

The Civics Initiative: Phases I and II.

A Joint project of the Hoover Institution and Stanford University

Josiah Ober. Founding Director, Stanford Civics Initiative. April 2024.

Phase I (2017-Spring 2024)

The Stanford Civics Initiative began informally in 2017, with discussions among a group of Stanford faculty from Schools and Departments across the university. We agreed that Stanford was failing in its historic responsibility to teach the next generation the fundamental knowledge and skills required for effective participation in a constitutional democracy. We envisioned a project that would return civic education to a central place in the mission of the university. That meant pushing for a fundamental reorientation of the First-Year undergraduate curriculum and creating a menu of advanced civics courses for second-to-fourth-year students. Beginning in 2018, donations from individuals and foundations enabled us to hire, first a part-time Lecturer and, by 2021, a full time Lecturer and three Postdoctoral Teaching Fellows. We focused from the beginning on the areas of political thought, political history, and political economy.

In 2021 a new first-year course, “Citizenship in the 21st Century,” was unanimously approved by the University’s Faculty Senate as the center-piece of a revamped three-term first-year sequence (Civic Liberal and Global Education: COLLEGE). In Winter 2024, it was taken by 1200 Stanford first-year students (2/3 of the incoming class). The course is taught in seminar format (classes of 15) by about 50 instructors, a mix of postdocs and regular Stanford faculty (COLLEGE postdocs are distinct from Civics Initiative postdocs, and are hired and paid by the university). Pending final Faculty Senate approval, the Citizenship course will be mandatory for all Stanford students. The Initiative’s associated faculty, Lecturer and postdocs were instrumental in the design and implement the new course. They also teach an array of more advanced civics-oriented courses for undergraduates. Beginning in Spring 2022, the Initiative has enabled Hoover Institution Fellows, lacking regular Stanford faculty appointments, to offer courses to Stanford undergraduates. These new courses have complemented and expanded the list of civics classes offered by Stanford faculty. Each of the new courses has been enthusiastically greeted by students.

All Civics Initiative courses count towards departmental and university credit. Civics Initiative courses (about 45 in 2024-25) are currently listed in the departments (or schools) of Political Science, Philosophy, Classics, History, Economics, IR, Ethics and Society, Public Policy, Law, East Asian Studies, and French. Many of our courses satisfy university distribution requirements, so they can be accommodated in the schedules of students in demanding programs, such as the School of Engineering. A list of Civics Initiative courses (with syllabi) is available at <https://civics.stanford.edu/>. Student course evaluations are available at <https://carta-beta.stanford.edu/>.

Phase II (Fall 2024- Spring 2028)

In fall 2024 I will begin an appointment at Hoover as half-time Senior Fellow, with the other half of my appointment remaining in Stanford Political Science (I have been a fellow “by courtesy”

at Hoover since fall 2022). This facilitates fuller participation in the Civics Initiative by Hoover. Our goal is to establish the Civics Initiative as a central, well-resourced program equally administered and funded Hoover and Stanford. The Dean of Stanford's School of Humanities and Sciences and the Director of Hoover recently approved a three-year budget that will enable (1) formalizing the administrative structure; (2) expanding our Civics course offerings, especially by Hoover Fellows, so as to (3) offer Stanford students the opportunity to earn a Certificate in Civic Preparation and we hope, later, a Minor in Civic Thought and Practice; and (4) promoting civic education as a national priority in post-secondary education through a network of postsecondary educators (i.e. regularizing the April 2024 Workshop)

Phase II details.

The primary components of Phase II are as follows:

- *Program Instructors* (5-8) Teaching undergraduates is an add-on to the duties of Hoover Fellows not cross-appointed in a Stanford department. A modest honorarium compensates Fellows for designing and teaching for-credit civics courses of their own design for Stanford students. Our goal is to expand the number of Hoover Fellows offering classes to Stanford undergraduates.
- *Postdoctoral Civics Fellows* (4) have completed a PhD at a leading university; they spend up to three years at Hoover/Stanford. Their appointment is half-time pursuing their own research, half-time teaching. They design new courses and assist in teaching larger lecture courses. They add to our curricular offerings and get training that helps them throughout their careers. After leaving Stanford/Hoover for faculty positions, they advance the goal of extending high-quality post-secondary civic education to colleges and universities nationwide.
- *Lecturers* (1-3). Teach courses and mentor students and postdocs. Provide year-to-year continuity in courses.
- *Network of Educators* (number TBD) Many American universities and colleges, and some state legislatures, are belatedly recognizing the need for post-secondary civic education. A regular series of conferences will bring together faculty engaged in building civics programs at public and private universities and colleges across the country. Faculty in the network establish strong relationships and share best practices. The network advances the imperative of producing cohorts of leaders with the civic knowledge and skills necessary for advancing the national interest across lines of partisan and regional difference.
- *Visitors* (1 annually) Drawing from the Network of Educators, we will host emerging leaders in civic education for extended visits at Hoover (from several weeks to several months). This enables them to learn in depth from Civics Initiative instructors and thereby to better design and implement civic education programs at their home

institutions. The goal is to foster the development a broad-based national leadership group.

- *Curriculum Development.* We will offer seed grants to Stanford faculty and Hoover Fellows who propose ideas for the development of courses integral to the civic curriculum. The grants incentivize instructors to identify gaps in our curriculum, and to develop innovative courses to fill those gaps. These courses enhance the education of Stanford students and, through the Network of Educations, serve as models for course development elsewhere.
- *Research Seed Grants.* These grants will jump-start research by on topics relevant to civic education, including devising ways to measure the impact and effectiveness of approaches that will be tried out at Stanford and at the institutions represented in the Network of Educators.
- *Faculty Director:* Stanford and Hoover share a senior faculty member's salary and benefits. The Hoover appointment allows the Director a reduced teaching load.
- *Program Administrator.* Assists the Faculty Director in all aspects of the administration of the program.

Discussion. The Civics Initiative developed organically, through ongoing discussions among faculty, donors, and administrators. Our funding has been, from the beginning, entirely “soft money” – year to year contributions from individual donors and foundations. We began very small, sponsoring a couple of courses offered by Brian Coyne (then a part-time lecturer). When these proved very popular with students, we were able to expand our donor base and eventually support a full-time lecturer (Brian) and three postdoctoral teaching fellows.

The active support of the chairs and the staff of the Political Science Department, Stanford's Development office, and a dedicated group of core faculty, has been essential. Most of the courses offered by postdocs and Hoover Fellows were initially listed in PolSci. The administration of the Initiative has remained very lean: decision-making is by a faculty committee (faculty involved in the Initiative receive no extra compensation). With the approval of the Department chair, PolSci staff provided administrative support to the Initiative *gratis*: as a result, all donor funds went directly to undergraduate teaching. We benefited from close, although informal, relations with the off-campus [Zephyr Institute](#) and with [Stanford's Program in Ethics and Society](#). Web site maintenance and outreach efforts have been handled by postdocs who volunteer to do the extra work without extra remuneration.

Major challenges so far: Because our funding has been year-to-year, we have not been able to do forward planning (e.g. for the Certificate program). We have been able to offer only year-to-year contracts to postdocs. A lot of time has been spent, especially by the Director (me) in fund-raising. The lack of a dedicated staff means that the Director ends up doing a lot of relatively

low-level administrative chores. These issues are likely to be ameliorated with the newly approved 3-year budget.

I expect that future challenges will include the following (and probably many things I have not yet thought about):

- Working out the details of running a program (the first of its kind) that has one foot in Hoover, the other in Stanford H&S.
- Moving from an informal Initiative to full Program status within H&S.
- Establishing the undergraduate Certificate Program.
- Planning for an eventual Minor. This will require coordinating between multiple university Departments and Programs.
- Fund raising. The H&S side of our budget is “backstopped” (i.e. guaranteed by the Dean) but the working assumption is that H&S expenses will be fully defrayed by donations from individuals and foundations. Hoover has already raised the funds to support the Initiative for the next three years, but I expect more fund-raising on that side as well.