



When Engagement is Not Enough: Approaches to Developing Courageous Citizenship Braver Angels Civic Scholars Council American 250th Anniversary Essay Collection on Courageous Citizenship

Romy Hübler, Ph.D.*
Towson University

This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

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Abstract

U.S. public trust in higher education has been eroding, with seven in ten Americans expressing that higher education is moving in the wrong direction. Yet, higher education can be a catalyst for renewing public trust by modeling and preparing its students, staff, and faculty for courageous citizenship. Utilizing the citizen professionalism framework, this essay features a case study of the Office for Social Impact at Towson University. It illustrates how staff members utilized citizen professional practices to move away from transactional service and narrow understandings of civic engagement to instead support the holistic development of students as active contributors to society.

Introduction

Higher education has long had a civic mandate that interlocks learning in the academy with the larger purposes of society (Boyer, [1992](#), [1996](#)). While the public purpose work of higher education has experienced many sea changes over the centuries, social activism in the 1960s and 1970s ushered in a new era of engagement with social issues ([Huebler, 2015](#)). National organizations like the Campus Outreach and Opportunities League (COOL) and Campus Compact started to emerge and laid “the groundwork for colleges and universities to institutionalize engagement efforts with resources, infrastructure, and technical support for students, faculty, and administrators” ([Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2023, p. 279](#)). Several frameworks and national calls to action have guided engagement work on campuses, including *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future* ([2012](#)), the *Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Theory of Change* ([2018](#)), and the *CLDE Framework for College Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement* ([n.d.](#)). In addition, national organizations, like the Carnegie Foundation, created processes for institutional self-studies, action planning, and public recognition.

Despite these efforts, the U.S. is experiencing a period of polarization and increasing concern about the future of the country and the world. A recent nationwide survey revealed that 55% of college students felt that American democracy was not working well, which marks a record low in the survey’s twenty-four-year history ([Panetta Institute for Public Policy, 2025](#)). It also showed that 68% of students are uncertain and concerned about the future of the country. At the same time, public trust in higher education has been eroding, with seven in ten Americans expressing that higher education is moving in the wrong direction ([Pew Research Center, 2025](#)). These survey responses beg the question, are current forms of engagement not sufficient? If not, what additional tools may be useful?

Aligned with their public purpose mission, colleges and universities can be catalysts for renewing public trust and increasing confidence in democracy and the future of the country. This essay argues that the citizen professionalism framework can strengthen current civic engagement efforts by preparing students for courageous citizenship. The framework emerged out of public work philosophy, which emphasizes that citizens can be active co-creators of a democratic way of life through their careers ([Boyte, 1989](#); [Boyte & Kari, 1996](#); [Boyte, 2011](#); [Boyte & Throntveit, 2022](#)).

Citizen Professionalism

In the late 1980's, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School developed a public work philosophy to counteract challenges to civic life and democracy (Boyte, 1989). It understood professions and places of work as sites for civic engagement and drew attention to the public dimensions of professions. The Center referred to these dimensions as civic professionalism ([Boyte & Hollander, 1999](#)). Elements include:

- Citizen professionalism is an identity: seeing oneself first as a citizen with special expertise working alongside other citizens with their own special knowledge to solve community problems requiring everyone's effort. This is not just an idealistic self-image but comes from a grounded realization that [society's] really big problems, including those in health care, education, and social welfare—sometimes known as “wicked problems”—cannot be solved by professionals working alone, nor by government alone. We need all hands on deck.
- Citizen professionals have a body of knowledge about the connections between the personal and the public dimensions of their professional practice. Citizen physicians, for example, understand the connection between diabetes, the fast food industry, and cultural practices of diet and exercise.
- Citizen professionals have a set of skills for facilitating public conversations and catalyzing public action. In the context of their regular service delivery, they are able to skillfully interweave the personal and public dimensions of the issues they and their patients or clients face. When the time is ripe, they are able to bring together other citizens for public conversations and sometimes for local action projects to address community needs ([Doherty & Mendenhall, 2024, pp. 25-26](#)).

Citizen professionals “do not distinguish between their civic and professional responsibilities” ([Graeff & Wood, 2021, p. 77](#)). They embody democratic practices that position them as joint problem solvers who take a relational approach to community organizing that values local and theoretical knowledge, strengthens community ties, and advances public work ([Boyte et al., 2025](#)). As such, citizen professionalism is an answer to professionalization that teaches experts “to look at people in terms of their deficiencies, not their assets, and to be detached from the civic life of communities” ([Putnam, 2000, p. 342](#)).

This chart contrasts professional dimensions of the outside expert and the citizen professional ([Boyte & Ström, 2009](#)):

	Outside Expert	Citizen Professional
Motive	Altruistic service	Co-creation and joint problem solving
Decision maker	Expert	Citizen—professionals and lay citizens
Goal	To solve a discrete problem	To solve a problem while also building community ties and strength
Method	Expert intervention	Public work

Approach to teaching	Instruction	Apprenticeship, relational, craft knowledge
Sources of knowledge	Academic and scientific knowledge, “book learning”	Local, spiritual and experiential knowledge as well as theory
Skills	Disaggregation, analysis, technical application	Integration, contextual understanding, building relations, organizing
Role of professional	Service provider	Catalyst

Citizen professionals can exist in any field. Scholars in psychology ([Doherty, 2020](#)), civil engineering ([Graeff & Wood, 2021](#)), and nursing ([Clark et al., 2017](#)), among others, have written about preparing students as citizen professionals in their fields. Faculty and staff profiles further showcase citizen professionals’ work in universities ([Boyte et al., 2025](#); [Ström, 2022](#)). Thus, this framework is useful to strengthen the civic life of communities and institutions.

Case Study: Citizen Professionalism in Action at Towson University

This section draws on my experiences as a staff member at Towson University (TU) and illustrates what citizen professionalism can look like in practice. Dubbed as Maryland’s University of Opportunities, TU is a public university in Towson. With almost 20,000 students, it is the second largest university in the state. It was founded as a teacher training school in 1866 and now offers more than 180 undergraduate and graduate programs. TU serves a diverse population with 57% identifying as a racial or ethnic minority. 90% of students are from Maryland, and 79% of working graduates are employed in the state ([Facts & Figures, n.d.](#)).

TU’s current strategic plan names devotion to civic responsibility and community engagement as a core value and encourages faculty and staff to create opportunities that “challenge students to be engaged participants in an inspiring educational journey preparing them for professional success and positive impact as engaged members of their communities” ([University Strategic Plan, n.d.](#)). The Student Affairs strategic roadmap names building on TU’s commitment to civic engagement as a key strategy to enhance students’ leadership development ([Strategic Roadmap, 2022](#)).

Leadership and support from the University System of Maryland (USM) strengthens efforts at TU. USM is comprised of twelve institutions, including TU, and three regional centers. Its strategic plan expresses a clear commitment to civic engagement, including goals of infusing it into curricula and educating students to be informed and engaged citizens and social change agents ([Vision 2030, n.d.](#)).

I have worked at TU since 2022. Initially hired as director of the Office of Civic Engagement and Social Responsibility (CESR) in the Division of Student Affairs, I worked with a team to expand narrow definitions of civic engagement. Programs now prepare students to bring about institutional and community-based change through a combination of building relationships, understanding systems, and engaging in collective imagination and problem-solving.

In what follows, I will reflect on the transformation of CESR into the Office for Social Impact and share how the Civic Renewal Initiative was developed to foster students’ capacities as

relational change agents. This section is organized using the citizen professional competencies referenced in the table above.

Reflection: Office for Social Impact

I became director of CESR in August 2022. The COVID-19 pandemic had left its mark: All five staff members had accepted other jobs, a hiring freeze left positions vacant for an extended period, most programs paused due to social distancing requirements, and one-time budget cuts became permanent. I learned about these challenges during my interviews, and I also learned about a possibility: Divisional leadership was looking for someone to reimagine the office and align it with best practices in the civic engagement field. The charge excited me as I saw an opportunity to utilize my citizen professional competencies in a new space and role. Below, I reflect on four competencies that I utilized to transform the office.

Method. Citizen professionals pursue a public work agenda, which “stresses the productive role of citizens as co-creators of thriving communities and a good society, not simply as voters and protestors (although voting remains important and protest action can make a point), or as volunteers (although civic-mindedness and neighborly action do help to make the world more livable)” ([Ström, 2022, p. 108](#)).

A public work agenda fits very well with educating students for civic engagement, yet my office used voting and volunteering as the main vehicles to engage students. Based on my personal and professional experiences, I knew I needed to expand programming to truly prepare students not only to navigate the world as it is but to shape the world as it could be.

I drew inspiration from educational philosopher John Dewey who in 1939 advocated for democracy to be understood not just as a form of government but as a way of life ([Dewey, 2021](#)). It is how we work together to build the future we want for ourselves and our communities. I also took inspiration from the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Theory of Change. Hoffman et al. ([2018](#)) argue that civic learning must be integral, relational, organic, and generative. It requires us to infuse civic engagement and democratic practices into the institution, foster authentic relationships, learn together and forge new paths, and strengthen a collective desire to improve conditions.

Role of Professional. Citizen professionals approach their work as catalysts, seeing possibilities and working with others to improve systems and conditions. Ström ([2022](#)) explains that “[t]his willingness to recognize potential partners rather than enemies among people from different backgrounds allows the citizen professional to play a catalytic role, building connections and unlocking creative possibilities that remain hidden in both polarized and siloed environments” (p. 115).

Before I started at TU, I knew very little about its inner workings. As a citizen professional, I knew I needed to learn about institutional culture to bring about long-term change. And I needed to build relationships with colleagues to do that change work with them. That meant building bridges across multiple divisions that had no organic communication and reporting structures. As a new staff member, I focused on building trust with colleagues who were doing similar or adjacent work across TU. I tapped into my existing network to get introduced to

changemakers at TU. Introduction emails created a sense of familiarity and trust. I also sought out trainings that connected to my work but were not explicitly named in my job description, such as dialogue. During those trainings, I shared my aspirations to educate students as co-creators of thriving communities and looked for potential collaborators. I also joined cross-divisional committees to contribute to ongoing institutional work that was aligned with my vision but used different concepts, like high-impact practices and restorative practices. Through these early efforts, I cultivated yearlong professional relationships and partnerships with colleagues across divisions that have been essential in catalyzing long-term change.

Motive. Citizen professionals are joint problem solvers. My office facilitated a service-learning fellowship to support faculty in developing courses with a community engagement component. During the pandemic, enrollment in the program declined. When I got to TU, no faculty had signed up for the 2022-23 academic year. I reviewed materials and noticed that they were outdated, lacked an exploration of higher education's public purpose, and did not include a discussion of the local context. I saw an opportunity to rewrite the training. Instead of doing so in isolation, I made it a collaborative process to: 1) cultivate cross-divisional relationships, 2) include different disciplinary perspectives, and 3) build buy-in from academic affairs.

I invited colleagues central to faculty development and community engagement to join the effort. We applied for a grant and hired a team of eight faculty fellows, a faculty evaluator, and a doctoral student. They worked with me and two other colleagues to develop training modules over the course of one year. Another group of five faculty fellows charged with the institutionalization of community engagement at TU piloted the training this year and provided in-depth feedback. The training will become available to faculty this fall semester. While the redesign took more than two years, the product represents different voices and experiences. At the same time, interest in the training has grown across campus. Colleagues also requested an expansion of the training to staff and students, which a cross-divisional committee is currently working on.

Skills. Citizen professionals are skilled in building relationships, understanding contexts, integrating ideas and processes, and community organizing. My organizing process started when I interviewed for my position. I knew that divisional leadership wanted my office to provide programming informed by best practices in the civic engagement field. As part of my interview, I had to give a presentation that detailed my vision. I used my presentation to introduce a public work agenda and position democracy as a way of life. The ideas were well received. When I started at TU, I looked for ways to infuse these ideas across the institution. Nationally recognized rubrics served as a useful organizing strategy. It allowed me to invite colleagues into conversations, assess our work in relation to national standards, and find opportunities to work together to address any gaps. As a campus, we are engaging in this process every two years, using the off year to make progress toward collective goals. More than 40 colleagues from almost 30 different departments participated in this year's process. Collectively, we have made meaningful updates to programming, educational materials, and systems.

Reflection: Civic Renewal Initiative

In this section, I explore how one of our programs, the Civic Renewal Initiative, develops students' individual and collective capacities to co-create thriving communities. The program originated from a series of conversations in 2020 when I worked at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC). The country experienced heightened moments of political and social crisis, including the pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and a contentious presidential election. UMBC community members felt confused, isolated, and powerless. To provide support during this moment of deep social divisions, I worked with colleagues to develop Together Beyond, a framework for guided conversations to support students, staff, and faculty in empowering themselves as participants in their campus communities ([Hübler et al., 2024](#)). Through Together Beyond, my colleagues and I trained dozens of UMBCers to facilitate conversations in the immediate aftermath of Election 2020, the January 6 United States Capitol attack, and the overturn of Roe vs. Wade by the U.S. Supreme Court.

When Charis Lawson, who also worked with Together Beyond at UMBC, and I started working together at TU, we used the framework to organize conversations about issues impacting the campus community, like food and housing access. We provided ad hoc training to students to facilitate what came to be known as TU Community Conversation. While the program engaged faculty, staff, and students in conversations about important issues, it offered limited opportunities to work toward collective change. At the same time, political and social divisions deepened, marginalized communities experienced increasing exclusion, and fear of engaging across differences intensified. We needed to do more than engage in conversations; we needed to train students to become change makers on our campus and develop their capacities to engage in public work.

In 2023, we expanded ad hoc training into a yearlong Civic Renewal fellowship in which students cultivate skills in restorative practices, dialogue, civic discourse, and community organizing while also addressing a real issue on campus. Charis took the lead in developing the initiative. Fellows participate in weekly trainings; facilitate TU Community Conversations and other programs that bring together faculty, staff, and students to talk about the issue; and work with campus partners to address the issue in a relational way. While the Civic Renewal Initiative focuses on bringing about change at TU, the competencies fellows are developing are transferable to any space, including their neighborhoods and places of work.

The initiative has been recognized with the 2026 Insight into Academia Civic Engagement and Community Service Award, “a national honor celebrating higher education programs that demonstrate exceptional commitment to strengthening communities, advancing civic learning and fostering the public good” ([TU Newsroom, 2026](#)).

Approach to Teaching. Citizen professionals take a relational approach and provide opportunities for experiential learning in which knowledge is crafted together. When developing the fellowship, Charis considered questions like: How can I signal my desire to know students? How can I show that their ideas and thoughts shape how we work together? She chose reflective questioning and storytelling as tools to build connection among fellows and staff, illustrate that

she values lived experiences, and co-create the space with fellows. These tools also allow her to push students to question the status quo and begin imagining life differently. This approach is woven throughout the yearlong fellowship.

Charis facilitates a story circle with each cohort that asks fellows and staff to reflect on a time that they felt safe in a community. They then dive into identifying characteristics that are needed to be in a community where everyone feels respected and heard. From there, the group establishes community standards - norms that guide their behaviors and actions. These standards look different for each cohort, which showcases that fellows' experiences, thoughts, and ideas matter.

In TU Community Conversations, audience members become active participants in the conversation. Unlike common event formats that solely feature experts on a stage in the front of the room, attendees actively participate in the program. After the panel, fellows facilitate listening circles with attendees at round tables, in which everyone responds to questions like: What is your connection to the issue? What insights did you gain from the panelists? How should we move forward as a TU community to address the issue? Each group then contributes to a poster that synthesizes their collective ideas. This format turns one-directional knowledge transfer into a collective process in which participants play a central role.

Sources of Knowledge. A citizen professional recognizes the importance of local, spiritual, experiential, and theoretical knowledge. Several learning outcomes aim to develop this capacity among fellows. They include: 1) explore how one's experiences and identities contribute to one's understanding of active participation for the public good; 2) learn from changemakers about navigating systems and structures to affect change; and 3) acknowledge the existence of a range of perspectives and interests.

In designing the Civic Renewal Initiative, Charis took inspiration from Paulo Freire ([2010](#)), Audre Lorde ([1984](#)), bell hooks ([1994](#), [2003](#)), and Amber Johnson ([2020](#)), among others. She wanted the initiative to have a critical, culture-centered approach that uplifts the power of collective imagination and creativity in knowledge construction. Several components intentionally make space for different sources of knowledge. For example, the TU Community Conversation includes a panel of students, staff, faculty, and community members who are doing work related to an issue. Listening circles then offer opportunities for participants to share their experiences and insights related to the issue. This structure values the expertise of people who hold different positional power as well as the lived experiences and expertise of audience members. In addition to the TU Community Conversation, Civic Renewal fellows engage in story circles with campus partners, facilitate town halls, and art-making programs to encourage collective learning, creative imagination, and brainstorming solutions.

Decision Maker. While "experts" are generally decision makers, citizen professionals share decision making power with "lay citizens." In the context of higher education, university leadership is generally regarded as the decision maker, while faculty, staff, and students are often the recipients of their decisions. Even when shared governance structures exist, faculty, staff, and students without positional power can feel excluded from decision-making processes. The Civic Renewal Initiative includes several learning outcomes that highlight the importance of

collective decision making. They include: 1) engage in goal setting and problem solving with diverse collaborators; 2) choose appropriate approaches and tools given the context to advance an effort; 3) develop an informed and strategic action plan to pursue collective and sustained actions.

For Civic Renewal fellows, collective decision making starts with the selection of the issue they are focusing on for the year. Each November, the Office for Social Impact invites 4,000 randomly selected students to complete a survey in which they name three issues they see as challenges on campus. Tabling throughout the year gives students an additional opportunity to identify issues they would like to address. Charis reviews these answers to select a focus for the year. After a semester of training and insight from community voice (e.g. TU Community conversations, story circles, and meetings with campus partners), fellows identify a project to work on.

Civic Renewal fellows host programs that invite any member of the TU community to participate. Charis and Civic Renewal fellows provide careful framing at the beginning of these programs to set the stage for collective learning and decision making. Using restorative practices and dialogue tools, such as community standards, listening circles, small group discussions, the program structure is carefully designed to give every participant opportunities to contribute. Program facilitators are also transparent about each step in the change project, outlining what has already happened, how the program is advancing the project, and what steps will follow, allowing participants to understand how their contributions will contribute to collective decision making.

Goal. Citizen professionals solve problems while also building community ties and strengths. Charis wants the Civic Renewal Initiative to enhance critical community reflexivity, a collective process of meaning-making that recognizes our interdependence and aims to affect positive change at TU. These learning outcomes support this approach: 1) cultivate mutual understanding and trust; 2) empower and uplift others to ensure an inclusive environment; 3) understand how privilege and systems of oppression impact one's own context/community.

Charis introduces Civic Renewal fellows to the power of participatory approaches at their program orientation. Guided by community standards, such as giving grace to self and others and speaking from an “I” perspective, fellows and program staff engage in storytelling to foster a holistic style of learning. They explore their own experiences, identify power dynamics, and find connections. This process requires vulnerability and can evoke discomfort. The goal is not to exploit vulnerability but instead to bring into the open the collective, systemic challenges we often experience in isolation and direct our pain towards fostering change and cultivating stronger communities. Fellows continue to enhance these skills through weekly trainings and by facilitating programs and conversations that are meant to both build connections and advance change.

Conclusion

The public purpose of higher education has long supported student engagement in civic and community efforts. Current societal divisions and worries about the future of our democracy

make this work more urgent. This essay illustrates how citizen professionalism can move us toward deeper forms of engagement in which work becomes a site of civic action and courageous citizenship. Faculty and staff can utilize citizen professional dimensions to advance democratic practices in their institutions while also creating programs and courses that develop those dimensions in students. Based on my experiences as a citizen professional, this work requires dedication and long-term commitment. Building trust takes time and progress is not always linear. Yet, change is possible if we engage in a relational process that values our collective knowledge and addresses real community needs. Institutional structures and cultures were built by people, and as a community we can reenvision and change those aspects that diminish our collective thriving. While this essay focuses on higher education, citizen professionalism can be infused in any field to collectively address challenges in our institutions, communities, and society.

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* Dr. Romy Hübler is the Director of the Office for Social Impact at Towson University. She has more than 15 years of experience researching, teaching, and working in civic learning and community engagement fields. Dr. Hübler is a Research Fellow with Campus Compact, a project leader of the Imagining America B-More with Imagination Collaboratory, and serves on the [American Democracy Project Steering Committee](#), the [Imagining America National Advisory Board](#) and the [Braver Angels Civic Scholars Council](#).