



Canada's Universities Fail Civic Education: Establishing Schools of Civics in Alberta Is a Model for Canada

John von Heyking & Geoff Sigalet

This study was commissioned by the Centre for Civic Engagement. The CCE is a non-partisan Canadian charity dedicated to conducting original research on public policy issues related to Canadian prosperity, productivity, and national flourishing. The CCE's research informs an active program of policy seminars, events, conferences, and lectures all aimed at providing the policy making community with actionable insights that encourage informed decision making on issues that matter to Canadians.

Introduction

Declining public confidence in Canada's universities clarifies just how badly they need reforms, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. There are clear signs that publicly funded universities are directly contributing to social problems, including the spread of authoritarian values among educated young people and the cancellation of controversial speakers as part of a culture of restricted speech¹ and enforced ideological conformity.

Modern research universities were intended to combat these kinds of social problems, and yet their increasingly sectarian character² threatens to undermine public trust in these institutions.³ This crisis has caught the attention of top policy-makers, including Alberta Premier Danielle Smith, who has commented upon the problems of ideological imbalance⁴ in universities and how lack of civic literacy and competence⁵ in society at large threatens democratic self-government.

The crisis in the universities has numerous causes, but fundamentally it comes down to the now widespread view that academic inquiry should be destructive or "critical," instead of constructive. Too many regard the role of university education as teaching students to repudiate and reject their social order, rather than understanding, preserving, and reforming it for the common good. Universities are failing in their mission to prepare students to become thoughtful and skilled citizens prepared for the challenges of liberal democratic citizenship.

The Government of Alberta is currently addressing the crisis of Alberta's universities through its Expert Panel on Post-Secondary Institution Funding and Alberta's Competitiveness,⁶ which will be chaired by Jack Mintz of the University of Calgary. The work of this panel can offer a window for policy experimentation, not only in Alberta but also in other provinces.

¹ Jamie Sarkonak, "He mildly questioned DEI. His law school calls that 'misconduct,'" *National Post* online, June 16, 2025, <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/jamie-sarkonak-he-mildly-questioned-dei-his-law-school-calls-that-misconduct>.

² Gregory Conti, "The Rise of the Sectarian University," *Compactmag.com*, December 28, 2023, <https://www.compactmag.com/article/the-rise-of-the-sectarian-university/>.

³ Cory J Clark, Calvin Isch, Jim AC Everett, and Azim Shariff, "Even When Ideologies Align, People Distrust Politicized Institutions," *PsyArXiv*, https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/sfubr_v1.

⁴ Jason Markusoff, "Danielle Smith wants ideology 'balance' at universities. Alberta academics wonder what she's tilting at," *CBC.ca*, April 20, 2024, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/danielle-smith-ideology-universities-alberta-analysis-1.7179680#:~:text=She%27s%20made%20it%20clear%20she,the%20CBC%27s%20Power%20and%20Politics>.

⁵ Lisa Johnson, "Alberta Premier Smith says MLAs to take lessons on governance following ethics report," *Edmonton Journal* online, June 9, 2023, <https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/alberta-premier-smith-says-mlas-to-take-lessons-on-governance-following-ethics-report>.

⁶ "Expert Panel on Post-Secondary Institution Funding and Alberta's Competitiveness," *Alberta.ca*, <https://www.alberta.ca/expert-panel-on-post-secondary-institution-funding-and-albertas-competitiveness>.

The Choices

There are two options facing policymakers: (1) either defund and shrink Alberta's universities, especially the parts that are most obviously complicit with social ills; or (2) reform and repurpose sections of the university to fulfill their original purpose. We recommend the second choice, and in this proposal, we set out a concrete plan to reform parts of Alberta's universities to serve once again their primary function of educating Albertans in the civic thought and principles that are fundamental to the Western way of life.

There have been many proposals to restore universities to their original purpose, but the basic truth is that no proposal will be effective without the right professors. No amount of think tank seminars for undergraduates or free speech legislation will make a real difference if the province does not also ensure that the right kinds of educators and researchers are on campus and that students are required to learn from them. We need boots on the ground.

At a time when civic literacy and civic virtue are in crisis and when more people than ever are moving to Alberta (including new Canadians), there is a critical need for civic education based on the best teachings of Western civilization. Liberal democracy depends on citizens capable of thoughtful reflection and deliberation about the significant problems confronting our society, and these citizens need the knowledge, skills, and habits that enable them to work together to solve those problems.

The Solution

We propose reinvigorating the civic mission at Alberta's post-secondaries, beginning with the establishment of a School of Civics at both of Alberta's flagship universities, the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary, whose enrolments can sustain them. Grant MacEwan University might also be able to sustain one. Smaller institutions, including the University of Lethbridge, could develop smaller-scale versions (e.g., building upon the new Jarislowsky Chair in Trust and Political Leadership). Schools on smaller campuses could have mandates modified to suit their smaller sizes, with less emphasis on research. The Schools would be degree-granting. They would be established by explicit amendments to the *Post-Secondary Learning Act* that establish their course offerings in civics as university-wide undergraduate mandates (see below for more details) and earmarked funds **from existing funding levels**.

Schools of Civics address the crisis of civic literacy and civic virtue, and the imbalance of perspectives in universities, by placing the founding ideals of Canada's liberal democracy at the forefront. It is probably too late to recreate balance within existing faculties, and, in any case, governments lack the legislative tools to micromanage university administration to enforce it. However, it is possible to create new Schools from scratch within the existing universities that are uninfected by and insulated from the existing pathologies. The new Schools would bring balance to the universities by providing a protected forum that affirms Canada's history and constitutional traditions. This affirmation should be achieved without shying away from examining past evils in a way that avoids the extreme view that regards Canada as an illegitimate "genocidal state." The Schools would not be partisan but rather pre-partisan in the sense that they aim to educate students in the character and basis of Canadian political, economic, and constitutional ideals and institutions that form the basis of free and civil debate on policy issues.

A Proven Model

Past plans for improving universities through board appointments and legislated free speech codes have failed because policymakers underestimated the total capture of these institutions by bad-faith actors. Our plan follows the successful example of American universities (e.g., University of Florida,⁷ University of Texas–Austin,⁸ Ohio State University,⁹ Arizona State University,¹⁰ North Carolina,¹¹ Utah,¹² Stanford,¹³ Tufts,¹⁴ Princeton,¹⁵ etc.) that have circumvented institutional capture and harnessed the power of the university to rebuild public trust.¹⁶ Here in Canada, McMaster University recently opened the Wilson College of Civic Leadership and Engagement,¹⁷ which offers undergraduate and graduate degrees. The University of Alberta is host to the Peter Lougheed Leadership College, but our proposal is more ambitious and focuses on educating for civic literacy in the social science and liberal arts traditions.

The success of these new American Schools is evident from their strong enrolments, their bipartisan support, and by the sheer number of new institutions being created. While these Schools depend on a large donor base to support academic programming, state governments provide essential operational support which also includes hiring of directors and tenured and tenure-track faculty who fully support the mission. For example, the Arizona state government provides \$5 million/year to the School of Economic Thought and Leadership at ASU, and the Ohio state government provides \$12 million/year for the five Schools it established in the state system. The Texas state government recently earmarked \$100 million¹⁸ for the School of Civic Leadership at UT-Austin.

⁷ "Leading a higher education revolution," *Hamilton School for Classical and Civic Education* online, https://hamilton.ufl.edu/?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=Search&utm_campaign=BA&utm_term=Gen&gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwmSzBhAsEiwAXE2CvwLJ7yHt5jR5gThtYjLiZP7JqulYgRoQUELKWV4HFMfBT7q9CTlfCLxoCfzcQAvD_BwE.

⁸ *The University of Texas at Austin Civitas Institute*, <https://www.civitasinstitute.org/>.

⁹ "Ohio State trustees appoint Chase Center academic council," *The Ohio State University* online, November 15, 2023, <https://news.osu.edu/ohio-state-trustees-appoint-chase-center-academic-council/>.

¹⁰ *Arizona State University*, <https://scctl.asu.edu/>.

¹¹ *The University of North Carolina*, <https://civiclife.unc.edu/>.

¹² "General Education," *The University of Utah* online, <https://generaleducation.utah.edu/>.

¹³ "Stanford Civics Initiative," *Stanford University* online, <https://civics.stanford.edu/>.

¹⁴ "Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life," *Tufts University* online, <https://tischcollege.tufts.edu/programs-major/civic-studies-co-major-minors>.

¹⁵ "James Madison Program," *Princeton University* online, <https://jmp.princeton.edu/>.

¹⁶ Justin Dyer, "Embracing Civics Can Help Restore Trust in Higher Education," *National Review* online, January 6, 2024, <https://www-nationalreview-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.nationalreview.com/2024/01/embracing-civics-can-help-restore-trust-in-higher-education/amp/>.

¹⁷ "Wilson College of Leadership & Civic Engagement," *McMaster University*, <https://wilsoncollege.mcmaster.ca/about-wilson-college/>.

¹⁸ "Board of Regents Invests \$100 Million in UT's School of Civic Leadership," *UT News* online, May 8, 2025, <https://news.utexas.edu/2025/05/08/board-of-regents-invests-100-million-in-uts-school-of-civic-leadership/>.

The Proposed Schools

Alberta should pilot new degree-granting “School of Civics” at each of Alberta’s flagship universities.

We propose that the School of Civics deliver a mandatory general education course that is required for every university student to graduate. This mandate could be entrenched by an amendment to the *Post-Secondary Learning Act*, and with amendments to the Campus Alberta Quality Council’s degree requirements that would oblige all Alberta post-secondary students to take a civics course for their degree. At a minimum, this mandate would be a three-hour credit course dedicated to the founding political, constitutional, and economic ideals of the Canadian government and its history. The curriculum would be more focused than that found in current programs of general education, which tend to offer a smorgasbord of courses whose emphasis on abstract notions of “global citizenship” or “citizenship without borders”¹⁹ fails to teach students to understand and engage their own democratic systems.

Each School of Civics would also offer at least one major and one minor program, based on a curriculum that includes those founding ideals, as well as multidisciplinary courses that integrate political philosophy, economics, history, literature, and public law. Ideally, the Schools would offer two majors (and minors) with a multidisciplinary flavour to fulfil its mission, one focused on philosophy, political science, economics and public law and another based around a Great Books curriculum. The majors and minors could be organized into two groupings: 1) Philosophy, Politics, Economics and Law (PPEL), and 2) Classical Civics and Statecraft. The number of course credits would be comparable to other majors and minors at the School’s host institution.

In addition to preparing students for thoughtful and deliberative citizenship, the majors would impart transferrable skills and ways of approaching problems that prepare students to succeed in meaningful careers in numerous fields, including law, government, public policy, finance, consulting, health, nonprofits and other areas.

The curriculum would also include a Work Integrated Learning component that could take the form of internships with public and private institutions that would promote civic learning. Key to the curriculum is imparting both knowledge of Canada’s political tradition but also practical knowledge and habituation into the forms, institutions, and practices of government that encourages responsible citizenship rooted in freedom of speech, deliberation, judgment, justice, and discernment of the common good, as opposed to the current indoctrination in political activism.

¹⁹ “General Education,” Mount Royal University, <https://catalog.mtroyal.ca/content.php?catoid=33&navoid=2704>.

School Mandates

These new Schools would have four mandates:

- (1) to promote a high standard of civic education for undergraduates, which includes guaranteeing academic freedom and viewpoint diversity on campus;
- (2) to fund research and graduate and post-graduate education in social sciences and humanities that promotes civic excellence;
- (3) to support new curricula for civic literacy to train and license new educators for K-12 education in Alberta; and
- (4) to champion free speech and civic discourse with the wider public.

Mandate #1: Promoting a High Standard of Civic Education for Undergraduates

Schools of Civics blend the study of classic texts in the Western tradition with the examination of the ideas, institutions, and civic culture that have shaped the tradition of free government upon which the Canadian political system is based. It also advances experiential and work-integrated learning (WIL) in leadership and civic affairs and the practice of civil discourse. Its aim is to raise the level of debate and civility by addressing the deeper questions that we confront both as human beings and as citizens. It promotes the understanding of the constitutional and institutional forms in which policy is debated, deliberated, and created.

Schools of Civics address the crisis of civic literacy and civic virtue that has led to the cancel culture in universities, which has spread out to create wider problems in society. By combining an education in the ideas of our political and cultural tradition with the experiential learning in practices of self-government and deliberation, the Schools of Civics can play a role in the education to liberty that universities were originally meant to perform.

Mandate #2: Civics Research

Research matters. Having balanced and robust research in the humanities and social sciences matters not only because knowledge about these areas is valuable in of itself, but also because research is regularly used for important political ends. This compounds the problems created by the serious imbalance in the current research environment at Alberta's universities. There is an obvious relationship between the paucity of faculty members who hold conservative or classical liberal political views and the bias of much research against conservative and classical liberal perspectives. Solving this problem requires correcting the imbalance in faculty and creating programs that support research from conservative and classical liberal perspectives. The impact of such research bias is perhaps the most obvious in the context of law schools. Alberta's law faculties did not feature a single constitutional scholar openly defending the constitutionality of Alberta's Sovereignty Act, despite there being a clear case for its orthodoxy.²⁰ We have a demand for local researchers working on important issues like this, but little to no supply.

²⁰ Jesse Hartery and Geoffrey Sigalet, "The Frontiers of Nullification and Anticommandeering: Federalism and Extrajudicial Constitutional Interpretation," *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, Forthcoming. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4817313.

As Ted Morton²¹ wrote recently, “To provide funding for new institutions on university campuses that ensure students have access to the ideas and facts that rebut and disprove the new pseudo-progressive orthodoxies. Fight false speech with true speech. The historical facts are on our side.” Recall that just five right-of-centre professors at the University of Calgary, in a generally left-leaning Department of Political Science with over 20 tenure track faculty, gained national and even international recognition as the “Calgary School” of political science. With beachheads across different fields and faculties, each School of Civics will hopefully create a host of new “Calgary Schools”.

Another factor is that the federal government has appointed academics to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) who have approved openly politicized criteria for research grants. It is unsurprising that there are reams of research that support the claims of radical progressives when the federal government has earmarked millions in funding for research explicitly aimed not at truth but at realizing the goals of progressive activists.²²

Alberta needs an aggressive strategy to support high quality academic research that challenges biased scholarship and balances the perspectives represented in existing research programs. Bringing high quality researchers to Alberta will require funding tenure-track research positions across the humanities and social sciences, with endowments allocated to Alberta Research Chairs (ARCs) in high priority research areas. The Government of Alberta’s New North America Initiative²³ that focuses on Canada-U.S. relations is a precedent. Some preliminary ideas for ARCs include: Constitutional Federalism, Constitutional Rights, Conservative Thought, Property Rights, Political Theory, Political Economy, Canadian History, Canadian Demography, Classical Education, and Drug Policy. If the ARCs were funded at the same level as Canada Research Chairs, these 10 chairs would cost only \$2 million annually, or less than 0.05% of the existing Alberta Advanced Education budget.

Chairs along these lines, and regular tenure track positions in the Schools of Civics, should be statutorily mandated as cross-appointments in cognate fields and faculties (subject to approval by the board of the School of Civics housing the position). For example, an Alberta Research Chair in Constitutional Federalism at the University of Alberta School of Civics, but also fully cross-appointed in the Faculties of Law and the Faculty of Arts’ Department of Political Science. This would effectively allow each School of Civics to not only create a new intellectual home for research, but also to significantly impact the balance of other fields and faculties. School of Civics professors would thereby have faculty voting powers in other fields and faculties without allowing those faculties to corrupt the School of Civics.

External observers have been the ones who have mostly examined the crisis of universities because most people within universities have an interest in either downplaying it or ignoring it. As a result, there are only a handful of academic studies²⁴ that examine the severity of cancel culture in Canadian universities. The success of these Schools will partly depend on encouraging research on civics and on establishing a body of scholarly evidence pointing to its effectiveness.

²¹ Ted Morton, “Woke is killing free speech on campuses and here are five ways we fight back!” *The Western Standard* online, March 13, 2023, https://www.westernstandard.news/opinion/morton-woke-is-killing-free-speech-on-campuses-and-here-are-five-ways-we-fight-back/article_c733fd42-c1b9-11ed-a484-af3ff6fe70e2.html.

²² Dave Snow, “The federal government is spending millions on equity, diversity, and inclusion research,” *thehub.ca*, April 2, 2024, <https://thehub.ca/2024/04/02/dave-snow-equity-diversity-and-inclusion-funding/>.

²³ “NEWS: School launches New North America Initiative focused on Canada-U.S. relations,” *University of Calgary School of Public Policy* online, <https://www.pollicyschool.ca/news/school-launches-new-north-america-initiative-focused-on-canada-u-s-relations/>.

²⁴ Eric Kaufmann, “Academic Freedom in Crisis,” *Center for the Study of Partisanship and Ideology* online, March 1, 2021, <https://www.cspicenter.com/p/academicfreedom>.

Each School of Civics would play an important role in supporting research not simply on the present crisis but also in examining the effectiveness of civic education at promoting political and social goods, and at developing a robust notion of “civic thought”²⁵ that underpins the school’s aims.

Mandate #3: Supporting Better K-12 Education

The crisis of civic literacy is not restricted to universities. There is a need for reform in the wider education system. A School of Civics is well-positioned to support K-12 reform, primarily in Social Studies, by assisting with curriculum development and providing resources and training in civic education for teachers, future teachers, and students. They could also fill gaps in current teacher training, especially for Social Studies, by providing teacher certification for teachers of civics. This, too, follows the example of the American Schools of Civics, which provide support for teachers for understanding their political tradition, in the form of courses, seminars and study guides.²⁶ One way the Schools of Civics can contribute to reform is to offer degrees in Civics or Classical Education that prepare teachers to deliver a content-rich curriculum like the one Alberta is rolling out.

Charter schools play a crucial role in K-12 reform. They offer content rich curriculum, with several offering rigorous history, philosophy, and economics teaching that goes beyond the Social Studies curriculum. They also promote a strong sense of belonging in their school communities that promotes civic virtues. In the United States, charter schools are important feeders into state civics schools. Alberta’s own strong charter school system can play a role in developing K-12 reform in partnership with the School of Civics.

Mandate #4: Championing Free Speech and Civil Discourse

The fourth mandate is for the School of Civics to promote free speech and civil discourse by holding public events and outreach that model these ideals, and by associating with the growing number of civil society groups championing free speech and viewpoint diversity. This includes holding public events (live and online) on prominent issues that invite noteworthy advocates from both sides of the spectrum to engage constructively and civilly. The aim is less to obtain agreement than to acknowledge that civil discourse thrives when reasonable people can reasonably disagree. ASU’s Civic Discourse Project²⁷ can be a model for this part of the mandate.

²⁵ Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey, “Civic Thought: A Proposal for University-Level Civic Education,” *American Enterprise Institute* online, December 11, 2023, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/civic-thought-a-proposal-for-university-level-civic-education/>.

²⁶ “Center for American Civics,” *Arizona State University* online, <https://civics.asu.edu/civic-literacy-curriculum>.

²⁷ “The Civic Discourse Project,” *Arizona State University* online, <https://scetl.asu.edu/civic-discourse-project>.

Funding

Based on levels of funding in the United States, we expect \$14 million/year for operating costs would be sufficient to fund Schools at both Alberta flagship universities (\$7 million for UofA and \$7 million for UofC). Funding would also be needed for capital space (though the government already owns properties in each city that could be adapted for this).

Dedicated funding is a key to the success of such programs. Consider the resources that past Albertans have contributed to creating and maintaining our research universities. Billions of taxpayer dollars and philanthropic donations have gone towards making our universities top ranking institutions for research and learning. Now the current corruption of these institutions threatens that investment and the future of our province. Continuing to invest in corrupted institutions without reform would mean sinking deeper into the sunk cost fallacy. Dedicated reform of these institutions will be a way of saving not only the investments of our ancestors, but their traditions and way of life. The 2024–25 forecast budget for Advanced Education in Alberta is just over \$7 billion. The amount required to fund the proposed Schools would be only 0.1% of that amount per year, or 2.3% of the increases in funding between 2023–24 and 2024–25.

There may be ways to find federal funding. Given the significant use of the federal spending power to influence the research and teaching conducted at Alberta's universities, it may be worth considering creative ways of using Alberta's constitutional power over its universities and municipalities to turn the tables on the federal government.

Conclusion

Albertans consistently poll²⁸ among the most patriotic Canadians, notwithstanding rising concerns about separatism and dissatisfaction with Ottawa. Establishing a School of Civics at Alberta's universities would develop and channel this civic patriotism and protect the investments Albertans have made in these institutions. Donald Trump has created a surge of patriotism across Canada, but younger generations appear notably less concerned about the threat of annexation. This is a very serious concern that Schools of Civics could help address across Canadian provinces. These institutions would help restore Canada's universities to their original civic mission and provide ideological balance and viewpoint diversity. They could also help staunch the growing out-migration of talented Canadian academics to civics schools in the United States. Establishing in law stand-alone Schools of Civics within each province's flagship universities would ensure the Schools fulfill their mission of promoting a constructive understanding of Canada's founding ideals and institutions and developing the next generation of Canada's thoughtful leaders and citizens.

²⁸ "Are you proud to be Canadian? Poll suggests that feeling is dwindling," *CTVnews.ca*, June 30, 2024, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/lifestyle/article/are-you-proud-to-be-canadian-poll-suggests-that-feeling-is-dwindling/>.

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John von Heyking (Incoming Associate Director, School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership, Arizona State University) and Geoffrey Sigalet (UBC Okanagan).

Geoffrey Sigalet is an assistant professor of political science at UBC Okanagan.

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