

Inside Higher Ed

All In? Or Just Some?

Carol Geary Schneider writes of civic learning, the equity shortfall and colleges' role in nurturing the habits of mind and heart and practical problem solving our troubled democracy so urgently needs.

By

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Just after World War II, when the United States' commitment to democracy, international community and the public good was at a peak, the six-volume 1947 Truman Commission report on higher education gave a huge boost to the community college movement and to integration, as well. Less famously, this major report on higher education's future also seized the moment to define, "from among the principal goals for higher education, those which should come first in our time." The commission cited three overarching goals for higher education:

- Education for a fuller realization of democracy in every phrase of living;

- Education directly and explicitly for international understanding and cooperation; and
- Education for the application of creative imagination and trained intelligence to the solution of social problems.

When was the last time you heard anyone in 21st-century policy circles make such a clear and direct connection between what students should learn in higher education and the “fuller realization of democracy” in our world and time?

Today, analysts are sounding warning bells about deepening societal divisions, dysfunctional government, rising authoritarianism and the crippling disparities we need to transform. On Jan. 6 this year, President Biden declared that “at home and abroad, we’re engaged anew in a struggle between democracy and autocracy ... We are in a battle for the soul of America.”

The stakes are high, as they have been in earlier eras of rupture and threat. And yet we hear no broad-based policy discussions about making civic inquiry and democracy engagement a top priority for college learners in general, much less for community college students.

The Biden administration wants to make “14 the new 12” via free tuition for community colleges. And some states have already made that move. But both at the federal level and in the states, those working to advance tuition-free community college—with targeted investments in increased completion—have been notably silent on the democracy knowledge and practical civic know-how that two years of learning beyond high school could build for this riven democracy. Instead, policy priorities remain resolutely focused on job skills and getting students quickly into the economy.

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It is time to bring together America’s alarmed recognition that “democracy is fragile” with the nation’s ongoing efforts to expand successful participation in postsecondary education. What we need now is a new era of policy and public engagement with

higher education's distinctive role in nurturing the habits of mind and heart and practical problem solving that our troubled democracy so urgently needs.

Democracy faces monumental problems, both at home and in a global era of rising authoritarianism. Those challenges—health, poverty, hunger, housing, the inequitable education system, climate, social distrust and more—are daily realities for many students. Racial slurs and messages from virulent white supremacist groups are spreading across American communities, including college campuses. As the president of my alma mater recently wrote to alumnae, students who have come to college to learn are struggling with pain, anger and exhaustion.

The fractures that threaten U.S. democracy are real and compounding. College students from all backgrounds—at both two- and four-year institutions—need to hear that their education will help them bring their knowledge, skills, examined values and direct practical experience to the hard work of co-creating the better future to which all Americans aspire. And that they will begin that work as part of their college studies.

It is time to broaden and democratize our postsecondary learning horizons. Today, many colleges and universities—but fewer community colleges—are raising core questions about students' roles as citizens in their general education programs and, increasingly, in their majors. And in 2020, an important report from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce supplied contemporary and comparative evidence that general education helps “tame” authoritarian inclinations and thus protects democracy. Meanwhile, two decades of research on the most common civic learning pedagogy—community-based projects completed as part of a “service learning” course—show that student participation in service learning: 1) correlates with increased completion, 2) enhances practical skills valued by employers and 3) builds students' motivation to help solve public problems.

Policy and higher education leaders must become bold in making the case that democracy is the foundation of everything else we hold dear, and that college students' democracy learning is mission-critical for all forms of higher learning—including two-year, four-year, career and technical, and short-term training, too. And we need to match advocacy with positive action. Frameworks already exist for advancing civic inquiry, deliberative dialogues and collaborative problem solving on social questions "across the curriculum." Diverse institutional designs for making civic inquiry part of all students' college learning already exist, as we will describe below.

Our challenge now is to significantly accelerate a grassroots-led civic learning revival that is now gaining momentum, although largely outside public or policy notice. And we need to set equity goals and markers so that the civic learning movement becomes inclusive rather than, as it is today, often marked by deep disparities between who participates and who does not.

Making Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Committed to Equity

Making democracy learning a shared priority for all postsecondary students, with special emphasis on those historically underserved, is the rallying cry and goal for a new coalition that leading organizations have recently announced. Titled Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement (CLDE), the coalition is calling for both American and global civic inquiry, guided practice in civil discourse, and collaborative work on real-world public problems to be part of each postsecondary student's educational pathway, including their career preparation.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities, Complete College America, College Promise, and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association organized the coalition, of which I am one of the leaders. The initiative has already received endorsements from over 60 partner organizations, including entire state systems, the Higher Learning Commission and a host of other student success and civic learning organizations. Together, these organizations have rallied around the overarching goal of making civic learning in college pervasive, inclusive, high-quality and "equity-committed."

Yolanda Watson Spiva, executive director of Complete College America, has summed up the coalition's equity priorities plainly: "We cannot be a stratified nation in which some college students prepare for civic leadership while others get the implicit message that democracy will not require either their time or their talent." Her observation points to the growing strength of the civic learning movement on campus, momentum that the coalition seeks to accelerate. But it points, as well, to the movement's most unfortunate weakness.

The growing strength? Hundreds of community colleges, colleges and universities already have created campus centers and programs for student civic learning, community-based projects, dialogues across difference and civic leadership development. National data suggest the impact of these efforts. The National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) routinely asks students whether—and how frequently—they took at course that included a civic action project in the community. The study director, Alex McCormick, has noted that some 53 percent of students at four-year institutions report taking one or more such courses during *their first year of college*. The number rises to around 60 percent by senior year.

The core weakness? At most institutions, participation in civic and democracy learning remains optional rather than part of the degree-requirement fabric. And the students least likely to "do optional" are America's low-income, first-generation students and students from historically underserved communities.

The result is deeply inequitable participation in college-level civic learning. The students whose profiles predict low civic participation enroll in high numbers in the nation's community colleges. That prediction turns out to be all too accurate. The Center for Community College Student Engagement, or CCCSE, the two-year counterpart to NSSE, reported this year that, across their multiple years in community college, 77 percent of respondents never took even one course that involved a community service project. (The two organizations are CLDE's research partners.)

Faced with such disparities, educators point out that community college students (and many four-year college students) often live very complex lives, balancing college

study with work and family and frequently facing searing societal disparities as well. But this reality makes college students' civic learning a design challenge, not an absolute impossibility. And, in this spirit, many leaders who care deeply both about civic engagement and about equity have already led the way in showing how students' civic learning and engagement can become integral, not optional, to students' degree progression—and not just at elite institutions but in broad-access ones, as well.

Under [Eduardo Padrón](#), Miami Dade College, the nation's largest community college, made social responsibility one of its requisite student learning outcomes over 15 years ago, and it has both fostered and assessed students' learning gains on civic engagement ever since. [Piedmont Virginia Community College](#) is working today to braid civic projects into its [majors](#) so that students develop practice in connecting their career studies to public questions and to the ethical choices that practitioners make in every field. [Kingsborough Community College](#), celebrated as a top community college with notable gains in completion, has made course-based civic learning a degree requirement. Other equity-committed institutions, like the [University of Wisconsin at Parkside](#), have embraced both the workplace and the community as sites for college students' projects on locally [significant public questions](#).

The prize-winning [Metro Student Success Program](#) at San Francisco State University is a particularly strong example of what a strong blend of equity commitments, deep civic learning, career preparation and sequenced supports for quality learning can achieve in practice for equity, student success and democracy. The program serves mainly low-income and first-generation students from historically underserved groups, and it has made a sequenced program of guided student work on searing social issues central to its efforts to support student completion. It provides a panoply of supports and services to its students, but it also focuses intensively on students' gains in essential learning outcomes—communication, critical thinking and so forth—and on students' own strategic work on some of San Francisco's most festering societal problems.

Moreover, students do this civic work in “academies” that are directly tied to their likely career directions: business, STEM, education, health, ethnic studies and liberal and creative arts. Graduates become, in Metro’s words, “professional workers for the social good.” The results are significant, with students’ gains in completion far outstripping those of a matched sample not in the program, and outstripping the university’s graduation rates over all.

Higher education must multiply the number of institutions where students from historically underserved backgrounds work simultaneously on getting their degrees, preparing for good jobs and discovering their own roles in democracy’s needed repair. That would prove to be a sound investment in both higher graduation rates and in democracy’s future.

As the Truman Commission knew, and as we must rediscover today, all college students can and should develop the “creative imagination and trained intelligence” that American democracy sorely needs to tackle its many urgent challenges, including systemic inequities themselves. It will take creativity and commitment, but with democracy’s future on the line, we can create educational pathways that involve all America’s college students with “complex lives” in tackling democracy’s tough challenges. We can do so not as an add-on to job preparation, but rather as an integral part of students’ professional and career development.

Just as important, in the words of Eduardo Padrón, “we have to rid ourselves of the elitist assumption” that civic learning is a priority only for certain kinds of students and certain kinds of institutions. Democracy is on the line—and college students who have the most to gain from finding solutions to society’s festering problems should be first at the table in helping to shape that promised better future.

Bio

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