

General Education for Citizenship

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I. Rationale

The charge to the Task Force on General Education asks it to formulate a coherent set of core knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that will equip BU graduates to thrive in their personal, professional, and civic lives. The subcommittee on “education for citizenship” has focused on the core knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that students will need in their civic lives, recognizing that these will overlap with the core knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that students will need in their professional and personal lives.

All of us, including the students we educate, are citizens of several communities that range in scope. We are citizens of our local communities/city and of a country. We are also members of a world community, although the claim that we are “citizens of the world” uses a different sense of the word than when we say we are citizens of Boston or of the United States.

Educating students for citizenship is in part to serve their interest. We hope and expect that an interest in being an engaged citizen and obtaining the knowledge and skills to engage responsibly will be a source of fulfillment for our students. Another important rationale is, like elementary and high schools, institutions of higher learning have an obligation that goes beyond their students to promote the public interest; and producing informed, public-minded graduates arguably contributes to that mission.

While it might be relatively easy to come up with a wish-list of desirable outcomes with respect to education for citizenship, it is unlikely that we can accomplish all of them well. Even on our subcommittee of three, there was probably (friendly) disagreement over what the priorities should be; and, even if the three of us agreed, there is no reason necessarily to conclude that our reviews are representative of the full task force. Thus, in what follows, we seek to lay out issues for the full task force to consider rather than make recommendations.

II. Objectives

We identified the following issues for the task force to consider:

1. *Academic knowledge vs. values formation*

One might argue that we should ask ourselves, “What do students need to know to be intelligent voters?” For example, given the likely importance of climate change as a pressing public policy issue throughout our students’ lives, do we need to make sure that all of our students know enough science to form intelligent opinions? But an alternative perspective is that education for citizenship is more about moral education than about knowledge. We might decide that an important objective is that our students can understand the public good and consider it important to pursue it even if it is at the expense of their own self-interest. We might consider it an objective of a BU education to graduate students who seek out and try to help the less fortunate members of society. These two perspectives are not either/or, and indeed they must almost certainly be combined to prepare students to be agents of social change. What balance should we endeavor to strike?

2. *To what extent should education for citizenship of a country be focused on being a United States citizen?*

Most of our students are from the United States, but many are not; and the proportion from other countries may grow. When we prepare students to be citizens of a nation, should it be their own nation or should we focus on preparing students to be citizens of the United States? What is the proper balance between inculcating generally applicable civic skills and values versus also including a specific focus on preparing students to participate in American democracy?

Suppose we conclude that to prepare our U.S. students for U.S. citizenship, we need to expand their knowledge of U.S. history and politics beyond what they learned in high school. What should we require of our non-U.S. students? Is there a conflict between preparing students to participate in American-style democracy, and inculcating global perspectives? What is the balance between these priorities?

3. *What level of citizenship should we emphasize – local, national, or global?*

Discussions of preparing students to be citizens of a country place a relatively heavy emphasis on participating in the political process (at least as voters but also possibly as public officials). Politics is less central to discussion of and efforts to prepare students for citizenship in a city or even smaller community. Those tend to envision engaging students in efforts to contribute to their communities in a variety of ways, many of which are outside the political process. Co-curricular activities, many of which include a service component, could be particularly valuable toward this aim.

4. *Knowledge vs. knowledge of and interest in issues*

The political process is in part about finding consensus but also in large part about handling areas of disagreement. When we prepare students for citizenship, should we be seeking to teach them the background that we believe is necessary to think intelligently about an issue (which may imply what we think is the right conclusion), or is it sufficient to have them engaged in the debates of the day? We have often heard on the task force assertions about the importance of critical thinking, a term which includes being able to assess the quality of information.

5. *Are there particular areas of knowledge that are particularly important for citizenship?*

Derek Bok's book *Our Underachieving Colleges* contains a chapter on education for citizenship. Bok observes that critical thinking, moral development, tolerance (of people of other races, ethnicity, religion, and philosophy), communication skills, and global understanding are important qualities for citizenship and are also widely-accepted general goals of a university education. He also observes that teaching students everything they need to know for citizenship is not feasible. Still, he lists four subject areas that are particularly important to prepare students for citizenship: U.S. politics, political philosophy, economics, and U.S. involvement in world affairs. While we appreciate these areas of inquiry, the list focuses on participation in government and leaves out other issues such as learning about and affirming civil society, the Public Square, and knowledge of the role of voluntary organizations in support of the common good. While the Bok list may be a good place to start, it is not necessarily complete. Our committee should discuss which subject areas seem most important for citizenship education.

III. Alternative Means of Achieving the Objectives

The means of obtaining the objectives will depend in large part on what the objectives are.

If we decide to emphasize local citizenship, then one approach would be to follow the Tulane model and require courses or co-curricular activities with a service component.

While our task force is charged with determining requirements that every BU undergraduate might satisfy, we still need to distinguish between what we require and what opportunities we create for those students who want them. What do we know about how vibrant student political clubs are on campus and should we be concerned about nurturing them? If we provide ample opportunity for service projects in which students voluntarily get involved in the community, do we promote citizenship more effectively than we would if we require service?