

Civic Skills and Federal Policy

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Summary: *Citizens can improve their communities, the government, and the nation through active civic engagement and collaboration. To do so requires skills. Educational programs and other government-supported initiatives have been shown to enhance Americans' civic skills and their levels of engagement. But these programs and other opportunities are scarce and unequal, often provided to people who are already the most likely to be engaged. A lack of civic learning opportunities not only inhibits Americans' civic participation, but also has harmful consequences for their academic and economic progress.*

Background

On his first day in office (January 20, 2009), President Barack Obama issued a Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government. The Memorandum said:

Transparency promotes accountability and provides information for citizens about what their Government is doing.

Public engagement enhances the Government's effectiveness and improves the quality of its decisions. Knowledge is widely dispersed in society, and public officials benefit from having access to that dispersed knowledge. Executive departments and agencies should offer Americans increased opportunities to participate in policymaking and to provide their Government with the benefits of their collective expertise and information. ...

Collaboration actively engages Americans in the work of their Government. Executive departments and agencies should use innovative tools, methods, and systems to cooperate among themselves, across all levels of Government, and with nonprofit organizations, businesses, and individuals in the private sector.

There is evidence that active citizens can effectively address public problems by using public data, working together, and collaborating with the government. Citizens need *skills* for all these purposes, but Americans' civic skills are uneven, at best, and opportunities to obtain them are scarce and unequal.

Certain federally-funded programs build civic skills:

- The federal government funds interactive civic education in K-12 schools, primarily through **Learn & Serve America** and the **Education for Democracy Act** (Kirby, Levine and Elrod, 2006). Evidence from national surveys shows that young people who have experienced such civic education are more likely than other students to be able to interpret political information correctly, to discuss political issues with peers and adults, to monitor the news, and to feel confident about their ability to speak in public (Comber, 2005). Further, students who have experienced interactive civic education show better ability to clearly express opinions, better collaborative group skills, and better ability to work in culturally diverse teams (Torney-Purta and Wilkenfeld, 2009).
- With an original grant from the **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**, Hampton, VA has reorganized its planning processes so that citizens, including youth, are heavily involved in setting priorities, advising city agencies, and making decisions. Particular planning processes in Hampton have involved as many as 5,000 citizens. The police chief credits youth participation with reducing crime. The city has developed training programs for municipal staff, youth leaders, and for citizen volunteers (Potaphuk, Carlson, and Kennedy, 2005; Sirianni & Schor, 2009; Sirianni, 2009).
- Community Action for a Renewed Environment (CARE) is a program within the **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency** that makes grants to partnerships of community organizations to address toxic pollution. CARE's grants support training and technical assistance. In addition, CARE organizes trainings and produces educational materials for the field, sometimes in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Sirianni 2009). An evaluation by the National Academy of Public Administration finds: "CARE partnerships have changed their environments by reducing pollution in their communities; a few CARE communities together have also had national impact" by developing new models or knowledge. "CARE communities have developed local environmental expertise and organizational capacity" CARE has also strengthened the EPA's own capacity (National Academies of Public Administration, 2009).
- Interactions with public agencies can be alienating and can depress civic engagement among the people served. **The Right Question Project (RQP)**ⁱ teaches individuals from low- and moderate-income communities the essential democratic skills needed to participate effectively with public institutions such as

their children's schools, job training programs, welfare offices, and Medicaid-funded health services. By deliberately targeting specific critical thinking skills, issue identification, and communication skills RQP has demonstrated positive impacts on their clients' motivation and behavior. In a pre-post experiment, Alegria and colleagues (2008) found that the RQP participants were far more likely to be active participants in their medical treatment and stay with their treatment-provider longer. Another study showed (RQP, 2009) that the RQP had a promising effect on the participants' efficacy about voting. In this small study, 93% of participants felt "more prepared" to vote and 87% confirmed that they felt they were much more likely to vote than if they had not learned these communication skills through the Right Question Project.ⁱⁱ

What are Civic Skills?

In their now classic book *Voice and Equality* (1995), Verba, Schlozman and Brady find that adults need three categories of resources to participate effectively in civic life: access to networks; interests or motivations; and time, money, and skills. They find that civic skills develop over the life course, beginning in adolescence and continuing into adulthood.

Although definitions of what constitutes a "civic skill" vary, Kirlin (2003) and also Syvertsen, Flanagan and Stout (2007) recommend categorizing the important civic skills into the following categories:

- Communication skills (both expressing and understanding facts and opinions)
- Democratic deliberation/collective decision-making
- Critical analysis of political information

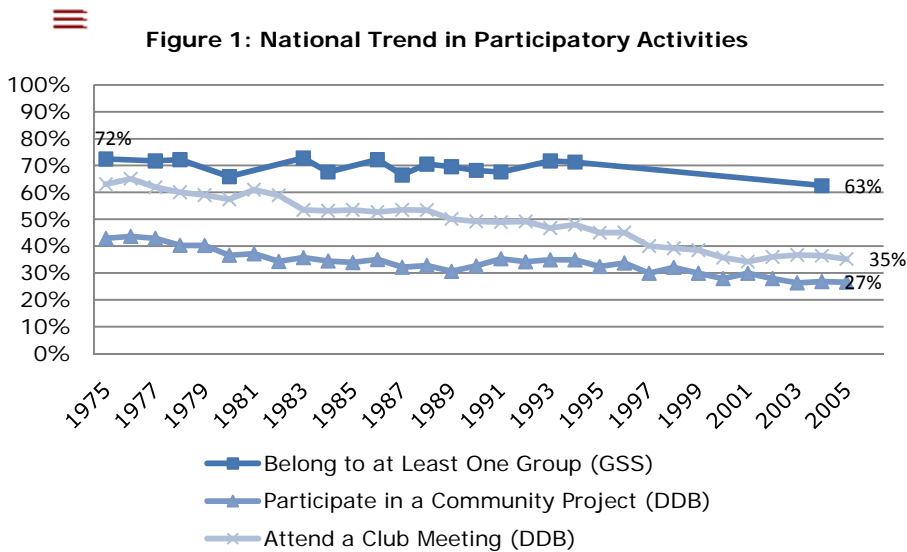
Currently, there is no broad consensus on what constitute civic skills and the list above is by no means exhaustive: one could add skills for managing civic groups and organizations (which can be as concrete as the ability to manage a budget or take minutes); technical skills, such as the ability to interpret environmental data; skills for teaching or leadership or public performance; and skills related to the new social media (among others).

There is an additional challenge of measuring civic skills. Currently, there is no national dataset that measures Americans' civic skills. Instead, national surveys focus more on the opportunities to develop civic skills as well as the outcomes of civic participation. In this fact sheet, we draw upon several national datasets to develop a snapshot of the level of civic skills that Americans possess.

Trends in Civic Skills

As discussed above, the closest surveys come to measuring civic skills is to measure the frequency of civic activities that usually require skills. Surveys also ask people to assess their own abilities to take various civic actions (which may measure confidence

more than skill). Recently, a few national surveys have added questions that ask about civic learning opportunities offered through K-12 schools. Although the trends are complex and not fully consistent, there is at least some evidence of decline in opportunities. Participation in groups requires and strengthens civic skills, but Americans became less likely to attend meetings, work on projects, and belong to groups between the 1970s and the 2000s. That decline preceded the rise of the Internet, which now provides some new ways to associate.



Source: GSS is the General Social Survey; DDB refers to the DDB Needham Life Styles

These measures are associated with education. As levels of engagement have fallen for all Americans, adults with lower income and without college education have been left deeply disconnected, compared to their predecessors in the 1970s (National Conference on Citizenship, 2006). Recent data shows persistent and serious gaps in participatory activities that require civic skills between Americans adults and youth of various backgrounds. Education, income, ethnicity, and immigration status are all strong predictors of civic participation and civic skill acquisition (*American National Election Survey (ANES) 2008-2009; Census Current Population Survey (CPS) September and November Supplements, 2008*, see Appendix A).ⁱⁱⁱ Our analysis of various national and federal datasets indicates that this declining national trend in some indicators of civic participation may be due, in part, to declining and unequal opportunities to build civic skills at schools, at home, and in communities and neighborhoods.^{iv}

Unequal Skill-Building Opportunities

People have unequal civic skills in significant part because they have unequal opportunities to learn and practice these skills. We learn civic skills in various settings, including:

- K-12 classrooms^v
- Higher education^{vi}
- The workplace
- Churches and other religious congregations
- Voluntary organizations
- National and community service programs, both military and civilian
- Families and neighborhoods

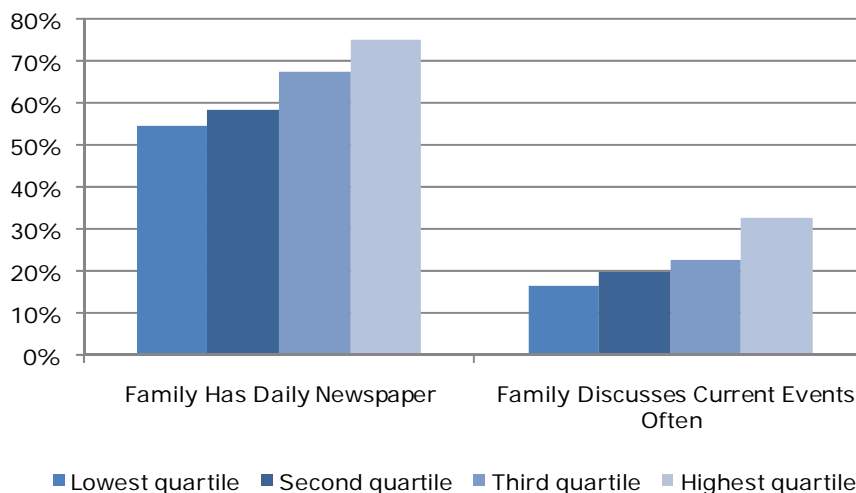
Unfortunately, both adolescents and adults have unequal opportunities to develop civic skills. In a study of high school students in California, Kahne and Middaugh (2008) find: “A student’s race and academic track, and a school’s average socioeconomic status (SES) determines the availability of the school-based civic learning opportunities. High school students attending higher SES schools, those who are college-bound, and white students get more of these opportunities than low-income students, those not heading to college, and students of color.”

Levinson (2007) draws upon several datasets to show that “poor and minority people are also demonstrably less likely to develop civic skills via education, the workplace, or participation in voluntary associations—three of the primary venues in which individuals have the opportunity to develop and practice communication, analysis, organization, and leadership skills relevant to civic and political participation. This is because they are likely to leave school sooner and be less educated, to have lower-status jobs, and to participate in voluntary associations less.”

Unequal Opportunities at Home and in Neighborhoods: Civic participation skills are first built at home, through parental influence. Research shows that children who say that they discussed politics or accompanied their parents to vote are more likely to vote themselves and are also more likely to say that they can make a difference in their communities.^{vii} However, not all children have access to information and opportunities for discussion at home. For example, the level of household income and parental educational attainment predict whether there is political discussion among family members and peers and other access to information (*Civic and Political Health Survey*, 2006). According to CIRCLE analysis of the *Education Longitudinal Study (ELS)*, 10th graders from lower socioeconomic background are less likely to have access to a daily newspaper at home and discuss current events with parents. Seventy-five percent of

the highest SES families have access to a daily newspaper while only 55% of households with incomes in the lowest quartile do. Similarly, youth from the highest socioeconomic background are twice as likely to discuss current events with their parents.

Figure 2: Home-Based Civic Skill Building Opportunity by SES



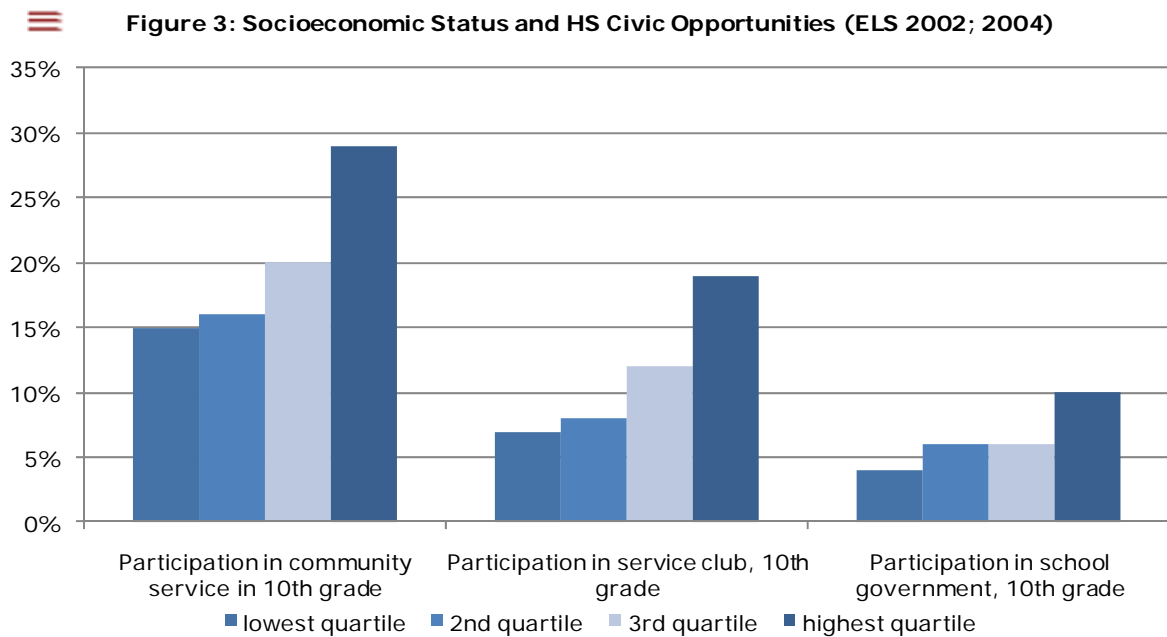
Source: *The Education Longitudinal Study (2002; 2004)*

Inequalities in school: Federal policy is more relevant to some settings than others. Federal laws and funding most directly affect educational institutions and national and community service programs. Unfortunately, fewer public schools offer school-based service-learning opportunities now than a decade ago. A recent study by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS, 2008) found that only 24% of schools offered formal service learning^{viii} in 2008, compared to 32% in 1999.

CIRCLE’s analysis of national youth data confirms findings from research by Kahne and Middaugh (2008), which show that children with fewer home civic opportunities receive unequal civic learning opportunities through their schools (defined as opportunities provided by the school to participate in student government, service clubs, newspaper/yearbook, or community service). Students of lower socioeconomic background are less likely to attend schools where community service opportunities are offered. Only about quarter of students (24%) from lowest socioeconomic quartile encounter school-sponsored community service opportunities, while four in ten students of highest socioeconomic background have these opportunities (ELS, 2002; 2004). Furthermore, the CNCS study (2008) found that schools that are located in lower-income areas were significantly less likely to offer service learning than more affluent schools at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. According to CNCS’s survey of school principals, the challenges in implementing service-learning are related to other priorities that schools have to deal with (e.g., academic requirements, standardized test scores), lack of funding and other resources, lack of professional

development opportunities to learn about service-learning, and a lack of awareness about policies encouraging service-learning in schools. The schools with lower funding and resources are more likely to face these challenges than more affluent schools.

This gap could also mean that higher SES youth are likely to be exposed to peers who perform service who in turn may introduce them to new civic opportunities. Data further suggest that the disparity in civic learning opportunities between students from lower and higher socioeconomic backgrounds becomes more severe in 12th grade, especially in regard to taking leadership roles in student organizations (ELS, 2004).



Source: Education Longitudinal Survey 2002; 2004

One’s racial/ethnic background may also predict civic learning opportunities. According to a youth survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, non-Hispanic white youth are more likely than Latino and African American youth to be offered at least one volunteer experience through their school (U.S. Census Bureau & The Independent Sector, 2005).

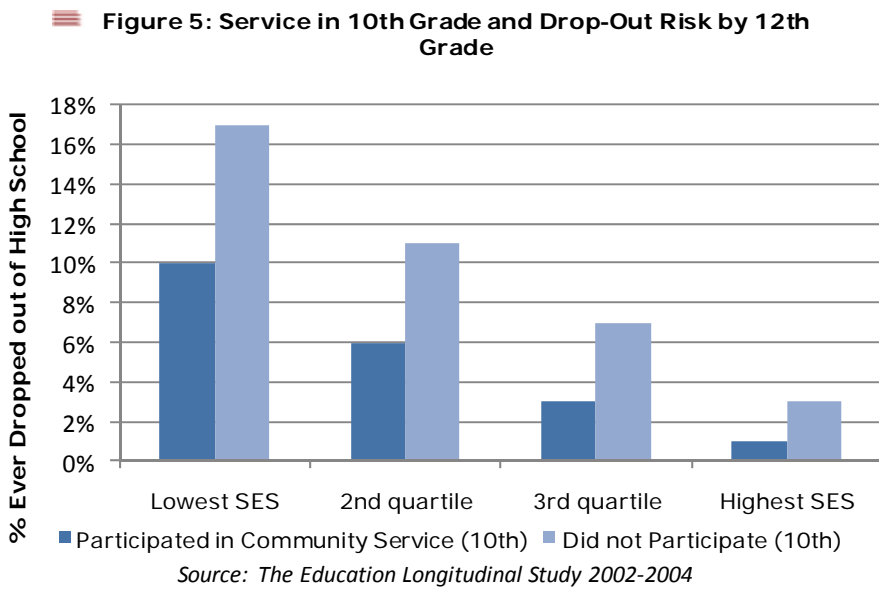
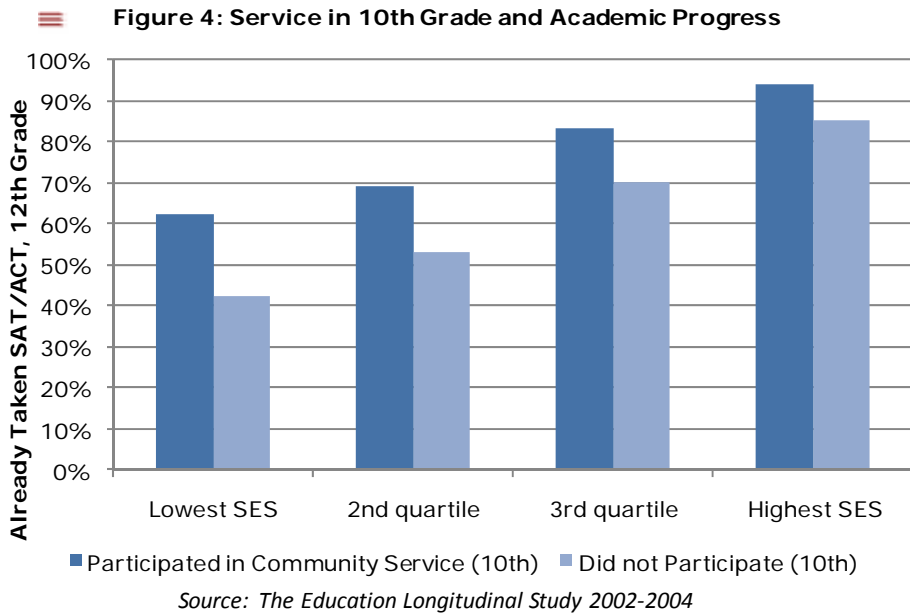
Immigration status is also relevant. According to the *Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey* data (2006), young adults (18-25) born outside of the United States were much less likely than youth born in the US to have participated in organized groups or clubs in high school.

Lack of Civic Learning Opportunities Has Academic Consequences

The consequence of unequal civic learning experiences is not only that disadvantaged students lack civic skills, but they also suffer academically. Similar to Davila and Mora (2007), our analysis of ELS data shows that youth who have civic learning opportunities

are more likely to follow a positive academic trajectory, which can include staying in school and preparing for college.

The opportunity to participate in community service through one’s school appears to have academic benefits. As seen in the figures below, students who participate in community service as 10th graders are far more likely to take college entrance exams and far less likely to have dropped out of school by 12th grade.



Moreover, our analysis of the ELS data suggests that schools that offer community service to 10th graders as part of their curriculum tend to send more students to four-

year colleges. Similarly, Davila and Mora (2007) find that “civic activities undertaken during high school are related to significantly higher odds that individuals graduate from college in later years, when controlling for a host of socio-economic and demographic characteristics.”

Lack of Engagement Often Implies Lack of Opportunity, not Motivation

Data suggest that young people of all backgrounds are motivated to act civically. From survey research we know that many young people who exhibit low levels of civic engagement are, in fact, quite motivated to work on civic problems. Youth from lower SES quartiles are in many respects more likely to think that being active citizens, supporting environmental causes, or correcting inequalities in the society are “very important.” For example, 24% of 10th graders who come from households in the lowest SES quartile think that it is very important to work to correct inequalities, compared to 16% of those who come from the highest quartile. This suggests that a lack of opportunities leads to lower civic engagement, not necessarily a lack of motivation.

When Given Relevant Opportunities, Americans Respond

Furthermore, we know that youth from disadvantaged backgrounds seem to benefit from civic opportunities *when they are offered*. According to CIRCLE’s analysis of the ELS data, youth who have civic learning opportunities as 10th graders are more likely to volunteer as 12th graders (after controlling for demographics). The 10th graders who participate in more school-sponsored civic activities (defined as student government, service club, newspaper/yearbook participation, or community service) are almost twice as likely to volunteer in the community as 12th graders, after controlling for demographic factors and academic achievement in 10th grade. These opportunities have academic benefits as well. Tenth graders who participate in the aforementioned civic activities are also more likely to have taken the SAT or ACT as 12th graders after controlling for ethnicity, income, and parental education.^x

According to the CPHS (2006), civically engaged young adults (18-25) recall participating in organized school groups in high school more than those who were not civically engaged as adults. For example, those who belonged to groups in high school were more likely as adults to keep up-to-date on the news, discuss current events with friends or family, or demonstrate their view on issues by wearing campaign buttons, displaying a bumper sticker, or displaying a sign for a political candidate.

Although Latino adults show lower levels of engagement on various indices of civic engagement and skills, our findings based on the *American National Election Study* (ANES) data (2008-2009) suggest that they are *more* likely to have participated in marches and about as likely to have signed a petition or invited someone to a meeting (ANES 2008-9, see Appendix A). A large number of Latinos participated in marches and

rallies focused on various aspects of the immigration debate in the past several years, and it is possible that this high rate of participation in marches reflects that trend. If that is the case, it shows that a usually disengaged group can be mobilized when relevant issues and opportunities for engagement are presented.

Conclusion

This fact sheet has shown that Americans' civic skills are uneven, at best, and that a major reason for the inequality and scarcity of civic skills is a dearth of learning opportunities. Our analysis has emphasized students and other young people, in part because the data are most comprehensive for them. However, civic learning is a lifelong process and inequalities exist for people of all ages. The federal government by no means has the sole responsibility for enhancing civic skills. State and local educational authorities, colleges and universities, municipalities, civic groups, unions, libraries and museums, and the news media (among other institutions) also play essential roles. But the federal government has a record of promoting Americans' development of civic skills and could strengthen these efforts in the future. The government must focus more thoughtfully on the issue of civic skills if it is to benefit from transparency, collaboration, and participation.

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Appendix A:

Table 1: Skill gaps in Organizing Activities by Demographic Groups (Source: ANES 2008-2009)

<u>Organizing Activities</u>	<u>Income level</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Education</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Latino</u>	<u>%</u>
Protest or Rally	<20k	20	< HS	9	Latino	31
	20-40k	15	HS	12	Non-Latino	18
	40-100k	20	Some College	18	-	
	>100k	23	Finished College	30	-	
Attended meetings of school/government	<20k	41	< HS	54	Latino	51
	20-40k	53	HS	48	Non-Latino	61
	40-100k	64	Some College	62	-	
	>100k	74	Finished College	73	-	
Petition on the Internet	<20k	23	< HS	21	Latino	28
	20-40k	26	HS	22	Non-Latino	35
	40-100k	38	Some College	37	-	
	>100k	46	Finished College	46	-	
Signed petition in person	<20k	54	< HS	52	Latino	67
	20-40k	58	HS	57	Non-Latino	68
	40-100k	73	Some College	74	-	
	>100k	76	Finished College	78	-	
Invited someone to meeting	<20k	20	< HS	18	Latino	22
	20-40k	20	HS	15	Non-Latino	24
	40-100k	24	Some College	23	-	
	>100k	30	Finished College	34	-	

Notes:

ⁱ The Right Questions Project is not directly funded by federal resources. However, the program is relevant because it specifically targets individuals who interact frequently with federal and state systems such as Medicaid offices, Social Security Administration, adult education programs, community-health centers, and housing authority offices. In these settings, the RQP aims to help participants build specific civic skills to participate more effectively in important decision making processes and interactions with the federal government.

ⁱⁱ See <http://www.rightquestion.org/resources/research>

ⁱⁱⁱ Specific statistics on civic participation for various demographic groups are available upon request.

^{iv} Not all civic indicators show downward trend. No declines are evident since the 1970s in the following trends: rates of voting, contacting other people about elections, and expressing confidence in one's ability to understand government and politics (National Conference on Citizenship 2006).

^v A study conducted by the Corporation for National and Community Service (2008) indicates that 68% of K-12 public schools at least recognize community service and 24% actually offer service learning curriculum. The proportion of public schools that offer service learning has declined since 1999. Furthermore the CPHS data (2006) suggest that 54% of young people (15-25) report that their high school civic classes required them to keep up with the news, 67% report having discussions about social and/or political issues with people holding different opinions, and 80% are encouraged to make up their own opinions about issues.

^{vi} According to a recent study by the American Association of Colleges and Universities (Dey et al., 2009), more than half of university students believe that their schools should focus on making contributions to the local community. However, fewer students perceive civic opportunities (50%) and even fewer actually participate in curricular or extracurricular community-based activities (19% and 26%). Furthermore, only about one-third of college students report that their campus has helped them increase awareness of the importance of being involved and helped them learn the skills necessary to participate and change the society for the better.

^{vii} "National Youth Survey" released on March 4, 2002, by CIRCLE, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship and the Partnership for Trust in Government at the Council for Excellence in Government.

^{viii} CNCS distinguishes service learning from community service by the extent to which service activities are integrated into an academic course or curriculum and presence of explicit learning objectives. CNCS further defines service learning by specifying it as "an activity that addresses real community needs and involves organized reflection or critical analysis activities as part of the learning (CNCS, 2008, p. 13)."

^{ix} The odds ratio for taking the SAT/ACT for those who have engaged more at 10th grade is 1.16, after controlling for ethnicity (Hispanic), gender (Male), urbanicity, SES, and 10th grade academic performance in math and reading (in PISA scores). This means that engagement in school-based civic opportunities is associated with a 16 percentage point increase in the chance of making concrete progress toward college entrance.