

I. Introduction

“The first and most essential charge upon higher education is that at all levels and in all its fields of specialization, it shall be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and process.”

— President’s Commission on Higher Education, *Higher Education for American Democracy* (1947)

This publication, *Civic Prompts: Making Civic Learning Routine across the Disciplines*, seeks to embrace the 1947 recommendation from the President’s Commission on Higher Education, published almost seventy years ago. *Civic Prompts* strives to translate this idealistic call into the everyday teaching world of faculty members who are responsible for constructing the many layered components of each course offered in their department. Designed for faculty members in particular, *Civic Prompts* offers in the fourth section of this publication a practical set of steps to use to infuse within majors, specialized studies, and interdisciplinary programs key civic and democratic concerns affecting the public good. It also takes to heart the Call to Action from a more recent publication, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future*, released at the White House in January of 2012, in which higher education was urged to “define within departments, programs, and disciplines the public purposes of their respective fields, the civic inquiries most urgent to explore, and the best way to infuse civic learning outcomes progressively across the major” (National Task Force 2012, 32).

Both reports were issued with a sense of urgency. World War II shattered economies, eviscerated democratic nations, destroyed life and landscape at a scale heretofore unimaginable, and revealed grisly horrors when few moral compasses governed individuals or nation-states. President Harry Truman understood that the world needed more than just an economic revival represented in part by the ambitious Marshall Plan. Convinced that colleges and universities should play a vital role in creating a different global future, he appointed a Commission on Higher Education, chaired by American Council on Education President George F. Zook. The Truman Commission, as it came to be known, mapped a modern mission for the academy in a series of reports in 1947. Many of the commission’s recommendations have been followed: from ending the academy’s racial segregation, to the expansion of access to four-year institutions, to the establishment of community colleges. Driving all of the recommendations, however, was the commission’s reaffirmation of the civic mission of higher education.

Nowhere is that more emphatically stated than in the Truman Commission’s summary statement about what the overall goals for higher education should be:

- Education for a fuller realization of democracy in every phase of living.
- Education directly and explicitly for international understanding and cooperation.
- Education for the application of creative imagination and trained intelligence to the solution of social problems and to the administration of public affairs.

(President’s Commission on Higher Education 1947)

A Crucible Moment, organized through a joint project with the US Department of Education, The Global Perspectives Inventory, Inc., and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), picks up the baton of these three cornerstone goals for higher education. The national report is grounded in the teaching experience of faculty, the research about the impact of civic

learning and democratic engagement on students and the community, and a deep conviction that without higher education embracing fully its critical civic mission, US democracy will be put at risk.

A key recommendation in *A Crucible Moment* states: “Expect students to map their capacity to make civic inquiries a part of their intellectual biography over the course of their studies and to reflect on and demonstrate their cumulative learning through general education, their majors, and their out-of-class experiences” (National Task Force 2012, 32). *Civic Prompts* tackles one of those frontiers: the major. Identifying the expected levels of civic achievement within fields, the report argues, would influence the boundaries of the subjects studied, the pedagogies adopted, and how students prepared themselves for their professional lives as well as for their participation in the civic life of their local and global communities. The major is, after all, where students devote the greatest portion of their academic studies. In turn, those studies often determine the course of their professional lives.

A Crucible Moment was released at the White House in 2012 in the midst of an inherited economic recession that many argued was matched in equal fury by a civic recession. The report enumerated extensive and troubling evidence of this civic anemia, including the fact that the United States ranked 139th in voter participation out of 172 world democracies in 2007 (National Task Force 2012, 1). But the report also offered good news about the foundation for civic learning and democratic engagement that had been partially laid in higher education over the intervening six decades since the Truman Commission. It could be found in the curriculum and in cocurricular life as well as in the explosion of campus/community partnerships through which students transgressed the boundaries of their campus to be more fully engaged in learning about the larger local and global communities to which they were connected. Or as the Truman Commission phrased it, being educated about the “application of creative imagination and trained intelligence to the solution of social problems” and through that to the wider world of “public affairs.”

Despite the evidence of increased opportunities for students to expand their civic knowledge and skills while in college, especially through community-based engagement, *A Crucible Moment* found that these opportunities were for the most part random, unconnected, uneven, optional, and available only to some students. With its recommendations formulated by a broad and varied constituency within and beyond higher education and by a National Advisory Task Force, *A Crucible Moment* mapped how civic learning and democratic engagement could become more pervasive, integrative, and intentional. The report set a high bar: make such learning expected for every college student. But how can the academy move civic learning from niches to norms?