

A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future
How the National Report Has Spurred Action
2012–2020

“Not since Ernest Boyer’s *Scholarship Reconsidered* has a national report received such buzz and had such impact.”

VP for Outreach, Auburn University

The Creation of *A Crucible Moment*

In response to widespread concern about the nation’s anemic civic health, the US Department of Education contracted with the Global Perspectives Institute, Inc. (GPI) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) to assess the status and vibrancy of civic learning in colleges and universities and to recommend how to animate education for democracy as a twenty-first-century outcome of college. From 2010-2011, GPI, led by Larry Braskamp, and AAC&U, led by Caryn McTighe Musil, organized a series of five national roundtables at the US Department of Education for nearly 140 participants from a wide range of constituencies including among others: civic educators and scholars, college presidents, students, student affairs professionals, leaders of civic organizations, disciplinary associations, philanthropists, and federal government representatives. A National Task Force oversaw the project and draft versions of the evolving report were circulated for commentary through additional public forums.

On January 10, 2012, at a White House conference telecast nationally, the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) released *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future* which proffered A National Call to Action. In brief, *A Crucible Moment* calls on higher education to reclaim its civic mission and to make civic learning at the college level expected rather than optional. To increase knowledge about civic ethos, literacy, inquiry, and action, the report calls for such learning to be pervasive and occur over time throughout the college experience: in both general education and college majors, student life and campus/community partnerships, and as an understood area of investigation and scholarship for faculty members across all disciplines.

Thanks to a grant from Bringing Theory to Practice and its donors the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation (now known as The Endeavor Foundation) and the S. Engelhard Center, AAC&U published and is continuing to disseminate *A Crucible Moment* freely online.

A New Vision for Civic Learning in Higher Education

An earlier definition of civic education stressed familiarity with the various branches of government and acquaintance with basic information about US history. This knowledge is still essential but is no longer nearly enough. Americans need to understand how their political system works, who it serves well and who it fails, and how to influence it. But they also need to understand the cultural and global contexts in which democracy is both deeply valued and deeply contested. They need to study the many struggles for democratic justice over centuries, both in the U.S. and around the globe. Moreover, the competencies necessary in a diverse democracy like ours cannot be learned only by studying books; democratic knowledge and capabilities are also honed through hands-on, face-to-face, active engagement in the midst of differing perspectives about how to address common problems and profound inequalities that affect the well-being of the nation and the world. Civic learning should

prepare students **with knowledge and for action** in communities and workplaces if just societies are to become commonplace.

Overview of Key Arenas of Action

A. Snapshot of How Some Campuses Are Using A Crucible Moment to Advance Civic Commitment

Wake Forest University used *A Crucible Moment's* Civic Learning Matrix through a newly created university-wide task force to identify areas of institutional strength and weakness across civic ethos, literacy, inquiry, and action. One finding caused the institution to focus on developing more cocurricular opportunities to increase students' civic literacy, and on enhancing Wake Forest's Social Action Collaborative to increase students' sense of efficacy in solving shared problems.

Oregon State University, inspired by *A Crucible Moment's* challenge to make civic learning more pervasive across campus domains, began to re-map organizational boundaries between student and academic affairs by making non-classified staff newly defined as professional faculty with service on the faculty senate and its committees. The process has facilitated cross-campus collaboration and a sense of shared ownership of student learning goals overall and education for democracy in particular.

Fort Hays State University used *A Crucible Moment's* Civic Investment Plan in a new strategic plan and first gathered data as *ACM* recommended; those data were then used to inform a set of recommendations to improve existing activities, expand efforts to reach all students, and institutionalize civic work across the university. The university has adopted the educational framework for a civic-minded campus (ethos, literacy, inquiry, and action) and created eight recommendations that include among them the development of the "engaged scholar" with specific metrics, adopting an academic focus for civic learning across general education and the major, and promoting a campus structure and culture that models civic learning and engagement.

Kingsborough Community College used *A Crucible Moment's* call to provide every student with a civic learning opportunity as inspiration for instituting a two-part civic engagement requirement for every Kingsborough graduate. Both can be within a course, or one can be within a course and the other within student life. The institution has a host of civic engagement sections now certified in their curriculum and co-curriculum, with more on the way. Strong faculty and staff development opportunities occur throughout the institution.

Elmhurst College, inspired by the report, did an environmental audit of civic learning and democratic engagement on its campus and then used *A Crucible Moment's* chart, "A Framework for Twenty-First-Century Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement," as a standard to identify where student affairs in particular was addressing or omitting to address various dimensions of civic knowledge, skills, values, and action. The institution then created a Civic Action Plan for monitoring progress in closing the identified gaps and keeping up a rich array of opportunities for students' civic learning.

Other campuses have used *A Crucible Moment* for a faculty development summer institute (**University of Wisconsin**), adopted the report for a campus-wide discussion (**Keene State University**), drew on sections of *A Crucible Moment* to train student leaders so they could apply their new knowledge in student clubs, assigned chapters from the PDF in courses (**University of Wisconsin**), and still other institutions used sections of *Crucible* with their community partners (**University of Pennsylvania**).

In addition to the groundbreaking initiatives that have been instituted on individual campuses, considerable change has occurred within and across state systems of higher education.

The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education has included “preparing citizens” among seven Key Outcomes for all graduates from the commonwealth’s twenty-nine public campuses, becoming in 2012 the first state board to emphasize civic learning as an expected college learning outcome. In 2017, Virginia followed suit through the **State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV)** by requiring institutions to assess civic engagement among students at public colleges and universities. Later that year, the **University System of Maryland**, referring to the work of Massachusetts and recommendations in *A Crucible Moment*, established a Civic Education/Civic Engagement Workgroup to establish civic learning and civic engagement as outcomes for undergraduates and to support their network of institutions in achieving those ends.

A new advocate within accreditation agencies also believes part of higher education’s purpose is to educate citizens for a diverse democracy: **The Higher Learning Commission (HLC)**, which is the largest of the six regional accreditors and represents 19 states and over 1,000 colleges and universities. In February 2019, HLC approved new criteria for accreditation that includes civic engagement and civic education for informed citizenship among its newest requirements. They go in effect September 1, 2020.

B. Leadership Coalitions: AAC&U and the CLDE Action Network

AAC&U has long emphasized the foundational ties between “liberal education” and education for informed, responsible democratic participation. In that spirit, we formed the CLDE Action Network in 2012, convened by Caryn McTighe Musil, which is committed to enhance coordinated strategies that advance *A Crucible Moment’s* goals. Each of the thirteen members is a national organization with extensive reach; each includes individuals who attended the CLDE National Roundtables; and each functions through its strong infrastructures as an important ongoing arena for sustained commitment to making civic learning expected rather than optional for college students. Together, these organizations reach some 2,000 universities and colleges (both two-year and four-year) and include more than 8 million students.

The initial CLDE Action Network included the following: the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU); the Anchor Institutions Task Force; the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U); the Bonner Foundation; Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP); Campus Compact; The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE); The Democracy Commitment; Imagining America; the Interfaith Youth Core; the Kettering Foundation; NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education; and The New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE). However, NERCHE dissolved in 2016 and was replaced in the CLDE Action Network by The Institute for Democracy in Higher Education (IDHE). The Democracy Commitment also no longer exists, so the CLDE Action Network currently includes twelve entities.

C. Selective Sponsored Project Initiatives by CLDE Action Network Members

Bridging Cultures to Form a Nation: Community, Difference, and Democratic Thinking (2012–15)

The National Endowment for the Humanities awarded AAC&U and its partner, The Democracy

Commitment, a three-year faculty and curriculum development grant for community colleges. The project sought to integrate civic scholarship and pedagogies across high-enrollment transfer and degree-completion humanities courses to deepen democratic understanding and capacities.

Citizenship Under Siege (2016–2017)

Building on the success of *Bridging Cultures to Form a Nation*, AAC&U and The Democracy Commitment paired again to win a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to facilitate a tapestry of public campus/community dialogues exploring who counts as citizens and who has been accorded full rights to democracy's promises. Seven community colleges organized a series of events on and off their campuses, along with national webinars and a special issue of *Diversity and Democracy* on this theme.

NASPA's Lead Initiative on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012–present)

Initiated in 2012, this project now involves over 100 NASPA member colleges and universities committed to encouraging and highlighting the work of student affairs in making education for a diverse democracy part of every student's college education. The institutions are building CLDE activities into student affairs strategic goals and learning outcomes, collecting data on students' civic learning, collaborating with students on strategies that help solve community problems through collective action, and promoting students' political engagement in elections.

AASCU's American Democracy Project, The Democracy Commitment, and NASPA's Lead Project

In 2015, rather than holding three separate civic June conference, AASCU, TDC, and NASPA joined to combine in the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Conference—CLDE 2015. Being part of the CLDE Action Network fostered this kind of collaboration, and the annual civic conference is one of the largest in the country each year involving students, faculty, student affairs professionals, and academic administrators. *A Crucible Moment's* categories of civic ethos, literacy, inquiry, and agency dominate the conference organizational structure, and they have added to the collective mix a new theory of change. With the end of The Democracy Commitment in 2018, AASCU and NASPA continue to co-sponsor the annual gathering for civic educators and practitioners.

Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Action Collaborative (Chicago and Philadelphia)

The Robert M. McCormick Foundation awarded AAC&U a grant from 2012 to 2013 to create a two-part Chicago CLDE Action Collaborative to help twelve institutions create more civic-minded colleges and universities across domains and disciplines within the same city. AAC&U partnered with Illinois Campus Compact and Interfaith Youth Core for this project. In 2014 to 2015, AAC&U funded a similar Philadelphia CLDE Action Collaborative in partnership with Pennsylvania Campus Compact to work with twelve colleges and universities seeking to use *A Crucible Moment's* recommendations to help foster more civic-minded institutions.

Bonner Foundation High-Impact Initiative: Integrating High-Impact Learning and Community Engagement

AAC&U and NERCHE were invited to be part of the Bonner Foundation's multi-year project from 2012-2016 composed of 23 colleges and universities. Caryn McTighe Musil of AAC&U and John Saltmarsh of NERCHE served as ongoing consultants to Bonner Foundation Vice President Ari Hoy to make civic learning more pervasive on campus and more beneficial to communities off campus.

The Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation initiated a series of partnerships with CLDE Action Network partners. Kettering

and The Democracy Commitment examined how community colleges can offer leadership on education for democracy. Partnering with AASCU and its American Democracy Project, Kettering explored how to assess civic learning. AAC&U and Kettering worked on a project examining the relationship between educating for citizenship and educating for work.

BTtoP's Funding Call for Civic Proposals

Bringing Theory to Practice has been an important partner in promoting information about *A Crucible Moment* in its newsletter and in its five-book monograph series on civic learning (*Civic Provocations; Civic Values, Civic Practices; Civic Studies; Civic Engagement, Civic Development and Higher Education; and Civic Learning and Teaching*). In 2012, BTtoP also issued a broad call for proposals intended to foster deeper understandings about the centrality of higher education's civic mission and received a landslide of proposals. The call supported campus dialogues, research, publications, and curricular and campus-wide initiatives. In July 2020, BTtoP transitioned from housing its headquarters at AAC&U to Elon University.

Institute for Democracy in Higher Education

IDHE is an applied research center that studies higher education's role in American democracy and supports college and university student political learning and participation. The Institute's signature initiative, the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement ([NSLVE](#)) examines student voting rates, patterns, and conditions at nearly 1,200 colleges and universities. The CLDE Action Network contributed to and promoted IDHE's important research and practice brief in 2018, *The Election Imperative: 10 Recommendations*.

Assessing Civic Learning

AAC&U and AASCU's Civic Learning Assessment Task Force produced a publication that offered profiles of the purpose, cost, administration, and outcomes of the major existing civic learning assessment instruments and made it available free on their respective websites.

D. Publications

AAC&U's Quarterly *Diversity & Democracy: Civic Learning for Shared Futures*

A periodical that has been capturing campus-based civic work since 1996 (originally under the title *Diversity Digest*), *Diversity & Democracy*, which will end its run in 2020, has lifted up topics that are essential to civic learning and democratic engagement. The Fall 2013 issue on **Higher Education for Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement** was informed deeply by the CLDE project. Since then, the publication has kept a steady focus on the recommendations flowing from *A Crucible Moment* and how campuses are putting them into practice. Other especially relevant thematic issues include: **Transformative Partnerships at Home and Abroad** (Winter 2013); **Assessing Students' Diversity, Global, and Civic Learning Gains** (Summer 2013); **Collaborating for Civic Learning: Student and Academic Affairs**, produced in partnership with NASPA (Fall 2013); **New Technologies: Implications for Higher Education's Democratic Mission** (Winter 2014); **General Education and Democratic Engagement** (Summer 2014); **Publicly Engaged Scholarship and Teaching**, produced in partnership with Imagining America (Winter 2015); and **Student and Institutional Engagement in Political Life** in partnership with IDHE (Fall 2015); **Social Innovation and Civic Engagement** (Summer 2016), **Community Engaged Signature Work** in partnership with The Bonner Foundation (Fall 2016); **Free and Civil Discourse** (Spring/Summer 2017); **Democracy's Graduates: Reimagining Alumnihood** (Spring 2018); and **Students as Agents of Change** (Winter 2019).

Imagining America Launches New Publication called *Public*

This online peer-reviewed and multimedia journal launched in 2014 features projects, pedagogies, resources, and ideas that demonstrate how to incorporate humanities, arts, and design in public life and as a means of constructing democratic societies and cultivating democratic culture. IA also published *Civic Professionalism: A Pathway to Practical Wisdom for the Liberal Arts* in 2016 by Amy Koritz, Paul Schadewald, and Hadassah St. Hubert.

***Peer Review on Rethinking Preparation for Civic Work* (in partnership with The Kettering Foundation)**

In summer 2015, another of AAC&U's quarterly publications focused on the topic of Rethinking Preparation for Civic Work: A Civic-Enriched Liberal Education. In a world where college graduates spend the majority of their public lives engaged in work, this issue of *Peer Review*, sponsored by the Kettering Foundation, focused on how colleges might reconceive preparation for work in addition to preparation for citizenship.

Civic Prompts: Making Civic Learning Routine across the Disciplines

Published by AAC&U in 2015, *Civic Prompts* addresses the undergraduate major as the next frontier of civic learning. A practical tool for building faculty capacity to meaningfully embed civic learning in their courses and programs, *Civic Prompts* represents a first step in investigating a largely uncharted territory. The publication is available for free download at AAC&U's website. The Endeavor Foundation funded grants from 2017-2020—Civic Learning in the Major: Education for Social Responsibility and the Public Good—which eventually involved 70 colleges and universities designing majors with opportunities for deep student learning about social justice and equity through the lens of their disciplines. The project produced publications like *Peer Review's Civic Learning in the Major by Design* (2017), webinars, institutes, mini-grants, and online case studies.

Bringing Theory to Practice Civic Series

This CLDE Action Network partner committed to producing a five-volume civic series that includes *Civic Provocations; Civic Values, Civic Practices; Civic Studies; Civic Engagement, Civic Development, and Higher Education; and Civic Learning and Teaching*. All publications are available in print and free PDF versions.

Kettering Foundation *Higher Education Exchange Journal*

This CLDE Action Network partner produces an annual publication intended to develop more democratic societies through the exchange of ideas between scholars and the larger public.

E. Distribution of *A Crucible Moment*

As of January 2016, through AAC&U alone, **10,134 printed copies** of *Crucible* have been sold or distributed freely; **31,307 individual visitors have viewed the PDF** of *ACM* on the website, and another **8,277 copies of the PDF were downloaded**. Thus, the *Crucible Moment* touch total is 49,718. If combined with data from AAC&U's twelve other partner CLDE Action Network organizations and from visits and downloads on the Department of Education site, that number increases dramatically.

Many who receive copies of *A Crucible Moment* share it with others. Still more learn about ACM's central ideas through the Campus Compact *Praxis Brief* written by several state compact leaders, while student affairs professionals learn about key concepts through the NASPA/Florida Campus Compact *Reading Guide*. Each of these is available for viewing, downloading, or purchasing from Campus

Compact and NASPA respectively and on AAC&U's website. The Department of Education also produced its own publication, *Civic Learning and Engagement: A Road Map and a Call to Action*, responding to recommendations in *A Crucible Moment*.

A Crucible Moment has also been introduced to hundreds if not thousands of other people through conferences, webinars, audio conferences, and workshops. Campus Compact with its 35 state chapters has been especially aggressive in promoting *A Crucible Moment* through its state and regional meetings, and Caryn McTighe Musil who authored the report on behalf of others, has spoken about the National Report's Call to Action at conferences in 15 states.

A Crucible Moment has also gone global, primarily through conferences and publications of the International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility, and Democracy that has been working for the past eighteen years in partnership with The Council of Europe, but it has also been introduced through presentations in South Africa and Japan.