Chapter 3

Student Acceptance of a Civic Engagement Graduation Requirement in an Urban Community College

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ABSTRACT

Civic engagement is an essential part of a democratic society, though it has recently tended toward adversarial political conflict. Although many college administrators favor encouraging or requiring student civic engagement, little is known about whether students themselves would support this, and how student characteristics are related to acceptance. Past and present civic activities of 2,327 students at a large, very diverse urban community college were surveyed using the newly developed KCC Civic Engagement Scale. Results showed strong agreement that the college had a responsibility to develop civically engaged students, but that the term "civic engagement" is unclear to many. Principal components analysis revealed four distinct factors: general non-political civic engagement, and low-effort, high-effort, and unconventional political activities. Level of student participation in various activities is primarily determined by a student's time availability and secondarily by a complex assortment of personal characteristics, including residency status.

INTRODUCTION

In a democratic society, civic engagement can produce positive outcomes in a number of forums that mobilize individual and collaborative participation in meeting the needs of a community or a global organization. In higher education, civic engagement involves the political and social activism of campus members working together to address an issue, change a political policy, or reconstitute authentic democracy on a campus (Ehrlich, 2000).

In America, democracy is built on the activism of its citizens. As Ehrlich (2000) pointed out, "A morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social

fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own" (p. xxvi). As Chaudhary and Gupta (2017) noted, engagement results in a sense of belonging in school, the community, and other societal groups, and, in a positive feedback loop, the sense of belonging encourages engagement. In addition, participation is a vehicle for youth to acquire knowledge and skills to influence decisions that affect them. Similarly, civic engagement in higher education is built on the political activism of its school community members. This chapter reports on a study assessing whether students support a civic engagement graduation requirement, and how student characteristics are related to acceptance.

BACKGROUND

Active civic collaboration is achieved by a diversity of groups and service organizations engaged in a social contract of thought and purpose. Only a couple of decades ago, it was possible to be optimistic about long-term trends towards a resilient civil society. In 1999, Ladd noted, "the engagement of individual citizens in a vast array of groups and voluntary service and charities is generating social capital as never before. This capital is now being spent to meet community needs in every town and city in America" (p. 3).

According to Stolberg (2008), President George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address challenged Americans to "devote at least two years — 4,000 hours — of their lives to public service. He promised to expand AmeriCorps, the so-called domestic Peace Corps, and double the size of the Peace Corps itself" (p. 1). As Boyte (2008) stated, "America in the last generation has… been a laboratory for creative civic experiments. These have generated an everyday politics of negotiation and collaboration that is more concerned with solving problems than with apportioning blame along ideological lines" (p. 1). Ironically, it can be argued that the resurgence of local activism envisioned by President Bush only fully developed six years later in the campaign of his replacement. Barack Obama's campaign and his landmark success in building an enthusiastic grass-roots organization revitalized public interest in civic engagement. In recent years, at least three major and inconsistent trends have received a great deal of attention: the Tea Party, Occupy, and Black Lives Matter movements.

Unfortunately, recent American events have given many observers grounds for a renewed pessimism. As Theis (2016) astutely observed, in 1975, in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, 52% of respondents to a Gallup poll still indicated that they had a high level of confidence in the presidency, and 42% also rated Congress highly. By 2012 these numbers had dropped to 37% and 13% respectively. It seems unlikely that these figures have risen since then. Theis argued that most political "engagement" in higher education is "about amassing facts and making expert arguments while lining up converts on your side rather than listening to different perspectives or interests and working toward a common solution. They are attempts to engage students in adversarial politics" (p. 42).

In the U.S., civic engagement in general still appears to be accepted almost unquestioningly as a public good. The improvement of civic engagement as a goal of education dates back at least to the writings of John Dewey (1859-1952). Dewey saw "school as a social center… public schools are particularly well suited… to function as neighborhood 'hubs' or 'centers' around which local partnerships can be generated and developed" (Benson, Harkavy, & Puckett, 2007, p. 85). In a review of the literature on civic engagement, Lin (2015) found that two goals drew the most attention: personal responsibility citizenship (following laws), and participatory citizenship (thinking critically about social issues). Lin concluded that citizen education consists primarily of three types of programs: character education,

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