



The University of Vermont

### **Civic Education at the University of Vermont**

Minh Ly, Assistant Professor of Political Science

“Knowledge is in every country the surest basis of public happiness . . . To the security of a free constitution it contributes in various ways . . . by teaching the people themselves to know and to value their own rights; to discern and provide against invasions of them; to distinguish between. . . the spirit of liberty from that of licentiousness - cherishing the first, avoiding the last - and uniting a speedy but temperate vigilance against encroachments, with an inviolable respect to the laws.”

**President George Washington**, First Annual Address to Congress, January 8, 1790<sup>1</sup>

As befits a university where the democratic theorist and educator John Dewey graduated (class of 1879), the University of Vermont has long embraced civic education. A survey of alumni asked what they learned at UVM, and they converged on **active citizenship**. 70% of alumni surveyed said that active citizenship and community engagement are “very critical” or “critical” to a liberal arts education.<sup>2</sup> The College of Arts and Sciences has since selected active citizenship and community engagement as one of the central learning goals for our students to practice and master.<sup>3</sup> To become active citizens, students must acquire a set of core competencies, which include **ethical reasoning and decision-making**, and **analytical and critical thinking**.

I chart in this paper the steps UVM has taken at the University, College, and Department levels to instill active citizenship. Of special interest to the participants in our workshop are how the university requires all students to take a **global citizenship course**, the College’s **Community News Service** to teach students journalism in local communities, and the Political Science Department’s **Vermont Legislative Research Service**, which trains students to conduct research for our state legislature. This research contributed to the adoption of ranked choice voting in the city of Burlington elections.

I then describe challenges to teaching citizenship, especially the paucity of civics before college, and lay out the opportunities for civic education, building on the Educating for American Democracy program led by Professor Danielle Allen and the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.

#### ***The University Global Citizenship Requirement***

Central to citizenship is the concept that we bear rights and responsibilities as members of our community. As President Washington pointed out, a right is not merely a license or “licentiousness” to do whatever we want – it is a liberty that is so important that it imposes duties on ourselves and others to respect that right.<sup>4</sup> UVM articulates the duties of citizenship in “Our Common Ground,” a set of

---

<sup>1</sup> George Washington, “First Annual Address to Congress.” January 8, 1790. *The American Presidency Project*, eds. Gerhard Peters and John Woolley, [www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/first-annual-address-congress-0](http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/first-annual-address-congress-0).

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Bill Falls, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, who shared this data in an insightful research interview on how UVM teaches citizenship.

<sup>3</sup> College of Arts and Sciences, University of Vermont, “Core Competencies,” <https://www.uvm.edu/cas/core-competencies>.

<sup>4</sup> On rights imposing correlative duties, see Leif Wenar, “The Nature of Rights,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 33 (3): 223-253. See also John Locke: “Freedom then is not what Sir Robert Filmer tells us . . . a liberty for every one to do

principles for campus life. These core values are **responsibility** for our actions, **respect** for each other, **integrity** with our own ethical conduct, **justice**, **openness** to the free exchange of information and ideas, and **innovation** in addressing the most urgent needs of our society.<sup>5</sup>

To foster these Common Ground values, the University of Vermont has established a set of courses that all undergraduate students must complete. All students take at least one **Global Citizenship course**, where they acquire the “skills necessary to participate effectively as a citizen in local communities and the world at large,” and to be “responsible members” of their communities.<sup>6</sup> Examples of Global Citizenship course are Introduction to Political Theory, which I offer, and American Political System, which is a class on civics teaching the philosophical foundations and structure of American government through the Federalist, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution.<sup>7</sup>

### ***The College’s Community News Service***

A major issue for democracy is that smaller towns and rural communities in Vermont and other states lack newspapers to inform citizens about local government. James Madison wrote that for citizens to be in charge of their government, they must have a “free press.” He stressed that the “circulation of newspapers through the entire body of the people” is “favorable to liberty.”<sup>8</sup> Many towns and rural communities, however, have become news deserts, without any daily or weekly newspaper reportage. Researchers have found that “since 2005, the U.S. has lost nearly 2,900 newspapers,” and over half of U.S. counties have little or no newspaper coverage.<sup>9</sup> Yet issues as consequential as education, the police, and the availability of housing fall in the purview of local government.

The College of Arts and Sciences, under the leadership of Dean Bill Falls, has pioneered **The Community News Service**, which provides local news reporting by students. The Community News Service partners with professional journalists and editors, who train students in journalism. In the process of reporting, students become more educated citizens and inform the broader citizenry. The aim of the Community News Service is to “**build citizenship skills**,” and to “provide local content to community newspapers.”<sup>10</sup>

The effort has led to the creation of the **UVM Center for Community News**, a national hub for teaching

---

what he lists, to live as he pleases, and not to be tied by any laws: but freedom of men under government is, to have a standing rule to live by, common to every one of that society, and made by the legislative power erected in it . . . and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man . . .” John Locke, “Second Treatise of Government” in *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), §22, pp. 283-284.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.uvm.edu/president/our-common-ground>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://catalogue.uvm.edu/undergraduate/courses/ccg/cgv/cgv.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.uvm.edu/president/our-common-ground>. I thank my Political Science colleague and former President of UVM, Tom Sullivan, who in a research interview contributed valuable discussion of the Common Ground values and his course, American Political System.

<sup>8</sup> On citizens being self-governing when they are the ones ultimately in charge, see Brook Manville and Josiah Ober, *The Civic Bargain: How Democracy Survives* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 15: “The alternative to rule by a boss is self-government by an active, participatory citizenship.” I put forward the principle that citizens are self-governing when they have the rights to hold their government democratically accountable, and they fulfill their duties to protect each other’s rights. See my manuscript, *Answering to Us* (under contract with Princeton University Press). Madison’s quote is from James Madison, “Public Opinion,” (December 19, 1791) in *The Writings of James Madison: Vol. VI: 1790-1802*, ed. Gaillard Hunt (NY: G.P. Putnam, 1906), 70.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.medill.northwestern.edu/news/2023/more-than-half-of-us-counties-have-no-access-or-very-limited-access-to-local-news.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.uvm.edu/cas/community-news-service>. See also <https://www.uvm.edu/ccn/about>.

student journalism. The Center for Community News is now collaborating with a **network of universities**, including the **Future of Media Project at Harvard** and the **Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media at the University of North Carolina School of Journalism and Media**. The Center for Community News has plans to expand to the SUNY system in New York. We should note that this provides an exemplar of how universities and colleges may work together, as we develop a national network for civic education, beginning with our conference.

### ***The Department of Political Science's Vermont Legislative Research Service***

Vermont features a **citizen legislature**. State legislators work part time and lack their own professional staff, an attribute Vermont shares with 13 other states. Legislators are limited in their resources for policy research when they draft laws. To help remedy this, Vermont representative Matt Dunne approached Professor Jack Gierzynski with the proposal that UVM students contribute policy research. Taking up this request, Professor Gierzynski created the **Vermont Legislative Research Service (VLRS)** in 1998.<sup>11</sup>

Students apply to competitive entry into an upper-level course taught by Professor Gierzynski and Dr. Jonathan Bradley. The course trains students in how to conduct rigorous nonpartisan policy research. Students are then assigned into teams, each working on a policy report at the behest of a state legislator. The research process is intensive, with each report refined over several drafts subject to peer and faculty feedback. In the most extensive projects, the entire class cooperates on a report. For example, "VLRS students designed and implemented an exit poll of voters in Vermont's largest city, Burlington, to provide legislators with an assessment of voters' opinions regarding the use of an instant runoff voting method of choosing the city's mayor."<sup>12</sup>

The Vermont Legislative Research Service has served as a template for a similar program, the **Iowa Policy Research Organization**, started by Professor Tom Rice at the **University of Iowa**. State legislators in Vermont and Iowa have attested to the value of student policy research. Representative Matt Dunne extols the civic education in practice that the students experience: "**VLRS offers a way for young people to see how the policy process can be a lever for change**. VLRS students quickly learn that their work is relevant to the legislative policy discussion and can change the outcome to a law. **Once students see how a research project influences legislation, they often become hooked, looking for the next opportunity to make a difference through the policy and political process.**"<sup>13</sup> Iowa State Senator Jeff Danielson admires the work of the IPRO program, which has been officially recognized by the state legislature: "it delivers high-quality research quickly." Danielson points to the prospects of propagating programs for student policy research in other states, "**I am sure that there are plenty of talented students at every college and university who would be excited about participating in a program like IPRO**. I am also sure that there are legislators in every state who would make good use of such a program."<sup>14</sup>

At a time when relations between universities and governments are fraught, programs where students collaborate with state legislators offer an opportunity for a rapprochement, as well as valuable practice

---

<sup>11</sup> The description of the VLRS follows Anthony Gierzynski and Tom Rice, "Students as Policy Researchers for State Legislatures," in *Civic Service: Service-Learning with State and Local Government Partners* eds. David P. Redlawsk and Tom Rice (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), chapter 10. The student written policy research reports are compiled here: <https://www.uvm.edu/cas/polisci/vermont-legislative-research-service-vlrs>.

<sup>12</sup> Gierzynski and Rice 2009, 220.

<sup>13</sup> Matt Dunne, "Voices: State Legislators in Vermont and Iowa," in Redlawsk and Rice 2009, 229.

<sup>14</sup> Jeff Danielson, "Voices: State Legislators in Vermont and Iowa," in Redlawsk and Rice 2009, 230.

in citizenship through public service. One of the most crucial forms of active citizenship, which is vital to the health of a democracy, is participation in local and state government. Alexis de Tocqueville maintained that “the institutions of a township are to freedom what primary schools are to science; they put it in reach of the people . . . Without the institutions of a township a nation can give itself a free government, but it does not have the spirit of freedom.”<sup>15</sup>

### ***Challenges to Teaching Active Citizenship***

In interviews with fellow faculty and administrators to prepare this memorandum, two chief challenges emerged. **First, how can students who are not majoring in Political Science learn citizenship?** While UVM requires all undergraduates to take a class in Global Citizenship, this requisite can be fulfilled by courses covering an array of subjects. It can be met by classes not only in democratic theory, but also in Chinese language or global cinema. These are worthy topics, but the difficulty is that **there is no shared curriculum in citizenship that all students learn.** If there were a single course that all students pursued, similar to Citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century at Stanford, the common set of materials would encourage a cohesive, university-wide conversation about the rights and duties of democratic citizenship. The question is how support of faculty could be built for such a course, when it might be perceived as predominantly benefiting one or two departments.

It would be instructive to **create a reader for a course in citizenship** to disseminate classes, like Citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, to other universities. A precedent is the widely used textbook, the *Princeton Readings in Political Thought*, but the proposed book would be distinctive in focusing on readings that teach and stimulate debate on the rights and duties of democratic citizenship.

**A second leading challenge is the absence of a background in civics and history to prepare students entering university.** 11 states, such as Vermont, Massachusetts, and New Jersey, are missing a civics requirement in their high schools.<sup>16</sup> Professor Kathleen Hall Jamieson at the University of Pennsylvania, outlined the results of the latest Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey: “It is worrisome that one in six U.S. adults cannot name any of the branches of government and that **only 1 in 20 can name all five freedoms protected by the First Amendment.**”<sup>17</sup>

U.S. citizens are far from meeting Washington’s admonition “to know and the value their own rights,” which they must understand “to discern and provide against invasions of them.”<sup>18</sup> In this regard, the United States is falling behind its peer democracies. Students in England take civic education for a full five years between the ages 11-16.<sup>19</sup> The purpose of the curriculum is to teach students “**the precious liberties enjoyed by the citizens of the United Kingdom.**” Students learn “the key elements of the constitution of the United Kingdom, including the power of government, the role of citizens and Parliament in **holding those in power to account**, and the different roles of the executive, legislature and judiciary and a free press.”<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 57-58 [volume 1, part 1, chapter five].

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.slj.com/story/a-look-at-civics-education-state-by-state>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/many-dont-know-key-facts-about-u-s-constitution-annenberg-civics-study-finds/>.

<sup>18</sup> Washington 1790.

<sup>19</sup> Civic education is mandated by law in England and Northern Ireland but taught as a non-statutory subject in Wales and Scotland. <https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/teaching-citizenship-and-life-skills-in-schools/>.

<sup>20</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f324f7ad3bf7f1b1ea28dca/SECONDARY\\_national\\_curriculum\\_-\\_Citizenship.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f324f7ad3bf7f1b1ea28dca/SECONDARY_national_curriculum_-_Citizenship.pdf), page 2.

Citizens cannot hold their governments **democratically accountable** if they do not know their rights and the duties of their public officials. The political scientists **Barry Weingast** and **Sonia Mittal** influentially observed that one of the functions of a constitution is to coordinate citizens resisting overreach by their government. Without constitutional rules that are common knowledge, citizens may disagree about whether a particular encroachment by a public official is egregious enough to justify opposition. But when rules, such as the Twenty-second Amendment's requirement that Presidents serve only two terms, are publicly promulgated in the Constitution, the requirements can become common knowledge among citizens, making it easier for them to coordinate in defense of their liberty. This in turn stabilizes the constitution, since citizens' "ability to coordinate against the government provides a powerful deterrent to constitutional transgressions."<sup>21</sup> Madison anticipated this thought when he said that by proclaiming our rights, a constitutional Bill of Rights will "exert an influence on government, by becoming a part of public opinion."<sup>22</sup>

The issue is that when citizens' knowledge of their government is paltry, due to their lack of a civic education, they will be unfamiliar with the limits on power established by the constitution, and less able to coordinate in defense of their freedom. Constitutions do not protect themselves, but they must be upheld by citizens. Madison reminds us of the need for active citizenship: "In bestowing the eulogies due to the partitions and internal checks of power, it ought not the less to be remembered, that they are neither the sole nor the chief palladium [safeguard] of constitutional liberty. The people who are the authors of this blessing, must also be its guardians."<sup>23</sup>

### ***Opportunities in Teaching Active Citizenship***

An opening for civic education is emerging, as citizens realize the cost of civic ignorance. Former Justice David Souter, in an address on civic education, emphasized, "I don't believe there is any problem of American politics in American public life which is more significant today than the pervasive civic ignorance of the Constitution of the United States and the structure of government. An ignorant people can never remain a free people."<sup>24</sup>

A poll found that **civic education commands the support of majorities of both Republicans (56%) and Democrats (56%).**<sup>25</sup> It was the only proposal of democratic reform that attracted majority approbation from either party. **Educating for American Democracy**, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities, is one of the prime programs rebuilding

---

<sup>21</sup> Sonia Mittal and Barry R. Weingast, "Self-Enforcing Constitutions: With an Application to Democratic Stability in America's First Century," *Journal of Law, Economics, & Organization* 29:2 (2013): 278-302 at 280.

<sup>22</sup> Madison 1906, 70. Madison argued that a Bill of Rights makes those rights common knowledge, facilitating the resistance of citizens to restrictions on their liberty. He wrote in a letter to Thomas Jefferson: "1. The political truths declared in that solemn manner acquire by degrees the character of fundamental maxims of free Government, and as they become incorporated with the national sentiment, counteract the impulses of interest and passion. 2. Altho' it be generally true as above stated that the danger of oppression lies in the interested majorities of the people rather than in usurped acts of the Government, yet there may be occasions on which the evil may spring from the latter sources; and on such, a bill of rights will be a good ground for an appeal to the sense of the community." James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, 17 October 1788 in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, Vol. 14: 8 October 1788 to 26 March 1789*, eds. Julian P. Boyd, William H. Gaines, Jr. and Joseph H. Harrison, Jr. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 20.

<sup>23</sup> James Madison, "Government of the United States," for the *National Gazette*, February 4, 1792, in Madison 1906, 93. The word *palladium*, meaning "safeguard," is derived from the statue of Pallas Athena, which was said to watch over the city of Troy, and later Rome.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.nhpr.org/nh-news/2012-09-14/former-justice-souter-warns-about-the-state-of-civics-education>

<sup>25</sup> <https://civxnow.org/sites/default/files/resources/CivXNow%20infographic%20-%20Luntz%20polling%20-%20FINAL.pdf> The other proposals surveyed were a year of national service, reduced money in politics, easier access to voting, regulation of social media, greater participation in religious activities, and ranked-choice voting.

civic education in high schools. The objective of Educating for American Democracy, designed by hundreds of state officials, educators, and university researchers, is to provide professional development to 1 million teachers in civic education, giving access to 60 million students to civic learning.<sup>26</sup>

**According to the Educating for American Democracy report, universities should provide leadership in civic education. It is crucial that we:**

- **Create civic education curricula, both for college and high school students, integrating the latest research in political science and history:** “Even well-resourced schools often work under outdated standards and inadequate curricula. Most classroom materials in the fields of history and civics have yet to benefit from cutting-edge thinking in the relevant academic disciplines at the college level.”<sup>27</sup>
- **Train teachers in civic education** and offer professional development opportunities.
- **Provide a civic education to all university students to prepare them for active citizenship:** “Colleges and universities should assess whether they adequately require rigorous American history and civic education—to include knowledge, skills, and virtues—of all their graduates.”<sup>28</sup>

### ***Postscript***

“Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: and a people who mean to be their own governours, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

**James Madison**, August 1822, inscription at the Library of Congress.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Educating for American Democracy (EAD). 2021. “Educating for American Democracy: Excellence in History and Civics for All Learners.” iCivics, March 2, 2021, p. 2. [www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org](http://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org).

<sup>27</sup> Educating for American Democracy 2021, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Educating for American Democracy 2021, 21.

<sup>29</sup> <https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch18s35.html>.