



PHI THETA KAPPA  
HONOR SOCIETY

2020 Edition

# TRANSFORMATIONS

Acknowledging, Assessing, and Achieving Change

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# Educating Communities about the Transformative Power of the 2020 Census

Omicron Beta Chapter  
Mesa Community College  
*Mesa, Arizona*

## **Theme**

Politics of Identity

## **Abstract**

Through scholarly research, collaboration, and focused action, the Honors in Action Council (the Council) discovered that the decennial census is a fundamental process to monitor population changes, political representation, and distribution of federal funds. The Council explored "Politics of Identity," one of the themes from the Honors Program Guide related to "Transformations: Acknowledging, Assessing, and Achieving Change" and determined that a community's identity heavily influences the politics of a city and the state. Due to large underrepresentation in minority populations, Arizona struggles with full census participation. The misrepresentation helps create a sense of "otherness" for those who are marginalized. A fear of discrimination leads to severe undercounting of Arizona residents, affecting funding and political representation.

The U.S. Census Bureau identified five misconceptions about the census: loss of privacy, fear of repercussion, distrust in the government, belief that the census does not provide benefits, and lack of efficacy. These misconceptions were amplified in 2019 when the Presidential Administration advocated for the inclusion of a citizenship question on the 2020 Census. The question was ultimately dismissed, but the discussion dissuaded participation of marginalized communities, especially undocumented individuals. In the 2010 Census, the college's surrounding community was one of the most underrepresented tracts in the city, with 60.2% of residents being undercounted. Annually, every person counted brings in \$3,000 in federal and

state funding, which affects hundreds of public services essential for communities. To increase participation and dispel misconceptions about the 2020 Census, the Council collaborated with the City of Mesa to establish a project titled "ICount2020." The Council participated in 14 events to discuss the census with residents in diverse communities. The Council educated more than 7,500 individuals about the benefits and security of the census and over 1,000 people pledged to respond to the 2020 Census.

## Objectives

The Council's overall goal was to engage the community, address misconceptions about the census, and educate the public about the benefits the census provides to their city. The first objective was to educate the Council on the Honors Study Topic by hosting seminars and lectures with field experts. The second objective was to conduct research using scholarly works, including articles, books, journals, and interviews that address census misconceptions, racial tensions in census response, and the importance of accurate representation. The third objective was to assess the local, regional, and national impact of the census and identify target audiences.

After the research objectives were met, Council members used their findings to set action objectives in order to make a positive impact on marginalized groups. The first action objective was to participate in a variety of community-oriented events to promote the census. The Council set a second action objective: to educate residents about the census and encourage them to complete it in 2020, and to fulfill the goal of collecting 500 pledges. The third action objective was to establish a Census Ambassador Program, which encourages civic engagement among students.

The Council recognized this project was a major endeavor, so members created a network with whom they would accomplish their action goals. Research stressed the importance of building community connections with participation of college students to increase census response rates. Since the project began as a grassroots movement, the Council worked directly with the college's Center for Community and Civic Engagement. The second objective focused on

communicating with key figures within the City of Mesa government and its Census Taskforce. This objective resulted in the City of Mesa and events in the city.

## Academic Investigation

After attending the 2019 International Honors Institute, the Council committed to studying the Honors Study Topic and initiated preliminary research around current events within the community. The Council then evaluated the relationship between the Honors Study Topic and the community's needs. They learned about the significance of the 2020 Census and became dedicated to understanding, "How will educating community members about the census dispel associated misconceptions, encourage participation, and transform communities?" Thinking critically about the impact of their research provided the Council with overwhelming insight into Transformations and Politics of Identity.

The U.S. Constitution requires a decennial count of all residents. Research has demonstrated challenges in achieving this goal. The first census in 1790 counted only white, free men; the census was not designed to count people of color.

Research indicates that race and ethnicity have always been an underlying issue in the census. The lack of inclusivity created by the census impacts the response rates and effectively undercounts marginalized groups. This disconnect deepens the misconceptions identified by the U.S. Census Bureau. The census also affects the political distribution of power. In 1920 U.S. Congress rejected the reapportionment of the House of Representatives because it felt the census results inadequately reflected the population. To combat undercounted populations, the U.S. Census Bureau manipulates census data; any slight alteration affects federal funding and political reapportionment. The census also affects a state's Electoral College representation.

## Conclusions

Along with particular groups being systematically undercounted, populations are often unwilling to participate in the census as well. An outbreak of fear among vulnerable communities emerged after the discussion of adding a citizenship question in 2020, which was expected to affect response rates within Hispanic communities. Minority populations fear deportation and misuse of their information, and generally are unaware of the importance of their responses. The census provides funding and resource allocations for programs on a local level, including firefighter assistance, Pell Grants, adoption, state and community highway safety, Section 8 housing, Head Start, special education grants, national school lunch and breakfast programs, foster care, student loans, and over 100 initiatives. Understanding fund allocations is the number one motivator across populations to increase response rates. In conclusion, the Council recognized that the identity of marginalized groups impacts a state's political power and federal funding. As scholar-servant-leaders, the Council embraced the role they had in the upcoming census. In response, they wanted to address the link between identity and politics within the community.

## Action

The Council's first action was to collaborate with the Mesa Community College's Center for Community and Civic Engagement and secure funding. The Council applied for and received a \$15,000 grant from the City of Mesa to fund the project and foster collaboration. Upon receiving grant approval, the Council created the Census Ambassador Program, open to students at both college's campuses.

The Council wanted a combined effort from both of Mesa Community College's campuses, an ongoing challenge for the chapter. As a condition of the grant and to demonstrate the project's urgency and sustainability, the Council agreed to collect 500 pledges and complete 2,000 service hours by the end of May 2020. To reach the goals outlined by the grant, the Council recruited 25 students to serve as Census Ambassadors to educate and engage the public in the census awareness campaign. Ambassadors serve as

change agents in the local community and are trusted advocates. This role increases student awareness and instills servant leadership as a lifelong endeavor. They participate in campus and community events, collect pledges, and promote job opportunities. Additionally, the city donated promotional materials and items to distribute at college and community events, including pledge cards written in both English and Spanish, pens, stickers, water bottles, chapsticks, polos for the Census Ambassadors and volunteers, along with a large blackboard with the question, "What would you do with \$3,195?" in English and Spanish. The City of Mesa Census Administrator suggested the first community event, Fiesta Latina, which celebrated Hispanic heritage in a variety of ways. The Council hosted a table and spoke with community members, answering any questions about the census.

**Twenty volunteers attended, 67 pledges were received, and over 200 attendees answered the question on the blackboard. An unexpected victory occurred when the City of Mesa Mayor John Giles and the college's mascot visited the Council's census table to respond on the blackboard.**

Further, the Census Bureau Partnership Specialist acknowledged the project's progression in its monthly report.

The Council hosted their informational booth at numerous events, many with diverse communities in attendance. People from low-income or Hispanic backgrounds were most prominent which tied perfectly into one of the project's action objectives. The Council witnessed first-hand the uniqueness of the community's identity related to "otherness" and were determined to transform the state's political representation. To affect this transformation, Council members collected pledges and informed attendees about census misconceptions. Overall, the Council attended 14 events including: Celebrate Mesa, Las Sendas Food Truck Fridays, the Arizona State Fair, the

Special Olympics Bocce Ball Competition, Mesa United Way's One Community Health and Resource Fair, Westwood High School's football game, the Phi Theta Kappa Arizona Regional Honors Institute, the East Valley Veterans Day Parade, and Halloween Extravaganza. Further, in October 2019, the City's 2020 Census Administrator invited the chapter president to report the progression of the project at the Mesa City Council meeting.

## Impact

The Council impacted a large, diverse group of individuals, including college and high school students, college faculty and staff, community members--predominantly Spanish-speaking--and local leaders within the city. They accomplished this through awareness projects, educational outreach, and the Census Ambassador Program. Transformed perceptions in marginalized groups forged change in their communities resulting in their increased understanding of the importance of census participation. To achieve this, the Council was comprised of 30 students, 25 of whom were Census Ambassadors; together, they served over 590 hours. By participating in 14 community events and utilizing social media to promote the census, the Council engaged with a diverse demographic and received over 1,000 pledges. The chapter invited the Census Administrator from the City of Mesa to present to over 75 students on the census at two general meetings - one at each of the college's two campuses. To raise awareness of the 2020 Census on a large scale, the Council contacted the director of a local clothing company State Forty-Eight, to request a unique shirt design to connect the 2020 Census to Arizona pride. This idea was presented to the City of Mesa Census Taskforce and six municipality representatives for potential funding. The Council worked with these municipalities and State Forty-Eight to create the design with the Council's slogan, "United We Stand, Together We Count" and produce 1,000 t-shirts. Additionally, three Council members presented "ICount2020" at the Phi Theta Kappa Arizona Regional Convention to over 180 people.

Qualitative outcomes reflect the responses received at community events, such as when the question, "What would you do with \$3,195?" was answered. The Mayor responded, "Paying tuition for college students." Common responses were

paying for medical bills, affording tuition, taking vacations, and assisting family members. These responses helped community members understand the importance of participating in the census. This project held significance for the community and for project members. Students had the opportunity to hold leadership roles during community and college events to develop their soft skills and grow as leaders and scholars. For example, the collected pledge cards asked for private information, such as phone numbers and email addresses. Members learned how to protect privacy while collecting the public's sensitive information, which is an important skill that can be useful in the workplace. Additionally, four students chose this project as their leadership endeavor in the Phi Theta Kappa Leadership Development course. One utilized his passion for magic tricks as a way to educate students about the census in an engaging way. Another member led the project's logistics, where he organized protocols for events, established volunteer schedules, and created a timecard for the Census Ambassadors.

Overall, the Council recognized the census' ability to transform community life for the next decade. The project provided an opportunity of active citizenship and embraced community diversity. By participating in community events, connecting with over 7,500 community members and creating the Census Ambassador Program, the Council served as a catalyst of change for the future of the 2020 Census. Through collaboration with the Center for Community and Civic Engagement, the City of Mesa, and the U.S. Census Bureau, the Council acknowledged, assessed, and achieved major change within the community.

## Resources

Eagles, C. W. (reprint, 1990). *Democracy delayed; Congressional reapportionment and urban-rural conflict in the 1920s*. (2012, February). *Reference & Research Book News*, 27(1). Retrieved from [https://link-galecom.ezp.mesacc.edu/apps/doc/A278666365/AONE?u=mcc\\_mesa&sid=AONE&xid=f18c2706](https://link-galecom.ezp.mesacc.edu/apps/doc/A278666365/AONE?u=mcc_mesa&sid=AONE&xid=f18c2706)

This source described the historical conflict of congressional reapportionment. With the shifting demographics of rural and urban populations, the 1920 Census failed to provide an accurate

representation. This example identifies the repercussions when large portions of the population are undercounted.

Haugen, D. M., Musser, S., & Berger, R. M. (2012). *The US Census: Opposing viewpoints*. Detroit, Michigan: Greenhaven Press.

This book focused on the lack of minority representation and contends that Census Bureau partnerships with undercounted groups helped increase participation. It directed the Council's commitment to work alongside the community and increase participation in the census.

Johnson, S. (2019). Stand up and be counted: Communities prepare for the largest, most expensive, and most controversial census in U.S. history. *The Progressive*, 83(3), p. 57+. Retrieved from [https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=OVIC&u=mcc\\_mesa&id=GALE|A591323752&v=2.1&it=r&sid=OVIC&asid=9f43409f](https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=OVIC&u=mcc_mesa&id=GALE|A591323752&v=2.1&it=r&sid=OVIC&asid=9f43409f)

This article considered the risk of an undercount in the 2020 Census due to fears surrounding the citizenship question. It highlighted a need to inform fearful populations and dispel misconceptions about the census.

Kimball, A. M. (2019, Fall). Complete count committees: The 2020 Census and beyond. *Georgetown Journal of Legal Ethics*, 729+. Retrieved from [https://link-galecom.ezp.mesacc.edu/apps/doc/A604381442/AOE?u=mcc\\_mesa&sid=AONE&xid=fa59122e](https://link-galecom.ezp.mesacc.edu/apps/doc/A604381442/AOE?u=mcc_mesa&sid=AONE&xid=fa59122e)

This article explained that when communities are undercounted, the Census Bureau manipulates the data in an attempt to create true representation. This slight manipulation alters the interpretation of the data, ultimately affecting the House of Representatives and the Electoral College apportionment. This information reinforced the connectedness of politics and identity.

M. Leal, personal communication, January 14, 2020.

Leal, a Partnership Specialist for the U.S. Census Bureau, advocated the importance of the census in reference to political power and state representation. The Council learned about the tie between politics and community participation in the 2020 Census.

McGeeney, K., Kriz, B., Mullenax, S., Kail, L., Walejko, G., Vines, M. Bates, N., & Garcia Trejo, Y. (2020, January 24). 2020 Census barriers, attitudes, and motivators study survey report: A new design for the 21st century. Retrieved from U.S. Census Bureau website: <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/final-analysis-reports/2020-reportcbams-study-survey.pdf>

The U.S. Census Bureau identified five reasons why people do not respond to the census: concerns about data privacy, fear of repercussion, distrust in government, lack of efficacy, and belief that there is no benefit in completing the census. The Council worked to address these issues when educating the community.

J. Robbins, personal communication, January 15, 2020.

Robbins, the Census Administrator for the City of Mesa, emphasized the vital role college students must play in the 2020 Census. As a result of this interview, the Council better understood the leadership roles they played in the upcoming census.

Schor, P. (2017). *Counting Americans: How the US Census classified the nation*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press.

This book comprised a detailed record of the evolution of the decennial U.S. Census from its inception in 1790 to 2010. The Council understood that race and ethnicity has historically impacted the census.