

First-In-The-Nation Civic Engagement Forums at New Hampshire's Community Colleges

Our goal is to encourage today's community college student to become informed about public policy and to be involved in the political process by making the process more accessible to them.

New Hampshire enjoys a unique tradition in hosting the First In The Nation Presidential Primary. It is one of the best venues to learn about citizen responsibility, democracy, politics and public policy. Granite Staters are proud of our tradition of active participation in the political process. At the heart of this proud tradition is the notion that everyone participates.

The Community College System of NH (CCSNH) students are representative of students at community colleges and members of working families across the nation. They are students who live in their home town, a majority are the first members of their families to attend college, three-quarters work while going to college, forty percent are twenty five or older, over a quarter of them receive Pell grants, just under one-half have federal student loans, and a third go on with their education beyond an associates' degree. They have an important perspective to bring to the national political dialogue. But, currently, their participation is not as strong as it could be.

CCSNH plans to enhance the educational experience of our students by holding Civic Engagement Forums at New Hampshire's seven community college campuses and three academic centers in Berlin, Claremont, Concord, Keene, Laconia, Littleton, Manchester, Nashua, Portsmouth and Rochester.

Starting in early September of 2015, civic classes tied to the Forums will be offered as a way to give students a deeper understanding of the forces that affect their community and the nation's future. Included will be an online course offered in the colleges' dual enrollment (high school and college credit) program taught at over ninety high schools in the state. The Forums will enable these students to engage with candidates and community leaders in an organized and relevant civic discourse.

The Civic Engagement Forums will give the candidates an opportunity to hear, learn from and respond to the voices of the population that often do not get heard—those who are young, those who live outside the media centers and those who are members of the middle-skilled working population. In addition, social media reporting of the Forums by students will enable the discourse and learning from the Forums to go beyond New Hampshire as will the sharing of the Civic Engagement curriculum, format and social media reporting with community college students across the nation.

Presidential candidates from both major parties will be invited to the Forums to engage with students and community members in a (semi-) structured format. Forum panels will be comprised of students from the civics classes, members of the community college advisory boards and other community leaders. In addition to candidates, the Forums will host prominent visitors to New Hampshire during the primary season, such as national and international political correspondents, political leaders and public office holders visiting New Hampshire to represent the candidates. Consistent with the spirit of the Primary, the more our students are involved in this process, the stronger our Democracy.