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Toward a More Comprehensive Definition of Civic Learning in the Twenty-First Century

With its focus on higher education as a site for citizenship, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* uses the dual terms of “civic learning” and “democratic engagement” to emphasize the civic significance of preparing students with knowledge and for action. Today’s education for democracy needs to be informed by deep engagement with the values of liberty, equality, individual worth, open mindedness, and the willingness to collaborate with people of differing views and backgrounds toward common solutions for the public good. Anne Colby and her colleagues capture the complexity of civic learning and democratic engagement when they define democracy as “fundamentally a practice of shared responsibility for a common future. It is the always unfinished task of making social choices and working toward public goals that shapes our lives and the lives of others” (Colby et al. 2007, 25). Moreover, as historian Diane Ravitch observes, “a society that is racially and ethnically diverse requires, more than other societies, a conscious effort to build shared values and ideals among its citizenry” (Ravitch 2000, 466).

The multifaceted dimensions of civic learning and democratic engagement necessary in today’s United States are suggested in figure 1 (next page), which maps a contemporary definition of civic and democratic learning, underscoring the breadth and scope of preparation for knowledgeable citizenship that a highly diverse and globally engaged democracy requires. This newly broadened schema of civic learning expands the historical definition of civics that stressed familiarity with the various branches of government and acquaintance with basic information about US history. This knowledge is still essential, but no longer sufficient. Americans need to understand how their political system works and how to influence it, certainly, but they also need to understand the cultural and global contexts in which democracy is both deeply valued and deeply contested. Moreover, full civic literacies cannot be garnered only by studying books; democratic knowledge and capabilities also are honed through hands-on, face-to-face, active engagement in the midst of differing perspectives about how to address common problems that affect the well-being of the nation and the world.

The framing offered in figure 1 is suggestive, not definitive; much more work is required to better clarify component elements of civic and democratic learning in this global century. In Chapter III, we call for a new commitment to undertake that work. Nonetheless, the four listed categories of *knowledge*, *skills*, *values*, and *collective action* are widely shared—if sometimes differently emphasized—among civic educators and practitioners. Similarly, in many analyses of civic learning (such as those cited in this report’s list of references), the learning outcomes within those four categories appear—albeit with slight variance in language—with remarkable consistency. This contemporary schema of civic knowledge thus represents a formidable yet exhilarating educational agenda that invites educators, scholars, and policy-makers to creatively and centrally locate education for civic learning and democratic engagement at the heart of our nation’s educational systems, from elementary school through college and beyond.

“A society that is racially and ethnically diverse requires, more than other societies, a conscious effort to build shared values and ideals among its citizenry” (Ravitch 2000).

FIGURE 1: A Framework for Twenty-First-Century Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement

Knowledge	Skills	Collective Action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiarity with key democratic texts and universal democratic principles, and with selected debates—in US and other societies—concerning their applications • Historical and sociological understanding of several democratic movements, both US and abroad • Understanding one’s sources of identity and their influence on civic values, assumptions, and responsibilities to a wider public • Knowledge of the diverse cultures, histories, values, and contestations that have shaped US and other world societies • Exposure to multiple religious traditions and to alternative views about the relation between religion and government • Knowledge of the political systems that frame constitutional democracies and of political levers for influencing change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical inquiry, analysis, and reasoning • Quantitative reasoning • Gathering and evaluating multiple sources of evidence • Seeking, engaging, and being informed by multiple perspectives • Written, oral, and multi-media communication • Deliberation and bridge building across differences • Collaborative decision making • Ability to communicate in multiple languages <p data-bbox="618 842 688 875">Values</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect for freedom and human dignity • Empathy • Open-mindedness • Tolerance • Justice • Equality • Ethical integrity • Responsibility to a larger good 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integration of knowledge, skills, and examined values to inform actions taken in concert with other people • Moral discernment and behavior • Navigation of political systems and processes, both formal and informal • Public problem solving with diverse partners • Compromise, civility, and mutual respect

By investing strategically to educate students fully along the four-part civic continuum, higher education can ignite a widespread civic renewal in America. When deep learning about complex questions with public consequence is coupled with college students’ energies and commitments, democratic culture is reinvigorated. Despite the label of disengagement often pinned to their T-shirts by others, evidence suggests a majority of the current generation of young people care deeply about public issues. True, many are alienated by uncritically partisan debate among the politicians and the polity, by corporate influence over policy making, and by inefficient government processes; yet, a significant portion of college students are interested in community service that leads to systemic social and political change. They also want to have more meaningful opportunities to discuss and address public issues (Kiesa et al. 2007). In reshaping the college experience, we need to capitalize on the yearning, the inclination, and the commitments of such students.

In a 2009 survey of entering college students undertaken by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), 35.8 percent responded that “becoming a community leader” was “essential” or “very important” and reported showing more commitment to treating each other as equal citizens