

Cyclone Civics:
A Civil Literacy and Engagement at Iowa State University

A paper prepared for the
APSA Teaching Learning Conference
Alexandria, VA
February 2025

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the initial stages of Cyclone Civics, a campus-wide initiative at Iowa State University aimed at addressing stakeholder concerns about declining civic literacy, knowledge, and engagement. It begins by analyzing the educational and political factors that inspired the initiative. The paper then outlines Cyclone Civics' objectives and highlights recent progress in its development. Finally, the authors seek insights from the panel on best practices to adopt, as well as potential challenges and opportunities for the initiative moving forward.

I. Introduction

It is of no surprise to this audience that the United States has witnessed a significant decline in civics education, leading to widespread civic illiteracy. A study by the U.S. Chamber Foundation revealed that over 70% of Americans failed a basic civic literacy quiz, struggling with questions about the three branches of government and the number of Supreme Court justices. Additionally, only half could identify the branch responsible for enacting laws.¹ This decline is partly attributed to educational policies like the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001,

¹New Study Finds Alarming Lack of Civic Literacy Among Americans. U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/civics/new-study-finds-alarming-lack-of-civic-literacy-among-americans?utm_source=chatgpt.com

which prioritized subjects such as math and reading, inadvertently reducing emphasis on civics.² Unfortunately, college students are not immune to this trend. A 2019 survey by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation found that college students performed no better than the general public on questions about the U.S. Constitution and basic government functions, highlighting a systemic gap in civics education at all levels. This lack of civic knowledge among young adults poses challenges to fostering an engaged and informed citizenry capable of participating meaningfully in democratic processes.

The civic literacy of students at Iowa State University (ISU) reflects broader nationwide declines in civic knowledge. The Fordham Institute, an organization dedicated to promoting civic engagement and education, assigned failing grades to the civics and history standards of two key states from which Iowa State heavily recruits—Illinois and Iowa. Even more concerning, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) revealed that Iowa State seniors fall behind their peers at comparable institutions in nearly every measure of student engagement related to civic education and involvement.³ Given these trends across education generally, and at Iowa State University specifically, leadership at Iowa State University in spring 2024 began to examine the state of civic education at the University and how concerns regarding its decline could be addressed.

Politics and Higher Education: For the better part of a decade, higher education has been criticized for its perceived liberal bias and faced charges that liberal professors are indoctrinating their students. However, reliable data on faculty members' ideological

² When and Why Did America Stop Teaching Civics? Sandra Day O'Connor Institute for American Democracy. https://oconnorinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/When-and-Why-Did-America-Stop-Teaching-Civics_.pdf

³ National Survey of Student Engagement. "NSSE 2023 Engagement Indicators." [https://www.ir.iastate.edu/sites/default/files/PDF's/NSSE23%20Engagement%20Indicators%20\(ISU\).pdf](https://www.ir.iastate.edu/sites/default/files/PDF's/NSSE23%20Engagement%20Indicators%20(ISU).pdf)

predilections is difficult to come by. One survey dating from the early 2000s, found that 80+ percent of faculty identified as moderate or liberal and only nine percent of faculty identified as conservative. Other studies found more lopsided ratios, with variations by institutional type (liberal arts colleges are more liberal) and discipline (Humanities disciplines have more liberal professors than economics or business).⁴ A more recent study that “scraped” professors’ Twitter interactions and responses found there were more conservative faculty members than previous studies, and that tenured faculty were more likely to hold conservative views than junior faculty.⁵ Nonetheless, the perceived bias has led to a backlash against “critical race theory,” often mischaracterized as teaching students that one race or gender is better than another and legislating what can and cannot be taught.⁶ The legislation continued with other “anti-woke” initiatives. Florida, for instance, ordered courses in Sociology be dropped from general education programs at public universities,⁷ and at least 12 states have passed “anti-DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion]” laws,⁸ a move mimicked by President Trump in recent days.⁹

Likewise, civic education has become politicized and is seen by some conservatives as an antidote to the presumed anti-American and left-leaning bias of college professions. The creation of various conservative think tanks or civics institutes at places like the University of Florida, the

⁴ Scott Jaschik. 2017. “Professors and Politics: What the Research Says.” *Inside Higher Education*. February 26, 2017. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/02/27/research-confirms-professors-lean-left-questions-assumptions-about-what-means>.

⁵ Alex Walters. 2024. “Actually, There are More Conservatives on the Faculty than You Think, Study Finds.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*. July 26, 2024. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/actually-there-are-more-conservatives-on-the-faculty-than-you-think-study-finds>.

⁶ Colleen Flaherty. 2021. “Legislating Against Critical Race Theory.” *Inside Higher Education*. June 8, 2021. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/06/09/legislating-against-critical-race-theory-curricular-implications-some-states>.

⁷ Anemona Hartocollis. 2024. “Florida Eliminates Sociology as a Core Course at Its Universities.” *New York Times*. January 24, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/24/us/florida-universities-sociology.html>.

⁸ Jessica Bryant and Chloe Appleby. 2025. “These States’ Anti-DEI Legislation May Impact Higher Education.” *Best Colleges*. January 22, 2025. <https://www.bestcolleges.com/news/anti-dei-legislation-tracker/>.

⁹ Shaun Harper. 2025. “The Human Cost of Trump Firing All Federal DEI Workers.” *TIME*. January 28, 2025. <https://time.com/7210295/cost-trump-firing-dei-workers/>.

University of Texas, Ohio State University, and Arizona State University¹⁰ has been welcomed by those embracing “heterodoxy,” or conversative ideology and Great Books pedagogy. Yet the fact remains that states have a long history of mandating civic education at the post-secondary level. A 2003 study found that nine states had a civics-related requirement in their state codes.¹¹ Florida and California joined this list in 2018¹² and 2019,¹³ respectively and in 2021, the Purdue University Board of Trustees adopted a “civic literacy” requirement for all undergraduates at all its campuses.¹⁴

Higher Education in Iowa: Iowa’s public higher education system is comprised of 15 community colleges, governed by a Board of Directors,¹⁵ and three public, four-year institutions -- the University of Iowa, Iowa State University, and the University of Northern Iowa -- known collectively as “regents’ institutions,” which are governed by an appointed Board of Regents.¹⁶ The Regents are charged with creating and enforcing policies for the regents’ institutions, although sometimes their efforts are superseded by the State Legislature.

Iowa is no exception to the politicization of higher education. In 2021, the Iowa State Legislature passed “House File 802,” which prohibits the inclusion of “specific defined concepts” in required government trainings and k-12 instruction, including sex or race

¹⁰ Ryan Quinn. 2024. “The Curious Rise of a Conservative—or Civic-Minded?—Center at the University of Florida.” *Inside Higher Education*. July 23, 2024. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/faculty-issues/shared-governance/2024/07/23/curious-rise-conservative-or-civic-minded-uf>.

¹¹ Karen M. Kedrowski. 2003. “Civic Education by Mandate: A State-by-State Analysis.” *PS: Political Science and Politics*. 36(2): 225-227. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3649313>.

¹² The 2024 Florida Statutes. Title XLVIII, Chapter 1007.

http://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?mode=View%20Statutes&SubMenu=1&App_mode=Display_Statute&Search_String=1007.25&URL=1000-1099/1007/Sections/1007.25.html.

¹³ Jose Franco, 2022. “Civic Engagement Leadership Program.” *PS: Political Science and Politics*. 55(2): 394-296. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652100175X>.

¹⁴ Daniel Morris. 2021. “Dictating Civics: How the Purdue Civics Literacy Requirement Was Imposed by Trustees and Administrators.” *Academe Blog*. June 21, 2021. <https://academeblog.org/2021/06/21/dictating-civics-how-the-purdue-civics-literary-requirement-was-imposed-by-trustees-and-administrators/>.

¹⁵ Community Colleges for Iowa. <https://www.ccfioriowa.org/our-community-colleges/website-homepages>.

¹⁶ Iowa Board of Regents. <https://www.iowaregents.edu/>.

stereotyping or scapegoating, or content that induces feelings of guilt or shame because of someone's race or sex.¹⁷ The state legislature's requirement that all public colleges and universities implement mandatory free speech training was enacted the same year.¹⁸ In the waning days of the 2024 legislative session, Iowa passed an anti-DEI bill, SF 2435, that reinforced the Regents' directives to dismantle all DEI offices and practices and to create a campus wide civics initiative.

The 2025 legislative session began on January 13, 2025 with a new higher education committee in the Iowa House. The chair of this committee has recently introduced bills to mandate a course on civics, with readings specified,¹⁹ and consistent general education requirements for the three regents' institutions.²⁰

Within this milieu, our story begins.

II. The Board of Regents and Cyclone Civics

In November 2023, the Iowa Board of Regents approved and released its Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Study Group Report.²¹ The report outlined ten initiatives aimed at addressing DEI practices that the Republican-controlled Iowa legislature and Governor Kim Reynolds largely deemed inappropriate. For example, Directive One required universities to “restructure the central, university-wide DEI offices to eliminate any DEI functions that are not

¹⁷ House File 802. <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=HF%20802>.

¹⁸ House File 744. <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=89&ba=hf744>.

¹⁹ House Study Bill 56. Introduced January 22, 2025.

<https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=91&ba=HSB%2056>.

²⁰ House Study Bill 63. Introduced January 22, 2025.

<https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=91&ba=HSB%2063>.

²¹ https://www.iowaregents.edu/media/cms/Board_Directives_62DBAF9AAC1FF.pdf

necessary for compliance or accreditation.” Other directives focused on issues such as partisan bias among faculty and the recruitment and retention of students. Relevant to this paper, Directive Nine instructed the Regent universities to “explore a proposal, including cost, to establish a widespread initiative that includes opportunities for education and research on free speech and civic education.” This directive would ultimately encourage the development of Cyclone Civics.

In Spring 2024, then-Provost Jonathan Wickert met with several stakeholders, including one of the authors, to discuss how to proceed. Eventually, the office of the President committed \$250,000 a year for five years to the initiative, which was named Cyclone Civics. Under the leadership of Ben Withers, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, a core group worked over the summer to develop a plan to implement Directive Nine. The core group evaluated the existing catalog, identifying over 300 courses that touched on politics, law, and/or public policy. The group also documented activities related to free speech and expression, including the Greenlee School for Journalism and Mass Communication’s annual First Amendment Days²² and the Regents’ annual free speech training, required of all employees and students.²³

Equally importantly, the stakeholders realized that what they do not know is also important: namely, what do the students know? Aside from anecdotal evidence and the indirect measures mentioned above, including NSSE and national indicators, the core group realized it could not answer this essential question.

²² “First Amendment Days.” Iowa State University. <https://greenlee.iastate.edu/student-experiences/first-amendment/>.

²³ “Free Speech.” Iowa State University. <https://freespeech.iastate.edu/>.

These stakeholders determined that the initiative should center on three key areas: enhancing *civic literacy*, fostering the development of *civic skills*, and cultivating a campus culture that values and respects the democratic process through *civic disposition*. Moreover, they determined that the initiative should have multiple components: curriculum and instruction, research, events and programming, and Extension.

Meeting the Mandates: Former Provost Wikert directed the group to create an initiative that would have research, curricular, public programming, and Extension components. As a public institution, all civic education activities must be nonpartisan and nonideological and adhere to the institution's principles of free speech and express.

Curriculum: Over the summer, an ad hoc group including faculty from the various liberal arts departments plus Education, Engineering, and Agriculture met to discuss possible curriculum changes. The group very quickly reached a consensus that a required civics course was needed. However, implementing such a new requirement would be difficult. Consequently, Cyclone Civics will also assess Iowa State seniors' civic literacy, and using the Purdue Civics Literacy Test to do so.²⁴ This assessment will provide information about seniors' civic knowledge and help build the case for curricular reforms. The curricular mandate will also be met by helping to offset the costs associated with relevant high-impact practices, such as field trips, conference attendance, participation in simulations, and/or relevant undergraduate research.

Programming: Cyclone Civics will meet its mandate to sponsor public events and programming by planning events and offering financial support for campus events that meet Cyclone Civics' goals. One example is to provide ongoing support for the Greenlee School's annual First Amendment Days celebrations. In addition, planning is underway for AY 2025-

²⁴ "Civics Literacy." Purdue University. <https://policyplanning.president.purdue.edu/civics-literacy/>

2026, which will celebrate America at 250 (the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence), including engagement with the University Lectures Program, the library, and the Music and Theatre Departments.

Extension: The Extension collaboration took off quickly, with conversations with Extension employees working in the Community Empowerment division. These employees indicated that local Iowa communities struggled to find people willing to volunteer on boards and commissions, knew how their local governments worked, and did not effectively engage with their local elected officials. The result is “Byte Sized Civics,” a series of short videos explaining the functions of local government and how to get involved.

Research: The research mandate is as yet undefined, although a group will work on this in Spring 2025.

In the meantime, the principal Cyclone Civics event will be a professional development conference for faculty and student-facing staff to focus on means to promote civic literacy and civic skills across the curriculum.²⁵

III. Best Practices and Pitfalls: A Discussion

Building on this background and recent developments, the authors seek to highlight best practices identified by the panel and participants at their respective institutions. Specifically, we are interested in learning which approaches have been most effective in enhancing civic literacy,

²⁵ Important contributions to the programming and structure of Cyclone Civics were made by work of authors and editors published by the American Political Science Association. Two APSA publications have been particularly helpful and the authors would like to acknowledge these important contributions here. The books are: *Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines* with editors Elizabeth Matto, Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion and Dick Simpson (APSA: 2017); and *Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen* with editors Alison Rios Millett McCartney, Elizabeth A. Bennion and Dick Simpson (APSA: 2013)

fostering civic skills, and cultivating a campus culture that values and respects the democratic process. Additionally, we are eager to understand the challenges similar initiatives have encountered in higher education and state policy, as well as how these obstacles have been anticipated and addressed. Given ongoing state electoral trends and policy dynamics, concerns about civic knowledge and engagement are unlikely to fade. Therefore, we hope to gain insights from both the successes and challenges faced by others working in civic education.

IV. Conclusion

Cyclone Civics at Iowa State University was launched in fall 2024 to address identified gaps in civic literacy and engagement. In a short time, the University has taken steps to integrate civic literacy into the classroom and curriculum, committed resources to civic assessments and research, and developed programming to advance Cyclone Civics' three-pronged focus on civic literacy, skills, and culture. However, less attention has been given to anticipating potential challenges and identifying best practices as the initiative progresses beyond its first year. With this in mind, we sincerely appreciate your insights and thank you for your time as Cyclone Civics continues to grow and evolve in the years ahead.