

White Paper:
Communicating Citizenship in a
Racially and Ethnically Diverse Culture

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Description: By illuminating the construction of the “good citizen,” we can bring critical insight and leadership to the negotiation of human relationships in racially and ethnically diverse communities.

Problem to Address

The centuries-long discourse of a singular American identity that presupposes certain beliefs about birthplace, religion, and biology has both empowered and imperiled groups trying to navigate their civic participation in a democracy. Texas A&M University (TAMU) stands at a pivotal intersection of these competing impulses given the dramatic changes in population predicted for Texas within the next two decades. As a flagship university whose stated mission and vision is to provide intellectual leadership on such issues as diversity and globalization, we have a responsibility to address a much-asked question: what does it mean to be a “good citizen” in multiracial and multiethnic cultures?

Research Program

The above-stated question has a number of related concerns that would need to be explored:

- How is the notion of “good citizen” framed by political and popular discourse?
- How do competing images of the “good citizen” impact the policies involving immigrants, people of color, and people of differing religions?
- What are the assumptions about “whiteness” contained in messages about citizenship?
- How does one disenfranchised group communicate its perceptions of citizenship with another disenfranchised group that it sees paradoxically as competitor and collaborator?
- What are the limits of participatory citizenship for different groups of people and how are those limits made rhetorically meaningful?
- How are resources, such as health care, provided for and expressed as opportunistic goals for certain groups of citizens, yet denied and expressed as burdensome processes for others?

Research Strength

Within the Department of Communication alone, several faculty members’ bring deep and distinctive strengths to this issue in their research:

- Ramasubramanian: message design and media
- Sharf and Stephenson: media influences and health disparities across cultures
- Mercieca: political theory and deliberative democracy
- Dorsey: rhetorical analysis and political discourse
- Burkart: media and civil liberties
- Rothenbuhler: race, class, and popular culture

Across the College there are faculty in Sociology, MALRC, American Studies, History, RESI, Political Science, Africana Studies, and other units who already bring their expertise to issues related to race, ethnicity, identity, citizenship, health, politics, and media. Finally, a variety of funding opportunities, such as from the Ford Foundation, will be aggressively pursued.

Resulting Landmark

Addressing this concern with a broad array of approaches and methodologies can contribute to our knowledge about the impulses that confound human relations, as well as inform the political policies that shape the meaning of contemporary citizenship. Sustained research on these questions should illuminate the discursive power of messages about citizenship that serve to affirm, deny, compel, disinterest, reward, and punish those who attempt to become a “good citizen.” Without doubt, if TAMU takes the lead on addressing these issues, it can become a distinctive site for policymakers and citizens who are struggling to find the communication processes that can help them to work together equitably.

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