



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.¹ They are also less likely to favor authoritarian political stances.² 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.”³ 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.

¹ 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>.

² 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/>.

³ 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.

Next Steps and Future Research

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.