

[CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AT THE MACRO LEVEL]

Civic Engagement in Virginia's Public Higher Education Institutions

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The syllabus for Forging Cultures of Resilience was a tall order for a fifteen-week undergraduate sociology course. The spring 2019 class aimed to incorporate multiple theoretical and philosophical perspectives with the lived realities of citizens. It included plans for conversations with both US and South African community activists; a mock city council meeting during which student teams would deliberate and propose solutions to structural inequalities in the local community; and a final essay exam asking students to reflect on the capacity of democratic processes to address racial inequality.

Coinstructors Dingani Mthethwa and Susan Bodnar-Deren at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia, weren't sure they could pull off incorporating all the strategies to promote and assess civic learning. They knew, though, that they could draw on the support of other faculty members participating with them in a yearlong, interinstitutional Debate for Civic Learning faculty learning community (FLC) cosponsored by VCU and James Madison University. The FLC would also provide them with expert advice as they developed, taught, and assessed the experiential learning class in which students would have multiple opportunities to practice civic behaviors. "When you incorporate a concrete activity, such as debate-based learning," Bodnar-Deren wrote in describing the class for the FLC, "we (as instructors) can observe and assess the students' civic behaviors, such as critical thinking, consensus building,

and synthesis of perspectives through a hands-on experience."

The impetus for the Debate for Civic Learning FLC and similar faculty development initiatives across Virginia was the statewide assessment policy, adopted in July 2017, that named civic engagement as a required competency that all public institutions of higher education must assess. As colleges and universities nationwide have been reclaiming their leadership role in supporting civic education to model democratic practices, graduate engaged citizen leaders, and collaborate with their communities to solve critical societal problems (AGB 2019; APLU 2015; Sutton 2016), Virginia is using its higher education assessment policy to further encourage that shift. Although the sudden transition to remote learning in the middle of the spring 2020 semester disrupted instruction and programming (as well as assessment activities) on most campuses, many faculty and staff around the state have continued efforts to develop students' civic capacities and strengthen civic-mindedness on their campuses.

A LEAP of Civic Engagement

In 2014, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV)—which oversees the activities of the state's fifteen four-year institutions, one two-year junior college, and the Virginia Community College System's twenty-three campuses—approved *The Virginia Plan for Higher Education*. Under one of the strategic plan's goals, "Optimize Student Success for Work and Life,"

SCHEV committed to "strengthen[ing] curricular options to ensure that graduates are prepared with the competencies necessary for employment and civic engagement" (SCHEV, n.d.-a).

Over the next few years, SCHEV identified a number of priority initiatives to focus the agency's efforts toward meeting its strategic goals. One of these initiatives called on SCHEV staff to "collaborate with institutions to measure the quality of undergraduate education, including civic engagement of graduates" (SCHEV, n.d.-b). SCHEV staff then embarked on a fifteen-month process, starting in spring 2016, to review and revitalize the state's policy on the assessment of undergraduate student learning. A twenty-one-member task force, made up almost entirely of representatives from Virginia's public two- and four-year institutions, began with a foundational question: What does a high-quality education look like in the twenty-first century? The task force returned to a statement on quality that had been drafted for SCHEV a year earlier in the wake of a symposium on that very topic. Drawing on the Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) framework articulated by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the statement affirmed that a high-quality college education—regardless of a student's field of study—should emphasize broad learning in a variety of disciplines, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integration and application of knowledge and skills. (See the sidebar on LEAP on page 26.)

Acknowledging SCHEV's specific references in the strategic planning documents, the task force named civic engagement as one of several competencies all public institutions would be required to assess among their students. In this way, the new policy not only responded to SCHEV's interest in civic engagement but also addressed the

“personal and social responsibility” component of the LEAP framework. The other required competencies, by contrast, focused on the development of intellectual and practical skills such as writing and critical thinking.

The task force spiritedly discussed how the policy could establish clear expectations while still honoring the individual missions and diverse contexts of the state’s thirty-nine public institutions. Some institutions were concerned that civic engagement would be reduced to participation in volunteer service. Most had no mechanism for counting students’ volunteer hours, and some believed that a community service requirement would be unreasonably burdensome to a large segment of their student population (such as those in rural areas attending college part-time while also managing work and family responsibilities). Other institutions worried that SCHEV would expect them to change their curricula to incorporate civic education (which SCHEV has no authority to do). Consequently, the policy gave institutions the flexibility to define and foster civic engagement in ways that made sense for each campus and its students.

From Policy to Student Learning

In June 2017, a month before the assessment policy was formally adopted, nearly 150 faculty, academic leaders, and community/civic engagement staff attended a meeting at which SCHEV staff discussed the policy’s civic engagement requirements. The meeting included presentations by representatives from two- and four-year institutions in Virginia, as well as a few invited speakers from other states, who gave their perspectives on the “hows” of civic engagement: how to define, teach, and assess it. Because the program was specifically about addressing this new state requirement, it drew a greater mix of people than might

normally attend a regional civic engagement conference and, consequently, allowed for much richer conversations about how institutions might incorporate civic engagement into their curricular and cocurricular programs. The schedule included time for institutional teams to work on their civic engagement assessment plans based on what they had learned during the day. Those who could not travel to the meeting could livestream the plenary sessions and ask questions via Twitter. Presenter materials, a recording of the livestream, and other resources were made available to all attendees, as well as to anyone else who expressed interest in the event.

The positive response to this 2017 civic engagement meeting led SCHEV to create additional opportunities for interested faculty, staff, and institutional leaders to gather and learn from one another. In the past two years, SCHEV has sponsored FLCs, statewide assignment design workshops (in person and online), and “days of dialogue” focused on teaching and learning. Although these initiatives often address more than just civic engagement, the high level of interest in civic engagement is evident. In the pilot year of SCHEV’s FLC initiative (2018–19), four of the six self-designed FLCs focused on topics related to the teaching of civic engagement.

Independently of SCHEV’s initiatives, institutions have offered faculty development programs of their own. George Mason University, for example, now offers additional recognition to promote involvement in civic- and community-engaged teaching, research, and service, including curriculum impact grants, work-study assistants for community-engaged research, and institution-level awards for faculty. Virginia Commonwealth University and James Madison University teamed up to host the inter-institutional Debate for Civic Learning FLC described at

the beginning of this article. That collaboration proved so beneficial that the FLC’s facilitators and participants hosted a two-day Debate for Civic Learning Summit at James Madison University in September 2019. Fifty faculty from sixteen campuses attended the summit, which was designed to support faculty members from around Virginia in promoting students’ civic learning and engagement through debate and deliberative dialogue pedagogies. The summit organizers received a statewide grant to award seven minigrants to attendees to support them in integrating debate pedagogy into their classes. Summit attendees from the University of Mary Washington (UMW) further built on the summit by organizing an FLC on Advocacy, Deliberation, and Civic Learning during spring and summer 2020. Faculty from a range of disciplines participated, even amid the disruption of COVID-19. Leslie Martin, who directs the UMW Center for Community Engagement and cofacilitated the FLC, said that although faculty had to adjust their courses and respond to scheduling and budgetary changes, “the emphasis on combining civic education and either debate or advocacy has not wavered.”

The Debate for Civic Learning Summit and related FLCs exemplify the cross-institution and statewide collaborations and trainings that have grown organically from the new assessment policy and SCHEV’s sponsorship of initial conversations and professional development offerings. As a result of the policy, strong relationships have developed between SCHEV and other organizations that share a concern for civic engagement. Jodi Fidler, coauthor of this article, has presented at meetings of the Virginia Engage Network, a statewide association of civic-oriented higher education faculty and staff. She has also collaborated with staff from Virginia’s Campus Compact to raise awareness

and promote civic engagement efforts among faculty and staff from around the state. The Virginia Engage Network, in turn, assists SCHEV in supporting civic-oriented FLCs and provides content expertise as needed. These mutually supportive relationships are creating professional networks touching all sectors of Virginia's higher education landscape.

Rising to the Challenge

During summer 2019, faculty researchers at VCU began collaborating with the authors of this article to analyze the civic engagement assessment plans that all Virginia public higher education institutions had submitted to SCHEV in accordance with the SCHEV policy. At the time, the data showed that a majority of institutions across the state were beginning work in the areas of civic knowledge and skills, and several institutions were also making intentional efforts to develop students' civic values and actions. These four dimensions—knowledge, skills, values, and collective action—make up the framework for civic learning and democratic engagement articulated in *A Crucible Moment*, a report commissioned by the US Department of Education under the Obama administration and prepared under the leadership of the Global Perspective Institute and AAC&U (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement 2012). A small number of institutions—including both of Virginia's public Historically Black Universities, Norfolk State University and Virginia State University—planned to address all four dimensions, using both curricular and cocurricular methods to develop students' civic competencies and assessing them through a mix of direct and indirect methods, including embedded course assessments, surveys, reflective writing, and participation in community service, voting, and other civic-minded activities.

SCHEV staff recognize the complex nature of civic engagement and understand that the civic engagement assessment requirement is part of a long game. Many institutions need time to build up the programs and structures that develop students' civic capacities. After all, assessment doesn't mean much if it is detached from actual learning experiences. What that means in practice is that the assessment plans are living documents that are very likely to change as institutions try out ideas, discover different approaches, and adapt to shifting circumstances. In the two years since institutions submitted the initial assessment plans, a number of institutions have made substantial modifications to their civic engagement plans. Some have revised their general education curricula and integrated civic engagement more purposefully into their programs; others have added or reallocated staff resources. George Mason University, for example, hired a director of civic engagement to provide centralized leadership across its three campuses. The centralized support for civic engagement has resulted in enhanced communication, resources, and visibility for existing civic partnerships, according to Julie Owen, an associate professor of leadership studies at GMU, while expanded reporting of civic engagement has led to greater awareness and opportunities for faculty, students, and community partners. "For many years," Owens said, "community-engaged work was done in episodic ways and focused on individuals dedicated to making a difference in area communities. This changed when Virginia raised the profile of civic engagement by including it as a core competency." These kinds of changes are exciting to see, and naturally, they will influence how institutions think



Faculty at the Debate for Civic Learning Summit at James Madison University in September 2019. (Photo by Jodi Fislser)

about assessment and even what kind of assessment is possible.

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted educational activities in ways that we have not had time to fully understand. Although teaching and learning continue, SCHEV suspended assessment reporting requirements for the duration of the crisis to allow institutions to focus their attention where it is most needed. The Virginia Engage Network and Virginia Campus Compact, however, continue to create opportunities for faculty and staff to gather virtually and to share ideas for keeping students engaged in civic and community-based learning despite the ongoing disruption to normal campus operations. The VCU Service-Learning Office, for example, is working directly with faculty instructors scheduled to teach community-engaged classes in fall 2020 to identify opportunities for online service and to help instructors deepen their students' civic learning outcomes even when online service opportunities are not available. The wave of activism that erupted after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May will likely generate renewed interest in civic issues and community-focused learning experiences, bringing a heightened sense of urgency to the challenge of preparing

students to be successful as members of a diverse, democratic society.

Moving Forward

Virginia has never before been in a position to evaluate where we are as a state with regard to civic engagement efforts at our colleges and universities. Although it may take repeated assessment cycles for us to gauge the impact of the policy and the various activities that have sprung up around it, we are looking forward to the civic engagement assessment reports that will be coming in over the next several years. It bears repeating, however, that this is a long-term effort. Meaningful learning and assessment do not end when a report is submitted. SCHEV

anticipates that the results of institutional civic engagement assessments will answer some questions, of course. More important, we hope these assessments will generate new questions and provide opportunities for even greater conversation and collaboration across Virginia's diverse institutions, benefitting not only our students, faculty, and staff, but also our communities, our state, our nation, and the world. 

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Leveraging the LEAP Framework to Advance Civic Knowledge

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As institutions and state systems undertake educational reform and renewal activities, they can leverage the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) framework to ensure civic learning and engagement outcomes are embedded into the fabric of the resulting curricular structures and pedagogical practices (see <https://www.aacu.org/leap>).

The LEAP framework begins with a set of essential learning outcomes (ELOs) that provide the foundation for a contemporary liberal education, including knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility (including

civic knowledge and engagement), and integrative and applied learning. Functionally, LEAP's ELOs have served many in higher education as a menu of possible outcomes to consider as they rethink their curriculum. For example, adopting the LEAP framework, including civic knowledge and engagement, in a general education reform effort would connect curricular reform to civic learning goals and would result in the long-term implementation of civic learning at an institution.

LEAP also suggests high-impact educational practices, which have been shown to result in deep learning gains. Several of these practices are well-established civic learning pedagogies such as service learning and community-based learning. In addition,

LEAP encourages practitioners to examine students' work to gauge how well they have developed the capacities the ELOs represent. LEAP provides a set of sixteen Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics to assist in this assessment, including one specifically on civic engagement (see <https://www.aacu.org/civic-engagement-value-rubric>). Practitioners can also use the Civic Engagement VALUE Rubric in faculty development efforts to ensure that pedagogy and assignments align with the specific elements that make up the civic engagement learning outcome.

Those wishing to establish civic learning and engagement as a signature element of their institution or system's educational culture are encouraged to revisit the LEAP framework. To help campuses make successful transitions to LEAP and to leverage VALUE's opportunities, AAC&U offers a range of conferences, institutes, publications, and webinars, many available virtually at <https://www.aacu.org>. 