

“Now Is the Time”: Civic Learning for a Strong Democracy

Sylvia Hurtado

Cultivating citizens for American democracy has historically been a key purpose of higher education, yet today’s college students are in contact with more divergent worldviews, increasing demographic diversity sometimes accompanied by fear of “the other,” and resulting conflict in policies amid rising inequality. Now is the time to recenter civic learning within and across all institutions and disciplines, as well as undertake more critical approaches to this work in terms of pedagogy that prepares students for a diverse and unequal society. Colleges’ collective efforts have already resulted in critical community engagement, curricula reform, and better ways of articulating and assessing civic learning practices. Extending civic learning to reflect how we teach will result in more engaged citizens capable of understanding differences, conflict as an opportunity to learn, and community-building processes characteristic of a strong democracy.

During a time of great civil unrest over racial injustice, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated, “Now is the time to make real the promises of our democracy.” Today’s changing demographics, globalization, media, and technology place young adults in regular contact with diverse cultures, social movements, and conflicting worldviews that raise important questions about our democracy and challenge their own perspectives. Now is the time to foster civic learning to prepare all students for engaging in a democracy embedded in an “increasingly contentious and fractured world, where diversity is crucial.”¹ The contemporary era is divided over key policy issues and rising inequality, and yet it represents a critical opportunity for the education and engagement of young adults. The 2018 midterm elections reflected a surge in voting among the high school senior and college-age population, with 31 percent exercising their right to vote and significant increases in youth political activism since the 2016 presidential election.² Increased voter turnout was attributed, in part, to one of the most contentious presidential candidates in U.S. history, who had no record of public service. Rather than abandoning

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ideals out of cynicism and growing dismay about democratic processes, youth surveys suggest a diverse, college-age population with a collective approach toward positive change. However, voting and activism are not the only behaviors to monitor. Engaged citizenship requires development of college students' capacities and habits of mind that include knowledge, skills, and values to counter misinformation, negotiate conflict, and identify threats to a pluralistic democracy. Further, although 87 percent performed some type of volunteer work during high school, only 19 percent of freshmen entering four-year colleges score high on civic engagement behaviors.³ That is, civic learning involves more than engaging in charitable service, and many students have yet to discover what democratic practices feel like in the classroom. How and what we teach the next generation is critical to building a hopeful vision of an American society that is more equitable, sustainable, and economically stable, and is governed by a strong democracy.

The purpose of this essay is to illuminate how inclusive 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. To begin, I provide a brief overview of the civic learning landscape in higher education. I call attention to integrative approaches to civic learning goals to bring coherence to campus efforts, even as the diversity and civic engagement movements have evolved separately and oftentimes exist in separate units on campus.⁴ Key democratic concepts and pedagogy typically associated with service learning and intergroup dialogue can be integrated into many courses and classrooms. The aim is to encourage faculty to take responsibility to engage diverse classrooms and develop a new generation of citizens willing to enact innovative solutions to the problems of the twenty-first century.

While primary and secondary education are intended to provide all students with education in civics – defined as the rights and duties of citizens and an understanding of how government works – higher education has historically played a special role in educating citizens for leadership in society. Cultivating citizenship has been embedded in the purposes of higher education from the days of the earliest colleges to the contemporary movements of civic engagement. It is a key component of a quality education. For example, accreditation agencies include civic engagement and civic discourse in a diverse and multicultural society as a core element in evaluating the quality of education that many campuses promote in institutional mission statements. Civic learning is also one of the five identified areas in the “Degree Qualifications Profile” established to promote the quality of associate’s to master’s degrees, fostering students’ capacity to “engage with, respond to, and reflect

on political, social, environmental and economic challenges at local, national and global levels.”⁵ Still, there is the common notion that civic learning is optional and that we are reaching only students who arrive with open hearts and minds about their personal and social responsibilities and choose specific college courses. We need to extend the reach and occasions for civic learning in college.

Much activity has taken place across the American higher education landscape in the last thirty years to recenter the role of colleges and universities in advancing civic learning. Many institutions have created new roles, initiatives, and centers supporting civic learning as well as increased their involvement in a broad social movement reflecting an array of academic groups and campus consortia concerned with civic learning and student development, including the initiatives and resources in such organizations as Campus Compact, Bringing Theory to Practice, and Imagining America.⁶ In 2012, the American Association of Colleges & Universities’ (AAC&U) National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement released the comprehensive report *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy’s Future*. It was a national call to action for civic learning to acquire equal footing and integration with educational career and degree-completion goals. The report helped jump-start and coordinate higher education efforts in an attempt to reverse a “civic recession” in the country, evidenced by the relative declines in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civic learning measures for twelfth graders from 1998 – 2010, and relatively low voter-participation rates among young adults.⁷ The report identified the many ways that higher education institutions have laid pathways to democratic engagement and provided a template that raised the bar for developing the civic-minded campus, including a focus on the college curriculum as well as the development of powerful community partnerships. Momentum surrounding the report renewed conversation about higher education’s role in cultivating citizenship and reinvigorated collective campus commitments to developing programs, serving communities, and reforming curricula.

The U.S. Department of Education funded and supported the work, but deferred to the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement to arrive independently at its recommendations for higher education. The Department released its own report intended to be priority-setting for a national agenda of educational goals for civic learning.⁸ Although momentum has evaporated at the federal level with the change in staff and administration, collective campus activity has not waned and, in several cases, efforts have been consolidated. The expansion of the reach of civic learning

and a commitment to diversity and democracy is evident in AAC&U's activities, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' American Democracy Project, and The Democracy Commitment (TDC), which recently emerged to foster community-college engagement. Campus Compact has over one thousand campus members, has merged efforts with TDC, and continues to encourage campuses to commit to developing civic action plans.⁹ The ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, a consortia of college campuses that emerged at the time of the *Crucible Moment* report, focuses on activities to increase youth involvement during and between elections and joined efforts with the nonprofit Civic Nation in 2016 to increase democratic engagement in the electoral process. ALL IN activities may have played a role in increasing midterm election turnout of the college-age population, as campuses devised plans and competed for awards to raise the voter participation rates of their student bodies. These higher education consortia continue to provide portals, events, and meetings where change agents share practices and resources to integrate the educational and civic missions of their institutions.

Institution-wide commitment is important, but how does such a commitment reach more students than those already inclined to seek civic learning activities in college? Educator and activist Parker Palmer has stated that “students learn not only from *what* is taught: they also learn from *how* it is taught.”¹⁰

If students are to be well served and are to serve a democracy well, we need to invite them into a lived engagement with democracy's core concepts and values. There are at least two ways to do this: by engaging students in democratic processes within the classroom and the school and by involving them in the political dynamics of the larger community.¹¹

Civic learning requires students to be active participants, as “democracy is not a spectator sport in which citizens can watch the pros at work.”¹² Our teaching methods can include aspects of civic learning to give students an opportunity to learn and practice democratic concepts, engage in dialogue across difference, and develop projects working alongside diverse communities. Even in this era of “digital connectedness,” Palmer believes we can engage in teaching to develop students' 1) understanding that we are all in this together; 2) appreciation for the value of “otherness”; 3) ability to hold tension or conflict in life-giving ways; 4) sense of personal voice and agency; and 5) capacity to create community. Civic learning can encompass each of these “five habits of the heart” and takes place in all types of venues, classrooms, and fields of study.

While a national standards framework exists for K–12 education to guide teaching and desired outcomes in civics education, no comparable standards for civic learning outcomes exist across all types of higher education institutions.¹³ Campuses establish their own faculty-driven standards that are adopted in consensual agreement. However, a civic engagement working group of educators and nonprofit staff, coordinated by the AAC&U, developed an integrated framework called the Civic Learning Spiral that captures multiple dimensions of civic learning in college. The framework was introduced as a way to consolidate the three contemporary reform movements of diversity, global learning, and civic engagement in higher education; identify multiple, interrelated dimensions of students' capacity for engaged citizenship; and give guidance on achieving personal and social responsibility as one of the AAC&U's Essential Learning Outcomes adopted by many institutions and campus systems.¹⁴ The framework identifies multiple areas of civic learning that can be incorporated more broadly in college courses, general education requirements, and campus programs.

At the Spiral's core lies the notion of interwoven learning across six dimensions or "braids": self, communities and cultures, knowledge, skills, values, and public action. Classroom and cocurricular activities can be directed toward outcomes in each of these dimensions. Increasing an understanding of *self* in civic learning involves developing one's own identity, voice, reflective practice, and sense of purpose. *Communities and cultures* outcomes include the development of empathy and appreciation for diverse individuals and communities, the capacity to transcend one's own embedded worldviews, and the recognition of inequalities that impact underserved communities. *Knowledge* outcomes involve understanding knowledge as socially constructed; information literacy in this era of "alternative facts" and misinformation, including the capacity to understand scientific evidence and critically evaluate sources of authority; and deep knowledge of key democratic principles, processes, and debates that inform one's major or area of study. *Skills* include conflict resolution, deliberation, and community-building, as well as the ability to work collaboratively and communicate with diverse groups. *Values* outcomes include ethical and moral reasoning and democratic aspirations such as equality, liberty, justice, and interest in sustaining the arts and sciences for the public good. Lastly, *public action* outcomes include students' participation in democratic processes and structures, multiple forms of action and risk-taking to promote social progress, and ally behaviors such as working alongside communities in need to solve important problems.

These dimensions of development are resonant with Palmer's notions of habits of the heart for democracy and are interdependent, but not organized

in a stage-like developmental sequence. For example, a greater understanding of self is often achieved in contact with people from different social identity communities and cultures, skills in deliberation and community-building are key to leading democratic governance structures in diverse communities, and self-confidence in one's voice is critical to participating in various forms of public action to effect change. Thus, each turn of the spiral represents the synthesis and integration of inextricably linked facets of civic learning. Repetition of learning across these braids promotes a "routine of integration that can lead to a lifelong disposition of open inquiry, dialogue across differences, and practice in public activism."¹⁵ The spiral depicts a framework for civic learning that is fluid and continuous and that can be applied to assess curricular and cocurricular program goals throughout a student's career. Mapping survey measures across these different civic learning dimensions for college students, we have observed strong associations between diversity experiences, habits of mind for lifelong learning, and civic learning outcomes in longitudinal assessments.¹⁶ Thus, institutions can articulate civic learning outcomes, invest in intentional practices, and begin to assess elements of each of these dimensions using student portfolios, course rubrics, surveys, and evaluation of programs or initiatives.

Intentional, engaging pedagogy for coursework and campus programming is the primary way to develop the different dimensions of civic learning in college students. Research syntheses have identified at least three pedagogies that promote civic learning through meaningful engagement: intergroup dialogue, service learning, and collective civic problem-solving.¹⁷ Students often describe service learning and intergroup dialogue as their most "eye-opening" experiences during college, as they begin to see the world differently with greater involvement and develop empathy for others in communities that may be quite different than their own. Students from underserved communities are attracted to these pedagogies because they offer a sense of purpose and an academic pathway to maintain a connection with and advance their own communities. Collective civic problem-solving permits students to learn by working on authentic problem-based projects along with peers, faculty, and community partners; in focusing on the purpose and process, "students learn about democracy by acting democratically."¹⁸

These pedagogies share several features. First, the experiential learning process encourages students to test their assumptions, revise their thinking, and begin to feel personally and socially responsible. Paulo Freire, an advocate of critical pedagogy, has stated that as students "are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, [they]

will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge.”¹⁹ New challenges evoke new understandings and “gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed.”²⁰ A second pedagogical feature is that learning is enhanced by guided self-reflection. Most college students have little time to reflect on their experiences, whereas service learning and intergroup dialogue require student journals that ask students to reflect on their learning and individual transformation throughout the course experience. Both Freire and educational theorist David Kolb agree on the importance of self-reflection: for Freire, it is vital for the development of a critical consciousness, and for Kolb, it is essential for abstract conceptualization in developing new knowledge.²¹ Moments of disequilibrium are recorded in student journals as learning instances in which their experiences contradict previous knowledge, bias, or beliefs. Instructors follow student reflections to provide additional content or process activities to help them achieve new understandings. A third common feature is that these pedagogies provide students with supported pathways to cross boundaries and step outside of their “comfort zone” to engage with “others” that differ by social identity, culture, power/social status, education, and worldview. For example, California State University, Monterey Bay, requires all students to take two service-learning courses that teach “critical civic literacy,” one in the lower division to build awareness and another in their major. Both courses emphasize the effects of power relations and social group identities on opportunities and participation in public life and stress the examination of root causes of systemic social problems in diverse communities. They define civic literacy as the “knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students need to work effectively in a diverse society to create more just and equitable workplaces, communities, and social institutions.”²² While not all service-learning courses take a critical civic literacy approach, Monterey Bay is integrating service learning in ways that address inequality as part of civic learning and using many of the principles of identity-based education.

Intergroup dialogue is unique in that it extends beyond raising awareness about social identity groups in the context of inequality by addressing key conflicts and building alliances. Its techniques and principles can be applied to many other types of courses and it is attentive to group dynamics, improving students’ skills for a deliberative democracy. The intergroup dialogue model, developed as an initiative between academic and student affairs units at the University of Michigan, has been replicated on many campuses and rigorously assessed.²³ There are several important premises that support the design of a sustained dialogue lasting from ten to fourteen weeks, or a course term. First, most of the social identity groups that enroll in dialogue have a long

history of conflict, and the pedagogy operates on the premise that emergent conflict “should not be avoided, denied, or excessively managed.”²⁴ When facilitated well, conflict is an opportunity to learn. Second, groups or course sections are intentionally structured to create equal status in terms of representation, oftentimes bringing together specific groups in which dialogue is needed to increase understanding. Using trained peer facilitators, the implementation of this model at the University of California, Los Angeles, has brought together men and women from different race/ethnicities, documented and undocumented students, students from different social class groups, LGBTQ and heterosexual students, as well as different religious groups for dialogue on key issues that shape their experiences. Third, much like a “flipped classroom,” students are provided foundational content for shared understanding that they read outside of class, and most class time is devoted instead to active learning exercises designed to facilitate dialogue and illustrate key concepts. The sustained dialogue includes four stages that focus on building 1) relationships and community, using inclusive group dynamic techniques; 2) students’ awareness about multiple social identities and group-based inequality, including systemic forms of privilege and oppression; 3) students’ capacity to discuss controversial topics and anticipate conflict; and 4) alliances and agency to engage in action with others in one’s community.²⁵ It is important to note that “hot topics” are not discussed until the group has gone through the initial stages of dialogue together, built some familiarity and community, and adopted a constructive process for dialogue. The last stage involves an action project or plan to carry out together on campus or in their community. Students gain confidence in intergroup relations skills and feel empowered to play a role in resolving intergroup problems in their campus or communities. In some cases, service-learning courses have also integrated intergroup dialogue pedagogy to improve students’ capacities to address tensions associated with understanding others’ social identities and power dynamics that affect diverse communities where students are engaged in service.

Service learning and collective civic problem-solving also have the unique pedagogical feature of not only teaching students’ civic responsibility, but also seeking to strengthen communities through engagement and development of powerful partnerships. Relationships established with community organizations or partners require trust, reciprocity in the relationship, mutually beneficial goals, and responsibilities that are often articulated in a memorandum of understanding with campus participants.²⁶ Many programs have moved from a deficit view or charitable approach to their practice in favor of advancing interdependence for the welfare and shared future of their community.

That is, rather than reinforce privilege, they are working toward helping students see that the problems communities face are “not just their problems” and create the sense that “we are all in it together.” Education scholar Robert Rhoads proposed that participation in this form of critical community service “provides a means to foster a sense of connectedness and offers an opportunity for students to understand themselves and to develop caring selves. . . . Caring selves are critical to the process of democracy and the struggle to build a more just and equitable society.”²⁷ Thus, in higher education, critical community service “should be seen as a key educational vehicle for fostering an ethic of care and a commitment to democratic citizenship.”²⁸ Consistent effort to sustain community relationships is also central to this pedagogy and, in many cases, instructors are assisted with public service or partnership units on campus who help to seed and maintain these relationships over time.

It is important to note that these pedagogies are not limited to the social sciences or humanities. There is value in having young scientists anticipate and learn to develop public trust, to engage with and understand diverse communities who can benefit from responsive innovations in science. Several campuses have developed signature STEM initiatives that train aspiring scientists to develop these sensitivities and solve real-world problems in local communities and across the globe. For example, University of Alaska-Fairbanks adopted a One Health initiative that focuses on advancing research on the interrelationship between the health of humans, the environment, and animals that is consistent with indigenous worldviews and suited for the many rural communities that have a close relationship with the natural environment in the state. Faculty and students are engaged in culturally responsive relationships with rural communities to study and solve health problems, which not only required the development of community relations and understanding of local needs, but also an integrated approach to science training and the development of an interdisciplinary curriculum. Students are engaged in experiential learning and reflection in critical research projects that are vital to the health of communities that rely on a subsistence lifestyle. Community partners also participate in data collection and practical uses of research that empower them to improve their quality of life. On a global level, students at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) participate in a series of interactive projects as part of their general education curriculum, to solve real-world science problems in communities locally and around the world. Beginning with the class of 2022, all first-year students will receive a scholarship to complete a project at one of WPI’s fifty-plus project centers located in thirty-one countries. As WPI states on its website, “the best way for students to understand and appreciate societal issues is to experience them firsthand.”

Faculty and instructors have been central to the development and introduction of these pedagogies in the college curriculum. Faculty have approved campus-wide general education requirements that include courses addressing service learning and intergroup dialogue. As a result, some institutions are reporting record numbers of courses that integrate classroom learning with community partnerships that address social and environmental issues. Faculty have also expanded the scholarship of teaching and application to better assess civic learning and evaluate their own impact on students and communities, respectively. Many departments have approved capstone courses that integrate service projects with local communities to meet major requirements. Dialogue training has also been integrated into required courses for preparing resident assistants and graduate programs in student affairs. Even with these multiple opportunities on campus, not all students have had occasion to participate in these courses. Civic learning is still optional on many campuses.

What can faculty do in classrooms to promote civic learning? Faculty can provide students with several tools or strategies that are useful in any kind of classroom or democratic workspace. Taking a page from the pedagogies described earlier, students should learn and practice active listening; ask different types of questions to prevent prejudice; create an awareness about power dynamics and co-construct inclusive ground rules for engagement that empowers others to use their voice; separate positions from interests when encountering opposing views; and explore commonalities and differences as they deliberate issues or engage in problem-solving. Faculty-designed exercises and activities have been implemented to address each of these deliberative skill areas. These faculty practices and student behaviors are what doing democracy looks like in the classroom.

The paradigm shift that is required in faculty mindsets involves inviting students to serve as cofacilitators of learning, empowering them to use their voice and creativity to reflect their social concerns, and working with difference in the classroom instead of ignoring it. By far the most difficult strategy is to value conflict as an opportunity to learn or, as Palmer has put it, learning to hold tension creatively to produce citizens “who know how to hold conflict inwardly in a manner that converts it into creativity, allowing it to pull them open to new ideas, new courses of action, and each other.”²⁹ Some students, just like faculty, are averse to any kind of conflict. When anticipating conflict one day in my class, a Latino student set others at ease by telling them they cannot plan for conflict or its resolution; in this course, “you learn to trust the process.” I could not have said it better, and it probably had even more weight coming from a peer who was a participant in the process. He was talking about the brave community and the process for open dialogue and respect we built

together that would ensure we would arrive at a deeper level of understanding by the end of our session. We learned to use strategies such as active listening, breaking down the conflict to determine the level and type (as not all conflict is a crisis), separating positions from interests, asking questions that go a long way in clarifying or affirming, employing empathy by recognizing multiple social identities, and acknowledging the privilege and oppression associated with these identities. According to political theorist Benjamin Barber, a “strong democracy *transforms conflict*. It turns dissensus into an occasion for mutualism and private interest into an epistemological tool of public thinking.”³⁰ As the students provided hope in our capacity to work through conflict, we were modeling a strong democracy in a pluralistic society.

This is not to say that all faculty now have the pedagogical knowledge and skills to make this shift in teaching, but many have the mindset and values that support the integration of civic learning activities in the classroom. For example, while only about 17 percent of undergraduate teaching faculty at baccalaureate-granting institutions report that they have taught a service-learning course in the past two years, 93.4 percent agree with the statement that “colleges have a responsibility to work with their surrounding communities to address local issues.” Over 84 percent agree that their role is to enhance students’ knowledge of and appreciation for other racial/ethnic groups, but over half think that “faculty are not prepared to deal with conflict over diversity issues in the classroom.”³¹ This suggests that many more faculty may appreciate opportunities to learn how to engage students in critical community service, employ dialogue techniques, and turn classroom conflict into productive mutual learning environments. With clear key values, articulation of civic learning outcomes, and faculty leadership, we have a much better chance at helping faculty implement more engaging pedagogies to achieve the goal of extending the reach of civic learning.

I have described a collective impetus to recenter civic learning within and across all institutions and disciplines, as well as more critical approaches to this work in terms of pedagogy that prepares students for a diverse and unequal society. I have described these civic learning developments in higher education optimistically, yet each day, I sense our democracy becoming more fragile. Political theorists have suggested dire consequences if we do not develop a strong democracy that is highly inclusive and also extensively open to public contestation, in which conflict is resolved through deliberation and respect for differences. A competitive political system that is exclusive in participation but also open to public contestation is unable to handle particular forms of conflict that arise.

Any dispute in which a large section of the population of the country feels that its way of life or its highest values are severely menaced by another segment of the population creates a crisis in a competitive [political] system. . . . The historical record argues that the system is very likely to dissolve into civil war or to be displaced by [an exclusive] hegemony or both.³²

Although this thesis is based on the history of political systems throughout the world, it seems to be hauntingly relevant in America today. If the democratic purpose of higher education is to protect against the threat of tyranny, now is the time for institutions to advance civic learning and safeguard our democracy.³³ The levers appear to be increasing participation of diverse groups and opportunities for public contestation, with deliberative processes in place and individuals capable of productively handling tension in such a democracy. Facilitated by civic learning pedagogies that include diverse communities on- and off-campus, today's students and their change-agent inclinations are our best hope in making real the promises of our democracy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sylvia Hurtado is Professor of Education at the University of California, Los Angeles. She is the editor of *Hispanic-Serving Institutions: Advancing Research and Transformative Practice* (with Anne-Marie Núñez and Emily Calderón Galdeano, 2015) and *The Magic Key: The Educational Journey of Mexican Americans from K–12 to College and Beyond* (with Ruth Enid Zambrana, 2015).

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