SYMPOSIUM

America's Financial Future, Civic Engagement

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Institutions of higher learning reflect the philosophies, environments, and resources of their location. Fort Lewis College sits in the San Juan Mountains, a part of the Rocky Mountain chain in southwest Colorado. Throughout its history, the College has successfully transformed itself to suit the needs of its students. Flexibility is demonstrated in frequent changes in focus, curriculum, student population, and programming. Founded as an agricultural high school in 1911, the College transitioned to a two-year college in 1927, implemented an agricultural and mechanic two-year degree program in 1933, assumed junior college status in 1948, and finally, in 1962, became a baccalaureate degree–granting institution that centered its educational objectives around a liberal arts philosophy. Additionally, the College's diverse faculty and student population impact the curriculum and programs. Students of differing classes, ethnicities, regions, and faith traditions share intellectual and physical space. Presently, the student population is just under four thousand, and there are approximately two hundred tenure or tenure-track faculty. Eighteen percent of the student population is native, representing over 125 different nations, but principally the Navajo nation. These statistics require the College to adjust its curricular objectives to suit the intellectual levels and goals of its students.

Like most students across the country, Fort Lewis first-year students often come to the College with established political interests, and during their time at the College, they become even more politicized. Reflecting their environment, the majority of students are politicized around environmental or native peoples issues. Most students, however, do not arrive on the campus with a sense of personal financial responsibility, let alone any cognizance or interest in government spending. Civically engaging these students is not difficult, but encouraging them to focus on the issues of fiscal responsibility is. Existing between the margins of adolescence and adulthood, students barely understand personal financial responsibility, let alone comprehend the scope of government spending and entitlements.

Recognizing the inherent challenges involved in raising students' awareness of national fiscal issues, two faculty members—myself, Jennifer Stollman from the Department of History, and John Gadbois from the Department of Economics—implemented several innovative co-curricular programming ideas. This article explores the methods developed and used by Fort Lewis College's America's Future faculty to promote cross-campus financial and civic literacy. Faculty members endeavored to create a comprehensive approach while accepting the challenges of their relatively isolated location. This article explores the successful core curriculum and campus programming designed and implemented during the 2008–2009 academic year, including lectures, course speakers, campuswide readings, panel discussions, games, workshops, live feeds, public information campaigns, and theater programs. I also discuss the challenges encountered by program planners and participants and offer strategies to other individuals endeavoring to construct campus programs and projects that relate to civic engagement and financial literacy. My intention in describing our strategies, programming, and the ensuing successes and challenges is to encourage other colleges to deploy strategies beyond traditional curricula to promote knowledge of this crucial national issue—one that will effect each and every person in this country over the next several generations. I believe that implementing such programming is essential to creating an engaged and active citizenry capable of solving some of the most difficult problems facing the nation.

PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTING THE AMERICA'S FUTURE INITIATIVE

Armed with several ideas after attending the America's Future Initiative annual meeting from September 11 to 12, 2008, John Gadbois and I returned to the campus determined to carve out fiscal consciousnesses among our students. From the very first stage of the process of implementing the America's Future Initiative, we both accepted that ours is a unique campus. Blessed with a gorgeous setting of the San Juan Mountains and the often raging Animas River, most of our students come to this campus for a solid liberal arts education and to partake in the stunning outdoor activities. Because of Durango's attractive environmental offerings, the College resembles a commuter campus, in that the campus culture is fairly weak. Intellectually, the students at Fort Lewis College resemble most colleges across the country—they are underprepared in thinking, writing, and communication skills, but they do arrive with the strength of broad thinking and as willing risk takers in both physical and academic pursuits. Durango's geographical isolation creates political isolation, and our students seem, at times, to live politically and intellectually disconnected from the rest of the nation. Additionally, because Durango is so isolated from larger urban areas, we also wanted to provide the residents of Durango and the surrounding areas with an opportunity to participate in the conversations and the programming.[1] In an effort to maximize the potential of our students' and residents' strengths and minimize the effects of presented challenges, we decided to use a multi-pronged approach that employed traditional and unusual methodologies. We understood that our economics and political science

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departments cover some of this material in their lower and upper division courses, but we wanted to address individuals who might not have access to this information. We did, however, embark on the traditional route of information distribution on campus and sought out the possibility of creating a distinct course that focused solely on civic engagement and government spending and entitlements. We worried about the delays inherent in developing and implementing new courses, as well as the chance that we might reach too narrow a population. We decided to flood the campus with co-curricular programming, thereby ensuring that faculty, staff, students, and town residents received information on federal spending and government and individual accountability.

During the first few weeks of the semester, we met to discuss our measures. We identified our target audiences and assessed the fiscal literacy of those groups. Aware that most of these individuals suffered from fiscal illiteracy, we decided to foster an ongoing conversation. We followed a workshop model in which individuals could either participate in all the events and gain tremendous amounts of knowledge on the issues or, if prevented by time limitations, attend only one event but exit with a solid foundational knowledge of the issues. We decided to host a series of "opening" events to promote initial awareness that would later culminate in a day-long event with several programs.

Understanding the importance of relying upon experts who knew how to foster awareness at the grassroots level, we next contacted the Concord Coalition, a nationwide, nonpartisan, grassroots organization that specializes in fiscal policy. The southwest regional coordinator, Jeff Thiebert, agreed to join us for several days' worth of programming. He recommended several ways to reach many individuals. To reach a wider audience, we contacted the local public radio station and arranged for a 30-minute program that could introduce the issues. *Rim Shots* is an issue-oriented show on which we discussed the basics of government spending. Additionally, in an attempt to harvest our most active students to best encourage wider student participation, we addressed the student senate's weekly meeting and alerted them to the issues and upcoming events. We also successfully solicited their services in staffing our events. The use of public radio and the student senate in these ways represented the hearty seeds planted for our project of fiscal awareness.

In addition to addressing some of our most active populations, we recognized that our events would fail if we did not create a buzz. Employing a business approach, we decided to create a brand. Soliciting the Graphic Arts Club's assistance on campus, we requested that they design a logo for our America's Future Initiative activities. Starting with the American flag, they replaced the stars with dollar signs. We hoped to create a brand consciousness; thus, all promotional fliers included this symbol. This move was solid. People who viewed the publicity materials were impressed by the logo because it integrated patriotism and capitalism. We also sent individual e-mails to department chairs, Student Services, and Residence Hall Life, alerting them to the day's events. In these e-mails, we asked faculty to offer credit for attending these events. Fortunately or unfortunately, the America's Future Initiative benefited from a growing national awareness and media coverage of fiscal spending, because the country was in a deep economic crisis, and students and others were starting to ask questions. In our advertising, we addressed these growing anxieties by suggesting that through a concerted study of the issues and participation in our activities, we would provide answers, knowledge, and possible solutions to these fiscal problems. We posted broadsides throughout the campus and town with this paragraph:

> Bewildered about recent national financial events and how the government is spending your money? Interested in becoming well-informed on fiscal issues so that you can make rational decisions rather than ignoring the problem or worse yet, casting a wrong vote? We have several campus events to help you sort through this confusion.

The provocative language and symbol created a stir on campus.

The centerpiece of the America's Future Initiative was held through a series of events that took place on October 23, 2009. Led by Jeff Thiebert, the first session, entitled "Fiscal Literacy: What is It?" was held at 8 AM. To a packed session, Thiebert outlined the basics of the U. S. economy. He covered budgets, deficits, and entitlements and, because of our close proximity to the presidential election, answered a host of questions about partisan economic plans. To reach our strongest students, we hosted a "lunch and learn" with faculty, students, and Thiebert. This event served as an excellent venue for students to interrogate the experts on the issues. During the afternoon session and eschewing a lecture format, we hosted an afternoon workshop on national financial responsibility. Moving beyond providing information for students' own edification, we hoped that we could encourage material

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political involvement. We anticipated that students' own analyses of the issues might propel them to action. In this capacity, students were guided through a series of questions and activities centering on fiscal awareness, basic political activism, and civic empowerment. During the evening, we rented our locally owned movie theater and invited the Fort Lewis College and Durango community to screen the movie *I.O.U.S.A.* This film explores the exploding national debt and the consequences for the future. The screening was a smash success, with a sold-out crowd. Audience members remained after the movie to discuss its main points. To the best of our ability, we estimated that we reached over five hundred individuals. Participant assessment forms revealed overwhelmingly positive responses, with requests for more events.

INITIAL ASSESSMENTS AND FUTURE ACTIVITIES

John Gadbois and I met several times to debrief the previous events and strategize ways to keep the conversation going. We continued to contextualize this information in our history and economics courses. Additionally, we provided Public Agenda's source materials on fiscal policy to our faculty members to use in their courses. We also strongly encouraged students to keep abreast of the rapidly incoming and changing information by joining, via the Web, Public Agenda, the Concord Coalition, the Heritage Foundation, and the Brookings Institution. All three are fiscal policy think tanks that represent a diverse spectrum of thought on the national debt and budget deficit issues. Membership in these organizations entitled students to access informational updates and alerted them to recent research, opinion and editorial articles, and discussion lists. In order to maximize and encourage active participation, we regularly assigned written and group work. To create incentives for student involvement, Public Agenda offered an essay contest, and several of our students submitted entries. Additionally, we routinely e-mailed students important articles on the national debt and out-of-control spending.

Several undergraduates clamored for more information, and we responded by providing more events. Members of the faculty ran a small reading group to discuss Andrew Yarrow's *Forgive Us Our Debts*, an excellent examination of the federal debt and the dangers of intergenerational spending. The Business Club and the members of the student senate invited a personal credit expert to speak on campus. The philosophy behind this invitation was to make this massive national issue more personal. By outlining to students the problems that accompany personal debt, we believed that we could make the issue of government overspending far more accessible and understandable. Introductory economics surveys supplemented course material with national debt education.

Perhaps one of our most unique experiments designed to spread fiscal awareness was through Fort Lewis College's theater department. The Youth Theater course was performing an old Sufi tale entitled *The Conference of the Birds*. Because this play discusses fearlessness and individual and communal empowerment, we envisioned that we could incorporate themes of civic engagement through the play's blocking, the adjustment of certain characters, and script changes. This strategy reached our theater majors, who were previously not attracted to civic engagement and who seriously lacked knowledge on government spending. The production also promoted outreach to the community, because the players performed the play to over two hundred middle school and high school students. The success of the play encouraged us to continue to find innovative and alternative ways to reach those individuals who were not traditionally associated with or politicized to this issue.

While recognizing that our previous programming reached many, we wanted to keep the momentum going. To that end, we designed several programs around April 15 to celebrate "Tax Week" as a method to advance the conversation on government economic policy. Through the already established brand of the America's Future Initiative, we extended an open invitation to the Fort Lewis College and Durango community to join us once again.

One of the greatest obstacles in promoting the America's Future portion of the American Democracy Project was attracting speakers to our campus. The remote location, coupled with the rising costs of travel, required that we be innovative in drawing top-notch speakers. To counter the perennial problem of not getting the best speakers in their field to our campus because of geography, we arranged for a conference call with members of the Heritage Foundation, the Concord Coalition, and the Brookings Institution. Participants included Stuart Butler of the Concord Coalition, Robert Bixby of the Heritage Foundation, Jeff Thiebert of the Concord Coalition, and Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution. Because this event was held shortly after the presidential inauguration and shortly after President Obama proposed the stimulus package to Congress, the panel participants updated the audience about the vast increase in governmental spending that occurred a mere six months after our initial programming. Frankly, the distance did not negatively impact the program's effectiveness. Students engaged in the conversation and were quite pleased that they could learn about these issues from the same individuals who advised Washington and the rest of the country on fiscal policy. Generously, the panelists took questions from the audience. Forecasting that students' questions might be too basic for some of the other audience participants, we invited an economics professor, Tino Sonora, to offer up some more complex questions. We wanted to reach the knowledge levels of all of our audience members. These beginner and expert questions provided an effective way to provide comprehensive knowledge.

Recognizing that we had built another audience through our previous radio show, we scheduled another half-hour discussion on the local public radio station. John Gadbois, Jeff Thiebert, and I traded comments from our individual expert perspectives on the nation's fiscal condition. We reviewed basic economics knowledge, assessed the current state of affairs, and speculated on the choices that the nation will undoubtedly face in the future. We discussed in detail the subject of government entitlements, health care, military spending, and partisan economic plans.

The next evening, because of popular demand, we rescreened *I.O.U.S.A.* Community members and students who

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could not attend in the fall viewed the film and participated in a discussion afterwards. Approximately 35 people attended, and, because the audience members possessed significant knowledge of the issues, we discussed potential future spending policies and the damaging effects of continued excessive spending on future generations.[2]

We had successfully reached students and community members, but we knew that the key to a long-lasting discussion of government economic policy and out-of-control spending depended on faculty awareness and buy-in. We invited several faculty members to join Jeff Thiebert at the local pub to discuss ways in which faculty might successfully integrate games, lesson plans, and research into their own courses. At first, this approach may appear extremely unorthodox, but the strategy appears to have worked. Several faculty members discussed ways in which they already presented material on fiscal policy and responsibility and seemed quite interested in using some of the innovative material provided by the Concord Coalition and Public Agenda.

LESSONS LEARNED

For the most part, the America's Future Initiative was successful. We reached our targeted audience of students, faculty, staff, and community members. Throughout the year, we faced and met several challenges. By far the biggest challenges to our project were resources, publicity, and faculty acceptance and support. The economic crisis has forced campuses around the nation to cut program spending. We encourage others facing similar problems to seek funds from their individual departments, colleges, and national endowments. Filling seats at many events will always be a problem on campuses that are overflowing with events and programs. Creating interesting and eye-catching broadsides is key. Making extensive use of campus communications' directors to move information about America's Future events through already established channels such as campus newsletters, e-mails, local newspapers, radio stations, and Web sites is absolutely crucial. On today's campuses, students gain information through many portals. America's Future project coordinators must have a command of these resources in order to reach these students. Getting faculty on board is also a real challenge to the success of this program. Faculty feel pressed for time, are resentful of "mission creep" and its growing demands, and are sometimes hesitant to engage, because they do not know the material. We strongly encourage project coordinators to meet individually with faculty, provide them with access to the material, and outline professional and philosophical incentives for getting involved in the project. Professional credit should also be extended to faculty members involved in the Initiative.

The conversation that we began in October of 2008 still continues. This year, we plan to host a series of panels and lectures to attract new learners, as well as expand the existing knowledge base of our previous participants. Through a series of conversations debriefing the events, we concluded that we need to dedicate even more resources to the project, involve an even wider audience, and find innovative methods to spread the message of fiscal responsibility to people. To ensure that the issues of citizenship and economic awareness continue to hold important places in the campus' intellectual arena, we submit that the College must dedicate faculty members to the project. Giving time in the form of a course release or a stipend frees individuals to devote substantial time and energy to this project. Still seeking ways to generate interest, we are hoping to encourage the art department and the English department to offer exhibitions and public readings on civic engagement and economic policy. Throughout American history, artists and writers have been some of the strongest observers and commentators on public issues. Through their works, they have propelled people to action. Although this is seemingly a nontraditional approach, we believe that individuals are moved by visual displays and personal expression. This serves as yet another method to reach more individuals. We plan to revisit the strategy of creating a one- or two-credit, six-week course on government spending and entitlements. We will also continue to exist as a resource for faculty who are interested in knowing how to incorporate lesson plans devised by national think tanks specializing in government spending and economic policy into their classrooms.

With each passing day, and as the national economic crisis deepens and widens, it is astonishing just how vital the America's Future Initiative is to college campuses across the nation. One short year later, students, faculty, staff, and community members are now clamoring for answers and solutions. Through innovative programming, publicity, and resource allocation, Fort Lewis College has successfully responded to those requests. The intention of those working on the America's Future Initiative is to expand the program to more colleges, universities, and other educational institutions. As individuals become more cognizant of just how complex the problem of government spending is, it is incumbent that we, as members of college communities, rise to this challenge to offer them the necessary information on out-of-control national spending. ■

NOTES

1. Denver is a six-hour drive and Albuquerque is a four-hour drive from Durango.
2. The version we screened was the original version, but the filmmakers have since updated the film to include recent events.

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