This year, thousands of men and women throughout the country are cramming to gain a civic education. They are trying to be sure they can pass the only test that the United States government sponsors on what knowledge is needed to be responsible American citizens. These individuals are immigrants who will lose their rights to government benefits unless they become U.S. citizens. What is the content of the test? Prospective applicants are given a booklet listing 100 questions about American history and government. The first three are: “What are the colors of our flag?” “How many stars are on our flag?” and “What color are the stars on our flag?” Examiners from the Immigration and Naturalization Service select a few of the 100 questions, and citizenship depends on whether an applicant can answer them.

Even the most fervent apostle of E. D. Hirsch would not suggest that knowing the number of Supreme Court justices (question 54) is evidence of good citizenship. Becoming and staying informed about one’s community, its needs, and its problems is important, as is engaging in collaborative activities that are designed to strengthen a community. Civic engagement means believing that you can and should make a difference in enhancing your community, and it means possessing the combination of knowledge, skills, and values necessary to help make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. How should these civic virtues be taught? For

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Illustration by Will Terry
A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experiences.

— John Dewey

answers, we must turn to sources other than the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

**Democracy and education**

There is not much research on the subject. We know that civic participation increases as the level of education increases, just as it increases with levels of income and wealth. But we know little about how higher education (or income and wealth) influences civic involvement. One obvious place to start is with John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. The book proposed two radical insights about American society: that most citizens, not only the elite, can have a life of the mind; and that a life that is only of the mind is inadequate to the challenges of American democracy. Our society requires civic engagement to realize the potential of its citizens and its communities.

At first glance, the table of contents of *Democracy and Education* may seem a bit disappointing; it contains neither a civic education curriculum nor a list of specific courses or skills that could promote civic virtues. Rather—and this becomes apparent only when one considers the book as a whole—it is about how leaders of a school or educational system could shape all of its programs and activities, curricular and extracurricular, around the goal of democracy. "A democracy," wrote Dewey, "is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experiences."

Dewey did not provide concrete examples or even many hints about how this "mode of associated living" could best be learned, but clearly he had in mind that a school should be a microcosm of society, structured in ways that enhance the learning environment. He stressed two key factors. First, "the school must itself be a community life in all which that implies." Second, "the learning in school should be continuous with that out of school." How could schools best meet these conditions? Again, Dewey did not provide details, and, like most of us in higher education, he was not one to practice much of what he preached.

Courses and seminars that focus attention on the ways in which our democratic society should—and does—operate naturally ought to be part of any effort to enhance civic learning. Students need substantive knowledge about the interactions of the public and private sectors, particularly within communities. Benjamin Barber and Richard Battistoni have organized a set of materials that provide the basis for an excellent academic offering along these lines. Such materials are important for the learning they provide, but are no less important for the base of common understandings they enable students to share. The famous *Harvard Red Book* promoted adoption of a general education curriculum not because it would reveal eternal truths—in the same sense that Robert Maynard Hutchins championed—but rather because a common body of materials can be the basis for shared academic experiences, and with those experiences may come development of shared values, or...
at least a discussion of what those values should be. In the context of civic values, agreement may not be reached on what steps best promote an engaged citizenry, but the resulting discussions can strengthen students' understanding of the importance of that goal and their determination to reach it. Without a common set of materials, the authors of the Red Book urged, there is a cacophony of voices calling in all directions, without the possibility of any one being heard—democracy’s most worrisome danger, as Pericles warned. For much the same reason, E. D. Hirsch proposed a body of shared knowledge about American history and government.

As Dewey emphasized, however, common readings, whatever their quality, may have little effect on enhancing civic learning if they are presented and discussed in a closed classroom. How students learn may well have more impact on their subsequent engagement in community activities than what they learn. Dewey stressed three key elements in the democratic learning process:

- That process should engage students in reaching outside the walls of the school and into the surrounding community;
- It should focus on problems to be solved; and
- It should be collaborative, both among students and between students and faculty.

These AmeriCorps participants have just been sworn in for one year of service with a National Service program sponsored by the Delaware Community Service Commission. In this breakout session, they are learning about different kinds of service opportunities.
Each of these elements is reflected in a pedagogy that is increasingly infusing undergraduate education throughout the country:

- Community-service learning, as opposed to closed classroom learning;
- Problem-based learning, as opposed to discipline-based learning; and
- Collaborative learning, as opposed to individual learning.

These strategies are not the only pedagogies that strengthen civic learning among undergraduates, but they are the most promising.

Common to these strategies are two threads that spiral through them like a double helix. Education as a social and socializing function is the first—what Jack Lane of Rollins College terms the "communalization of education." This is the thread that most directly reflects Dewey's focus on democracy as the overarching goal of education. "For Dewey," Lane writes, "the two principles of individualization and communalization of education were independent. The one motivated students to learn; the other motivated that learning worthwhile. Individualization without community led to self-indulgence and to the privatization and atomization of learning; community without individualization tended toward conformity, coercion, and even stagnation." However, as Lane also notes, even in progressive colleges such as Sarah Lawrence and Antioch, the concept of community never infused learning in American higher education, but was left to extracurricular activities and living arrangements.

The second common thread is a shift in emphasis from teaching to learning and a shift in the role of faculty member from teacher to coach. In a sense, this thread marks a return to Dewey's concept that student interest should be the starting point in education. Of all the elements in Dewey's views on education, this can be the most easily misunderstood, for it sounds suspiciously like a call to let students play in sandboxes or do whatever else they want to do. Instead, it was meant as a call to shape learning experiences around students' individual interests and needs.

**Community-service learning**

An extensive and growing literature describes and discusses each of these three pedagogies, and I will do no more than touch on a few key points. Because community-service learning has been my particular interest for some years, both in my own courses and in helping reshape undergraduate education at several institutions, I'll begin with that strategy and comment on it at greater length than the others.

The content and substance of community-service learning courses vary widely, but all such courses include academic study, community service, and structured reflection to integrate the study and service components. Community service may assume a variety of forms: direct aid to individuals in need, education and outreach activities, and policy analysis and research. Community-service learning—a subset of experiential learning, which in turn is a subset of active learning—has been around for a long time, but, like the other two movements, it has received strong impetus in recent years.

For community-service learning to be taken seriously by most faculty members, they must be persuaded that it strengthens academic learning. I do not suggest that academic learning can be enhanced by community-service learning in every course, any more than that all intellectual abilities can be developed only through application to community problems. But I am convinced that the academic learning of students in many courses covering most academic fields can be increased by integrating community service with readings, papers, lectures, class discussions, and other coursework.

The conclusions of one study may help illustrate the point. Three political science professors recently reported on
their course, "Contemporary Political Problems," at the University of Michigan. Out of a large class, they randomly selected one section to be engaged in community service, along with standard readings and written assignments, while the other sections of the class were not involved with community service and were assigned some added traditional classwork. They found that the students in the community-service learning sections were more successful than their classmates on three scales. Their grades were better (by blind grading) and they reported higher satisfaction on course evaluations. Of particular importance in terms of civic learning, their awareness of societal problems was significantly greater. The experiment was repeated with equally positive results. The faculty members emphasized that a key factor in these results was time spent integrating community service into the curriculum through regular discussion sections.

Two Vanderbilt professors have coordinated a much broader analysis of data from more than 1,500 students in community-service learning courses at 20 colleges and universities across the country. Preliminary results indicate that these students report they learn more, are more intellectually stimulated, and work harder in community-service learning courses than in their other classes. A RAND study of the Learn and Serve Program, sponsored by the Corporation for National Service and led by Sandy Astin at UCLA, reaches similar conclusions.

A number of writers who have chronicled the decline of civic engagement in America, including Benjamin Barber and Robert Putnam, have argued that community service is one of the most important ways—often the most important way—to counter that trend among students. Civic learning—in the sense of how a community works and how to help it work better—and academic learning are mutually reinforcing, as Dewey stressed. This also is true of the moral learning that students gain through community-service learning courses. By moral learning, I mean reinforcing the elements of character that lead to ethical actions. These elements include respect for the autonomy and dignity of others, compassion and kindness, honesty and integrity, and a commitment to equity and fairness. Civic learning and moral learning obviously are closely related; the first cannot occur without the second.

Undergraduate years, particularly for those transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, have a profound impact on moral character. Robert Coles of Harvard has argued eloquently for the proposition that moral character is enhanced by community-service learning. He has shown that community-service learning helps students think about themselves in relation to others—about who their neighbors are and about their obligations to their neighbors. Service connects thought and feeling in a deliberate way, creating a context in which students can explore how they feel about what they are thinking.

Civic learning—in the sense of how a community works and how to help it work better—and academic learning are mutually reinforcing...
and what they think about how they are feeling. The interaction of academic study and community service, linked by guided reflection, offers students opportunities to consider what is important to them—and why—in ways they otherwise too rarely experience.

The potential for learning through community service is particularly significant at commuter colleges and universities, which constitute the great majority of our higher education institutions. Students at these campuses usually are familiar with their community and its problems, and they expect to continue to live and work there. They become undergraduates to gain the knowledge and skills they think they need to lead productive lives in that community. All too often, however, they see little relationship between their intellectual learning and the issues they want to address personally or professionally. In the experience of faculty members across the country, community-service learning is the best means to provide that relationship.

Civic learning is an important impetus in the minds of most faculty members who are teaching community-service learning courses, but it is not the primary rationale. One in-depth study of community-service learning courses suggests that students may not even be aware of the goal of such courses. Marilyn Smith, formerly of the University of Maryland and currently director of the Learn and Serve Program at the Corporation for National Service, studied a group of students in community-service learning courses at Loyola College in Maryland. She found that while civic learning often was mentioned as a principal aim, many students failed to understand that aim. Her study suggests that perhaps the single most important step in promoting civic learning is to establish it as an explicit goal and communicate that goal clearly to students. Because many—perhaps most—faculty members fail to communicate any learning goals to their students, the step is not a small one.

**Problem-based learning**

The second expanding pedagogy directly related to civic learning is increased attention to problem areas, with less emphasis on disciplines. While problem-based learning has been practiced by many higher education faculty for many years, it recently has received a substantial infusion of interest. The key is not simply that problem-based courses are interdisciplinary, but rather that the starting point in course design is a problem. As students advance, they tackle increasingly difficult problems using increasingly sophisticated techniques and increasingly complex knowledge bases.

Dewey put particular emphasis on the problem or “project” approach as “the way out of [the] educational confusion” that permeated colleges and universities. A central error of higher education, he charged, was the arbitrary categorization of academic study into disciplines that were divorced from the complex concerns of society and its citizenry. The failure to integrate
disciplines, or to focus student inquiry on problems, made learning arid and abstract. The linkage between liberal and vocational education, so important to Dewey, also was tied to the problem-based approach, for it enabled students to develop skills and insights by training their attention on matters that seemed to them real and important, not remote and bloodless.

A reorganization of subject-matter which takes account of out-learnings into the wide world of nature and man, of knowledge and of social interests and uses, cannot fail save in the most callous and intellectually obturate to awaken some permanent interest and curiosity. Theoretical subjects will become more practical, because more related to the scope of life; practical subjects will become charged with theory and intelligent insight. Both will be vitally and not just formally unified.  

Shaped in this way, higher education can enhance a life-long process of engagement in helping resolve community concerns and promote constructive change.

The problem-based approach is key to preparing students for active participation in the on-going renewal of democracy. That renewal involves much more than attention to the minimal responsibilities of a citizen—to vote, to participate in various civic organizations, etc.—though these responsibilities certainly are both important and ignored by most citizens today. Democracy also calls for citizens to identify community problems and to work communally to resolve them. Again, I do not suggest that this benefit of the problem-based approach to learning is a factor in the minds of most faculty members who use it in their classrooms, but it is another piece of the larger picture that may be moving higher education closer to Dewey’s vision.

The most frequent criticism I heard... was that our graduates were unprepared to collaborate as members of a team.

Collaborative learning
Cooperative or collaborative learning (I use the two terms interchangeably, although some commentators define them differently) is a third strategy that both has a long history and increasingly is becoming part of undergraduate education. According to a recent volume, it “may well be the most significant pedagogical shift of the century for teaching and learning in higher education.” Like the problem-based approach, collaborative learning is integral to Dewey’s view of democracy as the goal of education, although again, that goal is not explicit in the minds of most faculty members who use the technique.

The most frequent criticism I heard as president of Indiana University, from both community leaders and employers, was that our graduates were unprepared to collaborate as members of a team. While most of the tasks they would be called on to perform in their communities and workplaces would be as team members, most of their undergraduate work had been done alone. Collaborative learning is targeted specifically toward enhancing the skills and abilities required to be a productive team member.

Examples
Many colleges and universities are actively engaged in one or two of these three strategies as a matter of conscious, campus-wide policy. (At every higher education institution, individual faculty members are using particular strategies as matters of their individual teaching styles.) A few campuses are leaders in all three strategies, although none of these is on the list of major research universities or prestigious liberal arts colleges. Furthermore, they are not among the “wannabes” for inclusion on that list. Rather, these are campuses where wise leadership and faculty cohesion have supported rigorous rethinking and restructuring across the entire curriculum. Alverno College—a small, private institution—is a prime example. Led by President Joel Reed, Alverno’s faculty members have done extraordinary work in analyzing the interactions of pedagogy and learning for several decades. Their findings have profoundly important implications for all of higher education. Portland State
Dewey urged that a community of learners is the primary mechanism through which this democratizing process can best occur. University—a large, public university formerly under the leadership of President Judith Ramaley—is another illustration of pedagogic change on an institution-wide basis.

**Fulfilling Dewey’s vision**

It has become common to bemoan a loss of civic responsibility, particularly among young people, and to urge increased attention to civic education among students at every level. If the issue is viewed solely as one of information transfer—fifth-grade civics in a more advanced form—the role of higher education inevitably is a modest one. This is no less true if the issue is seen solely as urging students to vote and pay attention to politics. John Dewey had much more in mind. He viewed American democracy and education as inexorably intertwined. This is not simply because our citizenry must be educated to choose its political leaders responsibly and to hold them accountable. Much more important is a democratic society in which citizens interact with one another, learn from one another, grow with one another, and together make their communities more than the sum of their parts. Dewey urged that a community of learners is the primary mechanism through which this democratizing process can best occur. To be successful, the community must be both interactive and collaborative—a place where decision-making processes are more important than the decisions themselves.

One reason why higher education has not done more to promote civic responsibility is that we do not have much empirical knowledge on a range of important issues in this realm. These issues include: What are the essential elements of effective citizenship for an American in the next century? What are the specific knowledge, skills, and values that contribute to those elements of good citizenship, recognizing that there may be a range of different ways to be a good citizen? What evidence is there about the contribution that higher education can make to developing these qualities in sustained and effective ways? What kinds of civic educational efforts have proven most effective in preparing students for responsible citizenship? What problems confront colleges and universities that attempt to engage in sustained civic education, and what are the best strategies to overcome them?

These are the kinds of questions that must be addressed if Dewey’s vision of democracy and education is to be realized. As ACE President Stanley O. Ikenberry notes in his opening
letter to this issue of Educational Record, questions such as these are the subject of the Council's multi-year project on civic responsibility and higher education. Other projects, in related arenas, are under way as well. Together, these projects hold some promise of providing operational insights into how to achieve the linkages between democracy and education that were so clear to Dewey in theory, though they continue to be clouded in practice.

If American higher education is to help society realize Dewey's vision of democracy, new forms of learning and new forms of defining what we mean by knowledge must emerge. We must recognize that a learning community is one in which no one single member of the community knows everything, in which every member can contribute something, and in which there is a clear vision of a better future combined with a healthy skepticism about the abilities of anyone to know all the answers—whatever the questions. This was the democratic society that Dewey envisioned and for which he posited a powerful role for higher education. It is past time for those of us in colleges and universities to meet his challenge.  

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1 The best recent publication on the role of higher education in civic life is the January/February 1997 issue of Change magazine, edited by Zelda F. Gamson and Peter Kiang.


4 Ibid., pg. 416.


8 Ibid.


17 Ibid., pg. 88.