

What if a State Required Civic Learning for All Its Undergraduates?

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Abstract: This essay tells the story of the first state in the United States to set the expectation that every undergraduate in public higher education would be involved in civic learning. In 2012, the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education made “Preparing Citizens” one of seven key outcomes of its Vision Project for public higher education. In 2014, the board passed a Policy on Civic Learning defining civic learning as “acquisition of the knowledge, the intellectual skills and the applied competencies that citizens need for informed and effective participation in civic and democratic life; it also means acquiring an understanding of the social values that underlie democratic structures and practices.” The essay concludes by pointing out it is known that civic life and the public good are threatened in multiple ways all over the world, and the forces threatening civic life are also at work upon our colleges and universities. Thus, the longer it takes for our educational institutions to make a commitment in practice to civic education, the harder it will be.

Keywords: civic learning, civic learning policy, undergraduate civic education, civic life, community engagement, public good, global common good

Introduction

One hundred years ago, John Dewey wrote, “Democracy must be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife” (1916, p. 139). Dewey’s insight was that a system of government relying on its citizens to share in political decision-making can succeed only if the people hold a shared vision of themselves as participants in public life, working with others toward a common good—and that systems of education are the primary tool that societies have to create this sense of civic identity among their members.

A commitment to the civic function of education goes back at least two millennia before Dewey. Cicero’s vision of the liberal arts draws from the same root word as liberty; for Cicero, the liberal arts were the knowledge and skills that a free people need to govern themselves, and it is the job of educators to develop that knowledge and those skills.

In the United States, a recent reaffirmation of that vision (and a “national call to action” to realize this vision in higher education) was the 2012 publication of *A crucible moment: College learning and democracy’s future* (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement). For the authors, postsecondary education is “one of the defining sites for learning and practicing democratic and civic responsibilities”; it is:

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an intellectual and public commons where it is possible not only to theorize about what education for democratic citizenship might require in a diverse society, but also to rehearse that citizenship daily in the fertile, roiling context of pedagogic inquiry and hands-on experiences. (p. 2)

The report goes on to urge “every college and university to foster a **civic ethos** that governs campus life, make **civic literacy** a goal for every graduate, integrate **civic inquiry** within majors and general education, and advance **civic action** as lifelong practice” (p. 14; emphasis in original).

In a global context, a 2015 UNESCO report (*Rethinking education: Towards a global common good?*) defined education as not just a “public good,” but as a “global common good,” and said that education has a new role of “fostering responsible citizenship and solidarity in a global world.” When the concept and practice of citizenship “is changing under the influence of globalization,” where “Transnational social and political communities, civil society and activism are expressions of emerging ‘post-national’ forms of citizenship,” education has a crucial role in promoting the knowledge we need to develop: First, a sense of shared destiny with local and national social, cultural, and political environments, as well as with humanity as a whole; second, an awareness of the challenges posed to the development of communities, through an understanding of the interdependence of patterns of social, economic and environmental change at the local and global levels; and third, a commitment to engage in civic and social action based on a sense of individual responsibility towards communities, at the local, national and global levels (pp. 65-67).

This view of the purpose of education is not, of course, universally held, and it competes with other views of education.

This article explores one example of a commitment to education for democracy and the public good, telling the story of the first state in the United States to set the expectation that every undergraduate in public higher education would be involved in civic learning. Many questions might arise about such an initiative. In describing the first steps taken toward this goal and articulating further steps planned, this article addresses four of those questions:

- 1) How might work be coordinated across two dozen different institutions, each with their own systems and structures of governance, so that coherent results are generated across the public system?
- 2) How might stakeholders find out how well students are learning what they need to learn to be informed and effective participants in civic and democratic life?
- 3) How might this work in higher education be linked to civic preparation in K-12 schools?
- 4) How might this work which is being done in one state—Massachusetts—contribute to a global common good?

The Initiative: A Massachusetts Policy for Civic Learning in Higher Education

The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education (BHE) sets policy for and directly oversees the 24 community colleges and state universities in the state; the five-campus University of Massachusetts (UMass) system has substantial autonomy under its own Board of Trustees, but is invited by the BHE to participate in its initiatives and sometimes does so. In 2010, the BHE adopted a Vision Project, a set of five goals for public higher education:

- 1) Increasing college participation among high school graduates,

- 2) Increasing degree completion,
- 3) Achieving higher levels of student learning,
- 4) Closing achievement gaps among students from different ethnic, racial, and income groups, and
- 5) Aligning degree and certificate programs with the needs of employers within the state.

The overarching goal was for Massachusetts to produce the best-educated workforce and citizenry in the nation.

When the goals were released to the campuses, several faculty and college presidents responded that while these goals focused clearly on educating the workforce, none of them directly addressed educating students for civic life. The Board agreed and in 2012 added the goal of “Preparing Citizens: Providing students with the knowledge, skills and dispositions to be active, informed citizens” (Vision Project, n.d.).¹

The BHE then established the Study Group on Civic Learning and Engagement, drawing from all three sectors of public higher education (the community colleges, the state universities, and the University of Massachusetts) to make recommendations to it about how this goal could be pursued. The Study Group presented its report in March, 2014 and, drawing on that report, the BHE passed a *Policy on Civic Learning* in May, 2014.

The policy defines Civic Learning as:

acquisition of the knowledge, the intellectual skills and the applied competencies that citizens need for informed and effective participation in civic and democratic life; it also means acquiring an understanding of the social values that underlie democratic structures and practices. (pp. 2-3)

The policy points to the Study Group’s report as a resource for campuses and notes that civic learning can happen in courses, in the co-curriculum, and in engagement with communities beyond the campus. It calls on the campuses to make civic learning an “expected outcome” for their undergraduates (p.4), and articulates three additional action steps, including the collection of data on the “extent and variety of civic learning on the campuses” (p. 6).

The Department of Higher Education (DHE) is the governmental agency charged with implementing the policy decisions of the BHE. In the fall of 2014, the DHE organized a Data Collection Team to help it figure out how to assess the “extent and variety” of civic learning; the team presented a report at the end of the fall. In 2015, the DHE hired a Director of Civic Learning and Engagement to work with the campuses and help them carry out the new policy.

Question 1: How Might Work Be Coordinated Across Two Dozen Institutions to Generate Coherent Results?

The Director began by asking how campuses could report to the DHE what courses they offer that have a significant or substantial focus on civic learning. All the campuses already upload data every year to the DHE on all their courses and students. The Data Collection Team recommended that the courses reported on receive special “flags” for Civic Learning—both with

¹ A seventh goal was also added for the University of Massachusetts, the research institution in the system—that it would conduct research that drives economic development in the state.

engagement (which would typically be service-learning) and without. The Director invited the twelve campuses with the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification to participate in a Civic Learning Team to plan this work; all seven of the community colleges and state universities responded and an eighth asked to join the process. The Civic Learning Team made several recommendations about course designations:

- 1) Any course from across the curriculum with a substantial focus on any one of the BHE's four elements of civic learning (knowledge, intellectual skills, and practical competencies needed for civic participation, and values underlying democratic structures and practices) would be eligible for designation as a Civic Learning course. (Some team members wanted to have separate designators for each of the four elements, but the team decided that making the system simpler would help with the challenge of achieving buy-in from each of the campuses for the process. Some team members also wanted the designation to be reserved for courses that address all four elements, but because most courses receiving the designation will be filling other roles in the curriculum as well—covering content for concentrations or majors, for example, or fulfilling general education requirements—the team decided that this more stringent application of the criteria would result in very few courses being designated. The team's hope was that with many courses bearing the designation, students would end up taking more than one civic learning course over their college careers, and that they would encounter different elements in different courses.)
- 2) There should be three “flags” a course might receive: a flag for civic learning where engagement is required of all students, a flag for civic learning where engagement is an option students may choose, and a flag for civic learning without engagement. Some team members argued strongly that requiring engagement for all students is a best practice in service-learning: it allows the instructor to build the engagement deeply into the course, giving time and energy to preparing the students for their work in the community and to guiding them in reflection that links their experience to the course learning goals and to the other resources for learning in the course. Other team members, particularly from some of the community colleges, responded by discussing the political realities of their campuses. On their campuses, some of the most enthusiastic and effective instructors of service-learning are adjunct faculty whose classes must hit minimum levels of enrollment to be kept on the books and run for the semester, and they fear that students unfamiliar with service-learning and its benefits would drop the course after coming to class and learning about what they would be required to do—and that the course could then be cancelled and the income they are counting on would be lost. To keep these faculty offering service-learning as at least a choice, the team decided to include a flag for civic learning with engagement optional.
- 3) The team noted that, depending on culture, tradition, and governance structures that will vary from campus to campus, the decisions to designate specific courses as civic learning courses might be made by an individual in a specific role, by a specific unit, or by a committee that either already exists for related functions or might be created specifically for this function. The designation authority would need detailed information about a course, such as a syllabus, in order to assess whether civic learning is a substantial part of the course.

- 4) Courses with multiple sections may be taught by different faculty with significant differences in their syllabi. Therefore, course designations should be made at the level of the individual section, not just at the level of the course.
- 5) The team discussed the importance of also tracking civic learning in the co-curriculum, and decided that designing a system for that goal should wait until the system for tracking curricular civic learning is in place and working.

The Director convened a meeting in November of provosts, directors of institutional research and registrars, and faculty and staff involved in civic learning to share the report and ask for feedback.

Following that meeting, the campuses are being asked during Spring, 2016, to assign the course designation authority as they see appropriate and begin designating civic learning courses for Fall, 2016. Academic Year 2016-2017 is seen as a pilot year for this process; as campuses try on the process, they will identify challenges to consult with DHE and with each other about.

The DHE's hope is that those challenges will be worked through and the system will be working relatively smoothly by 2017-2018.

Question 2: How Might Stakeholders Determine How Well Students Are Learning What They Need to Learn?

For some of the other student learning outcomes associated with the Vision Project, the DHE has organized institutional researchers, faculty and staff from the public campuses to use some of the AAC&U VALUE rubrics (<http://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics>)² to assess levels of competence demonstrated by students through writing assignments in courses and the production of other artifacts presenting their learning. Among the 16 VALUE rubrics is one for Civic Engagement, but while it aligns to some degree with some of the skills identified in *A crucible moment* and in the BHE Study Group's report, it does not address the elements of either civic knowledge or civic values. Thus, DHE staff decided to develop three rubrics for assessing Civic Learning: one for civic knowledge, one for civic intellectual and practical skills (using the VALUE rubric for Civic Engagement as a starting point), and one for civic values. The goal is to provide the campuses with tools they can use to assess how well their students are demonstrating the learning outcomes identified in a general way in the BHE Policy and in greater detail in the Study Group's report.

Bonnie Orcutt, DHE Director of Student Learning Assessment, organized a national rubric development team facilitated by Wende Garrison, who has also facilitated the development of most of the AAC&U VALUE rubrics. The team decided to work first on creation of an assessment rubric for Civic Knowledge; work proceeded through the fall of 2015 and a draft of the rubric will be available for field-testing in February of 2016. Like most of the VALUE rubrics, the Civic Knowledge rubric presents six criteria; each criterion is linked to four performance indicators representing a continuum of possible performance from introductory (or "Benchmark") to "Capstone". Criteria both include traditional definitions of civic knowledge and go beyond them; for example:

- **Key Concepts Underlying Democratic Societies** (*Knowledge of universal democratic principles, key texts, contested ideals, and methods of conflict resolution that shape democracy in the U.S. and other nations*) and

² VALUE here is an acronym for Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education.

- **Integrated Identity Concerning Civic Rights and Responsibilities** (*Knowledge of one's own sources of identity and of the influence of integrated identity on an individual's exercise of civic values, rights, assumptions, and responsibilities within wider local, national, and global communities*).

Because the BHE's goal in fostering civic knowledge is for that knowledge to be used, as students are prepared for effective participation in civic life, the performance descriptors for each of the criteria at the highest or Capstone level call for knowledge that is integrated with experience.

As this first rubric is field-tested, revised, and then distributed to campuses to use, DHE staff will begin work on the second and third rubrics.

Question 3: How Might This Work in Higher Education Be Linked to Civic Education in K-12?

The final action step in the BHE Policy on Civic Learning charges the Commissioner of Higher Education to "pursue discussions with the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education regarding how best to coordinate work on civic learning in the public schools with the implementation of this policy in the community colleges and the state universities" (p. 7). One outcome of this charge has been a process of collaborative planning for the BHE and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to revise their 2013 agreement on College and Career Readiness to add Civic Preparation as the third focus of their shared work. In Spring, 2016, DHE staff will join staff of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in a Civic Learning and Engagement Task Force to make recommendations and help develop a strategic plan for K-12 civic learning.

As this work moves forward, there are multiple possibilities for collaboration across these two sectors. Possibilities include:

- 1) Creating professional development opportunities for faculty from K-12 and higher education to learn from each other how they promote civic learning,
- 2) Integrating civic learning into teacher preparation for teachers in all fields, and
- 3) Using service-learning to connect college students with K-12 students around civic learning.

Question 4: How Might This Work in Massachusetts Contribute to a Global Common Good?

There are at least two ways that this Massachusetts initiative can contribute to the common good not only in Massachusetts, but also in a global context.

- 1) *Massachusetts students can develop a sense of civic identity that locates them solidly in their own communities and at the same time in their state, their nation, and the world.* We live in interlocking systems, and to be effective participants in civic life, students need to understand how the issues confronting them locally are most often connected to larger patterns that play out across the state, the nation and the globe. The BHE definition of civic knowledge reflects this understanding as it goes on to say, "The knowledge component of civic learning includes an understanding of the United States, including its history and governmental traditions, other world societies, and the relationship(s) between and among these cultures and nations" (p. 3). The goal of growth toward a global civic identity is therefore embedded in the draft Civic Knowledge rubric, as the criteria quoted above indicate.

One powerful way to promote this global sense of citizenship for Massachusetts students is to connect them to civic life in countries other than the U.S. This could be done face-to-face, either by engaging them in study abroad or in relationships with students or immigrants from the world beyond the U.S. It could also be done through technology, engaging students in video conversations across boundaries of nation and culture, exploring shared challenges that their societies struggle with and comparing the possible alternatives under consideration in their own societies.

- 2) *The Massachusetts experience can serve as a model for other states and other countries to adopt or adapt.* As this initiative plays out, it will generate potentially useful data about the effectiveness of a governmental mandate for civic learning in higher education—at least as it has been approached in this particular context. Even at this early stage, a few lessons stand out:
 - a. *Inviting stakeholders from the various colleges and universities to share in planning the implementation is critical.* In the short history of this initiative, at least three different cross-institutional teams have been convened to plan next steps: the Study Group, the Data Collection Team, and the Civic Learning Team, involving about sixty people from over half of the 28 institutions with undergraduate enrollments. Over two hundred people from almost all of the 28 institutions have come to at least one of two half-day meetings to hear about the status of the initiative and think about their roles in relation to it. The planning reflects the shared wisdom and experience of these various stakeholders, and when they return to their campuses, they are in a position to advocate for or at least explain the whole initiative.
 - b. *Civic Learning should be approached both with engagement and without.* There are critically important ways that students, without connecting to anyone outside their course, can develop knowledge and skills necessary for civic participation and can acquire a robust understanding of the political and social values that underlie democratic structures and practices. Literature, film, and dialogue across differences, for example, are tools for developing the civic skill of perspective-taking. But this learning changes in equally important ways when students must draw upon it as the basis for meaningful action in the larger world. Engagement with real problems beyond the classroom, working with real people beyond the classroom toward solutions to those problems can both test and revise classroom learning.
 - c. *Resources matter.* Every campus is a complex system where differing agendas drive conflict among faculty and staff for funding and perhaps the most precious resource of all, time. In the first two years of this initiative, the DHE had a special three-year Vision Project grant fund to support campus-based projects to move civic learning forward. In the past two years, as old projects have wrapped up, there have been almost no funds for new civic learning grants, but funds were found to hire a new DHE staff member focused on supporting civic learning. Resources, in the form of funding or time, make it more possible for busy faculty and administrators to shift attention to this work and make it a priority. If the body overseeing higher education decides to make civic learning a priority for its campuses, its chances of success are strongly related to the resources it has available to support this change.

Conclusion

A friend once told the author, “There are two kinds of time within the university—immediate time and glacial time. Occasionally things happen immediately. If they don’t happen immediately, expect them to happen on a glacial time frame.” The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education made Preparing Citizens a goal for public higher education in 2012, and in 2016 it will begin tracking courses across the state in which that goal is a significant component. For a 28-institution glacier, perhaps that is fairly rapid action.

We know that global climate change is causing glaciers all over the world to retreat more and more rapidly, so it appears that because of an external crisis, “glacial time” is speeding up. We know too that civic life and the public good are threatened in multiple ways all over the world, and the forces threatening civic life are also at work upon our colleges and universities. The longer it takes for our educational institutions to make a commitment in practice to civic education, the harder it will be. There is no better time to start that commitment than now.

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