

# Community College and Civics Report

A joint project of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center  
and the American Association of Colleges and Universities



**JULY 1, 2024**

## 2024 COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND CIVICS REPORT

Education has long been viewed as fundamental to sustaining and advancing American democracy. From an early age, students in the United States are expected to acquire a sense of their role as citizens and position as civic actors through primary and secondary civics education, largely focused on gaining a foundational understanding of America’s democratic systems. What is less clear, however, is what exactly happens with the skills of citizenship as students move into postsecondary education, including their ability to apply democratic principles within increasingly complex social and global contexts. The extension of these skills into college has long been a central aim of American higher education. For example, Thomas Jefferson, in founding the University of Virginia in 1819, noted the utility of a college education “to advance human knowledge, educate leaders, and cultivate an informed citizenry.”<sup>1</sup>

More than two hundred years later, a vast majority of U.S. colleges and universities recognize their unique civic identity as part of their institutional missions. The civic mission of community colleges is especially important, with nearly half of all college students receiving all or part of their postsecondary education from institutions of this kind. Because of both the extensive reach and historical legacy of democratizing access to higher education, the nation’s community colleges are a crucial focal point for understanding how higher education advances students’ development of civic learning and skill-building and the ways in which students engage in communities.

In order to examine the vital role community colleges play in supporting and advancing democratic ideals, the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania, in collaboration with the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), conducted research to learn about the programs, initiatives, and curricular experiences related to civic learning and community-based engagement offered by community colleges throughout the United States. As part of the forthcoming edition of “Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of the Nation,” the following report details the robust and significant levels of civic learning and community-based experiences happening across community colleges.

As fundamental as primary and secondary education are for advancing and supporting U.S. democracy, colleges and universities play a significant role in furthering the development of students’ civic skill-building both within and beyond coursework. In particular, community colleges provide affordable, high-quality educational opportunities to a significant percentage of undergraduate students in the United States (approximately 41%).<sup>2</sup> Second, community colleges often serve as anchor institutions<sup>3</sup> within communities, providing valuable labor market, economic, and civic support. Third, as envisioned in the *Truman Commission’s Higher Education for American Democracy* report (1947), the country’s expansive network of community colleges serves as an essential link between higher education’s dual commitments to equity of educational access and advancing democratic principles:

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<sup>1</sup> University of Virginia. About the University. <https://www.virginia.edu/aboutuva>

<sup>2</sup> Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University. Community College FAQs (2020-2021) <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/community-college-faqs.html> downloaded on October 30, 2023

<sup>3</sup> See for example, CUMU ANCHOR MISSION INITIATIVES <https://www.cumuonline.org/cumu-programming/anchor-mission-initiative/> downloaded on March 14, 2024

Hence the President’s Commission suggests the name ‘community college’ be applied to the institution designed to serve chiefly local community education needs...Its dominant feature is its intimate relations to the life of the community it serves... The complex demands of social, civic, and family life call for a lengthened period of general education period for a much larger number of young people.<sup>4</sup>

This report highlights findings from a survey of institutional leaders at 145 community colleges throughout the United States conducted June 16-August 11, 2023. Leaders included community college presidents, provosts, vice presidents of academic affairs, directors, and faculty members. The findings reflect community colleges<sup>5</sup> located in 42 states (See Appendix 1 for respondent titles and state affiliations). We are mindful that the term “community college” is in a state of flux. A number of institutions have begun to omit the word “community” from their designation, opting instead to use only the label of “college.” There has also been a rapid expansion of degree

types within this sector, specifically with regard to the offering of bachelor’s degrees, making the “two-year” designation of these institutions increasingly obsolete. We recognize these emerging issues as caveats for our employment of the label “community college” throughout this report.

The primary goal of this research is to understand the breadth and depth of civic learning and community engagement experiences across community colleges. However, there can be significant ambiguity in how the terms “civic learning” and “community engagement” are conceived. To mitigate issues with the interpretation of terms (i.e., “civic learning” and “community engagement”), respondents were provided with the following definitions at the beginning of the survey:

***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 can also mean acquiring an understanding of the values that underlie democratic structures and practices.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The President’s Commission on Higher Education (1947) Higher Education for Democracy. President’s Commission on Higher Education (1947) Higher Education for American Democracy: A Report of the President’s Commission for Higher Education. New York: Harper & Brothers, Vol. 3, p5. Google Scholar February 25, 2024

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of sampling, we are defining community college or junior college as meeting the following conditions:

1. They must not be classified as a 4-year institution that primarily grants bachelor’s degrees or higher.
2. If they are classified as a 4-year institution, they must indicate that their highest degree offered is an associate degree and they must be public or not-for-profit.
3. Otherwise, they must indicate they are 2-year colleges or less and...
  - a. They are not a tribal college.
  - b. They must be public or not-for-profit.
  - c. If they are public, the highest level must be less than 4 years and the highest degree must be an associate degree.
  - d. If they are not-for-profit, they must have a Carnegie classification of either “Associate’s Colleges: High Transfer-High Traditional”, Associate’s Colleges: High Transfer-Mixed Traditional/Nontraditional”, OR “Associate’s Colleges: Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical-High Traditional” or “Associate’s Colleges: High Career & Technical-High Traditional”

OR They must be a 2-year college identified as a primarily “Degree-granting, associate’s and certificates” and they cannot have “seminary” or “bible” in the name.

SSRS utilized the most recent (2021-2022) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) as the sampling frame for this study (<https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>).

<sup>6</sup> Massachusetts Department of Higher Education. Strategic Initiatives: Civic Learning. <https://www.mass.edu/strategic/civic.asp> downloaded on March 14, 2024

*Community-based engagement* is the process of working collaboratively with groups of people who live in the same locale, have shared interests, or find themselves in similar situations and come together to address issues of concern that affect the well-being of their community.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, where applicable, respondents were provided with specific institutional examples via websites and/or descriptions to illustrate a particular area of civic learning or community engagement (e.g., examples of civic learning within courses, types of community-based engagement experiences for credit, co-curricular community-based experiences, and types of centers devoted to promoting civic learning, faculty and/or staff development opportunities) (See Appendix 2 for examples used).

## **SURVEY PARTICIPANTS**

At the outset of the survey, respondents indicate their level of knowledge of the civic learning and community-based engagement offerings at their community college, with nearly nine in ten (86%) respondents being very or somewhat knowledgeable of the civic learning and community-based engagement curricula at their community college. A nearly equal percentage of respondents (84%) identify that their community college offers either civic learning courses or community-based engagement experiences for credit, or co-curricular community-based engagement experiences. Only 15% of respondents point to their community college not offering any civic or community-based engagement experiences while also indicating that they are generally knowledgeable about their community college's

curriculum. Unless otherwise noted, findings are based on the sample of respondents (n=127) who report their community college offering civic learning courses for credit, courses that contain community-based engagement experiences for credit (which we refer to as “curricular”), or non-credit bearing community-based engagement experiences (which we refer to as “co-curricular”).

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

- Respondents housed at community colleges that offer some type of civic learning (including civic knowledge) or community-based course content and/or experiences indicate that these offerings are largely designed to foster understanding of our system of government and U.S. history, and are aimed at developing students' capacity to become engaged citizens and leaders, developing critical thinking skills, working collaboratively, and exposing students to different viewpoints.
- For respondents at community colleges that do not offer civics learning courses, community-based engagement experiences in the curriculum, or co-curricular community-based engagement experiences, the barriers to doing so mainly entail a lack of resources, other curricular goals taking higher priority, or a lack of faculty/instructors who could offer these courses/experiences.

### ***Civic Learning and Community-Based Engagement Experiences Within the Curriculum***

- 72% of respondents indicate that their community college offers courses across the curriculum that include civic learning. However, only 18% say these courses are

<sup>7</sup> “Principles of Community Engagement: First Edition.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: CDC/ATSDR Committee on Community Engagement, 1997.

**92%**  
of respondents

indicate that their community college offers community-based engagement experiences

specifically designated as “civic learning.” Respondents report that these courses are largely designed to foster understanding of U.S. history and government systems.

- Just roughly one in four (26%) respondents say U.S. history is required, and fewer say students are required to take courses such as American government and politics (20%), the U.S. Constitution (10%), or understanding civic institutions (14%).
- 92% of respondents indicate that their community college offers community-based engagement experiences (e.g., service-learning, internships, community-based research, clinical fieldwork) within the curriculum.

### ***Co-Curricular Community-Based Engagement Experiences***

- Nearly three in four respondents (72%) indicate their community college offers co-curricular community-based engagement experiences, such as community volunteering opportunities (on- and off-campus), student government, student clubs and organizations, internships in local, state, or federal government, and internships with local businesses or non-profit organizations.

### ***Other Institutional Civic and Community-Engaged Offerings***

- About one-third (32%) of respondents say their community college offers professional development programs for faculty and staff aimed at integrating civic learning and community-based engagement experiences into curricula. The following impediments are listed as causes for the relatively low percentage offering professional development programs: the importance of other curricular areas, a lack of resources, and lack of faculty/staff interest.
- About one-sixth (17%) of respondents report their community college has a center devoted to civic learning and/or community-based engagement. Among respondents who report not having such a center, over half (59%) say that their community college would benefit from having one.

*Part I*

**Defining  
Civic Learning  
and  
Community-Based  
Engagement**

*Part I*  
**Defining Civic Learning and Community-Based Engagement**

Using the definitions of civic learning and community-based engagement provided at the beginning of the survey, nearly eight in ten respondents (79%) report that these definitions very closely (40%) or somewhat closely (39%) match those used at their community college. One-fifth of respondents (19%) indicate their community college does not have institution-wide definitions for civic learning or community-based engagement.

Respondents were also given an opportunity to provide their own community college’s definitions for “civic learning” and/or “community-based engagement.” Nearly seven in ten offered

a definition and these definitions were analyzed to identify common patterns in phrases or word usage. The “civic learning” definitions tend to emphasize teaching the principles of American democracy, the U.S. Constitution, and democratic institutions, but also included mention of engaging with the local communities, community service, and learning the necessary skills to engage; seeing issues/contexts from multiple perspectives, and the need for students to broaden their worldview (See Table 1).

**Table 1:** Common Themes in Community College Definitions of Civic Learning (n=83)

<b>Understanding Principles of American Democracy, the U.S. (and State) Constitution, and Institutions</b>
Understanding of the basic principles of American democracy and how they are applied to our republican form of government.
Understanding of U.S. Constitution, founding documents, political institutions.
Provide practical and intellectual skills to make informed decisions and participate in the democratic process.
Become more aware of their civic and democratic commitment.
Hosting panels of elected officials at the institution, some political advocacy.
<b>Engaging with Local Communities/Community Service and Learning the Necessary Skills</b>
Improve communities in which we serve; interact with others in the community.
Making a difference in the civic life of the community—goal is to provide a combo of knowledge, skills, values, and motivations that make a difference.
Participation in programs that benefit the community and oneself.
Teach a greater understanding of their role in serving their community.
Members of all student orgs are asked to attend college board meetings and local city council meetings as schedule allows.
Using technical/clinical experiences to serve the most vulnerable in the community
Through volunteerism, community service, voter engagement, and service-learning assistance.
Personal ethics, leadership, and skills necessary for civic engagement and social responsibility.
Curricular and co-curricular experiences providing students with knowledge and/or experience in civic operations and responsibility.
Responsibility through service learning.
<b>Broadening Worldview</b>
Broad worldview (from the perspective of others).
Inclusion and diversity.
Fostering a culture of belonging, collaboration, and mutual respect.
Students exercising civic responsibility with a global or local perspective.
Attuned to multiple perspectives inherent in our socially and culturally diverse world.
Students exercise civic responsibility with a global or local perspective.

*Part I*  
**Defining Civic Learning and Community-Based Engagement**

The major themes across definitions of “community-based engagement” focus on strengthening, engaging, and transforming local communities through service and community partnerships; developing students’ acquisition of skills to enact

social action and/or address social issues; advancing career development and/or acquisition of workforce skills; and helping students to situate community-based engagement within broader political, social, or economic contexts (See Table 2).

**Table 2:** Common Themes in Community College Definitions of Community-based Engagement (n=84)

<b>Strengthening, Engaging, and Transforming Community Through Service and Community Partnerships</b>
Engaging in community.
Strengthening community.
Transforming community.
Community leadership.
Community partnerships.
Service to community.
<b>Acquiring Social Action Skills and Addressing Social Issues</b>
Solving issues in community with a plan and executing it.
Develop and refine social action skills to make informed decisions.
Environmental leadership.
Address shared needs—positive social change.
Using local resources and knowledge to affect change and finding solutions to community challenges.
Meaningful relationships between students, faculty, staff and community to address shared needs and promote social change.
Experiential education addressing community needs.
<b>Placing Community-Based Engagement Within Its Broader Political, Social, or Economic Context</b>
Attributes of DEI and social justice, examining what historic and contemporary societal factors shape racial, class, and gender identity.
What roles do complex systems and network social structures play in the creation and perpetuation of the dynamics of power, privilege, oppression and opportunity; apply to past, current, or future social action.
The civic engagement activity must include a reflection component in which the student is required to report on, present, or explain the significance of the experience and locate it within its broader political, social, or economic context.
<b>Career Development/Acquiring Work Skills</b>
Ready to work/employment skills.
Career development skills.



*Part II*

**Prevalence and  
Variety of Curricular  
Civic Learning or  
Community-Based  
Engagement  
Experiences**

*Part II*

**Prevalence and Variety of Curricular Civic Learning  
or Community-Based Engagement Experiences**

**CIVIC LEARNING**

More than eight in ten of all respondents (84%) report that their community college offers civic learning courses or community-based engagement experiences either as part of the curriculum (credit-bearing) or as co-curricular (non-credit bearing) options. Among those respondents who say their community college offers these opportunities, a third (34%) report civic learning is “very important” relative to other curricula, programs, and activities at their institutions. Nearly half (49%) indicate civic learning efforts are “somewhat important,” and 16% report such efforts are “not too important.” Community-based engagement is of high importance relative to other curricula for nearly all respondents, with nearly four in ten (39%) reporting community engagement is “very important” and 49% saying it is “somewhat important.” Nearly three in four (72%) report that the civic learning courses they offer are within the curriculum. However, just about a quarter of these courses (24%) are specifically designated as “civic learning.”

Respondents were presented with a list of topic areas considered to be related to civic learning (i.e., American government and politics, civic institutions such as the courts, local, state, and national government, and news organizations, public speaking, group discussion or deliberation/debate, U.S. history, your state’s history, world history, and the U.S. Constitution) and asked

to indicate whether: a) their community college offers courses designed to increase understanding of these topics, b) students are required to take such courses, and c) these courses are specifically designated or identified or labeled as addressing “civic learning.”

A majority of respondents indicate their institution offers courses intended to increase students’ understanding of American government and politics, the Constitution, civic institutions, and U.S. history. However, only about a quarter of respondents (27%) report that courses in American government and politics are classified under the umbrella of civic learning. Just under a fifth of respondents report that courses addressing civic institutions (20%), U.S. history (18%), and the U.S. Constitution are classified as civic learning (See Table 3).

Further, while a majority of respondents indicate their community college offers courses aimed at increasing civic knowledge and understanding, very few report that they require students to take these courses. For example, a quarter of respondents (26%) report that U.S. history is required at their community college, while smaller percentages of respondents report that their community college requires students to take courses in American government and politics (20%), understanding civic institutions, including news organizations (14%), understanding the U.S. Constitution (10%), world history (13%), or their state’s history (5%) (See Table 3).

**Table 3:** Civics Courses Profile (n=127)

<b>Courses</b>	<b>% offering courses designed to increase understanding of topic area</b>	<b>% requiring courses in this topic area</b>	<b>% classifying courses in this area as “civic learning”</b>
U.S. history	72	26	18
World history	72	13	12
Public speaking	72	36	6
American government and politics	70	20	27
Civic institutions like the courts, local, state, and national government, and news organizations	66	14	20
U.S. Constitution	64	10	18
Group discussion or deliberation and debate	53	17	7
State history	51	5	8

Part II

Prevalence and Variety of Curricular Civic Learning or Community-Based Engagement Experiences

The following open-ended comments further clarify why certain courses that may be considered as providing civic learning are not specifically labeled as such:

“Although they may not be explicit, many classes include information and assignments that explore and encourage civic learning and community-based engagement. Example: an environmental studies class that explores sustainable gardens, and plants gardens as the lab work.”  
—Provost

“A lot [sic] of the civic engagement is incorporated into course work, history. It’s becoming more pivotal to go back and learn about civics in a calm and rational manner.”  
—Director of Institutional Compliance, Curriculum, and Effectiveness

“While specific civic learning courses are not required for graduation, there are requirements that make it impossible to avoid taking civic learning courses. These [are] selected from a list by students. They are not labeled as civic learning, but in essence that is what they are.”  
—Dean of Academic Services

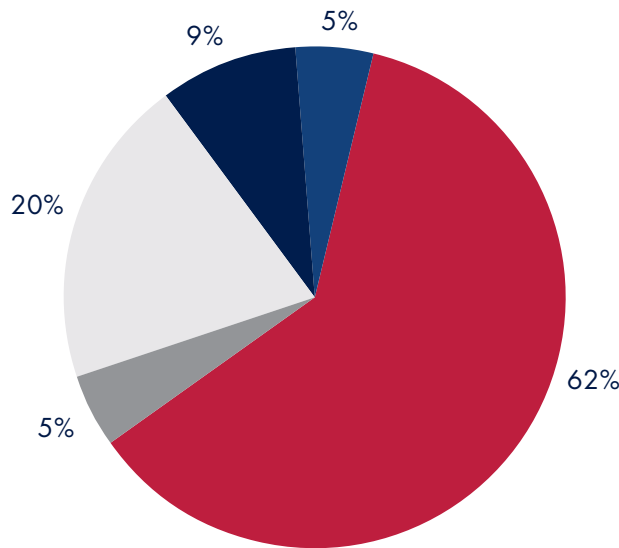
“Civic learning is not a learning outcome we normally contemplate or measure. Although many courses in history and social sciences do touch on the topic and many courses (such as health care courses) do have a community focus.”  
—Vice President and Academic Dean

COMMUNITY-BASED ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

Nearly all respondents (92%) indicate their community college offers community-based engagement experiences within the curriculum. These community-based engagement experiences include service-learning, internships, community-based research, and clinical fieldwork. Roughly a third of respondents (32%) report that their community college formally designates these experiences in their course catalog as community-based engagement experiences and 72% say at least some of these types of experiences are required for graduation (See Figure 1).

Most respondents believe that their community-based engagement experiences within the curriculum are helping students develop a variety of key skills such as working collaboratively, critical thinking, leadership, and becoming more engaged citizens (See Figure 2).

Figure 1: Percent of Community-Based Engagement Experiences Required for Graduation



Q: Are any of these courses required for graduation?

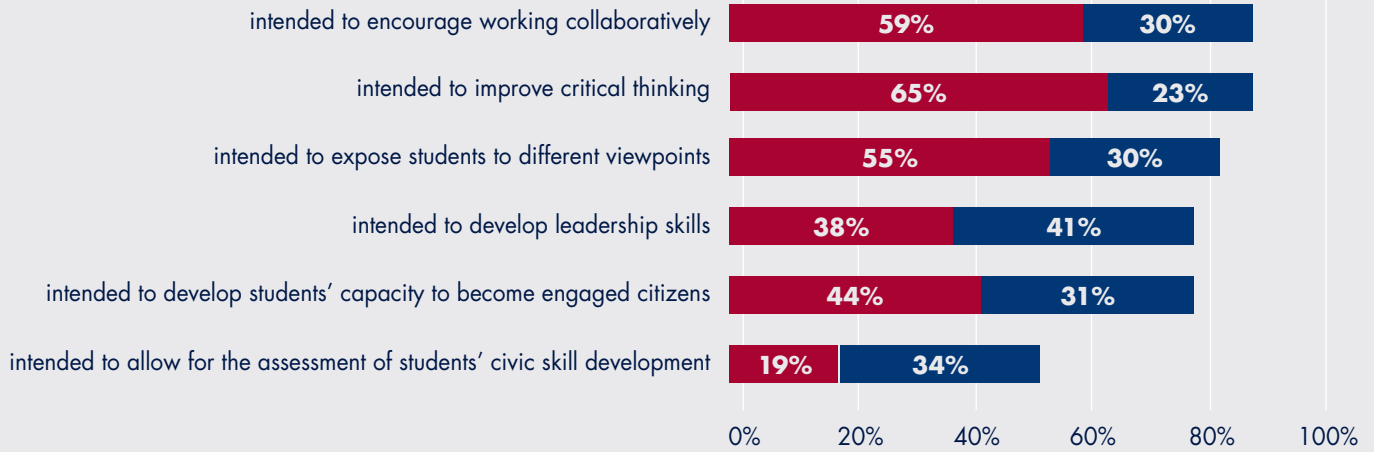
■ All of them ■ Some of them ■ One of them ■ None of them ■ No answer

*Part II*

**Prevalence and Variety of Curricular Civic Learning  
or Community-Based Engagement Experiences**

**Figure 2:** Percent Agreeing Community-Based Engagement Experiences within the Curriculum are Intended to Accomplish Specific Goals (n=127)

Q: Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the outcomes or objectives linked to the credit-bearing community-based engagement experiences offered at your institution. These experiences are:



Moreover, almost three in four respondents (73%) say they regularly assess the effectiveness of these community-based engagement experiences within the curriculum. Of those institutions that conduct this assessment, about a third (34%)

report these experiences are either very successful or somewhat successful (33%), though as stated above, these are self-assessments.

*Part III*

**Prevalence of  
Co-Curricular  
Community-based  
Engagement  
Experiences**

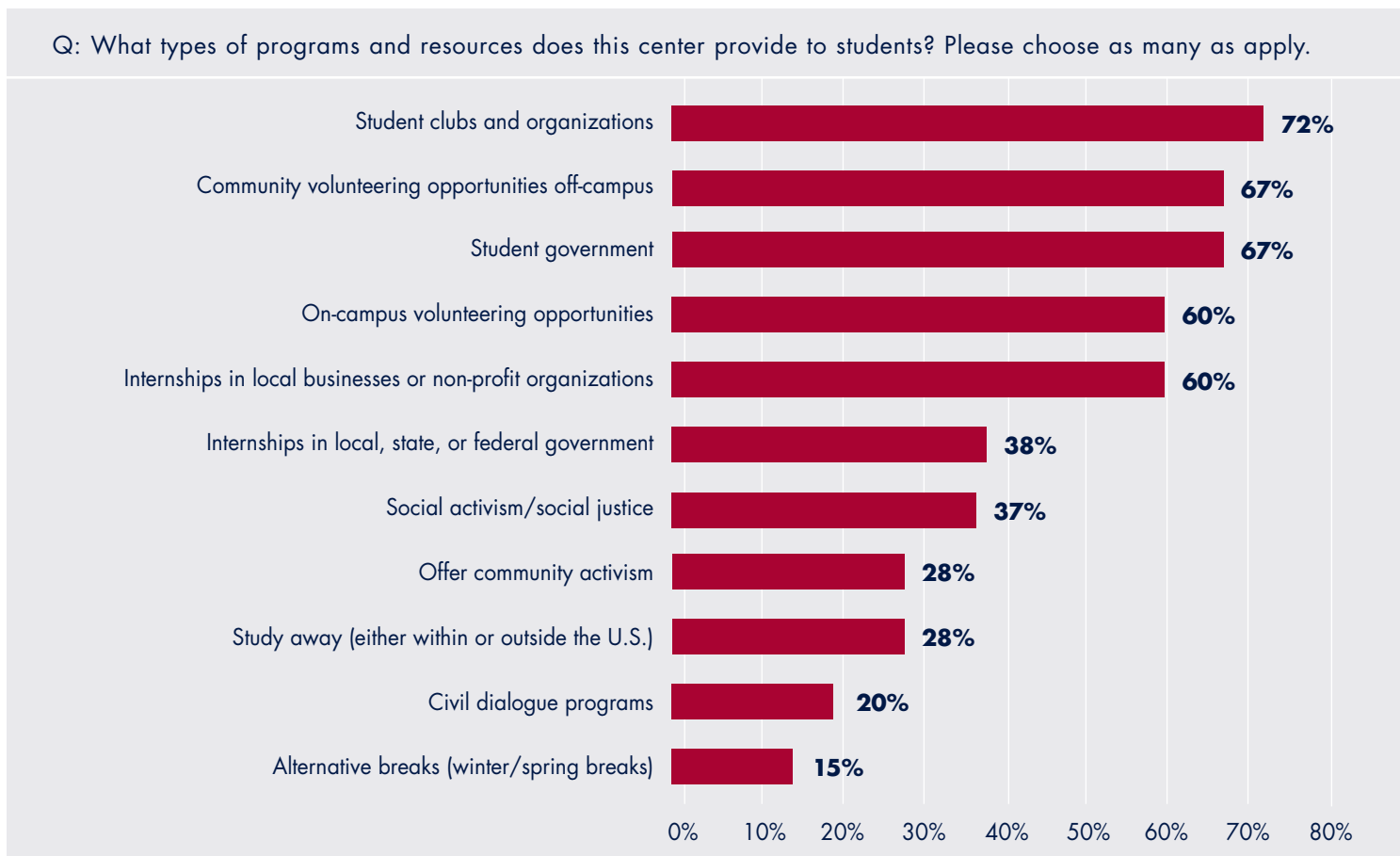
*Part III*

### Prevalence of Co-Curricular Community-based Engagement Experiences

Almost three-quarters (72%) of respondents say they offer co-curricular community-based engagement experiences, which we will refer to hereafter as “co-curricular.” About one-fifth (21%) say these co-curricular offerings are designated as “community-based engagement” at their community colleges.

According to respondents, a wide variety of co-curricular community-based engagement experiences are offered across their institutions such as student clubs and government, volunteering in a variety of organizations, and internships in state, federal, and local governmental bodies, and nearby businesses (See Figure 3).

**Figure 3:** Percent Offering Co-curricular experiences (Not for credit) (n=127)



In their own words, respondents point to several programs and organizations:

“In addition to items previously identified, our institution has multiple organizations that focus on civic learning and community-based engagement or that incorporate those principles in their activities. We also host [an after-school program] modeled after the 1964 Freedom Schools designed to teach African-American students about history, civic engagement, and social justice.”

—Community College President

“Several of our programs have work-based learning (apprenticeships, internships, clinicals, etc.) which are not directly related to civic learning and community-based engagement but which still link students with local community organizations and groups, including businesses. We view these as community-based engagement opportunities.”

—VP of Academic Affairs

*Part III*

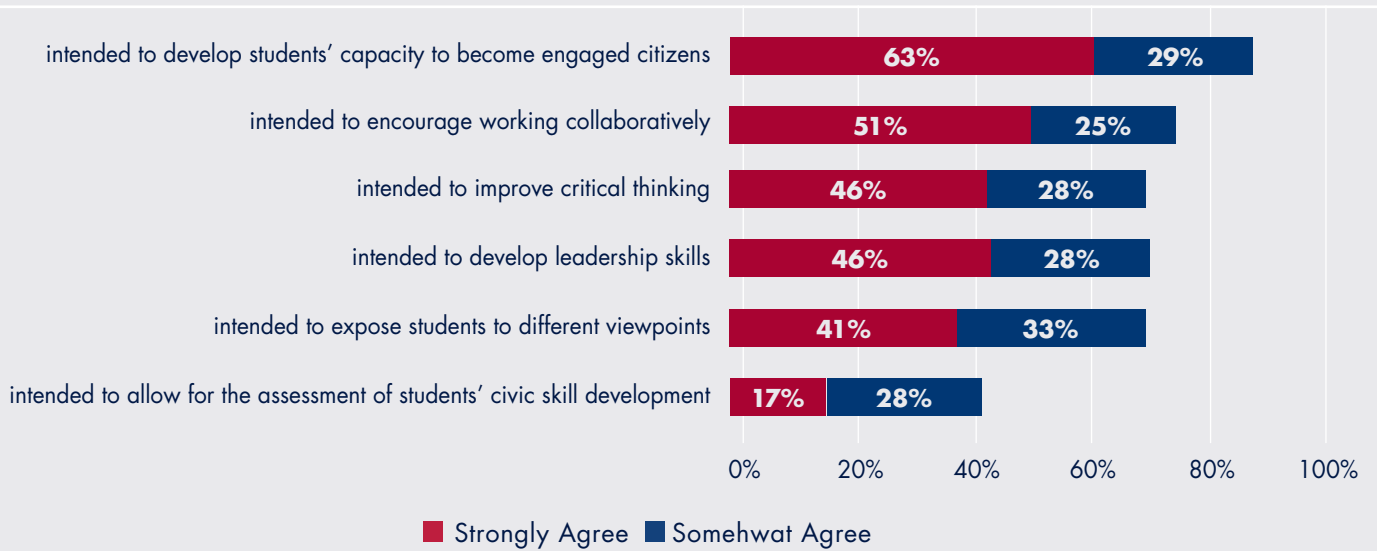
### Prevalence of Co-Curricular Community-based Engagement Experiences

Respondents are overwhelmingly in agreement on a wide range of intended outcomes associated with students' co-curricular community-based experiences. These outcomes include developing students' capacity to become engaged citizens,

encouraging working collaboratively, improving critical thinking, developing leadership skills, and exposing students to different viewpoints (See Figure 4).

**Figure 4:** Percent Agreeing Co-Curricular Community-Based Engagement Experiences are Intended to Accomplish Specific Goals (n=127)

Q: Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about the outcomes or objectives linked to the non-credit-bearing community-based engagement experiences offered at your institution. These experiences are:



### CO-CURRICULAR COMMUNITY-BASED ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES AROUND HOLIDAYS AND EVENTS

Other community-based engagement experiences revolve around holidays and events. Nearly nine in ten (87%) respondents indicate that their institution offers community engagement

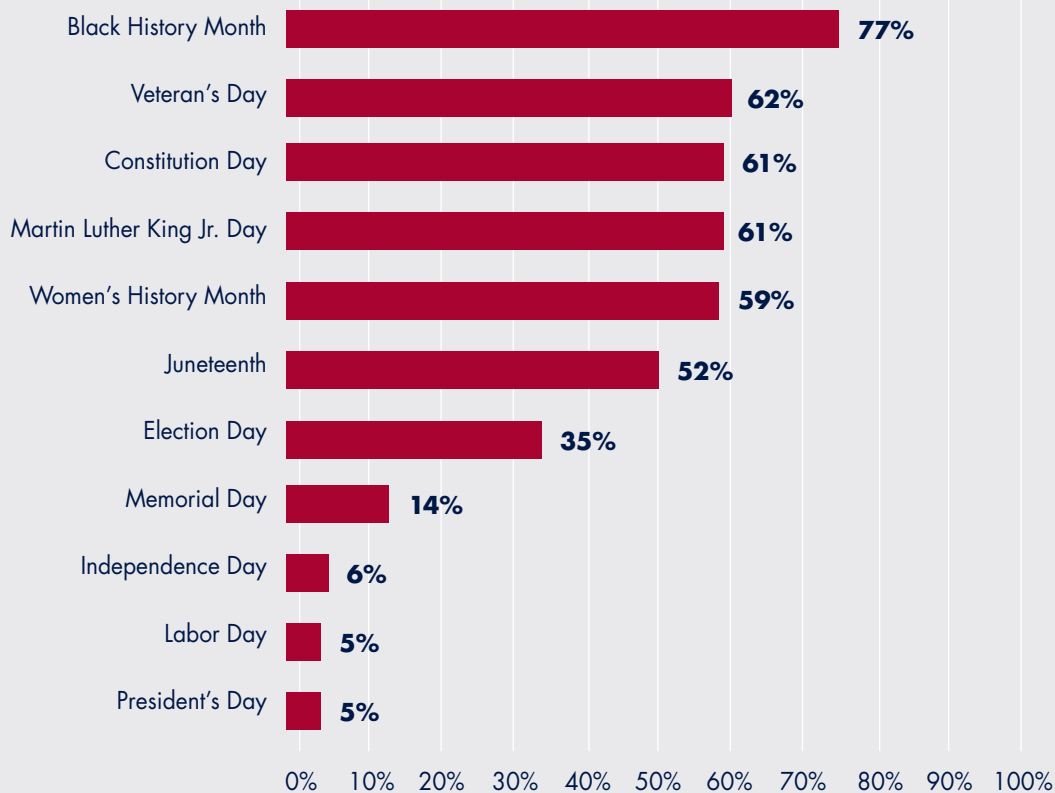
experiences anchored around national holidays and events, such as Black History Month, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Women's History Month, Veterans Day, Constitution Day, and Juneteenth (See Figure 5).

### Part III

## Prevalence of Co-Curricular Community-based Engagement Experiences

**Figure 5:** Civic Learning and Community-Based Engagement Experiences Around National Holidays and Events (n=127)

Q: Please indicate which of the following holidays or events your institution offers civic programming for outside of the curriculum. Please choose as many as apply.



Respondents are split over whether their community college is offering the right amount of co-curricular community-based engagement experiences to their students. Among respondents who indicate their community college currently offers community-based engagement experiences, 46% say it is not offering enough, while 49% say their community college offers about the right amount.

### PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT INTEREST IN CO-CURRICULAR COMMUNITY-BASED ENGAGEMENT

Respondents believe most students express interest in co-curricular community-based engagement experiences outside of the curriculum. Two-thirds (66%) of respondents believe that students at their community college are “somewhat interested” in

co-curricular community-based engagement experiences and 8% say their students are “very interested.”

An administrator cites the difficulty in engaging students to participate in civic learning opportunities because most students commute and do not remain on campus after their classes:

“Our college offers many opportunities for civic learning but as a small campus with a commuter student population it is often hard to engage students to participate as they leave campus so quickly.”

—Division Chair

This quote suggests that it may not be a lack of interest among students, but rather other reasons such as time and work commitments that lead to lower engagement levels.



*Part IV*

**Why Some Community  
Colleges Do Not Offer  
Civic Learning Courses,  
Community-Based  
Engagement Experiences  
within the Curriculum,  
or Co-Curricular  
Community-Based  
Engagement Experiences**

## Why Some Community Colleges Do Not Offer Civic Learning Courses, Community-Based Engagement Experiences within the Curriculum, or Co-Curricular Community-Based Engagement Experiences

We asked respondents who indicate that their community college does not offer either within curriculum civic learning courses and community-based engagement experiences, or co-curricular community-based engagement experiences to choose from a list the reasons for not offering these courses/experiences. The list included: “lack of resources for courses/experiences,” “lack of faculty/instructors who could offer these courses/experiences,” “lack of student interest in these courses/experiences,” “other curricular goals are more of a

priority,” and for co-curricular community-based engagement, only, “lack of outside community interest/participation.”

Though the sample size for those not offering civic learning or community-based engagement experiences is too small to make valid statistical inferences, the top reason respondents gave for not offering these courses or experiences is “a lack of resources.” The following lists the predominant choices for each curricular or co-curricular area.

**Table 4:** Causes for Not Offering Courses or Community-Based Engagement Experiences

<b>Civic Learning Courses within the Curriculum (N=49)</b>
Lack of resources.
Other curricular goals are more of a priority.
Lack of faculty/instructors who could undertake these courses.
<b>Community-Based Engagement Experiences within the Curriculum (N=21)</b>
Lack of resources.
Other curricular goals are more of a priority.
Lack of faculty/instructors who could undertake these courses.
<b>Co-Curricular Community-Based Engagement Experiences (N=21)</b>
Lack of resources.
Lack of student interest in these experiences (as noted in the section above).
Other curricular goals are more of a priority.
Lack of faculty/instructors who could undertake these courses.

The barriers noted above are reflected in the open-ended comments offered by administrators:

“As a low-funded community college, we don’t have the staffing resources to make this a priority, as much as I wish we did.”

—President

“Our students are poor. Our students are majority minority. Our students come to us to gain the knowledge skills and abilities need to break the cycle of poverty. We are doing all we can to reduce the amount of time and money required for them to get the knowledge, skills, and abilities they need. Many of us have benefited and society has benefited from the civic focused curriculum described here. My question for you is who pays for it? We cannot put it on the backs of our students.”

—Vice President of Instruction

“These types of activities have been harshly punished by the state legislature in the past, resulting in multi-million-dollar budget recessions to ‘off-set’ the ‘wasted taxpayer funds.’ Institutions that engage in civic engagement, or really

any sort of activity beyond training students to meet the workforce needs of the region, are financially discouraged and penalized when executed with non-state funds.”

—Dean of Students

While resources are a barrier, these respondents offer some hope for the future at these community colleges. At least a third in each group say there is a likelihood they will add either civics courses or community-based engagement experiences within the curriculum or co-curricular community-based engagement experiences in the next two years.

For example, as one respondent notes:

“[My community college] is focused on bringing more community engagement projects, events, and experiences to students. This is one of our institution’s strategic goals—community engagement.”

—Vice President of Academic Affairs

*Part V*

**The Prevalence of  
Professional Development  
Programs to Integrate  
Civic Learning and/or  
Community-Based  
Engagement Experiences  
into the Curriculum  
and the Co-Curriculum**

## **The Prevalence of Professional Development Programs to Integrate Civic Learning and/or Community-Based Engagement Experiences into the Curriculum and the Co-Curriculum**

Civic learning and community-based engagement experiences can succeed best with trained faculty and staff who are able to integrate these opportunities into a community college's curriculum. About a third of respondents (32%) report that their community college provides professional development for faculty and staff who are aiming to integrate civic learning and community-based engagement experiences into the curriculum. Though the small sample size (n=39) does not enable us to draw valid statistical inferences, there is commonality in the type of support respondents say these institutions provide faculty and staff. Most respondents from community colleges providing professional development indicate that professional development opportunities are implemented primarily through support for connecting with community partners, support for attending relevant conferences, offering examples/models of community-based projects to faculty, help in creating or revising assignments, providing workshops, offering resources and guidance around supervising a service-learning project, providing online resources, and providing example syllabi. For a majority, these programs are offered approximately once per academic year.

Most respondents at community colleges providing professional development say they are confident that the professional development opportunities offered are sufficient to integrate civic learning and community-based engagement into the curriculum. Nevertheless, when asked what needs to be done to better meet

faculty and staff professional development needs in this area, respondents cite the need for greater faculty and staff interest, a desire for their community college to offer more internal resources to fund such efforts, and needing additional state and federal funding.

Respondents at community colleges that do not provide any faculty or staff professional development aimed at integrating civic learning and community-based engagement experiences into the curriculum (65%) say there are other curricular priorities, 50% indicate a lack of resources prevent the implementation of professional development programs, and 42% cite a lack of faculty and staff interest. Adding support to the latter of these three causes, the following is offered by one respondent:

*"It is hard to motivate the faculty and staff to engage in this type of learning because of higher priority issues currently surrounding the institution."*

—Associate Professor of Political Science

Still, there is some interest in building in faculty/staff professional development around civic learning. About a third of respondents at community colleges who are currently not offering professional development say that it is very (4%) or somewhat likely (32%) that their community college will implement such faculty/staff development in the next two years.

*Part VI*

**Prevalence of Centers  
Dedicated to Promoting  
Civic and/or  
Community-Based  
Engagement**

## Prevalence of Centers Dedicated to Promoting Civic and/or Community-Based Engagement

One in six (17%) respondents say their community college has a center devoted to civic learning and community-based engagement. The size of a community college may have something to do with whether a school has such a center. Respondents from larger community colleges (i.e., 5,000+ students) are more likely to report they have a center devoted to civic engagement than those from smaller community colleges (27% versus 9%).

Because only nineteen respondents indicate their community college has a center devoted to civic or community engagement, it is not possible to draw valid statistical inferences based on this small sample. Descriptively, however, we can report the primary types of programs and resources that these centers provide include:

- Community volunteering opportunities
- Campus volunteering opportunities
- Community activism
- Service-learning opportunities in the community are identified
- Internships in local business or non-profit organizations are offered

Additionally, nearly all respondents with civic or community engagement centers at their community college believe these centers are doing very or somewhat well (98%) in meeting the civic learning and community-based engagement needs of students, with nearly half of all respondents indicating that their center does “very well” (49%).

Although most respondents note their community college does not currently have a center (n=106), a majority (61%) think such a center would benefit the community college. A third of respondents (33%) indicate they are not sure if such a center would benefit the community college.

A lack of resources is the primary factor cited for not having a civic or community engagement center (89%). Other factors include lack of faculty/instructors to staff a center (52%), other curricular goals are more of a priority (46%), perceived lack of student interest in a center (27%), and perceived lack of outside of interest (23%). One respondent noted the challenge of competing budget priorities:

“We have been engaging in discussions to start a center for Civic and Community Engagement and have hired a consultant. The proposal is delayed due to other budget priorities. There is much agreement as to the importance of these items due to their impact on student learning.”

—Chief Academic Officer

Overall, among respondents who report not having a center dedicated to civic or community engagement, only 14% say it is “somewhat” or “very likely” that such a center will be created in the next two years.

*Part VII*

# **Conclusions and Recommendations**

## *Part VII*

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Community colleges play a vital role in bolstering our democratic institutions and strengthening civic and community-engagement skills for the public good. Our survey indicates that, at least within our sample, community colleges are providing a broad range of civic and community-engaged experiences. Findings reveal, however, that even among these robust practices, opportunities exist for making civic and community-engaged efforts more transparent, better resourced, and more inclusive.

In terms of transparency, our survey found that while a majority of community colleges in our sample are offering courses and programs aimed at civic learning and community-based engagement experiences, only a relatively small number of those courses are designated specifically as “civic learning.” Similarly, most respondents say the civic learning courses at their institution are aimed at increasing an understanding of democratic institutions and U.S. history, while most see their institution’s community-based engagement experiences helping students to develop key skills such as leadership, collaboration, exposure to different viewpoints, and critical thinking. Without a clear designation of what civic and community-based engagement courses are or are intended to provide in terms of skills, it is uncertain to what degree students understand the larger aim of these experiences. Just like other sectors of higher education, community colleges must be intentional in communicating the purpose of the civic learning and community-based engagement experiences offered.

Nearly eight in ten respondents say their community college offers co-curricular community-based engagement experiences. These co-curricular experiences include student government, community volunteering opportunities, internships at local businesses, non-profits, federal, state, and local government agencies, and opportunities for social activism.

*“[My community college] has worked to instill a high level of understanding and advocacy for service learning and community engagement initiatives on campus and in the community. There have been many positive institution-wide efforts that include the development of model curricular and co-curricular practices; the promotion of sustainable community partnerships; and the development of good citizenship practices. Service learning and community engagement have become highly developed and institutionalized demonstrated by national honors we have received.”*

—Director of Service Learning and Outreach

In terms of resources, despite a vast majority of respondents indicating their institution offers course-based civic and community-engaged experiences, only a third report that their community college offers professional development programs aimed at incorporating civic learning or community engagement into the curriculum. As one administrator notes:

*“Our program is successful because we have two very passionate and committed faculty members (one in English and one in Sociology). Our Community Engaged Learning program is successful because it is faculty-led and faculty driven. I do not think we would have a robust program if it were not for the two faculty leaders who work hard to develop their full-time and part-time colleagues.”*

—Vice President of Academic Affairs

Thus, professional learning should be viewed as a priority resource for maintaining the quality and sustainability of civic and community-engaged practices. Investments in faculty and staff workshops and learning communities will provide invaluable opportunities for collaboration, shared ownership of efforts, and a greater sense of the diversity of community-engaged experiences happening across the institution.

Additionally, while only a small proportion of respondents offering civic learning say their institutions have centers dedicated to civic learning and community-based engagement, such centers provide a valuable ability to centralize civic and community-based efforts that can help align resources and increase transparency of mission. This might be why six in ten respondents from community colleges without a center say their institution would benefit from having one.

Findings from this research show that community colleges are making efforts to support and advance the democratic mission of higher education, but there is more that these institutions can do -- especially during critically important election seasons where a strong emphasis on civic learning and engagement is paramount. If Americans lack a basic understanding of how our government works, then they are less likely to participate in democratic processes, less likely to understand how to assess policy issues, and less likely to comprehend how various policies impact their lives. A recent Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) Constitution Day survey showed that only 33% of those individuals with at least some college education have taken a course on the use of the system of government and U.S.



## *Part VII*

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Constitution.<sup>8</sup> This same survey also showed that those who took a high school civics course were more likely to retain basic civics knowledge such as naming the three branches of government, identifying specific First Amendment rights, and correctly indicating the role of the U.S. Supreme Court in determining whether a law is constitutional.

In terms of inclusion, community colleges have an essential role in reinforcing and emphasizing the importance of civic learning and community-based engagement at not only the national level but, equally or even more importantly, at the local/community level. Such efforts may take the form of promoting engagement of others with differing viewpoints, working collaboratively, or becoming more involved in efforts to increase voter participation. In all cases, these efforts will gain even greater resonance when contextualized through issues facing the local community.

Additionally, many respondents report their community college offers programs around national holidays and events, but only a third say they do something around or on Election Day. Greater participation among community colleges to increase voter participation could reinforce civics knowledge across a campus and within the larger community.

We recognize the challenges faced by some of the more non-traditional students who are often combining full-time jobs and family obligations with their educational pursuits. They may not have the time or inclination to participate in co-curricular activities. Finding innovative ways to encourage involvement is something community colleges could consider.

A common barrier cited by respondents for not offering either civic learning or community-based engagement experiences is a lack of resources. This lack of resources may also prevent community colleges that do provide some offerings of this kind from including additional classes and experiences. With this limitation in mind, it is important to note that educational resources are available through civics education groups like those organizations who are members of the Civics Renewal Network.<sup>9</sup> In addition, organizations like the APPC and its

Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics (LAIC) have created opportunities like the Civic Mission of the Nation awards designed to develop and disseminate high-quality instructional resources and programs that support civic education for adult (18+) learners. Past award winners like the Gilder Lehrman Institute for American History, in partnership with LaGuardia Community College (N.Y), have created a Community College Learning Guide.<sup>10</sup> Another Civics Renewal Network awardee, The Center for Civic Education, in partnership with Anne Arundel Community College and Prince George's Community College (and Virginia Commonwealth University), created "Civil Discourse: An American Legacy Toolkit."<sup>11</sup> These resources, created through collaborations between Civics Renewal Network member organizations and community colleges, are freely available to all institutions and instructors who wish to incorporate this subject matter into their classrooms (See Notes 10 and 11 for links to main page of websites). These efforts are just two examples of free educational materials available to community college educators that are designed for their unique student body.<sup>12</sup>

There is much work still to be done to improve civics education and expand levels of community engagement within the United States. While K-12 education remains a foundation upon which a knowledgeable citizenry can take shape, a much wider range of institutions (e.g., the military, the private sector) must become more active players in this arena. Community colleges can build off the civics education work undertaken in K-12 while also serving as a point of correction for those individuals who did not engage in fruitful civics education experiences before graduating from high school. Community colleges attract members of groups (e.g., immigrants, low socioeconomic status, historically underrepresented) who would be best served to understand more fully their rights and responsibilities. This report signals America's community colleges are important players in the nation's civic education network, but also indicates that these institutions need to be thinking creatively about how they could be doing more to improve their civics-related offerings.

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<sup>8</sup> Annenberg Public Policy Center (2023) Many don't know key facts about the U.S. Constitution Annenberg Survey Finds. <https://www.annenberg-publicpolicycenter.org/many-dont-know-key-facts-about-u-s-constitution-annenberg-civics-study-finds>

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.civicsrenewalnetwork.org/>

<sup>10</sup> See [Civic Mission of the Nation: Community College Learning Guide | Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History](#)

<sup>11</sup> See [Civil Discourse: An American Legacy Toolkit - civiced.org](#)

<sup>12</sup> Additional resources are available through Annenberg Classroom at <https://www.annenbergclassroom.org/>

*Part VIII*

# **Methodology**

## *Part VIII* **Methodology**

Building on insights from an initial qualitative study of senior officials of state community college systems, the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania (APPC) engaged SSRS to conduct the APPC/AAC&U Community College Study of Civic Learning and Community-Based Engagement. This nationwide survey of faculty, administrators, and other school leaders at community colleges across the United States is a collaboration between the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). The target population for this study was community colleges in the United States (50 states plus District of Columbia). Rather than conducting a sample of the population, we attempted to conduct a census of the 964 U.S. community colleges.<sup>13</sup> While any employee of a community college with sufficient knowledge about their college's civic learning and community-based engagement efforts was eligible to respond to the survey, only one survey response per institution was allowed. We sought to engage responses from the institutional leader with the greatest knowledge of their institution's civic and community-based efforts.

Data collection was conducted from June 16-August 11, 2023. A target respondent at each community college was initially contacted via mail, followed by a reminder post-card and email asking them to complete the survey online. Initial contacts were given the option to provide a referral if they were not the person most knowledgeable about their institution's civic or community-based efforts.

The total number of respondents who completed the survey online was 132. An additional 13 respondents completed the survey via telephone with interviewers from SSRS, resulting in a final sample size of 145. Since only one individual from an institution could complete a survey, the data were weighted to represent the population of U.S. community colleges. Full details of the methodology, including design, questionnaire construction, data collection, and weighting are available upon a request made to Dr. Ken Winneg, Managing Director of Survey Research, Annenberg Public Policy Center, [ken.winneg@appc.upenn.edu](mailto:ken.winneg@appc.upenn.edu).

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<sup>13</sup> This is the universe of community colleges, according to the Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Data Education Data System.

*Appendix 1*

**Respondent Titles  
and States Represented**

*Appendix 1*  
**Respondent Titles and States Represented**

**Appendix 1 Table 1:** Respondent Title (N=145)

Title	Frequency/Percentage
President	33 (23%)
Provost	10 (7%)
Vice President for Academic Affairs	46 (32%)
Vice President for Student Affairs	3 (2%)
Vice Provost/Associate Provost/Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs/Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs/Associate Vice President for Student and Academic Affairs	5 (3%)
Dean	13 (9%)
Professor/Associate Professor/Instructor	5 (3%)
Department Chair	3 (2%)
Director	12 (8%)
Other*	10 (7%)
*Includes single mentions of assistant director, administrative specialist, chief institutional effectiveness officer, community relation strategist, community-based learning coordinator, confidential secretary, coordinator of civic and service learning, executive vice president, executive assistant to the president	

**Appendix 1 Table 2:** 42 U.S. States\* represented in the survey (N=145)

State	Frequency	State	Frequency
Alabama	3	Montana	1
Arizona	1	Nebraska	1
Arkansas	3	Nevada	2
California	12	New Hampshire	2
Colorado	6	New Jersey	4
Connecticut	3	New Mexico	4
Florida	4	New York	6
Georgia	2	North Carolina	12
Idaho	3	North Dakota	2
Illinois	4	Ohio	4
Iowa	3	Oregon	2
Kansas	8	Pennsylvania	4
Kentucky	4	South Carolina	2
Louisiana	3	Tennessee	1
Maine	2	Texas	5
Maryland	2	Utah	1
Massachusetts	4	Virginia	1
Michigan	6	Washington	4
Minnesota	3	West Virginia	2
Mississippi	3	Wisconsin	2
Missouri	3	Wyoming	1
<b>Total</b>			<b>145</b>

\*No completed surveys from respondents in Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Indiana, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, and the District of Columbia

## *Appendix 2*

# **Examples Shown to Respondents**

## Appendix 2

### Examples Shown to Respondents

#### EXAMPLE 1A

An example of a designated civic learning and community-based engagement courses offered for credit from North Shore Community College (Massachusetts)

[PN: IF CATI: The first type is] [PN: IF WEB: Type 1:] Designated civic learning and community-based engagement courses offered for credit, such as service-learning courses, internships, clinicals or field work.

Some institutions formally designate (or “tag”) particular courses as civic learning or as civic- or community-based engagement (e.g., “service-learning”). Some schools may even require students to satisfy a civic learning or civic- or community-based engagement requirement to graduate. Whether an elective or requirement, such courses help students develop the skills and competencies needed to become effective citizens. This could involve a curricular emphasis and/or a community-based experience to develop civic knowledge (e.g., foundational democratic principles or ideals), gain the skills needed to participate in political or community life, or explore the values that underlie America’s political and cultural institutions.

[PN: IF WEB: One example of such a designation is from North Shore Community College (Massachusetts).

Please click the example: <https://www.northshore.edu/academics/civic-learning.html>

#### EXAMPLE 1B

An example of a graduation requirement or pre-requisite can be found below from Kingsborough Community College (New York).

Please click the example: <https://www.kbcc.cuny.edu/civic-engagement/Homepage.html>

#### EXAMPLE 2

An example of a non-credit-bearing experience, either Service- or Community-Based Learning Outside of the Curriculum from College of the Canyons (California)

[PN: IF CATI: Moving on, the second type is] [PN: IF WEB: Type 2:] Non-credit-bearing experiences, either Service- or Community-Based Learning Outside of the Curriculum

Another way in which students can be exposed to civic learning and community-based engagement is through non-credit-bearing community-based learning experiences that take place outside of the curriculum. While not required, these experiences incorporate a project or activity where students engage with community partners either on campus, the surrounding community, or elsewhere.

[PN: IF WEB: The following example from College of the Canyons (California) demonstrates what this might look like.

Please click the example: <https://www.canyons.edu/academics/learning/civic-engagement/index.php>

#### EXAMPLE 3

Examples of a Civic-Learning or Community-Based Engagement Center from Salt Lake Community College (Utah) and Mount Wachusett Community College (Massachusetts)

[PN: IF CATI: Moving on, the third type is] [PN: IF WEB: Type 3:] A Civic-Learning or Community-Based Engagement Center

Some institutions have a center or office on campus devoted to civic learning and community-based engagement. Some of these centers work with faculty and staff to incorporate civic and community-based skills and knowledge into curricula, while others are strictly co-curricular. [PN: IF WEB: Two examples are the following at Salt Lake Community College and Mount Wachusett Community College.

Salt Lake Community College’s (Utah) Thayne Center for Student, Life, Leadership, & Community Engagement.

Please click both images below (they offer different content).

Please click the example: <http://www.slcc.edu/thaynecenter>

Mt. Wachusett Community College: <https://mwcc.edu/campus-life/brewer-center>

<https://mwcc.edu/campus-life/brewer-center/for-faculty>

#### EXAMPLE 4

Examples of a faculty and staff professional development aimed at integrating civic learning and community-based engagement experiences from Mount Wachusett Community College (Massachusetts)

[PN: IF CATI: Moving on, the fourth type is] [PN: IF WEB: Type 4:] Faculty and Staff Professional Development Aimed at Integrating Civic Learning and Community-based Engagement Experiences

Some campuses incentivize faculty and staff to integrate civic-learning content or civic- and community-based experiences into their courses. This process can include workshops, specialized trainings, faculty-learning communities, peer-to-peer coaching, supplemental salary, and so forth.

[PN: IF WEB: The following example from Mount Wachusett Community College (Massachusetts) provides an example of faculty and staff professional development aimed at integrating civic programming into the curriculum.

Please click the example: <https://mwcc.edu/campus-life/brewer-center/for-faculty>



## **Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC)/Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics (LAIC)**

The Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) was established in 1993 to educate the public and policy makers about communication's role in advancing public understanding of political, science, and health issues at the local, state, and federal levels. Guided by the motto "Research and Engagement That Matter," the policy center seeks to enhance civics education through the Leonore Annenberg Institute for Civics (LAIC), which has developed award-winning videos, games, books, and other materials available on [Annenberg Classroom](#) to help educators and schools teach the Constitution. LAIC also is the facilitator of the [Civics Renewal Network](#), a partnership of more than 40 nonpartisan, nonprofit organizations dedicated to providing no-cost, high-quality civics education resources. To learn more, visit [www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org](http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org).



## **American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)**

The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is a global membership organization dedicated to advancing the vitality and democratic purposes of undergraduate liberal education. Through our programs and events, publications and research, public advocacy and campus-based projects, AAC&U serves as a catalyst and facilitator for innovations that improve educational quality and equity and that support the success of all students. In addition to accredited public and private, two-year and four-year colleges and universities and state higher education systems and agencies throughout the United States, our membership includes degree-granting higher education institutions in more than twenty-five countries as well as other organizations and individuals. To learn more, visit [www.aacu.org](http://www.aacu.org).