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Civic Engagement: a study of changes in college

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Abstract

Using a mixed method longitudinal cohort design, the Tufts University study is examining student involvement in and attitudes towards civic engagement during the undergraduate years and beyond. It does this by using baseline data from students' levels of community service in high school and then analyzes a variety of curricular and co-curricular experiences in college. This article focuses solely on the research design and some preliminary findings of students' civic attitudes during their first two years of college.

Introduction

Nationally recognized best practices for research on civic learning outcomes often draw from Service-Learning measurements (Bringle, Phillips, & Hudson, 2004; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Research has shown that high school activities are a strong predictor of college activities (Astin & Sax, 1998; Jones & Hill, 2003; Marks & Jones, 2004). Research specifically on civic and political engagement has identified civic indicators in youth in general (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002). However, less data exists on the impact of college activities on civic and political engagement.

To address this gap in knowledge, the Jonathan M. Tisch College for Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University is conducting a study on civic engagement to examine the link between students' experiences and the development of their civic and political attitudes and activities over time. The study began in the fall of 2003 and will conclude the summer of 2012. During this time period, four academic cohorts of students (classes of 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010) are each tracked over six years. During the spring of 2007, the research team undertook the fourth year of survey administration of this longitudinal study.

The study addresses two main research questions: 1) To what extent does participation in specific programs and activities affect students' attitudes and behaviors towards civic engagement, during the undergraduate years and after graduation? 2) How do students' civic and political attitudes, knowledge, and skills develop and change during the undergraduate years? The study assesses the impact of the Citizenship and Community Scholars Program (CPS Scholars Program) in cultivating civic competencies, and identifies other activities that influence students' development in these areas. This multi-year, time-series study tracks four cohorts of students throughout their undergraduate tenure, as well as two years post-graduation. Each cohort is divided into three research groups based on their participation in the CPS Scholars Program or their level of high school community service: CPS Scholars, high involvement in high school participants, and low-involvement in high school participants.

This article provides background on civic engagement at Tufts University, a brief literature review of national research in this area, and comments on how the Tufts study can uniquely contribute to what is known at present. Next, we outline the research design and methodology of the study, including the process undertaken to develop the research instruments, recruit participants, and collect data. Finally, we share preliminary findings on attitudes, along with the relevance of the Tufts study's eventual findings to higher education.



Institutional Background

Under the leadership of President Lawrence S. Bacow, Tufts University has an articulated institutional mission that embraces three focus areas – active citizenship, international perspective and life sciences and the environment. Tufts uses the term “active citizenship” to encapsulate holistic, collective, multi-sector, results oriented civic participation towards community solutions (Hollister, 2002). Tisch College was created in 2000 to lead Tufts University’s mission to prepare students in all fields of study for lifetimes of active citizenship, promote new knowledge in the field, and build an enduring and broadly shared ethos of citizenship and public service across the university. The Citizenship and Public Service Scholars Program engages students in active citizenship projects while providing skills-based training and required academic coursework. The program follows a developmental model, using a structured framework to foster these connections and to achieve a set of civic learning outcomes. The CPS Scholars program includes a weekly meeting of the scholar community, regular staff advising on projects, retreats and workshops, and guidance on course selection.

Foundations of research

Theorists of democracy, citizenship, freedom, and the public sphere have long argued about the foundation of democratic skills (Dewey, 1916). One of the original purposes of higher education in the U.S. was to build a broad base of individuals equipped to engage in the policy debates of the day, to assure a strong democracy instead of yielding to the rule of a narrow aristocracy. Today, we witness a renewed commitment to that early mission of preparing people for lives of active citizenship (Boyer, 1996; Checkoway, 2001; Harkavy, 2006). As Amy Gutmann, President of University of Pennsylvania recently argued “No one mistakes Penn for an ivory tower. And no one ever will. Through our collaborative engagement with communities all over the world, Penn is poised to advance the central values of democracy: life, liberty, opportunity, and mutual respect”(Gutmann, 2004). Stanford University President John Hennessy, reinforces this direction “...I believe we provide our graduates with both the skills and sense of social responsibility necessary to make significant contributions to our nation and the world in the coming decades.” (Hennessy, 2005). Such institutional articulations provide evidence that effective student civic engagement is important and receiving recognition.

In this context the research on civic engagement is growing. Our study builds on two lines of research: Civic engagement/service learning and positive youth development. Nationally recognized best practices for research on civic learning outcomes often draw from Service-Learning measurements (Bringle, Phillips, & Hudson, 2004; Eyer & Giles, 1999). In particular, prior research has shown that high school activities are a strong predictor of college activities (Astin & Sax, 1998; Jones & Hill, 2003; Marks & Jones, 2004). Research specifically on civic and political engagement has identified specific civic indicators, electoral indicators and indicators of political voice (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002). Substantial empirical data has been provided by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) which collects information nationwide about college student participation in programs and activities that institutions implement for their learning and personal development.

Research from Positive Youth Development indicates that engagement can take many forms and still have a positive impact on youth development so it is important to examine all kinds of activities not just ones presumed to have an impact (Baldi et al., 2001). Even short intense experiences can have an impact on students, so tracking changes over time is a research imperative (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000).

In summary, civic engagement research is important to higher education today, and the Tufts study builds upon previous research by increasing the scope of inquiry in three ways: the study focuses on the entire student experience, not solely the classroom experiences; embraces curricular and co-curricular civic and political engagement, and tracks development over time through a mixed method, longitudinal approach in place of the more traditional cross-sectional, annual designs or pre- and post- intervention evaluations.

Research design & Methodology

The study collects qualitative and quantitative data on the activities and attitudes of undergraduate Tufts students from each of the four cohorts (academic classes of 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010) for six consecutive years (four years as undergraduate students plus two additional years as alumni.) The design for this longitudinal study includes the administration of an annual web-based survey instrument. The survey tracks the development of students' civic and political behaviors and attitudes. The study began in fall of 2003 and will conclude the summer of 2012.

A stratified, random sample of students (based upon each academic cohort's first year composition of gender and racial background, as well as school affiliation) was selected to participate in the study. Annual study recruitment invited all first year students to take the Tisch College Participant Survey. This survey instrument was designed as a screening tool, and queries respondents on their high school activities and involvement. Each academic cohort consists of 60-80 undergraduates, for a total of 267 participants.

Survey data is augmented by other data sources. Qualitative data is collected from ten percent of participants who are randomly sampled to be interviewed during their second and fourth years of college. In addition, participants' responses from routine outcomes assessment instruments (including the Sophomore Experience and Senior Surveys), student transcripts, and demographic data are triangulated.

The respondents to the annual high school survey became the population from which the sample for each cohort was pulled for the study. To facilitate later comparative analysis, respondents were divided into the three distinct groups based upon their involvement in the CPS Scholars program or community service activities in high school: CPS Scholars, High School – High Participators (HS Highs), and High School – Low Participators (HS Lows). For the cohorts from classes of 2007, 2008, and 2009, the student participation in community service in high school separated as follows: CPS Scholars: averaged 16.8 hours of community service per month in high school; HS Highs: had 19.3 hours of community service per month in high school; HS Lows: reported 2.7 hours of community service per month in high school.

Each spring, all participants receive and complete the annual Civic and Political Activities and Attitudes Survey (CPAAS) that was developed after reviewing a number of sources and with input from national experts[1]. The survey was created by compiling questions from existing instruments designed to gather information on college students' civic and political engagement, as well as creating additional items specific to the research questions. The items are integrated or adapted from the following eight validated instruments: First, CIRCLE's Young Citizens Survey for questions about involvement in different types of civic and political activities, second, Pew's Civic and Political Health of a Nation[2] for questions about involvement in activities including voting and current affairs, and third, the Americorps Baseline Survey[3] for questions about civic attitudes. The fourth and fifth sources are two sub-scales of the Civic Attitude and Skills Questionnaire (Social Justice attitudes and Diversity attitudes). The sixth and seventh sources are the Community Service Self-Efficacy Scale and the Public Service Motivation Scale respectively. The eighth and final source of items on the CPAAS is the Social Responsibility Inventory which measures levels of agreement with attitudinal statements[4].

The CPAAS asks a series of questions aimed at examining the extent to which the Tufts experience influences students' civic knowledge, skills, and values. The survey questions focus on both students' activities as undergraduates, as well as their civic and political attitudes. These activity and attitudinal questions are designed to enable a comparative analysis that highlights how participation in the CPS Scholars Program and levels of community service in high school affect students' choices of activities and their attitudes about civic and political action during the undergraduate years. A civic engagement scale has been developed to assess students' respective attitudes towards the importance of and belief in the values of civic engagement.

Students' attitudes towards the importance of civic engagement are measured on five factors: Value of Commitment to the Public Good, Personal Efficacy through Community Service, Personal Efficacy through Politics, Appreciation of Dynamics of Diversity, and Awareness of & Interest in Community and National Issues. Students' levels of participation in behaviors that exhibit their dedication to civic engagement are scaled according to the number of hours they spend participating in community service activities, civic actions, and political actions.

Preliminary findings

Preliminary findings suggest that students' civic attitudes and participation in civically-based activities vary significantly according to their levels of involvement in community service in high school and involvement in the CPS Scholars program while at Tufts. Specifically, CPS Scholars' involvement in activities at Tufts has differed from that of HS Highs or HS Lows, with CPS Scholars indicating being more involved than HS Highs or HS Lows in civic and political activities while at Tufts. Participation levels of all three research groups in community service activities have differed significantly from one another.

Additional, preliminary findings indicate that CPS Scholars' impressions of the importance of four of the five factor categories of civic learning outcomes have also differed significantly from the other two research groups. CPS Scholars' impressions of the implied civic responsibility of citizens to perform public service, their power to evoke change through both community service and political action, and the importance of remaining informed about community and national issues, are all significantly stronger than HS Highs or HS Lows. In contrast, only students' attitudes towards the fifth factor category, dynamics of diversity, do not significantly differ. Specifically, students' impressions (regardless of research group) are similar with regard to the positive and negative dynamics of interacting with individuals with diverse economic, cultural, and racial backgrounds. See issue website <http://www.rapidintellect.com/AEQweb/sum2007.htm>

Results of the qualitative follow-up interviews during participants' sophomore years have further illuminated these differences in students' opinions of an individual's ability to influence a community through civic efforts. CPS Scholars and HS Highs frequently indicated believing that individuals can evoke change in a community through community service. These interviewees cited the reactions and "feedback" of "the people that you interact with [through community service]" as evidence of the powerful effect of their efforts in the community. In particular, one interviewee noted "just seeing how you can make a difference, one person, person to person, that definitely has made me feel that individuals can impact a community." She continued on to describe how these community experiences had led her to believe that "if you really want to achieve it, you can somehow make a difference.

Preliminary findings also suggest that students' involvement in particular activities affect students' attitudes towards their self-efficacy, the value of commitment to the public good, and levels of community and national knowledge. Indeed, after isolating the variance due to a student's level of involvement in high school (their research group), students' levels of involvement in community service activities serve as significant predictors of their viewpoints on self-efficacy through community service and the value of and commitment to the public good. More specifically, a students' level of involvement in community service activities serves as the most influential factor in determining their beliefs towards their ability to evoke positive developments in a community through community service. Additionally, students' levels of

involvement in political activities serve as significant predictors of their viewpoints on their own self-efficacy through politics and awareness of and interest in community and national issues. In particular, students' participation in political activities has had the largest affect on their attitudes towards the need to acquire and remain informed on community and national issues.

Qualitative data has substantiated these findings as well. Interviewees noted that participation in specific activities had raised their awareness about civic or political issues. For example, one interviewee commented that her on-campus volunteer activity had, "increased my awareness on issues that are important." In addition, participation in particular activities also increased certain students' involvement in and concern about their community. For example, one interviewee noted that his off-campus volunteering opportunity at a free-clinic has, "definitely opened my eyes" to the issues of affordable health-care currently facing a large population of individuals in the metro-Boston area. Similarly, another interviewee indicated that the opportunity to "perform in various communities" through a community-based activity had "raised my awareness about some of the things that are going on."

Looking ahead

Although this longitudinal study is still in its early stages, with data collection scheduled to continue into 2012, preliminary findings suggest some important results. Participation in civic engagement activities and the acquisition of civic engagement attitudes has been found to differ based upon participation in CPS Scholars program, along with students' levels of participation in community service in high school. The early findings also suggest that even for students who were active in high school, an intense intervention such as the CPS Scholars program, is associated with even stronger civic attitudes.

In addition, as discussed in the preliminary findings, particular civic engagement activities predict students' development of civic competencies. Therefore, these initial results suggest that involvement in higher education can affect students' civic and political attitudes, a finding that could substantiate the need for institutions of higher education to promote these types of activities going forward. These findings, which already allude to a link between students' engagement in activities and their adoption of civic engagement attitudes, will help Tufts and other universities shape and direct programs that enhance student commitment to civically engaged lives.

The study of civic learning outcomes presents an exciting opportunity to conduct creative research that matters to the world. To date, the team has shared preliminary findings at several educational research conferences, including the American Association of Colleges and Universities, the North East Regional Campus Compact, the Northeast Association of Institutional Research, and the Eastern Evaluation Research Society. The Tufts Outcomes Study research team welcomes visitors, comments and questions at activecitizen.tufts.edu.

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Endnotes

- [1] Dr. Robert Bringle, Dr. Andrew Furco and Dr. Dwight Giles each reviewed and provided input on the survey instrument.
- [2] Pew's Civic and Political Health of a Nation survey instrument developed by CIRCLE at <http://www.civicyouth.org>
- [3] Americorps Baseline Survey was developed by the Corporation for National Service at <http://www.nationalservice.org>
- [4] The latter five of these eight instruments are reviewed in "The Measure of Service Learning" (see References).

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