

BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM

THE JAMES G.
MARTIN
CENTER
FOR ACADEMIC
RENEWAL

Civics Education

"A primary object of such a national institution should be the education of our youth in the science of government. In a republic what species of knowledge can be equally important and what duty more pressing on its legislature than to patronize a plan for communicating it to those who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the country?" George Washington, Eighth Annual Message

Why should civics education be reformed?

American colleges and universities are failing at civic education.¹ Too many graduates are ignorant of basic facts about American history and institutions. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) has called it a “crisis in civic education,”² and it is right to say so.

A 2019 survey³ by ACTA found that, among the surveyed college graduates, 70 percent incorrectly thought that Thomas Jefferson was the “father of the Constitution,” with only 18 percent correctly identifying James

Madison. Thirty-nine percent believed that the president has constitutional authority to declare war, while sixteen percent thought that the late Justice Antonin Scalia was the current Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Over half did not know the term lengths of members of Congress, and 12 percent believed that Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was the author of The New Deal.

According to its most recent report⁴ on what colleges and universities teach students, ACTA found that only 214 institutions out of 1,135 (about 19 percent) require a foundational course in U.S. government or history.⁵ Even history majors often are not required to study American history. ACTA’s 2021 report *No U.S.*

1. To read more from the Martin Center about the importance of civic education, visit: <https://www.jamesmartin.center/tag/civics/>

2. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), “A Crisis in Civic Education,” January 2016.

3. ACTA, *America’s Knowledge Crisis: A Survey of Civic Literacy*, 2019.

4. ACTA, *What Will They Learn?*, 2022.

5. To meet ACTA’s history/U.S. Government requirement, schools must require “a survey course in either U.S. government or history with enough chronological and/or topical breadth to expose students to the sweep of American history and institutions.”

History? found that only four of the top 25 public universities “require history majors to complete a wide-ranging course in U.S. history.”⁶

Civic ignorance, unsurprisingly, extends to the general public. According to the Annenberg Center for Public Policy, which takes an annual representative civics survey, less than half of U.S. adults (47 percent) could name all three branches of government.⁷ The same survey found that American’s overall civic knowledge notably declined from just two years ago. A 2018 survey⁸ by the Institute for Citizens & Scholars found that only 1 in 3 Americans could pass a test consisting of questions from the U.S. Citizenship Test. In the 2019 State of the First Amendment Survey,⁹ the Freedom Forum Institute found that sixteen percent of respondents believe that the right to bear arms is guaranteed by the First Amendment.

Universities aren’t just failing to teach students about their country’s history and constitutional structure, many actively propagate distorted and erroneous depictions of American history. Furthermore, these universities have reimagined “civics education” as a form of political activism.¹⁰ This form of education is less concerned with teaching students about American law, liberty, or self-government and

6. ACTA, “No U.S. History? How College History Departments Leave the United States out of the Major,” November 2021.

7. Annenberg Public Policy Center, *Americans’ Civics Knowledge Drops on First Amendment and Branches of Government*, September 13, 2022.

8. Institute for Citizens and Scholars, “National Survey Finds Just 1 in 3 Americans Would Pass Citizenship Test,” October 3, 2018.

9. Freedom Forum Institute, “State of the First Amendment Survey,” 2019.

10. David Randall, *Making Citizens: How American Universities Teach Civics*, National Association of Scholars, January 2017.

more about mobilizing young minds to further one-sided political goals.

An honest grounding in American history and principles will enable students to become knowledgeable, responsible, and engaged citizens. It will allow them to both understand their constitutional rights and respect those of others. And it may awaken in them an appreciation of the freedoms they enjoy and a sense of duty to preserve them.

Recommendations

The Martin Center recommends that legislatures, university boards, and faculty governing committees take steps to improve civics education in colleges and universities and improve civic literacy among college graduates.

Universities should:

- Create programming during freshman orientation that covers the First Amendment and its importance
- Rewrite general education requirements to include a 3-credit course or its equivalent on American Institutions and Ideals, which requires the reading of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution in their entirety, and at least three additional original works.
- Require students to pass a College Civics Literacy Test as a condition for college graduation.

Model university policies

- [Purdue University’s civics literacy graduation requirement](#)
- [Florida Board of Governors Regulation 8.006, Civic Literacy](#)

- The American Institutions Requirement included in the Arizona Board of Regents' [American Institutions General Education Requirement](#):

“The study of American Institutions will include at minimum (I) how the history of the United States continues to shape the present; (II) the basic principles of American constitutional democracy and how they are applied under a republican form of government; (III) the United States Constitution and major American constitutional debates and developments; (IV) the essential founding documents and how they have shaped the nature and functions of American Institutions of self governance; (V) landmark Supreme Court cases that have shaped law and society; the civic actions necessary for effective citizenship and civic participation in a self-governing society –for example civil dialog and civil disagreement; and (VI) basic economic knowledge to critically assess public policy options and to inform professional and personal decisions.”

Policymakers should:

- Require high school students to pass the U.S. Citizenship Test as a condition of high school graduation.
- Require public universities to make a course on American Civics a requirement for graduation as described above.
- Require college students to take a College Civics Literacy Test as a condition for college graduation.
- Establish measures such as an annual report to ensure compliance from colleges and universities.
- Require public universities to make syllabi for courses on American Civics publicly available

Model legislation

- South Carolina: [REACH Act](#)
- Texas Education Code § 51.301. Government or Political Science and § 51.302. American or Texas History
- Florida: [Florida Statutes Title XLVIII. § 1007.25. General education courses](#)
- National Association of Scholars: [American History Act](#)
- National Association of Scholars: [Syllabus Transparency Act](#)
- ALEC: [Resolution Supporting United States History Education](#)

Further Reading

From the Martin Center:

- [How the College Board Mangles the Teaching of History](#) by George Leef (February 19, 2021)
- [Did You Know? Students Are Clueless About History](#) by Shannon Watkins (September 24, 2020)
- [Why Students Have Turned Away from History](#) by David Kaiser (June 10, 2020)
- [The Breakdown of American Education and the Hopes for Change](#) by Jenna Robinson (July 8, 2020)
- [A Radical Pseudo-historian Meets His Match](#) by Wilfred McClay (April 15, 2020)
- [Reinvigorating the Teaching of American History](#) by Shannon Watkins (February 17, 2020)
- [Did You Know? The Disappearance of Civic Education at Elite Colleges](#) by Thomas Connor (July 18, 2019)
- [A History Textbook that Inspires, Not Lectures, Students about America](#) by Jenna Robinson (April 5, 2019)

- [Colleges Reject Duty to Teach Liberty's Framework](#) by Anthony Hennen (July 4, 2018)
- [American Colleges Are Forgetting to Teach Citizenship](#) by Wilfred McClay (January 20, 2016)
- [An Independence Day Special: Can the Republic Survive Higher Education's Influence?](#) by Martin Center staff (July 3, 2015)
- [The Martin Center Urges Federal Legislators To Reject The Civics Secures Democracy Act](#) (news release)
- [The Martin Center Supports the National Association of Scholars' Civics Alliance Project](#) (news release)

Other sources:

- [Making Citizens: How American Universities Teach Civics](#) by NAS
- [Civics Education: Necessary Principles and Curriculum Sketch](#) by NAS
- [Civics Curriculum Statement and Open Letter](#) by NAS
- [What Will They Learn? 2021-2022](#) by ACTA
- [RealClear American Civics](#)

For More Information

For supplemental data or additional research on this topic, please contact the Martin Center by phone or email. You can reach us at 919-828-1400 or info@jamesgmartin.center.

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About the Martin Center

The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal is a private nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education policy. Our mission is to renew and fulfill the promise of higher education in North Carolina and across the country.

We advocate responsible governance, viewpoint diversity, academic quality, cost-effective education solutions, and innovative market-based reform. We do that by studying and reporting on critical issues in higher education and recommending policies that can create change—especially at the state and local level.

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