Political Education of College Students:
Learning from History

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Reading headlines about higher education or skimming though reports from professional societies or glancing over the tables of contents of higher education journals from the last three or four decades, we would conclude that concern about college students’ preparation for civic life is a recent priority. Only in the past few years has this issue become a regular topic in academic discourse. But a longer and deeper look would reveal a different picture: the preparation of students for their role in the polity has been a constant feature of American higher education. From the founding of the first college in colonial North America to the present, American colleges and universities have offered their students some type of political education. The form of this political education, however, has varied across time and institution.

Like much of American higher education, collegiate political education can be divided into two broad periods — the colonial era to the late 19th century, when the small, religiously controlled college with a classical curriculum was the dominant model of higher education, and the period since, when higher education institutions became more various and marked by curricular diversity and a significant degree of individual choice. Political education fit relatively comfortably into the first model of liberal arts education. But it became problematic in the later era when liberal arts education became defined around the idea of freedom. Older practices of political education, which were largely didactic, no longer were acceptable.

Creating non-didactic forms of political education, however, proved to be a challenge. Faculty and administrators have had to negotiate difficult contradictions to maintain institutional neutrality and to avoid indoctrinating students. Two conceptual distinctions will help us understand how they created modern forms of collegiate political education that accommodated these tensions. The first is the distinction between consensual-versus-pluralistic approaches to political education. The second is the distinction between direct and indirect forms of political education. Faculty and administrators did not use these concepts to guide their practice. But we can look back over the 20th century and see how efforts at political education tended toward one side of these two different poles. In addition, as civic education once again demands our attention, we can use these concepts to more thoughtfully deal with the contradictions we face as we attempt to use liberal arts education to form our students’ political identities.

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American higher education traces its roots back to the founding of Harvard College in 1636. In the remainder of the colonial period eight more colleges were formed in what would become the original 13 states of the United States. All these colleges had strong religious orientations that were manifested in a number of ways. Many had governing boards controlled by ministers. Typically, the college president was also a minister. The
colleges had ties to a particular church. They had required chapel for students and a theological component to the curriculum.

These colleges also generally functioned as “public” colleges for the colonies in which they were located. In some cases, government officials served on the board of trustees. Often colonial governments provided some kind of financial support for these colleges. Ideas about proper government and the requirements of a good society were embedded in the curriculum, in the structure of the college, and in the expectations of student conduct.

The main purpose of these colleges was to groom ministers and other civil leaders. The education was holistic and didactic. It aimed to form students into a particular model of a human being. It was considered liberal because it was comprehensive, teaching all the branches of knowledge and attending to students’ intellectual, moral and spiritual development. Some of our contemporary ideas about liberal arts education persist from this period: the idea of forming the whole person and the idea of being general rather than particularistic (which we now sometimes equate with the difference between vocational and purely intellectual education, a distinction that would not be meaningful in the colonial period). But other aspects of this early liberal arts education we now reject, particularly its fixed content and its didacticism.

The separation of church and state after the American Revolution did not lead to the secularization of colleges since few Americans at the time thought that a person’s moral education could be divorced from religion. Instead, the state’s role was reduced. But the colleges maintained a strong commitment to political education and civic purposes. The civic vision was exemplified by the growing prominence of moral philosophy in the college curriculum. At most colleges in the first half of the 19th century, moral philosophy was the capstone of the curriculum. The president of the college usually taught it. The course aimed to draw together all knowledge and place it in a Christian framework.

Moral philosophy courses had explicit political content, covering what we now refer to as political theory and economics. Students learned about ideal governmental, social and economic structures and were instructed in practical and personal matters, including specific economic and political policies that they should support and oppose and how they should act as adult citizens. For the most part, the political content of this curriculum resonated with the Whig political party rather than their Jacksonian rivals. Many colleges shared this basic partisan orientation. However, some specific political differences divided colleges. The most prominent example was slavery. College’s positions on slavery were determined primarily by the region in which the college was located and also by its religious affiliation. The courses’ content and pedagogy were unabashedly didactic.

Although this collegiate model remained the norm for much of the 19th century, it never lacked critics. These critics gathered momentum as the century progressed and accrued enough power to institute real alternatives in the final decades. In the first half of the century, critics had a number of concerns, but did not yet offer a consistent alternative set
of practices or a coherent new understanding of a liberal arts education. By the late 19th century, however, various strands of reform coalesced, and critics successfully articulated an alternative vision of higher education organized around the ideal of freedom.

This new vision of liberal education took its inspiration from ideas about science that emphasized intellectual progress achieved through challenging existing beliefs and using empirical investigation to offer new alternatives. Drawing on this view of science, faculty and administrators redefined the purpose of liberal arts education. Now students were supposed to learn how to engage in a process of questioning and critically evaluating knowledge. The goal of this kind of liberal arts education was to help students develop the capacity for a certain types of reasoning and train them to make sound, independent judgments. This conception of liberal education survives and is captured by our phrase “critical thinking.” Developing critical-thinking skills is the most commonly cited goal of undergraduate education today. This redefinition of the liberal arts conception came into conflict with the didactic teaching that was so central in traditional colleges.

This new definition in liberal education was accompanied by a number of changes in institutional practice that were seen as mutually reinforcing. Relations with sponsoring churches were redefined in order to prevent church dogma from limiting the exploration of new ideas. Moral philosophy was replaced with a number of new sciences that examined the same issues but now using the methods of empirical research. Students were given more choice over what they studied. The criteria for the appointment of faculty changed — they were increasingly selected because of their contributions to the development of new knowledge rather than because they exemplified sound and upright character.

The political education of students was also supposed to change to conform to this new model of liberal arts education. The old didacticism was rejected and the new spirit of openness was embraced. The question remained, though, how to put this into practice? An easy answer to this question was the idea that a college should not be partisan — it should not let a particular political party determine what was taught; instead this should be determined by this process of critical investigation. Another corollary of non-partisanship was that a college could not force its faculty or its students to adopt a particular party line or impose any kind of political tests on them. This idea of non-partisanship directly paralleled the idea of being “non-sectarian” in regards to religion, and, in fact, it was adapted from that idea.

On the surface, the idea of non-partisanship seemed relatively straightforward. But when faculty and administrators tried to put it into practice a fundamental ambiguity emerged. The idea could be interpreted it two different ways: consensually or pluralistically. Defined consensually it would mean eliminating those positions that were associated with a particular party and therefore including only the things about which there was agreement. Defined pluralistically, non-partisanship would mean that all political positions should be represented. These were implicit alternatives. They were not made explicit and openly discussed, the implications drawn out and debated. But as institutional leaders coped with the practical problems of a political education under this
new ideal of freedom, they could adopt policies and practices that drew on one of these interpretations.

Throughout most of the 20th century, until the 1960s, the consensual approach predominated. Political issues found an expanding base in the modern liberal arts curriculum through the social sciences that had developed out of the old moral philosophy. Initially, the social science disciplines retained the normative orientation of moral philosophy. They believed that their ultimate purpose was to answer the question, “What is a good life and how can we achieve it?” This was reflected in the activist orientation of the first generation of social scientists. But this activist orientation was soon questioned and replaced by a narrower conception of science, one that eschewed normative work and sought an indirect relation to the question, “How can we achieve the good life?” Two developments triggered this change in the social sciences. The first were the academic freedom disputes that came up on campuses in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The second was the need of these new disciplines to establish strong professional identities and to legitimize themselves as sciences.

Beginning in the 1890s and continuing for the next few decades, there were a series of academic freedom cases involving faculty in the social sciences who espoused economic, social and political positions that were considered radical at the time. Some of the faculty who were involved in these cases taught at prominent institutions such as the University of Chicago and Stanford University, whose presidents promoted the ideal of freedom and supported the social sciences as the modern way in which the university could pursue its traditional civic role. These presidents had enthusiastically hired social scientists with normative orientations and assumed that they would play a central role in the political formation of students. Much to their surprise, though, problems developed when these faculty members took positions that were considered by important constituents of the university to be wrong-headed, ill-considered and dangerous. Suddenly, university leaders found their institutions at the center of complicated controversies.

These presidents discovered that their institutions became associated with and were held accountable for the positions that their faculty espoused. This is not surprising to us today because we see these types of cases with some regularity. Several of the most prominent cases happened at universities where the presidents had publicly touted the importance of academic freedom but then fired a controversial faculty member. The presidents always claimed that the faculty member was being fired for another reason, but they did not persuade enough people to quiet the outrage and charges of hypocrisy. At least some prominent people within and outside of academia believed that the social scientist in question was fired for advocating positions that wealthy donors who supported the university found offensive. Social scientists themselves realized that taking controversial positions might threaten their career, and university leaders became more wary of hiring people who might attract negative attention. As a result, instruction in the social sciences became more consensual and academics began to question whether they should take normative positions.
These changes were reinforced by the need to establish the social sciences as legitimate academic disciplines. One of the assumptions behind the creation of the new social sciences was that applying empirical investigation to social and political questions would yield authoritative answers (and end centuries of philosophic disputes). Advocates of the social sciences hoped that old ethical debates, the issues that deeply divided people, would soon be settled. This did not come to pass. Instead, social scientists started to split into different camps and fight amongst themselves. Since these fields were trying to establish themselves as sources of authoritative knowledge, social scientists found these disagreements embarrassing and threatening. They started to look among themselves to see how they could reduce their disagreements and better establish themselves as credible experts. They employed two strategies. The first was to introduce more rigorous methodological controls (this spurred the development of statistics). The second was to eliminate ethical positions and try to focus research more narrowly on questions of “fact.” Social scientists reasoned that since values were the source of most conflicts, if they banished value judgments from their work, they would also eliminate disputes. While imperfect, these solutions did limit the intensity of internal debate. Social scientists chose for themselves a consensus approach to their research and their teaching at the same time that the institutions were encouraging a consensual approach to political education as a way to avoid conflict with donors and community members.

This distinction between consensual and pluralistic approaches to political education operates at a number of different levels, including the level of individual classes, institutions and a system-wide level. The changes in the social sciences pertained to the classroom and institutional level primarily. But the distinction could also function on a system-wide level to determine how institutions divide and define themselves. We could imagine a politically pluralistic system of higher education in which different institutions have different political identities and aim to encourage in their students particular political behavior and/or loyalties. This would parallel the practice of having colleges with different religious affiliations. While in the United States, religious pluralism on a system-wide level has been accepted, political pluralism has not. Although there have been attempts to create colleges with particular political identities, such as the Populist Party’s attempt to take over certain state universities, these have met with resistance and ridicule. While there is a great deal of diversity among higher education institutions, political orientation has not become a widely accepted dimension for differentiation. Generally, we have historically assumed that all colleges and universities are broadly supportive of American democracy. In this sense, our system of higher education has been consensual.

The second distinction between indirect and direct approaches to political education operates mainly on a curricular and classroom level. The debates about general education in the period following World War II provide an excellent illustration of this distinction. We have tended to romanticize World War II and think of it as the Good War and assume that following the war Americans were optimistic because of the victory of the United States and their allies in this war. We also assume that the military victory felt like the triumph of democracy. On the contrary, the easy rise of Fascism in Europe, the scale of human destruction during the war and the creation of the atomic bomb at the end of the
war created anxiety about the future of democracy. This anxiety translated into heightened concern about the role of colleges and universities in preparing democratic citizens.

As the war ended, a slew of books and articles were published calling on colleges and universities to create new programs of political education. The authors of these publications agreed that the place for citizenship education was in the part of the curriculum known as “general education.” In the 1920s and 1930s, some faculty and administrators created a counter-movement against the reforms of the turn of the century. They argued that electives had created chaos in higher education and destroyed the unity and purpose of the college curriculum. They called for corrective action, which came to be called general education. Educators used the term in slightly different ways. On one hand, it could simply refer to any restriction on free electives, and, on the other hand, it could refer to a substantive effort to create a new kind of comprehensive education teaching all subjects an educated person should learn. There had been a few programs established at universities by 1945, but the movement had not yet been particularly successful at changing institutional practice.

But the post-World War II interest in citizenship education gave the movement new life. Suddenly general education had a primary purpose — educating democratic citizens. Agreement about the aim of general education was a big step forward for the movement, but there was still serious debate about the means. Advocates of different forms of citizenship preparation fell into two broad camps. One supported a contemporary problems approach, and the other promoted a Western Civilization/great books approach.

The first group argued that general education should have direct relevance to students’ lives and that it should address the real problems of the contemporary world. The most influential statement of this position was the President’s Commission on Higher Education report, Higher Education for American Democracy. It advocated that the students learn directly about pressing national problems, such as racial inequality. It suggested that higher education should prepare students to be citizens not only of the nation but of the world, and it recommended required courses in which students learn about international affairs and international organizations, such as the United Nations. The report recommended that colleges create required courses that covered these subjects. The classes were supposed to encourage students to develop a particular moral stance toward public affairs, one that emphasized personal engagement in politics, a sense of responsibility for ensuring justice for all, and respect and tolerance across religious and racial and national differences. These courses also would teach students about the importance of international cooperation and world peace. This report supported “direct” political education, both in the sense that it addressed contemporary political issues and that it had a didactic purpose.

Initially, this group seemed poised to set the standards for general education. In addition to the support of the President’s Commission, most of the researchers in the field of general education supported this model. There appeared to be popular support as well.
For example, Benjamin Fine, an education reporter for the New York Times, wrote a book entitled Democratic Education, promoting this model of general education. But the model always had critics, first from religious educators who did not want to see a secular curriculum become the norm, and also from Southerners who did not like the emphasis on racial equality. But the onset of the Cold War intensified the criticism considerably. This model of general education included controversial political topics, internationalism and government activism, both of which became viewed as signs of communist sympathies by conservative critics. In addition, the didactic orientation of the curriculum was painted as a form of dangerous thought control, similar to the kind of political education offered in the Soviet Union. Suddenly the fortunes of this model of general education were reversed. Universities and colleges were naturally reluctant to adopt a curriculum that was viewed as a covert means of developing communist sympathies among the future leaders of the nation.

As the contemporary problems approach to citizenship education became discredited, colleges and universities could easily turn to the second model, the Western Civilization course, for their general education curriculum. The most influential proposal for this model came from Harvard University’s Committee on General Education’s report, General Education in a Free Society. The Harvard committee proposed a course called “Western Thought and Institutions” as the core of students’ political education. This course was a selective history of the West, focusing on those periods in the past that were most relevant to the great questions of democracy in the present. The pedagogy of the course was as important as its content. The class was supposed to include weekly lectures offering a narrative of the development of democracy and twice-weekly discussions of works of philosophy and literature. Small discussion sections were supposed to encourage each student’s personal reading and questioning of these texts — a pedagogy designed to insure “the quality of alert and aggressive individualism,” which the committee saw as “essential to good citizenship.” Through this combination of lecture and open discussion, the committee hoped to create a pedagogy that struck the proper balance between the need to inculcate certain values and to encourage freedom and independence, which would also encourage in future citizens the proper balance of “liberty and loyalty” — both qualities that they saw as essential in a democracy. This course tried to encourage these values indirectly through the power of a certain historical narrative, through the selection of texts that made certain ideas attractive and others odious, and through the experience of discussion, reflection and judgment.

The Harvard report became the most influential of the various books on general education in the post-World War II period and the Western Civilization course the most commonly required courses in American colleges. Not all institutions, of course, taught the course exactly how the Harvard committee said it should be taught. Indeed, at many institutions Western Civilization became an introductory lecture course. The textbooks that were prepared for these courses emphasized the themes that the Harvard report stressed. The lecture format made the course more didactic than the Harvard Committee intended it to be by taking away students’ experience of coming to individual judgment.

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about the texts. It followed the indirect model, though, in that it tried to embed
democratic values in a historical narrative rather than teaching them outright and because
it did not address contemporary social and political issues. This indirect approach was
more consistent with the consensual approach because it avoided those controversial
political issues about which there might be multiple strongly held views.

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The Western Civilization course survived as the backbone of general education until the
end of 1960s, when it came under criticism from a variety of sources and when general
education requirements were drastically reduced at colleges and universities across the
country. Indeed, the upheaval caused on campuses by students’ unprecedented level of
political activity made higher education leaders reluctant to think about preparing
students for citizenship. It would take several decades of youth apathy before groups
interested in encouraging youth social engagement could get much hearing within higher
education. But this was a temporary hiatus, and we are now once again discussing how to
shape student’s political identities.

As we consider new programs of political education, we should look to the past to enrich
our deliberations. Political education is as old as the American college itself, but the
modern conception of liberal arts that emphasizes freedom has created certain challenges.
Institutional leaders thought that the idea of non-partisanship would guide the creation of
new forms of political education. But they discovered that non-partisanship was not as
easy to implement as they had imagined. There were two implicit ways of interpreting
non-partisanship: consensual versus pluralistic and direct versus indirect. For a long time
the consensual and the indirect dominated but there was never complete consensus about
these practices.

These conceptual dichotomies raise several crucial questions for contemporary
discussions of political education. What are the advantages and dangers of these different
approaches? Is it possible to have an indirect political education in today’s context? Is
that sufficient? What might it look like? Would it be possible to have a robust, direct
political curriculum without attracting intolerable levels of controversy? How could such
a program avoid indoctrination? Does a curriculum have to be either pluralistic or
consensual? Can we navigate between these two poles? We still face many of the same
tensions that earlier faculty and administrators confronted when trying to shape students’
political identities, but we have the opportunity to explicitly interrogate assumptions that
our predecessors could only implicitly follow.