Higher Education: Civic Mission & Civic Effects

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HIGHER EDUCATION: Civic Mission & Civic Effects

A Report by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement)

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Consensus on the Civic Mission

Participants agreed that colleges and universities have a civic mission, which includes being good institutional citizens that serve their communities in multiple ways; providing forums for free democratic dialogues; conducting research on democracy, civic society, and civic development; and educating their own students to be effective and responsible citizens. Most of the meeting was concerned with the last role: civic education at the college level.

Historical Background

In the nineteenth century, American colleges explicitly taught civics and morality and expected their students to incur moral obligations. Between 1880 and 1945, however, American universities participated in a broader cultural movement. This movement sought to replace communal obligations with free, individual choices guided by critical rationality and expertise. During that period, voting became a private activity (thanks to the secret ballot) and political parties were weakened. School districts were dramatically consolidated, reducing opportunities for citizens to serve on local school boards but expanding the power of experts. Likewise, the "modernist" university moved away from explicit moral education. Instead, it embraced choice, individualism, critical distance, and scientific rationality. Departments won administrative autonomy and expanded academic freedom and began to emphasize scientific research. Political science narrowed its attention to national and international affairs, even though citizens were still most likely to engage at the local level.

The motivation for these changes was civic, reflecting a belief in the democratic and social value of science, expertise, rationality, and centralization. Citizens and leaders were expected to choose among policy options based on evidence. However, scholars found that it was difficult to change society through research, and many decided that this was not their job. Autonomous, research-oriented disciplines became institutionalized and inward-looking, placing a high priority on the teaching of new scholars. The civic purpose of the modernist university was forgotten.

Between 1945 and 1960, relatively little academic discussion or research was explicitly concerned with citizenship. The modernist project originally had a civic purpose, but it submerged the topic of citizenship, which was seen as normative and unscientific.

In the 1960s, critics began to attack the university as a bureaucratic shell without a civic or other normative mission. Since then, there has been much civic experimentation on campuses. Student protests led to curricular innovations, including programs like Berkeley's Democratic Education at California (DeCal) initiative, which allows students to design their own courses on social and civic themes. Service-learning (the intentional combination of community-service with academic work) played a central role in reviving attention to the civic mission of colleges and universities. Campus Compact's Wimberg Declaration on the Civic Responsibilities of Research Universities (1999) marked an important moment of maturation. The book Educating Citizens (2003) described excellent practices at numerous institutions. There has also been a new wave of research on civic participation and the necessary identities, skills, dispositions, and knowledge of responsible and effective citizens. Some of this research has consciously encouraged considering multiple dimensions of civic engagement and has placed U.S. students into an international perspective.

There is evidence, however, that declarations are not always translated into practice. Incentives push college presidents to emphasize fundraising and rankings; professors (especially at research universities) are rewarded for publications and academic honors rather than service or dedication to a civic mission; students are torn between idealism and the perceived imperatives of training for occupations and professions. There is evidence that the civic performance of higher education fails to meet students' pre-matriculation expectations or their readiness to be engaged—especially for the increasing numbers of students who attend college at a later age and part-time.

The same incentive effects obtain for individual disciplines. For example, over the past decade, political science has made strides toward acknowledging its historical civic mission (between the recently established standing committee on civic education and the landmark report, Democracy at Risk). While there has been more research on civic education and engagement, the evidence suggests that progress in the area of pedagogical practice has been slow. As at the high school level, introductory American government courses in college tend to emphasize academic/disciplinary perspectives rather than civic concerns, and relatively few professors have adopted the teaching strategies that tend to enhance civic engagement.

What Constitutes Civic Engagement

The terms "citizenship" and "civic engagement" can be used in exclusive ways. For example, citizenship can mean a legal status conferred on and withheld from others. However, for the purpose of this document, "citizenship" means participation in political or community affairs, regardless of the participant's legal status.

During the last fifteen years, such participation has been defined and measured in increasingly broad ways. An early evaluation of a service-learning program aimed only one outcome variable.
surrounding college and the opportunities plummeted of assessments. Other research shows that diversity and the few community. Nevertheless, few colleges and universities today have thought through an overall framework for civic and political education that is comprehensive, coherent, conceptually clear, and developmentally appropriate.

### Major Trends over Time

Surveys by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute and the National Center for Education Statistics suggest:

1. There has been a substantial increase in self-described rates of volunteering, up to 30 percent among incoming college students in recent years.
2. Students' commitment to racial understanding and environmental responsibility rose after 1985 and peaked in the early 1990s, but appears to have declined subsequently.

### Convergent Evidence on Pedagogy

In general, learning and development require encounters with challenging ideas and people and active engagement with those challenges in a supportive environment. Education requires real-world activities and social interaction as well as discipline-based instruction. Learning occurs in many venues and from many sources.

These general principles are consistent with studies and longitudinal data that find lasting positive effects from service-learning, student government, religious participation, groups that explore diversity, and other experiential civic learning. Prompting students to reflect on their experience appears to be an important component.

The Carnegie Foundation's Political Engagement Project is examining courses and programs that use various forms of experiential civic education at the college level, including service-learning, internships in Washington, visiting speakers, simulations, collaborative social research projects, and living/learning communities. The preliminary findings, based on pre- and post-interviews and surveys, show positive results. Such programs have the potential to be a high-impact contribution to civic education at the college level.

In addition to the approaches used in particular classes, departments, and programs, there are thought to be important effects from overall campus climate, the heterogeneity of the student body, institutional leadership, and the array of civic opportunities both on campus and in the surrounding community. Nevertheless, few colleges and universities today have thought through an overall framework for civic and political education that is comprehensive, coherent, conceptually clear, and developmentally appropriate.

### Conditional Effects

Little research disaggregates the effects of college attendance—or of particular programs, approaches, and pedagogies—on different demographic groups of students. However, existing evidence suggests that effects vary. For example, data from the National Civic Engagement Survey suggest that men may gain political voice in college, but that women may not. The National Survey of Student Engagement (2004) found that students at historically black colleges and universities are far more likely to participate in a community project linked to a course and report gaining more personal, social and ethical development.

### Two Models of Civic Development

It is common in the literature on civic development to assume that students can be motivated, given incentives, or compelled to perform service. Their prior dispositions, along with policies concerning service or service-learning, determine their odds of participating. In the course of service, they may develop skills, dispositions, and knowledge that increase their chances of future participation.

An alternative model has been advanced in the work of James Youniss and colleagues and received some support from participants at the conference. In this model, motivation comes after membership and participation, not before. A community has traditions and groups that address social issues. They may recruit young people, including some who do not have favorable dispositions prior to being recruited. In the course of participation, these young people incur obligations, obtain fulfillments and develop relationships that affect their identity. They become more likely to participate in the future.

To the extent that the latter model applies, it suggests that much more attention should be directed to organizations and groups and the ways that they recruit (or ignore) young people as participants. Thinking about community factors can also prompt new ideas for civic interventions. For instance, if there are several colleges in a community, and each has a relatively homogeneous student body, then their students can be encouraged to delete or collaborate. Special attention should be given to what attracts part-time or non-traditional students to participate.
Civic Development as a Public and a Private Good

Participants agreed that civic identities, skills, dispositions, and knowledge are public goods because they strengthen a democratic society and promote social justice. Civic skills and behaviors may also be private goods because:

1. the same skills that are useful for civic participation (consensus-building, working with diverse people, addressing common problems) are also increasingly valuable in the 21st-century workplace;
2. students who engage in their communities while they attend school and college may be more likely to achieve educational success; and
3. civic participation arises from human relationships and obligations that can be fulfilling in an intrinsic sense.

The following dilemma surfaced frequently during the conference. On one hand, if individual colleges and universities devote resources to civic education, they may be less able to attract students whose priority is maximizing their own human capital to compete in a global economy. Nor will these institutions necessarily ascend in rankings of prestige that depend on their ability to attract top students and to generate peer-reviewed research. Many administrators and faculty members acknowledge that their institutions have a mission to develop good citizens, but they do not want to accept that responsibility along with other priorities and demands.

On the other hand, if colleges and universities provide service-learning opportunities and other forms of civic education with a focus on their private benefits for students, they may not achieve positive civic outcomes. Convergent research from numerous studies shows that achieving civic outcomes requires intentionality on the part of those who teach and their institutions.

Structure and Incentives

While civic learning has public benefits and may compete with other non-profit or private goals, it is crucial to address the institutional structures and incentives that either promote or discourage civic education at the college level. These structures may include the availability of relevant courses and student program criteria for tenure and promotion; systems for accrediting, evaluating, and rating institutions; and the availability of funding for particular kinds of teaching, research, and service.

Agenda for Future Research

While there is convergent evidence about the principles of effective civic education at the classroom or program level, much needs to be learned about the broader topic of college students' civic development. We need new forms of high-quality research, some of which should place colleges and universities in context. It is also important that research be designed and interpreted in ways that make it useful to those who influence university policies and relevant to professional organizations.

The following priorities for future research were identified during the conference. Some of these aims could be achieved by secondary analysis of existing data sets; others would require new data collection. Participants believe that researchers should strive to:

- disaggregate innovations that require changes in university policy from those that can be accomplished by a small group of faculty or students.
- strengthen research designs
- employ comparative, experimental, and longitudinal designs.
- Longitudinal or panel studies are especially important in this field, because we are concerned about the lasting effects of youth experiences. Randomized experiments are powerful methods for identifying causality.
- conduct comparative studies on multiple campuses.
- look for indirect as well as direct effects from programs and policies.
- look at the effects of programs on different groups of students or in different college and university contexts using hierarchical linear modeling.
- when appropriate, supplement quantitative with qualitative methods (e.g., interviews with faculty or students or institutional case studies of policy or practice).
- weigh competing explanations of the macro trends in civic engagement, considering how they are related to political, demographic, or economic factors. Consider also the impact of changes in social and economic context (e.g., the lengthening transition to adulthood, the changing content of occupational skills).

Phillip J. Ebert, Western State College, and Jane Jett, Kansas State University, co-convener of the 2004 conference

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- "With few exceptions... hardly involving religious organizations and youth groups) the association between educational level and community service is positive, linear, and consistent.
- This is a longitudinal study of the high-school class of 1965. Likewise, the IAS Study of 14-year-olds in 28 countries found large differences in civic participation by expected level of education for example, U.S. students who see themselves as college bound are three times as likely to report in to both as those without post-secondary educational plans. See Judith Torney-Purta, Carolyn Barber, and Britte Willemen, "Effort in the Civic Knowledge and Attitudes of U.S. Adolescents by immigrant Status and Hispanic Background," _Population Research and Policy Review_ 3 (1994): 121–134.