

# A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future

A National Call to Action Reading Guide

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Created for NASPA and FL Campus Compact

Greetings Fellow Reader,

This guide is designed to assist postsecondary educators in the acquisition, understanding, and application of the provocative information and recommendations of “A Crucible Moment.” In addition to summarizing key points and providing quotes from the document, questions are designed to offer reflection and encourage application of the information. The recommendations and expectations outlined in this report rely on individual’s capacity as educators to engage in new learning and practices. To expect students to develop civic outcomes most likely will call for educators to increase their own civic learning. For me, this document was a call to action as well as a call to learning in order to further my personal and educational commitment to sustaining our democracy. Enjoy reading, learning, and acting!

*Laura Osteen*

**About the Author**

Laura Osteen serves as the Director of Florida State’s Center for Leadership and Social Change and is an adjunct faculty member in the Higher Education department. Her research interest is undergraduate change agent development and she is a member of the Leadership Identity Development (LID) research team. The LID model is a guiding framework for undergraduate leadership development programs across the country. Dr. Osteen teaches the Leadership and Complexity course in the Undergraduate Leadership Studies Certificate Program and has been honored by FSU with the Uphold the Garnet and Gold Award. She is active in the International Leadership Association, Journal of College and Character Editorial Board, and LeaderShape Incorporated. She received her Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Maryland, College Park in College Student Personnel with an emphasis in leadership development.

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### *Background and Introduction*

A Crucible Moment was written to spark a national conversation on civic learning and democratic engagement; it is directly intended as a call to action.

- ✓ *Are you ready to learn and act upon this learning with others?*

History of its development: *A Crucible Moment* began with the US Department of Education who granted the work to the Global Perspective Institute (GPI) who subgranted it to Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) who in turn created the National Task Force. In addition to their own expertise and experience, the National Task Force enhanced this knowledge with supporting voices through five national roundtables, a background paper on the landscape of civic learning in higher education, and a literature review on educational practices correlated with student gains in civic learning. Larry A. Braskamp, GPI President, and Caryn McTighe Musil, AAC&U Senior Vice President, co- led the year-long creation process.

- ✓ *Who would you tap to write this report? How does the Task Force represent the knowledge and experience of our collective work in civic learning and democratic engagement?*

The report is rooted in two core concepts that frame citizenship – civic learning and democratic engagement.

- ✓ *Are these two concepts the hallmarks of citizenship for you? How would you conceptualize citizenship for the success of America's democracy?*

A Crucible Moment is rooted in the belief that we are in a civic recession that “we need to restore and expand our depleted civic capital and fully serve the democracy upon which our common future depends” (p. viii).

- ✓ *Are we in a civic recession? What would this be in comparison to? How does this recession look and feel on your campus?*

The National Task Force received this charge: “assess the current state of education for democracy in higher education and produce a report with a National Call to Action and specific steps through which multiple stakeholders can make college students’ civic learning and democratic engagement a pervasively embraced educational priority and a resource for democracy” (p. vii).

- ✓ *With this charge, what would you expect to find in the report? Did the report meet these expectations? What was a surprise?*

With the release of this report we are also celebrating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Morrill Act.

- ✓ *Would land grant colleges still be known as our nation's “democracy's colleges”? Would any college or university earn that moniker today?*

## **I. Why Education for Democratic Citizenship Matters**

### *Creating Urgency*

Described as a “citizenless democracy”, the first section demonstrates our failings with a series of statistics that highlight the “gap between the ideals of this nation and the reality of the daily lives of its people” (Charles Quigley).

To narrow this gap, revitalization of our democracy depends upon a “knowledgeable, public-spirited, and engaged population” (p. 2).

- ✓ *Is this revitalization our work in higher education? Who shares this responsibility with us? Are we fundamental or peripheral to this change?*

On page 4, *A Crucible Moment* provides a framework for civic learning and democratic engagement.

- ✓ *What are your initial reactions? How does this framework align with your campus definition and/or practices?*

Reflecting on our current generation of traditional-aged college students:

- ✓ *How would you define their level and form of democratic engagement? How does this reflect the community service statistics of their generation? How does it align or contradict the social and cultural myths that describe them?*

Community service does not always equate active citizenship, but can often be a first step. Our work as educators is to create reciprocal experiences that include critical analysis of social issues faced by our communities.

- ✓ *How are the concepts of citizenship and the actions of community service connected in your programs? In student reflections? In community service and outreach program trainings?*

*A Crucible Moment* outlines 10 Indicators of Anemic US Civic Health (p. 6), a summary statement of our civic malaise.

- ✓ *Taken together, these 10 indicators are a cry for civic revolution, why do we not seem to care? Why isn't this report a larger, national mandate and/or even conversation?*

A clear and present, policy and political reality is presented, the pressure for higher education to focus on jobs. With the belief that we are regressing to a 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial model of education, *A Crucible Moment* makes it clear we must find a way to do workforce training and citizenship development.

- ✓ *Can we do both? How do your governor, board, alumni, and/or trustees balance the outcomes of career and citizenship? How could we partner with employers as key stakeholders in both career and citizenship outcomes?*

Service-Learning is introduced as a strategy to connect career and citizenship. In addition to workforce development, graduation and retention are top priorities for higher education in America. With service learning's correlation with increased graduation and retention rates, there is “clear evidence that civic

learning in college is compatible with preparation for the modern workforce and improved graduation rates” (p.13).

- ✓ *Can we connect career and citizenship? If so, how can we capitalize on these two priorities of jobs and graduation to create a third priority - informed, engaged, responsible citizens?*

The urgency for civic learning and democratic engagement is set in chapter one, the National Task Force closes the chapter with a call for colleges to set ambitious standards to foster civic ethos, teach civic literacy, integrate civic inquiry, advance civic action as expectations for all students. Higher education must, “transform civic learning and democratic engagement from aspiration to everyday practice” (p. 14).

- ✓ *Is this urgency felt on your campus? What will be the greatest challenge your campus faces, transforming civic ethos, literacy, inquiry, or action? Where do you have the greatest opportunity?*

## **II. Crucible Moments of Civic Learning: Then and Now**

### *It is Possible*

Our hope to reinvent and reinvigorate higher education depends on bold and creative actions.

- ✓ *What history does your specific campus or state have in bold, creative change?*

Our national past has a history of supporting higher education’s role in creating an educated citizenry to support our democracy. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson created University of Pennsylvania and University of Virginia respectively to secure the emerging democratic nation.

- ✓ *What is the story of your university or college founding? How does civic learning and democratic engagement connect to your mission and vision? How will your mission and vision help or hinder your efforts in civic learning and democratic engagement?*

There have been two significant crucible moments in US higher education history; the Morrill Act of 1862 which created land-grant universities, and the Truman Commission of 1947 which created the community college system and remapped the purpose of higher education. Both moments expanded higher education opportunities for citizens across gender, class, and race; describing discrimination as an undemocratic process, the Truman Commission “challenged higher education to become a means to address the largest threat to the nation’s new role as leader of the free world” (p. 18).

- ✓ *Are we in a similar time for change? How does our current crucible moment compare to our nation’s reality in 1862 and 1947? Is it possible that American citizens were as apathetic to the called for changes then as they seem to be now?*

*A Crucible Moment* identifies five trends that set the stage for our current crucible moment for change: 1) increase in democratic nations, 2) intensified global competition, 3) dangerous economic inequalities, 4) demographic diversity, and 5) technological advances. “The most pressing of these are unequal access to college and economic lethargy” (p. 21).

- ✓ *How are these trends relevant and/or reflected on your college campus? In your programs and services?*

The linkages between quality education, workforce preparation, and civic engagement create our democratic conundrum of the day. In order to create strong communities, economic viability, and a healthy planet we need “agile, creative problem solvers who draw their knowledge from multiple perspectives both domestic and global, who approach the world with empathy, and who are ready to act with others to improve the quality of life for all” (p. 23).

- ✓ *Labeling these agile, creative problem solvers as democratic citizens, who are these citizens in your life? Who are the specific students, colleagues, and/or friends you have as role models, men and women who draw knowledge from multiple perspectives and improve the quality of life for all?*

### **III. Education for Democracy in the Twenty-First Century: A National Call to Action**

#### *Recommendations*

This Call to Action resides in the assumption that civic learning should be put at the core of primary, secondary, and postsecondary education.

- ✓ *Do you agree? Should it be primary? Who might most disagree with this assumption?*

K-12 partnerships are key. Must build “sturdy bridge” for lifelong learning and serve as each other’s “civic safeguards”. As partners we can, promote teacher and faculty development, expand curricula in schools and higher education, provide hands-on learning for college students to recognize profound inequalities in our schools.

- ✓ *What is the status of your K-12 school partnerships? Is it reciprocal? Are you each other’s safeguards?*

In higher education we must first recognize and then mobilize to act. Deep structural reforms will require visionary leadership. This Call to Action “will require unprecedented, widely coordinated, and collective commitments” (p. 29).

- ✓ *Where will this leadership come from on your campus? In your state? Who are your partners in this transformational work?*

Five Essential Actions for Higher Education:

1. Reclaim and reinvest in the fundamental civic and democratic mission
2. Enlarge the current national narrative that erases civic aims and civic literacy
3. Advance a contemporary, comprehensive framework for civic learning – embracing US and global interdependence
4. Capitalize upon the interdependent responsibilities of K-12
5. Expand the number of robust, generative civic partnerships and alliances locally, nationally, and globally

- ✓ *Which action step seems most challenging? Which step are you prepared to start on or continue your work with? Do any of them seem completely out of reach?*

The Call to Action provides specific recommendations for four constituent groups: two-year and four-year colleges and universities; policy and educational leaders; federal, state, and local governments; and a broad coalition of communities (K-12, Higher Education Associations, Disciplinary Associations, Civic Organizations and Community Leaders, Employers, Foundations and Philanthropic Entities).

Higher Education: faculty, student affairs, administrators, and students advance civic learning through:

- Foster civic ethos across all parts of campus and educational culture
- Make civic literacy a core expectation for all students
- Practice civic inquiry across all fields of study
- Advance a civic action through transformative partnerships, at home and school

Educational and Policy Leaders – it is time to make it clear that democracy is national commitment:

- Make civic learning for democratic engagement an expected component of program integrity and quality standards at all levels
- Make demonstrated achievement in civic learning – US and global – an integral part of quality assurance and public accountability at all levels

Federal, State, Local Governments – support and enable a public climate for revitalizing higher education's civic mission through:

- Champion civic learning explicitly and repeatedly as a fundamental US priority and a component of all educational programs
- Strategically refocus existing funding streams to spur civic learning and practice
- Create financial incentives for students to facilitate their access to college while expanding their civic capacities
- Tie funding for educational reform and research initiatives to evidence that the funded initiatives will build civic learning and democratic engagement
- Report on the levels of civic and democratic learning, set national and state goals for student achievement in civic learning, and make such outcomes a measurable expectation of school and degree-granting institutions

Recommendations are also made for key stakeholders: K-12, Higher Education Associations, Disciplinary Associations, Civic Organizations and Community Leaders, Employers, Foundations and Philanthropic Entities

- ✓ *How can you use these recommendations to start the conversation with campus colleagues in addition to policy leaders, government officials, and key stakeholders?*

- ✓ *Specifically, which higher education recommendations are you willing to commit to?*

“Above all, we hope to encourage readers to believe they can act in concert with others to close the civic achievement gap, reinvigorate our democracy, and help all people develop the capacities to work together to create stronger communities, a more vibrant economy, and a shared democratic commitment to promote the general welfare at home or abroad” (p. 40).

- ✓ *How would you assess your belief in your capacity to close this gap and reinvigorate our democracy? What would enhance this belief?*

#### **IV. Trailblazers for Civic Learning: From Periphery to Pervasiveness**

*Who*

Research from the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education at the University of Michigan, the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, and the Higher Education Research Institute, describes small a percentage of students identify growth in their civic learning during college. And yet, the same research shows that, “for students who do engage in multiple key practices at high levels over time, there is a greater level of growth in several of the civic learning measures” (p. 42).

- ✓ *Is it only a matter of numbers? If we increase participation are we on the right track? Or will it be a significant transformation of how we engage in high impact learning practices?*

Three critiques offered by the report state these practices are not: 1) offered in a developmental timeline, 2) pervasive across the student experience, and 3) expected of every student.

- ✓ *What are your reactions to this critique, both in its validity and relevance to your programs?*

Figure 6 on p. 43 identifies strategies to move from partial to pervasive...

- ✓ *Which of these strategies could your campus engage in? How would you measure your current investment through the lens of these strategies?*

There is a role for everyone to play:

Students: *A Crucible Moment* identifies five student trailblazing trends:

- demands for institutional local and global relevance and a focus on life's big questions,
  - highly engaged in community-based partnerships and social change,
  - represent the wide diversity of demographic and geographical communities,
  - community service as alternative form of political engagement, and
  - create active student organizations to organize change.
- ✓ *How do you see these student behaviors/characteristics on your campus? How are your programs and services enabling and empowering student voice and action?*



Faculty: faculty practices of community-engaged teaching and scholarship are growing and yet often unrewarded:

- teaching the arts of inquiry and innovation
- engaging the Big Questions
- connecting knowledge with choices and actions
- fostering civic, intercultural, and ethical learning; and
- assessing students' ability to apply learning to complex problems.

✓ *How do you see these behaviors/characteristics on your campus? Are faculty rewarded for these practices?*

Staff: as the first responders to student demands, student affairs staff create campus-wide civic ethos through efforts focused on social responsibility, community development, and student development.

✓ *How can student affairs skills in creating spaces of engagement be more readily tapped? How might they partner more effectively with faculty and students to amplifying their work in the areas of community service, intercultural learning, and self-governance?*

Institution: although more than only the President, the presidential role is a visible symbol of a campus' embodiment of its mission.

✓ *Does your campus President partner with community stakeholders? Do they have a voice at the College/University proverbial table? What public documents or networks does he/she belong to or give time and resources to? How does the President define the boundaries of the community within which the campus resides?*

Trailblazers do not work alone; key stakeholders are critical partners in this work.

✓ *Who are your partners in K-12, Higher Education Associations, Disciplinary Associations, Civic Organizations and Community Leaders, Employers, Foundations and Philanthropic Entities?*

## **V. A Foundation Partially Laid: Pathways to Democratic Engagement**

### *Concrete Examples*

✓ *What specific programs, pedagogies, and partnerships are you engaged in to create and advance civic literacy, civic inquiry, and civic action?*

*A Crucial Moment* identifies three strategic areas for civic learning and democratic engagement: curriculum integration, powerful pedagogies, and transformative partnerships.

- ✓ *Does your campus rely on one these areas over the others? Is a balance of them possible? In what area are you most comfortable? In what areas would you like to invest future efforts towards?*
- 1. Curricular Integration: mapping intentional and developmental curricular efforts in civic learning across undergraduate general education and specialized fields of study. An example of a national model to measure student learning outcomes, the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) is described.
- ✓ *On a scale of not offered, to available, to sought-after, to required, where would you place your campus offerings of undergraduate courses with civic learning outcomes? Are there pockets of faculty or disciplines where these courses are clustered? If distributed or required, how did the momentum for these courses develop? How might you share this success with colleagues at other campuses?*
- 2. Powerful Pedagogies: the teaching strategies of intergroup and deliberative dialogue, service learning, and collective problem solving, have been shown to be effective in enhancing civic learning.
- ✓ *How are these pedagogies encouraged on your campus? How are faculty and staff taught and encouraged to learn them? Are faculty and staff recognized for adopting new teaching strategies into courses and programs?*
- ✓ *Is student learning measured in the curricular and co-curricular programs utilizing these strategies? Specifically connected to the political process, how can educators use these pedagogies to model alternative forms of decision making, negotiating, and advocacy?*

Identified as a concern within service learning, the impact of this powerful pedagogy may depend on nuances such as: the kind of experience, level of student responsibility, scale of issues addressed, learning outcomes sought, and impact of engagement on stakeholders.

- ✓ *How are you measuring or tracking such differences in your programs? How are programs intentionally designed to meet the specific learning outcomes such as those in Figure 7: The Faces/Phases of Citizenship (p. 60)?*
- Together these pedagogies represent “a larger and long-term trend toward better integration of academic and applied learning, and toward giving college students many opportunities to expand and demonstrate capacities they will need both in civic contexts and at work” (p. 63).
- ✓ *To amplify efforts and learn from each other, do you collaborate with your colleagues on campus invested in these pedagogies?*
3. Transformative Partnerships: Campus and community collaborative, generative partnerships that transform communities, scholarship, and student learning. Core values of these partnerships that move them from charitable to reciprocal to generative are “interdependency,

innovation, multiple perspectives, and a commitment to a long-range investment in the public good" (p. 64).

- ✓ *Do your programs "go out into" the community or are they "a part of" the community? What economic, educational, political, historic, cultural, and/or social issues are your partnerships addressing? Are your efforts concentrated across issues relevant to the community or in silo areas representing campus resources/needs? How are you creating public space for faculty, staff, students, and community members to enhance civic skills and practice civic action?*
  
- ✓ *Across the strategies of curricular integration, powerful pedagogies, and community partnerships, how would you evaluate your "foundation for the next generation of commitments to educate for democracy" (p. 67)?*

## **VI. Conclusion**

### *Commitment*

"Democracy is the defining characteristic of our country" (p. 69).

- ✓ *Is it the defining characteristic of our educational process? Why? Why not?*

"To be an American means to take responsibility for democratic purposes, practices, vitality, and viability" (p. 69).

- ✓ *Do you agree? Do you accept this responsibility, individually? As an educator?*

"Civic knowledge and capability...are hard won" (p. 69).

- ✓ *As a result of reading and discussing *A Crucible Moment*, what hard work are you committed to do next?*

"*A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* insists that we dare not be passive about increasing our nation's civic capacity" (p. 69).

- ✓ *Do you accept this call to action?*