

March 2012 Issue #2

# At the Forefront of Change

## Newsletter of the American Commonwealth Partnership

"Promoting the work of building democracy colleges for the 21st century"  
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### SPECIAL ISSUE: INTRODUCING CITIZEN ALUM

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**Charter Members**

#### Doers, Not (Just) Donors

**Citizen Alum counters the image of alumni as primarily "donors" with a vision of them as also "doers." Alums are allies in education--crucial partners in building multi-generational communities of active citizenship and active learning.**

#### Welcome to Citizen Alum

Citizen Alum, based at the University of Michigan, started six months ago as an affiliated program of the [American Commonwealth Partnership](#) (ACP) and was announced at the January 10 White House meeting, "For Democracy's Future"

We are looking for 25 colleges and universities representing all sectors of American higher education. Working with this network, we plan to develop ways to exchange good models as well as to foster bold aspirations. We want to support campus Citizen Alum teams that extend the university's public mission to more offices and departments. Finally, we hope to become a community that views alumni, along with other constituencies, as "agents and architects of democracy," to use the language of the [Wingspread Declaration](#).

At each site, we look for a team that is willing to work with the national network for three years. The team should include representatives of community engagement centers, academic programs, alumni associations, development, and, of course, citizen alums themselves. There is no fee for

Augsburg College  
De Anza College  
Harvard Center for Public  
Interest Careers  
Kennesaw State University  
University of La Verne  
Metropolitan State  
University  
Syracuse University  
University of Michigan  
University of Michigan-  
Dearborn  
University of Minnesota,  
Jandris Center for  
Innovative Higher Education  
Winona State University

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joining.

We conceive of Citizen Alum as, first, a national listening project focus on alumni; second, a capacity-building project to *make public* the civic passions of alums, current students, faculty, and staff; and third, a participatory research project that brings these groups together to explore questions that are important to them..

Along with Alex Olson, a doctoral student in American Culture at the University of Michigan who is a collaborator on the project, I have been having a series of inspiring phone calls and meetings with people from interested campuses. These encounters have confirmed our belief that colleges and universities are trying many different creative strategies as they reframe their approaches to public engagement in ways that support richer cross-generational connections.

Please contact me if you would like to join the Citizen Alum network of campuses, centers, and consortia.

Julie Ellison  
Professor of American Culture and English  
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## Different Ways to Do It Right:

### Alumni Listening Projects

"Start listening projects to gather and learn from the reflections of engaged alumni" is right at the top of Citizen Alum's list of goals.

Alumni are central to Citizen Alum. Each participating campus or center is assembling a Citizen Alum team. (See "Who's On Your CA Team?") Each team will include alumni members. Citizen Alum is committed to involving alums in multiple ways--through participation in academic activities (like capstone courses), working on specific issues with campus-community projects in the region--or serving on the Citizen Alum campus team.

One of the reasons we started Citizen Alum is because we are convinced that creative new strategies in alumni relations are taking shape on college and university campuses all over the country. Over the last six months, as Citizen Alum has gone from a lunchtime brainstorm at the American Democracy Project conference to a viable national undertaking, we have learned of existing or new alumni listening projects at several member campuses. The

diversity of these programs shows that there are, indeed, many different ways to do it right.

**For four examples, see "Listening Projects," below.**

*What Questions Are They Asking?  
Metropolitan U Students To Interview Alums*

1. How you are involved in your community or in efforts to solve public problems?
2. How do you address community issues through your work? What are the primary social issues related to your field?
3. What motivated you to become involved in community and public problem-solving? How did your path to civic engagement start?
4. Were there any particular classes, instructors or organizations that particularly shaped your ideas or your approach to community work? How?
5. How has your life changed because of your community involvement? What have you gained from being a civic actor?

From "Citizen Alum Interview Questions" developed for writing and media and communications courses

**Listening Example #1:  
Augsburg College**

**Lutheran Campuses Organize "Vocation for Life"**

Tom Morgan, Director of the Center for Faith and Learning at Augsburg College describes an alumni listening project rooted in the values of vocation and civic engagement.

"A little over a year ago," Tom writes, "we entered into an informal partnership with several other Lutheran

institutions-Augustana College (Rock Island, IL), Augustana College (Sioux Falls, SD) Capital University (Columbus, OH), Concordia College (Moorhead, MN), Gustavus Adolphus College (St. Peter, MN), Luther College (Decorah, IA), and Wartburg College (Waverly, IA)." The group's goal was "to intentionally serve the callings of our alumni...in all aspects of their lives, including their lives as citizens and members of their respective communities."

This project, Vocation for Life, draws on rich Lutheran traditions to:

- create mechanisms for vocational reflection at critical life stages
- challenge alums to make meaningful choices at critical moments in their lives; and
- keep the vocation conversation alive beyond the college years, so that alums will maintain a rich relationship with our institutions and each other.

To date, Vocation for Life has hosted one experimental gathering of alumni. Three more are planned.

These events are learning experiences. Morgan reports that "we intend to use what we learn from these experiments to design regional gatherings that will be open to alumni from all twenty-six ELCA colleges."

## **Listening Example #2: Metropolitan State**

### **Integrating Interviews Into Academics**

Jodi Bantley, Coordinator of Community Service Learning at the Center for Community-Based Learning (soon to become the The Institute for Community Engagement and Scholarship) writes that Metropolitan State's approach to Citizen Alum focuses on "academic integration and student learning."

The institutional relationship-building between alumni relations and other units that is needed to achieve such integration is an important fringe benefit.

The Department of Communication, Writing, and the Arts explored CA as an "engaged department" project. There is considerable faculty interest in crafting CA components for

courses that range from a basic Information Studies class to the capstone course.

To date, the most concrete academic outcome of CA is a plan to integrate "citizen alum stories" into coursework. Two sections of a Basic Writing course will be dedicated to the theme of civic engagement in Fall 2012, involving 44 students per semester in gathering alumni stories. The Human Subjects Review Board has approved a guiding set of interview questions (see "What Questions Are They Asking?") and a step-by-step guide for students.

Two Spring 2012 semester pilots will give the interview assignment a test run. It will be integrated into an upper division Media Studies course, 'Communicating with New Media,' and a Social Science department internship, sponsored by the Center for Community-Based Learning.

### **Listening Example #3: University of Michigan**

#### **College Connections**

In her role as Director of External Relations and Annual Giving Programs for the College of Literature, Science and the Arts (LSA) at the University of Michigan, Nini Geraffo developed College Connections. With a young professional staff made up of recent graduates, [College Connections](#) interviews LSA alumni, usually in person. The interviews include discussions of the "dean's themes." One of those themes is "citizenship."

Already, questions about philanthropy and citizenship are revealing some thought-provoking trends.

For example, while only a few "gap" (post-2005) alums have been interviewed so far, there seem to be striking gender differences between the older and younger cohorts of engaged alums. Among "situated" (pre-2005) alums, men outnumbered women 60% to 40%. Among engaged "gap" alums, women outnumbered men by a startling 75% to 25%. These data (if confirmed) raise important questions about patterns of engagement among both college students and recent cohorts of alumni.

College Connection's data indicate the value of research that began as a way to inform fundraising. While the growing interview database continues to serve the goal of strengthening graduates' identification with LSA, College Connections has also become a Citizen Alum partner.

Geraffo and her staff know that their listening project discovers "doers" as well as "donors," and they are eager to fine-tune their questions to learn more about alumni engagement.

## **Listening Example #4: Winona State**

### **An Innovative Web Platform**

Dr. Kara Lindaman of Winona State's Citizen Alum team (and point person for the American Democracy Project at Winona State) sends word of the group's decision to produce "gap" and "situated" alumni narratives in video and written form. Through undergraduate research and other forms of intentional engagement, students will begin to collect and disseminate this critical work this spring.

These narratives will be featured on the [Winona 360](#) site--a wonderful place that is something like an online student-produced community media center for the region.

Through surveys and interviews, a rich database of alumni engaged in public work will lead to a better understanding of the civic learning and civic health of WSU students, before and after they graduate. These efforts involve collaborations with academic units and with the WSU Alumni Office and Foundation. They also contribute to the Rural Outcomes Initiative of Minnesota Campus Compact by documenting the economic development and workplace contributions of alums in Southeastern Minnesota.

## **Why Listen?**

**Listen to be surprised.** Engaged alums take their civic vocation seriously. They come bearing gifts--the gifts of experience, ideas, skills, and strategies. As ACP National Coordinator Harry Boyte says, citizen alums "are hidden treasures."

**Listen to connect.** Asking the right questions about what alums are doing is the first step in learning about their civic creativity. (See "What Questions Are They Asking?") At Metropolitan State, the Citizen Alum team sees this as relationship-building, "laying the groundwork to connect

directly to alums as public problem-solvers."

**Listen to stimulate research.** Alumni are potential research partners--co-investigators on inquiries that benefit both the college and alumni themselves. For example, a joint research project might look at the aspirations and choices of publicly active students during the transition from college to career.

**Listen to change the culture on campus.** Listening projects connect academic and administrative offices to the university's public mission in new, more collaborative ways.

## **Joining CA: Kennesaw and La Verne**

**At two receptive universities, planning for systemic public engagement is underway. Citizen Alum adds a valued dimension.**

On opposite sides of the country--at Kennesaw State University in Georgia and the University of La Verne in Southern California--public engagement is central to broad new initiatives. On both campuses, people in varied roles and different units all have civic learning and civic professionalism on their minds.

Kennesaw State has launched "Engage KSU," anticipating the opportunity in 2015 to apply for the Carnegie Foundation's Elective Community Engagement Classification. Having made the decision to incorporate public engagement into its mission as it approaches its 50th anniversary, KSU is in the midst of a year-long community engagement project. Five teams are charged with planning in the areas of teaching, scholarship, service, infrastructure, and partnerships. Citizen Alum is consistent with the Engage KSU initiative already underway and offers a way to connect with the university's many young alumni.

The University of La Verne, having welcomed new president Devorah Lieberman last summer, is spending a year in a participatory strategic planning process aimed at defining the La Verne Experience. According to Lieberman, that experience will be an education for "civic professionals." It will be rooted in an interdisciplinary curriculum that is "designed by the campus," with "theory in the classroom and practice in the community," combined with reflection.

Distributed over ten campuses, all sectors of the University are designing the La Verne Experience. Here, too, in a community with a strong sense of momentum, Citizen Alum clicked.

## Honors

### **Syracuse U Keeps New Grads Engaged as Fifth-Year Fellows**

Eighteen recent college graduates were awarded either Engagement Fellowships or Entrepreneurship Engagement Fellowships. Read about them here:

[Engage.Syr](#)

### **University of Michigan--Dearborn Celebrates "Difference Makers"**

Check out the homepage of UM-Dearborn, with a link that takes you to rich information about the [Difference Makers](#) you will meet there. Who are they? Students and alumni who have been nominated by faculty, staff and peers for "academic and professional achievement, integrity, leadership and creative contribution in and out of the classroom."

## Track the National Conversation

[ACP's Democracy U Blog--Citizen Alum entries](#)

[Adam Doster, "When College Ends, So Does Activism" \(2007\)](#)

[Ashoka U -- Social Entrepreneurship Education](#)

[The Alumni Network -- Princeton AlumniCorps](#)

[The Democracy Commitment -- An American Community College Initiative](#)

[Tisch College CASE Network at Tufts University](#)



## On the Horizon

### Almost Here

The CA website is under construction. We should be online in May

### Conferences and Meetings in 2012

[Look for two Citizen Alum sessions at the American Democracy Project Conference June 7-9 San Antonio.](#)

[Join us at the Citizen Alum session at the Imagining America conference October 5-7 NYC](#)

### Looking Ahead to 2013

Discussion are underway about a Citizen Alum summer institute hosted by the Jandris Center for Innovation in Higher Education at the University of Minnesota. Stay tuned.

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