

A CLDE Briefing Paper

**Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition:
Purpose, Partnerships, and Vision for Students' Democracy Learning**

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The Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Coalition

Purpose, Partnerships, and Vision for Students' Democracy Learning

For Democracy to Thrive, Democracy Learning is Essential

► **The CLDE Coalition**

Four national organizations, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), Complete College America (CCA), College Promise, and State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO), have taken the lead in forming a new national coalition, titled Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement (CLDE).

The CLDE Coalition brings together educational and policy leaders with the goal of making students' Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement expected, inclusive, and "equity-committed." "Equity-committed" means that we give special attention to first-generation students, low-income students, minoritized students, and others who too often do not participate in civic and democracy learning in higher education.

CLDE affirms that students from underserved communities need to be first at the table in helping to build a more inclusive, equitable, and creative democracy in the United States (U.S.) and in shaping a new era of energetic leadership for democratic values and institutions around the globe.

► **CLDE Is a Collaboration, Not a New Organization**

The CLDE Coalition works in active partnership with a civic learning movement that has already taken root, both in K-12 and in postsecondary education.

CLDE leaders are not forming a new organization.

Rather, **we are collaborating with numerous partner organizations**—both national and state-based—that also seek to strengthen students' civic learning and democracy engagement, from school through college.

Working together, we will *accelerate* the reach of the civic learning moment, strengthen its direct connection to democracy's future, and help all U.S. students, especially those from underserved communities, gain the kinds of learning that are foundational to a thriving, inclusive, and creative democracy.

The founding partners include influential policy organizations. Together, we work to engage policy leadership at all levels—institutional, state, federal, and accreditor (quality assurance organizations)—to make democracy learning a top priority for all U.S. students.

► **Our Name, the CLDE Coalition, Signals Our Ties to *A Crucible Moment* (2012) and to the Numerous CLDE Collaborations *Crucible Helped Spur***

The civic learning movement that CLDE seeks to help accelerate has been growing since the 1990s, fueled by energetic and committed leadership from both organizations

and educators at hundreds of diverse four-year colleges, community colleges, and universities.

The movement gained new momentum and visibility in 2010 when the U.S. Department of Education commissioned a far-reaching study to discern where the civic learning movement stood at that time and what should be done to strengthen students' civic and democracy learning at all educational levels.

That study was led by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement or **CLDE**. The CLDE Task Force is the official author of the resulting 2012 report, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*.

Crucible was written in dialogue with educators and organization leaders across the U.S. Its publication and White House release galvanized a new surge of effort to embed civic learning and community-based projects across the college curriculum and co-curriculum and to involve students in generative partnerships between educational institutions and community organizations.

To sustain the *Crucible* momentum, AAC&U (which had organized the Crucible analysis and national dialogues) created an informal coalition of fourteen major organizations whose leaders agreed to advance the *Crucible* recommendations in ways related to their missions.

That coalition was titled the **CLDE Action Network**. AAC&U led this CLDE Action Network until 2020, and made its quarterly, *Diversity and Democracy*, a shared space to publicize CLDE Action Network members' national meetings and civic initiatives as well as campus-based innovations and research.¹

Working together, the CLDE Action Network partners helped promulgate the term CLDE, which became shorthand for civic learning leaders' collaborations. In this spirit, members created numerous national and regional projects that used the title CLDE. You can find [here](#) a list of CLDE projects created between 2012 and 2015.

In 2015, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and NASPA--Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, both active members of the CLDE Action Network, decided to rename AASCU's annual American Democracy Project conference the CLDE meeting, with both organizations as co-sponsors. Their CLDE conference is a significant resource for educators working on civic learning in the curriculum, co-curriculum, and the community.

¹ Original Members: American Association of State Colleges and Universities, Anchor Institutions Task Force, Association of American Colleges and Universities, Bonner Foundation, Bringing Theory to Practice, Campus Compact, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Imagining America, the Institute for Democracy and Higher Education, the Interfaith Youth Corps, the Kettering Foundation, and NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. The Democracy Commitment, another member, has since merged with Campus Compact while the 14th member, the New England Resource Center for Higher Education has closed. AAC&U became the American Association of Colleges and Universities in 2022.

In 2020, the CLDE Coalition conducted its own landscape analysis of where the civic learning movement in higher education now stands. We shared our top conclusion in a 2021 “Shared Commitment” call to action:

Today, higher education is dotted with pockets of great democracy learning and practice. But to fulfill higher education’s civic mission, we need to make civic inquiry and democracy engagement part of each student’s educational pathway.²

This is long-term work, and leadership on many fronts will be needed.

► **With Our Partners, the CLDE Coalition is Setting New Civic Learning and Democracy Engagement Goals for a New Era**

Most Americans know that U.S. democracy faces profound challenges. Democracy is polarized in the U.S and confronts brutal authoritarianism abroad. Many alliances, established and new, are rising to meet the moment and the CLDE Coalition celebrates our colleagues’ leadership and commitment.

But we also believe that **higher education has a special and under-recognized role to play in democracy’s renewal—by fostering democracy learning across-the-curriculum and co-curriculum; by teaching such democracy fundamentals as evidence-based reasoning, civil discourse about difficult issues, and collaborative problem-solving; and by encouraging new connections between K-12 civic and history learning and higher education.**

The CLDE Coalition is focused on the needed learning and promotes shared efforts, both by educators and policy leaders, to help all students graduate both prepared and inspired to help create a just, inclusive, and thriving democracy.

In this context, CLDE leaders have developed shared goals and priorities for action.

► **The Goals. Collaborating with Many Partner Organizations and Educators, the CLDE coalition promotes**

- **Quality and Equity:** Build commitment and capacity—across postsecondary education—to make civic learning and democracy engagement an expected part of a quality college education for all college students, *with equitable participation by students from underserved communities a top priority.*
- **Democracy Engagement:** Engage students with democracy’s history and future in a diverse United States, in U.S. communities still struggling to reverse inherited disparities, and in a globally interdependent world where authoritarianism is on the rise.

² To-date, sixty-nine organizations have endorsed this Shared Commitments call to action. Their names can be found at the CLDE website, www.collegeciviclearning.org.

- **Collaborative Problem-Solving:** Prepare each postsecondary student, through creative combinations of general education, arts and sciences studies, and career-related studies, to work directly on selected public problems that society needs to solve—e.g., problems in racial healing, health, education, housing, climate, digital access, human rights, justice systems, interfaith cooperation, and more.
- **Policy Commitment:** Secure policy support and investment in the goals listed above.

► **A Note on the CLDE Goals for Student Learning:**

The learning goals outlined above are flexible and adaptable to many diverse educational missions, institutional contexts, and student needs. **CLDE is not proposing a “one-size-fits-all” design for students’ pathways to civic and democracy acumen.**

Rather, we are sharing with our partners templates and campus examples that illuminate **multiple ways that civic inquiry and problem-solving can be braided into both general education and college majors** (including career and technical studies), and connections between them, from the first to final year of college. We seek, in other words, to foster learning necessary to democracy across-the-curriculum, and through students’ active community-based work on significant public questions and challenges.

We also are studying ways that higher education and K-12 can work together to create purposeful and progressively more challenging pathways to democracy learning, through foundational studies in K-12 and problem-centered inquiry in higher education.

We describe this approach as Guided CLDE Pathways.³

We further use the [CLDE Framework](#) developed for *A Crucible Moment* which was intentionally designed to encompass **both K-12 and postsecondary** in a longer arc of purposeful and progressively more action-oriented forms of learning.

As our collaborations progress, we anticipate that the *Crucible* CLDE Framework for civic learning across school and college will be revised, providing new clarity about the *complementary* roles of school and college in helping students gain the recommended knowledge, skills, examined values, and practical experience. Some of our partners have already begun work to make equity and inclusion more prominent in frameworks for civic and democracy learning, and we intend to learn from their work.

³ The term “Guided Pathways” has gained standing in higher education as an evidence-based “student success/completion” strategy. CLDE coalition leaders will work to help institutions see how CLDE learning and Guided Pathways to student success can and should be woven together.

► **Priorities for Action**

To help achieve our goal of making students' civic learning and democracy engagement inclusive, the CLDE coalition will collaborate with our partners to:

- Make democracy learning in higher education a shared priority both for educators and policy leaders at all levels: state systems and agencies, federal leaders, accreditation associations, and policy organizations that influence policy priorities and choices for U.S. education;
- Create generative and equity-minded connections between educational movements that too often remain separate activities in higher education institutions: Civic or Public Engagement initiatives (involving students, faculty, staff and community partners); Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives; Completion/Student Success initiatives; and Career Readiness initiatives;
- Promote reciprocal alignments between the active K-12 history and civic learning movements and the equally active but currently less visible CLDE movement in postsecondary education;
- Promote models for braiding civic and democracy learning (as described above) into students' postsecondary learning pathways, through creative redesigns of general education, majors, and connections between them;
- Involve U.S. students in working collaboratively—in credit-bearing courses—with educators and community-based organizations on one or more of democracy's many challenges, with students from underserved communities first in line;
- Synthesize and promulgate evidence that students' active work on public issues and projects correlates with increased degree completion; builds skills needed both for democracy and the modern workplace; and fosters students' post-graduation commitment to building a more inclusive, just, and creative democracy;
- Develop, beta test, and deploy CLDE indicators that help institutions discern their own capacity to foster graduates' democracy engagement and their own progress in engaging all students and especially underserved students in studies and experiences that build democracy engagement;
- Provide active, ongoing, and practical support for teams from institutions, state systems and agencies, and other civic-minded consortia to design Guided Learning Pathways that deepen students' civic and democracy learning, from school through college while raising the overall levels of student success.

► **An Invitation**

The work described above is shared work. We welcome additional partners and actively seek examples of institutions where all students already are participating—equitably—in studies and community projects that build their readiness to help build that “more perfect union” the U.S. Constitution envisions. Please let us know about your CLDE-related work at info@collegeciviclearning.org.