

FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE, A COLUMN DEDICATED TO RECOGNIZING SUCCESSFUL “BRIDGES” BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS, REPORTS ON RESEARCH WITH PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

THE LANGUAGE OF YOUTH CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS

Since CIRCLE’s inception, we have used the term “civic engagement” to describe the broad range of activities that people do for purposes that they consider to be larger than themselves. Using the term “civic engagement” as an umbrella term is useful for research, but at CIRCLE we don’t assume that this language is best for all practical situations. In fact, in 2008, the National Conference on Citizenship (NCOC) tested this phrase and others to see if and how the terms resonated with the American public. They found that almost one third of respondents said they did not know what “civic engagement” meant. The report found that, “despite the popularity of the phrase in education today, Millennials were the most likely (at 42%) to say they didn’t know what it meant.”¹

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Given the findings from the NCOC report, we decided to ask several youth-serving organizations about the language they use to describe their civic work. We spoke with three organizations working in three different contexts:

- Learning to Give is a national organization that “educates youth about the importance of philanthropy, the civil society sector, and civic engagement.”^{2,3}
- The Institute for Ethical and Civic Engagement is a local organization whose purpose is to “nurture and encourage ethical and civic education at the University of Colorado at Boulder, to prepare our students for a lifetime of service to society as thoughtful, ethical and engaged citizens and contribute to the vitality of the many communities we serve from the local level to the global.”⁴
- The Seattle Young People’s Project, “a youth-led, adult-supported social justice organization that empowers youth (ages 13-18) to express themselves and to take action on the issues that affect their lives.”⁵

INTENTIONALITY

All three organizations reported that they are intentional in their use of language. None use the term “civic engagement” exclusively, but instead use a variety of terms to describe the specific engagement strategies they are promoting. Learning to Give often uses the following terms in their work: philanthropy, service, volunteerism, and nonprofit/civil society sector. According to Learning to Give’s Director, Barbara Dillbeck, they do not change their language for different constituencies: “We use the same words, just simplified definitions with children.” Dillbeck’s experience is that “Kids like big words – if they can say ‘stegosaurus’ they can say ‘philanthropist.’” Learning to Give is actively working against preconceptions about the word “philanthropy.” According to Dillbeck, “It’s the adults that have a misconception of philanthropy as rich dead men giving money that is slowly being clarified... We have found that it is very understandable for children grades K-12.”

The Seattle Young People’s Project uses the terms “empowerment” and “youth organizing” intentionally to distinguish their work from other efforts. Co-directors Jeremy Louzao and Sunny Kim say they use these terms “because they accurately capture differences between what we’re doing and what others are [doing].” The idea that there are “root causes” to community and social problems is an important idea and lesson for their work, which directly motivates what language they use.

The term “civic engagement” has been used by the Institute for Ethical and Civic Engagement, but is also part of the language used across the UC-Boulder campus (home of the Institute), including by the school’s Chancellor, admissions department and other departments. Peter Simons, director of the Institute, says that students receive this language and message from many offices, including consistently from the leadership of the University. It is also a core element of admissions presentations.



