

Association for Community Colleges

Introduction to the initiative

The Association for Community Colleges (ACC) is a non-governmental and non-profit organization working for the development of a European (transnational) public sphere. The main idea of the ACC is that a unique way of promoting this objective would be through establishing European Community Colleges on a common European level and all over Europe. The idea of European Community Colleges is inspired by the boarding school format of the Nordic folk high schools, dating as far back as N.F.S. Grundtvig's times (mid-19th century). By bringing European adults together in the informal environment of European Community Colleges the ACC creates space for European adults to meet, share experiences, opinions, and discuss topics important to them.

The ACC defines European Community Colleges as schools that:

- take their starting point in an idea and an objective that is defined by a non-governmental group of citizens running the school,
- have as their ideal boarding-school courses that last for a longer period of time (the longer the better),
- organize courses on topics of common (European) interest in accordance with the idea of the group running the school,
- are "governed by culture" in the sense that life at the individual schools should be influenced by local traditions and culture,
- have mixed groups of European adults as their target group; adults who are interested in learning and thus also in paying part of the courses themselves.

ACC's vision, mission and activities can be described as combining both a broader and a more particular approach. All parts of this presentation include the following two aspects: first, it is a general introduction of the underlying values that the organization stands for and second, it is a description of specifics that distinguishes the ACC method of working with questions of Active Citizenship and Democratic Society.

Summary

All the activities of the Association for Community Colleges are by definition transnational and involve many countries. The involvement of 'countries', however, happens by the direct involvement of the citizens of (not only) European countries. In fact, the nearly 600 members of the ACC come from all the following countries: Albania, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Georgia, Greece, Guinea, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, F.Y.R. Macedonia, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom and USA.

Apart from the body of individual members, which illustrates how important diversity and widespread geographical representation are for the ACC, the structure of the organization consists of the ACC International Programme Office (currently located in Denmark) and a number of local ACC Committees that are formed for the purpose of organizing specific European Community College Courses. While the ACC International Programme Office stands for continuity, the ACC Committees ensure that each individual project is carried out taking into account the very specifics of a particular region and/or topic.

As outlined above, the aim of this nomination is to combine two approaches, which are both reflected in the time aspect as well. While the association strives for long-term goals as outlined above, a significant part of its work consists of proving by doing. Since 2000 the ACC has carried out more than 20 European Community College courses and other European events inspired by the boarding school format of the Nordic folk high schools. The European events have taken place in Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, the Netherlands, Romania and Slovenia.

Project Description

The ultimate goal of the Association for Community Colleges is more than ambitious. It is to develop a European (transnational) public sphere. The main strategy and the core idea of the ACC is that a unique way of promoting this objective would be through establishing European Community Colleges on a common European level and all over Europe. To this end, the ACC combines policy work, lobbying, networking and research together with the actual carrying out of European Community College courses with European participants discussing issues of common (European) interest.

The variety of topics of the European Community College courses is dealt with in many different ways. Some of the topics may require input through lectures to ensure that the participants have the relevant amount of knowledge to be able to discuss later. Workshops are created so that the participants can debate a particular topic in smaller groups, and later plenary sessions make it possible to share the thoughts of groups and individuals and to get response from the rest of the participants. An equally important part of the European Community College courses is the getting to know one another. The

participants involve themselves in different games and socializing events during the course, but just as important here is the non-scheduled time, where the participants get the chance to learn about fellow Europeans.

The uniqueness of the ACC method lies in combining the formal, non-formal and informal learning aspects and placing the three of them into the framework of residential community colleges where everyone is a learner and a teacher at the same time. Apart from acquiring knowledge and skills that enable them to participate as active citizens both at the local, national and transnational level, the participants create a sample European public sphere where they practice the art of co-citizenship - learning and living together while being enriched rather than hindered by diversity. This way they pass the stage of stereotype and put faces on the otherwise impersonal map of Europe.

By joining a European Community College course the participants enter a network of fellow Europeans who are now aware of each other and aware of the different aspects that play an important role in the decision making processes. The diversity of the participants is the key idea of the European Community Colleges. There could be no cultural exchange if there was no diversity. The ACC therefore involves as many partners from various European countries as possible in each project.

The European Community Colleges are organised by ACC Committees throughout Europe with the assistance of the ACC International Programme Office. This organizational structure enables the effective sharing of know-how at a common level while running the individual projects in a decentralized way. The ACC International Programme Office functions as a resource bank with budget proposals, project descriptions, ideas and documentation material available to its members.

The office is also responsible for maintaining and updating a common website www.acc.eu.org that serves both as reference point for ACC members and as a promotion portal displaying the results of ACC policy work, articles written and other material apt for dissemination.

Part of the website is the so-called "Multiplier", a section that provides reference material such as project descriptions, budgets, high resolution photos for printing, guidelines etc. to be used by members wishing to organize their own events. The "Multiplier" is thus a resource base containing the experiences gained at previous European Community College courses.

The ACC also works as a publisher. Every year an Annual is produced which is distributed to members, partners and media all over Europe. The magazine "ACCENT - Community Colleges for Europe" is an opportunity for the ACC members and the organizers of European Community College courses to publish the results of an event. Until now ACCENT has been published with the following titles: "Europe of Rights Community College 2003. This is just a beginning" (ACCENT No. 1) and "Transylvania Community College 2003. Youth Proposal for a Common European Constitution" (ACCENT No. 2). The ACCENT No. 3 "European love and other challenges of enlargement" and No. 4 "A European Demos" were issued in 2006. The ACC is also the co-publisher of the "European songbook", compiled by Naomi Woltring and featuring 44 songs from all over Europe.

As part of the work for establishing European Community Colleges, ACC is active also as a lobbyist. Particularly the preparation and policy development of Youth and other programmes of the EU has the attention of ACC. Time and again there are chances to express opinions in this process. The aim of contributing to the development of a European public sphere can be served even better through the next generation of EU programmes. Under headlines like "participatory democracy" and "citizenship in action" the ACC attempts to point out how current programmes limit possibilities. The ACC opts for the opportunity to organise real European educational events for all layers of society.

The European Community Colleges organised by the ACC Committees have focused on various topics. The origins of the ACC date back to the Minority Courses organized at a Danish Folk High School, Højskolen Østersøen, in 1997 and 1998. Minority issues have also been the theme of some of the European Community College courses arranged later on - the future of minorities in the EU and the rights of minorities in the EU. Human Rights have also been the guiding topic of European Community Colleges; as well as European citizenship and European identity.

In order to develop a European public sphere it is also important that the public is aware of the political and social system of the EU. Several European Community Colleges have focused on the different aspects of and developments in the EU; such as the European constitution, European policies, EU enlargement, rural Europe, political representation in Europe and the system of European political institutions.

The ACC has committees in France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Macedonia, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania and United Kingdom, as well as several transnational committees. The committees work within the ACC to establish European Community Colleges and they use the ACC for networking and promoting their activities.

The recruitment of participants takes place at a European level thanks to the wide network of partner organizations and individual members willing to promote ACC activities. The active involvement of participants during the individual Community College courses happens naturally by putting emphasis on sharing, valuing of input, cherishing diversity and challenging stereotypes.

Impact

The impact of the work of the ACC can be seen at several different levels. Each individual participant of any of the European Community College courses could give a personal testimony mapping his/her development in terms of knowledge, skills, values, friendships and networks developed. The steadily growing number of members of the ACC shows that individual Europeans have been influenced by their participation in the European Community College courses and wish to support the idea of establishing European Community Colleges as a pathway towards a European public sphere.

The ACC committees and their local and European partners have developed the precious know-how enabling them to effectively run transnational events with a specific common theme and guided by local culture. In order to enhance and multiply this know-how, a number of Community College courses have worked with the very idea of establishing permanent European Community Colleges. One of the outcomes of such an event was the preparation of the "Act on European Community Colleges", which set up the guiding principles for a future First European Community College (FECC).

Another important part of developing the idea of European Community Colleges is to be able to learn from previous experiences, to learn from each other. The ACC has therefore established the Bridging Community Colleges where organizers of previous Community Colleges can meet with future organizers to exchange and develop ideas. The Bridging Community Colleges has resulted in many concrete ideas for new European Community College courses. ACC as an organization has thus matured and can provide guidance and support to groups and individuals who share its vision of becoming active European citizens by engaging in a debate with fellow European citizens within the format of a Community College course.

Similarly to impact, success can be recognized and tracked at many different levels within the scope of activities of the ACC. Each individual positive evaluation at the end of a European Community College course, every new member of the ACC, every group of active Europeans setting up an ACC Committee and willing to put a lot of effort, time and energy into organizing a European event - all these are an expression of success of the ACC work. Recently, Europe has been facing some turbulent times due to the complicated ratification process of the European Constitution. "Europe in crisis", however, revealed the potential of and the need for the kind of meeting places that the ACC has been campaigning for ever since 1999.

After the referenda in France and the Netherlands earlier this year, Scandinavian papers reported about Margot Wallström's plans to develop democracy through European citizens' meetings of many kinds. The major plan, launched under the title Plan D, seems to mirror the two concrete proposals formed by participants of European Community College courses: the "Action 6" and the "Act on European Community Colleges"; and in the wider sense everything that ACC has stood for since 1999.

Plan D is meant to allow European citizens to meet and discuss issues of common interest and thereby develop the much demanded European public sphere. As an example Mrs. Wallström has been quoted for saying that: *"EU should and could support the building up of a pearl-chain of forums leading through Europe - a sort of People's Universities or Folk High Schools"* (translated from Swedish - Svenska Dagbladet, June 4th, 2005). This is what the ACC has accomplished a number of times. It has arranged European Community College courses and proved that the idea works. By bringing Europeans together it has created the room needed for developing a European public sphere.

The work of the Association for Community Colleges was also recognized by the Organizational Development Network (ODN) who appreciated the ACC's ability to work transnationally, adjusting and switching between the centre and periphery (the Office and the Committees) while not having money as a motivating factor and depending only on voluntary work. The global potential of this approach made the ODN convinced that ACC deserves to be the recipient of the 2004 Outstanding Global Work Award, which was presented to the chairperson of the ACC in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

As stated in the introduction, the Association for Community Colleges combines the work for a long term vision with proving the viability of that vision by carrying out events that illustrate what would otherwise be just empty statements. It is this symbiosis that has given the organization the necessary amount of self-confidence and strength to carry on in spite of relying on volunteer work and ad-hoc funding for most of its events. It is the same symbiosis that allows for continuous learning from own mistakes and refining of strategies and best practice.

There is no doubt that without the extensive network of partners, supporters, sympathizers and members, the ACC Committees and the ACC International Office would be unable to carry out its work - neither at the wider policy level nor at the level of specific projects.

They key is the European bottom-up approach

Factor of each and every individual project completed by the Association for Community Colleges is the synergy created by bringing Europeans together and giving them the space and tools necessary to explore complex issues of common interest. It makes all the difference whether you discuss democracy, active citizenship, human rights etc. in a classroom full of people with similar cultural background, identity and value system or whether you make the very same issues alive by handing them over to a transnational polity. A small sample of European public sphere with participants as diverse as possible transforms the topics discussed from an academic and impersonal list into issues that matter in the daily lives of the participants; they can be illustrated by personal stories and experiences and they only make sense at the European level when discussed and explored by Europeans themselves. The Association for Community Colleges has proved on numerous occasions that the its

mission has validity and that the establishment of European Community Colleges would enhance active citizenship and democracy at the European level by creating a common European public sphere.

Facts:

The ACC board currently (2006-7) consists of the following persons:

- John Petersen (Århus), chairman
- Conchi Gallego (Madrid), vice
- Mjellma Mehmeti (Skopje), secretary
- Jan-Christoph Napierski (Berlin), treasurer
- Dasa Bolcina (Trieste), member
- Erik Jentges (Berlin), substitute
- Emma Yeoman (Cambridge), member
- Elisabeth Alber (Turin), substitute
- Lucie Cizkova (Copenhagen/Prague), member

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