Equity-Focused Civic Learning Across Disciplines

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Transitioning to full-time faculty in 2020 and the subsequent appointment of Endowed Professor for Civic Education and Engagement in 2021, I shifted my attention from K-12 to civic learning that benefits college students and the community. Studies in civic learning support in higher education find it is common for civics to be viewed as a separate subject area or even something extra-curricular. I researched civic mindedness and responsibility and found writers like Sylvia Hurtado explaining, “college teaching based on civic learning goals can model community and democratic principles to enhance students’ civic skills and dispositions for a diverse and changing world…Intentional, engaging pedagogy for coursework and campus programming is the primary way to develop the different dimensions of civic learning in college students” (Hurtado 2019, 95, 99).

Prompted by supportive literature for curriculum-embedded strategies, I invited faculty from across degree programs to include civic learning in at least one required course with the aim of building capacity for social awareness, incorporating diverse perspectives, empathy, co-constructing equitable and just solutions, disrupting and resisting inequities, a sense of duty, concern for others, and a feeling of agency. The initiative had these civic learning goals: 1) incorporate intentional and specific course outcome(s) with the expectation that students will identify civic dispositions; and 2) incorporate specific criteria for students to identify and reflect on the development of civic dispositions and the impact for future learning and action in an associated assignment and its assessment.

Equity-focused educational practices that foster culturally-responsive teaching and learning environments hold potential for students entering civic life. In summer 2018, I began my support for civic learning at the K-12 level in earnest as the senior associate dean in the College of Education and Health Sciences (CEHS). With a team of writers from civic-focused organizations across the Commonwealth, we developed micro-credentials focused on civic learning with topics including, but not limited to, Massachusetts city and town governments, local civic action projects, and managing difficult discussions.

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Eight faculty from seven different programs across three colleges joined me and worked to develop rubrics and scoring tools so that students could demonstrate that they met the civic learning criteria. In order to explore student perceptions and analyze evidence of educational impact, a survey was developed to gather data for evidence of students’ growth and development regarding civic dispositions, including civic-mindedness and civic responsibility. Ten survey items addressed student perceptions and areas of growth we hoped to target. The survey was conducted at the end of the fall 2022 semester across all courses identified by the civics initiative faculty participants. The data from the responses received (n=59) indicated that incorporating civic learning expectations in required coursework across disciplines may benefit student growth in understanding civic responsibility and possibly the value of civic action for their field of study and future communities.

In spring 2023, faculty presented our results at two conferences: the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement conference, co-sponsored annually by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Each of the sessions was well attended and we heard from participants whose roles ranged from staff in student affairs, to directors of centers for community engagement, and some faculty. Overwhelmingly, they, too, are looking for strategies for spreading civic learning throughout degree programs.

As a result, we have made connections with institutions across the country and shared with them the goals and processes for our initiative.

Learning about students’ growth and development regarding civic dispositions, including civic-mindedness, civic responsibility, social empathy, and collaborative efforts toward the greater good, is incredibly important.

Fostering civic dispositions speaks to students’ readiness to contribute to their communities for the betterment of society. As we endeavor to advance the work we do for social justice, racial justice, and civic engagement in the pursuit of equity, we answer the call from the Department of Higher Education in Massachusetts as they describe how civic learning fits with their Equity Agenda, “…which calls for equity and racial justice in all elements of the undergraduate experience. Through equitable access to civic learning, all students—including students of color who have previously experienced barriers to their success—will develop the knowledge and skills that they need for informed and effective participation in civic and democratic life” (https://www.mass.edu/strategic/civic.asp).

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