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 dialogue, 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 emphasized scientific and professional obligations with increasing scientific dominance and expanding the social sciences. As the, the "civic" mission of the modernist university was submerged the topic of citizenship, which was seen as nonnative and unscientific. In the 1960s, students 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 training of 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 subordinated the topic of citizenship, which was seen as normative and unscientific.

In the 1960s, critics begin 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 (DeCall) 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 Waisman 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 obtained for individual disciplines. For example, over the past decade, political science has made strides toward acknowledging its civic mission (witness 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 some 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 that used only one outcome variable:
voter registration. Other early assessments asked whether students planned to volunteer in the community as adults; an affirmative answer constituted success. Since then, researchers have recognized many other dimensions of civic development, including attitudes and values, identities, habits, skills and knowledge, and many forms of behavior in relation to politics, civic society, and markets. The Civic and Political Health of the Nation report by Scott Keeter et al. (CIRCLE, 2002) identified 19 behaviors that were "indicators of civic engagement," ranging from voting and donating to volunteering and political consumerism (purchasing or boycotting products because of an ideological commitment). The Carnegie Foundation’s ongoing Political Engagement Project (PEP) uses a similar diversity of measures.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, most political scientists emphasized election-related activities when they studied political participation. However, during the Vietnam era, scholars began to attend to a broader range of activities, including protests, boycotts, and membership in social movements. Since then, Americans have embraced even more forms of political participation, such as making purchases or investment decisions to support social or political causes, giving money to think tanks, using "affinity" credit cards, communicating via blogs, and wearing clothing with political messages — to mention just a few examples. Participants agreed that it is important to teach about and to study (although not necessarily to endorse) the full range of participatory acts. Unless we investigate new forms of political engagement that are particularly popular among youth, we may overlook how "political" young people are.

The quantity, quality, and equality of civic participation are all important, but they do not necessarily move in the same direction. A reform can increase the number of people involved, for example, while undermining the quality or equality of participation. Furthermore, various conceptions of "good citizenship" sometimes conflict. A detached, critical, informed voter is different from someone who is deeply enmeshed in a community. All young people should be prepared to select and exercise forms of civic engagement that are appropriate to their own circumstances.

Major Trends over Time
Surveys by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute and the National Center for Education Statistics reveal that:

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 somewhat.

3. Interest in and discussion of politics plummeted after the 1960s and then rose after 2000. The resurgence began before Sept. 11, 2001. The level is still low compared to the 1960s. In interviews, students tend to say that politics is not "relevant" to them.

The Civic Effects of College Attendance: Empirical Evidence

There are strong correlations between years spent in school and college and participation in politics and civic society. However, there is some evidence that the relationship between time spent in college and civic engagement is not as strong or straightforward as it is supposed to be. Besides, this correlation does not hold true for college and university students' civic skills, knowledge, and commitments and make them more likely to participate. There are several other plausible explanations, including the following:

1. Perhaps adolescents who are already disposed to civic and political participation are more likely than disengaged students to attend and complete college. In that case, college degree is the only way to explain the relationship observed above. Others who later go to college have more interest, efficacy, socialization, and knowledge. Furthermore, differences among colleges (such as their size, type, and mission) may suggest that students who attend these institutions may have more consistent influences on civic outcomes. This finding suggests that institutions are not educating students for citizenship as much as they are selecting applicants who already have characteristics such as interest in civic participation or political issues. However, most existing research has used easily available data on institutions; therefore, the results may not hold true for college and university students.

2. Perhaps, compared to citizens with less education, those who are educationally more successful have more social status and resources. Therefore, major institutions are more likely to recruit them and promote their interests and as a result, these people are more likely to participate. The strongest evidence for this hypothesis is the following combination of facts. In the past, the most educated people are the ones most likely to engage in politics. Mean levels of education have substantially increased since 1980, yet levels of participation are flat.1 This makes sense if years of education are proxies for social status.

3. Perhaps colleges attract young people who are civically engaged, and they learn civic skills and dispositions from one another. Such "peer effects" appear strongly in several studies and could help explain the correlation between college attendance and civic engagement. Peer effects can be positive when a civic-minded student body shares and reinforces skills and attitudes favorable to engagement. Peer effects can also be negative when disengaged students congregate together.

The available data make it difficult to test these hypotheses with great precision. However, most participants believe that colleges can and should reinforce the civic characteristics that their incoming students bring with them, thereby adding civic value to student’s education. Support for this judgment comes from studies that find certain pedagogies effective (see below). These pedagogies are employed by some faculty at many colleges and universities, although numerous students do not experience them. Their beneficial effects could be compounded by large social trends, including a general decline in some forms of participation among adults. In turn, aggregate declines in civic participation may be caused by factors unrelated to education.

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, seminars in Washington, visiting speakers, simulations, collaborative social research projects, and learning communities. The preliminary findings, based on pre- and post-interviews and surveys, show some positive results from the 21 programs studied, with a particularly strong positive influence on students who enter the programs with a low level of political interest.2 Other research shows that diversity classes and discussions also influence students’ attitudes and behavior. Such programs have the potential to make an important 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 disengages the effects of college attendance—or of particular programs, approaches, and pedagogies—from 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.3 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 listed as a course and report gaining more personal, social, and ethical development.4

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 builds institutions and groups that address social issues. They 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 fulfillment, and develop relationships that affect their identity. They become more likely to participate in the future.5

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

Since civic learning has public benefits and may compete with other private goods, 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 programs; 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:

- improve and expand the measures used in research
- focus on relevant characteristics of institutions: not just size, type, mission and for which data are easily available—but also campus culture; policies (such as promotion and tenure criteria, allocation of the faculty to first-year courses, campus work-study allocation, and financial-aid policies); institutional leadership at all levels from the department to the university as a whole and the array of civic engagement opportunities provided across each campus and community for full- and part-time students and for students in different fields of study;
- broaden and improve existing measures of civic engagement (without dropping older measures that are useful for measuring trends);
- conduct research on community colleges as well as four-year institutions;
- measure civic outcomes along with other potential benefits of education—such as academic success, marketable skills, life satisfaction, and fulfilling social relationships—to learn more about how these outcomes interrelate;
- disaggregate factors that are sometimes conflated
- disaggregate research on institutions of higher education by looking at different types of institution and multiple venues within colleges and universities;
- disaggregate outcomes by level of analysis (individual, organization, university-wide culture, surrounding communities, and other external contexts);
- disaggregate data by gender, race and ethnicity, immigrant status, family socio-economic status, ideology, religion, and region;
- disaggregate "civic engagement" by form (e.g., volunteering, voting, protest); by political versus non-political purpose, by location and venue; by formal or informal organization, by level or intensity of participation, and by motivation (e.g., concern about an issue, personal enhancement).

William Tizett, "Modem Universities: Abundant Citizenship: Historical Perspectives
circle working paper 19.


With few exceptions, ... largely involving religious organizations and youth groups) the association between educational level and community service is positive, linear, and consistent."


Kend all Manning and Richard Nisbett, Consequences and Politics (Philadelphia University Press, 1998.); cit. 8 and 9: Jenkins, "Education and Political Development Among Young Adults," Politics and the Socialization, 3 (1971), p. 322. This is a longitudinal study of the high school class of 1964. Likewise, the ISA study of 194-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 with those with non-secondary educational plans. See Judith Torney-Purta, Carolyn Barber, and Brit Wiberg, "Differences in Civic Knowledge and Attitudes of U.S. Adolescents by Immigration Status and Hispanic Background," Educational Researcher, 35 (2006).

*Note: in this, Jane Jacobs, and Kenneth Stokeland-Melton, "Education and Democratic Citizenship in America (Chicago, 1996)."


4. Lopez and Elzud, since the data are cross-sectional, not longitudinal, they do not prove that individual males become political active.


See, e.g., the American Diploma Project's benchmarks in English and mathematics, which include civic skills (see www.adpinfo.org/html/ www.adpinfo.org).

Little available research has investigated this relationship at the college level but there is some supportive research about younger students.