

## Civic Responsibility in Higher Education

*Edited by Thomas Ehrlich*

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College students will define “civic responsibility” very differently. Some will equate it with volunteering and community service, some might discuss the responsibilities of citizenship and why it is important to vote. Still others might describe organizations in their hometown that represent civic involvement and contributions to one’s community.

Thomas Ehrlich’s excellent collection of essays about higher education’s important role in civic responsibility addresses a broad range of thoughts and practices. In addition to providing specific examples of various institutions’ civic engagement initiatives, it is a comprehensive look at the historical and philosophical foundations for higher education’s responsibilities as well as a timely and critical argument for institutional engagement. Today’s college students will face complicated moral and social problems in their professions and in the communities in which they do and will live. The contributors to this collection suggest ways to help students not just face these challenges but contribute to solutions. Student affairs professionals should recognize this as both a way to enhance and expand students’ learning and leadership experiences, and an opportunity to partner with academic affairs on an important and timely issue. Similarly, academic leadership should recognize the opportunity for interdisciplinary research and programming. All students of leadership can benefit from reflecting on the importance of the civic engagement and community involvement beyond a particular campus border.

The book’s introduction provides the context for the importance of preparing today’s students for responsible citizenship. The rest of the book is divided into five parts: (1) What are the problems: Higher education and its students; (2) What are colleges and universities doing about the problems: An overview; (3) Interactions with other sectors of society; (4) Perspectives from different sectors of higher education; and (5) Special challenges.

Part one’s emphasis on student attitudes and behavior makes clear that this entire collection is directly related to students, and how educators can help them develop as citizens. The case is clearly made for being concerned about college students’ attitudes about civic engagement and the challenges faced in addressing civic responsibility. The second part of the book provided a survey of good practices aimed at promoting civic responsibility among colleges and universities. Part three focused on the intersections that exist between civic education and other social sectors such as the media, public education at the primary and secondary levels, and the special challenges to civic and community engagement posed by the digital age and the move toward the on-line

campus. The fourth part of the book showed the editor's respect for the mission and culture of individual institutions and the need for each institution to consider the kind of college or university they are, the needs of the community in which they are located, and the unique resources and opportunities they offer. Essays about enhancing civic education reflect many perspectives, including the community college, comprehensive university, liberal arts college, historically black college, religious-based college, and the research university. This section provided a rich set of examples of how institutions actually incorporate civic responsibility and education into their curriculum and campus culture. The last part of the book addressed the themes that cut across institutional type and mission and make a case for partnerships and regional, as well as national, collaboration among institutions.

Student affairs professionals with an interest in measuring their own institution's attitudes and commitment to civic education might consider using Nancy L. Thomas' chapter, *The College and University as Citizen* as a starting point. Thomas listed and gave innovative examples of ten historical and contemporary institutional activities and how they can be more strongly related to civic engagement and education. She included the following in her inventory: (1) Responsive curricula; (2) Cooperative extension and continuing education programs; (3) Clinical programs and field-based learning opportunities for students in professional programs; (4) Top-down administrative initiatives; (5) Centralized administrative-academic units with outreach missions; (6) Academically based centers and institutes; (7) Faculty professional service and academic outreach; (8) Student initiatives; (9) Institutional initiatives with an economic or political purpose; and (10) Access to facilities and cultural events.

Thomas concluded her section with a discussion of strategies for identifying and implementing these kinds of initiatives and finding the ones that best fit an institution. This was an inspirational chapter for engaging college leadership to talk with students, colleagues, and community leaders about possibilities.

The President's call to Americans to volunteer and engage in community service following the September 2001 terrorist attacks contributed to a renewed interest in service, and current events define a "teachable moment" in terms of civic responsibility. In July 2002, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching announced the creation of a program studying the political engagement of students. The Political Engagement Project will be co-directed by Ehrlich and Anne Colby, a senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation. Thomas Ehrlich's *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education* is an excellent resource for educators, leaders, students and citizens who wish to contribute to greater civic responsibility.