

Every Student, Every Degree: Bold Higher Ed Action to Renew U.S. Democracy

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Support for college civic learning is growing, but what are advocates' goals for student learning? This essay describes four distinct but potentially complementary college civics movements. It then shows why and how the CLDE Coalition approach draws from each movement to build students' democracy knowledge, dialogue and problem-solving skills, and practical preparation to tackle public-good questions both in civil society and in students' careers. The essay outlines an "across-the-curriculum" approach that provides multiple touchpoints for civic and democracy learning: in general education, in all departmental majors and programs of study, and in students' experiential learning.

David Campbell's thoughtful essay on renewing civic culture argues for higher education's role in fostering Americans' facility in the arts of productive disagreement.¹ I fully endorse Campbell's call.

In this essay, however, I want to widen our vision of what higher education should bring to U.S. democracy in this turbulent era of deep polarization, political dysfunction, and heart-breaking violence. Teaching the arts of productive disagreement is certainly part of the solution. But there is much more that we can do.

Specifically, I invite readers to commit to two actions. First, take the time to explore the *several* fast-growing civic and democratic learning movements – described below – that are both anchored in higher education and designed to bring new vision, new voices, and new creativity to a democracy plainly in need of renewal.² Second, encourage at least one college, university, or community college – one where you teach, are an alum, or serve as an advisor – to make a 250th American anniversary commitment to embed civic and democracy education within the *required* college curriculum, both in general education and major programs of study. And this commitment should include bringing K–12 educators into new dialogue about the complementary roles of primary/secondary schools and colleges in building the capacities that our fractured democracy urgently needs.

Whether as citizens or international visitors, all U.S. students are earning their degrees in a constitutional democracy that rests authority in “We the People.” And all students should therefore devote time and talent to exploring constitutional democracy and practicing “small-d” democratic capacities, those habits of mind and heart that prepare them to make thoughtful, examined, and consequential choices about their potential roles in the future of democracy.³ That work begins in K–12 schools. But it should go higher and deeper as students pursue postsecondary degrees. Higher education’s cultural reach is enormous. Two-thirds of all Americans now enroll in postsecondary education at some point in their lifetime, while most who teach in K–12 schools prepare for that work in higher education. Imagine if we put that potential reach in service to democracy.

This essay draws from my work as the founding director of the Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition (CLDE Coalition), a national alliance now based at American University, and, from 1998 to 2016, as the president of the democracy-committed American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). I provide a brief portrait of the multiple civic and democracy learning movements now rapidly gaining ground across the postsecondary sector. Taken together, these movements provide a compelling outline of what contemporary college education for democracy should include. I then turn to seizing the opportunity of this 2026 anniversary year to move college civic learning from its current standing as widely available but typically elective to an expected component – just like communication and quantitative reasoning – in a high-quality college education.

Campbell is right to find reasons for hope in initiatives like the Institute for Citizens & Scholars’ important effort to bring higher education presidents together both to foster constructive dialogue and to measure reductions in what Citizens & Scholars calls “affective polarization.” But that work is best understood as one component in a suite of fast-growing postsecondary movements to revitalize civic and democratic learning in college.

These major civic learning movements and their intended learning outcomes include:

1. the constitutional literacy movement (sometimes called “civics”),
2. the civil dialogue movement,
3. the community engagement movement, and
4. the movement to include civic and ethical inquiry in career and technical fields.

Constitutional literacy proponents are acting on the sobering evidence that 30 percent of Americans cannot name even the three branches of government, and the majority cannot name more than one of the five freedoms included in the

First Amendment.⁴ Thoughtful scholars throughout the academy are bringing new intellectual leadership for engaging democracy in higher education.⁵ There is active political support for this constitutional literacy movement, and at least fourteen states now require study of American institutions and ideals in order to earn a degree. Some state laws specify reading core texts and/or Supreme Court cases relevant to democracy's contested development over time. *The intended outcomes for this constitutional literacy movement include deepened knowledge and informed citizenship.*

Civil dialogue leaders promote respectful engagement with differing views, including progressive, centrist, and conservative views. They advocate for campus programs in which faculty, staff, students, and senior administrators *all* practice the skills needed for productive dialogue. They also urge new training for faculty to guide such dialogues in their courses. The State University of New York (SUNY) has made "civic discourse" a required general education outcome for *all* students in its mega system of sixty-four two-year and four-year institutions, including technical schools. Dozens of nonprofits now assist such efforts, both at the state level and in individual institutions.⁶ *The intended learning outcomes include humility, active listening, and constructive engagement across differences of many kinds.*

Community engagement is the civic learning movement with by far the most extensive reach and impact across all sectors in postsecondary education. For more than four decades, Campus Compact and a host of sister organizations have led the movement to make community-facing courses, often called service learning, widely available throughout U.S. higher education. The National Study of Student Engagement has found that 59 percent of those who graduate from four-year higher education institutions report taking at least one course that included a community-based project.⁷ The community engagement movement emphasizes reciprocal relationships with communities and meaningful benefits to community organizations that participate in this engagement. *The intended learning outcomes include civic motivation, practical problem-solving skills, and the demonstrated capacity to collaborate with people whose views and experiences are different from one's own.*

Civic and ethical inquiry in career and technical fields is perhaps best described as a set of emergent movements rather than a discrete national campaign. The growing attention to ethical inquiry reflects the effort, led by AAC&U since 2002, to recognize and strengthen ethical reasoning as integral to liberal learning, an essential learning outcome, and a valued career skill.⁸

In addition, many professional fields now emphasize either teaching the ethics of a specific profession or embedding civic inquiry in majors, or both. For example, the influential business program accreditor AACSB has established "societal impact" standards that require business programs to explore ways that business decisions can help "better" U.S. communities.⁹ The artificial intelligence revolution has raised the ethical learning stakes to new heights for every college major, since all fields confront core questions about fairness, transparency, trustworthy

information, and social responsibility. *The intended learning outcomes include examined choices concerning public-good issues important in specific fields and practice in applying ethical reasoning to real-world professional and workplace issues.*

Taken together, the four contemporary college civics movements just described provide new clarity about what a twenty-first-century college education for informed citizenship should include. And so, following a nearly two-year dialogue across higher education, the CLDE Coalition has drawn these several purposes together into the CLDE Framework for College Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement, a unifying framework that includes 1) democracy knowledge and levers for change, 2) bridge-building and problem-solving, 3) practical experience and projects, and 4) career-related civic and ethical learning. (“Bridge-building” is the CLDE Coalition’s term for “civil discourse.”)¹⁰

The overarching goal for college civic and democratic learning, the CLDE Coalition contends, is each student’s development of civic purpose, agency, voice, and judgment. Some people speak of students developing “civic faith.” We recommend that each student *make examined choices* both about the value and values of living in a free society and about the roles they want to play in securing the future of free democracies.

How can higher education help graduates develop these capacities? The CLDE Coalition recommends what we call CLDE *pathways*, which begin in the initial year of college, most likely in general education courses and/or in required courses like communications.¹¹ Curricula can include reading, writing, dialogue, and assignments related to constitutional democracy’s premises and development in the United States and other societies.

In this pathways conception, such early college civic inquiry is foundational, not terminal. Civic and ethical questions should be further explored in students’ program of study, reinforcing the notion that small-d democratic principles such as fairness and concern for the greater good need to be practiced in the workplace as well as the public square. Similarly, civil discourse and “bridge-building” should be practiced as part of students’ major programs, including in projects that students may work on to complete their degree requirements.

And, finally, the CLDE Coalition recommends that postsecondary education should provide some kind of integrative experience that also includes civic inquiry and ethical reflection. The integrative experience might be part of a required practicum, such as student teaching, a public health clinical assignment, or a capstone project in business or engineering. It might include an undergraduate research project, a senior thesis, or a creative portfolio showing students’ accomplishments over time. It might include final year assignments in which students document their gains in civic learning and purpose and show how small-d democratic capacities were gained at multiple touchpoints in their course of study.

If well-designed, CLDE pathways create an integrative civic and democratic through line, from first to final year of instruction, in which students engage challenging problems and issues, practice dialogue with others about the best approaches to those problems, learn to bring evidence-based reasoning and a sharp eye for disinformation to the table, and apply these capacities to significant questions both in the wider world and in their own lives.

The actual pathways will vary, depending on students' interests and choice of fields and projects. But purposeful CLDE pathways will prepare every student to deal with complex questions whose answers are either unknown or actively contested as a core component of their college studies. And by addressing problems through *multiple* disciplinary and experiential lenses, educators can provide a new and pragmatic answer to college students' perennial question: "Why do I have to take all these liberal arts courses outside my major?"

Most institutions already have all the potential pieces of public-spirited CLDE pathways in place. Across U.S. higher education, virtually every institution requires specific general education courses, insists that students must complete writing or communications courses, and points students toward majors that have their own requirements. Further, countless institutions are now promising students that their education will include "real-world experience," whether through internships, required practicums, or service learning. These are the recommended components in a public-spirited CLDE pathway.

The missing piece is an explicit focus on education for democracy as an integrative through line that *connects* general and specialized studies with students' own questions about problems they believe society needs to tackle. Educators have put the needed pieces of civic and democratic inquiry pathways in place. But, to date, only a few higher education institutions identify civic learning as a priority for all their students.

The next step is for educators to *integrate and illuminate* the stepping stones in these CLDE pathways, helping students discover both that education for democracy will be a core component of their degree and that, while they prepare for careers, they also need to explore the ethical and social responsibilities that their intended profession includes.

This brings us to the second recommendation: a concerted effort, by everyone connected to higher education, to confront and revise the dominant narrative about the educational purposes of both primary/secondary school and college. Overwhelmingly, educators, policy leaders, and the media have joined forces over the last four decades to insist that the main point of college is to gain access to economic opportunity.

It is time to forcefully advance an expansive counternarrative: namely, that education in a democracy hones the capacities we need to ensure that democracy thrives.

Higher education's distinctive role is preparing graduates to solve problems together, in the economy, in civil society, *and* in the myriad connections between them.

Changing a dominant narrative takes time, but the 2026 anniversary of the nation's founding provides a rare high-visibility opportunity. Many Americans know Benjamin Franklin's laconic description of the 1787 Constitution: "A republic, if you can keep it." But as Richard Haass, president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, points out in his recent book *The Bill of Obligations*, Americans lack any vocabulary or conceptual framing to describe their own "responsibilities" to democracy and its future.

So in this season of historical commemoration, I encourage readers to join the national movement to make education for democracy – across school and college – both a national priority and a catalyst for that civic renewal every American knows is needed. Set a timeframe: say, the period from 2026 to 2037, the years when the United States will commemorate both its founding and the writing of the U.S. Constitution.

Where might you begin? Most *Dædalus* readers either work in higher education or hold degrees from a U.S. collegiate institution. Start with the institution you know best.

Does your institution's mission offer some version of preparing graduates for their roles in a democracy? Are civic learning courses and experiences available but entirely optional? Or, worse, are they required but taught in large lectures that allow no opportunity for practicing productive dialogue? Do your departments emphasize their field's role in preparing students to make examined choices about public-good and public policy issues they will encounter in their careers? If most students do practicums or internships, does your institution provide opportunities for them to reflect on and discuss the ethical and public-good issues they encountered in those settings?

And, casting the net wider, is your institution part of a state or national group that is itself reclaiming higher education's public-good mission? If so, connect your institution's civic and democratic learning initiatives with a collective call to broaden Americans' conception of the essential civic and democratic purposes of both school and college education.

I was reminded, in watching the PBS series *The American Revolution*, that citizen-led "committees of correspondence" played a key role in connecting potential leaders across all thirteen colonies. And that in an era of stagecoach and horse-carried mail!

Making civic and democracy learning a national priority will require our own contemporary version of the founding colonies' committees of correspondence. What role can each of us play in creating them?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ David E. Campbell, “Learning to Disagree: Why We Need a Refresh of Our Civic Culture,” *Dædalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 178–188, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/learning-disagree-why-we-need-refresh-our-civic-culture>.
- ² This essay is informed by two major reports from the Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition: *Every Student, Every Degree: College Civic Learning for Today’s Students and Tomorrow’s Democracy* (Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition, 2024), <https://www.collegeciviclearning.org/every-student-every-degree>; and *For All College Students: The CLDE Guide for Generative Curriculum Planning* (Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition, 2026), <https://www.collegeciviclearning.org/clde-guide>. The CLDE Coalition was founded in 2021 by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, Campus Compact, College Promise, Complete College America, and State Higher Education Executive Officers. The Coalition became part of the Democracy Innovation Lab at American University in 2025. For more, see <https://www.collegeciviclearning.org>.
- ³ Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition, *Every Student, Every Degree*, 8. The CLDE Coalition uses the term “small-d” to refer to the principles of democracy rather than to the political party. Notably, Americans currently are divided over whether the United States is best described as a “republic” or a “democracy.”
- ⁴ The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania annually surveys Americans’ knowledge of basic constitutional information. The 2025 findings are available through Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, “Americans’ Knowledge of Civics Increases, Annenberg Survey Finds,” September 11, 2025, <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-knowledge-of-civics-increases-annenberg-survey-finds>.
- ⁵ Much of the constitutional democracy literature has focused on K–12 education, but a federally commissioned national report highlighted higher education’s essential role. See Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement National Task Force, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future* (Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement National Task Force, 2012). See also Ronald J. Daniels with Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2021); and Richard Haass, *The Bill of Obligations: The Ten Habits of Good Citizens* (Penguin Press, 2021). American University now intends to provide both intellectual and educational leadership to engage all students with their responsibilities to constitutional democracy.
- ⁶ Campus Compact is helping higher education leaders select among the fast-growing number of civil discourse training providers. See Campus Compact, “Better Discourse: A Guide for Bridging Campus Divides in Challenging Times,” July 25, 2024, <https://compact.org/resources/better-discourse-a-guide-for-bridging-campus-divides-in-challenging-times>.
- ⁷ For NSSE evidence, see Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition, *Every Student, Every Degree*, 17. The literature on engaged college learning is voluminous. AAC&U

published a meta-analysis of what the research shows in Jessica R. Chittum, Kathryn A. E. Enke, and Ashley P. Finley, *The Effects of Community-Based and Civic Engagement in Higher Education: What We Know and Questions That Remain* (AAC&U, 2022), <https://www.aacu.org/research/the-effects-of-community-based-engagement-in-higher-education>. The study includes an informative annotated bibliography of fifty-three high-quality research studies.

- ⁸ Greater Expectations National Panel, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* (AAC&U, 2002), https://dgm81phhv63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Publications/Archives/Selected/GreatExpectationsRpt_2002.pdf; and National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, *College Learning for the New Global Century* (AAC&U, 2002), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED495004.pdf>. AAC&U has tracked higher education's embrace of "ethical reasoning" as both an educator and employer goal since 2007. The most recent study is Ashley P. Finley, *The Agility Imperative: How Employers View Preparation for an Uncertain Future* (AAC&U, 2025), 9, 19–21, <https://dgm81phhv63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Research/PDFs/AgilityImperative2025.pdf>. The report documents employer views on multiple liberal education learning outcomes, including ethical judgment and decision-making.
- ⁹ AACSB, *AACSB and Societal Impact: Aligning with the AACSB Business Accreditation Standards* (AACSB, 2023; rev. 2025), <https://www.aacsb.edu/-/media/documents/accreditation/aacsb-and-societal-impact.pdf>.
- ¹⁰ You can find a printable version of the CLDE Framework at College Civic Learning, "What Should Students Gain from Civic and Democracy Engagement in College?" <https://www.collegeciviclearning.org/learning-framework> (accessed July 15, 2026).
- ¹¹ Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition, *Every Student, Every Degree*, 33–36, provides sample CLDE pathways for both two-year and four-year collegiate institutions. *For All College Students* explores the recommendation in detail.