

# **Stephen Sharkey & Russell Brooker**

## **Teaching and Assessing for Students' Civic Engagement Across the Curriculum**

**Stephen Sharkey & Russell Brooker**  
Alverno College

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Many faculty and staff around the country express a principled commitment to making student civic engagement a core learning outcome of the curriculum. How exactly can this happen? We came to the Institute on College Student Values as representatives of Alverno College's Kellogg Civic Engagement Cluster Project, in order to discuss how we employ an "ability-based" approach to defining civic engagement across the curriculum and use specific, agreed-upon criteria to evaluate student development of that engagement. We focused on two aspects of civic engagement in particular: the abilities of "Effective Citizenship" and "Developing a Global Perspective." We defined each of these, and explained how they are integrated into the curriculum across many disciplines. Then we presented a very specific example of how the two abilities are assessed through a junior-level simulation required of all students, and invited participants to explore how they might define and assess students' civic engagement on their campuses. Following are the main highlights of our session and discussion.

### **The context: Alverno College**

What is today called "civic engagement" has been at the center of our educational enterprise for both students and faculty since the college was founded over a century ago, through the operation of our curriculum and the norms and values guiding our daily life. This commitment led to our original interest in participating in the Kellogg Civic Engagement Cluster Project, and then later sharing aspects of our work at the Institute of College Student Values annual conference. We share with the editors of this book of Conference Proceedings the concern for the future of this country, and believe that effective civic engagement programs in colleges can go far to help create the citizens we need to better our society.

Alverno is a private, urban liberal arts and professional college for women located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Our approximately 1,900 students are of all ages, races, religions, and financial means. More than half are among the first generation in their families to attend college; 75 percent are age 23 or older (the average age is 30); many are employed, often full-time; and more than 90 percent qualify for need-based financial aid. In addition, 35 percent of students are women of color, the highest percentage of minority students for any four-year public or private college in Wisconsin. A key emphasis in the Alverno mission has always been to offer the advantages of a private liberal arts education to women who might not otherwise find it within their means. Thus our tuition is comparatively low, and we provide strong academic systems to support students with unrealized and perhaps unidentified college potential to make an effective transition to postsecondary learning. Courses are taught and degrees pursued in both weekday and weekend timeframes.

### **Alverno's ability-based approach to defining and developing student civic engagement**

How do faculty specifically understand the notion of civic engagement in this context? To answer this we must very briefly describe our ability-based, student learning outcome-oriented curriculum requiring students to integrate knowledge and abilities as demonstration of achievement of the outcomes of their education. Our approach to civic involvement “our theory-in-use for creating the engaged campus” flows directly from our philosophy of education as embodied in the curriculum, developed over 30 years from our practice.

What distinguishes Alverno from most other American colleges is its ability-based curriculum and assessment process. Students are expected to acquire the knowledge traditionally associated with a specialized baccalaureate degree and to master eight core abilities needed to apply that knowledge effectively throughout their lives (see Alverno College Faculty, 1976/1992, for a fuller description of each ability). The abilities are:

**Communication**  
**Analysis**  
**Problem solving**  
**Valuing in decision making**  
**Social interaction**  
**Developing a global perspective**  
**Effective citizenship**  
**Aesthetic engagement**

These eight abilities serve as the foundation for the curriculum and constitute the core of each student’s learning sequence from start to finish. Thus faculty use them to shape all of their courses in general education and in the majors and minors, strongly emphasizing active, experiential learning in the process. We sustain the ongoing scholarly exploration of teaching and assessing these abilities in cross-disciplinary departments “one for each ability. These departments study the latest pedagogy in that domain, offer workshops to colleagues, help create special student learning opportunities related to the ability, network in the community, and have some responsibility for monitoring the curriculum for effectiveness in teaching and assessing the ability.

A key dimension of the ability-based curriculum is *assessment*. Faculty have developed systematic programs of performance-based assessment to accountably measure student demonstration of the abilities at progressively higher levels of sophistication within both general education and the disciplines. Student progress toward graduation is tracked simultaneously in terms of both course requirements and ability levels accomplished.

Assessments are *criterion-referenced*. That is, they are designed to reveal the level of each student’s abilities in applying content knowledge in a performance, and they include explicit criteria for satisfactory achievement, which faculty use in their judgment and which students themselves use in a *self-assessment* of their performance “a critical part of the overall assessment process (Alverno College Faculty, 1979/1994). Some assessments are conducted in class, while others are “external”; that is, they constitute outside validity checks on students’ cumulative development in an area of study, often involving complex, real-life tasks such as independent research or simulations that are evaluated by community volunteers.

One final practical point. Each ability is defined developmentally in terms of six levels. Abilities are typically developed in courses, with different courses focusing on different abilities. After a student demonstrates that she has mastered an ability level, she is

â€œvalidatedâ€ in it. Each student must demonstrate all abilities at least to Level 4, and a subset of advanced ability levels determined by her major areas of study.

### **Civic engagement in particular**

Within the ability-based curriculum, several abilities are relevant to civic engagement, but two most directly relate to it and were the focus of our remarks:

- In *Effective citizenship*, students learn to function as effective citizens in society. In one aspect of that ability, students are required to perform service for a client who may be on or off campus. Virtually all students meet this requirement at least once, and some meet it several times.
- In *Developing a global perspective*, students learn to apply the perspective of other cultures regarding global issues, and form their own outlook.

These abilities at the core of civic engagement routinely find expression most directly in several areas:

- *A widespread ethic of service and community involvement.* Civic engagement is stressed in a variety of ways in our organizational norms and academic standards. For example, service is one criterion used to identify students who graduate with honors. Also, student organizations and clubs are encouraged to include community service as part of their regular activities. Faculty model this for students and such activity is rewarded in terms of professional advancement.
- *A broadly infused internship program.* All Weekday and many Weekend students are required to perform one or two internships. Each internship is linked with the studentâ€™s major or support area of study. Students serve a wide variety of clients, including businesses, non-profit organizations, and health and social service agencies. Internship sites number in the hundreds and range from homeless shelters, community organizations, and church associations to government agencies and private companies large and small. The key point for present purposes is to signal the core value of interning and volunteering in all academic departments, and to emphasize the crucial â€œenablingâ€ role of the Internship Office, which is sufficiently familiar with the disciplines to effectively assist us to realize the collegeâ€™s civic engagement goals.
- *Courses.* Many courses in a wide variety of disciplines require students to focus on civic issues in order to develop greater understanding of the subjects and their professional application. Some typical courses of this sort are *Community Development, Marketing Research, Computerizing the Organization, and Advanced Nursing Theory and Practice.*

### **Civic engagement in a more political context**

Civic engagement, then, is widely and deeply infused into the curriculumâ€”in a variety of settings and contexts. However, in the past few years, the faculty have begun to emphasize the *political* aspects of involvement more than before. While there have long been courses on political subjects--such as American Politics and Comparative Social Policyâ€”as well as politically-oriented internships, civic engagement has been defined as simply involvement in the community. Even in the Effective Citizenship ability, there had not been a special emphasis on political citizenship.

This increased emphasis on political citizenship has taken several forms, most notably in the expansion of academic programs with political perspectives. In the middle 1990s, a new major of Community Leadership and Development (CLD) was added to the curriculum. This major emphasizes urban social and political development and is taught jointly in the Social Science and Business departments. Students learn to work in a variety of community settings, including in community based organizations and other not-for-profit environments. Several of the courses emphasize the political aspects of communities.

In 2002, a new Political Science major was added to the curriculum. It will complement the CLD program by concentrating on American national politics. By requiring two internships in political settings and stressing political research, the new major will have a very experiential emphasis.

But most students are not CLD or Political Science majors, so most students do not benefit from these programs. The Alverno faculty thought that there should be an opportunity for all students to develop their political knowledge to help them in their political involvement. In addition, the faculty saw a need to integrate global politics and economics into the political instruction.

In response to that need, a series of new courses was developed in 2001. These are upper-level courses that are required of all Weekday students. These courses have the prefix of GEC, meaning Globally Effective Citizen, with course numbers in the 300 series. Many faculty and staff members contributed to the development of the courses, but three instructors took leading roles. As an illustration of the multi-disciplinary nature of Alverno and the courses, the three faculty members were from the Business, History, and Nursing Departments (although the Business instructor is now in the Social Science Department). Two of them are now teaching GEC courses. These courses, and an assessment process employing a simulation that follows them, are the subject of the rest of this paper. To date, three GEC courses have been developed:

- GEC 301: Human Rights in the United States and China
- GEC 302: The Power of Water
- GEC 303: Crime and Punishment (to be offered in Fall, 2002, for the first time)

Although each instructor chooses the content of his or her course to fit personal interest and expertise, the courses as a whole follow a general framework. First, each course must develop students' abilities in two abilities, Developing a Global Perspective and Effective Citizenship at Level 3 and Developing a Global Perspective at Level 4. To demonstrate their development at these levels, the students must meet the following three general criteria that in effect create for assessors a picture of the performance we are looking for:

1. Use others' perspectives and discipline frameworks and concepts to engage in an informed critical discussion about the implications of diversity and interconnection in the world (*Developing a Global Perspective, Level 3*).
2. Describe and use the functioning principles of organizations to articulate how governmental and non-governmental sectors influence public and social policy (*Effective Citizenship, Level 3; Developing a Global Perspective Level 3*).
3. Draw on diverse and credible sources to develop and articulate your own perspective about diversity and global inter-connectedness (*Developing a Global Perspective, Level 4*).

Second, the content of each course must address topics with specific characteristics. The characteristics are designed to achieve the goal of requiring the student to examine an issue currently important both in the United States and in one or more other countries so that she recognizes the inter-connectedness of political issues in the world sees that there are multiple perspectives for each issue. The topics of each course must:

- Be important for the United States and one or more other countries.
- Be international in scope and illustrate the globalization of politics and economics in the world today
- Be current
- Include a component in one or more foreign countries on which the American government could act
- Have two or more sides on which reasonable people could disagree

Third, the focus of each course must include politics, economics, and geography. That is, all the issues explored in the courses must have important economic components. This criterion is easy to meet because virtually all political issues do have economic aspects. Each course must explicitly connect the politics and the economics of each issue. In addition, each course must address the geographic components of each political-economic issue.

The major activities in each GEC course revolve around the students researching one specific issue of the course, such as women's rights in China or water conservation in Ethiopia. Each student also identifies a non-governmental organization (NGO), such as Human Rights Watch or Worldwatch Institute, and explores that organization's views and policies and recommendations concerning the topic the student has researched.

### **The simulation-based assessment at the conclusion of the course**

At the conclusion of each semester, all the students in all the sections of the GEC courses meet for a simulation in which they present the results of their research. Students from all the course sections are combined. Each student acts as a representative of the non-governmental organization she has chosen and presents that organization's analysis of the issue and recommendations to simulated representatives of the United States government in reference to what the US should do about the issue. (The student could recommend US intervention or non-intervention, or some other response.) Community members from outside the college, typically professionals, simulate members of the Bush administration and act as assessors to evaluate the students' performances. Generally, each assessor evaluates one or two students. Each presentation lasts 7-10 minutes. Typically, five or six students make their presentations to one set of assessors. Each student prepares and delivers her presentation individually; these are not group projects. In her presentation, each student must follow the following basic protocol:

- Describe her non-governmental organization
- Summarize the issue
- Explain the dimensions of the issue
- Represent the views of the non-governmental organization (NGO) on the issue
- Propose US action, or non-action, on the issue
- Answer questions from the assessors if any are asked

After all students in the group have testified, students and assessors discuss all the presentations in order to develop recommendations for the US government.

At the conclusion, the students assess their own performances, and the assessors determine if the students have demonstrated the abilities at the required levels. Each student receives written feedback on her performance.

### **Evaluation of the course and assessment**

Overall, the courses and simulations have worked well. Students who have taken the course have clearly developed their abilities in Effective Citizenship and Developing a Global Perspective, and they have learned a new body of knowledge. They have also refined their ability to make presentations. (Course instructors have noticed the tremendous improvement students have made from “practice” presentations in their classes to the “real” presentations in the simulation.)

For many students, their knowledge of politics and economics progresses from practically nothing. Student performances on quizzes early in the course and their own assessments of their knowledge levels have revealed that, at the beginning of the course, many of the students have been profoundly unaware of politics and economics in terms of both basic facts (like how many houses of congress there are) and broader principles (like the definition of democracy or a market economy).

The course and subsequent simulation have faced some challenges that affect the entire experience. First, there is typically a tremendous range of knowledge levels among the students. For example, some students have taken several courses in politics, including comparative politics, while others have taken none. Some have taken economics courses, while others have not. Some are interested in the subjects being taught, while others are not (and many resent having to learn them). For students with minimal backgrounds in politics and economics, the amount of information to learn can be daunting. For example, in the Human Rights course, some students not only learn what is in the First Amendment to the US Constitution, they learn that there is a First Amendment.

This problem is mitigated somewhat by the common background in research and making presentations that all Alverno students have. For example, all students, whatever their majors, are required to do frequent research projects in their majors. In addition, each Alverno student has made several presentations on a variety of topics before she begins the GEC course. Even in the material is unfamiliar, the activities in the course are not.

A second challenge is not exactly a problem, but certainly an issue that requires a decision. Specifically, there are tradeoffs that cannot be avoided. The most obvious tradeoff is that if one does something in a course, one does not do something else. In the Human Rights course, time spent on China is not spent on the United States. As a result, students do not learn as much about their own country because they need to learn about China. An outside observer could accurately guess that no 3-credit course could cover human rights in both the United States and in the People’s Republic of China thoroughly.

The Alverno faculty have decided that it is preferable to include both Effective Citizenship and Developing a Global Perspective abilities in the course. The two abilities complement each other; while the course may lose detail and complexity of one by including both, the course gains depth and perspective.

### **Implications for other institutions**

There are many detailed and thorough explications of the concept of civic engagement around these days (e.g. Ehrlich 2000) and case studies of curriculum reform efforts are beginning to emerge in this arena. There is more effort afoot to define civic engagement in terms of what students should be able to know and do with what they know such that their pattern of engagement can be more readily discerned. What we have found at Alverno is that it is one thing to have a detailed list of all the lofty characteristics of the engaged student and exhort them to acquire these characteristics. It is a more important thing to have specific curricular tools in place which address civic issues and involve assessing student performance against clear, observable criteria. And we are very convinced of the positive value of our general ability-based approach to course design and student learning assessment. By using this approach we have been compelled to create a more detailed picture of the civically engaged student. Having this clearer picture in turn helps us better know such a student when we see one, and better stand behind the claim that features of our curriculum are concretely assisting students to develop in the ways we value.

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