

# 3

*Educating for civic competence is an important societal mission of the community college. This chapter describes obstacles to and opportunities for the success of this mission.*

## Appraising the Efficacy of Civic Education at the Community College

*George H. Higginbottom, Richard M. Romano*

Community colleges have multiple missions. The two most visible and vocal are the occupational education and workforce training mission and the baccalaureate transfer mission. The former resonates deeply with community leaders and provides rich justification for financial support. Success in this mission is a potent measure of institutional effectiveness. The baccalaureate transfer function, aimed at moving graduates along to academic majors and career programs at four-year institutions, is of equal importance. However, it seems indisputable to us that a major societal function of higher education—to provide general (as civic) education—is an equally important measure of the community college's performance and value. The arguments that follow are predicated on three propositions: (1) the provision of general education is more a public good than a private one; (2) civic competence has historically been the essence of general education's public purpose; and (3) effective general education needs to be cross-curricular and integrative.

Not all community college general education goals are, or ought to be, explicitly civic. However, we contend that education for civic competence has been and continues to be the principal public purpose of general education—herein referred to as “general (as civic)” education. From Thomas Jefferson's vision of education to “inform the discretion” of a democratic citizenry, to Dewey's seminal study of the democratic ends of public education in *Democracy and Education* (1916), to numerous contemporary advocates espousing similar rationales (Ehrlich, 2000, for example), the overarching

societal goal of education, both secondary and postsecondary, has been civic competence.

In this chapter we shall assume that the community college is indeed effective in educating students for both successful employment and baccalaureate transfer. Further, we claim that the general education curriculum, in particular its contributions to effective democratic citizenship education, advances a critically important societal goal. How optimally it might do that, and the obstacles and opportunities that it faces in trying to do so, are the issues that frame our discussion.

### **The Goals of General (as Civic) Education**

There is a consensus in higher education on the learning that graduates ought to hold in common. This learning is usually called *general education*, an ensemble of skills, knowledge, and dispositions that partially make up the attributes that we associate with an educated person: one who, in the parlance of Progressive Era educators, is able to make sense of experience, personal and vicarious, current and historical (Miller, 1988). This education derives principally from the content of the arts and sciences disciplines and their unique modes of inquiry, and is customarily organized by subject and method into clusters—science, mathematics, social science, and humanities.

Although liberal arts transfer programs usually have enough room to incorporate the civic education component of general education, occupational and vocational education curricula are typically too crowded to incorporate more than a few arts and sciences courses, and even these are often turned to vocational ends. Therefore, robust civic education programs that propose to include all students, while being adequately responsive to societal expectations for developing educated citizens, must be infused into existing courses and cocurricular activities across the community college campus. These efforts also must be carefully conceived, deployed, and assessed; doing so presupposes clear and widespread understanding as to what needs to be taught and in which venues.

Among the desired attributes of *liberally educated* college graduates, held to be outcomes of arts and sciences course work, are intellectual curiosity; broad knowledge; inquiry, literacy, and critical-thinking and problem-solving skills; enriched sensibility leading to the capacity for empathy; and a moral point of view that respects human and public affairs. Although not as clearly applicable as vocational and professional skills and knowledge, the attainment of a liberal education is also practical because it undergirds the capabilities that individuals must acquire to be successful in the economic, social, and political aspects of their private and public lives, and especially in their lives as democratic citizens.

The importance of the civic education mission was recognized in the Truman Commission Report of 1947, widely regarded as providing a major

stimulus to the modern community college movement. However, as the community college grappled with rapid sector and institutional growth during the 1960s and 1970s, the citizenship education goals so vigorously advocated in this report—and the courses that served those ends—were subordinated to the narrower workplace training goals of the emerging vocational programs. (For a detailed history, see Higginbottom, 1991.)

Beginning in the late 1970s and continuing through the 1990s came a resurgence of interest in reforming the largely shattered general education core at both the four-year and the two-year college. Harvard's *Report on the Core Curriculum* (Faculty of Arts and Sciences, 1978), the revamping of the curriculum at Miami Dade Community College (Lukenbill and McCabe, 1978), the urgings of higher education organizations such as the American Association of Community Colleges, the American Association for Higher Education, the Association for the Study of Higher Education, and the work of Boyer and Levine (1981), Gaff (1983), and Cohen and Brawer (1987), helped spawn a national debate over the value and purposes of general education. These attempts to restore some coherence to the general education core and return it to its base in liberal learning were at least partially successful at the community college level (Higginbottom and Romano, 1995). Still, the public aims of the community college have a weak footing and are often subordinated to workplace utility goals (Higginbottom, 1994). If education for citizenship is to be a responsibility of the nation's community colleges, what might we expect such a program to look like?

### **A Generic Community College Civic Education Program**

Unattainable through course work alone, civic education requires a deliberate, integrative program of skill development, theoretical understanding, and practice. Because civic competence is so multidimensional, it must be a collegewide goal: an integrated program of course, curricular, and cocurricular elements, framed by the institutional mission and vigorously supported by college administrators, faculty, and staff. Student accretion of citizenship competencies will depend ultimately on the faculty's understanding of the constitutive features of civic education and a willingness to incorporate goals and pertinent teaching strategies into their instruction, as well as their active support of cross-curricular and cocurricular programs and activities. Substantial in-service education and training will be essential, as will imaginative and dedicated leadership at all levels of the institution.

A successful campuswide civic education program would include course work in U.S. history and other social sciences, including public policy study and debate; possibly a capstone course that addresses development of an ethical perspective; a cocurricular civic forum conceived and managed by faculty and students; community service infusion programs;

and community public affairs and political forums. Foundational literacy skills—reading, writing, critical analysis, and discursive skills—while not always civic-specific, are other crucial elements of civic education that students would be required to learn and practice.

This is not to say that such a model would succeed fully in its aspirations. However, this model puts many of the requisite elements of civic education into place, and would need only a strong institutional commitment to ensure its effectiveness. Whether any institution can make such a commitment and follow through on it is quite another matter. Yet if we assume, for the sake of argument, that a general (as civic) education plan with the features just noted is in place, and that it is a well-understood program that is supported across the institution, we can begin to consider the likelihood of its success, given the various obstacles to realizing our cross-curricular infusion goal.

### **Obstacles and Opportunities in Implementing a Successful General (as Civic) Education Program**

As we enter the twenty-first century, a familiar set of pressures threatens the goals of liberal and general education in the community college. Yet a few promising signs are also on the horizon. Which forces will be the most powerful is an open question. The best that we can do is highlight the current obstacles to and opportunities for implementing a successful general and civic education program and suggest what might be done to keep it alive and well.

**Obstacles.** There are a variety of obstacles to the general education mission, including the workforce training culture, demands for institutional accountability, the current mix of full- and part-time students and faculty, and shifting political agendas. All of these threaten to turn back the gains that general education made in the late twentieth century.

*Workforce Training Culture.* The niche that the community college has carved out for itself in higher education is associated with workforce training, both through formal degree programs, and increasingly, through short-term, nondegree programs directed at developing specific workplace skills. These programs emphasize the development of personal and *private* goods as opposed to the *public* ones we stress. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with this part of the community college mission. However, if it dominates the whole culture of the college, it may threaten the goals of general (as civic) education. In particular, many faculty in occupational areas will regard the community college's civic mission as a distraction. Pressure from them and the workforce side of the college, for instance, might lead to the substitution of technical writing for the more traditional English composition courses that emphasize critical thinking and self-expression. Similarly, public speaking, which is more of a personal and private good, will be substituted for competence in civic discourse, which has a public aim.

In addition, with the emphasis on preparing students to work, basic literacy in the form of remedial education may crowd out those subjects designed to deliver liberal learning. On the whole, the workforce training culture and general (as civic) education are uneasy bedfellows, and colleges will have to struggle to make them complementary.

*Accountability.* Colleges are rightfully being called upon to be accountable, and if they are not, their accreditation and funding may be jeopardized. Assessing broad societal goals such as civic competence, however, is difficult because such competencies are not always course-specific and include noncourse elements. Most colleges are working with outcomes-based competencies in order to meet demands for accountability, but the goals of integrative general education are not so easily adapted to the outcomes format. Assessing the value-added in critical thinking, for example, is more difficult than testing for competencies in accounting, engineering, or nursing. Even at the course level, evaluating learning through performance is difficult at best in an area like literature, where student-constructed meaning—not authors' plots and characters—is the paramount goal. Similarly, in history, where the primary instructional goal is historical understanding, not mere factual recall, technical assessment models can subvert faculty's views of worthwhile knowledge and learning. Along with the workforce development movement, the drive for accountability threatens to push liberal education into the background and substitute a narrow functionalist outlook.

*The Changing Nature of the Student Body.* Much has been written about the shifting demographics in the community college student population. What we focus on here is the part-time, full-time mix of students. In the past, circumstances have greatly increased the number of part-time or non-degree-seeking students, and this makes it more difficult to achieve the goals of general education. The current swirl of students between two- and four-year colleges results in more community college students transferring before they get degrees than afterward (Adelman, 1999; Townsend, 2000; Romano and Wisniewski, 2005). Moreover, students use the community college in different ways. If a four-year student attends a community college for a summer or a semester before returning to the four-year campus, is the community college responsible for that student's general (as civic) education? The answer to that question is *no!* A well-designed civic education program spread over two years will have little impact on the students enrolled for just one course. This situation, however, becomes part of the justification for infusing civic learning throughout the college. The occasional student will not receive the full treatment, but some elements can still be delivered. However, if the student body is populated by more part-time and occasional students, it is more difficult for the community college to achieve the goals of general and civic education. It also weakens the arguments of those who push for more ambitious general education programming.

The students themselves are also an obstacle, because most of them do not seem to value the goals of general education. Even four-year college students put more importance on workplace skills than citizenship skills. As Schneider and Humphreys (2005) have recently pointed out, proponents of the value of liberal and general education have not done a very good job of selling its importance to students and their parents. In the current student-as-consumer environment, this does not bode well for the future.

*The Changing Nature of the Faculty and Power Over the Curriculum.* Without question, the part-time, full-time mix of faculty also affects the goals of general and civic education. On this issue, economic constraints have clearly tilted the scale in favor of more part-time faculty at both two- and four-year colleges. Who is going to conceive, organize, administer, and assess the civic education infusion program? Part-time faculty are less able to influence the overall direction of the curriculum, and with fewer full-time faculty to carry the load, power over what is taught in a program shifts to college administrators. Community college administrators travel in the company of local employers and politicians. For administrators, it takes a deep commitment to the goals of common learning to resist the pressures of always meeting workplace needs. This means that employers and business advisory groups will have more influence over what is taught, and will be tempted to invade the general education core for their own purposes. In the end, the group that gains control of the curriculum will determine the nature of the general education program on each campus.

*Political Winds.* Much has been written about the impact of the so-called culture wars on the college curriculum (Higginbottom and Romano, 2001). The struggle for control and residual antagonisms can politicize the campus or state and local education hierarchies, and may blow the civic education agenda off course. For instance, civic education advocates might be accused by campus liberals of inculcating blind patriotism, a practice far from the critical and deliberative civic competence that we envision. Alternatively, conservative leaders, fearing a 1960s-type radical resurgence on campuses, may seek to throttle the development of participatory civic education by restricting general education requirements to the mastery of basic skills and discipline distributions.

**Opportunities.** Despite the threats that could compromise the objectives of general and civic education at the community college, some interesting opportunities exist for advancing it. Some of these, such as service learning, learning communities, and integrated studies, are internal to the college and are well under way. Others, such as the need for a flexible labor force in the age of changing technology and the global economy, are external forces that might affect the nature of the curriculum.

*Flexibility of Faculty.* Compared with faculty at the university level, those teaching in the arts and sciences at the community colleges are less bound to their discipline. Because they teach courses that are largely at a

freshman or sophomore level, these community college faculty tend to be generalists rather than specialists. Arguably, they also think more about the process of teaching and learning than do university faculty. Doing so makes them more amenable to developing curricula and teaching strategies that emphasize integrated studies and involve students in the learning process. All of these factors favor the infusion of the broader goals of general education and civic competence into a variety of existing courses and new interdisciplinary courses and activities.

*Service Learning and Learning Communities.* In the past few years, community colleges have embraced learning communities and service learning as ways to engage students in the learning process. Service learning is the workshop of civic education. It brings some excitement to learning and helps students connect abstract ideas to practical concerns. To assist colleges in this effort, the American Association of Community Colleges has provided grant funding to support the goals of civic education and service learning on the campus level (Gottlieb and Robinson, 2002).

Learning communities also hold the promise of helping all students integrate their learning, an important goal of liberal and general education. When courses that are linked together are infused with elements of civic education, they can advance the goals that we are advocating. Used as a method for teaching remedial students, learning communities also hold the promise of bringing those who are underprepared for college-level work into the mainstream of the intellectual life of the campus (Grubb, 1999).

However, although both the service learning and the learning community movements have the promise of assisting faculty in advancing a civic education agenda, they will need to reach a much greater segment of the student population than they currently do in order to have a real impact on the overall culture of the college.

*An Increased Market Demand for Broad-Based Education.* Employers of technical and vocational graduates deliver a confusing message to students. Executives speak in public about the need for broad-based skills, but those who do the actual hiring look for industry-specific skills. At some point, the rhetoric of the executives may reach down to the hiring level, and the general education competencies that we are advocating will become more valued. On this point, the current debate over the outsourcing of American jobs is instructive.

Whether one thinks that outsourcing is a boon or a bane for the American worker, the controversy has people talking about the ways technology and globalization are transforming the U.S. economy. An important part of the message that students are receiving from the media and their parents is that they must become part of the knowledge society, which places a high value on going to college and engaging in lifelong learning. In addition, “flexibility and mobility are the watchwords of the new economy; a career spent with the same employer, or even in the same line of work, is fast becoming the exception

rather than the rule. Accordingly, students are now advised that the knowledge they gain in their majors will not be useful for long unless coupled with the skills and dispositions that enhance their ability to find and take advantage of new opportunities as they arise” (Huber and Hutchings, 2004, p. 2).

Uncertainty about the future has the potential to force students to take an interest in public affairs and to think about the impact of external forces on their private and public lives. In an age of increasing credentialism, it is also likely that greater numbers will become convinced that they should complete the associate degree and aspire to a bachelor’s degree or beyond. Their doing so is likely to increase the demand for broad-based education and advance the civic agenda.

As for community college presidents and faculty, they are currently presented with conflicting messages. In one ear they hear the voices of the local business community and the workforce side of the campus about the importance of training students for a specific job in a specific industry. In the other ear they hear the voices of the futurists, saying, “Teach students how to think critically and creatively, teach them how to get along with people of other cultures, and give them broad-based skills that are transferable.” Imparting these broad-based skills to students will make them better workers, to be sure, but also advance the goals of general education and produce better citizens. Community college leaders who think seriously about the future will need to pay less attention to those who advocate the narrow road.

*Increased Emphasis on Transfer.* Under the “Obstacles” heading, we suggested that a greater number of part-time, nondegree students would make the job of promoting general and civic education at the community college more difficult. If the opposite occurred, however, and the student population shifted in favor of the more traditional full-time student who was interested in attaining the bachelor’s degree, then advancing the liberal education agenda would be easier. There are signs on the horizon that point to the likelihood of this scenario. For example, if the trend to cut state funding for public universities continues, public four-year colleges will increasingly privatize themselves by raising tuition and fees closer to the level of the private sector. For a larger number of students, going away to a four-year college will become too expensive, so they will attend the local community college for the first two years. In this unfortunate scenario, students are diverted from their first-choice college and the transfer population explodes. Of course, some of this is already occurring, but is it a short-term blip on the radar screen or a long-term trend? If the transfer population at the community college continues to grow rapidly, it will not only alter the composition of the student population and the types of courses offered to meet their needs but will also alter the composition of the community college faculty. Hence, more liberally trained and relatively fewer vocational faculty will be hired. With a greater voice at the table in curriculum discussions, the case for general and civic education will be strengthened.

## Conclusion

Will the forces generated by the threats to compromise civic education at the community college overwhelm those generated by the opportunities to expand it? Time will tell. But the net impact will differ depending on the mission of the college and the state in which it operates. It will also depend on the leadership in the colleges themselves. To keep liberal learning and the civic education mission alive and well, faculty must immerse themselves in developing the pedagogical skills that will advance these goals. Administrators must agree to hire more faculty who espouse these goals, and must guard the general education core from the pressures of the workplace test. Even at the most technical of colleges, general and civic education must be given a seat at the table.

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The Evolution of Civics Education Civic education can be much broader than a course that introduces students to the political system and current events (Lay, 2012). When civic education focuses on only knowledge, it often emphasizes memorization of facts. However, as Levine (2015) and Kahne (2015) point out the memorization of facts does little to develop deeply committed citizens who become and remain engaged in our democracy. Indeed, when civic education seeks to develop empowered active citizens, the focus shifts to civic action which supports students' civic engagement (Mitra & Serriere, 2015; Rubin, 2011).

1. Civic education is extremely important as the Indian political system is changing drastically and thus, having the right civic education is crucial.
2. Civic education creates awareness and consciousness among the citizens of our country.
3. Civic education promotes understanding of ideas of democracy and functioning of democratic governing bodies.
4. Civic education gives an insight into democracy.
5. Civic education creates awareness of the constitution, fundamental rights, and duties within a democracy.

836 views · View upvotes. At the national and regional levels: Knowledge or ignorance of Civics plays an important role in the elections. It also influ. A community college, sometimes known as a junior college is a higher education institution that provides a two-year curriculum that can lead to an associate's degree. Other programs in place include a transfer program towards a four-year degree and occupational programs, one and two-year programs of study. Besides coursework focusing on academic programs, courses are also often offered at the community college for personal growth or development. Historically, community colleges sprang up in the early 20th-century as a way to meet young adults' needs who did not or could not afford to leave their families to pursue further education. Early on, many community colleges helped support African Americans and women who wanted to go to college.