



IS THERE A ROLE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN REDUCING THE GAP IN YOUTH CIVIC PARTICIPATION?

In August, CIRCLE released a major report entitled “That’s Not Democracy: How Out-of-School Youth Engage in Civic Life and What Stands in Their Way.” We found that young people are interested in civic and political issues—and when they are recruited to participate in organizations or events they often engage—but they face a general lack of opportunity, especially compared to peers who have any college experience. Since engagement early in life is related to later participation, today’s opportunity gap could foreshadow participatory gaps in the future.

We offered recommendations for several stakeholder groups, including policymakers, schools, and civic organizations. One sector for which we did *not* propose explicit recommendations was higher education. As we emphasize in the report, 42% of youth (18-29) do not have college experience and only 24% of 18- to-24 year-olds are college students in 2012. Yet colleges and universities have been called “anchor institutions” and “democracy schools,” suggesting that they have broad roles in their communities, not limited to educating their own students. What, if anything, could they do to engage youth not currently enrolled in college?

WHAT, IF ANYTHING, COULD THEY DO TO ENGAGE YOUTH NOT CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN COLLEGE?

The answer differs depending on the context of each specific community and the assets that exist within the institution and local organizations. One strategy is to try to increase matriculation rates to serve a broader range of young people. Here are a few examples of other ways in which campuses have tried to enhance the civic engagement of non-student youth:

SUPPORT AND PROMOTE OPPORTUNITIES FOR A WHOLE COMMUNITY

Young people who do not have college experience are less likely than college students to be registered to vote or to cast a ballot. They are also much more likely to be contacted by campaigns and parties and invited to participate in politics. In our focus groups, we found little evidence of organized political outreach to non-student youth. But there are exceptions. For example, the League of

Women Voters (LWV) has 800 state and local chapters working to “improve our government and engage all citizens in the decisions that impact their lives.” LWV chapters have found ways to engage higher education in providing low-income youth with more exposure to opportunities. The University of California-Fresno LWV chapter goes to local high schools to register voters. The Houston LWV has worked with higher education administrators to involve students in voter registration in local high schools and at concerts.

CAMPUS EFFORTS TO BUILD COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH (CBPR) OPPORTUNITIES CAN ALSO CREATE SPACES WHERE ALL YOUTH CAN PLAY IMPORTANT CIVIC ROLES AND BUILD SKILLS.

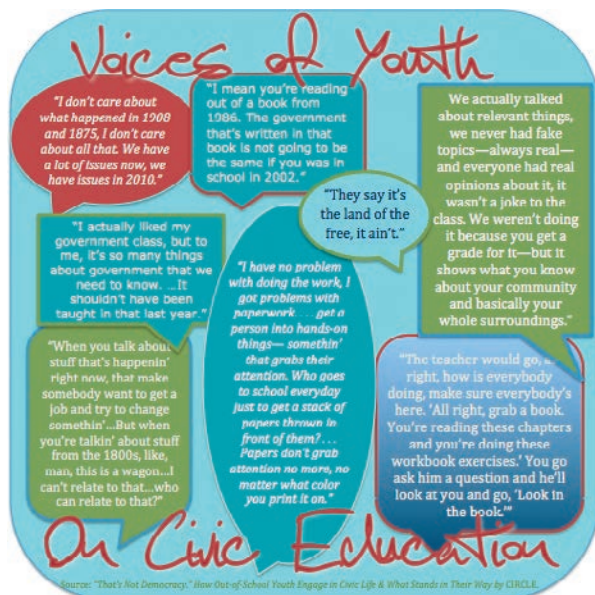
Campus efforts to build community-based participatory research (CBPR) opportunities can also create spaces where all youth can play important civic roles and build skills. An example related to Tufts is “*Nuestro Futuro Saludable: The Jamaica Plain Partnerships for Healthy Caribbean Latino Youth*.” With funding from the National Institutes of Health and the National Centers for Minority Health and Health Disparities, and in close partnership with community groups, Tufts professors Flavia C. Peréa and Linda Sprague Martinez engaged teenagers to design an intervention to address health disparities among Caribbean Latino youth. The teenagers offered essential expertise about their community and became civically engaged as part of their work.

PREPARE TEACHERS TO DO HIGH QUALITY CIVIC EDUCATION

K-12 schools reach a wide range of youth. Many of the young adults whom we interviewed in focus groups recalled poor experiences with civic education while they were still in school. An important role that higher education plays is preparing future teachers to serve all students. Research shows that simulations of democratic processes, interactive pedagogies, and opportunities to discuss current issues promote youth engagement. Schools of education can prepare teachers to use such pedagogies. The

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TeacherCorps, for example, is a partnership between the University of New Mexico Community Engagement Center and Department of Teacher Education. The program engages future teachers with “innovative teacher preparation with a focus on community-based service-learning and civic engagement.”



HIGHER EDUCATION AS CONVENER

The departments and programs of a given university usually support a wide variety of specialties, topics, and community partnerships. As a result, an institution of higher education can serve as a convener in its community, not seeking to impart knowledge but to facilitate a discussion and bring people with diverse knowledge to the table. The Bonner Center for Civic and Community Engagement at the College of New Jersey (TCNJ) is working on just this task with respect to youth in the Trenton area. According to Pat Donohue, Assistant Provost for Community Engaged Learning Programs and Partnerships at TCNJ, this is a “grassroots project that leads to recommendations about preventing juvenile crime [and] promoting positive youth development.” Several stakeholders have been a part of the project, including youth from the local YouthBuild site and high schools, who contribute their own experiences and knowledge to help envision new ways to engage youth in Trenton. Professors also sit on each Working Group and complete literature reviews—thereby combining youth, community and campus expertise before finalizing recommendations.

AS A RESULT, AN INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION CAN SERVE AS A CONVENER IN ITS COMMUNITY, NOT SEEKING TO IMPART KNOWLEDGE BUT TO FACILITATE A DISCUSSION AND BRING PEOPLE WITH DIVERSE KNOWLEDGE TO THE TABLE.

INSTITUTIONAL REFLECTION ON REAL OUTCOMES

Lastly, colleges and universities should reflect on their impact on non-students. These institutions choose to admit some young people and not others. Do their students learn knowledge, values, and skills that will allow them to act democratically and equitably in their post-graduate work? Does treating college students as future leaders send a message that other youth are not leaders? These are questions that deserve explicit consideration in colleges that hope to support civic renewal. ★