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Representation and Participation of the Community in Community Colleges

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Abstract

This paper explores the current status of Nepali community colleges (CCs) regarding representation strategies and community participation in their internal governance. It draws on qualitative data from unstructured interviews with nine participants sampled using a non-probabilistic purposive sampling procedure, followed by a document study of the respective colleges. The sample included the head of college management, a CMC member, the campus chief, and student representatives from three colleges in Koshi province. The study reveals that the representation is highly local and donor-centric; therefore, little space is left for citizen- and parent-level representation in governance. The study further revealed that the level of participation in the decision-making process is not static; rather, it ranges from 'non-participation' to, at most, 'partnership', in which the power lies with the secretary and the CMC chair to make the decision. The study also showed that the degree of participation was largely determined by the agenda's localization; the more localized the agenda, the higher the degree of participation in the CMC meetings.

Keywords: Higher Education, Community College, Participation, Representation

Introduction

Participation is described with the definition of democracy as an act of inclusion in decision-making (Carpentier, 2012): “an act of joining with others in doing something” or “association with others in a relationship as a partnership” (Dijkers, 2010), usually on a formal basis with specified rights and obligations (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The term has been an emerging agenda item in the democratic Western community for socio-economic life, even enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Jancovich, 2017). It is an active process whereby beneficiary or client groups influence the direction and execution of development or management to enhance their well-being in terms of income, personal growth, self-reliance, or other values (Coulibaly-Lingani, Savadogo, Tigabu, & Oden, 2011). Therefore, active participation in decision-making processes to influence, change, or improve outcomes (Churchman, 2012, p. 1) is well assumed in institutions and organizations.

The term 'participation' has been associated with another phrase, 'Community participation', 'public participation', or 'citizen participation', as a process where people, individually or through organized groups, can exchange information, express opinions and articulate interests, and have the potential to influence decisions or the outcome of the matter at hand (Oli & Treue, 2015 as cited in ILO 2000). The members of the community a) develop the capability to assume greater responsibility for assessing their...needs and problems, b) plan and then act to implement their solutions, c) create and maintain organizations in support of these efforts, and d) evaluate the effects and bring about necessary adjustments in goals and programs on an ongoing basis (Zakus & Lysack, 1998). Thus, community participation gives people a sense that they can solve their problems through careful reflection and collective action.

Categorizations are also made, such as those in Pateman (2012): full participation exists when all members of the body have equal power over the decision; Bhandari (2026). Representation and Participation . . .

partial participation is when some members have power while others only influence decisions; and pseudo-participation is when some members have no power (Cunningham, 1972). Fraser (2005), on the other hand, describes four approaches of community participation: (1) anti- or reluctant communitarians and economic conservatism; (2) technical-functionalist communitarians and managerialism; (3) progressive communitarians and empowerment; and (4) radical/activist communitarians and transformation.

Some participation frameworks have been developed, e.g., Carpentier (2011a, 2011b) views participation as an ideological contestation with five theoretical frameworks of participation, namely democracy, spatial planning, development, arts and museums, and communication; Hentschel & Lanjouw's (1996, p. xias cited in Heyi, 2020) Transformational approaches are few. A distinction is also made in terms of the degree of participation between “genuine” and “pseudo” participation (Carney, Bista, & Agergaard, 2007). In which genuine participation is one in which citizens are empowered to choose their roles and use “real” power in decision-making, whereas participation is “pseudo” when “the purposes of participation are to inform citizens about decisions, placate their complaints, and manipulate their opinions” (Khanal, 2013, p. 237).

Another well-known framework (Anderson & Grinberg, 1998) for characterizing community participation is Arnstein's (1969). To her, community participation is:

The redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens to be deliberately included in the future. It is how they can induce significant social reform, which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society (Arnstein, 1969). The framework principally focuses on redistributing power to those who will benefit from it in the future.

Ladder of community participation

Community participation follows a terrain. To measure community participation in organizations and institutions, several frameworks are discussed; among them, the best framework (Cornwall, 2008) is Arnstein's (1975) ladder of participation, which serves as a point of reference for the present study. The ladder is presented in Table 1:

Table 1

Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969)

8	Citizen control	
7	Delegated power	Citizen power
6	Partnership	
5	Placation	
4	Consultation	Tokenism
3	Informing	
2	Therapy	Non-participation
1	Manipulation	

According to this framework, participation is based on the degree of power distribution in decision-making and its execution. This ladder of citizen participation constitutes eight levels. They are further grouped into three categories relative to authentic citizen participation. The lowest category represents manipulative participation (influencing the public and gaining support through propaganda, treating them as a rubber stamp or in a therapeutic role), while the highest category refers to degrees of citizen power/citizen control. The middle category indicates degrees of citizen tokenism (Tosun, 2006). To her, “participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless” (p. 216). Nonparticipation includes manipulation and therapy. Tokenism includes the third, fourth, and fifth rungs of the

ladder: informing, consultation, and placation, respectively. In the middle is “degrees of tokenism”, shown in “informing”, “consultation”, and “placation”. Tokenism is a form of participation in which people have ‘voice’ and some degree of autonomy, though they rarely can change directly the status quo of decisions and plans already taken elsewhere. Citizen power includes the final three rungs of the ladder: partnership, delegated power, and citizen control.

The theme of community participation is frequently associated with accountability (Cornwall & Gaventa, 2001), sustainability (Warburton, 2013), development, and institutional strength across almost all development sectors, and higher education is no exception (Sharma, 2008). When the community college system in Nepal is in question, the issue of community participation is even more relevant, since this community holds a 38.06% share of student enrollment (University Grants Commission, 2024) and makes a significant contribution to the production of Bachelor's- and Master's-level graduates.

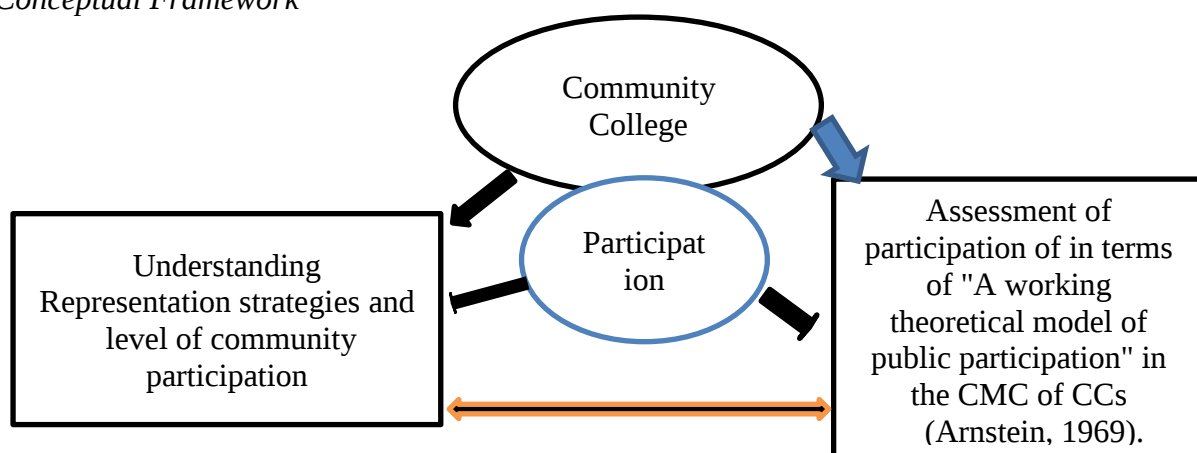
Method and Material

This paper examines the current status of community colleges in terms of stakeholders' understanding of the colleges, community representation strategies within internal governance, and their participation in the decision-making process. The study was framed as a generic/basis qualitative approach, which is described as the study in which "the researcher describes his study as a “qualitative research ” without declaring it a particular type- such as a phenomenological, grounded theory, narrative analysis, or ethnographic study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 23) or case study for "not finding to fit this study neatly within the confines of a single established methodology", the generic approach as an opportunity (Kahlke, 2014). The study is not bounded strictly enough to any one design, i.e., it is “not guided by an explicit or established set of philosophic assumptions of the known [or more established] and much focused

qualitative methodologies” such as the “big three” phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography.

Sampling was conducted using a non-probabilistic purposive technique, and, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) as effective, nine unstructured interviews were undertaken to elicit participants’ experiences. Data were transcribed, thematized, and described as suggested by Kahlke (2014), staying near the surface of the participants’ descriptions. During analysis and interpretation of the data, the researcher used the community participation literature and Sherry Arnstein’s ‘Ladder of Citizen Participation’ to evaluate the amount of “citizen control” within the process of determining a program or policy based on the public participation techniques used at each phase of the college plan (Arnstein, 1969). The research sites were community colleges located in Koshi, covering both the hilly area and the Terai, namely Udayapur, Morang, and Jhapa, so that diverse understandings could be explored. The sampled community colleges were quality assurance accreditation (QAA) awarded by the University Grants Commission, Nepal, and were affiliated with Tribhuvan University (UGC). Of the colleges sampled, one is located in the hilly region and was established in 2043, another in 2048, and the third in 2038.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



Results and Discussion

In this subsection of the paper, I have discussed the data, keeping the three significant objectives of the study: the nature of community representation in CCs in the governing bodies at the college level, analysis and assessment of participation in campus management meetings based on the popular theoretical concept Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969).

Nature and Process of Representation in the Internal Governance

The first section of the analysis focuses on how community holders are represented in the governing bodies of the community college. As per the purpose, the statutes of the campuses were studied, followed by key informant interviews to identify the nature and types of governing bodies and the inclusion of members (henceforth, representation) in the CCs. From the information, it is known that the community colleges have two-layered bodies of governance: (i) the senate/campus assembly and (ii) the campus management committee. The first one is said to be the supreme body of legislation, which consists of a large number of members representing the wider community as much as possible, as per the policy provision of the campus statute itself. In addition, the colleges have established other subsidiary committees, such as the internal audit committee and the appeals committee. Such committees are in addition to the academic committees, including the Head of Departments, the Internal Examination Committee, the Alumni Association, Student Quality Circles, the Self-Assessment Team, the Research Management Cell, and the Internal Quality Assurance Committee.

When studying the nature of representation principally in the two governing bodies, the campus senate/council and the CMC, the following situation could be revealed:

Table 2*Community Representation in the Campus Council (CC) College-Wise*

Campus	Council/senate	CMC
A	Large legislative body that includes the conditionally selected cash/ land donors, FSU president, secondary-level school head teachers /principal of the catchment areas, teacher representative of the college, ward chair, member of parliament, mayor, deputy mayor, member of parliament of the provincial government,	A governing body made up of the elected members from the campus council/senate (27 members-flexible), the mayor, ward chair, members nominated by the new committee, a teacher representative, a university representative, and the campus chief.
B	A legislative body consisting of donors, former campus management committee members, and members nominated by the campus's current management committee	A governing body made up of the elected members from the campus council/senate (23 members-flexible), in which the mayor, ward chair, members nominated by the new committee, teacher representative, FSU president, university representative, and campus chief.
C	A legislative body consisting of donors, former campus management committee members, and nominated members by the campus current management committee, making decisions.	An executive body made up of the elected members from the campus council/senate (17 members-flexible), in which the mayor, ward chair, members nominated by the new committee, teacher representative, FSU president, university representative, and campus chief.

From the study, it has been known that the senate (previously called council or parisad), as a legislative body, has been dominated by cash or land donors since its

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establishment to date. The statutory provision shows that the nominated members in this body are usually the elite (though they were called educationists or intellectuals) who donated to the colleges. From the study of the statute, it can also be known that the principle of inclusion, such as gender, is not mandatory for colleges. In the process of CMC formation, the number varies from college to college, except for the inclusion/exclusion of the student representative on the committee. Of the three colleges, only one has made mandatory representation of female members on the CMC, while one has not. In the case of colleges, two colleges have student representatives, while one does not have a representative in the CMC. The obligatory member in all colleges has been the university representative appointed by the affiliating university for the campus, who has usually been a teacher at the constituent campus.

Based on the information in Table 1, community colleges have established two main governing bodies to maintain a deliberate balance between academic governance and community, following the UGC (2019) guidelines, which aim to balance academic quality and community accountability in CCs. This oversight has not been made obligatory in the UGC manual, but the UGC's aim serves as the guideline for implementation. The only requirement of the UGC is an updated CMC when applying for funds and/or when intending to pursue quality assurance accreditation, and for participation in UGC projects such as NEHEP and EPBF (UGC, 2019). Such a two-tiered representation of governance in the CCs is justified by the Nepal Public Campus Association (NPCA) (2021), which highlights that the two-tier governance system serves as a democratizing force in higher education, ensuring that both educators and local stakeholders share decision-making power. The fitness of the two-tier governance was also highlighted by Poudel (2016), who argued for its sustainability and its ability to respond to challenges and maintain the balance between academic autonomy and community expectations. To compare the university senate with the senate of the CCs, it has been noticed that the senate has been an academic body rather than the Bhandari (2026). Representation and Participation . . .

representation of the citizens in the Tribhuvan University Affiliation Guidelines (2018), while the senate of the CCs has been largely dominated by representatives and local donors rather than academicians.

Based on key informant interviews on the nature of the governing bodies, an attempt was made to explore the reality by posing the question: "How are community stakeholders represented in the two-tier bodies?" According to the key informants of campus A and C (campus chiefs) mentioned in the two extracts:

...the senate is formed including all the CMC members since the establishment of the college, mayor of the municipality, deputy mayor of the municipality, chair of each ward of the municipality, major members of the teachers' association of the campus unit, major officials of the Free Student Union, major members of the non-teaching staff unit of the college, guardians of the students who topped the class in each class and some locally popular people nominated by the CMC.

... a senate is formed with the inclusion of selected parents as per the nomination of the college chief, donors nominated by the CMC, some educationists-intellectuals nominated by the CMC, and the representatives of the municipality and governmental bodies. This senate forms a new campus management committee. In the CMC and the senate, both teachers and students are represented, along with the members of the senate, in which the campus chief, as the academic head, is the member-secretary.

From this triangulated information, it is known that they have followed the statute to form the governing body. Still, the involvement of community stakeholders such as students, parents, and people's representatives, and the process they expressed, is flexible and debatable, resulting in conflict among the stakeholders. The Senate is not formed through a broad-based election involving common citizens, but rather on the judgment of already established bodies and their continuation, known as historical bias Bhandari (2026). Representation and Participation . . .

(Bhat, Rajan, & Gamage, 2023), in the representation for inclusion. The selection is predetermined rather than open to the common stakeholders.

In the case of colleges, the opportunity for representation is largely dependent on donations to the campus. It seems that citizens' access is restricted by donations; hence, democracy has been minimized, as indicated by Creamer (2026) in community colleges. At this point, we can examine the different ways the common people are represented by the mayor, deputy mayor, ward chairpersons, and members of parliament (people's representatives). However, a stronger argument is that the representation is weakened by the priority given to land or to a cash donation. Such representation is a proxy for civic representation from the social capital perspective (Putnam, 2020) and the perspective of democratic education theory (Democracy, 1944), and it does not guarantee deliberative democracy. So, from Dewey and Putnam's perspective, representation is insufficient, and symbolic representation risks weakening civic trust and engagement.

The absence of students and parents, in particular, in the senate reflects the dominance of a donor-centric governance model (Sajjad, 2016) that prioritizes external legitimacy over grassroots participation to satisfy affiliating universities and funding agencies. In this situation, an argument is also found that community colleges are not supported by the government; as a result, they depend on local donors (Phuyal, 2023), leaving the students and the parents aside, making community representation pseudo, in contrast to the 'genuine' as discussed in (Rose, 2003; Sanoff, 2015). This structure may shape the governance towards accountability to external stakeholders rather than internal beneficiaries.

Student Participation in the CMC

Moving from the representation of the community in the community college to the level of community participation, a common question was asked of the campus chiefs and the CMC chairs of the CCs: "How are campus management committee Bhandari (2026). Representation and Participation . . .

meetings run in general and specific cases such as teacher appointment and non-teaching staff appointment?" The campus chiefs and the CMC chairs of campuses A and C mentioned that they have a student representative on the Campus Management Committee, but in decisions on the selection of teachers and non-teaching staff, the student representatives are not involved, despite the equal rights of the members stated in the campus statutes. As mentioned in Table 1, at campus B, the student representative is not considered a member of the CMC. As the campus chief of campus, A mentioned:

As per the policy, a student representative for selecting teachers and non-teaching staff has to be appointed, but it looks like a drama in practice for us. So, we have convinced the student leader that it would be odd for students to select teachers, and we have also convinced them that they do not want to get involved in the teacher and non-teaching staff selection process. The principal of College C mentions the experience as, "... , we did involve them once in teacher selection; now we have convinced all not to involve student representatives in the teacher evaluation marking since s/he is his/her teacher"

The student participant of college C also justifies the information and says, *"They suggested not to get involved in the marking for evaluation during teacher selection, so are we doing?"* Based on the information, the FSU president of college C mentions: *In all situations, we are involved in the meeting of the CMC, but in the case of teacher and non-teacher staff selection, we are not supposed to get involved"*. This information has been corroborated by the campus chief as well.

Table 3*College-wise Provisions for Representation*

Provision for representation		College A	College B	College C
In the UGC document	No Provision is specified	Representation is provided in the statute, but the participation is selectively denied in practice	Representation and participation of the students in the CMC are not provided	Representation is provided in the statute, but the participation is selectively denied in practice
In the affiliating university document	The free student union representative was, but it has been avoided by the 2026 Ordinance			

From the information in Table 3, the issue of student participation in the university and the colleges has become even more debatable, since the subject colleges have not stated a mandatory provision in their statutes in parallel. Moreover, participation has also been a matter of compromise, a form of cooperation among the members on some issues, such as teacher selection and recruitment. This can be considered a form of politics, a sociopolitical solicitation, or a functional reality of the context. But, in many instances students' involvement is being given great importance as Dunder (2013) described it as a unique kind of wisdom that should be taken seriously when decisions are made that will primarily and most directly impact student experience; involving students proved to be one of the most effective mechanisms of accountability because the students were able to weigh in on decisions and offer perspectives that others simply could not (Gibbs & Wood, 2023). In contrast, Detchen Bhandari (2026). Representation and Participation . . .

(1940) in "Shall the Student Rate the Professor?" admits that a completely factual basis for evaluating the operation of teaching by the students is most unlikely and any one set of characteristics with equal force to teaching of all kinds of material to all kinds of students under all kinds of circumstances. Stance is uncertain; the exclusion of student involvement is based on the functional reality of the context, in contrast to the other issues, such as the teacher and non-teaching staff quality (Mainali, 2021), the complaint of the recruitment and selection controlled by CMC and administrators (Mainali, 2021). Some scholars have also called it a selective bias, in that student representatives are deliberately excluded from critical decisions (Gupta, 2018), as a historical denial of access (Bhatta, Adhikari, Thada, & Rai, 2008). Therefore, participation is expressed in degrees (Khanal, 2013), and participation can be interpreted in layers, leading to a logical conclusion. In essence, despite the seriousness of the issue of student participation in promoting institutional democracy, as in Arnstein (1969) and Dewey (1916), the specific community context should be considered equally vital in resolving the issue of student participation.

Analyzing the level of participation

Concerning the analysis and assessment of the level of participation in the CCs, the information was drawn from the meeting status of the CMC, from the campus chiefs, and the CMC members who were asked, "How intensive are the CMC meetings?" "How much do the CMC members participate in the meeting?" In response, the campus chief of Campus B mentions:

In my experience, when the issue is purely academic, such as result analysis, teacher performance, or the requirements of educational instruments, the members do not argue, and the agenda is unanimously passed at the meeting. When the issue concerns students and political conflicts, the members discuss it at length in the meeting, but it is difficult to reach a decision. On most occasions, there is indecision since they carry out the agenda outside the
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meeting and discuss it at the political level. Until there is political consensus outside the college, the agenda cannot be settled. Sometimes it helps. When the agenda is about construction, most participants actively participate in the meeting. In quality concerns, such as policy-making, only two to three members participate in the meeting. It is easily endorsed.

The information indicates that the degree of participation varies depending on the nature of the agenda and the participants' areas of expertise. Additionally, participation is observed to be high when the issue concerns students' political conflicts, because everyone knows something about the local conflicts. So, we cannot accurately determine the level of participation, but it is relatively correlated with the nature of the agenda.

Regarding participation, the observation at Campus C is slightly different. To him, *"in many instances it is difficult to reach the minimum presence of the participants in the meeting, so, occasionally we have to call them to sign the decision. Sometimes, we have to send the decision to the house of the members, then they put the approval signature in the decisions."* This context is also evident in the case of Campus A and B as well but the frequency of such cases differ from campus to campus and situation to situation. The campus chief of campus B mentions, *"at least there will be discussion between the campus chief (secretary) and the chair of the CMC before the participants are asked to agree with the decisions."* In this situation, a few members, such as the campus chief and the CMC chair, actively participate; others are non-participants but they just put the signatures. In this sense, it is difficult to discriminate solely by level of participation.

New issue-based information has been provided by one of the CMC members of campus B regarding his own level of participation. He informs:

We are seen as so weak in the meeting that we easily put our signature on the decision because the campus chief and the CMC chair represent the same

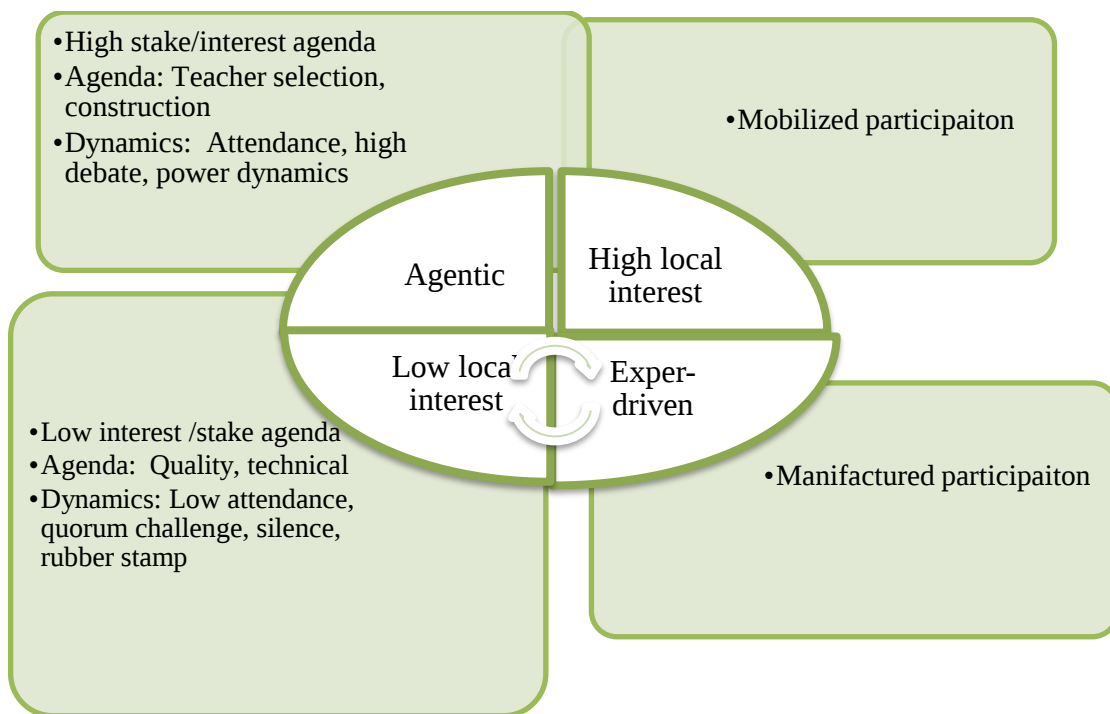
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ideology; they often meet outside in separate meetings and come with ready-made decisions. That seems fine since, in most cases, the discussion agenda is kept secret from the members.

This signals the manipulation of the meeting by the key figures, with a strange kind of participation. It is closely related to informative participation, in which the key persons discuss and decide; others' role is to listen and agree. The situation of the community college, then, resembles the parents' participation in schools as observed by Khanal (2013), who remarked that parental participation in school governance has been captured by established local leaders and politicians. Likewise, the information provided also reflects the country's socio-political situation (Simkhada & Van Teijlingen, 2010). In this situation, the ideological community becomes active, whereas the real community serves as a dummy in decision-making processes. When compared with the theoretical concepts of participation, genuine participation is absent (Finsterbusch & Van Wicklin, 1989); instead, pseudo participation (Khanal, 2013, p. 237) exists in practice in the CCs, as also mentioned by one of the college students who is a CMC member of college A:

We are not involved in the key evaluation process for the selection of teaching and non-teaching staff, e.g., the written and oral examinations for teacher selection. So, there is little doubt, but if there is doubt, we disagree with the recommendation while endorsing the decision from the CMC. In almost all cases, we are convinced by the decision.

From the information from the campus chiefs and the student representatives, we can summarize the information in the following framework:

Figure 2*Participation Framework*

From the framework, we can observe four dynamics of participation in CMC meetings within CCs.

1. Mobilized participation: Participation can be considered mobilized, high-stakes, or High-Interest in cases such as human resource management, such as teacher selection. At this time, participation peaks; members attend voluntarily and debate intensely because the outcomes yield tangible local capital, influence, patronage, or ideological alignment.
 2. Manufactured participation: concerns the "Quorum Crisis". It takes place in academic, pedagogical, or non-public concern agendas. In such a situation, the minimum required number of presences is challenging. Participation drops below the institutional baseline because the issues lack immediate political or
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public salience; getting members to physically attend becomes a logistical challenge. Participation here is artificial, sustained only through chasing members to meet legal quorums.

3. Silent/Deceptive participation: Silent/Deceptive participation occurs when the meeting is purely educational; during a meeting, only a few vocal members dominate the floor while the majority remain passive. This silence is a mix of a lack of technical expertise and an absence of personal or political stakes.
4. Structural barriers to authentic participation: A hidden mechanism that actively suppresses people from participating is a critical aspect of participation. It has been a deliberate structural exclusion or gatekeeping. In this participation, key persons are bypassed in favor of wider stakeholders, such as students, by imposing certain high-stakes restrictions, not because stakeholders are indifferent, but because their involvement would disrupt the power balances.
5. Manufactured consensus in participation: This reveals how agendas are manipulated and consensus developed. When the campus chief and chairperson iron out disagreements before the meeting starts, the formal meeting becomes a performance. The "readymade agenda" turns authentic democratic participation into administrative obedience. The decision has already happened; the CMC is just giving it a legal stamp.

Assessing community participation based on Arnstein's 'Ladder of Participation'

Based on information from key informants who participated in the CMC meeting, the assessment of participation has also been made using Arnstein's Ladder of Participation framework.

Table 4*Assessing participation*

Agenda Item	Level on the participation ladder	Actual Power Dynamic
Teacher Selection / Politics	Partnership / Placation	High stakeholder power, bargaining, and fierce negotiation
Educational Issues	Informing / Consulting/Tokenism	Members are present but largely passive listeners to expert staff.
Pre-aligned Readymade Agendas	Manipulation / Therapy	Participation is engineered purely to rubber-stamp executive decisions.

By examining the information and Table 4, we can argue that when CMC issues offer a lower level of local political capital (such as standard educational issues), the degree of participation declines to 'Tokenism', relying on executive pressure just to secure a quorum. However, when an issue threatens or feeds local power and patronage, such as hiring a teacher, the committee rapidly climbs the ladder to demand a partnership in power. This shifting baseline justifies that participation in the CCs is determined by a mix of personal expertise and localized stakes.

If certain members of the committee attend the meeting with outside influence, and decisions are taken based on political sharing, it can be considered non-participation rather than the genuine one in which the powerholders 'teach' and 'cure' other participants (Arnstein, 1975). There are situations, as informed by the students, where the participants are not involved, but they are "informed of the decision", and they allow them to hear. They can also raise their voices in the meeting, but their voices are not reflected in the decision; this is what Arnstein calls 'informing' and 'consultation' and, in a single term, 'tokenism'. In other situations, such as collaborating with certain institutions, purchasing equipment, or construction, participants are free to opine, partner, decide, and withdraw from the decision. They often act in ways that emphasize

“sharing” and “working together” to make decisions, as noted by Gray in 1989 (Nishimura, 2017). Even some power is delegated to a particular member of the committee to table the decision, depending on their expertise. This is the highest level of participation, called 'citizen control' with 'partnership' and 'delegation' of power in Arnstein's words. In essence, participation and its level analyzed from the perspective of Sherry Arnstein's “A ladder of citizen participation”; the level of participation varies across agenda items rather than with the sequential and individualistic nature of expression.

Findings and Conclusion

As a locally structured community institution, the community of the community college is an issue of discussion and worth studying the community representation at the level of common citizens and beneficiaries. Such colleges are understood as a local property (cultural property) of the community established based on the 'local need and access of the time' for higher education. The communities, as expressed by the informants, include students and parents, individual donors, teachers, the community of schools, governmental and non-governmental organizations, consumers of the forest, the tax office, and the UGC. From the document study followed by the key informant interview, two-layered representations- senate/assembly and Campus Management Committee (CMC) could be known, in which the first is the legislative and the second the executive, in which the donor domination is higher than the academic ones due to their obligations of donor dependency and the lack of government funding to the CCs agencies. At the same time, the students' representation is not found mandatory within the CCs and across the higher education institutions in Nepal. Some colleges provide student representation, whereas others avoid it. In some colleges, students are represented in both the governing bodies, whereas in others, the provision is to be represented only in the senate, not in the CMC. This is the structural denial as well as the functional reality of the community, since the binding policies are not specifically Bhandari (2026). Representation and Participation . . .

guiding the colleges; rather, this is being denied even in the government's current policy. Despite the two levels of representation, variation is found among the colleges, including the inclusion and exclusion of students and the specification of inclusion criteria (e.g., gender and caste).

Based on the operational realities of Nepali community colleges, institutional governance is characterized by uneven stakeholder participation in CMC meetings. Participation fluctuates based on individual stakeholders, local political capital, and elite gatekeeping by key committee members. These dynamics reveal that participation is not a stable institutional metric but an opportunistic resource that ranges from highly mobilized to barely noticeable in terms of the agenda of their concern. It has also been observed in the participation that authentic democratic governance is arguably undermined by information irregularities and strategic exclusion. Sometimes, the members (such as students during teacher recruitment) are intentionally locked out, and sometimes the backroom political alignments make participation "readymade," reducing the participation to rubber-stamp.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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