

In the Search of Good Citizens and Civic Leaders?
Don't Overlook Students Enrolled at Non-Selective Institutions

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Recent discussions about reinvigorating cultivation of good citizens and civic leaders in the United States have largely focused on the role faculty at elite institutions should play in this endeavor. Yet tailoring such efforts to elite institutions will be ineffective overall for a number of reasons. Not least of these is that very few US college and university students attend elite institutions. Only 6 percent attend a school with an acceptance rate of 25 percent or less; the vast majority attend non-selective institutions (NSI's) with admission rates of 70 to 80 percent.¹ Efforts to educate citizens in a mass democracy must be implemented at NSI's simply because that is where most students enroll. It is also important to note that many students purposefully choose nearby campuses – and are often “undermatched”² according to their academic ability -- because most prefer geographic proximity over status. Nearly 70% of public four-year college students, for example, choose to attend an institution within two hours of their home.³

Beyond preparation for citizenship, less selective state institutions play an outsized role in preparing students who go on to serve as civic and political leaders. A strong pattern emerges at the state level, especially for governors, supreme court justices, legislative leaders, attorneys general, and education chief, where nearly 60 percent emerge from public universities.⁴ This pattern is surely even more prominent among local public servants. Further, many recent national leaders' alma maters contradict the stereotype of Congress as an extension of the Ivy League – including Kevin McCarthy (California State University Bakersfield) Hakeem Jeffries (SUNY Binghamton), Mitch McConnell (University of Louisville) Joe Biden (University of Delaware) and Kamala Harris (Howard University).⁵

Given the heavy lift they perform for our democracy, it is important to understand the way NSI's circumstances and student bodies differ from those of their elite peers. First, given limited state funding and declining enrollment, few have the capacity to establish a stand-alone Civic Studies Department. Even if they did, such a unit would be at immediate risk, given a growing trend to pass legislation eliminating low demand programs at state-funded schools.⁶ Yet faculty in NSI's political science, history, and philosophy departments still care intently that courses on the democratic tradition in Western culture – from the

histories of ancient Greece and Rome to enlightenment political theory, American political thought and Constitutional law – are taught. In my discipline of political science, for example, job postings at NSI’s typically focus on one of the three major institutions or on American political thought, as these are considered core classes in the major. When new hires are willing to cover additional subjects (e.g., political media, campaigns/elections, gender and politics, or race and politics) these are considered a “bonus” and are offered as specialized upper level electives to round out departmental offerings. In particular, NSI political science units prioritize faculty hires in public law, as Con-Law classes are popular with pre-law and criminal justice majors, nearly always have a waiting list, and are considered an important source of revenue in tuition-driven budget models. Similarly, my NSI colleagues in history and philosophy still prioritize hires who can teach courses on Western civilization and Western political thought, in part because these are popular or required courses in the general education program. The most straightforward way to preserve the vast majority of college students’ exposure to courses that relay this type of civic knowledge is to preserve NSI humanities and social science departments where faculty lines are dedicated to covering the most relevant coursework.

Second, the students at NSI’s are fundamentally different than those at elite institutions, in large part because the children of the wealthiest Americans are drastically overrepresented in highly selective schools. At the Ivies, one in every six students has a parent in the top one percent. Further, applicants connected to the top .01 percent are more than twice as likely to be accepted at these institutions, even when their test scores are no higher than others seeking admission.⁷ One consequence of this recruiting strategy is more ideologically polarized campuses characterized by clusters of intensely progressive or far left students – which is more likely among wealthier student cohorts because post-materialism emerges when people have been free from economic concerns for successive generations.⁸ Perhaps surprisingly given the tendency of long periods of economic security to produce post-materialist values, elite students are not interested in pursuing their commitments through public service or nonprofit professions. Rather, they arrive on campus in a hyper-competitive mode, facing off against one another in pursuit of far more lucrative jobs in finance, consulting, and technology. Estimates suggest anywhere from 40 to 60 percent of recent graduates from selective institutions pursue one of these three narrow career paths.⁹ Students at elite institutions justify this choice, noting that they are increasingly skeptical of achieving social change through government and nonprofits. Instead, many embrace the concept of “effective altruism,” convinced that they will have more impact on the issues they care about through their future capacity to engage in philanthropy than through their own direct involvement.¹⁰

Few if any of these characteristics are shared by students enrolled at NSIs. At NSI's students come from a much wider array of socio-economic backgrounds, leading to more diversity in lived experiences and, inevitably, less consistency in ideological preferences. While students with post-materialist political commitments still enroll at NSIs, they are not over-represented, and they are not always the loudest or most visible groups on campus. In my experience, the presence of more students from lower and middle class backgrounds results in substantial numbers who are pragmatic and willing to embrace civility, deliberation and compromise, even across ideological and partisan lines. Perhaps the types of students more apt to enroll at NSI's are skilled at deliberating and assessing trade-offs because they are forced make these types of imperfect decisions about wicked problems frequently, as they juggle work, family, and academic obligations in their everyday lives. Finally, NSI students are less intent on pursuing a narrow path to financial success and far more interested in pursuing public service professions. For example, recent political science graduates from my own NSI include those who have gone on to serve as executive directors of county party organizations, campaign consultants, state legislative aides, mayoral advisors, and nonprofit staff, as well as those who have already run for office or aspire to do so in the near future. These career paths are not atypical of other NSI political science graduates across the country.

A long-term solution for cultivating good citizens and civic leaders at elite institutions may be to adjust recruitment strategies and admission policies to ensure the student body is comprised of students from a wider array of socioeconomic backgrounds.¹¹ A more immediate and practical solution is to help NSIs, the institutions that educate the vast majority of US college students, continue to provide high-quality civics courses and experiential learning opportunities known to transform our students into the good citizens and civic leaders a functional democracy requires.¹² NSI's are, of course, not without our own distinct set of problems in this endeavor. Exposing students to transformative civic knowledge is hampered by difficulty sustaining humanities and social science departments, which offer the most relevant courses, in the face of declining enrollment. The growing pressure to offer three-year bachelor's degrees also means that fewer students will be required to take these courses as general education requirements are pared down to make an abbreviated timeline to graduation feasible.¹³ Beyond staffing and curricular concerns, our students are not hyper-competitive, and especially post-pandemic, encouraging them to seek out essential hands-on learning through internships and co-curricular experiences in student life has been difficult.¹⁴ While challenging, these types of obstacles are not insurmountable and can be addressed through good leadership from campus presidents, innovative solutions from dedicated faculty, and responsive policymaking from state legislators. They will not be overcome, however, unless civic-

minded faculty and administrators from NSI's are included in ongoing conversations about how to best reinvigorate civics instruction on our campuses.

¹ Richard Arum and Mitchell L. Stevens, "For Most College Students, Affirmative Action Was Never Enough," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2003. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/07/03/opinion/for-most-college-students-affirmative-action-was-not-enough.html>.

² Jonathan Smith, Matea Pender, and Jessica Howell, "The Full Extent of Student-College Academic Undermatch," *Economics of Education Review*, 32(2023):247-261, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2012.11.001>.

³ Abigail Wozniak. "Going Away to College? School Distance as a Barrier to Higher Education," *EconoFact*, March 22, 2018, [https://econofact.org/going-away-to-college-school-distance-as-a-barrier-to-higher-education#:~:text=The%20majority%20%E2%80%94%2056.2%20percent%20%E2%80%94%20of,CIRP%20survey%20\(see%20chart\)](https://econofact.org/going-away-to-college-school-distance-as-a-barrier-to-higher-education#:~:text=The%20majority%20%E2%80%94%2056.2%20percent%20%E2%80%94%20of,CIRP%20survey%20(see%20chart).).

⁴ Andy Smarick. *Publics and Place: Leadership Development by State-Run and State-Based Universities*. New York: The Manhattan Institute: October 31, 2024. <https://manhattan.institute/article/leadership-development-by-state-run-and-state-based-universities>

⁵ Frank Bruni, "The Real, Hidden Truth About College Admissions," *The New York Times*, August 3, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/03/opinion/college-admissions-affirmative-action.html>.

⁶ Ryan Quinn. "Legislatures Require Colleges to Cut Degrees in Low Demand," *Inside Higher Ed*, July 15, 2025. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/state-policy/2025/07/15/latest-legislative-directives-cut-degrees-low-demand>

⁷ Aatish Bhatia, Claire Cain Miller, and Josh Katz. "Study of Elite College Admissions Data Suggests Being Rich Is Its Own Qualification," *The New York Times*, July 24, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/07/24/upshot/ivy-league-elite-college-admissions.html>

⁸ Ronald Inglehart, "Changing Values among Western Publics from 1970-2006," *Western European Politics*, 31 (2008): 130-146, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402380701834747>.

⁹ Arif Saleem. "Finance, Consulting, and Tech are Gobbling Up Top Students," *The Economist*, December 19, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/christmas-specials/2024/12/19/finance-consulting-and-tech-are-gobbling-up-top-students>; Jin Kwon, Sina Shaikh, and Anmol Dash, "50% of full-time jobs among recent Penn Grads are in Finance and Consulting, DP Analysis Finds," *The Daily Pennsylvanian*, September 20, 2023, <https://www.thedp.com/article/2023/09/penn-careers-consulting-finance-wharton-college-post-graduate-outcomes>.

¹⁰ Francesca Mari. "What Do Students at Elite Colleges Really Want? Many of Harvard's Generation Say 'Sellout' is Not an Insult." *The New York Times*, May 22, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/22/business/gen-z-college-students-jobs.html>.

¹¹ Michael S. Roth, "How Higher Education Can Win Back America," *The New York Times*, December 27, 2024. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/27/opinion/college-education-tuition-egalitarian.html?unlocked_article_code=1.k04.G149.P6KJLudLTlUV&smid=url-share&fbclid=IwY2xjawL5wexleHRuA2FlbQlxMQABHm6CjEzovf6JxfEFT7dbgK8wQ_mnXtsKV5z404vV5UQg1TY44MYaGNneZSpO_aem_t2u_KyGSWgtEEP-fl0BkBg

¹² Anne Colby, Elizabeth Beaumont, Thomas Erlich, Josh Corngold, *Educating for Democracy: Preparing Undergraduates for Responsible Political Engagement*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007; Anne Colby, Thomas Ehrlich, Elizabeth Beaumont, and Jason Stephens, eds. *Educating Citizens: Preparing America's Undergraduates for Lives of Moral Responsibility*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003; Marianne Magjuka, ed, *Power to the Polls, A Guide to Developing Civic Learning, Election Engagement, and Political Action in Higher Education*. New York: Routledge, 2023; Also see the series of edited collections dedicated to teaching civic engagement published by the American Political Science Association, available for free online <https://web.apsanet.org/teachingcivicengagement/>

¹³ Johanna Alonso, "Is the 3-Year Degree Dream Becoming a Reality?" *Inside Higher Education*, July 28, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/academics/2025/07/28/colleges-accreditors-and-states-embrace-3-year-degrees>

¹⁴ Ashley Mowreader, “Data: Students Less Involved on Campus Post-Pandemic,” *Inside Higher Education*, April 11, 2025, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/college-experience/2025/04/11/fewer-students-engage-college-activities-after>