

Coordination of Civics Education at Two- and Four-Year Higher Education Institutions in the State of Arkansas

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We survey course coordinators in sixteen political and social science departments at two- and four-year public and private colleges and universities in Arkansas to assess the state of civics education in the state. Specifically, we look at their curriculum focus, methods of education and employment of instructors, and how/if assessments of civics knowledge are conducted. Our snapshot indicates the lack of a standardized approach to civics education in Arkansas and an inconsistent picture of the state of civics knowledge, as perceived by those who oversee it. There is also some indication of concern by the latter about the civics literacy of students entering college-level civics courses.

Introduction

In a 2006 study that assessed students' understanding of the democratic institutions and ideals, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) sampled more than 25,000 students at grades four, eight, and twelve. It found that about two out of three students have basic civics knowledge, but that from 1998 to 2006, average scores improved only in grade four, with most of the improvement among lower-performing students (Lutkus and Weiss 2007). In the study, some 73 percent of fourth-grade students "scored at or above *Basic*, meaning they demonstrated at least a partial mastery of civics knowledge and skills fundamental for proficient work at their grade," and "24 percent ... scored at or above the *Proficient* level, meaning they demonstrated at least competency over challenging subject matter. It was noted that there was improvement across genders and the identified ethnic groups of White, Black and Hispanic (Lutkus and Weiss

2007). However, these rates do not give us confidence that our students are achieving civic literacy.

Understanding the value of civic literacy and achieving it is a complex process that requires a systematic coordination among many stakeholders. Coordination of classroom-based civics education is largely dictated by the states, and states take a variety of approaches to teaching, or not teaching, civics. Indeed, a 2003 study of 48 states' social studies standards, including civics, by the Albert Shanker Institute faults many states, including Arkansas, for failing to teach history and civics in a comprehensive fashion.¹ It recommends most states "overhaul their academic standards" (Albert Shanker Institute 2003). Regarding Arkansas, the study concluded that the state's standards lacked in their ability to politically educate citizens. The study called Arkansas standards "largely unteachable, overloaded as they are with more than 50 sweeping, complex but abstract processes for each grade span" (Gagnon 2003, 39). The report criticized Arkansas' teaching of civics as lacking common reference to "ideas, writings, personalities, events, and turning-points that might enable citizens from all walks of life to understand and talk with each other coherently about public affairs" (Gagnon 2003, 39). In addition, it should be noted that Arkansas does not assess social studies via pretests or posttests. Arkansas does however, participate in National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) testing (Herrick 2011).

¹ The Albert Shanker Institute lists itself as a nonprofit organization established in 1998 to honor the late president of the American Federation of Teachers. According to the Institute's mission statement, Shanker considered public education and trade unionism "indispensable to democracy." The 2003 report said that "education standards in only 24 states and the District of Columbia have documents that include, fully or partly, the specific study topics to make an adequate civic core of learning ... Yet, even in these cases, essential topics are scattered and lost in an overwhelming mass of material. Some standards cite a laundry list of topics and ideas that teachers must try to cram into the school day. Others provide only vague guidance about what is to be taught, while posing broad, sweeping themes and questions. The result is that standards are not even "coverable" in the time schools have. Much less are they teachable in imaginative, memorable ways" (Albert Shanker Institute Press Release 2003). The report reviewed official state standards and framework documents listing the middle- and high school topics and skills to be studied in social studies, civics, economics, geography and history and ranked them according to five criteria: (1) Are the essentials of a civic core specified early? (2) Are the topics teachable within the allotted time frame? (3) Do the documents provide a scope and sequence (partially met)? (4) Is the essential required of all students? (5) Are the important facts and ideas presented coherently across subjects? The source for evaluation of Arkansas was listed as the "Social Studies Curriculum Frameworks," Arkansas Department of Education, Revised, July 2000. Arkansas was ranked as having partially met the criteria in only category (3) and as having not met the criteria in the other four categories.

This generalized research conducted by the NAEP will have to substitute for an Arkansas-specific study. It is this lack of specific knowledge that we seek to correct with our research by examining the coordination of civics education in higher education in the state of Arkansas. Specifically, we survey course coordinators at ten four-year universities, 11 four-year private universities and 22 two-year universities in Arkansas to assess how civics education is being taught in the state.

Despite growing concern about a decline in civic literacy, the state has relatively low requirements for civic credits. For students graduating in 2012–2013, and prior to that school year, one unit of civics and one unit of civics/American government are required for graduation. However, for students graduating in 2013–2014 and thereafter, only one-half unit of civics is to be required for graduation, according to the Arkansas Department of Education's Rules Governing Standards for Accreditation of Arkansas Public Schools and School Districts, Standard IX (Herrick 2011).

This decline in civics education is not typical of every state. For instance, the state of Georgia, which in 2006 ranked highest among the states in college degree completion (Callan 2006), places more value on civics education at the pre-college level. The publishers of a text designed to prepare students for the Georgia Government Exam note that "citizens in our society [are] not expected to be political spectators but active participants ... Ours is not a spectator government but a participatory one. We must become knowledgeable and participate if we are to maintain our Republic as created by the Founders" (Digby and Wilkinson 2007, 2).

Literature Review

The need for more state attention in general to civics education is under scholarly discussion. Many scholars (Delli, Carpini, and Keeter 1996; Niemi and Junn 1998) link levels of political knowledge to the acceptance of democratic principles, attitudes toward specific issues and political participation; they in turn link these goals to formal education (Hoekema 2000). Yet, social science has not done enough research on how formal education addresses these goals (Campbell 2005), and especially how this is done at the college level. This has resulted in limited data for policy makers and therefore low policy priority.

Indeed, the literature on civics education that does exist has largely focused on adolescents, rather than college students. It has emphasized what impacts political engagement, (Beck and Jennings 1982; Hanks 1981; Smith

1999; Youniss, McLellan and Yates 1997; and Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995) and how service learning programs should be a class or graduation requirement (Billig 2000; Galston 2003; Niemi, Hepburn and Chapman 2000; and Walker 2002). Nevertheless, many strongly believe that higher education can play a powerful role in civic development (Beaumont 2005). The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (CIRCLE) says that colleges and universities should have a civic mission that includes educating students to be effective and responsible citizens (2006). While there are many emerging opinions on the role of colleges and universities in this effort, there is very little research on how to educate students to be effective and responsible citizens. One reason for this lack of research is that an early study by Langton and Jennings (1968) framed a generation of studies that concluded high-school civics courses had little or no impact on student political knowledge.

Niemi and Junn's (1998) analysis of the 1998 NAEP provided evidence to the contrary. They found that civics courses had a significant impact on adolescent political knowledge and were a significant predictor of political engagement (Delli, Carpini and Keeter 1996). Greene's (2000) re-analysis of Niemi and Junn's (1998) research subsequently narrowed this effect. While Niemi and Junn had concluded that taking a civics course led to an increase of about four percentage points on the NAEP, Greene found that the gain was only two percentage points, and was limited to students currently enrolled in a civics course. Still, this research showed that taking a civics course mattered a little, for a little while. Niemi and Junn's (1998) findings evidenced the need for greater knowledge about the most effective techniques for teaching civics (Campbell 2005).

Niemi and Junn did give us reason to believe that student performance on civics evaluations was linked positively to political discussion in the classroom (Campbell 2005), at least at the high-school level. While we have some evidence that civics education can have an impact, there is disagreement among scholars about how it should be done. For instance, after studying undergraduate students entering twelve colleges and universities immediately after high school, Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont and Stephens (2003) recommended integrating moral and civic education into the curriculum. They also encouraged efforts to enhance critical-thinking skills and gain appreciation for other cultures and perspectives. Fonté (2008), however, was highly critical of this emphasis on service-learning pedagogy and universal human rights, over the study of historical and philosophical underpinnings of the American liberal democratic state. He was especially critical of fusing moral purpose and civic engagement, including social

justice, which he says has “left-of-center political connotations for many people” (466).

Hutchens and Eveland (2009) also took up the debate over traditional learning versus other methods in their contrast of the effect of two study methods – discussing media sources and engaging in political debate – on civic participation, political knowledge, internal political efficacy, political cynicism, news elaboration, discussion elaboration, and interpersonal and mediated political communication behaviors. They found both teaching approaches correlated negatively with civic outcomes. However, their study was limited to single Ohio urban school district.

A study of 28 nations, including the United States, concluded that discussion of political issues in the classroom helped students’ civic proficiency (Torney-Purta 2002, Torney-Purta and Richardson 2005; Torney-Purta 2001–2002). This work backed up a similar conclusion from a previous cross-national study of civics education by Torney, Oppenheim and Farnen (1975). Campbell (2005) found that classroom environment affected civic proficiency and future intentions to be politically engaged. Several scholars have emphasized the need to make civics education relevant across the generations so the material is better retained (Syvertsen, Flanagan and Stout 2007; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins and Delli Carpini 2006). They also encourage such activities as deliberative classroom discussions, mock elections and community service (Feldman, Pask, Romer and Hall Jamieson 2007; McDevitt, Kiouisis, Wu, Losch and Ripley 2003; McIntosh and Muñoz 2009; Syvertsen, Flanagan and Stout 2007). Sloam (2008) suggested a bottom-up, interactive, active-learning approach in which students were encouraged to explore their political interests and understanding.

Scholars also are pointing to the need for assessment of what is taught (Beaumont 2005; McIntosh and Muñoz 2009). Beaumont (2005), for instance, says much more formal assessment is needed to determine the effect of moral and civics learning programs. However, she also notes that assessment may require extra training and oversight. And, she says, it is helpful to look at high-quality models developed by others. She recommends the annual freshman survey run by the University of California’s Higher Education Research Institute (UCLA/HERI); the National Survey of Student Engagement; and the models used by Campus Compact.

Therefore, the gaps in our knowledge about civic education, and the uncertainty about how to conduct it, point to the need for more study on what is being done and if it is effective. It is with this in mind that we look at

how universities and colleges in Arkansas are addressing certain elements of civics education.

Methodology

We conducted interviews from the fall of 2009 through the summer of 2010 with coordinators of American National Government (ANG) courses in political science and social science at two-year and four-year public institutions, and four-year private higher education institutions, in Arkansas.² We chose to survey course coordinators, rather than others involved in civics education, out of time and resource considerations and because these coordinators have power to change the way civics is taught. They also have a broad view of their departments needs and the campus needs.

We contacted every college and university in Arkansas via email and telephone. We got a response from 17 out of 44 coordinators at eight four-year public universities; two four-year private universities and seven public two-year colleges (see Table 1).³ According to our research, several colleges or universities (two of the four-year private universities and one of the two-year colleges) do not offer an American National Government or related class.

Our survey consisted of a set of guided, semi-structured interview questions in which we encouraged participants to describe how many sections of ANG courses were taught each semester, the average number of students per section, the content of the civics courses, who was teaching them, and if and how evaluations were implemented. Our first set of questions sought to provide a basic description of how many classes, on average, of civics or American National Government were taught each semester and how many students on average were enrolled in these courses during the fall of 2009 or fall of 2010. Our goal was to obtain a baseline assessment of the perceptions of civics literacy and an understanding of how civics education is coordinated in the state of Arkansas.

² American National Government or a related class, including *Introduction to Political Science*.

³ This relatively low response rate is not uncommon in a survey. Additionally, department chairs and coordinators are inundated by requests for information. The greatest participation in this study came from four-year public schools (eight out of ten responded). In comparison, the response rate from four-year public schools was two out of eleven. For two-year community colleges and technical schools, the response rate was seven out of twenty-two. We obtained the lists of colleges and universities from the Arkansas Department of Education (2009).

A second set of questions sought to provide a qualitative evaluation of how much freedom course instructors have in designing the civics courses they

Table 1. Arkansas Universities and Colleges' Study Participants by Name, Location, and Years of Study Offered

Institution	Location	Public/Private	Years of Study
University of Central Arkansas	Conway	Public	4 year
University of Arkansas	Fayetteville	Public	4 year
University of Arkansas	Fort Smith	Public	4 year
University of Arkansas	Little Rock	Public	4 year
University of Arkansas	Pine Bluff	Public	4 year
Arkansas Tech University	Russellville	Public	4 year
Southern Arkansas University	Magnolia	Public	4 year
Arkansas State University	Jonesboro	Public	4 year
Ouachita Baptist University	Arkadelphia	Private	4 year
Central Baptist College	Conway	Private	4 year
Arkansas State University	Beebe	Public	2 year
Arkansas State University	Mountain Home	Public	2 year
Black River Technical College	Pocahontas	Public	2 year
Northwest	Bentonville	Public	2 year
ArkansasCommunity College			
Pulaski Technical College	North Little Rock	Public	2 year
Southeast Arkansas College	Pine Bluff	Public	2 year
South Arkansas Community College	El Dorado	Public	2 year

teach. A third set of questions on evaluation surveyed whether or not pre- and post-assessments of civics knowledge (before and after taking an ANG class) were conducted and if course coordinators would be interested in doing this online. We asked this because of an expressed interest by members of the Arkansas Political Science Association in conducting a more, large-scale study that compares efforts at various institutions. A fourth set of questions on demographics sought to describe the population we surveyed.

The study was limited by the number of participants, which hinders generalizability. However, we believe that, as with grounded research, the reader can make inferences into his or her own programs (Strauss and Corbin 1998) from this data, much as one would a case study, ascertaining what resonates with their assessments of their students' civic literacy. In addition, our sample includes some of the major institutions in Arkansas.

Findings

Number of Sections of ANG; Average Enrollment

The participating colleges and universities in this study offered an average of eight sections of ANG in the fall of 2009. A two-year public college, Pulaski Technical College, offered the most sections of all the participants (20), exceeding that of the four-year institutions. Ranking second (with 18) was the University of Central Arkansas, a four-year public university, followed by another two-year public college, Northwest Arkansas Community College (17). The average number of students per section was 43. Two public two-year colleges well exceeded that by each having 70 students in their two sections: Southeast Arkansas College and South Arkansas Community College. The University of Arkansas-Fayetteville had on average the highest number of students per section (100). For this flagship university, it is not atypical to have two or more sections each semester that enroll more than 150 students per section.

Several of the four-year public institutions had 50 students in each of their sections: the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith (in each of its seven sections), the University of Arkansas-Little Rock (in each of its five sections) and Arkansas State University-Jonesboro (in each of its ten sections) (see Table 2).

The participants in this study revealed that 29 percent of the colleges and universities employ full-time instructors and 35 percent employ mostly full-time instructors.⁴ The two-year schools are less likely to employ full-time instructors. At the two-year colleges and technical schools that responded, half or fewer of the instructors were employed full-time (see Table 3).

⁴ Initially, we asked this question open-endedly, which provided a variety of responses. Several participants reported ratios, and some reported percentages. For the purposes of comparison, we devised the following coding system: (1) all instructors were considered full-time if participants responded all, or 100%; (2) most of the instructors were considered full-time if the response was 60% to 90%, or a ratio that equaled that; (3) half the instructors were considered full-time if the response was 50%–60%, or a ratio that equaled that; (4) less than half the instructors were considered full-time if the response was 40%–50%, or a ratio that equaled that; (5) few of the instructors were considered full-time if the response was 10%–40%, or a ratio that equaled that; and (6) none of the instructors was considered full-time if the response was less than 10%.

Table 2. Average Number of Reported Sections of American National Government or Related Courses Taught Each Semester and Students Per Section

	Average No. of Sections	Average No. of Students
University of Central Arkansas	18	35
University of Arkansas-Fort Smith	7	50
University of Arkansas-Fayetteville	11	100
University of Arkansas-Little Rock	5	50
University of Arkansas-Pine Bluff	6	40
Arkansas Tech University	6	50
Southern Arkansas University	3	25
Arkansas State University-Jonesboro	10	50
Ouachita Baptist University	1	20
Central Baptist College	12	40
Arkansas State University at Beebe	5	30
Arkansas State University-Mountain Home	3	30
Black River Technical College	8	15
Northwest Arkansas Community College	17	30
Pulaski Technical College	20	25
Southeast Arkansas College	2	70
South Arkansas Community College	2	70
Average number	8	43

Are Full-Time Instructors Teaching American National Government or Political Science?

Table 3. Number of Full-Time vs. Part-Time Instructors Teaching American National Government or a Related Course

All the instructors are full-time	29%
Most of the instructors are full-time	35%
Half the instructors are full-time	12%
Less than half the instructors are full-time	12%
Few of the instructors are full-time	0%
None of the instructors is full-time	12%

Do Instructors Teaching American National Government or Political Science Hold a Ph.D.?

The participants in this study revealed that 41 percent of the colleges and universities employed instructors with Ph.D.'s, and 29 percent of the colleges

and universities mostly hired instructors with Ph.D.s.⁵ Most of these responses came from the four-year public and private institutions. The two-year community colleges mostly employed instructors with Master's degrees (see Table 4).

Table 4. Number of Instructors Holding a Ph.D. that are Teaching American National Government or a Related Course

All of the instructors have a Ph.D.	41%
Most of the instructors have a Ph.D.	29%
Half of the instructors have a Ph.D.	0%
Less than half of the instructors have a Ph.D.	0%
Few of the instructors have a Ph.D.	6%
None of the instructors has a Ph.D.	24%

What is Taught?

A great majority (65 percent) of the ANG courses taught focused on the fundamentals of government, according to the survey. A small number of participants (6percent) said their focus was on a variety of civil liberties and/or rights. Some participants said there was no one focus in the courses taught and that many instructors approached the subject quite differently. The expertise of the instructors often determined the focus of the course, especially at many of the four-year public and private institutions (see Table 5). Of course these were also the institutions most likely to employ instructors with PhDs.

⁵ Initially, we asked this question open-endedly, which provided a variety of responses. Several participants provided ratios, and some provided percentages. For the purposes of comparison, we devised the following coding system: (1) all instructors were considered to have a Ph.D. if participants' response was all or 100%; (2) most of the instructors were considered as having a Ph.D. if the response was 60%–90%, or a ratio that equaled that; (3) half of the instructors were considered to have a Ph.D. if the response was 50%–60%, or a ratio that equaled that; (4) less than half of the instructors were considered to have a Ph.D. if the response was 40%–50% , or a ratio that equaled that; (5) few of the instructors were considered to have a Ph.D. if the response was 10%–40%, or a ratio that equaled that; and (6) none of the instructors was considered to have a Ph.D. if the response was less than 10%, or none.

Table 5. What is Taught in American National Government or Related Courses?

Focus on fundamentals	65%
A variety of topics	29%
Focus on civil liberties and rights	6%

Do Instructors Have Freedom to Develop Their Course Curriculum?

The participants in this study said that a majority of instructors that teach American National Government (65percent) have some freedom to develop their curriculum, while 29 percent of participants said that their instructors had total freedom to develop their curriculums. Most of these responses came from the four-year public and private colleges and universities. A small number of community colleges and one four-year public institution (6percent) reported that their instructors followed a curriculum developed by the department (see Table 6).

Table 6. Do Instructors Have Freedom to Develop Their Course Curriculum?

Instructors have some freedom to develop curriculum	65%
Instructors have total freedom to develop curriculum	29%
Instructors have no freedom to develop curriculum	6%

Do Instructors Have Freedom to Choose Their Course Textbooks?

Among participants, 35 percent of instructors that taught ANG reported they had total freedom to choose their course textbook, while 18 percent reported that their instructors had a great amount of freedom to choose their texts. Most of these responses came from four-year public and private colleges and universities.

A large number of participants (47percent) revealed that their instructors adopted the textbook chosen by the department. Most of these participants were two-year community colleges; a few four-year public universities also reported that their departments chose the text. Some participants described the department's choice of textbook as a "group effort" (see Table 7).

Table 7. Do Instructors Have Freedom to Develop Their Course Textbooks?

Departments choose textbooks	47%
Instructors have total freedom to choose textbook	35%
Instructors have a great amount of freedom to choose textbook	18%

Are Evaluations Conducted, and if So, How?

Half the participants (50percent) reported that they conducted assessments of students' civics knowledge before and after they took an ANG class, while 44 percent reported they did not. But 69 percent reported conducting post-assessments, and 56 percent said they would be willing to conduct assessments online (see Table 8).

Table 8. Pre- and Post-Assessments of Students' Civics Knowledge in Connection with American National Government Classes

	Yes	No	"Maybe"
Are pre-assessments conducted?	50%	44%	6%
Are post-assessments conducted?	69%	31%	0%
Are you open to conducting assessments online?	56%	13%	31%

Select Demographics of Survey Participants and Participant Comments

On average, participants in our study had chaired their sections for six years, giving them enough time to evaluate their efforts. Participants obviously shared the concern of scholars about the state of civics education. Among their comments were: "Students are not very aware of the political world around them"; "Because students aren't required to take American National Government after the ninth grade, they are lacking knowledge and motivation"; "Encouraging civic participation should be a campus-wide activity"; and "Student knowledge resembles the hourglass distribution, [as] large groups have below or above average [knowledge], and only a small group in the middle have average knowledge."⁶

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In this study, we have attempted to provide an initial snapshot of the coordination of civic literacy at the college level in Arkansas by surveying the course coordinators of ANG at 16 two-year and four-year public and private colleges and universities. Participants in our study revealed to us their growing concern that students are not literate in civic knowledge. The participants struggled to balance the academic freedom of instructors with attempts to standardize the curriculum, course objectives and assessments.

⁶ According to Herrick (2011), the Arkansas Department of Education does not specify in which grade students must take the required social studies courses; rather this is a district decision.

It was also apparent from the findings of this study that offerings of civics courses and the coordination of their teaching varied depending on the size of the school. While the smaller two-year community colleges were less likely to have an instructor with a Ph.D., they were more likely to have a smaller class size. Additionally, the smaller schools were more likely to standardize the course objectives and textbook. The instructors of larger schools may have more freedom to choose their textbook, but they teach much larger classes.

Overall, most of the schools attempted to evaluate their students in some way, and many were open to conducting this assessment online. Many participants mentioned they would be interested in producing an assessment that could be used to compare campuses.

In its 2002 report, “Greater Expectations Report: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College,” the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) recommended that students be taught through their civics courses to be more responsible for their personal actions, more dedicated to the values that support a democratic society, more actively engaged as contributing citizens and more tolerant of diversity (AACU 2002). The AACU report, along with others, indicated that civics literacy is being viewed as increasingly important. However, the educational process we use to achieve civic literacy is complex, as demonstrated by our study and that of others. And certainly more study is needed of the college-level efforts in this regard.

For universities, assessment requirements and financial concerns are driving the demand for courses to meet desired learning objectives. Such factors also are raising the question of whether effective measurement requires more standardized approaches to civics education, including textbook selection. The state of Georgia provides one, state-standardized model of pre-college assessment in this regard. Ultimately, the emphasis on civic literacy and its assessment requires some basic agreement on what we consider to be a healthy democracy and how our students can be prepared to contribute to that.

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