

What Does the Democracy Wall Reveal?  
No Shortage of Opinions!

December 2015

Volume 9, Issue 4

Individual Highlights

Charity to Solidarity 2

NYPIRG Executive Director Speaks 3

President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll Member With Distinction



Carnegie Foundation Elective Classification in Community Engagement



Democracy Wall at 9 Main Street posing the question; “What do we owe each other?”

You may have noticed a chalkboard wall on the front of Main Street SUNY Cortland (9 Main Street), the home of SUNY Cortland’s Institute for Civic Engagement’s community offices. The “Democracy Wall” (one of four) has been featured at 9 Main since September, as part of SUNY Cortland’s involvement in the national American Democracy Project’s Economic Inequality Initiative.

Democracy Walls empower people to give visual expression to their opinions regarding democracy and economic inequality-related issues.

The initiative’s 70-member task force is composed of SUNY Cortland faculty, staff, and students, Cortland County not-for-profit agency supervisors, and individual community members. Task force members are recruiting people from other areas, including business, faith-based organizations, and government.

The group is sponsoring the democracy walls to facilitate community dialog about democracy in America.

People have inscribed hundreds of responses to prompts posted on the 3’x 7’ chalkboards, which have been displayed at several locations throughout the

community. The task force hopes to generate meaningful conversation about democracy and inequality, and – by analyzing responses inscribed on the walls – members expect to generate insight into the issues that most concern community members.

The initial analysis is based on 164 responses recorded over two months. Most of the responses have been thoughtful and representative of many sides of issues, while others do not seem to take the Wall seriously – inscribing sentiments that do not respond to the question posed, listing names or phone numbers, or drawing the same illegible logo over and over again. Still, much of what is posted is pertinent and thoughtful.

Most responses were easy to classify, though some defied labeling: Responding to the prompt, “What do we owe each other?,” for example, someone wrote *cake*. Did the author mean “food?” luxuries?” or maybe “comfort”?. ...or perhaps “cake”?

This initial series of prompts generated responses that mirror concerns at both the national and local levels; one prompt specified national concerns: “What is our country’s biggest challenge?”

## From Charity to Solidarity Rethinking Student Service in Urban Communities

*By Lisbeth Ortiz and Katherine Milanes*

Khuram Hussain, an assistant professor of education at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, spoke to a group of 40 students at Corey Union on November 19. Titled, “From Charity to Solidarity: Rethinking Student Service in Urban Communities,” the talk focused on pertinent social issues and how students can implement change.

Focused on building solidarity to identify and impact social change, Hussain’s talk invited students to view a different perspective on teaching and community service. Throughout the presentation, Hussain emphasized that teachers need to begin the change within the classroom, and engage students with activities that inspire them to speak with one another and to express their thoughts and ideas on the issues.

One issue Hussain identified and discussed was how to address inequalities that exist within our communities; specifically inequalities based on race that are ignored or go unnoticed in advertisements, during teaching, or in general interactions. Hussain critiqued how advertisements display images and often focus on one race, as an example

---

### A Conversation— On Common Core

With the help of the American Association of University Women, High Achievement New York (HANY) recently held a public conversation to discuss the Common Core assessments. HANY is a coalition made up of teachers, parents, and civil rights and business groups working together to ensure that every student in New York State receives a first-rate education.



**Khuram Hussain, assistant professor of education at Hobart and William Smith, Colleges, speaks about impacting social change**

of disparities that should not be ignored. As he stated, “most images display a white person helping a black student or a white person holding a black child.”

One way that Hussain is addressing social issues is through his most recent project, “Action Research: Methods & Sampling.” This project integrated college and high school students, and long-term residents of different races and genders. It was intended to bring together different perspectives regarding topics that people are often uncomfortable discussing. The college students then developed a community education project to address some of the key issues identified. The project enabled Geneva High School students and college students to connect on campus and work on the issues together.

---

Stephen Sigmund, the executive director of HANY, began by presenting the Common Core State Standards. In the discussion that followed, representatives from St. Mary’s Elementary School and Homer High School reviewed how each school had different ways of implementing the requirements set by the state. Both groups agreed that the content in the exam needs to change. They recommended that the state have educators design the tests, rather than private companies. A more detailed examination of Common Core will be featured in the ICE January newsletter.

## NYPIRG Executive Director Discusses Lobbying



NYPIRG Executive Director, Blair Homer

On November 9, NYPIRG's Executive Director, Blair Homer, reflected on his 30 years as a lobbyist.

NYPIRG (the New York Public Interest Research Group) is the largest student-led lobbying group in New York State.

Homer met with two literature classes and an Ethics class. The Ethics class' instructor, Dr. Robert Earle, noted that the students had been discussing Peter Singer's 1971 paper, "Famine, Affluence and Morality," in which Singer argues that the affluent do far less than they should.

Earle asked Homer, "Besides giving money, what can we do?" Homer replied, "Act wisely through activism and other political actions, to build coalitions for change."

Earle's question reflected Homer's over-riding interest: "How do you put a lobbying campaign together to win?" Homer's answer, basically, is to know your audience.

Homer later expanded on his comments in a chat with four students, the President of the League of Women Voters of Cortland County (Alison King), two SUNY Cortland staff, and SUNY Cortland's NYPIRG's Project Coordinator, Skylin Baestlein.

Homer began by saying that in the U.S., persuasion takes place through campaign donations and through lobbying. A lobbyist must know his audience, know the issue's information, and talk to the public.

For example, a lobbyist needs to know that legislators "appreciate discussion over debate," so "connect your information to ideas that legislators already understand."

Alison King elaborated, saying that when dealing with scientific information, such as with hydraulic fracturing, a lobbyist needs to explain the science in plain English. Homer agreed, adding that a lobbyist can further strengthen his credibility with a

legislator by bringing an expert to a meeting, by recruiting other legislators who can advocate for his cause, and by recruiting organizations that a legislator favors.

NYPIRG took this third step, for example, when it partnered with physicians to help pass smoking bans, and when it worked with AARP to keep pharmaceutical prices down.

Homer's experience also taught him that legislators want to show that they are productive; so a lobbyist should help a legislator realize how a particular legislative action can help the legislator reach that goal.

King asked Homer what NYPIRG does when there is no "smoking gun" element in an issue, such as the "Ash for Trash" proposal that, at the time, the Cortland County legislature was considering (but later defeated). Homer said that NYPIRG refers to other countries' steps, like Germany, which treats "fly" ash from incinerator smokestacks as hazardous waste, and which also stopped hydraulic fracturing.

(In the "Ash for Trash" plan, Cortland County would have sent its trash to Onondaga County's incinerator; then Cortland would have imported Onondaga County's incinerator ash for its landfill. The problem: The ash contains toxins such as dioxin; we do not know much about – we have no "smoking-gun evidence – regarding harmful health effects of ash landfills.)

Munair Wright, a Sustainable Energy Systems graduate student, asked, "How does NYPIRG choose its issues?" Homer explained that NYPIRG's (student-led) Board considers NYPIRG's historical interests (such as the cost of higher education), the executive director's suggestions (which the Board need not take), and "windows of opportunity for the political entrepreneur" – such as decisions forced by funding deadlines. Overall, lobbying is "more of an art than a science: Yes, you need to know the legislative process, but you must also recruit your most effective advocates."

Contact Information

Mary McGuire, Director.  
 (607) 753-48061 or  
 Mary.McGuire@cortland.edu

John Suarez: Office of Service  
 Learning Coordinator.  
 (607) 753-4391 or  
 John.Suarez@cortland.edu

Cynthia Guy: Community  
 Innovation Program  
 Coordinator.  
 (607) 753-4271 or  
 Cynthia.Guy@cortland.edu

Sponsors

The Office of the President  
 The Office of the Provost  
 The Office of Research and  
 Sponsored Programs  
 The Cortland Fund  
 The Cortland College  
 Foundation  
 The Division of Institutional  
 Advancement  
 Bringing Theory to Practice

Connect with us!

/GetInvolvedCortland  
 @CortlandICE  
 /CortlandICE  
 cortland.edu/get-involved



Wall featured at Cortland Career Works for People with Disabilities Employment Week

*(Democracy Wall continued 'from page 1)*

In response, nine Democracy Wall “votes” dealt with money and power as our biggest challenge: *economic inequality, stop entitlements, corporations, too much power, abuse of authority, corruption, corrupt president, Obama policies, and let Trey [Martin?] sing.* Three others dealt with religion: *Islam/Sharia Law, killing Jews, and help poor Christians.*

Such answers reflected emotions that contrasted with more positive reactions that were posted in response to a second prompt: “What do we owe each other?” Many of the 65 replies suggested positive emotional “debts,” which split into three groups: respect, which included *faith, tolerance, trust, and loyalty* (21 mentions), love (11), and integrity, which included *truth, accountability, and honesty* (6).

This second prompt also elicited “tangible” responses that included financial items (such as *a living wage*), services (including *access to health care, investment in infrastructure, reliable public transportation, and reusable energy*), and “products,” like *the arts, clean air, and time.*

So far, the most often-used prompt on Walls has been “What freedoms do you value most?” Its “chalk-chat” responses were written across five days in four locations: Access to Independence, Career Works, 9 Main Street, and on the SUNY Cortland campus during the Cortland Area Communities That Care “Jump Start 10” Conference for 10th-grade students.

More than half (41) of the 79 comments named topics related to freedom of

expression; 22 of those 41 comments were from 10th-graders. Five comments named the right to vote.

Six comments, including four from 10-graders, promoted gun rights. Those writers might consider gun rights to be civil rights, which could also be a label for the comments of eleven other respondents, who wrote words related to gender and to gay marriage. Eight of those writers were 10th-graders.

Three 10th-graders, and five people who wrote on the Access to Independence board, were among the eleven people who claimed the right to an education as their most important freedom.

Democracy Walls have been featured at agencies’ events, such as the Cortland Area Communities That Care’s Jump Start 10 Conference for 10th graders, and at Cortland Career Works, during People with Disabilities Employment Week. Another wall is currently featured at Cortland Prevention Resources’ LGBT offices.

Starting in December, a third democracy wall will be featured in the lobby of Corey Union on the SUNY campus. It will move to Old Main in January. Different questions will be posed, and passers-by are encouraged to inscribe a response. The Initiative’s participants are working with Cortland high school administrators to place a fourth wall at the high school.

Feel free to share your thoughts on the Economic Inequality Initiative’s *Democracy Wall.*