

Building Local Capacity: The Initiative for Civic Leadership at UT Dallas

Amanda D. Clark,

Director, Initiative for Civic Leadership

Assistant Professor of Instruction, Political Science

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Abstract

The UT Dallas Initiative for Civic Leadership empowers students to engage in their local community through rigorous coursework and government internships in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. Through an immersive internship experience, the Initiative seeks to foster future student leaders prepared to meet the challenges within their communities. The mission of the Initiative is supported by a commitment to non-partisan civic engagement. We strive to create an environment that welcomes diverse perspectives and fosters a sense of civic duty through governmental service. Through strategic partnerships with local governments and community organizations, the Initiative for Civic Leadership seeks to enhance the academic and professional trajectories of our students and deepen the university's connection to the DFW area. Our goal is to establish this initiative as a program that exemplifies UT Dallas's commitment to excellence and leadership, providing a model for civic engagement education that can be emulated across Texas and beyond. Historically, UT Dallas is a STEM school. By encouraging this career path, we hope to bridge polarization and misconceptions about government service and help us promote a deeper understanding of political science as a necessary component of any degree.

Introduction

In the fall of 2024, I started a new job as a visiting assistant professor at the University of Texas at Dallas (UTD) in the political science department. My research background is in democracy, citizen engagement, and election administration. In my prior position at Florida International University (FIU), I was a member of the public administration department and focused on teaching courses on public service and managing global cities. I had the good fortune of working on initiatives, through both teaching and research, aimed at increasing student awareness of voting/elections and working with the Ferre Institute for Civic Leadership

to increase connections between FIU students and local civic leaders. FIU was also a member of the NextGen Service Corps sponsored by the Volcker Alliance; a program designed to introduce students to public service.

As I began my new career at UTD, I was sad to not be as involved in civic engagement activities as I was at FIU. However, in a prime example of “right place, right time,” an opportunity to jump back into this area with both feet presented itself. About 4 or 5 weeks into the semester, the Dean of the School of Economic, Political, and Policy Sciences (EPPS) asked if I would be interested in taking over the Initiative for Civic Leadership (ICL) at UT Dallas. The Initiative was the brainchild of Dr. Patrick Muenks, who was leaving our local campus to work for the University of Texas system in Austin. The answer was yes! However, there are some obstacles to launching a program to create civic leaders in a state consistently ranked among the least civically engaged in the nation (UT Austin, 2018). This state is also in a nation where civics is being taught less and less across the board, mistrust in institutions is high, and at a newer university with a focus on the sciences.

UTD is a young school, its predecessor institution being the Graduate Research Center of the Southwest, founded in 1961 by Eugene McDermott, J. Erik Jonsson, and Cecil Green of Texas Instruments. The plan was to create higher education opportunities for local Texas students to prevent brain drain from the region and provide Texas Instruments with well-trained employees. By 1969, the University of Texas at Dallas was born of this initial institution; UTD only began admitting undergraduates in 1975 (juniors and seniors) and its first incoming freshman class in 1990. Given its Texas Instruments roots, the university is heavily invested in

STEM and other science programs. Figures 1 and 2 (from UTD, 2024) provide detailed information regarding the student population.

Figure 1 Student Population

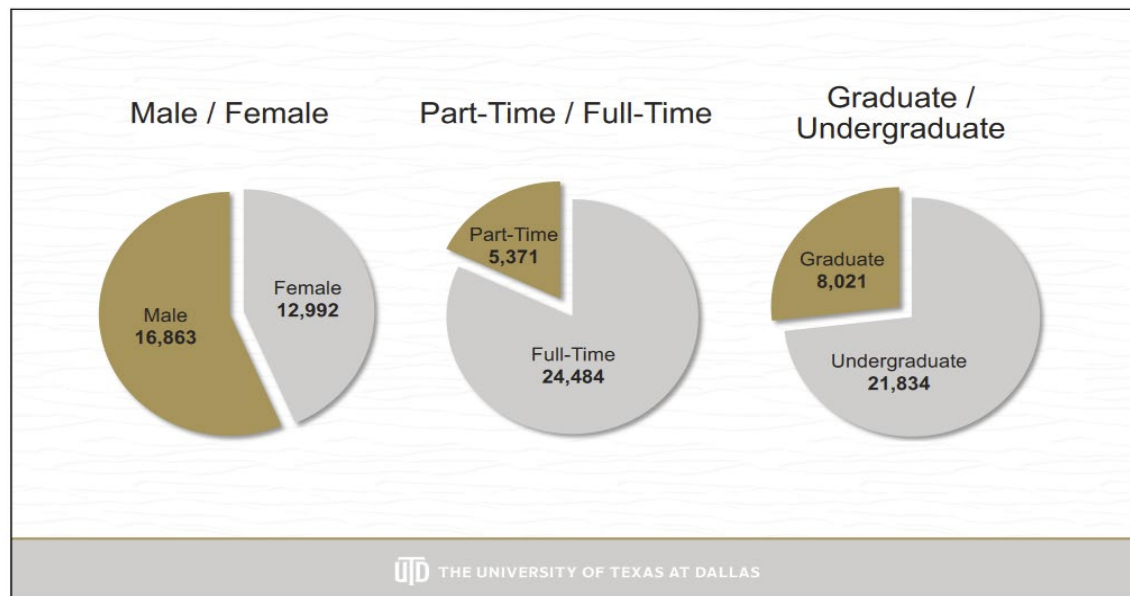
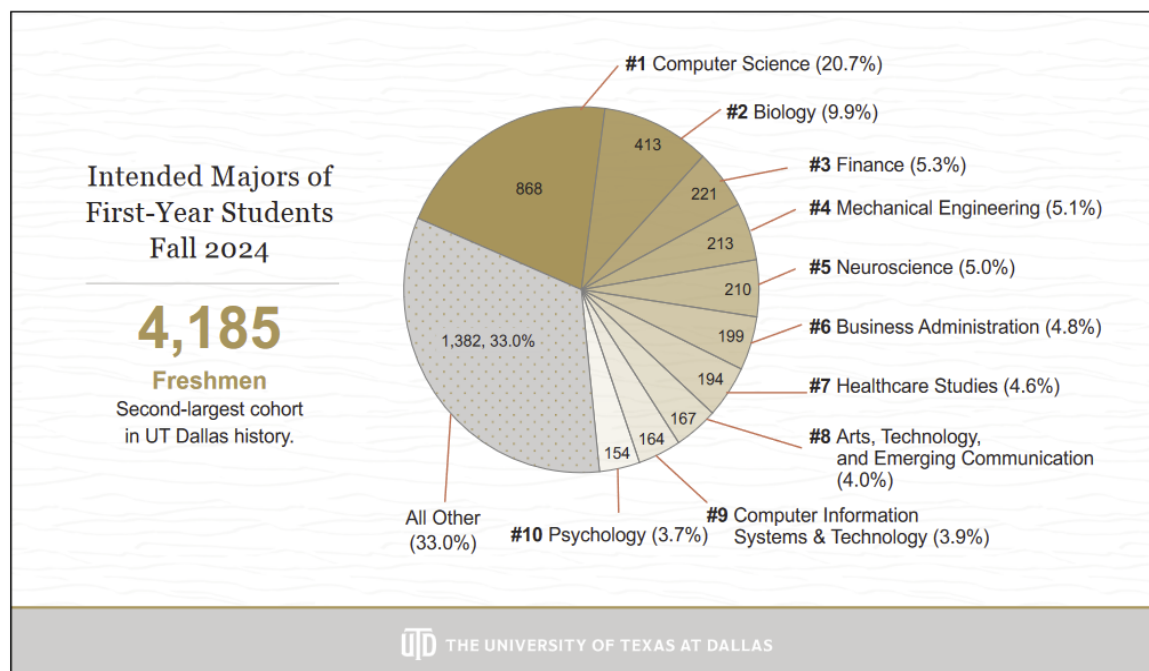


Figure 2 Intended Majors of 2024 Incoming Freshman



Building an Initiative for Civic Leadership in this environment provides both opportunities and challenges. The small, but mighty, EPPS School in which the ICL is located constitutes a fraction of the overall student body. Many students are housed in computer science, engineering, and other STEM pathways; while there have been calls for more STEM students to be encouraged to explore public service and policymaking (Bray et al, 2020; Chang et al., 2023; NISO, 2024; Rimm-Kaufman et al, 2021; Spaulding & Nair, 2020), implementing concrete plans to integrate these students is another thing altogether. In this paper, I will outline the challenge of civic engagement pedagogy in polarized times, then I will describe the opportunities and challenges of building the ICL at UTD and end with a description of our long-term strategic plan to create a flagship program in civic leadership for the entire university.

Civic Engagement and Public Service in Polarized Times

What does it mean to be civically engaged? When reviewing activities and phrases used across political science (i.e., civic engagement, citizen participation, community organizing, service learning, community service, or democratic citizenship), it becomes apparent there is no one-size-fits-all program. Civic pedagogies encompass all these concepts and more as attributes and contributors to students' civic learning (Bell et al., 2024). Thinking about public service as a route to civic engagement or vice versa, the Haas Center for Public Service describes pathways that focus on community-engaged research, social entrepreneurship, and activism (Haas, n.d.). Students can learn about their communities through activities like interviewing local politicians and public servants, attending public meetings, and learning about elections (APSA, n.d.). Unfortunately, many of these skills are going unused or unappreciated in a very polarized society.

Increasing violence and violent rhetoric, lack of trust in institutions, and dehumanization of others will lead to a breakdown of our democracy. In a recent Gallup poll, 80% of American adults believe “Americans are greatly divided on the most important values” (Jones, 2024). Trust in the government is low. Twenty-three percent of Americans said they have trust in the federal government in a 2024 survey (Partnership for Public Service, 2024); however, trust in local and state governments is slightly higher (Jones, 2023). In addition, polarization has been proven to increase stress and anxiety, which create or exacerbate even more serious health conditions (Fraser et. al, 2022) and polarization has been found to undermine families and increase divisions between different socio-economic classes (Jilani and Smith 2019). Robust civic engagement programs and curricula focused on democratic health are vital to combatting polarization and reversing distrust in institutions (Bell et al., 2024; Campbell, 2019; Cramer, 2016; Glover et al., 2021; Whaley & Clapp, 2022).

Yet, a concerted focus on civic engagement in higher education has its challenges. McCartney (2017) laments the fact that most civic engagement courses are only offered in political science and similar programs. Tenure and promotion schemes do not prioritize community-engaged scholarship or administrative work on civic engagement programs (Seligsohn & Grove, 2017). In addition, with less than 20% of U.S. states requiring a year of civics in high school, higher education professionals will need to start from a very basic level of knowledge before they can challenge students to a higher level of engagement. These challenges are even more difficult to surmount given the hostile atmosphere in which higher education currently finds itself.

In Texas, higher education and its proponents have been under attack from fellow public servants. Academic freedom, diversity initiatives, tenure, and salary have all come under intense scrutiny in recent legislative sessions. Senate Bill 17, passed in 2023, banned diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs; Senate Bill 18 in the same year sought to originally ban tenure but settled for changing fundamental aspects of the process to allow for more discretion by the university to fire (The Daily Texan, 2024). While these efforts might not seem to be relevant to building a civic education program, efforts to dismantle DEI programs and reject diversity in hiring do impact the ability of universities to attract faculty from all walks of life (McGee, 2023). Building a civic engagement program absolutely includes not just academic diversity but personal diversity as well. Communities are not monolithic, and a myriad of viewpoints and experiences are vital. Building civic leadership capacity through coursework and internships will hopefully help bridge the divide we are seeing across the country.

The ICL Program

The ICL provides students with invaluable experience in local, state, and/or federal government internships without the need to leave the Dallas-Fort Worth area (the “Metroplex”). The program has two main goals: to inspire and prepare students to serve their communities and the nation by building practical, collaborative leadership skills and to foster a pipeline of new talent to our partners in government agencies across the Metroplex. Students accepted into the program have a fellowship experience that includes upper-level academic courses on civic engagement and state and local government combined with guest lectures, special events, and seminars on professional development.

The Metroplex has a population of 7.6 million people, which is larger than 38 states. This area includes 71 municipalities, 11 counties, 40 independent school districts, and dozens of special purpose districts that cover a variety of public services including water management, hospitals, utilities, and economic development. These government entities represent a significant untapped opportunity for UTD to create internship opportunities for students and connections with local governments. Tomorrow's civic leaders must come from a myriad of different majors, all working together to solve complex societal problems. Local governments provide many opportunities in every field and ICL will help make better connections between UTD graduates and local public service opportunities.

Students are required to take two 4000-level courses from the following: Civic Engagement, Participation, and Advocacy; State and Local Government Policymaking; Wicked Social Problems; or Policy Analysis. Two courses are offered per semester, along with the required internship credit course. The academic courses include theories and themes in civic engagement and policy creation broadly but do focus on these topics through the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex and State of Texas lens. The assignments in the courses include several short reflection papers on relevant policy problems, class discussion leader, and course participation. Within each module, relevant practitioners are scheduled to speak to the class. Examples of guest speakers include former city managers, the Dallas Federal Reserve Bank, Dallas County Election Department personnel, and nonprofits like the North Texas Food Bank.

Initially the courses are open to all students, not just the ICL cohort. This was done to advertise the program and the department. In time, if enough students join the program, the courses will be limited to the ICL cohort to encourage cohesiveness. Currently, if any non-ICL

students like the courses, they can apply to the ICL to finish the program in the next semester. This flexibility enables us to keep marketing the program and eventually attract more students. Flexibility may also be required as we reach out to students outside of traditional majors like political science.

Opportunities and Challenges in Dallas

Founded in 1969, UTD has only known periods of growth and expansion. As was communicated to me when I started at the university, saying “yes is still a thing here.” A young but growing school often gives more opportunity to try new programs and build them with little institutional baggage or roadblocks (Kim, 2017). Dr. Jennifer Holmes, the Dean of EPPS, has been undeniably supportive in building the ICL, along with other initiatives and community-engaged research opportunities. For example, Dr. Timothy Bray and his research team recently created the North Texas Quality of Life Initiative¹; the framework aims to create a data repository for residents, policymakers, and city leaders to use to better understand the challenges and opportunities facing North Texas. The Public and Nonprofit Management department is highly regarded and ranked number 1 in North Texas and number 3 in Texas (US News and World Report, 2023). Yet, EPPS is still a small school in the university community.

From 2013 to 2025, enrollment at UTD increased by 51%; however, numbers have leveled off in recent years (UTD, 2024). While the enrollment cliff in Texas has been tempered by the growth of inbound residents, the state overall has seen declining enrollments across the board in higher education (Fikac, 2023). In times of economic scarcity, universities often need

¹ <https://ntxqualityoflife.com/>

to scale back programs or focus on “job creation” pathways. As mentioned above, a dedicated focus on preparing students for the jobs of tomorrow might not correspond with carving out space for more civic engagement. Reframing the need for civic leadership as an integral part of a holistic job creation program is essential.

On the other hand, UTD has a robust Honors College. Since its founding in 2014, the Hobson Wildenthal Honors College has had over 1,300 students and 850 National Merit Scholars. The Honors College is the conduit through which undergraduate students apply for the Archer Fellowship; the Archer Fellowship is a highly competitive program that enables students to work and live for a semester in Washington D.C. There are also opportunities for undergraduates to apply for the Texas Legislative Fellowship Program (TLFP) which provides students a chance to live and work in Austin, TX during the biennial Texas Legislative session. The success of the Honors College at UTD speaks to the interest in robust, challenging academic experiences (even those with a public service component).

Attracting students with public service and political science interests is one thing. Attracting students in computer science, biology, pre-medicine, and other sciences is quite another. Students in STEM programs are less engaged and know less about social and political issues; in addition, even when they do know about issues, they feel they are not as important as their individual career goals (Garibay, 2015; Goldenkoff, 2020). Yet, these students also need a healthy understanding of how democracy and public programs work, as issues like global pandemics, the spread of artificial intelligence, and climate change impact every country and public policy decision. Conversely, citizens also need to be better prepared to read and synthesize highly technical and scientific knowledge (Jacoby, 2022).

Some of the issues are logistical and bureaucratic. As we have encountered on our path to building the ICL, students in other degree programs have stricter requirements and set schedules for accomplishing their goals. The ICL is envisioned to mimic the Archer Fellowship or TLFP in that it should be accomplished in one semester, with a fellowship cohort feel. However, during a meeting with academic advisors from the Natural Sciences and Mathematics department, we learned that a cohort approach might not work for their students. Twelve credit hours of political science coursework and an internship would not fit easily within their students' degree plans. Students in these pathways might have space for one elective in a semester and certainly would not be able to do a 20-hour internship at the same time. Most of the advisors indicated that the internships would need to be done in the summer semester for their students.

Building flexibility into the program, while necessary to attract students from other programs, could also take away from the cohort feel we have envisioned. To counteract this effect, we plan on hosting events outside of the classroom. Guest speakers, advocacy days at the State Capitol, and activities hosted by the UTD Career Services Center will also be available for our students. For example, the UTD Career Services Center hosts an event called Comet Treks, where students may take a "field trip" to local companies and government agencies to enable them to network and attend Q&A sessions on the ground. Prior Comet Treks locations include the local Dallas office of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the Secret Service, Abbott Laboratories and Emerson Electric.

Finally, at UTD, and many other schools across the nation, we are struggling with finding paid internship opportunities for our students. The literature on the importance of hands-on

experience with local government agencies proves that the internship component is vital to our mission (Foley & Jordan, 2024; Lamb et al., 2023; Lucas, 2024). We strive to recruit students from across the university, not just those with the means to complete an unpaid internship. If a student must give up a paid part-time job to enter our program, it may put them in a vulnerable position either personally or for their families. However, most public and nonprofit internships are not paid. This wrinkle inevitably gives us the task of seeking and securing grant funding to cover the gap to recruit and retain students (Jordan & Matzke, 2024). In addition, the Texas Board of Regents recently approved a policy that would enable all students with a family income of \$100,000 or less free tuition to any University of Texas institution (Munoz, 2024). This is wonderful news for our ability to recruit underrepresented students but only heightens the need for paid internships.

Conclusion and Future Steps

The ICL is an ambitious project to encourage UTD students to think about how they fit in their larger community no matter what their major. While the courses are housed in the political science department, topics and information will come from a variety of sources. As societal problems get more complex with concerns about technological change, the impacts of climate change, and fighting misinformation, the integration of civic leadership concepts for all students is a crucial mission. Faculty need to engage in civics education to help meet student demand for instruction and guidance in the democratic process (Houston, 2024). Initiatives like the ICL will help prepare students to engage in local, state, and national governance structures while also seeing what that work looks like in practice.

The ICL at UTD is still in the early stages. Our current goal is to promote the program with undergraduates in the School of Economic, Political, and Policy Sciences while building pathways within the program to accommodate students from non-political science majors. We also hope to expand to offer opportunities to master's students or incorporate existing internship programs within the Public and Nonprofit Management Department. In addition, paperwork has been filed to create an official certificate for those who complete the ICL requirements so that students may have a concrete credential for future employment. As we build the ICL at UTD, we hope to reverse some of the negative trends that place Texas at the bottom of the civic engagement ladder, at least in the Metroplex.

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