

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Agents of Change

Go to college, get good grades and land a decent job when you graduate. You might call it the path of least resistance, the universally accepted route to the American Dream. Harry Boyte thinks we can do more.

An architect of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Boyte is a proponent of incorporating civic engagement into higher education. By doing so, he argues, students become agents of change in their communities and professions. “The election was a wake-up call for educators to take the democracy school ideal to another level of focus,” he noted. “We need democracy identity not simply activity, democracy colleges, not simply democracy centers.”

Boyte will bring his message of engagement to UCSB Thursday, Nov. 17 at 4 p.m. in the McCune Conference Room in the Humanities and Social Sciences Building. His talk, “Public Universities and the Future of Democracy,” is part of the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center’s (IHC) yearlong public events series, Community Matters. “The series is dedicated to exploring two main themes — how democratic values and aspirations can be advanced through civic engagement and how the mission of the liberal university can best be realized when it provides academic opportunities for students to embrace their roles as democratic change-makers,” said [Susan Derwin](#), IHC’s director.

According to Derwin, Boyte believes universities must give students a sense of empowerment. “Democratic change happens in communities when citizens work

together in pursuit of common goals,” she said. “Especially in this time of civic divisiveness, students need to be reassured that their voices will be heard and that they count, and they need to know that we as a university are invested in fulfilling our educational mission through academic programs that advance diversity, civic agency and inclusive community-building.”

Boyte’s work has given him deep insights into democracy and civil engagement. He worked for the Rev. Martin Luther King as a field secretary with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. In the following decades he’s authored nine books on citizenship, democracy and community organizing. He has worked with numerous foundations and organizations in the U.S. and abroad dedicated to community development and civic renewal. He is also a proponent of civic studies, a transdisciplinary field that focuses on the communal creation of and participation in democracy.

That focus on civic engagement dovetails with UCSB’s commitment to active involvement in the community, Derwin explained. “We’re developing partnerships with schools and organizations that will enable our students to engage with Santa Barbara community members through jointly conceived collaborations,” she said. “Through an afterschool program at the Lower Westside Community Center, for example, some of our studio art and dance students will be working with local youths on visual and performing arts projects. Through another partnership with IV Elementary School, UCSB students are serving as interpreters during parent-teacher conferences. Our goal is to create programs that will help our students to realize their potential as engaged, active citizens.”

Cole Cohen, the IHC’s program and events coordinator, said civic engagement “is not just formal education, but education out in the world. Your work in the university is a building block that’s part of this larger society. Engaging as a community member with members of other communities, both on and off campus, prepares students to be lifelong thinkers about values, ethics, and the social and culture changes we’re seeing.”

Remixing the Imagination

Public participation on a grand scale will be the focus of a Community Matters workshop, [“Think Critically, Act Creatively: World Building for Civic Engagement,”](#) Friday, Feb. 3 from 10 a.m. to noon in the McCune Conference Room. Led by Harry Jenkins, a professor of communication, journalism, cinematic arts and education at

USC, the event will ask participants to imagine a future better world and what it will take to make it possible.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.