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## Higher Education Civic Learning and Engagement: A Massachusetts case study

JAN BRENNAN

The Massachusetts Department of Higher Education (MDHE) lays out their ambitious strategic plan for Massachusetts public institutions with the commitment, “We will produce the best-educated citizenry and workforce in the country.”<sup>1</sup> Among the key outcomes is:

### PREPARING CITIZENS PROVIDING STUDENTS WITH THE KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND DISPOSITIONS TO BE ENGAGED, INFORMED CITIZENS.<sup>2</sup>

This Promising Practices in Education report explores the civic learning and engagement efforts of Massachusetts’ public higher education system in five areas:

1. Vision and articulation of Preparing Citizens as a core educational commitment.
2. Development of a state higher education Policy on Civic Learning, which includes a first-in-the-nation undergraduate civic learning outcome.
3. Creation of civic engagement and service-learning course designations.

4. Progress in statewide assessment and accountability for civic learning.
5. First-in-the-nation policies to align civic learning across the K-16 education continuum.

Like many state public higher education systems, Massachusetts began with several exemplary civic learning and engagement programs, but civic learning was not a central academic expectation and engagement opportunities varied widely across institutions and degree programs.<sup>4</sup> Civic learning is also only one of many priorities for state higher education. Producing an educated workforce is the top priority for Massachusetts, with a projected deficit of 50,000+ college graduates needed to work in high-skilled industries critical to the state’s economic health. Against this workforce-centric backdrop, civic supporters fought successfully for a strategic focus on civic learning and engagement in the state’s higher education policy agenda. Massachusetts serves as an effective case study of postsecondary civic learning policy, not because promoting civic learning and engagement in state higher

### Massachusetts’ Public Higher Education System

- 29 public campuses including: 15 community colleges, nine state universities and five University of Massachusetts campuses.
- 300,000 students.
- 40,000 faculty and staff.
- 33,000 degrees and certificates issued annually.<sup>3</sup>



education was a smooth and simple process, but because committed supporters overcame challenges and barriers to arrive at a successful outcome.

## Laying the Groundwork: Vision and commitment

It takes a village to advance civic learning and engagement. One of the lessons drawn from Massachusetts is how state leaders leveraged and coordinated work across sectors to establish an educational commitment to prepare citizens. While the executive branch pursued the strategic vision through the governor's office, Massachusetts Board of Higher Education (MBHE), MDHE and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MDESE), the legislature built momentum through the Special Commission on Civic Engagement and Learning. The groups then came together in a Study Group on Civic Learning and Engagement to make concrete recommendations for policy and implementation.

"Critical to the success of Massachusetts' civic learning and engagement efforts was engaging a broad and inclusive group of stakeholders in the development process," shares Sen. Richard Moore, who served as chairman of the Special Commission on Civic Engagement and Learning. If the organization had a stake in civic learning and engagement outcomes, there was an effort to give them a seat at the table. Participating organizations ranged from the League of Women Voters to the state bar association; the judiciary; state associations of teachers, principals and superintendents; faculty unions; nonprofit and civic organizations; business organizations and the media.

### Civic Learning Elevated as a System-Level Goal

In 2009, MDHE and MBHE launched a strategic planning effort, referred to as the Vision Project, to bolster public understanding of the contributions of public universities and colleges to the state and to emphasize the return on

investment for state financial support. The strategic plan helped to unify and focus Massachusetts' higher education institutions and leadership on key outcomes, and to create a platform for assessment and accountability.

In May 2010, the MBHE approved the strategic plan recommendations, including the vision, "We will produce the best-educated citizenry and workforce in the country. We will be a national leader in research that drives economic development." They also approved five initial key outcomes related to college participation and completion, student learning across diverse subgroups and workforce alignment. Although the strategic vision statement invoked citizenry, the initial outcomes centered primarily on workforce and economic development results. An openness to continued refinement of the strategic plan and ongoing opportunities for input from the higher education community resulted in an identification of this deficiency, and the strategic higher education goal of Preparing Citizens was added in 2012.<sup>5</sup>

### Special Commission on Civic Engagement and Learning

Proceeding along a separate but similar track, the Massachusetts Special Commission on Civic Engagement and Learning began under the auspices of legislators keenly interested in these issues. The Special Commission was charged in 2011 by the legislature to investigate the status of civic education in the state and called for the development of civic learning and engagement outcomes for Massachusetts' higher education institutions. Both the commissioner of higher education and the commissioner of elementary and secondary education served as members of the Special Commission, which also included representatives of the legislature and the judiciary and education, civic and special interest groups. The cross-sector makeup of the Special Commission strengthened the foundation being created for collective work and impact.<sup>6</sup>

The Special Commission report, *Renewing the Social Compact: The Report of the Special Commission on Civic Engagement and Learning*,<sup>7</sup> was released in 2012. The report included broad recommendations to coordinate and



support adult civic engagement programs; expand civic learning requirements, curriculum and resources in K-12; and commit to higher education infrastructure, resources and assessment strategies that would prepare all Massachusetts students for citizenship. The report specifically called for the approval of Preparing Citizens as a new outcome for higher education.<sup>8</sup>

## Higher Education Study Group on Civic Learning and Engagement

Drawing from the parallel work of the strategic vision project and legislative Special Commission on Civic Engagement and Learning, the MDHE in 2012 created the Study Group on Civic Learning and Engagement (MDHE Study Group). The state's postsecondary institutions were represented in the MDHE Study Group by college presidents, an assistant provost and campus directors of civic engagement, experiential learning or service-learning. The 15 members also included state Sen. Richard Moore and representatives from Massachusetts Campus Compact and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE).<sup>9</sup> The MDHE Study Group met several times between October 2012 and September 2013 to detail policy and implementation strategies to advance the Preparing Citizens outcome.

The MDHE Study Group defined and articulated a shared understanding of civic learning and engagement as their first important contribution. Initially charged with defining civic education, the group instead recommended the adoption of the term "civic learning and engagement" as reflective of current language and practice. Identifying its focus on increasing effective democratic participation,<sup>10</sup> the MDHE Study Group created definitions that clarified elements of civic learning and civic engagement, specified civic content and competencies, and provided a platform for all stakeholders connected with civic learning and engagement to work collaboratively.

## DEFINITION OF CIVIC LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT

The civic learning and engagement key outcome of the Vision Project is to prepare individuals for effective democratic participation, which in turn promotes growth of healthy communities, global economic vitality, social and political well-being and democratic human interactions.

Higher education institutions engender students' civic learning — the knowledge, skills, values and competencies that citizens in a democracy need to carry out their civic responsibility — through participation in civic engagement, academic coursework, co-curricular activities and off-campus programming. Students should have an understanding of the United States, other world societies and the relationship between these constituencies.

Civic engagement in higher education involves faculty, staff and students in reciprocal partnerships with public, private and nonprofit organizations in communities (local, regional, statewide, national and global) to address critical social issues and align curriculum, scholarship, research and creative activity with the public good.

- Final Report from the Study Group on Civic Learning and Engagement: Preparing Citizens<sup>11</sup>

Significant activities of the MDHE Study Group included:

- 2012 MDHE questionnaire, completed by all 29 public campuses, which provided a benchmark of current higher education civic learning and engagement activities.
- Review and alignment of recommendations with the Association of American Colleges and Universities' National Task Force on Civic Learning and Engagement's



(2012) report, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future*.<sup>12</sup>

- Review and alignment of recommendations with the U.S. Department of Education (2012) report, *Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy: A Road Map and Call to Action*.<sup>13</sup>
- Presentation of preliminary recommendations at the *Rooting Change: The Vision for Civic Engagement in Higher Education* conference.
- Presentation of preliminary recommendations at the *Civic Learning and Student Success Action Summit*.
- Preliminary recommendations distributed to public campuses for comment.

For Massachusetts, the commitment to *Preparing Citizens* stands as both a matter of obligation and competitive advantage. The state's education leaders found the poor state of American civic understanding among its postsecondary students as a compelling reason to recommit and reinvest in preparing students for citizenship by making civic literacy a core expectation for all students. Informed and engaged citizens will in turn bolster American democracy, drive global economic competitiveness and strengthen civil dialogue and relationships.

Furthermore, colleges and universities need to distinguish themselves to attract the students they desire. The *Preparing Citizens* report reflects a belief that students will find postsecondary opportunities for civic engagement and coursework incorporating community-engaged pedagogies attractive and that this student interest will make Massachusetts higher education institutions more competitive.

Increasing civic literacy and engagement results in potential short-term and long-term gains for multiple stakeholders in Massachusetts. Definitions for sustained longer-term impacts of democratic participation appear as healthy communities, economic vitality, well-being and improved community relationships.<sup>14</sup> The report concludes, "As the first and only state to require public higher education institutions to include civic learning and

engagement as an expected student learning outcome, Massachusetts is poised to become a national leader in the field of civic inquiry and action."<sup>15</sup>

## Massachusetts Higher Education Policy on Civic Learning

With a commitment to *Preparing Citizens* established, the next step for the MBHE was to adopt a state policy for postsecondary civic learning. The MDHE Study Group completed the key work of gathering input from institutions and stakeholder groups and developing policy recommendations. The MDHE Study Group also initiated comprehensive documentation on student civic learning and engagement experiences with the *Massachusetts Institutional Rubric for the Promotion and Development of Civic Learning and Engagement*. The MBHE took the final step to incorporate these recommendations into a statewide *Policy on Civic Learning* for public institutions.

### MDHE Study Group Recommendations

In October 2013, the MDHE Study Group submitted its report, *Preparing Citizens: Report on Civic Learning and Engagement*, which contained eight recommendations for the MBHE:

1. Adopt a shared definition of civic learning and civic engagement.
2. Require all public higher education institutions to conduct and submit a preliminary internal assessment of their capacity to support civic learning and engagement by August 2014. A rubric for the internal assessment informs planning and resource allocation, and facilitates the sharing of best practices and models between state institutions.
3. Require all public higher education institutions to articulate in their five-year master plans how they will support civic learning and engagement as a measurable

student outcome. The MBHE approves institutional master plans, establishing accountability for the Preparing Citizens goal.

4. Require that all new academic programs subject to board approval describe alignment with the Preparing Citizens goal. This requirement encourages cross-disciplinary and integrated approaches and highlights how civic learning and engagement are complementary to academic and workforce development course objectives.
5. Include engaged scholarship in evaluation criteria for faculty hiring, retention and promotion with details and timeline to be developed through a collaborative process between the MBHE and faculty unions. Unless faculty reward systems align to value civic learning, inadequate incentives and professional development support will exist for teachers to embed civic learning and engagement practices.
6. Provide research and support for the common measurement and comparison of student civic learning and engagement outcomes, including development of measurement instruments, expanded campus reporting requirements and continuing an exploratory pilot study on qualitative civic learning measures.
7. Facilitate and support civic learning and engagement implementation through a variety of resources and strategies, including convenings, dedicated MDHE staffing, grants and fellowships, and advocacy.
8. Include civic learning and engagement in college-readiness initiatives to ensure adequate preparation of K-12 students for successful postsecondary civic learning.

Encompassed within the MDHE Study Group final report is the Massachusetts Institutional Rubric for the Promotion and Development of Civic Learning and Engagement.<sup>16</sup> The assessment framework identifies strategies and indicators for building civic learning capacity through:

### Institutional support

- Practices such as alignment with institutional mission, and inclusion in strategic planning and evaluation systems.
- Structures including designation of a coordinating entity for civic learning and engagement, resources and staffing.

- Policies including support of civic learning and community-engaged pedagogies such as service-learning, and support for related faculty scholarship.

### Faculty support

- Professional development, inclusion of civic learning in faculty recruitment, hiring, recognition, promotion and tenure, funding and leadership.

### Student support

- Benchmarks for student learning outcomes and assessment, community-engaged course designation, student recognition, funding and development of extracurricular opportunities.

### Community support

- Outreach, recruitment and recognition of community partners, development of mechanisms for partner advisory role and feedback that ensures mutual benefit.

With well-defined areas for development, the MBHE moved toward actionable policy progress and in May 2014, they adopted the Policy on Civic Learning,<sup>17</sup> the first-in-the-nation state policy, making civic learning an expected outcome for all Massachusetts' undergraduates.<sup>18</sup> The board's civic learning policy applies directly to the state's 24 public community colleges and state universities. While the five campuses of the University of Massachusetts provide substantial elective civic learning opportunities – in fact, UMass is the first system to have every campus receive the Carnegie Community Engagement Elective Classification – they opted not to join the other public institutions in a commitment to civic learning for *all* undergraduates. This has been a setback to establishing a common statewide policy and metrics, but has not deterred efforts on the participating campuses. MDHE acknowledges the challenge of gaining system-wide buy-in, but hopes that civic learning successes from the community colleges and state universities will influence stronger alignment from the University of Massachusetts over time.

The policy defines civic learning to include the development of civic knowledge, intellectual skills and



applied competencies needed to effectively engage in civic activities, as well as social and political values associated with democratic and civic institutions. The policy also charged campuses to (1) develop strategic goals, plans and curricula fostering civic learning, and (2) identify new ways to measure and report student civic learning outcomes. The Policy on Civic Learning clearly articulates that civic learning happens across classrooms, co-curricular and community environments.

To promote civic learning and engagement, the MBHE policy outlined four broad action areas beginning in the 2014-2015 academic year:

- 1. Strategic planning action** – campuses will incorporate civic learning as an expected student outcome.
- 2. Support action** – MDHE will convene campuses to exchange civic research, pedagogies and best practices, and support faculty training, research and curriculum development.
- 3. Data collection action** – MDHE will lead efforts to operationalize civic learning metrics and establish data collection, assessment and accountability systems.
- 4. Coordination with public schools action** – MDHE will align and coordinate civic learning across the K-16 public school system.

To support the civic learning work of the campuses, in 2015, MDHE created the position of director of civic learning and engagement. Commissioner Carlos Santiago hired Dr. John Reiff, a former member of the MDHE Study Group and the director of civic engagement and service-learning at the University of Massachusetts Amherst since 2000, as the first director.

As with many state public higher education systems, Massachusetts community colleges, universities and the University of Massachusetts campuses utilize a variety of governance structures and individual institutions exercise considerable autonomy. This case study reveals how MBHE's Policy on Civic Learning balanced a consistent statewide approach and accountability for student civic

learning outcomes with flexibility for each campus. While guided by the overarching statewide policy framework, the academic freedom of individual institutions and faculty remains preserved, allowing them to develop civic learning opportunities most effective for their institution, student population and community context. The Policy on Civic Learning focuses on creating conditions for coordination and providing support and incentives.

Additionally, the scaffolding framework has the advantage of facilitating participation beyond public higher education institutions. The Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Massachusetts actively participated in the development of civic learning recommendations and many of the institutions voluntarily participate in the Vision Project's Preparing Citizens goal. Similarly, legal and nonprofit civic learning organizations and programs use the framework to align their work and contribute to the Preparing Citizens goal.

## Civic Learning Course Designation

With focused action plans and defined leadership in place, efforts now shifted to capacity building and implementation at the institutional level. The new director of civic learning and engagement led the work with campuses, and decided to first focus on civic learning through course designations that could be used consistently across the state higher education system to identify civic learning and engagement. Drawing the campuses into the course designation process not only allows statewide data collection and assessment, but also catalyzes conversations among key stakeholders on each campus about what constitutes civic learning and what elements should be in a course with such a focus. A MDHE Civic Learning Team, led by the MDHE director of civic learning and engagement and with more than 30 members from eight public campuses, worked over summer 2015 to develop criteria for the designation of courses as providing significant opportunity for civic learning and to



develop a process for reviewing and assigning the civic learning designation to courses.

The MDHE Civic Learning team recommended two distinct civic learning course designations to differentiate courses that offer classroom-based civic learning and those that offer a stronger experiential service-learning opportunity outside the classroom. Courses bearing the designation Civic Learning with Engagement Required (CLER) would meet the following criteria:

1. The course requires all students participate in a substantial civic engagement activity that is linked to course learning goals.
2. The civic engagement activity provides reciprocal benefits to both the students and a broader community beyond the classroom.
3. The civic engagement activity includes reflection in which the student communicates the significance of the experience and locates it within its political, social or economic context.
4. Course outcomes include at least one of the four elements of the MBHE definition of civic learning: knowledge; intellectual skills; applied competencies or practical skills for informed and active civic participation; and understanding values underlying democratic structures and practices.

Courses bearing the designation Civic Learning without Engagement would meet only the requirement that at least one of the four MBHE definitions is included in a significant or substantial way.

The value of involving a broad group of campus leaders in the planning is illustrated by discussions that resulted in a third course designation. There was a concern that requiring a civic engagement activity for all students in a course could discourage enrollment. Students fearful of the demands of such courses might chose not to enroll, adversely impacting offerings and faculty, particularly adjunct faculty. To increase flexibility, a third course designation, Civic Learning with Engagement Optional

(CLEO), meets the CLER requirements except that students are offered a choice between a civic engagement activity or another substantial project with a civic learning focus.

The Civic Learning Team also suggested that campuses make these designations public in course catalogs and on student transcripts, so the campus commitment to civic learning is more visible.

### **CIVIC LEARNING AT BRISTOL COMMUNITY COLLEGE (BCC)**

To manage identification of civic learning courses and support for faculty teaching them, BCC created a Civic Learning Team with faculty and staff from the Civic Engagement Office, Social and Behavioral Science, Center for Teaching and Learning, Central Academic Affairs, Registrar and Institutional Research. The team, which meets monthly, organized the following:

- The Civic Learning Repository, a collection of curriculum materials, project and assignment ideas, and community partners.
- Discussions with departments (several each semester) to identify courses appropriate for designation and plan training and support for the faculty — so capacity to fulfill the civic learning expectation will grow incrementally with attention to quality.
- Incentives for both faculty and students to take on Civic Learning with Engagement courses: Creation of a Zero-Credit Lab which entails a lab fee (allowing an additional stipend to faculty who choose to build community engagement into their courses) and a commitment to use open education resources rather than textbooks, so even with the lab fee students end up paying less than for a traditional course.
- Assessment of student civic learning outcomes and the impact of civic engagement on persistence and retention.
- Exploration of adding designated courses as a general education requirement.

Each participating campus started the work to review courses and assign the designations beginning with the 2016–2017 school year. Course designation efforts also include strengthening faculty skills in engaged learning and in working with community partners to develop impactful community-focused service-learning projects.

## Civic Learning Assessment

Massachusetts found two obstacles to conducting a comprehensive evaluation of student civic learning and engagement outcomes: (1) a lack of available data, and (2) the absence of assessment rubrics.

Massachusetts' public campuses did not collect or make available consistent data that document the number and type of civic learning and engagement opportunities, including the number of courses using community-engaged learning pedagogies and co-curricular offerings. Further, student outcome data tracking systems did not provide opportunities to integrate student outcome data from civic learning experiences into these systems.

State campuses undertook the task of overcoming these obstacles through the creation of civic learning data collection teams. The campuses tasked the teams with identifying courses with a civic learning focus, developing assessment tools and tracking, and coordinating the exchange of assessment strategies, data and best practices between public campuses.

This work has been quite complex due to a lack of agreement on the best civic learning measures, and tension between (a) formative and summative assessment approaches and (b) concerns about meeting the requirement to benchmark institutions by comparing assessment data across state higher education data systems.<sup>19</sup> The MDHE Study Group noted that a national platform for comparison does not exist because the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System does not capture civic learning outcomes.<sup>20</sup>

Recommendation six from the MDHE Study Group outlines three approaches to the development and comparison of civic learning outcomes:

- Leverage existing regular administration of the Community College Survey of Student Engagement in community colleges and National Survey of Student Engagement in four-year institutions to measure behaviors related to civic learning and engagement.
- Increase the capacity of the existing Massachusetts Higher Education Research Information System to include systematic tracking of civic learning and engagement outcomes. MDHE will convene institutional research and assessment staff to develop and operationalize measurement metrics.
- Expand the existing statewide assessment pilot Advancing a Massachusetts Culture of Assessment to address civic learning assessment.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, the MDHE Study Group report created the Massachusetts Civic Learning and Engagement Outcome Assessment Framework,<sup>22</sup> which specifies preliminary learning outcomes for civic knowledge, skills, values and action for students. The MDHE Study Group acknowledged the contributions of the Civic Engagement VALUE Rubric from the Association of American Colleges & Universities<sup>23</sup> and their Liberal Education and America's Promise initiative<sup>24</sup> in informing development of the Massachusetts Framework.

- **Civic and democratic knowledge** includes key historical documents, political structures and systems, rights and responsibilities of citizenship, social and political movements, and the contributions of diverse cultures.
- **Civic and democratic skills** encompass use of scientific reasoning and critical inquiry, understanding multiple perspectives, communication, teamwork and collaboration.
- **Civic and democratic values** include respect for freedom and human dignity, tolerance and appreciation of diversity, ethical integrity, civility and commitment to the greater good.





- **Civic and democratic action** encompass identifying root causes, working collectively to address shared problems, navigating political, social and economic systems, and planning and engaging in public action to improve the quality of life.

Initial assessment efforts focused on civic knowledge, with an assessment rubric being field tested during the 2015-2016 school year.

MDHE encourages institutions to further test the civic knowledge rubric and pilot test the civic values rubric to contribute to further refinement. An assessment rubric for civics skills is envisioned for future development.

Massachusetts student civic learning and engagement assessment resources include:

- [Massachusetts Civic Learning and Engagement Outcome Assessment Framework](#), (found in Appendix B of the Study Group Report).
- [Civic Learning Definition](#).
- [Civic Knowledge Rubric](#).
- [Civic Values Rubric](#).
- [Civic Learning Outcomes Resources](#).

## Integration of Civic Learning and Strategic Goals

Like every state higher education agency, the MDHE has a range of strategic goals. In 2016, from the larger set of goals, the MDHE identified what it calls its Big Three focused on improving college access, closing achievement gaps and raising college completion rates.

## TRACKING STUDENT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT BENEFITS

Participation in civic engagement and service-learning coursework brings substantial benefits that range from retention to graduation and employment income.

- MDHE found that students in service-learning courses at Mount Wachusett and Bristol Community Colleges between 2011-2016 showed a semester-to-semester retention rate more than 20 percent higher than students not in these courses. At North Shore Community College, within a degree-seeking cohort from 2011, students who participated in service-learning courses graduated between 2012-2014 at a rate double (34 percent vs. 17 percent) than students who did not participate in these courses.<sup>25</sup> A meta-analysis of service-learning impacts shows students who participated in service-learning:
  - Demonstrate significant positive gains in self-efficacy, attitudes toward school and learning, civic engagement, social skills and academic performance.
  - Demonstrate enhanced self-efficacy and self-esteem, an increase in positive attitudes and behaviors related to community involvement, and gains in social skills relating to leadership and empathy.<sup>26</sup>

A report from the University of Georgia showed that students who participated in community-engaged service-learning: made \$4,600 more annually in their first full-time job than comparable students; received their first raises more than two-and-a-half months sooner than those who had not taken service-learning courses.<sup>27</sup>



Civic learning and engagement, while a goal in itself, also contributes to each of these Big Three goals – particularly through civic engagement activities. Massachusetts service-learning mentoring courses reach into K-12 and help youth from under-represented populations construct a vision of college as a possibility in their own futures and develop the attitudes and skills that can get them to college and make them successful. A significant linkage between participation in civic engagement activities and retention to graduation for students generally, and for students in under-represented group specifically, has been shown both in national studies and in data collected from the Massachusetts campuses. Making the link between civic engagement and state educational goals related to student recruitment, retention, graduation and employment success can be a critical strategy for sustaining the commitment through shifts in administration, leadership and priorities.

## P-16 Civic Learning and Engagement Continuum

The Massachusetts civic learning commitment calls for civic learning opportunities throughout a students' public schooling and postsecondary education. To facilitate this alignment, the MDESE continues to develop the Preparing Citizens goals and plans, and aligned strategies for K-12 schools. Massachusetts became the first state in which the elementary and higher education departments and their boards are working collaboratively to establish an aligned continuum of civic learning and engagement throughout a student's educational experience.

In early 2014, MDESE held a special meeting on civic education, resulting in the creation of the MDESE Working Group on Civic Learning and Engagement (MDESE Working Group). The MDESE Working Group met over the next year to assess the status of Massachusetts' K-12 civic learning, identify resources and model practices, recommend opportunities to expand and infuse civic learning across the curriculum and to work with higher

education to develop a K-16 civic learning and engagement pathway. The MDESE Working Group also made strong efforts to expand stakeholder input, including conducting a civic learning survey in partnership with Massachusetts Association of Superintendents, holding a public hearing, and engaging the Massachusetts Student Advisory Council and the Massachusetts Council for the Social Studies.

Almost 60 percent of responding superintendents characterized the level of civic learning in their districts as insufficient. Superintendents strongly opposed additional course or testing requirements, instead calling for hands-on experiential civic learning opportunities, such as service-learning, project-based learning and capstone projects. The MDESE Working Group drew guidance from six effective civic learning practices recommended in [Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools](#)<sup>28</sup> and further developed in Education Commission of the States' [Guidebook: Six Proven Practices for Effective Civic Learning](#).<sup>29</sup> Another key resource included the National Council for the Social Studies' [College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards](#) (C3 Framework).<sup>30</sup> The C3 Framework supports active civic learning through an inquiry arc in which students conduct inquiry, apply disciplinary concepts and tools, evaluate and use evidence, communicate conclusions and take informed action.

MDESE Working Group recommendations approved by the MBESE include:

1. Provide training for civic life as part of college and career readiness, and establish a shared statewide K-16 definition of civic learning and engagement.
2. Establish a statewide network of five regional civic learning advisory councils to lead learning and engagement efforts.
3. Convene an annual conference in partnership with professional organizations to identify and promote promising civic learning pedagogies and practices.
4. Initiate revision of the history and social studies curriculum frameworks to include integration of the C3 Framework.



5. Establish funding support for district adoption and expansion of the six promising practices for effective civic learning.
6. Develop assessment strategies to evaluate civic learning student outcomes.

The collaborative efforts by the departments and their boards lay the groundwork for the first coordinated state civic learning commitment to students across a state K-16 continuum.

## Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Discussions with key stakeholders in the Massachusetts civic learning and engagement work identified several important lessons learned, including:

- **Prioritize broad and ongoing stakeholder engagement.** Identify the full range of partners engaged with civic learning and engagement, including government, education, legal, civic, nonprofit, business and media. Involve stakeholders early and often.
- **Build common understanding.** Start by establishing common definitions and shared understanding to support collective action and impact because several definitions exist for civic learning and engagement.
- **Leverage existing programs and models.** Many institutions already offer exemplary civic learning and engagement programs. In expanding the breadth and consistency of civic learning experiences, use current successful programs as models.
- **Balance requirements and accountability with autonomy and flexibility.** Craft statewide and institutional policies to provide a framework and incentives for action, but allow sufficient flexibility for partners to prioritize and customize approaches. While MDHE seeks to increase student participation as quickly as feasible, they advise campuses to avoid quick fixes, such as widespread course designations

without ensuring the quality of depth of civic learning components. MDHE would rather see a thoughtful approach to quality civic engagement, even if that means a slower or more gradual adoption.

- **Identify and support institutional champions.** Institutional action is often driven by champions in positions of leadership. Identifying and providing support for civic learning advocates, from seed funding to professional development, can catalyze action and success.
- **Address assessment challenges.** The absence of standardized assessment criteria for civic learning and engagement outcomes creates challenges for evaluating the success and impact of programs. Start by instituting course designations and integrating civic learning data into tracking and accountability systems. Consider what existing assessments and surveys could contribute toward civic learning data.
- **Anticipate setbacks and plan for sustainability.** Every ambitious project has setbacks. The fact that the University of Massachusetts has not yet brought their civic learning efforts into alignment with the statewide policy is an obstacle. Funding is a continuous struggle, even impacting the part-time MDHE director of civic learning and engagement position. Dedicated funding and staffing will help sustain implementation efforts. Create contingency plans to address funding cuts and other obstacles to ensure setbacks don't derail progress.

As they continue working to fully realize their vision of Preparing Citizens, Massachusetts already sees the impact of their renewed commitment to civic learning and engagement for all students. Significant implementation work remains on the individual campuses, additional resources are needed and the development and improvement of data and assessment systems continues. While still a work in progress, elevating the goal of Preparing Citizens to a core expectation of Massachusetts' public education, the adoption of a statewide higher education civic learning policy and initial implementation efforts on Massachusetts campuses provides a guide to other states committed to elevating civic learning and engagement for their students.



## TIMELINE

### 2009

- ➔ MBHE conceives a strategic planning effort, called the Vision Project, which is developed and launched by MDHE.

### 2010

- ➔ MBHE adopts the strategic goals developed through the Vision Project as a new public agenda for higher education.

### 2011

- ➔ MDHE conducts regional visits to meet with faculty governance leaders of all public higher education institutions.
- ➔ Special Commission on Civic Engagement and Learning authorized by the legislature.

### 2012

- ➔ MDHE questionnaire collects baseline data on public institution civic learning and engagement activities.
- ➔ Preparing Citizens outcome added to the Massachusetts strategic vision goals.
- ➔ MDHE Study Group on Civic Learning and Engagement established.
- ➔ Special Commission on Civic Engagement and Learning submits its report, *Renewing the Social Compact*.

### 2013

- ➔ Rooting Change: The Vision for Civic Engagement in Higher Education conference conducted.
- ➔ MDHE Study Group on Civic Learning and Engagement draft recommendations distributed to public campuses for comment.
- ➔ MDHE Study Group on Civic Learning and Engagement final report and recommendations released.

### 2014

- ➔ MDESE special meeting on civic education conducted.
- ➔ MDESE Working Group on Civic Learning and Engagement created.
- ➔ MBHE adopts Policy on Civic Learning.

### 2015

- ➔ MDHE Civic Learning Team develops course designations.
- ➔ Civic Learning and Student Success Action Summit conducted.
- ➔ MDHE creates the position of director of civic learning and engagement.
- ➔ MDESE Working Group submits their report, *Preparing Citizens: Report on Civic Learning and Engagement*.

### 2016

- ➔ Joint Agreement on College and Career Readiness amended by the MBHE and MBESE to include Civic Preparation.
- ➔ Civic Knowledge and Civic Values rubrics for assessing student civic learning outcomes drafted.
- ➔ Pathways to Civic Learning conference conducted.
- ➔ Civic Engagement and Service-Learning course designation process begins on Massachusetts public campuses.
- ➔ Campus data collection teams work to expand and improve the assessment of civic learning and engagement outcomes.

### 2017

- ➔ Civic Learning in Context conference conducted.



## ENDNOTES

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4. Massachusetts Study Group on Civic Learning and Engagement. *Final Report from the Study Group on Civic Learning and Engagement: Preparing Citizens* (Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2013, 3, <https://www.capecod.edu/files/service/vision-project.pdf>.
5. Ibid., 4.
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7. Ibid., 6.
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## AUTHOR

*Jan Brennan is a project leader with Education Commission of the States' National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement, supporting the development and success of programs that prepare students for full participation in democratic life. Outside of the office, Jan plays bass, runs agility courses with Chase the Dog and putters in the yard with her partner Michael. Contact Jan at [jbrennan@ecs.org](mailto:jbrennan@ecs.org) or 303.299.3661.*

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