

CIRCLE IS 10!

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) was founded in July 2001, with a first generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. Since then, our organization has evolved, grown, learned, diversified our funding and activities, and moved from the University of Maryland to the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship & Public Service at Tufts University. This special tenth anniversary issue of Around the CIRCLE is devoted to an overview of our first decade.

CIRCLE: WHO WE ARE, WHAT WE'VE DONE & WHERE WE ARE HEADED

BY: PETER LEVINE, DIRECTOR OF CIRCLE

CIRCLE conducts research on civic education in schools, colleges, and community settings and on young Americans' voting and political participation, service, activism, media use, and other forms of civic engagement. All our research is intended to help strengthen youth participation in our democracy.

We have not selected this topic for its academic interest. Today's national and global problems are serious and dangerous. Whether Americans are most concerned about a high school dropout rate of one third, homeland security threats, the Wall Street meltdown, or global warming, we cannot count on leaders and policies to solve our problems for us. The public must provide the will, energy, ideas, creativity, and resources to make significant progress.

COLLABORATION IS THE GENIUS OF AMERICAN DEMOCRACY.

The United States has never overcome any major challenges without tapping the skills, energies, and passions of millions of our citizens. Collaboration is the genius of American democracy. But surveys show that collaboration and problem-solving are in decline. People are substantially less likely to work on community projects or to attend meetings than they were a generation ago. Core components of our traditional civil society—daily newspapers, unions, and national voluntary associations—are in decline. To be sure, Americans have opportunities to build a new and possibly a better civil society out of novel components (including online tools). But rebuilding will take careful thinking and hard work; it will not occur automatically.

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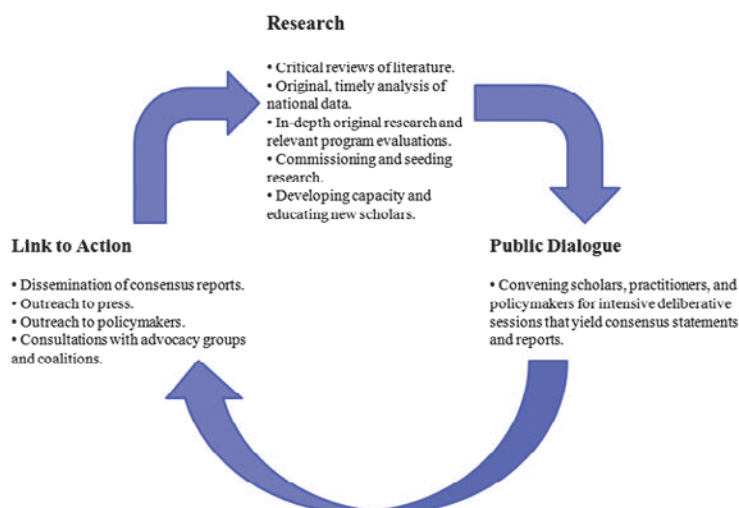
NOVEMBER 2011

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Renewing civil society must start with youth. Very few interventions have lasting impact on adults' civic behavior, but numerous programs that target youth have been found to develop habits of civic participation. At the same time, many of the declines in traditional civil society are generational, with each new cohort of Americans less engaged than its predecessors. Re-engaging youth requires a concern with equity and inclusion, because disparities in the level of civic participation are now stark and dangerous.

CIRCLE'S MODEL AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In our first decade, CIRCLE has begun to address this problem with a cycle of activities that includes original research studies and program evaluations, outreach to the press and the public, conferences of experts who help us write consensus reports, and engagement with practitioners, policymakers, and youth—who, in turn, inform our research agenda.



This research-dialogue-action cycle has had tangible outcomes. First, CIRCLE has built the research field. When our organization was founded in 2001, there was still only a trickle of research on the civic engagement and learning of young people. The body of literature was strikingly small, considering that the future of our democracy depends on the preparation of young citizens. Furthermore, scholarship had little impact on practice. Educational policies, classroom strategies at all levels (from kindergarten to graduate school), community service programs, and the efforts of political campaigns and the news media to reach young audiences were some of the areas of practice that were conspicuously uninfluenced by theory or research about young people as citizens.

ALTHOUGH CIRCLE IS NOT SOLELY RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS CHANGE, INDEPENDENT EXPERTS ACKNOWLEDGE CIRCLE'S IMPORTANT ROLE IN MOVING THE RESEARCH ON YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT FROM A TRICKLE TO A TORRENT.

Today this situation is dramatically different. The torrent of research on youth civic engagement includes highly technical articles and monographs—even a new 706-page scholarly handbook—as well as popular magazine articles and books, such as *Citizen You: Doing Your Part to Change the World* by Jonathan Tisch, Karl Weber, and Mayor Cory Booker.¹ Interdisciplinary research conferences and sessions seem to occur every few months.

Although CIRCLE is not solely responsible for this change, independent experts acknowledge CIRCLE's important role in moving the research on youth civic engagement from a trickle to a torrent. Harvard University Professor Robert Putnam has said of CIRCLE: "You've brought the best and most serious research to one place. You've applied an expert screen on the research. It's a crucial contribution to the field. It's a model for policy relevant and academic debates. [It's] useful to have someone studying the issue who's outside the debate and can be a reliable source for information."

Second, CIRCLE has begun to change public discourse and press coverage about young people as citizens. Teenagers and young adults are beginning to be seen more positively, as contributors or potential contributors to civil society. At the same time, disparities among youth are more widely recognized—in particular, the differences in civic engagement by ideology and by social class.

Although CIRCLE now uses social media to engage the public directly, we continue to work with professional reporters to influence public dialogue through the news media. CIRCLE's research has been cited in most national newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, and on CNN, NPR, PBS, MTV, and Fox News. In the months between July 2008 and the 2008 presidential election, CIRCLE was cited in 1,253 newspaper, magazine, broadcast, or web stories, including 829 print media articles. Nonprofits and government agencies also regularly consult us and other researchers.

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Third, CIRCLE has substantially influenced the field of civic education in k-12 schools. When CIRCLE was founded, it was still the “accepted wisdom in the political science profession” that high school courses on civics, government, current issues, law, and American history had “little or no effect on the vast majority of students.”² Civic education was a neglected public priority, and academic research was largely irrelevant to it.

However, by 2001, evidence was beginning to emerge that schools could help young people to develop civic skills and commitments. In 2003, working with Carnegie Corporation of New York, CIRCLE convened some 60 experts on civic education for a series of face-to-face discussions. We provided participants with original statistics from national polls and assessments. Although the participants represented organizations as diverse as the Heritage Foundation and the two national teachers’ unions (as well as independent scholars from several disciplines), they were able to reach consensus and write a joint report entitled *The Civic Mission of Schools*.

The report was the subject of a syndicated column by David Broder, several unsigned editorials, and numerous news stories. Copies were distributed at a White House Forum on History, Civics, and Service and a Congressional Conference on Civic Education, among other events in the first year after its launch. More than 30,000 copies were requested.

The *Civic Mission of Schools* then became the charter for the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, an advocacy coalition comprising more than forty groups. The campaign’s National Advisory Council is co-chaired by retired Justice Sandra Day O’Connor and former Congressman Lee Hamilton. It is the leading advocacy organization for civic education.

After the Campaign’s launch, CIRCLE returned to independent research on civic education. In fact, we have published work that has complicated some of the recommendations presented in the *Civic Mission of Schools* report.

Fourth, CIRCLE has changed political campaigns in America by helping to show that it is cost-effective to mobilize people between the ages of 18 and 30. From 1972 until 2002, youth voting was basically in decline in the United States. Many explanations could be offered, but one contributing factor was the tendency of campaigns to write off young people. The 1970s

began with moderately low youth turnout, and political professionals believed it would be wasteful to try to mobilize people under 30. Sometimes, campaigns would scan contact lists for younger citizens and delete them as low-probability voters. The result of not being contacted was even lower turnout: a vicious cycle with dangerous implications for our democracy.

Since the 2002 election cycle, CIRCLE has produced a stream of timely national and state statistics that became the basis for most press coverage of young voters. We have also conducted our own national polls, contracted researchers to conduct randomized field experiments, convened scholars and practitioners, and issued joint reports with Rock the Vote, Generational Alliance, and Young Voter Strategies.

“CIRCLE has been influential in generating interest on important issues and forced scholars to take account of disciplines besides those to which they belong. CIRCLE has clearly been a vehicle for intellectual broadening and awakening.”

—JAMES YOUNISS, RESEARCH
PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY,
THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF
AMERICA

Turnout rose significantly in 2004 and 2008. Clearly, research was not the main cause of this change, but lines can be traced directly from our research work to the behavior of political leaders. A senior official on one national presidential campaign wrote after the 2004 election: “I literally would have been lost without CIRCLE on the campaign!!! You would laugh if you read any of my briefing memos or talking points—they are littered with CIRCLE research.” The person most responsible for Barack Obama’s successful outreach to young voters in Iowa (where youth turnout quadrupled in 2008) had collaborated with CIRCLE on nonpartisan efforts earlier in the decade. Meanwhile,



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we provided timely tailored research for nonpartisan education efforts.

AMERICA NEVER SOLVES ITS DEEPEST PROBLEMS WITHOUT ITS CITIZENS, AND THUS WE CANNOT MOVE FORWARD WITHOUT OUR NON-COLLEGE-BOUND YOUNG PEOPLE.

Finally, CIRCLE has worked to improve strategies and day-to-day practices in organizations that engage young people, mainly by replying to their requests for research and evidence. We have provided training and technical assistance to at least 340 organizations in the form of tailored research and statistics, presentations, advice on evaluation or strategy, research design, and collaboration in planning events.

OUR CURRENT FOCUS: NON-COLLEGE YOUTH

Ever since CIRCLE's launch, we have been concerned with disparities among young people. Focusing on the national trends in voting, volunteering, and other forms of civic engagement—whether they are rising or falling—can obscure enormous gaps among people of the same generation. For example, almost half of young adults (age 18-29) have no college experience. Compared to their college-educated peers, they are less than half as likely to vote and less than one third as likely to volunteer.

For Americans up to age 18, high schools provide an institutional structure for civic learning. After that age, the massive infrastructure of higher education (constituting almost 3 percent of GDP and subsidized by the government) is available for some and provides them with civic education. But people who do not pursue education past high school have very few opportunities for civic learning.

This situation has grown distinctly worse. We have tracked 10 forms of civic engagement from 1970 to the present: belonging to a group, attending religious services, belonging to a union, reading a newspaper, attending a meeting, working on a community project, being contacted by a political party, volunteering, voting, and trust in other people.³

"CIRCLE fact sheets and working papers are key resources for Kettering Foundation research on youth civic engagement. Moreover, CIRCLE's collaborative way of working and commitment to connecting different groups concerned about youth and civic life have been extremely useful to Kettering."

—DAVID MATHEWS AND
JOHN DEDRICK, KETTERING
FOUNDATION

With one exception, all of these forms of engagement have dropped substantially for all youth. (The one exception is volunteering, which has risen as more institutionalized volunteering programs have been created.) With no exceptions, these 10 forms of engagement are now much less common for non-college youth than for their college-educated peers.

As a result, non-college youth are basically missing from our groups, meetings, projects, and elections—in a way that was not true in 1970. Society misses their potential contributions; they lose opportunities to learn and form networks; and their issues are overlooked. Since research finds significant psychological and educational benefits from civic engagement, these young people are missing chances to develop personally in healthy ways.

Programs exist that engage working-class 18-to 29-year-olds in civic activities, supported by philanthropy and a few small federal initiatives. These programs (whose leaders CIRCLE has convened on several occasions) provide a base of experience and data. During the fall of 2011, CIRCLE is completing a major evaluation of YouthBuild USA and analyzing data from our own focus groups in Little Rock, Baltimore, Richmond, and Lowell (Metro Boston).

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We intend to continue studying working-class young adults both in and out of civic programs and developing recommendations based on their ideas and our research. America never solves its deepest problems without its citizens, and therefore we cannot move forward without our non-college-bound young people. ★

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lonnie Sherrod, Judith Torney-Purta, and Constance Flanagan, *Research on the Development of Citizenship: A Field Comes of Age* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2010); Jonathan Tisch, Karl Weber and Mayor Corey Booker, *Citizen You: Doing Your Part to Change the World* (New York: Crown, 2010)
- 2 Richard G. Niemi and Jane Junn, *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, p.16).
- 3 Constance Flanagan, Peter Levine, and Richard Settersten, *Civic Engagement and the Changing Transition to Adulthood*, CIRCLE monograph, 2009.

"CIRCLE has been an incredibly important force within the civic engagement movement. I have used CIRCLE's research to make the case for several of my organization's initiatives. In addition, CIRCLE helps add legitimacy to our work in the civic engagement movement. In particular, CIRCLE has helped us get the attention of law makers and major foundations as a 'canary in the mine shaft' of sorts. I am so grateful for CIRCLE's leadership in civic engagement!"

—CECILIA M. ORPHAN, DOCTORAL STUDENT, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, FORMER NATIONAL MANAGER, AMERICAN DEMOCRACY PROJECT, AASCU

"CIRCLE is the go-to source for information on historic turnout data and analysis. We use your data to make the case for the need for youth engagement."

—MATT SINGER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BUS FEDERATION

