American democracy depends on having a well-informed population. Yet today, when most Americans carry smartphones in their pockets and have a world of information at their fingertips, our nation is plagued by disinformation and distrust. We talk past one another instead of listening, and we are rapidly losing the capacity to solve problems together. Small-d democratic principles, such as fair decision-making and equality, and the stability of our democracy are at stake.

Civic learning for an engaged democracy — with all college students participating — can help our country meet this challenging moment. It gives students essential context about democracy, engages them in real-world efforts to address pressing public problems, and builds employer-valued skills. Students graduate ready to apply what they have learned in their jobs and communities.

Civic learning for an engaged democracy combines learning and action throughout the college experience. Through this work, colleges build equity and public purpose into higher education. Colleges also give students opportunities to practice productive dialogue with those who disagree — in their courses, in collaborative community-based projects, and through research. As a result, students will gain skills that employers value and real-world experience in problem-solving with diverse partners. They will graduate prepared to participate in re-establishing social trust and ensuring a fair, lasting democracy.

You Can Help

Nearly two-thirds of Americans believe that U.S. democracy is in crisis.*

Higher education leaders and policymakers can help address this crisis by ensuring that civic learning for an engaged democracy is part of every college student’s degree plan — and connecting it to other postsecondary priorities, such as completion, equity, and free academic inquiry.

Join us for a year-long series of five Planning and Action Forums called College Civic Learning for an Engaged Democracy. We welcome higher education leaders, faculty, staff, and students; policymakers and staff; K–12 educators; civic leaders; employers; and philanthropies.

Learn more at collegeciviclearning.org.

* https://www.npr.org/2022/01/03/1069764164/american-democracy-poll-jan-6
What Is Civic Learning for an Engaged Democracy?

Civic learning for an engaged democracy builds three elements into college students’ coursework: learning about democratic principles and levers for change; honing high-value skills, such as critical inquiry, communication, and problem-solving; and developing practical experience through collaborative work in real-world settings. All of this work is undergirded by students’ reflecting on their own identities, practicing productive dialogue with those who disagree, and examining how choices affect individuals and their communities.

Many colleges and universities already include part of this work in some students’ education. Now it is time to do more — and to ensure that students from all backgrounds take an active role in examining what democracy is and how it might evolve.

Higher education institutions should build all elements of civic learning for an engaged democracy into the curriculum and every student’s academic plan. Policymakers should support innovation and efforts to scale effective strategies. When all students participate in civic learning for an engaged democracy, both they and the country will be better prepared to solve our nation’s challenging problems.

Get Involved: Five National Forums Provide Opportunities for Discussion, Inspiration, and Planning

Across the country, community colleges, colleges, and universities already offer courses and programs related to civic learning for an engaged democracy. But most college students do not participate. Now it is time to explore ways to provide civic learning for all college students and connect it with community-based partnerships and students’ preparation for careers.

From December 2022 through October 2023, colleges and policymakers are participating in a series of forums to discuss civic learning for an engaged democracy and to make plans for their own institutions. The five Planning and Action Forums are open to higher education leaders, faculty, staff, and students; policymakers and staff; K–12 educators; civic leaders; employers; and philanthropies.