How—and Why—Colleges Teach Civic Learning for an Engaged Democracy

Civic learning for an engaged democracy is an intentional approach that 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. Civic learning for an engaged democracy results in significant benefits for both students and the nation.

**Colleges build civic learning for an engaged democracy into students’ coursework**

**Through Content**
- Democratic principles and levers for change
- Civic inquiry and learning related to careers
- Constitutionalism and the political systems that frame democratic governance
- Founding and freedom texts for the U.S. democratic republic
- U.S. and global freedom movements
- Authoritarianism and anti-democracy

**By Building Students’ Skills**
- Critical inquiry and evidence-based reasoning
- Digital, data, and media literacy
- Productive engagement with diverse views and experiences
- Ethical reasoning and actions
- Problem-solving with diverse partners
- Purpose and agency grounded in a strong sense of identity

**With Practical Experience**
- Collaborative projects and problem-solving with diverse partners
- Community-based research and projects
- Service learning
- Intergroup dialogue and exploration
- Equity and justice engagement and action
- Guided reflection on students’ learning from real-world experience and problem-solving

**All college students participate in CIVIC LEARNING FOR AN ENGAGED DEMOCRACY**

**Benefits to Students**
- Higher levels of persistence and completion
- Development of a personal code of ethics and values
- Deeper engagement with issues of justice, freedom, and responsibility
- Deeper understanding of people from other backgrounds
- Better informed choices about civic and equity issues in careers and communities
- Stronger interest in solving public problems across difference
- Stronger collaborative and problem-solving skills
- Increased self-efficacy and sense of belonging

**Benefits to the Nation**
- Graduates ready to address significant public problems in both careers and society
- Graduates with practical problem-solving skills desired by employers
- Graduates with practical problem-solving skills needed in a diverse democracy
- Graduates more committed to civic action, social responsibility, and equity
- Graduates both prepared and motivated to bridge societal differences
- Higher levels of voting and community service
- Higher levels of engagement with democracy


The CLDE Coalition
Each community college, college, and university determines how to incorporate **civic learning for an engaged democracy** into its own curriculum. Their approaches might include, for example, democracy labs, service learning, social justice work, and research projects. Ideally, **civic learning for an engaged democracy** includes collaborative, community-based problem-solving work as well as opportunities to deeply engage with public issues that are important to students and society.

**Examples of Civic Learning for an Engaged Democracy**

**Bonner Scholar and Leader Programs** are hosted by 65 colleges and universities across 23 states. Each year, these programs enroll more than 3,000 students, most of whom are students of color and students from low-income families. Students participate in a four-year program of experiential learning that includes collaborating with nonprofits and government organizations to address pressing community issues. Students in the program have higher retention, persistence, and graduation rates than their peers, and many graduates pursue at least a year of full-time service after graduation.

**Harvard University** has an Ethics and Civics requirement in its general education curriculum. Ethics and Civics courses examine the dilemmas that individuals, communities, and societies face as they explore questions of virtue, justice, equity, inclusion, and the greater good. Students analyze diverse modes of ethical inquiry and practice; situate ideas about ethics and civic engagement in their historical, cultural, and social contexts; and/or explore real-world ethical questions.

**Kingsborough Community College (NY)** fosters civic awareness while giving students the skills they need to actively participate in their communities. All students are required to have at least one civic engagement experience before graduating. This requirement can be satisfied through coursework or an approved non-course-related experience, and the common assessment measure for these experiences is a reflective assignment. The college has defined three domains of civic engagement (civic knowledge, political knowledge, and social responsibility), and reflective assignments are assessed using a rubric based on these domains.

**The Metro College Success Program at San Francisco State University (CA)** includes a two-semester course — the Living Lab — that allows students to reflect on the income inequality in their own communities while building a sophisticated analysis of the political economy of the Bay Area. The Metro program also provides academic and wraparound supports to historically underserved first- and second-year students at San Francisco State University. The program has eliminated the gap in graduation rates for Metro's historically underrepresented students as compared to a matched comparison group as well as their more advantaged peers.

**Southern Methodist University** requires a course in Civics and Individual Ethics. This requirement reflects the university’s conclusion that students must be able to identify their own ethical convictions, think self-critically about them, and reflect on their merits. The university has established rubrics to assess whether students "demonstrate an ability to engage in ethical reasoning about civic and individual life."