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QuickTakes!

Stockton Faculty Research: Civics Lessons in College Could Increase Political Participation

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Education about civics in colleges and universities could reverse declining levels of public knowledge about government and increase political participation, according to research published today by the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University.



The report, “Midwife to Democracy: Civic Learning in Higher Education,” was written by Jennifer Forestal, assistant professor of Political Science at Stockton. Increasing civic engagement is part of the mission of the Hughes Center, which sponsored the research.

Democracy flourishes when citizens are informed and actively participate in civic life, the report says, but evidence suggests that Americans lack knowledge about the U.S. political system and are tuning out. Dr. Forestal cites Annenberg research showing only 38 percent of U.S. adults could name all three branches of government. According to a 2015 research sponsored by the Hughes Center, more than half of New Jersey adults could not name a single U.S. Supreme Court justice, and only 29 percent could identify freedom of speech as one of the freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment.

This lack of knowledge is reflected in lack of civic activity, the report says. In 2007, the United States ranked 139th in voter participation out of 172 world democracies.

“This paints a pessimistic picture. It seems that the prospects are dim for the kind of vibrant and active citizenry that is critical for a thriving American democracy,” said Dr. Forestal. “However, civic learning can reverse this trend.”

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Focusing on civic education in colleges, the report points to six building block to creating a more informed and active public:

- ◆ Instruction in basic facts about government and politics;
- ◆ Skills in applying those facts, such as discussing real-world issues and events;
- ◆ Cultivation of democratic values, including respect for freedom, a sense of justice and ethics;
- ◆ Practice in demographic situations, such as mock elections, model United Nations programs and mock trials;
- ◆ Connections between students and their communities, including service learning and volunteerism;
- ◆ Support for civic education from higher education institutions.

Many colleges and universities include one or two of those elements of civic education in their programs, but the curriculum is too varied and uneven to produce consistent results.

Dr. Forestal's report recommends broadly integrating civic education in college curriculum so that it is intertwined with multiple areas of study, using several strategies.

One is to implement a "civics across the curriculum" approach in which civic education is used in a variety of college programs. The proposal is modeled after "writing across the curriculum" programs, in which instruction about writing is integrated into major courses.

Another proposal is to provide a separate certificate program, a minor, or a college major on civics that is open to all students but is not required. Also, colleges could require all students to take a one-semester civics course in order to graduate.

New technologies and the Internet are making it easier for people to find information about politics and to express their views and try to influence public discussion of issues. "Institutions of higher education are well suited to provide the tools to engage in participatory democracy," Dr. Forestal said.

"Democracy is more than a set of institutions, it's a way of life," she said. "If we are to keep the spirit of democracy alive, citizens must have not only the knowledge, but also the skills, values and interest to engage in politics. Civic education programs are an important component in cultivating them."

To read the full [report](#) and view other research, visit Stockton.edu/hughescenter.

About the Hughes Center

The William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy (www.stockton.edu/hughescenter) at Stockton University serves as a catalyst for research, analysis and innovative policy solutions on the

economic, social and cultural issues facing New Jersey, and promotes the civic life of New Jersey through engagement, education and research. The center is named for William J. Hughes, whose distinguished career includes service in the U.S. House of Representatives, Ambassador to Panama and as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Stockton. The Hughes Center can be found on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/StocktonHughesCenter> and can be followed on Twitter @hughescenter.