



Trygve Throntveit, University of Minnesota  
College of Education and Human Development

**Reclaim democracy by restoring citizens to center of public life**

**A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview**  
March 24, 2017

**Present**

Steve Anderson, Janis Clay (executive director), Paul Gilje, Randy Johnson, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz, Paul Ostrow (chair), Dana Schroeder (associate director), Trygve Throntveit, T. Williams. By phone: Dave Broden.

**Summary**

Through a very long process, citizens--who were once central to the project and processes of self-government in the United States--have been marginalized, according to Trygve Throntveit of the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development (CEHD). He says citizens are no longer co-constructors of public life. Instead, they've been relegated to the role of consumers. And institutions of higher education have been complicit in this shift from a civic to a consumer politics.

In response to this crisis in civic life, Throntveit and three other faculty members from the U of M and Augsburg College have organized the Minnesota Civic Studies Initiative (MNCSI), housed in the CEHD. Over two years, MNCSI is convening a diverse group of widely connected people to conversations aimed at reclaiming democracy as the work of citizens.

Throntveit describes the young field of Civic Studies and its focus on ethics, facts and strategies. He notes that MNCSI and the Civic Caucus have overlapping concerns: turning to the community sector for action and recognizing the need for a cultural shift.

Throntveit discusses the differences between organizing and mobilizing and says he's not sure how technology can help develop relationships like those that would happen if people were conversing around a table. He describes the Minneapolis Residency Program, in which CEHD is a partner. The program helps highly skilled educational assistants and paraprofessionals in Minneapolis schools who want to become elementary teachers keep their jobs while they undergo teacher training.

He urges academics to get out into the community and participate as citizens. Over the next five years, he says MNCSI hopes to see some sort of long-term institutional commitment from the U of M to the project's open-ended, ongoing work.

**Biography**

Trygve Throntveit is development officer for the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development (CEHD). He is also a Dean's Fellow for Civic Studies and, as of 2017, editor of *The Good Society: A Journal of Civic Studies*. He is one of the organizers of the Minnesota Civic Studies Initiative, hosted by the CEHD. The Initiative is a group of diverse people convening to work on reclaiming democracy as the work of citizens.

Throntveit has published several articles and book chapters on the history of U.S. politics, foreign policy, and social thought and has authored two books: *William James and the Quest for an Ethical Republic* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and *Power without Victory: Woodrow Wilson and the American Internationalist Experiment* (University of Chicago Press, available June 2017).

He received his bachelor's degree in history and literature from Harvard College and his master's and Ph.D. (2008) in history from Harvard University. He taught for several years at Harvard and did a postdoctoral

fellowship at Dartmouth College's John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding before moving back to the Twin Cities.

Throntveit grew up in Saint Paul and is a 1997 graduate of Saint Paul Central High School.

### **About the Minnesota Civic Studies Initiative (MNCSI).**

MNCSI, founded in late 2016, is funded by a grant from Chicago's Spencer Foundation and is hosted by the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development (CEHD). Organizers of the Initiative are Clayton R. Cook, Tania Mitchell and Trygve Throntveit of CEHD and Harry C. Boyte of Augsburg College. For the next two years, MNCSI will convene a small, but widely connected, group of culturally, ideologically and professionally diverse Minnesotans with the goal of reclaiming democracy as the work of citizens.

MNCSI was conceived as a local and practical response to a national moral and political crisis. Americans of diverse political, social, and cultural perspectives agree that our public life is dysfunctional and fear that our major political institutions--from government bodies to political parties to the media--are inadequate to the task of improving it. MNCSI's organizers view these problems as consequences of a decades-long development by which citizens, once central to the project and processes of self-government in the United States, have been marginalized.

### **Background**

Since September 2015, the Civic Caucus has been undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major community problems. On Nov. 27, 2016, the Caucus issued its report based on that review, [Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process](#). The Civic Caucus interviewed Minnesota Civic Studies Initiative (MNCSI) co-organizer Trygve Throntveit to learn how MNCSI hopes to reclaim democracy as the work of citizens and how its work might intersect with that of the Civic Caucus.

### **Discussion**

**The Minnesota Civic Studies Initiative (MNCSI), hosted by the University of Minnesota, is convening a select group of strategically positioned citizens for a two-year series of conversations about civic renewal.** MNCSI co-organizer Tryg Throntveit from the U of M's College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) said that his and his colleagues' intention was to bring together a culturally, ideologically and professionally diverse group of around 15 to 20 widely connected people to build personal and working relationships. The aim of the conversations is to explore and model ways to restore citizens to the center of public life through discrete public projects they select and pursue together.

The focus of the conversations, he said, is what role they and other citizens, as well as the U of M and other institutions, can play in reclaiming democracy as the work of citizens. Throntveit interviewed all of the people in the group to see if they were capable of having civil conversations and would welcome different opinions. Members of the group have, at various points, included:

- [Amira Adawe](#) of the Minnesota Department of Health, who is very active in issues facing the Minnesota Somali community;
- [Ron Anderson](#), vice chancellor for academic and student affairs, Minnesota State (formerly MnSCU);
- [Peter Bell](#), former chair of the Metropolitan Council and former member of the University of Minnesota's Board of Regents;
- [Toni Carter](#), Ramsey County commissioner;

- Kelly Chatman, pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in North Minneapolis;
- Samuel Clark, city attorney for Saint Paul;
- Gary Cunningham, CEO, Metropolitan Economic Development Association;
- Anil Hurkadli, program officer, Thrivent Financial Foundation;
- Mary Anne Kowalski and Kris Kowalski-Christiansen, owner and CEO of Kowalski Markets;
- Marina Lyon, former director of the Pohlad Foundation;
- Kevin McDonough, pastor of St. Peter Claver Parish in Saint Paul and Incarnation Parish in Minneapolis;
- Wintana Melekin, director of civic and political engagement, Neighborhoods Organizing for Change;
- Trina Olson, executive director, PFund Foundation;
- Mitch Pearlstein, founder of the Center of the American Experiment;
- Francisco Segovia, director of Waite House, part of Pillsbury United Communities;
- Jim Scheibel, former mayor of Saint Paul;
- Chuck Slocum, consultant and former executive director, Minnesota Business Partnership;
- Vic Rosenthal, former executive director of Jewish Community Action;

**MNCSI's co-organizers felt public life was facing a crisis, even before the 2016 election.** "There was dysfunction in our political culture and our institutions seemed inadequate to address it," Throntveit said. "We view the problems as consequences of a very long process by which citizens, who were once central to the processes of self-government in the United States, have been marginalized. They're not co-constructors of public life. They're relegated to the role of consumers."

"Institutions of higher education have been complicit in this shift from a civic to a consumer politics," he continued. "Most have embraced the role of factories producing ideal workers or of launch pads for students' personal economic advancement and abandoned the task of equipping students and cooperating with the broader public to sustain conditions of genuine self-government."

**Civic Studies is a young, robust, nationwide field of research and practice.** "It provides a vocabulary to free our deliberations and our imaginations from the stale conceptions that are perpetuated by prevalent political speech," Throntveit said.

Civic Studies is focused on three related questions:

1. Ethics: What is right and good?
2. Facts: What is actually going on?
3. Strategies: What would work or be worth experimenting with?

"Civic Studies seeks to engage not just scholars from multiple disciplines, but any thoughtful citizens committed to catalyzing civic renewal," he said. It's interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary, or beyond academic disciplines.

"The process we envision for our deliberations is sort of a freestyle or off-road

Minnesota Process," he said, referring to the public-policy process recommended in the Civic Caucus report.

"The forms and habits are similar, but the course and

finish line are mysterious."

Within this broad civic studies framework, Throntveit said, MNCSI organizers hope participants in the conversation will strive to achieve three major goals: 1) new relationships revealing unlikely allies in causes to which the participants are already devoting time and resources, or wish to be; 2) concrete strategies for catalyzing civic renewal among Minnesota's education, business, public service, faith and other communities; and 3) specific recommendations for how an institution such as the University of Minnesota can become an ongoing catalyst for the kind of civic politics the participants will be practicing.

"It's a field, but really it's an aspiration to engage in sustained, interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary inquiry into what is a good society," Throntveit said. "Civic Studies is trying to theorize and describe the basic habits of discourse, of thinking and of ways of interacting that will empower communities to be collaborative co-creators of their life together. Participants accept their conflicts of interest and values, but recognize that they must do some sort of work together."

**MNCSI and the Civic Caucus have overlapping concerns.** Throntveit said the most obvious overlap is the turn to the community sector for action, as discussed in the Civic Caucus's November 2016 report, [Looking Back, Thinking Ahead: Strengthening Minnesota's Public-Policy Process.](#)

He said from MNCSI's perspective, there are two main reasons--one negative, one positive--to turn to the community sector:

1. The negative reason to turn to citizens is that formal political institutions, at least at the state and national levels, are in gridlock.
2. The positive reason is what MNCSI considers the purpose and promise of self-government. Like the Civic Caucus report, MNCSI's organizers emphasize that creative policy and creative solutions to common problems emerge from an organic, plural and serendipitous process of hard work, discussion, mutual interrogation and tolerant deliberation. Those don't emerge from trying to apply pre-existing, ideological formulas or negotiating trade-offs among them.

Throntveit said another overlapping concern for MNCSI and the Civic Caucus is the need for a cultural shift. Part of the work of making that shift will include diagnosing and understanding the previous, unwelcome cultural shift to a consumer politics. "Part of it will include new techniques of engagement to close the gap between citizens and their government and between citizens and other citizens," he said. "The work of the Civic Caucus is one effort at coming up with a new way or a revised way or a rehabilitated way of doing that."

He said it will take a concerted effort by individuals, communities and institutions to get people in rooms and in relationships and let a new culture emerge.

**MNCSI and the Civic Caucus might differ slightly in emphasis.** Throntveit said MNCSI is cautious about foundations or universities assigning specific tasks to citizens. "Ideally," he said, "foundations and universities would both identify and address specific policy issues--do public policy as traditionally understood--and

facilitate the more open-ended, rigorous, yet also serendipitous, activity of citizens getting together to discuss, define and redefine the problems and concerns they brought to the encounter initially."

The balance has often been skewed toward institutions assigning tasks to citizens, he said. MNCSI was conceived as a means of fostering the activity of citizens getting together to do that work themselves.

"We don't need to have a false dichotomy between public policy in more formal settings--rigorous, empirical analysis of various public problems and the careful proposal of solutions--and another form of public analysis, which is more citizen-focused and serendipitous," Throntveit said.

**MNCSI is taking an "organizing" approach to counteract recent populist, "mobilizing" responses to the frustration that is widespread among Americans.** Throntveit made that remark in response to an interviewer's comment that we can't reach out to get more people to participate in public life without confronting the growth of an often angry, divisive populism in recent years. "Organizing begins with creating relationships among people, rather than mobilizing like-minded groups against other groups," Throntveit said.

There is room in our politics for mobilizing, he said, but our political culture is too heavily weighted toward mobilizing *against* others, rather than organizing *with* others. Organizing groups are often underfunded, swamped with work, and promoting complex messages and, thus, don't get the publicity that the mobilizing approach gets.

**What's the role of technology in the process of developing relationships as we would if we were engaging with people around a table?** An interviewer asked that question, pointing especially to the tendency of younger citizens to rely heavily on technology. Throntveit said he hasn't figured out yet the role of technology in this process. He tends to think we need to find ways to utilize it without being irrationally devoted to it. Young people do communicate remotely, but they also desire to be involved in face-to-face activities, he said.

He said the overrepresentation of young people in mobilizing actions, as opposed to voting, shows they want to get together to do something. He suggests that organizers use technology for recruitment and for letting people know where things are going on, but not simulcast these events or otherwise obviate the need to be there in person. Unless technology evolves to where people can engage remotely in the full sense--so they can read each other's body language and so, if someone says something thoughtless, she or he can't turn off the screen and escape--we need to be careful about relying on it. So far, social media has proven a better mobilizing than organizing tool.

**Is there a role for an institutional citizen?** An interviewer asked that question and Throntveit said there must be a role for institutional citizens. Indeed, MNCSI was founded because its organizers felt that institutions of higher education have largely abdicated their civic function. Instead, they market themselves as producing the workers employers need.

The interviewer commented that at times in the past, corporations have defined their corporate social responsibilities in conversation with the local communities that were critical to their business. Perhaps due to the multinational or global character of most big business today, corporate institutions are now defining their responsibilities without input from citizens.

**Will MNCSI have an impact on teacher training?** An interviewer asked that question and Throntveit responded that CEHD itself is working hard with schools, community partners and families to better prepare teachers for the types of situations they'll confront. The college is also working to create broader and more resilient support networks for new teachers. That work long predates MNCSI, although it was one reason that the organizers felt CEHD was a good home for the initiative.

That said, teacher training might well be an issue that MNCSI's participants choose to address. Throntveit said the National Association of Scholars, which he described as a conservative group, issued a report in 2016 in which it said colleges of education shouldn't be involved in what the group sees as "radical, progressive politics." The association defined radical, progressive politics as a set of activities that included service-learning programs, crafting of culturally sensitive curricula, and advocacy of improved and better-funded human services both within and outside of school buildings.

"But," he said, "there's no other way to prepare teachers to address any of the problems besetting our schools and our communities than to make them aware of just how many services and needs schools are asked to provide and meet--and just how few resources they receive in proportion to the challenge."

**The Minneapolis Residency Program is one example of CEHD trying to be creative in working with school districts and the community.** Under the program, Throntveit said, Minneapolis schools are asked to identify educational assistants and paraprofessionals who are highly skilled and want to be elementary school teachers, but who can't afford to quit their jobs and get a master's degree.

CEHD, partnering with the Minneapolis Public Schools and the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, created a structure where the people who are identified by schools keep their jobs and get teacher training at the same time. The teachers-in-training, who must have a bachelor's degree before starting the program, commit to coming back to the Minneapolis school district to teach.

In 2017-2018, the program will include a yearlong co-teaching experience in-between intensive summers of University of Minnesota coursework. Program candidates will each earn a stipend, will be eligible for benefits during the residency and will pay a reduced U of M fee for the licensure program.

**What are the mechanisms and processes by which the more involved citizens MNCSI envisions might influence people in office?** An interviewer asked that question after commenting that he sees two ways in which citizens can become effective with respect to government:

1. Run for office; or
2. Try to influence people who are already in office by (a) trying to set an agenda and priorities for them and maybe working out specific proposals; and (b) coming into the decision-making process and trying to influence it, which includes lobbying and special interests.

Throntveit responded that we need people to run for office and to influence people in office, especially if they commit sustained resources and time to set an agenda for a policymaker. "In an ideal world, there might even be a role for lobbying," he said.

But, he said, there's a third way: to have citizens participate in broad, informed and sustained discussion of their public life, which, in turn, should inform and broaden the perspectives of elected officeholders. "We need to have citizens see their role as informing policymakers, rather than demanding that what is in their personal interest be embodied in policy and served by every decision," Throntveit said. "Of course, we also need officeholders who will pay attention to such discussions and media that will cover them."

**In the past, a number of U of M faculty members brought themselves into the community as citizens who happened to be part of the University.** An interviewer made that comment and gave the examples of Esther Wattenberg, Jan Hively, Frank Boddy, John Adams, Charlie Backstrom, John Brandl and others. He asked whether there should be pressure for current faculty members to do the same. "It was enormously helpful to the community," the interviewer said.

In response, Throntveit said that part of the problem is a lack of thought leadership coming out of American universities on public problems. To be fair, that reflects many decades of academic experts being ignored by

policymakers, business interests and citizens who close their ears to information suggesting a need for difficult decisions or sacrifices. Nevertheless, Throntveit agreed that communities needed more from the academy. "Universities have accepted their role as factories of ideal workers, rather than nurturers of democratic citizens," he said. "A balance between what I see as a university's ideal economic and social roles can't be achieved unless academics get out into the community and participate as citizens."

Throntveit recommended the website [Footnote1.com](http://Footnote1.com), which tries to digest and communicate publicly relevant academic expertise and foster connections between experts and policymakers.

### **Why is MNCSI housed in the CEHD rather than in the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the U of M?**

An interviewer asked that question and Throntveit said the reason is that it grew out of the work of CEHD faculty members who were interested in getting out of the University and engaging with citizens. "We got Dean Jean Quam, who has long worked to cultivate an ethos both civic and entrepreneurial in CEHD, to agree that we could spend some of our time that way," he said.

He noted that he and others applied for research funding for the project from the University, but were denied. "It was stiff competition from very talented people across the University," he admitted. "Still, I think another disadvantage was that we're not doing something that falls under the traditional definition of research. Our goal is to treat the work of analyzing, redefining and taking control of public life by citizens as a form of research, married to practice."

He said if the MNCSI organizers had wanted to make their group more University-faculty weighted, they would have asked for Humphrey School, Law School, Public Health and other faculty to be involved. But the group wanted to be mostly non-U of M faculty; they wanted to avoid appearing like a group of experts looking for high-profile endorsements of their latest theory.

**What is the vision for what MNCSI will look like in five years?** An interviewer asked that question and Throntveit responded that the answer largely depended on the conversation group's concerns, passions and ability to identify common projects. A personal interest of his is the thorny problem of how to narrow the achievement gap in the Twin Cities. But he sees his role, and that of his colleagues, as gleaned from the group some guidance as to what an institution of higher education like the University of Minnesota could and should be doing to catalyze civic renewal on an ongoing basis.

"I wouldn't say the U of M is heavily on the side of Civic Studies now," he said, in response to a question about how MNCSI had gotten the U of M "on board" with the program. "It's mostly unknown beyond CEHD," Throntveit said. "But that is one of our goals for five years from now. We hope to see some sort of long-term institutional commitment to our open-ended, ongoing work."

**The Civic Caucus should be both bold and humble in suggesting ways for foundations to do what its report is asking them to do.** Throntveit gave that response to a question about how the Civic Caucus should approach the foundation community. In its report, the Civic Caucus looked to that community both to prioritize a list of issues Minnesota must address and to call for proposals from organizations who would approach those problems using the Minnesota Process outlined in the report.

He said the Civic Caucus should seek audiences with foundation executives to argue that they should fund a few groups interested in this type of more open-ended work. "Too many foundations place too much emphasis on outputs," he said. "If you can't quantify it, they won't fund it. These are things that can't always be quantified. That is not to say that foundations are doing the 'wrong' things, but merely to acknowledge that they could do more and different things. If the Civic Caucus could communicate that message without either disparaging the work that foundations are doing or prescribing such work in a dogmatic way, it would do a huge service to the community."

**There doesn't seem to be a lot of interest in civic engagement from the collective corporate community.** An interviewer made that comment and added that it would be in corporations' enlightened self-interest to support programs like that of MNCSI and the Civic Caucus. "To pursue the Civic Caucus agenda on civic engagement, we need broad participation from every segment of the community, especially from high-profile segments," the interviewer said. "Corporations are in a position to elevate the profile of this and to get serious discussion from across the community." Throntveit agreed.