



## Why Teaching Civic Engagement is a Shared Responsibility in Colleges and Universities

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The essential ingredient for a thriving democracy is an engaged citizenry. To function effectively, democracies need informed citizens who participate in civic life, can deliberate effectively, and are committed to working with others to address the needs of all citizens.

Such citizenship can be learned and must be taught, so institutions of higher education have an essential role to play. Although political science has much to contribute to this effort, teaching civic engagement needs to take place across all disciplines and should be woven into the fabric of campus culture. Good work in civic education is underway on many campuses across the country. In our text, *Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines*, my co-editors and I draw from ongoing efforts to offer a selection of evidence-based examples of how to encourage civic skills, knowledge, and attitudes in students.

### The Need for Civic Education

The 2016 presidential elections and ensuing presidency of Donald Trump have revealed deep divisions within the populace. Recent events have also drawn attention to the principles of American democracy and highlighted the importance of citizen civic engagement. Civic engagement refers broadly to active participation by citizens in the lives of their communities, states, and the nation. It involves learning about the community and political system, crafting solutions to address the community's problems, and engaging in constructive deliberation to work towards solutions. Many observers have raised concerns about the vitality and basic health of American democracy, pointing to the toxicity of current U.S. public discourse and the fact that most citizens are disengaged from the core activities required for the upkeep of democracy.

### The Role of the University

Colleges and universities play a critical role in imparting the skills, attitudes, and knowledge that are fundamental to democratic citizenship. Civic engagement education is, according to my co-editor Alison Rios Millett McCartney, "central to the survival and vitality of democracy and the educational mission of colleges and universities in the 21st century." A growing body of scholarship on civic engagement has been conducted by political scientists, part of which points to well-tested educational best practices that are grounded in research and nonpartisan in nature.

But civic engagement education is not only the work of political scientists. University educators from all fields need to embrace the value of civic learning and demonstrate how civic values can be included in lessons delivered not only in social science classrooms but also in humanities classes and in the fields of science and engineering as well. Although it may not come as naturally as it does to social scientists, educators in the humanities and the sciences have found ways to integrate civic learning into their instruction. The most creative efforts preserve each discipline's core content and link theoretical and practical tenets. At Colorado State University for example, students enrolled in "Arts Policy and Advocacy" write advocacy briefs and press releases to better appreciate the links between the arts and the shaping of public policies. In environmental engineering classrooms at Norwich University in Vermont, undergraduates apply what they learn in labs by partnering with local fifth graders to develop master plans for future playground re-development. In an English composition course at the State University of New York at Cortland, students write essays about policy solutions to issues facing their community and present their work to the Mayor.

Civic learning opportunities can and should extend beyond the classroom – to campus-wide event planning, extra-curricular and residence life, and faculty professional development. For example, Ohio's Miami

University hosts an annual “Citizenship and Democracy Week”– an interdisciplinary event that incorporates dozens of civic engagement opportunities for students, faculty, staff and residents of surrounding communities including lectures, voter registration drives, and even a naturalization ceremony. The positive results include improved ties between the university and the local community, stronger on-campus relationships between disciplines, deeper integration of curricular and co-curricular programming, and enhanced levels of civic knowledge and interest in politics among participants.

Instruction and practical steps in civic and political engagement ought not be reserved for election years, but should take place throughout the year in all facets of campus life. Indeed, as asserted by the Director of the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education Nancy Thomas and her co-author, political scientist Margaret Brower, campuses can use normative and programmatic steps to foster ongoing learning about civic engagement.

## Heeding the Call to Action

Calls to teach civic engagement are longstanding, but they have broadened and taken on a new urgency in recent years. And as my co-editor Dick Simpson notes, current efforts to extend civic instruction across many departments and disciplines are a relatively new phenomenon. National organizations such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities, Campus Compact, the Higher Learning Commission and the American Political Science Association are joining forces to advance these efforts.

However, the call to equip students with the skills, attitudes, and knowledge required to be informed and engaged citizens does not come without controversy. Some critics claim that the effort is partisan or ideological in nature.

Are they right? Certainly, civic engagement efforts on campus should avoid urging any one political or policy outlook on students. In principle and best practice, civic engagement instruction is wholly neutral. University efforts can focus though on equipping students to participate thoughtfully and peacefully in American democracy and governance, no matter their political party affiliations or ideological bents.

Backed by scholarship, educators and administrators now have the tools available to transform their campuses into laboratories of democracy, preparing the citizens and leaders of tomorrow to contribute to more robust and civil public conversations, healthier political debates, and improved public policies.

**Read more in Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, and Dick Simpson, *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen*, (American Political Science Association, 2013), and Elizabeth C. Matto, Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion, and Dick Simpson, *Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines* (American Political Science Association, 2017).**