EDUCATING UNDERGRADUATES FOR AMERICAN DEMOCRACY: THE THIRD WAY CIVICS APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

It is one of few statements upon which Americans left, right, and center agree: The nation faces a civic crisis. Polarization, rage, and militancy vie with cynicism, disengagement, and despair in the much-vaunted battle for America's political soul—all while trampling grace, deliberation, and cooperation underfoot. What can and should our institutions of higher education do to address this situation?

Such a question demands at least as many responses as there are distinctive functions of higher education. This article explains one effort to answer it with reference to the sector's most visible—and arguably most essential—field of endeavor: undergraduate teaching and learning. The Third Way Civics initiative (3WC) unites institutions across the country in an experimental approach to civic learning in college, centered on a one-semester, credit-bearing course on American political and social development across time. Orchestrated by the Minnesota Humanities Center (MHC) and funded by MHC, the Teagle Foundation, and Lumina Foundation, 3WC directly fosters the embrace and development of several core commitments and building blocks identified by MJCSL guest editors as essential to healthy civic identity, including commitments to liberal democracy, personal integrity, and public-minded self-reflection, and building-block capacities for engaging constructively across differences and for active, collaborative acquisition of democratic knowledge, habits, and skills. In these ways, 3WC responds not only to pundits' predictions of a civic apocalypse, but to what surveys reveal to be a growing (and far more hopeful) desire among students for a practically democratic education: one that positions them for economic success but also prepares them for lives of public purpose and productive citizenship.

After two decades of ever-increasing investment, efforts to reinvigorate the civic purposes and enhance the civic impact of higher education have yielded mixed results. On one hand, hundreds of institutions of higher education (IHEs) have identified some sort of direct contribution to building and sustaining a democratic

culture as essential to their mission, and civic-engagement centers and initiatives have proliferated (Chittum, Enke & Finley, 2022; Koekkoek, van Haan & Kleinhaus, 2021; Jones & Lee, 2017; Fitzgerald et al., 2012; NTCLDE, 2012; Finley, 2011; Lawry, Laurison, & VanAntwerpen, 2006/2009). On the other hand, public trust in the sector continues to erode, with students and families questioning the economic and social returns on increasingly expensive degrees while communities question the uses to which institutions put their massive physical and economic resources (AGB, 2018; Fishman, Nguyen & Woodhouse, 2022; Hart Research Associates, 2018, 2015; Hiler & Erickson, 2019; Jones, 2018; Schleifer, Friedman & McNally, 2022). Finally, little data exists with which to assess even the general impact of civic-engagement initiatives, much less determine which strategies and practices are reliably and significantly effective (Chittum, Enke & Finley, 2022; Finley, 2011). Indeed, if building and sustaining democracy is a central purpose of IHEs, the overall decline of democratic norms and institutions in the United States—both empirically and in the esteem of many Americans—suggests that the sector is one of several in our society with a lot of work to do (AAAS, 2020; Atwell, Bridgeland, and Levine, 2017; Finkel et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019; Kingzette et al., 2021; Saltmarsh, Hartley & Clayton, 2008).

So, what *can* and what *should* the sector do to address this state of affairs?

Such a question demands at least as many responses as there are distinctive functions of higher education. For too long, however, administrators and thought leaders have conceived the public purposes of higher education in narrow terms of extramural service or political didactics: terms that have not just crowded out other approaches but have also, in the absence of complementary commitments, marginalized service-oriented faculty and staff while alienating large segments of the public skeptical of moralizing elites (Boyte, 2009; Boyte, 2015; Chittum, Enke & Finley, 2022; Colby et al., 2007; Dzur, 2021; Mintz, 2022; Peters, 2017, 2021; Schneider, 2022; Scobey 2010; Thomas, 2010).

This article describes an effort to formulate, test, institutionalize, and replicate an effective complement to the outreach, service, and truth-speaking work of IHEs and their faculty. **Third Way Civics (3WC)** is a curricular intervention designed to infuse civic inquiry, civic identity-formation, and civic capacity-building into what many if not most Americans deem the essential function of higher-education: undergraduate teaching and learning. With support from the Teagle Foundation, we developed 3WC (in consultation with several colleagues[1]) to foster three broad competencies among the undergraduate learners who go on to lead and work within society's other major institutions. These competencies are:

1) **information literacy**, including capacity to evaluate empirical and normative claims critically, to hold conflicting perspectives in tension, and consider the impacts on diverse communities of the actions such perspectives imply;

1. Those most involved in helping us refine 3WC's theory and goals and develop the curriculum were Harry Boyte, Augsburg University/Institute for Public Life and Work; Marie-Louise Ström, Institute for Public Life and Work; and Peter Levine, Tufts University.

2) **civic literacy**, including familiarity with major historical and contemporary features of American politics, ability to connect personal interests to public interests, and capacity to empathize with the interests and worldviews of diverse individuals and groups; and
3) **civic agency**, denoting capacity and disposition to identify connections among personally and publicly meaningful goals, formulate contextually appropriate strategies for achieving them, and collaborate across differences to execute, refine, and adapt such strategies while keeping the goal of communal learning and thriving uppermost in mind.

The main hypothesis (and animating hope) of the 3WC initiative is that the fostering of such competencies among students will advance the democracy-building work of higher education in five crucial respects:

1) **reduced polarization** among students and those they influence, leading to wider and deeper public trust in democratic norms and processes, increased socio-political stability, and more productive citizen and official engagement with complex and costly societal problems at local, state, and federal levels (Kingzette et al., 2021; McCoy & Somer, 2019; Moore-Berg et al., 2020; Mutz, 2002; Poteat et al., 2011; Stanley et al., 2020; Zmigrod, 2020);
2) **enhanced civic and career readiness**, as students enter their working lives with the critical, creative, adaptive, and collaborative skills that both political communities and business enterprises depend on for healthy growth (Bowman, 2010; Finley et al., 2021; Finley, 2021; Kumar et al., 2022; Moody, 2020; NACE, 2021; Nelson Laird, 2005; Page, 2007);
3) **stronger communities**, as graduates disposed and equipped to create links between their civic and professional goals—as well as between their own such goals and those of neighbors—take up positions of formal and informal leadership, catalyzing the creative talents and productive capacities of their fellow citizens (Campbell, 2008; Einfeld & Collins, 2008; Kahne & Sporte, 2009; Kanter & Schneider, 2013; Leihninger, 2016; Michaels, O'Connor & Resnick, 2008; Thomas, 2019; Zuniga, Williams & Berger, 2005);
4) **greater equity**, as students and faculty who have learned to value cultural and intellectual difference, support diverse ways of knowing and problem-solving, and appreciate the contributions of diverse individuals and groups to the quest for a just and thriving society go on to carry these lessons into campus life, the workplace, and other spheres of collective activity (Gurin et al., 2004; Holoien, 2013; Nelson Laird, Engberg & Hurtado, 2005; Page, 2007; Roska et al., 2017); and
5) **institutional relevance and survival,** as millions of students seeking to build lives that are both personally rewarding *and* publicly meaningful turn once again to higher education for inspiration and resources to help them do so (Gallup and Bates College, 2019).

As noted, these are hypotheses, and like most hypotheses they reflect hopes (James, 1897): hopes simultaneously inspired and tempered both by our direct experiences and by the second-hand experiences the scholarly literature affords us. In other words, 3WC is very much a pilot. Nevertheless, our pilot efforts in nine IHEs across three

states,[2] combined with existing research, suggest that the ambitious goals and transformative impacts we hypothesize can be achieved relatively simply; scale is the limiting factor.

The sections below explain the basic 3WC approach and its implementations and outcomes to date. Throughout we will emphasize how 3WC can foster students' embrace and development of several "core commitments" and "building blocks" identified by MJCSL's guest editors as essential to healthy civic identity (Schnaubelt, 2022; Schnaubelt et al., 2022). But we also go further. We believe that a bedrock focus on the type of intensive, classroom-based civic learning 3WC provides can catalyze a much broader civic reconstruction of U.S. higher education, by 1) transforming institutional culture, particularly faculty professional identity; 2) enriching the empirical record on which to build and evaluate other forms of civic learning; and 3) putting students at the center of a personally rewarding and publicly meaningful education that they will expect and support for subsequent cohorts.

The Why, What, and How of Third Way Civics

The term "Third Way Civics" does not denote a single formula for "doing civics" in college. It does, however, describe a distinctive and coherent set of problem statements, theoretical commitments, strategic assumptions, and pedagogical principles related to the dual crises facing American democracy and American higher education.

Why Third Way Civics?

In recent years, the academy, media, and a growing number of local communities have been engulfed in increasingly bitter "History Wars" and "Civics Wars": debates pitting those who see the American experiment as essentially triumphant against those who see it as irredeemably tragic, and setting those who conceive civics as a body of socio-political knowledge against those who conceive it as training for socio-political activism (Boyte, 2015; Packer, 2021; Randall, 2017). Burgeoning but still inconclusive evidence suggests that each side vastly overestimates (or at least overstates) the size and hostility of the other's camp (Hawkins et al., 2022). Still, many students and faculty feel forced to join sides or, instead, to divorce their educational and professional goals from any clear public purpose (Bender, 1997; Coles and Scarnati, 2015; College Pulse, 2021; Gallup and Bates College, 2019; German & Stevens, 2021; Hemer, Perez & Harris, 2019; Koritz & P. Schadewald, 2015, p. 12; Throntveit, 2021). The result is that both political polarization and political apathy are fostered as much as countered by immersion in campus life (Booth et al., 2023).

The 3WC approach does not offer an alternative ideology but employs a non-partisan, depolarizing *pedagogy*, developed to transcend the binaries of the history and civics wars while building student capacity to think,

2. Ball State University, Muncie, IN; Metropolitan State University Scholars in Prison Program, Lino Lakes, MN; Minnesota North Community College (Eveleth, Hibbing, Itasca, Rainy River, Vermillion, and Virginia, MN); Minnesota State University-Mankato (MSU-Mankato); MSU-Mankato Scholars Serving Time Program, Shakopee, MN; North Central University, Minneapolis, MN; Southeastern University, Lakeland, FL; University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN; Winona State University, Winona, MN.

learn, and work across differences.[3] It is designed to foster information literacy, civic literacy, and civic agency among students, equipping them to depolarize their relationships, find meaningful connections between their private and public lives, and catalyze learning and growth within and between their communities and workplaces. It also puts students' diverse viewpoints, questions, and contributions at the center of their learning, which research shows enhances the perceived relevance, retention, and capacity for critical application of academic content.[4]

Put briefly, 3WC seeks to immerse students in a reflective and collaborative experience that does not provide answers to major public questions but builds their individual and collective capacities to pose their own questions, formulate their own answers, and act—boldly yet humbly—on the latter. For educators, legislators, parents, or students worried that "civics" must mean indoctrination by one or the other "side" in a bipolar culture war, "Third Way Civics" offers just what it implies: a *third* way of conceiving democracy education, focused not on stuffing students' brains with the historical interpretations and contemporary implications their particular instructor deems "correct," but on stimulating students brains with the variety of experience and perspectives shaping past and present; training them, in other words, to think *for* themselves but not *by* themselves.

What is Third Way Civics, and how does it work?

Third Way Civics is a course. Or rather, it is a way of *teaching* courses that is designed to foster civic skills and dispositions. In most (but not all) of our pilots, it has taken the form of a U.S. history course, because demands for civic learning are so often couched in terms of national historical literacy. We think the 3WC approach can be transferred to multiple subjects across many disciplines. For illustrative purposes, however, we will focus primarily on our U.S. history pilots. These have all been one-semester courses, most taught in two 90- to 120-minute meetings each week over 12 to 15 weeks. Some have covered the period from the 1500s to the present; others have narrowed in on the mid-nineteenth to early twenty-first centuries. All, however, have included treatment of the revolutionary and constitutional periods to which so much later political discourse refers, and which an increasing number of state legislatures (ten, at the time of writing) require students to study in order to graduate.

Despite the youth of our initiative, 3WC is more than just a theoretical proposition. It has been piloted in nearly a dozen classrooms, and many classroom teachers will find much of its pedagogy familiar. Third Way

3. In this regard, 3WC is closely aligned with the K12-focused Educating for American Democracy project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education and National Endowment for the Humanities (EAD, 2021; Throntveit and Levine, 2022).

4. Decades of research in K12 settings shows that comparing, contrasting, analyzing, and evaluating multiple perspectives helps all students become critical thinkers more deeply engaged in their learning as well as better prepared for democratic citizenship; see especially Banks (2020); Abrami, et al. (2015); and Zhang, Torney-Putna, and Barber (2012). On the broad academic and social-emotional benefits of learning and practicing intellectual empathy, authentic listening, respectful reason-giving, collaborative problem-solving, and other civic skills in a self-directed fashion that highlights the productivity of diverse perspectives, see Hernandez et al. (2019); Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018); Cohen et al. (2018); Ozer (2017); Feldman et al. (2007); Roholt, Hildreth, and M. Baizerman (2003); and Hildreth (2000). Data on the academic benefits of civic identity formation and skills development in undergraduate settings is sparse, especially outside service-learning contexts. For highly suggestive implications, especially regarding retention and persistence, see Boyte (2018); Hoffman (2015); and Swaner (2007).

Civics does, however, depart from common practice in the stringency with which it adheres to certain pedagogical commitments. These commitments, and our efforts to ensure that they pervade the 3WC student experience, are described below.

A contested canon

In some ways, 3WC resembles a student-centered, inquiry-driven version of the mid-twentieth century "great books" model. A key difference is that its "canon" of key civic sources exposes students to a mix of traditional texts as well as texts (in multiple media) from culturally and ideologically diverse perspectives that illuminate important but less familiar aspects of national development. Another difference is that no text is read in isolation, as if it were the sole or highest authority on a subject. Instead, each week students engage with clusters of texts, curated to convey divergent perspectives on a particular moment or problem in US history. Different groups read different clusters, first comparing their interpretations in "same-cluster" groups, then teaching and learning from their peers in "cross-cluster" groups. The result is to emphasize the contestation of ideas, perspectives, concepts, and practices that has always characterized the history of self-government in the Americas, even among individuals (like the students themselves) with experiences and information in common. The point is not to dwell on discord. Rather, it is to give students an opportunity for testing, revitalizing, and revamping our working models of a free and just society.

Finally, there is no prefabricated interpretive framework mediating students' encounter with course texts: no lecture, no textbook, only headnotes providing the most basic context for each text and, occasionally, a glossary defining unfamiliar or easily misconstrued terms. The point here is to emphasize that *someone* must make meaning out of information; that *no one*—not even credentialed authorities like professors, journalists, or public servants—has perfect information or infallible powers of interpretation; and that before any of us can critically analyze and compare the claims of competing authorities, *all of us* need to develop capacity and strategies for making meaning out of messy information ourselves. We hope that by forcing students to teach and learn from one another, pooling their differing information and comparing their diverse interpretations, we help them appreciate the importance of their individual meaning-making work while also appreciating its limits.

Because the contested canon—the syllabus—is so central to 3WC, the principles guiding its basic design and classroom use deserve concrete illustration. Below is an example of a unit constructed along 3WC lines, taken from a model syllabus distributed to 3WC instructors in 2021:

Example Unit: Revolution and Constitution

Common readings

All students read the following documents:

- Favorable and unfavorable colonist responses to the Stamp Act Riots (with explanatory note explaining the Stamp Act)

- The Declaration of Independence
- Selections from the U.S. Constitution: Preamble, 3/5 Clause, and Bill of Rights (read aloud in class, all students participating)
- Benjamin Banneker to Thomas Jefferson, making the case for extending the principles of the Declaration and Constitution to Americans of African descent

The above texts are selected to ensure that every student is directly familiar with the country's founding documents *and* gets a sense of the complex context in which they were written and received.

Distributed readings

Along with the common readings for this unit, each student reads *one of two* additional "Clusters" that further contextualize and complicate the common readings. Thus:

Half the class reads...		***The other half reads...***	
Text	**Theme**	**Text**	**Theme**
Selections from *Federalist* 10 and 51 (1788)	Case for large federal republic and US Constitution	John Adams to Samuel Adams (1790)	Two patriot brothers disagree on the importance of a strong executive vs. a virtuous public
"Brutus" IV (1788)	Case against large federal republic and US Constitution	Judith Sargent Murray, "On the Equality of the Sexes" (1790)	Argument for challenging gender hierarchies while also giving women a special role in the moral education of citizens
Mercy Otis Warren, *Observations on the New Constitution* (1788)	Argument *for* women's political rights in the new nation but *against* the US Constitution and its encroachments	General Council of Ohio Valley Tribes to US Commissioners (1793)	Argument that the US govt's actions toward Ohio tribes contradict its founding principle of gov't by consent

These distributed clusters are designed to serve two purposes.

- The first purpose is to allow half the class to become "expert" in the debates surrounding the ratification of the US Constitution and the other half to become "expert" in several disagreements and challenges surrounding the implementation of the new constitutional order that emerged just a few years after ratification. Each cluster therefore reinforces the impression of the common readings that "the founding" was not a single event understood in universal terms, but an extended series of arguments, negotiations, conflicts, and compromises in which diverse values and interests were at stake.
- The second purpose is to set the stage for each student to engage in a mutual teaching and learning relationship with their classmates, including students who read the same texts they did *and* with those who read different texts. In other words, students teach each other both about different ways to interpret the same information *and* about the differing implications of diverse information sources for a common theme. How is this achieved?

- *Before class*, each student reflects in writing on one or more of the unit's guiding questions, drawing on specific passages from their readings. For example, a student might answer the question, "Are divisions in a democratic republic a bad thing or a good thing, and why?" by weighing the differing perspectives of Madison, Brutus, and Banneker.
- *In class*, students explain their answers to the guiding questions *and* identify the texts supporting them in a series of small-group exchanges—first with classmates who read the same clusters (which we sometimes call "first-order" discussions), and next with classmates who read different ones ("second-order" discussions). Thus, a student who read Murray and the Ohio Tribes might challenge a student who was convinced by Madison's notion that a large federal republic can prevent the rise of dominating interests. The latter student might respond that what Murray and the Tribes are really demanding is full inclusion in the federal republic. A third student, who also read Madison et al. but has heard the other cluster explained, might respond that the Ohio Tribes might really be asking for something along the lines Brutus desired, namely autonomy from centralized rule, and so on.
- *Later in class*, the instructor convenes the whole group to discuss the unit's guiding questions, calling on students to share the most compelling answers they heard from *other students* (a technique we call "playback") and then explain how they reinforced, complicated, or challenged their own answers.

This unit plan illustrates what we earlier described as the essential elements of the contested canon and the students' encounter with it: a mix of foundational texts, historically influential perspectives, and marginalized or absented voices; intentional juxtaposition of divergent and even discordant perspectives in each of multiple reading assignments; a near-total lack of any prefabricated interpretive framework; and an emphasis on students' simultaneous responsibility for and dependence on the quality of their own *and* their classmates' learning.

A contestable canon

It would, of course, be perfectly legitimate for an instructor teaching the unit described above to assign, say, *The Federalist* selections to *all* students and assign, say, the Banneker letter to one of the reading clusters, or even to assign substitutions for either or both texts. Indeed, to emphasize the characteristic contestation of values, meanings, and goals that our canon was designed to convey, we invite our partners to treat the 3WC "canon" itself as contestable.

Faculty are encouraged to substitute readings they judge more relevant to their students' lives, or which they simply love to teach. We ask only that they follow three rules of thumb, ensuring that their substitutions 1) still illuminate the larger theme or debate at issue; 2) balance ideological perspectives and cultural traditions; and 3) emphasize both the challenges and the rich resources and promise of the American democratic tradition. In our faculty workshops and weekly term-time check-ins we emphasize that students, too, should have multiple opportunities to challenge the relevance of the course texts and their quality as vehicles of civic learning, so long as they first take time to digest and understand them. In these ways, faculty and students become co-creators of a larger civic-learning project.

Building civic muscle—and career readiness

Complementing the malleable canon of any 3WC syllabus are activities designed to enhance student engagement with its content while developing reflective, deliberative, and collaborative skills essential to self-government and—not incidentally—prized by employers. Indeed, one primary focus of the course is to challenge the binary of civic and professional life by encouraging students to reflect on the public implications and purposes of their education and, by extension, the vocational paths they are exploring. Every course meeting is structured to connect traditional, individual civic activities of inquiry, interpretation, fact-checking, and synthesis to more relational, political (not to be confused with partisan) activities. Thus, in one course meeting students might first work alone to write an evidence-based response to a prompt, then in pairs to share, challenge, and synthesize each other's conclusions, and finally in a group to answer the following question: What should we, as citizens, *do* with what we have learned about the past, the present, and one another?

The major goal of such iterative reflection, consultation, action, and reassessment is to foster the civic capacities that animate a constitutional framework with the purposes and work of the people—to put civic muscle on the institutional skeleton of democracy. At the same time, those same civic capacities are highly valued by employers—and, apparently, in short supply.

According to Hart Research Associates (2018, p. 3), "The college learning outcomes that both [executives and hiring managers] rate as most important include oral communication, critical thinking, ethical judgment, working effectively in teams, working independently, self-motivation, written communication, and real-world application of skills and knowledge." A recent National Association of Colleges and Employers *Jobs Outlook* survey (2022) found that nearly all employers surveyed ranked critical thinking, communication, and teamwork as "very" to "extremely" important qualities in new hires out of college; technological proficiency, though desired, was far lower on the NACE group's scale of priorities. Yet only around half of surveyed employers rated recent graduates "very" or "extremely" proficient critical thinkers and communicators. This situation presents a huge opportunity for IHEs to assert their relevance to public calls for better prepared citizens and better prepared workers—calls that often seem to clash, but that the 3WC approach harmonizes.

Civic professionalism

This is not to downplay the distinctive and even countercultural view of civic learning and workplace preparation that 3WC embodies. The initiative is founded on the belief that people cannot *become* empowered and responsible citizens unless and until they are *free to act* like empowered and responsible citizens. For this reason, instructors and students both are expected to approach the course in a spirit of *civic professionalism*.

Civic professionals (sometimes called "citizen professionals" or "democratic professionals") strive to ensure that the spaces they control by virtue of their credentials, status, institutional location, knowledge, or talents are not, in fact, *controlled* so much as *opened* by their efforts, made permeable and responsive to the wisdom, concerns, and talents of their fellow citizens (Boyte, 2009; Clark et al., 2017; Doherty, Mendenhall & Berge, 2010;

Dzur, 2008, 2019, 2021; Koritz & Schadewald, 2015; Peters, 2017, 2021). A civic-professional instructor in a 3WC-style course, therefore, will follow the lead of the syllabus template, which frames each course meeting as a free space in which students create rather than merely receive civic knowledge. Of course, students are provided texts and placed in situations intended to catalyze their learning. But they are not told by their instructor what to think or conclude. Instead, they are coached and guided in teaching themselves and one another about the texts they read, what those texts reveal about the past and present of American politics and society, and what they, as citizens, should do with what they have learned.

Meanwhile, students develop their own civic-professional identities and dispositions. The more acclimated they grow to the civic-professional environment their instructors cultivate, the less they will seek to control conversations, win arguments, or establish the superiority of their knowledge or skills in class. They need not be shy about sharing their opinions, judgments, and talents; rather, an effective 3WC course will support students in reconciling their self-interest in personal expression and flourishing with their shared interest in the free flourishing of others. The hope—inspired by the decades-long, globe-spanning "Public Achievement" model of youth civic education (Boyte, 2008, 2018; Hildreth, 2000; Roholt, Hildreth & Baizerman, 2003)—is that students will carry this civic-professional commitment to collaboration, co-creation, and mutual respect into their other courses, their current and future workplaces, their neighborhoods, and all their public activities.

One course cannot ensure the realization of that hope. But it can provide a concrete foundation for it. Beginning about four-to-six weeks into a semester, 3WC students form small groups and begin a weeks-long process of formulating, refining, and attempting to execute some sort of collaborative, civic problem-solving or muscle-building activity with partners beyond the classroom, and typically outside the college or university's walls altogether. Their instructors are trained to coach them in co-creative strategies and tactics and to help them avoid technocratic or unidirectionally service-oriented approaches. In other words, 3WC instructors coach their students first to *explain* both the nature of the course and their personal interest in whatever issue they are hoping to work on; next to *listen* to the needs and aspirations of potential partners; then to *ask* those potential partners what a valuable collaboration would look like to them; and finally, to *negotiate* a mutually beneficial arrangement.

This approach, of course, takes time; and although most groups, as a result, alight on much smaller projects than they initially envision, many projects are not "completed" in the ways students imagine at the outset. From our perspective, that is a worthwhile tradeoff. For one thing, if instructors follow the guidance provided (in written form and through weekly instructor-cohort check-ins), they coach their students to approach partners in a spirit of curiosity and humility that does not waste people's time or make unfulfillable promises. Meanwhile, students still have ample opportunity to learn (and might learn more deeply) several crucial lessons: that mutually beneficial and sustainable change can be desired in theory yet contested in practice; that it cannot be imposed on people by self-styled experts; that it depends as much on good relationships as on good data, good arguments, or good plans; and that, above all, it takes work—and that such reflective, collaborative, relationship-building work is in itself important to sustaining democracy, regardless of the immediate outcome. The result cannot replicate the benefits of the best conceived and executed service-learning courses. At the same time, we think 3WC prepares students for such courses while avoiding the harm that other service-learning courses can inflict on

communities, by insisting that students approach social action not as experts, fixers, or unreflective pieceworkers but as learners and "co-worker[s] in the kingdom of culture" (DuBois, 1903, p. 4).

Summary

In sum, a 3WC-style course is distinguished by the following essential elements:

- **Readings** consisting entirely of primary sources (with only the barest explanatory notations), chosen to reflect the diversity of actors, goals, practices, and perspectives that have shaped American history, politics, and culture (the "contested canon").[5] Instructors are encouraged to work with colleagues, community scholars, and their students to revise the standard reading list to ensure diversity and relevance, so long as the result conveys a) the perpetually contested meaning and character of self-government in America, and b) the historical importance of everyday citizens joining hands, across differences, to improve their shared public life (thus the "contestable canon").
- **First- and second-order discussions** are designed to reinforce students' agency in the interpretation of evidence while simultaneously highlighting the inadequacy of their own or any single interpretive lens. *First-order discussions* divide students into separate groups—each assigned different reading "clusters"—which they initially read and analyze individually, then discuss with others exposed to the same texts. Individual analysis and first-order discussions are guided by the same set of prompts and require students to identify for their peers the explicit textual bases for their answers. *Second-order discussions* place students in "mixed-cluster" groups, in which they answer the unit prompts with reference to their same-cluster discussion while inviting answers, queries, and challenges from their "different-cluster" peers.
- Finally, through **co-creative classroom activities and extramural projects**, students are prompted to connect what they have *learned* through individual and collective inquiry to what they *ought to do* in their individual and collective capacities, by instructors who help them develop a strategy for applying the knowledge and skills learned in the course to some collaborative enterprise involving a community beyond the classroom.

Third Way Civics and Civic Identity

Conceivably, the development of *skills* essential to democratic citizenship can be accomplished without developing the civic *identity* to ensure such skills are applied in democratic ways or toward democratic ends. How does 3WC address the organizing question of this special issue, namely: How can colleges and universities foster civic identity among their students?

This is a question of actions and outcomes. So let us review what, ideally, the 3WC-approach to civic learning *does*.

5. Versions of the course addressing the history of world political thought, history/philosophy/ethics of science, and other subjects have also been developed or are in development.

Most generally, 3WC pushes students to investigate the origins, structure, and value of American institutions and traditions as well as the motives, strategies, and tactics of those who have shaped, challenged, and changed them. Assigning only primary sources, 3WC confronts students with major debates over the meaning and purpose of "self-government" since European settlement, familiarizing students with that concept's essentially contested character and attuning them to both the devastating tragedies and inspiring triumphs that jointly define our past. Putting students in charge of their own and their classmates' learning, 3WC neither dictates their conclusions nor protects them from the conclusions of their peers. Rather, 3WC provides information *and* skills to help undergraduates understand the past, present, and possible futures of American democracy, while also exploring their own potential paths toward a personally rewarding *and* publicly meaningful life.

In other words, 3WC directly fosters the embrace and development of several core commitments (CCs) and building blocks (BB) identified by MJCSL guest editors as essential to healthy civic identity (Schnaubelt et al., 2022). Specifically, 3WC teaches students that commitment to liberal democracy (CC1) is critical to personal integrity (CC3). It does so, however, not by defining for students what the specific structure or outcomes of any aspiring liberal democracy must look like. Instead, it fosters what we think the editors would consider a "communitarian mindset" among students (CC4): 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. The most important means by which 3WC fosters this communitarian or, as we prefer, *civic* mindset[6] are by building students' capacities to engage constructively across differences (BB1) and encouraging their acquisition of democratic knowledge, habits, and skills (BB2)—goals that students pursue through joint study of diverse historical figures and practices and through weekly exercise of critical, empathic, and co-creative muscles.

The 3WC model also addresses the guiding questions that have organized this special issue. For instance:

How is [3WC's focus on] developing a healthy civic identity related to other student learning outcomes, for example, moral and ethical development, critical thinking and self-reflection, critical information literacy, development of historical knowledge, and so on?

- 3WC's design reflects decades of research suggesting that the only way to develop a healthy civic identity is to develop one's moral and ethical orientations, subject such orientations and their consequences to critical

6. We want to be careful to distinguish our thinking from "communitarian" thinking as political theorists and philosophers typically understand it (e.g., Sandel, 1998). We appreciate the efforts of self-described communitarian thinkers and activists to revive concern for the cultural and ethical foundations of citizenship and for the everyday, interpersonal interactions that build and sustain "social capital": norms, networks, and activities providing a relational foundation for collective governance (e.g., Putnam 2000). At the same time, we worry that communitarian language often muffles the pluralistic noisiness of American life, muting the inescapability and creative potency of citizens' conflicting commitments, perspectives, and interests that writers such as Nagel (1991) and Stout (2001) have emphasized. Thus, we prefer to rehabilitate a larger and richer conception of the "civic" as including all those activities in which individuals and groups seek to negotiate their differences and reconcile their personal interests in a spirit of genuine public mindedness and creative, constructive "public work" (Boyte, 2015; Boyte & Throntveit, 2021).

examination, and to discipline such examination through appeal to contemporary and historical evidence from a diversity of sources and perspectives.

- 3WC's design goes further, pushing students to test and assess the importance of such learning outcomes to a personally rewarding and publicly meaningful life in community—whether that community comprise only classmates in the course or a larger college, municipal, national, or global community.

How is the connection between social justice and healthy liberal democracies conveyed to students?

- 3WC employs the perspectives of diverse historical actors to provide students with multiple accounts of both the theoretical connections between social justice and liberal democracy and the consequences, for real human beings in diverse situations, of acting on those theories.
- By engaging multiple understandings of democratic action in pursuit of social justice from a consequentialist perspective, 3WC students are forced to confront the fact that moral reasoning must be paired with strategic logic in order for justice and democracy to flourish; history suggests that action guided solely by unbending principle often undermines the actor's cause, while strategic engagement across differences creates opportunity for self-reflection, learning, and personal change.

How can healthy civic identities be cultivated across diverse student populations and institutions?

- As the foregoing suggests, the 3WC curriculum is structured to develop core commitments and building blocks of civic identity that assume diversity of experience and opinion as both an empirical fact and an ideal characteristic of a democratic community.
- Furthermore, the 3WC initiative writ large consists in the simultaneous piloting of the 3WC curriculum in institutions of every type—public and private, urban and rural, secular and denominational, two-year, four-year, and comprehensive—across multiple states. If students consistently enroll in and demonstrate growth through the course in such a broad array of settings, we will be justified in arguing that our model of self-directed, collaborative engagement with primary sources and contemporary issues can foster a civic identity that is both sensitive to place and attuned to universal themes.

How has the [3WC] initiative distinguished between civic learning and partisan politics?

- The 3WC curriculum does not seek to turn students toward or away from partisan politics generally or partisan stances on specific public issues. Rather, 3WC is designed to 1) introduce a broader understanding of politics as the building and negotiation of a shared public life; 2) suggest that collaborative rather than adversarial modes of politics are possible and have often proven strategically effective for people and communities of nearly all social and political locations; and 3) equip students with skills fundamental to the practice of equitably collaborative, productive politics.
- 3WC's curriculum is simultaneously designed to suggest that partisan debate over issues involving genuine value trade-offs need not result in the sort of mutual mistrust or dehumanization that precludes productive collaboration on other tasks.

Evaluation, Learnings, and Outcomes

Regarding the editors' final guiding question, pertaining to "rigorous assessment" of civic learning interventions, we must reiterate that 3WC is a pilot. We are in the early stages of data collection and cannot draw any statistically sound conclusions about our intervention at this point. We have, however, developed an assessment framework and tools that will rigorously test and (we hope) corroborate the hypotheses driving the initiative.

We base our plan partly on an "objectives-oriented" approach focused on the extent to which proposed objectives are achieved (Worthen, 2004). Additionally, we use a "participant-oriented" approach that involves both 3WC students and faculty in our efforts to evaluate and continually improve the course (Leff & Mulkern, 2002). Finally, we rely heavily on principles and methods of "developmental evaluation," developing new measures and tracking mechanisms as outcomes emerge, soliciting real-time feedback in forms that are easy for partners to engage, and approaching the evaluation process as a means to advance our learning and that of our partners by inviting the latter's creative input (Patton, 2010).

Our main quantitative tool is a pre/post survey administered to all 3WC students. This survey is designed to evaluate changes in student knowledge of the American past, familiarity with American political institutions, opinions regarding historical and contemporary issues in American politics and society, and dispositions toward civic engagement and action. The survey is easily accessible in a variety of learning environments, including through hyperlink and QR-code access to desktop and mobile versions and through paper versions for students—such as our incarcerated students—lacking internet access.

In addition to the pre/post surveys, the evaluation framework includes focus groups, student and instructor interviews, institution-specific course evaluations, and the collection of course related documents (e.g., syllabi, assignments, student writing samples, classroom recordings).

Finally, we iteratively evaluate and develop each 3WC course and the overall initiative through weekly check-ins with instructors, summer workshops convening new and veteran instructors, observations of classroom teaching, and (voluntary) instructor journaling.

As of January 2023, roughly 140 students have taken a 3WC course and completed both the pre- and post-intervention survey. Another eleven instructors have participated in weekly and/or end-of-semester debriefings, focus groups, or interviews. Again, we do not have enough data to undertake any rigorous statistical analysis. Still, the student and instructor feedback we have suggests the course design is solid and its impacts positive and profound.

Student feedback. Comparison of pre- and post-intervention assessments have shown significant increase in the percentage of students who described themselves as likely to engage in several civically healthful behaviors, including:

- "Listening to people talk about politics even when I already know I disagree"
- "Analyzing news stories to try to figure out if they are presenting multiple perspectives"

- "Asking myself if my opinions take account of the experiences of those who see things differently"
- "Trying to put myself in the place of people who differ from me and see things differently"

In general terms, the percentage of students who indicated confidence in having the tools to communicate productively with someone whose views are different increased from 39 percent at the beginning of the course to 52 percent at the end of the course. The percentage reporting confidence in their ability to seek out information to develop an informed position on a social or political issue increased from 39 percent to 48 percent.

Although we consider these changes over time to be significant in magnitude, we obviously hope to see even larger percentages of students reporting such confidence in their civic capacities by the end of the course. We have been far more satisfied with changes in student attitudes and dispositions toward democracy and civic engagement.

Perhaps most striking was a significant rise in student appreciation for democratic institutions. Data through the Fall 2022 semester indicate that the percentage of students agreeing with the statement that "a democratic form of government is critical to individual and collective flourishing" increased from 48 percent to 81 percent between the pre- and post-course surveys. Conversely, the percentage of students agreeing that democracy was either "overrated," or was simply one form of government or one among multiple effective forms of government, decreased from 16 percent to only 3 percent.

Students also expressed far more appreciation for the course's influence than their self-reported skills growth would suggest. To the prompt, "American history has been useful in teaching me what it means to be a citizen in today's world," the percentage of students who agreed with the statement rose from 36 percent to 63 percent between the pre- and post-course surveys. Meanwhile, the percentage of students who felt *strongly* that "the teaching of American history can help us overcome political differences and collaborate" rose from 45 percent to 56 percent.

What actions might these changes motivate? Here our relatively small data set and still imperfect survey tool make it difficult to draw conclusions. Certain results, however, are highly suggestive.

Take voting, for example. Our post-course survey did not ask, and thus we do not know, to what extent the course affected respondents' voting behaviors. Nevertheless, course data from 2022 show significant increases both in the percentage of 3WC students who reported being registered to vote and who reported actually voting—increases that, in both cases, far outpaced national trends. The percentage of 3WC students registered to vote rose from 46 percent to 65 percent between pre- and post-course surveys, while the percentage who voted in a local, state, or federal election rose from 38 percent to 61 percent. By comparison, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University estimates that nationwide, around 27 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds voted in the 2022 midterm elections—a near-record turnout, but still less than half the rate at which 3WC students cast ballots (CIRCLE, 2022).

The course seems to influence more complex civic behaviors, too—or at least student attitudes toward such behaviors. Student feedback in a variety of forms strongly indicates increased desire to understand people with

different experiences, perspectives, and opinions, as well as increased motivation to work with others to contribute to a better campus or community.

For instance, both the pre- and post-course survey ask students to define, in their own words, the meaning of citizenship. The pre-course prompt tends to elicit perfunctory definitions focused on an individual's juridical relationship to the state, such as "It [citizenship] is a legal way to say I'm allowed in this country." The post-course survey has elicited more detailed definitions with consistent themes of interdependence and cooperative action, such as, "Citizenship is when you take part in the process for the betterment of your community, but also for your nation as a whole"; "Citizenship means being involved in the country you are a part of"; and "[Citizenship means] responsibly voting, being aware of current political and social events, and volunteering for the betterment of society."

The major themes we identified in these post-course student definitions of citizenship were:

- **Citizenship as belonging.** Many students described citizenship as involving a sense of belonging to a particular place, being a member of an identifiable group or community, and having some practical connection to other members.
- **Citizenship as participation:** Many students also defined citizenship as involving active participation in a community, through formal politics and non-partisan, civil associations.
- **Citizenship as contribution**: Several students defined citizenship in terms that went beyond simple participation to emphasize personal responsibility to the community, accepting "ownership" of its problems, and intentionally contributing to the common good.
- **Citizenship as loyalty:** Students frequently described citizenship as involving loyalty to their country and fellow citizens, abiding by collectively established rules and norms even when it involves sacrifice.
- **Citizenship as growth**: Finally, a remarkable number of students described citizenship in terms of their own personal growth—but for public ends. Many "definitions" of citizenship contained personal pledges to (for example) "be more critical," "become a better teacher," "develop more cultural awareness," and "be open to different views."

Multiple students have publicly testified to the changes suggested by our data. As one Ball State University student told Throntveit during a course observation at that institution, "Sometimes it seems like our country is not even one country. We are learning that democracy has always been messy, and learning how to put ourselves in other people's shoes before we judge them or make decisions affecting them."

During a similar trip to Southeastern University, Throntveit received a similar report from a student who stopped him after class in the hallway. "We are learning it's okay to change our minds," she said, referring to herself and her classmates. Moreover, she added, they were learning "how to do it while keeping our values, and how to use these muscles [we exercise in class] outside the classroom."

Third Way Civics students at Minnesota State University-Mankato echoed those sentiments. "I've learned to listen, and that listening is often the best way to learn," said one. "All college should be this way." "This is

the most exciting class I've had in college, and I'm a second-semester senior," said another. "It's [the] place where I have the most genuine, deep conversations, and learn most about myself and about the past and the world."

Instructor feedback. Instructors have also testified to the course's transformative impact—on their students and themselves. "Third Way Civics has been a real eye-opener," states one veteran history professor and mentor to aspiring social studies teachers at a regional public university in Minnesota. "Seeing students deeply engage with documents and one another and, in a self-directed way, developing sophisticated civic judgments, viewpoints, and skills has forced me to reconsider how I have been teaching my own history classes and, maybe more importantly, how I instruct future Social Studies teachers to approach their classes."[7]

Another instructor (also a veteran history and social-studies education professor at a different regional public university) was worried the course would flop when his roster of twelve students showed four transfer students and six others who had participated only minimally in previous classes. The result was quite the opposite. Two undeclared students decided to become history majors after the course, and all twelve "completed the course work and remained engaged and enthusiastic throughout.... [T]he class readings, format, and outcomes were great for the students in the class. I would often enter the room and the students were already engaged in discussions thus testifying to their interest in the readings and questions at hand."[8]

An English professor and high-level administrator at a private, denominational, urban university also praised the 3WC approach and outcomes, stating that "having no background in history or government has really highlighted the value of the pedagogy" for her. "Just as in contemporary civic life, my students wrestle with *not* knowing all the context around what they're reading, as do I; and yet all the time they tell me, 'I'm learning so much in this class!' They're learning to learn for themselves and with one another rather than from a 'sage on the stage.'"[9]

What We Don't Know and What We Want to Do About It

There are several things we do not know about the Third Way Civics approach to undergraduate civic learning that would help us determine whether and how we should continue to promote its adoption. This paper's external reviewers helped us identify some of the most important. These include:

How does 3WC compare to other undergraduate civic learning interventions?

We do not know of any interventions in undergraduate settings that seek to fuse civic content and civic skills-acquisition in the ways that 3WC attempts. Nor do we know of any large-scale studies of undergraduate civic learning generally that are not represented in our bibliography. This is not to say that such interventions and studies do not exist; indeed, in future, we hope to find them, to improve not only our assessment of 3WC but the course itself.

7. Personal communication to Trygve Throntveit, March 10, 2022.
8. End-of-term review submitted to Trygve Throntveit and David Roof, January 26, 2023.
9. In a Zoom call with Trygve Throntveit, February 23, 2022.

How should 3WC be evaluated and assessed once it evolves beyond the pilot stage?
Since we last collected and analyzed data from our pre/post student surveys and faculty focus groups (January 2023, in time to submit this paper), our data set has grown significantly. Along with our funders, which now include Lumina Foundation, we are exploring more robust evaluation and assessment methods appropriate to the scale and maturity of the intervention.

Should 3WC be required, and if so, when and for whom?
We have taken a "mustard-seed" approach to 3WC: plant it wherever it can be planted, then cultivate its growth and spread. While we have no studies to support the claim, it seems clear to us that forcing a curriculum on a department, division, or institution is both the best way to get clean data and the worst way to get genuine buy-in or seed sustainable change. Therefore, if asked by an instructor or administrator whether 3WC should be offered as a gen-ed elective, a first-year seminar offering, or a required course (for all students or certain majors), we answer, What do you think would work best for you and your students? The 3WC approach was designed to catalyze co-creative rather than prescriptive reform of undergraduate curricula, in keeping with its ultimate aim of developing capacity rather than prescribing formulae for civic action. That said, several partner institutions are considering requiring a 3WC-style course of specific majors, while others are considering building the approach into their core curricula. We will carefully track any such experiments to learn what we can about the benefits or drawbacks of mandatory civic learning in college.

Which institutions respond best to 3WC?
Current institutional partners run a broad gamut: community colleges (including institutions serving large numbers of high-school students earning double credit), small private denominational institutions, midsize and large private universities, large regional public universities, and one flagship campus. We have not yet secured a partnership with an elite liberal arts college, a historically black college or university, or an Ivy, "Ivy-plus," or "public Ivy," though we are in conversations with representatives of each institutional type. As our coalition grows, we hope to learn more about (and report on) what institutional structures, missions, cultures, and constituencies respond best to 3WC. Anecdotally, we have found that faculty and administrators at highly status-conscious institutions are far less willing to collaborate on curriculum and experiment with their pedagogy in the ways 3WC requires than their peers at community colleges, regional private universities, and regional publics. We hope that good results will translate into growing esteem for 3WC and increased interest from elite institutions, but it may be that their cultures and incentive systems are simply not aligned with the aims and methods of 3WC.

Conclusion: A Work in Progress

Third Way Civics is a work in progress, in two senses. First, it is under construction, and likely always will be. There are research questions we cannot address adequately without more data and, in several cases, enhancing our tools, such as the impact of the course on student voting behavior, or post-graduation career trajectories.

There are alternative syllabi, variant curricula, and expanded textual and professional-development resources to be created, vetted, and refined. Excitingly, there are K12 teachers, schools, and school districts in multiple states interested in adapting the 3WC approach to their needs, and at least one or two higher-education administrators thinking about how their involvement in and support for such work could reconnect their institutions to their local communities.

Third Way Civics is also a "work in progress" in the sense of work in pursuit of something better: a better higher-education system, a better political culture, and a better society. It asks students to confront our nation's long and continuing tradition of disagreement: over the purposes and features of self-government, over the general narrative of our collective history and many of its most important episodes, and over the legacies and lessons of the past for the present. 3WC encourages students to value both civic *knowledge* of history and government as well as civic *capacity* for collaborative inquiry and action, and to view both types of civic learning as essential to responsible, productive, personally rewarding, and publicly meaningful lives. Ultimately, we believe 3WC will prove effective in preparing collaborative and productive citizens, equipped and motivated to recognize common interests, formulate common values, and devise common strategies for acting across even deep differences of experience and perspective. In these ways, we believe 3WC will help colleges and universities do what families, businesses, and the general public all agree they should do: prepare their students for lives and careers that are both personally rewarding and publicly meaningful.

Part of that preparation involves a grounding in the basic chronicle of U.S. history, familiarity with several major debates and themes in the development of American democracy, and a better understanding of the traditions and institutions that shape public life in the United States today. Still, 3WC is not meant to be a comprehensive U.S. history or government survey. Nor is it intended as a credentialing process for *becoming* a citizen. Rather, 3WC is an opportunity for students to gain knowledge and skills that will foster civic identity and build civic capacities by thinking and acting *now* like the citizens they *are*: citizens whose impact on others is a present and significant fact, as well as an eternally recurring and open-ended choice.

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Author Note

The work described by the authors has been funded by the Teagle and Lumina Foundations, which have provided salary support and stipends.

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