

A New Birth of Freedom in Higher Education: Civic Institutes at Public Universities

By Paul Carrese

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Key Points

- Conservatives frequently bemoan the ideological monoculture on college campuses, but they too rarely propose constructive solutions. One notable exception has been Arizona State University's School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership (SCETL), which is funded directly by the Arizona state legislature as a distinct academic unit.
- Currently in its sixth year as a department, SCETL does more than offer new undergraduate courses. It serves a growing number of majors, offers an MA to service the burgeoning classical education movement, fosters a robust and diverse speaker series for the greater public, and plays a key role in renewing American civic education in Arizona and across the country.
- Several other states have taken note and are launching similar institutes. More should consider doing so. These institutes can do far more than create a safe space for conservative ideas on campus; they can facilitate a new birth of educational freedom in America.

In 2016, Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey and the Arizona state legislature launched a first-of-its-kind higher education reform: a mandate to the state's (and America's) largest public university to establish a new department. The department would focus on classical ideas in civics and economic liberty to better prepare new generations of American leaders. It would also bring intellectual diversity to a university culture that had shifted toward a left-progressive monoculture, as with American academia in general.

The establishment of the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership (SCETL) has proven a success far beyond its original mandate.

As its founding director, I'm grateful to the American Enterprise Institute and the Conservative Education Reform Network for the chance to inform policymakers and the public of SCETL's story—an especially timely project given that in the past year, state governments in Florida, Tennessee, and Texas have similarly mandated and funded the establishment of new departments or institutes broadly modeled on SCETL at their flagship public university campuses. The new institutes in Austin, Texas; Gainesville, Florida; and Knoxville, Tennessee, have distinct names but a similar spirit. More modest efforts have spread to

public university campuses in Colorado, North Carolina, and Utah.

The common inspiration behind all these efforts was the bold decision by Arizona legislators to move beyond grandstanding complaints about higher education's ideology and do something literally constructive about it—build something new. The influence of SCETL to date has extended far beyond the Arizona State University (ASU) campus, and the establishment of other such institutes in other states could serve as further force multipliers for true liberal education in universities—and even a renaissance of civic spirit in K–12 education.

Although SCETL was created on a Republican party-line vote and met with initial skepticism, if not hostility, from some on the left, broader recognition of the trans-partisan nature of our work came in the 2022 legislative session, when the Arizona legislature nearly doubled SCETL's base annual appropriation on a bipartisan basis. And in a heartening development, the Institute of American Civics at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, was established this year on a bipartisan basis. This shows that although Republicans may be initially more inclined to support such initiatives, these initiatives need not be launched or sustained on a partisan basis. These institutes can play a pivotal role in restoring intellectual diversity, fostering a healthy climate for the study of great books, and paying dividends off campus.

Prospective founders, donors, legislators, faculty, and supporters in America's experimental arena of federalism should consider bringing this reform to their states—or to more than one campus in their state. There is a massive need for better civic knowledge and virtues among our citizenry and aspiring citizens, and there is a massive need to restore space in our public universities for serious liberal arts education and intellectual diversity. The new birth of freedom is needed in both American civic life and our educational culture and institutions. It is my hope that over the next several years, more state legislatures will mandate and fund similar institutes at their universities. In the hope of facilitating that process, I'm glad to share the story of SCETL's establishment and influence.

A Complex Mission in a Public University—and Its Immediate Success

As a new kind of academic department in American higher education, SCETL uniquely combines three missions that had not adequately been achieved by then-existing departments at ASU.

- Be an independent academic unit or department with its own tenured faculty, offering its own curriculum and degrees, which combine an interdisciplinary liberal arts education with American civic education; further emphasize intellectual diversity, rigorous study of great works and debates, and civil discourse; and inspire students to be leaders in American civil society or statesmen and stateswomen in public affairs, domestic or international.
- Provide civic education to the ASU community, Arizona, and national audiences through our school's community programs and two centers—one focused on civic education and the other on economic liberty—including through the school's public speakers program emphasizing intellectual diversity and civil discourse.
- Support K–12 education and schools in restoring a rigorous American civic education in civic knowledge and virtues about our constitutional democracy—in Arizona and nationally—through the work of the school's faculty and our Center for Political Thought and Leadership.¹

In our first semester, in the fall of 2017, SCETL taught 40 students. In the 2022–23 year, we will teach 1,300, including 75 majors and 60 minors in our own undergraduate degrees, with a new certificate in philosophy, politics, and economics (known as PPE). We also have established an MA degree that is attracting students from across the country. Our Civic Discourse Project has offered national-caliber speakers to tens of thousands of audience members and viewers.

Our school is still a work in progress. We are building and refining every semester. But we already have provided proof of concept, and our rapid growth indicates that a real need clearly has been met in shaping students, a university campus, K–12 schools, and civic life. Even as enrollments in

humanities and social science units at ASU have been flat or declining, our enrollment is growing at 20 percent a year.

The Big Idea: A Department Reconnecting Liberal Arts Education and Civic Education

In 2015, Gov. Ducey and the Republican-controlled legislature took steps to improve K–12 civic education in Arizona’s public schools and intellectual diversity in its public universities. The first bill Ducey signed required high school graduates to pass the same American civic knowledge test required of new citizens by US Citizenship and Immigration Services.

That year, a public controversy that has since become all too familiar flared up over a course offered by an ASU English professor on “the problem of whiteness.” Given the principle of academic freedom, conservatives in state government realized they couldn’t quash that course or others of a similar bent. Instead, they decided to do something constructive in the contest of ideas. ASU had two small centers devoted to discussion of conservative ideas—the Center for the Study of Economic Liberty and the Center for Political Thought and Leadership. The legislature determined to merge them to create a new, separate department to promote intellectual diversity and mandate a space for teaching about the fundamental civic issues of American politics and constitutionalism.

The legislature and governor proposed the new SCETL in a section of the state budget, rather than as a separate bill. The aims of and ambitions for SCETL can be inferred from the title and a few other elements in a sparse budget paragraph. The appropriated money, initially \$3 million annually, merged two existing centers and can be only used for the direct operations of SCETL, not by the university for other purposes. The school “shall operate as a single stand-alone academic entity” within ASU, and it is to submit an annual report to leaders in the state legislature and the governor that includes at least the following information: funding received from all sources; a “description of faculty positions and courses offered”; total student enrollment, undergraduate and graduate; and “significant community events, initiatives or publications.” All of

this suggests a complex educational and civic mission for an entity meant to be distinctive and as independent as possible within the university. The final clause stated that the legislature “may request the director of the school” to appear at the Arizona house or senate “to report” on the school’s progress.²

The president of ASU, Michael Crow, already was known for championing innovation in higher education. Crow worked quickly with Patrick Kenney, the dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, to create a functioning department. Kenney deserves particular commendation for his bravery and academic integrity in defending the initiative against ferocious faculty criticism. He formed an advisory board of distinguished scholars and public intellectuals within weeks.

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Harvey Mansfield drafted a founding mission statement on behalf of that board, which articulated the need for intellectual diversity and blending classical liberal education with an American civic education.³ The board also developed the outline of an undergraduate curriculum, using Princeton’s James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions as a partial model. But the true challenge—and opportunity—for ASU was to establish a separate department with its own faculty tenure lines, degrees, curricula, and programs.

Because two board members knew that I had founded a great books honors program at the Air Force Academy, I was recruited as the founding director. Kenney and I selected George Will as the keynote speaker for a public event announcing the launch of the school, to which the governor—along with leaders of the legislature and judiciary and other state and civic leaders—were invited.

Kenney and I, with the founding faculty and staff we hired, then worked to prove this was not a partisan Republican project, but rather an excellent educational and civic reform initiative. We faced particularly stiff headwinds given that the

two centers merged had received funding from the Charles Koch Foundation, which provided fodder for a splendid propaganda campaign by left-leaning critics at ASU and beyond against the academic legitimacy of SCETL.

I asked the dean to arrange immersion sessions in my first months as an ASU tenured professor, so I could visit the predominantly left-leaning departments of history, philosophy, political science, and various “studies”—all of which felt targeted by the legislature’s intervention. I offered to respond to their questions and concerns and told them they could fire away because I was wearing the parting gift from my military colleagues at the Air Force Academy: a Kevlar vest.

Fortunately, the Arizona Board of Regents, and particularly Karrin Taylor Robson, advocated a new graduation requirement in American civics at the state’s universities just as SCETL was being launched. And by 2021, two center-left leaders in higher education were prominently making the same argument on which SCETL was founded and that the Arizona regents were pressing: American higher education was failing in its educational and civic mission.

Derek Bok, former president of Harvard, argued in *Higher Expectations: Can Colleges Teach Students What They Need to Know in the 21st Century?* that the absence of civic education and required core curricula was doing a disservice to students of most universities and colleges.⁴ Ron Daniels, president of Johns Hopkins, deepened this critique in his 2021 book, *What Universities Owe Democracy*.⁵ Bok and Daniels implicitly affirmed what SCETL had been saying and doing for years, thereby affirming that ours is not a partisan “conservative” vision.

Universities can and should have a dedicated nonpartisan space that provides robust intellectual and civic discourse in classrooms, undertakes extensive public outreach and civic education efforts, and prepares and motivates young people to think as Americans about civic responsibilities and leadership. If liberal education means free inquiry and discussion about the most fundamental questions concerning humanity, nature, and the divine, it also means awareness that the word “liberal” bespeaks a dual reality. Only among a free people, enjoying political liberty and the rule of law, can traditions and institutions of Socratic

inquiry truly thrive. Thus, those devoted to genuinely higher education must be equally devoted to the study and perpetuation of political liberty; otherwise, they are free riders, self-contradictory, and living on borrowed time.

Shaping Teachers and Leaders: A Master’s in Liberal Education and Leadership

By SCETL’s second year, the university provost asked us to develop an MA degree to serve the local and national growth in classical schools. Great Hearts Academies, an Arizona-based classical charter school network, had unsuccessfully tried to work with ASU’s education school. We designed our MA in classical liberal education and leadership for three audiences:

- Learners seeking an advanced classical liberal education and current teachers in classical schools seeking something other than the approach provided in most MEd programs;
- American history and civics teachers seeking intense study of American constitutional principles and political development and the intellectual and civic virtues needed to be an informed, engaged American citizen and leader (not quite what most MEd degrees offer); and
- Leaders in civil society, the private sector, and the public sector who want a deeper grounding in the intellectual and civic virtues that an advanced liberal arts education provides.

Our master’s degree looks to Western civilization, with its rich heritage of texts and blend of intellectual and moral virtues in learning and civic life, to prepare the future work of educators, citizens, leaders, and statesmen and stateswomen. This complex approach discusses and teaches the virtues necessary for revitalizing civil discourse in America today and prepares citizen leaders for meaningful lives in whatever sectors and paths they choose. As classical education continues to grow, this kind of graduate degree, blending liberal arts and civic education, is another resource meeting the needs and interests of students, teachers, parents, and citizens.

Civil Discourse for the ASU Community and Beyond

The Civic Discourse Project is SCETL’s multiyear forum for high-level discussion on contemporary topics and their deeper dimensions.⁶ Each year, it explores a particular theme through speaker events open to the community. The larger theme remains civil disagreement across diverse views and the provision of space for heterodox views seldom heard on major American campuses. The spirit of this work is akin to that of the national higher education reform group Heterodox Academy, and we’ve hosted both Jonathan Haidt and John Tomasi—along with many other Heterodox Academy notables—as speakers.

Education decisions ultimately must be made at the state and local levels.

Since fall 2017, our Civic Discourse Project has brought 150 speakers to campus (during COVID-19 months, via webinar), and over 6,000 audience members have attended our public events. Many other national-caliber speakers have helped us attract students, faculty, and staff from a range of ASU units to hear a range of views. Such speakers have included Danielle Allen, Peter Berkowitz, Arthur C. Brooks, Ross Douhat, Joanne Freeman, David Leonhardt, Yuval Levin, Glenn Loury, Rich Lowry, Mansfield, H. R. McMaster, Walter Russell Mead, Yascha Mounk, Robert Putnam, Jonathan Rauch, Nadine Strossen, and Andrew Sullivan.

Some of the civil discourse events are dialogues, with the speakers agreeing to discuss their strongly differing views. In spring 2022, the first of a three-part series “Can We Talk Honestly About Race?” featured Loury (from Brown University) and Khalil Mohammad (from Harvard and the *New York Times’* 1619 Project)—yielding a lively yet civil discussion of their divergent views, followed by interviewer questions and then audience questions. From 2017 to the present, we have explored themes ranging from free speech and intellectual diversity in higher education and American society to polarization and civil disagreement; race, justice, and leadership in America; and renewing

America’s civic compact. This year, our speakers are addressing ideological conformity on campus and in American society.

SCETL also coproduces a podcast, *Keeping It Civil*, with Arizona PBS to feature extended interviews with Civic Discourse Project speakers.⁷ We have published edited volumes of essays from the project. In 2022, we published *Citizenship and Civic Leadership in America*, with contributors including Peter Levine, Loury, Lowry, Wilfred McClay, Henry Olsen, and Rogers Smith.⁸ In the coming year, we will publish volumes titled *Free Speech and Intellectual Diversity* and *Renewing America’s Civic Compact*. The school also partners with the Arizona Chamber of Commerce on speaker events and with the Phoenix Council on Foreign Relations.

Renewal of Civic Knowledge and Civic Virtues in K–12 Education

SCETL co-led a national study from 2019 to 2021 on the framework for a K–12 American civics and history curriculum with partners from Harvard, iCivics, and Tufts. The final report was released in March 2021 as *Educating for American Democracy* (EAD).⁹ It was designed as a national collaborative effort, on the notion that pulling together center-left and center-right views on civics was the best strategy for producing better civic education in K–12 schools.

Our national team was awarded a grant for the study from the US Department of Education and National Endowment for the Humanities. SCETL has implemented the study’s approach in Arizona, fully in the federalism-inspired spirit of EAD: that national guidelines are appropriate for our constitutional republic but education decisions ultimately must be made at the state and local levels. We know that there are center-left (or further left) efforts to implement the broad EAD guidelines at the level of specific civics and history curricula and lessons from kindergarten through the 12th grade. SCETL is trying to show that a center-right interpretation and implementation also can be achieved in schools.

Truth be told, several national conservative authors severely critiqued the EAD report and proposals as not really bipartisan or a national-consensus effort. They argued that it is dominated

by leftist views and that a few conservatives (like me) were used as sheep's wool to hide the wolf of the anti-American agenda the study really pushes on schools. While I have written several essays replying to our most vociferous critics, the best answer is that initiatives like EAD need not be dominated in practice by the left if the right shows up and plays a constructive role, as SCETL has in Arizona—and other such institutes could do in other states.

The conception of civic education in the EAD study mirrors what SCETL has been building at ASU since 2016, and indeed the EAD study argues that the entire ecosystem of education in civic knowledge from K–12 to universities and colleges must be renewed and rebuilt. Such a civic education is indispensable for preparing informed and engaged participants in the American experiment who can contribute responsibly to civil society and political affairs.

The EAD authors, SCETL, and the founders of the new departments on American civics in other state universities share the concern that America has forgotten: Abraham Lincoln's 1838 warning on the perpetuation of our political order.¹⁰ If America were to fail, it would not be by foreign conquest but by suicide—due to civic ignorance about our laws and Constitution, combined with a decline in the civic virtues needed to sustain civil disagreement and civic friendship amid the diverse views in our republic. The EAD also strongly invokes Alexis de Tocqueville's idea, expressed in *Democracy in America*, of a reflective patriotism that loves America through study and argument.¹¹ Truly, American civics incorporates love of people and place but elevates these sentiments to match our country's foundations in universal principles and self-government.

SCETL's work on civic education, in tandem with our Center for Political Thought and Leadership, also reflects strong continued interest from the Arizona legislature, which has passed legislation directly tasking SCETL to undertake or support particular civic education projects. We have been named in four pieces of legislation about civics since 2016. The most recent directs the Arizona State Board of Education to consult with SCETL on completely revising the state's standards for civic education in schools.

Proposing, Then Building, a Department of American Civics and Leadership: Rules of Thumb

As you can see, SCETL has done far more than provide a home where a handful of conservative professors can hang their hats. This new department has attracted an ever-increasing number of undergraduate and graduate students, facilitated a diverse and robust dialogue for the general public, aided in the classical education renaissance, and reinforced civic education in both higher education and Arizona's public schools. Similar programs could do the same if they were established in other states. For American educators, patriots, and leaders interested in launching one of these American civics departments in your nearest public university campus, I will supplement this general set of ideas, aims, and chronicles of the SCETL project with some lessons learned that might be helpful.

Gain consensus among civic leaders, legislative leaders, and crucial university leaders and faculty. Be guided by a clear conviction about the innovative reform needed but bring along crucial stakeholders to build the foundation needed to actually implement a successful new department or institute.

Propose to build on or collaborate with any existing programs on campus of similar spirit. Show faculty and other leaders that the civic-funded mandate is a multiple-sum opportunity to bolster shared aims rather than a competitor for students, funds, and support.

Draft legislative aims and language worthy of gaining bipartisan support. This is because, contrary to left-leaning critics of these initiatives, they are not partisan ideological efforts. The practical challenge of building a department from scratch—from hiring new faculty to developing curricula to recruiting students—requires a minimum level of support or non-hostility from university faculty and staff; a bipartisan mandate for the effort will preempt or mitigate most criticisms.

Build a distinguished, expert advisory board and draft a clear mission statement. This will provide guidance and support for hiring the founding director or chair and founding faculty and building other elements of the academic unit. It will also bolster the argument that the initiative is academically serious and civically urgent, rather than narrowly partisan.

Pray for better and braver angels among university leadership. It will take bravery to challenge the predominant disposition in most administrations and faculty, which is against any kind of traditional American civic education and Western civilization. If the right kind of leaders are sparse, try to steer the effort toward more amenable leaders while building governing mechanisms that can incentivize the university to support implementation of the civic mandate.

Bring in private donors early on, to make the initiative a public-private partnership. Appropriated state funds cannot be used for such crucial components as student scholarships, some elements of speaker events and other public programs, and the endowed or funded professorships needed to recruit and retain excellent faculty.

About the Author

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Notes

1. Arizona State University, Center for Political Thought and Leadership, website, <https://cptl.asu.edu>.
2. Arizona Joint Legislative Budget Committee, “Fiscal Year 2017 Appropriations Report: Arizona State University—Tempe/DPC,” 378, <https://azjlbc.gov/17AR/uniasum.pdf>.
3. Arizona State University, School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership, “Mission Statement,” <https://scetl.asu.edu/mission-statement>.
4. Derek Bok, *Higher Expectations: Can Colleges Teach Students What They Need to Know in the 21st Century?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).
5. Ronald J. Daniels, Grant Shreve, and Phillip Spector, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021).
6. Arizona State University, School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership, “The Civic Discourse Project: Addressing the Pressing Issues of Our Times.,” <https://scetl.asu.edu/civic-discourse-project>.
7. Arizona PBS and Arizona State University, School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership, *Keeping It Civil*, <https://keepingitcivil.podbean.com>.
8. Carol McNamara and Trevor Shelley, eds., *Citizenship and Civic Leadership in America* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022).

Hire several founding faculty leaders with administrative experience and inclinations. Many years of program building, in both expected and unexpected tasks, lie ahead. Of course, faculty with great strengths in scholarship and teaching also are needed, but capable administrative leaders can be a rare commodity among academics, and a director will need to lead a team of capable builders.

Concluding Remarks

I invoke Lincoln’s new birth of freedom to describe this higher education reform and urge its importance. Our *SCETL Pocket Constitution*—which we distribute everywhere from classrooms and speaker events to the state legislature—includes the Gettysburg Address and Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, along with the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, to make a portable, inspiring packet of American political principles. The great task for those committed to restoring serious liberal education and American civic education to our universities is to build, in various locales and campuses, the public-private partnerships dedicated to the collaboration required of educators, state governments, donors, and civic leaders.

9. Danielle Allen et al., *Educating for American Democracy: Excellence in History and Civics for All Learners*, March 2021, <https://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org>.
10. Abraham Lincoln, “The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions (Lyceum Address),” *Teaching American History*, <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/lyceum-address>.
11. Alexis de Tocqueville, “On Public Spirit,” in *Democracy in America*, ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1:225-27.

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