TEACHING & LEARNING

Executive Summary: Civic Education Policy in Higher Education

CARAH ONG WHALEY | APSA CIVIC EDUCATION COMMITTEE

As one of its first initiatives, the recently established APSA Civic Education Committee sought to collect information about civic learning and civic education and related curriculum requirements at the college and university level. The goal is to create an archive of curricular requirements and produce a policy paper summarizing the current landscape to identify where civic education is already embedded in higher education, where significant gaps remain, and which institutional, system-level, and state policy pathways most shape whether students encounter meaningful civic learning before graduation. Similar efforts have been undertaken in K–12 education, but only limited data collection has been developed for higher education.

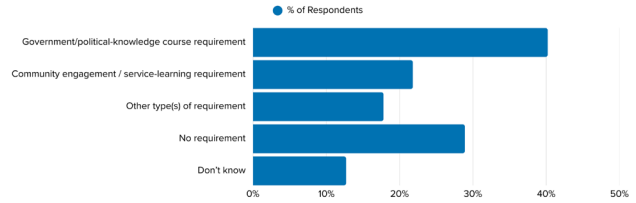
This analysis draws on the anonymized Civic Education Survey fielded by the American Political Science Association in fall 2025, along with additional responses to a similar survey fielded by the APSA Civic Education Committee in the same period. Responses were de-duplicated for a total of 353 unique respondents. Among the consenting APSA survey respondents, N=330 represented institutions across 45 states and the District of Columbia. A subset of 135 respondents out of the 353 unique respondents provided requirement language and/or a legislative reference or link, which allowed us to analyze qualitative differences in approaches.

The results point to a fragmented civic education landscape in higher education. Many respondents report formal civic learning requirements, but a sizable share report none at all, and the form these requirements take varies substantially by institution size, degree type, and institutional mission. In a moment when higher education has been politicized and is being pressed to justify its public value, demonstrate relevance, and respond to the growing role of states, boards, and university systems in shaping civic education through requirements and incentives, it is increasingly important to understand where civic learning is required, how it is defined, and who is responsible for teaching it. This is especially true because political science faculty and departments often teach the very courses that fulfill these requirements and have long contributed to scholarship on effective civic learning in higher education.

Among our main findings are:

- Course-based political/governmental knowledge requirements are the most common overall, with about four in ten respondents reporting this type of requirement.
- About one in five report community engagement requirements.
- About three in ten report no civic education requirement at all.
- Respondents from large institutions most often report course-based political/governmental knowledge requirements.
- Respondents from small, liberal arts, and religious institutions are more likely to report community engagement requirements.
- Respondents from small institutions are more likely to report institution-mandated requirements.
- Respondents from large institutions are also more likely to report state legislature mandates than respondents from medium or small institutions.

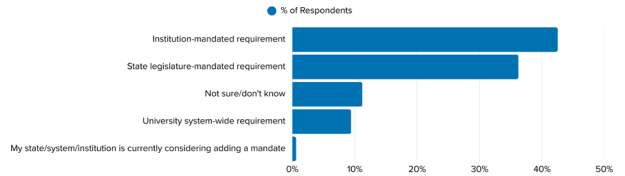
Requirements Reported



Because multiple options could be selected, the first three rows can overlap.

Among respondents who reported the level of a requirement, 42.9% said it was institution-mandated, 35.3% said it was state legislature-mandated, 11.2% were not sure, 9.4% reported a university system-wide requirement, and 0.6% said their state, system, or institution is currently considering adding a mandate.

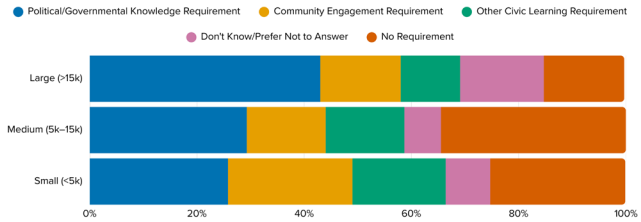
Governance Pathways



Respondents from small institutions were more likely to report institution-mandated requirements, while respondents from large institutions were more likely to report state legislature mandates than respondents from medium or small institutions.

© AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION 2026

Requirement by Institution Size



Broader state and university system policies suggest that civic education in higher education is expanding through multiple pathways, including legislative requirements, board or regent policies, general education frameworks, and civic engagement initiatives. Analysis of these efforts show differences in whether they emphasize civic literacy, constitutional knowledge, civil discourse, civic engagement, or active democratic participation.

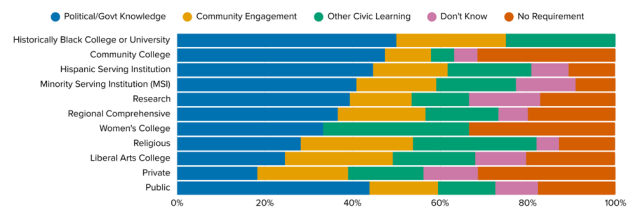
A FRAGMENTED CIVIC EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

The survey findings suggest that civic education in higher education remains uneven rather than universal. Course-based civic requirements are the most commonly reported, with about four in ten respondents reporting a government and political knowledge requirement. About one in five report engagement-based approaches. Roughly three in ten respondents report no civic education requirement.

These patterns vary across institutional settings. Respondents from large institutions most commonly report political or governmental knowledge requirements, with about 43% of respondents from large schools reporting this type of requirement, compared with roughly 29% at medium schools and 26% at small schools. By contrast, respondents from small institutions are most likely to report community engagement requirements, with about 23% reporting this requirement compared to 15% of respondents from medium-sized institutions and 15% of respondents from large-sized institutions. Respondents from medium institutions have the highest share reporting no civic education requirement at all, at 35%, compared with only 15% of respondents from large institutions reporting no requirement.

The survey also reveals meaningful differences by institution type. Respondents from HBCUs, Hispanic-Serving Institutions and community colleges most commonly report political or governmental knowledge requirements. By contrast, respondents from private institutions report the lowest rate of political or governmental knowledge requirements, at about 18%. Nearly one-third of respondents from private institutions, community colleges and women's colleges report no civic education requirement. Respondents from religious institutions (25.6%) and liberal arts institutions (24.6%) were most likely to report community engagement requirements.

Reported Requirement by Institution Type

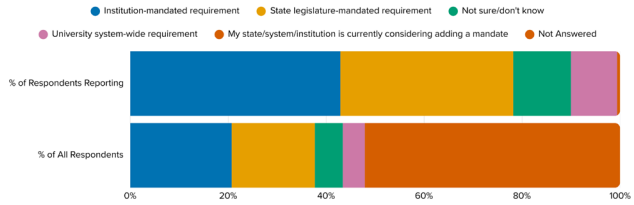


Taken together, these findings suggest there is no single dominant model of civic education in higher education. In some settings, civic learning is embedded through formal coursework focused on political and governmental knowledge. In others, it takes the form of community engagement or other civic learning requirements. In a substantial share of institutions, respondents report no formal requirement at all.

INSTITUTIONAL AND STATE PATHWAYS

The survey results also highlight different governance pathways, whether shaped internally by institutions or by state-level mandates. Among respondents who reported the level of a requirement, 42.9% said it was institution-mandated and 35.3% said it was state legislature-mandated. Smaller shares reported university system-wide mandates, uncertainty about the source of the requirement, or a requirement still under consideration.

Requirement Level (Where the Mandate is Located)



These pathways vary by institution size. Respondents from small institutions were more likely to report institution-mandated requirements, while respondents from large institutions were more likely to report state legislature mandates than respondents from medium or small institutions. This pattern suggests that smaller institutions may have more autonomy or a stronger internal inclination to establish civic requirements, while larger institutions are more likely to operate within statewide policy frameworks.

The broader state policy landscape also shows that civic education is entering higher education through multiple routes. According to the state-law summary compiled alongside this survey analysis, 14 states had policies related to civic education for public institutions of higher education as of February 2026. Most of these requirements share a common core: students must learn US history and constitutional principles, usually through a credit-bearing course, an exam, or both.

At the same time, states differ in what they ask civic education to accomplish. Most statutes focus narrowly on founding documents and civic knowledge. A smaller number more explicitly include civic proficiency, active participation, deliberative discussion, civil discourse, or engagement. South Dakota stands out for defining civics proficiency as "a comprehensive understanding of civic knowledge, values, and skills, enabling active participation in civic life as informed and responsible citizens." Arizona's Board of Regents emphasizes opportunities for students to practice civil discourse and civic engagement. Florida is distinctive in requiring deliberative engagement, including political discussions and civil debates.

BROADER NATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

Beyond legislated mandates, postsecondary civic education is also being advanced through other state and system-level mechanisms. The materials compiled for this project identify ex-

© AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION 2026

amples in Massachusetts and Virginia, where state policy and assessment expectations encourage institutions to treat civic learning as an expected undergraduate outcome or required competency. Other systems and agencies, including Arizona, Connecticut, Hawai'i, Kentucky, Maryland, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and SUNY, have incorporated civic learning into general education frameworks, student learning goals, experiential learning expectations, transferable skills, or public service initiatives.

These developments are important not only because they signal increased attention to civic education, but also because they show that the field is expanding along different lines. Some efforts focus primarily on American history, government, and constitutional literacy. Others connect civic learning to broader goals such as civic participation, democratic citizenship, civic responsibility, service learning, empathy, or public problem-solving. The national picture is therefore one of growth, but not uniformity.

CONCLUSION

The APSA Civic Education Committee survey provides an important baseline for understanding civic education policy in higher education. Civic education is present in many places, but uneven in form, governance, and scope. Some institutions and states emphasize civic literacy through required courses or exams. Others emphasize civic engagement, discourse, or broader democratic capacity.

Many institutions still appear to have no formal requirement at all. This suggests that higher education is still treating civic learning as uneven, optional, or peripheral rather than as a shared expectation of undergraduate education. If many institutions have no formal requirement at all, then whether students leave college with exposure to civic knowledge, constitutional principles, civil discourse, or community-engaged learning depends too heavily on where they enroll, what they major in, and whether they happen to seek out those opportunities on their own. This matters because higher education has long claimed a civic mission alongside its workforce and research missions. When civic learning is not embedded in the curriculum, colleges and universities risk producing graduates who are highly trained in specialized fields but unevenly prepared for democratic participation, public problem-solving, and informed engagement with institutions and public life. Our survey findings, taken together with the broader state-policy landscape, suggest that higher education is still not approaching civic preparation with the same consistency that it applies to other general education goals.

The APSA Civic Education Committee survey provides an important baseline for understanding civic education policy in higher education. It shows a landscape in which civic education is present in many places, but uneven in form, governance, and scope. Some institutions and states emphasize civic literacy through required courses or exams, others emphasize civic engagement, discourse, or broader democratic capacity, and many institutions still appear to have no formal requirement at all. These findings underscore the need for a systematic archive of higher education civic requirements and the policy contexts that shape them, so that the field can better understand where civic education is embedded, where gaps persist, and what institutional, system-level, and state policy levers most influence adoption. Ensuring widespread access to high-quality civic education is central to how higher education prepares the nation's next generation to serve as responsible, informed and active participants who can effectively address pressing public problems and continue our nation's experiment in constitutional self-governance.

METHODOLOGY

The findings presented here are based on the anonymized Civic Education Survey fielded by the American Political Science Association in fall 2025. The APSA survey included consenting respondents only (N=330) from 45 states and the District of Columbia. These responses were combined with additional responses to a similar survey fielded by the APSA Civic Education Committee in fall 2025 and de-duplicated, yielding a final dataset of 353 unique respondents. In addition, 135 consenting respondents provided requirement language and/or a legislative reference or link, allowing the analysis to pair survey responses with examples of institutional and state policy language. ■

© AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION 2026