

# Blogging for Community Engagement Learning—An Experiment

BY JOHN B. STEPHENS

Blogs come in many flavors and are a primary information source for a growing portion of the citizenry. From Facebook personal notes to the social and political commentary of Huffington Post or Redstate.org, blogging often aims for reaction or for personal interests. I have been part of an experiment in having many viewpoints (currently fourteen regular contributors) being presented on the same blogging platform. I'm pleased to describe how the Community Engagement Learning Exchange (CELE; <http://cele.sog.unc.edu/>) is tracing an unusual path in the blogosphere: respectful, substantive, and personal views on a key civic topic.

Our experiment began when Kevin Smith, Senior Community Specialist, Housing and Neighborhoods Department for Raleigh, North Carolina, posed an interesting question about community engagement. Kevin's day-to-day focus is on citizen capacity building, leadership training, and asset-based community development. A veteran of community forums, advisory committees, surveys, and other outreach, Kevin wondered: What do the participants think as they go through different methods? What do they think works and why?

Fortunately, the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Government, where a colleague, Rick Morse, and I work, has a long tradition of being responsive to state and local government officials. We work to translate rigorous academic research about aspects of government to practical use. Through conversation with Kevin, Rick and I developed a proposal for an experiment in online exchange for mutual learning.

*Author's note: While I am the author of this article, CELE is a team effort, with most of the administrative and outreach functions shared by me and Dr. Ricardo Morse, a School of Government UNC-Chapel Hill colleague. Colleagues in the School of Government Information Technology Division provides essential technical and analytic support.*

Our primary interest is to create a way for grassroots citizens, local government officials, and academics to contribute equally to ideas, experiences, assessments, and critiques of community engagement. What was new was a concerted effort to engage citizens beyond a particular project for reflections about circumstances and methods for community engagement. Our goal is to create a learning community via an online platform.

We saw a great deal of academic research and coverage in practitioner publications like *Governing*, *Public Management*, and *National Civic Review*, and there are excellent web resources in the areas of citizen engagement and deliberative democracy more generally. Most materials are aimed to those planning or evaluating public participation.

What was new was a concerted effort to engage citizens beyond a particular project for reflections about circumstances and methods for community engagement. Our goal is to create a learning community via an online platform.

These resources are by and large for citizen engagement practitioners. The academic work in this area tends to be utilized by other academics. Meanwhile, citizens who engage with their local governments are the focal point of engagement efforts and have much experiential knowledge, yet there are few if any outlets for them to share that knowledge.

While *National Civic Review* provides a good platform for practitioners based in government, NGOs, and citizen groups, it was one of several organizations that did not have an online method for structured exchange. We found that other groups had

listservs or websites and blogs to announce items, but our effort appears to be unique: an ongoing, structured exchange on topics of the authors' choosing, not from an organization using a blog as a method of publicity.

The experiment focuses on the ability of a set of people of diverse backgrounds to create something of value to them and a wider audience via a blog. In particular, we seek to provide some degree of balance, so the viewpoints from the three kinds of contributors—engaged community members (citizens), government practitioners, and scholars/researchers—are valued. We know that community engagement can occur without a government agency setting the terms of the input.

Finally, the key is *learning from each other* how people in a community can productively engage in the development of the community and better understanding how individuals and community organizations can best engage the public they serve.

#### **Purpose of the Community Engagement Learning Exchange**

The Community Engagement Learning Exchange is a platform for local government and other community-based public service practitioners to connect with engaged community members and scholars that focus on community engagement.

The purpose is to share knowledge and insights related to community engagement practice. The exchange is a place for scholars to share their insights with practitioners and engaged community members, where practitioners share their experiences and insights with academics (in the process helping to inform research) and with the publics they serve and where engaged community members (the focus of engagement efforts) share their experience and insights with practitioners and academics (in the process helping improve practice and also helping shape research agendas).

#### **Starting the Blog**

The blog went live in December 2014. The outreach and invitation was fairly informal and coincidental. We initially focused on North Carolina, so that there may be a common state context for blog writers. Our aim was equal numbers of contributors across the three categories (citizen, government, and academic).

Rick and I assumed that we should make the mechanics of blogging as easy as possible for contributors. We would do all the formatting of the text and images so the workload was minimized for the authors. A September 2014 conference call identified goals, roles, and expectations for contributors with Rick and me as administrators.

**Participants and Frequency of Blog Posts.** Our initial eleven bloggers were:

- a. Four citizens: Durham, North Carolina (2), Raleigh, North Carolina, and Woodfin (western North Carolina)
- b. Four local government: Charlotte, Chapel Hill, Knightdale (Greater Raleigh), and Raleigh
- c. Three academics: Wake Forest University (Political Science Department), Winston-Salem; two UNC-Chapel Hill (School of Government).

We agreed on two responsibilities for bloggers:

- a. To write their posts (or solicit someone to contribute when it was their turn) once every eleven weeks; keeping an approximate three-week rotation between academic, government, and citizen writers;
- b. To provide comments each month on other blog posts. The goal was for comments on two blog posts in a month.

**Contributors, Categories, and Tags.** Contributor profiles were created with a head shot photo and short biography. The WordPress blogging software allows readers to click on a profile and see the blog posts by that person. <http://cele.sog.unc.edu/contributors/> (See Profile of Brian Bowman on page 54.)

Bloggers defined which of eleven categories fit each of their posts. They could select multiple categories or no category.

CELE Blog Categories		
Advisory committees	Capacity building	Civic education
Community partnerships	Dialogue & deliberation	Diversity
Elected officials	Innovation	Online participation
Outreach methods		Public meetings

Another tool is “tags”: unique words or phrases to capture the particular ideas of a blog post (similar to keywords or hashtags). This provides another means for seeing connections among posts or internet searches to draw people to the blog.

For example, the tag “social capital” returns five blog posts, including Citizens Academies and Civic Infrastructure and Structuring Community Involvement—Anti-poverty work in Durham and Preparing Engaged Citizens for Life in Community.

**Tone of the Blog.** A central part of the blog is to focus on the “design,” “process,” or “conduct” of community engagement, more than whether an “outcome” was good or fair. The “About” section of the blog addressed the goal of candor and respect:

Mutual learning occurs through respectful dialogue and a desire for understanding. As such, our vision for this learning exchange is that all contributors and commenters will be honest but also respectful and courteous to one another. Not all experiences are positive ones. Indeed, we often stand to learn the most from our failures. But even difficult experiences and areas of disagreement can and should be discussed in the spirit of this experiment, which is one of dialogue and learning.

Our effort posed a unique distinction for the leaders of the School of Government (SOG). The SOG had established blogs on various topics to reach audiences with timely, relevant information for the work of a variety of court system and state and local government officials. However, all this material is generated by faculty and other professionals, with attention to the SOG values of policy neutrality and nonadvocacy. These values have been important for the SOG credibility with North Carolina public officials of various partisan and ideological views.

Thus, we designed the blog to have each post carry a disclaimer:

### Please note...

This site welcomes a variety of viewpoints and perspectives on community engagement. Ideas shared here should not be considered as being endorsed by the UNC School of Government in any way as the School is nonpartisan and policy-neutral.

And, with three initial posts on December 3, 2014, we were up and running.

### Content, Activity, and Publicity

The strongest parts of the blog have been the quality and range of content and the frequency of new

### Contributor Profile and List of Posts



**Brian Bowman**

Brian Bowman is communications director for the Town of Knightdale, NC where he manages media relations, content creation, and branding. He earned a Master of Arts in Communication and Technology from UNC-Chapel Hill and a B.A. in Mass Communication from Campbell University. Prior to public service, Bowman was a news reporter. He has earned numerous peer awards for social media and video production.

#### Internet Access Enhances Government Transparency, but Underserved Populations Remain

This entry was contributed by Brian Bowman, on December 28th, 2015 at 12:10 pm and is filed under Dialogue & Deliberation, Innovation, Online Participation, Outreach Methods, Uncategorized.

This entry was tagged with the following terms: accessing government information, color blindness, disabilities and internet access, Elderly Outreach, Non-English Speakers and internet access, People without Internet Access, Underserved Populations, Usability and Design, Web Access.

#### Trust through Transparency – Law Enforcement Agencies Ask Citizens for Input and Service

This entry was contributed by Brian Bowman, on September 29th, 2015 at 10:06 am and is filed under Advisory Committees, Civic Education, Community Partnerships, Dialogue & Deliberation, Diversity, Outreach Methods, Public Meetings.

This entry was tagged with the following terms: citizen, citizen advisory committees, Civic Engagement, deputies, dialogue, government, law enforcement, Police, police community advisory board, sheriff.

#### Beginning a Conversation with your Local Government

This entry was contributed by Brian Bowman, on April 2nd, 2015 at 10:29 am and is filed under Civic Education, Outreach Methods.

This entry was tagged with the following terms: Call Centers, Citizen trust in local government, Citizens reporting problems, city and county communications offices, Communication, Facebook, Government Social Media, Online government information, public information officers, Questions about local government, Smartphone Apps.

#### Assessing Free Online Civic Engagement Tools – Three Examples


This entry was contributed by Brian Bowman, on January 26th, 2015 at 7:50 pm and is filed under Online Participation, Outreach Methods.

This entry was tagged with the following terms: community information, Community outreach, Facebook Group Pages, FrontPorchForum, Google Hangouts, Google+ Karmapols, Knightdale, neighborhoods, Nextdoor.com, online engagement tools, OurCommonPlace, Social media, Water forces.

#### Blog Highlights 2015 – a Sampler from the Community Engagement Blogging Team

This entry was contributed by John Stephens, Dan Bagley, Michelle Bir, Brian Bowman, Shawn Colvin, Emily Edmonds, Cate Elander, Traci M. Ethridge, Katy Haeriger, Stephen Hopkins, Rick Morse, Jennifer Phillips, Kevin Smith, Melody Warnick, on December 30th, 2015 at 1:51 pm and is filed under Capacity Building, Civic Education, Community Partnerships, Dialogue & Deliberation, Diversity, Innovation, Online Participation, Outreach Methods, Public Meetings, Uncategorized.

## Sample Blog Post



Community Engagement Learning Exchange  
A UNC School of Government Blog


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### A student's view: Steps for Universities to advance student Civic Engagement

This entry was contributed by Katy Harriger, on December 3rd, 2015, at 7:12 am and is filed under Capacity Building, Civic Education, Community Partnerships, Elected Officials, and Outreach Methods.



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T.J. Smith is a senior majoring in Politics and International Affairs and minoring in Biology and Spanish at Wake Forest University. He is from Greensboro, NC, and is highly engaged on campus and in the Winston-Salem community. In this post, he responds to our invitation to provide a student voice in the discussion about the role higher education institutions can play in civic life.



As a guest author, I would like to write from the student perspective in discussing civic engagement. I will be responding to Dr. Harriger's post on the [importance of civic education and the importance of community engagement](#). In particular, I hope to use my own experience as a Wake Forest University student to **illustrate two things the university can provide students in order to advance civic engagement.**

**First, the university must offer service learning but within the proper framing.** I agree with Dr. Harriger's post that too often college students are engaged in community projects that do more harm than good so I would like to offer a solution.

Many college students hold a savior complex when entering the community to do service. This means that they hold an implicitly demeaning view that they are helping a community that can't help itself rather than a view that they are here to collaborate with the community. Therefore, the university must offer service learning and community service along with a discussion of social justice framing.

The university should be sure to partner with the community to ensure that students are working on the community's self-defined needs.

In my own experience, I served as a tutor for ESOL students at a local high school for my Racial and Ethnic Politics course. The service-learning course was properly framed through a seminar so that my task was to collaborate with these students so they could work towards achieving their goal. The outcome of my semester of service learning was a better understanding of the systemic issues affecting the immigrant community as well as these students performing better in their classes. The students recognized that I was not coming into to tell them how they were doing things, writing, but rather that I was there to support them.

**Second, the university must provide opportunities for students to take social justice courses and then engage in substantive, socially useful research.** I agree with Dr. Harriger that knowledge is important in working to address community challenges in a democratic society. Universities should provide courses that can equip students with the conceptual knowledge and vocabulary necessary to fully understand how society has engrained subtle yet powerful forms of oppression. These courses must be intersectional. This means they explore the way our social identities overlap be it race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion etc. To quote Dr. Melissa Harris-Perry, these courses must ask "what voices and truths are missing in these circumstances?"

But the university must not stop at just disseminating this knowledge. Rather it must then provide opportunities for students to further their knowledge through research.

This research is critical to showing students how they can affect change and how new policies are developed. For me, this took place through my personal research following a semester taking courses in identity politics and the history of race and law.

I spent one semester assisting a faculty member in studying the legacy of Brown v Board of Education (1954) followed by my acceptance of a research fellowship with the Anna Julia Cooper Center (AJC) studying the effects of segregation on education at the intersection of race, gender and the South. Through my research, I am beginning to understand the historical causes of educational inequality and I am better able to understand the systemic approach to this issue.

Further, I was given the opportunity by Wake Forest and the AJC Center to attend the White House Council on Women and Girls research summit on "Advancing Equity for Women and Girls of Color." At this conference, I saw the practical implications of research in the development of inclusive policy. These experiences have informed my career decisions as well as given me a better understanding of how I can use the knowledge I have accumulated during my college years to help work towards change.

**What do you think?**

As a student suggesting solutions in this post, I am curious to know if you think including student voices in developing university programs can improve or worsen civic engagement initiatives?

Likewise from an ethical standpoint, do you think service learning is productive in itself or does it need framing to ensure success?

Lastly, I am convinced that a major mission of universities is to develop students for democratic society. That said, how can universities increase the number of students taking social justice courses? How can universities provide more opportunities to students seeking to complete research involving intersectional framing?

Tags: Civic Engagement, Civic participation, Community Engagement, Community outreach, Educating citizens, Effectiveness of community outreach, Lessons Learned

#### SUBSCRIBE

Subscribe to the CLEL mailing list to receive the latest blog entries as well as they are posted.

#### PLEASE NOTE.

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#### CATEGORIES

- Advisory Commissions
- Campus Funding
- Civic Education
- Community Partnerships
- Design & Collaboration
- Events
- Knowledge
- Online Participation
- Outreach Methods
- Public Meetings
- Uniqueness

#### CONTRIBUTORS

- Don Rupp
- Michelle Be
- Benjamin
- Emily Connor
- Emily Connor
- Tom M. Ehrlich
- Katy Harriger
- Stephen Higgins
- Rob Marshall
- Kevin Galt
- John Galt
- Katelyn Warren

#### RECENT COMMENTS

- Kevin Arrandson on [Fostering Transparency in Essential](#)
- Rob Marshall on [College Drive for LIFE Greensboro](#)
- Ben Marshall on [College Drive for LIFE Greensboro](#)
- Neighborhood Redevelopment
- Carl Kessler on [Highlighting Home Community Engagement](#)
- Rob Marshall on [Highlighting Home Community Engagement](#)
- Rob Marshall on [College Drive for LIFE Greensboro](#)
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#### TAGS

- Campus Funding
- Civic participation
- Community Engagement
- Community Outreach
- Educating citizens
- Effectiveness of community outreach
- Lessons Learned
- Local government
- Local leadership

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#### Join the Conversation

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked \*

Name (required):

Email (will not be published) (required):

Comment:

posts. We had no idea if this effort would fizzle after one month or one round of everyone posting once (about eleven weeks), but we have retained almost all bloggers and are adding more.

The frequency of new material has been almost weekly, although we had two months (February and May 2015) where there were only two posts. Scheduling has been adjusted: one of our bloggers was on family leave and others have had occasional work or life changes. One early blogger found a successor (from the same city government) after her initial post. With a few weeks having two new posts, we reached 48 posts over the first 52 weeks of the blog.

The viewership for the blog has been small but is growing. I do not find this surprising: we are taking on a niche area and are not operating from within a website that has a national profile.

For the first nine months, there was an average of 400–600 page views monthly. There has been a recent upswing: during September to November of 2015, readership was between 700 and 1,000 per month. Individual posts usually have 50 to 80 unique visitors. The most popular ones (over 100 views) range widely by content. Of the ten top posts, topics include:

- Sustainable civic participation
- Beautiful budgets: Opportunities and gaps in online local budget engagement
- Police-community relations through outreach to barbers in Charlotte
- Engaging through art
- Homelessness: Responsibility, services, and person-to-person magnanimity
- Affordable housing and transportation choices
- Financial transparency is essential, but not the entire solution
- Translating academic research to results oriented solutions
- Neighborhood activism aimed at attracting a new sizable employer

Overall, more than 3700 unique viewers have engaged the blog in some way.

**Categories.** To summarize the general concerns of the contributors, each post can be placed in one or

more categories. The categorization is imperfect: sometimes the writer offers the categories, sometimes the administrators (Rick or I) suggest which categories fit. Also, each post can have unlimited tags to specify key words or phrases, and we have not tried to compare tags with categories for consistency or completeness.

For example, Civic Education is not limited to K-12 settings, so readers may be surprised by the content, which ranges from citizen-police advisory boards, city-run citizen academies, engaging youth with deliberative problem-solving, higher education's role in preparing students to be engaged citizens to why it is hard to vote in local elections. That is the point, in many ways: one topic within or related to community engagement can be considered in different ways. Readers of the blog can choose a category to view those posts.

From the categories mentioned above the most blogged are:

- Outreach methods—cited in 34 posts, and used pretty evenly across the kinds of bloggers (10—academic; 11—citizen; 13—government)
- Capacity building—18 posts (6—academic; 4—citizen; 8—government)
- Diversity—17 posts (2—academic; 8—citizen; 7—government)

Least used categories:

- Nine blog posts: Advisory Committees and Public Meetings
- Eight blog posts: Elected Officials and Online Participation

The citizen bloggers have more often pointed to shortcomings of community engagement efforts. One contributor wrote about a police-community partnership that has faded. Another assessed voting access changes, political protest for racial equity, and the value of anti-racism training for action and reform.

Bloggers based in local governments have most often reported on the work of their jurisdictions (e.g., pocket parks and police-community relations committees), and academic bloggers have often looked at the practical applications of their research

(e.g., citizen academies and university-community partnerships).

Publicity for the blog takes a few forms: Twitter (five bloggers have Twitter accounts, and there is a separate account for the blog), Facebook, selected posts highlighted through School of Government listservs (to particular audiences), and bloggers' individual email blasts. More active publicity has occurred since fall 2015 (and is addressed later). Only half of readers come to the blog directly; another 30 percent come via another social media site or a general web search.

### **Assessment, Variation, and Expansion**

We conducted a survey of bloggers in June 2015 about their blogging experiences. Generally, our team felt they were challenged to consistently create blog posts but enjoyed doing the blog. They wanted more comments on their posts, as one measure of knowing their work is being read.

Indeed, comments have been lower than the goal of two per contributor per month. Rick and I did not often prompt people in general, and we never “called out” anyone in particular to make comments. Given our emphasis on creating new posts and managing the schedule, comments were a lower priority at the start. We are working on forming posts that end with questions or some other hook to encourage comments.

The majority of posts had zero, one, or two comments. Ten of the 54 posts (through February 2016) garnered three to five comments. The highest number of comments came from a guest blogger, Eric Jackson, who is adept at social media. His January 2016 post, *Beautiful Budgets: Opportunities and Gaps in Online Local Budget Engagement*, drew 22 comments (some of which are Eric replying to others' thoughts).

The next top commented posts came from a community-based blogger, Michelle Bir, who joined the team in fall 2015:

- Homeless Challenges: Magnanimity and Responsibility increases Effective Engagement—fourteen Comments
- Fayetteville History and City Symbols: the Weakness of Online Opinion—nine Comments



Another post, Citizen Participation at the Local Level: Elected Officials, Advisory Board Positions, by Brian Bowman had nine comments, with the author responding to four people (including three fellow bloggers).

The two most active commenters overall are academic bloggers: 19 and 11 comments, respectively. The next two are citizen contributors (10 comments and 9 comments) and then a government contributor (8 comments).

While we asked our fellow contributors to use their publicity methods, Rick and I felt a higher obligation to consider how to attract more readers and convert some of those readers into commenters.

We had solicited one guest blogger as of May 2015. Through an academic contact at Colorado State University, Sabrina Slagowski-Tipton, a graduate student at the Center for Public Deliberation, offered a new angle on community engagement. She wrote of her work with other college students to train high school students in group dialogue techniques, similar to what is taught at the college level (<http://cele.sog.unc.edu/engaging-youth-with-deliberative-problem-solving/>). The high school students also participated in a nationwide mental health conversation, which took place through a virtual interface (<http://creatingcommunitysolutions.org/texttalkact>).

In October 2015, we reached a government and consultant audience via a webinar to members of the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2—Canada and USA chapters).

Consequently, Rick and I took the lead on seeking other guest bloggers, as one way to expand both content and their guests' networks of readers. We have had four more guest bloggers (Candice Streett, of Richmond, Virginia; Eric Jackson, Asheville, North Carolina, and two enlisted as a result of the IAP2 webinar Kevin Amirehsani, Denver, Colorado, and Jennifer Trotter, Brea (near Anaheim), California). In fall 2015, two regular bloggers joined the rotation: Michelle Bir (Fayetteville, North Carolina) and Melody Warnick (Blacksburg, Virginia).

A second effort to build more interaction among the blogging team were blogging pairs: two

contributors working together on a single blog post. Emily Edmunds and I combined in August 2015 on a blog about participation, trust and location-based social media government monitoring (<http://cele.sog.unc.edu/participation-trust-and-location-based-social-media-government-monitoring/>). In October 2015, Cate Elander and Rick created an online dialogue on what neighborhood gentrification might be like with authentic, collaborative engagement of long-time residents with the gentrifiers (<http://cele.sog.unc.edu/gentrification-and-collaborative-engagement-what-if/>). These posts did not attract comments, but they did assure at least two-person exchange on a topic.

Finally, for improved publicity, we worked with three UNC undergraduate students through a service learning project of their public relations writing course (September to December 2015). This yielded a Public Relations audit and plan as well as a short video showing why one of our team (Brian Bowman) contributes to the CELE blog.

#### Lessons

For over a year, we have built and maintained a multiauthor blog of people of diverse backgrounds, experiences, and interests in civic engagement. So the first lesson is that it can be done.

**Successes.** What seems to contribute to the regularity we have established is to provide a schedule of two to three months at a time, yet be flexible as people's circumstances call for adjustments. Second, reminders in the two- three-week window are helpful to prompt contributors. Overall, we are encouraged that the summer 2015 survey showed that seven of the eleven contributors found the preparation of the posts about what they expected, and nine people thought the frequency of posting was just right.

Encouragement is important. The administrators have worked to provide comments more often than other bloggers, as one way to show interest and try to start a dialogue. More informal phone and email contact to check-in and listen to ideas or offer possible topics has been part of our experience.

**Challenges.** What we are working on is beefing up the *exchange* part of the learning exchange. While any reader can learn by reading multiple posts, our

goal is to build more comments on each new post to create the string of ideas, questions, or criticisms tied to the initial post as a more visible way to measure the learning exchange.

The lack of comments was a weakness identified by eight out of eleven bloggers in the June survey. They either expected more or wanted more comments. The organizers are working on this via four strategies:

- i. Improved marketing in general (for example, assistance from the students in the Public Relations class)
- ii. Guest and new regular bloggers—more people reaching more audiences
- iii. Better notification: As of March 2016, we have automated notices to bloggers about comments to their posts and, for our core contributors, about comments to their comments on a post
- iv. Joint blog posts. We may try more two-author blog posts as one way to assure exchange among the contributors.

Beyond counting comments, another measure of exchange can be if a blog post cites an earlier post. One blogger, Katy Harriger, has had a theme about university engagement with community: translation of research, strong community-university partnerships, and student learning via community engagement. As we have regular or guest bloggers prepare material, we will point them to previous posts as a way to build a thread of discussion.

#### **Value of This Exchange**

The first phase of the work is complete: starting a blog, and having regular, diverse, and quality contributions has been achieved. As with other online platforms, the material is public, easily searched, and can be augmented by many people's views, questions, and information.

The blog format is open and flexible. The experiment builds on the UNC School of Government's values of responsiveness to state and local government officials in North Carolina.

The blog addresses several kinds of questions:

1. What do citizens think about different kinds of community engagement?

2. What might academics learn from hearing first-hand experiences and perspectives from the people doing community engagement?
3. How might engaged citizens' perspectives be influenced by being in a learning community with academics and practitioners of community engagement?
4. How might the practice of engagement by local governments and nonprofits be influenced by collaborative learning with academics, citizens, and other practitioners?

The experiment is ongoing. With somewhat reduced transaction costs, as long as there is a set of committed contributors and sufficient moderation of comments to assure candor and respect, this will be an open resource.

**Invitation to the Blog.** In closing, I would like to invite readers to come to the blog: <http://cele.sog.unc.edu/>. The main page has a "Subscribe" box for entering an email address. People can then track the blog through notification of each new post (about one per week).

I think reading the blog can capture the positive give-and-take of new ideas to enhance your civic engagement work. Moreover, comments from many perspectives can drive the conversation. Finally, we are open to guest bloggers.

Our hypothesis is that finding grassroots citizens to read, comment, and to be guest bloggers is harder than seeking contributions from local government officials and academics. As comments grow, and more people provide input, we hope to keep a balance of voices, so that the learning exchange stays true to its goal.

We are not limited to North Carolina or any region. Three recent guest bloggers, from Virginia, California, and Colorado, have offered thoughts on neighborhood influences on economic development (<http://cele.sog.unc.edu/engaged-neighborhoods-can-attract-business-a-richmond-va-success/>), changing the direction of a grant proposal showing true community ownership (<http://cele.sog.unc.edu/the-power-of-empowerment/>), and "thick" and "thin" forms of civic engagement (<http://cele.sog.unc.edu/how-thick-or-thin-is-your-civic-engagement-project/>).

As online material proliferates, having forums that offer diverse views and seek mutual learning is resonant with many goals for strong civic life: participation, respect, and collective action. We will nurture this learning community with the hope of growing

a rich resource for those interested in community engagement across North America.

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*John B. Stephens is associate professor, School of Government, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

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