Forming Civic Virtue through an Honors Seminar Focused on Local Civil Rights History

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Abstract: Citizenship and related values are common elements in the missions of honors programs. Our goal was to design a junior honors seminar with an intentional focus on developing citizenship, civic identity, and civic virtues through engagement with the challenging history of our city, Montgomery, Alabama. The course employed four evidence-based strategies for character formation in higher education: reflection on personal experience, engagement with virtuous exemplars, dialogue that increases virtue literacy, and awareness of situational variables. This paper describes our focus on learning about Civil Rights history to develop citizenship and civic virtues, the course's impact on students, our reflections on the course's effectiveness, and recommendations for courses with similar goals.

Keywords: character education; City as Text™; civic identity; civic virtue; Civil Rights; curriculum development; virtue literacy

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Most honors programs share the goals of preparing students not only for their professions but also for good citizenship. Their mission or vision statements typically specify the goal of becoming good citizens. For example, the University of Alabama Honors College mission (University of Alabama, n.d.) is to "inspire students to connect with others as they become…Ethical and Empathetic Citizens…within their chosen fields of study and beyond." The University of Michigan's vision statement (University of Michigan, n.d.) emphasizes "personal and social responsibility and nurturing civic and community-engaged students." The mission of San

Diego State University's Weber Honors College (San Diego State University, n.d.) is to provide "a unique community and a gathering space for a diverse group of students who share a commitment to…giving back to the communities in which they live and work."

The Auburn University at Montgomery Honors Program has a core value of global citizenship. Adapted from the American Association of Colleges and Universities VALUE Rubrics (2024), the related learning outcomes, which are much like the learning outcomes held by other honors programs, state that honors students will

- become more informed, open-minded, and responsible people who are attentive to diversity across the spectrum of differences;
- seek to understand how their actions affect both local and global communities; and
- address the world's most pressing and enduring issues collaboratively and equitably.

These missions, vision statements, and learning outcomes are common not only for honors programs but also for many universities and colleges. For example, one of our institution's core values is to promote "citizenship and community engagement" (Auburn University at Montgomery, *Mission and Vision*, n.d.). These examples also provide evidence that honors programs have goals related to the development of student character in the form of civic identity and the civic virtues to impact local and global communities. Development of engaged citizens with the knowledge, character, and dispositions to affect their communities is vital in our fractured political climate.

Although some might assert that public higher education oversteps if it strives to develop student character, counterarguments include the historic role of character development in higher education; the importance of character and ethics in educating for the professions; and the unrealistic assumption that education could exist without some character formation. Reuben (2022) explains that historically "virtue was at the core of the early American college" and that "it has never been completely abandoned," although she argues that it was deemphasized as institutions "adapted to the conditions of modern industrial society" (p. 41). As programs of study focused on professions such as education, law, nursing, and social work, they prioritized development of virtues specific to the particular discipline (e.g., compassion for nurses). Finally, the core mission of universities is to teach certain virtues, most evidently intellectual virtues that include curiosity and open-mindedness.

In *Character Education in Universities: A Framework for Flourishing* (Jubilee Centre, 2020), the authors state, "The question is not whether, but what qualities of character are being formed by university education, and how intentionally this formative aspect of education is undertaken" (p. 8). This framework asserts that universities can develop intentionally curricular and co-curricular programs that enable students to cultivate civic virtues, moral virtues, performance strengths, and practical wisdom. In this regard, honors programs may be standard setters in higher education related to development of character, particularly citizenship. Brooks et al. (2022) remark on a "growing movement to recover and reimagine character education in universities" (p. 3), underscoring that the related curricular and co-curricular work done in honors programs provides pilot programs for the rest of the university.

CONTEXT

Inspired by AUM's vision that our institution strives to be "recognized as an integral community partner" (Auburn University at Montgomery, *Mission and Vision*, n.d.), a team of faculty and staff pursued and were awarded a grant from the John Templeton Foundation titled "From Civil Rights to Civic Virtue: Forming Character through Community" (CRCV). The mission of the CRCV "is to foster civic identity, commitment, and civic-mindedness through community-engaged learning experiences" ("Civil Rights and Civic Virtue Society," p. 1). We pursue these goals through activities that promote a greater understanding of the Civil Rights history of Montgomery and our region, including the many exemplars, both those who are well known (e.g., Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks) and less familiar (e.g., Jo Ann Robinson and Fred Gray). We characterize civic virtues as the character traits of a good citizen. They are the personal qualities that enable a person to contribute to the good of a community, aligning with the Jubilee Centre's description of civic virtue as engagement of institutions and individual students in their local, national, and global contexts. These include service, civility, hospitality, citizenship, and charity" (Jubilee Centre, 2020, p. 7). CRCV focuses on the development of civic identity and the civic virtues we see demonstrated through the lives and activities of exemplary individuals involved in the Civil Rights Movement: courage, hope, justice, perseverance, and solidarity. The CRCV project provides an opportunity to revisit topics that may have been neglected in AUM students' high school education and to center the development of civic virtue in addressing injustice and community needs.

AUM's University Honors Program includes themed seminars that count toward the university's core requirements. The junior seminar focuses on civic engagement and leadership and has the theme Challenging the Process, which fits well with the mission of CRCV. For each offering of the course, a different perspective is taken on the theme, and students are encouraged to find ways to influence our local communities. The *Honors Program Handbook* describes the course as follows: "This course focuses on the nature of leadership and the cultivation of leadership skills, in whatever domain(s) the faculty teaching the course chooses to emphasize" (Auburn University at Montgomery, *University Honors Program Handbook 2024-2025*, n.d.).

In this iteration of the junior seminar, the course was designed to deepen student understanding of the Civil Rights movement by employing evidence-based strategies that can foster character development related to civic virtues (Lamb et al., 2022). Students read Frye Galliard's *Cradle of Freedom* (2006), studied primary sources, viewed documentaries, and visited local civil rights museums, including the Rosa Parks Museum, Freedom Rides Museum, and the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice.

A diverse group of 11 students enrolled in the class, including seven females and four males, seven who identified as white and four who identified as Black or African American. During the semester they took the course, three students were sophomores, seven were juniors, and one was a senior. Two of the female students were Muslim; several other students were devout Christians. Others were less outspoken about their religious beliefs. The students' majors included biology (5), computer science (2), pre-nursing (2), chemistry (1), and social work (1).

The course incorporated evidence-based strategies identified by Lamb et al. (2022) with particular emphasis on reflection on personal experience, engagement with virtuous exemplars, dialogue that increases virtue literacy, and awareness of situational variables. Students wrote reflective journals weekly; heard local exemplars speak, including a class discussion with Henry Allen, Jr., one of the foot soldiers of the Selma to Montgomery March; read Christian B. Miller's *The Character Gap* (2018), which uses psychological research to point out that we are less likely to be virtuous than we may think, particularly in certain contexts; and had class discussions of virtue generally and, more specifically, virtues demonstrated by exemplars of the Civil Rights Movement. The course concluded with students proposing a project that could affect the campus or local communities.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This course should enable students to . . .

FOUNDATIONAL KNOWLEDGE

1. Demonstrate understanding of the nature of moral and civic virtues.
2. Demonstrate understanding of some key events of the Civil Rights Movement.

APPLICATION

3. Construct a profile describing the civic identity, purposes, and virtues displayed by an individual during key events of the Civil Rights Movement.
4. Construct a profile describing the civic identity, purposes, and virtues of a person in their own life whom they think of as a living exemplar of deep and sustained moral and civic commitment.

INTEGRATION

5. Display connections between the knowledge, skills, and abilities they are learning through their major and their own developing sense of civic identity, purpose, and character.

HUMAN DIMENSION

6. Produce an aspirational personal statement of civic commitment and purpose to which they would like to devote their life combined with an analysis of the virtues they will need to embody this ideal.
7. In teams, propose a substantive plan of action for a service project that could benefit the community.

CARING

8. Discuss the ways this course is cultivating an increased desire to improve or benefit their personal communities.

LEARNING HOW TO LEARN

9. Develop a personal learning project consisting of goals, a plan to achieve these goals, and strategies for self-assessment in fulfilling these goals.

ANALYSIS

One of the course learning outcomes was to increase virtue literacy (#1). Although students had most likely been exposed to character education in some form during their K-12 education, they were less likely to be familiar with language related to virtue. Classroom discussions of *The Character Gap* and of the virtues of Civil Rights exemplars addressed the goal of increasing virtue literacy. The following excerpts were typical of the student reflections on virtue.

- I pondered how many slaves had hope through adversity. In our class discussions, we mentioned the virtue of hope, and why hope is a good thing to have.

- Even though it seemed that they were walking through the valley of the shadow of death, the slaves hung on to a little hope as they prayed to God for deliverance.

The next two quotations also demonstrate that students understood the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean, that "every virtue lies between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency. In short, virtues are means" (Fisher, 2018, p. 55).

- I think that [Fred] Shuttlesworth displays the virtue of resilience well. In this context, I define resilience as making decisions to continue efficiently and wisely. Shuttlesworth does not have the deficiency vice of hesitation, and he does not have the vices of excess, inconsideration [sic] and ruthlessness, so he is admirable for his ability to make decisions well in the midst of pressure-filled situations.

- To more precisely define the virtue of discipline that I am attributing [to John] Lewis, I would label the vice of deficiency of discipline to be irrational and rash and the vice of excess of discipline to be extreme obedience. Lewis falls in between these two vices on the mark of virtuous discipline because he makes sound decisions that are appropriate for the given circumstance in regard to time, reason, place, and person.

Another course learning outcome (#2) was to increase student understanding of the Civil Rights Movement. Students' initial reflections confirmed the instructors' concern about their prior knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement; most only recalled a few major figures or events from the

Civil Rights Movement, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., the Selma March, and Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her bus seat.

The following two student reflections demonstrated a connection to students' own religious beliefs and compassion for or identification with the exemplars. We are hopeful this indicates that they are integrating what they learned about civic virtues into their own current belief systems. As the Framework (Jubilee Centre, 2020, p. 5) points out, development of character is "culturally responsive" because it is "emphasized in many cultures and can draw on resources from diverse traditions."

- Further into the [Legacy] Museum, I visited the holograms of slaves that told their stories. One woman longed in a pleading tone, "I wish I could hold those children and tell them that God will keep us safe. He will make things right." I wept. Thinking about humanity's failure to love one another was overwhelming at that moment.

- As a Muslim, Palestinian woman in the south [sic] where UA [the University of Alabama] is so close, I find it ironic how just 50 years ago almost, anyone not considered white would be degraded. It's completely unacceptable how they treated Miss [Autherine] Lucy because of the color of her skin. She teaches me how grateful one should be for being able to be educated without discrimination and death threats to your life. Also, that education shouldn't be taken for granted. Knowledge is something no one can ever take from you.

Another student learning outcome (#3) addressed the application of their understanding of the Civil Rights Movement and virtue literacy. These four reflections also demonstrated students' growing awareness of their own civic identities:

- Today while I was standing in the spot where the Freedom Riders were beaten, I tried to picture what that would have been like from a first-person point of view. What would I have done?

- Because I studied John Lewis, who possesses the virtue of courage, I have since been challenged to further develop my moral identity by fighting for things that are just and promote more social equality.… I will now question myself before taking actions that will affect the lives of many others, would promote equality for them, or lessen the amount [sic] of abilities that they have. Also, a lesson that I learned from my study on Lewis that I would hope to apply to my own life

is to always aim to build a beloved community. I feel like I would be able to carry this out well when I hopefully become a social worker in my professional career.

- It wasn't comfortable for Jim [Zwerg] when he got off that Greyhound bus in Montgomery, and yet he was gracefully virtuous when others were harming him. Being uncomfortable is an essential method to grow in many virtues. To practice Jim [Zwerg]'s virtues that I admire, I must find myself utilizing virtuous behavior even in the most uncomfortable and difficult situations.

- This study [of an exemplar] has challenged me in a way that I need to be challenged. It made me think about how far I am actually willing to go to fight for what I believe in. It also challenged me because Fred Shuttleworth is a lot more dedicated to his causes than I believe I would be. He was not afraid of death. He would give his life to ensure posterity.

CONCLUSIONS

Student reflections demonstrate the impact of the course and the promise of the course design. Assignments that required students to profile local and Civil Rights exemplars and reflect on visits to the rich Civil Rights resources provided evidence of changes to their knowledge and awareness of their developing civic identities.

One assignment, the final project, in which students proposed ways to impact their communities, was not realized. Spring semester ended, students dispersed for the summer, and their enthusiasm for the projects had waned by the time fall semester began. Honors students are typically very involved in activities on and off campus and juggle an array of competing priorities, and this project lost its urgency for them. In future offerings, the seminar might be scheduled in the fall with a one-hour, follow-up colloquium in the spring so that students could implement the projects they designed earlier.

The region surrounding Montgomery is rich with resources for teaching Civil Rights history. Other institutions seeking to offer a similar course will likely (and unfortunately) be in regions with their own histories of social injustice as well as exemplary citizens who have courageously pursued justice. These spaces would provide equally rich opportunities for students to develop their civic identities and commitments.

Another improvement to the course would be to incorporate more of the elements of City as Text™, such as initial reflective writings on their knowledge and beliefs about Montgomery and a walking exploration of downtown Montgomery early in the semester with the goal of raising questions such as "whose lens–from what viewpoint–we are looking" (Braid, 2021, p. ix). Juxtapositions between Civil Rights and Confederate history are still disappointingly easy to find in downtown. We could design an assignment in which students incorporate the lenses of their own majors into their examination of Montgomery's Civil Rights history and their civic identities. Near the end of the semester, another walkabout and reflective writing would help them synthesize the prior beliefs they held with what they had since learned about our Civil Rights history and its vestiges. Our goal is that the experiences of the course would demonstrate to them that their understanding has "organized itself into areas, events, and interactions that either immediately or eventually make sense out of contradictory bits of information" (Braid, 2021, p. ix).

We acknowledge that "in reality, all institutions have a formative effect on those who inhabit them" (Jubilee Centre, 2020, p. 4). Honors programs have a formative impact on student character development, whether we intend it or not. Honors programs also have the potential to serve as incubators for innovations that affect the university. How might we align our curricular and co-curricular programing to reinforce character traits and virtues so that students flourish as individuals during and after their college experiences? Our experience with the design of this course suggests promising avenues to explore related to citizenship, civic identity, and civic virtue through exploration of place and local histories. We argue for the intentional design of honors learning experiences based on the evidence-based strategies that have been shown to develop character as described by Lamb et al. (2022) and as demonstrated by the powerful effect of City as Text practices.

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