



Q&A: ENACT and Student Civic Engagement in Action

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On December 10, 2025, SSN featured several of the authors of the new book *ENACTing Change: A Handbook for Teaching Advocacy and Civic Engagement*—Maine SSN chapter leader Robert Glover, alongside Kathleen Cole, Richard J. Meagher and Melissa Stimell. Together, they provided real-world examples of how to bring civic engagement into the classroom, sharing key take-aways from their work on student civic and advocacy engagement and offering advice tailored to university-based researchers on how to on designing opportunities that help students participate in democratic processes.

Here are some highlights from their conversation:

Melissa Stommel on the story behind the creation of ENACT

“It was 2009, and I was confronted with students who were really passionate but were feeling like they didn't have the skills to be changemakers, and they wanted those skills. I started talking to Massachusetts legislators, community organizations, teachers, and lobbyists about how to better engage students in our democracy. And the result was a course called Advocacy for Policy Change focused on teaching students about our democracy through engaging them deeply in the state legislative process.

At the state legislative process, students can have real access: they can meet with legislators, they're treated like people, they can sit down and have real conversations. So that was our focus and through a multi-year grant, we were able to export this model across the country to all different kinds of universities and colleges where they could adapt the model to their institution's needs, their student population, and their legislative environment. This network became ENACT: The Abraham Feinberg Educational Network for Active Civic Transformation.

So what did students do in ENACT courses? Well, they choose a bill before the legislature, and it's typically an issue that they feel passionately about, and they develop an expertise on the issue through research, through interviewing experts, through interviewing those affected by the problem, and they develop a legislative advocacy campaign. And then they try to get the bill passed.

As in the real world, the students might create an elevator pitch, they might write an op-ed, they may create an infomercial, and they talk to legislators. So the classroom becomes a laboratory within which students

practice their communication and advocacy skills before taking them out on the road to the statehouses.

What we found is this course really empowers students to build their confidence, to feel like they have a voice in policymaking. It helps them find spaces where their voices matter and where their voice can move the needle even a little bit on issues of importance to them.

We've done multiple program assessments and we found that it's really helping create an informed and more engaged citizenry with ENACTors voting at a higher rate than their counterparts and participating in our democracy at higher rates, through donating to issues that are important to them, through signing petitions, through contacting elected officials. And over 70% say that the course shaped their professional trajectory, informing them and steering them towards public service and organizations dedicated to social justice."

Rob Glover on the basic components of an ENACT course

"We are presenting this in conjunction with a book that we have published. It is meant to be a very practical handbook for faculty who are interested in doing this type of work and integrating this into their pedagogy.

There's some different features to the ENACT course, and we lay this out in the book, but one is that these are obviously experiential courses. So ENACT is very much grounded in learning by doing. Students aren't simulating engagement. They aren't writing as if you were presenting testimony. Many of them are prepping testimony to deliver or prepping for meetings that they're going to have with lawmakers or sponsors of bills.

It is focused on the state level, so we deliberately work in the policy area where students are in greater proximity to lawmakers and the decisions being made.

It is evidence-based. The courses build on decades of scholarship on experiential learning, advocacy, civic engagement. And it also enforces in students that when they go to the statehouse, not only should they be telling their story and situating their legitimacy to talk about an issue, but they should come armed with the facts and evidence and very much try and ground what they say in evidence.

It is modular, meaning that some of us teach ENACT courses with all of the different dimensions that Melissa mentioned, and some of us just want to integrate kind of a piece of this and maybe build out over time something that is an entire course structured around state legislative advocacy.

It is interdisciplinary. So the warm home for these sorts of courses is obviously political science, governments, public policy, but we've had folks teach these courses in public health, environmental studies, nursing.

And lastly, it is also fun and exciting. So in these courses, students, after an initial period in which they're kind of freaked out and they don't feel like they can rise to the challenge, ultimately they find the immediacy and the urgency of what they're doing in these courses very cool and very fun, going from where you're kind of overwhelmed to really feeling empowered and confident and gaining a sense of political efficacy."

Kathleen Cole on preparing students to visit their state capitol

"[The capitol] is a really intimidating place for students. They are entering an environment that's really fancy. Everybody's wearing professional clothes. And so what I try to do with my students to prepare them for their Capitol visits is really acknowledge those identity threats that can happen at the Capitol and work to create a supportive class community that can help us to collectively share the weight of being in this exciting but intimidating place and to support each other in taking risks when we feel under threat.

Community is built into the class in a few different ways. We do a lot of check-ins, both individual and team check-ins, but also in having the students advocate in teams rather than individuals working on bills. That really does automatically build in a little bit of a support network for them as they're doing their work together.

Capitols can also be really difficult places to navigate and that can create its own kind of anxiety. So at the beginning of the semester, we're there doing tours of the building. We're checking out different resources. We're having different meetings there before they end up having those group meetings with their legislators.

I also work to arrange class visits with legislators who share my students' identities. So I'll invite a panel of legislators to come to my class that are working-class people who've been elected, who are BIPOC members of our legislature, who share the backgrounds of my students.

And then the last thing that I want to share that I do is called the Narrative Tour of the Capitol. So we go into the Minnesota State Capitol and we're thinking about who's represented here? If this building tells the story of Minnesota, what's the story? Who is assumed to be the audience of the building? And then what does it mean for us to be the folks who are actually showing up there to do this work? And how are we going to support each other through it?

And so giving students that opportunity to really acknowledge openly and reflect on together and develop strategies together for what it means to do this work in a place that, depending on what state you're in, might be actively hostile to the things that your students want to work on.

Rich Marr on the process of guiding students through legislative research.

"I think the biggest question that people first ask when they encounter this model is what bills should students choose? How do students decide? How do we as faculty guide them in deciding what bills are appropriate for this class and what aren't?

And in the book, we provide this matrix that lays out some of the considerations that both instructors and students should think about when they think about the bills that they're going to select. And the matrix is

aligned on two axes, from internal to external factors, and from sort of the interest in an issue versus perception of an issue.

I think the internal and external is fairly easy to parse out. The internal factors are about the person, the student themselves, and what bills are a good match for them. You certainly want students to engage in work that they care about, and so trying to match their passions and interests to the legislation that's pending. And they need to consider not just their interests, but also what they represent in the world.

On the external side of things, outside of the students, are the sort of broader political environment. ENACT is a nonpartisan program, but students have partisan affiliations and ideological interests and there's a broader political environment that we must engage in. We have to be aware of what are the current issues that are being discussed in our state legislatures. Some of those have a lot of heat on them, some of those students might be ill-advised sticking their nose into, and others they might be very helpful.

And students have to think about: Is this a bill that has a chance at all of being considered? Is it a bill that's going to be killed next week in a committee, or is this something that we can work on for the entire semester? Is this something that even if it does get killed, we're so passionate and convinced about that we want to carry it forward and we want to work on the next session, or we know that even if it's not active now, we have a plan of what we're going to do to continue our work here during this semester?

So these are some of the considerations we encourage our educators and students to think about when they think about choosing a bill. And that feeds into and requires a lot of fact-finding. And so we have offered some models for assignments that help students do that. And I wanted to mention two of them, the first being a legislative research report.

And for folks who are let's say maybe not as familiar with experiential learning or a little concerned about, you know, particularly educators and engaging with the model, I think the legislative research report is often a good foothold because it's very academic.

It can be very much like work you've done in other courses, both you and students, right? It can be the group project that can be very much like a policy report or a research report in any other class.

And you want to encourage students to recognize they're not going to become experts as much as someone who's been in the field for 20 years, but they can learn enough and get enough information that they can feel confident in their meetings with legislators and their offerings of testimony.

We also encourage students to do an assignment that I call here a one-pager. A single piece of paper that is a piece of paper that you hand to a legislator or legislative staffer that becomes the kind of encapsulation of all that research that you've done and that you leave behind with the legislator so that they know who you were.

They have a record of the meeting. They remember what you argued for. And they have a very clear idea of what you're asking them to do. Vote for this bill, vote against this bill, gives information about the bill, arguments about the bill. It can also include personal stories, either from the students, from advocacy networks, from news and media accounts. So narratives that help explain what's at stake and why the bill solution is important. And a fact sheet that has a number of facts."