

## CURRICULUM

# How Colleges Ignite Civic Engagement



Bloomberg via Getty Images

A costumed climate activist at Ohio U. recruits student voters for early polling in the 2016 presidential election. Colleges are creating new courses in civic engagement and finding ways to get students involved as campus activists.

By Michael Anft | JANUARY 07, 2018

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**TOWSON, MD.**

**A**. J. Bhadai came to Goucher College four years ago with a goal that had little to do with his classes or his social life: He wanted to volunteer in nearby troubled, inner-city Baltimore.

"I was a person of color from a suburban household in upstate New York," says Mr. Bhadai, now a senior sociology major. "I wanted to work in a diverse city. Getting involved there was what I needed to do to feel involved in the world."

But he had little idea of how to get there. He soon turned to Goucher's Community-Based Learning office, where he became acquainted with several programs that link undergrads with volunteer service work in

the city.

## Turning Students Into Citizens

"We've been so scared of appearing partisan or political that we're really not educating for democracy," says Nancy Thomas, director of the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education, at Tufts University. Colleges are trying to change that, honing students' political and rhetorical reasoning, and broadening their experiences beyond the campus gates.

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As a junior, he worked as a mentor to students at a public middle school. This year he volunteers at an organization that teaches veterans and other people with disabilities how to farm. Just as he had envisioned, his social and political views have developed because of those experiences.

"There's so much to do in the world, but now I feel prepared to do my part of that work," he says.

But is the volunteer learning that Mr. Bhadai and other students at liberal-arts colleges experience enough? Can it, on its own, create socially and politically aware students?

Those questions are at the heart of a debate in higher education. At a time when the "facts" surrounding sociopolitical disagreements are in dispute, and a politically divided nation worries that elected officials aren't up to solving seemingly intractable problems, should colleges and universities be offering considerably more than service-learning opportunities to get students politically involved?

Many institutions seem to think so. Perhaps to reach more students than the six in 10 who typically take part in service-learning programs, dozens of colleges in recent years have started so-called civic-engagement centers or programs. Spurred on by a 2012 federal report that focused on higher education's role in improving "the nation's anemic civic health," many institutions are creating courses in civic engagement and politics, training faculty members in how to calmly and effectively lead students through intense political discussions, and finding ways to get students involved as campus activists.

A few can point to concrete gains. Students at the University of Houston-Downtown have put together a model Walk 2 Vote program that has greatly increased voting and voter registration on campus. It's being replicated at colleges around the nation. At the University of New Hampshire, students are trained to run campuswide discussions on issues and events that affect them, such as hooliganism during ice-hockey matches and the movement to divert university investments away from oil and coal companies.

Some institutions have begun to seed their campuses and curricula with civic content. James Madison University, among others, added a voting precinct to its campus. The University of Houston-Downtown's Center for Public Deliberation has worked to infuse discussions of complex political issues throughout courses in multiple disciplines, including ones in urban sustainability, critical race studies, and ethical decision making.

"There's been a big push to integrate civic learning and service learning into the curriculum," says Andrew Seligsohn, president of Campus Compact, a group that focuses on the public purposes of higher education and includes 1,000 colleges and universities as members. About half of the group's institutions have signed on to a "civic action plan" developed by the organization in 2015, and more than 90 percent have dedicated administrative or funding support to civic-engagement efforts campuswide, Mr. Seligsohn says.

"This is the next step for the movement — how to hold public dialogues and teach deliberative practices, get students thinking through issues, teaching them how to value democracy," Mr. Seligsohn says.

**D**espite progress on those fronts, many who call for heightened political engagement on campus say there is much more to be done to prepare students for meaningful civic lives. At this point, they say, higher education is failing them.

"My fear is that we'll end up on the wrong side of history," says Nancy Thomas, director of the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education, at Tufts University. "We've been so scared of appearing partisan or political that we're really not educating for democracy. We're seeing a chipping away at democracy without a strong, nonpartisan, but distinctly political response from campuses."

While service-learning opportunities geared toward showing students the real world continue to grow, she says, most institutions have tinkered around the edges of their curriculum, adding too few civics courses. They should focus, Ms. Thomas believes, more on honing students' political thinking and discourse skills, and on teaching them how to work together through complex issues like climate change and income inequality.

"Required civics courses are still so rare as to be almost unheard of," she says.

Others worry that the current focus on academic return on investment and an emphasis on vocationalism may be keeping colleges from developing far-reaching civic-education programs. What's more, rich and expensive liberal-arts institutions — like Goucher — may be the only ones with the wherewithal to send their students abroad or on intensive service-learning experiences. Public universities can't offer students similarly immersive experiences.

"The mission of a liberal education is to educate for democracy," says Lynn Pasquerella, president of the Association of American Colleges & Universities. "Community service can promote equality by showing students how other people live. But I worry that if we don't find a way to make service learning available to a wider range of students, only those who can afford to buy the time for community service will benefit. I worry we'll end up with a Jeffersonian artificial aristocracy, an intellectual oligarchy."

While socioeconomic class differences are a concern, some note that it's important to give civics lessons to the children of the rich, too. At Pitzer College, a liberal-arts institution with a \$68,000-per-year price tag, "20 percent of our students come from the top 1

percent," says Tessa Hicks Peterson, assistant vice president for community engagement. "It's really important to teach people who will likely have a lot of power in society about people who aren't like them."

Civic educators at public institutions say their mission is to give students the tools to understand how policy is made, how it affects their lives, and how to convert all that into advocacy or activism.

"Students are very motivated to do this work, but they lack the skill set," says Margaret Mulrooney, associate vice provost for university programs at James Madison. "It's our job to help them develop that."

Higher education hasn't been doing that job very well, research suggests. In 2016 the United States ranked 28th out of 35 Western democracies in voter turnout, according to a Pew Research study. The federal 2012 report said that a traditional definition of civic education, one that focused on the functions of the branches of government, was no longer sufficient. "Students also need to understand the cultural and global contexts in which democracy is both deeply valued and deeply contested."

**N**ot everyone is on board with the idea of the politically reinvigorated campus, however, or at least not one with the kind of civic consciousness embraced by many colleges. These critics see the formation of new civics programs, many of them with a leftward tilt, as a misuse of resources.

"Universities have changed their structures and marginalized courses that teach real civics," says Peter Wood, president of the National Association of Scholars, a conservative think tank backed by right-leaning foundations. "As these new courses have been developed, there's been a relative loss of courses in traditional civics."

State legislatures may be the best chance to reverse the trend, he says. "College presidents and boards seem to be on the opposite side from us. The answers may need to come from outside the university."

Those who lead newer programs designed to teach students civics say that they are doing the same job that traditional courses did, but that they are also highlighting the growing diversity of a modern campus.

Colleges often have to fill the gaps in civics learning left by high schools; only eight states require high-school seniors to pass tests in civics in order to graduate, a sign that such lessons are rarely being taught.

To help students catch up, many colleges work to make them aware of the political process, how policies are made, and what citizens can do to affect them.

"Activism is essential," says Ms. Mulrooney. "But students also need to know what to do next. They have to get in there and push. This isn't a spectator sport."

Many students these days are interested in issues — the deaths of minority men at the hands of police, women's rights on and off campus — and are eager to make a difference, educators say. Voting among college students ticked up by three percentage points in 2016 from 2012.

"Students have strong ties to identity groups who are challenged now — DACA students, other students of color, people in urban situations," says Nancy Cantor, chancellor of Rutgers University at Newark. "On many urban campuses, you see students dealing with these issues in their neighborhoods every day. It gives us a great opportunity."

In 2009, Rutgers-Newark formed an honors living-learning community that encourages students to work for change on campus and beyond. The program's 160 students study civic engagement and then take it into the surrounding communities, working in the arts, health, journalism, and policy.

"We're educators, so as important as it is for us to want to have students help local organizations, we really have to make sure that the projects they're involved in are mutually beneficial and there for the long haul," Ms. Cantor says. "It has to be a strong learning situation."

**E**arly research shows that while more students are discussing issues on campus, relatively few pour their interest into political drives or movements.

Still, evidence suggests that those who do become involved in politics are desirable students to have.

"They aren't slackers. These are the people who exemplify all that you hope a university student will be," says Jillian Kinzie, associate director of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which is run by Indiana University at Bloomington's Center for Postsecondary Research.

Last year NSSE launched a small, experimental study of political activism. Among 6,000 students from 26 institutions, one in eight said they had taken part in political activism. Other measures showed that those activists were much more likely to be "involved in synthesizing information, integrating their learning, connecting ideas with social problems, and developing greater relationships with faculty members" than those who hadn't, Ms. Kinzie says.

What's more, campuses where students vote in very high numbers exemplify learning advantages. A study led by Ms. Thomas and the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education at Tufts looked at 80 colleges with high voting rates to see what was different about them.

"The intense role faculty had in civic education jumped out at us," says Ms. Thomas. "We discovered that there was an openness at each campus, and that students had been educated so that they could take part in controversial discussions without blowing up. These campuses had high levels of social cohesion and took advantage of that when it came time to have those kinds of conversations."

Project Pericles, a collaboration of 31 institutions, most of them private liberal-arts colleges, has encouraged its members to introduce a total of 100 civics courses into their curricula in recent years. "It reflects our belief that college students need to be able to see public issues from a wide variety of angles," says Jan Liss, the consortium's executive director. "We'd love to see civic-engagement courses embedded in a number of majors — everything from music to physics to theater." Some have heeded the call. Susquehanna University teaches virology with an emphasis on civic impact, while Saint Vincent College, in Latrobe, Pa., includes political implications in its "Chemistry and Crime" course.

Project Pericles encourages colleges to map out their civic offerings and to find gaps by measuring them against those of other member institutions. "We're getting more and more inquiries from colleges asking, 'How do we get this started?'" says Ms. Liss. "We're really starting to get some serious traction on this."

The goal isn't limited to campus activism, community work, or courses, she says. It's to tie them all together into a cohesive strategy geared to each campus.

That may be happening at Goucher, which has worked hard to kick up its student voting rates by hosting campuswide debate-watching and election-night parties, and having students sign "voting pledges." Students run the Goucher Poll, a respected survey of the political views of Marylanders, and political-science majors devised an exit poll for the Baltimore mayoral race in 2016.

Perhaps the best sign that students here are politically engaged came late last year, when a group of students approached professors about assigning them a mentor for community organizing.

"There's been a lot of talk about setting up a program to teach Goucher students how to mobilize people and lead movements — something that students would eventually take the lead on," says Mr. Bhadai, the sociology major. "There's a big part of this campus that doesn't shy away from being political."

*This article is part of:  
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