



# Assessing the Civic Campus

The Link Between Higher Education and Democracy

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# Executive Summary

The link between higher education and participation in and attitudes toward democracy is well-documented in the literature. Those with a college degree are more likely to vote, more civically active, and politically knowledgeable.<sup>1</sup> They are also less likely to favor authoritarian political stances.<sup>2</sup> While the aspects of higher education—whether instruction in critical thinking, service-learning opportunities, enhanced economic stability, or upward mobility—that lead to these outcomes are less clear, it is clear that higher education can play a fundamental role in upholding democracy and shaping informed, active citizens, and postsecondary education is often cited as a significant factor in shaping the civic fabric of society.

Yet in recent decades, observers have voiced concerns about the dearth of college courses that deal with topics related to civics or fundamental concepts of a democratic and free society. Notably, *A Crucible Moment*, a 2012 report by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, issued a national call to action aimed to “reclaim and reinvest in the fundamental civic and democratic mission of schools and of all sectors within higher education.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, political polarization, mis/disinformation, censorship, and uncivil discourse have turned academic campuses into proxy settings where these larger political battles are increasing in prevalence and frequency.

Against this backdrop, Ithaka S+R, in collaboration with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, undertook a research project focused on the link between higher education, civic engagement, and democratic attitudes and behaviors.

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<sup>1</sup> Caitlin E. Ahearn, Jennie E. Brand, and Xiang Zhou, “How, and For Whom, Does Higher Education Increase Voting?” *Research in Higher Education* 64, no. 4 (June 2023): 574–97, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-022-09717-4>.

<sup>2</sup> Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, Lenka Dražanová, Artem Gulish and Kathryn Peltier Campbell, “The Role of Education in Taming Authoritarian Attitudes,” *CEW Georgetown*, 7 October 2020, <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/authoritarianism/>.

<sup>3</sup> National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement and Association of American Colleges and Universities, eds., *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy’s Future* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012).

Below, we present a landscape review of the relevant literature on the topic, guided by the following research questions:

- What is the impact of postsecondary education on civic engagement and democratic attitudes and behaviors?
- How have researchers defined, operationalized, and measured civic engagement in the context of higher education?
- How are postsecondary institutions and key stakeholders institutionalizing civic engagement as part of their curricular and co-curricular programming?

In our landscape review, drawing on studies from the past few decades, we focus on how researchers and practitioners define civic engagement, the nature of the relationship between higher education and civic behaviors and attitudes, the differential impact of civic education on different groups, and the effectiveness of different types of civic engagement programming. Below we present our key findings and areas of strategic priority for higher education institutions, as well as directions for future research.

## Key Findings

- **There is no one clear definition of civic engagement.** The literature is split between those who use civic and community engagement interchangeably and those who argue that the two are similar but distinct concepts.
- **The existing research is predominantly quantitative in focus.** Most of the research focuses on the quantity of education (i.e., number of years in postsecondary education) as opposed to the content or quality of education.
- **The existing literature is overwhelmingly focused on voting outcomes.** Voter turnout or intent to vote are the two most commonly used outcome measures in the literature, particularly in the context of federal elections. While fundamental, voting is one of many forms of democratic engagement, and one to which access can be suppressed.
- **Longitudinal studies are rare.** Most studies are restricted to case studies of individual campuses and do not study the impacts of

their initiatives over time. Most research focuses on self-reported data through attitudinal surveys that capture civic attitudes, with few able to capture civic behaviors. Most research cannot be generalized or replicated.

- **Certain student populations—and the institutions that serve them—are understudied.** Despite evidence that civic education programming's effects differ by demographics, students of color, as well as rural, first-generation, and low-income students are understudied in the literature—as are the institutions that serve these diverse student bodies. Regional public universities in particular are virtually invisible within the literature.
- **The residential experience matters.** Nascent research on institutional isomorphism shows that the strongest institutional predictor of high levels of civic engagement is whether an institution is residential or not. This has implications for commuter-dominant campuses, as well as for online learning post-pandemic.
- **STEM departments in particular could benefit from integrating civic engagement into the curriculum.** While incoming undergraduates express similar levels of interest in civic engagement programming or coursework, preliminary research shows that STEM majors are less civically engaged than their humanities and social sciences counterparts and have lower satisfaction with civic engagement opportunities on their campuses.

# Introduction

As Claire Willeck and Tali Mendelberg note, “the link between education and political engagement is among the most replicated and cited findings in political science. If scholars could use only one variable to predict voting, contacting public officials, signing a petition, or talking with others about public affairs, it would be the level of education.”<sup>4</sup> This is not surprising, given that in the US context one of higher education’s primary goals has historically been to promote democracy—civic engagement was legally stipulated in the establishment of land-grant universities in 1862.<sup>5</sup> The Truman administration doubled down on this mission, publishing a report in 1947 on *Higher Education for American Democracy* which states that “the first and most essential charge upon higher education is that at all levels and in all its fields of specialization, it shall be the carrier of democratic value, ideals and process.”<sup>6</sup>

**While younger cohorts of Americans are historically the most educated, they are also the least politically engaged.**

Yet, while younger cohorts of Americans are historically the most educated, they are also the least politically engaged. This presents a bit of a paradox for researchers and practitioners. In 2012, the authors of *A Crucible Moment* reported on certain indicators of the “anemic” state of US civic health, referencing that the US ranked 139 out of 172 in voter participation among global democracies in 2007, and that the average civic literacy score of college seniors surveyed in the 2007-2008 academic year was an “F.”<sup>7</sup> A 2023 survey of 18-24 year-olds in the US conducted by the Institute for Citizens and Scholars found that more than half of those surveyed were dissatisfied with the state of American democracy, and only 40 percent were able to answer one out of four civics questions correctly (while only four percent could answer all four correctly). One-third indicated they had no intent to engage civically in 2024 in any

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<sup>4</sup> Claire Willeck and Tali Mendelberg, “Education and Political Participation,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 25, no. 1 (12 May 2022): 89–110, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051120-014235>.

<sup>5</sup> Act of July 2, 1862, Public Law 37-108 (Morrill Act), which established land grant colleges: “Morrill Act (1862),” United States Government National Archives, last updated 10 May 2022, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/morrill-act>.

<sup>6</sup> President’s Commission on Higher Education, *Higher Education for American Democracy, Vol. I, Establishing the Goals* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1947), 102.

<sup>7</sup> National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement and Association of American Colleges and Universities, “A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future,” *Global Perspective Institute and the Association of American Colleges and Universities*, 5 October 2011. <https://www.aacu.org/publication/a-crucible-moment-college-learning-democracys-future>.

form (for instance by voting, volunteering, or donating), despite 68 percent indicating that they believe their vote matters. Most stark, four in 10 young adults reported being pessimistic about the future of American democracy, and more than five in 10 reported having no or little trust in government institutions.<sup>8</sup> More importantly, public trust in higher education is also on a downward trend, particularly across ideological lines.<sup>9</sup> Recent evidence shows that incoming college undergraduates are some of the most politically polarized cohorts since the mid-1960s, with just 43.6 percent of first-year students in 2019 identifying as politically middle-of-the-road.<sup>10</sup>

These statistics also coincide with what can be termed a “global democratic recession.”<sup>11</sup> The Varieties of Democracy Project is an international empirical effort to ascertain the “health” of democracy across the world. In 1996, more than a quarter of the global population lived in democratizing countries, yet according to the researchers’ latest report in 2022, “advances in global levels of democracy made over the last 35 years have been wiped out.” The project estimates that 72 percent of the global population (5.7 billion people) now lives in autocracies, while a record 42 countries, including the United States, are becoming more autocratic.<sup>12</sup> In a similar research effort, the “Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict Report” by the *Economist’s* Intelligence Unit found a similar “global picture of stagnation and regression,”<sup>13</sup> with 135 countries registering either a decline or stagnation in freedoms, while the 32 that did improve their index scores did so only marginally.<sup>14</sup> The above-mentioned Institute for Citizens and Scholars survey found that those

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<sup>8</sup> “The Civic Outlook of Young Adults in America,” *Institute for Citizens & Scholars*, September 2023, <https://citizensandscholars.org/focus-areas/accelerate/civic-outlook-of-young-adults/>.

<sup>9</sup> Megan Brennan, “Americans’ Confidence in Higher Education Down Sharply,” *Gallup*, 7 February 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508352/americans-confidence-higher-education-down-sharply.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen B. Stolzenberg et al., “The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2019,” *Higher Education Research Institute*, UCLA, 2020, <https://www.heri.ucla.edu/monographs/TheAmericanFreshman2019.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Larry Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (January 2015): 141-55.

<sup>12</sup> Evie Papada et al., “Defiance in the Face of Autocratization. Democracy Report 2023,” *V-Dem Institute*, 2 March 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4560857>.

<sup>13</sup> “Democracy Index 2023: Age of Conflict,” *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2024, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

respondents who are not engaged in any civic activities are more likely to be open to the use of violence to suppress dissent.<sup>15</sup>

Against this backdrop of democratic recession, this report aims to shed light on the role postsecondary education plays in upholding democratic attitudes and behaviors within the US, given the university's role as a democratic laboratory. *A Crucible Moment* called for civic engagement as a third national priority, with the goal of educational institutions thinking of their role as “producers” of democracy, and committing to fostering informed, engaged, and responsible citizens, specifically urging postsecondary institutions to focus on fostering civic ethos, integrating civic inquiry within college majors and general education, and advancing civic action.<sup>16</sup>

Since that report's call to action, several scholars have undertaken efforts to synthesize the literature on postsecondary civic education. Notably, Jason C. Fitzgerald, Alison K. Cohen, Elena Maker Castro, and Alexander Pope conducted a review of research on civic education between 2009-2019, identifying over 600 studies. However, their review is restricted to studies that mention the terms “civic,” “citizenship,” or “citizen” together with “education” in their titles or abstracts, and includes normative, non-empirical studies.<sup>17</sup> More recently, Jessica Chittum, Kathryn Enke, and Ashley Finley provide a review of the efficacy of high-impact practices in higher education in general, as well as community-based and civic engagement high-impact practices more narrowly. However, in an effort to combat the issue of generalizability of research on the topic, the authors explicitly focus on multi-year and multi-site studies, identifying 53 studies that fit these criteria.<sup>18</sup>

In the following landscape review, we build off of these works to provide an updated high-level synthesis of the conceptual and definitional challenges

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<sup>15</sup> “The Civic Outlook of Young Adults in America,” *Institute for Citizens & Scholars*, September 2023.

<sup>16</sup> National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement and Association of American Colleges and Universities, “A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future,” *Global Perspective Institute and the Association of American Colleges and Universities*, 5 October 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Jason C. Fitzgerald et al., “A Systematic Review of the Last Decade of Civic Education Research in the United States,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 96, no. 3 (27 May 2021): 235–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2021.1942703>.

<sup>18</sup> Jessica R. Chittum, Kathryn A. E. Enke, and Ashley P. Finley, “The Effects of Community-Based and Civic Engagement in Higher Education: What We Know and Questions That Remain,” *American Association of Colleges and Universities*, 2022, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED625877>.



driving civic engagement and civic education research in four key ways, with the understanding that landscape reviews are comprehensive, but not exhaustive. We begin with a discussion of the lack of agreement among scholars and practitioners over how to define civic engagement, or what terms to use, highlighting the debates over the use of “civic,” “citizen,” “democratic,” “political,” or “community” engagement, which are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature. Second, we highlight why not only generalizability, but also replicability, self-selection, and the dearth of longitudinal research, all pose key challenges to researchers focused on this topic. Further, we aim to take a step back and provide a high-level overview of the evidence behind the claim that educational attainment, particularly in the postsecondary setting, drives civic engagement in the first place, before moving on to discuss the impact of specific practices and institutional characteristics. Finally, we highlight some of the opportunities for further research into the equity implications of civic engagement research, particularly as students of color, as well as rural, first-generation, and low-income students—and the institutions serving them, such as regional public universities and community colleges—are understudied in the literature. In the following sections of the report, we synthesize where things stand more than a decade after the publication of *A Crucible Moment*, but first we start by discussing what civic engagement actually means to researchers and practitioners.

## Civic Engagement, Defined

First, there is the issue of what “civic engagement” actually means. The literature is split between those who use “civic engagement” and “community engagement” interchangeably, those who argue the two are somewhat overlapping but different concepts, and those who argue that civic engagement is subsumed under community engagement (and vice versa). As Lorilee Sandmann notes, community engagement as a concept is in a state of “definitional anarchy,”<sup>19</sup> with as many as 48 different terms being used to capture community engagement activities in higher

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<sup>19</sup> Lorilee Sandmann, “Conceptualization of the Scholarship of Engagement in Higher Education: A Strategic Review, 1996-2006,” *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement* 12, no. 1, (2008): 91-104.

education.<sup>20</sup> For example, Carrie Myers, Scott Myers, and Martha Peters use the term civic engagement to “broadly indicate an individual’s involvement in their community.”<sup>21</sup>

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In the 1970s and 1980s, civic engagement was synonymous with student volunteerism, yet in the 1990s the term began applying to service learning and more academic activities.<sup>22</sup> Once research started demonstrating the positive impact of service learning on political outcomes or skills that underscore political behavior, civic engagement started being explicitly linked to democratic engagement.<sup>23</sup> Others prefer using a fairly broad conceptual framework; democratic engagement can be a four-pillar concept that covers the knowledge, skills, values, and behaviors of active citizens, covering engagement “from the national to the hyper-local,”<sup>24</sup> or it can be a five-pronged approach of civic ethos, civic literacy and skill building, civic inquiry, action, and agency.<sup>25</sup> Fitzgerald et al. find that researchers most often use the term “citizen,” as opposed to civics or citizenship to discuss their research scope. Given that “citizenship” can be an exclusionary term that can limit the range of political behaviors

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Farnell, “Community Engagement in Higher Education: Trends, Practices and Policies,” *NESET Report*, 2020, 22, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/071482>.

<sup>21</sup> Carrie B. Myers, Scott M. Myers, and Martha Peters, “The Longitudinal Connections Between Undergraduate High Impact Curriculum Practices and Civic Engagement in Adulthood,” *Research in Higher Education* 60, no. 1 (1 February 2019): 83–110, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-018-9504-4>.

<sup>22</sup> Brent J. Evans, Christopher R. Marsicano, and Courtney J. Lennartz, “Cracks in the Bedrock of American Democracy: Differences in Civic Engagement Across Institutions of Higher Education,” *Educational Researcher* 48, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 31–44, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X18809053>.

<sup>23</sup> John Saltmarsh, Matthew Hartley, and Patti Clayton, “Democratic Engagement White Paper,” *New England Resource Center for Higher Education Publications*, 13 February 2009, [https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nerche\\_pubs/45](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nerche_pubs/45).

<sup>24</sup> Ronald J. Daniels, Grant Shreve, and Phillip Spector, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.97330>.

<sup>25</sup> David Hoffman et al., “Higher Education’s Role in Enacting a Thriving Democracy: Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Theory of Change,” *American Democracy Project*, June 2018. <https://compact.org/sites/default/files/CLDE-Theory-of-Change.pdf>.

individuals can engage in (i.e., non-citizens, as well as certain citizens, cannot vote), the authors suggest the use of “civic actor” instead.<sup>26</sup>

**Research shows that what counts as “good citizenship” or “civicness” varies ideologically.**

Definitions of what constitutes civic engagement can also be influenced by the larger political landscape, particularly with the rise of political polarization. While this is an understudied topic, early research shows that what counts as “good citizenship” or “civicness” varies ideologically. In one study of civics teachers in Missouri, the type of civic education ideology individuals subscribe to has a significant impact on what type of civic behaviors teachers believe the curriculum should emphasize. The authors of the study use a three-pronged typology of conservative, liberal, and critical ideologies, where conservative civic education focuses on patriotism, free market economy, and upholding historical tradition; liberal civic education emphasizes multiculturalism, tolerance, and pluralism; and critical civic education focuses on deconstructing traditional notions of citizenship, with the explicit goal of interrogating power structures to promote greater justice. The authors found that while all three types support personally responsible civic behaviors such as helping those in need, telling the truth, and abiding laws, only conservative and liberal ideologies support participatory civic behavior (such as being actively involved in local and state issues) while critical ideology correlates with a lower likelihood of what the authors call system justification (or simply put, legitimizing the current political system), and instead being critical of it (and supporting protesting, for example). Notably, some demographic variations are also worth highlighting. Rural teachers, more experienced teachers, and those teaching higher grades were more likely to endorse conservative civic ideologies. Experienced teachers were also more likely to promote personally responsible civic behaviors. Female teachers were more likely to support critical civic behaviors, while those teaching middle school tended to favor participatory civic behaviors.<sup>27</sup> While the research project in question focuses on K-12 teachers and not college instructors, it raises the question of whether the ideological identity of faculty has an impact on their pedagogical approaches to civic education.

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<sup>26</sup> Jason C. Fitzgerald et al., “A Systematic Review of the Last Decade of Civic Education Research in the United States,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 96, no. 3 (27 May 2021): 235–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2021.1942703>.

<sup>27</sup> Ryan T. Knowles and Antonio J. Castro, “The Implications of Ideology on Teachers’ Beliefs Regarding Civic Education,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 77 (1 January 2019): 226–39, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2018.10.009>.

At a high level, the literature indicates that civic engagement has a community-based dimension (but not all community engagement is civic), a politically participatory dimension (aimed at solving a public problem), a collective action dimension (to stress the need for collaboration and means through which individuals can make an impact), and a social change dimension (actively working to shape the future). As Richard P. Adler and Judy Goggin note, even Robert Putnam in his monograph on the decline of social capital and civic engagement never actually defines civic engagement, only disengagement.<sup>28</sup> The body of research described in this report uses civic engagement, democratic engagement, community engagement, and political participation to describe a fairly consistent set of measures, dimensions, and outcomes.

## The Link Between Higher Education and Democracy

The exact nature of the relationship between education and civic engagement or political participation is more ambiguous.

Higher education, particularly the completion of a four-year degree, has consistently been linked to higher levels of civic or political engagement.<sup>29</sup> Yet, the exact nature of the relationship between education and civic engagement or political participation is more ambiguous. In other words, while there is strong evidence to support a correlation between education and participation, the evidence for that relationship being causal is mixed. As Claire Willeck and Tali Mendelberg note, “for every positive finding, null results abound.”<sup>30</sup> Despite the multidisciplinary nature of the topic, most of the research references in this report come from political science—not surprisingly given that the American Political Science Association singles

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<sup>28</sup> Richard P. Adler and Judy Goggin, “What Do We Mean By ‘Civic Engagement’?” *Journal of Transformative Education* 3, no. 3 (July 2005): 236–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344605276792>.

<sup>29</sup> See David E. Campbell, “Civic Engagement and Education: An Empirical Test of the Sorting Model,” *American Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 4 (1 October 2009): 771–86, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2009.00400.x>; Jonathan Horowitz, “Doing Less with More: Cohorts, Education, and Civic Participation in America,” *Social Forces* 94, no. 2 (2015): 747–74.

<sup>30</sup> Claire Willeck and Tali Mendelberg, “Education and Political Participation,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 25, no. 1 (12 May 2022): 90, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051120-014235>.

out “education for civic engagement and responsive governance” as a foundational objective of political science as a field.<sup>31</sup>

Three models have been proposed to explain the link between education and civic or political engagement. The first describes a causal relationship where education directly influences engagement by instilling the core skills essential for participation, such as literacy, critical thinking, and understanding bureaucratic systems.<sup>32</sup> Yet, this model struggles to account for the inverse relationship between levels of education and declining levels of political participation in the aggregate.<sup>33</sup> A second model, the socialization one, argues that education serves to socialize individuals into democratic norms and behaviors, such as empathy, civil disagreement, respect for laws, commitment to justice, or even internalizing that voting is a prerequisite of good citizenship.<sup>34</sup> The third model, of education as a proxy, holds that education plays an indirect role, and that another confounding variable, such as socioeconomic status, personality type, or intelligence, are the true driving forces behind participation.<sup>35</sup>

## Does college actually impact political engagement after graduation, or are politically motivated individuals simply more likely to enroll in college?

To test for a direct causal relationship, Andrew Perrin and Alanna Gillis used national longitudinal data from the 2002 Educational Longitudinal Study to test whether the effect of postsecondary education completion on post-graduate political engagement is independent of self-selection into college. In other words, does college actually impact political

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<sup>31</sup> David E. Campbell, “What Social Scientists Have Learned About Civic Education: A Review of the Literature,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 94, no. 1 (1 January 2019): 32–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2019.1553601>.

<sup>32</sup> Alexander K. Mayer, “Does Education Increase Political Participation?” *The Journal of Politics* 73, no. 3 (1 July 2011): 633–45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002238161100034X>.

<sup>33</sup> Kien Le and My Nguyen, “Education and Political Engagement,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 85 (1 September 2021): 102–441, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102441>.

<sup>34</sup> Claire Willeck and Tali Mendelberg, “Education and Political Participation,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 25, no. 1 (12 May 2022): 89–110, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051120-014235>.

<sup>35</sup> Kien Le and My Nguyen, “Education and Political Engagement,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 85 (1 September 2021): 102–441, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102441>.

engagement after graduation, or are politically motivated individuals simply more likely to enroll in college? The authors examined graduates' levels of three types of political engagement at age 25-26: voting in the 2008 presidential election, voting in any local, state, or national election between 2009-2011, and volunteering once a month during the two most recent years. Controlling for selection effects, such as parental income and level of education, they find that postsecondary completion is positively and independently associated with all three civic engagement outcomes.<sup>36</sup>

In a similar study designed to test the causality between education and civic engagement, Kien Le and My Nguyen use data from the International Social Survey Programme to study the impact the number of educational years has on three civic engagement outcomes: interest and knowledge of politics, attitudes toward political freedoms, and acts of participation. The authors find that for every additional year of education, an individual's interest in politics goes up by 6.7 percentage points, while self-perceived knowledge of politics increases by 8.5 percentage points, with similar rates of increased support for various political freedom items.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, while education had an impact on political attitudes and interests, the authors observed no significant effect on behaviors or actual engagement (voting and political affiliation),<sup>38</sup> a finding consistent with previous studies that found that education does not increase voting or participation.<sup>39</sup>

As Le and Nguyen note, “the role of education in a representative democracy may not lie with increasing the quantity of citizens' political involvement (voting and affiliation) but lie with enhancing the quality of

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew J. Perrin and Alanna Gillis, “How College Makes Citizens: Higher Education Experiences and Political Engagement,” *Socius* 5 (1 January 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119859708>.

<sup>37</sup> The authors use a total of eight statements meant to capture support for four types of political freedoms: protesters' public meetings, protesters' demonstrations, extremists' public meetings, and extremists' book publications.

<sup>38</sup> Kien Le and My Nguyen, “Education and Political Engagement,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 85 (1 September 2021): 102-441, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102441>.

<sup>39</sup> See Adam J. Berinsky and Gabriel S. Lenz, “Education and Political Participation: Exploring the Causal Link,” *Political Behavior* 33, no. 3 (September 2011): 357-373; Cindy D. Kam, Carl L. Palmer, “Reconsidering the Effects of Education on Political Participation,” *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 3 (July 2008): 612-631.

their involvement (interest, knowledge, attitudes).”<sup>40</sup> Others have found similar evidence—for example active learning in the context of civic education can strengthen pro-democratic attitudes and commitment to norms and also increase knowledge.<sup>41</sup> John Holbein and D. Sunshine Hillygus come to a similar conclusion in their 2020 book *Making Young Voters*, suggesting that while young voters are not necessarily apathetic, seeing as they report high levels of interest and intent to vote, they do not follow through and act on these interests and intentions.<sup>42</sup> Yet a rare study that employs a randomized experimental design finds that a civics course focused on civil liberties increased knowledge of said liberties, but had no effect on students' attitudes.<sup>43</sup>

### The literature overwhelmingly focuses on voter turnout as the main outcome measure.

As such, these studies bring up several challenges in studying the nature of the relationship between higher education completion/programming and civic or political engagement. For one, the literature overwhelmingly focuses on voter turnout as the main outcome measure, as several of the studies cited above reflect. In one study, Aaron Weinschenk and Christopher Dawes find that there is no significant relationship between the number of civic courses taken in high school and voter turnout later in life. Using five different datasets, both quantitative and qualitative, Holbein and Hillygus draw a similar conclusion, that the number of civic courses has a minor impact on voter turnout in adulthood.<sup>44</sup> In a study focused on service learning, Joseph Kahne, David Crow, and Namjin Lee find no statistically significant relationship between service learning on the intent to vote, or on actual voter turnout, in adulthood.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Kien Le and My Nguyen, “Education and Political Engagement,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 85 (1 September 2021): 102-441, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102441>.

<sup>41</sup> Jason Gainous and Allison M. Martens, “Civic Education: Do Liberals Do It Better?” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 21, no. 3 (1 September 2016): 261-79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2016.1205965>.

<sup>42</sup> John Hillygus and Holbein D. Sunshine, *Making Young Voters: Converting Civic Attitudes into Civic Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Donald P. Green et al., “Does Knowledge of Constitutional Principles Increase Support for Civil Liberties? Results from a Randomized Field Experiment,” *The Journal of Politics* 73, no. 2 (April 2011): 463-76, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381611000107>.

<sup>44</sup> John Hillygus and Holbein D. Sunshine, *Making Young Voters: Converting Civic Attitudes Into Civic Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> Joseph Kahne, David Crow, and Namjin Lee, “Different Pedagogy, Different Politics: High School Learning Opportunities and Youth Political Engagement,” *Political Psychology* (7 December 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2012.00936.x>.



Two issues arise related to the literature’s focus on voting outcomes, whether turnout or intent to vote. First, while voting is a fundamental form of civic or political engagement, it is one of many—and one that *can* be suppressed through various voter ID or residency requirements. Then again, individuals who do not have the right to vote (such as system-impacted individuals or non-citizens) can still engage in other civic behaviors that would benefit from a more robust research agenda. Second, not only does a large body of research on the topic focus on voting outcomes, but the overwhelming focus of voter turnout studies is on federal elections. Indeed, even the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE), one of the most comprehensive datasets of over 1,200 campuses and 10 million student records, captures the voting turnout of actively enrolled college students only in national elections.<sup>46</sup>

This focus on federal elections operates against the backdrop of increasingly nationalized politics within the US. As Daniel Hopkins notes in *The Increasingly United States*, there are two mechanisms through which politics become nationalized: “If voters’ choices in state and local races echo those in national races, their voting is nationalized in this respect...[or] political behavior is nationalized when voters are engaged with and knowledgeable about national politics to the exclusion of state or local politics.”<sup>47</sup> Focusing on voting outcomes in federal elections can lead to the erasure of regional issues and civic engagement across diverse communities, when higher education institutions could benefit from acting as “stewards of place,”<sup>48</sup> committed to serving the (often multiple) local communities in which they operate.

Another issue is that of generalizability and replicability. Many of the studies on postsecondary education and civic engagement are based on institutional case studies, making it difficult to assess the impact institutional characteristics may have, or the sorting of their student populations—whether or not certain types of students tend to self-select into certain types of institutions. Another issue spans from the reliance on self-reported participation rates in survey data. Specifically, it is difficult to

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<sup>46</sup> The National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement was launched in 2013. See: “About Us,” National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, *Tufts University*, 2024, <https://idhe.tufts.edu/about-us>.

<sup>47</sup> Daniel J. Hopkins, *The Increasingly United States: How and Why American Political Behavior Nationalized* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 3.

<sup>48</sup> Kevin McClure, Cecilia Orphan, and Ashish Vaidya, “Recommitting to Stewardship of Place,” *American Association of State Colleges and Universities*, February 2024, <https://aascu.org/resources/recommitting-to-stewardship-of-place/>.



control for the social desirability bias that might affect respondents. Unsurprisingly given the scope and complexity of the work, very few studies are longitudinal in nature. Even the Perrin and Gillis and Le and Nguyen studies referenced above, both longitudinal, rely on self-reported data and track “adulthood” political engagement only through age 26, roughly four years post-graduation for a traditional undergraduate. Yet nearly 13 percent of undergraduates enrolled at four-year public universities today are older than 25.<sup>49</sup> It is also unclear how many higher education institutions attempt to track the civic engagement of their students and alumni long term. In fact, a survey of 30 Campus Compact universities found that at the time of the study in 2011 only one—Tufts University—featured a longitudinal study tracking the impact of their civic education programming.<sup>50</sup> Yet, more research is needed, both longitudinal in nature, as well as research spanning multi-institutional programming and its impacts, such as the American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ American Democracy Project which includes nearly 300 institutions that serve highly diverse students and communities.<sup>51</sup> The existing scholarship is also focused on the quantity of civic education—or simply views education itself as a quantity—rather than its content or quality. Simply put, the majority of studies focus on the impact of the years of education (and completion) more so than on the content of students’ academic careers.

In a systematic review of a decade’s worth of civic education research (2009-2019), the authors found that a majority (53 percent) focused on postsecondary initiatives and most commonly examined civic outcomes and coursework (30 percent). The majority (34 percent) of articles relied on qualitative methods, followed by articles that were theoretical or argumentative—with a normative focus on what civic education or its outcomes should be (29 percent).<sup>52</sup> In a similar review of 53 studies focused on community-based and civic engagement high-impact practice, Chittum et al. find that 31 were multi-institution studies, and 22 were single-institution studies. Yet 71 percent of all studies used indirect, self-

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<sup>49</sup> “Current Term Enrollment Estimates,” *National Student Clearinghouse Research Center*, 2024, accessed 11 April 2024, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>.

<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth L. Hollander, “Civic Education in Research Universities: Leaders or Followers?” *Education & Training* 53 (2011): 166–76, <https://doi.org/10.1108/00400911111115708>.

<sup>51</sup> “American Democracy Project,” *American Association of State Colleges and Universities*, accessed 14 February 2024, <https://aascu.org/civic-global-engagement/american-democracy-project/>.

<sup>52</sup> Jason C. Fitzgerald et al., “A Systematic Review of the Last Decade of Civic Education Research in the United States,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 96, no. 3 (27 May 2021): 235–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2021.1942703>.

reported data.<sup>53</sup> These reviews point out some of the challenges of collecting primary data on civic education, as well as challenges to studying causal links between higher education programming and civic behaviors in particular.

## Postsecondary Civic Engagement Research

In the postsecondary context, one notable challenge for civic education is that not all disciplines seem to foster civic attitudes and behaviors as well as others. Research suggests that humanities and social sciences majors are associated with higher levels of engagement, and earlier studies support the hypotheses that these types of majors provide students with specific skills that support civic engagement. As Perrin and Gillis note, the humanities boost deliberative skills such as civil discourse and public speaking, while the social sciences not only directly engage with socio-political problems, but also provide the statistical training that underwrites probabilistic and causal thinking.<sup>54</sup> Elsewhere, the literature notes that the social sciences are positively associated with higher voter turnout; conversely, taking more STEM courses is negatively associated with voter turnout among college graduates.<sup>55</sup> Perrin and Gillis also found evidence that humanities, arts, and social science coursework are all positively associated with civic engagement outcomes (social science most strongly)

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<sup>53</sup> Jessica R. Chittum, Kathryn A. E. Enke, and Ashley P. Finley, "The Effects of Community-Based and Civic Engagement in Higher Education: What We Know and Questions That Remain," *American Association of Colleges and Universities*, 2022, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED625877>.

<sup>54</sup> Jason C. Fitzgerald et al., "A Systematic Review of the Last Decade of Civic Education Research in the United States," *Peabody Journal of Education* 96, no. 3 (27 May 2021): 235–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2021.1942703>.

<sup>55</sup> See Norman Nie and D. Sunshine Hillygus, "Education and Democratic Citizenship," in *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society*, eds. Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteritti (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 30–57; and D. Sunshine Hillygus, "The Missing Link: Exploring the Relationship Between Higher Education and Political Engagement," *Political Behavior* 27, no. 1 (2004): 25–47.

but did not find evidence that natural sciences coursework is associated with lower levels of civic participation post-completion.<sup>56</sup>

If a student took a year of civics coursework they were more likely to vote after graduation than those who did not take those classes.

The youngest eligible voters in America are voting at historically low rates: in 1992, 52 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds voted in presidential elections, but by 2016 only 46 percent did;<sup>57</sup> though others estimate that figure returned to 50 percent in the 2020 election.<sup>58</sup> Given that citizens are eligible to vote at age 18, it is worth looking at the impact that high school education has had on civic engagement, and there are studies that focus on the impact of civics courses, extracurricular activities, community service, and service learning.<sup>59</sup> According to the Center for Educational Equity at the Teachers College at Columbia University, looking at data for high school students between 1988 and 2002, if a student took a year of civics coursework they were more likely to vote after graduation than those who did not take those classes.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, a positive correlation between voting rates and collaborative extracurricular activities was found in studies conducted in 2010 and 2014, as well as when students participated in voluntary or school-mandated community service or were involved in student government.<sup>61</sup> It is also worth noting the impact that state programs have on civic engagement among students of voting age. For instance, high school students in a handful of states are eligible to earn the Seal of Civic Readiness for completing additional hours than what is required to graduate.<sup>62</sup> While the Seal of Civic Readiness program ties its activities to demonstrating specific civic participation and

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<sup>56</sup> Andrew J. Perrin and Alanna Gillis, “How College Makes Citizens: Higher Education Experiences and Political Engagement,” *Socius* 5 (1 January 2019)

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119859708>.

<sup>57</sup> “Research Summary: Political and Civic Behavior,” *Center for Educational Equity, Teachers College, Columbia University*, January 2019, 1, <https://civxnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Research-Summary-Political-and-Civic-Behavior-12-13-18.pdf>.

<sup>58</sup> “Half of Youth Voted in 2020, An 11-Point Increase from 2016,” *Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, Tufts University*, 29 April 2021, <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/half-youth-voted-2020-11-point-increase-2016>.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 6; “Seal of Civic Readiness,” New York State Education Department, accessed 9 February 2024, <https://www.nysed.gov/curriculum-instruction/seal-civic-readiness>.

proficiencies learners develop, the long-term impact of the program remains understudied.

In the postsecondary context, one notable challenge for civic education is that not all disciplines seem to foster civic attitudes and behaviors as well as others. Students enrolled in STEM majors in particular lag behind their peers when it comes to civic engagement measures, both while enrolled in college and after graduating. In one instance, the launch of a civic-focused institute led to a 44 percent increase in democracy-focused undergraduate courses in a single academic year. However, STEM students are substantially underrepresented in these courses; between fall 2019 and spring 2021 only 19 of 575 biomedical engineering majors enrolled in a “democracy-focused” class.<sup>63</sup> Yet, STEM students’ level of interest in democracy-focused courses or programming is comparable to non-STEM students, suggesting there is an opportunity for institutions to do more to ensure STEM students have the time, access, and curricular capacity to engage in these types of civic-minded activities throughout their academic careers.<sup>64</sup>

Students enrolled in STEM majors in particular lag behind their peers when it comes to civic engagement measures, both while enrolled in college and after graduating.

Research conducted in 2022 by matching data from the College Board, the National Student Clearinghouse, and national voting records, sought to investigate the impact of STEM majors and coursework on the participation rate in politics among younger Americans. They found that while STEM students are slightly less likely to vote than non-STEM students, “STEM students *on average* do not vote at appreciably lower rates than non-STEM students and STEM coursework *on average* does not meaningfully decrease the chances that young people will be critically engaged.”<sup>65</sup> Yet, college STEM majors were only 0.9 percentage points

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<sup>63</sup> “Democratic Engagement: A Report at Johns Hopkins University,” *Stavros Niarchos Foundation SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins*, accessed 14 February 2024, <https://snfagora.jhu.edu/publication/democratic-engagement-a-report-at-johns-hopkins-university/>.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> D’Wayne Bell et al., “Do STEM Students Vote?” *Annenberg Brown University*, July 2022, accessed 14 February 2024, 3, <https://doi.org/10.26300/OSKG-Z829>.

more likely to vote after graduating, compared to other students.<sup>66</sup> Rather than focusing solely on STEM majors, it is important to note that it is 15 percent more likely for students taking individual social science courses, typically outside of their majors, to vote in comparison to some STEM majors.<sup>67</sup>

In discussing the evidence that the humanities, arts, and especially social sciences correlate with high levels of political engagement, Perrin and Gillis note that “Although these fields on average have smaller economic gains for students after graduation (Thomas and Zhang 2005), the evidence is that they bring civic gains. Universities are right to claim that they are, on average, fostering civic engagement in their students and must rigorously defend the arts, humanities, and especially social sciences if they wish to continue to do so.”<sup>68</sup>

On the other hand, when it comes to high-impact practices, the literature overwhelmingly focuses on service-learning programming. Service learning was originally defined in 1950 as, “learnings related to evaluation, record-keeping, resource-getting, and selecting, democratic discussion processes, and reading.”<sup>69</sup> In 1996, Barbara Jacoby defined service learning as “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development,” also noting that “reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service learning.”<sup>70</sup> As Daniels notes, “by almost any measure, service learning has been more successful than any other post-

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>68</sup> Andrew J. Perrin and Alanna Gillis, “How College Makes Citizens: Higher Education Experiences and Political Engagement,” *Socius* 5 (1 January 2019): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119859708>.

<sup>69</sup> Marián Queiruga-Dios et al., “Assessment Methods for Service-Learning Projects in Engineering in Higher Education: A Systematic Review,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (July 2021), <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.629231>; R. H. Simpson, “An Evaluation of Motivation, Assignment Making, Problem Procedures, and ‘Service Learnings’ in a School System,” *Journal of Educational Research* 44 (1950): 1-13, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00220671.1950.10881829>.

<sup>70</sup> Queiruga-Dios et al., “Assessment Methods for Service-Learning Projects in Engineering in Higher Education,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (22 July 2021): 2, <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.629231/full>; Barbara Jacoby, “Service-Learning in Today’s Higher Education,” in *Service-Learning in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices*, eds. Barbara Jacoby and Associates (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 3-25.

secondary civic education initiative before it.”<sup>71</sup> A systematic review of community-based and civic engagement-focused high-impact practices found that 68 percent of studies (out of 53 total) focus on service-learning experiences.<sup>72</sup> Earlier research shows that this type of high-impact practice does promote attitudes that underscore civic engagement—self-reflection, tolerance of others,<sup>73</sup> as well as motivation to volunteer throughout college.<sup>74</sup>

Relevant to the STEM discussion above are two studies focused on the use of biology course-based undergraduate research experiences at two different minority-serving institutions. These courses, taught at the University of Texas at El Paso and at the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, had students engaging with their local communities to address health-based inequities in their local contexts and found evidence of increased favorable perceptions of community engagement. While the former had students focus on communities at the border with Mexico on topics such as the agricultural impacts of fungi,<sup>75</sup> the latter focused on disease incidence, health literacy, and language barriers in health care. Notably, in the North Carolina study, the majority of students (54 percent) indicated that their favorite part of the course was its community engagement, and they exhibited greater interest in community activism as compared to their levels of interest in undergraduate research or a career in research.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ronald J. Daniels, Grant Shreve, and Phillip Spector, *What Universities Owe Democracy*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.97330>.

<sup>72</sup> Jessica R. Chittum, Kathryn A. E. Enke, and Ashley P. Finley, "The Effects of Community-Based and Civic Engagement in Higher Education: What We Know and Questions That Remain," *American Association of Colleges and Universities*, 2022, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED625877>.

<sup>73</sup> Lori Simons and Beverly Cleary, "The Influence of Service Learning on Students' Personal and Social Development," *College Teaching* 54, no. 4 (September 2006): 307–19, <https://doi.org/10.3200/CTCH.54.4.307-319>.

<sup>74</sup> Alexander W Astin et al., "Understanding the Effects of Service-Learning: A Study of Students and Faculty," *The Higher Education Research Institute, University of California Los Angeles*, 31 July 2006, <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=50096288c2f51afa4973b03583362af35f8a4bb9>.

<sup>75</sup> Jeffrey T. Olimpo, Jennifer Apodaca, Aimee A. Hernandez, Yok-Fong Paat, "Disease and the Environment: A Health Disparities CURE Incorporating Civic Engagement Education," *Science Education and Civic Engagement* 11, no. 1 (2019): 13–24.

<sup>76</sup> Michele K. H. Malotky, Kayla M. Mayes, Kailyn M. Price, Gustavo Smith, Sherese N. Mann, Meshia W. Guinyard, Sarina Veale, et al., "Fostering Inclusion Through an Interinstitutional, Community-Engaged, Course-Based Undergraduate Research Experience," *Journal of Microbiology & Biology Education* 21, no. 1 (April 2020) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7195161/>.

Perrin and Gillis also find evidence that participation in a community-based project in college is positively associated with voting and volunteering while being mentored was associated with future volunteerism.<sup>77</sup> It is worth noting that selection motivations do have a differential effect on the impact of service-learning experiences. Intrinsically motivated students—those interested in participating in service learning on their own—are more likely to join similar programs in the future. Extrinsically motivated students who benefit from high levels of autonomy (i.e., where students feel an enhanced personal commitment to the community) during their service-learning experience are more likely to have a positive experience and commitment to their community, while those with low levels of autonomy (i.e., feeling obligated to satisfy a credit requirement that does not feel aligned with their major or personal goals) are deterred from participating in further social or civic activities.<sup>78</sup>

Closely related to service learning is the emerging practice of collective civic problem-solving. While service learning tends to focus more narrowly on the activity and place, usually in the local context, collective civic problem-solving shifts the focus more to the process and conceptual framework of democratic engagement. This type of pedagogy is commonly used in programming focused on US diversity or global citizenship, ranging from single-semester courses to multi-semester experiential or residential programs.<sup>79</sup> Bowman found that students who engaged in diversity-focused programming exhibited higher levels of civic attitudes and behaviors while in college,<sup>80</sup> while study abroad programs showed the smallest effect sizes of all high-impact practices.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Andrew J. Perrin and Alanna Gillis, "How College Makes Citizens: Higher Education Experiences and Political Engagement," *Socius* 5 (1 January 2019),

<https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119859708>.

<sup>78</sup> Charlotte Sze-Yeung Lai and Patrick Chi-leung Hui, "Service-Learning: Impacts of Learning Motivation and Learning Experience on Extended Social/Civic Engagement," *Higher Education Research & Development* 40, no. 2 (23 February 2021): 400–415,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1756748>.

<sup>79</sup> For examples, see Anne Colby, Elizabeth Beaumont, Thomas Ehrlich, and Josh Corngold, "Educating for Democracy: Preparing Undergraduates for Responsible Political Engagement," *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* 14, (Spring 2008): 92–97.

<sup>80</sup> Nicholas A. Bowman, "Promoting Participation in a Diverse Democracy: A Meta-Analysis of College Diversity Experiences and Civic Engagement," *Review of Educational Research* 81, no. 1 (2011): 29–68.

<sup>81</sup> Jessica R. Chittum, Kathryn A. E. Enke, and Ashley P. Finley, "The Effects of Community-Based and Civic Engagement in Higher Education: What We Know and Questions That Remain," *American Association of Colleges and Universities*, 2022, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED625877>.



High-impact experiences during college are positively associated with higher levels of civic engagement at age 26, post-graduation.

It is worth noting that a couple of studies suggest that when it comes to high-impact practice experiences, quantity may matter more than the content of these experiences. In a 2014 study, Kawashi-Ginsberg and Levine found that of traditional age (18-to-24-year-old) students who were exposed to multiple tools of civic education, those who could recall more tools were those more likely to vote.<sup>82</sup> Another study found that high-impact experiences during college are positively associated with higher levels of civic engagement at age 26, post-graduation. Specifically, if a student were to take part in six high-impact practices,<sup>83</sup> they would engage in 2.5 more civic activities than a student with no such experience.<sup>84</sup> Hansen and Schmidt find similar evidence that the number of high-impact practices is more significant than the specific type.<sup>85</sup>

The emerging field of deliberative pedagogy is another effective civic education initiative. As Matthew Carcasson argues, “deliberative pedagogy is best understood as a teaching philosophy focused on equipping students with the mind-sets and skill sets necessary for high-quality participatory decision-making in the face of ‘wicked’ problems. Most complex social and public policy issues are wicked problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973)—that is, problems that have no technical solution, but that call for ongoing communicative processes of broad engagement to address underlying competing values and tensions.”<sup>86</sup> In the 1990s, the

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<sup>82</sup> Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Peter Levine, “Diversity in Classrooms: The Relationship between Deliberative and Associative Opportunities in School and Later Electoral Engagement,” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 14 (1 December 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1111/asap.12038>.

<sup>83</sup> (a) Internship, co-op, field experience, or student teaching; (b) Research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements; (c) Study abroad; (d) Community-based project as part of a regular course; (e) Culminating senior experience, such as a capstone course, senior project or thesis, or comprehensive exam; and (f) Program in which you were mentored.

<sup>84</sup> Carrie B. Myers, Scott M. Myers, and Martha Peters, “The Longitudinal Connections Between Undergraduate High Impact Curriculum Practices and Civic Engagement in Adulthood,” *Research in Higher Education* 60, no. 1 (1 February 2019): 83–110, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-018-9504-4>.

<sup>85</sup> Michele JoAnn Hansen and Lauren Schmidt, “The Synergy of and Readiness for High-Impact Practices During the First Year of College,” *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition* 29, no. 1 (2017): 57–82.

<sup>86</sup> Martin Carcasson, “Deliberative Pedagogy as Critical Connective: Building Democratic Mind-Sets and Skill Sets for Addressing Wicked Problems,” in *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning*



University of Michigan became one of the first institutions to lay the groundwork for intergroup dialogue programs, while California State University, Chico employs a town hall meeting style design as part of their First-Year Experience curriculum. In addition to town hall meetings, Tarleton State University also hosts biannual Texan debate days, as well as having a civic-minded dedicated living and learning hall.<sup>87</sup> Other institutions have designed centers specifically focused on promoting dialogue on their campuses, such as the Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy at Kansas State University, the New England Center for Civic Life at Franklin Pierce University, the Center for Community Engagement at Sam Houston State University, Cleveland State University’s Office of Civic Engagement, Florida Gulf Coast University’s Office for Service Learning and Civic Engagement, and the Office of Civic Engagement and Social Responsibility at Towson University, among others.<sup>88</sup> Related to this is the growing interest in information literacy instruction being fit for purpose in the age of mis/disinformation, focused on a dynamic and critical exploration of traditional media, social media, and algorithms that finds “the fine balance between media education/literacy for critical resilience and the tipping point into distrust of all information.”<sup>89</sup> For example, Indiana University Kokomo developed a “Mind over Chatter” digital literacy tool advertised as a resource premised on the idea that information literacy needs to adapt to the “post-truth era.”<sup>90</sup>

An open classroom climate with teachers seeking their students’ input, particularly when used in combination with other instructional methods, shows the most promising results in terms of driving civic engagement.

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for *Democratic Engagement*, eds. Timothy J. Shaffer, Nicholas V. Longo, Idit Manosevitch, and Maxine S. Thomas (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2017), 3–20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/j.ctt1qd8zh2.6>.

<sup>87</sup> “Tarleton State University Action Plan,” *ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge*, 19 September 2022, <https://allinchallenge.org/campuses/tarleton-state-university/>.

<sup>88</sup> “Teaching Civic Engagement,” *American Political Science Association*, 2024, <https://web.apsanet.org/teachingcivicengagement/additional-teaching-resources/civic-engagement-centers-and-institutes>.

<sup>89</sup> Julian McDougall, “Media Literacy Versus Fake News,” *Medijske Studije* (2019): 39, <https://doi.org/10.20901/ms.10.19.2/submitted>.

<sup>90</sup> Mark Canada, Paul Cook, Polly Boruff-Jones, and Christina Downey, “Mind Over Chatter,” Indiana University, 2024, accessed 10 April 2024, <https://expand.iu.edu/browse/moc/courses/mind-over-chatter>.

A growing number of studies show that fostering an open classroom climate, where students discuss and debate social and political issues, can increase civic engagement. Martens and Gainous find that an open classroom climate with teachers seeking their students' input, particularly when used in combination with other instructional methods, shows the most promising results in terms of driving civic engagement.<sup>91</sup> In a similar study using a panel of Swedish students, researchers found a causal relationship between an open classroom climate and an increase in civic knowledge.<sup>92</sup> In a longitudinal study of 1,000 students across 21 high schools in Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin, Diane Hess and Paula McAvoy found that students who were in open climate classrooms not only were more likely to express intent to vote, but they were also more likely to develop or strengthen an interest in politics, follow the news, and report greater tolerance of engaging with differing points of view than their own.<sup>93</sup>

Given the relevance of deliberative pedagogy to civic education, it is worth highlighting how political polarization, dis/misinformation, and free speech/academic freedom challenges could hinder building an effective open classroom climate. Debates over campus free speech and the rights and responsibilities of academic freedom of inquiry are not new, but they have become deeply partisan in recent years, according to PEN America research on the topic.<sup>94</sup>

In 1915, the American Association of University Professors published its Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure, stating that a key function of an academic institution is “to promote inquiry and advance the sum of human knowledge.”<sup>95</sup> It also stated that “institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good and

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<sup>91</sup> Allison M. Martens and Jason Gainous, “Civic Education and Democratic Capacity: How Do Teachers Teach and What Works?” *Social Science Quarterly* 94, no. 4 (1 December 2013): 956–76, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2012.00864.x>.

<sup>92</sup> Mikael Persson, “Classroom Climate and Political Learning: Findings from a Swedish Panel Study and Comparative Data,” *Political Psychology* 36, no. 5 (1 October 2015): 587–601, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12179>.

<sup>93</sup> Diana E. Hess McAvoy Paula, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (New York: Routledge, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315738871>.

<sup>94</sup> “Chasm in the Classroom: Campus Free Speech in a Divided America,” *PEN America*, 18 June 2019, <https://pen.org/chasm-in-the-classroom-campus-free-speech-in-a-divided-america/>.

<sup>95</sup> “Making the Case for Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy in a Challenging Political Environment: A Resource Guide for Campus Leaders,” *PEN America and American Council on Education*, 2023.

not to further the interest of either the individual teacher or the institution as a whole. The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition. Academic freedom is essential to these purposes and applies to both teaching and research.”<sup>96</sup> Since 1915, the declaration has undergone revisions prompted by further reconsiderations of both students’ rights and the role of universities following waves of major social changes and events.

In their report, the Bipartisan Policy Center includes free speech, but also the visual arts, in the term “free expressions,” and they strongly believe it to be “an essential means to an inclusive campus.”<sup>97</sup> PEN America further notes that a core tenet of campus free speech is the idea of respect, which “entails an obligation to understand what may cause offense and why, and to avoid such words and actions, even if no offense is intended.”<sup>98</sup> However, campuses across the country, according to the Bipartisan Policy Center, have expressed doubts that “free expression and diversity, equity, and inclusion are compatible commitments,” as many see free expression as a means to oppress others or inflict harm. Forty-nine percent of undergraduate students believe that rights around free speech conflict with diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) on occasion, and 27 percent say they are in conflict frequently.<sup>99</sup> The rationale behind this is understandable, as members of historically-minoritized groups have reported not truly feeling accepted on their campuses, as well as having the implicit responsibility of addressing issues related to marginalization.<sup>100</sup> However, the Center recommends that campus leadership emphasizes that through fostering discussion, “it is possible to achieve a campus culture in which free expression *helps* the cause of diversity, equity, and inclusion by building student resilience and understanding of the range of perspectives, opinions, and experiences of others.”<sup>101</sup> It is worth highlighting that some observers have expressed skepticism about whether conservative and liberal views are equally accepted on campus.<sup>102</sup> Since 2015, the number of college campuses

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Jim Douglas et al., “Campus Free Expression: A New Roadmap,” *Bipartisan Policy Center*, November 2021, 6-10, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/a-new-roadmap>.

<sup>98</sup> “Campus Climate,” *PEN America*, accessed 9 April 2024, <https://campusfreespeechguide.pen.org/issue/campus-climate/>.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>102</sup> “Making the Case for Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy in a Challenging Political Environment: A Resource Guide for Campus Leaders,” 2023, 3.

Students and other community members are at a disadvantage if differing viewpoints or opinions are suppressed.

adopting a free expression statement has increased, highlighting a commitment from leadership “to create opportunities to affirm the university’s commitment to free expression and open inquiry.”<sup>103</sup> The University of Chicago’s *Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression* highlights what is known as the Chicago Principles, a set of rules that have been adopted by a number of different campuses. The Chicago Principles state that the institution’s “fundamental commitment is to the principle that debate or deliberation may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even most members of the University community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed.”<sup>104</sup> Essentially, students and other community members are at a disadvantage if differing viewpoints or opinions are suppressed. The suppression of different perspectives on campus highlights the polarization problem faced both on and off campuses, where opposing political party members tend to vilify their counterparts for having different values.<sup>105</sup>

While some research suggests that civic education correlates with higher retention and completion rates, we know little about other student success outcomes, or how variation in civic education impacts these. As one study notes, “the most robust findings related to the effects of community-based or civic experiences focus on personal and social responsibility outcomes [yet] there was little continuity in the measures used to examine personal and social responsibility variables.”<sup>106</sup> Efforts to collect institution-wide data on the impacts of civic-engagement programming could mitigate this. For example, San Francisco State University’s Institute for Civic and Community Engagement is in the process of institutionalizing a system-wide data collection effort through a faculty survey meant to capture specific student learning outcomes tied to civic and community service.<sup>107</sup> Another overarching issue when it comes to studying the impact of different types of initiatives is that of self-

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<sup>103</sup> Jim Douglas et al., “Campus Free Expression: A New Roadmap,” *Bipartisan Policy Center*, November 2021, 13, <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/a-new-roadmap>.

<sup>104</sup> “ACE, PEN America Resource Guide to Help Campus Leaders Make the Case for Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy,” *American Council on Education and PEN America*, 24 February 2023, 4, <https://www.acenet.edu/News-Room/Pages/ACE-PEN-Academic-Freedom-Guide.aspx>.

<sup>105</sup> Jim Douglas et al., “Academic Leaders Task Force on Campus Free Expression,” 2021, 10.

<sup>106</sup> Jessica R. Chittum, Kathryn A. E. Enke, and Ashley P. Finley, “The Effects of Community-Based and Civic Engagement in Higher Education: What We Know and Questions That Remain,” *American Association of Colleges and Universities*, 2022, 24, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED625877>.

<sup>107</sup> “Overview,” *Institute for Civic and Community Engagement (ICCE)*, 2024, <https://icce.sfsu.edu/course-designation-CEL%20initiative>.

selection.<sup>108</sup> Specifically, not only is there the broader question of self-selection when it comes to college enrollment (is it a question of socioeconomic status, parental education, and income, genetic or personality predispositions?) but also a question of who self-selects into specific curricular and extracurricular activities. In the absence of studies that rigorously control for this phenomenon, either through randomization or natural experimental design, the causal link between higher education civic programming and civic engagement will remain an open question.

## Equity and Civic Engagement

“Democratic engagement is meaningless if it does not reflect a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion,”<sup>109</sup> argues Scott Warren, echoing the call to action from *A Crucible Moment*. Yet, we know from the literature that institutions and different policies generate a racialized effect on participation—i.e., voter ID laws, criminal records, and distance to polling locations all negatively impact individuals of color.<sup>110</sup> Further, there is growing literature on the impact civic education has on political participation across racial and ethnic groups, given the reasonable expectation that civic education might also have a racialized effect. Indeed, the 2008 Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement Project found such differences—with Latino students overall less likely to participate in acts of political engagement (voting, donating, joining a political group) and public voice (boycotting, protesting, signing a petition, contacting a public official).<sup>111</sup> Meira Levinson has termed the

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<sup>108</sup> David E. Campbell, “What Social Scientists Have Learned About Civic Education: A Review of the Literature,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 94, no. 1 (2019): 32-47, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0161956X.2019.1553601>.

<sup>109</sup> Scott Warren, “Democratic Engagement: A Review at Johns Hopkins University,” *Johns Hopkins Stavros Niarchos Foundation SNF Agora Institute*, 2022, 11, [https://snfagora.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/DemocraticEngagement\\_SNF\\_AgoraReport.pdf](https://snfagora.jhu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/DemocraticEngagement_SNF_AgoraReport.pdf).

<sup>110</sup> Matthew Nelsen, “Teaching Citizenship: Race and the Behavioral Effects of American Civic Education,” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics* 6, no. 1 (March 2021): 157–86. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2019.19>.

<sup>111</sup> Cathy J. Cohen, “Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Politics,” in *Transgressing Boundaries: Studies in Black Politics and Black Communities* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

phenomenon of such structural inequities and barriers that drive marginalized groups to engage less civically as the “civic engagement gap.”<sup>112</sup>

While the concept that civic education can have different effects on different demographic groups—and indeed have a compensatory effect in certain instances—the differential or compensatory impacts remain understudied in the literature.<sup>113</sup> In a 2012 brief to supplement *A Crucible Moment*, Ashley Finley notes that “there is scarce data on civic outcomes connected with the experiences of underserved students (underrepresented minorities, first-generation, transfer and low-income).”<sup>114</sup> In their review of the civic education research between 2009 and 2019, Fitzgerald et al. found that only 2.8 percent focused on marginalized populations,<sup>115</sup> while Chittum et al. found that one-fifth of studies, 11 out of 53, focused on findings about underserved student populations.<sup>116</sup> Continuing Langton and Jennings’ line of inquiry, Neundorf, Niemi, and Smets find that civics courses taken by students offer long-term benefits to those students who otherwise do not get much political exposure at home.<sup>117</sup> David Campbell finds that civics courses that feature open climate formats have a compensatory effect for disadvantaged students in terms of anticipated voter turnout, but not necessarily in terms of factual knowledge.<sup>118</sup> Gainous and Martens find that using a variety of instructional methods (textbooks, classroom

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<sup>112</sup> Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>113</sup> M. Kent Jennings and Kenneth P. Langton, “Political Socialization and the High School Civics Curriculum in the United States,” *American Political Science Review* 62, no. 3 (1968): 852–67, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1953435>.

<sup>114</sup> Ashley Finley, “A Brief Review of the Evidence on Civic Learning in Higher Education,” January 2012, <https://www.csc.edu/about/strategic-plan/pdf/CivicOutcomesBrief-A.Finley.pdf>.

<sup>115</sup> Jason C. Fitzgerald et al., “A Systematic Review of the Last Decade of Civic Education Research in the United States,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 96, no. 3 (27 May 2021): 235–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2021.1942703>.

<sup>116</sup> Jessica R. Chittum, Kathryn A. E. Enke, and Ashley P. Finley, “The Effects of Community-Based and Civic Engagement in Higher Education: What We Know and Questions That Remain,” *American Association of Colleges and Universities*, 2022, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED625877>.

<sup>117</sup> Anja Neundorf, Richard G. Niemi, and Kaat Smets, “The Compensation Effect of Civic Education on Political Engagement: How Civics Classes Make Up for Missing Parental Socialization,” *Political Behavior* 38, no. 4 (2016): 921–49.

<sup>118</sup> David E. Campbell, “Voice in the Classroom: How an Open Classroom Climate Fosters Political Engagement Among Adolescents,” *Political Behavior* 30, no. 4 (1 December 2008): 437–54, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-008-9063-z>.

discussions, role-playing, debates, public engagement) have a similar compensation effect for diverse learners.<sup>119</sup>

Matthew Nelsen finds that of students enrolled in a civics course, white respondents report higher levels of civic engagement and external efficacy (the belief that they can personally enact or contribute to change), while Latinx and Black respondents report greater levels of being willing to participate in acts of public voice.<sup>120</sup> In a previous study, and one of the few ones featuring an experimental design, Nelsen randomly assigned Chicago school students a textbook excerpt that used either traditional pedagogy or critical pedagogy, where “traditional civics curricula emphasize white political actors and traditional forms of participation (e.g., voting), critical content disrupts traditional narratives, emphasizing the agency and grassroots political action of marginalized groups.”<sup>121</sup> On average, Black and Latinx students who were exposed to the critical pedagogy excerpt reported higher levels of intent to engage civically than those who were in the traditional pedagogy group (while the critical pedagogy treatment had no effect on white students).<sup>122</sup>

Perrin and Gillis find evidence in support of a persistent “class ceiling, in which class origins show continuing, iterative effects.” In their study, after controlling for such socio-economic selection factors, the authors found that African American graduates outperformed other racial groups in civic participation, while women outperform men, noting that “for all outcomes, African Americans and women are significantly more likely to participate, net of other predictors.”<sup>123</sup> In a different study, Joshua Kalla and Ethan Porter found that civic education may increase women’s political ambition

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<sup>119</sup> Jason Gainous and Allison M. Martens, “The Effectiveness of Civic Education: Are ‘Good’ Teachers Actually Good for ‘All’ Students?” *American Politics Research* 40, no. 2 (March 1, 2012): 232–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X11419492>.

<sup>120</sup> Matthew Nelsen, “Teaching Citizenship: Race and the Behavioral Effects of American Civic Education,” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics* 6, no. 1 (March 2021): 157–86. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2019.19>.

<sup>121</sup> Matthew D. Nelsen, “Cultivating Youth Engagement: Race & the Behavioral Effects of Critical Pedagogy,” *Political Behavior* 43, no. 2 (June 1, 2021): 751–84, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-019-09573-6>.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 752.

<sup>123</sup> Andrew J. Perrin and Alanna Gillis, “How College Makes Citizens: Higher Education Experiences and Political Engagement,” *Socius* 5 (1 January 2019): 7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119859708>.



levels.<sup>124</sup> Interestingly, a handful of studies suggest a potential trickle up effect that warrants further research—when children vote, parents tend to follow.<sup>125</sup> If postsecondary civic education can increase the political engagement of learners and trigger a spillover effect that alone can help higher education institutions make a case for their value proposition when it comes to the public good.

An estimated 60 percent of all rural youth and roughly a third of urban and suburban ones live in such civic deserts.

A particular challenge that raises further equity concerns is the rise of “civic deserts.” The term describes scenarios or communities that lack the opportunity for civic engagement. An estimated 60 percent of all rural youth and roughly a third of urban and suburban ones live in such civic deserts.<sup>126</sup> Notably, these figures pre-date the 2020 onset of the pandemic and growing prevalence of remote or hybrid environments. More research is needed to ascertain whether the growing digital divide in higher education is exacerbating the problem of civic deserts, or if increased digitization provides a bridging opportunity for individuals in rural environments.

Related to regional or geographic setting is the need for more research focused on institutional differences in civic education programming and their impacts. While few studies look at institution-level predictors of civic engagement, a promising study by Brent Evans, Christopher Marsicano, and Courtney Lennartz sets out to investigate whether differences in institutional missions, activities, and infrastructure impact outcomes related to civic engagement. Using a sample of 275 institutions (from the American Association of Universities, the Annapolis Group, and the 2015 *US News & World Report*’s “Universities Where the Most Freshmen

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<sup>124</sup> Joshua Kalla and Ethan Porter, “Can the Political Ambition of Young Women Be Increased? Evidence from U.S. High School Students,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 17, no. 2 (2022): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1561/100.00020106>.

<sup>125</sup> Jens Olav Dahlggaard, “Trickle-Up Political Socialization: The Causal Effect on Turnout of Parenting a Newly Enfranchised Voter,” *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 3 (2018): 698–705, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055418000059>.

<sup>126</sup> Matthew N. Atwell, John Bridgeland, and Peter Levine, “2017 Civic Deserts: America’s Civic Health Challenge,” *National Conference on Citizenship, Tufts University, Civic Enterprises*, n.d., <https://www.unr.edu/main/pdfs/verified-accessible/divisions-offices/student-services/student-life-services/student-engagement/civic-deserts-health-challenge.pdf>.



Commute”), the researchers examined the mission statements of universities, whether they had a dedicated office for civic engagement, and other measures of civic and political engagement. Several intriguing findings emerged relative to institutional variations. Specifically, the authors focus their analysis along three dyads—public vs. private institutions, research intensive institutions (from the Association of American Universities) vs. liberal arts institutions (from the Annapolis Group), and residential vs. commuter institutions.<sup>127</sup>

**The strongest predictor of civic engagement outcomes, across institution types, is residential status, even when controlling for funding and selectivity.**

First, while a minority of all institutions included civic engagement terms in their mission statements, public ones were more likely to use terms such as “civic,” “citizen,” and “service.” Despite showing more commitment to civic engagement in these missions, they did not provide more civic engagement opportunities than private universities. Private institutions offered more service options such as trips, days of service, and service-learning courses. They were also more likely to offer a service-themed residence hall, as well as more likely to have a dedicated civic engagement office, “with 10 times the number of staff per capita, when compared to publics.”<sup>128</sup> This is not particularly surprising given that private universities have an infrastructure/spending advantage of roughly four times more than public universities. Yet, the outcomes on civic engagement measures do not differ significantly by sector. In fact, the strongest predictor of civic engagement outcomes, across institution types, is residential status, even when controlling for funding and selectivity. The authors “find that residential institutions offer substantially more opportunities for civic engagement than commuter colleges, and this advantage remains even after controlling for selectivity, research, size, and student services expenditures, all of which potentially biased previous studies.”<sup>129</sup> These findings have particularly salient implications for commuter institutions, as well as those faced with adapting to increasingly remote learning environments. However, the authors note that their sample is not representative of all postsecondary institutions, as they explicitly “excluded military academies, for-profit institutions, special interest institutions such as culinary and arts schools, and two-year community colleges due to the specific nature of their missions.”<sup>130</sup> Yet,

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<sup>127</sup> Brent J. Evans, Christopher R. Marsicano, and Courtney J. Lennartz, “Cracks in the Bedrock of American Democracy: Differences in Civic Engagement Across Institutions of Higher Education,” *Educational Researcher* 48, no. 1 (January 2019): 31–44, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X18809053>.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

nearly a third of all undergraduates in the US in fall 2021 were enrolled in community colleges.<sup>131</sup>

To this point, in 2012 Finley noted that despite that more than 40 percent of all undergraduates enrolled at public two-year institutions, only a quarter of these students took a course that included a service-learning experience.<sup>132</sup> In fall 2021, when 30 percent of all undergraduates in the US were enrolled at two-year institutions, the shutdown of campuses and the switch to remote learning in the aftermath of the pandemic further negatively impacted service-learning offerings at community colleges. In particular, faculty and community partners reported a sense of being “stretched thin” and needing to reimagine what civic engagement means on their campuses, particularly as the pandemic highlighted the need for community engagement offices to shift their focus to addressing student basic needs.<sup>133</sup>

Civic engagement is not just good for democracy itself, but is also linked to better outcomes for individuals themselves.

Even more, 47 percent of all bachelor’s degree-seeking students in the US are enrolled at regional public universities, a category that is not defined or recognized to the same degree as other institutional typologies (by Carnegie class, by sector, by minority-serving status). As Cecilia Orphan, Mac Wetherbee, and Beckett Duncan note, “despite their crucial role in expanding educational opportunity throughout P-20 education and supporting regional wellbeing, foundational knowledge is lacking about how to identify and define RPUs [regional public universities] and there is no official list of RPUs. As a result, sector-wide quantitative data and research are nearly nonexistent, and RPUs and their students experience

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<sup>131</sup> Lena Jones, “As the Dust Settles - A Snapshot of Civic and Community Engagement at Community Colleges 2022-23,” *Campus Compact*, 2022, 5, <https://compact.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/As%20the%20Dust%20Settles%20-%20A%20snapshot%20of%20civic%20and%20community%20engagement%20at%20community%20colleges%202022-23.pdf>.

<sup>132</sup> Ashley Finley, “A Brief Review of the Evidence on Civic Learning in Higher Education,” January 2012, <https://www.csc.edu/about/strategic-plan/pdf/CivicOutcomesBrief-A.Finley.pdf>.

<sup>133</sup> Lena Jones, “As the Dust Settles - A Snapshot of Civic and Community Engagement at Community Colleges 2022-23,” *Campus Compact*, 2022, 5, <https://compact.org/sites/default/files/2023-11/As%20the%20Dust%20Settles%20-%20A%20snapshot%20of%20civic%20and%20community%20engagement%20at%20community%20colleges%202022-23.pdf>.

ongoing invisibility in scholarly and policy discussions.”<sup>134</sup> Not only do these institutions enroll nearly 40 percent of all Pell-eligible students, but they also enroll a significant number of first-generation students, as well as nearly 70 percent of all Black students, nearly half of all American Indian or Alaska Native students, and 44 percent of Latinx students. The authors also note that almost a third of RPUs meet the thresholds for minority-serving institution designations, and almost half are rural-serving institutions, a stark figure given the above-mentioned concept of civic deserts.<sup>135</sup>

Higher levels of civic engagement are linked to better health outcomes, self-reported rates of well-being, higher career satisfaction, and a greater sense of community.

Civic engagement is not just good for democracy itself but is also linked to better outcomes for individuals themselves. Higher levels of civic engagement are linked to better health outcomes, self-reported rates of well-being, higher career satisfaction, and a greater sense of community.<sup>136</sup> If we see racialized patterns of civic engagement or any patterns that would deepen a civic engagement gap between certain demographic groups, this has implications for furthering inequality on these types of individual outcomes as well.

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<sup>134</sup> Cecilia Orphan, Mac Wetherbee, and Beckett Duncan, “Identifying, Defining, and Supporting Regional Public Universities and Colleges,” *Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges*, December 2022, [https://assets-global.website-files.com/5fd3cd8b31d72c5133b17425/639f181b4e925bbd72afea0a\\_IADRPUs%20Executive%20Summary.pdf](https://assets-global.website-files.com/5fd3cd8b31d72c5133b17425/639f181b4e925bbd72afea0a_IADRPUs%20Executive%20Summary.pdf).

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Carrie Myers, Scott M. Myers, and Martha Peters. “The Longitudinal Connections Between Undergraduate High Impact Curriculum Practices and Civic Engagement in Adulthood.” *Research in Higher Education* 60, no. 1 (February 1, 2019): 83–110. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-018-9504-4>.

# Conclusion and Future Research

Most pressing is the need for institutions to prioritize civic engagement in their missions and commit to measuring and tracking civic outcomes alongside established student learning and success outcomes.

Against the backdrop of growing polarization, the rise of anti-DEIA initiatives, and growing distrust in public institutions including higher education, the need for universities to recommit to civic investment emerges as more pressing than ever. Historically, particularly in the US, the university has been an institution dedicated to strengthening democratic principles by championing social mobility, producing knowledge, promoting pluralism, and fostering citizenship education.

While this report details the complexities of researching the exact nature of the relationship between higher education and civic engagement, the link between the two is as close to a social science universal truth as there is. This report details what we know so far about that link, and where future research is needed. Most pressing is the need for institutions to prioritize civic engagement in their missions and commit to measuring and tracking civic outcomes alongside established student learning and success outcomes, in order to deepen our understanding of the role civic education plays in shaping learners' long-term civic attitudes and behaviors, and allow universities to design targeted, data-driven initiatives. After all, in these hyper-partisan times, the college campus is an increasingly rare space where diverse individuals come together to debate ideas and work collectively to solve public problems; the university is a democratic agent responsible for shaping active and informed citizens. With that being said, several avenues for future research and actionable items emerge from the landscape review.

**Invest in a robust research agenda required for the success of civic engagement initiatives.** As detailed above, there are well-documented methodological challenges posed by replicability, generalizability, and self-selection bias. The popular saying is that “what gets measured gets done,” and that holds true in the field of civic engagement initiatives in higher education. Committing to tracking civic engagement outcomes alongside other student success outcomes would not only strengthen the ability to conduct longitudinal research and research into the impact of different types of curricular or co-curricular initiatives, but it would also strengthen the value proposition of a college degree as a social good.

**Prioritize research on understudied student populations and the institutions that serve them.** The landscape of higher education institutions is highly diverse, across sector, region, Carnegie class, residential status, and urban/rural setting, not to mention the demographic characteristics of student populations served. Yet, existing research predominantly focuses on and comes from research-intensive institutions. More research is needed highlighting civic engagement efforts, needs, and typologies at other types of institutions, particularly community colleges and regional public universities, given the demographic diversity of their student populations.

**Develop studies and interventions designed to further investigate targeted impacts, particularly in the co-curricular context.** More research is needed on the differential impacts that civic engagement programming or coursework has on different demographic groups, a topic which remains understudied within the literature. Furthermore, given the initial findings regarding the importance of the residential experience, further research is needed into the implications and initiatives needed to target non-residential students, with the goal of preempting civic deserts both on- and off-campus.

**Design and research curricular initiatives and their fit for purpose.** Several insights from the landscape review that have to do with civic education would benefit from further investigation—the impact of political ideology on how civic engagement is defined, information literacy strategies to combat misinformation on campuses, reconciling open classroom climates with free speech challenges on campuses, for starters. More broadly there is the question of how to integrate civic education across different types of majors and what specific civic agency skills should be prioritized across a common or specialized civic curriculum.

**Increase and facilitate collaboration.** Civic engagement programming and research are both large-scale, long-term efforts in need of systematic collaboration, yet a lot of the work remains siloed. Not only are there silos across research efforts (across disciplines, but also across academics, policymakers, and researchers outside of academia), but also across different units across campuses, as well as local communities. Facilitating and promoting intra-campus and inter-campus collaboration, as well as collaboration with community organizations, can strengthen civic engagement initiatives and build robust coalitions of stakeholders.

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