

# Moving Democratic Learning from the Margins to the Core

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## For Democracy's Future:

Educators Reclaim Our Civic Mission

A White House Forum

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It's an honor to talk with you about the findings and recommendations of the report we are releasing today, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*. This new report is very much a companion piece to *Guardian of Democracy*, the 2011 report on the civic mission of our schools that Martha Kanter has just described. The core message of both these reports is captured in the subtitle of today's forum. We are calling on educators at all levels to reclaim our civic mission and to make both civic learning and democratic engagement widely shared expectations for all students at all levels, from school through college graduation.

We also are calling on educators to reinvent the way we prepare students to take responsibility for democracy, and to promote contemporary designs for civic learning that combine rich knowledge, including knowledge of democratic principles and practices, with direct, hands-on, face-to-face work in our communities that focuses on public problems that affect our future—problems like poverty, literacy, nutrition, health, and the environment.

The key idea in this report is that we need to prepare students with knowledge, for democratic community and problem solving. And we need to replenish our capacity to work constructively together, even when we disagree.

But before I talk about *Crucible's* specific recommendations, I want to acknowledge and thank some of the many people who contributed to this work: Martha Kanter and her colleagues at the Department of Education, the other members of the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, and Larry Braskamp of Global Perspectives Institute, who helped lead the broad national dialogue that informs the report. And we all want to salute our colleague, Caryn McTighe Musil, who served as the scribe and lead author for the task force. Most of all, I want to acknowledge all the other authors of this report, many of whom either are in this room today or are joining in this forum from other sites via live streaming. *A Crucible Moment* was written through a year-long dialogue with educators and civic leaders—both in higher education and in the schools—across the country. You—faculty, staff, presidents, school educators, civic leaders, students—helped us

frame the recommendations we're releasing today. But even more importantly, you have demonstrated, through work you already are doing, that what *Crucible* recommends is actually achievable for all our students.

So, what does this report recommend?

A *Crucible Moment* signals with its very title the scope and severity of the challenges Americans face at this moment in our history. Clearly, we have entered a period of turbulent, roiling, long-term change—change in the economy, change in the global community, changes in the way we interact with societies that are now taking on their own new roles on the world stage. We have always thought of ourselves as an opportunity society; now we face the reality of deepening economic divides and of growing worry that too many of our fellow Americans really are being left behind. Like earlier difficult eras in our history, this time of severe testing forces us back to foundational decisions about who we are as a society, what we believe, what it means to contribute, what we need to accomplish for our own citizens and for democratic movements that are emerging around the globe.

*Crucible* argues that, as we face these difficult and far-reaching questions, higher education can and should play a far more visible and influential leadership role in building the civic capital—intellectual, practical, and ethical—that democracy needs for a vibrant future. The report points to earlier “crucible moments” in American history—for example, the Civil War era, when the Morrill Act was passed, and the era following World War II—when our society turned directly to higher education to be the carrier of democratic ideals and practices. And this, we argue, is exactly what we need to do today.

But, as virtually everyone who took part in the national dialogue agreed, we need to face the unhappy reality that education's democratic mission has largely been pushed to the sidelines—both in the schools and in postsecondary education. For the past generation, we have talked—in public—ONLY about the connections between higher education and the economy. As the *Guardian of Democracy* report points out, we have focused our educational system, at all levels, primarily on two big C's—college and careers—while falling completely silent on that third big C, which is citizenship.

In its key recommendations, *Crucible* calls on us to challenge and change this public discourse and to work together—across school and college—on a contemporary framework for civic learning that includes and combines rich knowledge, strong skills, examined democratic values, and direct experience in contributing to the larger community. Thanks to the creativity of civic-minded educators around the country, the component parts for this new framework have already been put in place in some parts of higher education. The report provides many specific examples of these component parts, which include

- new curricular models for general education that explore democratic issues and dilemmas;
- curricular models for moving public issues and social responsibility directly into students' career preparation;

- powerful pedagogies—like intergroup dialogue, interfaith dialogue, and service learning—that teach people how to work together, even when they disagree;
- creative public partnerships between higher education and civic organizations to work over the long term in solving systemic problems and building healthy communities;
- new recognition that public scholarship—connected to community problems—is an important part of higher education’s democratic mission;
- new tools for assessing the result of our civic commitments.

These democratic innovations, while enormously promising, still are partial rather than pervasive.

The evidence suggests that, altogether, only about one-third of our students are taking courses that link their studies with community service, and only one-third strongly agree that college helps them really gain in their capacity to contribute to their communities. Moreover, while we know that participation in service learning is directly correlated with greater levels of both learning and college completion, and while we also know that completion is especially challenging for students who enroll in two-year institutions, only one in four community college students has had even one service-learning course. The goal for the immediate future needs to involve all our students, not just some of them, with the responsibilities of democratic citizenship.

The liberal arts and sciences “core curriculum” is part of this vision for twenty-first-century democratic learning, and *A Crucible Moment* calls for new attention in the core curriculum—both in school and in college—to the ideas, values, institutions, and contestations that continue to frame democracy at home and around the world. We salute institutions like Miami Dade College, which has already made civic engagement and social responsibility a general education requirement for all 150,000 of its first-generation students.

Yet general education is only a part of the civic-learning equation, the report points out. College majors—including those that prepare students directly for jobs—need to play their own part in teaching students what it means to take responsibility for democracy. In this spirit, we are recommending that “public questions” and “civic inquiry”—what some call “civic professionalism”—need to be incorporated into every field of study and every major. Those preparing for careers in science, health, engineering, education, public service, business, accounting, and the trades all need practical experience in examining the kinds of public questions with which every field inevitably wrestles. The report provides very specific examples of institutions, like Worcester Polytechnic in Massachusetts and California State University–Monterey Bay, where this kind of career-related civic learning already is a core part of each student’s academic major.

Many people are going to respond to this report by saying that this sounds like a good thing, but don’t we really need to focus, in these difficult times, on preparing students for jobs and the economy? But this is not an either/or choice. Employers are pleading with us to send them graduates who have a fuller understanding of global community AND who know how to work with others—in diverse teams—to solve complex problems. The

vision for democratic learning we provide in this report builds exactly that kind of knowledge and competence. When students learn how to work with others on civic challenges, they also develop skills and values that will help them solve problems in the workplace.

The long-term challenge, of course, is to move these inspiring models for democratic learning from the sidelines to the center. Civic-minded educators across the country have already created extraordinary demonstration sites for what can be done. Now we have to take democratic learning to scale. And that is our larger purpose today.

With this convening we intend to launch a broad effort to make this kind of democratic learning expected rather than optional, to make it a hallmark of American education at all levels and a self-renewing resource for democracy around the globe. The association I head pledges to play a coordinating role with a dozen additional national organizations and with all our 1,250 college and university members in taking this effort forward to fruition.

Democracy, as Dewey reminded us, needs to be born anew in every generation. With the release of this report, we and all of those who helped write it recommit ourselves, with deepened determination and with a creative plan for action, to the service of democracy's most profound ideals—for all our students and for the wider world.