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FIVE THINGS

FIVE THINGS Student Affairs Professionals Can Do to Institutionalize *Civic Engagement*

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NASPA
Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education

FIVE THINGS ISSUE BRIEF SERIES

The Research and Policy Institute Five Things Issue Brief Series is designed to connect leaders in the field of student affairs with academic scholarship focused on critical issues facing higher education. Intended to be accessible, succinct, and informative, the series provides NASPA members with thought provoking perspectives and guidance about what current research tells us about supporting student success in all its forms. To provide feedback on the Five Things series, or to suggest future topics for consideration, please contact Brian A. Sponsler, NASPA vice president for research and policy and series editor, at bsponsler@naspa.org.

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American higher education has deep civic roots. The earliest Colonial Colleges were founded to ensure there would be successive generations of civic and religious leaders. In 1740, Benjamin Franklin (1749) founded the University of Pennsylvania because he believed that "an *Inclination* joined with an *Ability* to serve Mankind, one's Country, Friends and Family . . . should indeed be the great *Aim* and *End* of all Learning" (p. 30). That same democratic impulse is articulated in the founding documents of hundreds of colleges established in the years following the American Revolution. It is reflected in the ideals that established our great land-grant universities in the 19th century. In 1873, the trustees of what would become The Ohio State University said that they intended to educate students not just as "farmers or mechanics, but as [individuals], fitted by education and attainments for the greater usefulness and higher duties of citizenship" (Boyte & Kari, 2000, p. 47). The same aim is evident in the establishment of our historically Black colleges and universities and our faith-based institutions.

Despite this rich historic legacy, by 1980, many people felt that that this civic purpose was in danger of being lost. There were shifts in societal attitudes about the purposes of higher education, as shown by trend data from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA): In 1969, 80% of incoming freshmen said that developing a meaningful philosophy of life (the ideal of a well-rounded, formative liberal education) was an important goal. By 1996, that value had dropped by nearly half, to 42%. Over that same period, the percentage of students who said they were attending college "in order to be very well-off financially" (i.e., to get rich) went from one half to three quarters (Astin & Sax, 1998). Simply put, over a couple of decades, higher education went from being seen largely as a public good—something that benefits society and enriches lives—to a private good, a credential that individuals purchase to improve their own economic prospects.

Over the past two-and-a-half decades, a whole host of efforts have aimed to reclaim the civic purpose of American higher education. In 1980, the National Society for Experiential Education, which had 600 members, was one of the only organizations holding an annual conference aimed at linking academic and community-based work. More than two dozen other regional and national conferences with a civic focus have since been established that collectively draw together more than 20,000 individuals annually.

All these efforts have had a tremendous effect. One window into this is survey data from Campus Compact (the only group gathering these kinds of data). In 1991, Campus Compact had 235 institutional members. A survey of these members (institutions highly supportive of civic engagement efforts) showed:

- 16% of students at these institutions were involved in service (almost all of it volunteerism);
- 15% of these institutions had (or were

considering establishing, which means they did not yet have) offices to support this work; and
- 59% of the presidents at these institutions characterized the extent of their faculty's involvement in this work as "little" or "not at all." (Eisenberg, 1991, pp. 2–3)

Fast-forward to today: Recent surveys of Campus Compact members (now numbering 1,100, a quarter of all colleges and universities) showed:

- a third of all students (31%) participate in service and service-learning courses annually (Campus Compact, 2011);
- 94% of member institutions have an office or center coordinating service-learning and/or civic engagement efforts (Campus Compact, 2011);
- 42% of member institutions take activities like service-learning and community-based research into account in promotion and tenure decisions (Campus Compact, 2011); and
- 90% of member institutions' strategic plans specifically mention instilling in students a sense of responsibility to their community as an important outcome (Campus Compact, 2007).

This civic engagement movement has had a significant impact on American higher education. However, the degree to which these civic activities have become institutionalized—have become truly a defining feature of particular colleges and universities—has varied and has not produced the desired effects.

Research shows that young adults' political knowledge is woefully inadequate; 56% of American youth cannot define the word *citizen* as a person who is able to vote (Milner, 2008). Although there was a slight increase in the number of young adult voters in the 2008 presidential election, the participation rate still hovers around 40%, the lowest among all voting age demographics (Kirby, Marcelo, Gillerman, & Linkins, 2008).

This picture is more complex. Although traditional forms of youth political participation (e.g., voting, protesting, or wearing buttons) are waning, it has been posited that youth may be participating *differently*, rather than less (Dalton, 2008; Youniss & Yates, 1997; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Research demonstrates that students are volunteering in greater numbers than ever before (Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Palucki Blake, & Tran, 2009). According to 2009 data from HERI, 31% of college graduates currently volunteer in their communities, and 26% of current students volunteer, the latter at a 30-year high. However, the following quote from the Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education sums up a predicament:

> We are encouraged that more and more students are volunteering and participating in public and community service, and we have all encouraged them to do so through curricular and co-curricular activity. However, this service is not leading students to embrace the duties of active citizenship and civic participation. (Ehrlich & Hollander, 2000, p. 1)

Clearly, there is more work to be done. Student affairs professionals can play a significant role in making civic learning and democratic engagement a part of every student's experience in higher education. There are many benefits to advancing this work related to the field of student affairs:

- Community-based learning, like service-learning, is a powerful way for students to link theory and practice and to build critical-thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Involvement in civic engagement, like other student engagement activities, has been shown to positively impact retention.
- Civic engagement also builds strong relationships between colleges and universities and the communities in which they do their work.

This brief argues that student affairs professionals generally—and chief student affairs officers (CSAOs) especially—can play a pivotal role in the important civic purpose of advancing our democracy through the preparation of citizens. While the responsibility of this task is shared among faculty, administrators, policy makers, and community leaders, student affairs leadership is crucial to institutionalizing civic learning

and democratic engagement. The next section of this brief offers five suggestions for CSAOs to consider to improve their institutional culture, policy, and practice in order to advance their institution's educational opportunities to prepare students for active citizenship and active participation in our democracy.

FIVE THINGS

1 Recognize That Successful Civic Engagement Efforts Are an Expression of the Central Mission of the Institution

Our colleges and universities operate today in a challenging environment. Competition for students is stiff and resources are often scarce. Institutional leaders must make difficult decisions about which efforts are indispensable and which ones are expendable. The factor that determines essential core activities is an institution's mission. A clear and compelling mission clarifies the priorities of an institution and underscores its unique value proposition. It answers the question, "With all the choices prospective students have, why should they come here?" Upholding the mission is the most important responsibility of boards of trustees and presidents. It is also what guides strategic planning processes and is a fundamental requirement of accreditation processes.

Campuses that have developed successful civic engagement efforts are ones where this work is inextricably linked to the core mission of the institution. Of course, different institutions have different kinds of missions. For example, Olivet College, a small liberal arts school in rural Michigan, sought to reclaim its progressive roots by redesigning its core curriculum and cocurriculum around the ideal of "education for individual and social responsibility." Portland State University, an institution that emphasizes teaching and research, redefined its mission and its place within the state education system of Oregon with the motto, "Let knowledge serve the city." In both instances, civic engagement efforts were a means of enabling the institution to fulfill its larger mission. Among institutions that have not undergone a significant mission redefinition process, successful civic engagement efforts tend to be ones that are linked to institutional priorities. Thus, service-learning can be promoted as a powerful pedagogy at institutions that are teaching-centered, as a means of enabling students to develop leadership skills at institutions where professional preparation is a priority, and in order to foster a commitment to social justice at faith-based institutions. The bottom line is that civic engagement activities need to be seen as an essential strategy that enables the institution to fulfill its unique sense of mission.

CSAOs can play an important role by pointing to the historic, civic purpose of their institutions as the senior leadership takes on questions about long-term planning and strategy. CSAOs can also explain how civic engagement activities, such as service-learning, student leadership, democratic dialogues, and university/community partnerships offer important opportunities for the institution to advance its core mission, including its broader service to society and democracy.

> KEY QUESTIONS: How does your institutional mission statement express the civic mission of your college and university? What connections can be made from your institutional history to democracy, civic engagement, or your community?

2 Establish Clear Definitions of Civic Engagement

To make civic engagement a core part of the university and the division of student affairs, CSAOs must remember the purpose of civic engagement, which is strengthening our communities and democracy through developing students for lives of active citizenship.

Figure 1. Comparing Civic Engagement Frameworks

	Civic engagement *(focus on activity and place)*	**Democratic civic engagement** *(focus on purpose and process)*
Community relationships	Partnerships	Reciprocity
	Deficit-based understanding of community	Asset-based understanding of community
	Academic work done for the public	Academic work done with the public
Knowledge production/research	Applied	Inclusive, collaborative, problem-oriented
	Unidirectional flow of knowledge	Multidirectional flow of knowledge
Epistemology	Positivist, scientific, technocratic	Relational, localized, contextual
	Distinction between knowledge producers and knowledge consumers	Co-creation of knowledge
	University as the center of public problem-solving	University as a part of an ecosystem of knowledge production addressing public problem-solving
Political dimension	Apolitical engagement	Facilitating an inclusive, collaborative, and deliberative democracy
Outcome	Knowledge generation and dissemination through community involvement	Community change that results from the co-creation of knowledge

Source: Saltmarsh & Hartley (2011, p. 22).

There are many definitions of civic engagement, and the language around civic engagement can be confusing and vague. Tom Ehrlich's description of civic engagement offers a clear and useful definition:

> Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivations to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. (Ehrlich, 2000, p. vi)

Moreover, CSAOs should adopt and use the framework of *democratic* civic engagement. It is easy to think of civic engagement as efforts defined by activity and place. In this way, civic engagement is "some kind of activity (a course, a research project, internships, field work, clinical placement, economic development, volunteerism) that occurs in the 'community' (local, national, global)" (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009, p. 6). The risk is that civic engagement becomes shorthand for partnerships (in any form) and the "lack of [a] clear definition can leave some campuses and their leaders with the impression that they are 'doing engagement,' when in fact they are not" (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2002, p. 8).

This framework of civic engagement can be compared to the idea of democratic engagement (see Figure 1), which is defined by democratic processes and a democratic purpose. Efforts are not done *for* the community but, rather, *with* the community. The university does not merely apply its expertise to the community. Rather, democratic civic engagement recognizes that universities and communities both are sources of knowledge. By working together, they can address pressing problems for all. The purpose of democratic engagement is not only to produce learning for students and to address issues in the community, but also to strengthen the democratic

Figure 2. Levels of Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement

Partial foundation laid	Pervasive civic learning
Civic learning is optional for some students	Civic learning is expected for all students, regardless of field or area of study
Civic learning is a one-time experience	Civic learning is infused across students' educational experiences over time in a developmental arc
Teaching critical thinking does not include real-world contexts	Teaching critical thinking occurs in relation to issues of public significance
Civic learning is individually oriented	Civic learning also fosters collaboration with diverse people and groups
Civic learning focuses on external engagement	Civic learning also asks students to reflect on their own social identity
Faculty in some disciplines and certificate programs raise civic questions in relation to their field	Faculty in all disciplines and certificate programs raise civic questions in relation to their field
Community-based scholarship is accepted in some departments	Community-based scholarship is positively viewed in all departments and influences hiring and promotion
Civic learning initiatives in the curriculum and cocurriculum are parallel but not integrated	Civic learning initiatives in the curriculum and co-curriculum are coordinated and connected through partnerships between academic and student affairs
Community engagement is unidirectional, with the university providing expertise to the community	Community engagement is reciprocal, with universities and communities working together to identify assets and solve public problems
Mission and vision statements do not explicitly address civic responsibility	Mission and vision statements explicitly address civic responsibility

Source: National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012).

practices that make for stronger communities. Clear definitions are important in this work, so as not to distract from the core purposes of educating students for lives of citizenship and active participation and strengthening communities.

On some campuses, presidents have used civic language as a means of championing activities like economic development and job preparation. While these certainly positively contribute to society, they do not necessarily develop the competencies Ehrlich noted for students or do much to strengthen democracy. CSAOs must be clear about what civic engagement is and, thus, what goals are most important for the institution and the division of student affairs to educate students for democratic participation.

KEY QUESTIONS: How do you define civic engagement for your campus? What specific skills and values do you hope to provide to your students and your graduates? How does your work improve and strengthen your community?

3 Create a Campus Ethos for Civic Engagement

Many different kinds of programs can help students develop civic skills: involvement in sustained service projects, participation in service-learning courses, democratic deliberation and dialogue projects, and living and learning in communities that grapple with

pressing societal problems. However, no single intervention or even set of interventions is likely to make a significant difference in the development of students. *It takes an overall environment—a campus ethos—that engages students both in and out of the classroom.* CSAOs are in a unique position to think about the overall ecology of learning that students experience, from the time they apply, to orientation, and through their curricular and cocurricular experiences.

CSAOs and student affairs professionals can work in collaboration with their academic colleagues and community partners to include civic learning and democratic engagement in all aspects of students' experiences. Students do not experience their "college education" in silos or through organizational charts. Rather, students learn in a variety of channels with varying levels of sophistication. To support and connect these myriad experiences, CSAOs and student affairs professionals should consider how their areas' specific learning outcomes contribute to and relate to the campuswide learning outcomes as well as the academic curriculum. In this way, civic learning and democratic engagement are not optional, they are pervasive features of the student experience and institutional policy and programming. Many institutions have partial foundations for civic learning; pervasive commitments are needed to educate students for democratic participation (see Figure 2).

Similarly, institutional leaders cannot just espouse civic values but should model democratic practices. An institution that says it wants to promote civic engagement but does not provide a meaningful way for students to be involved in institutional decision making is not teaching by example. Residence halls run as dormitories or hotels are less likely to shape students than living-learning communities where students have a hand in the life they are creating in the community. Student affairs professionals at all levels can create by example environments that allow students to practice the skills of citizenship and participation.

It is not the responsibility of a few to educate for citizenship; it is the work of all and requires a campus ethos centered on democratic ideals and practices. Merely pointing out examples and opportunities at "The Center for Civic Engagement" does not a campus ecology make. Institutional leaders, and specifically CSAOs, can form partnerships and relationships with community members and organizations, faculty, staff, and alumni to all work to educate students for citizenship through a pervasive campus culture for civic engagement.

> KEY QUESTIONS: Is the campus ethos for civic learning and democratic engagement partial or pervasive? Who are the key partners to help promote civic engagement on campus and in the community?

4 Use the Many Channels of the Cocurriculum

The division of student affairs can be the leader in developing the overall ecology of a campus dedicated to educating for civic engagement. Because student affairs professionals have the privilege of educating students outside of class, there are many opportunities for civic development. For example, there are allies on every campus that can advance this work. CSAOs can look within their own divisions at diversity initiatives, residence life, leadership programs, orientation, career services, or student advising, among others. If all of these functional areas support the ideal of educating students for citizenship, student affairs can truly be the leading voice on campus for civic engagement.

It can be easy to rely on service-learning as the primary vehicle for students' civic engagement and civic development. Thousands of service-learning courses have been developed, representing the most common approach institutions have taken to engage students civically. As such, service-learning activities have in large part become synonymous with civic engagement. The reality is that although service-learning is a powerful pedagogy for advancing civic learning and democratic engagement, it is not the only pedagogy.

Student affairs professionals have many opportunities to develop students civically through the cocurriculum via experiential learning; in living-learning communities and in residence halls; through volunteerism, community service, or leadership programs; and in facilitated dialogues and conversations with peers. The key components in all of these are the opportunities for applied learning, ability to practice civic skills, and

opportunities for personal development through reflection and relationship building. Applied learning supports the outcomes related to student development that are demonstrated in civic areas, such as a young person's ability to work with others, appreciate diversity, serve as a leader, think critically about issues, and work to make a difference in his or her community. The work of student affairs professionals is critical to students' civic development and their futures.

In this way, student affairs professionals have the opportunity to be leaders on their campuses and in the field of civic learning and democratic engagement.

KEY QUESTIONS: What programs exist that already foster civic learning and democratic engagement work, and how can you build on these successes? What areas could be enhanced by civic learning and democratic engagement work?

5 Know if You Are Being Successful

As the nation continues to focus on accountability and ongoing assessment in higher education, it is often the case that what is counted, counts. If goals are truly a priority, institutions should be able to demonstrate progress toward realizing them. The first step in this process is to determine what outcomes are the highest priority. Numerous potential outcomes of civic engagement efforts might be measured: Are we helping students develop critical thinking skills through service-learning courses or work with community partners? Are these experiences helping students learn how to work collaboratively with others, a skill employers consider important (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2013)? Are we helping students develop greater disciplinary understanding? Is developing this understanding sufficient, or do we also want students to develop a sense of civic agency so that they act on that knowledge?

CSAOs are in a position to play a key role, spurring discussions at the senior level about what kinds of outcomes ought to be monitored and measured. It is not uncommon for different individuals or groups at an institution to gather data that have civic implications (e.g., evaluations of service-learning courses, student surveys regarding cocurricular and leadership activities, career services data on where graduates decide to work, and attitudinal data on cohorts of students through participation in national surveys like the Cooperative Institutional Research Program and the National Survey of Student Engagement.) However, it is all too uncommon for institutions to look across these broad data sources and paint a larger portrait with descriptive statistics about how the entire college experience is shaping the academic, civic, and personal development of students. Student affairs can work with other constituents to grapple with these data and reflect on how it might be gathered more systematically in the future.

KEY QUESTIONS: How do you measure a student's civic development? What are the ways in which assessment data related to civic learning can be collected across the division of student affairs?

CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this brief is to acknowledge, recognize, and clarify the unique role that student affairs professionals and CSAOs specifically can have in promoting civic learning and democratic engagement on their campuses. Through thoughtful planning, careful campus programming and initiatives, and developing environments to support civic learning and democratic engagement, student affairs professionals can improve learning outcomes and civic development of their students and the institutional culture of their college or university.

These five suggestions offer student affairs professionals the opportunity to be leaders on their campuses in championing civic learning and democratic engagement. Changing an institutional culture to promote these values requires leadership, collaboration, assessment, reflection,

and institutional commitment. These suggestions should be shared with student affairs professionals at all levels and discussed with academic colleagues, faculty members, administrators, and community partners. CSAOs can serve as leaders in this area, and, in their role, implement these five recommendations to better educate students for lives of citizenship to serve our communities and our democracy.

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Figure 3. Additional Resources for Consideration of Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement Topics

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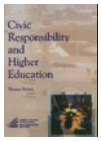

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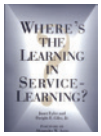

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ABOUT NASPA

NASPA–Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education is the leading association for the advancement, health, and sustainability of the student affairs profession. We serve a full range of professionals who provide programs, experiences, and services that cultivate student learning and success in concert with the mission of our colleges and universities. Founded in 1919, NASPA comprises more than 13,000 members in all 50 states, 29 countries, and 8 U.S. Territories.

Through high-quality professional development, strong policy advocacy, and substantive research to inform practice, NASPA meets the diverse needs and invests in realizing the potential of all its members under the guiding principles of integrity, innovation, inclusion, and inquiry.

NASPA members serve a variety of functions and roles, including the vice president and dean for student life, as well as professionals working within housing and residence life, student unions, student activities, counseling, career development, orientation, enrollment management, racial and ethnic minority support services, and retention and assessment.

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