Introduction

Public Discourse is a significant endeavor. By learning, applying, and honing skills in the community, you will develop writing, oral communication, critical thinking, argument, problem solving, and research skills. At the end of the semester, your resultant project will provide a sense of pride and accomplishment as well as a meaningful indicator of what you are capable. Your project and portfolio of work drawn from addressing an actual issue will enhance applications and interviews for internships, jobs, and graduate study.

This text serves as a companion for successful completion of the course and your community advocacy project. The text focuses on the concepts and skills of argument and public advocacy and provides a step-by-step guide for both civic engagement and general college success. The materials on argument, advocacy, and public speaking can and should be employed more broadly in papers, public presentations, small group conversations, and interpersonal interactions.

Choosing a Problem

Of course, your growth in this course and your ability to use your project in future applications and interviews depends on the project you choose. Because of the nature of the course, you will need to make that choice quickly. The course is designed to help you choose a topic. This text contains a variety of project examples, including an epilogue of student stories. In the classroom, your instructors and peers

Choose your project intentionally—choose it as a challenge. What you choose to do is reflective of who you are as a person. When you challenge yourself with a project, you get so much more out of it. Valentina Muraleedharan '14

will provide examples and feedback on proposed problems. Public Discourse Night, a student-led panel in the first week of the semester, also presents an opportunity to learn from previous students and ask them questions to help guide your choice and your project as a whole.

As you choose your project, challenge yourself. Take on a project that is worthy of your time, will make a real difference in the community, and will result in a significant and meaningful experience that you can talk about in interviews and application letters. Choose something that is actually a problem and has not been or is not being fully addressed by another individual or group at this time. Choosing an "easy" problem or one about which you are not passionate will limit your success and growth in the course.

Consider the communities of which you are a part. Are there problems that come to mind? What problems have you faced and what problems does the community discuss? What could be enhanced in your community? As you envision your life beyond college, where do you see yourself involved in the community? In those areas, identify problems you can start addressing

now in your local community. If you are unsure about relevant and appropriate problems, check out community websites and local newspapers for ideas. Talk to community members, particularly those who are involved in community organizations or government. What problems do they face or see in the community? What problems are not discussed by the community and should be? Do they know other community members who might have other ideas?

What general problems are of interest to you? If you are concerned about the environment, is there a pressing environmental problem in your community? Perhaps your

> *Don't go for something that **could** be fixed. Go for something that you **want** to be fixed. Find something you are passionate about. That was my biggest motivator and drive forward to complete work.* Mackenzie McCann '15

community needs to increase recycling, reduce water consumption, decrease pesticide use, or enhance green spaces. Brainstorm, be creative, and find something about which you care.

Overall, as you think about your communities and possible problems, consider what will look more impressive on a graduate or fellowship application or to a potential employer—taking on a campus concern or tackling a problem in your home community? Graduate schools, fellowship competitions, and employers are flooded with applications from over-involved college graduates with high GPAs. Choose a project that makes your application stand out.

To be successful in this course, you do not need to completely resolve a problem in one semester, but you will need to undertake thorough research, complete extensive analysis, and take appropriate action to attempt to address a significant problem in your community.

The Project

Readings, assignments, and exercises are designed to take you through a deliberative, systematic, and successful process with your problem. Through that process, you will learn as much as possible about the problem and community involved.

First, you must research thoroughly before coming to a conclusion about the problem and what needs to be done. Certainly, when you choose your problem, you will have some idea about what it is and what needs to happen. Hold loosely to those ideas. The research process will bring you into contact with a variety of perspectives on the problem and introduce you to other communities with similar problems. In that process, you may find out that your initial ideas about the problem were incorrect or your thoughts about how to address it were inappropriate. That's great. Determining that you are mistaken before you state an opinion or take action is always better than after.

Mareka was concerned about the number of strip malls in her city, a suburb of Minneapolis. She was certain that the city needed a plan and new laws to decrease strip mall development. Before addressing the city council, the course assignments required her to do detailed research into strip malls and the situation in her hometown. In her research, Mareka found that her hometown was actually a national model for city planning and zoning laws that controlled the development of strip malls and protected downtown businesses. This information changed her project. After

researching the current situation and laws in her city and other cities, she presented to the city council a plan for minor changes to further strengthen the existing zoning laws.

Initially as you consider problems, you will not know about causes and possible solutions and should question what you do know until you are able to verify it with evidence. A thorough research process will guarantee that when you do make an argument and take a stand, you will do so as an expert who has considered all perspectives on the problem. Although some people may not agree, they will have to respect that your stance is supported by sound research and analysis.

Second, the course assignments provide steps that will prepare you for action in the community. The research process and your increasing expertise will form a foundation for the other steps—knowing the problem, being aware of possible ways to address that problem, considering the best way to address the problem in your particular community, and ultimately taking action. Each

> *Something that I would advise or suggest is keep talking about it. Talk to your roommate, talk to your friends, talk to your teacher, talk to people, and see how they feel. Say, "Hey this is what I'm doing," and when you talk about it more it gets you excited, it gets you passionate, and it reminds you "Oh yeah this project is really cool." So keep talking about it*. Blia Xiong '13

step will build upon the others, and the course materials and assignments will support that process. By the time you take action, you will do so with expertise, confidence, and passion.

Finally, the process you use in the course is an effective method for future civic engagement as well as for projects in college and your life beyond college. Whatever your major and whatever you do in the world, you will need to be able to research a problem fully, understand differing perspectives, collaborate with others, write and speak clearly and effectively, consider a number of alternatives, choose among those alternatives, and ultimately act. The project and the learning are exemplary of a liberal arts education. You will learn humility of knowing that you alone do not know everything about a situation, but also gain the confidence of knowing that in any given situation you have the skills to work with others to fully understand, carefully evaluate, effectively advocate, and enact change.

The purpose of the course is to immerse you in a real community problem in order for you to gain important skills that will serve you in this course, your college career, and your life beyond college. Choose a problem that will challenge you, allow you to gain and hone these skills, and be worthy of your effort throughout the semester.

> *From the beginning of the semester, it seems like such a big task that you cannot complete, but as the semester goes on, you find people who are willing to reach out to you and are willing to help you, and it all just comes together with your work and the work of others*. Michaela Holm '14

As you choose your project for the semester, consider the following project guidelines. The evaluation of every assignment will be based on the guidelines.

Project Guidelines

A successful project (one worthy of a passing grade) must meet the following guidelines. These guidelines will be used in grading your action and final project.

1. Community-Based. The project derives from a problem in a community (not solely a personal concern). Also, the research, the approach, and the process must be centered in the community and developed around its concerns in coordination with community members. A thorough understanding of the problem results in insight that leads to effective, collaborative, and sustainable solutions.

    Local. Successful projects are rooted in a community of which an individual is a part and involve a problem in which an individual is invested. Projects attempting to solve a perceived problem for another community or group of people to which one does not belong do not meet the local requirement and violate a number of other guidelines (community based, deliberative, and ethical).

    Collaborative. The project must involve others in the community. Researching or acting alone without involving others is not an option. Collaboration is a key communication skill and required for effective action in any community.

    Sustainable. The plan must be sustainable. A one-time event to raise money or awareness does little to address a problem long term and may do more harm than good. Sustainability is an important test for determining how best to address a problem.

    Appropriate. The problem and the eventual plan to address that problem must be appropriate to the context and adapted to the specific community audience. A successful project is a substantial undertaking, something worthy of a semester-long project and of the community's needs and support. Actual change is not a measure of success, but taking a significant step to address the problem is required.

2. Deliberative. Perspectives from all sides of the problem, including voices not at the table or not often heard, are essential for developing a full understanding of the problem and possible ways to address it. Solely utilizing library research or one or two experts in the community is not sufficient to move forward with a successful project. The problem must be fully explored to determine how it influences people throughout the community and to develop a plan that best honors the diversity of viewpoints.

    Evidence-Based. Civic advocacy must be based in the best available community-based and library research. The description of the problem and a viable plan to address the problem must be supported by available research. Prior to taking a stand on the problem or developing a plan to address the problem, thorough research is imperative.

3. Ethical. Of course, all pieces of the project must be pursued ethically. Research must be accurate, be correctly cited, and include all points of view on the problem. The action must be undertaken in a way that takes into account other voices, particularly those not often considered. Overall, no portion of the project (research, assignments, or action) should harm others or put anyone at risk.

    Reflexive. A successful project demonstrates thoughtfulness and reflection throughout. Both failures and successes should be acknowledged and analyzed. Failures and mistakes will happen; how they are handled is much more important. The entire project should provide insight into personal growth and development.

Past Projects

Problem	Action
Adult fitness and obesity concerns in hometown	Researched other communities' responses to adult fitness needs. Presented plan for fitness trail to the Park Board and helped implement it.
Party buses and under-aged consumption in a local community	Collaborated with high school officials to implement an education program on the harms/potential consequences of underage drinking on party buses. Also worked with a community group and testified in front of the Minnesota State Senate Transportation and Public Safety Committee.
Achievement gap for students of color in hometown high school	Researched ways that other schools addressed similar issues and collaborated with a local organization to develop a plan for local middle and high school students. Presented the plan to the school board.
Concerns about the economic and social impact of the closure of the local high school	Interviewed business owners, mayor, and local residents to determine concerns. Coordinated with local businesses and the new school to create incentives for students and faculty to patronize local businesses in towns that lost schools due to school consolidation.
Lack of support for GLBTQ individuals at a high school	Worked with school counselor, high school principal, school district superintendent, and students to start a GLBTQ support group. Coordinated with a local university to implement teacher training on GLBTQ issues.
Communication difficulties between managers and employees who are non-native English speakers.	Discussed concerns with employees and managers and researched local organizations that could provide language-training support. Proposed plan to local and district managers, and English classes were included in the orientation process at restaurants.

Past Projects (continued)

Racist incidents and tensions at a high school	Researched methods to address racism and presented a plan based in inter-group dialogue to the principal. Worked with a local university to implement a program in inter-group dialogue at the high school.
Lack of low-income housing in hometown	Worked with local agencies to develop a plan to provide additional low-income housing. Met with the mayor and presented the plan to the city council.
Frustration and guilt experienced by siblings of children with disabilities	Coordinated with school and community organizations to develop and promote a support/discussion group for siblings of children with disabilities.
Domestic violence in a local community	Collaborated with police, social service agencies, and former victims of domestic violence to develop an outreach day to promote the resources available in the community.
Bullying at a high school	Presented a plan to the principal and the school board, who both agreed to support a student-led bullying prevention and awareness program.
Cultural barriers for Latino students and families in the school system	Worked with the school to develop a Latino-parent support group to facilitate involvement in teacher conferences and school meetings.
Unsafe levels of E. coli in a large regional lake	Researched a successful plan used by another community to disinfect the beach and reduce the geese population and presented it to the city council.
Outdated and dangerous football field/track turf at hometown high school	Presented an alternative to synthetic turf and a plan to pay for it to the athletic director and booster club representatives.
Social isolation of special education students in a school district	Met with school officials and students to develop a student group to facilitate interaction between special education and standard curriculum students.