

Civic Education: The Phoenix Arises

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Commentary

The study of American history and government is undergoing an unprecedented renewal, akin to the phoenix—a mythical bird that is reborn by rising from the ashes of its predecessor.

Major universities have recently launched independent institutes, sometimes called “schools of civic thought,” dedicated to the in-depth exploration of an American political tradition that goes beyond partisan politics. These institutes have independent hiring authority and significant state funding.

So far about a dozen civic institutes have sprung up, from Arizona, Texas, and Florida to Tennessee, North Carolina, and Ohio—and others will be founded soon. They not only serve college students, but many also help K-12 teachers learn how to teach American history and government more effectively. Their mission is broad, with wide public programming.

In America, we have the privilege of living in a democratic republic, arguably the greatest the world has known. Citizens can engage in politics, persuade their fellow citizens, and effect real change. Our history offers many such examples.

It is all the more tragic and dangerous, then, that many students know so little about our history and institutions. They feel powerless and disaffected.

Too often, instead of engaging with America’s founding principles and history, students hear about the supposed oppressiveness of Western civilization and the American “slavocracy,” with dogmatic teaching of oppressor-oppressed ideas. Our students are frequently taught to believe the worst of our nation and its people.

By contrast, these new institutes endeavor to tell the complete American story—its warts but also its promise to give freedom and opportunity to all. They highlight our long and torturous journey to get ever closer to achieving the vision in our Declaration of Independence—that all men are created equal and are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

This phoenix-like story has been long in preparation at the Jack Miller Center for Teaching America's Founding Principles and History (JMC). Over 1,200 professors working in the academy today have been a part of the JMC network, writing and teaching about the American political tradition. This network has transformed a struggling subfield into a strong, competitive discipline and created a talent pool of faculty to support this movement's rapid growth.

The pipeline for a new generation of classroom leaders was started 20 years ago when JMC began its program of summer institutes for young postdocs and professors. Now these professors operate at institutions of all types. Seven of the eight Ivy League schools have partnered with JMC, as have 18 state universities, along with many liberal arts and religious colleges.

[Over 300 JMC-supported programs](#) enrich the academic lives of students, providing guest speakers, fellowships, courses, and a chance to interact with dedicated faculty who are outside of the stale, progressive academic mainstream.

The Center for American Studies at Christopher Newport University is an example of this transformational work. Begun in 2007 with JMC's assistance, it has grown to be a major force on campus. Co-directed by Professors Elizabeth and Nathan Busch, it has a full-time faculty of six who mentor many undergraduate students. The Center has brought to campus distinguished scholars and public officials, including the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, Jonathan Turley, John Yoo, and William J. Perry, for presentations to the university community.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) works alongside JMC to promote the formation of new independent institutes. ACTA has redoubled its efforts to ensure that all undergraduates pass a required course that covers core American founding principles.

For 30 years, ACTA has warned of the cost of higher education's malfeasance. In 2000, its extensive survey of students at the 50 most elite colleges and universities revealed a shocking level of historical and civic ignorance. ACTA's survey report, "[Losing America's](#)

Memory,” led to a joint, unanimous [resolution](#) passed by Congress that called for improving the civic knowledge of college students.

ACTA’s [2024 survey](#) that polled 3,000 college students shows that we must redouble our efforts.

Our work so far has helped South Carolina adopt the [REACH Act](#). Since 2021, all of the state’s public universities require a course in which students study the key documents and moments in our nation’s story.

The new institutes of civic education, which began at Arizona State University in 2017, have now expanded into eight states on 13 campuses. Most recently, Ohio passed legislation that has already led to new institutes being set up at its five public universities. The goal is to expand civic education programs into many more states.

ACTA’s National Commission on American History and Civic Education is convening 24 of America’s most distinguished scholars, thought leaders, and educators to produce a white paper on the urgency of restoring the undergraduate requirement in American history and government at every college and university in the nation. The white paper will provide guidance on the scope of that course and how trustees and legislators can make America’s civic rebirth a reality. An anthology of essays, “American History and Government: What Every College Student Should Know,” will enhance the national conversation.

The new civic institutes will re-engage students with America’s story of freedom and opportunity for all. The joint contribution of JMC and ACTA, made alongside other civic-minded organizations, private and public, will renew students’ understanding of our nation as the land of the free. This is how Americans can mend our flaws and face the challenges of the future together.

From [RealClearWire](#)

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Jack Miller is the founder and chairman of the Jack Miller Center, an organization that promotes the teaching of America's founding principles and history by supporting professors and programs on campuses nationwide as well as courses for K-12 teachers that help them build engaging lessons for their students.

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