



Civic Thought: A Proposal for University-Level Civic Education

Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey

December 2023

Key Points

- There is widespread, bipartisan concern that American universities are not adequately preparing students for citizenship. The most ambitious efforts to attend to this problem to date have been undertaken by Republican-led state legislatures, which have mandated that state universities create new academic units for civic education.
- While this innovation has been undertaken to meet political needs, its success or failure will be determined by academic standards. To meet those standards, these new academic units will need to define and execute a distinctive intellectual mission.
- An intellectual mission in the fullest sense requires a coherent program of teaching and research in a specific and demanding discipline. This report sketches the outlines of such a program, which we call “Civic Thought.” As its core elements are derived from a consideration of the intellectual demands of citizenship, it may be useful to all those working toward the renewal of university-level civic education.

Leading voices at America’s most prominent universities have recently pointed out that institutions of higher education are failing to offer students the civic education they need to play a constructive role in political life. Johns Hopkins President Ronald J. Daniels wrote a book to encourage fellow leaders in higher education to reconsider “what universities owe democracy.” A pair of Stanford faculty, writing in the *New York Times*, claimed that “by abandoning civics, colleges helped create the culture wars.” What can colleges and universities do to meet the next generation’s need for a richer civic education?¹

While Johns Hopkins, Stanford, and others have done good work developing extracurricular programs and course sequences in response to this perceived need, the most ambitious projects in civic education have been undertaken by several state governments

that have made substantial investments to create new academic units at their public universities. The model for this mode of reform is Arizona State’s School of Civic Thought and Leadership, founded in 2017 through the efforts of Gov. Doug Ducey and the Arizona state legislature; in the past two years, similar schools have been founded in Florida, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah. These schools will have the same powers that other academic units have to hire their own faculty, design their own curricula, and offer their own majors and minors. This structural feature enables these schools to have a more profound effect on students and a more sustained effect on campus than do programs of study housed within or between existing departments whose primary purpose is something other than civic education.²

What will it take for these ambitious projects to offer a civic education that has a profound, enduring, and positive effect on the university's work and culture—and on the country beyond the university's gates? Among the factors that will determine these projects' success, one of the most crucial is the articulation of a distinctive intellectual mission. For while the needs these schools have been created to meet are political, the standards by which they will prove themselves worthy of their place on campus are academic.

The articulation of an intellectual mission in its fullest sense requires defining a program of teaching and research with a particular scope of study and a characteristic approach, one that will train scholars in a demanding and recognizable discipline. Projects that define and implement a mission that can win the allegiance of both those who criticize the university's civic failures and those who worry about the university holding true to its academic purpose have the most promise for surviving and thriving on campus—and making a durable contribution to our political and intellectual life.

In this report, we sketch the broad outlines of a new program of teaching and research that we call "Civic Thought." Our argument draws on many informative conversations with administrators and faculty, especially with the group of impressive scholars who serve as the deans and directors of the new initiatives in public universities—but we do not claim to represent any group's conclusions. We present this sketch of Civic Thought in the hopes that it may prove useful to the new schools in public universities and to other academics concerned about civic education as they work to launch new programs of study that will deserve to command both sustained public support and widespread academic respect.

A Civic Education Proper to the University?

Why does civic education deserve a place on our campuses? The proposal to offer a civic education in the university can sound like a plan to offer remedial classes, imparting lessons one should have learned in high school. As Arizona State's Paul Carrese points out, even those who are enthusiastic about civic education often see it as a kind of mental hygiene—a dull necessity one would not engage in for its own

sake but that is useful for warding off the infectious diseases of politics.³

Many reflective Americans have long understood, however, that there is something intellectually demanding, a high-order ambition of the mind, involved in our project of self-government. From the beginning, Americans have built universities to help us realize that ambition. A group of the first Massachusetts Bay Colony settlers, many of them educated at Cambridge, founded Harvard in 1636—in time to educate the first generation of children born to them on this continent. The 17th and 18th centuries would see the founding of many more institutions of higher education, such as William & Mary, St. John's College, Yale, and the University of Pennsylvania.

These American educational institutions predate the events, documents, and political institutions at the center of our national self-understanding. We had colleges before we had a Declaration of Independence or Constitution, and no country without institutions of higher education would ever imagine such documents. In addition to the venerable written principles of American self-government, one sees in our practice an unwritten principle, once articulated by Daniel Patrick Moynihan: "If you want to build a great city, build a great university and wait two hundred years."⁴

Americans have invested so steadily and generously in their colleges and universities because they know, at least tacitly, that competent American citizenship, particularly for those who will take on positions of leadership, makes serious demands on the mind. After all, in a republican form of government, citizens are collectively sovereign. Sovereignty entails overseeing and taking responsibility for the entire project of self-government. No sober person would want to take on such a significant responsibility without the aid of reflection and study.

The mottoes of many of our colleges and universities reflect this view, such as the University of North Carolina's Light and Liberty, Ohio State's Education for Citizenship, and the University of Texas's Education Is the Guardian Genius of Democracy. Over time, however, the aims of collegiate education have drifted away from the cultivation of competent citizens to the training of specialists and critical thinkers. While specialization is useful and critical thinking has its place, the intellectual aspiration to competent citizenship is

distinct. Citizenship makes a particular kind of intellectual demand, and these new schools of Civic Thought should develop curricula with a scope, approach, and discipline designed to meet it.

The Scope of Civic Thought

What is the scope of that demand? What is the content of Civic Thought?

Exercising competent American citizenship first of all requires the study of American political institutions, particularly the constitutional systems of state and federal governments. To judge the actions of its officeholders well, one must understand the political philosophy that animates the system, becoming conversant in the arguments that guide our political institutions' design. One must also understand the history of our efforts of self-government as they have played out in practice: particularly its political, diplomatic, and military dimensions, from the colonial period to the present. As William Inboden, the director of the University of Florida's Hamilton Center, points out, these fields, crucially important to the education of citizens, have been in recent years neglected by conventional history departments.⁵

But the study of America's project of constitutional self-government is not a stand-alone enterprise. Even when patriotically motivated, efforts to treat the study of America as self-sufficient tend to backfire. Such efforts often begin historically with the American Revolution and philosophically with the Declaration of Independence, our most fundamental statement of political principles. But if one looks at American institutions from the vantage point of abstract principles, judging them in terms of how perfectly they instantiate the ideals of democracy, equality, and liberty, those institutions tend to look, at best, like halting and insufficient first steps toward the realization of a noble vision.

One gets a more accurate view of our institutions by broadening one's scope of inquiry and considering our distinctive political enterprise as a relatively recent chapter in an old story: the often tragic history of human efforts at self-government. That history poses a series of daunting questions to those interested in democratic and republican self-rule: Is democracy fated to burn brightly and quickly consume itself, as

it did in ancient Greece? Do republican forms of government necessarily succumb to the temptations of oligarchy, populism, empire, and despotism, as they did in ancient Rome?⁶

Such questions illuminate the citizen's perspective because they do not take the possibility of democratic self-government for granted. When we understand self-government as fundamentally questionable—as something that the long sweep of history suggests might not even be enduringly possible—then we are prepared to see our institutions with fresh eyes. The quest to govern ourselves then presents itself to us as a series of daunting, even paradoxical questions.

The Madisonian formulation of one of those questions will be familiar to readers of the *Federalist Papers*: How can institutions empower majorities to rule without permitting them to tyrannize? Another version of the question at the heart of our constitutional design has recently been formulated by Yuval Levin: How can our political institutions enable us to act together without compelling us to think alike? When we bear such questions in mind, we are better prepared to appreciate our political institutions as ingenious answers to intimidating problems—an appreciation necessary to all citizens who would seek to preserve and improve those institutions.⁷

By understanding our institutions of constitutional government, our characteristic political philosophy, and the history of American politics in practice as answers to the challenging, even paradoxical questions posed by the effort to govern ourselves, we enter into the perspective of responsibility—the citizen's proper perspective as one who participates in sovereign oversight of, and takes responsibility for, the American political project. The achievement of such a perspective is the first object of civic education proper to the university.

But the citizen's responsibility includes grappling with not only the structures of government but those aspects of life over which government has authority. The Constitution states that American government exists “to promote the general Welfare” of the people it governs. What is the scope of that enterprise?⁸

At its various levels, American government touches almost every dimension of human life. Our federal government includes a Treasury Department, a Commerce Department, and a Federal Reserve. Those who wish to judge that government's activities competently

will want to equip themselves with an understanding of at least the basic principles of political economy. Federal, state, and local governments all supervise our education system. An American citizen would therefore wish to develop a reflective answer to the question of what it means to educate a human being. Our federal government has created the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the National Endowment for the Arts, which means that competent citizenship entails consideration of what science, art, and literature are; whether, when, and why government should support them; and what principles should govern the kinds of research and artistic activity public funding should sustain. Federal, state, and local authorities all issue environmental regulations, which means that the competence of American citizens necessitates thinking through the proper relationship between human beings and nature. Courts at every level make judgments about the boundaries between religion and the state, which means that citizens who want to assess their courts accurately will want to reflect on what religion is, what politics is, and how the two best relate.

The scope of our political concerns does not even stop at our country's borders. No country exists in a vacuum, and the citizens who have ultimate responsibility for our relations with other nations will want to understand the fundamental questions of war and peace, cultural and economic exchange, and international relations. Seeking to understand how the world's other major powers, such as Russia and China, understand themselves would also plainly be useful.⁹

Even those who judge that the extent of the federal government's activities has become too broad will find it helpful to consider the full range of issues that arise as political questions. The border between questions we consider political and those we believe should be outside or above politics frequently shifts, as political authorities seek to expand their powers or limit their responsibilities. In a self-governing country, the authority to define and police the boundaries of political power and responsibility ultimately rests with citizens themselves.

The duties to defend limited government and insist on responsible government demand that citizens seek to understand those dimensions of human life that are properly subject to political authority and those

from which political authority should be excluded, so as to define those boundaries intelligently. As Justin Dyer has put it, the limited-government principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution "were nested in a rich moral and theological tradition that subordinates will to reason, preserves the rule of law, prudentially limits government power, and protects individual rights." Keeping politics limited requires understanding that moral and theological tradition—and much else that lies beyond the limits of politics narrowly understood.¹⁰

Finally, to develop an appreciation of the country our political system governs, it helps to go beyond the academic study of all these questions and engage with the work of practitioners in various areas of American life. Students of Civic Thought should get some experience with their fellow citizens in business and industry, politics and philanthropy, and education and the service sector to understand their work and experience the practical import of the framework of laws within which they carry it out.

The scope of the civic education required to develop citizens ready for the imposing responsibility of intelligently exercising a share of political sovereignty is therefore extensive. In fact, it is vast and worthy of the human mind's highest aspirations. For while particular political actors superintend some part of our government's operations, the citizen takes responsibility for the whole, judging presidents, governors, courts, and representatives for the successful or unsuccessful exercise of the particular responsibilities confided to them and their competent or incompetent superintendence over the specific arenas of American life within their purview.

An education in citizenship, then, could be as expansive as an attempt to understand everything within the citizen's domain of competence, which is nothing less than the whole of human life, insofar as every part of that whole may be touched by politics. John Henry Newman once described a liberal education as aspiring to "the clear, calm, accurate vision and comprehension of all things, as far as the finite mind can embrace them, each in its place, and with its own characteristics upon it."¹¹ Such a clear, calm, accurate vision of everything political life touches should be civic education's aim.

The ancient Greeks understood the intimidatingly ambitious character of civic education. As the political

philosopher Pierre Manent has put it, the Greeks knew there is something Promethean involved in human self-government—an element of stealing fire from the gods. The effort to achieve such an understanding of our human situation as would allow us to govern ourselves well might seem hubristic. But it is the direct and logical consequence of taking our civic responsibilities seriously. Its intellectual demands are anything but remedial, and they are more than sufficient to constitute college-level work.¹²

The Approach of Civic Thought

If meaningful, university-level intellectual work is to be done in a field as dauntingly expansive as what we have outlined, Civic Thought will need an approach that defines it, distinguishes it from other fields of inquiry, and gives it constructive direction. That approach should take its bearings from the manner of thinking inherent in the practice of citizenship. How do people need to learn to think in order to be competent citizens?

Citizens are tasked with making prudential decisions about things that must be done in common. As the legal theorist Jeremy Waldron argues, the opportunity for political life arises when there is a need to make a common decision and a disagreement about which decision is best. Facing a specific practical challenge or opportunity, citizens need to be prepared to think well about how to choose one course of action out of the possible alternatives. In a democratic republic such as our own, citizens need to learn how to deliberate with others who have different perspectives and experiences. They need to be capable of evaluating different arguments and considering different needs as they consider the best possible course of action for the country as a whole.¹³

The citizen's work requires a different kind of intellectual preparation than what is most commonly offered in our universities today. The dominant mode of inquiry in both research universities and liberal arts colleges is suited to specialized research, since this is what is required for faculty to advance in their profession. Given the widespread acknowledgment that such specialization is inappropriate for early-stage undergraduates, most universities set out a course of "general education" or "liberal education." What these terms mean in practice varies, but they usually indicate

either an introduction to a number of specialized disciplines (in the form of general education requirements) or the reading of "great books"—fundamental texts of Western civilization or world cultures.

To explain how either model of education prepares one for life after college, university leaders often claim they teach critical thinking. But neither specialized research, general education, nor critical thinking is equivalent to the art of prudential, collective decision-making needed to practice citizenship well. Comparing Civic Thought with these other modes of study will make clear how it is a distinct, possible, and necessary mode of inquiry to be taught in our universities today.

The approach of the scholar of Civic Thought will differ from that of the specialist. Specialists become experts in a particular subject matter by limiting their scope of inquiry and examining every detail within this narrowed frame. The cultivation of scientific and scholarly expertise in the universities has proven to be of great public benefit, especially through the development of new technologies. Contemporary citizens should learn to consult and evaluate different forms of expertise in the course of deliberating between alternative courses of action. Insofar as the citizen's responsibility is, however, for the whole of our common life in all its complexity, political decisions cannot be derived from the counsel of any particular specialist.¹⁴

Scholars of Civic Thought should therefore pay particular attention to authors whose works, though often categorized as literature, science, or philosophy according to the now-customary distinctions of academic life, in fact transcend those distinctions, striving to give a synoptic account of the whole of human life. To train oneself to follow the thought of comprehensive authors such as Plato or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe is to train oneself in thinking about the whole in a disciplined way. From these authors, one might learn how human minds have sought to offer comprehensive sketches of the human situation while remaining aware of both the unavoidable incompleteness of such efforts and their necessity for orienting ourselves in the world. By studying several such comprehensive authors, one might also learn to perceive how different accounts of the whole change one's understanding of the various parts and their relation.

This manner of striving after a general or liberal education differs from how those terms are typically

understood today. Unlike most forms of general education, Civic Thought trains the student not in a variety of specialized perspectives but in the manner appropriate to a disciplined generalist. Unlike many forms of liberal education understood as great books education, Civic Thought asks students to understand their humanity through the lens of their work as citizens.

Many great books programs treat students as if they are, or should be, “unencumbered individuals,” free to choose from a variety of compelling ways of life and commitments. Students of Civic Thought, on the contrary, will begin from the effort to understand the political and social contexts in which they are already implicated, and then they will proceed to see how living up to citizenship’s inherent commitments requires fundamental inquiry into perennial human questions. Understood this way, Civic Thought may be considered a kind of liberal education, aligned with Marcus Tullius Cicero’s elucidation of the *artes liberales*—arts that enable one to live as a free person, capable of engaging with others in self-government.¹⁵

The approach of Civic Thought also differs from that of critical thinking. The term “critical thinking” was introduced into educational literature by John Dewey, who thought it to be a key component of a “scientific attitude.” Critical thinking became an especially popular feature of both K–12 and higher education as it became clear that citizens in a mass democracy would need to learn to grapple with massive amounts of questionable information. While the components that constitute critical thinking have been debated by educational theorists over the past century, they typically include the ability to sort facts from values, assess statements, and determine the strength of proposed conclusions.¹⁶

These are important educational aims, but they are insufficient for the intellectual work of citizenship. Citizens must learn to not only evaluate information but also deliberate well with others, consider different needs and perspectives, relate what they discover about parts to what they suppose about the whole, and make prudential decisions about courses of action. Critical thinking does not prepare students adequately for these tasks.

The popularity of the term “critical thinking” in the academy may furthermore contribute to the formation of an ethos that undermines effective citizenship.

For the culture and incentive structure of the contemporary university encourages both the dominant academic left and the dissident academic right to emphasize the academy’s role as social critic.

As a Cornell humanities professor recently remarked in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, lamenting tendencies of her own left-academic faction, academics tend to “valorize ruptures: revolution, resistance, fragmentation, shock, break, unsettling, dismantling, disorder.” One sees this sentiment echoed in documents esteemed by the academic right, such as the University of Chicago’s 1967 Kalven Report, which, in advocating institutional neutrality, postulates that the university’s “mission . . . is to provide enduring challenges to social values . . . to create discontent with existing social arrangements and propose new ones,” and in sum, to be “upsetting.” In part for professional reasons and in part because of ideological commitments, academic life rewards social, intellectual, and political critique more than constructive proposals to attend to real problems citizens face.¹⁷

Since citizens need to learn to deliberate together about problems that call for action, the approach of Civic Thought is best characterized by a phrase borrowed from Hannah Arendt—the “willingness to take joint responsibility” for the problems one’s country faces and the remedies that might be employed to address them. For example, while considering the national debt, scholars of Civic Thought would consider it as *our* problem, and they would inquire into how fiscal accountability might be restored without neglecting areas where spending is truly necessary. The willingness to take joint responsibility for the challenges facing one’s country means, in Arendt’s words, refusing to adopt a posture of “estrangement” from it, an attitude of unquenchable “dissatisfaction . . . and disgust with things as they are,” and striving rather to understand oneself as implicated, for better and worse, in the unfolding history of one’s political community.¹⁸

To cultivate the capacity for taking joint responsibility, one must strive to know and love the object of one’s efforts, as Arendt makes clear. Those engaged in Civic Thought should be able to relate their country’s history, characterize its strengths and weaknesses, and describe the kinds of people who make it up. They should be able to assess the opportunities it offers and

the ways in which it makes certain dimensions of the pursuit of happiness more difficult.

Those engaged in Civic Thought should also strive to *love* their country—for it is difficult to either understand or improve something unless one cares about it enough to devote attention to it and work to make it better. Loving engagement with one’s fellow citizens can take the forms of thoughtful dissent from majority opinion and insistent, well-argued demands that one’s country bring its practice into line with its principles, as Martin Luther King Jr. demonstrated in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Even in critique, the sign of love is the willingness to take joint responsibility for one’s country and the disposition to persuade those of the next generation that their country is worthy of their study, participation, and work.¹⁹

This willingness to take joint responsibility for one’s country exemplifies what Alexis de Tocqueville described as “reflective patriotism.” Reflective patriotism is not simply sentimental attachment to one’s land, nor does it entail the view that one’s country is objectively superior to all others. Rather, it is a reasoned appreciation for how one’s life and happiness are intertwined with the fate of one’s country. It entails both a conservative respect for the inherited conditions that shape one’s life and the people that shape one’s world and a future-oriented inclination to respond energetically to the country’s injustices and inadequacies. Civic Thought requires an approach animated by this kind of reasoned appreciation for one’s country.²⁰

The Discipline of Civic Thought

Civic Thought, then, has a scope determined by the breadth of the citizen’s responsibilities and an approach oriented by the aim of preparing oneself to take joint responsibility for one’s country. There is also a discipline specific to this program of study, a manner of structuring inquiry that gives a certain shape to its research and teaching. Civic Thought gives priority to questions that bear on action, fashions its modes of inquiry after the pattern of shared deliberation characteristic of political life, and presents the results of study as contributions to a common conversation that has consequences.

Since inquiries in Civic Thought give priority to questions that bear on action, they call for the exercise

of practical reason. Matters of action are the questions about which people properly deliberate—as Aristotle put it, those matters that “admit of being otherwise” and bear on what is “good or bad for a human being.” Such investigations can be usefully distinguished from the elaboration of explanatory systems to describe patterns that do not change and are therefore not potential objects of choice; these are more appropriately examined with the tools of speculative reason. Such questions cannot be ignored by the inquiries characteristic of Civic Thought, but those inquiries should begin and end with the consideration of choices we might make about things we might do.²¹

While the practice of citizenship directs our attention to questions that bear on action, the discipline of Civic Thought will take up such questions in a way proper to academic life. A university should be an “island of patience in a culture of haste,” encouraging the development of a deeper understanding and longer-term perspective than that usually afforded by a fast-paced society.²²

A course on the ethics of artificial intelligence, for example, might examine specific regulatory proposals currently before Congress in the light of inquiries into the natures of technology and human intelligence. Drawing on works such as Martin Heidegger’s *The Question Concerning Technology*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, René Descartes’s *Discourse on the Method*, and Aristotle’s *On the Soul*, such a course would help students cultivate a perspective on urgent problems enriched by an awareness of the most fundamental questions they raise.

Academic inquiries meant to inform and enrich the practice of citizenship should, moreover, not be limited to the kinds of questions well-ordered polities put up for votes. They might also take up the nature of human flourishing or the character of the American dream, insofar as these questions have implications for political debates about subjects such as education, family, and economic policy. Such broad inquiries into the orienting questions of human life can help us understand why such policy debates exist in the first place and therefore counter the tendency toward ideological reactivity that makes such debates fruitless. They can also inform civic deliberation with a deeper and more comprehensive conception of the goods political action seeks to realize.

Second, the mode of pursuing inquiries in Civic Thought should be shaped by the kind of dialogue that animates properly political life. As Aristotle notes, to be a citizen is “to have a share in ruling and being ruled”; it is a role that entails engaging with other people in a way that is neither domineering nor subservient. To see human beings as “political animals,” as Aristotle does, is to recognize “viewpoint diversity” as a given of the human condition and a useful corrective to the partiality of our own minds. In practical terms, this suggests that schools of Civic Thought should make it their mission to ensure that a diversity of politically salient viewpoints are represented in the university. Their modes of research and teaching should also involve the regular practice of the prudential reasoning with others that is essential to the exercise of citizenship.²³

Reasoning in common with other citizens requires one to speak in a broadly intelligible way. Those who engage in serious study of a specialized topic tend to speak in shorthand, using terms that make sense only to other specialists. While this practice allows specialists to make efficient advances in understanding, the results of their studies must be “translated” to become part of civic discourse. Those who engage in Civic Thought will make grateful use of specialized research, practicing the particular art of rendering complex thoughts in a “simple common language intelligible to every intelligent person.”²⁴

This effort to speak in a commonly intelligible language is necessary for civic deliberation, as it facilitates the effort to relate parts of knowledge to the comprehensive practical question under consideration. As John U. Nef, the founder of the University of Chicago’s Committee on Social Thought, understood, universities have been motivated to give up their civic mission in part because the consideration of comprehensive problems runs counter to the compartmentalization and specialization on which the modern division of academic labor depends. Nef therefore argued that more attention needs to be paid to articulating the “relations between the various branches of scholarship.”²⁵

Whereas Nef and University of Chicago President Robert Maynard Hutchins thought the fragmentation of inquiry in the modern university could only be redressed by the restoration of a metaphysical “queen of the sciences,” Civic Thought can offer a way of producing community among scholars that is more suited to citizens of a democratic republic. The practical

questions that animate Civic Thought can serve as common points of orientation for many branches of inquiry without subjecting the freedom of research and teaching to a hegemonic intellectual system or an ideological litmus test. For Civic Thought makes the effort to engage in thoughtful common action, in which agreement is ultimately necessary to achieve, rather than theory, in which disagreement is inevitable and often productive, the principle of unification.²⁶

Finally, the aim of illuminating practical action should lead scholars of Civic Thought to emphasize prudence and persuasion in their modes of presentation. They should consider whether they have reached a point in their investigations where presentation would be meaningful and anticipate the effect their words might have on those who hear them. Above all, their findings should be presented as contributions to a common conversation that has consequences—implications for the way a community thinks and the decisions it makes about common courses of action.

A Civic Thought curriculum should therefore include courses in which students study and practice the modes of speech and writing especially relevant to citizens, who make decisions through common deliberation and can lead only insofar as they are able to persuade. The conversations of Socrates and Catherine of Siena and the speeches of Cicero and Frederick Douglass should be analyzed and imitated as models of how to seek truth in common with others. One might learn from them how to persuade people of things those people do not wish to see, yield before the more comprehensive views others may present, and gather diverse human beings for the sake of action. Seminar-style classes that embody the conversational pursuit of truth; occasions for rhetorical presentation in which students must strive to master the logical, ethical, and emotional aspects of persuasion; and oral defenses of one’s academic work should be major elements of the Civic Thought curriculum.

A Civic Thought degree should signal that those who have completed its requirements know how to make practical questions the focus of their inquiries without lapsing into a narrow pragmatism, communicate their thoughts in language intelligible to inquirers with different experiences and perspectives, and attend to the art of persuasion and weigh their words carefully. Acquiring this set of durable skills suits young people for not

only civic life but also many kinds of work, and employers would likely value a degree that reliably indicates such training. The presence on campus of a body of scholars trained in such a discipline would moreover be beneficial to the shared intellectual and practical life of a university.

Civic Thought and the Contemporary American University

The need for renewed attention to the university's civic mission has become widely recognized. While several universities are making serious efforts to address this need, the most profound attempt to date has been initiated by politicians—notably, by Republican state legislatures. The political origin of the schools launched by these legislatures has led some to claim they are illegitimate intrusions into academic life. But such claims overlook the historical reality that the universities in which such schools are being established were once created by a political process, whose contentiousness has been since forgotten. In a self-governing country, moreover, a political origin story should not be a tainted origin story.²⁷

To be sure, the political pressures now driving change at our colleges and universities can do real damage, especially if they eliminate important fields of study or prohibit the teaching of certain concepts. But outside pressure can also be an indispensable force for reform.

Like every other human institution, universities “easily fall into ruts,” as Daniel Coit Gilman, the first president of Johns Hopkins, put it in the 1876 inaugural address that launched that institution. It is often impossible to emerge from ruts without an external impetus. Public authorities are within their rights to create new schools dedicated to areas of study that universities have demonstrably neglected and that stand to contribute to the public good.²⁸

Once established, however, schools of Civic Thought will have to prove themselves by living up to the standards inherent in the academic enterprise. They will have to establish a distinctive and productive field of study, with an appropriate scope and a characteristic approach; they will have to train students and faculty in a genuine intellectual discipline that gives rise to rigorous and useful work. In this report, we have sought to show how they might do that by taking seriously citizenship's intellectual requirements. The noble ambition to participate responsibly in the governance of our common life makes serious demands on the mind. These new schools can do important work by training Americans to better meet those demands.

To be sure, universities and colleges exist to provide a home for many kinds of intellectual activity, many of which go beyond even the highest-level preparation for citizenship. Some kinds of study require the cultivation of specialized expertise beyond the citizen's requirements, some inquiries aim at the understanding of truths that cannot change and that have little bearing on the domain of human action that is the citizen's concern, and some things deserve to be studied simply because they are true or beautiful, not because we are responsible for them.

But a field of study dedicated to meeting the intellectual needs of those who take the demands of citizenship seriously is surely a worthy part of universities whose mottoes often indicate that no work is more proper to them. The generations that established the institutions bearing those mottoes plainly understood that institutions dedicated to “teaching democracy to know itself,” in Tocqueville's phrase, were worthy of substantial investments of time, work, money, and love. By working to realize that ambition, schools of Civic Thought can help rehabilitate our universities' reputations—and make a much-needed contribution to the recovery of intelligent American citizenship.²⁹

About the Authors

Benjamin Storey and **Jenna Silber Storey** are senior fellows in Social, Cultural, and Constitutional Studies at the American Enterprise Institute. They are concurrently research fellows at the Civitas Institute at the University of Texas at Austin and scholars in the Tocqueville Center at Furman University, where they taught in the Department of Politics and International Affairs for many years and directed the Tocqueville Program. They lead AEI's project on the future of the American university.

Notes

1. See Ronald J. Daniels, Grant Shreve, and Phillip Spector, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021); and Debra Satz and Dan Edelstein, “By Abandoning Civics, Colleges Helped Create the Culture Wars,” *New York Times*, September 3, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/03/opinion/colleges-civics-core-curriculum-culture-wars.html>. See also the Educating for American Democracy project, focused on improving K–12 civic education and spearheaded by Harvard’s Danielle Allen, which notes that “in recent decades, we as a nation have failed to prepare young Americans for self-government, leaving the world’s oldest constitutional democracy in grave danger, afflicted by both cynicism and nostalgia, as it approaches its 250th anniversary.” Educating for American Democracy, website, <https://www.educatingforamerican democracy.org>.

2. See Stavros Niarchos Foundation Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins, “The Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) Committed \$150 Million to a Joint Effort with Johns Hopkins University to Create the SNF Agora Institute,” <https://www.snf.org/en/work/grants/grants-database/the-johns-hopkins-university-endowment-2017>; and Stanford Civics Initiative, website, <https://civics.stanford.edu>. Arizona State University created the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership in 2017; the University of Mississippi created the Declaration of Independence Center in 2021; Utah Valley University created the Civic Thought and Leadership Initiative in 2021; the University of Florida created the Hamilton Center for Civic and Classical Education in 2022; the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, created the Institute for American Civics in 2022; the University of Texas at Austin created the School of Civic Leadership in 2023; the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill created the School of Civic Life and Leadership in 2023; the University of Toledo created the Institute for American Constitutional Thought and Leadership in 2023; Ohio State University is founding the Salmon P. Chase Center for Civics, Culture, and Society at present; and three further such initiatives have been mandated for other Ohio campuses. For more on the history of these initiatives, see Paul Carrese, “A New Birth of Freedom in Higher Education: Civic Institutes at Public Universities,” American Enterprise Institute, January 24, 2023, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/a-new-birth-of-freedom-in-higher-education-civic-institutes-at-public-universities>.

3. Paul Carrese, “Civic Education as a Duty and a Delight,” RealClearPublicAffairs, August 25, 2021, https://www.realclearpublicaffairs.com/articles/2021/08/25/civic_education_as_a_duty_and_a_delight_791212.html.

4. Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1962); and *Economist*, “From Rustbelt to Brainbelt: How Universities Can Drive Prosperity,” July 23, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/07/23/from-rustbelt-to-brainbelt>.

5. Lee Strang of the University of Toledo College of Law pointed out to us that the study of state constitutions is essential to civic education in a federalist system. William Inboden, quoted in J. C. Derrick, “New Hamilton Center Promises Independence,” *Main Street Daily News*, October 24, 2023, <https://www.mainstreetdailynews.com/news/new-hamilton-center-head-promises-independence>.

6. The study of the history of self-government, particularly in its Greek, Roman, and later European versions, has often featured as part of “Western Civ” curricula that were once common on university campuses but have fallen out of favor over the past 40 years, often because some students and faculty see such courses as rooted in notions of cultural supremacy. Whatever we may find to celebrate or reprove in this history, however, we cannot afford to ignore it, for its influence on us is incalculable, and its lessons for us are invaluable. As James Hankins puts it, “If we turn our backs on the past, we won’t understand ourselves, and we will be easier prey for noxious superstitions and conspiracy theories.” Nathaniel Peters and James Hankins, “On Virtue Politics,” *Public Discourse*, January 6, 2020, <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2020/01/59123>.

7. Yuval Levin, *American Covenant: How the Constitution Unified Our Nation—and Could Do It Again* (New York: Basic Books, forthcoming). An excellent, concise history of attempts to self-govern can be found in Brook Manville and Josiah Ober, *The Civic Bargain: How Democracy Survives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023).

8. US Const. preamble.

9. Peter Berkowitz notes the long-standing inattention to questions of war and peace in dominant conceptions of liberal education in Peter Berkowitz, “Liberal Education and Liberal Democracy,” *Weekly Standard*, April 20, 2018, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/curtailed-speech-diluted-due-process-and-politicized-curriculums-are-ruining-higher-education>.

10. Justin Dyer, “Reports of the Death of Liberalism Are Greatly Exaggerated,” *Dallas Morning News*, December 4, 2022, <https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2022/12/04/reports-of-the-death-of-liberalism-are-greatly-exaggerated>.

11. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962); and Robert C. Koons, “Can Virtue Be Taught? Western Civilization and Moral Formation,” in *Western Civilization and the Academy*, ed. Bradley C. S. Watson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

12. Pierre Manent, *The Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

13. Jeremy Waldron, *Political Political Theory: Essays on Institutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). On the nature of specifically political speech, see Jenna Silber Storey and Benjamin Storey, “Political Speech in Divided Times,” *National Affairs*, Fall 2022, <https://nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/political-speech-in-divided-times>.

14. For a helpful discussion of the nature of political prudence and its relation to expertise, see Jennifer A. Frey, “Political Wisdom and the Limits of Expertise,” *Breaking Ground*, July 2, 2020, <https://breakingground.us/political-wisdom-and-the-limits-of-expertise>.
15. The phrase “unencumbered selves” comes from Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982). See Marcus Tullius Cicero, “On the Orator,” in *The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Documentary History*, ed. Bruce A. Kimball (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010). For an account of the manner in which Renaissance scholars understood liberal education to be useful to political life, see Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education in the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).
16. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022), s.v. “Critical Thinking,” <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/critical-thinking>.
17. Caroline Levine, “In the Humanities, Open-Endedness Should Not Be an End in Itself,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 27, 2023, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/in-the-humanities-open-endedness-should-not-be-an-end-in-itself?sra=true>; and Harry Kalven Jr. Committee, “Kalven Committee: Report on the University’s Role in Political and Social Action,” *Record* 1, no. 1 (November 11, 1967), https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/KalvenRprt_o.pdf. https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/KalvenRprt_o.pdf.
18. Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1961). Here Hannah Arendt describes the “willingness to take joint responsibility for the world” as the proper attitude of a teacher; we have adapted her phrase to the specific context and content of civic responsibility.
19. Arendt, “The Crisis in Education”; and Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.
20. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), vol. I; part II, chap. 6.
21. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics: A New Translation*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011).
22. Benjamin Storey and Michael Glenwood, “Of Bookworms & Busybodies,” *Furman Magazine* 54, no. 4 (Winter 2012), <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol54/iss4/5>.
23. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
24. John U. Nef, “The American Universities and the Future of Western Civilization,” *Review of Politics* 1, no. 3 (July 1939): 241–60, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1403950>.
25. Nef, “The American Universities and the Future of Western Civilization.”
26. Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1936).
27. The documentary histories of many public universities show that politically appointed commissioners, regents, and trustees have founded new academic units in the past, and they specified the fields of study to be taught in these institutions. See, for example, University of Virginia, “Rockfish Gap Report of the University of Virginia Commissioners, 4 August 1818,” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-13-02-0197-0006>; and University of North Carolina, “Laws and Regulations for the University of North Carolina, August 2, 1795,” <https://docsouth.unc.edu/true/mss01-02/mss01-02.html#Notenote31>.
28. Daniel Coit Gilman, “Inaugural Address,” <https://www.jhu.edu/about/history/gilman-address>.
29. Alexis de Tocqueville, “Letter to Silvestre de Sacy,” quoted in André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

© 2023 by the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research. All rights reserved.

The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) educational organization and does not take institutional positions on any issues. The views expressed here are those of the author(s).