A Menu-Based Approach to Civic Skill Development and Community Engagement in Courses Across Levels, Modes, and Disciplines

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Developing this generation's civic skills is vital to maintaining and strengthening the foundation of democracy. There is an urgent need to improve civic education and promote civic literacy, knowledge, and engagement among today's college students. This is something faculty can promote across the disciplines.

Meanwhile, higher education institutions are under rising pressure to increase the number and variety of online courses. Accelerated by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the issues of enrollment declines, budget cuts, financial pressures, and market demand are bolstering online course offerings at campuses across the country (Hall 2023). What does this mean for civic literacy and skill development? Can civic literacy, skills, and engagement be promoted in 100% online courses? And how can face-to-face and online courses incorporate civic skills training without sacrificing necessary class time or content required by departments or accrediting bodies? Is there a quick and easy way to introduce students in all disciplines and course levels to the core civic skills they will require after graduation?

I argue that the answer is yes!

This brief essay explains how a menu-based approach to civic literacy offers opportunities for student civic engagement in their communities – and from the convenience of their homes.

While community-based learning advocates recognize the many advantages of well-designed, reciprocal, long-term partnerships that benefit student learners and community partners, there is some evidence that online learning can facilitate, rather than inhibit, community-engaged pedagogies (Guthrie & McCracken, 2012; Purcell, 2017). Indeed, one study concluded that "e-service-learning—the marriage of online learning and service-learning—holds the potential to transform both endeavors by freeing service-learning from geographical constraints and by equipping online learning with a tool to promote engagement" (Waldner et al., 2012, p. 145).

I offer such an approach to students taking political science courses at IU South Bend. It is an approach that can be used in other courses across the disciplines with students across the state and nation. I adopted and adapted a model pioneered by political scientist Judithanne McLauchlan (McLauchlan 2019) to include more online-only assignment options during the COVID-19 pandemic and continue incorporating both online and in-person civic action projects in my courses.

In addition to audio/video lectures, readings, films, and multimedia materials reinforced through worksheets, quizzes, and discussion forums, I also require a series of hands-on civic engagement activities for all students.

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Students can deepen their understanding of American government, politics, and political culture by completing a series of civics assignments and writing short reflection papers. In these papers, students describe what they did for their project, and what they learned about politics, the community, and themselves, as well as how the project may influence their future behavior. The reports can be very brief (1-4 pages) and can require students to relate what they learned from the experience to the material covered in lectures and in the assigned readings. An instructor may also require that students participate in discussion boards using the campus learning management system (e.g., Canvas) to post about their civics projects and respond to others. Students can be asked to complete several projects based on course learning objectives and available time.

At a time of democratic backsliding characterized by political polarization, negative partisanship, disinformation, and high levels of distrust in government (and fellow citizens), helping students to understand that they can become informed political actors who engage in ways that benefit their local community is critical.

The "menu" of potential civics projects includes activities such as attending a city council, school board, or county commission meeting; attending a homeowner's association meeting; volunteering for a community agency; visiting a federal or state courthouse and watching the proceedings; volunteering for a political campaign; and contacting an elected official about an issue of interest. Students verify their completion of the civics projects by including an appendix with photos of them at the events and/or scans of business cards, meeting agendas, or other artifacts of the civic engagement activity.

Online activities can be verified through screenshots, abbreviated transcripts, timestamps, and email messages from (or contact information for) interview subjects and volunteer coordinators. Specific post-activity assignment requirements also help to assure students that all members of the class are doing the work.

During ordinary semesters, my primary goal is to get people out from behind their keyboards and computer screens and out into their communities – and to introduce students to opportunities for engagement available to them after graduation. For this reason, no two assignments can be of the same type (e.g., only one city council meeting), and, prior to the Spring 2020 semester, only one of the civics projects could be "online" (e.g., watching an Indiana Supreme Court oral argument online or watching a Sunday morning political TV show). However, the requirements are easy to adapt to specific CDC guidelines for social distancing or individual students needs or limitations related to childcare, transportation, medical challenges, or other factors.

Even when a public health crisis, or other circumstance, has confined students to their homes, students can analyze a political talk show, comment on a federal rule change, write a letter to the editor, or conduct a Zoom interview with an elected official. They can make phone calls for a political campaign, watch a local government meeting online, or listen to an oral argument in front of their state's Supreme Court. These are just a few of the ways that students can observe, analyze, and engage in politics in action. See my online list of Citizen Action Project COVID-19 Adaptations here for a more comprehensive listing of examples.

Such projects expand students' understanding of the political world around them and their vision of how they can participate in representative democracy now and in the future. At a time of democratic backsliding characterized by political polarization, negative partisanship, disinformation, and high

levels of distrust in government (and fellow citizens), helping students to understand that they can become informed political actors who engage in ways that benefit their local community is critical.

Over the years, my students have written to their U.S. senator and representative, governor, state legislators, commented on federal rule changes, submitted op eds to their local newspapers, analyzed the oral arguments of court cases of special interest. They have attended school board, city council, and county council meetings and volunteered for service agencies and political campaigns – often bringing family members with them generating new and important conversations in the household. Some have even joined their local homeowners or neighborhood associations, and run for leadership posts in these organizations, after attending for the first time for class credit. Students sometimes fall short in analyzing an oral argument or following the correct procedure to submit a letter to the editor, but these are teachable moments, allowing opportunities for detailed feedback and project revisions. Such cases are quickly overshadowed by students who become politically active after meeting with a local party chair or add a journalism minor after interviewing a political journalist or watching a taping of the weekly public affairs TV program I host for a local PBS affiliate.

Now that the pandemic is over, opportunities for face-to-face engagement abound, limited only by the imagination of the instructors and students dreaming up new ways to practice civic skills by connecting classroom learning to meaningful experiences online and in the community beyond our computer screens. Individual professors can adapt assignments to focus on topics and skills of high relevance for specific classes and disciplines and determine the appropriate number of projects and ratio of online versus community-based activities.

Available time, resources, training requirements, partnerships, course level, and learning goals will influence the menu options and course

requirements, but instructors and students need not invest an entire semester to become acquainted with – and practice – important civic activities that will benefit them, and the broader society, as they continue to use these skills – and develop new skills – as they practice political, civic, and community engagement over time.

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