

# The Maine View

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## Civic Education in the University of Maine System

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**“If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects something that never was and never will be.”**

It is with this quote from Thomas Jefferson that the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) began its 2006 report on citizenship education at the nation’s colleges and universities. Based on a survey involving thousands of college undergraduates, the institute’s report concluded that the country’s higher education institutions are failing to provide students with even a basic understanding of the nation’s “history, government, foreign affairs, and economy.” “Knowledge of America’s history and institutions is alarmingly low,” the study finds, “because universities fail to increase undergraduate civic learning in any meaningful sense.”[1]

The study, one of the largest ever conducted on the subject of civic learning at the nation’s colleges and universities, was based on an extensive survey of student knowledge conducted by the University of Connecticut’s Department of Public Policy. More than 14,000 students at 50 colleges were quizzed on their knowledge of American history, government, foreign affairs, and economics. The average college senior scored below 70 percent at every college. As a group, the seniors scored only 1.5 percent better than the college freshmen, leading researchers to conclude that “institutions of higher learning in America do little” to add to the “civic literacy” of their students.[2]

ISI’s conclusions are not without precedent. A 2002 report by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) found from its own survey that “seniors from America’s elite colleges and universities were graduating with an alarming ignorance of their heritage and a profound historical illiteracy.”[3] This report followed up an earlier study by ACTA that reached similar conclusions. “Four out of five — 81 percent — of seniors from the top 55 colleges and universities in the United States received a grade of D or F,” on ACTA’s 1999 collegiate survey of American history and culture.[4]

Even the Association of American Colleges and Universities, an organization of the nation’s higher education institutions themselves, concluded in a 2005 report that collegiate performance with regard to study for “democratic citizenship” has been “insufficiently addressed” by current practices.[5]

What are the nation’s colleges doing wrong? As the ISI report puts it succinctly, “students don’t learn what colleges don’t teach.” Simply put, too many students are not required, as a part of their collegiate experience, to take courses in government, history, and economics. While the ISI report did not analyze course requirements at the schools it studied, ACTA president Anne Neal reported in 2006 that her organization’s study of 50 top colleges found that “a mere 14 percent of the colleges compel their students to study American government or history...and not one of the colleges among the 50 demanded that its students study economics.”[6]

Are students here in Maine required by the state’s own public university system to take courses that teach the fundamentals of U.S. history, government, and economics? A survey of the so-called “general education” requirements of the seven University of Maine colleges reveals that while policies vary from campus to campus, it is indeed possible and perhaps even probable that students at these schools graduate without ever taking even a single class in government, economics, or history.

### Citizenship Education in the University of Maine system

Though none of the seven universities of the University of Maine system were part of the survey research done by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, a rough idea of how well the system is doing at providing students with the kind of education needed for civic literacy can be developed by reviewing the general education requirements of the University of Maine schools. What civics-related courses, outside a student’s major area of study, do these universities require degree-seeking students to take?

### The University of Maine

The University of Maine, at Orono, is the state's largest public university and the flagship campus of the University of Maine system. As a result, the university not only offers its students more degree and course offerings than the other schools in the system, it has by far the most complex general education requirements.

According to its 2007-2008 undergraduate catalog, the University of Maine requires that students take general education classes in five broad areas; mathematics, science, writing competency, ethics, and something that the university calls "Human Values and Social Context." That category is broken down further into five subcategories; "Western Cultural Tradition," "Social Context and Institutions," "Cultural Diversity and International Perspectives," "Population and the Environment," and "Artistic and Creative Expression." Students are required to take 18 credits worth of classes across these five areas of study in order to complete a bachelor's degree and must take at least three credits in each of the five areas.[7]

Are classes in fields of study such as U.S. history, government, and basic economics a part of these requirements? The University's undergraduate catalog would suggest otherwise.[8]

There were about two dozen courses offered for the fall 2007 semester, at the freshman or sophomore level, which would meet the requirements for "Western Cultural Tradition," for example. These included two "United States History" courses, two "European Civilization" courses, and a pair of political science courses, "Introduction to Political Theory" and "Introduction to World Politics."

The "Western Cultural Traditions" requirement can also be met, though, by taking something called "The Performance Event," which, according to the course description, gives students "an introduction to the arts through attendance at artistic events on the University of Maine campus." Students could also meet the "western tradition" requirement by taking "History of Mass Communication," or "the Nature of Story," which "explores the fundamental activity of why and how we create, tell and read/listen to stories." "Introduction to Canadian Studies" which "acquaints students with varied aspects of the Canadian experience" and "includes an optional field trip to Canada," is another option.

In short, though the University of Maine does offer what one might consider "traditional" courses in western history, there is no specific requirement that students take them in order to satisfy general education requirements.

Much the same could be said about courses offered to satisfy the "Social Context and Institutions" requirement. The University does offer an "American Government" course and entry-level courses in both microeconomics and macroeconomics that meet this requirement. There is also a "Public Administra-

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tion" course which covers a broad range of government and public service-related issues, and a promising economics course dealing with issues such as "the price system, resource allocation, the organization of markets, the economics of government policy, and international aspects of the economy."

Much as with "Western Traditions" though, opportunities abound to meet the requirements of this area of study with classes such as "Readings in Outdoor Recreation," or "Fundamentals of Interpersonal Communication," which places a "special emphasis on developing knowledge and skills applicable to face-to-face interactions between individuals." Another choice might be "Family Interaction" which is focused, according to the course description, on the "interpersonal dynamics of dating, courtship, mate selection, and the development of family life."

Courses offered in the area of "Cultural Diversity and International Perspectives" are almost exclusively focused on non-western and minority studies. Even this important requirement can be met, though, by taking "Peace and Pop Culture," which analyzes "creative expression by active artist-peace builders working in different media throughout the world," including those in the "cartoon, Internet, video game, and comic book publishing industries."

The University of Maine does require every student to do coursework in the seemingly narrow field of "Population and the Environment." A search of the catalog found less than a dozen freshman and sophomore level courses, without prerequisites, that a student could take to meet this requirement. There appears, though, to be little difference between them. "Human Population and the Global Environment" is described as introducing students to the "contemporary global issues of population growth, natural resource conservation and environmental protection"; "Humans and Global Change" covers "how humans are now changing global climate through the addition of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere"; "Environmental Policy" examines the "economic sources of environmental degradation"; and "World Food Supply, Population and the Environment" focuses at least part of its study on "environmental problems relating to food production and distribution."

Whatever one believes about global warming and other environmental concerns, it seems to be that students can get a degree from the University of Maine without a government class, without an economics class, and without a history class, but

must take a class on contemporary environmental issues. How will students make use of their newfound environmental awareness, does the University think, if they have never taken a basic civics class?

### **The University of Southern Maine**

The situation is little better at the University of Southern Maine (USM), the state's second largest higher education institution, which likewise has no general education requirements for U.S. history, government, or economics.

The USM "Core Curriculum" does require two courses in the social sciences, but these run the gamut from classes in sociology and psychology to those related to anthropology and business practices. USM's core curriculum guide lists three dozen classes that meet the social sciences requirement, including a course that "examines the relationship of baseball to American society." [9]

USM also requires a single course in a category called "other times/other places" which functions as a blend of the "western tradition" and "cultural diversity" areas of study offered at the University of Maine. Students could satisfy that one-class requirement with a U.S. History course or with a class on "Beginning American Sign Language," "Diversity amidst Globalization," "The Anthropology of Sex and Gender," or "Victims of Progress: Indigenous Peoples in the Modern World." [10]

As with the University of Maine, therefore, it is relatively simple to graduate from USM without a single course in history, government, or economics.

### **University of Maine at Augusta**

The University of Maine at Augusta (UMA) gets the credit for the most confusing set of general education requirements.

UMA's description of its general education program indicates that its Bachelor's degree candidates are required to take only one class in the humanities and two in the social sciences. [11] The general education requirements listed on the course checklists that the University provides to students, however, differ from those requirements and also vary from degree program to degree program. [12]

Liberal Studies majors, for instance, are required to take the one course in the humanities and two in the social sciences, but are additionally required to take two courses in something called "Diverse Times and Cultures." This requirement may be met by taking any of a series of first-year history courses, or by taking foreign language courses or American Sign Language.

For whatever reason, Computer Information Systems majors do not need to take those courses. They can get by with just the two social science classes and the single humanities course, requirements for which, by the way, can be satisfied by taking any of a long list of classes, including "The American Movie."

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Biology majors, inexplicably, not only have to take the "Diverse Times and Cultures" courses, but two classes in the humanities and three courses in the social sciences.

Area of study also restricts a student's choices regarding which courses to take in order to meet these requirements. Library Studies majors have to take two courses in the social sciences, but according to the checklist can choose only psychology and sociology classes. Public Administration majors, though, can take any social science course to satisfy their general education requirements, including, for instance, "Human Sexuality," which is a "course designed to enable students who have a background in the fundamentals of human sexuality to gain further insight into the range of human sexual expression," according to the course guide. [13]

UMA is perhaps to be applauded for varying its general education requirements to better fit student needs, but this results in a confusing jumble of requirements that make it unclear what exactly a student leaving UMA with a degree has actually learned. Whatever the degree, though, it is likely that coursework in government or history was not part of it.

### **The University System's smaller schools**

With no more than two thousand students in any of them, the remaining four colleges in the University of Maine system offer significantly fewer courses to their students than the larger schools. Despite this, the smaller universities often seem to do a better job of insisting that students do at least some coursework in civics and history in order to obtain a degree.

The **University of Maine at Presque Isle (UMPI)** probably does the best job of requiring its students to take courses that enhance civic literacy. UMPI requires two courses in history, offering students the choice of taking two introductory courses in either World or U.S. History, or a combination of an introductory-level course and an upper level course. The school also requires two courses in the social sciences, which may include courses in economics or political science. Like the other campuses, UMPI also demands coursework in the "multicultural experience," but offers a broader range of courses that meet that requirement than do many of the other campuses. [14]

The **University of Maine at Fort Kent (UMFK)** has the distinction of being the only University of Maine campus to actually require coursework in "Western Civilization." Students are required to take a single class in that category, which includes two Western Civilization courses, two U.S. History courses and two modern history courses. Students at UMFK are also

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required to take a social/behavioral science course, which could include courses in economics, geography, world cultures, or political science, and can also take government or political science to satisfy a one-course “Citizenship/Service and Social Responsibility” requirement.[15]

The smallest campus in the University of Maine system, the **University of Maine at Machias** also requires two history courses, at least for some majors, but insists that one of them be “non-western.” It does not, however, require that the other history course be “western.” The Machias campus also requires two classes in the field of “Humans in Social Context,” which includes everything from behavioral and social sciences to “business law.” As with the other schools, courses in economics and government are available, but not required.[16]

The **University of Maine at Farmington (UMF)** bills itself as a public version of the many small, elite private schools that dot the New England countryside, and to its credit, it offers an impressive array of courses in the humanities and social sciences for a school of its size. It requires, though, only two courses in all of the social sciences, which it defines as including “anthropology, economics, geography, history, political science, psychology, sociology, or women’s and gender studies.”

It seems unfortunate, given UMF’s strong history and political science programs, that it does not actually require students to take any courses in those areas.[17]

### **Findings**

This review of the general education requirements and course descriptions of the seven schools of the University of Maine system would seem to support claims by some observers that colleges and universities are not doing enough to develop civic literacy in their students. Not one of the schools in question mandates a course a government, economics, American history, or foreign affairs. In most cases, these areas of study are lumped into the broad category of “social sciences,” where they compete with sociology, psychology, and other fields for the attention of students looking to satisfy what is generally only a two course requirement.

To their credit, the universities do a good of job mandating coursework on the study of other cultures, and several also require classes in ethics as well. The University of Maine at Fort Kent even requires that students take a class in the field of “Citizenship/Service and Social Responsibility.” Yet none of the schools require a class in the basics of the U.S. Constitu-

tion, or coursework in the fundamentals of the national and world economy, or even a survey class in America’s history and heritage.

As stated at the outset, ISI did not conduct its study of student knowledge on the campuses of the University of Maine, but it seems likely from the lack of required coursework in civics and history that they would find a similar lack of achievement here in Maine.

### **Response of Maine’s Citizenship Education Task Force**

Concerns about the lack of civic education here in Maine at both the K-12 and higher education levels led to the creation in 2004 of the Citizenship Education Task Force, commissioned by the state legislature to assess “the scope and quality of citizenship education in Maine.” In its final report, the task force called for Maine’s institutions of higher education to “graduate civically-prepared students who are not only ready to work, but to participate in their communities.”[18]

While the more detailed recommendations of the task force are to be the subject of future analysis, it is important to note that missing from those recommendations was any mention of requiring civics coursework at the collegiate level. The task force preferred instead to identify “promising practices” among Maine’s institutions of higher education where they could be found, and then to call upon the legislature to “encourage higher education institutions to attend to the mission of civic education.” The report also concluded that “prioritizing civic learning and engagement among Maine’s higher education institutions is hugely dependent upon further funding and staffing within the Maine Department of Education.”[19]

### **Conclusion**

There can be no doubt that many students graduate from the schools of the University of Maine system with excellent educations and go on to be productive members of society and good citizens. It may well be that these schools offer courses outside the fields of government, economics, and history that contribute meaningfully to the civic literacy of their students.

Yet study after study confirms that such students are graduating college with a distressing lack of knowledge about even the most basic facts regarding the nation’s political system and history. Worse still, research finds that this lack of understanding impacts levels of civic engagement. A 2006 study by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement found that “substantial numbers of young people are disconnected from politics and community life.”[20]

The good news, as the ISI study found, was that “students who demonstrated greater learning of America’s history and institutions were more engaged in citizenship activities such as voting, volunteer community service, and political campaigns.”[21] In short, the more students know about politics and history, the more civically involved they are.

For students to gain such knowledge, though, requires that our institutions of higher education actually teach it, and for all the good work that they do providing quality educations to Maine's young people, it appears as though our state universities could be doing a much better job.

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