RESEARCH ROUNDUP

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CIRCLE CONVENES LEADING RESEARCHERS TO DISCUSS THE CIVIC MISSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

On December 1st and 2nd, 2005, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the American Political Science Association's Standing Committee on Civic Education and Engagement, and CIRCLE convened 22 distinguished scholars in Palo Alto, CA, to discuss the civic mission of higher education. Participants (representing the disciplines of psychology, political science, philosophy, education, sociology, and economics) discussed the historical role that higher education has played in developing citizens as well as some major research findings on the topic. The meeting resulted in a detailed agenda for future research.

The complete findings from the meeting are contained in a new report entitled "Higher Education: Civic Mission, Civic Effects" which can be downloaded from CIRCLE's Web site www.civicyouth.org.

CONSENSUS ON CIVIC MISSION

Participants agreed that colleges and universities have a civic mission. After considering the historical role that colleges and universities have played in developing citizens, the attendees came to consensus that the civic mission of these institutions includes being good institutional citizens that serve their communities in multiple ways: providing forums for free democratic dialogue; conducting research on democracy, civil society, and civic development; and educating their own students to be effective and responsible citizens. The meeting focused on this last role, civic education.

THE CIVIC EFFECTS OF COLLEGE ATTENDANCE

The researchers spent much of the day discussing what is known about the effects of college attendance on civic engagement. Current research shows strong correlations between years spent in school and participation in politics and civil society. However, these correlations do not by themselves prove that colleges and universities enhance students' civic skills, knowledge, and commitments and make them more likely to participate. There are several other plausible explanations, including the following:

(1) Adolescents who are already disposed to civic and political participation are more likely than disengaged students to complete higher levels of education.
(2) Compared to citizens with less education, those who are educationally more successful have more social status and resources, which lead to more engagement.
(3) Colleges bring relatively engaged young people together so that they learn civic skills and disposition from one another.

The available data make it difficult to test these hypotheses with great precision. However, there is evidence that colleges can at least reinforce the civic characteristics that their incoming students bring with them, thereby adding value.

CONVERGENT EVIDENCE ON PEDAGOGY

Attendees also discussed the effects of different pedagogies. In general, they agreed that learning and development require encounters with challenging ideas and people. Moreover, learning happens when students are actively engaged in a supportive environment. Education requires real-world activities and social interaction as well as discipline-based instruction. Learning occurs in many venues and from many sources.

These general principles are consistent with studies and longitudinal data that find lasting positive effects from service learning, student government, religious participation, groups that explore diversity, and other experiential civic learning. Prompting students to reflect on their experience appears to be an important component.

The Carnegie Foundation's Political Engagement Project is examining courses and programs that use various forms of experiential civic education at the college level, including service-learning, internships, semesters in Washington DC, visiting speakers, simulations, collaborative social research projects, and living/learning communities. The preliminary findings, based on pre- and post-interviews and surveys, show positive results from the 21 programs studied, with a particularly strong positive influence on students who enter the programs with a low level of political interest.

CIVIC DEVELOPMENT AS A PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GOOD

The dilemma of civic development as a public and private good,

which colleges face when implementing civic education initiatives, surfaced frequently during the conference. Participants agreed that civic identities, skills, dispositions, and knowledge are public goods because they strengthen a democratic society and promote social justice. However, if individual colleges and universities provide civic education as a public good, they may not be able to attract students who seek the individual human capital needed to compete in a global economy. The same problem of incentives applies for faculty. Many professors acknowledge that their institutions have a mission to develop good citizens, but they do not want to accept that responsibility themselves.

The report finds, "Since civic learning has public benefits and may compete with other, more private goods, it is crucial to address the institutional structures and incentives that either promote or discourage civic education at the college level. These structures may include procedures for tenure and promotion; systems for accrediting, evaluating, and rating institutions; and, the availability of funding for particular kinds of teaching and research."

TWO MODELS OF CIVIC DEVELOPMENT

Participants also discussed the role of motivation in civic education. It is common in the literature on civic development to assume that students can be motivated, given incentives, or compelled to conduct service. In short, changing the values or priorities of youth affects their participation. An alternative model, advanced in the work of James Youniss and colleagues, received some support at the conference. In this model, motivation comes after membership and participation, not before. Most young people will participate if they have opportunities. In the course of participation, they incur obligations, obtain fulfillment, and develop relationships that affect their identities. They become more likely to participate in the future.

AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The meeting concluded with the development of a research agenda to enhance civic education at the college level. Peter Levine, one of the conference organizers, notes, "While there is convergent evidence about the principles of effective civic education at the classroom or program level, much needs to be learned about the broader topic of college students' civic development."

The following priorities for future research were identified during the conference. Participants believe that researchers should strive to:

1. Change and enlarge the measures used in research

- Focus on relevant characteristics of institutions: not just size, type, mission (for which data are easily available), but also campus culture, institutional leadership, and the array of civic opportunities provided across each campus and community.
- Broaden existing measures of civic engagement (without dropping older measures that are useful for measuring trends).

2. Disaggregate factors that are sometimes conflated

- Disaggregate research on institutions of higher education by looking at different types of institution and multiple venues within colleges and universities.
- Disaggregate outcomes by level of analysis (individual, organization, university-wide culture, surrounding community, and other external venues).
- Disaggregate data by gender, race and ethnicity, immigrant status, family socio-economic status, ideology, religion, and region.
- Disaggregate "civic engagement" by form (e.g., service, voting, protest), by political versus non-political purpose, by location and venue, by formal or informal organization, by level or intensity of participation, and by motivation.

3. Strengthen research methods

- Employ comparative, experimental, and longitudinal methods. (Longitudinal studies are especially important in this field, because of concern about the lasting effects of youth experiences.)
- Conduct large comparative studies on multiple campuses.
- Look not only for direct effects from programs and policies but also for indirect effects.

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4. *Focus on institutions and communities*

- Develop evidence about the impact of institutional leadership (which includes both the effects of individual leaders and the institutionalization of their vision).
- Examine institutional culture as both a dependent and an independent variable: what effects do different campus cultures have, and how can positive cultures be built?
- Investigate interactions between communities and institutions of higher education in shaping student outcomes.
- Study higher education as a venue for free public debate: to what extent does a college or university that promotes debate affect political discourse outside?
- Investigate the integration of a broad range of co-curricular opportunities.

5. *Address issues raised by the current literature*

- Weigh competing explanations of the macro trends in civic engagement: do they result from political, demographic, or economic changes? What is the impact of changes in social and economic context (e.g., the lengthening transition to adulthood, the changing content of "occupational" skills)?
- Address self-selection problems to disentangle effects of colleges from maturation effects and broader changes in society.
- Investigate the effects of civic pedagogies on students' academic learning (defined in traditional ways).

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