granting institutions and 1294 two-year (2022, p, 1). This represents a 63% difference between the sectors. Campus Compact lists 396 four-year member institutions as compared to 101 two-year member institutions, representing a 119% difference.

The American Political Science Association (APSA) tracks the number of civic engagement institutes and centers at institutions of higher education. Their website lists seventy-one centers at four-year institutions as compared to five at two-year institutions (APSA, n.d.), representing a 174% difference. A recent report from the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center and the American Association of Colleges and Universities cites that "most respondents note their community college does not currently have a center" for civics engagement (2024). This offers a glimpse into the civic landscape based upon institutional type.

A 2019 study examined civic engagement activities and outcomes by institutional type. Findings did demonstrate that "not all institutions provide equal opportunity for civic education and engagement" (Evans et al., 2019, p. 39) with a significant difference between commuter and residential institutions. This has implications for community colleges since "most community colleges were not designed as residential colleges" (Elfman, 2024, para. 15).

Public institutions were more likely to emphasize civics in their mission but did not offer as many civic activities when compared to private institutions (Elfman, 2024). A 2014 found that "students who attend a community college have lower rates of community-based engagement than students who attend a four-year college" (Newell, p. 806). A 2006 analysis found that students who attended a 2-year college were less likely to volunteer and register to vote (Lopez & Brown, 2006).

A recent publication from Complete College America cites that this disparity extends to media coverage of higher education. Whether it be related to student protests, the end of affirmative action, the recent Free Application for Federal Student Aid rollout, “news stories about higher education—the engine of economic mobility in the United States—continue to focus on the shortcomings of the elites while forgetting the open-access institutions that are the essence of that engine” (2024, p. 11).

Saving Democracy

A common theme written about in a variety of publications is the idea of higher education not just fostering but saving democracy (Bridgeland et al. 2024; Comerford, 2023; Daniels, 2021; de Groot, 2022; Guarasci, 2022; Richardson, 2023; Roth, 2023; Schneider, 2022; Tierney, 2022). This theme is underscored by recent civil unrest and research findings.

Civil unrest is on the rise on some college campuses, particularly after the killing of George Floyd (Taylor, 2021), the attack on the United States Capitol (United States Attorney’s Office, 2024), and protests over the Israel-Hamas war (Blake & Palmer, 2024; Whittington, 2024; Gretzinger, 2024). While educators encourage civil dialogue (Blake & Palmer, 2024), critics charge that institutions of higher education failed in their responsibility to hold students accountable for their actions and teach the difference between free speech and civil disobedience (Whittington, 2024; Gretzinger, 2024).

College campuses are not the only places in which civil disobedience, protest, and violence have erupted. The attack on the nation’s Capital on January 6, 2021, led to predictions of an impending civil war and political violence (Simon & Stevenson, 2023). Even without the threat of violence, “Americans are unhappier and more divided than most about the state of their

democracy, and particularly gloomy about its prospects for improvement” (Wike & Dimock, 2024, para. 2).

There are others who argue, however, that the recent wave of student protests is not unique and only part of a historical pattern in the United States in which “college protests have become a staple of American life and often influence the outcomes of political strife” (Jimenez, 2024, para. 7). The contention is that American history is filled with icons of civil disobedience including Henry David Thoreau and Martin Luther King, Jr. (The Conversation, 2024).

Additionally:

In high-stakes situations, it can be morally permissible to choose to peacefully break certain laws in order to raise awareness of greater injustices. It’s called civil disobedience. And it’s part of a long-standing American tradition going at least as far back as the Boston Tea Party. It also includes the abolitionist and suffrage movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 1970s (The Conversation, 2024, para. 4)

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) report that civic literacy, the “basic knowledge of American history and government” (2024, para. 1), is on the decline among higher education students. This trend is not unique to college and university students. Research by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation found that “more than 70% of Americans fail a basic civic literacy quiz on topics like the three branches of government, the number of Supreme Court justices, and other basic functions of our democracy” (2024, para. 2).

Higher education institutions are “integral to the democratic project” (Daniels, 2021, para. 6) and called upon to increase their efforts to “address the crisis in democracy” (Richardson, 2023, para. 4). Additionally, “higher education has a crucial role to play in civic

engagement and safeguarding democracy (Complete College America, 2024, p. 18). Democracy is described as “frail and in jeopardy” (Guarasci, 2022, p. xv) and “under attack” (Comerford, 2023, para. 3).

There is a thread of criticism to these writings that range in severity. Some publications suggest that higher education “can be more intentional about how they prepare educated citizens to participate in and defend our democracy” (Comerford, 2023, para. 9) and that “civic education and engagement in our universities-educating toward self-government and engaged citizenship-could use a major reset” (Bridgeland et al., 2024, p. 13).

Others are more forceful in their criticism and call to action for higher education to “seize this moment to confront directly and courageously the challenges before it (and others still on the horizon) to requite its responsibility to liberal democracy” (Daniels, 2021, para. 20). Democracy is “fragile” (Schneider, 2022, para 7) and “higher education leaders must become bold in making the case that democracy is the foundation of everything we hold dear” (Schneider, 2022, para. 11).

Still others are much more political and inflammatory in their challenges that “colleges and universities must defend democracy to defend their very mission, to defend their values of free inquiry and teaching. At this time that means calling out the dangers of tyranny while inspiring democratic practices among young people” (Roth, 2023, para. 17). The United States is described as in a recession regarding democratic ideas with “countries long through to be securely democratic have moved toward fascism - and none more so than the United States” (Tierney, 2021, p. 199). “The future of U.S. democracy depends, in no small part, on the strength and vitality of its colleges and universities” (Complete College America, 2024, p. 3).

Conclusion

Civic engagement is inherent in the mission of community colleges. The literature review highlighted a range of activities, from minimally to highly engaged, that community college leaders can decide upon to execute their institution's civic role. While existing research provides general insights and frameworks regarding the decision-making of higher education leaders, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the factors that influence community college leaders' decision-making about how to execute their institutions' civic role and how they conceptualize and describe their institution's civic role.

Given the wide range of activities colleges can engage in to fulfill their civic role, it is not understood how leaders make decisions about their civic activities. Recent civil unrest and declines in civic literacy have amplified calls for higher education to fulfill its civic responsibilities and contribute to saving democracy.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter reviews the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The research design, site selection, study participants, instrumentation, and data collection are also reviewed. Additionally, the data analysis, alignment table, limitations, ethical considerations, and study quality are presented. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to assess the factors that influence community college leaders' decision-making about how to execute their institution's civic role. It also aimed to explore how community college leaders conceptualize and describe their institution's civic role.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What factors influence community college leaders' decision-making about how to execute their institution's civic role?

Research Question 2: How do community college leaders conceptualize and describe their institution's civic role?

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This study utilized one theoretical framework and two conceptual frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

"The theoretical framework serves as a guide to your research and assists in determining what things you will measure and examine" (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 18). The theoretical framework that guided this study was Johnson's social engagement theory, which offers a comprehensive framework for understanding engagement. This theory recognizes both

individual and systemic factors contributing to different states of engagement (Johnson, 2018).

This provided a framework to assess individual and systemic factors influencing community college leaders' decision-making about their institution's civic role. This included factors such as institutional budget, staffing limitations, institutional mission, political environment, personal experience with civic engagement, and personal values around civic engagement.

As previously cited in this study, civic engagement lacks a singular, clear definition. Johnson's social engagement theory, which acknowledges a "dynamic system contributing to engagement states" (2018, p. 13) provided a broader engagement framework that guided the study.

Another reason for the selection of Johnston's framework for the theoretical theory of this dissertation is that it allowed consideration for both individual and social aspects of engagement. This is like the variety of factors that influence community college leaders' decision-making generally and are important for understanding how they make decisions about civic involvement specifically.

A drawback to this theoretical framework is that it is new and untested. While "traditionally, theoretical frameworks are developed a priori, or before data collection in quantitative designs" (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 13) there is latitude for other approaches. "However, a theoretical framework may also involve a theory that is developed in the course of the dissertation study" (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 13).

Conceptual Frameworks

One conceptual framework utilized in this study is Arnstein's ladder of participation which articulates a range of involvement from participants in decision-making from non-participatory to highly engaged (Arnstein, 1969). This is like the array of civic engagement

activities in higher education from which leaders may choose to execute their institution's civic role as described in the literature review of this study.

This framework informed the questions about how leaders conceptualized and described their institution's civic role. The rungs of Arnstein's ladder include informing, placating, consultation, and partnership among others (1969). The framework guided the development of survey items and subsequent interview questions focused on the factors influencing community college leaders' decision-making about their institution's civic role and how they conceptualized and described that role.

Herbert Simon's choice theory (1956, 1965, 1978) was the second conceptual framework that guided this study. Simon posits that human decisions are not always rational and can be influenced by numerous factors (Simon, 1965). This aligns with the element of choice and factors that influence choice as described in the purpose of this study. Viewing community college leaders' decision-making about their institution's civic role through Simon's lens, there could be any number of internal and external factors influencing their decision-making. Factors could include personal values and experiences related to civic engagement, institutional budget, the mission of the institution, and staffing capacity. This idea contributed to the foundation for the survey component of the mixed methods research design.

Simon's theory as a conceptual framework provided a structure and rationale for examining the factors that influence community college leaders' decision-making about their institution's civic role. The framework was particularly relevant for this dissertation as it emphasizes the idea that decision-making is not often a purely rational process but rather influenced by any number of external factors. This concept prompted a deeper understanding of how community college leaders navigate a complex environment when making decisions about

their institution's civic role. Their choices may be influenced by a variety of factors and practical considerations rather than ideal, optimal solutions. Additionally, by applying Simon's concept of satisficing, how leaders make decisions that are good enough given their institutional context, available resources, and broader societal expectations were explored.

Another central idea in Simon's choice theory is "satisficing" (1956, p. 129). According to Simon, decisions are not always optimal and there can be limitations to optimal decision-making. Applying this to community college leaders, factors could influence their decision-making resulting in "satisficing" (Simon, 1956, p. 129) rather than optimal decisions resulting in robust civic engagement activities to fulfill an institution's civic role.

This same concept of decisions that are not optimal guided interview questions about how community college leaders conceptualized and described their institution's civic role. Community college leaders might conceptualize and describe the civic role of their college as optimal or less than optimal, "satisficing" (Simon, 1956, p. 129).

Research Design

The research design for this study was a quantitative leading mixed methods approach with an explanatory sequential design. This "pragmatic approach to educational research" (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 213) allowed the researcher to make use of the "full spectrum of data" (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 213) rather than being limited to only qualitative or quantitative data. "The embracing of mixed-methods approaches is useful, we think, because it allows a more nuanced conversation surrounding the ways in which qualitative and quantitative methodologies can learn from one another" (Jamieson et al., 2023, p. 11).

The purpose of the study was to assess factors that influence community college leaders' decision-making as well as to explore how community college leaders conceptualized and

described their institution's civic role. The two components of the purpose lent themselves to mixed methods explanatory design, "a two-stage design which sees quantitative data being used as the basis" (Almalki, 2016, p. 293) for qualitative research. A mixed methods approach allowed for a "greater depth and breadth of information which is not possible utilizing singular approaches in isolation" (Almalki, 2016, p. 288).

Site Selection

Public two-year community college systems in the Desert Southwest of the United States were targeted for this research. No additional criteria were utilized. According to the United States Census Bureau, the Desert Southwest includes Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, and West Texas (2019). The Southwest United States is a culturally diverse region with a higher population growth rate and younger population than the United States averages (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Community colleges in the Southwest serve diverse communities and student populations. As an example, half of the Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) in the United States are in California, Arizona, and Texas. "HSIs are defined in federal law as accredited and degree-granting public or private nonprofit institutions of higher education with 25 percent or more total undergraduate Hispanic full time equivalent (FTE) student enrollment" (Excelencia in Education, 2024, p. 2). This, again, points to the similarities in this region.

Community colleges in the Southwest face similar challenges with economic fluctuations and immigration issues, which could impact their civic mission. As an example, "no other states aside from California and Arizona" (Weissman, 2024, para. 16) have state laws that dramatically impact community college fiscal states - California's Fifty Percent Law and Arizona's Expenditure Limitations.

Study Participants

Community college leaders in the Desert Southwest United States – specifically chancellors, presidents, and vice-presidents – were the targeted participants for this research. Focusing on these leaders aligned with the study's purpose: to explore how community college leaders conceptualized and described their institution's civic role, as well as the factors that influenced decision-making regarding the execution of that role. The goal was to obtain 60 survey responses with subsequent 10-12 interviews.

There were no criteria, other than institutional role, for participation. However, demographic data was collected for subsequent descriptive analysis including tenure in the role, institutional size, budget, and staffing.

Instrumentation

A cross-sectional survey, which captures quantitative data “from participants at a single point in time” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 133) was utilized to assess the factors that influenced civic engagement decision-making. Both closed- and open-ended questions were used to capture trends while also allowing for personal, in-depth answers. Survey questions were developed in alignment with the purpose of the study as well as the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The literature review also informed the development of survey questions as did the personal civic engagement experiences of the researcher. The survey, included in Appendix D, was piloted to ensure that the instrument was clear and understandable and captured the data desired.

Quantitative data informed the development of questions for the follow-up, semi-structured interviews with ten survey subjects to better understand how community college leaders conceptualized and described their institution's civic role. Findings from the quantitative

results guided the refinement of interview questions, ensuring that they explored key themes and patterns that emerged from the initial survey data. The primary instrument for the qualitative portion of this study, specifically the interviews, was the researcher herself, who conducted, transcribed, and analyzed the data, ensuring consistency in data collection and interpretation.

Data Collection and Data Sources

The researcher obtained Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct the research. Following IRB approval, the researcher employed a multi-pronged approach to recruit study participants, which included:

1. Engaged with community college consortia leaders in the Southwest United States to explore their potential support of the research, including Arizona's Community College Coordinating Council and The Community College League of California.
2. Approached national civic organizations with community college membership in the Southwest United States to support the research, including Campus Compact.
3. Contacted personal networks of community college leaders and invited them to participate in the survey.
4. Reached out to potential study participants directly via publicly available emails encountered online.

A letter of introduction, description of the research, instrumentation, and a consent form were included in each outreach strategy. Samples are included in Appendices B and C. Potential participants were informed of the measures taken to safeguard their privacy.

Survey data was collected through an online platform and securely stored in the cloud. While data was collected anonymously, participants had the option to provide contact

information if they are willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Additionally, demographic information was collected including:

- size of the institution as defined by enrollment (headcount)
- size of the institution as defined by budget
- location of the institution as defined by state
- tenure of the leader in their current position

Interviews were conducted by the researcher through Zoom using a semi-structured interview protocol (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Secure cloud storage was used to store collected data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred sequentially. First, the survey dataset was prepared for analysis by downloading into an Excel spreadsheet through the Qualtrics online platform. Survey data underwent descriptive analysis, “identifying patterns in the data to answer questions about who, what, where, when, and to what extent” (Loeb et al., 2017, p. 1), regarding factors that influence community college leaders’ decision-making about how to execute their institution’s civic role. “At its core, descriptive analysis is data simplification. The researcher’s job is to reduce the body of data to a format that helps an audience (such as practitioners, policymakers, or other researchers) to better understand a phenomenon” (Loeb et al., 2017, p. 39). In the case of this study, descriptive analysis included:

1. Measure of central tendency (mean) which is a “simple and compelling ways to describe and compare measures of interest” (Loeb et al., 2017, p. 22) such as the average number of times a particular factor was rated as having an impact on leaders’ civic engagement decision-making.

2. Measures of variability, such as range to “determine how scores vary” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 195).
3. Comparisons of data across “place, and population or group” (Loeb et al., 2017, p. 24).
As an example, comparing factors ranked as influencing leaders’ civic engagement decision-making with institutional role.

Survey data results helped to inform the development of qualitative interview questions. As an example, survey results indicating a strong personal belief that civic education is important to a healthy democracy helped to frame a question asking leaders to describe their own definition of civics. Consistent with the quantitative leading mixed methods approach to this study, the qualitative phase enriched the quantitative findings, providing a more comprehensive understanding of leadership perspectives.

Next, interview data was collected and analyzed. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and memos created to capture connections to theoretical and/or conceptual frameworks or to highlight significant portions of the interview (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Data was coded and categorized. Categories then served as the foundation for theme development (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

Alignment Table

A table was created that demonstrated the alignment between the problem based on the literature findings, the research questions, the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and the methodology. The alignment table is found on Appendix A.

Limitations

The accessibility of community college leaders and their willingness to participate was a limiting factor in this study. The honesty and transparency of the respondents was outside of the

control of the researcher. Conditions at individual community colleges could have impacted survey responses.

Given the focus on community college leaders in the Desert Southwest United States, the findings may not be generalizable to all community colleges across the country or to those in different regions. The sample is geographically specific, and community colleges in the Southwest may differ from those in other parts of the country.

Ethical Considerations

It is necessary for researchers to act “in a responsible and fair way, while continually keeping in mind the interests, needs, and protection of current and/or future research participants” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 68). To this end, ethical considerations were made throughout the study.

IRB approval was obtained by the researcher prior to engaging with any potential participants and is included in the Appendix. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before engaging in the survey and interviews. All participation was voluntary without any pressure or coercion. A copy of the consent form that also includes an explanation of the risk of harm is included in the Appendix. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participants was safeguarded with a secure data management system. The researcher maintained integrity, honesty, and transparency throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Reflexivity Statement

“Reflexivity refers to the conscious, active acknowledgement of one's own belief, bias, and judgement systems before, during, and after the actual research process” (Jamieson et al., 2023, p. 2). The researcher chose to include a reflexivity statement to be transparent about potential biases throughout the research process.

The researcher is a 54-year-old Latina who has always resided in a large metropolitan city in the Southwest United States. The researcher has been involved in civic and community engagement her entire career in a variety of sectors including a religious setting, municipal government, K12 public education, and public higher education.

Additionally, the researcher has been civically engaged in her community on a personal level for multiple decades. She has participated in campaigns at the local and state level focused on both issues and candidates. Her current professional role is in an external affairs department guiding civic engagement for a large institution of higher education.

To mitigate any bias, the researcher acknowledges her positionality and personal experience with civic engagement. She maintained transparency in all decision-making related to the study and engaged actively in reflexive practice. Additionally, the researcher consulted with peers familiar with her work to identify and challenge any potential biases.

Study Quality

To ensure that the “data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings are presented in a thorough and verifiable manner” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 180) trustworthiness is a vital component that guided the research. Several strategies were employed to maintain trustworthiness, including:

1. Pilot testing “to identify problems before implementing the full survey. Pilot testing looks to examine the validity of each question. It’s concerned with whether the question is capturing the information it’s intended to measure” (Cleave, 2021, para. 12).
2. Nonprobability sampling to include the “entire population” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 143) of the identified group rather than narrowing down by some other criteria.

3. Content validity to ensure that the survey measures what it intends to measure which could include “wording, format, and display of items” (Roebianto et al., 2023, p. 6).
4. Member-checking to verify the accuracy of data collected by sharing with the participants and soliciting their feedback (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).
5. Audit Trails to maintain a detailed record of the research process including the decisions made and rationale for each (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).
6. Eight Big Tent criteria - utilizing “eight key markers of quality in qualitative research” (Tracy, 2010, p. 837). A few examples of how criteria will be applied include:
 - a. Worthy topic - Addressing the civic role of community colleges was a timely subject with both practical and scholarly significance as referenced in Chapter 2.
 - b. Rich Rigor was achieved by utilizing a mixed methods approach including 10 follow-up interviews after an initial survey. Semi-structured interviews included questions appropriate to the topic. The researcher ensured accuracy in interview transcriptions by utilizing an online tool in addition to personal review. Transparency was maintained in describing the organization and analysis of interview data.
 - c. The researcher remained honest and transparent throughout the dissertation journey including data collection and analysis to achieve sincerity.
 - d. Self-reflexivity was critical in this study given the researcher’s lengthy involvement with civic engagement activities on both a professional and personal level. This has been detailed above in the reflexivity statement.
 - e. Credibility included “thick description” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843) with detailed interview results so as to demonstrate findings. Additionally, credibility was

upheld by employing triangulation, using survey data, theoretical, and conceptual frameworks.

- f. This study employed a mixed methods approach rather than relying solely on qualitative techniques. It may be difficult to demonstrate findings in the “beautiful, evocative, and artistic way” (Tracy, 2010, p. 845) described by Tracy but, at a minimum, findings were clearly presented to achieve resonance.
- g. Results of the study are intended to contribute to the literature regarding the civic mission of community colleges and the factors that influence community college leaders’ decision-making about their institution’s civic role. The conceptual frameworks came from non-education fields including public administration. This has the potential to provide “new conceptual understandings that can be used by future researchers” (Tracy, 2010, p. 646). Additionally, the study focused on a timely and relevant topic, enhancing its practical significance.

Summary

Chapter 3 outlines the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guide the research. It also describes the research design, including site selection, study participants, instrumentation, data collection methods, and data sources. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the alignment table, study limitations, ethical considerations, and the quality of the study.

Chapter 4 - Findings and Analysis

This chapter begins with a review of the research questions, followed by a description of the data collection methods. An analysis of the data collected from surveys and interviews with community college leaders is then presented. First, a descriptive analysis of the survey results is provided, followed by an exploration of the key themes identified in the interviews. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to assess the factors that influence community college leaders' decision-making about how to execute their institution's civic role. It also aimed to explore how community college leaders conceptualize and describe their institution's civic role.

Research Question 1: What factors influence community college leaders' decision-making about how to execute their institution's civic role?

Research Question 2: How do community college leaders conceptualize and describe their institution's civic role?

Quantitative Phase

Data Collection - Quantitative

Presidents and Vice-Presidents of public two-year community college systems in the Desert Southwest of the United States were the subjects for this research. According to the United States Census Bureau, the Desert Southwest includes Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico, and West Texas (2019). A map of this region was overlaid on maps of the community college systems in each of the states and regions mentioned, which resulted in the identification of 97 institutions.

The researcher reviewed the website of each institution to obtain emails for the Presidents and Vice-Presidents. Leadership structures varied among the colleges, so Vice-President (VP) roles included a range of titles: VP for Academic Affairs/Teaching and Learning/Instruction, VP for Student Affairs/Student Success, VP for Administrative Services/Business/Finance, VP for Development/Community Success/Workforce. This process resulted in a total of 347 email addresses collected.

An anonymous survey link, with a description of the purpose of the research and an informed consent form, was sent to all 347 emails. Not all emails were successfully delivered as indicated by out-of-office replies as well as notices indicating the staff member was no longer with the institution. Of those successfully delivered, a total of 72 survey responses were collected. Three responses were excluded from the dataset due to missing data (no values or responses recorded), and an additional six were removed because fewer than 20% of the questions had been answered. This resulted in 63 valid survey responses for descriptive data analysis. This exceeded the researcher's target of 58 survey responses to reach a confidence level of 90% with a 10% margin of error from a total population size of 347 (Survey Monkey, n.d.)

Instrumentation - Quantitative

A quantitative cross-sectional survey to “capture information from participants at a single point in time” (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017, p. 133) was developed to obtain responses informing the two research questions. This consisted of 30 questions related to factors that influence the civic role of the institution and leadership decision making with a Likert scale response: 1=No influence, 2=Little influence, 3=Somewhat influence, 4=Significant influence, 5=Very significant influence.

Five open-ended questions were included in the survey to capture information regarding key stakeholders and barriers to civic engagement. One question provided an opportunity for survey respondents to opt into a follow up interview. Finally, seven demographic questions asked about institution region and size closed out the survey.

A draft survey was piloted (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017) with nine community college leaders holding the positions targeted for this research. Feedback from these individuals indicated that the survey purpose and questions were clear. The complete survey is included in Appendix D.

Demographics – Respondents

Institutional Role

Survey respondents reflect an array of institutional roles. Table 1 displays the roles of survey respondents with nearly half (44%) of respondents holding the role of President. Due to slight variations in position titles and for ease of reporting the data, vice president roles are categorized as follows: VP–Students (inclusive of student affairs and student success titles), VP–Academics (inclusive of academic affairs and teaching/learning titles), VP–Business (inclusive of administrative services, business, and finance titles), and Other. Nine respondents did not indicate their role. Added to the three people in “other” leadership roles, there are 12 respondents, or 19% of the study, for whom role is not known.

Table 1*Institutional Role of the Survey Respondents*

Role of Respondents		
Role	N	%
President	28	44%
VP Students	9	14%
VP Academics	8	13%
VP Business	6	10%
Other	3	5%
No Responses	9	14%
Total	63	100%

Note: This table indicates the institutional role of survey respondents.

Tenure

Table 2 displays the tenure (in years) of respondents both in their current position as well as in higher education generally. The average tenure of survey respondents in their current leadership position was less than a decade with responses ranging from one year in the position to a high of 21 years in the position. The average tenure in higher education generally was much higher with one respondent having served 47 years in higher education.

Table 2*Tenure, in Years, of Respondents both in the Current Position and in Higher Education*

Tenure of Respondents							
Role	N	Tenure in the Current Position			Tenure in Higher Education		
		Average	Low	High	Average	Low	High
President	28	5.57	1	17	25.86	9	47
VP-Students	9	6.33	2	9	24.44	14	29
VP-Academics	8	4.5	1	8	24.88	9	34
VP-Business	6	8.33	1	21	21.67	13	30
Other	3	1	1	1	25	22	30
No Responses	9						
Total	63	5.15	1	21	24.37	9	27

Note: This table indicates the tenure of respondents both in their current position as well as tenure in higher education.

Demographics - Institution

Location

Table 3 displays the states where respondents indicated their institution was located. An equal number (22) were from Arizona and California institutions. Few responses were collected from New Mexico (4) and Texas (3), although 12 individuals, or 19% of respondents, did not indicate in which state their institution was located.

Table 3*Location of Respondents by State*

Location of Institutions		
State	N	%
Arizona	22	35%
California	22	35%
No Response	12	19%
New Mexico	4	6%
Texas	3	5%
Total	63	100%

Note: This table indicates the State in which the institutions of the respondents are located.

Institutional Type by Geographic Setting

Table 4 displays institutional type, with all types represented. About one third of respondents indicated that their institution is suburban, followed by urban institutions (20%) and rural institutions (22%). There were 9 respondents (14%) that did not identify institutional type.

Table 4*Institutional Type by Geographic Setting (Urban, Suburban, Rural)*

Institutional Type		
Geographic Setting	N	%
Suburban	22	35%
Urban	18	29%
Rural	14	22%
No Response	9	14%
Total	63	100%

Note: This table illustrates institutional type by geographic setting, with institutions classified as suburban, urban or rural.

Headcount

Table 5 describes the average institutional student headcount by state of the respondents. Each state had a range of headcount with a low of less than 1,500 students and a high of 25,000. New Mexico and Texas, the states with the lowest survey responses, had the lowest enrollment by a single institution.

Table 5

Institution Headcount by State

Site	Student Headcount			
	N	Average	Low	High
Arizona	20	11769	4100	25000
California	19	14101	4014	25000
New Mexico	4	9269	1485	25000
Texas	3	10342	1485	20501
No State	3	11732	7331	20041
No Response	14			
Total	63	11443	1485	25000

Note: This table describes the average headcount, lowest headcount, and highest headcount of all institutions included in survey responses, disaggregated by state, as well as responses on headcount that did not indicate a state.

Factors

All Respondents

Respondents were asked to rate to what extent a variety of factors influenced their decision-making about the civic role of their institution. These questions included factors internal to the institution such as budget, staffing, staff expertise, academic freedom, guided pathways, and basic needs support. External factors were also included such as community partnerships, government regulations, political support, and the local, state, and national political environment. Responses were calculated to provide a mean score for each survey question as indicated in Table 6.

Table 6

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations - All Respondents

Survey Questions			
	Question	Mean	SD
1	To what extent does the local (municipal, county) political environment influence your decisions on the types of civic activities in which your institution participates?	3.41	0.91
2	To what extent does the state political environment influence your decisions on the types of civic activities in which your institution participates?	3.59	0.96
3	To what extent does the national political environment influence your decisions on the types of civic activities in which your institution participates?	3.44	1
4	To what extent do concerns about race relations influence your decisions on the type of civic activities in which your institution participates?	3.43	1.2
5	To what extent do concerns about the ability to engage in civil dialogue influence your decisions on the type of civic activities in which your institution participates?	3.22	0.92
6	To what extent do the public's perceptions of higher education influence your decisions on the types of civic activities in which your institution participates?	3.32	0.91
7	To what extent do you consider political support from your state elected officials when choosing and/or approving civic activities for your institution?	3.02	1.05
8	To what extent do you consider government regulations or policies when choosing and/or approving civic activities for your institution?	3.75	1.03
9	To what extent do you consider issues of academic freedom/freedom of expression when choosing and/or approving civic activities for your institution?	3.79	1.08
10	To what extent does your institution's annual budget directly limit or influence the range of civic activities your institution can pursue?	3.3	1.2
11	To what extent do staffing levels impact your institution's ability to plan and execute civic activities?	3.75	0.98
12	To what extent does the availability of subject matter experts influence the type of civic activities in which your institution engages?	3.27	0.95
13	To what extent does your institution's core mission or values drive the civic activities in which your institution engages?	4.17	0.73
14	To what extent are faculty viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution?	3.82	0.84
15	To what extent are staff viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution?	3.63	0.91
16	To what extent are students viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution?	3.87	0.95

Survey Questions

	Question	Mean	SD
17	To what extent are community partners (e.g., NGOs, nonprofits, civic groups, government agencies, private sector) viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution?	3.65	0.77
18	To what extent is community engagement part of your institution's overall strategy for executing its civic role?	3.76	0.86
19	To what extent do other key stakeholders (e.g., donors, alumni, local activists) influence decisions about your institution's civic role?	3	0.95
20	To what extent does your institution's tolerance for risk influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	3.63	0.89
21	To what extent does your institution experiment with innovative civic activities or approaches to engagement?	2.86	0.86
22	To what extent do challenges with tracking and measuring civic outcomes influence the type of civic activities in which your institution participates?	2.69	0.99
23	To what extent do you consider infusing civic learning outcomes across the curriculum?	3.02	1.05
24	To what extent do challenges with infusing civic learning outcomes across the curriculum influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	2.95	0.98
25	To what extent do you view civic education as essential for a healthy democracy?	4.33	0.78
26	To what extent do you view civic engagement opportunities for students as important in advancing democratic ideals?	4.12	0.77
27	To what extent does an emphasis on workforce preparation influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	3.31	1.01
28	To what extent does an emphasis on student basic needs influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	3.64	1.09
29	To what extent does an emphasis on increasing enrollment influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	2.91	1.1
30	To what extent does an emphasis on guided pathways influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	2.67	1.1
31	To what extent have the federal actions of the last few months influenced the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	3.74	1.15

Note: This table displays the mean scores and standard deviations for survey questions, all respondents.

On a scale of 1=No influence, 2=Little influence, 3=Somewhat influence, 4=Significant influence, 5=Very significant influence, most responses fell within the somewhat influence category (M = 3.0 to 3.87). This included a mix of factors both internal and external to the institution. Samples to demonstrate these factors are listed below.

Internal Factors

1. To what extent does your institution's annual budget directly limit or influence the range of civic activities your institution can pursue? ($M=3.30$)
2. To what extent do staffing levels impact your institution's ability to plan and execute civic activities? ($M=3.75$)
3. To what extent does your institution's tolerance for risk influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages? ($M=3.63$)

External Factors

1. To what extent does the local (municipal, county) political environment influence your decisions on the types of civic activities in which your institution participates? ($M=3.41$)
2. To what extent does the state political environment influence your decisions on the types of civic activities in which your institution participates? ($M=3.59$)
3. To what extent does the national political environment influence your decisions on the types of civic activities in which your institution participates? ($M=3.44$)

Table 3 displays the survey questions with the lowest mean scores, signifying little influence on leadership decision making. These questions all had factors internal to the institution such as a focus on guided pathways, civic learning outcomes, and enrollment. No survey question had a mean score lower than 2.67.

Table 7

Survey Questions with the Lowest Mean Scores All Respondents

	Survey Questions	Mean Scores
Q24	To what extent do challenges with infusing civic learning outcomes across the curriculum influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	2.95
Q29	To what extent does an emphasis on increasing enrollment influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	2.91
Q21	To what extent does your institution experiment with innovative civic activities or approaches to engagement?	2.86
Q22	To what extent do challenges with tracking and measuring civic outcomes influence the type of civic activities in which your institution participates?	2.69
Q30	To what extent does an emphasis on guided pathways influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	2.67

Note: This table displays the survey questions with the lowest mean scores among all respondents.

Three questions had a mean score in the significant influence range and are displayed in Table 8. Two of these questions related directly to the leaders' personal views on the role of civic engagement and civic opportunities in a healthy democracy. The third question relates to the institution's mission and values.

Table 8

Survey Questions with the Highest Mean Scores All Respondents

	Survey Questions	Mean Scores
Q25	To what extent do you view civic education as essential for a healthy democracy?	4.33
Q13	To what extent does your institution's core mission or values drive the civic activities in which your institution engages?	4.17
Q26	To what extent do you view civic engagement opportunities for students as important in advancing democratic ideals?	4.12

Note: This table displays the survey questions with the highest mean scores among all respondents.

Factors – Disaggregated by State

Survey question responses were disaggregated by the state in which respondents were located. Table 9 presents the survey questions grouped by state, along with the highest mean scores. Questions with a mean score of 4.00 or higher in any state grouping were included.

Mean scores varied across state groups. In response to the question, *to what extent do you consider government regulations or policies when choosing and/or approving civic activities for your institution*, Arizona was the only state group to report a mean score of 4.00. Arizona was also the only state to score 4.00 or higher on three additional questions, including *to what extent have federal actions over the past few months influenced the types of civic activities in which the institution engages*.

Texas was the only state group to score 4.00 or higher on three questions, including *to what extent does an emphasis on student basic needs influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages*. California was the only state to score a 4.00 on the question related to staffing levels impacting civic engagement, while Texas was the only state to score a 4.00 on the question addressing the extent to which the annual budget directly influences or limits civic engagement.

The only group to score the question, *to what extent are students viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution*, a 4.00 or higher, was the group that did not identify the state in which they were located.

Table 9

Survey Questions Disaggregated by State with a Score of 4.00 or Higher

Influential Factors		Factor Scores by State of Respondent Institution									
		Arizona		California		New Mexico		Texas		No Answer	
		N=22		N=22		N=4		N=3		N=12	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Q8	policies when choosing and/or approving civic activities for your institution?	4.00	0.93	3.66	1.18	3.50	0.58	4.00	1.00	3.91	0.94
Q9	To what extent do you consider issues of academic freedom/freedom of expression when choosing and/or approving civic activities for your institution?	4.05	1.09	3.77	0.92	2.50	0.58	2.67	2.08	4.00	0.77
Q10	directly limit or influence the range of civic activities your institution can pursue?	3.00	1.07	3.68	1.21	2.25	1.26	4.00	0.00	3.36	1.36
Q11	To what extent do staffing levels impact your institution's ability to plan and execute civic activities?	3.64	0.90	4.00	0.93	3.25	1.71	3.67	0.58	3.73	1.10
Q13	values drive the civic activities in which your institution engages?	4.05	0.84	4.41	0.59	3.75	0.50	4.00	1.00	4.18	0.75
Q14	To what extent are faculty viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution?	3.82	0.91	3.86	0.89	3.25	0.50	4.00	1.00	3.80	0.63
Q15	To what extent are staff viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution?	3.86	0.94	3.32	0.78	2.75	0.50	4.00	1.00	3.90	0.88
Q16	To what extent are students viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution?	3.86	1.04	3.86	0.89	3.25	0.50	3.67	1.53	4.10	0.88
Q18	To what extent is community engagement part of your institution's overall strategy for executing its civic role?	4.00	0.87	3.45	0.80	3.75	0.96	3.67	0.58	3.86	1.43
Q20	influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	4.00	0.93	3.36	0.85	3.25	0.50	3.67	0.58	3.57	1.39
Q25	To what extent do you view civic education as essential for a healthy democracy?	4.64	0.58	4.18	0.85	4.25	0.96	4.00	1.00	4.00	1.30
Q26	opportunities for students as important in advancing democratic ideals?	4.32	0.84	4.09	0.68	4.00	0.82	3.67	1.15	3.86	1.15
Q28	influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	3.55	1.34	3.64	1.00	3.75	0.50	4.00	1.00	3.71	1.30
Q31	To what extent have the federal actions of the last few months influenced the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	4.23	1.07	3.50	0.96	3.25	0.96	3.33	1.15	3.43	1.78

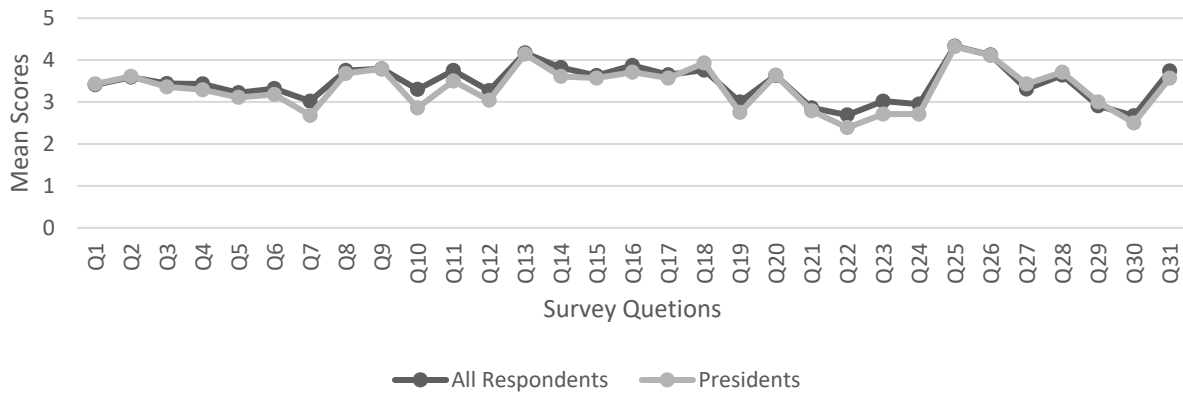
Note: This table, disaggregated by state, displays the questions with a score of 4.00 or higher in any state grouping.

Presidents' Responses

Survey question responses were disaggregated by institutional role. Since Presidents were the largest share of respondents, their means were compared to the means for all respondents, as indicated in Figure 2. There is very little variation between mean scores for all respondents and mean scores for Presidents.

Figure 2

Mean Scores for All Respondents and Presidents



Note: This figure displays the mean scores on survey questions for all respondents and for Presidents.

Survey questions with the highest mean scores for all respondents, as displayed in Table 8, were consistent with the highest means scores among Presidents. Survey questions with the lowest mean scores for all respondents, as displayed in Table 7, were largely consistent with those for presidents, with one exception. Question 29, which addressed a focus on increasing enrollment, had a mean score of 3.0 among presidents, placing it in the somewhat influential range rather than little influence. Additionally, four other questions were rated as having little influence by presidents, as indicated in Table 10.

Table 10*Additional Survey Questions with Low Mean Scores Among Presidents*

	Survey Questions	Mean Scores
Q10	To what extent does your institution's annual budget directly limit or influence the range of civic activities your institution can pursue?	2.86
Q19	To what extent do other key stakeholders (e.g., donors, alumni, local activists) influence decisions about your institution's civic role?	2.75
Q23	To what extent do you consider infusing civic learning outcomes across the curriculum?	2.71
Q7	To what extent do you consider political support from your state elected officials when choosing and/or approving civic activities for your institution?	2.68

Note: This table lists the questions scored as having little influence by Presidents that were not among the low mean scores for all respondents.

Presidents' Responses Disaggregated by State

Presidents represented the largest share of survey respondents (44%). President responses were disaggregated by the state in which respondents were located as displayed in table 11. The largest number of president responses came from California (N = 12), followed by Arizona (N = 11). New Mexico and Texas each had two president responses, and one respondent did not indicate a state. Table 10 displays the survey questions grouped by state, along with the highest mean scores. Questions with a mean score of 4.00 or higher in any state grouping were included.

There were differences in how presidents from each state rated the survey items. Presidents in New Mexico were the only group to rate factors related to local and state political environments at a mean score of 4.00. Presidents in Texas were the only group to rate budget and staffing issues at a mean score of 4.00. Arizona presidents were the only group to rate items

related to the impacts of academic freedom and freedom of expression, as well as recent federal actions, at a mean score of 4.00 or higher

Across all states, presidents rated the extent to which their institution's core mission or values drive civic activities at a mean score of 4.00 or higher.

Table 10

President Survey Questions Disaggregated by State with a Mean Score of 4.00 or higher

President Factor Scores Disaggregated By State											
Influential Factors		Arizona		California		New Mexico		Texas		No Answer	
		N=11		N=12		N=2		N=2		N=1	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Score	SD
Q1	To what extent does the local (municipal, county) political environment influence your decisions on the types of civic activities in which your institution participates?	3.73	0.90	3.33	0.98	4.00	0.00	2.50	2.12	2.00	
Q2	To what extent does the state political environment influence your decisions on the types of civic activities in which your institution participates?	3.73	1.01	3.58	0.90	4.00	0.00	3.50	2.12	2.00	
Q8	when choosing and/or approving civic activities for your institution?	3.91	0.94	3.42	1.08	3.50	0.71	4.00	1.41	4.00	
Q9	To what extent do you consider issues of academic freedom/freedom of expression when choosing and/or approving civic activities for your institution?	4.19	0.87	3.58	1.00	3.00	0.00	3.00	2.83	5.00	
Q10	or influence the range of civic activities your institution can pursue?	2.55	1.13	3.33	1.44	1.50	0.71	4.00	0.00	1.00	
Q11	To what extent do staffing levels impact your institution's ability to plan and execute civic activities?	3.45	1.04	3.75	0.97	2.00	1.41	4.00	0.00	3.00	
Q13	To what extent does your institution's core mission or values drive the civic activities in which your institution engages?	4.00	1.00	4.25	0.62	4.00	0.00	4.50	0.71	4.00	
Q14	To what extent are faculty viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution?	3.64	1.03	3.42	0.79	3.50	0.71	4.50	0.71	4.00	
Q15	To what extent are staff viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution?	4.09	0.94	3.00	0.43	3.00	0.00	4.50	0.71	4.00	
Q16	To what extent are students viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution	3.82	0.98	3.50	0.80	3.50	0.71	4.50	0.71	4.00	
Q18	To what extent is community engagement part of your institution's overall strategy for executing its civic role?	4.27	1.01	3.50	0.52	4.50	0.71	3.50	0.71	5.00	
Q21	To what extent does your institution experiment with innovative civic activities or approaches to engagement?	2.64	0.92	2.83	0.72	2.50	0.71	4.00	1.41	2.00	
Q25	To what extent do you view civic education as essential for a healthy democracy?	4.73	0.65	4.17	0.94	3.50	0.71	4.00	1.41	4.00	
Q26	To what extent do you view civic education as essential for a healthy democracy?	4.36	0.92	4.00	0.74	3.50	0.71	4.00	1.41	4.00	
Q28	To what extent does an emphasis on student basic needs influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	3.64	1.57	3.67	1.07	4.00	0.00	4.00	1.41	4.00	
Q29	influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	2.82	1.17	3.33	0.78	2.00	0.00	4.00	1.41	1.00	
Q31	To what extent have the federal actions of the last few months influenced the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?	4.09	1.30	3.33	0.89	3.50	0.71	3.00	1.41	2.00	

Note: This table displays President survey responses, disaggregated by state, with a mean of 4.00 or higher.

Open Ended Questions

The survey included several open-ended questions allowing participants to expand on several aspects of civic engagement at their institution. These questions addressed the civic engagement opportunities of which they were most proud, the greatest barriers to fulfilling their institution's civic role, and the key stakeholders involved in carrying out that role. While not all respondents answered these questions, themes did emerge from the collected responses.

When asked what civic engagement opportunities at their institution they were most proud of, activities related to voting were cited most often, followed by community events, civil dialogues, and external partnerships. All response themes are listed in table 12.

Table 12

Response Themes for Opportunities

Response Themes - Opportunities	Number of Times Cited
Voting (Voter Registration, Polling Location)	18
Civil Dialogues	6
Community Events	6
External Partnerships	5
Service Learning	4
Student Government	3
Basic Needs Support	2
LGBTQ/Pride	2
Workforce and Jobs	2
Civic Learning	1
Early Education Outreach	1
Support for Dreamers	1

Note: This table lists the response themes for civic engagement opportunities for which respondents were proud that their institution offered.

Respondents had an opportunity to share the biggest barriers faced when attempting to execute the civic role of their institution. The most often cited barrier was the current political climate followed by staffing challenges, limited funding, limited resources, and waning student participation. All response themes are listed in table 13.

Table 13

Response Themes for Barriers

Response Themes - Barriers	Number of Times Cited
Political Climate	12
Staffing Challenges	10
Limited Funding	9
Limited Resources	6
Lack of Student Participation	4
Time Constraints	3
Institution is Risk Averse	3
Cultural Barriers	2
Narrow Mission of the Institution	2
Resistance to Change	1
Difficulty Controlling/Monitoring Topics	1
Lack of faculty focus	1
Issues of Compliance	1
Issues with Engagement as an Online Institution	1
Deference Given to 4-year Systems	1

Note: This table lists the response themes for barriers respondents face when attempting to execute the civic role of their institution.

The final open-ended survey question asked respondents to consider who were the key stakeholders, partners, and networks when executing the institution's civic role.

Overwhelmingly, students were cited as the primary stakeholders followed by faculty, staff, community, and local municipalities. All response are listed in table 14.

Table 14

Response Themes for Stakeholders

Response Themes - Stakeholders	Number of Times Cited
Students	25
Faculty	19
Staff	16
Community	10
Local Municipalities	10
Nonprofits	9
Business and Industry	8
County Officials	6
College Administration	5
Federal Agencies	5
Alumni	5
Politicals (General)	4
State Legislators	4
Organizations (General)	2

Note: This table lists the response themes for the key stakeholders considered when leaders execute their institution's civic role.

Survey - Incomplete Data

The survey included a question about the annual budget of the institution as well as how the leader defines the civic role of the institution. Few responses were collected for these questions, so a descriptive analysis is not provided.

Qualitative Phase

Data Collection - Qualitative

The quantitative survey previously analyzed included an open-ended question allowing survey participants to opt into a voluntary, follow-up interview to further explore the research questions. Research Question 1: What factors influence community college leaders' decision-making about how to execute their institution's civic role? Research Question 2: How do community college leaders conceptualize and describe their institution's civic role?

A semi-structured interview method was used with the researcher preparing "a limited number of questions in advance and plans to ask follow-up questions" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 31). Interview questions can be found in Addendum E. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and interview subjects were asked for permission to allow for recording and transcription via the Zoom platform. Participants were assured of anonymity and informed that, while direct quotes from interviews could be included in the final dissertation, pseudonyms would be used to protect personal identity. Post-interview, a copy of the transcribed interview was provided to each participant to allow for member checking to verify accuracy and ensure credibility.

Instrumentation - Qualitative

The researcher was the primary instrument for the qualitative portion of this research. The researcher took time before each interview to cognitively shift into the role of interviewer rather than practitioner. The researcher leads civic engagement activities at their institution and was mindful of "how their own attitudes might influence the questions they ask as well as how they react to the answers" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 72). This strategy helped the researcher set aside personal biases and judgments, allowing them to listen attentively and probe for nuance, thereby enhancing the depth and richness of the interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Demographics - Respondents

A total of 11 survey respondents volunteered for follow-up interviews that occurred in September and October, 2025. Ultimately, ten interviews were conducted, as one respondent could not be scheduled due to calendar conflicts. All leadership roles targeted for the study were represented, with half of the interviewees serving as presidents of their institutions, as shown in Table 15.

Table 15

The Institutional Role of Interviewees

Role of Interviewees	
Role	N
President	5
VP-Academics	2
VP-Students	1
VP-Business	1
Other	1
Total	10

Note: This table displays the institutional role of interviewees.

There were no interview subjects from the state of Texas. One interview subject was from the State of New Mexico. Four interviewees were from California and five from Arizona.

Qualitative Analysis

The researcher took notes during the interviews, not to record verbatim answers, but as a form of memoing to record thoughts on how the interview proceeded generally (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), as well as impressions about the participants' emotions and affect. Memos also included personal reflections of the researcher, notes about potential quotes, and how content might

connect to research questions or theoretical frameworks. Each transcribed interview was reviewed before the next interview to allow the researcher to obtain a general understanding of the content and emerging themes. This also aided the researcher in determining when the point of saturation (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017) had been reached.

After all interviews were completed, the transcripts were first analyzed manually on printed copies, with the researcher adding handwritten descriptive codes. The coding process was then repeated electronically in Word to allow for comparison, verification, and refinement of the initial codes. Codes were subsequently grouped using the theoretical frameworks and research questions as anchors, resulting in the identification of six overarching themes.

Direct quotes from interviews are included in the description of themes. To ensure anonymity, interviewees are not identified by name. Instead, quotes are attributed by the participant's role and state, as outlined in Table 16.

Table 16

Interview Participant Identifiers Used for Quote Attribution

Quote Attribution		
Attribution	Role	State
PRES-AZ-1	President	AZ
PRES-AZ-2	President	AZ
PRES-AZ-3	President	AZ
PRES-AZ-4	President	AZ
PRES-CA	President	CA
VPA-CA-1	VP-Academics	CA
VPA-CA-2	VP-Academics	CA
VPS-AZ	VP-Students	AZ
VPB-CA	VP-Business	CA
Other-NM	VP-Other	NM

Note: This table describes interview participant roles and state locations used for quote attribution while maintaining participant anonymity.

Theme 1 - Research Question 1

Community College leaders' decision-making is anchored in personal and institutional values. Leaders described a values-based lens to guide decisions generally as well as the civic engagement work of their institution. This lens included both personal values and institutional values and policies.

Leaders described alignment to institutional vision, mission, values, and policies as a guidepost for decision-making. This included adherence to formal mission, vision, values documents, college plans, and administrative regulations. Additionally, consideration was given to the inherent responsibilities of being a public access institution, including institutional neutrality and access for all. “We just recently updated our mission and vision for the whole [district] and that included the statement, Civic Vitality, as part of our core mission”, (VPA-CA-1, interview, September 29, 2025). As PRES-AZ-2 explained, “I task myself, I task my team. My VPs and my leadership team with the question of, is this serving our vision and mission? Does this decision resonate with our core values, which is ultimately serving students in the community” (interview, October 2, 2025).

A challenge in relying so heavily on written documents, such as college plans, is that if civics are not explicitly included it could make it difficult to remain an institutional priority. “I don't know if any of the metrics that we capture, or measures that are focused on civic engagement, and if they are, they're not broadly shared enough to where I would know” (VPB-CA, interview, September 30, 2025).

This idea of service to students and community, through a personal lens of what is ‘right’ or impactful, was a common thread among interviews. As PRES-AZ-4 succinctly stated, “The reality is, how does it affect students? How does it affect the people I serve here, and then how will it affect our communities?” (interview, September 30, 2025).

Other leaders framed mission as the broad mission of community colleges rather than their specific institutional mission documents. As PRES-AZ-1 described, “small m mission, like what you think the purpose of community colleges generally...our job is to improve the lives of the people we interact with like, that's the mission to me” (interview, October 3, 2025). This was reinforced by thoughts from VPS-AZ when asked to define her use of the term mission,

I think the reason I got into this work was the philosophical mission of community colleges. I love that this is creating those opportunities, particularly for people who may have not thought this was a possibility for them. And I think community colleges have the unique perspective of being the champion of underdogs in some ways and I love that” (interview, September 29, 2025).

Alignment to personal values was also described as a strong factor in the decision-making process of community college leaders. This factor was not connected to the formal documents of the institution but, rather, the individual’s own values. As described by PRES-CA, “I think it starts with my own values and I have things I consider to be my own values, but the institution values as well and I think that would be a foundational component to decision-making” (interview, October 2, 2025).

Leaders consistently spoke about doing the *right thing* for students and the community with little definition of what constituted right, other than a subjective alignment with personal values. PRES-AZ-3 described this process:

...is it the right thing to do? And that's something that I guess you can get is extremely subjective, but after I look at student benefit, I look at, will it benefit the college, even the system as a whole. And then for me, just, I don't want to say it's a gut check, but there's an element of... Is this the right thing to do? (interview, September 30, 2025)

Theme 2 - Research Question 1

Navigating a shifting national political environment while managing local dynamics influences the decision-making of community college leaders. Leaders described the need for political awareness, both local and national, as critical to decision-making. They operate in a politically charged environment balancing relationships with local municipalities, state agencies, and community groups. Leaders described local politics as having the ability to shape what engagement takes place while divisiveness at the national level has created a heightened need for caution.

Community college leaders repeatedly referenced the “current political environment” in broad terms, alluding to divisiveness and heightened environment at the national level. “You know, given the state of the U.S, especially after the assassination of Charlie Kirk. Things are just so heightened, and everything that we do is being scrutinized, right?” (PRES-AZ-2, interview, October 2, 2025). The national political environment has leaders acknowledging that “there's just a lot of ugliness out there” (VPA-CA-1, interview, October 2025) that has “shaped my decision-making” (PRES-AZ-1, interview, October 3, 2025) leading to a hesitancy around civic engagement.

This hesitancy reflects both the personal emotional toll of the national political environment as well as programmatic and financial considerations. Leaders mentioned reconsidering what events to sponsor or engage in, as well as additional security at events and

the related costs. All of this makes prioritizing civic engagement difficult “because how much more headaches do you actually want in the moment?” (VPA-CA-1, interview, September 29, 2025).

There was a tone of sadness and worry to the discussion about the national political environment from community college leaders, both in spoken word as well as physical expression and tone. Leaders spoke about the violent imagery used in discourse at the national level “we are at war with...that’s disturbing imagery” (PRES-AZ-2, interview, October 2, 2025) along with a “heightened awareness of divisiveness at the national level” (PRES-AZ-1, interview, October 3, 2025). VPA-CA-2 referenced a letter from a federal agency filled with “racism” and “anti-immigrant sentiment” (interview, September 30, 2025). The worried tone is exemplified in these thoughts from PRES-AZ-4:

I am scared right now, and you know what, I'm one of those people who always sees the glass half full. My prediction right now is that we probably have not hit rock bottom yet. That will have a whole lot more problems before we're able to realize that we're gonna have to all learn how to live together and work together, and more specially, respect each other (interview, September 30, 2025).

While national politics weigh heavily on leaders and influence decision-making, local politics were described as equally impactful on the college’s engagement with students and the community. PRES-CA described weighing “student demand and student interest” when considering civic engagement programming but also being sensitive to local dynamics such as “the cities that we serve and so forth, I have to be aware of that, are there any hotspots or sensitivities” (interview, October 2, 2025). Several leaders echoed this sentiment, including

PRES-AZ-2 who spoke of partnering with local municipalities and having to use a “political lens” to navigate local partnerships (interview, October 2, 2025).

For some leaders, local political challenges included navigating relationships with tribal nations. This was mentioned as unique and a point of pride but also challenging in having to navigate relationships with sovereign nations, “it's essential that we have an understanding of our relationship with each of those respective constituencies” (PRES-AZ-4, interview, September 30, 2025) and “to make sure that we're being aware of the civic needs of that unique population” (VPS-AZ, interview, September 29, 2025).

Theme 3 - Research Question 1

Resource constraints and risk management impact the decision-making of community college leaders regarding their institution's civic role. According to interviewees, civic engagement competes with other institutional priorities. Leaders described balancing many needs and initiatives with limited resources in a challenging political environment requiring ongoing risk management.

Leaders, when asked if they were satisfied with the levels of civic engagement at their institution, expressed that they wished they could do more. “I’m proud of what we are doing, but it definitely, in the past couple of years, feels like I wish we could do more” (PRES-CA, interview, October 2, 2025). Barriers to doing more involved resource constraints, “money, people, and time” (VPA-CA-2, interview, September 29, 2025). It has been well documented that “community colleges operate with substantially fewer resources for core academic and student support functions than public four-year institutions” (Community College Research Center [CCRC], 2022, para. 3). Interview participants spoke to this reality as a barrier to increased civic activity, “it could all come down to resources, right?” (VPB-CA, interview,

September 30, 2025). VPA-CA-2 shared that “I’m sure if you’ve talked to anyone before, if I’m not your first person, you know that funding is the biggest one” (interview, September 29, 2025).

Financial resources, however, are not the only resource constraints impacting the civic role of community colleges. “I think people think resources is just money, but how do you think about your staff, and are you as robustly staffed as you would like? What about the people end of things?” (PRES-AZ-4, interview, September 30, 2025). At some rural institutions, it is difficult to fill positions at all, let alone for a civic portfolio of work. Other institutions rely on a small cadre of staff to carry out the civic work rather than embedding it across the institution, “I worry that we're attaching too much to a person or two people, not a holistic component” (PRES-AZ-3, interview, September 30, 2025).

Resource constraints create competition among college initiatives, making it difficult for the civic role to become a priority (VPA-CA-1). Community college students face many challenges, such as obtaining workforce certifications to secure employment and support their families, as well as meeting basic needs like housing and food security. One leader shared that, in addition to the many needs students face, the most recent grant to be eliminated at their institution was childcare. Thus, “it's so easy to probably get too busy or not have enough resources to do any type of civic engagement” (VPA-CA-1, interview, September 29, 2025).

Even when resources are available to support the civic role of colleges, leaders stated that they must also consider risk in a charged political environment prone to public scrutiny and cancel culture. Leaders expressed concern about speakers on campus or civil dialogues that could trigger pushback from those with a different point of view. Concerns about going viral or being subjected to a lawsuit were expressed by leaders. PRES-AZ-2 shared this perspective:

But when people push back because they disagree, they'll go to the governing board, they'll write to the chancellor or go to the media itself, saying, you know, there's something's happening at our institution that I disagree with, and here's why, right? And in those spaces, it becomes difficult because you don't know, like, how much that's going to explode (interview, October 2, 2025).

Theme 1 - Research Question 2

Community college leaders describe the civic role of their institution as educating students to participate in democratic life. Leaders emphasized civic learning and civic participation through curriculum, co-curricular activities, and community programs to help students develop civic skills.

Community college leaders repeatedly spoke of preparing students for democratic and civic life. A variety of terms were used to convey the same perspective of education around civics including civic life, civic literacy, civic participation, civic skills, critical thinking, and information literacy. The underlying role expressed was that of preparing students, while in college and on campus, for civic life out in the community.

“I think a big core part of our civic responsibility is, we are helping students learn skills to, um, enable them to better participate in democracy” (PRES-CA, interview, October 2, 2025). “I think it is incumbent upon us as an institution to educate students at all levels, meaning at all ages, at all backgrounds of the value of civic participation” (PRES-AZ-3, interview, September 30, 2025). “I think it's our responsibility to play a role in ensuring that students understand what it means to be civically minded, um, not only have the opportunity, but also have the ability to participate in civic discourse” (PRES-AZ-1, interview, October 3, 2025). “While we're educating

individuals, the outcome of that is that they can be really great humans and productive citizens” (VPS-AZ, interview, September 29, 2025).

The ways in which this is accomplished are many, according to the interviewees. Leaders described civic learning happening in the classroom, through co-curricular activities, and service in the community. While these strategies were described and examples provided, there was an acknowledgement by interviewees that more could be done. “Figuring out how to more um, deliberately fold some of this type of work into our classes and into the curriculum is probably one of the ways that we need to figure out how to engage the students” (PRES-AZ-1, interview, October 3, 2025).

Civic efforts were also described as haphazard and disjointed. Leaders acknowledged that while “there's some real good pockets of engagement” it is “haphazard” and “isn’t very organized” (VPA-CA-2, interview, September 30, 2025). Thought needs to be given to the “the institutionalization” (VPB-CA, interview, September 30, 2025) of civic engagement efforts and activities. Some leaders expressed concern that civic work is overly dependent on a single faculty or staff member and wondered what would happen when that person left the institution.

Another concern expressed by leaders was how to fully engage students. There is a sense of disengagement that leaders struggle with in executing their institution’s civic role. “I think there’s a core number of students, but it’s a small core that are engaged in civic learning and civic activities, we’re not getting broad enough participation” (PRES-AZ-3, interview, September 30, 2025). “How do we bring those people that are on the margins more into the fold?” (VPS-AZ, interview, September 29, 2025).

Theme 2 - Research Question 2

Community college leaders describe the civic role of their institution as both supporting the local community and serving as a neutral civic forum. Leaders described a dual civic role, both on and off campus, of serving as a neutral forum on campus where students and community members can engage in open civic discourse, while also actively participating in the broader community through service, partnerships, and local initiatives.

In describing the civic role of their institution, leaders consistently connected service to the community along with service to students, “a two-fold responsibility” (VPS-AZ, interview, September 29, 2025). “So, I look at our civic responsibility. Not only in terms of teaching our young people responsibility and being responsible adults and citizens, but also our contribution in how we contribute to our entire community across this region” (PRES-AZ-4, interview, September 30, 2025). Emphasizing service to the community as an important component of their civic role, leaders described both serving as a place for community members to come to and experience civic life as well as the college being out in the community.

Involvement with voting was an often cited example of how colleges serve the community. “I was really proud of how we responded to being a voting site on campus” (PRES-AZ-3, interview, September 30, 20235). “I'm really proud of our students, there is a large get-out-the-vote campaign” (VPB-CA, interview, September 30, 2025). As PRES-AZ-2 expressed:

We should be a place where we also provide a service to the community in terms of participation with regards to voting places and info and providing that type of information to provide a secure, safe place for folks to be able to utilize their civic rights, to apply their civic duties (interview, October 2, 2025).

One of the roles emphasized by college leaders was the idea that the college itself should be neutral while being a place for civics to be experienced. Our “role is really to be a foundation and a platform in which civic exploration and opportunities and engagement and connection can occur” (VPS-AZ, interview, September 29, 2025). “The college's civic role is to be a place where we can have maximum engagement from all viewpoints on the spectrum and that means hosting things” (PRES-AZ-2, interview, October 2, 2025). “I think it's meaningful when we have a speaker, or we are a host of a voting site, that our community is coming to a place of neutrality, a place of open discourse to engage” (PRES-AZ-3, interview, September 30, 2025).

Beyond the campus, leaders highlighted the college’s role in the broader community. This idea of service to community was described as an inherent part of the college mission “I think it's also incumbent upon us with community being sort of in our middle name, if you will” (PRES-AZ-3, interview, September 30, 2025). “We call ourselves the county college, here in [name] county” (Other-NM, interview, September 22, 2025).

Service to the community was described by college leaders in different ways. This included providing early education opportunities, supporting workforce development, promoting economic development, and leaders serving on community boards. “We also are very active in our community with those economic and workforce development groups who are essential to the growth of any community that we serve” (PRES-AZ-4, interview, September 30, 2025). “I do sit on a lot of different committees as well. First, I try to listen first. What does our community want? I connect to not just me, but our board members, our president, our executive leadership” (Other-NM, interview, September 30, 2025).

Theme 3 - Research Question 2

Partnerships are the fundamental components of how community colleges execute the civic role of their institution. Leaders highlighted partnerships as essential to advancing the civic mission of their institution. These included partnerships with municipalities, counties, and community-based organizations.

Examples described by the interviewees included partnering with local chambers, community-based organizations, and other educational institutions to host a variety of civil dialogues, forums, and speaker series. “So, it's like we have these two outside organizations that are doing, in my opinion, the heavy lift” (PRES-AZ-2, interview, October 2, 2025).

Partnerships with K12 education were also mentioned as important to the civic role of serving the community. This included periodic events, a “local school district approached us for a food drive” (PRES-AZ-3, interview, September 30, 2025). However, it also included ongoing outreach and collaborations as described by Other-NM:

We know that in the engagement of the community, too, down to our younger age groups is very key. We have very strong working relationships with public schools. Local schools, not just public schools, because we have a lot of private schools partnerships, too (interview, September 22, 2025).

Workforce and economic development partnerships were also described by leaders in how they execute the civic role of their institutions. “We also are very active in our community with those economic and workforce development groups who are essential to the growth of any community that we serve” (PRES-AZ-4, interview, September 30, 2025). This included partnering for the development of workforce programs as well as internships to provide students

with experiential learning opportunities, “we have programs for paid internships” (VPB-CA, interview, September 30, 2025).

“I think, in partnership with other government agencies, we're fulfilling an... an important civic responsibility” (PRES-CA, interview, October 2, 2025). Partnerships with other government agencies included cities, counties, and tribal nations. “We work very closely, I know I do, with our elected officials. We work very closely and have relationships. With all of our county, our local, and our state. Officials, we think that's important” (PRES-AZ-4, interview, September 30, 2025). Similar to the partnerships with K12, the purpose ranged from events such as food distributions to ongoing collaborations for economic development efforts.

Summary

The chapter began with a review of the research questions followed by a description of the data collection for the quantitative leading mixed methods research. A descriptive analysis of survey results was presented. This was followed by a description of the key themes from interviews with supporting quotations. Chapter 5 examines the implications of the study's findings and provides recommendations for further research.

Chapter 5 - Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter reviews the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, methodology, and data collection. A discussion of the findings as related to the theoretical framework, conceptual frameworks, and literature is presented. The chapter then presents unexpected findings, implications, and recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Statement of the Problem

Preparing students for civic life is inherent in the mission of community colleges as is the civic role of the institution itself (Ronan, 2012; Zook, 1947). Community college leaders are called upon to lead their institutions including the fulfillment of this civic role (AACC, 1988, 2000, 2022). Yet civic literacy is on the decline (ACTA, 2024; US Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2024) and civil discourse has been overshadowed by civil disobedience on some college campuses (Blake & Palmer, 2024; Gretzinger, 2024a; Whittington, 2024).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to assess the factors that influence community college leaders' decision-making about how to execute their institution's civic role. It also aims to explore how community college leaders conceptualize and describe their institution's civic role.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What factors influence community college leaders' decision-making about how to execute their institution's civic role?

Research Question 2: How do community college leaders conceptualize and describe their institution's civic role?

Discussion of the Findings Related to the Theoretical Framework

The findings align with Johnston's Engagement theory that asserts engagement is a “socially situated phenomenon within a dynamic system” (Johnston, 2018, p. 30). While survey data indicated community college leaders consider community stakeholders as “somewhat” influencing their civic engagement role, a range of community groups were listed as key stakeholders in an open-ended question about the institution's civic role. Additionally, during interviews, community college leaders described the civic role of their institution as existing within the larger community environment and in service to the local community. Examples described by leaders include supporting workforce development programs and serving as a polling location.

Community engagement and support is a reciprocal relationship with community factors, such as local politics, impacting the system and its civic role as much as the college impacts the community. Leaders describe working “very closely...with all of our county, our local, and our state officials” (PRES-AZ-4, interview, September 30, 2025) yet also having to be “very careful not to step on toes” (PRES-AZ-4, interview, September 30, 2025). The dynamic nature of community conditions and leaders does have an impact on colleges as repeatedly described by community college leaders.

Johnston's theory also describes “engagement as a social system with a social structure—that is across individual and social levels” (2018, p. 20). This aligns with how leaders described their civic role as serving the broader community, as previously described, as well as individual students. As VPS-AZ explained, “I'm huge on helping individuals...educating individuals” (interview, September 29, 2025). Leaders explained many ways that the system supports the engagement and development of individual students ranging from academic to co-curricular, and

service in the community. The institution's role in the civic education of students results in individual outcomes for those students such as becoming a contributing member of a community and finding their civic agency. The dual role of both service to community (social level) and students (individual level) was reinforced by leaders and supports Johnston's theory.

Leaders acknowledged many internal (i.e. resource constraints) and external (i.e. current political environment) challenges to fully executing the civic role of their institution. As an example, while staffing and fiscal constraints were scored in survey data as "somewhat" influencing the civic role of the institution, staffing challenges, limited funding, and limited resources were listed in an open-ended question as barriers to executing the civic role of the institution. These same barriers to full execution of a college's civic role were also mentioned during interviews. The variety of challenges to executing the civic role of the institution do support Johnston's assertion "that outcomes of engagement at the individual and social level are influenced by a range of social, organizational, and environmental influences" (2018, p. 31).

Johnston's theory asserts that engagement is both a process and a state (2018). The process of engagement is described as involving communication and relationship building, which was also described by college leaders. During interviews, community college leaders described the power of relationship building with a variety of local leaders, community groups, municipalities, feeder schools, and tribal nations as a necessary component of their role in the community. College leaders also acknowledged the difficulties or conflicts this can pose in a challenging political environment. "Drastic shifts in federal policies and confusion and uncertainty, make it really, really difficult for us who support students, and for the students themselves" (PRES-CA, interview, October 2, 2025). This is also supported by survey data that, while local, state, and national politics were scored as "somewhat" influencing the civic role of

the institution, the political environment was the top cited answer in an open-ended question asking about barriers to executing the institution's civic role.

Engagement as a state is also included in Johnston's theory, with distinct dimensions that "contribute to operationalizing engagement" (2018, p. 23). One dimension is Orientation, "defined as a collectively held philosophy (disposition) of beliefs and behaviors" (Johnston, 2018, p. 23). Yet, leaders describe their desire to do more with their civic role and challenges of fully engaging students and staff. Civic efforts were not always coherent and unified. Additionally, civics were not always included in a college's mission, vision, values, and plans, which hinders efforts to fully institutionalize civic engagement.

Another dimension contributing to engagement as a state is "collective action," defined as "a shared consensus or agreed definition or salience of the topic" (Johnston, 2018, p. 23). Community college leaders repeatedly noted the difficulty of operating in an increasingly polarized political environment. The absence of a shared understanding of the civic role of community colleges was evident in examples of community pushback and heightened scrutiny of their activities. Even internally, one college leader described challenges related to the language and definition of civics.

Even folks who are doing this work don't know of any of the terms, so that's why I always give two names. I say civic engagement or democracy commitment, because I know that there's other ways to talk about civic engagement, but the primary purpose is fundamentally strengthening our democracy (VPA-CA-2, interview, September 30, 2025).

Given both these internal (resource constraints) and external (political environment) challenges community college leaders face in executing their institution's civic role, sustaining a stable and institution-wide state of civic engagement may prove difficult.

Discussion of the Findings Related to the Conceptual Frameworks

Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation provides a framework for analyzing the depth of civic involvement, ranging from nonparticipation to citizen control. Both quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that most institutions operate within the middle rungs of the ladder—informing, placation, and consultation—rather than at the highly engaged level of citizen control. Quantitatively, college leaders rated community partners and key stakeholders as only “somewhat” influencing the institution's civic role. An open-ended question asking about stakeholders involved in carrying out the civic role of the institution generated a wide range of community groups such as municipalities and nonprofits.

In interviews, leaders described their institution's civic role largely in terms of hosting community events, such as voter registration drives, public dialogues, and serving as a polling location. While these activities enable participation, they rarely involve co-creation with the community or shared decision-making. Leaders also described their civic work as “haphazard” or dependent on a few individuals rather than institutionalized, reinforcing the pattern of mid-level engagement on Arnstein's ladder. This underscores the challenge of moving from perfunctory activities toward authentic partnership and community co-ownership.

During interviews, leaders identified a range of community groups, elected officials, government entities, and tribal nations as critical partners in executing their institution's civic role. Colleges were described as “partners” in bringing events to campus or hosting events that bring community members to the college, for example, food distribution events, dialogues, and

town halls. Partnerships were also described in terms of supporting broader community efforts, such as workforce and economic development.

Examining Arnstein's definition of partnership, however, it includes the concept that “power is in fact redistributed through negotiation between citizens and powerholders. They agree to share planning and decision-making responsibilities” (1969, p. 221). This is a higher level of engagement than serving as a site host, no matter how gracious or cooperative, to any number of activities or programs. The partnership rung of Arnstein’s ladder is further described as a community holding the ability to negotiate with those in power and coming to the organization with “hat on head instead of in hand” (1969, p. 222). This suggests that community members and stakeholders would be embedded in the decision-making process of the institution. Shared governance is an integral principle for higher education institutions, involving internal stakeholders (faculty, staff, students) in a collaborative decision-making model. A true partnership, according to Arnstein’s definition, would open up shared governance to community members and external partners.

Herbert Simon’s Choice Theory provides a lens for understanding how leaders make decisions under conditions of uncertainty and constraint. Simon posits that decision-makers are not fully rational but instead operate in complex environments, making choices that “satisfice” rather than optimize (1965, p. 129). This framework aligns closely with the realities described by community college leaders in this study.

Community college leaders consider a wide range of factors, both internal and external, when considering how they execute the civic role of their institution. According to quantitative survey results, 23 of the 30 questions related to factors that influence leadership decision-making

about the civic role of the institution were rated as ‘somewhat’ influencing. Only four questions were scored as having little influence with no questions scoring no influence.

According to qualitative analysis, community college leaders describe weighing many different factors when deciding how to fulfill their civic mission. Internal institutional factors including balancing competing institutional initiatives along with staffing and financial constraints. “It could all come down to resources, right?” (VPB-CA, interview, September 30, 2025). Other internal factors are specific to the leaders themselves and involve personal values. As described by one president, it is a “gut check” (PRES-AZ-3, interview, September 30, 2025) guided by personal values. External factors are also part of the consideration of community college leaders including the local, state, and national political environment, “I believe there are national challenges right now, specifically, so if you'd talk to me 6 months ago, my answer would maybe have been different” (PRES-AZ-1, interview, October 3, 2025).

These comments reflect Simon’s assertion that choices are influenced by competing demands. According to Simon, when “confronted with multiple goals” an organism will find a “path that will permit satisfaction at some specified level of all of its needs” (1965, p. 136). This idea of satisficing, rather than optimizing, is further reinforced by qualitative data from community college leaders about the need to do more regarding the civic role of their institution. “I do think there's opportunities to do more, and not maybe just more, but do differently, and to do with design for more impact” (VPS-AZ, interview, September 29, 2025). “Yeah, I'm proud of what we're doing, but it definitely, in the past couple of years, it feels like I wish we could do more” (PRES-CA, interview, October 2, 2025). “I wish we could do more” (PRES-AZ-4, interview, September 30, 2025). Ultimately, leaders make pragmatic decisions that balance

mission-driven ideals with political and resource realities which is a representation of Simon's satisficing behavior.

Bringing together the theoretical (Johnston) and conceptual (Arnstein, Simon) frameworks provide a comprehensive interpretation of the study's findings. Johnston explains the dynamic components of engagement; Arnstein illustrates the degree of civic participation achieved; and Simon clarifies why decisions about civic engagement are driven by competing pressures. Community college leaders exhibit strong individual and societal commitment to engagement (Johnston), but their institutions often operate at mid-levels of participatory power (Arnstein) due to limited resources and competing priorities (Simon). The interaction of these frameworks reveals that community college civic leadership is both aspirational, driven by personal values but constrained by external realities and competing priorities.

Discussion of Themes Related to the Literature

Community College leaders' decision-making is anchored in personal and institutional values. Qualitative data analysis revealed that college leaders utilize a lens of values - both personal and institutional - as part of their decision-making process. Leaders referred to personal values and "gut check" (PRES-AZ-3, interview, September 30, 2025) as key factors in their decision-making. Alignment to college mission, vision, values, and plans were also repeatedly cited. This is reinforced by quantitative data analysis. Of the 30 questions asking leaders to rate factors and the level of influence on their decision-making, the questions with the highest mean scores related to personal and institutional values. Question 25: To what extent do you view civic education as essential for a healthy democracy? ($M=4.33$) Question 13: To what extent does your institution's core mission or values drive the civic activities in which your institution engages? ($M=4.17$).

This is reflective of what was revealed in the literature: higher education leaders rely on personal experiences, social interactions, and “individual cognitive orientation” (Eddy, 2015, p. 724) in constructing and executing their leadership. Hornak and Mitchell reinforced this idea in asserting that personal factors are primary influences on decision-making (2016). They cite that “competing demands, available resources, organizational practices and expectations, and the president’s personal values and beliefs influence the interpretation of a college’s mission, vision, and values in regard to decision-making” (Hornak & Mitchell, 2016, p. 122). This would indicate that the degree to which community college leaders rely on formal vision, mission, values, and plans is also, in part, determined by personal views and interpretations.

Navigating a shifting national political environment while managing local dynamics influences the decision-making of community college leaders. The literature reveals repeated calls for institutions of higher education to save democracy (Bridgeland et al. 2024; Comerford, 2023; Daniels, 2021; de Groot, 2022; Guarasci, 2022; Richardson, 2023; Roth, 2023; Schneider, 2022; Tierney, 2022). Civic literacy is on the decline (ACTA, 2024) and civil unrest is on the rise on some college campuses, particularly after the killing of George Floyd (Taylor, 2021), the attack on the United States Capitol (United States Attorney’s Office, 2024), and protests over the Israel-Hamas war (Blake & Palmer, 2024; Whittington, 2024; Gretzinger, 2024). Considering these factors, it is not surprising that navigating a political environment was a theme in qualitative data analysis. While quantitative data demonstrates that local, state, and national politics ‘somewhat’ influence decision-making, navigating politics was repeatedly cited during interviews with community college leaders.

Resource constraints and risk management impact the decision-making of community college leaders regarding their institution's civic role. Resource constraints (both fiscal and

human) were cited in both open-ended survey questions and interviews as a factor in leadership decision-making. This is aligned with a review of the literature, specifically the funding disparities between community colleges and universities (Kolbe & Baker, 2019; Community College Research Center [CCRC], 2022). In addition to resource constraints, the literature demonstrates that higher education leaders confront many complex challenges including resource constraints, competing priorities, and heightened public scrutiny (Nevarez & Wood, 2012). These challenges, cited in the literature, were a distinct theme of qualitative analysis. Leaders spoke of a “heightened awareness of divisiveness” (AZ-PRES-1, interview, October 3, 2025), “fiscal constraints” (PRES-CA, interview, October 2, 2025), and “potential problems” (VPA-CA-1, interview, September 29, 2025) associated with civic activities.

Community college leaders describe the civic role of their institution as educating students to participate in democratic life. Leaders emphasize civic learning and civic participation through curriculum, co-curricular activities, and community programs to help students develop civic skills. All of these methods for educating students are cited extensively in the literature, each with benefits and challenges.

Embedding civic learning outcomes across the curriculum (Flores & Rogers, 2019; CLDE, n.d.) along with teaching and learning for civics (Tierney, 2021; AACC, 1988) is often cited in the literature. Challenges exist, however, in developing meaningful assessments (Ronan, 2011) due to a lack of clear definition of civic engagement (Hulbert & Harkins, 2024; Adler & Goggin, 2005). This challenge with defining civics and civic education was also cited by community college leaders during interviews (VPA-CA-2, interview, September 30, 2025).

Co-curricular activities including ways for students to engage in experiential learning, community-based learning, and service learning are cited throughout the literature (Thomas,

2000; Schneider, 2000; Gaurasci, 2022). Additionally, on campus programming such as opportunities for civil dialogue and civic education are other co-curricular activities. Challenges do exist, however, in ensuring efficacy of service learning (Howe & Fasnecht, 2017) as well as ensuring staff with the appropriate skills to coordinate and lead engagement efforts (Kuttner et al., 2019; Shannon & Wong, 2010). The issue of staffing was reiterated in qualitative research with community college leaders who cited staffing as a barrier to fully executing the civic role of their institution.

Community college leaders describe the civic role of their institution as both supporting the local community and serving as a neutral civic forum. Community college leaders provided multiple examples of hosting events on campus to engage the community while executing the institution's civic role. Examples included hosting food distribution events and serving as a polling site. The idea of opening up physical spaces on campus for community engagement is reflected in the literature as an expected, perfunctory service (Alcantar, 2024; Guarasci, 2022; Thomas, 2000).

Likewise, serving as a convening agent is reflected in the literature (AACC, 2000; Campus Compact, 2024) but challenges in carrying out this role are acknowledged. Colleges may not have the staff expertise to coordinate and lead engagement efforts (Kuttner, et al., 2019; Shannon & Wong, 2010). Additionally, colleges are dealing with many competing demands and resource constraints as was shared by leaders during interviews. This may not fully enable colleges to serve as an effective convenor (Nevarez & Wood, 2012).

In light of civil unrest and an increasingly polarized political environment (Blake & Palmer, 2024; Simon & Stevenson, 2023; Taylor, 2021; United States Attorney's Office, 2024; Wike & Dimock, 2024), more institutions of higher education are adopting policies of

institutional neutrality (Blake, 2024). The need to remain neutral, as a convener and as an institution, was reflected during interviews with community college leaders. “I don't want to give the perception that we're leaning in one direction or the other, other than just saying, look, we're just going to be an open space and try to be as neutral as possible” (PRES-AZ-2, interview, October 2, 2025).

Over the last, probably, two and a half years I have been the least demonstrative version of myself as a leader in higher education than in my previous 28 years of leading from any role, leading from any seat, if you will. Because of the idea of, well, the divisiveness of the country and the idea of institutional neutrality (PRES-AZ-1, interview, October 3, 2025).

Partnerships are the fundamental components of how community colleges execute the civic role of their institution. Community college leaders described many different types of partnerships as critical to the execution of their institution’s civic role. Similarly, community-based partnerships are also cited throughout the literature and offer a multitude of ways in which the civic role of the institution may be executed. This includes partnerships across the educational pipeline to improve the educational environment (Thomas, 2000; Yamamura & Koth, 2018) and support students' development of civic skills (Ronan, 2011; Guarasci, 2022). Partnerships to support students' basic needs such as food and housing are also well cited throughout the literature (Lee & Drumm, 2019; McKibben, et.al., 2023; Preston, 2024; Yamamura & Koth, 2018). Workforce development partnerships are another well cited example of how community colleges fulfill their civic role (Domenech, et al., 2023; Jacobs and Worth, 2019; PVCC, n.d.; Yamamura & Koth, 2018). Public-public partnerships whereby community

colleges partner with other public entities, is another robust area of the literature (Jacoby, 2009; Yamamura & Koth, 2018).

Unexpected Findings

Emotional Tone and Language

The emotional tone exhibited by community college leaders, both in personal affect and language, was a sad and unexpected finding. As interviews were drawing to a close, leaders were asked if they had anything else to share and where they thought this body of work was headed. Leaders exhibited facial expressions, gestures, body language that reflected frustration, despondency, and sadness.

Several leaders described a noticeable decline in civic engagement due to the current political environment, heightened scrutiny, and “people on edge” (PRES-AZ-1, interview, October 3, 2025). They acknowledged that this reduction in engagement “is the opposite of what needs to happen” (VPA-CA-1, interview, September 29, 2025), yet recognized it as the present reality. Even those who expressed cautious optimism that conditions may improve, and that civic work will eventually see a resurgence, noted that we are currently in a downward moment and “probably have not hit rock bottom yet” (PRES-AZ-4, interview, September 30, 2025).

Shift from Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) to Neutrality and Civics

In light of the Executive Order banning DEI programs in the federal government (White House, 2025) and subsequent federal guidelines, the topic has been written and spoken about extensively in the public sphere. However, no DEI focused quantitative or qualitative research questions were posed to community college leaders, nonetheless, the topic was raised during interviews. One leader specifically described a shift in a staff committee focus from DEI to civics. Another leader spoke of community members either adamantly opposed to or supportive

of DEI work and the need for neutrality, communicating that “I need you to understand that I do not need three letters to treat people with dignity and respect” (PRES-AZ-4, interview, September 30, 2025). Yet another leader shared that the executive orders have given voice to those who share that perspective and had not been heard or included by the institution.

I don't know if we've done the best at, um, there's a growth area of giving appropriate voice to, oh boy, I don't even know how to say this. The anti-DEI, or the voices that are like, hey, listen, I don't really think what you're saying about white privilege, or some of these concepts, I'm having a really hard time with. And I don't, you know, I'm listening to maybe the voices of what I'm hearing in certain media or Tucker Carlson, or what have you (VPA-CA-1, interview, September 29, 2025).

This sentiment of recalibrating to be neutral and listening to the other side of issues, including perspective of the other side not focused on or supportive of DEI, was an unexpected finding.

Lens of Personal Values

The extent to which community college leaders explained their decision-making through a lens of personal values was unanticipated. While this was mentioned in the literature (Eddy, 2005), the degree to which this was a primary factor in leadership decision-making was striking. Leaders repeatedly described weighing decisions against institutional values, risk, but also their personal (albeit subjective) values. “Trying to do what is right for the right reasons” was a distinct theme of qualitative findings. This aligns to quantitative results, in which the survey question with the highest mean score ($M=4.33$) was regarding the personal views of the participants: *To what extent do you view civic education as essential for a healthy democracy?* The researcher appreciated the honesty and vulnerability of interview subjects in sharing such a personal aspect of their decision-making process.

Implications and Recommendations

Leadership Development

Community college leaders utilize “both their own personal guiding value as well as those of the college” (Hornak & Mitchell, 2016, p. 131) as reflected in the literature and during interviews for this study. Additionally, how leaders interpret events, activities, and the college mission, vision, values is another component to decision-making (Eddy, 2005; Hornak & Mitchell, 2016). This provides an opportunity to include civics, understanding the civic mission of community colleges, and implementing civic education and engagement as essential leadership competencies for community college leaders.

The civic role of the community colleges is well articulated in seminal documents of the sector (Zook, 1947; AACC, 1988; AACC, 2000), yet, not mentioned in either the 3rd or 4th editions of the AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders. The words civic and civics are not included in either edition. The word engagement is used in relation to engaging with faculty, media, and alumni. This presents an opportunity to include the civic role of community colleges in the competencies so that as community college leaders develop, civics can become part of their skillset and values. If the competencies are indeed used to “guide the development of emerging leaders and to assist colleges with the selection of employees dedicated to the community college mission, vision, and values” (AACC, 2018, p. 3) the civic role of the colleges would be an appropriate addition.

This could be accomplished by establishing a distinct Civics Commission at AACC, like other standing commissions focused on areas such as Student Success and College Readiness. While AACC leadership, including the CEO and senior staff, could provide stewardship for this

work, a commission composed of community college leaders could offer feedback and front-line perspectives on how civics might be infused across all levels of the leadership competencies

Additionally, the 4th edition of the Competencies leans heavily into DEI related work that is now being targeted by the federal government and shifted away from on a practical level by many of the leaders interviewed for this research. Competencies throughout include equity mindedness, cultural competence, equity agenda, microaggressions, and structural bias (AACC, 2022). In as much as leaders describe a practical shift from DEI to civics, the competencies expected from leaders could similarly evolve to support the critical civic role of the community college sector. These civic competencies could be included with each tier, appropriately framed for the position level – entry-level, manager, executive, etc.

Samples of what civic-based competencies, reflective of the literature and research findings, include:

1. Civic and Community Leadership - Demonstrate a deep commitment to the community college's public purpose by advancing civic learning, democratic engagement, and community partnerships; and ensure institutional decisions strengthen civic life and community well-being.
2. Civic Responsibility and Democracy Commitment - Lead with integrity to uphold the college's civic mission; foster environments that support civic literacy, civil discourse; and build partnerships that expand access to democratic processes and community well-being.
3. Civic Engagement and Public Good - Integrate civic priorities into institutional strategy and decision-making; evaluates how policies and programs advance community well-

being; and engages internal and external stakeholders to co-create opportunities for democratic participation, service, and collective impact.

The recommendation to include civics and an understanding of the civic mission of community colleges extends to existing community college leadership programs including the Community College Leadership Program (CCLP) through Kansas State University, the League for Innovation in the Community College's Executive Leadership Institute (ELI), AACC's Future Presidents Institute, the National Community College Hispanic Council's Leadership Fellowship Program, and the Aspen Rising Presidents Fellowship, among others.

Professional development programs designed around weekend institutes or modular content could incorporate dedicated sessions focused on the civic role of community colleges. These sessions could draw from the seminal documents of the sector, such as those included in the literature review of this dissertation, along with featured speakers actively engaged in civic and community-based work.

Programs that include formal, credit-bearing coursework could add a new course or redesign an existing course to address the civic role of community colleges and best practices in the field. For example, the current CCLP program could infuse civics and the colleges' civic role into several existing courses, including:

- EDACE 857/858/859 Effective Leadership and Theory – Examining how the civic role of community colleges impacts effective leadership, including community engagement and partnerships.
- EDACE 920/921 Educational Value Choices – Developing an appreciation for the civic role of colleges as part of a leader's personal values and decision-making lens.

- EDACE 855/856 Aligning Vision, Planning, and Resources – Exploring how community partnerships and the civic role of the colleges become part of the college vision with appropriate resources and support.

Leadership Tools

Leaders described weighing the risks and benefits of civic activities in a polarized political environment marked by heightened scrutiny. Navigating political risk is a challenge that could be minimized with appropriate frameworks and tools for assessing risk. This could provide leaders with another guidepost for decision-making beyond their personal values.

Risk management is another topic not specifically mentioned in either the 3rd or 4th editions of the AACC Competencies for Community College Leaders (2018, 2022). There is minimal mention of risk in the 3rd edition “understand the institutional process for taking calculated risks to improve the student experience; be willing to take risks based on research and data” (AACC, 2018, p. 33). Whether it be a framework developed by the institution itself, a national group such as AACC, the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO), or the National Association of College and University Attorneys (NACUA), a tool to support leaders in assessing and navigating political risk is an important opportunity for community college leadership development.

Additionally, AACC could provide support to community college leaders navigating their civic role through the creation of a Civics Institute. This could be modeled after the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) which includes content on issues such as free speech, how to discuss politics in a classroom setting, and developing a civic infrastructure (AAC&U, 2025). A community college

specific Institute could tailor content to acknowledge the financial and staffing realities of the sector while still supporting the intentional development of the community college civic role.

There are also opportunities for the community college sector to more intentionally partner with national civic organizations such as Campus Compact and the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) initiative. While individual community college leaders may already be involved with these organizations, a more systemic approach could better support the sector in developing leadership capacity and shared best practices in the civic space. Such an approach could include formal partnerships between AACC and national civic organizations to elevate, coordinate, and support the role of community colleges in civic engagement at a national level.

College Level Civic Outcomes

Community college leaders referenced the mission of the colleges in relation to civic engagement, both formally and informally. Whether it be “small m” mission or formal mission, vision, values documents, institutional mission is a factor in decision-making (interviews, 2025; Eddy, 2005; Hornak & Mitchell, 2016). As one leader described, “all of our resource request processes are linked to that plans, so when push comes to shove, or there are any competing priorities and needs, we go back to that plan” (VPB-CA, interview, September 30, 2025). That leads to an important question of what happens to civic programming and activities if civics is not a clearly articulated part of the college vision, mission, values, or goals? Encouraging community college leaders and trustees to incorporate civic outcomes into institutional plans and metrics could help ensure that civic engagement is not treated as an optional or add-on body of work but rather an embedded and measurable component of the work of the institution.

Similar to the recommendations to create a Civics Institute at AACC and include civics as part of existing community college leadership development programs, civics could be intentionally infused into work being conducted by national trustee associations such as the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT). The civic role of community colleges could be included with existing trustee education and onboarding programs. Additionally, sessions on how to include the civic role in formal vision, mission, value statements could be a featured session at the annual conference or other trustee convenings. These efforts could be institutionalized by a distinct civic committee at ACCT.

Civics and Accreditation

Higher education accreditation agencies could strengthen civic standards within their accreditation processes, building upon institutional efforts to embed and measure the civic role of community colleges through defined civic outcomes. Civic standards could emphasize clear, evidence-based criteria and measurable indicators, allowing institutions to demonstrate how civic learning and engagement are assessed and continuously improved. The current higher education accreditation landscape is in flux with calls for reform and the development of new agencies (Pillar & Shanderson, 2025). Some agencies have either relaxed or dropped existing standards related to DEI in light of recent Executive Orders and federal guidance (Greenberg, 2025; Moody, 2025). This presents an opportunity to reorient standards from DEI to civics.

The national Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) coalition has an initiative specifically focused on accreditation and civic standards. The initiative specifically promotes “the use of the accreditation process and the activities of accrediting commissions to accelerate civic learning for an engaged democracy among all types of postsecondary institutions

across the U.S.” (CLDE, n.d.b.). Such efforts could elevate the role of civics within community colleges and reinforce its significance across the higher education landscape.

Funding the Institutionalization of Civics

During interviews, community college leaders acknowledged that the civic work of the college is “not as institutionalized as maybe it could be” (VPB-CA, interview, September 30, 2025). There are “some real good pockets of engagement” (VPA-CA-2, interview, September 30, 2025) but how does this translate to a scope of work embedded across the institution? As VPS-AZ described, “I think in many spaces, I’m seeing from my leadership colleagues, this wait and see what happens kind of mindset and mentality. And I think that is the opposite of what we should be doing” (interview, September 29, 2025). Additionally, resource constraints (financial and staffing) pose a challenge to effectively institutionalizing civics at many colleges. The work resides with a small group of staff, competing alongside other needs, or as a passion project of a faculty member. This reality is unlikely to change given the ongoing disparity in community college funding (CCRC, 2022; Kolbe & Baker, 2019).

A recommended course of action is to encourage higher education and civic think tanks to move from research to action through financial incentives. There are numerous centers, coalitions, and think tanks throughout the country focused on higher education and civic research - CLDE, The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, Institute for Higher Education Policy, among others. While research on frameworks, policies, and practices in the civic space is valuable, it does not always translate into action at the practitioner level. The willingness and dedication to the civic role demonstrated by leaders was an important finding, but so too was the acknowledgment of resource constraints. Financial incentives that support the implementation of research at the local level could help bridge the gap between the theoretical and the practical.

As an example, national calls to add civic learning outcomes across the curriculum offer aspirational models for what this might include. At a practical level, however, this requires time and expertise to implement at a local level. Funding to support the faculty time necessary to develop and implement at a single college or college system is a missing but important component to bridge the gap between aspirations and reality.

Recommendations for Future Research

Community college leaders described the challenges of navigating an increasingly difficult political environment, acknowledging that they often rely on their personal values to guide decision-making. An important area for future research is the relationship between personal values and political navigation. Are there particular personal values that enable leaders to more effectively manage a politically charged environment? Is there a correlation between specific personal values and leadership success? Success could be defined by factors such as length of tenure or the absence of votes of no confidence.

As the community college sector deals with leadership transitions and a decline in tenure of leaders, the identification of personal values that leads to leaders' success could be of value. As institutions look to grow leaders from within as well as hire externally, a personal assessment of values and decision-making approaches could support more sustainable leadership across the sector.

Ensuring that the civic role of the institution is intentional and embedded across the organization was described as a challenge by community college leaders. Future research could examine models of civic support at high-performing institutions to better understand how some colleges have been able to sustain this work despite resource constraints and political pressures. Case studies of community colleges recognized as civic leaders could help identify successful

staffing structures, organizational models, and cross-departmental collaborations that support civic programming and activities.

This research could identify best practices for institutionalizing civic work, whether that be through dedicated centers, distributed leadership models, faculty and staff roles, or integrated planning processes. These findings could then support other colleges seeking to start or expand their civic engagement efforts. Case studies could be conducted at institutions of varying sizes, governance structures, funding models, and geographic contexts, recognizing the diversity of the sector and the need for adaptable approaches rather than one-size-fits-all solutions.

Summary

The researcher assessed the factors that influence community college leaders' decision-making about how to execute their institution's civic role. Findings revealed that community college leaders consider many internal and external factors when considering how to execute the civic role of their institution. Very few factors included in the quantitative survey were scored as having little influence on decision-making. Ultimately, however, three themes emerged:

- Community College leaders' decision-making is anchored in personal and institutional values.
- Navigating a shifting national political environment while managing local dynamics influences the decision-making of community college leaders.
- Resource constraints and risk management impact the decision-making of community college leaders regarding their institution's civic role.

The researcher also explored how community college leaders conceptualized and described their institution's civic role. Three themes emerged from the findings:

- Community college leaders describe the civic role of their institution as educating students to participate in democratic life.
- Community college leaders describe the civic role of their institution as both supporting the local community and serving as a neutral civic forum.
- Partnerships are the fundamental components of how community colleges execute the civic role of their institution.

The findings of this research had both practical implications in addition to recommendations for future research.

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Appendix A - Alignment Table

Problem Based on Literature Findings	Research Questions	Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks	Methodology	Survey and Interview Questions
Rising civil unrest (Whittington, 2024; Gretzinger, 2024) Declining civic literacy (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, 2024; US Chamber of Commerce Foundation, 2024)	1. What factors influence community college leaders' decision-making about how to execute their institution's civic role?	Social Engagement Theory (Johnson, 2018) Arnstein's Ladder of (1969) Ladder of (1969) Herbert Simon's Choice Theory (1956, 1965, 1978)	Quantitative-leading mixed-methods approach with an explanatory sequential design: Survey	Survey 1-30
	2. How do community college leaders conceptualize and describe their institution's civic role?	Social Engagement Theory (Johnson, 2018) Arnstein's Ladder of (1969) Ladder of (1969) Herbert Simon's Choice Theory (1956, 1965, 1978)	Quantitative-leading mixed-methods approach with an explanatory sequential design: Interview	Survey Open-Ended Questions 1-4

Appendix B - Letter to College Leaders

Dear College Leader,

My name is Deanna Villanueva-Saucedo, Associate Vice Chancellor at Maricopa Community Colleges leading the Center for Excellence in Inclusive Democracy. I am also a doctoral student at Kansas State University in the Community College Leadership Program. I am conducting a research study to fulfill the requirements of my doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to assess the factors that influence community college leaders' decision-making about how to execute their institution's civic role. It also aims to explore how community college leaders conceptualize and describe their institution's civic role. For the purposes of this study, community college leaders are defined as Chancellors, Vice-Chancellors, Presidents, and Vice-Presidents.

I respectfully request your participation in a confidential survey. Results of the survey will be analyzed to describe and further understand what factors influence leadership decision-making about the civic role of community colleges. This could inform programs, partnerships, and policies that support leaders in fulfilling their civic mission. The survey should take approximately # minutes to complete.

Participation in the survey is completely voluntary and confidential. By consenting to participate, you are also consenting for the researcher to include your responses in the data analysis but you will not be identified. You can cease participation at any point during the survey and responses will not be recorded.

The first portion of the survey will ask you for your informed consent. Again, this is completely confidential and voluntary. A copy of the study can be provided upon request by contacting the researcher at deannav@ksu.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this request to participate. I look forward to learning more about the factors that influence leadership decision-making about the civic role of community colleges.

Deanna Villanueva-Saucedo

deannav@ksu.edu

480.433.2473

Dissertation Committee Chair: Dr. Terry Calaway / terry74@ksu.edu

Appendix C - Informed Consent

Informed Consent

Project Title: Conceptualizing the civic role of community colleges: Assessing and exploring factors that influence leadership decision-making.

Project Approval Date: [date]

Project Expiration Date: [date]

Length of Study: 15 Minutes

Principal Investigator: Dr. Terry Calaway

Co-Investigators: Deanna Villanueva-Saucedo / deannav@ksu.edu

Contact Details for Problem Questions: Dr. Terry Calaway / Terry74@ksu.edu / 913.952.2725

IRB Chair Contact Information: Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Cheryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

Project Sponsor: Kansas State University or Not Applicable?

Purpose of the Research: The purpose of this study is to assess the factors that influence community college leaders' decision-making about how to execute their institution's civic role. It also aims to explore how community college leaders conceptualize and describe their institution's civic role. Results of the survey will be analyzed and will contribute to the literature regarding the civic mission of community colleges and could inform policies that support leaders in fulfilling their civic mission.

Procedures or Methods to be Used: The study will be conducted in two phases. The first phase is a confidential survey that can be completed anonymously online. Survey data will be analyzed collectively to ensure that individual responses remain confidential and unable to be linked to any individual person. The second phase will be an interview with audio and video recorded through google meet. Interview subjects will be provided with a pseudonym (a fake name) to protect their privacy. A transcription (written record) of the interview will be saved in a password protected format. The transcription will be provided to interview subjects to verify accuracy.

Risks or Discomforts Anticipated: There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts from participation in this study.

Benefits Anticipated: The study is designed to contribute to the literature regarding the civic mission of community colleges. Results could inform policies that support leaders in fulfilling their civic mission.

Extent of Confidentiality: Participation in either phase of the study is voluntary. Participants may withdraw at any time with responses being deleted. No individually identifiable information will be collected. All information collected, whether by survey or interview, will be saved for five years in a password protected format. Data will not be shared for any additional research other than that of the primary researcher.

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D - Quantitative Survey Questions

As a community college leader (Chancellor, Vice-chancellor, President, or Vice-president), I seek your honest responses regarding the factors that influence your decision-making about how to execute your institution's civic role.

For the purposes of this study, the civic role of community colleges refers to fostering civic engagement, promoting democratic values, and preparing students to be active, informed citizens.

Scale: 1=No influence, 2=Little influence, 3=Somewhat influence, 4=Significant influence, 5=Very significant influence

1. To what extent does the local (municipal, county) political environment influence your decisions on the types of civic activities in which your institution participates?
2. To what extent does the state political environment influence your decisions on the types of civic activities in which your institution participates?
3. To what extent does the national political environment influence your decisions on the types of civic activities in which your institution participates?
4. To what extent do concerns about race relations influence your decisions on the type of civic activities in which your institution participates?
5. To what extent do concerns about the ability to engage in civil dialogue influence your decisions on the type of civic activities in which your institution participates?
6. To what extent do the public's perceptions of higher education influence your decisions on the types of civic activities in which your institution participates?
7. To what extent do you consider political support from your state elected officials when choosing and/or approving civic activities for your institution?
8. To what extent do you consider government regulations or policies when choosing and/or approving civic activities for your institution?
9. To what extent do you consider issues of academic freedom/freedom of expression when choosing and/or approving civic activities for your institution?

10. To what extent does your institution's annual budget directly limit or influence the range of civic activities your institution can pursue?
11. To what extent do staffing levels impact your institution's ability to plan and execute civic activities?
12. To what extent does the availability of subject matter experts influence the type of civic activities in which your institution engages?
13. To what extent does your institution's core mission or values drive the civic activities in which your institution engages?
14. To what extent are faculty viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution?
15. To what extent are staff viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution?
16. To what extent are students viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution?
17. To what extent are community partners (e.g., NGOs, nonprofits, civic groups, government agencies, private sector) viewed as active participants in the civic role of your institution?
18. To what extent is community engagement part of your institution's overall strategy for executing its civic role?
19. To what extent do other key stakeholders (e.g., donors, alumni, local activists) influence decisions about your institution's civic role?
20. To what extent does your institution's tolerance for risk influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?
21. To what extent does your institution experiment with innovative civic activities or approaches to engagement?
22. To what extent do challenges with tracking and measuring civic outcomes influence the type of civic activities in which your institution participates?
23. To what extent do you consider infusing civic learning outcomes across the curriculum?
24. To what extent do challenges with infusing civic learning outcomes across the curriculum influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?

25. To what extent do you view civic education as essential for a healthy democracy?
26. To what extent do you view civic engagement opportunities for students as important in advancing democratic ideals?
27. To what extent does an emphasis on workforce preparation influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?
28. To what extent does an emphasis on student basic needs influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?
29. To what extent does an emphasis on increasing enrollment influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?
30. To what extent does an emphasis on guided pathways influence the types of civic activities in which your institution engages?

Open Ended Questions:

1. What civic engagement opportunities are you most proud of at your institution and why?
2. What are the biggest barriers you face when attempting to execute the civic role you envision for your institution?
3. How do you define the civic role of your institution?
4. Who do you consider the key stakeholders, partners, and networks when executing your institution's civic role?
5. Would you be willing to participate in a brief follow-up interview to discuss how you conceptualize and describe the civic role of today's community college? If so, please provide your contact information.

Demographic Questions:

1. What is the size of your institution as defined by enrollment (headcount)?
2. Would you describe your institution as rural, suburban, or urban?
3. What is the size of your institution as defined by annual budget?
4. In what State is your institution located?
5. How many years have you been in your current position?
6. What was the career path that brought you to your current position?
7. How many years have you been in higher education?

Appendix E – Qualitative Interview Questions

1. What is your definition of civic engagement?
2. What is a point of pride for you regarding civic engagement at your institution?
3. Do you think you are hitting the sweet spot in terms of what your institution does in the civic engagement space?
4. When you make decisions as a community college leader, what factors do you consider, what are your guideposts?
5. When it comes to making decisions about the civic engagement role what your institution engages in, are there any factors that come into that mix?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share as our time comes to a close? Anything else related to civic work and, if you could take a peek into the future, where is this body of work headed?