

HIGH SCHOOL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES PRODUCE ACADEMIC BENEFITS

New CIRCLE research by Professors Alberto Dávila and Marie T. Mora suggests that participation in civic engagement activities such as voluntary community service, service-learning, and student government during the high school years enhances academic achievement. In two new CIRCLE Working Papers, Dávila and Mora, using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS), find that those civic engagement activities raise the odds of graduation from college and improve high school students' progress in reading, math, science and history. For example, they estimate that service experiences—when required as part of high school courses—raise the odds of graduation from college by 22 percentage points.

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While the impact appears to be universally positive, different types of activities affect demographic groups in distinct ways. Young men, for instance, appear to make greater academic gains when they participate in service activities: they are 29 percentage points more likely to graduate from college on time if they have engaged in service to fulfill a class requirement during high school, controlling for the other factors measured in NELS. Student government activities seem to produce the strongest effects on female students.

NELS 1988 tracked the educational attainment of a specific cohort over time—from 8th grade through college graduation. According to Dávila and Mora, "NELS represents the most suitable panel dataset to analyze the questions posed in our study because of the relatively young age of the initial cohort, the large nationally-representative sample size, and the detailed questionnaires." Additionally, NELS allowed the researchers to control for a host of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics (including eighth-grade scores on standardized tests, which allowed them to hold constant initial academic ability or motivation).

HIGH SCHOOL ACADEMIC BENEFITS OF SERVICE NOT GENDER-NEUTRAL

Looking first at community service activities, Dávila and Mora found that, on average, students who participated in service-learning¹ scored 6.7 percent higher in reading achievement and 5.9 percent higher in science achievement than those who did not participate in service-learning. Voluntary community service activities produced slightly bigger results: students participating in voluntary activities scored 8.1 percent higher on reading scores and 7.6 percent higher on

¹ Service-learning is defined as "course-related required community service."

IN THIS ISSUE

- 1 High School Civic Engagement Activities Produce Academic Benefits
- ≡ RESEARCH ROUNDUP
- 4 The Civic Effects of Higher Education
- 6 Youth Population on the Rise in 2006
- 8 A Teacher's Perspective on Closing the Civic Gap
- 9 Youth Turnout Increases for Second Election in a Row
- ≡ FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE
- 10 CIRCLE Hosts Research Forum for Practitioners
- 11 CIRCLE in the News



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Continued from page 1

science scores. These relationships hold even when controlling for the factors measured in NELS.

Additionally, Dávila and Mora found that service opportunities, while academically beneficial for both male and female students, produced greater academic gains for male students. For example, young male students who participated in service activities (either required or voluntary) scored about nine percent higher on reading scores than those who didn't participate in any service activities. The academic gains from service opportunities were smaller for female students: females who participated in service scored about five percent higher than those who did not participate in service.

On the other hand, young women who participated in student government appeared to benefit slightly more scholastically than their male counterparts. Being involved in student government improved the academic progress of female high school students by 1.1 and 1.7 percent in history, mathematics and science achievement. The authors conclude, "It appears that the average scholastic returns from civic engagement activities during high school are not gender-neutral."

Dávila and Mora found that academic gains were similar across different racial/ethnic groups. Overall, they conclude that "high-school civic engagement does not generally favor the academic development of one racial/ethnic group over another."

SERVICE LINKED TO HIGHER EDUCATION GAINS

Additionally, civic engagement activities appear to have long-term academic benefits: Dávila and Mora find, "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 socioeconomic and demographic characteristics."

Specifically, they found that students who participated in service-learning activities in high school were 22 percentage points more likely to graduate from college than those who did not participate. Similarly, they found that service-learning had a greater effect on male college graduation rates while participation in student government had a stronger effect on female graduation rates. Required service appears to be more effective for males than

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) promotes research on the civic and political engagement of young Americans. Although CIRCLE conducts and funds research, not practice, the projects that we support have practical implications for those who work to increase young people's engagement in politics and civic life. CIRCLE is also a clearinghouse for relevant information and scholarship. CIRCLE was founded in 2001 and is funded predominantly by Carnegie Corporation of New York and The Pew Charitable Trusts. It is based in the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.

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Continued from page 2

voluntary community service.

The relationship between high school civic engagement and college graduation varied across racial/ethnic groups. The long-term effects of both voluntary and required service were greatest for African-American males. Additionally, service opportunities seemed to raise college attendance for white students more than for Asian-American students.

WHO PARTICIPATES?

Dávila and Mora also show that participation in civic engagement activities differs by racial/ethnic group and by gender. Looking first at gender differences, the researchers find that across all four racial/ethnic groups studied (non-Hispanic whites, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans) young women were the most likely to participate in voluntary service activities in high school.

Continued on page 12

TABLE 1: THE EFFECTS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ON ACADEMIC PROGRESS 4 YEARS AFTER THE 8TH GRADE

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITY	PERCENT INCREASE IN ACADEMIC SUCCESS			
	READING	MATHEMATICS	SCIENCE	HISTORY
<i>All Students:</i>				
Performed community service between 1990-92 as required for class	+6.7%	+4.6%	+5.9%	+3.3%
Performed strictly voluntary community service between 1990-92	+8.1%	+6.5%	+7.6%	+4.3%
Participated in high school student government	+0.3%	+1.3%	+1.0%	+1.5%
<i>Females:</i>				
Performed community service between 1990-92 as required for class	+4.9%	+4.7%	+4.7%	+3.3%
Performed strictly voluntary community service between 1990-92	+5.7%	+5.0%	+6.3%	+3.9%
Participated in high school student government	---	+1.7%	+1.7%	+1.1%
<i>Males:</i>				
Performed community service between 1990-92 as required for class	+9.4%	+5.6%	+8.2%	+3.9%
Performed strictly voluntary community service between 1990-92	+9.5%	+6.3%	+7.2%	+4.3%
Participated in high school student government	---	---	---	+1.2%

Table 1 Notes: The results in the top of the table are based on over 12,000 students in the NELS who: (1) were in the 1988-1992 NELS panel, (2) reported information on the frequency of community/volunteer work in 1992, (3) were in school during the 1992 survey, and (4) had non-missing scores on the corresponding 1988 and 1992 IRT exams. The gender-partitioned samples include approximately 6,000 female and 5,900 male non-Hispanic white, African-American, Hispanic, and Asian-American students. Using the regression method of ordinary least squares (OLS), these estimates are based on regressing the natural logarithm of the 1992 IRT score on the corresponding 1988 ln(IRT) score, interaction terms between race/ethnic binary variables and the civic engagement measures, required community service performed for reasons other than class, participation in eighth-grade student government, low eighth-grade academic ranking, immigrant status, household characteristics in 1988 (family income, parents' highest education level, parents' marital status), school characteristics in 1988 (percent of students receiving free lunch and location: urbanicity and geographic region), and binary variables for missing information for family income and the percent of students in the 1988 school receiving free lunch. Sampling weights provided by the NELS are employed here to maintain the national representation of the sample. ("---" means no increase in academic progress.)

Continued from page 3

They also found students of different racial/ethnic groups participated in civic engagement activities at different rates. Overall, Asian students were the most engaged, while Hispanics were the least engaged. Factors associated with immigration do not appear to contribute to the lower participation rates of young Hispanics. The authors conclude, "We do not find evidence that immigrants are any more or less civically engaged than U.S.-born students. As such, the relatively low civic participation rates among Hispanic teenagers appear to be driven by relatively low educational expectations and tight time constraints instead of the fact that this group has a higher share of immigrants than non-Hispanics whites."

The complete findings are contained in CIRCLE Working Papers (#52) "Civic Engagement and High School Academic Progress" and (#53) "Do Gender and Ethnicity Affect Civic Engagement and Academic Progress?" In addition, a new CIRCLE Fact

Sheet, An Assessment of Civic Engagement and High School Academic Progress, contains a summary of the two papers. All three products can be downloaded from CIRCLE's homepage at www.civicyouth.org. ■

Design: Lomangino Studio Inc.

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