

Highlights From

A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future

A report from the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement

In response to widespread concern about the nation's anemic civic health, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* calls for investing in higher education's capacity to make civic learning and democratic engagement widely shared national priorities. The report calls on higher education and many partners in education, government, and public life to advance a 21st century conception of civic learning and democratic engagement as an expected part of **every student's college education**.

A New Vision for Civic Learning in Higher Education

An earlier definition of civic education stressed familiarity with the various branches of government and acquaintance with basic information about U.S. history. This is still essential but no longer nearly enough. Americans still need to understand how their political system works and how to influence it. But they also need to understand the cultural and global contexts in which democracy is both deeply valued and deeply contested. Moreover, the competencies basic to democracy cannot be learned only by studying books; democratic knowledge and capabilities are honed through hands-on, face-to-face, active engagement in the midst of differing perspectives about how to address common problems that affect the well-being of the nation and the world.

Civic learning that includes knowledge, skills, values, and the capacity to work with others on civic and societal challenges can help increase the number of informed, thoughtful, and public-minded citizens well prepared to contribute in the context of the diverse, dynamic, globally connected United States. Civic learning should prepare students **with knowledge and for action** in our communities.

Components of 21st century civic learning should include:

- Knowledge of U.S. history, political structures, and core democratic principles and founding documents; and debates—US and global—about their meaning and application;
- Knowledge of the political systems that frame constitutional democracies and of political levers for affecting change;
- Knowledge of diverse cultures and religions in the US and around the world;
- Critical inquiry and reasoning capacities;
- Deliberation and bridge-building across differences;
- Collaborative decision-making skills;
- Open-mindedness and capacity to engage different points of view and cultures;
- Civic problem-solving skills and experience
- Civility, ethical integrity, and mutual respect.

Recommendations – The National Task Force urges Americans to:

1. **Reclaim and reinvest in the fundamental civic and democratic mission** of schools and of all sectors within higher education
2. **Enlarge the current national narrative that erases civic aims and civic literacy** as educational priorities contributing to social, intellectual, and economic capital
3. **Advance a contemporary, comprehensive framework for civic learning—embracing US and global interdependence**—that includes historic and modern understandings of democratic values, capacities to engage diverse perspectives and people, and commitment to collective civic problem-solving
4. **Capitalize upon the interdependent responsibilities of K-12 and higher education** to foster progressively higher levels of civic knowledge, skills, examined values, and action as expectations for every student
5. **Expand the number of robust, generative civic partnerships and alliances locally, nationally, and globally** to address common problems, empower people to act, strengthen communities and nations, and generate new frontiers of knowledge

A Crucible Moment provides specific campus examples illustrating how to move from “partial transformation to pervasive civic and democratic learning and practices.”

FIGURE 6. From Partial to Pervasive: Constructing More Advanced Levels of Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement in Higher Education

Partial foundation laid ...	Civic learning is pervasive ...
• Civic learning is optional for some students	• Civic learning is expected for all students, regardless of field or area of study
• Civic learning is a one-time experience	• Civic learning is infused across students' educational experiences over time in a developmental arc
• Teaching critical thinking does not consider real-world contexts	• Teaching critical thinking also occurs in relation to issues of public significance
• Civic learning is individually oriented	• Civic learning also fosters collaboration with diverse people and groups
• Civic learning focuses on external engagement	• Civic learning also asks students to reflect on their own social identity and location as well as those of others
• Faculty in some disciplines and certificate programs raise civic questions in relation to their field	• Faculty in all disciplines and certificate programs raise civic questions in relation to their field
• Community-based scholarship is accepted in some departments	• Community-based scholarship is positively viewed in all departments and influences the hiring and promotion of faculty
• Civic learning practices in the curriculum and cocurriculum are parallel but not integrated	• Civic learning practices in the curriculum and cocurriculum are coordinated and connected through partnerships between academic and student affairs
• Community engagement is one-directional, with colleges and universities providing expertise to the community	• Community engagement is reciprocal, with colleges/ universities and communities working together to identify assets and solve public problems
• Mission and vision statements do not explicitly address civic responsibility	• Mission and vision statements explicitly address civic responsibility

See www.aacu.org/civic_learning/crucible for full report; see Chapter 3 for full set of recommendations. Figure 6, above, is on page 43.

A Crucible Moment also documents:

“Ten Indicators of Anemic US Civic Health”

1. US ranked 139th in voter participation of 172 world democracies in 2007.
2. Only 10 percent of US citizens contacted a public official in 2009-10.
3. Only 24 percent of graduating high school seniors scored at the proficient or advanced level in civics in 2010, fewer than in 2006 or 1998.
4. Less than one-half of 12th graders reported studying international topics as part of a civic education.
5. Half of US states no longer require civics education for high school graduation.
6. Among 14,000 college seniors tested in 2006 and 2007, the average score on a civic literacy exam was just over 50 percent, an “F.”
7. Opportunities to develop civic skills in high school through community service, school government, or service clubs are available disproportionately to wealthier students.
8. Just over one-third of college faculty surveyed in 2007 strongly agreed that their campus actively promotes awareness of US or global social, political, and economic issues.
9. A similar percentage (35.8 percent) of college students surveyed strongly agreed that faculty publicly advocate the need for students to become active and involved citizens.
10. One-third of college students surveyed strongly agreed that their college education resulted in increased civic capacities.

Sources for this data appear in the final report, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future*, see: http://www.aacu.org/civic_learning/crucible/