



REPORT

Lessons from a Team of Bloggers on Community Engagement

May 2023

John B. Stephens

Adrienne-Nicole Abija

[John B. Stephens](#) is an associate professor of public administration and government at the School of Government. [Adrienne-Nicole Abija](#) received a dual master's degree in city and regional planning and in public administration from UNC-Chapel Hill in May 2023. Her area of interest is diversity, equity, and inclusion through public engagement with a focus on local government policies and programs.

The School of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill works to improve the lives of North Carolinians by engaging in practical scholarship that helps public officials and citizens understand and improve state and local government. Established in 1931 as the Institute of Government, the School provides educational, advisory, and research services for state and local governments. The School of Government is also home to a nationally ranked Master of Public Administration program, the North Carolina Judicial College, and specialized centers focused on community and economic development, information technology, and environmental finance.

As the largest university-based local government training, advisory, and research organization in the United States, the School of Government offers up to 200 courses, webinars, and specialized conferences for more than 12,000 public officials each year. In addition, faculty members annually publish approximately 50 books, manuals, reports, articles, bulletins, and other print and online content related to state and local government. The School also produces the *Daily Bulletin Online* each day the General Assembly is in session, reporting on activities for members of the legislature and others who need to follow the course of legislation.

Operating support for the School of Government's programs and activities comes from many sources, including state appropriations, local government membership dues, private contributions, publication sales, course fees, and service contracts.

Visit sog.unc.edu or call 919.966.5381 for more information on the School's courses, publications, programs, and services.

Aimee N. Wall, DEAN

Lauren G. Partin, ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR FINANCE AND OPERATIONS

Jennifer Willis, ASSOCIATE DEAN FOR DEVELOPMENT

FACULTY

Whitney Afonso	Timothy Heinle	David W. Owens
Gregory S. Allison	Margaret F. Henderson	Obed Pasha
Lydian Altman	Cheryl Daniels Howell	William C. Rivenbark
Rebecca Badgett	Joseph Hyde	Dale J. Roenigk
Maureen Berner	Willow S. Jacobson	John Rubin
Frayda S. Bluestein	James L. Joyce	Jessica Smith
Kirk Boone	Robert P. Joyce	Meredith Smith
Mark F. Botts	Diane M. Juffras	Michael Smith
Brittany LaDawn Bromell	Kimberly Kluth	Carl W. Stenberg III
Anita R. Brown-Graham	Kirsten Leloudis	John B. Stephens
Peg Carlson	Adam Lovelady	Charles Szypszak
Melanie Y. Crenshaw	James M. Markham	Thomas H. Thornburg
Connor Crews	Christopher B. McLaughlin	Shannon H. Tufts
Crista M. Cuccaro	Kara A. Millonzi	Emily Turner
Leisha DeHart-Davis	Jill D. Moore	Amy Wade
Shea Riggsbee Denning	Jonathan Q. Morgan	Jeffrey B. Welty
Sara DePasquale	Ricardo S. Morse	Richard B. Whisnant
Kimalee Cottrell Dickerson	C. Tyler Mulligan	Teshanee T. Williams
Phil Dixon, Jr.	Kimberly L. Nelson	Kristina M. Wilson
Jacquelyn Greene	Kristi A. Nickodem	

© 2023 School of Government
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Use of this publication for commercial purposes or without acknowledgment of its source is prohibited. Reproducing or distributing the entire publication, or a substantial portion of it, without express permission, is prohibited. For permissions questions or requests, email the School of Government at publications@sog.unc.edu. Other School publications can be accessed on our website: sog.unc.edu/publications.

Introduction

In December 2014, a group of twelve people started the *Community Engagement Learning Exchange (CELE)* blog to explore different experiences and views related to community engagement. Unlike blogs that advocate on behalf of a community or organization or that focus on specific social or political issues, this effort was designed to offer three kinds of perspectives: grassroots community people, local government employees, and academics specializing in community engagement. The goal was to create an honest, respectful online conversation about various civic and community topics with moderated comments so that contributors and readers could exchange ideas and learn from each other.¹

Purpose, People, and Commitment

The purpose of the *CELE* blog was to foster mutual learning. It aspired to generate a positive give-and-take of diverse views on participation and engagement theory, practice, and impact. Although initiated by two academics, the desired audience was people who care about civic engagement across a variety of settings. To make it more accessible, specialist jargon was minimized.

Since *CELE* was a forum for a broad range of thoughts and experiences, Rick Morse and John Stephens recruited a “three-legged stool” of contributors: community members, government workers, and academics. When the blog launched in December 2014, of the twelve people who’d pledged to be regular contributors, three were academics, four were local government employees with communication and/or public involvement duties, and five were community folks. They all lived in North Carolina, but by mid-2015 guest contributors from outside North Carolina were also blogging. (Profiles of most of these bloggers and their blog posts can be found at <https://cele.sog.unc.edu/contributors/>.)

The collective commitment was to provide readers with a new blog post every week. This meant that each contributor would write at least one post, from 400 to 700 words, every ten to twelve weeks. As long as their posts touched on the theme of community engagement, contributors were free to choose their topics. Each contributor was also asked to post two comments a month on their colleagues’ posts. The hope was that regular exchanges among the core contributors would encourage outside readers to engage and offer comments. Five years later, in the fall of 2019, *CELE* paused to assess its accomplishments and shortcomings. Though *CELE* is no longer regularly updated, it is still accessible online at <https://cele.sog.unc.edu/>.

1. For a description of the initiation and early operation of *CELE*, see John B. Stephens, “Bloggging for Community Engagement Learning—An Experiment,” *National Civic Review* 105, no. 2 (Summer 2016), 52–59, <https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/ncr-articles/bloggging-community-engagement-learning-experiment/>.

How Does *CELE* Compare to Other Participation and Engagement Blogs?

There is a wide range of social media focused on information or viewpoints related to community engagement. To determine if *CELE* was unique in its structure and content, we analyzed the websites of twenty-seven relevant organizations and twenty-four of their associated blogs (a few of the organizations didn't have blogs) to explore specific points of comparison and contrast.

Similarities to the *CELE* Blog

CELE shared some similarities with the twenty-four blogs: The length of each blog post was usually about 700 words. The content focused on civic-engagement best practices, and many of the posts were reflections on community-engagement issues from an academic or theoretical point of view. The blogs' overarching goal was to promote civic engagement and encourage conversation. None of the blogs seemed to have a strong comments section. Very few of the posts had more than three comments, and some of the blogs didn't have comment sections at all.

Differences from the *CELE* Blog

The writers of the comparison blogs included city planners, state and local officials, tech gurus, and public participation professionals, among others. *CELE* featured more community organizers than most of the comparison blogs. Several blogs were part of larger organizations, and the content was aimed at members of those respective organizations (e.g., IAP2 Canada, <https://iap2canada.ca/>). Some of the community-engagement consultants and professional associations used blog posts to promote their services, professional-development seminars, or publications.

Posts on the comparison blogs had a strong bent toward technological developments in the field of community engagement. Blogs like *Citizen Lab* (<https://www.citizenlab.co/blog>) and *Bang the Table* (now called *The Granicus Blog*, <https://www.bangthetable.com/blogs/>) used their platforms to market software for governments to better engage their citizens. Other blogs advocated for specific policies (e.g., NCPIRG, <https://pirg.org/northcarolina/latest/>) or acted as networking sites for local government leaders (e.g., National League of Cities, <https://www.nlc.org/citiesspeak/>). The blogs of the Sunlight Foundation (<https://sunlightfoundation.com/>) and Public Agenda (<https://www.publicagenda.org/>) focused on providing training for government leaders.

Some of the comparison blogs had stronger social and visual media than *CELE*. They sometimes featured podcasts and interviews with contributors that made the experience feel more personal (e.g., University of Mississippi's *Engaged! Community Engagement Blog*, <https://dce.olemiss.edu/engaged/community-engagement-blog/>, and the National Civic League's news blog, <https://www.nationalcivicleague.org/news/>). And while *CELE* tended to focus on current local issues, larger organizations focused on national issues such as public policy and police brutality.

CELE by the Numbers

In the first five years, *CELE* had a total of 194 posts, which was about 75 percent of the goal of one blog post a week. In addition to the nine to twelve committed contributors, there were twenty-three guest bloggers who wrote a total of thirty-seven posts. Bloggers were asked to use hashtags (keywords and phrases) from twenty standard categories, so that readers could more easily find posts on engagement topics that interested them. The five categories with the most posts were “Innovation,” “Capacity Building,” “Civic Education,” “Dialogue and Deliberation,” and “Outreach Methods” (<https://cele.sog.unc.edu/categories/>).

Traffic Trends

The first three months had the highest levels of engagement. December 2014 through February 2015 had up to 1200 views per day. Views quickly dropped after this period to around 50 per day and stayed there through the next six months. In the last few months of the blog’s first year, that number steadily increased. Over time, except for a few spikes in readership (from 700 to 1000 in a day), the daily views ranged from 75 to 100. This level of readership was lower than desired, but we did not have a target number by which to define success. From 2015–19, the strategy was to enlist guest bloggers and draw on their formal and informal online networks to attract readers. This was largely unsuccessful.

Popular Blog Posts

On average, each blog post had two to three comments, which was well below our goal of strong online interaction. However, the ten most commented-on posts had from eleven to twenty-three comments. The topics of the most popular posts varied widely, from participatory budgeting (e.g., “Beautiful Budgets: Opportunities and Gaps in Online Local Budget Engagement,” <https://cele.sog.unc.edu/beautiful-budgets-opportunities-and-gaps-in-online-local-budget-engagement/>) to police-community relations (“Steps for Working on Police-Community Relations—Where Do We Start?,” <https://cele.sog.unc.edu/steps-for-working-on-police-community-relations-where-do-we-start/>).

The high levels of engagement with these posts may stem from their relevance to current events. Posts such as Michelle Bir’s “Fayetteville History and City Symbols: The Weakness of Online Opinion” (<https://cele.sog.unc.edu/fayetteville-history-and-city-symbols-the-weakness-of-online-opinion/>) and “Black Lives Matter: My Fayetteville Experience of Losing Black Citizens” (<https://cele.sog.unc.edu/black-lives-matter-my-fayetteville-experience-of-losing-black-citizens/>) directly respond to present concerns in the Fayetteville community.

Bir, a core contributor from 2016–19 who wrote four of *CELE*’s ten most popular posts, chronicled several debates pertaining to police accountability, homelessness (“Homeless Challenges: Magnanimity and Responsibility Increases Effective Engagement,” <https://cele.sog.unc.edu/homeless-challenges-magnanimity-and-responsibility-increases-effective-engagement/>), and panhandling (“Panhandling: A Public Nuisance or the Enemy of Economic Development?,” <https://cele.sog.unc.edu/panhandling-a-public-nuisance-or-the-enemy-of-economic-development/>). Readers seemed to enjoy her targeted take on what are otherwise national issues.

Other popular posts took bold stances on issues while offering practical solutions for practitioners. Since the School of Government is a nonpartisan entity,² the blog’s administrators took

2. For more on the School’s policy-neutral and nonpartisan values, see <https://www.sog.unc.edu/about/mission-and-history>.

steps to not censor opinions, and many writers were not shy in offering policy recommendations. Comments on the most popular posts came from individuals seeking recommendations for their own communities or challenging a writer's ideas.

Guest contributors took the opportunity to offer personal reflections on projects they were working on. For example, in “Dorothea Dix Park: A Park for Everyone” (<https://cele.sog.unc.edu/dorothea-dix-park-a-park-for-everyone/>), Dan Parham presented an inside look at design issues and public-engagement efforts related to Raleigh's Dorothea Dix Park.

The length of the posts with the most comments ranged from 300 to 1800 words.

Successes and Shortcomings

To develop a balanced assessment of *CELE*'s strengths and weaknesses, we interviewed several contributors³ and sought feedback from three people who had never seen the blog.⁴ We integrated these comments into our analysis.

The successes included the blog's content, its variety of topics and viewpoints, and its usefulness as a platform to help academic findings reach a general audience. Its shortcomings included the inexperience of some of the bloggers, the lack of diversity in a few areas, the unattractive visual presentation, and the small number of posts that prompted a vigorous exchange of comments.

Successes

In our estimation, the blog reached about two-thirds of its goal to provide a forum for multiple voices to interact and learn from each other. It did, however, fully achieve its goal of providing a compelling range of perspectives and topics. One post offered different views on the ways in which language can create an impression of inclusion and exclusion. Another addressed physical barriers to community participation. There were timely posts on some of the controversies surrounding Confederate monuments. A few posts stimulated a lively exchange of comments, which demonstrated some degree of mutual learning.

The contributors mentioned the value of having a space to speak about issues of local and personal concern. They appreciated the opportunity to share firsthand experiences rather than just academic or analytical ideas. Unlike other publications or online platforms, *CELE* allowed them to address timely matters in a personal way.

Many contributors chose not to write to a specific demographic but to craft their posts for a general reader. Like the writers, the range of people who made comments on the most-viewed posts included regular citizens, activists, and practitioners.

Writers found that the blog helped them engage with other practitioners and served as a networking tool. Posts were shared within their professional circles, creating opportunities for conversations outside of the blog itself.

3. We are grateful for the feedback of these *CELE* bloggers: Kevin Amirehsani, Michelle Bir, Brian Bowman, Emily Edmonds, Beth McKee-Huger, Rick Morse, and Melody Warnick.

4. External reviewers were asked to examine specific aspects of *CELE* (purpose, contributors, subject categories, and particular blog posts) and to read at least two posts in two categories that interested them. Thanks to Zainab Baloch (founder of Raleigh's Young Americans Protest), Keiva Hummel (communications coordinator, National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation), and David Plouffe (heritage planner, Calgary city government, and public-participation professional).

We determined that a mix of timely “hot topics” (affordable housing, protests over Confederate monuments) and “evergreen concerns” (access, inclusion, impact of community engagement) was a strength of this blogging experiment. One external reviewer acknowledged that the blog had a “good local connection” and was “a good place to post research and ideas.” The same reviewer also noted that “trying to connect universities, practitioners and citizens is worth doing” and in that regard the blog achieved “some success.”

Nonetheless, most of the posts did not get many comments, and every regular contributor fell far short of commenting twice a month on their colleagues’ blog posts—even Morse and Stephens, the blog’s initiators, didn’t attain that goal. To address this shortcoming, Morse and Stephens solicited guest bloggers as a means of attracting new readers and comments. Two of the most commented-on posts came from guest blogger Eric Jackson. Both of Jackson’s posts were about local budgets and online and in-person engagement (“Beautiful Budgets: Opportunities and Gaps in Online Local Budget Engagement,” <https://cele.sog.unc.edu/beautiful-budgets-opportunities-and-gaps-in-online-local-budget-engagement/>, and “Open Budgets Ho! The Way forward for Online Budget Engagement,” <https://cele.sog.unc.edu/open-budgets-ho-the-way-forward-for-online-budget-engagement/>). As mentioned earlier, Michelle Bir also wrote several posts that inspired numerous comments.

A second operational success was keeping close to the goal of weekly posts, at least until about spring 2019. After that, the average was two to three posts per month through August 2019. Thus, there was fresh material for the small number of readers (under 100) who subscribed to the notification list and for readers who found the blog through other online platforms (usually Twitter and Facebook).

For Morse and Stephens, one way to leverage the value of the blog was to share insights about it in academic publications. Dr. Stefanie Panke took the lead on formulating quantitative and qualitative analyses of *CELE*’s content as well as the blogging experience. The research focused on informal learning spaces online,⁵ the idea of digital citizenship in a social media landscape,⁶ and trying to get “beyond the echo chamber” in order to promote critical discourse and informed reflection.⁷

Shortcomings

The greatest shortcoming was an absence of exchange and learning among contributors as measured by comments on posts. Rarely did one blogger mention or challenge another contributor’s ideas in a post. It’s possible the blog had an impact elsewhere, but without comments on the website, that remains pure speculation. Michelle Bir shared her *CELE* posts via Facebook and gained some comments on that platform. As far as the blog’s overall goal of mutual education

5. John Stephens & Stefanie Panke, “Creating Learning Spaces in the Blogosphere: Lessons Learned from Initiating a Group Blog on Community Engagement,” *Proceedings of E-Learn: World Conference on E-Learning* (Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education, Washington, D.C., 2016): 234–41, <https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/173946/>.

6. John Stephens & Stefanie Panke, “Exploring Digital Citizenship in the Social Media Landscape through the Lens of a Blogging Community,” *Proceedings of EdMedia: World Conference on Educational Media and Technology* (Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education, Amsterdam, 2018): 1762–67, <https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/184405/>.

7. Stefanie Panke & John Stephens, “Beyond the Echo Chamber: Pedagogical Tools for Civic Engagement Discourse and Reflection,” *Educational Technology & Society* 21, no. 1 (January 2018): 248–63, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26273884>.

on community engagement, one reviewer believed *CELE* worked well for local government and academic readers but not as well for community activists.

We judge this as a downside of providing maximum freedom for writers to choose their own topics and approaches. While this allowed for easier access to their unique experiences and analyses, it did not encourage a deeper examination of topics or connections among the contributors.

There were two jointly authored posts, which enabled a degree of dialogue and exchange. One reviewer commented that this “two-voice” approach was unusual and valuable and noted that it should have been used more often. It was not used more often, however, because *CELE*’s administrators were cautious about overloading their community and government bloggers with specific assignments.

One reviewer suggested that the purpose of the blog needed to be written in concise, clear language: the “About” section (<https://cele.sog.unc.edu/about/>) used too much jargon in trying “to specify the roles of academics, community leaders and government employees, which makes it hard to follow.”

Some reviewers were critical of the lack of diversity of the contributors and the limited range of viewpoints. One reviewer wrote that it “seems like most of the exchange is happening between people in academia or of similar ideologies.” While some aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) were observed, one reviewer did not see contributors who were explicitly working on civic engagement with DEI or truth-and-reconciliation-process expertise. Adding a contributor on equity in journalism or community-based journalism would have offered a different lens.

The blog did not keep up with changes in methods of online engagement. According to one reviewer, the blog had “very long posts with few graphics. Format seems very academic and ‘stuck in 2017.’” The need to stay on top of social-media trends is an important lesson for the *CELE* blog.

The blog had preparation and operation challenges. Some contributors felt unprepared for their roles. All bloggers—regular and guest—had varying levels of experience writing blog posts. Additional onboarding exercises would have made them more comfortable with producing content and would have set clear expectations for formatting. Some bloggers felt the lack of clarity led to an unnecessary amount of revision and editing. Most contributors noted that even with a schedule and periodic reminders of when their next posts were due, they sometimes felt pressed for time. Since the blog administrators did not see significant variation in the quality of their posts, this sense of pressure did not appear to affect their contributions.

Several contributors felt that the lack of marketing may have contributed to the low levels of engagement. For example, though Morse and Stephens established [@sog_cele](#) on Twitter, they did not use it regularly. This critique supports the larger theme of needing to expand the types of content shared: online platforms lend themselves well to visual storytelling, to sharing information in short formats, and to the traditional promotion of links across social media sites.

The final area of deficiency is related to the actions readers could take after reading a *CELE* blog post and the impacts of community-engagement efforts:

- a) According to one reviewer, the posts should present more of a call to action or prompt an answer to a “So what?” kind of question.
- b) Another reviewer stated that *CELE* needs to focus more on the impacts of engagement—how it affects the person participating as well as the broader community—which is important not only for accountability but also for showing that participation does produce results.

Lessons and Recommendations

We think the aspirations of the *CELE* blog were worthwhile, especially in a polarized online environment. The following lessons may help guide similar efforts to reach and connect experts and participants in community engagement, from nonprofit and government organizers to evaluators of its impacts.

1. Develop a multimedia platform. The 2014 start of the *CELE* blog predated TikTok, Snapchat, and the popularity of podcasts as social-media outlets for engagement. The approach should include text, audio, and video to create a more attractive experience that engages people through multiple avenues. This recommendation came from two of our external reviewers and from Nikki Abija. Given their experiences with YouTube, podcasts, and other online media, they all judged *CELE* as behind the times. Blog writers should have a “social media kit” to support cross-posting, Tweeting, creating short videos, and taking other steps to build audiences and views.
2. Start with a small group of writers and create a clear plan for engaging them on specified topics or questions. While a higher level of planning and commitment than *CELE*'s may limit potential contributors, it will likely ensure better focus and ongoing exchange. Being more explicit in asking “So what?” or other provocative questions can encourage comments from readers and might lead to other forms of response by way of blogs, vlogs, and so forth.
3. Do more jointly authored posts. The reviewer who praised the “two-voice” approach singled out these posts:
 - Rick Morse and Cate Elander’s “Gentrification and Collaborative Engagement: What If?” (<https://cele.sog.unc.edu/gentrification-and-collaborative-engagement-what-if/>) and
 - Emily Edmonds and John Stephens’s “Participation, Trust and Location-Based Social Media Government Monitoring” (<https://cele.sog.unc.edu/participation-trust-and-location-based-social-media-government-monitoring>).

The direct dialogue offered in these posts is more likely to elicit readers’ comments.

4. Be ready to respond to current events that link community-engagement concepts and experiences with hot-button issues. For example, after the August 2017 Unite the Right rally and counterprotests in Charlottesville, the *CELE* blog posted “After #Charlottesville—What Kinds of Engagement on Statues and Symbols in Passionate Debate?” (<https://cele.sog.unc.edu/after-charlottesville-what-kinds-of-engagement-on-statues-and-symbols-in-passionate-debate/>).

Conclusion

The *Community Engagement Learning Exchange (CELE)* blog was a unique experiment from 2014–19. Drawing from the experience and perspective of grassroots, government, and academic sources, the blog offered hundreds of posts by regular and guest contributors on a wide range of topics related to community engagement. Though the blog’s content was strong and varied, it fell short of reaching its goal of stimulating online conversation and mutual learning among bloggers and readers. We hope the lessons learned from this experiment will promote similar work by civic-life advocates who aim to democratize mutual learning on community engagement through online conversation.



**SCHOOL OF
GOVERNMENT**