

Optional Writing Prompt A

“It’s Colleges’ Job to Train Citizens”

By Ronald J. Daniels on Dec. 29, 2019, in *The Washington Post*

Americans have been failing at participating in the daily business of democracy for years. Political tolerance hit a 20-year low in 2014 (a decline that shows no signs of abating), alarming numbers of young people struggle to distinguish reliable information from misinformation online, and the public’s faith in core democratic institutions — and fellow citizens — is eroding more by the day.

The responsibility of addressing this crisis must lie with our educational institutions. Too often, K–12 schools are asked to shoulder this burden, but with nearly 70 percent of all high school graduates enrolling in college, higher education cannot skirt its obligation for nurturing democratic citizens. It is a charge that dates to the origins of the republic. In his first State of the Union address, in 1790, George Washington implored Congress to invest in higher education to teach students the subtle and difficult art of good democratic citizenship.

In the more than 200 years since, U.S. higher education has only ever imperfectly achieved Washington’s lofty ideal. For most of the 19th century, colleges and universities sought to develop students’ moral faculties; from the end of the 19th century through the beginning of the 20th, they championed training in scientific reasoning as the cure for society’s ills; and after World War II, they created ambitious general education programs to instill in students the knowledge and values of a common cultural inheritance.

Since the 1980s, the dominant paradigm for civic education has been community service. This movement has been hugely successful in strengthening connections between students and the communities of which they are a part, in helping to develop positive attitudes toward diversity of experience and thought, and in promoting critical self-reflection. The emphasis on service learning has done enormous good, but it hasn’t prevented the breakdown of democratic structures that we’re now witnessing.

A truly robust civic education must encompass the full suite of aptitudes necessary for good citizenship. These include a grasp of the history and theory of democracy to bring a nuanced understanding of the past to public life and critical reasoning skills that help to distinguish true information from false. Other vital elements in good citizenship: a commitment to values such as tolerance and equality that provide standards against which to hold policymakers and policies to account and a disposition directed toward cooperation and action.

As it stands, colleges and universities have not risen to this challenge.

But there are the stirrings of a civic education revival on the horizon. In October, the University of Virginia’s College of Arts and Sciences approved a new general education curriculum that uses interdisciplinary coursework to foster 21st-century citizenship. Since 2014, Massachusetts has advocated the creation of new civic learning courses in its public colleges and universities and has developed robust, multifaceted criteria to evaluate their effectiveness. And at my own institution, Johns Hopkins University, we have launched the Agora Institute to better diagnose the problems besetting liberal democracies around the globe, to encourage dialogue and participation through public events, and to offer courses in the study of democracy.

Colleges and universities must train not only engineers, scientists, humanists and business leaders but also citizens. And we must do so in the hope that our students will help us to build a democracy where the constitutional glass can remain unbroken.

Prompt: After reading “It’s Colleges’ Job to Train Citizens,” write a 750-word essay in which you argue whether or not Cal Poly should require coursework to foster 21st century citizenship. If you believe a required course(s) would teach Cal Poly students the subtle and difficult art of good democratic citizenship, support your position with compelling arguments that expand upon or go beyond the points already offered in the article. If, instead, you believe the university need not train citizens through a required course(s), defend your position with compelling arguments that expand upon or go beyond those points already offered in the article. Your essay should show an understanding of the article without simply repeating it, and you should incorporate specific details from your own experience and knowledge into your response.