



The Civic Education Revival In Higher Education

Table of Contents

A Renewed Interest
in Civic Education 3

—

Core Readings
on a New (or Old) Form
of Civic Education 4

—

Key Resources:
The Emerging Data
on Civics Centers 9

—

Varied Viewpoints:
Proponent and
Critic Perspectives 13

A RENEWED INTEREST IN Civic Education

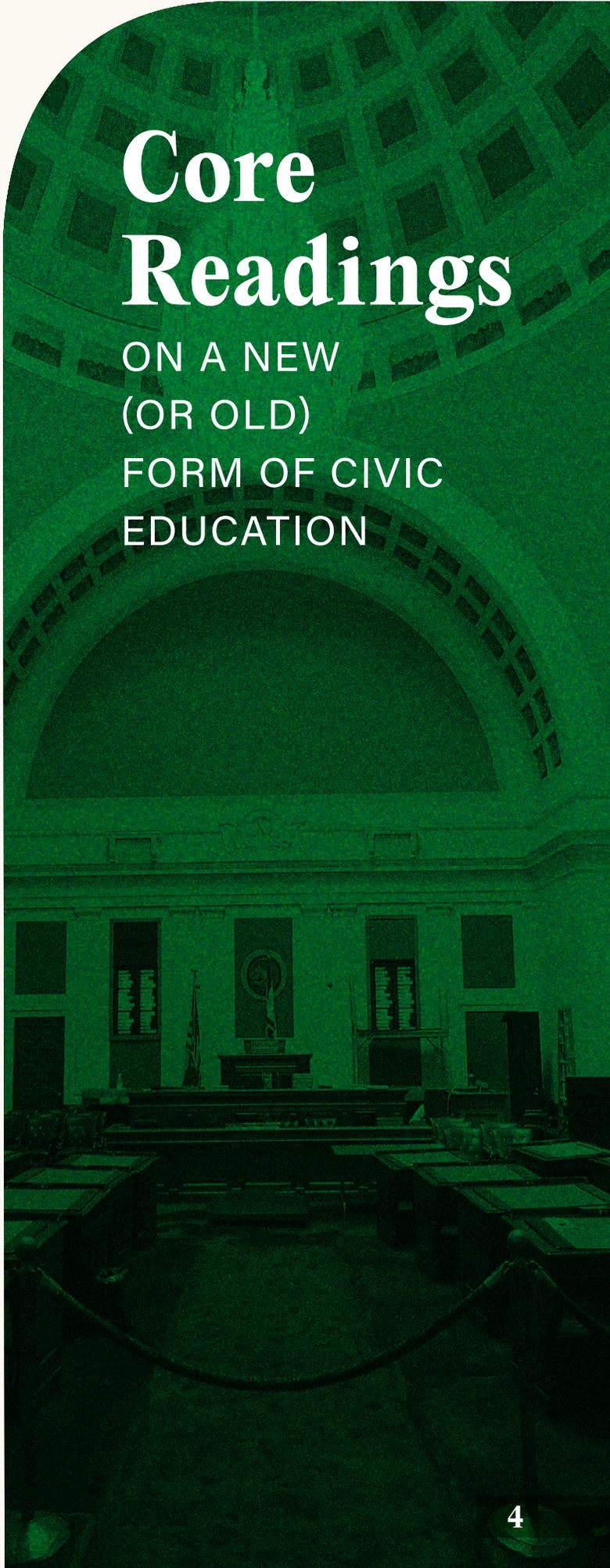
In the last decade, a wave of new schools, departments, and academic centers devoted to civic education — “civics centers” hereafter — has emerged at universities across the country. Backed by legislative mandates in states like Arizona, Florida, Tennessee, Texas, and North Carolina, they represent one of the most significant structural shifts in higher education in recent decades, attracting hundreds of millions of dollars in state appropriations as well as federal grant money.

The new centers emphasize a different strand of civics education than the community-engagement model currently dominant on college campuses. While both can broadly be called “civics education,” the new reform movement seeks to restore balance to the discipline by reintroducing a more traditional focus on classical liberal arts, statesmanship, and Western political thought. Perhaps as a natural consequence (and, as is evident from the core readings and broader discussion), questions of viewpoint diversity, disciplinary balance, and nonpartisanship are top of mind for many commentators.

This reading guide from Heterodox Academy is intended to familiarize readers with key arguments from proponents (and critics) of the civics reform movement and orient them to the broader discussion about its potential implications for higher education.



To learn more about viewpoint diversity in the academy, please see HxA’s website.



Core Readings

ON A NEW
(OR OLD)
FORM OF CIVIC
EDUCATION

Virtually all of the proponents of civics reform in higher education — including all readings in this section — position it as a way to shore up democratic literacy, address intensifying political polarization, and restore waning public trust in universities. Similarly, all criticize the prevailing model of civic education as having strayed from its traditional emphasis (e.g., civic literacy and specific discursive virtues) in favor of progressive activism, which offers at best an incomplete education in responsible citizenship. To avoid repetition, the descriptions here primarily focus on what distinguishes each reading.

What Universities Owe Democracy (2021)

Responding to declining faith in universities and democratic backsliding over the course of the 2010s, Johns Hopkins University president Ronald Daniels (along with co-authors Grant Shreve and Phillip Spector) calls for universities to recover their public mission.

What Universities Owe Democracy



RONALD J. DANIELS

WITH GRANT SHREVE
AND PHILLIP SPECTOR

[Read Here](#)

Why you should read it:

This book, which has been widely discussed across academia and policy circles, presents a deeply researched argument for civic education from the center-left leader of a mainstream research university relatively early on in the timeline of the reform movement.

What you'll learn:

Daniels identifies civic education and fostering dialogue across difference as two essential functions of the university in our democracy. After tracing the evolution of civics education in the United States, he suggests that today's universities have overemphasized community service learning at the expense of other critical lessons for how to live in a pluralistic society. He identifies several obstacles to citizenship education, including a lack of will from leadership, the specialized nature of higher education curriculum, and politicized disagreement over the proper content of civic education curriculum.

Daniels argues that colleges and universities should require students to “wrestle with the animating questions of democratic life,” including taking an honest look at some of the darker parts of America's history and its legacy. Daniels treats “purposeful pluralism” similarly, arguing that students today are less prepared to engage across difference, tracing this in part to university policies that allow students to self-segregate (through housing, social, and curricular choices) and their tendency to invite individual speakers rather than stage debates.

If too few citizens share a broad understanding of the value and philosophical underpinnings of democratic institutions, it's not unreasonable to envision a time when a majority of Americans do not argue or vote for their preservation.

A New Model for Civic Education in America's Public Universities: The Institute of American Civics at the University of Tennessee (2022)

This white paper was written by faculty in the Baker School of Public Policy at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in 2022, where Tennessee's state legislature had mandated the creation of an Institute of American Civics. Along with Arizona (2016) and Florida (2022), the legislation came relatively early in a larger wave of bills requiring public universities in several states to establish new civics centers.

[Read Here](#)

Why you should read it:

As the founding document for a prominent state-mandated civic center, this white paper provides insight into how universities have worked with legislatures to create centers for civic education on campus.

What you'll learn:

The authors lay out two concerns that motivate the creation of the Institute of American Civics (IAC): 1) poor civic knowledge and participation and 2) the toxic nature of contemporary political discourse. The Tennessee legislature's priorities for the center (restated in the white paper) similarly show that the lawmakers conceived of civic education along similar lines: both in terms of knowledge about American institutions/ political thought and training in civic discourse/ open debate. This was a pattern common to many centers, including virtually all legislatively mandated ones. The authors consistently emphasize the nonpartisan nature of their proposal by highlighting quotes from Democratic lawmakers, noting the broad bipartisan support with which the bill passed, and making their own arguments against the politicization of education.

Educators at all levels should ask whether we are part of the problem of America’s civic coarsening and decline, and whether we should question recent academic norms — predominantly skeptical of patriotism and of America, and emphasizing civic engagement over civic knowledge — to consider, instead, a higher civics more conducive to American civic strength and health.

Paul Carrese on Civic Thought and Leadership: A Higher Civics to Sustain American Constitutional Democracy (2024)

Paul Carrese, founding director of Arizona State University’s School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership, authored this peer-reviewed article in 2024 as the civics center movement emerged as a national trend. By 2024, at least eight Republican-led states had founded or funded centers of civic thought and leadership.

[Read Here](#)

Why you should read it:

This paper synthesizes several existing perspectives with Carrese’s own center-right views, particularly with regard to the structure and content of civics education. Carrese is at the forefront of the national civics reform movement in public universities, having served as the architect of one of its influential early models, and continues to serve on the boards of several schools of civic thought.

What you’ll learn:

Carrese proposes a “higher civic education” that emphasizes knowledge about the American constitutional order and instruction in leadership, which he argues will prepare students to participate responsibly in the American tradition of self-government. In addition to cultivating these democratic virtues, Carrese argues that the creation of new civics centers, especially with state backing, offers a way to reintroduce traditional areas of inquiry (e.g., statecraft, military history, leadership) that are essential for democracy, yet relatively neglected in the contemporary civics education landscape. As Carrese emphasizes, his piece echoes bipartisan calls from university leaders such as Ronald Daniels of Johns Hopkins and Derek Bok of Harvard for colleges to renew their missions related to civic education (often written explicitly into their charters and mottoes).

Even a small, indirect share of responsibility for the whole political enterprise requires that one make judgments about a vast range of issues: What constitutes a just economic order? Where is the line between politics and religion? When should we keep our traditional laws, and when should we change them? Understanding such questions well can be a worthy object for a lifetime of study.

Storey & Storey: Why Civic Thought? (2025)

Reflecting on their experience convening leaders of new centers through the Alliance for Civics in the Academy and their collaboration with Johns Hopkins University's working group on Civic Thought and Practice, the Storeys articulate the value of a discipline of civic thought in higher education: the cultivation of "civic excellence."

[Read Here](#)

Why you should read it:

Ben and Jenna Storey are two of the leading scholars in the civics reform movement, both political theorists affiliated with Furman University, the Civitas Institute at the University of Texas, and American Enterprise Institute (AEI). This essay represents an intellectually serious but accessible defense of civic thought as a legitimate academic discipline.

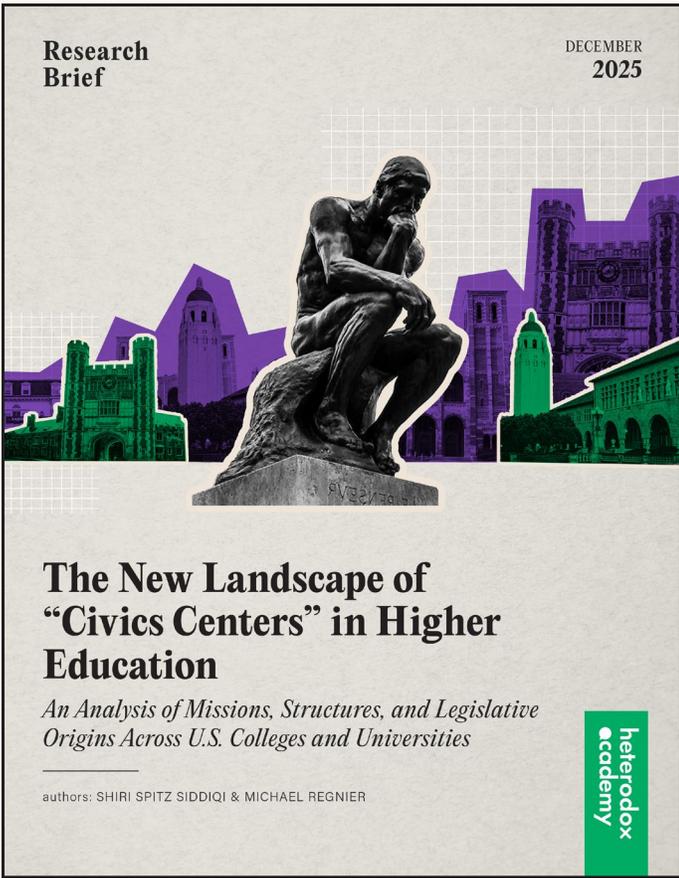
What you'll learn:

The authors' key argument is that Americans need an education that will equip them for the collective decision-making that democracy requires. Self-government is demanding, and to achieve "civic excellence," students need to understand the structure and philosophy of American political institutions and grapple with an array of questions, including the proper role of government in many areas of society. Although existing approaches to liberal education often attempt this, the authors maintain that the study of civic thought must be as holistic as the many areas affected by politics in our daily lives. This kind of learning, in the Storeys' view, is essential for forming wise judgments about what to do and how to act as members of our pluralistic society.



Key Resources:

THE EMERGING DATA
ON CIVICS CENTERS



HxA Research Brief: The New Landscape of “Civics Centers” in Higher Education

Over the last decade, and especially since 2021, American universities have launched a wave of new schools and centers to promote teaching and research in civic thought and discourse. A significant portion was mandated by legislation, signaling the importance of this brand of civics to lawmakers while spurring debate about their implications for self-governance. This report from Heterodox Academy describes 45 civics centers, examining their emergence over time, their distribution across the country, and trends in their missions and aims.

[Read Here](#)

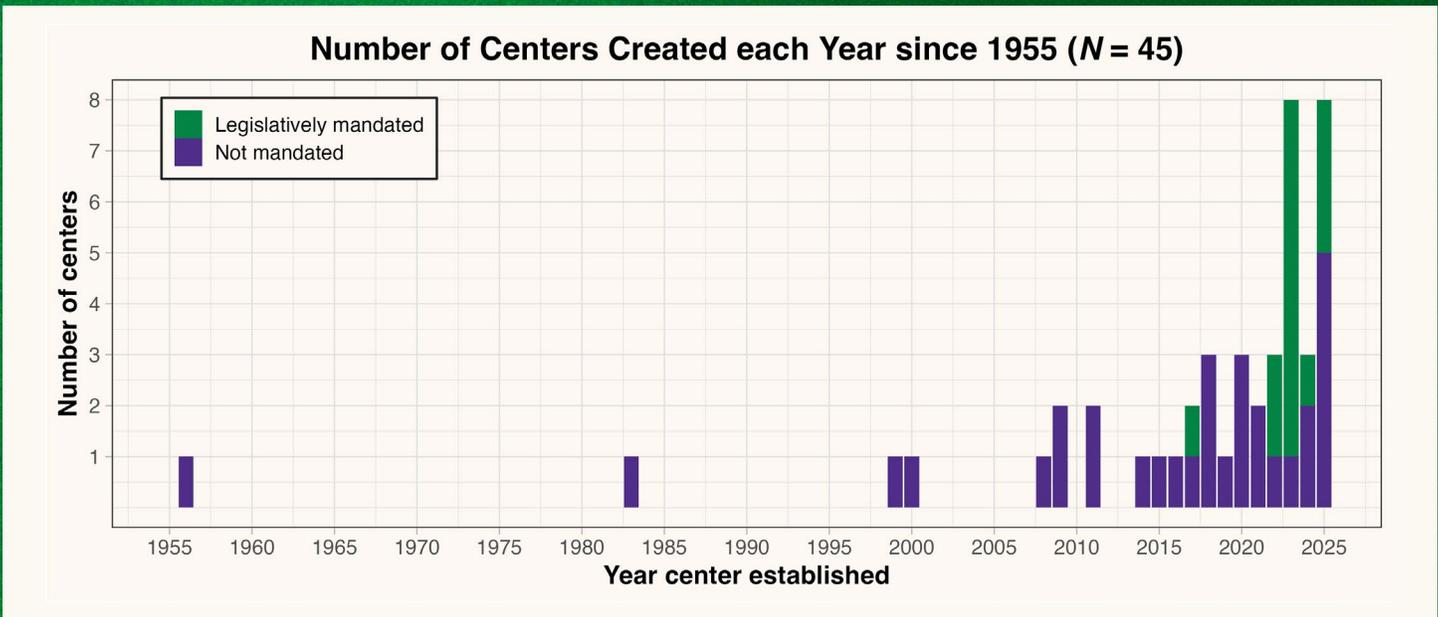


Figure 2. Number of Centers Created each Year since 1955

A Crucible Moment **College Learning and** **Democracy's Future**

In 2012, the National Task Force for Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement published this landmark report documenting low civic literacy and voter participation. The report is widely cited for what it shows about the gaps in Americans' civic education. Still, some proponents of the current reform movement argue that it emphasizes community engagement and progressive activism at the expense of other components of civic education (e.g., familiarity with the history of political thought shaping American democracy; training in civil discourse).

Making Citizens: **How American Universities** **Teach Civics**

This report by the National Association of Scholars critiques what the authors term “the New Civics,” as symbolized by A Crucible Moment (the 2012 Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Task Force report). It includes critical case studies of civics curricula at four universities in Colorado and Wyoming, plus educational resources (including a sample syllabus) representing their proposed reforms to civic education.

Schools of **Civic Thought website**

This webpage spotlights the contributions of the Jack Miller Center and associated scholars, including Paul Carrese, to the new wave of schools of civic thought.

Key Resources

Civic Thought

This webpage hosts selected articles and media on Civic Thought from American Enterprise Institute's Center Future of the American University.

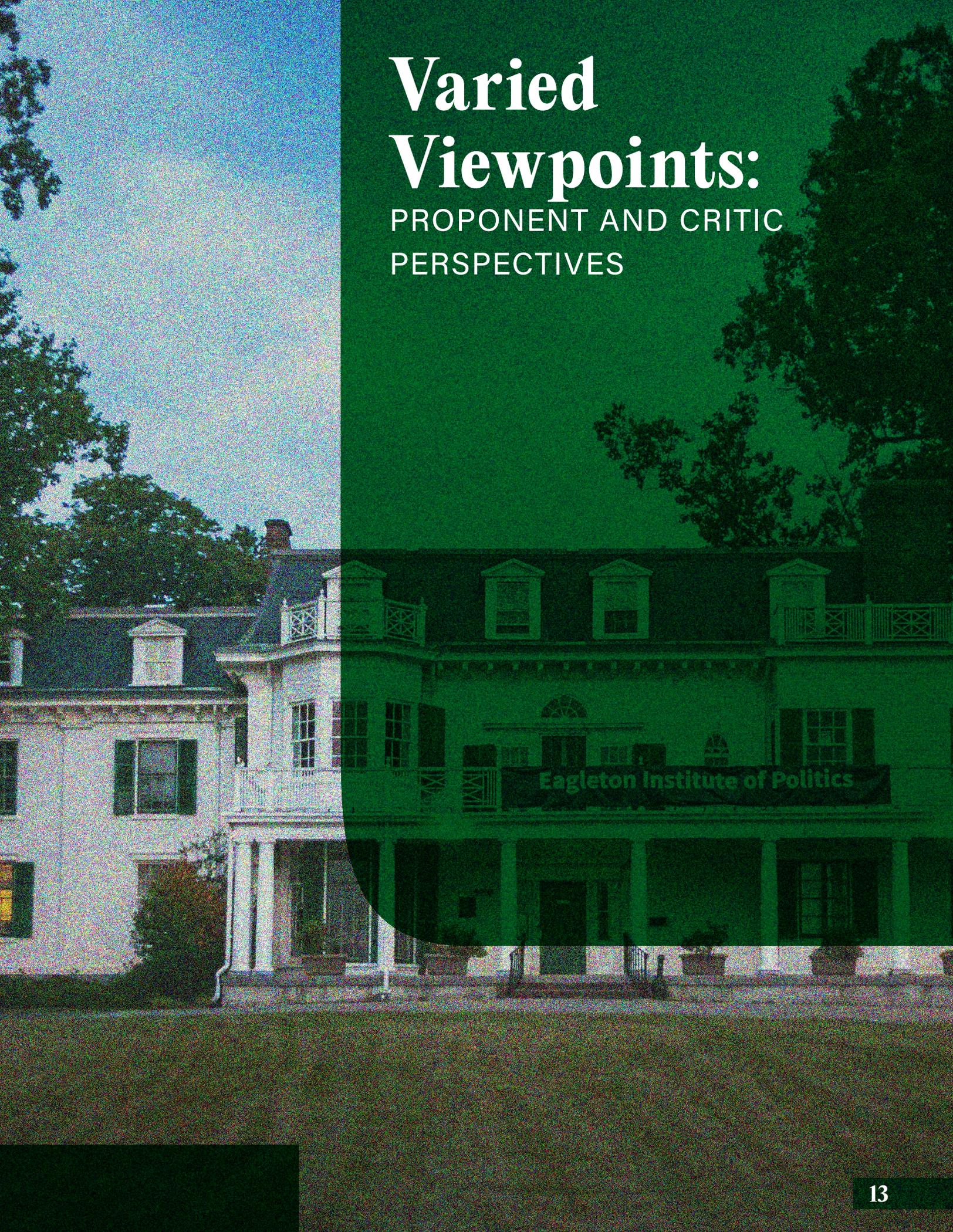
50–State Comparison: Civics Education

This report from the James G. Martin for Academic Renewal summarizes current civics requirements at the K-12 and college level in the United States.



Varied Viewpoints:

PROPONENT AND CRITIC
PERSPECTIVES



Restoring the Academic Social

Contract -

“[P]romising though it is, the focus on civic thought has limits. [. . .] [A]s a notional academic field, “civic thought” is rather narrow, and largely appeals to political theorists and related scholars of the American founding. [. . .] [I]n its separatism it risks surrendering the chance to influence the troubled humanities and social-science disciplines that have contributed to the broader loss of trust in higher education.”

WILLIAM INBODEN, NATIONAL AFFAIRS

To Save Themselves, Universities Must Cultivate Civic Friendship -

“We believe a fundamental reason for the decline of the pursuit of truth on campuses is the collapse in acknowledging the importance of civic friendship. [. . .] A university culture of civic friendship is one in which faculty and students recognize, and act consistently with the recognition, that reasonable people of goodwill can respectfully disagree about controversial — indeed, even the most important, life-defining, and identity-forming — questions.”

*ROBERT P. GEORGE AND CORNEL WEST,
THE WASHINGTON POST*

Higher Education Reform, Civic Thought, and Liberal Education -

“[P]rograms in civic thought should strive to form more thoughtful citizens, whether of the left, center, or right. [. . .] [C]ivic thought should not seek status as a separate field of study. . . . Instead, civic thought should bring to bear on the myriad challenges of citizenship in a free society. . . the wisdom that is gleaned from, and the toleration and humility that are developed by, study of history, languages, literature, the principles of politics and economics, and the leading opinions about ethics and faith.”

PETER BERKOWITZ, REALCLEARPOLITICS

America and its Universities Need a New Social Contract -

“But as we have focused on national security, economic competitiveness, and the integration of all subsets of the population into a technologically powered economy, we have neglected another dimension of national well-being: civic strength. [. . .] [Civic strength] entails broad and deep support for the pillars of our constitutional democracy: constitutionalism, rule of law, nonviolence, universal inclusion. It also entails broad and deep comfort with pluralism, power sharing, civil disagreement, reflective patriotism, civic friendship, and collaboration through political institutions.”

DANIELLE ALLEN, THE ATLANTIC

Embracing Civics Can Help Restore Trust in Higher Education -

“American civics draws on multiple academic disciplines, including politics, economics, philosophy, history, and law, but it is not reducible to any one of them. It is anchored in the study of Western civilization and American constitutionalism, and it fosters a patriotism that is spirited, thoughtful, and open to critical self-reflection. [. . .] Before we can develop a reasonable outlook on the policy issues of the day, we must first acquire knowledge of the character and basis of the political institutions we have inherited and must now steward as Americans.”

JUSTIN DYER, NATIONAL REVIEW

On Saving the Humanities -

“Our understanding is that the civics centers . . . raise a question of interest (e.g., Who should rule?), introduce students to texts that offer or seem to offer an answer to this question, and then encourage the students to assess the merits of the authors’ proposals. This is an excellent way to help young citizens think through big questions. But it will not save the humanities, which . . . were traditionally tasked with developing . . . expert close readers and, for that matter, expert interpreters of music, art, and architecture as well.”

SOLVEIG GOLD AND JOSHUA KATZ, AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

Proponents

What's So Conservative About Civics, Anyway? -

“We should spend far less time and ink debating whether something emerges from Republican or Democratic roots. [. . .] Whatever the political disposition of civic centers or other programs across campus, we need more and better cross-campus commitment to democratic knowledge, values and beliefs if we wish to continue and strengthen the American democratic tradition.”

ERIC HARTMAN, INSIDE HIGHER ED

A Chance to Build Rather than Ban -

“Schools and centers within universities organized around themes the mainstream has neglected, led by credible scholars, could address the narrowing of research and teaching through broadening inquiry rather than constraining coercion. [. . .] The more such outposts are created as new centers, the more cracks and crannies will be available for unexpected thinking—and the less easily universities will be dismissed as ‘captured’ by the interests and assumptions of a single political or cultural tribe.”

MICHAEL REGNIER, FREE THE INQUIRY

Civics Education Is Back. It Shouldn't Belong to Conservatives. -

“If civics is conceived as embracing the question of the shaping of a pluralist society . . . then [Africana studies, ethnic studies, and women’s studies] have a firm claim on delivering it. [. . .] It is in these long-established courses where the distance between ideals and realities, between the Bill of Rights and the behavior of governments are plumbed in greatest detail. As colleges struggle to incorporate civics into their general-education programs, they will have to decide if they will simply add new civics classes to their requirements or if they will pack the elements specified by their state legislatures into an existing course. [. . .] The safer and cheaper option is to find some way to integrate or combine civics with something already taught.”

TIMOTHY MESSER-KRUSE, THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Critics

Old Project, New Vehicle: Conservative Civics and Leadership Institutes in Historical Context -

“The mission statements of these institutes promise to offer ‘classical’ and ‘traditional’ humanities curricula to promote civics, leadership, and entrepreneurship. However, every university affiliated with these centers already offers public policy majors, Classics programs, and business schools. Why the redundancy? [. . .] The assertion that the campus is some bastion of Marxism helps the right strategically inch its ideas closer to the mainstream and its age-old objectives—a return to greater racial, gender, and economic inequality—closer to reality. The new college centers are just the right’s latest vehicle in a longer struggle to control higher education.”

LAUREN LASSABE SHEPHERD, FRONTIERS OF AMERICAN REACTION

Why I Think the New Civics Centers Will Fail -

“Anyone who thought that the Civics Center legislation was about deeper conversation about the republic was not paying attention for the decade as first-year writing and all gen ed was flattened into transferable ‘skills’ that soon states will be using AI to deliver. In the end, the new Civics centers will ‘solve’ the problems administrators know how to measure – seat allocation, transfer articulation, athletic eligibility – not civic ignorance. There will be little serious wrestling with ‘foundational texts,’ at least in the mandated classes.”

HOLLIS ROBBINS, ANECDOTAL VALUE

**The
Guardian**

Move Over, Gender Studies: The Conservative Tide Coming for US Universities



Inside
Higher
Ed

The Battle for Viewpoint Diversity

RealClear Investigations

Civics Revolution: Conservatives Are Reviving Traditional Education With a Modern Twist

THE CHRONICLE OF
HIGHER EDUCATION

How a Center for Civic Education Became a Political Provocation

Campus Civics Centers Are Getting Millions From Trump. Here's What They'll Use It For.

*The
Atlantic*

The Era of DEI for Conservatives Has Begun

Developed by Heterodox Academy as a resource to foster open inquiry on college campuses.

About Heterodox Academy

Heterodox Academy (HxA) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit membership organization of faculty, staff, and graduate students working to foster a culture of open inquiry on college and university campuses.

Support Open Inquiry in Higher Ed

Become a member or *make a donation*.

(Donors of at least \$120 a year, or just \$10 per month, will receive a yearlong print subscription to inquisitive, HxA's quarterly magazine, as our gift to you.) If you want to stay up-to-date on HxA news, research, and upcoming events, *subscribe to our emails*.

Have questions?

Reach out to questions@heterodoxacademy.org

