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Assessing Civic Engagement: Adaptation of an Institution-Wide Civic Learning Initiative

Sheena G. Serslev Ed.D., Kristen Wright

Author Note

Sheena G. Serslev, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3661-041X>

Kristen Wright, <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9774-6446>

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Intersection: A Journal at the Intersection of Assessment and Learning

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Abstract: This collaborative session explored creative ways to assess civic learning through audience insights and presenter experiences. Following an overview of how George Mason University is advancing civic engagement, the presenters outlined the development of civic engagement student learning outcomes, the scaffolding of civic engagement course designations, and shared initial findings from a civic engagement survey and course evaluations. The session closed with participants actively engaging in co-creating promising practices for elevating civic engagement as an institutional priority.

Keywords: *Civic Engagement, Assessment Alignment, Civic Learning*

Background

Civic engagement has been prevalent in universities for several years and is an area of increased interest that has been adopted as a national initiative for promoting student success. The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) defines civic engagement as “an array of knowledge, abilities, values, attitudes, and behaviors that in combination allow individuals to contribute to the civic life of their communities. It may include, among other things, exploration of one’s role and responsibilities in society; knowledge of and ability to engage with political systems and processes; and/or course-based or extra-curricular efforts to identify and address issues of public or community concern” (Policy on Student Learning Assessment and Quality in Undergraduate Education, 2017). In addition to defining civic engagement, as of 2017 SCHEV has included civic engagement as one of four required core competencies that are embedded in their state-wide required assessment of undergraduate student learning.

In addition to providing some background information about the relationship to civic engagement in the state of Virginia, it is also relevant to note the authors’ institutional context in respect to promoting civic engagement. The authors’ home institution, George Mason University, is a large, public, Research 1 institution that serves a diverse student body of over 40,000 students (Mason Facts and Figures, 2024-2025). George Mason hired a director of civic engagement in 2019, and subsequently, in 2020, the campus selected civic engagement as the initiative outlined in the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) as part of its 2022 reaffirmation of accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). The campus community agreed that civic engagement reflects an

opportunity for growth and is an issue that George Mason University values to improve student success.

Another critical tenant of the progression of civic engagement at George Mason is the development of the Office of Community Engagement and Civic Learning (CECiL) in 2022. This four-person office is housed within Undergraduate Education. In 2023, the campus adopted course designations specific to civic engagement and civic learning. This institutional context lays the backdrop for a discussion on the development and assessment of a large-scale civic engagement initiative.

Session Outcomes

- Upon completion of the session participants were expected to be able to:
- Describe the evolution of our civic engagement learning outcomes through key stakeholder engagement
- Develop aligned civic engagement assessment methods that are grounded in existing literature
- Summarize findings from multi-leveled civic engagement course designations, survey results, and student artifacts
- Reflect on opportunities to elevate the impact of civic engagement efforts within their own institutional contexts

The session outcomes were described at the onset of the presentation and referenced throughout the conversation. The aim was to provide an overview of efforts to centralize and formalize civic engagement in the curriculum and allow time for ideation and reflection on the information presented and its relevance in distinct professional settings.

Civic Engagement Literature

The development and implementation of civic engagement was informed by national best practices like the American Association of Colleges and Universities Civic Engagement VALUE Rubric (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2010). Civic knowledge, civic identity, and civic action were established as the three key areas for assessing student learning in our programs. These three outcomes align with research on the ways curricular community engagement can prepare students to interact with their community and environment and develop lifelong practices of democratic values (Johnson, 2015).

In addition to covering our process for creating and adapting campus-wide student learning outcomes, the session explored the methods used to assess those outcomes. Course evaluations and review of student artifacts in both curricular programs and high-impact student experiences to see what kind of learning is happening in our semester, year-long, and multi-year programs. Another source of data is a recently administered campus-wide Civic Engagement Survey with the goal of understanding students' perceptions of support for civic engagement, their tendencies and engagement preferences, and their perceived ability to engage with civic issues. Both our artifact review and campus-wide surveys align with promising practices in civic engagement literature that suggest a variety of strategies, both

quantitative and qualitative, are needed to understand the kind of learning that takes place in these experiences (Gelmon, Holland & Spring 2018; Hatcher, Bringle & Hahn, 2017).

The decision to emphasize the curricular integration of civic engagement is supported by previous studies as well. George Mason is a Research 1 institution in a rapidly growing part of the United States, where we also serve a large portion of first-generation college students and non-traditional learners. This, combined with some of the limitations of traditional service programs, informed the goal to look towards curricular integration and paid experiences as key strategies to reduce barriers to participation (Mitchell, 2008, and Wade, 2001).

Developing Aligned Civic Engagement Outcomes

The creation of student learning outcomes focused on civic engagement was informed by broader outcomes of the QEP, which stated that:

- 1. Opportunities for community and civically engaged learning are prevalent on campus
- 2. Community engagement and civic learning are embedded into the undergraduate degree programs and curriculum
- 3. Community engaged research is supported and funded at the graduate and undergraduate levels
- 4. Students who engage in community and civic learning are prepared for career and post-baccalaureate study.

The civic engagement student learning outcomes were formed in an interactive process that integrated several campus stakeholders. There was a QEP assessment committee, an effort to gather student feedback through focus groups, and a revisiting of the initially proposed student learning outcomes after the pilot year. Faculty, students, administrators, and community partners were all integrated in the development and review of George Mason’s civic engagement student learning outcomes. The student learning outcomes below address the categories of civic knowledge, civic identity, and civic engagement and are scaffolded to include an outcome at the exploring, developing commitment, and transforming levels of learning.

Table 1

Civic Engagement Student Learning Outcomes

Student Learning Outcome	Exploring	Developing Commitment	Transforming
Civic Knowledge: Ability to apply and understand knowledge of civic engagement and social justice learning	Recognize and describe theories and approaches to civic engagement	Connect civic engagement theories and approaches to personal experiences, academic learning, and relevant social justice issues	Apply knowledge of civic engagement and relevant social justice issues through an engaged experience

Civic Identity: A commitment to civic engagement that comes from an understanding of self in the context of community	Identify how personal values, social identities, and perspectives influence understandings of civic engagement	Reflect on how personal values and social identities influence participation in civic engagement and role in the community	Critically reflect on how sustained engagement in civic activities demonstrates a sense of social responsibility and commitment to community
Civic Action: Ability to take personal or collective action to address a community issue or injustice	Explore and describe ways of working to address community issues and injustices	Evaluate actions (personal or collective that could be taken to positively impact a community issue that involves an injustice	Collaborate with relevant stakeholders (community organizations, campus groups, etc.) to take effective action to address injustices and positively impact a community

Session participants each received one of the nine student learning outcomes outlined in the table above and engaged in small group discussions to articulate assessment methods that are aligned with their given outcome. The conversation generated many of the ideas that we also had identified as potential methods for assessing these outcomes, including the importance of integrating direct student work, especially as we aspire to document student transformation through an enduring commitment to civic engagement. A combination of direct and indirect assessments will be used to measure civic engagement student learning outcomes and examples of these methods include review of student work with rubrics, course evaluations, community partner evaluations, pre-and-post evaluations for long term programs, program evaluations for short term programs, and surveys.

Integration of Civic Engagement Across the Curriculum

At George Mason, three distinct forms of course designations have been established to categorize civic engagement in coursework:

- CL (Civic Learning): Courses that incorporate civic learning into readings, assignments, or discussions throughout the course. Civic Learning includes knowledge, skills, and commitments to interact effectively with others, and both participate in and improve their communities and the broader society.
- CBL (Community-Based Learning): Courses that have a community-based learning or service-learning component where students engage in meaningful service connected to their course learning objectives and respond to community identified needs.

- MI+CE (Mason Impact Civic Engagement): Courses that engage students in the process of asking and answering an original question in partnership with a community organization.

Recently, Communications 101: Fundamentals to Communication, a large course that is embedded in the general education curriculum, received a course designation and is an important milestone in expanding the reach of civic engagement coursework. Continued efforts to communicate course designations to faculty are underway to ensure the curricular integration of civic engagement courses across individual degree programs as well.

Exploring Initial Findings

The table below maps specific questions from a recent civic engagement survey to the broader program outcomes QEP. The survey was administered in February 2025 to degree-seeking undergraduate students, and we anticipate running the survey again in 2026 and 2027. The student population that completed the survey is representative of the undergraduate student body and reflects 6 percent of degree-seeking undergraduate students at George Mason.

Table 2

Civic Engagement Survey Results

QEP Outcome	Indicators	2025 Survey	2027 Goal
Opportunities for community and civically engaged learning are prevalent on campus	Survey Question 1: During your time at George Mason, have you participated in any of the following civic engagement activities?	70.41% said Yes to at least one activity	75% of survey respondents say Yes
	Survey Question 3: Beyond coursework, are there other settings where you have participated in community service or civic engagement?	70.05% said Yes to at least one other setting	30% of survey respondents say Yes
Community engagement experiences and civic learning are embedded into undergraduate degree programs and curriculum	Survey Question 2. During your time at George Mason, have you taken a course with a community service or civic engagement requirement?	10.32% of respondents said Yes	40% of respondents say Yes
Community engagement is funded at the graduate and undergraduate levels	Survey question 5. In your experience, how much does George Mason emphasize the following? (full question in survey instrument)	Average 62.30% Quite a bit or Very much	60% Quite a bit or Very much

	Survey question 6. During your time at George Mason, whether course related or not, how often have you done the following? (full question in survey instrument)	Average 47.88% Quite a bit or Very much	60% Quite a bit or Very much
Undergraduate students who engage in community and civic learning are prepared for career and postgraduate study	Survey Question 4. Please rate your ability to do the following: (full question in survey instrument)	Average across areas is 71.88% Good or Excellent	65% Good or Excellent
	Survey Question 7. Overall, how much has George Mason contributed to you being an active and informed member of your community?	Average across areas is 41.41% Quite a bit or Very much	65% Quite a bit or Very much

The table reflects the 2027 goals that were proposed in the QEP, given that there was no baseline data, the initial survey data allows for more specific targets and goal setting for the future. In addition to the quantitative findings, the open-ended survey question of what a student found most meaningful for civic learning and community engagement experiences yielded rich data for future exploration. Students cited the ability to have productive dialogue with their peers and make connections to their classroom and respective discipline, as one respondent noted:

For me, the most meaningful experiences in civic learning and community engagement have been those where I could apply my engineering and technical skills to real-world challenges that benefit others. One standout experience has been...where my team is developing autonomous ground and aerial vehicles to assist in search-and-rescue scenarios. This project has given me insight into the importance of technology in humanitarian efforts, reinforcing my belief that engineering can serve a greater social purpose.

Moving from the broader QEP outcomes towards the specific civic engagement student learning outcomes, the coursework that has established one of the civic engagement designations is the primary source for assessing community engagement and civic learning. Initial review of course evaluations have been informative in refining the questions for two distinct evaluations: one for Civic Learning courses and another for Community-Based Learning + Mason Impact courses. Themes of applying their coursework to professional settings and making incremental improvements in communities emerged with student feedback like the following:

I really liked the civic learning parts of this course. They helped me see how what we learn in class connects to real-life and the world around us. I learned how important it is to be a

responsible citizen and think about how our actions can affect others. The class made me more aware of issues in society and showed me how I can make a difference, even in small ways.

In addition to course evaluations, direct student work will be reviewed to assess our initial efforts in establishing the instruments and process for an artifact review. After reviewing sample student work, it became apparent that greater distinction was needed between our civic identity and civic action student learning outcomes, and amendments have since been made and are reflected in the sample rubric in the appendices. These initial pilots have been informative and laid the groundwork for further data collection and analysis in the 2025-2026 academic year.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

In the process of building out a centralized effort to advance civic engagement on the campus and through the curriculum, there are promising practices for advancing this work that are outlined below:

- Alignment with institutional initiatives and priorities, like accreditation, provides resource, buy-in, and sustainability of initiatives.
- Diverse stakeholder engagement is engagement throughout the process including development, implementation, and assessment.
- Civic learning is difficult to assess and still the body of literature supports the importance of this high impact practice.

Session participants also brainstormed ways to bring civic engagement to the forefront in their respective contexts while applying the strategies and resources presented in the session.

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About the Authors

Sheena G. Serslev, Director of Institutional Assessment, Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Planning, George Mason University, sserslev@gmu.edu

Kristen Wright, Director, Office of Community Engagement and Civic Learning, George Mason University, kwright22@gmu.edu