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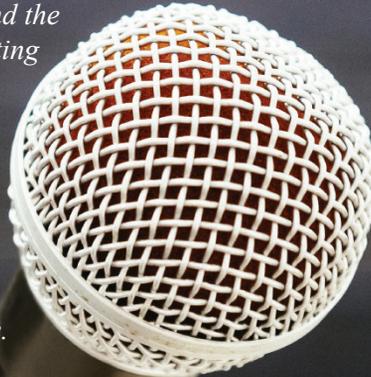
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BEING AND BECOMING A COLLEGE STUDENT

Pedagogy as Rite of Passage

By Thia Wolf, William M. Loker, Ellie Ertle,
Zach Justus, and April Kelly

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In Short

- The college years are meant to be transformative for traditional-aged students who come into university as adolescents and leave as emerging adults.
- Pedagogy can play an active role in moving students through this transition by providing “ritual” occasions for students to practice their emerging identities.
- Public dialog is an important context to build student awareness of the value of their academic study and their responsibility as active participants in a democracy.
- Public sphere pedagogy at California State University, Chico has a track record of encouraging student persistence, enhancing academic engagement and strengthening students’ sense of civic identity and efficacy.
- Public sphere events such as the Town Hall Meeting and Chico Great Debate can be scaled to reach many hundreds of students each semester with potentially transformative effects on student personal, academic and civic development.

Luis Tiznado, the young man at the podium, speaks to a packed auditorium—over 800 students, faculty and community members fill every seat. His words are piped through to the lobby so that those who did not find seats can hear him. To open his keynote address, he takes the audience, the majority of whom are first years, back to his first day of college:



So it's approximately 10 in the morning. I'm a freshman. Pumped. I have my new sneakers on, new backpack, everything ready to go. . . . I walked into Political Science 155 . . . and I sat in the very back row. As I sat there, I fretted. I think to myself . . . I'm seventeen. I have no interest in political science. I'm not even old enough to register to vote. . . . But everything changed within [the first few] weeks.

Luis goes on to describe how his “passion” was ignited through the process of undertaking research into incarceration of juveniles in the United States. His interest piqued, Luis sampled some criminal justice courses, eventually becoming a criminal justice major in the Political Science department. As he gained a greater understanding of social inequities that funnel some minors toward prison, Luis engaged his Greek organization in the development of a yearly event that brings together at-risk youth and college students to help underserved juveniles think about attending college.

For me, the Town Hall Meeting was not just a semester's project. It was the beginning of my career as an undergraduate student at Chico State. [In] fact, it was the beginning of a lifelong journey. The point of today is for all of you to be a more civically engaged student by the end of the night. . . . Within a tight-knit community like Chico, you have every resource out there possible for you to get connected. Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do tonight: identify a problem, but don't stop there. You need to find a solution. These amazing community stakeholders who you will be in front of tonight, they have plenty of things to say. When you listen, you learn. And once you have learned, you can lead.

As Luis's speech at the opening plenary session of California State University, Chico's 19th Town Hall Meeting indicates, the Town Hall frequently serves as a transformative experience for students. It is one of several public sphere pedagogy (PSP) events that first-year students may participate in as part of the required General Education curriculum.

In PSP courses, students work singly or in groups, researching a public issue of pressing concern. They are then brought together with diverse campus and community members who also have an investment in the issues the students have explored. Students participate actively in a pedagogically purposeful public sphere, a space for public dialogue and collaborative reflection that is carefully designed to enhance student learning outcomes by providing a clear purpose for assigned work. Entering into dialogues with campus and community participants in ways that open their research and points of view to a broader public, students' coursework transcends the boundaries of the classroom. Suddenly, their research counts for more than a grade and is subject to scrutiny beyond that of their teacher. As a final step, students are encouraged to take their learning and apply it to further civic work and action. Together, these activities have been shown to increase students' sense of academic engagement, their belief in themselves as effective civic actors, and their disposition to take an active role in civic life.

PSP began on our campus as a project to engage first-year students more deeply in their studies by designing purposes for academic work that matter both for students' learning and for their development of a college student identity. Support for this project was provided for several years by the Charles Engelhard Foundation's *Bringing Theory to Practice* project.

Understanding the first year of college life as emerging adults working to develop an identity accords with sociologist Vincent Tinto's insight into students' reasons for persisting in or leaving college. In his now-famous article, “Stages of Student Departure: Reflections on the Longitudinal Character of Student Leaving” (1988), Tinto uses Van Gennep's anthropological framework referring to rites of passage as a way of understanding why students do or do not persist in a college environment:

On one level [Van Gennep] was interested in the “life crises” that individuals and groups face during the course of their lifetime. He saw life as being comprised as a series of passages leading individuals from birth to death and from membership in one group or status to another. . . . Of his numerous concerns, the one that is most directly related to the process of student departure is the one that focuses on the movement of individuals from membership in one group to membership in another, especially as this movement occurs in the ascendancy of individuals from youthhood to adult status in society. (440)

We take the concept of “status” to relate to both identity formation and meaning-making. Deciding that the pursuit of

knowledge in higher education is a worthwhile endeavor, not just for career-seeking, but for personal insight and growth, requires shifting students' sense of themselves *and* of the meanings they ascribe to schooling.

Mechanisms of control and of support in high school change radically in a college environment where students' altered social status—moving from youth to adulthood—provides more freedom of choice but less direct, ongoing help with managing time and achievement. We need to be realistic about the fact that becoming an adult learner in a college setting doesn't happen automatically when an 18-year-old enters college: a shift must occur in the learner's view of self, of school, and of the relationships between the two. A student's learning capabilities are markedly enhanced by a genuine desire to explore the academic side of what college has to offer and by the understanding that this exploration has a critical impact on their sense of community, their capacity for deriving complex meaning from their experiences, and their hopes and aspirations for the future.

In recent work on learning and identity, researchers examining the social nature of learning argue that “membership” is a necessary component of both knowing and belonging and that we learn in communities of practice where we understand ourselves to be likely or actual members (Wenger 1998; Nasir & Cooks 2009). Membership allows us to construct identities within those communities. On our campus, PSP provides liminal students—those standing “betwixt and between” established social identities (Arnett 2007; Turner 1964; Palmer, Kane, & Owens 2009)—with a meaningful rite of passage to help them make the transition from outsider/neophyte to insider/practitioner identities in both university and community settings.

To understand how PSP functions as an early rite of passage in the life of college students, we will explore two examples of PSP offerings at CSU, Chico: The Town Hall Meeting and the Chico Great Debate.

THE TOWN HALL MEETING

The CSU, Chico Town Hall Meeting began in 2006, conceived of by three English composition faculty members as a culminating event embedded in several sections of the required first-year writing course. The first Town Hall consisted of 180 participants, primarily students, with some administrators, faculty and staff, and community members. Students presented the results of their research and led group discussions centered on their own research, gradually including the views of invited consultants. Within a year, the event had grown to include more than 600 students and more than a hundred campus and community participants. This astonishing growth resulted from faculty interest in joining “the movement” toward a relevant, participatory curriculum.

By the time the Town Hall moved from the Department of English to the Department of Political Science in fall 2009, the event was a well-established feature in the first-year experience offerings at Chico State. In 2009, Political Science faculty took various features of past Town Halls

and stabilized the format by offering three structured parts: a plenary with a student keynote speaker who has been a participant in a prior Town Hall; a breakout discussion section involving twenty to twenty-five students who have researched similar policy issues; and a roundtable composed of groups of eight to ten students with policy-makers and expert consultants, who help students to conceptualize “action plans” for next steps for public participation.

The event takes place over two-and-a-half hours, requiring increasing participation from students as the night unfolds. The students begin as audience members at the plenary, typically expressing nervousness and uncertainty when they check in for the event. Following the plenary, which includes the encouraging words of a Town Hall alum student keynote speaker like Luis Tiznado, they move to a discussion setting where every student must share insights from their research at least once and where all students are invited to contribute at multiple points in the conversation. Student participation concludes in a small group setting with an expert with whom they discuss their ideas and consult for advice as they prepare action plans based on their research and their Town Hall experience.

The Town Hall event thus moves students from passive to active roles and requires their use of practices valued by the university community (research, articulate verbal representation of a position, dialogue with informed others, reconsideration and revision of prior work based on new information). Students emerge from the experience having participated in a larger community in new ways and having used learning in a course to establish credibility and belonging in a public context outside of the classroom.

Jesus Frederick Quintana

I chose to come to CSU, Chico almost at random. I'm the first person in my family to go to college, and I didn't have a very clear picture of what it would be like.

When I enrolled in the American Government course, I didn't know it was a Town Hall section. I just picked a time that fit with my schedule. It's strange to think now that this choice changed everything for me. Before this course, I had never researched a single subject for an entire semester. We had to find articles about the topic we had chosen and add to our research in this way every week. I became deeply passionate about my chosen topic, human trafficking. This was something I knew nothing about to start, but by the time I got to the Town Hall, they had to ask me to wrap up my discussion of my research during the breakout session. I knew a lot by then, and I wanted to tell everyone all about it!



When I entered the auditorium for the first part of the Town Hall, this was the first time I was ever in a place with so many people. Meeting others that evening who were researching and getting passionate about the same topic that mattered to me was eye-opening. Before the Town Hall my life was about going to class and coming back to my dorm; I didn't really interact much. After the Town Hall, I joined the campus club "Stop Trafficking of Persons" and became their researcher: my job was to stay current on the topic and share what was happening with other members.

Following the Town Hall, I gradually became more and more involved in the community and campus. Now I interact with everyone—from fellow students to faculty. I am currently an intern with the Chico Police Department. In fact, my major changed because of the Town Hall. I decided to take an introductory criminal justice course the next semester. I was a computer science major, but as I became more interested in and committed to understanding and addressing social problems related to crime, I realized that I needed to major in what mattered to me most. I am graduating with a degree in criminal justice, and I hope to enter the Police Academy in Sacramento. When I look back on it now, I tell people that the Town Hall was the start of a whole trajectory for me. It was the catalyst that helped me become an active learner, a community member, a mentor, a leader.

Asked within a week of the Town Hall, "What did the Town Hall experience mean to you?," students will, in over 70 percent of their written reflections, describe one or more changed feelings or perspectives that they find meaningful:

Student Reflection: I felt like my voice was really being heard for the first time.

Student Reflection: The Town Hall Meeting really inspired me to get more involved in my community and stay educated on current politics. I feel like I was more educated when I voted two weeks ago due to research from the project. I was a little intimidated in the beginning of the discussion, but once I started speaking up I felt empowered.

Student Reflection: This experience meant a lot to me. I really felt that I was in my element. I was confident with what I had to say and I was confident in my work, so I feel as if I may take Political Science a bit further in my college career.

Student Reflection: The experience gave me hope that there is possibility for change in our society.

These responses, we argue, indicate key moments of transition for new students, "turning points" (Palmer, O'Kane, & Owens, 2009) in the students' liminal status, as "an event(s) or an experience(s) . . . at university that stand out, and which triggers and results in the student developing . . . a sense of belonging to university life" (41). While Palmer et al. focus on experiences of new students in the first six to

eight weeks of college life, including negative turning points preventing them from remaining in college, our research on the impacts of PSP indicate that positive turning points. The PSP provides for students throughout the term course-embedded rites of passage in response to opportunities for participation in public settings that feel consequential to the student.

Malcom James Lamar Dixon

I didn't originally think I would go to college. My performance in high school was uneven, and I wasn't sure if a college would accept me. CSU, Chico was the first university to send me a letter telling me I was accepted, so that's where I chose to go. I remember the day I received that letter: December 20th. Knowing I would go to college after all really gave me a boost.



Once I arrived, I had difficulties at some points really addressing the workload. The first time I took the required American Government course, I enjoyed the class meetings and discussions, but I didn't apply myself to the work outside of class. The second time I took the class, I was in a section with the same teacher, but the Town Hall was now included. I found the Town Hall extremely enjoyable. The discussion in the breakout session allowed me to put my ideas into a broader conversation and helped me develop additional perspectives about my research on human trafficking. In the roundtable, talking with the consultant helped me to focus my ideas about ways to approach the issue in order to make change.

After the Town Hall, my work focused on strengthening education around this topic and trying to raise awareness. I was astonished to discover that Sacramento, my home city, and Chico were in the middle of a trafficking ring. To this day, this issue is important to me, and I talk to people about it. I am especially concerned about the safety of my female friends, and I always caution them about taking safety precautions when they are out and about in the world.

The Town Hall allowed me to enter a public space where I could talk about my ideas with my peers and with others who actually worked on an issue I had come to care about. It meant much more to me than taking a test. It's because of the Town Hall that my research became more than a school project: the problem of human trafficking became real to me. A lot of my course work has been reading books and listening to lectures, but without practical application. This was especially true in my lower division courses. The Town Hall made my early

work in college memorable and meaningful—and it made me feel that my work had importance. In this class, I stopped thinking about a grade. I wanted to make the most of the experience because I knew I wasn't going to get this experience in other courses.

THE CHICO GREAT DEBATE

The Chico Great Debate, part of an assignment sequence in the Communication Arts and Sciences Department, was created following a request from the City of Chico. The assistant city manager, John Rucker, approached the First-Year Experience program in 2009, following his participation in the Town Hall as a consultant. Rucker requested the creation of a “model for civil discourse about contentious issues” to address incivility in City Council meetings. The FYE program approached faculty in the Public Speaking course and the Speech and Debate course, eventually setting up a meeting between these faculty members and the assistant city manager.

These discussions produced the multi-faceted Chico Great Debate (CGD). The Great Debate works with a divisive umbrella topic—e.g., immigration reform, inequities in the criminal justice system, mental health issues, etc.—and allows students to research, present and debate issues connected to the main issue for the day. From its debut in spring 2010 to the present, the CGD has grown from about 300 to up to 2,000 participants.

The event spans an entire Friday, from 9 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. and includes students from both CSU, Chico and nearby Butte Community College, faculty and administrators from both campuses, and community members. Political parties share Civic Expo space with student exhibitors, discussion groups meet in the Old Municipal Building, and student speakers present research on facets of a selected public issue in multiple venues, including City Hall, the City Council Chambers, and the outdoor City Plaza.

Caylie Rose Myhre

My family is so supportive of my being in college, but they can't give me advice about how to figure things out here. My father, a fire chief, didn't need a college degree; my mother completed her AA but not her BA. She works in special education.

I am a communication design major and, at this point, a very involved student. I currently hold an internship in broadcasting at a local news station, I work on campus, and next semester I will be in Italy doing a “study abroad” semester.

My first semester at Chico State, I took public speaking.



The umbrella topic for the Chico Great Debate was mental health issues, so I chose autism, something I was a little familiar with because many of the students my mother works with are autistic.

At the Chico Great Debate, I gave a speech in the Main City Council Chambers. This was a five-minute speech in front of a packed room. I'd never done anything like that before. Honestly, having to do something so momentous early has helped me through my entire college career. That experience helped me gain self-confidence. I'm not a shy person, but being in a situation where I had to know my facts and back up my position with evidence was completely new to me. All the work of the semester and standing up to speak at the event made me realize that if I did my work and knew what I was talking about, I could talk to others, I could answer questions. It was kind of amazing to me because I didn't know I could do any of it!

Since then, I am more of a participant in all of my classes. If I'm called on in class or if the teacher asks a question that no one else is responding to, I feel confident that I can speak up and be clear. Gaining this level of confidence helped me interview for my current internship: I thought, “If I can give a speech like that in front of lots of people, talking to one person is nothing after that.”

Overall, it was just a really great experience. I can't say I was happy in the beginning when I learned I would be making that speech, but now I am extremely happy that I did it. I still talk about it to my friends, it meant that much to me.

An important development in the evolution of the Chico Great Debate has been a growing partnership between Chico State and nearby Butte Community College. For students from the Community College, the event provides a foretaste of life as a transfer student and encourages participants to see themselves as capable equals and welcomed members of the university community.

Amanda Teibel

I am a Butte Community College student currently majoring in microbial genetics. I hope to create vaccines in the near future. I enrolled in public speaking as part of the GE requirements for my degree. I did not know it when I enrolled in the class, but my section happened to be one that participated in the Great Debate.

When my teacher mentioned that we would attend the Chico Great Debate, I knew I had to present my speech



or I would regret it. I contemplated giving my speech throughout the semester until the event was a week away!

I expected the event to be much more nerve-wracking than it actually was. After I presented, many people congratulated me on my speech and a lot of people were quite supportive of the fact that I had gone up on stage to speak. As a result of the event, I gained a lot of confidence. I had always been the type of person to say “No” to everything that involved being the center of attention. I wanted to get out of that mindset. I learned that I can’t be afraid of standing up in front of a crowd and presenting my ideas to others.

Not only did presenting at the Great Debate boost my confidence, it also gave me experience I can draw on. Last spring I was given an opportunity to obtain an internship that required me to present a science-related topic that I am passionate about to my Community College’s faculty and staff. Because I had previous experience speaking in front of strangers, I was able to mentally prepare myself for this work—and succeed!

“Students often remark that PSP events are the first places where they feel ‘taken seriously’ . . .

Hall sections. Students indicate, however, that they sign up for specific sections because these fit their schedules, not because some sections are marked “THM.”

Once in the course, all the students participate. Our Office of Institutional Research has established that typical predictors of success (such as high school GPAs or SAT scores) are generally *not* significantly different between the THM and non-THM groups. The THM is not a “boutique program” reaching limited numbers of self-selected students, rather it affects many hundreds of diverse students each semester. The positive effects on persistence noted for Chico State students is also emerging as a trend among Butte Community College students participating in the Great Debate; rates of persistence are higher for those students who participate in the Great Debate compared to similar students who do not.

PSP PERSISTENCE OUTCOMES

From their inception, the Town Hall and Chico Great Debate have incorporated assessments using multiple methods to measure a range of effects on students. We have been particularly concerned with student persistence—a prerequisite for student success and a focus of first-year experience programs nationally. If we were correct in our belief that these events functioned as rites of passage for students early in their college careers, a reduced rate of “departure,” to use Tinto’s term, should be one result of participation in PSP.

The CSU, Chico Town Hall Meeting (THM) program is quite large, 600–800 students per semester, but not all sections of our “American Government” course participate. This allows us to compare students who participate in the program to those who do not. Measured over the course of eight years, marked effects on persistence have been identified. Students who participate in the THM persist at a statistically significant rate, 3–7 percent higher than those that do not. The effects on persistence are not limited to the first year, but often extend through each of the next three years.

Additionally, in most years the effects of participation in PSP on persistence are more marked for students of color, most of whom are first-generation students on our particular campus. In some years, persistence rates of students of color participating in the THM are actually higher than their white counterparts, a reversal of national trends and our own campus experience.

The persistence data are even more impressive given some other features of the program. First, there is no self-selection among the students. Frequently, civic engagement programs are populated by students who are already civically minded, but this is not the case with the THM. Until 2011, students did not know if they were in a Town Hall section of American Government or not. Starting around 2012, the class schedule identified Town Hall versus non-Town

ADDITIONAL ASSESSMENT RESULTS

As mentioned above, the Chico Great Debate reaches the students enrolled in all sections of the required oral communications courses at CSU, Chico. Hence, unlike the situation in the THM or with Butte Community College students, no control group is available to compare impacts on persistence of Great Debate participants versus non-participants. However, we have included Chico Great Debate participants in other assessments aimed at measuring the effects of participation on academic and civic engagement.

Our measures for academic and civic engagement are surveys carried out each semester among participants in the Town Hall and Chico Great Debate (CGD). Questions on the survey are derived from nationally normed instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire, and others. For instance, the NSSE survey measures typical features of the academically engaged student, such as “Came to class prepared,” and “Tried to see how ideas from different courses fit together.” Our results show a strong statistical connection between the CGD and increased levels of academic engagement.

The CGD also has a significant impact on aspects of social agency, as defined and measured according to UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute. Every fall semester, some first-year students are enrolled in communication courses and participate in the CGD, while some freshmen will not encounter the course and event until the spring term. We are thus able to compare some features of the event’s impact on students by surveying both groups each fall. For the student group not yet experiencing the CGD, 31 percent see themselves as potential community leaders. After they experience the CGD program that number jumps to 41 percent.

Students in the THM also show significant gains in Community Efficacy (for instance, “Do you impact your community?”). Students not in the THM respond to this prompt positively at a rate of 56 percent, while students in the THM respond positively at 67 percent. Students who go through these programs stay current with political affairs at a rate of 66 percent as opposed to students who do not go/have not yet gone through the programs, at 59 percent, as measured by a four-year survey administered to seniors.

The survey questions reveal both differences in behavior/attitudes and differences in self-concept. Following PSP work, students perceive academic work, civic involvement and themselves differently. After ten years of working with students in these designed public contexts, our experience gives us confidence that the approach has merit, especially as it is flexible enough to work with small numbers of students—as we have done in course-specific PSP events such as a “Social Justice Fair” hosted by 100 college students for the campus and local schools—as well as very large numbers.

We embed this work in the first year in part as a way to “prime the pump” for students’ more direct work with organizations and causes in service-learning and civic engagement courses they may take in their sophomore year, and in the numerous civically-focused clubs they may join as they move through college. Most important from a First-Year Experience standpoint, however, is the identity work that entering these public spaces affords students. As equal participants with adult experts in dialogues about public issues, students often remark that PSP events are the first places where they feel “taken seriously,” and where they experience themselves as capable of engaging the world of adult concerns.

CONCLUSIONS

College life has long been recognized as a transitional period, facilitating the passage from adolescence to adulthood. University life prepares young adults to transition not only into careers and the world of work, but to become responsible adult participants in their communities and democratic life. As Tinto and others have observed, all students face challenges in adjusting to college life; effectively making this transition is critical to student success, including persistence and graduation.

Although all students face challenges in negotiating this transition, the task is more daunting for first-generation, low income and minority students. These students must cope with financial strains, a lack of familiarity with higher education contexts, and, in some cases, issues of academic preparation. The experience of college for many first-

generation, ethnically diverse students is a combination of culture shock and alienation due to the paradoxical combination of an unfamiliar social context and first-year academic offerings that seem to repeat their often dreary experience of high school academics. This set of circumstances often creates additional barriers to their quest for a sense of meaning and belonging.

Public Sphere Pedagogy (PSP) provides a context for bringing diverse students into the academic culture of the university through linking scholarly research to pressing public issues and requiring that students place themselves and their research in the broader context of a public sphere of peers, faculty, and community members. A relatively low-cost, scalable innovation, PSP has accumulated an impressive track record for increasing retention and academic engagement for students of diverse backgrounds.

We feel that broader adoption of PSP and the principles that underlie this approach can move American higher education decisively in the direction of supporting the success of all students, especially diverse, New Majority students, and thereby help higher education meet its intellectual, social, and economic missions. 

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