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Civics Education

Background

The question of how to best educate students to become well-informed citizens is not a new one. At the 1905 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA), William A. Schaper, a professor at the University of Minnesota presented a report entitled “What Do Students Know About Government Before Taking College Courses in Political Science?” This report was the first of its kind, and led to the APSA’s active involvement over the last century in examining curricula and instruction in pre-college civics and government education in the American school system.¹

Political Science scholars agree that civic education in America is inadequate, and agree that hands-on education is the best route to pre-college study of civics and government. There is much debate in the political science field about the long-term effectiveness of pre-college civic education. “Americans’ engagement in civic affairs is low and declining,” warns Michael A. Neblo of the Task Force on the Federal Election System, citing a 15% drop in voter turnout between 1964 and 1996.² Charles N. Quigley, Executive Director of the Center for Civic Education gives an example of one of the many effects of this: “only 6 percent of (a random sample of) Americans (surveyed by the National Constitution Center in 1997) can name all four rights guaranteed by the First Amendment.”³

The Effectiveness of Civics Education

The United States Office of Education’s Committee on Pre-Collegiate Education issued a report in 1971 citing that pre-college courses in political science were “faulted for their lack of realism and comparative perspective on U.S. politics, for too much emphasis on institutions and legal

¹ Mann, Sheilah. “Political Scientists Examine Civics Standards: An Introduction.” PS Online, APSA’s Journal of the Profession, September 1999. <http://www.apsanet.org/CENnet/mann.cfm?option=print> viewed on April 5, 2004.

² Neblo, Michael A.. “Civic Education Programs.” July, 2001. Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia.

³ Quigley, Charles N.. “Civic Education: Recent History, Current Status, and the Future.” *Public Perception and Understanding of the Justice System*. American Bar Association Symposium. February 25-26, 1999. p. 4.

aspects of government, and for a reliance on memorization and rote learning.”⁴ Over the next three decades, the APSA’s emphasis on civics curriculum in secondary education increased, but agreement on specific curriculum was not reached. A 1999 report issued by the APSA stated “As a profession, political science now encompasses a wide array of fields of inquiry, and as a collectivity, political scientists have differing views about the content of the pre-college curriculum in government and politics as well as about the values and objectives of political socialization, making it unlikely that the Association could present a consensus about the curriculum.”⁵ According to Hindy Lauer Schachter, professor of management at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, “Modern political scientists are split between those who want to create a polity of active citizens working for the community and those who posit the citizen as passive customer intent on individual satisfaction.”⁶

In his 1999 essay, Charles Quigley criticized the lack of extensiveness of civics education in the United States. He noted the inadequacy of standards on both the state legislative level and within the states’ educational systems. The level of civics education a student receives is “too little, too late... Today a student can graduate from high school in the state of Illinois without ever having taken a course in American government. The same is true in twenty-nine other states that do not require students to take such courses.”⁷

Schools that do require students to take a civics class typically incorporate it into their senior year as a loose overview of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. “Successful civics education,” Charles Quigley asserts, “fosters inquiry, reflection, and the development of analytic skills” by getting students intimately aware of judicial and elective processes through hands-on experience.⁸ According to scholars Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady, “Investigations of citizen political participation in democracies around the world inevitably find a relationship between education and [political] activity... Education also affects participation by imparting information about government and politics, and by encouraging attitudes such as a sense of civic responsibility or political efficacy that predispose an individual to political involvement.”⁹ Quigley asserts that incorporating simulations of “town meetings, legislative and administrative hearings, coalition building, and lobbying exercises has helped to develop an understanding of our political institutions and procedures as well as the development of participatory skills.”¹⁰ Michael Neblo agrees, saying that “the most successful programs involve students—and occasionally their parents—directly in governmental processes, either through participation in mock elections or through cooperation and debate.”

⁴ Mann, Sheilah. “Political Scientists Examine Civics Standards: An Introduction.” PS Online, APSA’s Journal of the Profession, September 1999. <http://www.apsanet.org/CENnet/mann.cfm?option=print> viewed on April 5, 2004.

⁵ Mann, Sheilah. “Political Scientists Examine Civics Standards: An Introduction.” PS Online, APSA’s Journal of the Profession, September 1999. <http://www.apsanet.org/CENnet/mann.cfm?option=print> viewed on April 5, 2004.

⁶ Schachter, Hindy Lauer. “Civic Education: Three Early American Political Science Association Committees and Their Relevance for Our Times.” PS Online, APSA’s Journal of the Profession, September 1999. <http://www.apsanet.org/CENnet/PS/schachter.cfm?option=print> viewed on April 5, 2004.

⁷ Quigley, Charles N.. “Civic Education: Recent History, Current Status, and the Future.” *Public Perception and Understanding of the Justice System*. American Bar Association Symposium. February 25-26, 1999. p. 2.

⁸ Quigley, Charles N.. “Civic Education: Recent History, Current Status, and the Future.” *Public Perception and Understanding of the Justice System*. American Bar Association Symposium. February 25-26, 1999. p. 3.

⁹ Verba et al.

¹⁰ Quigley, Charles N.. “Civic Education: Recent History, Current Status, and the Future.” *Public Perception and Understanding of the Justice System*. American Bar Association Symposium. February 25-26, 1999. p. 3.

Civics Education in Vermont

In Vermont, 33 town and city districts operate high schools.¹¹ These independent school districts are mandated by the state to follow “Vermont’s Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities”¹² This framework mandates that students in grades 9-12 exhibit competency in the following areas:

- Examine ways people become citizens of the United States
- Analyze and debate the problems of majority rule and the protection of minority rights as written in the U.S. Constitution
- Analyze how people organize and exercise political power in limited governments (e.g. - United States, Japan, India,) and unlimited governments (e.g. 20th Century totalitarian systems) and assess how each system has or has not worked in practice as representative democracies or authoritarian regimes
- Evaluate how political systems, including the American system, evolve
- Trace the origins and interpret the continuing influence of different political philosophies as they emerged from the following traditions: Greco-Roman, European, Enlightenment, -- Eastern traditions, African traditions, Native American traditions
- Analyze the influences that interest groups and public opinion have had on political, social, and economic life.¹³

The Vermont Department of Education’s framework and standards are a vague guideline and contain no specific requirements for teacher training or curriculum to fulfill these standards. Secondary education programs in civic education vary widely across the state, and information on specific curriculum in the schools is not readily available.

How Should Pre-College Civics Education Be Approached?

Other states that mandate civics education have designed specific statewide curriculum guidelines. In March of 2000, the Arizona State Board of Education adopted specific standards for civics education with guidelines from kindergarten through grade 12. Arizona goes beyond other states’ minimum required study of the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights to encompass political philosophy, comparative systems of government, civil rights and civil liberties, voting and the citizen’s role in the election process.¹⁴

There are many resources available for teachers of civics and government. In the course of his research, Michael Neblo studied a program called “Kids Voting USA,”¹⁵ which originated in Arizona in 1988 and now has affiliate programs in 30 states. Working with “Kids Voting USA,” students actively research the candidates and the issues at stake in an election. On Election Day

¹¹ Sherman, Michael, ed. Mathis, William J. “Education” in “Vermont State Government Since 1965.” Queen City Printers, Inc, Burlington, 1999. UVM and the Snelling Center for Government.

¹² The Vermont Department of Education website http://www.state.vt.us/educ/new/html/pgm_curriculum.html viewed on April 7, 2004.

¹³ The Vermont Department of Education website http://www.state.vt.us/educ/new/html/pgm_curriculum.html viewed on April 7, 2004.

¹⁴ Arizona Board of Education website <http://www.ade.state.az.us/standards/ssstudies/standard2.asp> viewed on April 7, 2004.

¹⁵ <http://www.kidsvotingusa.org>. Viewed on April 7, 2004.

students go to the polls and “cast replica ballots, oftentimes in real booths alongside the adults in the precincts serviced by their schools.”¹⁶ Neblo cites another program designed by The Center for Civic Education called “Project Citizen,” which is based on the work of philosopher and educator John Dewey. The premise is that if students are encouraged to have an ongoing interest in public policy then they will be more likely to have a lifelong interest in politics. The research of political scientists Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady parallels this, stating “[t]he skill-creating aspect of education” is what translates directly and indirectly to civic skill and ultimately to participation.¹⁷

Political science scholars agree that decline in civic participation in the 18-24 age group is worrisome. It is not enough for a state to mandate pre-college education. When designing civics curriculum, specific attention should be given to interactive learning, and studies should be conducted on long-term effectiveness of these programs in increasing civic participation.

This report was prepared on April 9, 2004 by J. W. Dunnivant, Selene M. Hofer-Shall, and Rebecca McCarty.

Disclaimer: This report was been prepared by undergraduate students at the University of Vermont under the supervision of Professor Anthony Gierzynski. The material contained in this report does not reflect official policy of the University of Vermont.

¹⁶ Neblo, Michael A.. “Civic Education Programs.” July, 2001. Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia. p. 4.

¹⁷ Verba Sidney, et al. p. 306.