

# Mapping Legitimation of Civic Engagement through Undergrad, Graduate, and Faculty Participation

Gregory G. De Blasio and Emma Woeste

## Abstract

*The authors provide a framework for understanding the process of legitimation and the status of legitimacy as it applies to civic engagement and community-based initiatives. They apply their own case study experience with a social circus organization as an example of how legitimation occurs during the practice of civic engagement. The authors outline strategic and tactical direction for establishing legitimacy with stakeholder, community, and institutional relations.*

Academic programs in public relations are natural sites for civic engagement. Public relations students and faculty routinely embrace opportunities to address issues outside the classroom with enthusiasm. Work outside the classroom can involve the delivery of creative messages, campaign strategies, media management, and other aspects of professional public relations counsel. The opportunities for students and academics include internships, class projects, and sites for volunteer work and research. Opportunities are most often tied to nonprofit institutions with the nonprofit status contributing significantly to what becomes a very comfortable working relationship with student and faculty groups. Clients from nonprofit institutions can appreciate the many work hours that come free of charge when working with students and faculty while the call for civic engagement within academia is being answered.

Civic engagement as it is performed by university students and faculty is recognized as being a worthwhile endeavor because of its contribution to community well-being, its ability to extend learning and research activity beyond the classroom, and quite simply for its own taken-for-granted character. The quality of “taken-for-grantedness” was among Parsons’ (1956) criteria for organizations and institutions to attain the status of legitimacy among their constituent publics. Because of the taken-for-granted worth of civic engagement, the concept invites question about how students and faculty who practice civic engagement enact a strategy of legitimation through its practice. In a very offhand way, legitimation occurs as students receive course credit and grades and when faculty receives recognition for their efforts to fulfill the civic engagement expectations as outlined by their respective institutions. But in order to better understand the value of civic engagement, the process of its legitimation and how it maintains a status of legitimacy should be the subject of more formal means of evaluation. The research presented in this paper does not seek to question the value of civic engagement, but instead explores how civic engagement attains a status of legitimacy among those actors who either practice or benefit from its practice. A case study analysis of an organization that has served as a civic engagement site for Northern Kentucky University (NKU)

students and faculty provides the insight into organizational legitimacy and the process of legitimation holds the organization participation of students and faculty.

This paper is presented in four sections. The first reviews the concept of legitimacy and how it relates to the Circus Mojo organization, which is the site of this study. In addition, the process of legitimation as it is enacted by the organization and through civic engagement activities is explained. The second section details a history of civic engagement activities that have included the participation of both Circus Mojo personnel and NKU students and faculty. The third section suggests a framework for recognizing and understanding a process of legitimation as it unfolds. Although the framework most directly applies to the context of Circus Mojo, its suitability for broader applicability will be argued. Finally, a fourth section draws inferences from the activities of Circus Mojo and from the noted civic engagement initiatives concerning a process of legitimation and the status of legitimacy.

## **Legitimation and Civic Engagement**

Although this research focuses on what is certainly a process of legitimation, the process that is observed is not part of a compartmentalized program at NKU, nor is it related to a formal management initiative that can be traced back to Circus Mojo. A more accurate description of the observed legitimation process would place it as part of an ongoing-shared interest of public relations study and practice between university and community publics. Process-related activities allow NKU students and faculty to learn how public relations could be best practiced by Circus Mojo and similar organizations. In turn, Circus Mojo fulfills its need to communicate with constituent publics through public relations initiatives and, at times, with NKU as a communication-practitioner partner. The relations between the two organizations are built upon sharing information, planning, and acting on behalf of each other. The characteristics of the legitimation activities by the university and Circus Mojo are distinguished from more typical focus areas that receive the lion's share of attention in legitimation study. Legitimacy is often questioned when an organization falls short of fulfilling expectations or operating within acceptable norms. A crisis situation calls an organization's legitimacy into question, for example.

The study of organizational legitimacy examines how organizations attain and maintain a status of legitimacy among the constituent publics or stakeholder groups to which they are connected. Organizational legitimacy as informed by Parsons (1956) questions whether an organization operates outside the values and norms of its constituent groups. If an organization operates outside the prevailing norms of demonstrating sensitivity toward children, for example, its status as a legitimate childcare facility would be placed in jeopardy. Early macro conceptions of legitimacy created fundamental sociological ground, addressing broad institutionalized political, economic, and religious systems (Boulding 1971; Parsons 1947; Weber 1978).

The study of process-oriented legitimacy examines discrete policies, decision criteria, or other actions taking place among stakeholder groups. The process-oriented view of

legitimacy helps to keep attention focused on the institutionalized aspects of society. Scholars have examined how governmental and non-governmental organizations and institutions strive to attain legitimacy by closely minding the processes of decision-making and public debate (DuPuis and Gillon 2009; Palazzo and Scherer 2006; Rønningen, Flø, and Fjeldavli 2004). The relation of institutionalization to legitimacy is particularly germane to the current research. Established rhetorical forums operate to constrain speakers representing organizations to employ reasonable arguments within fixed bounds, which cause public communication of decision-making and debate to be institutionalized (Mayhew 1997).

Much of the attention dedicated to legitimacy also includes its two dominant but very different forms: (1) legitimacy as a conferred status, and (2) legitimacy as a deliberate strategic determinant for organizational activities (Aurini 2006; Boyd 2000; De Blasio 2007; Suchman 1995b). Whether conferred or part of a rhetorical strategy designed to sway public discourse, legitimacy establishes an organization as deserving support from its publics (Hearit 1995). Mayhew (1997) examined Parson's (1947, 1956) normative approach to legitimacy and the likely tempering influences on public discourse advertising and public relations practitioners and other "professional communicators" cause. Can we sometimes be persuaded to support an organization or policy that is really not deserving of our support, but because its managed public discourse creates an inaccurate picture of the current circumstances?

Scott (2008) helps to make the argument that what is institutionalized also is legitimate in a discussion of schools and their operation. The goals of schools, for example, are clearly connected to the greater cultural values of education and for following procedures and processes that make the successful attainment of goals probable. Operating this way, schools maintain their status of legitimacy among constituent groups and also become institutionalized. Schools deliver value beyond any immediate lesson, and therefore they operate beyond the technical requirements at hand (Scott 2008). Institutions, therefore, are expected to create and preserve value. The categorization of Circus Mojo as social circus and the civic engagement activities of NKU producing a unique value will be discussed in later sections of this paper. The subsequent and appropriate discussion of legitimation activity is not limited to separate organizations or institutions operating discretely, but instead incorporates examination of the legitimation activity that binds organizations and institutions.

With legitimacy relating to the values and norms of society or of a given community, it follows that the degree of involvement organizations and institutions have with other community actors would be important. The community-based research models of Strand et al. (2003) help to explain Circus Mojo's and NKU's civic engagement as it involves shared goals, greater community involvement, and social change. Both Circus Mojo and the university routinely interact with hospitals, children's centers, local governments, and with communities of practice that share special interests or needs. When civic engagement includes collaborative participation, organizations can be seen more as part of a community rather than as separate entities. The idea of examining

legitimacy and evaluating civic engagement as an integrated community effort is central to the purpose of this research.

## **Civic Engagement**

Every institution has a vision of what civic engagement should be. Some are better positioned to incorporate civic engagement into their more ordinary or daily routines. A characteristically routine approach to civic engagement can be applied to class syllabi, faculty guidelines, or as program components. Rather than being limited to only formal requirements and their implementation, civic engagement as part of everyday routines would be more natural and free flowing.

Extending beyond a formal statement of direction that constricts civic engagement, Northern Kentucky University has been fortunate to be able to collaborate with an organization that has a civic engagement agenda of its own. NKU was introduced to Circus Mojo, a local social circus organization. The introduction and ensuing association granted NKU the opportunity to develop shared interests relating to engaging community and other stakeholders common to both organizations. A social circus organization by definition is dedicated to pursuing a range of community-building activities. The institution of social circus connects with schools, hospitals, and other community organizations through educational instructions and entertainment performances to support the personal development of young people by enhancing physical and social skills (Bolton 2004; Le Plus Petit Cirque du Monde – Centre des Arts du Cirque Sud-de-Seine 2008; Mota 2010). The daily routines of Circus Mojo, therefore, call for and require collaboration among community actors as the organization delivers educational and social services. In a related way, NKU drives community collaboration through its own commitment to education and to civic engagement. As Circus Mojo and NKU began to collaborate, an association filled with promise and mutual benefit was formed. Both organizations realized the immediate value of planning and delivering communication programs aimed at reaching and resonating with stakeholder groups, many of whom were bounded by geographic community.

## **Civic Engagement and Internships**

The first Circus Mojo-NKU shared initiative was the assignment of a public relations student intern to help Circus Mojo establish an identity among community participants and to better address media management strategies. The student contributed to Circus Mojo's web presence and social media efforts while fulfilling internship requirements that are part of the public relations program. Another NKU student volunteered to document Circus Mojo's activities and interactions with community groups with a series of video productions. In keeping with the spirit of social media communication, many of the completed segments were uploaded to YouTube and other sites as part of an ongoing communication initiative. Video documentation of community involvement included performances, meetings with local business leaders and visitors from abroad, and with city officials interested in the continuing restoration of the Circus Mojo facilities.

## **Civic Engagement and Group Participants**

Anyone with an interest in civic engagement does not need to look too closely to realize how Circus Mojo collaborates with numerous community actors on a daily basis. Circus Mojo appeared to be a natural partner for civic engagement initiatives with interested NKU students and faculty. Given the immediate challenges facing Circus Mojo, the area of public relations and communication counsel continued as an obvious and natural ground for shared initiatives. The business and the tasks of running a social circus are understandably complex. Consider, for example, the tasks associated with training staff, managing facilities, and scheduling performances. Planning and delivering communication initiatives to constituencies within the community can be equally complex and a huge resource drain on the organization. Fortunately, a mechanism was in place that could supply Circus Mojo and other organizations with close to 600 work hours during the course of a semester to help.

Each semester, the undergraduate Public Relations Cases & Campaigns class (PRE 377) at NKU takes on a class client. The students begin by meeting the client, in this case Circus Mojo, to become acquainted with issues, problems, or opportunities that can be addressed through communication initiatives. The initiatives take the form of a planned campaign complete with objectives, actions, and a means of campaign assessment. The Circus Mojo-NKU campaign focused on the community collaboration among Circus Mojo staff, local children, local government, and investors. By involving students with an outside organization, they can begin to develop an understanding of the value of civic engagement through its actual practice. Public relations counselors, including student counselors, typically require an inside and very detailed view of the organization in order to do their best work.

The NKU students saw firsthand, for example, Circus Mojo's dedication to community collaboration, the university's commitment to engaging the community, and practical value as it relates to the subject matter of their public relations course. Exposing students to programs encompassing various forms of community collaboration is a vital step toward developing community leaders (Heath 2007). Considering the mission and work of Circus Mojo with its own constituent publics and its association with NKU and the public relations program, a longer-term form of community collaboration with additional value was put in play. Value is manifest in the act of collaboration and in the results the collaboration is likely to produce.

*“Autonomous stakeholders with varying capabilities . . . directed toward mutually accountable, typically innovative ends, producing long-term social change at a local level in a cooperative, relatively nonhierarchical relationship that is negotiated in an ongoing communicative and principled process”  
(Heath and Frey 2004, 194).*

Following the involvement of Circus Mojo and the Public Relations Cases & Campaigns class, the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapter at NKU arranged to provide additional counsel to the organization. PRSSA students

looked forward to implementing some of the planning that was completed by the Cases & Campaigns class and took up day-to-day media management tasks as well.

## **Civic Engagement and Research Interests**

Although significant, the association Circus Mojo and NKU formed through engaging a student intern, completing a class-sponsored project, and its extension by a student organization had not yet reached its limits. Being a fairly new organization in the community, Circus Mojo was careful to consider how its image could be perceived throughout the community. (Note: at the time of this writing, Circus Mojo has been functioning in its fully operational, refurbished facility for less than one year but had been working toward that end for more than two years.) Although a circus represents fun and a source of entertainment to some, others could consider a circus setting and its performers to bring heretofore unknown and unsavory behaviors to the small town it would call home. Circus Mojo's principal owner and director expressed the concern about the organization's image in the community as a need for Circus Mojo to attain legitimacy among all its stakeholders.

Questions concerning how Circus Mojo would go about attaining and maintaining legitimacy among its stakeholders represented the start of the current research undertaken by NKU faculty and a graduate student interested in organizational legitimacy. The study of organizational legitimacy, in this case, is inclusive of perspectives associated with community-based research and civic engagement. In keeping with the traditions of action-oriented, community-based research (CBR), we argue that studying legitimacy and Circus Mojo will have a hand in leading to social change. By participating further in CBR, NKU is helping to "mobilize and empower the community" (Strand et al. 2003, 101).

A key difference between traditional research and CBR is the social change that CBR research provides (Strand et al. 2003). CBR doesn't focus on gathering meaningful data alone. CBR seeks data that will advance the community in ways that are similar to the legitimation goals of Circus Mojo and civic engagement. Circus Mojo seeks to enhance its role in the community through its school, hospital, and cultural programs. NKU, or any university committed to civic engagement, seeks to better understand and explain the value of connecting to community outside university walls with students and faculty. As we look ahead, this research will examine community collaboration as a necessary part of civic engagement and its legitimation.

## **Legitimation Test**

In keeping with the idea of CBR advancing community goals, a framework is needed for a better understanding of how organizations can achieve legitimacy within a community. A literature review suggested four conditions related to stakeholder, community, and institutional relations necessary for a more comprehensive understanding of the legitimation process. Achieving legitimacy is an important goal for any enterprise. Legitimacy is essential for an organization to stay in business and satisfy community

expectations (Palazzo and Scherer 2006). Examining the process of legitimation enabled for reflexivity considering that Circus Mojo, in fulfilling its organizational mission as social circus, and the researchers, in fulfilling their civic engagement and scholarly objectives, needed to attain a status of legitimacy with each other.

The conditions for legitimacy include stakeholder perspectives and community relations as informed by community connectedness. In addition, because an organization cannot declare itself to be legitimate, the idea of the organization supporting the legitimation of other organizations is considered. Lastly, institutional relations are examined by way of the degree to which Circus Mojo can speak on behalf of the institution it represents. In this case, Circus Mojo represents a social circus.

### **Stakeholder Informed**

First, a definition of a stakeholder needs to be operationalized. “A stakeholder refers to any individual or group that maintains a stake in an organization in the way that a shareholder possesses shares (Fassin 2009).” Second, some differentiation among stakeholder roles needs to be established. Those with moral obligations to the organization play a role that is certain to affect the outcomes of the communication and other actions of the group (Phillips 2003). By being stakeholder-informed, an organization’s public communication is based upon information and needs that the community has expressed. The April 2010 edition of the Circus Mojo newsletter provides an example of Circus Mojo being stakeholder-informed when the organization invited community groups to be a part of the upcoming summer camp. This also shows that Circus Mojo uses civic engagement. NKU’s involvement included a videographer intern capturing the highlights of the event and students coming to a performance that showcased their learned talents. A second example showed the collaboration with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. This organization also is engaged in social circus and offered the opportunity for Circus Mojo guests to watch their performance. In return, Circus Mojo invited Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus to visit with NKU and other community members.

### **Community Connectedness**

Connectedness is the existence of transactions tying organizations to one another that could include contractual relationships, participation of personnel in common enterprises, and informal ties (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). The owner of Circus Mojo visited the Brazilian Embassy to discuss partnerships with their social circus network in May 2010. This collaboration showed the power of coming together within an altogether separate institution. The two groups were able to share ideas and grow their organizations to become better entertainers and entrepreneurs for the social circus community. Through the use of “Mojo Medicine” at the local Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, Circus Mojo engages with ill children in the community. This tie between Circus Mojo and the hospital is the result of fulfilling the mission of social circus. Tending to relationships is more fruitful than assessing the value of one-off transactions. A relationship is long lasting and a transaction is a one-time occurrence (Post, Preston, and Sachs 2002). The relationships that universities form

through civic engagement should be long lasting, so that students and faculty can build upon the connection over time.

### **Avenues of Legitimation**

Organizations achieve legitimacy as they work through “avenues” of legitimacy. The idea of avenues we argue are not simply routes of convenience or indicators of direction, but evidence of how organizations achieve legitimation only through their interaction with other organizations and institutions. Circus Mojo participated in the 2011 Artswave, which took place in the greater Cincinnati area. This event consisted of different stakeholder groups coming together to watch the progress of Circus Mojo performers. The event invited collaboration with outside community organizations, such as the Cincinnati Roller Girls (roller derby) and a local nursing home. NKU was among the stakeholder groups who came to watch this presentation that showcased the social circus aspects of this organization. In addition to NKU, Circus Mojo has tended relationships with various community organizations, such as the Madisonville Arts Center. Circus Mojo introduced the concept of circus art to this group and informed their stakeholders through the May 2010 newsletter.

### **Acts as a Prolocutor**

The final element of the test looked at Circus Mojo as a prolocutor. A prolocutor is “one who speaks or acts on behalf of a group” (Mayhew 1997). Circus Mojo has the function of supporting social circus. Their August 2010 issue highlighted their circus performance as therapy at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital. Circus Mojo visits with children residing in the hospital and helps to ease their stay. By teaching children to perform different tricks or to solely entertain them, Circus Mojo utilizes its Mojo Medicine techniques to make a difference. In addition, the July 2011 issue showcased social circus as a worldwide phenomenon by joint performance with international performers and Circus Mojo. Circus Mojo performers are making a great impact within the social circus institution. The May 2010 edition elaborated on their talk at the Northern Kentucky International Trade Conference on behalf of social circus. The presentation is a prime example of being a prolocutor for social circus and informing the community of its benefits.

Through the concurrent execution of stakeholder, community, and institution relations, Circus Mojo achieves legitimation. Circus Mojo’s legitimation impacts community members and organizations, such as NKU. Involving students, faculty, and alumni through civic engagement with this organization builds a strong community network. This collaboration extends an example for other organizations to mirror this behavior.

## **A Legitimation Framework that Applies to Social Circus and Civic Engagement**

Among the earlier questions that guided this research was the need to understand how Circus Mojo—a single organization—sought to establish its own legitimacy among

constituent publics. Organizations often relegate community as a key stakeholder public and Circus Mojo was obligated to do the same considering its nature and dependency on community resources. Additional questions concerning social circus, its unique nature, and how it could be explained as a phenomenon or institution soon required attention as well. How Circus Mojo sought to establish legitimacy, therefore, required that concepts related to community and institutionalization be given fairly equal weight with those related to organizational legitimacy. The need to expand the realm of understanding organizational legitimacy was further underscored by the civic engagement initiatives that were underway, which brought Circus Mojo and NKU within each other's operating spheres. The research questions that fit so well concerning the legitimation of Circus Mojo also applied to what was being called civic engagement. Civic engagement is heavily dependent upon community resources to operate and does so as an institution unto itself. Consider, too, that civic engagement as it is practiced in this case is related to an educational institution.

Holding to our primary subject of legitimacy, we conclude that questions concerning organizational and institutional legitimacy are more complex than previously regarded. We propose criteria necessary for an understanding of a legitimation strategy. Strategic legitimation occurs within and among three sites: (1) as an individual managed organization; (2) as a community member; and (3) as a representative, if not a prolocutor, of an institution. The legitimacy test applied to the public newsletter communication of Circus Mojo in the previous section of this paper was inclusive of the criteria for understanding a legitimation strategy. As a case-study example, the newsletters met the conditions of the test for communication that informs a legitimation strategy. An argument for how legitimation is understood can now be extended to civic engagement by examining some of the strategic commonalities of social circus and civic engagement.

Community is a complex concept. Should every geographically bound community be looked upon as a discrete unit, or is a community to be considered principally as part of the greater civil society? Whether community is regarded as complete in its own right or something that iterates a greater public form, community is not a fixed monolithic concept (Bhabha 2004). Examining the roles of social circus and civic engagement in the community requires care and considerable facility with the concept. When engaged in community-based research, for example, Strand et al. (2003) emphasize the need for research activities to improve conditions in the community. A taken-for-granted aspect of civic engagement is that it, too, improves community welfare. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) stress community participation, which is explained as community collaboration or connectedness, as communities grow and develop identity. Communities grow, therefore, through organized engagement. Often a requirement of community-based research, community organizing of any kind is dependent on collaborative partnerships (Heath 2007).

Community collaboration and participation can be explicated by Fassin's (2009) stakeholder, stakeholder, and stakekeeper model. The model goes beyond the singular definition of a stakeholder as anyone who can influence or be influenced by

the organization. As Circus Mojo and NKU collaborate, for example, stakeholders would consist of community members with an interest in the process or outcome of activities and communication. Children attending a Circus Mojo summer camp or public relations students seeking to counsel Circus Mojo in fulfillment of a class assignment are counted among stakeholders. A stakeholder in the community would be local government for Circus Mojo and the university administration for NKU students and faculty. Local government, for example, directs what Circus Mojo can and cannot do with the renovation of its facility through building codes and ordinances. NKU administration encourages civic engagement through policies that direct student and faculty contributions. Media also would fit into this category as reports of community development and events are distributed. A stakeholder, described by Fassin (2009) as being part of an “outer ring,” represents entities that are nonetheless able to bring pressure upon the organization for its actions within the community. For Circus Mojo, stakeholders would be the health-care system that is evaluating the use of clown visits as therapy for hospitalized children. Stakeholders for NKU faculty and staff would be peers at other institutions, professional associations, and academic publications that look to stay current with pedagogical practice and research. From Fassin’s (2009) models, the role of community as a stakeholder is made clearer as well as the different types of “stakes” a group within the community could invest in an organization. The exercise of identifying stakeholders in this way illustrates how collaboration can take place among community groups.

Scholars examining legitimacy have applied normative standards while tracing processes related to institutions and institutionalization (Parsons 1947, 1956; Scott 2008; Zimmerman and Zeitz 2002). With the importance of organizations and institutions adhering to normative standards established, Parsons (1947, 1956) outlined a process of institutionalization in which members of a collectivity fulfill obligations and enact solidarity and membership. Community actors, and the various types of stakeholders, therefore, enact their affiliation and extend their influence in an ongoing discursive process leading to institutionalization; and later, if successful, to one of legitimation. In the current example, enactment occurs as community actors alter their status with each other through behaviors representing acceptable norms and fulfilled expectations. Functioning this way, the community is actively constructing its own environment (Scott 2008). Legitimacy, then, is within reach if the discursive arenas are grounded in an institutional construct that recognizes community membership and value (Palazzo and Scherer 2006).

What drives the need for collaboration among community actors, organization, or practitioners of public relations and civic engagement, and why does this activity lead to institutionalization? The public relations scholar or practitioner would be quick to point toward an issue, which could be a problem or opportunity as a primary motivator. Suchman (1995a) sees institutional creation as the development, recognition, and naming of a recurrent problem to which no preexisting institution provides a satisfactory repertoire of responses. Institutionalization occurs, therefore, to solve a persistent problem and perhaps to seize upon a recognizable opportunity. Institutionalization follows a process of innovation, habituation, objectification, and

sedimentation (Scott 2008). The starting point of the process—innovation—would certainly be welcomed to address a recurring problem. Whereas, the end point—sedimentation—suggests additional layers of what had come earlier as institutionalization was occurring. The process suggests that institutionalization has a cyclical nature. As one problem is solved, another arrives or room for improvements in an earlier set of responses is perceived. Sedimentation, therefore, could represent a cyclical building toward future responses

## **Tactical Legitimation of Civic Engagement**

Keeping Suchman's (1995a) idea of institutionalization emanating from the need to address an as of yet to be recognized or addressed problem, the essential character of social circus and civic engagement come to mind. Social circus, for example, places circus performers in schools, hospitals, and detention centers, and thereby provides comfort and entertainment where it previously did not exist. A garden variety circus travels but not inside the walls of community and social institutions. A social circus, therefore, provides a response to a problem or opportunity that had been left unattended. In a similar vein, civic engagement addresses community issues or initiatives that require some kind of collaborative response. Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) outlined a series of legitimation strategies that apply to new venture organizations. The strategies certainly have bearing on the observed actions by Circus Mojo performed on behalf of social circus and those performed by NKU students and faculty in the name of civic engagement. With little selective editing, strategic direction can be reconsidered as tactical "how to" information.

Writers have recognized foundational and broad categories of legitimacy that include pragmatic or regulative, normative, cognitive, and moral measures (Aldridge and Fiol 1994; Palazzo and Scherer 2006; Scott 2008). Simple enough, the first category relates to self-interest and the economic and legal constraints that can apply to the organization. The difference between the second and third categories can be elusive, however, when seeking to reduce legitimation strategies to practice. The second category, the normative, requires the scholar-practitioner to discern what is held to be acceptable and valuable by a community or public. The third category, the cognitive, requires the scholar-practitioner to discern whether what the organization does is, in fact, acceptable and valuable. The cognitive category reintroduces the taken-for-granted quality of organizational legitimacy. The moral category is considered the most important by Palazzo and Scherer (2006) and is derived from communication.

“While theories of organizational legitimacy normally refer to the compliance of some taken-for-granted societal background rules, we argue that the idea of public acceptance can no longer be decoupled from public discourse. Instead, moral legitimacy results from communication” (Palazzo and Scherer 2006, 79).

The apparent necessity of organizations and community actors to operate in a public communication network, from which their discourse can be appraised, places social circus and civic engagement squarely in the eye of legitimation tactics that we

propose. By recognizing the foundational strategic categories of legitimation and the successive strategic direction informed by Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002) to break through the “legitimation threshold” as a starting point, a tactical framework for the legitimation of civic engagement emerges. As a strategic and tactical frame, we propose civic engagement activities communicate the actors’ ability and intention to:

1. Create value and social alignment
2. Design initiatives to be future oriented
3. Demonstrate institutional entrepreneurship
4. Enact the community environment
5. Remain engaged in legitimation through conformance, collaboration, and creation.

The framework is certainly helpful in planning or describing civic engagement initiatives and arguing for their legitimacy, but it also presents some challenge. First, although the framework notes areas that require attention, it is not specific to the degree that precise actions can be denoted. The apparent shortcoming is actually a sign of the framework’s utility as it is in keeping with the contextual nature of legitimation. This research maintains that the perspective of legitimacy needs to be broadened to take into account interactions with the community and institutional influences upon community actors. The framework accounts for community actors that include separate organizations, institutional affiliations, and the actions of individuals whether a student, a faculty member, or a circus performer. There are other factors, however, that include institutionalization, the constraints upon community collaboration, and the category of legitimacy, which is the focus of attention that is entirely dependent upon context.

## **Conclusion**

A thorough understanding of contextual conditions will go a long way toward enabling legitimation from the start through the finish of civic engagement efforts. Faculty planning and practicing civic engagement should articulate its legitimacy in the same fashion as corporations as a valuable resource. If civic engagement is part of a community-based research program or student learning experience, Strand et al. (2003) promote its value to the community and its ability to address previously untended community and social issues. The benefits of community-based research are closely aligned with the promise of civic engagement and the mission of social circus. Similarly, research projects, civic engagement, and social circus create opportunity for greater community involvement. Finally, community-based programs can be instrumental to the success for social action and policy change.

Although the perspective of viewing community as groups of stakeholders is derived from corporate economic models, and viewing community as a discrete public is associated with the planning of public relations campaigns, a humanistic component also is present. Stakeholder management includes a commitment to the integrity of the individual, to groups, and to the general public (Post, Preston, and Sachs 2002). The legitimation of social circus and civic engagement is not a process of segmenting individual and groups and aiming messages or actions at their perceived needs. The legitimation that is essential,

however, binds individuals, organizations, institutions, and community with the communicative actions broadly conceived and known as civic engagement.

## References

- Aldrich, Howard, and Marlene Fiol. 1994. "Fools Rush In? The Institutional Context of Industry Creation." *Academy of Management Review* 19 (4): 645–670.
- Aurini, Janice. 2006. "Crafting Legitimation Projects: An Institutional Analysis of Private Education Businesses." *Sociological Forum* 21 (1): 83–111.
- Bhabha, Homi. 2004. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Bolton, Reginald. 2004. "Why Circus Works: How the Values and Structures of Circus Make It a Significant Developmental Experience for Young People." PhD diss., Murdoch University.
- Boulding, Kenneth. 1971. "The Legitimacy of Economics." In *Kenneth Boulding: Collected Papers: vol. 2. Economics*, edited by Fred Glahe. Boulder, CO: Colorado Associated University Press.
- Boyd, Josh. 2000. "Actional Legitimation: No Crisis Necessary." *Journal of Public Relations Research* 12 (4): 341–353.
- . 2009. "756\*: The Legitimacy of a Baseball Number." In *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations II*, edited by Damion Waymer, Robert L. Heath, and Elizabeth L. Toth, 154–169. New York: Routledge.
- De Blasio, Gregory. 2007. "Coffee as a Medium for Ethical, Social, and Political Messages: Organizational Legitimacy and Communication." *Journal of Business Ethics* 72: 173–189.
- DiMaggio, Paul, and Walter Powell. 1983. "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields." *American Sociological Review* 48: 147–160.
- DuPuis, Melanie, and Sean Gillon. 2009. "Alternative Modes of Governance: Organic as Civic Engagement." *Agriculture and Human Values* 26: 43–56.
- Fassin, Yves. 2009. "The Stakeholder Model Refined." *Journal of Business Ethics* 84: 113–135.
- Hearit, Keith. 1995. "Mistakes Were Made: Organizations, Apologia, and Crises of Social Legitimacy." *Communication Studies* 46: 1–17.

- Heath, Renne Guarriello. 2007. "Rethinking Community Collaboration through a Dialogic Lens: Creativity, Democracy, and Diversity in Community Organization." *Management Communication Quarterly* 21 (2): 145–171.
- Heath, Renee Guarriello, and Lawrence Frey. 2004. "Ideal Collaboration: A Conceptual Framework of Community Collaboration." In *Communication Yearbook 28*, edited by Pamela J. Kalbfleisch. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Le Plus Petit Cirque du Monde—Centre des Arts du Cirque Sud-de-Seine. 2008. "Journée de réflexion sur le cirque éducatif et social." (The development of social circus.) Conference paper presented March 18, 2008.
- Mayhew, Leon. 1997. *The New Public: Professional Communication and the Means of Social Influence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mota, Marianthi. 2010. "How Social Circus Programs and Institutions Are Promoting and Respecting Children's Rights." Master Thesis, University of Berlin.
- Palazzo, Guido, and Andreas Georg Scherer. 2006. "Corporate Legitimacy as Deliberation: A Communicative Framework." *Journal of Business Ethics* 66: 71–88.
- Parsons, Talcott. 1947. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Parsons, Talcott. 1956. "Suggestions for a Sociological Approach to the Theory of Organizations." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 1 (2): 225–239.
- Phillips, Robert. 2003. "Stakeholder Legitimacy." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 13 (1): 25–41.
- Post, James, Lee Preston, and Sybille Sachs. 2002a. "Managing the Extended Enterprise: The New Stakeholder View." *Stanford University Press*, 6–28.
- . 2002b. *Redefining the Corporation Stakeholder Management and Organizational Wealth*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Rønningen, Katrina, Bjørn Egil Flø, and Elsa Fjeldavli. 2004. "The Legitimacy of Multifunctional Agriculture." *Centre for Rural Research*: 1–25.
- Scott, Richard. 2008. *Institutions and Organizations Ideas and Interests*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Strand, Kerry, Sam Marullo, Nicholas Cutforth, Randy Stoecker, and Patrick Donohue. 2003. *Community-Based Research and Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Suchman, Mark. 1995a. "Localism and Globalism in Institutional Analysis: The Emergence of Contractual Norms in Venture Finance." In *Institutional Construction of Organizations: International and Longitudinal Studies*, edited by Richard Scott and Soren Christensen. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Suchman, Mark. 1995b. "Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches." *Academy of Management Review* 20 (3): 571–610.

Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.

Zimmerman, Monica, and Gerald Zeitz. 2002. "Beyond Survival: Achieving New Venture Growth by Building Legitimacy." *Academy of Management Review* 27 (3): 414–431.

### **Author Information**

Gregory G. De Blasio, Ph.D. (communication, Wayne State University) is associate professor of public relations at Northern Kentucky University. His teaching and research interests include public relations management and practice, organizational legitimacy, social issue communication campaigns, and communication ethics.

Emma Woeste is a graduate student in the department of communication at Northern Kentucky University. She is focusing on organizational legitimacy and community-based research.

Gregory G. De Blasio  
442 Griffin Hall  
Highland Heights, KY 41099  
E-mail: [deblasiog1@nku.edu](mailto:deblasiog1@nku.edu)  
Telephone: 859-572-6317  
Fax: 859-572-6187

Emma Woeste  
Department of Communication  
Northern Kentucky University  
Nunn Drive  
Highland Heights, KY 41099  
E-mail: [woestee1@mymail.nku.edu](mailto:woestee1@mymail.nku.edu)  
Telephone: 859.496.7471