

# Op-Ed: A Challenge to College Presidents

DARRYL G. GREER | NOVEMBER 19, 2019 | **OPINION**

Their leadership is required in the promotion of good government, informed citizenship and effective civic engagement



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College presidents need to provide stronger leadership on civic learning. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt stated, “Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education.” Too many college presidents abrogate responsibility to lead

the academy in this regard.

Ambassador and former Congressman Bill Hughes, who recently passed, was a champion of civic learning, dedicated to teaching others about citizenship. As the guiding light for the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University, he tirelessly encouraged the center’s advisers, staff, faculty and students to focus squarely on the important role of educators to advance principles of civic engagement.

Unfortunately, his vision remains largely unfulfilled. Studies published by the Hughes Center [indicate how little citizens understand](#) about the Constitution and the structure and function of our governments. Currently, citizens should be better informed about civics as they evaluate the impeachment process affecting Congress, the judiciary and President Trump.

A recent Annenberg study of citizens’ knowledge of government structure, confirms these studies, indicating that only [about 40% of Americans can name the separate branches of federal government](#), and fail to grasp the basic constitutional principle of “checks and balances.” In a politically unstable time globally, this ignorance of how government works is a threat to free societies and democratic participation.

In a recent speech, former President Obama lamented what he called the “cancel culture” on college campuses, meaning students being so fixed in a political position that they purposefully identify a weak opposing view of others to knock down, thereby justifying their own. But effective civic participation means more than tolerance of other points of view.

## **Requiring a higher level of discourse**

Civic engagement requires a higher level of discourse that is outcomes-based, considering priorities, risks, benefits and consequences of action or inaction. This is what Dan Yankelovich called “Coming to Public Judgement to Make Democracy Work,” 1991. Such engagement leads to making informed decisions, based on shared opinions that are legitimate, measurable and sustainable. This requires practical knowledge of how our civic culture works.

Unfortunately, not enough leadership comes from college presidents in this regard. Many will disagree, and point out the numerous campus-initiated, foundation- and association-sponsored projects that support civic learning, the [American Democracy Project](#) for example. But these are not enough to overcome the inertia of failing to put civics closer to the center of colleges’ missions.

The HESIG project ([Higher Education Strategic Information and Governance](#)), and the Stockton Polling Institute in its survey of New Jersey college students found that only about 5% indicate civic awareness as an important outcome of college, far behind critical reasoning and communications skills, getting a good job, and values such as teamwork. In the face of these data, presidents need to provide more leadership within and outside the academy, to do more than talk about the importance of being civil and tolerating different viewpoints. More is at stake than just learning how to get along.

Past college presidents have taken on this difficult leadership role. Nationally, I think of presidents I have known, such as Rev. Ted Hesburgh (Notre Dame-IN), Norman Francis (Xavier-LA), and John Millett (Miami-OH). Closer to home are former presidents Bill Maxwell (NJCU), Vera King Farris (Stockton) and Tom Kean (Drew). Each of these leaders took the risk to speak out forcefully and consistently about civil rights and civil behavior. But even more important, they understood that at the center of these values is a fundamental understanding of principles,

structures and functions of governance that allow individuals to practice citizenship as a means of “securing the blessings of liberty.”

Educating and creating better citizens requires at its roots deeper understanding of our democratic structures, the Constitution, the three branches of government, how they work, and the role of citizens in maintaining, protecting and reforming them where they live.

## **At the center of college learning**

Accordingly, the goal of civic participation should be at the center of college learning, not on the periphery. It is not something to be left to the political science or history departments. Basic principles of civic participation can be engaged across the curriculum, whether the humanities, sciences or arts. To argue that such integration would politicize the academy should be anticipated, but should not be accepted as means of deflection from what needs to be accomplished.

This is a good time for college presidents to be bold, not timid, about leading on civic learning.

Here is what they can do:

- Take more risks; don't play it safe. Actively plan to speak publicly on important contemporary policy issues, tied to the meaning to citizenship. Tell trustees, the faculty, elected officials and others what they plan to talk about in advance, and do it. Promote the positive consequences of informed and active citizenship, linked to democratic outcomes and the common good;
- Make civic learning mission-centered, to provide a deeper understanding of how civic participation supports taking legitimate action in a democracy. Integrate civic learning across the curriculum. Every academic discipline is affected by local, state and federal entities that establish, administer or interpret law and regulation based on constitutional principles. Civic learning and participation can be examined across the university, through reading, writing, art, research, simulation and field experience, without wandering into partisan political territory.

- Build stronger partnerships with schools and organizations that promote civic learning and invite practitioners to the campus to support the faculty and to share firsthand knowledge with students about how government works, and its effect on their lives.

Many people have responsibility for leading in a democracy. It takes citizens who are informed about civic structure and function to make democracy work in practice. This needs to be a higher priority for colleges. This is where college presidents can lead.

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