Civic Education by Mandate: A State-by-State Analysis

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As a profession, political scientists have been interested in the state of civic education for nearly a century. The American Political Science Association (APSA) has been involved in a discussion of teaching political science, and communicating the desire to turn our students into educated, responsible citizens since its inception (Mann 1996; for a more negative interpretation, see Leonard 1999). More recently, the association has sponsored discussion of civic education in the pages of *PS* and elsewhere. This renewed interest stems in part from a concern about the quality of primary and secondary education in the United States generally, and in part from a concern about the decline in civic engagement in the United States (Putnam 1995). Today's traditional college students come to us with little interest in, and a cynicism of, public affairs that is disheartening to those who love politics (Bennett 1998; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1996; Mann 1999).

Some efforts are underway to change this state of affairs. National standards for civic education from K-12 have been developed and critiqued (Dry 1996; Merelman 1996). A movement to incorporate "service learning" to promote good citizenship is growing nationwide (see for example, Battistoni and Hudson 1997; the September 2000 issue of *PS*). Many other articles offer advice to political science professors on means to instill a sense of civic duty in their students, consistent with the charge of APSA's Task Force on Civic Education (Carter and Elshtain 1997).

However, none of these efforts will work unless the students are enrolled in courses that cover this material, whether in the primary, secondary, or post-secondary levels. One study by the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs (Tolo 1999) found that more than half of the states mandated some civic education at the K-12 levels; 49 states had content standards in civic education and 29 states require high school students to complete a course in government or civics. However, no similar study has been done at the post-secondary level. The purpose of this article is to determine how many states require college students to take some course in American government, civics, or similar subject matter, through state statute, regulation, or other binding *state-level* (not institutional) mandate.

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Background

South Carolina has a statutory mandate that requires that all students enrolled in public high schools or colleges undertake a study of the Constitution, *Federalist Papers,* and the Declaration of Independence (South Carolina Code of Laws, Section 59-29-120-150). At my institution, this "Constitution Requirement" is embedded in the general education program. Students may take either one semester of American Government, a two-semester American History sequence, or a course on Political Economy, offered by the Economics faculty. These courses fulfill both the Constitution Requirement and general education requirements in social sciences or humanities, as appropriate. While data on the students' motivation for taking particular courses are not available, the Political Science Department appears to be the primary beneficiary of this requirement.

I became interested in the topic of state mandates for college-level civic education when the Constitution Requirement was attacked in the course of a larger debate on redesigning the university's general education program. The new general education proposal reduced hours in the social sciences, humanities, and the physical and natural sciences. The Constitution Requirement was attacked on several grounds: 1) that it gave an unfair advantage to the departments that offered courses to satisfy this requirement—especially Political Science; 2) the state requirement was silly and unnecessary; 3) few, if any other states had similar laws; and 4) few of the other four-year, public institutions in South Carolina complied.

This article is a product of my effort to collect some data to bolster my arguments of the importance civic education, and to retain the Constitution Requirement within the general education program. I used my preliminary data in my (eventually successful) efforts to retain the Constitution Requirement in the new general education program. This article provides more definitive findings.

Methodology

My initial efforts included contacting members of the APSA's Section on Undergraduate Education and by posting a query on the listserv sponsored by the Women's Caucus for Political Science.[1] I asked for information on policies in the members' respective states, *not* the general education policies of individual institutions. I received dozens of responses in very short order, and collected information on about 20 states. For those states where two or more political scientists indicated that there was no state requirement, I did no further research. For those states where one or more political scientists had indicated that there was a state mandate, I searched the state codes and regulations online to find the precise language and legal citation. In one case, I received conflicting responses from political scientists and conducted my own investigation of that state. For those states where I received no data, I searched the state codes and regulations online. My search terms included "curriculum," "subjects of instruction," "American Government," "American History," and "civics." When a question about state standards remained, I contacted the

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agency that governs public higher education in that state.[2]

Results

Nine states require some study of American government, the Constitution, or civics for students enrolled in public institutions of higher education. Five of these states also require study of their respective state constitutions. The states are geographically concentrated in the deep South, border states, or the far West. No states in New England or the Mid-Atlantic regions have such a state law or regulation. (For a complete list, along with legal citations, see Table 1).

Notably, most of these mandates are worded very broadly, which allows for disciplines other than Political Science to offer courses that meet this requirement. For example, the Arkansas requirement is for American government or history. The "American Institutions" requirement in Utah may be met through courses in History and Economics in addition to Political Science. Two states, Texas and Georgia, have requirements in *both* history and government at both the state and the national levels.

Two other states have a similar requirement that does not specify the study of American government or constitutions. Tennessee requires the study of American or Tennessee state *history* (Tennessee Code, 49-7-110), and West Virginia has a statewide *citizenship* requirement, which may be met through formal coursework, internships, or public service activities (West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission 1996).

I also learned that several states have common "core curricula" that serve to satisfy general education for some state institutions. The SUNY system in New York, for example, includes American Government in its general education curriculum, which applies to all SUNY campuses in the system. The California State University system requires study in "United States History, Constitution, and American ideals" at all its branch campuses, but this requirement does not apply to the University of California system (California State Regulations 2002, §40404). Minnesota has a "transfer curriculum" that all regional state universities and community colleges honor. This curriculum includes a multidisciplinary "ethical and civic responsibility" component (Minnesota Transfer Curriculum 2002), which may be met through courses in Political Science, History, or Philosophy.[3] A systematic study of general education curricula and transfer articulation agreements goes far beyond the scope of this study, but these anecdotal findings do suggest that civic education, broadly defined, is more widespread than a study of state mandates alone would suggest.

Table 1
States with a Statewide Civic Education Mandate at the Post-Secondary Level

State	Contents of Mandate	Code or Regulatory Citation
Arkansas	American History or Government	Arkansas Core Curriculum
Georgia	U.S. Constitution and Constitution of Georgia	Georgia State Code 20-3-68.
Illinois	U.S. and Illinois State Constitution[4]	Illinois Community College Board Rules, Section k
Missouri	U.S. Constitution and Missouri state constitution and institutions	Missouri Revised Statutes 170.111
Oklahoma	U.S. Government and U.S. History	"Policy Statement on Undergraduate Degree Requirements and Articulation," p. II-2-150
South Carolina	U.S. Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and *Federalist Papers*.	South Carolina Code 59-29-120-150.
Texas	U.S. Constitution and Texas Constitution	Texas State Code: Subchapter F. §51-301
Utah	American Institutions	R465-3.3.3 General Education Policy Statement
Wyoming	Constitution of the United States and the State of Wyoming.	Wyoming State Code 21-9-102.

Source: Data compiled by author from public documents

Implications

This study demonstrates that nearly one of every five states has a state-level mandate to study the American Constitution or a related topic. On the one hand, this finding appears to demonstrate that these state legislatures or bureaucracies recognize the value of civic education in producing an informed citizenry. That one-half of these states also require a study of state constitutions is also noteworthy, given the decentralized, federal nature of the American system.

On the other hand, the vast majority of states (41 of 50) do not include such a mandate. This, of course, does not imply that students enrolled in these states' colleges and universities do not take American Government or other civic education courses. They do, and do so in very large numbers as institutions seek to shape students into well-rounded, liberally educated individuals. However, higher education institutions are under pressure to increase four-year graduation rates and to comply with ever more complicated accreditation requirements for professional programs. These pressures lead to a temptation to reduce the number of general education hours, which could bring civic education under attack, as it did at my institution. In my case, I was able to bolster my arguments about the *merits* of retaining the University's Constitution Requirement with hard data on other states and other institutions in my state—and with arguments about respect for the rule of law.

Notes

1. I wish to express my gratitude to the many colleagues—too numerous to mention here—from across the country who responded with information on their states.

2. For the purposes of informing my institution's general education debate, I also sought information on the 11 South Carolina public colleges and universities that offer bachelor's degrees, and queried the members of the South Carolina Political Science Association who attended the 2002 annual meeting. I learned that seven of the eleven institutions comply with the state mandate.

3. These states differ from Arkansas, which is included in the table, because Arkansas' core curriculum is binding upon all state-supported institutions, which is not the case in Minnesota or New York. In addition, the Arkansas

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curriculum was developed in response to a state mandate to develop such a common core curriculum.

4. The requirement in state code is binding upon K-12 schools only. Institutions of higher education must certify that students have met this requirement at the high school level. If students have not passed a high school level course, they may take an examination to demonstrate their competency or enroll in a college-level course (Schelung 2002).

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