

# Building Democracy's College: Professor Garnar gives his 'last lecture'

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History Professor Doug Garnar has been dubbed the “king of civic engagement,” but he’s quick to discount any image of royalty.

Rather, he views himself as a servant and a guide, supporting students and the larger community in the hard and often messy work of democracy.

“I have a passion that the college is a civic laboratory on its best days,” he said April 30 during his final lecture as a full-time faculty member. Of course, he wryly admits, not every day is its best day.

Garnar – who is now retiring – has spent 44 years educating citizens, and has had a profound impact on campus.

The first SUNY Broome faculty member and the first community college faculty member to be awarded the SUNY Distinguished Service Professorship, his achievements include coordinating service-learning efforts, directing the Liberal Arts Community Internship program; founding the Older, Wiser, Learners (OWLS) program, SUNY Broome’s Ecology Club and the Sleep-Out for the Homeless event; and playing an important role in creating SUNY Broome’s Shared Governance system.

He is also heavily involved in the college’s Center for Civic Engagement, leading and reinvigorating the campus’ Civic Engagement Board, organizing public deliberations in and out of the classroom, as well as political candidate debates, community events, forums and voter registration activities.

Outside of the college, he served for many years on the Urban League Board of Directors, the Greene School Board and recently became the first community college faculty member to be elected to the Board of the nationally prominent National Issues Forum, which is affiliated with the well-known Kettering Foundation. He also spearheaded efforts to create the Neighborhood Assemblies project in the Binghamton community.

He began his lecture with snippets of his life before the college. A native of Long Island, he was named after General Douglas MacArthur, and called Sandy for his blond hair. He was told to “study hard, read, read, read, get good grades and go to college” – a dedication that cost him the lead in the school play. He ran competitively in the 1960s while a student at SUNY Albany – including a 50-mile race with his coach in his sophomore year.

In a good race, his coach told him, you reach the finish line with nothing left in your tank. You give it your all, but wisely, so you don’t run dry early on. It’s a lesson that Garnar – once the college’s cross-country coach – has

taken to heart as he continues his work on deliberative democracy post-retirement.

“He personifies the community in community college,” SUNY Broome President Kevin Drumm told the Press & Sun-Bulletin after Garnar’s lecture. “He reminds everybody that serving the community is our mission.”

## **Democracy’s College**

“Democracy’s College,” the title of Garnar’s last lecture, comes from the six-volume Truman Commission report on higher education, which was also the first to use the term “community college.” President Harry Truman didn’t have a college degree himself, but believed in giving the opportunity to others, reflected Garnar, who was only 2 ½ years old when the report was issued.

The report envisioned higher education as an integral part of democracy, educating the populace for citizenship. The sentiment was influenced by the developing Cold War with the Soviet Union and the haunting images of the Holocaust, the latter of which spawned questions on how a democracy could descend into such an abyss, Garnar said.

That report spawned the creation of the five New York State Institutes of Applied Arts and Sciences – one of them in Binghamton, later to be called SUNY Broome.

The first class consisted of 80-plus veterans and a handful of women – all white. The first African-Americans – 10 in total – attended in 1956, seven years before the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

The newborn college was largely a technical school with a limited focus; the Liberal Arts weren’t added until 1962. From the beginning, it had a relationship with Cornell University, which ran seminars for the first teaching faculty.

From 1947 to 1970, which saw the development of State Tech into Broome Community College, civic education was largely extracurricular. Students formulated their own constitution, held elections and created a student newspaper. The yearbook chronicled campus life and community from 1949 until its last edition in 1986. Student government was also much larger than today because of how it was composed, Garnar remembered. And every Monday at 3 p.m., founding President Cecil Tyrrell stopped all classes and brought in speakers – an intellectual exercise that brought the campus together.

“It was through the extracurricular that the notion of preparing students for citizenship took root,” said Garnar, who came to SUNY Broome in 1971 after graduate studies at Binghamton University.

The civic mission wasn’t just limited to students, either; the president created a faculty group that eventually sowed the seeds of the shared governance system.

## **A work in progress**

Like any human endeavor, the democratic experiment can be a messy one: fraught with fits and starts, heated by discussion and contention, and dependent upon a lot of work – hard work.

Campus life slowly became more atomized and public participation dwindled – mirrored by trends in the larger culture, explored in Robert Putnam’s essay and later book *Bowling Alone*. Simply put: civic engagement appeared to be going out of style.

From the 1970s to 2010, the college’s “Shared Governance was allowed to exist,” although only in the capacity to offer recommendations to the administration, Garnar noted. Campus civic involvement dwindled, with the yearbook ending its run in 1986 and, eventually, the student newspaper. In the 1980s, the position of faculty advisor to student government disappeared, and the student government – which once had legendary basketball Coach Dick Baldwin’s salary reduced in the name of fairness – lost direct control of its funds due to SUNY mandates.

By the 1990s, participation in student government dwindled to virtually nothing; for three election cycles, there were no contested positions except for one, whose holder was ultimately appointed by administrators.

The mission of educating democracy’s citizens, however, wasn’t abandoned; instead, it went in a different direction. With the advent of General Education, a shift was underway to put civic education within the curriculum itself rather than relegate it to extracurricular activities.

“We begin to see the emergence of the concept of public work, the work of public citizens,” Garnar said.

Examples of this at SUNY Broome are [Bridging the Digital Divide](#) and the [Health for Haiti](#) global service learning course, which Garnar dubbed “public work on the grand scale.”

The concept of service learning emerged about fifteen years ago. While it has provoked questions and discussion on whether volunteerism is as crucial as other kinds of public work, it succeeds in pushing students beyond their personal agendas, Garnar said.

The college also developed a new Shared Governance model. While it only has an advisory role, it gives various stakeholders on campus – students included – a voice on issues and decisions.

“Democracy is always a work in progress,” Garnar said. “It is citizens who help to build this country.”

To foster citizen involvement, Garnar is heavily involved in facilitating [public deliberation](#), a non-argumentative discussion of important issues that focuses on aspects of a problem, potential solutions and the strengths and weaknesses of those solutions. Most recently, a [deliberative discussion of Broome County’s heroin problem](#) drew more than 500 people to the West Gym.

Through the college’s [Center for Civic Engagement](#), children as young as the second grade are engaging in public

deliberation to identify and solve problems in the local schools.

Democracy, in short, isn't old, tired and dying, but taking new forms.

"I'm hoping that we have sown seeds that will take democracy in new directions, where citizens have a much greater role in shaping the communities they want," he said.

Near the end of his lecture, Professor Garnar offered several suggestions to promote the college's civic mission. There's a student effort underfoot to create a new, independent student newspaper both online and in print. The booklet of campus history – last issued on the college's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary – should be periodically updated and reissued. The yearbook should return as a campus chronicle. Start a Democracy Wall, in which students post a question a week and passersby are encouraged to post answers. Return a faculty member to an advisory role in student government.

And look to the Student Village for other democratic possibilities, as a civic laboratory within a civic laboratory.

"The challenge is to re-invigorate passion for democracy," he said. "Democracy is hard, hard work."

**Professor Doug Garnar's "Last  
Lecture"**



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