

## [CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AT THE MACRO LEVEL]

## A Commitment to Civic Learning in Massachusetts

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In 2015, Kimberly Barboza came to Salem State University in Massachusetts, curious about social justice issues but lacking a formal understanding of civic learning. In her first year, her interest in environmental science led her to become involved in the campus chapter of the Massachusetts Student Public Interest Research Group, and she soon discovered the university's new Center for Civic Engagement (CCE). The CCE was designed to bring together people interested in a range of issues, make connections between different forms of social justice, and teach skills for addressing those issues. As Kimberly settled into her second year, she became a crucial member of the CCE, focusing her activism on gender-based violence and taking on several campus leadership roles, including serving as student cochair of the Advocacy Day Committee and as president of the Florence Luscomb Women's Center.

"I deepened my understanding of my civic responsibilities and became part of a community of socially conscious students," Kimberly said of her civic engagement at Salem State University. "My education and experiences helped me understand complicated issues in gender-based violence."

Upon graduation, Kimberly worked for the anti-sexual assault movement to create better policies for students and survivors. Following that experience, she accepted a role at the CCE as the founding coordinator of the Frederick

E. Berry Institute of Politics and Civic Engagement.

Kimberly's growth and leadership in civic engagement are illustrative of a long history of civic activism in Massachusetts. In fact, it was the advocacy of public college and university faculty, concerned by what they saw as too strong an emphasis on workforce development in public higher education, that led the state's Board of Higher Education (BHE) in 2014 to include civic learning in its strategic agenda (Brennan 2017). As we struggle to preserve and participate in our democracy during the COVID-19 public health and economic crisis, the knowledge, skills, and competencies that are incorporated in a robust civic education are even more critical than ever.

### Statewide Civic Learning

In its 2014 Policy on Civic Learning, the BHE defined civic learning as the

acquisition of the knowledge, the intellectual skills, and the applied competencies that citizens need for informed and effective participation in civic and democratic life; it also means acquiring an understanding of the social values that underlie democratic structures and practices.

Civic learning, the BHE noted, can occur through academic coursework, cocurricular activities, and off-campus civic engagement. The policy directs

Massachusetts's twenty-four state universities and community colleges to involve all their undergraduate students in civic learning. (See <https://www.mass.edu/bhe/lib/documents/AAC/AAC14-48CivicLearningwithPolicy-RevisedFinalforBHE.pdf> for the full policy.)

Toward this end, the policy includes a four-point action plan to advance the system-wide goals, with the first point addressed directly to the campuses and the other three to the Department of Higher Education (DHE), the state agency that works with the campuses to implement the board's policies:

#### 1. Attention to civic learning as a goal in campus strategic plans.

The civic learning policy calls on campuses "to incorporate civic learning . . . as an expected outcome for undergraduate students," and the BHE works with campuses as they revise their strategic plans, evaluating drafts before the final version is submitted for full BHE approval.

For example, Salem State University's strategic plan, approved in 2017, identifies civic engagement as one of its seven core values, pointing to the role of the CCE in partnering "internally with faculty and staff and externally with regional partners to provide our students with the pedagogy and experiential learning opportunities to become engaged members of their communities, the nation, and the world." The plan also aims to expand civic learning and engagement through active learning approaches. The key metric associated with civic engagement was to "achieve Carnegie Classification for Civic Engagement" in 2020—which Salem State fulfilled in January.

#### 2. Facilitation and support for campus work in civic learning through conferences and meetings to share best practices and, as available, the

## provision of funding for campus projects.

In 2015, Massachusetts's DHE hired John Reiff, coauthor of this article, to work with campuses in building capacity to promote civic learning. One of the first outcomes was a collaboration with Cynthia Lynch (also a coauthor) at Salem State University to create a daylong conference that explored pathways to civic learning. The two went on to plan additional conferences each year, addressing topics such as the impact of civic engagement on student learning and success and the habits and practices of democracy. More than a hundred faculty and staff from across the state attended each conference, and Reiff continues to advise administrators and faculty on individual campuses.

When the coronavirus crisis hit, Reiff organized virtual conversations with educators across the state about the challenges of doing civic engagement work as campuses and community organizations have moved their work online. Faculty and staff from Massachusetts's community colleges are currently participating in meetings every few weeks, sharing their practices of pivoting to virtual community engagement and helping each other plan for an uncertain fall semester.



Salem State University students visited Massachusetts Congressional representative Ayanna Pressley in Washington, DC, in March 2019. (Photo by Kate Adams)

## 3. Development of new ways to measure the extent and variety of civic learning and report student outcomes.

Beginning in fall 2016, the DHE asked Massachusetts's community colleges and state universities to designate course sections across the curriculum with a substantial focus on civic learning (with no engagement component), civic learning with engagement as an option, and civic learning with required engagement. Courses designated for civic learning without engagement may include political science or history courses, in which students learn about the function of three branches of government or the history of struggles to increase democratic participation. The courses may also focus on identifying ways to address social, economic, or environmental problems or on taking the perspective of someone whose identity differs significantly from one's own and participating in dialogue with that person. Courses with engagement (either required or as an option) offer projects or placements involving the community beyond the classroom, linking projects explicitly to course learning goals and to at least one of BHE's four components of civic learning: knowledge, intellectual skills, practical skills, and values. Students reflect on their experiences

within broader political, social, or economic contexts. Examples include a class on food insecurity that created a cost-free, mobile food pantry that brings fresh produce and healthy shelf-stable food directly to the campus and surrounding community twice each month, or a

composition class sharing and discussing writing with an organization of formerly incarcerated women.

From summer 2018 through summer 2019, state universities enrolled 34,697 students in civic learning courses, and community colleges enrolled another 39,686. While these figures include students who took more than one civic learning course during the year, it still represents a significant portion of the roughly forty thousand students enrolled in the state's universities and the eighty thousand students enrolled in the state's community colleges.

## 4. Collaboration with the state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to develop a cross-sector plan for civic learning from kindergarten through college.

In 2016, the BHE and the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education added civic preparation to a preexisting joint agreement on college and career readiness, creating a framework for collaboration on civic learning in public K-16 education (see [https://www.mass.edu/bhe/lib/documents/BHE/04\\_BHE%2016-05%20Civic%20Preparation%20Added%20to%20Career%20Readiness.pdf](https://www.mass.edu/bhe/lib/documents/BHE/04_BHE%2016-05%20Civic%20Preparation%20Added%20to%20Career%20Readiness.pdf)). Drawing on this agreement, in 2018, the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved a revised history and social science curriculum framework that emphasizes civic education throughout grades K-12 and requires a yearlong civics course in grade 8. The state legislature passed a bill requiring all public school systems to facilitate student-designed civics projects between grades 8 and 12.

## Salem State's Center for Civic Engagement

Although Salem State University has a rich history of civic engagement, it wasn't until the launch of the CCE in 2015 and its intentional alignment with the DHE

policy that it began to strategically build a holistic civic-minded campus. The CCE focuses on advocacy, civic learning, community, and political engagement and has created curricular and cocurricular programming that engages students with community members in civic life and prepares them for democratic participation.

One of the CCE's programs is Salem State's First-Year Day of Service: Moving Forward, Giving Back (MFGB), which promotes civic engagement and social justice and creates an opportunity for two hundred new students to feel connected to their campus and surrounding communities. Data show that participation in MFGB correlates with increased retention, GPAs, and overall satisfaction with Salem State as well as stronger peer connections and a greater desire to get involved in on- and off-campus organizations. "It made me feel like I can make a difference while here at Salem State, and I learned that every little thing counts," one participating student said.

After the 2016 election, with students concerned about Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), rollbacks in gender rights, and policies unfairly targeting minority and underserved communities, the CCE established Advocacy Day: For People Who Want to Take Action to teach students to raise their voices and look at issues through multiple perspectives. The event features guest speakers and workshops and has addressed social justice issues like immigration, voting rights, women's rights, economic and housing justice, racial justice, and LGBTQ rights. The CCE also created advocacy education initiatives for which CCE staff and students visit approximately forty classes a semester to help students connect their curricula to their lived experiences, develop civic agency to influence decisions in their communities, and learn how to engage elected officials in the advocacy process. "The CCE's advocacy workshops give

my students an opportunity to consider how they can influence and advocate for the social issues that are important to them," said sociology professor Sara Moore, "whether that's gender equity, college affordability, or racial justice."

In 2017, the CCE reviewed service learning on campus, identifying several troubling issues, including inequitable power dynamics and a lack of intentional learning outcomes. This analysis led to a new approach, Critically Engaged Civic Learning (CECL), which brings together community members, community partners, students, faculty members, and other education leaders to codesign, implement, and evaluate CECL initiatives, addressing the root causes of inequality in the community (see Vincent, Lynch, and Moore 2018). "If we as students wanted to do something to promote change in our communities, I feel like we definitely would be able to do it," said a student who participated in a CECL project. "Showing us these problems and what we can do about them made us feel more empowered."

The CCE's annual Your Voice, Your Vote election programming involves voter registration and two months of intensive educational election programming that includes ballot question panels, political workshops, debate watch parties, candidate forums, civic art, teach-ins, and a large voter mobilization effort. For Election 2018, the CCE provided more than fifteen events, registered more than nine hundred voters, and saw six hundred students vote on campus. Overall, Salem State had a 46.8 percent student voting rate, which was 20 percent higher than the national average, according to the National Study on Learning, Voting, and Engagement. The university also earned a Gold Seal from the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge and was listed in *Washington Monthly's* 2018



Salem State University students have helped change campus culture around voting, leading Salem State to have a level of student voting well above the national average. (Photo by Emma Kearns)

America's Best Colleges for Student Voting. During the 2020 primary, more than four hundred Salem State students cast ballots just weeks before leaving campus due to COVID-19 concerns.

As of this writing, the CCE is developing strategies to advance civic learning and engagement while Salem State remains closed during the pandemic. One plan in the works is a scaled-down Day of Service that has students working in small groups on campus or virtually to address the needs of the greater Salem community as it recovers from the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, the CCE is developing advocacy modules to support faculty as they adjust their fall 2020 courses. Finally, there will be a robust effort to register students to vote online, prepare them to vote, and provide virtual election workshops, debate watch parties, and guest speakers via webinars for individual classes and the community at large.

### Challenges to Meet

One of the biggest challenges to Massachusetts's 2014 Policy on Civic Learning is that each state campus has its own culture and priorities. Moreover, campuses belong to one of three different systems: the University

of Massachusetts system, the state university system, and the community college system. The state legislature gave the University of Massachusetts system considerable autonomy in relation to the BHE, and the system's president chose not to formally participate in the civic learning initiative. As a result, civic learning and engagement course designations and campus consultations have been limited to the nine state universities and fifteen community colleges. Among those institutions, some have created civic learning faculty development programs or centers; others have not.

A related challenge is funding. In the first years of this initiative, grants allowed the campuses to build civic learning infrastructure, and Reiff's position as half-time director of civic learning and engagement was created. However, when state budget cuts ended the DHE's capacity to incentivize campuses through civic learning grants and reduced Reiff's position to quarter-time, some campus leaders saw the initiative as an unfunded mandate that they could largely ignore. Other campuses, however, took the BHE's mandate as a supportive context for their own commitments to civic education and the future of democracy. In the current pandemic-driven economic constriction, it would be difficult to persuade campuses to make new commitments of their own funds to build infrastructure for civic engagement; however, Reiff has been working with campus leaders to articulate how the current infrastructure supports campus priorities such as community relations and student retention and should therefore be maintained.

A third challenge is the cataclysmic emergence of the coronavirus. As of this writing, campuses in Massachusetts (as in the rest of the nation) are closed to students and faculty, spring 2020 courses pivoted midsemester to remote teaching,

and fall plans remain uncertain. Civic engagement in this context has been shredded as faculty have been occupied with managing online instruction, many students have struggled to participate in that instruction because of lack of access to needed technologies, and many community partners are shifting how they operate and encountering new needs. Losses in revenue coupled with new costs are also hitting campus budgets.

To address some of these COVID-19 challenges, DHE is adapting its activities designed to support civic learning and engagement:

- The annual conference on civic learning and engagement originally scheduled in May 2020 will now be a virtual symposium in September 2020.
- Campus leaders are working to run remote faculty development programs for educators drawn to civic engagement because of the pandemic, as well as to help civic engagement faculty address community partners' needs under social-distancing guidelines. Reiff is working with Campus Compact—a national coalition of colleges and universities supporting campus-based civic engagement—to create a COVID-19 civic engagement virtual toolkit for faculty and curriculum development.
- Reiff and Campus Compact are creating virtual civic learning communities, based on theme, issue, or institution type, to help civic-minded faculty and staff stay connected.

To varying degrees, all of us—students, faculty, and staff—are struggling with the trauma of the pandemic, and our plans for our ongoing work should be “trauma-informed” (Davidson 2020). Offering options for civic engagement is an important way to support our students in moving beyond the boundaries of their own trauma, experiencing

a larger community, and experiencing their own agency in strengthening that community. We have the opportunity to share across our campuses our creative responses to continuing civic learning and engagement, which weave a web of support for faculty, students, community partners, and campus leaders.

Yet as we focus on this work, we must also hold a broader vision. As Harkavy, Bergen, Gallagher, and van't Land (2020) remind us, “The post-COVID-19 world must be based on the values we cherish: democracy, human rights, and the rule of law as well as social justice, inclusion, and equity.” The pandemic is sharpening challenges to democratic institutions and values, and colleges and universities must prepare students to participate in civic life with knowledge, skills, and competencies they need to be effective advocates for a more democratic and just society. They deserve nothing less from us. ☐

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