



The New Core

How Colleges are Building
Civic Skills Through
General Education



C&S is working to spark 20 million young people to step up as civic problem-solvers by 2029.

College Presidents for Civic Preparedness

is C&S's flagship higher education coalition, bringing together 140+ college presidents across institution type, geography, and political context to strengthen civic culture on campus. Coalition members share a commitment to ensuring all students—not just those who opt in—graduate prepared not only for careers, but for participation in civic life.

Campuswide Immersion is the coalition's intensive implementation offering. It supports college presidents in working alongside trusted campus leaders to build campuswide plans that embed civic preparation across academics, student life, and campus leadership—and measure how students are developing three essential civic skills: respectful discussions, using reliable information, and collaborating across differences.

The Power of &

CAMPUSWIDE IMMERSION CAMPUSES

- Benedict College
 - Claremont McKenna College
 - Colorado College
 - Dartmouth College
 - DePauw University
 - Duke University
 - Howard University
 - James Madison University
 - Montclair State University
 - Rollins College
 - Skidmore College
 - University of Denver
 - University of Pittsburgh
 - Wellesley College
 - American University
 - Denison University
 - Fordham University
 - Macalester College
 - Ohio Wesleyan University
 - Otterbein University
 - Towson University
 - University of Nebraska at Omaha
 - University of Richmond
 - Wesleyan University
 - Augsburg University
 - Cornell University
 - Davidson College
 - Fairmont State University
 - Franklin & Marshall College
 - Hudson County Community College
 - La Salle University
 - Mount St. Joseph University
 - Salem State University
 - University of Dayton
 - University of North Texas
 - University of Wisconsin–Madison
 - Wake Forest University
 - Washington and Lee University
 - Weber State University
- [See all College Presidents for Civic Preparedness campuses](#)

C&S BY THE NUMBERS

20M young people
by 2029

140+ College Presidents for Civic Preparedness members

39 Campuswide Immersion campuses



Today's college students need to graduate with more than a diploma.

They should also leave campus with the skills to participate productively in the workplace and their communities: having respectful discussions, using reliable information, and collaborating across differences.

General education is a uniquely powerful way to drive this learning. Even in [its earliest forms](#), general education was seen as a vehicle for inspiring productive citizenship. [Research suggests it can deliver on that promise](#), equipping students with lifelong learning skills, an understanding of individual and social responsibility, the ability to take ethical action, and a spirit of civic engagement.



Students who feel a strong sense of campus community seem to look especially positively on general education, [according to one study](#)—and the impact may work both ways.

After all, general education reaches all students, engages faculty across disciplines, and shapes the overall college experience. It offers a practical way to help all students—not just those who opt into specific programming or academic tracks—show up, speak up, and take action to solve problems on campus and beyond, creating a spirit of community and care.

So why doesn't every school use general education to further civic learning? For one thing, general education reform is a genuinely complex undertaking, requiring buy-in and effort from administrators, faculty, and staff across campus. Widespread assumptions about how the process has to work, barriers that stand in the way of its success, and [drawbacks that may arise](#) certainly don't make it feel any simpler.

In C&S's work with faculty, staff, and campus leaders, we have repeatedly heard assumptions about reforming general education to strengthen civic learning. Among others, we've heard people say that:

- **It has to happen all at once**, because general education reform is often associated with

institution-wide curriculum redesign. That can feel like a daunting proposition for schools and faculties that already have too much to do and not enough time.

- **Civic learning only makes sense for certain disciplines**, such as political science. That belief makes some people question whether general education is the right place to offer civic learning opportunities.
- **Adding civic learning to general education takes away from career preparation.** This idea reflects concerns that increased emphasis on civic skills comes at the expense of specialized coursework, disciplinary expertise, or workforce preparation.
- **Civic learning is inherently partisan and sparks unwanted conversations**, making it seem inappropriate for general education. A belief that civic learning is controversial or partisan—whether it's seen as left- or right-leaning—makes some think it cannot be taught in a neutral way.

It's not hard to see how beliefs like these dissuade some schools from doing the work. Here's the thing, though. Plenty of campus leaders also told us that these beliefs are not necessarily correct—or that the issues are at least more nuanced than they might appear. In a recent C&S survey, **76% of schools said at least one common assumption about general education reform isn't totally true.**

Across the College Presidents for Civic Preparedness coalition, our flagship

group of campus leaders from more than 140 diverse institutions, schools have found creative ways to challenge preconceived notions and update general education to emphasize civic learning. They have added courses, set community engagement requirements, embedded specific skills throughout curricula, added programming that complements core classes, and much more.

No two approaches look exactly alike, but each reflects the same goal: Reaching every student on campus, so they all graduate ready to leave their marks on the world. Campuswide Immersion, our intensive implementation offering focused on universal civic engagement, supports schools in doing this work. General education is another effective way to drive campus culture change.

General education reform isn't easy. It only gets harder when unchecked assumptions cloud the process. Of course, each school has to figure out what works for them—but the following examples show what's possible.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

We wanted to understand the drivers, challenges, and assumptions that shape colleges' approaches to general education reform, so we surveyed campus leaders from 41 schools in C&S's College Presidents for Civic Preparedness coalition. Nearly two-thirds of responses came from Campuswide Immersion schools. Schools were asked to describe general education changes they've made (or are planning) and how their views evolved as the process unfolded. They were also given a list of common assumptions about general education reform and asked to select those they felt were partially or totally incorrect.

TOP FINDINGS



40%

of schools have made, or are in the process of making, changes to general education.



24%

are interested in making general education changes, but haven't done so yet.



43%

cited desire for clearer purpose as a motivator, while 38% mentioned student demand.



76%

said at least one common assumption about changing general education is incorrect or only partially correct.

Assumption #1

Change must happen all at once



Reality:

Plenty of schools make incremental change

Changing general education can feel like an all-or-nothing proposition. It's generally an interlocking set of requirements that, together, form the backbone of students' educations. How can you change part of it without changing all of it?

The reality is, many schools make incremental changes. In our survey, **more than half of schools making general education changes reported taking gradual steps.** Among schools that are already in the process, 35% have made full changes, while 53% have made partial

adjustments and 12% are still in a pilot phase.

In many cases, these processes last multiple years. Campuswide Immersion member Washington and Lee University, for one, has been working on a new general education program for close to a decade, with implementation set to begin in the fall of 2027. That hard-won experience shifted campus leaders' original perception that curriculum change had to happen all at once, they reported in the survey.

SURVEY RESULTS



have made full changes



have made partial adjustment



are still in a pilot phase

CAMPUS SPOTLIGHT



Moravian University



“Our general education program was 25 years old and was in desperate need of updating,” says President Bryon Grigsby. Rather than scrapping the whole thing at once, Moravian’s faculty drove efforts to develop a new system over the course of about five years. That purposeful, gradual process gave Moravian’s faculty the space to think boldly, reimagining not only what general education looks like but what it can achieve.

Led by faculty, Moravian is shifting general education from a checklist system—taking specific courses in specific disciplines—to one rooted in student choice and skill-based learning. This new model allows students across departments to learn key civic skills, such as how to understand the cultural forces that shape their interactions with others. Since the new

model was introduced in the fall of 2025, 250 students and counting have benefitted from 15 revamped general education courses, and those numbers are still rising. A “Beyond the Classroom” component also encourages students to become engaged community members by completing experiences such as internships, clinical education, and student teaching.



TIP: Gradual change can be effective, providing opportunities for feedback, iteration, measurement, and participation from stakeholders across campus.

Assumption #2

Civic learning belongs only in certain disciplines



Reality:

Any subject can include civic learning

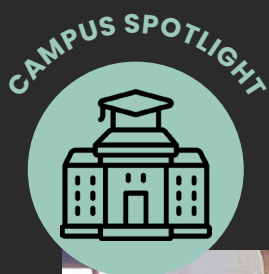
It's easy to see how civic learning fits into certain disciplines, like political science and history. The idea that the list should stop there was one of the most commonly challenged statements in our survey. **More than 40% of respondents flagged the assumption that civic learning belongs only in certain disciplines as totally or partially incorrect.** Schools in the cohort offer living proof that it can fit into every department.

As a Campuswide Immersion school, the University of Nebraska at Omaha is committed to transcending departmental boundaries—and sees that those efforts are paying off. “We have evidence from faculty members using experiential and community-based teaching strategies, such as service learning, that help us

know students are engaging civically in different disciplines, especially those that are not ‘typical,’” says Chief Engagement Officer Julie Dierberger.

University of Dayton President Eric Spina sees the task similarly. “As part of the current Campuswide Immersion cohort, we see this as an essential part of the core holistic learning our students must do to engage productively in society,” he says. Key skills such as addressing differences, identifying credible information, and solving problems collaboratively benefit students across majors, both during their time on campus and as they transition into the rest of their lives. Embedding these skills into diverse disciplines is often a matter of shifting perspective.





State University of New York



Revamping general education is no small task for the State University of New York system, a network of 64 campuses that cumulatively educates close to half a million students. That isn't stopping Chancellor John B. King Jr. Updating SUNY's general education requirements has been part of a broader civics and service initiative, which aims to strengthen democracy, improve discourse, bridge differences, and promote civic engagement among SUNY students," he says.

Guided by King's office and supported by Civil Discourse and Civic Education and Engagement Fellows, who are SUNY faculty and staff from a diverse set of disciplines, the system is ensuring that all students take part in this learning. As of fall 2026, the SUNY system has implemented a civic discourse requirement in its general education curriculum. Undergraduates will demonstrate ability to deliberate ideas, practice dissent, consider multiple viewpoints, and build

other civil discourse skills. Once the system reaches full implementation, its new general education offerings will reach tens of thousands of students per year. And unique opportunities for civic learning are already emerging, even in departments that may seem surprising. In engineering classes, for example, students learn how to consider community input and debate the impact of public design projects.



TIP: Consider core civic skills that are relevant across many subject areas, and those that are mission-driven. General education can be a way to deliver on institutional priorities and further the common good.

“We see this as an essential part of the core holistic learning our **students must do to engage productively in society.**”

— UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON PRESIDENT ERIC SPINA

SCOPE OF REACH

Cumulatively, across institutions that took our survey,



800

general education courses
have been revamped



15,500+

students have been reached



53,000+

students are expected to be
impacted after full implementation

Assumption #3

General education is a barrier to career prep



Reality:

Career prep and general education can co-exist

[Research shows](#) that employability is a major motivator for young people when they enroll in college. Many students see college not only as an opportunity for personal growth and learning, but also as a stepping stone toward a rewarding career. General education courses, then, may be seen as a distraction, taking valuable time away from career-specific learning. “The most difficult perception to overcome is helping students understand the importance of general education and how it benefits them,” one president agreed.

It may not be easy, but it is possible to shift that mindset. **Forty-three percent of our survey**

respondents called out the perception that general education takes away from career preparation as one worth reconsidering. In some cases, schools are purposely marrying the two.

“We are continuing to combat the myth of general education as a barrier to career preparation,” says University of Findlay’s Vice President of Academic Affairs Christine Denecker. “Experiential learning is part of the general education curriculum, so students are being challenged to include career preparation directly into their general education choices.”

CAMPUS SPOTLIGHT



Pennsylvania Institute of Technology



Pennsylvania Institute of Technology is a career-focused school that specializes in preparing students for careers in healthcare, business administration, and other professional fields. Because of this focus, P.I.T. must balance general education innovation with the curricular requirements of professionally focused programs, many of which are shaped by accreditation and licensure standards.

Even so, President Matt Meyers is committed to thinking outside the box. “Employers and communities increasingly need graduates who can think critically, communicate effectively across differences, evaluate information responsibly, and understand their role in contributing to the public good,” he says. To produce those graduates, Meyers is exploring

creative ways to infuse civic learning throughout required courses, such as by teaching skills including ethical decision-making, cultural competency, information literacy, community engagement, and professional accountability. These skills will serve P.I.T. graduates in their careers, as well as their broader lives.



TIP: Look for opportunities to integrate civic education within existing pre-professional courses.



Approaches that complement general education

General education is uniquely influential, given that it reaches all students. It's also not the only way to infuse a college curriculum with civic learning, as these schools show.



Cleveland State University offers an “Inquiry Pathways” program in addition to its core curriculum. These multi-disciplinary offerings, on topics such as Justice & Society and Healthy Futures, equip students with the skills they need to think critically, consider multiple viewpoints, and collaborate with others.

Warren Wilson College introduced a streamlined curriculum in 2024, combining academic, civic, work-based, and service learning. This meant reducing credits required by some majors, but every department successfully made the change.



Swarthmore College doesn't have a classic general education curriculum. Still, it designates certain classes—offered across humanities and STEM departments alike—as “Engaged Scholarship” courses that focus on solving problems and making a difference within the larger community.

Assumption #4

Civic learning is likely to spark backlash



Reality:

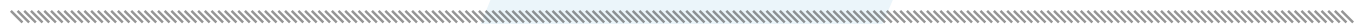
Students are ready to engage—with the right support

Around half of schools told us they'd heard either that civic learning is inherently partisan or that students avoid the difficult conversations that may stem from it. About as many respondents, however, marked each of these assumptions as partially or completely incorrect. These results show that the challenge is real—and so is the payoff when the process is executed thoughtfully.

University of North Texas President Harrison Keller has seen both sides of the coin. "Many faculty are nervous at first, because they think this work implies bringing discussion of specific controversial topics into their classrooms," Keller says. The Campuswide Immersion school has overcome that fear by focusing

on the general development of civic skills, such as solving problems collaboratively and voicing disagreement productively. This subtle reframing makes civic learning feel safe, rather than scary.

Others have succeeded by letting students chart the way. Multiple schools noted that students are often ready and willing to participate in complex conversations—they just need support from their schools and educators. "Students are willing to embrace opportunities for exchange and engagement," emphasizes Benedict College President Roslyn Artis. Student motivation is there. Structure and guidance from faculty and campus leaders can help nurture it.



CAMPUS SPOTLIGHT



James Madison University



“We have heard faculty, often more so than students, say civic learning is partisan and that students in their classes avoid challenging content-based conversations,” says Kara Dillard, JMU’s Campuswide Immersion lead. She and other faculty members are working to highlight the truth: Civic learning is for everybody, and it’s politically neutral.

They are working toward a new six-credit general education requirement focused on engaged citizenship and democracy, aiming to give all students, from all political persuasions, the skills they need to understand and meaningfully participate in public life. Twenty courses have

been revamped so far, and when all is said and done, JMU expects 5,000 students to learn about these topics each year through general education. The school is also training educators to support students during difficult classroom conversations, so they feel safe and productive.



TIP: Administrators and educators can provide the support needed to capitalize on student interest, turning civic learning into productive action.



Measuring outcomes

Any school contemplating general education reform should get clear about what success looks like. To start, take inspiration from these College Presidents for Civic Preparedness coalition members, which have found unique ways to measure the outcomes that flow from revamping general education.

For more support, consider joining Campuswide Immersion, which is focused on implementing and measuring campuswide change. We support Campuswide Immersion schools in tracking how well students identify credible information, how often they take part in productive conversations, and how deeply they believe in bridging differences, among other metrics.

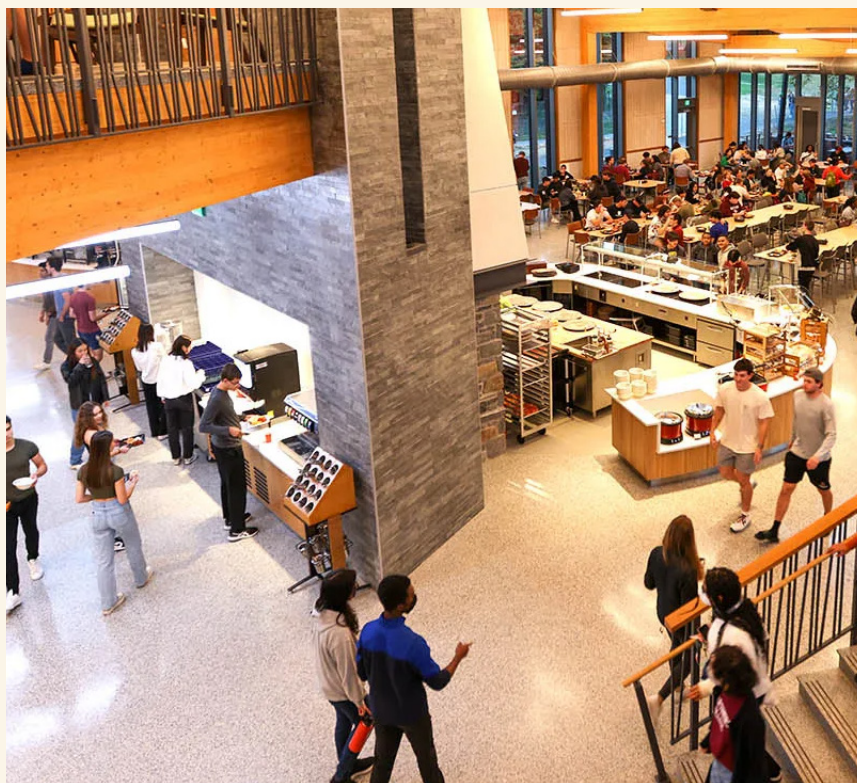


Tohono O'odham Community College integrates civic engagement derived from the Tohono O'odham people's Himdag (way of life) roots. The school encourages students to connect with core values internally, while also spreading their message externally through service, internships, and community leadership to ensure that generational cycles of Indigenous knowledge "always will continue" (cem hekid 'am o himad).

Macaulay Honors College (CUNY) is developing metrics specifically related to civic education, to be used to track school-wide progress toward campus learning objectives. Already, it tracks learning outcomes related to civic communication in core seminars.



Aurora University uses common rubrics and assessment tools, applied across departments, that measure how well students master key skills such as collaboration, evidence-based reasoning, and issue analysis. Faculty engagement in the curricular improvement and assessment process is another important aspect of success for the school.



Every college campus is unique, guided by its own **norms, rules, and culture.**

The schools in our survey demonstrate the many ways of approaching this work—and moving past the assumptions that can limit it before it truly begins. Over the years, it's become clear that campus leaders are worried they have to have it all figured out at once, that civic learning only fits into certain disciplines, that adding to general education means taking away from career preparation, and that weaving civic learning into general education invites polarization and controversy.

With creative thinking, deliberate planning, and buy-in from campus leaders, faculty, and students, these assumptions give way to a more nuanced reality. General education reform can occur on many timelines. It can reach all disciplines and co-exist with career-focused learning. And, perhaps most importantly, it can engage everyone in peaceful, productive civic learning—for the benefit of students, campuses, and communities.

For more of C&S's guidance on integrating civic learning into general education, click [here](#).

Ready to build a campus culture that prepares students for civic life? **We're here to help.**

- Join College Presidents for Civic Preparedness.
- Join the next Campuswide Immersion cohort.





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