

Introduction

Scott Henkel & Samantha Vandermeade

We are delighted to launch the first issue of *Experiments in Democracy*, the journal of the Democracy Laboratory. The Democracy Laboratory is a project of the Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research at the University of Wyoming. We are grateful to our friends at the University of Wyoming Libraries for hosting *Experiments in Democracy* on their Open Journal platform, making sure that the journal meets the highest standards of accessibility and scholarly quality.

The Democracy Laboratory seeks to empower students, faculty, and the public using interdisciplinary methods in order to connect our communities and to strengthen the quality of our democracy. Conceived as a dynamic, interdisciplinary, and intergenerational space, the Democracy Lab provides a space where researchers, students, and community members can gather so that they may collectively recognize problems, form collaborative and intergenerational teams, hypothesize and test solutions, design plans to meet shared goals, and produce research projects. From its moment of creation, the Democracy Lab promised to reanimate traditional humanistic sources, methodologies, and theories and then (re)direct them toward developing workable solutions to our grandest challenges and most difficult dilemmas, first among them: how to make liberty and justice for all a fact of life rather than a distant dream.

We draw inspiration and support from the National Endowment for the Humanities' "A More Perfect Union" initiative, the American Academy of Arts & Sciences Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship and its report *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*, and from the Grand Challenges Initiative at the University of Wyoming. In the best spirit of the Land Grant University mission, the

Democracy Lab is an incubator where people can discuss, debate, and discover ideas meant to engage our communities, address societal challenges, and improve our collective circumstances.

Each year, the Democracy Lab gathers a cohort of participants, an interdisciplinary and intergenerational team of people committed to the work of improving the quality of democracy and equality in our state, nation, and world. Cohort members receive the opportunity to hone, develop, produce, and publish both individual and collective projects related to research on the quality of democracy, curriculum development, community engagement, or journalism. Cohort members participate in an interdisciplinary curriculum designed to facilitate their individual projects, develop community engagement skills, and become more productively engaged citizens.

The culminating events of the experience are a one-day symposium in which participants share the results of their work with the public, held at the Albany County Public Library, followed by the publication of their work in this journal.

We wish to thank the Democracy Lab's advisory committee, which was composed of University of Wyoming faculty, students, and Wyoming public servants who met to discuss and design the structure, curriculum, and aims of the Democracy Laboratory.

Early conversations between colleagues about the potential of something like a humanities laboratory began in the fall of 2021, and a working group was quickly formed. Through the 2021-2022 academic year, through biweekly meetings and hours of individual and subcommittee labor, a vision for the Democracy Lab began to emerge, one which prioritized interdisciplinary methods—drawn from diverse disciplines such as anthropology, art, cultural studies, geography, history, literature, philosophy, political science, and public administration—and intergenerational mentorship, both of which characterized the Democracy Lab's earliest design and permeate its now-realized programming. It was from these meetings that both the design of the cohort program and its culminating publication emerged. To design the Democracy Lab, we studied many models for community-engaged research and civic engagement, including Leadership Wyoming, the Center for a Vital Community at Sheridan College, and the Highlander Research and Education Center.

Like all work conducted in a laboratory, and in the spirit of exploration to which we were all committed, our labor together was full of trial and error, revision and resubmission, and hypothesis and testing. The Democracy Lab, and this publication, is stronger for it, and so we want to extend our heartfelt thanks to the advisory committee members, who contributed their expertise to make the Democracy Lab possible, and to the lab's facilitators, who guide participants through its curriculum:

SCOTT HENKEL, PI, director, Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research, departments of English and African American and Diaspora Studies

AMY ALBRECHT, director, Center for a Vital Community at Sheridan College

STEPHANIE ANDERSON, Head, School of Politics, Public Affairs, and International Studies

ADAM BLACKLER, History

CATHY CONNOLLY, Gender and Women's Studies, School of Culture Gender, and Social Justice, and member of the Wyoming House of Representatives

SARA FLITNER, Flitner Strategies, former mayor of Jackson, WY, and Lead Facilitator of the ENDOW initiative

JENNIFER HARMON, Family and Consumer Sciences, College of Agriculture and Natural Resources

SHAWN REESE, executive director, Wyoming Humanities Council and former Policy Director to Wyoming Governor Matt Mead

JANEL SEELEY, director, Ellbogen Center for Teaching and Learning

SALEM STULL, former project coordinator, Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research

RILEY TALAMANTES, UW undergraduate and former ASUW President

SAMANTHA VANDERMEADE, Gender and Women's Studies

CHEN XU, Wyoming Geographic Information Science Center

The Democracy Laboratory admitted its first cohort of participants during the 2022-23 academic year. True to its design, the first cohort included University of Wyoming faculty, students, and members of the public—an interdisciplinary and intergenerational mix of people. The participants presented their work in a public symposium held at the Albany County Public Library on 29 April 2023. The essays included in this journal show a broad range of participant interests and research problems. The essays are diverse in terms of both content and methods—this reflects how the lab understands democracy: capacious, complicated, and including a wide array of voices.

Tennessee Watson's essay "Democracy at Work" was inspired by oral-historian Studs Terkel's book *Working*. Watson and her collaborators wanted to talk to ordinary Americans about their working lives and make those conversations available in a unique way: rather than traditional oral histories, the project makes the conversations available as jukebox recordings, each one lasting the amount of time it takes the worker to make a dollar.

In "WyHOMEing: Wyoming's Landscape for the Homeless," Chaley Dimoff shows that homelessness is a very personal and very human experience with many perspectives, emotions, and versions of reality, yet it is one of the most inhuman experiences a person can go through. By telling about work with Family Promise of Albany County, Dimoff makes sure that the stories and experiences of so many individuals, families, and children are heard.

How do we create and provide viable platforms for young people to be visionaries in their own communities and within our democracy? Aubrey Edwards, working with the Youth Justice Institute that she founded, co-creates spaces with young folks where they can discuss issues that affect them in their communities, explore these issues with adults, community leaders, and envision their futures through artmaking. Working alongside young people in an array of capacities for the last 20 years, often making art and always in awe of how they navigate their worlds, Edwards shows how youth advocacy is a practice and that it is a joy to be in service to young people.

Robby Bishop argues that at the heart of many contemporary concerns about increasing partisanship, divisiveness, and animosity is increasing reflexivity about the effects of how knowledge is acquired, developed, and disseminated. In an era of polarization and “post-truth,” he asks: What does it mean to know things well—as a citizen, in a democracy, today?

Nicole Foss and her collaborators ask, “What Does Sexual Assault Have to Do With Democracy?” Foss selected people from her social network who had previously shown interest in advocacy and speaking publicly about their experience as survivors. Each of the interviewees consented to participating and elected to be named as coauthors with their testimony directly transcribed. They argue that the maintenance of democracy and the project of ensuring equal citizenship are ultimately issues of justice.

In closing, we also wish to express our gratitude to Robby Bishop who, in addition to writing one of the essays for this issue, designed the format for *Experiments in Democracy* and worked with Sierra Pandey and Chad Hutchens, digital librarians at the University of Wyoming, to bring the journal to fruition. Thanks to that work, *Experiments in Democracy* meets the highest standards in digital accessibility and access to knowledge; it is also an elegant artifact, a fitting home for ideas about the quality of democracy.