

**Civic Engagement at Teaching-Focused Universities:  
Navigating the Challenges for Pre-Tenure Faculty**

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Teaching-focused colleges and universities offer their faculty unique opportunities to incorporate and deploy civic engagement pedagogies and research. This educational mission is twofold: First, to prepare students for careers by teaching critical and analytical abilities via liberal arts courses and integrated, interdisciplinary programs. Second, to cultivate active and engaged citizenship within their students. However, in an era of acrimonious politics, growing anti-intellectualism, and discounting of a college degree's value, these institutions find themselves on the "front lines" of the nation's sociopolitical discontent. As such, faculty engaging in civic engagement work (especially pre-tenure) may find themselves in an environment that, while historically receptive, increasingly makes such efforts more difficult.

In this chapter, we provide perspectives from three pre-tenure assistant professors that highlight the challenges encountered and opportunities present with civic engagement work while navigating these politically turbulent waters. While we all come from teaching-focused institutions, our universities vary widely in their contexts. Thus, our advice is meant to be general while we also provide specific accounts from our own experiences to illustrate different concepts. We do this with the caveat that your institution may be different in some important respects.

We break down the chapter into thematic sections focused on various points of contestation for faculty engaging in this work. First, we talk about institutional support structures internal and external to institutions fundamental to civic education efforts. Second, we highlight how institutional culture may challenge and support civic engagement work. Third, we offer advice on how civic engagement pedagogy should be mindful of specific student populations and their unique needs. Finally, we end by offering some factors that faculty should consider as they navigate the tenure and promotion process to ensure that their civic engagement scholarship and activities are recognized as part of their professional portfolio.

**INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT STRUCTURES: HOW SUPPORTIVE IS YOUR INSTITUTION?**

Pre-tenure faculty work at a variety of institutions with different resources, strategic initiatives, and administrative prerogatives. Understanding the type of support your institution is capable and willing to devote to civic engagement initiatives is a crucial first step in successfully navigating the educational bureaucracy. While this type of support necessarily includes financial resources, it also includes internal institutional validation for why the work is being done and how it benefits the institution as a whole. Additionally, pre-tenure faculty may benefit from seeking external backing for their efforts as a way of finding support necessary to maintain the programs and activities they wish to pursue.

Those of us who do this work understand its importance, but pre-tenure scholars need to be able to convey that importance to diverse audiences so as to secure institutional support both internally and externally. Internal support includes those constituencies at your institution that you can leverage to create a coalition of individuals and on-campus entities who have the capacity to support your

initiatives. Administrative backing from higher administrators (i.e., presidents, chancellors, provosts, deans, et cetera) is especially important for pre-tenure scholars as it provides some assurance that civic engagement initiatives will be credited toward tenure (see also Kedrowski 2022). This may come in the form of public statements from administrators in support of civic engagement efforts, help promoting events internally, and in-kind use of campus facilities and resources.

Ideally, this kind of internal support would also come with funding to supplement what cannot be done for free. Even when not fiscally feasible, administrators can be a bridge to outside funding and donors who may provide such financial backing. In order to gain administrator support, it is key to explain the benefits of such efforts as a marketing tool for the institution as well as a marker of good will to the surrounding community. For example, administrators are keen on touting an institution's external markers of success, such as the Carnegie Foundation's Elective Classification for Community Engagement<sup>1</sup>, which provides a good example of public and visible administrative backing that may or may not provide sufficient internal support. Speaking with fellow faculty and staff about what pockets of funding may exist on campus, especially those leading other civic engagement-related projects, may prove fruitful.

If internal support is lacking, it is important for pre-tenure faculty to understand the reasons why the institution is wary about publicizing civic engagement work. Often, external pressures may be part of that reasoning. External forces can be both supportive and prohibitive to civic engagement work. For example, state legislators or other stakeholders may be particularly supportive of this work, but are unfamiliar with it and institutions may be wary of bringing light to the work being done. Discussions with an institution's marketing and communications department and those responsible for strategic planning can help in understanding how civic engagement fits within the broader institutional mission so that this work can receive both external and internal backing.

Pre-tenure faculty may have to go outside of their institution to find financial backing for their efforts. Grant funding is one source that can be both internal and external to your institution. While large grants (including federal grants) exist, these funds may be difficult to come by and restrictive in nature. It may be worth prioritizing smaller, local grants or grants from organizations to which the institution is a member instead of immediately seeking large, national funding sources. While most of these funding sources focus on traditional undergraduate students, some community organizations are particularly interested in outreach to working students, veterans, and individuals of all ages. For example, many public institutions can look to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), which provides resources and support networks like the American Democracy Project (ADP). Religiously affiliated institutions may be members of a consortium of similar institutions with resources or a shared vision that may include civic engagement as a priority (e.g., the Lutheran Educational Conference of North America). Your campus donor engagement professionals can potentially also connect you to individuals in the community and alumni who are eager to support these types of endeavors.

### **ENSURING A POSITIVE RECEPTION: INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE & FOCUS**

Assuming pre-tenure faculty want to integrate their civic engagement work into their professional activities, understanding their institution's culture and focus is an important factor to consider. While we focus on teaching-intensive institutions in this chapter, we note there is variation among these campuses' cultures. For instance, regional comprehensives are, by design, anchored to a regional

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<sup>1</sup> The Elective Classification for Community Engagement is awarded in two year cycles, with campuses receiving the classification required to recertify every six years. For more information, see the Carnegie Foundation's website: <https://carnegieelectiveclassifications.org/the-2024-elective-classification-for-community-engagement/>. (Accessed April 10, 2023.)

geography that imparts itself on the institution's character and denizens. This is somewhat different from other institutions that may prioritize teaching but do so within the context of a larger societal (often social justice infused) mission. In short, we offer some guidance about how pre-tenure faculty navigate their institution's culture and focus.

While differing in cultures and foci, a common similarity is that teaching-focused institutions have missions that are conducive to civic engagement praxis. For instance, two of our institutions have received the Carnegie Foundation's Elective Classification for Community Engagement. This designation allows instructors to designate their course as emphasizing "community engagement," allowing instructors to design courses that place civic engagement and democratic learning at their cores. Many of these courses are nested within the general education curriculum, providing considerable opportunity for exposing large amounts of students to civic and political engagement work and activities.

The emphasis an institution places on general education and civic engagement in its general education program can have ripple effects on civic engagement across the institution and its value in the curriculum and campus community. Therefore, pre-tenure faculty may find that existing general education courses or new ones nested within the framework can be a fortuitous means of engaging in civic pedagogy. A general education course that engages in consistent and deliberative civic pedagogy, and provides space for these conversations, yields greater outcomes in civic capacity and knowledge regardless of major or course of study (for a review, see Suarez 2017). For institutions with minimal or reducing general education course requirements, faculty may wish to focus their efforts on promoting civic engagement in clubs and organizations that can reach all students, regardless of whether they complete a specific general education class. Faculty at institutions with stronger general education requirements should work to ensure that civic engagement becomes or remains an integral part of these courses. While your institution's general education program may not always be a pathway for pre-tenure faculty interested in civic engagement, the curricular creativity one can exercise in these courses provides another opportunity for academic and professional recognition.

However, caution is warranted. Instructors should be mindful about deploying active and experiential pedagogies without appropriate safeguards and preparation, both in and outside the classroom. Increasingly, administrators may be wary of classes and student organizations that may be seen by students and the larger, outside community as too "activist" or politically "unbalanced." This can be especially true for institutional cultures that emphasize impartiality or societal missions that are meant to be non-political/partisan. Other campuses may find themselves facing political headwinds that question the very legitimacy of civic engagement-related work. Facing these circumstances, professors may find success anchoring their lessons in best practices constructed from extant political scholarship. Another avenue is to frame such work as addressing what Boyer (1990) calls "consequential problems," or matters of import to the institution's larger mission and/or the regional community's concern.

Next, instructors should be attuned to what their students will encounter themselves, especially in the classroom and while on campus. While such deliberative and active learning techniques cultivate students' individual civic capacities (Thomas & Brower 2017), the greater erosion of sociopolitical norms of civil dialogue and debate means that many students may feel isolated, distraught, and generally uneasy when sharing their opinions and engaging in constructive dialogue. Creating a classroom environment that centers the student's civic capacity is a good way to ensure that students understand the nature of the course while administrators see it as advancing the institution's larger goal of creating capable citizens.

Likewise, the larger focus of teaching-focused institutions on community engagement helps to provide multiple avenues for students and faculty alike to not only engage in civic learning and practice, but also for faculty to undertake research and service-related activities that benefit the larger, regional community. While regional institutions should be mindful about how they approach their nested communities (Tanjeem & Illuzzi 2022), faculty have the capacity to approach the community as a partner

in community-based activities that double as both a mission priority for the institution but also as a resource for community shareholders. Such work not only may be counted as scholarship in tenure and promotion decisions but may also receive recognition and support from administration and other university resources (Moffett & Rice 2022). Additionally, such activities can prove fruitful for integrating students into the campus and regional communities, either as research assistants and/or as part of a course. Faculty should be mindful of these opportunities and cultivate a network with community partners. Your institution's community/governmental affairs office or related university-wide committees may be helpful in this regard.

In short, instructors should be mindful about their institution's culture and mission priorities. Avoiding pitfalls (or at least acknowledging tradeoffs) implicit in any culture is necessary to ensure that one can take full advantage of institutional missions that promote and value civic and democratic engagement.

### **UNDERSTANDING STUDENT NEEDS AND CHARACTERISTICS**

Beyond understanding institutional culture, support, and policies, pre-tenure faculty also must investigate and understand student characteristics and needs. While a quick review of the institution's mission statement or website can reveal something about institutional culture and support, student characteristics and needs operate at a micro-level. Without specifically investigating one's own course, major, or student organization, pre-tenure faculty may be unaware of the challenges that their students face. Such information is often gathered informally and gained through experience. Therefore, pre-tenure faculty — who tend to have joined an institution more recently than their tenured colleagues — need to pay special attention to student needs and characteristics to ensure that the civic engagement practices that they implement are effective. We focus on how pre-tenure faculty can best understand how students think about civic engagement, their educational and out-of-class backgrounds, and political socialization.

Civic engagement pedagogy emphasizes the cultivation of civic skills, knowledge, and experiences that bolster a student's political efficacy, creating a citizen who is a regular and productive member of society (McCartney 2017). However, students may not immediately know what civic engagement is and why they benefit from participating. Students, academic disciplines, and institutions sometimes package civic engagement not as a deliberative practice, but rather as service learning or volunteering. While potentially beneficial, one-time volunteer or "drive-by" events are unlikely to build the combination of service, civic knowledge, and interest in civic participation that underlie civic engagement (McCartney 2017). When asked, many students will often equate civic engagement with clean-up activities, food drives, and other charitable activities.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, civic engagement should not be limited to voter registration drives or events with elected officials, as this often gives the impression that off-election years are devoid of civic value. Pre-tenure faculty planning to implement civic engagement programs or projects in their classrooms should, therefore, first gauge how students define civic engagement. Doing so will help them explain the purpose of civic engagement activities which will help to ensure that students fully understand pedagogical methods before completing course evaluations or other faculty assessments critically important for earning tenure and promotion.

Pre-tenure faculty interested in creating civically engaged classrooms have less experience doing so compared to more senior faculty. Scholarly literature offers many excellent suggestions for civic engagement projects and approaches. There are, however, several ways that students' pre-college educational backgrounds may impact civic engagement effectiveness. At a general level, the quality of K-12 education in an institution's recruiting territory may dictate that civic engagement efforts begin by

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<sup>2</sup> In his survey study (see *infra* note 3), O'Brochta found that a third (33.3%) of respondents defined civic engagement as volunteering, almost exclusively as one-time events. Voting was next at 11.5%.

providing students with basic civic knowledge including an understanding of how governments function. All faculty, but especially those who are pre-tenure, need to demonstrate that their pedagogical techniques are effective and promote student learning. Therefore, pre-tenure faculty may wish to conduct a baseline assessment of civic knowledge in their classrooms or on campus to better justify the need for civic engagement work and to demonstrate future success of civic engagement programs. For example, O’Brochta, in a baseline survey of approximately 1,000 students, found that 57.3% knew that a two-thirds majority is required to override a presidential veto, about on par with the average U.S. adult.<sup>3</sup> State and local knowledge, however, was substantially lower, with only 16.2% of respondents knowing the number of Congressional districts in the state. These findings certainly reflect this particular institution’s position in one of the lowest scoring states for high school education and college preparation,<sup>4</sup> but it also suggests that faculty should emphasize state and local knowledge first, especially when a series of short-term successes are usually necessary for tenure and to help to build a long-lasting civic engagement program.

Beyond baseline assessments of pre-college political knowledge, pre-tenure faculty should take special care to consider the generalizability of scholarly literature for their student population based on their out-of-class experiences. Such scholarly literature has recently started to become more inclusive, but has focused on providing civic engagement opportunities to traditionally aged undergraduate students on a primarily residential campus who do not work during the academic year. Collectively, our institutions serve a substantial number of first-generation college students, many of whom are working and who receive financial aid. Accessibility of civic engagement opportunities is critical for equity. Civic engagement experiences should be accessible to students taking online classes, transfer students, non-traditional students, and students with disabilities. Thinking about civic engagement programming with an equity mindset will help faculty target small and meaningful interventions that also are achievable for those who are pre-tenure. Pre-tenure faculty often do not have the capacity or connections to develop new civic engagement programs designed specifically for their student populations. Combining ideas from scholarly literature with existing programs and initiatives on campus may be one way to build civic engagement capacity while investigating how suggestions from existing literature fit onto campus.

Non-traditionally aged students, graduate students, and commuter students are constituencies that are both often overlooked and can be essential resources for pre-tenure faculty developing civic engagement programs. What these students share is access to community and life experiences that can help pre-tenure faculty members narrow down ideas for civic engagement projects and better implement them. In a focus group of graduate students (as part of his larger study; see *supra* note 3), O’Brochta found that graduate students discussed their interest in more voter education and awareness of local community organizations through programs that are distinct from those targeted toward undergraduate students. Lorentz’s and Saks’s institutions offer illustrative examples of the unique challenges and opportunities of pre-tenure faculty looking at civic engagement programs beyond traditional undergraduate students: Both institutions have large commuter student populations, with most students at Saks’s institution being commuter students. Engaging commuter students requires a

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<sup>3</sup> The survey was approved by the IRB (22-118) and is available from the author in the form of an institutional report. Data taken from the 2020 Annenberg Public Policy Center’s Constitution Day Civics Survey: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/09/17/civics-knowledge-among-american-adults-jumps-new-survey-hold-your-applause/>. (Accessed April 10, 2023.) The 2022 survey did not give answer choices and instead asked whether ⅔ majority was accurate or not: [https://cdn.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Appendix\\_APPC\\_Civics\\_Sept\\_2022a.pdf](https://cdn.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Appendix_APPC_Civics_Sept_2022a.pdf). (Accessed April 10, 2023.)

<sup>4</sup> For a ranking of states, see US News’s collegiate rankings: <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/rankings/education/prek-12>. (Accessed April 10, 2023.)

significant concentration of resources and effort to extend their time on campus that may not otherwise occur. Non-traditional students also present unique issues. Many students — undergraduate and graduate alike — are working and/or caretakers for children or parents. These responsibilities are undeniably important and often make civic engagement a secondary concern (at best). For a pre-tenure faculty member, working with these students reveals opportunities to develop new partnerships across campus with different student affairs organizations to help facilitate these students' time on campus. For example, childcare services, lounges, and food access are all important opportunities for pre-tenure faculty to discuss civic engagement ideas and to develop allies across campus that are supportive of civic engagement work.

Finally, students are politically socialized in different ways that impact civic engagement effectiveness. None of our campuses have been immune from the uncivil nature that permeates partisan politics and discourse, especially during the era of COVID-19. Lorentz's institution is situated in a region that is home to several hotbeds of right-wing MAGA/Trumpism that has engendered opposition, often with explosive displays in area newspapers and events. Meanwhile at Saks's university, cultural clashes are commonplace as students from rural areas in mid-Michigan often come into contact for the first time with students from urban centers in Flint, Detroit, Lansing, and beyond. More broadly, some students, especially those in religious organizations and labor unions, may be familiar with or belong to cultural institutions, block clubs/neighborhood associations, civic organizations, and interfaith networks that present political and nonpolitical opportunities for civic engagement pre-college that pave the way for later success in college civic engagement. The types of skills and familial socialization that these students receive translate to a different set of values once on campus. Both from a civic engagement and a public service motivation perspective, these formative experiences often lead to future engagement in the public sphere (see, e.g., Holt and Choi 2022; Piatak and Holt 2019). Pre-tenure faculty are especially vulnerable to changing political socialization. Some students may belong to organizations that provide straightforward opportunities for civic engagement collaborations. Other civic engagement projects may be better implemented after a series of successful smaller projects wherein pre-tenure faculty can gauge how responsive students, the administration, and the community are to their efforts.

Taken together, we encourage pre-tenure faculty to systematically study their students to understand their civic engagement needs. Existing tools like the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement or National Survey of Student Engagement (NSLVE) may be useful if your institution participates in these national programs. However, these tools are insufficient because they are not purpose-built for the type of civic engagement projects and programs any one faculty member is interested in implementing. Pre-tenure faculty need to do civic engagement work with a clearly defined design and measurable results. Doing so requires significant pre-project work in order to ensure that civic engagement projects and programs are well-received, meet their objectives, and are designed so that they fit into a tenure and promotion packet.

### **TENURE & PROMOTION: ENSURING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IS COUNTED**

Campuses vary in their tenure and promotion (T&P) procedures, although a commonality across institutions is that probationary faculty will be evaluated in the three traditional areas of teaching, scholarship, and service, possibly among others (e.g., collegiality, student advising/mentoring, off-campus activities, etc.). In addition to our campuses operationalizing the traditional standards differently (see below), our institutions also vary in the categories candidates are evaluated in. For example, O'Brochta's institution includes criteria for collegiality, advising, leadership (on or off campus), beyond the traditional service category. Ultimately, how civic engagement scholarship and pedagogy factor into one's tenure portfolio ultimately comes down to how one's institution views civic

engagement specifically during the tenure review process. Here, we offer some suggestions for pre-tenure faculty to consider:

First, we highly recommend that pre-tenure faculty thoroughly review all applicable tenure criteria. This is important given how some institutions may have standardized tenure processes applicable across the institution, some may have unit-specific (e.g., departmental or college-level) bylaws, and others may have a combination thereof. These processes may be found in collective bargaining agreements, governing bylaws, administrative directives, and the like. Speaking with tenured faculty is also recommended, as they can help you navigate the process generally and determine how one's civic engagement work fits into relevant criteria (or not). Some institutions have vaguely defined tenure and promotion policies or policies that are unwritten. It is even more crucial in this case to work with colleagues in your unit to develop a written understanding of what forms of civic engagement work, if any, will count toward tenure and how (Moffett & Rice 2022).

Second, understanding how civic engagement scholarship and teaching will be received by a tenure review board is important as you plan out your career's pre-tenure journey. This is highly dependent on the tenure criteria employed by your institution. For institutions that utilize a standardized T&P system applicable across academic units, there may be some built in flexibility for civic engagement work that other T&P processes may not permit. For instance, Lorentz's institution utilizes a common T&P system across the university that is incorporated into the faculty's collective bargaining agreement. Given the university's larger strategic commitment to community engagement, the T&P guidelines broadly define teaching, service, and scholarship to include community-focused activities that bolster the University's profile. Civic engagement pedagogy employed in one's teaching is favorably received, and civic engagement scholarship, especially if it is locally impactful and bolsters the University's community profile, can also be counted in the scholarship and service categories (Moffett & Rice 2022).

Other institutions may employ unit-specific T&P criteria, which may or may not be nested within a university-wide system. Saks's institution offers T&P criteria at the unit-level linked with disciplinary standards. At her institution, most units recognize civic engagement work as service, not as scholarship, although there are some distinctions. For example, faculty who engage in community-based scholarship will often be able to count their work as scholarship if they are able to secure a publishing venue for their work. While allowing for some additional flexibility at the unit-level for including civic engagement work as a part of teaching, research, and service, the unit-specific nature means that the faculty member needs to be aware of their unit's and the larger discipline's guidelines about how such work will be received. This may pose a barrier for traditional political science units, given the discipline's historical treatment of civic engagement work as teaching and service, but the discipline is recognizing the importance of civic engagement and pedagogy work for T&P (see, e.g., Kedrowski 2022; McCartney 2013, 2017). It also means that the faculty member may need to educate colleagues who will be advocating on their behalf about civic engagement scholarship and pedagogy or at least discuss their work to get a sense of how it will be presented to the tenure and promotion committee.

As discussed, there is often great flexibility for counting civic engagement work at teaching-focused institutions, albeit one must be attentive to the nuances of the T&P criteria. Indeed, many teaching-focused colleges and universities often encourage faculty to submit tenure portfolios that advance a common theme. Civic engagement work can easily achieve this end: a faculty member's incorporation of civic engagement pedagogy in her teaching can inform her service activities and research agenda. In Lorentz's case, his first- and second-year probationary reviews all noted the common theme of civic engagement and democratic learning inherent in his teaching praxis, scholarship, and service activities, noting how, collectively, they promoted the University's mission. While this approach requires a good deal of synergy among the faculty member's professional activities, the payoff likely makes a T&P review more manageable and successful.

## **CONCLUSION**

Faculty at teaching-focused universities have many opportunities to incorporate and promote civic engagement praxis and scholarship in their professional activities. In many ways, these institutions are extremely receptive to faculty who wish to pursue civic engagement work, but that does not mean there are no impediments to navigate. In this chapter, we have detailed a few of these institutional, curricular, and logistical challenges wrought by our divisive politics, offering advice about how best to overcome these obstacles while still ensuring that your work is both efficacious and properly recognized (professionally and institutionally). That is the larger lesson to glean here: your institution's context matters a great deal, and once you understand your particular environment, you will have a better understanding of how to proceed with civic engagement work on and off campus. Even in this divisive period, helping to educate the next generation of active, engaged citizens (and scholarship!) still pays dividends.

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