

**AGB ADVISORY STATEMENT**  
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# Reclaiming Higher Education's Leadership in Support of Civil Education

**About AGB**

Since 1921, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) has had one mission: to strengthen and protect this country's unique form of institutional governance through its research, services, and advocacy. Serving more than 1,300 member boards, 1,900 institutions, and 36,000 individuals, AGB is the only national organization providing university and college presidents, board chairs, trustees, and board professionals of both public and private institutions and institutionally related foundations with resources that enhance their effectiveness.

## Reclaiming Higher Education's Leadership in Support of Civil Education

Since the founding of the republic, education has been understood to be integral to the project of American democracy. While there have always been challenges to creating a “more perfect union,” including various and often severe restrictions on access to education, the nation's colleges and universities have served as vital institutions for advancing fundamental values and forming an educated and engaged citizenry.

Today, however, just as that great potential for democratic socialization is being realized for many more people than at any time in our history, notably including citizens from groups historically underserved by our educational system, an array of forces is converging to constrain the purposes of higher education. Inordinate emphasis on narrow workforce development goals, for example, threatens to crowd out broader aims related to civic engagement and democratic renewal. Meanwhile, broadly speaking, our political culture seems increasingly incapable of sustaining reasoned debate or achieving consensus on national policies and priorities. We seem less able as a society to argue civilly, to practice the arts of democracy, and to evoke the democratic virtues that distinguish our nation—and make education itself possible.

To help ameliorate these challenges, higher education leaders must recommit to the ideal of the engaged college or university whose mission includes promoting democratic values and making direct, pragmatic contributions to the local and national community. Higher education itself must reclaim its leadership role in support of civil education.

### A Note on Terminology

As used in this statement, the term CIVIL EDUCATION is intended to indicate broad concern for educating students as full participants in democracy. Several elements contribute to that broad concern, but each is more connotatively narrow: “civics,” as it involves education about the operations of government; “civility,” as it involves standards of respectful behavior and reasoned argument; “civic engagement,” as it involves constructive interactions within a democratic society.

## 1. Today's Challenges

Democracy in America today seems threatened, fragile, battered, or even broken. Meeting these challenges is critical for the nation—and also very much within the realm of higher education to help address. Several areas are of particular concern:

**Democratic efficacy and literacy.** Many citizens do not understand how their government works, and many seem disinclined to engage in the practice of democracy. This disinclination extends even to our elected officials, who have difficulty reaching compromise on policies that might ameliorate the nation's intractable problems. Some perceive that democracy itself is stalled, in that its processes do not work as well as they should or once did. These forfeitures far transcend partisan divides; rather, they embody a grave attenuation in our ability to practice the skills of civic participation and the habits of engagement that constitute democratic action on local and national levels. We seem to have lost the sense that we are citizens of a common community, working at least in part for the common good.

**Pluralism.** Racism, xenophobia, and other forms of intolerance are rising in tandem with the increasing demographic diversity of our nation, making it all the more critical that we find ways to reinforce democratic values and practices—and find ways to respect the diversity of voices and modes of discourse in American society. There are also global ramifications: in an interdependent world, growing threats to democratic values beyond our own borders point to the urgency of civil education as a global project.

**Equality.** Persistent income inequality and a corresponding sense of decreasing social mobility have led too many members of our society to conclude that the American Dream may now be out of their reach. In an era of unsustainable rises in costs and student debt loads, the economic role of higher education has rightly come under scrutiny. The perception is taking hold that higher education is a private good that serves to reinforce and reproduce an elite, rather than a public good that acts as an engine of social mobility. The resulting decline in public trust undermines further the role of higher education as a democratizing force in our society.

**Truth and evidence.** Increasingly in our society, we are witnessing an alarming and heightened skepticism toward institutions, including colleges and universities, that have historically been guardians and progenitors of knowledge and expertise—a skepticism that extends even to facticity, evidence, and truth per se. The interpretive functions of the humanities and social sciences and the empirically oriented natural sciences seem equally misunderstood and devalued.

**Civil discourse.** To the detriment of democracy itself, public discourse has devolved to a state where the vitriolic espousing of opinions often substitutes for trying to understand different points of view. Even worse, many choose to block out or shout down opposing points of view. While new forms of communication make it easier than ever to reach broad audiences and to share ideas, they also make it easier to spread false information quickly and to manipulate public opinion. Such difficulties impede our ability to conduct productive discussions in our communities and our workplaces, in the press, in our government, and on our campuses. They hamper our capacity to listen to one another and to engage productively with each other in the practice of democracy.

## 2. Higher Education and Democratic Values

*Can—and should—higher education address these critical challenges?* The answer to this question is rooted in the fundamental purpose of higher education in a democracy and the indispensable role colleges and universities play in transmitting the values and virtues necessary for sustaining it. As the Truman Commission on Higher Education recognized more than seventy years ago, in the aftermath of the Second World War and at a time when access to higher education was expanding dramatically as a result of the GI Bill, “the first and most essential charge upon higher education is that . . . it shall be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and processes.” Our own times demand that higher education reaffirm its acceptance of this charge.

Civic engagement reflects not just the rights but also the responsibilities of citizens to use their education and skills to participate in democratic processes and discussions, and to strive to make a positive difference in their society. Institutions of higher learning serve an essential function in this regard by educating citizens about democracy and how they can engage productively in what might be called the practice of the democratic arts. Higher education can thus help sustain and nourish a healthy democracy by forming engaged citizens who have learned to think broadly about the needs and interests of other people within their communities, states, nation, and, indeed, around the globe.

AGB shares the belief, expressed in 2012 by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement that “today’s education for democracy needs to be informed by deep engagement with the values of liberty, equality, individual worth, open-mindedness, and the willingness to collaborate with people of differing views and backgrounds toward common solutions for the public good.” AGB further shares the task force’s suggestion that “education for the modern workforce”—a theme so dominant in recent discussions about higher education—“should not displace education for citizenship.”

We cannot take for granted that democracy will continue to operate and thrive without intentional effort from each subsequent generation. As leaders of the sector of society that is fundamentally charged with educating citizens, every college and university holds a measure of responsibility for the health of our democracy.

As one of the few social institutions where significant numbers of individuals from all backgrounds come together for a common purpose, higher education serves as a vital laboratory of pluralistic democracy. The greater diversity of our nation is now reflected more fully in our campus communities and student populations that traverse class, race, gender, age and numerous other forms of personal identity. It is now even more incumbent on colleges and universities to educate for the American ideal of “e pluribus unum,” as one people rooted in the unique and always evolving blend of cultural legacies that make up the republic.

Colleges and universities further help advance civil education when they create and sustain spaces for dialogue on challenging topics, inclusive of broader communities. This kind of dialogue is essential both for rigorous scholarship and for a healthy democracy—and can occur in the formal curriculum, in the co-curriculum, and in interactions with the broader community. Maintaining spaces where disagreement, constructive conflict, and authentic listening can occur helps students discover the connections between truth, democracy, and citizenship.

Colleges and universities build democracy when practices of inclusion and honoring of diversity are part of the education offered to students in the curriculum and co-curriculum and when these elements are intentionally integrated into how the institution itself functions as a community. In that regard, colleges and universities provide students not only with the skills and knowledge required to succeed in the workforce, but also the capacity to contribute to the nation's civic life. Higher education institutions provide opportunities for students to cultivate engagement with people unlike themselves—through campus activities, political participation, and community service—which translates to greater civic engagement and effectiveness throughout their lifetimes.

Institutions of higher education advance democracy when they help students connect work and professional identity with citizenship. The robust understanding of democracy that students can gain in college fosters a commitment to continued engagement as citizens after graduation. Studies show that college graduates are more likely than their non-graduate peers to vote, run for public office, and contribute to community-building projects. Further, with its focus on the needs of others, communities, and the wider society, civil education is a strong antidote to the isolation and disconnection students sometimes feel; concern, care, and sacrifice for others can promote well-being and help learners develop a healthy sense of self.

In summary, the definition of “liberal” in “liberal education” stems from the Latin word “liberalis,” or freedom. Liberal education places primary value on freedom of thought, critical analysis, open-mindedness, adaptivity, empathy, and life-long learning. These are the habits of mind and

practice that contribute to a thriving democracy, but they need to be learned. It is incumbent on colleges and universities to help students strengthen these invaluable skills so they are prepared to engage actively and productively in the political and civic life of our democracy. Higher education must recognize that, in contributing to the formation of an educated citizenry, the curriculum and co-curriculum contribute inestimably to the capacity of our democracy to sustain itself. The deeper focus on civil education proposed here—and being effectively enacted on many campuses—can therefore have a profound and richly positive impact on the very practice of democracy.

In these ways, civil education helps students learn the skills of democratic participation and the habits of engagement that put the practice of democracy into action—and develop an understanding of why such a practice matters. And there is ample evidence that a focus on civic engagement and, more broadly, civil education, is beneficial for student well-being and student learning as well as for the fiscal health and public standing of colleges and universities—and, ultimately, good for the country. In the final analysis, a lack of attention to civil education is a risk for higher education and the nation.

### **3. Call to Action**

The Association of Governing Boards believes that higher education can, should, and indeed must address the critical challenges facing American democracy described above. Colleges and universities must leverage their positions as leading institutions in civil society to remind us of the intrinsic value of the civic virtues and their centrality in helping our nation reach its highest aspirations. And in the United States, where higher education governance is entrusted to independent boards of citizen trustees, governing boards are especially well positioned to ensure that civil education is an enduring priority for the nation's colleges and universities.

The aims of civil education square well with the fundamental missions of institutions of higher learning, and furthering those aims fits squarely with the fiduciary responsibilities of board members. Additionally, governing boards must help anchor their institutions in the communities in which they are situated. As citizen trustees, board members are guardians of our institutions of higher learning and, importantly, stewards of the values they embody. Under that mantle, governing boards have enormous influence as informed stewards and leaders to speak with independent credibility about the benefits of higher education that accrue to individuals and to American society. Without taking one political position or another, boards can work with campus leadership and faculty to ensure that the values of a civil and democratic society are embedded in campus policies and practices. Governing boards can and do model the kind of civil behavior AGB seeks to promote, fostering civility in their work as fiduciaries and in their collaborations with institutional leadership, and advocating on a broader scale for the kinds of civility necessary for our institutions to function.

Recognizing the diversity and uniqueness of institutions, AGB does not seek to create a set of recommendations for all, nor do we urge boards to intrude upon areas that are related to curricular programs and content. Rather, we encourage boards to reaffirm their commitment to strengthening and sustaining American democracy—and their institution's practice of civil education. To that end, we encourage boards to understand the complexity and the urgency of these challenges, to engage with faculty and students regarding these issues, and to advocate on behalf of higher education in support of meaningful civil education.

## 4. Suggested Practices for Presidents and Governing Boards

Based on their respective roles and responsibilities, governing boards, chief executive officers, and faculty have separate (albeit overlapping) ways in which they can advance civil education. Suggestions for such engagement follow here, with two important caveats. First, this statement is advisory and not prescriptive. Presidents and governing boards must determine whether the suggested practices are of value at their individual institutions. Second, AGB recognizes that each institution of higher education is unique, with its own culture, values, and mission. We thus expect that an institution will implement these practices in a manner best fitting its specific environment, circumstances, and aspirations.

- **Focus campus conversations and make civil education an institutional priority.** Together, boards and presidents can signal the importance of civil education by making discussion about the institution's role in advancing the practice of democracy and engagement in civic life a focus of board discussions. In institutional mission statements, strategic plans, policies, and related documents, they can assert that civil education is a priority. Likewise, presidents can work with the board and with faculty to ensure that faculty reward systems, including those for tenure and promotion, adequately reflect institutional priorities for civil education.
- **Audit current practices.** Presidents can conduct, and boards can encourage, a "civic audit" of their institutions. This would involve regular assessment of how the institution is supporting civil education by considering metrics related to campus climate, leadership, student engagement, the civil education curriculum, and partnerships with the community and government organizations. Such assessments might include examination of what graduates of the institution actually know about how government works and whether they contribute to the civic life of our democracy. Similarly, if the institution agrees graduates should exhibit the skills and principles of democratic citizenship, it should ask which institutional practices make a difference for learners in this regard. Results of such audits shared with the board can inform strategic planning and future activities.



- **Empower the faculty.** Because civil education is inextricably part of the curriculum, faculty members have a distinct role in preparing students to be full participants in a democracy; it is the faculty's responsibility to design and deliver the curriculum. But it is the board's responsibility to remind the faculty of institutional and societal priorities and to ascertain that students are achieving academic excellence within the institutional mission. Crucially, boards can empower the faculty to engage in this work and to move with dispatch to determine and then execute a course of action demonstrating academic support for the commitment to civil education this statement frames.
- **Understand the important function of general education.** In assessing curricula, faculty should consider—and boards should understand—the linkage between the core values of general and liberal education and the necessary skills for engaging personally in the practice of democracy. Boards and faculty should ask whether all students graduate with a deep understanding both of how democracy works and how they can contribute to society as fully engaged citizens. Questions might also include the degree to which civil education is truly integrated throughout the curriculum.
- **Support experiential learning.** On many campuses, faculty are increasingly engaging students in forms of experiential, active, “hands-on” learning that enables them to practice the arts of democracy through community engagement. These include service-learning projects, community-based research, and internships. Moreover, in addition to benefits for student and community well-being, research has shown that these types of educational experiences have a high impact on student engagement with their learning and on their achievement of expected learning outcomes—a positive impact disproportionately experienced by students from groups historically underserved by higher education. Boards and presidents should encourage these high-impact practices and seek to ensure that all students have multiple opportunities to participate in them.
- **Support research related to civil education.** Faculty research related to civil education is essential in helping students and society better understand the principles of democracy and how it functions. Faculty research that engages students in key questions about how citizens enact democracy can have particular impact on campus culture—and in communities; employing student and community co-researchers can go even further in strengthening democratic practices. Support from boards and campus leadership can signal the value of such research for the institution and the nation.
- **Support civil education activity on campus.** Often, symbolic actions—words of support, attendance at events, recognition of key participants—can be highly valuable on campuses. By highlighting student activities and faculty research, or even by teaching a class themselves, campus leaders can actively and publicly show support for civic engagement on campus. Boards should become knowledgeable about activities and campus programs that contribute to building a culture of democracy; with presidents, they can help promote their value and benefits both on and off campus.

- **Model civil discourse and debate.** Presidents and boards can advance the practice of democracy by modeling those processes themselves. Boards can ensure that all participants in discussions, deliberations, and decision making in board meetings show respect for each other, practice careful listening and reasoned debate, and operate in a spirit of collaboration and openness. Board members who speak out publicly on civic issues—and support their president and faculty as public voices advocating for civil education—similarly reinforce the values of democracy. In working within the framework of shared governance, boards, campus leadership, and faculty can consciously model the principles of civil discourse and respectful debate—and make a tangible difference in establishing a campus climate that supports civil education.
- **Help institutional stakeholders understand civil education.** Presidents and boards can help key stakeholders—including faculty, staff, students, parents, alumni, legislators, and community members—understand why civil education is important and how it serves the institutional mission. In conversations, presentations, and speeches, campus leaders can explain how the institution they serve advances democratic principles and practices and upholds an institutional commitment to contribute to the public good. As part of that effort, and as guardians of higher education, they can more intentionally recognize that the ongoing viability of colleges and universities depends on having citizens capable of doing the work of democracy. Similarly, boards can be more intentional in recognizing that citizens who value higher education are in an institution's best interests; citizen trustees are in an especially good position to make a difference in this area.
- **Understand the institution's past.** A disconcerting truth about institutions of higher education is that many did not always live up to democratic ideals. Toward a goal of deepening democratic understanding, campus leaders can more fully examine their institution's past and make corrections—and, in so doing, highlight the challenges that exist in realizing the principles undergirding the Constitution as it has evolved over the years.

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## Discussion Questions for Boards, Leaders, and Campuses

This statement aims at *engagement*—vigorous debate and conversation, open discussion about democratic ideals and practices. In that spirit, AGB urges the use of the preceding list of practices as prompts for campus dialogues. Boards and other campus leaders might also consider the following questions:

- How well does our institution balance preparation for the workforce with the parallel need to educate citizens who will contribute actively and productively to democratic society?
- Are we doing enough as an institution to get students to focus on the rights and conditions of others beyond themselves? What can we learn from an audit of our institutional culture?
- What is our institution doing to educate learners who can fully engage in democratic practices and be productive members of civil society? How well is it fulfilling that mission? If we agree that graduates should exhibit the skills and principles of democratic citizens, then how would we know the goal has been achieved?
- To what extent do the board, campus leadership, faculty, and students discuss the curricular and co-curricular ways in which our commitment to civil education can be carried out?
- What is the role of our institution—and higher education in general—in helping students practice democratic engagement, not just prepare for future participation? How do we understand the complexities of citizenship in an era of contestation regarding immigration?
- How do we understand the Truman Commission’s emphasis on “democratic values and ideals” in the context of our role as a higher education institution?
- In advocating for “civility,” what are we also doing to protect honest differences of opinion, “speaking out,” and constructive arguments? Are we fully respectful of cultural traditions that may affect definitions of “civility”?
- How has our institution historically understood its role in inculcating the practices of democracy?



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