



## Massachusetts Department of Higher Education

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### **Guidance for Designating “Civic Learning” Courses February 12, 2016**

#### **Introduction**

Civic learning is a key element in the mission of all educational institutions in a democracy, and especially of public higher education. John Dewey recognized the essential relationship between education and democracy when he said, “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.” The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education affirmed this role for public higher education when in 2012 it made Preparing Citizens a key outcome of the Vision Project, drawing attention to the important role of public colleges and universities in preparing individuals for effective democratic participation. In the Board’s Policy on Civic Learning, passed in May, 2014, the Board called on the campuses to make Civic Learning an “expected outcome” for their undergraduates. It recommended that “campuses should think about engendering civic learning” in three ways: “through academic coursework, co-curricular activities and off-campus civic engagement.” The Board added that “Given the challenges of defining measurable learning outcomes . . . in the area of civic learning combined with the focus of the Vision Project on accountability and public reporting, the ability of campuses to document student participation in experiences designed to promote this goal is especially significant.” The Board went on to charge the Department with “capturing the extent and variety of civic learning on the campuses,” including collecting civic learning data “through the Department’s Higher Education Information Research System (HEIRS).”

The Board and the DHE recognize Massachusetts public colleges and universities already embed civic learning and engagement in the educational experiences of their students in a wide variety of creative and effective ways. The DHE’s collection of data on Civic Learning courses is intended to enable the DHE to share—across the campuses and with the taxpayers of Massachusetts—the complex story of the good work being done in the state’s colleges and universities. It is also part of a larger initiative aimed at helping campuses build their capacity to support civic learning and use it in their work toward other Vision Project goals, such as closing achievement gaps and increasing college completion rates.

Drawing on input from many campus stakeholders (including the members of the 2014 Data Collection Team, the 2015 Civic Learning Team, and a November 2015 meeting at Worcester State University attended by approximately 100 administrators and faculty), the Department has chosen to focus initially on collecting data about courses that have a substantial or significant civic learning focus. This document provides guidance for that process, including:

1. The Board's definition of Civic Learning,
2. Types of course designations and criteria for making those designations,
3. Recommendations for the designation process,
4. A timeline for the first (pilot) year (through Spring, 2017), and
5. A statement of support from the DHE for this work.

### **1. The Board's Definition of Civic Learning**

The Board's 2014 Policy on Civic Learning offers the following definition:

**Civic Learning** means the acquisition of the knowledge, the intellectual skills and the applied competencies that citizens need for informed and effective participation in civic and democratic life; it also means acquiring an understanding of the social values that underlie democratic structures and practices.

- The **Knowledge** component of civic learning includes an understanding of the United States, including its history and governmental traditions, other world societies, and the relationship(s) between and among these cultures and nations.
- The **Intellectual Skills** component refers to qualities of mind necessary to engage effectively in civic activities.
- The **Applied Competencies** component refers to the practical skills and capacities needed to engage effectively in civic activities
- The **Values** component refers to understanding the social and political values that are associated with democratic and civic institutions.

### **2. Types of Course Designations and Criteria**

Every course receiving a Civic Learning designation should be designed to include, in a significant or substantial way, **at least one of these four elements** of the BHE definition of Civic Learning.

The HEIRS II Data Dictionary is being set up with a new Civic Learning Indicator and three new codes:

**CL (Civic Learning)** is for courses without an engagement component.

**CLER (Civic Learning with Engagement Required)** is for civic learning courses in which all of the following apply:

- A. The course description or syllabus articulates a substantial Civic Engagement activity which is explicitly linked to course learning goals and to at least one of the four elements of the Civic Learning definition.
- B. Every student in the course is required to participate in the Civic Engagement activity (project or placement).

C. The Civic Engagement activity is designed to provide reciprocal benefits to both the students and a broader community or communities beyond the classroom (that broader community could be the campus community or a community beyond the campus).

D. The Civic Engagement activity includes a reflection component in which the student is required to report on, present, or explain the significance of the experience and locate it within its broader political, social or economic context.

**CLEO (Civic Learning with Engagement Optional)** is for civic learning courses which offer a choice between a Civic Engagement placement or project—as defined above—and another substantial project with a Civic Learning focus which does not require engagement beyond the classroom.

Because some multi-section courses with different instructors have significant differences between sections, course designations will need to be made at the section level. For example, some sections of a course might have a civic learning focus while others do not. Alternatively, some sections might have an engagement requirement while others do not.

If none of the categories is assigned, courses will default to **NA (Not Applicable)**.

### **3. Recommendations for the Designation Process**

In accordance with their individual cultures and systems of governance, each campus will need to determine who—or what body—will hold the responsibility for designating Civic Learning courses. Choices might include an individual holding a relevant role, a campus-wide unit with a focus on civic learning and engagement, a pre-existing committee or one created specifically for this purpose. The Department asks that this responsibility be assigned as quickly as possible, so that the designating body can begin making designations for at least a sample of courses to be offered in Fall, 2016.

The designating body should look at course goals and intended learning outcomes—and the activities and resources supporting those goals and outcomes—as presented in course syllabi, to identify courses that have a substantial or significant focus on Civic Learning as defined by the Board (above). Campuses may wish to begin in Spring, 2016, by selecting for review a set of courses where the possibility of designation is high. Many campuses may already have course designations that intersect with these new designations. Campuses with service-learning course designations, for example, would simply need to:

- check that their designation process aligns with the criteria for Civic Engagement, and
- ensure that the courses make an explicit link for their students to at least one of the four elements of the Civic Learning definition.

At other campuses, the designating body might begin by reviewing syllabi from a sample of departments whose disciplines or teaching approaches have strong linkages to civic knowledge, skills, or values.

Course designations will be entered in a special category in the registrar's course database, for reporting through HEIRS. The Department recommends that campuses make the designations visible to students and faculty, to underline their commitment to preparing citizens. The public designation, however, may not be possible before students choose their courses for Fall, 2016, and may need to come later.

#### **4. A Timeline for the Pilot Year**

##### Spring 2016:

- Campuses assign the responsibility for making the course designations to the appropriate individual, unit, or committee.
- The designating body develops a process for making course designations and applies it to a sample of course to be offered in the fall.
- Designations are added to the registrar's course/student database.
- Each campus is invited to provide the DHE with feedback on the successes and challenges it encounters in this process.

##### Fall 2016:

- The designating body reviews course materials courses to be offered in the spring and decides on designations for them. Ideally, all courses for which a designation is appropriate will be identified.
- Designations are added to the registrar's course/student database.
- Each campus is invited to provide the DHE with feedback on the successes and challenges it encounters in this process.

##### Spring 2017:

- The designation process continues for fall courses that have not been reviewed.
- Feedback to the DHE is invited.
- The campus's annual upload of course/student data through HEIRS to DHE will include the use of the Civic Learning codes.

At the end of the pilot year, the DHE will provide to the campuses a report using aggregated data to show the system's progress toward the Board's goal that Civic Learning will become an expected outcome for undergraduates throughout the system.

#### **5. Support from the DHE**

The DHE recognizes that campuses would benefit from access to support and resources, and offers the following:

- The DHE's Director of Civic Learning and Engagement, Dr. John Reiff, is available to meet with administrators, faculty and staff on campuses to consult or offer workshops on the process of course designation or on the design of Civic Learning courses.
- The DHE has developed a rubric for assessing student learning outcomes regarding Civic Knowledge, which will be available before or by February 29 at <https://civiclearningrubric.wordpress.com/civic-knowledge-rubric/> for field testing. This rubric could be used by faculty and by review committees to articulate their goals for students regarding Civic Knowledge. Dr. Reiff will be working this spring with a national team on similar assessment rubrics for Civic Skills and Civic Values, which will be shared with the campuses when they are developed.
- Dr. Reiff will convene two meetings later this spring for faculty and staff to explore together challenges and best practices in teaching that leads to civic learning, and will develop a website with models of best practices, resources contributed by the campuses, and links to various stakeholders who might support campuses in this work.

The DHE is also seeking funding to allow it to make grants directly to campuses to build capacity for this work.