

CIVIC SKILLS AND FEDERAL POLICY

On April 29, 2010, scholars, civic leaders, and federal officials met in Washington to develop a federal policy agenda for civic skills. The conference was convened by CIRCLE at Tufts University's Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service. It was co-sponsored by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools and Strengthening Our Nation's Democracy (SOND). This report was written and endorsed by 33 participants (not including any of the federal officials who attended).

Participants shared these fundamental premises:

American citizens and communities can address our nation's fundamental problems. ...

But to do so **requires civic skills**, especially the ability to gather and interpret information, speak and listen, engage in dialogue about differences, resolve conflicts, reach agreements, collaborate with peers, understand formal government, and advocate for change. (Appendix 1 lists important skills in more detail.)

President Obama rightly noted on his first day in office that "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." ...

But **for government to benefit from citizens' knowledge, citizens must have skills** of expression, collaboration, and analysis.

Civic skills are gained from families, communities, private associations, local schools, and institutions of higher education. ...

But the **federal government has also played a constructive role** in developing skills since the time of the founders and should be a leader and role model again today.

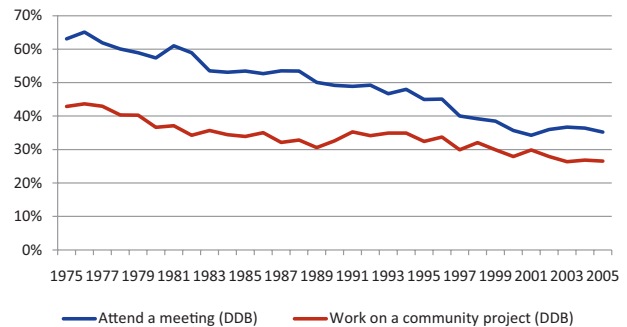
Knowledge and information are important, and so are acts such as voting and volunteering. ...

But **neither knowledge nor action** is satisfactory without civic skills.

Civic associations—among other institutions—have developed their members' skills throughout American history. ...

But these **associations are in deep decline** (notwithstanding some important new forms of online association), and therefore we cannot count on the public's civic skills to be adequate in the decades ahead.

This graph shows declines in two activities that build civic skills and reflect the use of civic skills: attending club meetings and participating in community projects.



Source: DDB Life Style Survey

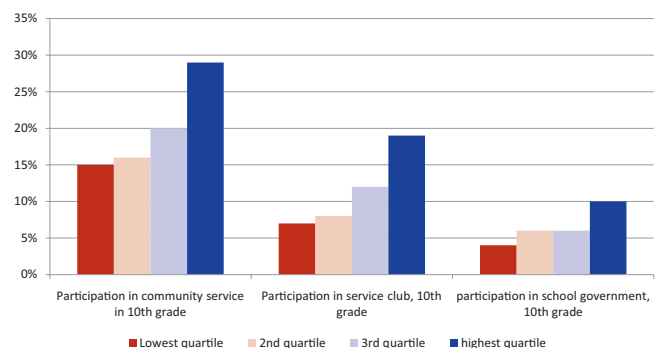
Policymakers and the public are rightly concerned with preparing young people for college and a competitive, global job market ...

But **developing civic skills also helps students to succeed academically** and in the workplace because civic skills are life skills.

All Americans must step up and contribute to common problems. ...

But **civic skills are highly unequal**. Working class youth and immigrants are especially unlikely to receive such opportunities in their schools or their communities.

Civic Learning Opportunities are More Common for Wealthier Students



Source: The Education Longitudinal Study, 2002, 10th grade data



The original mission of public schools, early colleges, and subsequent public university systems in America was to prepare the next generation of effective and responsible citizens. ...

But today education at all levels is influenced by accountability measures, and **we lack standards and means of accountability that measure civic outcomes** with reliability and enhance civic learning.

Americans respond well to opportunities to contribute to their communities and learn skills. ...

But such **opportunities are scarce.**

Statistical evidence in support of these points is presented in the CIRCLE fact sheet, *Civic Skills and Federal Policy*, available at <http://www.civicyouth.org/federal-policy-and-civic-skills>.

Participants broadly defined the federal role in developing civic skills. Not only educational programs and programs aimed at youth are relevant. *All* federal agencies interact with citizens and community-based organizations and can support and enhance their skills. Federal civil servants also need skills to engage effectively with citizens and see themselves as role models. Learning civic skills is a lifelong process, constantly evolving as public problems, tools and technologies, and policies shift.

Those who endorse this report believe that the federal government must take the following steps to enhance the public's civic skills.

- 1) Across federal agencies, develop common principles, values, and language that help build the civic capacities of civil servants and that nurture authentic public engagement. This objective may require both an inter-agency working group on skills within the federal government and convening others outside the government to develop common principles and strategies. One important outcome would be more inspiring language for talking about "civic engagement."
- 2) Using similar principles, values, and language to those mentioned in #1, improve the training of future teachers and the professional development of current teachers. Base this effort on new research about what enhances teacher education.
- 3) Define the goals of K-12 and postsecondary education as preparation for further education, career, *and* citizenship and explore ways to make these three goals cohere, recognizing that most civic skills are also academic and job skills. Reframe civic skills so that they are also workforce skills. Make skill development a lifelong objective, not just a function of schools from kindergarten through 12th grade.
- 4) Redirect service-oriented programs and opportunities so that they become civic-skill-building and community-capacity-building programs. Go beyond the "service" language. At the same time, recognize that some service and service-learning programs already have strong records of developing civic skills.
- 5) Identify and invest in community-based organizations and community-university partnerships that target and legitimately reach young people who are not on a track to attend college and that build their civic skills (in addition to meeting other objectives). Invest in their efforts to develop civic skills.
- 6) Use social service agencies as opportunities to build portable civic skills among the "clients" of government. For example, social service agencies can be used as an entry point to civic education by providing voter registration assistance.

Many more ideas were proposed by particular working groups in the April 29th conference but did not receive as much support as those listed above. These ideas are listed in Appendix 2.

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APPENDIX 1: CIVIC SKILLS

In surveys completed before the conference, participants identified the following as important civic skills.

Speaking and listening

Speaking and writing effectively on public issues; communication skills, persuasive argument, listening to others (especially those with whom you disagree); the ability to understand and be sensitive to different points of view and the reasons for them; the ability to discuss controversial issues in an informed way that doesn't lead to demonizing others or their opinions. In short, all the things that empower someone to use his or her voice effectively and with integrity in co-creating our common public world.

Collaborating, organizing fellow citizens

Convening and leading meetings, negotiating/compromising, problem-solving, decision-making, dialogue and deliberation, collaborative team work, goal-setting, consensus-building, public problem-solving through a variety of methods (advocacy, service, political engagement etc), working with others (especially those who are different).

Understanding formal politics

Basic knowledge of institutions and processes, understanding government, understanding political power. Power analysis—identifying various levers of power, how to access them, and which levers are appropriate to try to access and deploy given one's aims. Also, ability to participate in activities essential to the democratic process, including voting, petitioning for government to take action, and expressing opinions.

Advocacy

Exercising one's rights, community organizing, knowledge of the levels of government, knowledge of how to effectively engage policymakers and the system.

Information-gathering and processing

The ability to distill information and experience into an understanding of major common issues. Critical thinking (challenging ideas, questioning positions); the ability to discern fact from fiction, rumor from news, and demagoguery from honest debate; the ability to identify and define issues, gather the information needed to describe them (their scope, who is affected and how, etc.), analyze their root causes, develop

solutions that address those causes, and create a plan of action to accomplish those solutions. Identify multiple causes (individual, institutional, systemic; both proximal and distal) as a means both of understanding problems and devising solutions. A sense and knowledge of history, of salient issues in the present and of the complexity of the process of moving from the present to the desired future in public policy. Knowing how to interpret political communication such as cartoons or editorials.

Technology

Using technology to gather and share information and organize people to create change, savvy with the traditional media and new social media; the ability to judge online materials for accuracy.



APPENDIX 2: ADDITIONAL POLICY PROPOSALS

At the end of the conference, participants were asked to cast just two votes each for policy proposals that had been developed during the course of the day. The proposals that received the most votes are presented above, in the main text. The following proposals also emerged from working groups and received votes in the final plenary.

To enhance civic learning in schools from kindergarten to 12th grade

- Increase funding for research on civic education
- Enhance school climates to nurture and encourage civic-skills training for all students.

To develop the civic skills of young adults not on track to college (approximately half of the young population):

- There should be a greater emphasis, overall, on recruiting non-college youth to civic engagement and civic learning.
- The federal government should use its power to convene across sectors.

To strengthen the role of higher education in developing civic skills

- Develop criteria for programs within higher education that include: student readiness and skill development, reciprocal community-university relationships and learning exchanges, cross-sector engagement, and community development and problem-solving. In each college or university, a community review board implements and assesses these criteria. Community colleges have especially important potential because of the students they reach and their relationship to their communities.
- Pass the DREAM Act (the The Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act), which makes certain undocumented aliens eligible for federal financial aid.

To strengthen the role of federal agencies in civic-skill development

- Organize peer-to-peer learning opportunities for federal civil servants concerned with public engagement.

- Gather and apply advice about criteria for “authentic engagement” from civic engagement and citizen participation experts.
- When government regulations require public participation, include a range of allowable or recommended mechanisms such as planning, data gathering, and data use and interpretation.
- Encourage civic participation by allowing or encouraging flexible strategies that reward groups for improvements beyond required compliance.