MJCSL Introduction to the Special Volume

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Abstract

This introduction provides an overview of the conceptual framework for this special volume. It outlines the origins of the "core commitments and building blocks of civic identity," identifies how each of the contributions connect to this framework, and offers some insights on how such a framework might help advance the field of community service-learning and related efforts.

Introduction

Higher education institutions in the U.S. have played a central role in preserving and renewing democracy, and nearly every college or university's mission includes some version of "to educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society" (as seen in Harvard's mission). Of course, this civic purpose has been just one of the functions of higher education, competing with other goals like social efficiency and social mobility. The attention this purpose has received has fluctuated over time and across institutions (Labaree, 1997). Since the 1980s, preparing students as citizen-leaders increasingly involved some combination of co-curricular volunteer service, service-learning, and community engagement. Today, the centers and programs that support this work aim to help students think critically about their relationships with communities, develop an understanding of pressing social and environmental issues and the skills needed to address them, and work with others to improve community outcomes. Yet, scholars in the field have criticized this approach as lacking in explicit attention to the civic and political dimensions of community work (Colby et al., 2007). Calls for greater attention to the civic formation of college students have only increased in the wake of the polarizing 2016 and 2020 elections and the activism and advocacy following the murder of George Floyd.

In *What Universities Owe Democracy,* Ronald J. Daniels, Grant Shreve, and Philipp Spector (2021) argue that with liberal democracy faltering and autocracy expanding globally, today's colleges and universities must reestablish their role in supporting democracy. The authors identify four distinct functions where higher education must play a role: social mobility, citizenship education, the stewardship of facts, and the cultivation of pluralistic, diverse communities. By these measures, our current approaches often fall short. As Daniels (2021) argue:

> (...) service learning, on its own, is not an education in democracy. It generally does not seek to explain why democratic values matter or to ask hard questions, such as why democracies have fallen short of the values

> they proclaim. It is not designed to nurture affinity for democracy as a system of popular governance. And it does not aim to provide students with the knowledge necessary to engage with or reshape democratic institutions. Service learning has, in this one respect, become a crutch: a way for university presidents to celebrate civic engagement without explicitly having to provide a civic education (...).

Given the current state of our democracy, it would be difficult to claim that efforts to educate citizens and citizen-leaders have been successful. We lack a common language and a shared understanding of what it means to educate for active citizenship and how this should be accomplished.

There are a number of factors that prevent the development, articulation, or adoption of a shared framework related to civic education. First, a pluralistic, diverse democracy demands that we explore and create different meanings and approaches to educating in this domain. Second, higher education is not immune to competitive forces–each institution wants to claim that it produces the best doctors, lawyers, etc., and yes, perhaps even the best citizens. Third, as a field we use a dizzying number of overlapping terms (civic engagement, community service, community engagement, service-learning, community-based learning, experiential learning, etc.) that make it challenging to forge a shared vision for how higher education can contribute to students' civic development. Fourth, even when community-engaged practitioners can agree on principles (such as reciprocity with community partners), student-level outcomes are often considered to be too context-dependent to be shared or measured across different institutions.

Despite these and other factors that keep us from adopting shared student outcomes regarding civic education, the time may have come for our field to consider whether we can better defend democracy through a more coherent shared framework and language, as opposed to specific student civic learning outcomes at the program or campus level.[1] The good news is that there is remarkable similarity across institutions already, and there have been some efforts to try to understand or establish a foundation for educating for effective citizenry.

Since Dwight Giles and Janet Eyler published a groundbreaking compendium in 1999 (*Where's the Learning in Service Learning?*), there have been important efforts to map civic learning outcomes at both the postsecondary and K-12 levels. Outcomes are often framed as 'core competencies' and include reference to specific knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors.

Recent efforts to articulate or map outcomes at the K-12 level include the 2021 *Educating for American Democracy* (2021) report and roadmap by published by iCivics, and several publications from the Institute for Scholars and Citizens, including *From Civic Education to a Civic Learning Ecosystem: A Landscape Analysis and Case for Collaboration* (2019) and *Mapping Civic Measurement* in (2023).

Some postsecondary examples include AAC&U's 2012 publication ***A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future***, and the Center for Engaged Democracy's compilation of core competencies for civic engagement (Butin et. al., 2012). Steinberg, Bringle and Hatcher (2008) mapped common civic learning objectives that can guide the design, implementation, and assessment of curricular and co-curricular civic engagement programs in the Civic-Minded Graduate, and Bringle and Wall (2020) subsequently found correlations between

1 It is important to note the difference between a framework (or road map) and specific outcomes.

this framework, civic identity, and student interest in charity, service programs, and advocacy types of service. In 2020, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences described the importance of civic education in *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*, and in *What Liberal Education Looks Like: What It Is, Who It's For, & Where It Happens*, the Association of American Colleges & Universities (2020) forcefully reasserted that liberal education offers the best preparation for work, citizenship, and life.

Despite these and other efforts, very few colleges or universities have adopted a framework or a particular requirement focused on citizenship and civic identity development. The authors of the Warren Wilson College case in this volume offer one example and describe the challenges they faced navigating language at a small, liberal arts institution. Stanford University is a notable exception, having recently adopted a new first-year required Civic, Liberal and Global Education sequence that includes a course on citizenship in the 21st century. Debra Satz, dean of the College of Humanities and Sciences, and Dan Edelstein, one of the architects and director of the effort, make a powerful argument that the lack of a shared intellectual framework has fueled intolerance and increased polarization. They suggest that "civic education" equips students "to live in a democratic society whose members will inevitably disagree on many things" (2023).

We suspect the readers of this journal have an understanding of the current state of civic education, and there are a wide variety of disciplinary domains required of a holistic approach to the proposed core commitments and building blocks of a civic identity. It would be impractical to adequately cover, in this short introduction, the literature from the disciplines relevant to developing the capacity to engage constructively across differences: communication, political science, sociology, psychology, social psychology, among others. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, taking a conventional academic literature review approach would be contrary to how the framework was developed, which was (and continues to be) an inquiry informed by the experience and wisdom of practitioners as well as scholars engaged in community-based learning and research.

Origin Story of the Core Commitments and Building Blocks

This special volume has its origins in a process that started at a single campus and led to a broader conversation with educators at colleges and universities across the country. In 2015, the Haas Center for Public Service at Stanford University launched Cardinal Service, a university-wide effort to elevate public service and civic engagement as an essential element of the Stanford experience. Cardinal Service employed a "networked approach" that recognized that public service, serving-learning, and community engaged learning and research were not the purview of a single center, but an institution-wide responsibility that required deep commitments from across campus. The Haas Center was created in 1985, when few campuses had well-developed infrastructure to support community engagement, and the success of the Cardinal Service initiative relied upon and was emblematic of the progress that has been made in postsecondary environments over the past 35 years. Indeed, few campuses are without some developed infrastructure and programming that supports student involvement in both extracurricular and course-based community engagement.

In 2018, in the nascent stages of the development of a new strategic plan, the Haas Center developed a vision that focused on the cultivation of civic identity. However, we did not define what we meant by "civic identity". Since we had moved to a networked approach, it was important that stakeholders from across the university be engaged in the conversation about how the concept of civic identity was understood and manifested in different areas. We sought to create a framework that was malleable to a variety of program-specific outcomes and could also provide meta-level guidance for what ought to be considered in a holistic, integrated approach to developing civic identity.

An initial version of a framework for exploring civic identity was developed by Lauren Etchells, Alexandra Koch, Megha Parwani, and Thomas Schnaubelt, and a series of conversations took place with stakeholders (students, faculty, staff, and partners) at Stanford University during the summer of 2021. The civic identity framework was further explored through individual conversations with leaders in the field and during a national webinar hosted by Campus Compact in February 2022. The framework was subsequently refined for the *Core Commitments and Building Blocks of a Healthy Civic Identity* White Paper that guided the call for submissions to this special volume. Each iteration of the framework focused on a series of questions to consider rather than predetermined, standard outcomes. Our hope in sharing this framework with colleagues, and in editing a volume that uses it as a conceptual guide, is to provoke further conversations (and more importantly, collective action) on what a civic identity is and ***how we measure our success in cultivating a healthy civic identity*** on our campuses. We believe doing so is a critical step in reestablishing our collective role in preserving and renewing democracy.

The ultimate goal of all aspects of this project is to bring people together around a shared commitment to developing a shared vocabulary and understanding of the multidimensional and interdependent efforts necessary to improve civic learning for future generations. We found broad consensus that we need to fundamentally rethink and enrich the ways we prepare young people to be successful citizens in a democracy, but until those of us who work in this space have a clearer understanding of the formation of students' civic identities and a shared vocabulary to describe it, systemic change is unlikely. This is true at both an individual institution and within an entire field. In order to decide what needs to be done, how it should be done, and how to assess our progress along the way, we first needed to bring leaders together around a common understanding of the challenges before us.

The Concept and Terminology of "Civic Identity"

Literature on the concept of "civic identity" reveals that it is both intuitive and amorphous. Hart, Richardson, and Wilkenfeld (2011) suggest that civic identity can be understood as "a set of beliefs and emotions about oneself as a participant in civic life." L. Lee Knefelkamp (2008) offers a broad definition of civic identity. Knefelkamp suggests that civic identity involves an attempt to *locate one's self in community* and is comprised of four essential characteristics:

a) it is developed through engagement with others;
b) it is distinct from, but deeply connected to complex intellectual and ethical development;
c) it is a holistic practice that requires the integration of critical thinking and the capacity for empathy; and,
d) it is a deliberately chosen and repeatedly enacted aspect of the self.

Like Knefelkamp, we posit a concept of "civic identity" that extends beyond civic competence and habits of active democratic participation. Rather than providing a definition, we present the following observations about the nature of civic identity for consideration.

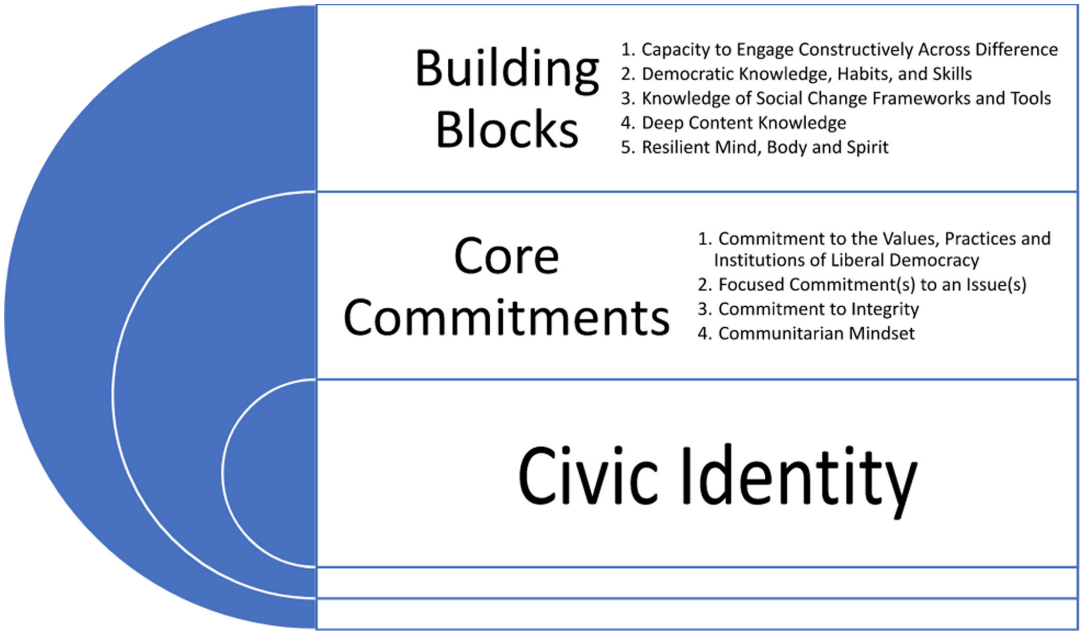
- Civic identity is developed through the habitual interrogation of one's individual responsibility as a member of a community (or communities), and by routinely considering how actions impact others.
- Civic identity depends on a level of self-awareness requisite for interrogation of matters related to dynamics within oneself and between oneself and others.
- Civic identity operates at multiple levels of community. Individual's civic identities are a set of beliefs and emotions related to who they are with respect to communities that they are members of–whether at the uber-local level (neighborhood), or the state, regional, national or global levels.
- Civic identity is closely connected to an individual's moral and ethical development and beliefs.
- Civic identity requires intentionality regarding political orientation, but should not be equated with political ideology. While the formation of political commitments is part of developing a civic identity, having a civic identity is not predicated on choosing a specific political orientation. Conservatives, liberals, and other orientations are all expressions of civic identity. While the concept of civic identity requires one to answer the question, *"what is your individual responsibility to a larger community?*," this question doesn't require a specific answer. A healthy civic identity involves intentionality and well-reasoned consideration of that question.
- Civic identity relies upon the continuous development of knowledge and skills required to be informed and effective members of a community. It requires an individual to understand the mechanisms of participation and how to influence change within a particular community (e.g., voting, organizing, volunteering, etc.). Individuals with highly functional civic identities often understand and engage in multiple pathways of civic engagement and public service, and are adept at code-switching across various forms of social change.
- Civic identity is connected to, but distinct from, other identities. A healthy civic identity relies on the continual formation and understanding of one's other various identities: personal, cultural, ethnic, career, spiritual, and others.
- Civic identity requires a commitment to democratic dispositions, such as maintaining an understanding of current events, thinking critically, fostering equity and inclusion, listening generously and engaging in courageous conversations across difference, and cultivating a sense of belonging.

- At an institutional level, the cultivation of civic identity requires an unwavering commitment to ethical and effective service, cultural humility, an expansive view of public service, and opportunities to use knowledge and research to address the pressing issues of today and to anticipate those of tomorrow.
- Democracies[2] function best when citizens have well-developed civic identities.

The use of the term "civic identity" conveys not only a connection to other identities, which invites consideration of the intersectionality and positionality of our own identities, but also transmits that the process of developing one's civic identity is complex, dynamic, and (most importantly) a lifelong journey. Our challenge is to operationalize the concept of civic identity in and across higher education settings in ways that acknowledge our different contexts yet enable us to learn more effectively from one another. We offer a framework of three core commitments and six building blocks that serves as a foundation for considering the development of a healthy civic identity. Each must be attended to in a holistic way for the foundation to be strong, and those of us dedicated to fulfilling our institutions' civic purposes must find ways to rigorously assess our efforts in each of these areas.

Overview of Civic Identity Core Commitments and Building Blocks

Our proposed framework for the development of a healthy civic identity comprises the following four core commitments and five building blocks.



2 As noted in the Council of Europe brief on democracy,"there are as many different forms of democracy as there are democratic nations in the world." While the ideas and observations in this paper are based mostly on democracy within the US, the basic commitments and building blocks described in this paper are applicable across democratic societies.

Core Commitments

1. **Commitment to the Values, Practices, and Institutions of Liberal Democracy** – There is an interdependent relationship between a commitment to the values of liberal democracy and our ability to realize a more socially just and sustainable world. A healthy civic identity requires an understanding of, and dedication to, democratic ideals, as well as a willingness and ability to act when values, practices, and institutions are threatened or fail to deliver.
2. **Focused Commitment(s) to an Issue(s)** – This commitment is inseparable from the content knowledge-building block. Having commitments without knowledge about the issues is ineffective, and having knowledge without commitments renders one rudderless or immobile.
3. **Commitment to Integrity** – Integrity is an active practice; not a static virtue. It is deeply connected to the first two core commitments. Integrity involves honesty, reliability, respect, and the ability to generate trust. People with integrity do what they say they will do. As part of our civic identity framework, a core commitment to integrity is manifested by a regular and rigorous personal assessment of how one's actions, speech, and thoughts align with one's commitments to democratic values and the issues that are most meaningful to them. Integrity requires regular reflection and realignment.
4. **Communitarian Mindset**[3] – This involves a delicate balance between independence and interdependence. It manifests in how one interacts with others to advance the *common* good.

Building Blocks

1. **Capacity to Engage Constructively Across Difference** – A healthy civic identity requires that we build the capacity to engage constructively across the full-spectrum of socio-economic, cultural, and political issues that often divide us.
2. **Democratic Knowledge, Habits, and Skills** – While individual campuses or programs must define and articulate these outcomes for themselves, democratic knowledge, habits, and skills are the mission and enduring value of liberal education.
3. **Knowledge of Social Change Frameworks and Tools** – The development of a healthy civic identity requires an understanding of the different ways by which one can affect social change and the tools needed to be effective. Examples include the *Pathways of Public Service and Civic Engagement* curated by Campus Compact, Stanford University's *Principles of Ethical and Effective Service*, and the *University of Minnesota Approaches to Social Change*.

3 The language used to describe this commitment will, in the future, be modified to *"civic mindset"* to avoid confusion regarding communitarianism as a political theory. The authors have opted to use *"communitarian"* here to maintain consistency with the original call for proposals and various references by contributors to this volume.

4. **Deep Content Knowledge** – Passion and commitment is necessary but insufficient in the development of a healthy civic identity. Developing deep content knowledge in relevant domains is as important as developing a clear and focused commitment to that issue.
5. **Resilient Mind, Body, and Spirit** – There is a growing body of evidence in regard to the connection between our minds and bodies, and the final (and often neglected) building block of a healthy civic identity acknowledges the importance of, and interconnection between, self-care and community-care. When we regularly stretch, exercise, laugh with students or family, eat healthy food, limit screen time, and get sufficient sleep, we deepen our resilience, and our hearts remain open to all that we encounter.

For more details about each concept, please refer to the *Core Commitments and Building Blocks of a Healthy Civic Identity* White Paper.

Distinguishing Characteristics of the Civic Identity Framework

There are several outstanding competency-based models regarding civic learning outcomes. For example, the Center for Engaged Democracy produced an excellent compilation and analysis of core competencies for civic engagement, used by a wide range of institutions of higher learning. One of the key innovations embedded in this framework is the integration of core commitments with building blocks. While core commitments are observable and are not fixed, they are distinguished from building blocks insofar as they are more intrinsic and an expression of individual values, and therefore are much more difficult to objectively assess or target for improvement. Building blocks, by comparison, typically involve specific skills and competencies, and the processes of acquiring these skills are more easily observable by external parties. The relationship between core commitments and building blocks is symbiotic and reversible. For example, a clear commitment to a particular social issue often motivates a person to develop deep content knowledge on that issue, and the reverse can also happen.

There are several other characteristics that distinguish the core commitments and building blocks framework from other models. First, our intention is to take a **more comprehensive approach** that broadens the aperture of what is considered, and to explicitly name elements that are often either assumed or unmentioned (this is most true of the core commitments). For example, while nearly every civic engagement program or initiative seeks to deepen student engagement in a social issue, this is not always named as an explicit outcome, and, therefore, the development of "deep content knowledge" about the issue(s) being explored is often not included as an outcome. As a second example, the building block of "resilient mind, body, and spirit" recognizes the interconnection between "self-care" and "community care" and ensures it is an intentional outcome.

Second, the model is **grounded primarily in the diverse experiences of students and practitioners**, and builds upon the collective wisdom of practitioners, students, and scholars from a wide range of postsecondary institutions. The individuals coordinating the development of the framework have experience working in community and civic engagement within a wide range of postsecondary environments, including public and private,

two-year and four-year, large and small institutions. Students helped craft the initial framework, and community partners have also provided critical input.

Third, the framework provides **shared language while allowing flexibility to support campus or program-specific outcomes**. For example, while one of the building blocks is "knowledge of social change frameworks and tools," an individual educator, program, or campus will decide which frameworks and tools are most appropriate. Likewise, decisions about what "democratic, knowledge, habits, and skills" should be emphasized are a program/campus-level decision. As W.B. Gallie (1956) famously articulated, democracy is an *"essentially contested concept,"* which means that disagreements about what constitutes democracy are genuine and sustained by perfectly respectable arguments and evidence, and that these disagreements are essentially unresolvable because they are rooted in how different parties understand the fundamental meaning of the concept.

Overview of Contributions

Each of the contributions were selected because they offered a distinctive perspective on one or more of the core commitments and building blocks. We also attempted to ensure that a variety of geographies and types of institutions were represented.

In *Educating Undergraduates for American Democracy: The Third Way Civics Approach*, Thronveit and colleagues describe an approach to civic education that has been adopted by a consortium of institutions that centers commitments to liberal democracy, personal integrity, and civic mindset (the author's helpful reframing of *communitarian mindset*), and building-block capacities for engaging constructively across differences and for active, collaborative acquisition of democratic knowledge, habits, and skills.

In *Civic Learning Through a Lens of Racial Equity*, Corbin and colleagues describe a state-level process to strengthen civic learning and tie their effort specifically to a commitment to the values, practices, and institutions of liberal democracy, which necessitates a corresponding commitment to racial equity.

Tulane University's *Newcomb Scholars Program* represents an approach attentive to developing a sustained and deep commitment to an issue (in this case the political cause of feminism) and communitarian mindset.

In *Defending Democracy*, Alexander Kappus describes a peer education program focused on nonpartisan political engagement as a means of developing a commitment to integrity and building a resilient mind, body, and spirit.

The Lens of Civic Identity: A Developmental Model for Undergraduate Education is included as an example of an institution-wide effort at Warren Wilson College to create and implement over ten years a shared framework that develops, among other things, the capacity to engage constructively across differences and build democratic knowledge and skills.

Martin and colleagues offer *Becoming Entrepreneurs of Connection* primarily as a means of developing the capacity to engage constructively across differences, but the focus on entrepreneurship also serves as an example of the integration of a particular social change framework.

Finally, *How College Students Can Depolarize,* as the name suggests, describes and shares some recent data on how Deliberative Polling helps build the capacity to engage constructively across differences.

Concluding Insights and Observations

We would like to conclude the introduction to this special volume with several observations and insights about the process.

Not surprisingly, pluralism and competing ideological perspectives were actively engaged throughout this process, and the framework continues to evolve as a result. For example, early in its development there were robust conversations about whether the first core commitment should be to "democratic values, practices, and institutions" or to "social justice." We ultimately chose the means (democratic values, practices, and institutions) rather than the end (social justice). Contributions also vary in terms of whether they align with a particular theoretical or ideological perspective (feminist and racial equity in the cases of Tulane and Massachusetts respectively) or choose to remain "neutral" (Third Way Civics).

Second, it is clear that we are a field of deeply thoughtful innovators and reformers. We received a surprising number of responses to our call for contributions that, rather than seeking to conform to the core commitments and building blocks framework, proposed a new alternative. Others made helpful suggestions that strengthen the framework. For example, in their contribution to this volume, Tryve Throntveit and colleagues make the useful suggestion that we avoid potential misinterpretation of the use of *"communitarian mindset"* by using *"civic mindset"* to indicate a "a mindset that challenges sharp binaries of self and other, public and private, and good and evil, while simultaneously affirming the freedom and consequence of individual intellectual, moral, and political judgments and demanding a polity responsive to such politically sophisticated citizens."

Community and civic engagement practitioners have clear individual visions, and the number and diversity of proposed frameworks was both inspiring and concerning. We've included several contributions that were able to provide an alternative perspective while also connecting to the core commitments and building blocks model (e.g., Civic Learning Through a Lens of Racial Equity, and the Warren Wilson model, which builds from the Civic-Minded Graduate). It is also worth mentioning that none of the projects described in this volume started explicitly as explorations of *"civic identity,"* particularly as described within the Core Commitments and Building Blocks framework.

Third, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge several elements and perspectives that are not included in this volume. While we were able to achieve diversity among the geographic locations and types of institutions represented, we were not able to include a contribution or case study from a two-year college or a predominantly minority-serving institution. We were also surprised at the relative lack of focus or attention paid to the communitarian (or civic) mindset among the submissions we received. Conversely, the concept of engaging constructively across differences was a very common theme among the submissions we received.

Fourth, there is wide variation among the contributions in terms of the scale of the social challenge being addressed. Some are narrowly focused on local concerns, while others are tackling large, systemic issues. This is not a critique; in fact, we believe it is important for students to have experiences that traverse the spectrum.

Fifth, this special edition contains a variety of types of contributions by design. We have proposed a broadly integrative model, and our intention was, in part, to include contributions that highlighted cases that include

certain core commitments and building blocks. In some cases, we were able to identify studies that included empirical evidence of outcomes. In other cases, we sought to highlight promising practices via a case study that shed light on what we believe are under-explored dimensions of our work.

The concept and terminology of *"civic identity"* has been the subject of debate throughout the development of the white paper and this special volume. For some, the terminology inherently removes the community from consideration. Others raise concerns about its usefulness, particularly in our current moment when the idea of a shared understanding of what constitutes civic life, given the salience of our other identities, is being questioned and redefined. Many of the schools and programs that have used civic identity as a frame for discussing learning outcomes reported that these conversations with colleagues sparked lively debates about the term. We appreciate those who have lifted up these issues and believe there is great value in continued exploration of the concept and terminology of *"civic identity"* as a means of challenging students to locate themselves within community. The discussions that are invoked have been, and will continue to be, both meaningful and useful.

We invite readers to think of the Core Commitments and Building Blocks as a road map, and the contributions included in this volume as interesting potential destinations. The original White Paper will continue to evolve as a heuristic tool for institutions and programs, and we hope that readers find both the framework and the contributions useful as we continue to explore the role that postsecondary institutions play in strengthening democracy.

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