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[Stanford First-year curriculum: COLLEGE - Civic, Liberal, and Global Education](#)

**Background:** In 2020, the Stanford Faculty Senate approved a new first-year curriculum, called COLLEGE, for Civic, Liberal, and Global Education. The previous first-year curriculum, while excellent in many ways, prioritized choice for students and so did not provide a shared first-year experience. It also didn't have any special place for civic education. The new curriculum foregrounds education for democratic citizenship and makes clear that the university is renewing its [historic commitment](#) to ensuring that all students gain some civic knowledge regardless of their intended major or career.

**The civic course:** Taught each winter quarter, Citizenship in the 21st Century is the civic element of the COLLEGE curriculum. The course began as a small pilot project and now is taken by approximately 1200 Stanford first-year students each year. It's taught in seminars of 15 students by faculty and postdoctoral lecturers specially hired and trained for the program. By design, instructors come from a range of fields. This collaborative structure enables the course to explore citizenship using diverse texts and media including drama, literary fiction, speeches, philosophical works, and poetry. [The shared syllabus is available here.](#)

**Citizenship in the 21st century curriculum and course goals:** The subject of the class is *citizenship* in the sense of shared participation in large group decision-making. This initial, very abstract definition marks a particular sense of citizenship off from other nearby concepts. Small children and people subject to an authoritarian regime both hold citizenship of their countries in the sense of nationality, but are excluded from shared participation in its decision-making processes. A small group of friends or family may make decisions together, but large groups cannot rely solely on the particular ties each individual has with the others. This definition also opens up as (potential) sites for citizenship a variety of non-state entities: religious groups, businesses, activist or revolutionary groups, maybe even universities. The class starts from the premise that citizenship is worthy of study, but does not assume that all students do or should value it, much less that they understand it the same way, or are citizens of the same groups.

Any attempt to make this initial definition more concrete leads immediately into highly contested terrain: What is the group, and who are its members? Do members participate on the basis of shared values and goals? If so, what values? What goals? What decisions does the group make, and what decisions are left to individuals or other groups? What process does the group use to make decisions, and is the process an equal or unequal one? How do individuals negotiate their overlapping memberships in different groups? Questions like these are never settled once and for all, and a central goal of the class is for students to learn about how answers to these questions have changed over time. The class also explores the ways excluded and marginalized people have fought for equal respect and inclusion in existing groups or formed their own alternatives; the ways historical developments have put pressure on

old answers or suggested new ones; and the relationships between debates about citizenship and other debates in ethical, political, and social thought.

A second central goal is for students to take their place as active and critical participants in (and not just observers of) these ongoing debates about the meaning of citizenship. Understandings of citizenship need to be rethought in every era, and it's a truism to say that our era poses new challenges. Many inherited understandings of citizenship presume homogeneity despite radical diversity, presume hierarchy despite undeniable demands for equal respect and status, and presume insularity despite transnational issues like climate change and infectious diseases that require worldwide responses. Other models of decision-making like technocracy and authoritarianism are becoming increasingly popular alternatives. Students in this class talk through these and other challenges and what it would take to meet them in the coming decades.

**Looking ahead:** COLLEGE is officially still a pilot project and will return to the Stanford Faculty Senate for long-term approval and expansion in the next 1-2 years. As of now, first-year students choose 2 of the 3 courses in the sequence, but the long-term vision is for all students to take all three courses. The class has so far generally been successful, creating a shared experience for students while also giving them the kinds of learning experiences (conversations, one-on-one interaction with faculty) that are only possible in small classes. Student evaluations have in general been in line with university averages, even though, as a requirement, not all students would choose to be in the class.

**Challenges:** The course takes on deeply sensitive topics, including race, gender, social class, immigration, and more. Instructor training emphasizes ways to create the right classroom environment for conversations like these, but this will always be difficult to consistently get right. By design, the goal of the course is not to have students debate present-day national or international politics, but events outside the classroom can often reshape, with little time for reflection, what a conversation looks like on a particular day. Our large instructor group has, not surprisingly, a wide diversity of views about how to handle political issues in the classroom, even though we all want students to feel respected and achieve the course goals. These issues will be especially challenging during 2024, when COLLEGE will be running right through an election and its aftermath. We'll also continue to need to make the case for the importance of the course as a requirement for all students, especially given the many competing priorities they face both in their Stanford educations and looking ahead to their careers.