

The Program in Democracy and Citizenship

By Harvey Klehr, Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Politics and History

The Program in Democracy and Citizenship (PDC) is a curricular initiative intended to increase undergraduates' knowledge on topics necessary to become responsible, informed citizens of a democratic society. Started by Mark Bauerlein of the Department of English, the program now resides in the Department of Political Science, and I am the director.

In recent years numerous studies have demonstrated an alarming decline in civic literacy. Tests of students at all levels of the educational system and surveys of the general public reveal an abysmal ignorance of basic facts about American history and of the principles and values that underlay the American democratic system. The founding fathers would have been appalled and alarmed; many of them argued that without an informed and public-spirited populace, a democratic society could not endure.

Emory College of Arts and Sciences aims to prepare students for "intellectual leadership of the nation" and imbue them with "a commitment to use knowledge to improve human well-being," among its missions. To fulfill these aspirations, Emory must do more to ensure that students graduate with a sophisticated understanding of the principles and history of democracy. Several years ago the General Education Requirements were changed so that students no longer have to take a course in American history or two courses on the history of Western thought or even one course in non-Western cultures. Although there have been no studies of how students have reacted, anecdotal evidence suggests that fewer and fewer students come to their political science or history classes with a sure grounding in American history or knowledge of American government. Many Emory students avoid such courses entirely.

The Program in Democracy and Citizenship was created to address this kind of problem in concrete ways. We partner with various departments to offer courses emphasizing basic texts in American and classical democratic principles. This year we paid for fourteen sections of the basic freshman English composition course. Normally the temporary faculty and graduate students who teach these sections use whatever readings they want, ranging from science fiction to romance novels. The thinking is that the goal of the course is to improve student

writing and the readings used to do it are irrelevant. The PDC freshman composition sections use great texts—speeches and essays from the American tradition, such as George Washington's farewell address, the Federalist Papers, Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural; essays by Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony; and speeches by Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. Our premise is that such vital works are part of our common intellectual heritage, and students should be exposed to them.

We also sponsor two courses in Ancient Mediterranean studies where students are exposed to the Greek and Roman foundations of Western society. This year we hired an adjunct professor to teach courses in the political science department on liberalism, conservatism, and democratic citizenship. A postdoctoral fellow in political science taught courses on the political thought of Abraham Lincoln, the American founding, and the American political tradition.

We also bring speakers—primarily journalists and public intellectuals who typically do not get to college campuses—to classes to meet with students and discuss issues in American public life based on founding principles. This year we also sponsored a major lecture by Richard Brookhiser, whose books on American founders have been best sellers. His talk, "What Would the Founders Do? Our Questions, Their Answers," drew an enthusiastic crowd of 150 students.

We have in the past provided summer grants to faculty to develop courses with more historical content. We hope in the future to partner with additional departments such as economics, sociology, history, and philosophy to find ways to increase the number of courses offered around the topics of democracy and citizenship. These efforts have been supported in the past by a three-year grant from President James Wagner and the Woodruff Fund, by gifts from several foundations, and by a three-year commitment from the Jack Miller Center that enabled us to hire a postdoctoral fellow in political science to teach courses on American political thought. The PDC is actively seeking additional financial support that will enable us to continue these initiatives and, hopefully, expand them. If you have any questions about the PDC or are interested in supporting it, please contact me at polshk@emory.edu. PS



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