



What's Next for Higher Education's Civic Engagement Movement?

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This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what "courageous citizenship" is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: "We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: "I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture."

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Abstract

This overview of higher education's U.S. civic engagement movement (CEM) provides insights into how those who want to reinvigorate our institutions' civic mission should proceed. Past waves were often reactionary and promoted a single pedagogy. The author argues that instead efforts should encompass a wider array of curricula and campus programming interventions promote students' overall democratic capacity.

Origins of the Civic Engagement Movement in US Higher Education

The Civic Mission of US Colleges and Universities

Both the earliest private colleges in the United States, as well as its quickly expanding number of public institutions, took their civic mission seriously. Politicians facing a growing population, increasing enfranchisement, and a mass democracy realized that an educated citizenry committed to public service was a valuable public good ([Addis 2003](#)). Hence even as the number of public and land grant institutions expanded, colleges and universities were expected to “foster enlightened civic and political leadership” ([Hartley 2011, p. 28](#); See also [Rudolph 1990](#) and [Thelin 2019](#)). While institutions still overwhelmingly included this goal in their mission statements, promoting civic virtue was marginalized after World War II, as colleges and universities began to prioritize individual intellectual and professional development, with curricular offerings focused on meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse economy ([Hartley 2011](#)).

Early Stages of the US Higher Education's Civic Engagement Movement

By the 1980s, at least some US administrators and professors were frustrated with this skeptical view of character development. This sentiment was exacerbated as students, mirroring broader societal trends, were increasingly focused on their own individual advancement at the expense of their public obligations ([Bellah et al. 1985](#); [Bloustein 1999](#)), and culminated in efforts to revitalize the civic mission of American higher education. The resulting Civic Engagement Movement (CEM) emerged from convenings held to discuss these concerns, with those attending embracing John Dewey's approach to cultivating good citizens through experiential learning. Those affiliated with the CEM movement prioritized a pedagogical approach that came to be labeled “service learning” as they believed supplementing students' classroom learning with meaningful service in their communities would lead to increased civic and political participation. By 1985, a small group of advocates launched [Campus Compact](#), an organization to support higher education institutions incorporating this approach.

One measure of the CEM's success was the widespread embrace of service learning at all educational levels throughout the United States. Another was the institutionalization of support for this approach on US college campuses and in higher education professional associations. Many campuses now highlight service learning by housing it within a center or institute charged with providing professional development for faculty and with reaching out to community partners. Professional associations beyond Campus Compact were founded to promote community engaged learning. Meanwhile, the [American Association of State Colleges and Universities](#) (AASCU) launched the [American Democracy Project](#) annual convening to support

civic engagement efforts at four-year institutions, and its success inspired [The Democracy Commitment](#), intended to provide similar programming and support for US community colleges. By 2010, the [Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching](#) (CFAT) had established a [Community Engagement Classification](#) to provide public recognition for institutions that prioritize service learning on their campuses.

Institutionalizing service-learning was successful in many ways. It heightened Millennial college students' concerns about public issues, which they were more willing to address through increased commitment to voluntarism ([Zukin et al 2006](#)). Yet college students' political engagement, and especially voter turnout, remained an issue. President of the American Political Science Association in the mid-1990s Elinor Ostrom responded to these ongoing concerns by calling for a renewed commitment to civic education within the discipline. Her presidential taskforce report on this issue ([1998, p. 636](#)) called for further intervention, concluding that "levels of political knowledge, political engagement and political enthusiasm [among American youth] are so low as to threaten the vitality and stability of democratic politics in the United States."

Not all political observers shared these concerns, convinced that political participation would inevitably flow from Millennial college students' reinvigorated attention to public issues ([Dalton 2008](#)). Others, however, expressed deep concern that young citizens purposefully avoided traditional political activity in an era of escalating partisan polarization, turning to voluntarism and political consumerism instead ([Zukin et al. 2006](#)). Volunteering, these critics pointed out, can supplement voting and other forms of overt political engagement, but cannot replace them. In particular, Boyte ([1991, p. 765](#)) warned that even with the institutionalization of service-learning, college "appears to leave students without concepts or language to explore what is political about their lives" – a warning that was confirmed when more than half of graduating college seniors in the early 2000s reported college experiences had little effect on their intention to vote ([Kuh and Umbach 2004](#)).

If Service Learning is Not Enough, What Should Campuses Do?

As these concerns surfaced, scholars affiliated with the [Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching](#) (CFAT) undertook the Political Engagement Project (PEP), a cross-campus effort to implement and assess a wider array of teaching practices designed to promote students' political engagement ([Colby et al. 2003, 2007; Erlich 2000](#)). As Beaumont ([2013](#)) highlights, PEP yielded three core findings. These are, first, that such efforts can be effective in cultivating students' political engagement; second, that these outcomes can be accomplished without imposing a particular ideological or partisan bias; and third, that such efforts do not widen the 'democratic achievement gap' as they have a consistently higher impact on politically disengaged students. Specifically, the PEP project assessed whether students had gained political understanding and skills essential for active citizenship in a democracy. In addition, it tracked improvements in students' motivation to participate in politics, as well as their self-assessed likelihood of participating in the future. PEP findings underscored the importance of a more comprehensive approach to civic learning, highlighting the importance of scaffolding. Findings indicate that the college experience should initially provide students with adequate substantive knowledge and skills, laying the foundation for deep, transformative learning as students come to embrace a civic identity, realizing that they can (and should) apply these in meaningful and effective ways beyond the classroom. Notably, these positive outcomes – of

students with the requisite knowledge, skills and dispositions of good citizenship -- were most likely to occur when students had opportunities to actively participate within a politically active community, where they could acquire and practice political action skills, but also where their peers expected them to engage in civil political discourse and to collaborate with others in racially and ethnically pluralist contexts ([Beaumont 2013](#)). It should come as no surprise that these types of learning opportunities are largely experiential, falling into the category of high-impact teaching practices that bolster student engagement more generally ([Kuh 2008](#)). It should also come as no surprise that they replicate lost opportunities for robust political socialization in the US' once rich array of voluntary associations as described in seminal assessments of everyday Americans' political participation ranging from Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* to contemporary political behavioralists' *Voice and Equality* ([Tocqueville 1969](#); [Verba et al 1995](#); See also [Strachan 2024](#)).

As teacher-scholars built on the findings of the PEP project, they began to identify an array of experiential learning activities that can be used to cultivate civic engagement including not only reinvigorated approaches to service learning with community partners, but also guided discussion of controversial political issues with peers and community members, internships in political settings, simulations of political decision-making, participation in campus student organizations, running for seats on student government bodies, and more (See [Bell, Ong-Whaley and Rank 2024](#); [Goldberg and Ong-Whaley 2024](#); [Magjuka 2023](#); [Matto et al 2017](#); [2021](#); and [McCartney et al 2013](#)).

Yet it is important to recognize that if higher education's goal is to fully develop students' democratic capacity – even the best designed civic engagement class or campus activity is not enough. This type of character development requires reiterative experiences that are much more likely to take place when the institutional culture on campus supports and rewards the faculty and staff who are responsible for implementing civic engagement activities (See [Kuh et al. 1991](#); [Kuh et al. 2005a](#), [2005b](#) for insight into the importance of institutional culture.)

Shortly after the PEP was published, an effort to reinvigorate and refocus the CEM gained traction. After a series of meetings, civic reformers connected to higher education formed The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement ([2012](#)) and issued *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democratic Engagement*. The report, which has been described as igniting a “national conversation about how to reimagine civic learning and democratic engagement” ([Magjuka 2023, 1](#)), encouraged US colleges and universities to embrace a wider array of curricular and programming innovations beyond service learning and community engagement. Further, recognizing the essential role of institutional culture in its agenda, *A Crucible Moment* ([2012, p. 14](#)) urged, “every college and university to foster a civic ethos that governs campus life, makes civic literacy a goal for every graduate, integrates civic inquiry within majors and general education, and advances civic action as lifelong practice.”

Prioritizing Voter Registration and Mobilization

In response to these initiatives, many colleges and universities extended their commitment to civic learning beyond service-learning and community engagement. Some established civic engagement centers or hired new student affairs staff with titles such as “director of civic engagement.” Others provided course releases to allow interested faculty to step into these roles. While programming, staffing, and support varies from campus to campus, US colleges and

universities are now much more apt to have a broader array of civic engagement curricula and programming.

And yet, deep concern over declines in youth voting were responsible for much of *A Crucible Moment's* traction. Hence while some elements encompassed in a more comprehensive approach to civic engagement pedagogy recommended by both the report and by the PEP study emerged on campuses, interventions with a pragmatic focus on voter registration and mobilization took precedence. As noted above, low turnout among young Americans was a persistent source of concern despite the widespread embrace of service learning in higher education. For example, after a precipitous drop to only 32.4% in 1996 presidential election, a 1998 amendment to the Higher Education Act required all colleges and universities receiving federal funding to make voter registration material widely available to all students. Institutions complied, but with little effect on college students' participation in elections. Years later, Barack Obama's presidential campaigns purposefully mobilized youth voters in 2008 and in 2012, increasing 18-to-29-year olds' voter turnout to approximately 50% and reversing trends in low voter turnout among young Americans. Scholars and political observers breathed a collective sigh of relief – only to have their concerns reignited when youth turnout dropped to 13% in the 2014 midterm elections ([State-by-State Youth Voter Turnout 2023](#)), marking a stark realization that paying attention to politics and voting were not ingrained habits for most American young people ([Harvard and Shea 2013, pp. 22–4](#)).

In response, a full array of nonprofit organizations and resources emerged to coordinate campus voter registration and mobilization work across the country. One of the most important resources from this latest wave of civic innovation has been the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), initiated in 2013 by Nancy Thomas, director of the [Institute for Democracy & Higher Education](#) (IDHE). IDHE is now affiliated with the [American Association of Colleges and Universities](#) (AAC&U), while NSLVE is currently housed at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life. NSLVE is the largest study of college student voting behavior in the United States. The project marries deidentified student records from approximately 1,200 colleges and universities with publicly available voting records. Participating campuses receive a free campus-specific NSLVE report after each midterm and presidential election. These allow campuses to track their own students' overall registration and turnout rates. They also provide insight into registration and turnout by demographic identities and by major, helping campuses to target pockets of recalcitrant students ([Thomas et al 2021](#)). Other prominent nonprofits who help US campuses use this information effectively as they develop campus voter registration and mobilization plans include [ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge](#) established in 2016; the [Fair Election Center's Campus Vote Project](#), initiated in 2014; and [Students Learn Students Vote](#), established in 2016. All three have programming to help campuses implement effective Get-Out-the-Vote efforts, including the opportunity to compete in campus challenges, apply for small grants, and train and pay student democracy fellows. Other nonprofits focus on providing detailed information students will need to register and vote in various states and localities. These include [Democracy Works' Turbo Vote](#), established in 2012; and [Ballot Ready](#), launched in 2015.

While it is impossible to disentangle the effects of these initiatives from other influences, voting rates for young Americans in general and for college students specifically spiked in ensuing elections. Youth voting in general increased from 39% in the 2016 presidential election to 50%

and in the 2020 presidential election ([State-by-State Youth Voter Turnout 2023](#)). Across the same period, college students' voting rates jumped from 52% to 66% ([Thomas et al 2021, p 3.](#)). Before viewing campus voter registration and mobilization drives as an unqualified success, however, it is important to note that US youth voting in midterm elections actually declined slightly, from 28% in 2018 to 23% in 2022 for youth overall, and from 40% in 2018 to 31.3% in 2022 for college students ([Gismondi et al 2023](#)). This is still a vast improvement over the nadir of 13% youth turnout in 2014 but a decline, nonetheless.

CIRCLE's survey data does reveal, however, that campus programming still plays an important role in youth voter outreach efforts, as 48% of youth without college experience said they were never contacted about the election, compared to only 29% of youth with college experience. ([Medina, Siegel-Stechler, and Suzuki 2025](#)).

Beyond Campus GOTV: The Next “Magic Bullet” for Youth Civic Engagement on Campus

There is no reason to believe these efforts to mobilize youth on college campuses will diminish. For those concerned with youth turnout, outreach to college students is an effective strategy for reaching young voters, as about 63% of US high school graduates immediately attend college ([Fast Facts 2021](#)).

Yet civic reformers have new concerns for the health of American democracy and youth political socialization that are once again initiating innovation in campus civic engagement work. The escalation of overt rudeness and political violence ([Kalmoe and Mason 2022](#)) that accompany partisan polarization has suppressed many young Americans' interest in public service or willingness to run for elected office for at least the past decade ([Lawless and Fox 2017](#); [Strachan et al 2024](#); [Shames 2017](#)).

More recent polling highlights general dissatisfaction with political outcomes and a declining faith in democracy overall. The 2024 national Harvard Youth Poll, for example, found that only 11% of 18- to 29-year olds believed the country was “generally headed in the right direction” ([Institute of Politics 2024](#)) They appear to lack faith that democratic institutions will be able to address their concerns, as a 2023 survey by the American Public Media Research Lab found that only 27% of Americans aged 18 to 25 strongly agreed that democracy is the best system of government, compared to 48% across all age groups ([Helmstetter and Fraser 2023](#)).

A recent national survey of Gen Z Americans by CIRCLE ([Apau et al 2025](#)) provides more nuanced, although still troubling, insights into whether young Americans value democracy. CIRCLE found broad support (ranging from 81 to 72%) for democratic principles and values including the importance of having leaders elected in free and fair elections, fair laws and equal treatment of all people, ensuring elected officials obey the law, and protecting people's right to free speech. Yet confidence in American democracy was low, as only 36% of young Americans thought that government could address current issues of concern, while even fewer at 16% agreed with the claim that “democracy is working well for young people.” Just as troubling, while 63% of 18-29 year old Americans were described as having a “passive appreciation” of American democracy, 31% had a “dismissive detachment” with far less faith in the values of democracy or confidence that it works to solve people's problems. The attitudes of a slim minority, 7%, were described as “hostile dissatisfaction” as these respondents were most critical

of the state of US democracy and most willing to consider extreme acts to accomplish political ends required to reform it ([Apau et al 2025](#)).

Two distinct approaches have emerged to address these escalating concerns for young Americans' support for democracy. The first attributes youth rejection of democracy to lack of civic knowledge. Reformers in this camp, affiliated with prominent nonprofit organizations including the [Jack Miller Center](#) and the [American Enterprise Institute](#), trace Gen Z's dissatisfaction with the United States to limited exposure to a particular type of civic knowledge. Topics of concern include the history of democracy in the Western tradition, the development of Enlightenment political theory highlighted in early American political thought, and the role of the US Constitution in limiting the exercise of government authority through separation of powers and reserving power to states. Their solution has been to change state laws, particularly where Republicans have unified control of state governments, to require all college students at public universities to take at least one class that includes presentation of these topics through original documents, such as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Federalist Papers ([Douglas-Gabrielle 2025](#)).

The second, far more intertwined with the CEM reforms that first emerged in the 1980s, focuses on current levels of polarization as the root cause of young Americans' dissatisfaction with American democracy. Reformers in this camp embrace an array of dialogue and deliberation initiatives designed to increase civil discourse and understanding among college students with different ideological and partisan preferences. Campus-specific initiatives in this vein are at this point seemingly ubiquitous, as administrators work with student affairs staff, civic engagement directors, and faculty to demonstrate their commitment to open discussion of challenging political issues. These endeavors are supported by an ever-growing array of nonprofits ranging from well-established groups like the [National Issue Forum Institute](#), which has long been associated with providing issue guides on public issues of concern, to more recent additions, including [Unify America's College Bowl](#), which pairs students with different partisan and ideological preferences in a conversation hosted on their online platform. Others offering more in-depth training, workshops, and coordination of large-scale campus events include [the College Debate and Discourse Alliance](#), [Braver Angels](#), and the [Constructive Dialogue Institute](#).

Neither of these approaches is wrong and both will address important deficits in students' learning. Recall, for example, that service learning successfully enhanced students' concern for public issues, while concerted campus GOTV efforts have increased youth voter turnout rates substantially. Going forward, US college students enrolled in required civics courses will certainly gain additional civic knowledge after increased exposure to the documents and debates surrounding America's founding, and those who participate in deliberation and dialogue initiatives will be more prepared to communicate effectively across political differences. Neither, however, fulfills past recommendations for developing a comprehensive approach to civic learning on campus. To effectively bolster college students' democratic capacity, civic engagement programming must shift from reactionary efforts to address a pressing crisis (e.g. disinterest in public life, low youth voter turnout rates, limited appreciation for democracy, or intolerance associated with partisan polarization) to a holistic endeavor to cultivate civic dispositions along with the knowledge and skills required to sustain a democratic form of government over the decades. Indeed, this is the recommendation that emerges from CIRCLE's recent survey of Gen Z, as the defining characteristic of young Americans who were most

disillusioned with democracy and its outcomes was that they were the least prepared to participate effectively in the political process ([Apau et al 2025](#)).

Next Steps – Be Comprehensive, Timely, and Intersectional

This push for a comprehensive, scaffolded approach to civic learning in higher education does not mean that we should not be innovative. Rather, teacher-scholars persuaded that higher education has an obligation to cultivate our students' democratic capacity must ensure that our pedagogy provides students with the ability to respond to the current, rapidly changing political environment. Just a few years ago, for example, preparing US students for “rude” politics and ad hominem attacks would be enough. Yet the current US political environment has moved beyond rudeness and is now characterized by escalating threats and violence ([Kalmoe and Mason 2022](#)). It is clear that teacher-scholars must prepare students to meet additional challenges to democracy beyond escalating partisan polarization, in a world increasingly characterized by backsliding democracy and rising authoritarianism ([International Idea 2023](#)).

It is not fair to encourage students to actively participate in the political process without considering which civic skills are most appropriate for what they are apt to encounter when they do. The same innovative approach will be essential to prepare them to counter the effects of propaganda and misinformation, nonstop exposure to social media, access to artificial intelligence, and more. Students will need a new and reinvigorated set of civic skills to successfully establish and sustain democratic systems of governance going forward. In the spirit of giving students what they need, teacher-scholars will also have to consider how lived experiences affect their reaction to these efforts. Teaching strategies that worked when only the sons of the elite arrived on a few college campuses will not work as our student bodies become more inclusive. As higher education seeks to prepare students for political participation, academics must think about our students and what they need given their direct, lived experiences. How can internships and service learning commitments accommodate students with lower socioeconomic backgrounds or nontraditional students with family commitments? How might those with different partisan, ideological, or religious values respond to topics addressed in deliberative forums? How will women and members of other disenfranchised demographic groups respond to lessons about founding documents and political theories that initially denied them civil rights and access to the vote? Until quite recently, higher education's civic reformers have focused on identifying universal best practices that they believed would have a uniform effect on every student on every campus. Social scientists know that this blanketed approach will not work as our own research demonstrates that demographic groups have varied reactions to political phenomena, which include political learning experiences. No political behavioralist would attempt to publish research without including a full array of demographic identities as controls because prior research findings indicate that experiences based on race, ethnicity, sex orientation, religion, culture, nationality, and so on, will influence respondents' reactions. Those committed to civic engagement pedagogy must take these findings to heart, as we seek to develop effective civic and political learning that works for all of our students ([Poloni-Staudinger and Strachan 2020](#)).

Conclusion

The trajectory of the CEM in the United States provides insights into how those affiliated with an effort to reinvigorate our institutions' and our discipline's civic mission should proceed. Unfortunately, the most prominent elements of the US-based CEM have often been reactionary, responding to the crises of distinct eras by prioritizing a single best teaching practice (or "magic bullet") that, if uniformly implemented across our campuses would transform students into the good citizens democracy needs. To the contrary, the next wave of the CEM should not prioritize a single approach. It should encompass a wider array of curricula and campus programming interventions designed to cultivate the civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions linked to students' overall democratic capacity. Further, those who embrace this work must be flexible and innovative, as we tailor pedagogy and programming that meets current students' needs by considering the civic skills needed to navigate the current political climate, the varied needs of a more diverse student body, and the nuanced approaches appropriate for a new political context. To help our students establish, nurture, and sustain democratic systems of government going forward, we must not only embrace higher education's civic mission, but must also transform this work to ensure that it is not only comprehensive, but also more timely and more responsive to students' circumstances.

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