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First-Year Experience or One-Year Experience? The Future of Civic Engagement in Higher Education

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Abstract: Building on recent civic engagement conversations, this article considers several legal proposals and existing frameworks that are meant to expand opportunities for civic growth and interaction in higher education. Though well intentioned, these proposed and existing guidelines, as we demonstrate, in many cases, restrict the ability of students to learn in traditional ways that facilitate their civic interactions on campus. The suggested and recently implemented reforms include expanded Advanced Placement and Dual Credit opportunities, reduced support for general education classes, and 90 h degrees intended to replace 120 credit hour degrees. The issue with all of these ideas (implemented or not), as we show, is that they amputate what is critical to a genuine undergraduate civic engagement experience: time physically spent on campus, building bonds of trust within a cohort in a way that makes possible the tough conversations, without which true civic connection never becomes a reality. The recommendation of our article as a whole, then—at the local, state, and federal levels—is to use all available legal tools, including ones connected to financial aid and accreditation, to not further reduce time that students are required to spend on campus as a prerequisite of graduation. Maintaining residential requirements, as we further show, will also advance goals of equity and equal access.

Keywords: civic engagement; state legislature; accreditation; dual enrollment; diversity; equity and inclusion

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1. Introduction

This Special Issue of the journal raises worthy questions of "civic engagement," including questions of power, justice, and the law: are institutions of higher education obliged to encourage or require civic engagement and what should that civic engagement look like? Furthermore, what is the role of social justice, informed patriotism, or DEI in this civic engagement, for example, and who decides such questions? As the promotion of civic engagement has grown in popularity since the 1980s (sparked by, for example, Thomas Ehrlich's *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*), and then again after 2000 (spurred by studies such as Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*), residential four-year colleges or universities assumed for themselves a significant obligation to promote it (Morrow et al. 2023). In this essay, we defend residential higher education, particularly in institutions that award baccalaureate degrees, as the best locus for inculcating civic engagement. We argue that it is superior to community colleges or K-12. As background, summarized in this introduction, there are two important and unrelated phenomena: (1) K-12 is now retreating from promotion of civic engagement and (2) a century of federal policy has tried to make baccalaureate education not a privilege but an accessible goal for all. Our main argument is that residential higher education enables a particularly effective learning cohort/community and curriculum at a particularly important time of life (Sections 2.1–2.3). Beginning in Section 2, we articulate and challenge the dilution of the residential experience with various schemes awarding college credit without substantial residency and, secondarily, the more traditional

core curriculum of general education typically taught in the first two years of residency. To the point of this Special Issue, we argue that state governments and accreditation agencies constitute a de facto and de jure legal environment that undermines civic engagement by undermining residential higher education's advantages.

The assumption of responsibility for civic engagement by higher education was begun by political and legal initiatives The GI Bill and Great Society sought to make higher education accessible to more Americans, especially those for whom college would otherwise be too expensive. Concurrent with the GI Bill, President Truman's Commission on Higher Education published a study emphasizing the importance of higher education to promote "the welfare of our country and of the world" by expanding educational opportunities and promoting curricula advancing international affairs and social understanding.

The commission's study emphasized what we now call civic engagement and its optimism for higher education's advantages were fitting. As a setting for promoting civic engagement, higher education certainly possesses definite advantages over K-12, for example. First, there are questions of institutional commitment, resources, and equity. Can K-12 carry yet another responsibility? Even as recently as 2011, a study by the Department of Education and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) determined that expanding students' civic capacities had been "pushed off the priority list" in K-12 and that "even the most nominal gestures toward civic education had begun to recede from the K-12 curriculum." Half of state governments no longer require civics education. And in states that do, scores on civics tests demonstrated racial disparities reflecting socioeconomic divides between school districts and resources. This disengagement from any curricular responsibility leaves civic engagement to clubs, student government, or community service, for example, but those opportunities are likewise disproportionately available for wealthier students rather than disadvantaged ones. (A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's... 2005. A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future) Second, schools implementing civic engagement programs face an increasingly polarized electorate inclined to politicize every suggested reform. What can or must be taught in a "civics" program: Diversity? Patriotism? Antiracism? American Exceptionalism (D'Andrea 2024)? Sadly, the problem of extremely partisan politics demonstrates precisely why civic engagement may be more necessary than ever. For many reasons, therefore, we should not expect K-12 to surpass higher education as the best locus for promoting civic engagement.

Despite higher education's advantages, however, we contend that noble initiatives to promote it there are now undermined by recent mandates from state legislatures, proposed changes by accreditation agencies, and a changing cultural and economic landscape (especially in the wake of the pandemic) threatening to undermine residential higher education as the best incubator of civic engagement. Presumably reformist measures, we argue, will undermine the more promising pathways to civic engagement in higher education. Though these presumed reforms are defended to appear consistent with the ideals of the GI Bill or Great Society, for example—an effort to make higher education more accessible—we contend that these measures will do nothing to address the real problems facing residential higher education. Reforms will not make *higher education* more accessible, especially the comparative advantage of inculcating civic virtues. These presumed reforms will only make *credentialing* more accessible. The resulting changes will undermine both diversity and equity in higher education, stratify it further, narrow its viewpoints, and blunt the most promising steps of the last few decades to improve civic engagement in higher education.

2. Higher Education

2.1. Leveraging Higher Education

Residential higher education's advantages are not simply owed to K-12's decline and its promotion as federal public policy. Residential higher education provides unique conditions at a unique time in a student's life to incline them to a lifetime of civic engagement.

Civic Engagement is a term that has come to mean almost any kind of political participation or education about politics or political values. The Policy Circle, for example, defines

civic engagement as whatever makes a difference in the civic life of communities through relevant knowledge, skills, or values. Through civic education, students identify with broader social problems, ideally leading to increased participation in elections, volunteering, advocating, serving in political office, and other demonstrations of civic responsibility (The Policy Circle 2024).

Increasing civic engagement is a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. The transition to adulthood should be defined by, among other things, taking responsibility for the polity: awareness of political institutions and issues and how they impact communities. Adults are expected to know certain facts related to politics and to practice the activities of citizenship including participation, membership, and becoming informed. Essential for these activities is adopting political values and ideologies after mutual consideration with others. Political habits and values can certainly take root outside of college, of course, and did for generations in America. But so long as more Americans have been attending college (especially since the 1970s), and are encouraged to do so, alternative paths to civic engagement (e.g., going straight to work out or getting married just after graduation from high school, joining the military, or going into the trades) are less popular or delayed by college. There is a rising chorus of concern, however. Constance Flanagan and Peter Levine note that between the 1970s and 2010, the only measure of civic engagement that has increased among young adults is volunteering (Flanagan and Levine 2010).

One approach to this relative decline of civic engagement would be to presume that increased attendance at college is not a locus for promoting civic engagement but has simply delayed a connection that will be established only after graduates establish their own households and careers. But why should higher education not instead more aggressively leverage its opportunity to promote civic engagement, especially since the federal government is intent on increasing college attendance. For example, the Obama administration asserted a goal for America to lead the world in its proportion of college graduates by 2020 (A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's... 2005. A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future). College students agree with a more aggressive approach to civic engagement in higher ed: the University of Michigan Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education concluded from the Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI) data of 24,000 students at 23 different institutions that "students want their colleges to foster a stronger institutional emphasis on contributing to the larger community" (A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's... 2005. A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future).

The reasonable alternative to defaulting to post-university paths to civic engagement is to leverage this longer transition to adulthood through the campus and treat college as an essential locus for connecting young people to civic life. Civic engagement in college will enable markers for maturity and commitment to one's community even before marriage or career. Flanagan and Levine argue that the longer transition to adulthood makes college "the central institution for civic incorporation of younger generations" (Flanagan and Levine 2010).

But why? Part of the answer is obvious: quickly maturing students are beginning their adult lives, forming their own political views potentially distinct from their parents, and building their own economic and financial stake in the polity. College is ideally a place for reflection and investigation, coupled with action, to clarify one's values and habits and commit seriously to civic responsibilities. Insofar as even the most minimal conception of civic engagement relies on one being *in community*, college becomes that initial community after becoming an adult. And college is, after all, not simply participation in just *any* community but in one with both mentors and a significant cohort of peers. Mentors construct an intellectual framework and tutor the values and habits practiced; the cohort reinforces and challenges its members as students work together to clarify civic values and reinforce civic habits. We believe that it is this in-person cohort character of residential higher education that makes it an ideal space for learning and practicing civic engagement.

2.2. The Superiority of Residential Baccalaureate Higher Education

We emphasize that the model civic engagement incubator is not just *any* higher-education experience but *residential* higher education. Recent civic engagement projects confirm the superiority of residential higher education. In 2013, Stanford University's Haas Center articulated six pathways to civic engagement, a framework intended to direct student academic experiences toward civic engagement, public service, and contributing to the common good. Together with the AAC&U the Haas Center launched a working group to research students' interests and predispositions concerning civic engagement (Dedman 2021). Between 2015 and 2022, this working group surveyed 14,100 students over 84 institutions to determine how universities approach civic engagement. The Haas/AAC&U pathways reflected in the survey largely presuppose residential higher education. Pathways 1, 2, and 4 emphasize community-engaged learning and research wherein coursework and academic research identify the concerns of a community and determine the best course of action. While one could interpret the three pathways to apply equally to any student enrolled in college, a cohort of researchers and actors working within both the same academic community and proximate population (i.e., essentially being in the same place) is self-evidently effective.

Campus cohorts therefore become a place where the skills needed to research community needs and measure amelioration deploy academic skillsets (e.g., quantitative analysis, survey methods) typically learned *and applied* in traditional academic settings.[1] Whereas one can argue that the remaining three pathways in the Haas project (philanthropy or social entrepreneurship, for example) may apply *after* graduation, the aforementioned pathways (e.g., Community-Engaged Learning and Research, Direct Service, Community Organizing and Activism) are best achieved by students who are working alongside one another, deploying their skills learned in common, and seeing the results of shared service. The local community or campus becomes a laboratory of sorts.

Data from the Pathways survey confirm residential education as an incubator combining both skill and care. According to Haas, faculty and staff are essential to "place students in community settings where they have strong pathway inclinations" to take responsibility for a good civic life. This not only means encouraging students to consider all six pathways "during college." It also means taking advantage of the *residential experience*. Pathways emphasized by participants in the study include not only service learning, but "learning communities," the first-year experience, student government, clubs, and themed residence halls (Dedman 2021). Such organizations and programs leverage campus spaces outside of the classroom, spaces that are likewise essential for civic engagement. To quote the DoE/AAC&U study again, "Full civic literacies cannot be garnered only by studying books; democratic knowledge and capabilities are also honed through hands-on face-to-face active engagement in the midst of differing perspectives about how to address common problems that affect the well-being of the nation and the world." (A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's... 2005. A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future) Eric Morrow and Boleslaw Kabala emphasize this cohort element for collaboration when they call for exposing university students to "a maximum diversity of opinions and lived experiences" that will build trust in cohorts and increase "the likelihood of true dialogue across difference." (Morrow et al. 2023)

In addition to these typical residential campus experiences, another institutional hub for civic engagement involves campus centers, an increasingly essential part of the campus life and learning (Sweet 2023). Such centers are not confined to purely administrative

[1] The six pathways are 1. Community-Engaged Learning and Research: Connecting coursework and academic research to community-identified concerns to enrich knowledge and inform action on social issues. 2. Direct Service: Working to address the immediate needs of individuals or a community, often involving contact with the people or places being served. 3. Policy and Governance: Participating in political processes, policymaking, and public governance. 4. Community Organizing and Activism: Involving, educating, and mobilizing individual or collective action to influence or persuade others. 5. Philanthropy: Donating or using private funds or charitable contributions from individuals or institutions to contribute to the public good. 6. Social Entrepreneurship and Corporate Social Responsibility: Using ethical business or private sector approaches to create or expand market-oriented responses to social or environmental problems.

functions but leverage the campus experience as students are given the opportunity to participate in the local community initiatives, campus community initiatives, political initiatives, campus programming, or curricular initiatives. Though community colleges, which are overwhelmingly online or commuter in nature, may boast campus centers with a mission to boost civic engagement, their centers are not nearly as robust as those at baccalaureate institutions. Community college centers lack resources, including infrastructure, funding, and staff. Furthermore, community college students are often enrolled part-time, are older, and have significant work or family obligations. Such extracurricular commitments hamper the possibility of benefiting from a relationship with civic engagement centers. Community college students are often in-between the old paths to civic engagement (work and family) and the new ones promoted in higher education. Furthermore, higher teaching loads at community colleges and the increasing paucity of full-time faculty (relative to part-time/adjunct) also discourages robust mentoring towards civic engagement. Service-learning, once a staple of civic engagement at community colleges because it relies so heavily on a local but non-residential student population, has faltered since the pandemic (Jones 2023). When one considers these disadvantages, increasing ratio of online courses to traditional courses, and the absence of residence halls, community colleges are at a significant disadvantage relative to residential baccalaureate programs.

Campus centers are much healthier at residential colleges and universities. Such centers include multicultural centers, volunteer centers, service-learning centers, gender and sexuality centers, outreach offices, Title IX offices, and disability support services. However, other types of center include programming, research, dialogue, or curriculum. Highlighted by the American Political Science Association's (APSA) ongoing Teaching Civic Engagement Project, these centers and institutes do not satisfy legal or administrative imperatives (such as DEI or Title IX) but encourage a broader context obliging deliberative democracy (Matto 2024). Such centers may be funded by state legislatures or rely on existing institutional funds or donors. The University of Kansas, for example, has both the Center for Civic and Social Responsibility (CCSR), focusing on things like service learning and political participation, as well as the Robert J. Dole Institute of Politics. The CCSR's mission is relatively broad: "Through community and campus partnerships, the Center for Service Learning advances service-learning, community-engaged scholarship, and civic engagement that fosters a commitment to participation for a diverse, just, and global society". The Dole Institute, however, promotes "political and civic participation as well as well as civil discourse in a bi-partisan, balanced manner". The Dole Institute considers itself a locus for both political discussion and participation by (1) telling the "compelling story of Bob Dole's life" as a public servant; (2) housing congressional papers (including Dole's); and (3) hosting public programs such as lectures and panels. Both centers leverage the center's campus residential student community, and the Dole Institute emphasizes that advantage: "While the objective is to accomplish this mission on a broad scale, our location at the University of Kansas provides a unique opportunity for outreach to young people and students".

For all of the aforementioned reasons, residential baccalaureate education is best for civic education and its advantages make it superior to community colleges or K-12. However, state governments in cooperation with accreditation agencies, both constituting an essential legal environment, seem bent on undermining these advantages.

2.3. Curriculum and Civic Engagement: "Curriculum Plus"

As noted, the four-year model to complete the baccalaureate degree has come to define a certain path to maturity and wisdom. An essential part of this four-year model was a more-or-less standard curricular approach that front-loads general education courses and prerequisites while upper-level students specialize in their majors/concentrations/minors.

First- and second-year emphasis on general education, disproportionately the liberal arts, naturally lends itself to greater consideration of civic issues (Higher Learning Commission 2019). Immersed in these courses, therefore, it is not surprising that while 44.8% of first-year students strongly agreed that their campus actively promoted awareness of social, political,

and economic issues in the US, and 43.3% strongly agreed that it promoted awareness of the same issues globally, only 34.3% of seniors concurred in the case of the US issues, and only 22.9% agreed in the case of global issues. This is likely not simply a question of different perception of their alma mater by freshmen versus seniors but reflects the concentration of general education/liberal arts content that naturally lends itself to civic engagement. As students specialize in their majors, particularly in STEM or business, for example, they likely take fewer courses promoting civic engagement.[2]

These liberal arts or "general education" courses, front-loaded for first- and second-year students, traditionally reflected a core curriculum reflecting what was routinely called "western civilization." During the 1980s and early 1990s, progressives attacked these core classes as inherently prejudiced against marginal voices and mostly succeeded in having them stripped away (Kimball 1990). The result was a student-directed education across a menu of courses reflecting to the research interest of faculty, hence exposing them to specific research areas less likely to cohere within the same institution and certainly not from university to university. Insofar as these research interests appeared to be niche interests, or reflected political trends within disciplines, civic education arguably suffered not only from the change but from the perception of the change. Additionally, defined content that would directly inform civic engagement: "An understanding of federalism" or "Historical ideas of justice" were replaced by sociological or psychological definitions of higher or lower-order skills like "critical thinking" as a kind of universal methodology applicable to any number of literary or social science pursuits (Behar-Horenstein and Niu 2011; Nosich 2014; Davies and Barnett 2015). In truth, critical thinking amounted to whatever the faculty thought it was—statistical modeling, literary deconstruction, or whatever the professor herself thought was best (Tirunet 2014).

Such trends in higher education, whether catering to research interests that chased trends within disciplines or emphasizing vague soft skills like critical thinking became perceived as increasingly ideological and progressive. Conservatives began to see universities—sometimes rightly—as more rigidly ideological, something akin to political reeducation, rather than a more objective training in civic engagement (Abrams and Khalid 2020). Whether they were right or wrong, the civic mission of the university began to lose broader bipartisan support and state legislatures found it easier to cut budgets for higher education as tax revenues declined, especially in states with balanced budget amendments to their constitutions (Flannery 2022). The result has been a dramatic decline in public outlays for public universities or proposals for consolidation (Forman 2024). Public university campuses even face closure altogether (Gretzinger 2024). The "reforms" we describe later in the paper that abbreviate the time students spend on campus became an alternative to maintain enrollment (albeit reduced). Another response, which we do not address at length but which parallels to increased online enrollment and Dual Credit programs, is to use adjunct faculty at a per-class rate far below what tenured and tenure-track faculty make or to close department tenure lines or even whole departments (Hurlburt and McGarrah 2016a, 2016b). The hardest hit subjects, the ones more important for making engaged citizens, have often been humanities or social science departments most likely to be perceived as overly politicized. These departments may have also lagged in enrollment, arguably in part because of because of their politicization (Dutt-Ballerstadt 2019).

Our point is not simply that we should maintain front-loading of defined—even core subject—liberal arts and general education, even though these courses pertain more to civic engagement. Though we would even support spreading general education over the entire residential experience, we also support using upper-division courses outside of the liberal arts to build civic engagement. But the challenge should not be limited to relying exclusively on curricular content. The model should always be "curriculum plus" to see the four-year experience holistically. In the Bonner Foundation Model for Civic Development, for example, the first two years enables "Exploration" and "Experience" but the later years

[2] Of course, majors courses, even in STEM or business fields, can integrate civic engagement but this requires significant coordination among the faculty in departments already given to a more utilitarian approach to education. Citizenship Across the Curriculum Huber and Hutchings.

promote leadership of peers. Such leadership could involve projects (as it does in the Bonner Model) or intellectual leadership. It may also include leadership in elements of campus communal life promoting civic engagement.

A proper approach must fully leverage the four-year model and not turn the residential baccalaureate experience into a curricular relay race, handing off civic engagement from general education that one has to "get out of the way" to upper division courses, especially in STEM or business, for example. The baccalaureate curriculum should reflect the entire residential experience as a scaffolding throughout residency using both curriculum and extracurricular life together to increase wisdom and maturity to enable democratic civic life. First-year seminars, for example, can set the tone for classroom habits *and* extracurricular engagement while upper-division coursework leverages both what the student has learned and expects the student to demonstrate growth in civic virtue. The experience of growth and maturation should not be seen as simply completing courses or even projects as part of a checklist for credentialing. Rather, the student becomes a holistic work in progress throughout the time spent on campus, growing cognitively and emotionally from first-year student to senior.

Though institutions vary in how they take advantage of scaffolding during the student's residency, there is ideally some effort to cultivate culture and community in which the student is encouraged by residency to "steep" and grow. The increasingly popular first-year experience, for example, implies not only that the first year is the first not merely of one or two years (as it would be with abbreviated residency), but also that the student is being enculturated into a community in which he will and should spend time—especially as a cohort. He is not a lone transient among persons completing a checklist a la carte. In residential campuses, the first-year experience often overlaps with dorm residency requirements, classrooms integrated with residence halls, first-year seminars, and freshman orientation experiences.

3. The Decline of Residential Higher Education

3.1. Amputating the Residential Experience

What happens if students are not on campus much at all, however, especially as a cohort? What if students increasingly become mere transients passing through residential colleges, if at all, to acquire credits to round out an experience begun in high school? As we previously argued, we believe that disruption of the traditional college experience—not simply in its curriculum but in its potential for residency as a cohort—will seriously undermine the potential for education toward civic engagement. In this section, we articulate the threats to residential baccalaureate education that constitute the decline of residential higher education.

There are several programs that undermine the residential experience by shortening the amount of residential time necessary to earn a baccalaureate degree—if residential time is needed at all. Most of the programs we address push college-level courses (or what purport to be college-level courses) back into high school matriculation. Though some programs abbreviating residency date back to the 1950s, their popularity has advanced considerably under both de facto and de jure reforms. What has motivated these so-called reforms? Tuition increases have certainly encouraged students to abbreviate their time on campus. Costs have also outpaced inflation, though the rate of increase has slowed over the last few years. Between 1980 and 2020, the average price of tuition, fees, and room and board for an undergraduate degree increased 169% from USD 10,231 to USD 28,775 (McGurran 2023). The price of college has outpaced wages by multiples (Maldonado 2018). Students pursuing baccalaureate degrees at private nonprofit institutions and public institutions are also less likely to complete their degree in four years. Even associate degrees are taking longer to complete (Shapiro et al. 2016). As the baccalaureate degree has become more expensive or time-consuming, students find abbreviating their residency more appealing. The following programs enable that abbreviation but undermine civic engagement.

3.1.1. Advanced Placement[3]

The College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) program has posed a potential threat to residential education for several decades and is increasingly promoted by legal mandates. Created in the 1950s as part of the Kenyon Plan funded by the Ford Foundation and involving upscale prep schools, the AP program enables students nationwide to take high school courses that meet College Board standards and, upon successful completion, make a student eligible to sit for an exam (scored out of 5). The score earned on an AP exam, now available in over thirty subjects, may qualify a student to receive credit for a course in college. Receiving credit could mean replacing a required course with an elective. For example, a student is required to take Microeconomics in college, but having earned credit through a 3/4/5 (out of 5) on the AP exam, he is now allowed to substitute another course toward graduation requirements. Because many AP classes are often prerequisite courses or similar to "Intro to" courses in college, this could free up the student to do more advanced work sooner but would not shorten the time spent in the baccalaureate classroom. Earning acceptable scores on 5 subject exams, for example, would free up 5 classes for electives.

AP credit may shorten time spent on campus, however, if students are not required to substitute courses but simply receive credit toward graduation. In that case, for example, a student who earns acceptable scores on 5 subject exams could earn 3–5 credits per subject and likely eliminate somewhere between a semester and what is typically a full year of residence (15–25 credit hours). The student the begins their degree with a significant number of classes completed and residency is shortened. The student will likely also be off-sequence with other first-year students. This will place him in a different cohort, if he is in any cohort at all.

As it currently stands, however, the AP program is limited in its ability to shorten residency. In 2018, 1,130,920 students had three or more AP Exams on College Board records. In other words, they had taken three exams. This would amount to a semester at most and probably less depending on the credit hours of the courses in the college's catalog. A much smaller number of students in 2018 (35,453) took 9 AP Exams—potentially an academic year (two semesters) or more worth of credit (The College Board 2018). In 2022 only about one-third (34.6%) of US high school graduates took at least one AP Exam during high school, and only about one-fifth scored a 3 or higher (the minimum score many colleges will accept) on at least one AP exam (Reports-The College Board 2024a). In short, AP is probably still not making much of a dent to reduce residency or disrupt cohorts.

Legal mandates are changing the AP/college landscape, however. State legislatures are determined to expand AP exam access, especially for low-income students. Low income students now enjoy fully funded AP exams in six states and partially funded exams in fifteen states. Twelve states and the District of Columbia fully fund AP Exams for all low-income *public school* students (Reports-The College Board 2024b). Efforts to advance AP classes are having an effect, and not simply for test-taking by low-income students. Between 2012 and 2022, over 20 states have seen more significant increases in students taking the AP exam (Reports-The College Board 2024c). The legal environment extends beyond subsidizing exams. As of 2022, 36 states adopted statewide or systemwide AP policies. These policies require public education institutions in the state to award credit for AP Exam scores of 3 or higher. Programs requiring credit for a score of 3 have grown 22% since 2015. Policies requiring credit be given (without a particular score) have grown 14% in the same period (Reports-The College Board 2024c).

The AP program and its consequences for students raises the first of many questions about what motivates college-credit equivalency programs and who benefits from them. It is notable that some colleges, particularly those considered more elite, deny AP credit altogether while many more limit how many credits a student can receive from AP exams

[3] The AP program has similarities to the IB (International Baccalaureate) program and the CLEP (College-Level Examination Program) exam program insofar as each offers an exam whose score may result in college credit or advanced standing. Fewer states (Michigan, West Virginia, and Ohio) subsidize CLEP exam costs for low-income students and there is no state mandate to accept CLEP scores for credit though the American Council on Education has recommendations. More elite schools accept fewer, if any, CLEP exams for credit.

(Schnoebelen 2013). Dartmouth, for example, no longer gives credit *regardless of the exam score*, arguing that AP classes and exam prep are not equivalent in rigor to their own courses (DeSantis 2013). Obviously, Dartmouth does not consider the Dartmouth education (more correctly, the experience of being a student *at* Dartmouth) to consist of fungible educational experiences let alone "testing out" of a subject. A Dartmouth vice president described the motivation succinctly: "Ultimately, we would like a Dartmouth education to take place at Dartmouth" (Schnoebelen 2013). Dartmouth made this determination when AP test-takers could not pass its final exam in the presumably equivalent course, an outcome from which they inferred that students did not have the appropriate body of information transmitted and retained from their AP classes.

Dartmouth's objection to AP credit forces us to ask what a class is supposed to accomplish: is it only to transmit a body of facts testable on an exam? Or is it supposed to also inculcate skills and applications not confinable to a fungible assessment, and in a cohort of learners who develop a relationship with one another? It is this latter outcome, not the exam, that seems much more consistent with good civic engagement. The College of William & Mary, for example, were concerned that if Advanced Placement through AP exams went unchecked, it would consume many of the general education courses that it considered essential to student transformation—particularly in the first year. The point was not, as it seems to be for Dartmouth, to retain their own liberal arts courses for the sake of rigor. Rather, William & Mary decided that existing courses more typical of "Intro to..." may not successfully enculturate new students and impart necessary academic habits that transcend subject. They therefore instituted more interdisciplinary courses and subordinated testable content to the ability to think about and connect the knowledge that they gained (Berrett 2014). New interdisciplinary courses and seminars in the William & Mary curriculum became no longer equivalent to the non-interdisciplinary high school AP courses. This interdisciplinary approach also seems a fertile ground to seed civic engagement.

The most important attribute of William & Mary's approach is that it leverages the essential qualities of a good residential education by deploying robust faculty and departments typically found in a reputable baccalaureate institution and demonstrates that civic engagement and maturity consists of much more than learning a body of facts. One can imagine, in addition to their interdisciplinary pedagogy, other reasons to refuse AP equivalency: longitudinal civic projects or other essential hands-on activities including service learning, for example, none of which could be replicated on an AP exam.

3.1.2. Dual Enrollment

Another threat to civic engagement in residential higher education is programs that use some variation of dual enrollment (DE) or concurrent enrollment (CE), which is another program begun in the 1950s. Unlike AP, however, which became more popular within a few decades of its creation, DE/CE has become much more popular over the last two decades (even though most states do not require that parents be notified of DE/CE opportunities). Students in these programs do not graduate high school and then pursue college credit, as students typically did in the past. Instead, they earn college credit and even work towards an articulated associate or baccalaureate degree while attending high school or even middle school. Depending on the state, students may be part or full-time in their enrollment, and many states do not set limits on the number of credits a student may take.

Financial arrangements vary and reflect financial incentives created by states. Students double-counted for enrollment may garner extra funds from the state for both the college and the secondary school system. Secondary schools or districts may be responsible for tuition but some states enable all secondary school students to attend tuition free, including a stipend for books. Some states may have a GPA requirement that obliges cost-sharing. In most cases, however, the situation is considered advantageous for students from a cost perspective: some families/students do not pay for the credits, some pay a subsidized rate, and even in the worst case a community college tuition rate probably lower than the tuition

(and fees, room, and board) at a residential baccalaureate institution for a student without substantial financial aid or scholarships.

Though state law varies, both 2 and 4 year colleges (private or public) are eligible to offer DE/CE courses, though it is most often 2 year public institutions (community colleges) that offer them (Huiskes 2023). College enrollment *before* high school graduation is not limited to private and public secondary schools; it is also popular with homeschool families, especially parents not confident to teach upper-level classes, those desirous of shortening the time spent in college, or if the family is able to take advantage of subsidized or free tuition through their districts or states without having the student otherwise enrolled full time in public school. Homeschooling families may even become a favorite market for DE/CE since it will put families otherwise not counted for state or federal money into play for the school district and/or college.

What is the consequence of DE/CE being so attractive to such a wide spectrum of students? Courses associated with civic engagement, the general education or liberal arts classes in the first two years, are typically those offered to high school students in DE/CE. Because college credits earned through DE/CE often overlap with high school graduation requirements (sometimes defined in the law as "Dual Credit") these courses would be part of a typical "college prep" high school path. In this respect, DE/CE's role in cannibalizing the post-secondary curriculum likely overlaps with many AP courses, and there is no question that DE/CE is having a significant effect on enrollment in general education courses in baccalaureate institutions (Gilbert 2017).

Though DE/CE students are earning college credit, it is not likely that they are having a college experience. And it is less likely that they are having a robust civic engagement experience. Though community colleges are transcripting the credit, the classes are often taken at the secondary school campus or online specifically as DE/CE, which means the students essentially continue having the same secondary school experience or only a virtual experience. Furthermore, insofar as classes are not taken on the college or university campus, students are not mentored by a full-time member of the college or university faculty, or sometimes even an adjunct faculty member. DE/CE classes offered onsite at a secondary school (typically classified in the law as "concurrent enrollment") are usually taught by designated instructors not otherwise employed by the college but instead meeting minimal credential requirements (Education Commission of the States 2019). Only some state mandates give preference to on-campus classes for college transcript credit while others oblige some kind of transcript credit for all DE/CE courses. Our aforementioned maturity desirable for civic engagement is definitely blunted by DE/CE even more than by AP classes. Credit given by AP exam scores are not transcripted as college classes but classes taken in high school but dual-transcripted and dual-credited are. And unlike AP classes typically taken by high school students, DE/CE may be available to students as early as sixth grade. Some states even mandate that DE/CE classes *must* be available to students this young.

Once again, legal mandates are undermining residential higher ed: over 30 states require college credits earned through DE/CE to transfer to public postsecondary institutions. DEI is a contributing motivation: like the AP program, many see DE/CE as an ideal pathway for disadvantaged students to pursue a college degree (Edwards et al. 2021; Zinth and Barnett 2018; Fink and Jenkins 2023). Education Commission of the States in 2017 advocated publicizing DE/CE opportunities as a best practice along with guaranteeing transferability regardless of how credits are earned (online, at the secondary institution, or on campus), eliminating tuition for parents, and fully funding or reimbursing participating institutions.

By contrast, because the consequential AP program is administered by the non-profit College Board corporation, any laws hoping to advance its use can regulate only one side of the program. For example, a legislature can mandate that exam scores be accepted (as noted above) but it cannot regulate the exam or obligatory curriculum, for example. In the case of DE/CE, however, government funds and statues at various levels govern both K-12 and higher education in almost every case; both sides of the program fall under the purview of

the state legislature or education bureaucracy. Every state with the exception of New York has a statewide dual-enrollment policy. (Education Commission of the States 2019) and many states are becoming increasingly aggressive in expanding and subsidizing forms of DE/CE (PerryCook 2023). For example, even though just 6% of California students now take a college course through dual enrollment in their first year of high school, California's community colleges chancellor Sonya Christians has called for automatically enrolling all of its eighth graders (over 400,000) in a college course (Gallegos 2023).

3.2. The 90 Hour Degree

3.2.1. Eliminating General Education in Higher Education

The third program amputating residential higher education is just getting started with its second significant effort at accreditation: 90 credit hour baccalaureate degrees intended to replace existing 120 credit hour degrees. As we note below, the idea's genesis goes back at least to 2009. But what is surprising is how the idea is advancing not simply alongside AP and DE/CE but because of them. The idea is gaining support from surprising quarters, including some traditional residential higher education faculty. Their support should not indicate that they have lost confidence in the value of their institutions, however, or that they support the 90 h degree on its own merits. Rather, they support the abbreviated degree because AP and DE/CE have created a class divide. It is wealthier and more privileged students who have access to these abbreviating mechanisms even though they have fewer constraints to pay residential baccalaureate tuition. The traditional faculty supporting the 90 h degree reason that with rising costs and an atrophying commitment to full-time faculty and robust general education anyway (as we noted), equity mandates that colleges might as well slash the obligations of residential higher education for everyone.

For example, in a 2017 essay for the Chronicle of Higher Education, Arkansas State University professor Erik Gilbert described the effect of AP and DE/CE on his introductory world history classes: "Last semester my class had 25 students; 10 years ago it would have had 40. It's not that our overall enrollment is down—we had record enrollment last year. Nor does this reflect some shift in students' interests over the past decade. Then, as now, most students took world history and other gen-ed courses because they had to, not because they wanted to." What Gilbert is saying is that most students never wanted to take his world history class. But whereas they had fewer or more routes to avoiding it in the past, now they now have easier routes via AP and DE/CE.

Gilbert's concern is not simply enrollment, however, but demographics. Who has been able to leverage AP and DE/CE to obtain credit for classes like his, arguably the ones more foundational for understanding civic affairs? Gilbert's answer is telling: "The students in my gen-ed classes are disproportionately minorities, adults, and graduates of rural high schools. I am teaching fewer middle-class, suburban, white students. . . For middle-class students who attend well-funded high schools, general education at less- and moderately selective state universities is increasingly a thing of the past." This is consistent with what has happened at Dartmouth or William & Mary, for example. More elite students have more routes to abbreviating their residential college experience. There are obvious DEI concerns here, especially Kabala and Murrow's emphasis on civic engagement as "true dialogue across difference." Based on Gilbert's experience, we can conclude that there is relatively less "difference" in the DE/CE classes: they are mainly populated by suburban white students. In his classes there is also relatively less difference because those students are increasingly absent. They will have fewer minority, adult, and rural students in their cohort.

Given the state of things in his classroom and their greater implications, Gilbert proposes two solutions in the hope of achieving equity. He first proposes abolishing AP and DE/CE courses altogether because blocking that route to preempting his course would increase diversity in his classroom: "That way, students from across the social and economic spectrum would have the benefit of being in class together, getting a real liberal-arts education." He rightly points out that insofar as elite private colleges often refuse CE/DE classes for credit (just some refuse AP credit), their students enjoy a more robust liberal arts education than

what is offered to students in DE/CE, AP, online, or by high school instructors certified by a community college to teach concurrent enrollment courses, for example.

Gilbert's second proposal encapsulates the latest threat to residential higher education's advantage for civic engagement, a proposal that has advanced considerably since he wrote the essay in 2017: "The other option would be to eliminate gen ed. Europe has embraced a three-year degree, and most of what we would call general education occurs in high school there. Students go directly from high school into their majors. Concurrent enrollment is quietly creating something similar in this country".[4] Shifting general education back to high school for everyone, and thereafter eliminating it from the current degree requirements in higher education, however, presumes that most of college credit-eligible courses taught to high school students are truly equivalent. They are not. Gilbert is giving the lie to these equivalency programs. As Gilbert notes, "These courses are taught in high schools, to high-school students, by high-school teachers. They are high-school courses" (Gilbert 2017). He is right, but the solution is to drive enrollment back up into the college classrooms, not to eliminate the college courses or to continue to presuppose that high school and college courses are equivalent. Similar concerns about equivalency were being expressed in 2016 about the expanding DE/CE program in Texas. Teachers lacked graduate coursework in the subject they were teaching for college credit, felt pressured to pass DE/CE students, and encountered too many students who lacked the maturity to complete a college-equivalent course (Mangan 2016).

Civic engagement under such a proposal to eliminate general education, insofar as civic engagement relies on general education particularly in the first one or two years of baccalaureate coursework, would be doomed. Shifting these subjects back to the vagaries and variables of secondary schools would not only put them at the mercy of disparate staffing but also force students to engage foundational subjects without requisite maturity or rising stakes in the political system. Courses lacking rigor and consistency also make it impossible for universities to capitalize on what the student learned in high school to scaffold and/or standardize versus scaffolding on courses taught by their own faculty. Students in affluent secondary schools (whether public or private) might also suffer from a lack of diversity relative to higher education. As schools or school districts tried to address these problems of funding, curriculum, rigor, or diversity, they would no doubt run into the political and ideological buzzsaw currently making coherent K-12 policy difficult.

3.2.2. Competency Assessment Replacing Contact Time

Gilbert's proposal to create a three-year degree is an inequitable but somewhat logical solution to an inequitable status quo (the ability of more affluent students to test/dual-enroll out of their college general education courses), but there is another proposal for a three year degree rooted in the growing inequity of the cost of the baccalaureate degree. Higher education "reformers" again want to reduce baccalaureate degrees requirements (under accreditation) from 120 h to 90 h. This is not the same as the increasingly popular "accelerated" degree wherein students complete 120 h in three years using higher-than-normal semester schedules, summer, or online enrollment. It is the case already that 12% of full-time private and 10% of full-time public university and college students are finishing four year degrees within three years, though this may be a combination of AP/DE/CE and summer enrollment or taking 18+ hours in a fall or spring semester (Marcus 2022).

At the heart of the 90 h proposal is a knife to the heart of civic education, which is time spent together not only in residence on campus but in class together. The traditional "credit hour" is replaced with individualized "competency-based education". Time is not spent in class together with peers/cohort/collaborators or a professor/mentor. Instead, a student acquires and demonstrates competency by whatever means enables passing an assessment. It is not unlike the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) except it is managed by the institution rather than the College Board (which administers CLEP and AP and the SAT). Not surprisingly, some of the most ardent advocates for replacing credit hours with assessed competency have included Capella University and Southern New Hampshire

University, both online universities whose primary market is nontraditional adult students looking for the fastest and most inexpensive credentialing route and have no intention of attempting a residential baccalaureate degree.

Reinforcing the value of the classroom credit hour, especially insofar as it bolsters residential education, discourages the grossly inferior alternative of the credentialing for-profit higher education institution. For-profit universities have struggled for years to find inroads into the higher education market, and shortening degree requirements means that they might be able to boost graduation rates, as for-profit institutions dramatically lag on this metric (Ortagus and Hughes 2021). The fewer the hours for non-profits, the better for the for-profit institutions. As for-profit institutions appear to succeed, they become more appealing for disastrous financial ventures by traditional institutions such as the losing bet that University of Arizona made with Ashford University (Boehm 2024).

A previous effort to create 90 h degrees in 2009 failed to impress accreditors; (Rosenberg 2016) however, a new effort launched in the last few years includes at least twelve colleges and universities attempting to create three-year degrees. It is worth noting that one of the participating institutions asked not to be publicly identified, suggesting the controversy that such an announcement might raise. Another institution refused to create three year degrees in subjects in political science, history, and philosophy (Marcus 2022). Though they did not cite preserving civic engagement as their motive, it is interesting that these subjects would be considered essential to creating competent citizens in a democracy and the test institution was not comfortable abridging it. These are subjects that, if not simply lists of testable data, oblige a community of learners to achieve maximum benefits.

There are now failures and successes in this new effort. As of 2023, the New England Commission of Higher Learning had declined New England College's proposal for a 100 h degree. Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission has expressed their willingness to consider proposals, though none of the colleges in the test group work with them. Other accreditors have expressed similar willingness, WASC Senior College and University Commission and the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (Moody 2023b).

Despite the failed attempt in 2009, however, the first 90 h degree has finally been approved. Seven 90–94 credit hour bachelor's degrees were offered by Brigham Young University–Idaho and affiliated Ensign College beginning in 2024 following approval by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. It is notable that all of these degrees are in professional programs: applied business management, family and human services, software development, applied health, and professional studies (BYU), communication and information technology (Ensign) (Moody 2023a). They achieved these truncated degrees by eliminating electives and by building a "nested certificate structure" along with general education. Another proposal by American Public University proposal which targets "adult learners" eliminates electives but retains general education. It seems then that electives are being eliminated rather than general education, but were any general education courses retained, and were these electives entirely wide open or were they satisfied by liberal arts coursework? That might have some consequences for civic engagement.

4. Conclusions

When one considers that marginalized or disadvantaged students (including first-generation students) have even fewer resources to devote to a baccalaureate degree, abbreviating the route to the credential may seem not only just but obligatory—especially when such abbreviations are readily available to affluent secondary schools more than underprivileged ones. Do we not want higher education to be more accessible, after all, and would this not be achieved by expanding access to the abbreviated routes? The answer to this question depends on what one means by higher education—especially if we expect it to enable and encourage civic engagement. Early sampling of slightly more rigorous coursework in high school in AP/DE/CE, for example, may instill confidence in marginalized students to do college-level work, for example, and that is good. But enabling confidence or building resilience does not justify a credentialling checklist beginning in middle school

that disregards the prerequisites for civic engagement education repeatedly mentioned in our argument such as mentoring, cohorts, a community of learners, academic resources such as campus centers, and maturity just prior to independence

Socioeconomic divisions will persist and worsen if residential higher education is further truncated. There is no reason to think—especially given the economic and political disparities in secondary schools—that momentum toward expanding abbreviated routes will not be exploited by a meritocratic elite who view earning college credits in high school or completing an accelerated degree as evidence of prodigious academic ability and entitlement. Their wealthier school districts or private schools will fund abundant opportunities. Other elites (including elite institutions) who refuse abbreviated routes will continue to enjoy a robust immersion in civic engagement education, including in the liberal arts, at elite schools who understand residential higher education to be a transformative experience. Students in marginal secondary institutions will graduate from high school to then to enroll in atrophied general education courses on revolving door campuses populated by students trying to "get it over with". However progressive higher education may think itself to be, and however much elite institutions have substituted electives for the traditional core curriculum, elite institutions have invested too much in liberal arts faculty and courses, and too much cache in the meritocratic idea of an "educated person" being "well rounded". They will not embrace an expedited degree in the hope of transcending class differences. As abbreviation advances, the axe will fall primarily on civic engagement-essential courses for all but the elite. This will skew civic engagement in American in favor of the elites who will have the academic and experiential background in higher education to continue it throughout life, learned in classrooms largely devoid of dialogue across difference. At best, disadvantaged students can only look forward to equivalency classes in high school or college, also without much dialogue across difference.

When students earn college credit in high school, the benefits of residential higher education are lost. The student almost certainly loses the mentoring of a college instructor, is not participating in a scaffolded experience as a residential student, and is not living on campus with peers as a cohort to engage in dialogue or contemplation or practice civic virtue together. She is likely not participating in a first-year experience, taking freshman seminars or interdisciplinary courses, taking classes as a cohort, or participating in as many college-level extracurriculars (the latter already suffering from the pandemic) (Gretzinger and Hicks 2024). The student is also not college age and has not left home, having much less leisure or maturity for, or stake in, the higher education experience. It may be possible to participate in some civic engagement projects (service learning, for example) insofar as a partnering college requires it of its high school students, but the college or university has little ability to shape or transform the student outside of the curriculum.

To avoid treating higher education as a credential to be expediently secured, the consequential harm to both disadvantaged students and civic engagement, the credit hour measurement should be retained and competency-based assessment rejected for all except perhaps a small population of part-time adult learners whose circumstances prevent residential higher education. Likewise, relegating higher education to online ventures is useful for professional or continuing education students, but these students are quite aware that they are giving up the residential experience and are often in a more advanced stage of life that benefits less from the residential experience. Marginalized students should not be relegated to this utilitarian trade-off.

The traditional residential education at a baccalaureate degree-granting institution for generations of students was typically a four-year academic year residency to earn at least 120 "credit hours," with a credit hour typically being a measure of instructional content defined by the Department of Education for federal aid and otherwise determined by accrediting agencies or states (US Department of Education (ED) 2023). Critics of the credit hour may contend that it is historically a faculty-centered rather than student-centered measurement: it measures time spent together rather than learning (Parry 2013). However, that is precisely the point. Civil society is time spent together in common cause. Defenses

of the credit hour, however, reflect what studies reinforce as the advantage of residential higher education: time spent together, *rightly understood and leveraged to the advantage of the residential student*, is not but one among many dispensable and fungible means to an end defined by assessments. Nor is time spent together simply one of several potential inputs equally capable of producing an outcome unrelated to the time spent (Schur 2013). Rather, time spent together (and well spent) in person produces a unique product emphasizing the communal, action-oriented, and dialogical elements of civic life. As such, we believe that the credit hour is and ought to be the defining unit for higher education (Fabris 2015).

We believe that our proposals will do much more not only for civic engagement in higher education but also for disadvantaged students most likely to benefit from it. Civic engagement, after all, can remedy the political marginalization of disadvantaged students and therefore merits even more emphasis. None of the options considered above—AP, DE/CE, or 90 h degrees—promise anything other than to leave the student with a relatively truncated understanding of civic engagement. The reason is that the in-person character of traditional course work promotes civic engagement more than the suggested simulacra can replicate. High schools are simply not college campuses: they lack their own residential cultures, fraternal associations, and independent mentorship among field experts.

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