

Paul Carrese, Professor

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Memo for the Stanford University/Hoover Institution workshop on "Citizenship in the 21st Century University," hosted by the Center for Revitalizing American Institutions:

A summary of the "Civic Thought and Leadership" movement in American public universities; and proposed core principles for "a higher civics" in American higher education

A. "Civic thought and leadership" departments, centers, colleges in American public universities

In 2016 the Arizona legislature and governor mandated, and separately funded, a new department at ASU; subsequently a national movement has developed to establish new departments, colleges, or super-centers of "civic thought and leadership" under various names. The units have their own tenure lines, curricula and degrees, and programs; offering a blend of classical liberal arts learning and American civic education. To date there are 8 states, and 13 public university campuses, that have adopted this civic thought & leadership model of a higher civics in American public universities. Even the departments and super-centers (not only the colleges) report directly to a university provost. Some examples, to capture the range of institutions and the names:

Arizona State Univ, [School of Civic & Economic Thought and Leadership](#) (department)
Univ of Texas Austin, [School of Civic Leadership](#) (college; houses the Civitas Institute)
UNC Chapel Hill, [School of Civic Life and Leadership](#) (department, but with dean-director)
U of FL Gainesville, [Hamilton Center for Classical & Civic Education](#) (department; soon a college)
Ohio State Univ, [Salmon P. Chase Center for Civics, Culture, & Society](#) (department)
Univ of Tennessee Knoxville, [Institute of American Civics](#) (department)

This reform restores to state universities an American civics appropriate to higher education. Private institutions also should consider the emphasis this reform places upon restoring American civic knowledge, along with intellectual diversity and Socratic heterodoxy – what Tocqueville referred to as America's "reflective patriotism" – in the 21st century American university. As Derek Bok's 2020 book, and Ron Daniels' 2021 book, establish from a center or center left-view, this kind of liberal-arts civic education once was central to all American colleges and universities; a blend of classical liberal education and American civics to prepare civic-minded leaders for public life, the private sector, and civil society. In the Arizona case, the existence of the new ASU department prompted the state board of regents to establish a new general-studies graduation requirement for all three state universities; it is now in effect as an "American Institutions" course requirement.

ASU's School of Civic & Economic Thought and Leadership (SCETL) [states](#) its first mission as providing an interdisciplinary education—with its own faculty, courses, degrees—in political and moral thought; American civic and constitutional thought; economic thought; and leadership and statecraft. A second mission provides intellectual diversity and civil disagreement, in coursework and also in a public-speaker series and student experiences; SCETL's main series is [The Civic Discourse Project](#). A third mission supports renewal of K–12 civics and history education through teacher preparation, professional workshops, and curricular materials; mostly via the [Center for American Civics](#) in SCETL. A challenge to note: the states thus far mandating-funding these CTL units all are Republican-dominated; although there now is bipartisan support in Arizona, and the Tennessee institute earned bipartisan support at its founding. The leaders of these units need to show the Socratic spirit of an academically conservative field, versus a partisan or culture-war project.

B. Core principles of a higher civics: American civic knowledge and civic virtues

I served as founding director of SCETL at ASU, 2016 to 2023; having taught political science as a civilian professor at the US Air Force Academy for two decades. While on research leave this year I am a fellow of the [Jack Miller Center for Teaching America's Founding Principles and History](#). I recently published a [journal article on the civic thought & leadership field](#) that cites the Bok and Daniels books noted above; also cited are a report I wrote for AEI in 2023 on this movement; and essays by the new UT Austin Dean Justin Dyer and by AEI fellows Ben and Jenna Storey which further address the academic rationale and content for a higher American civics in this new CTL field. The article cites the Stanford Civics Initiative and the new required Stanford course; also the Agora Institute at Hopkins and plans for a “democracy education” requirement there. Public universities – mostly founded from 1789 onward (UNC) with an explicit rationale of civic education – have the most obvious grounding for this reform-restoration movement; yet all elite private universities and colleges claim to be educating leaders. Finally, the article also cites my co-authorship of a national study on K-12 civics and history education released in 2021, *Educating for American Democracy* (EAD). Danielle Allen (Harvard) and Peter Levine (Tufts) were the most prominent center-left scholars leading the study; they invited me to join, a known conservative, to develop national-consensus guidelines for states and local education authorities. Since publishing the article I have finished reading Manville and Ober, *The Civic Bargain*; and also studied the “Citizenship in the 21st Century” syllabus; also the Crittenden & Levine article on “civic education” in the Stanford Encyclopedia (online). My proposed principles for a higher civics in American universities and colleges draw on the academically conservative but non-partisan CTL field for America’s public universities; on the EAD study and my own scholarship on an American civics; and they have much overlap with the Manville-Ober approach, the Stanford course, and the Crittenden-Levine approach – but these principles also would pull the EAD consensus and these Stanford sources toward a greater emphasis on an American civic education, grounded in our founding principles and the 250-year development of our constitutional democratic republic.

A main rationale for an American-constitutionalist emphasis is that only such an approach can pull our civic culture and political order out of the serious crisis we have inflicted upon ourselves. My main authority for this diagnosis and remedy is Lincoln’s 1838 Lyceum address on “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions.” Yet as Manville & Ober note, Franklin’s storied remark about “a republic, if you can keep it” offers the same view: self-government in republics and democracies is a fragile experiment; difficult to sustain; needing a great emphasis on citizenship education. Most recent references to the Lyceum address note Lincoln’s warning about a temptation to seek refuge in authoritarian, demagogic figures to cope with political violence and disorder. We tend to overlook Lincoln’s diagnosis of the major cause of the American crisis of his era: a decline in civic education, particularly civic knowledge, including a rational, constitutionally-informed patriotism. His remedy: a renewed emphasis on just such civic knowledge and informed patriotism about America, grounded in both reverence for and rational study of the Declaration, the Constitution, and American law generally. Also largely overlooked today is Lincoln’s strong charge, therefore, that if the American republic fails it will not be by foreign conquest, but due to our own failings and consequent disintegration: “If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide”.

The perilous decline of American civic health in our own time, coupled with the precipitous decline in public confidence in all American institutions and professions – to include higher education – suggests we should prioritize a rational and patriotic civic education in American constitutionalism, as well as the civic virtues required for citizens and leaders to operate our constitutional order, and thrive, in a still-dangerous world.

Drawing on but revising the EAD report and the Stanford sources, I define a higher civics as **coursework and supplemental experiences** that provide the **American civic knowledge** and **civic virtues** needed to prepare **a self-governing people for the rights and duties of citizenship**, thus to **perpetuate our constitutional order** “for ourselves and our posterity” (Preamble). Such an education in civics and our constitutional history equips citizens and aspiring citizens of the American democratic republic to understand, appreciate, nurture, and, where necessary, improve their political system, civil society, and civic culture. Socratic study of **American civic knowledge**, including the philosophical and historical sources of our civic and constitutional principles, points also to study and inculcation of the **civic virtues** need to **sustain and motivate self-government at all levels** of 21st century American life – from individual, family, neighborhood, and civil society to the state, the national republic, and a world in which America remains a leading power and the greatest liberal democracy. Such civic understanding, and development of civic virtues needed to practice self-government, captures the challenges better than the now-prevalent educational language about “the knowledge, skills, and dispositions” necessary for effective civic participation. Our constitutional order is designed to accommodate and indeed foster disagreement across separated institutions in governments, as well as across levels of government (local, state, federal), to achieve more-just or less-stupid policies and laws; and our vibrant civil society long has shared the challenge of building an *e pluribus unum* from such a complex political-social order. This challenging **constitutional order of a self-governing republic**, featuring representation and high offices as well as democratic voice, requires a self-understanding beyond the post-Dewey emphasis on democracy, with its flattering but insufficient emphasis on egalitarian empowerment. It requires study of and encouragement to develop the **civic virtues** of an American citizen: first, **a reflective patriotism** – Tocqueville as classic source, with King’s “I Have A Dream” a great 20th century model: praising “the architects of our republic” and “the magnificent words of the Constitution and Declaration” yet arguing about their meaning and demanding full implementation of the rights and principles of citizenship they proclaim. Another crucial civic virtue for study and encouragement is **civil disagreement** about important academic and civic ideas; emphasizing a reasoned free speech that marshals evidence, arguments, and credible sources rather than passions and indignations, and open to hearing divergent views both for self-enlightenment and for the practical aim of finding necessary compromise and consensus where at all possible. This points to a third crucial civic virtue, of **civic friendship** among Americans across political and philosophical differences.

An American higher civics is “a central part of a liberal education in its original sense: the education befitting a free person. It rests on open inquiry, reasoned debate, and freedom of thought and speech, all in the pursuit of truth” (Dyer, UT Austin). It fosters “a patriotism that is spirited, thoughtful, and open to critical self-reflection.” This befits an America founded on ideas and individual natural rights. Tocqueville’s endorsement of our “reflective patriotism” – blending gratitude for America and its principles with insistence upon argument and questioning, aimed at both government and fellow citizens – thus is featured in the EAD report; along with civil disagreement and civic friendship. A Socratic yet patriotic education, supplemented by practical experiences, is needed **to motivate and prepare** students for service, leadership, and civic discourse in American life – to include global affairs – in whatever path they choose.

Could “Citizenship in the 21st Century” include more American-constitutionalist elements, both for Socratic reasons of intellectual diversity and to prepare Stanford students to understand the majority of America that is not liberal-progressive? Perhaps: assign the entire U.S. Constitution, with all amendments, early in the course; and trim some cosmopolitan-leaning topics/readings, and current-debates topics (put those in “further optional reading”) to study and debate more of the exemplars of American civic thought and leadership (beyond *Federalist* 10, Douglass July 5th address, MLK “Birmingham Jail”) – e.g., *Federalist* 9, 70, 78 as well; Washington’s Farewell Address (all); Seneca Falls Declaration; Lincoln’s Lyceum Address, Gettysburg Address, Second Inaugural; Susan B. Anthony; FDR’s “Four Freedoms;” and “I Have A Dream.”