Massachusetts Board of Higher Education Policy on Civic Learning: Summary

In May, 2014, the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education (BHE) adopted a first-in-the-nation state policy on civic learning for public colleges and universities and committed to work with the Commonwealth’s community colleges, state universities and University of Massachusetts campuses to incorporate civic learning as an "expected outcome" for undergraduate students beginning in the 2014-15 academic year.

The Board adopted the following definition of Civic Learning:
“Civic learning means acquisition of the knowledge, the intellectual skills and the applied competencies that citizens need for informed and effective participation in civic and democratic life; it also means acquiring an understanding of the social values that underlie democratic structures and practices.

- The knowledge component of civic learning includes an understanding of the United States, including its history and governmental traditions, other world societies, and the relationship(s) between and among these cultures and nations.
- The intellectual skills component refers to qualities of mind necessary to engage effectively in civic activities.
- The applied competencies component refers to the practical skills and capacities needed to engage effectively in civic activities.
- The values component refers to understanding the social and political values that are associated with democratic and civic institutions.”

The Board noted that civic learning can occur through academic coursework, co-curricular activities and off-campus civic engagement.

The policy also includes a four-point action plan to advance the system-wide goals through:

1. Attention to civic learning as a goal in campus strategic plans;
2. Facilitation and support for campus work in civic learning through conferences and meetings to share best practices and, as available, provision of funding for campus projects;
3. Development of new ways to measure and report students' civic learning outcomes;
4. Collaboration with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to develop a cross-sector plan for civic learning from kindergarten through college.

The BHE Policy reaffirmed a March 2012 vote to add civic preparation as a key outcome to the state’s strategic agenda, aiming to achieve national leadership among state systems of public higher education.

In 2016, the BHE and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education added Civic Preparation to a pre-existing joint Agreement on College and Career Readiness, creating a framework for collaboration on civic learning in public education K-16.

Types and number of institutions impacted by the Massachusetts Policy on Civic Learning:
The policy directly impacts the 15 community colleges and 9 state universities overseen by the
Massachusetts Board of Higher Education (BHE). The 5-campus University of Massachusetts system has
a separate oversight structure and has not chosen to participate formally in this Civic Learning initiative,
although each of the 5 campuses does hold the Carnegie Community Engagement classification.

When the initiative/policy started:
The initiative started in 2012 when the BHE named “Preparing Citizens” as one of the goals in its
strategic vision for public higher education. The Board followed this initial goal-setting with a 2014
Policy on Civic Learning that, drawing on AAC&U’s A Crucible Moment, spelled out what “Preparing
Citizens” should include and laid out a set of action steps to begin moving campuses toward the goal.

Current activities of the initiative:
1. When the BHE reviews strategic plans for each campus, it looks for a plan to involve
undergraduates in Civic Learning.
2. The Department of Higher Education (DHE) organizes opportunities for administrators and
faculty from the campuses to meet and share best practices. The 5th annual statewide
conference planned for next May will be co-sponsored by Campus Compact for Southern New
England and will include participants from campuses in Connecticut and Rhode Island:
anticipated participation is around 200.
3. In the course-and-student data reported twice yearly by the campuses, the DHE has asked for
courses with a substantial focus on Civic Learning—with or without engagement beyond the
classroom—to be so designated.
4. The BHE has worked with the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to add Civic
Preparation to their joint agreement on College and Career Readiness, creating a framework for
civic learning in public education K-16.

Future and emerging activities of the initiative:
1. In the past year, K-12 public education has adopted a History and Social Science Curriculum
Framework that has civic education written into every year, including a new year-long 8th grade
civics class and civic engagement projects. DHE will facilitate integration of higher education
with this initiative.
2. With additional funding, DHE hopes to provide support to campuses to do more civic learning
across the curriculum and to build civic learning in the co-curriculum.
3. With additional funding, DHE hopes to complete development of tools to assess student civic
learning outcomes and support campuses in using them to guide curricular and co-curricular
approaches. (See https://civiclearningrubric.wordpress.com for two draft assessment rubrics
created by DHE.)

For more information, see http://www.mass.edu/strategic/civic.asp or contact Dr. John Reiff, Director of
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