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Civic Learning & Engagement

College Attendance¹ and Civic Engagement Among 18 to 25 Year Olds

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In 2004, an estimated 53 percent of (or 15 million) 18 to 25 year old U.S. citizens had college experience while an estimated 47 percent (13.4 million) had not attended college. This is an increase in the percent of young people who have college experience of more than 7 percentage points since 1972. In October of 2003, 31 percent of 18 to 25 year olds were currently enrolled in college, with 71 percent of those students reporting that they were attending four-year colleges or universities. Table 1 shows the distribution of college experience across age groups, for 1972 and 2004.

Table 1 – Educational Attainment Among 18 to 25 Year Old Citizens

	<i>All 18-25s</i>	<i>Age Group</i>				<i>All Adults 26 and older</i>
		<i>18-19</i>	<i>20-21</i>	<i>22-24</i>	<i>25</i>	
1972						
Less Than HS	18.6%	24.7%	16.2%	16.2%	17.1%	40.9%
HS Diploma	35.6%	33.9%	33.9%	36.8%	39.4%	33.8%
Some College	36.3%	41.3%	48.1%	28.7%	24.0%	13.0%
BA or greater	9.5%	0.04%	1.8%	18.3%	19.5%	12.4%
2004						
Less Than HS	15.4%	29.5%	11.3%	11.1%	8.9%	12.6%
HS Diploma	31.8%	38.3%	30.2%	29.4%	29.2%	32.4%
Some College	41.4%	31.9%	57.3%	39.5%	33.8%	26.5%
BA or greater	11.4%	0.2%	1.2%	20.1%	28.0%	28.4%

Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements, 1972 and 2004.

Previous research on differences in civic engagement between young people with some college experience and those without suggests that college attendance is positively associated with some measures of civic engagement.³ For example, since 1972, voter turnout in presidential elections for young people with some college attendance was 15 to 20 percentage points greater than voter turnout rates among young people with no college experience.⁴ In this fact sheet we present current evidence that largely supports the findings of other researchers. Compared to their peers who have not attended college, young people who have some college experience show higher levels of civic involvement, electoral participation, and political voice across several measures.

There are some important exceptions, however. Youth with no college experience match, or surpass, their counterparts with college experience in some key areas, most notably in protest activities. However, while college attendance is associated with greater levels of engagement, even among those with college experience there are substantial differences in patterns of engagement. For example, recent college graduates are generally most engaged, followed by current college students, followed by those who have some college exposure but are not currently enrolled in school.⁵ These survey data also suggest that college attendance does not affect women and men uniformly, with young women who are current college students surpassing all other groups on measures of volunteering, for example.

In this fact sheet, we present new evidence on the correlation between a wide range of civic engagement measures and college attendance.⁶ We define four mutually exclusive groups of young people ages 18 to 25. These are:

1. **Current college students.** These are individuals who at the time of our survey said they were enrolled in a college or university.
2. **College graduates:** These are individuals with at least a bachelor's degree.
3. **Young people with some college experience:** These are young people who have said they have more education than a high school diploma, but are not currently enrolled in school. This group includes young people who may have dropped out of college, have an associate's degree or technical degree, or who are taking time off from school.
4. **Non-college youth:** These are young people who have no college experience.

Groups 1 through 3 represent those young people who have some college experience. Our two primary sources of data are the Current Population Survey November Supplements (1984 to 2004) for voting statistics, and the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey conducted by CIRCLE in April and June of 2006 (CPHS 2006).⁷

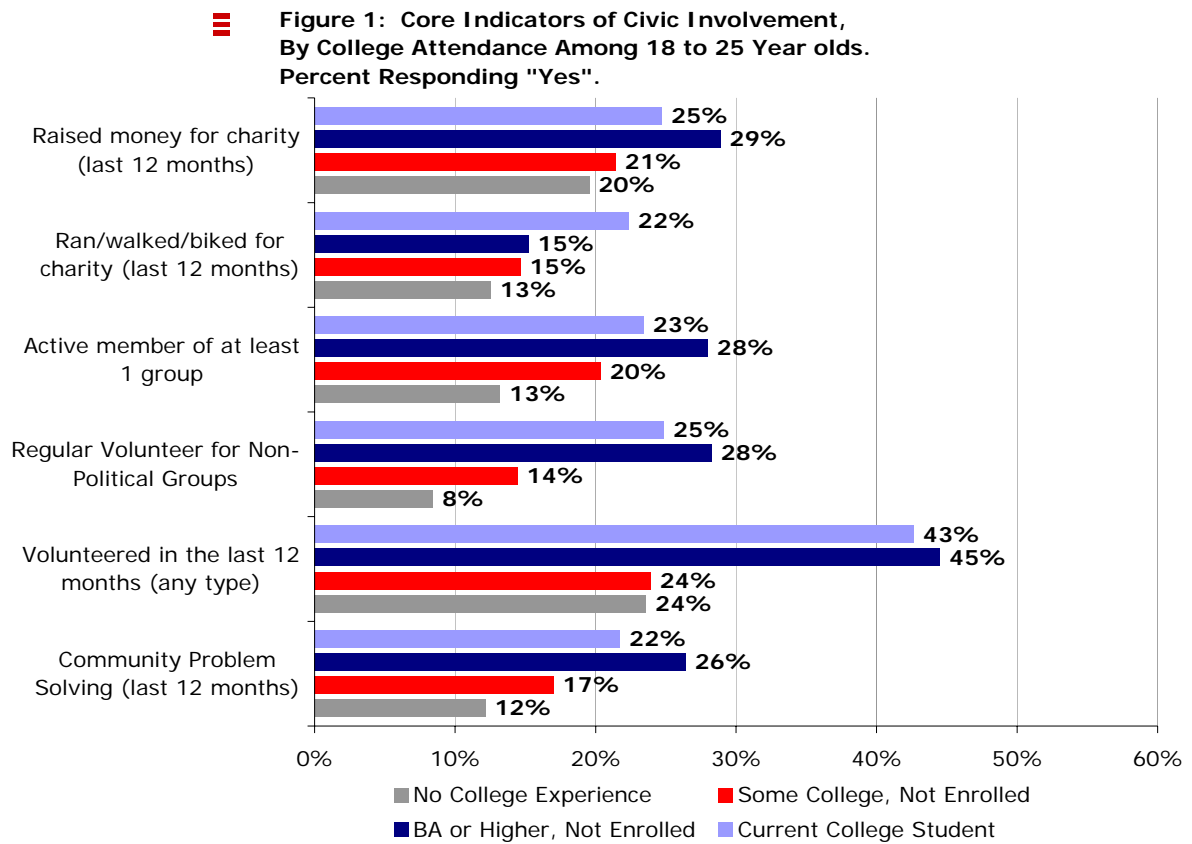
When interpreting these results, one should be cautious to not assign a causal relationship between college attendance and civic engagement. While it is possible that further education fosters civic engagement, it is also likely that any correlation between civic engagement and college attendance may be driven by the factors that both influence why an individual attends college *AND* why someone is more likely to be civically engaged.

Community Involvement

Scott Keeter and colleagues in their recent book *A New Civic Engagement*, and their 2002 report *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation* identified 19 measures of civic engagement, and identified three categories for civic engagement activities. These include "civic activities," "electoral activities" and "political voice activities."

In the CPHS, there are five core indicators of "civic" (or "community") involvement: volunteering, community problem solving, charity activities (running, walking, or riding to raise money), general fundraising for charity, and group membership. On these indicators, young people with college experience show a higher level of participation compared to their peers who have not attended college. Those who have completed college are more involved in their communities than their counterparts who have some college experience or are currently enrolled in school.

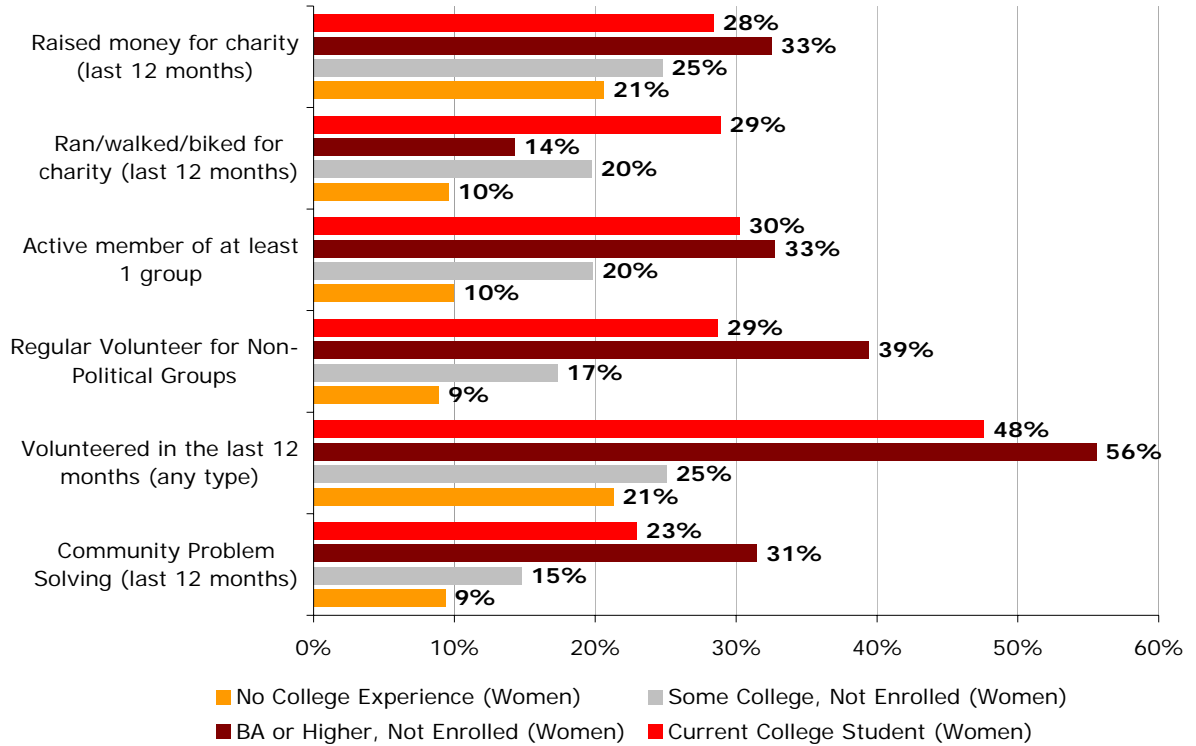
Volunteering is the single activity that draws the greatest number of youth participants. In 2006, 42 percent of current students said they had volunteered in the last 12 months, while 45 percent of college graduates, 24 percent of young people with college experience, but not currently enrolled, and 24 percent of non-college youth said they had volunteered in the past 12 months.⁸ See figure 1.



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

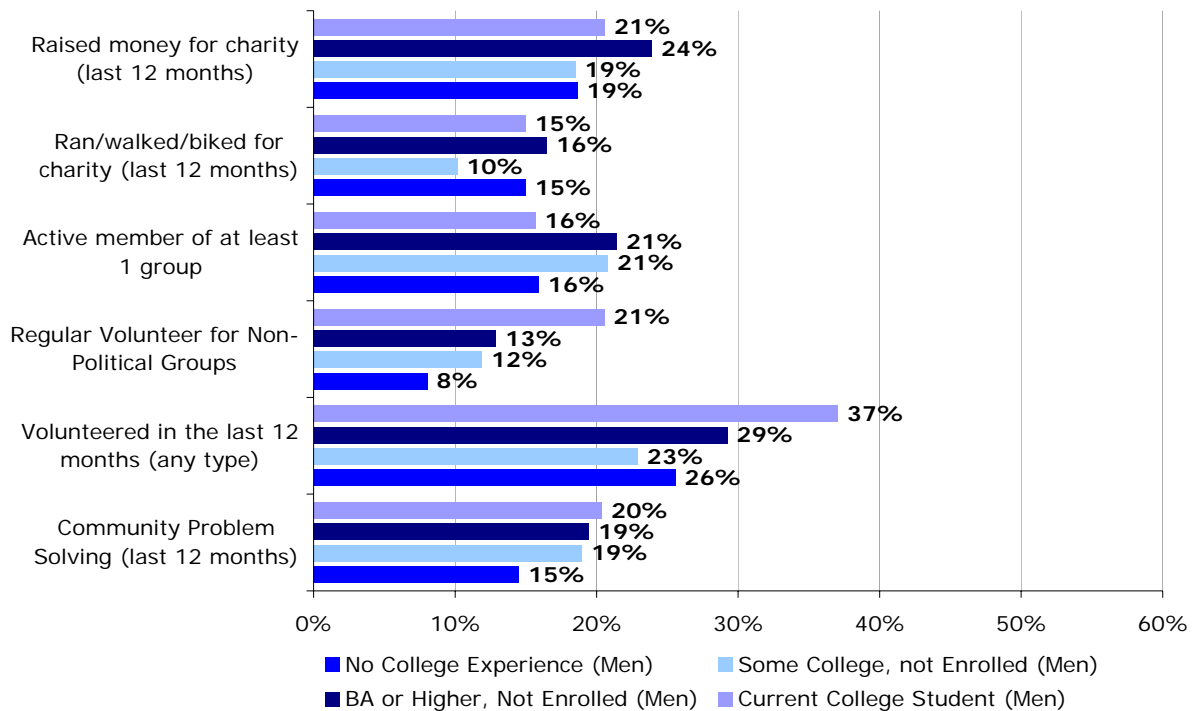
Young women with college experience are more involved than their male counterparts in all "civic" activities. However, this is not true for women with no college experience. These young women are less engaged than their non-college male counterparts in charity activities (run/walk/ride), group membership, volunteering, and community problem solving. Further, among young women, college graduates report the highest levels of civic engagement across all measures, with over half saying they had volunteered in the past 12 months. In contrast, among young men, non-college males match, or surpass their counterparts with some college experience in the civic activities of run/walk/ride for charity, group membership, raising money for charity, and volunteering in the past 12 months. See figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2: Core Indicators of Civic Involvement, By College Attendance for Women 18 to 25 Year olds. Percent Responding "Yes".



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

Figure 3: Core Indicators of Civic Involvement, By College Attendance for Men 18 to 25 Year olds. Percent Responding "Yes".



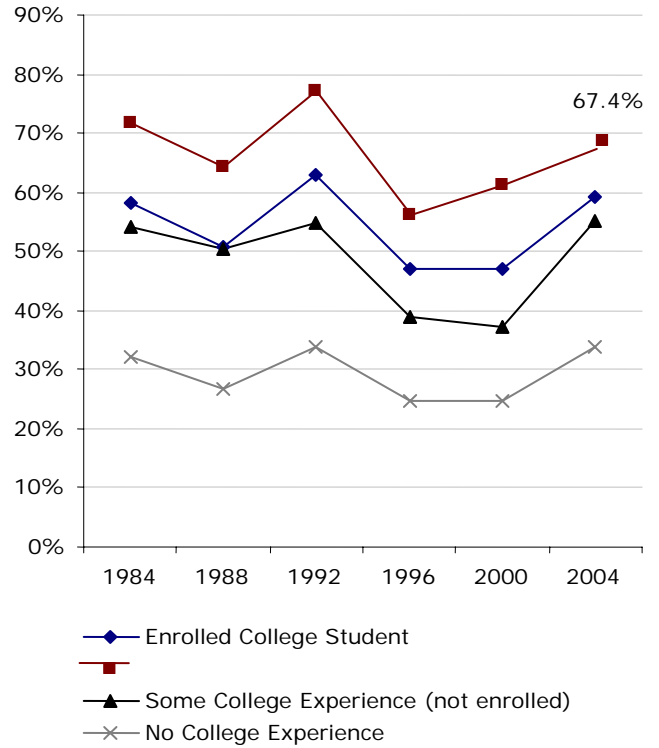
Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

Electoral Participation

Forms of electoral participation include: regular voting in elections, volunteering for political campaigns or candidates, persuading others to vote, displaying campaign buttons or signs, and working or contributing money to candidates, political parties, or organizations that support candidates.

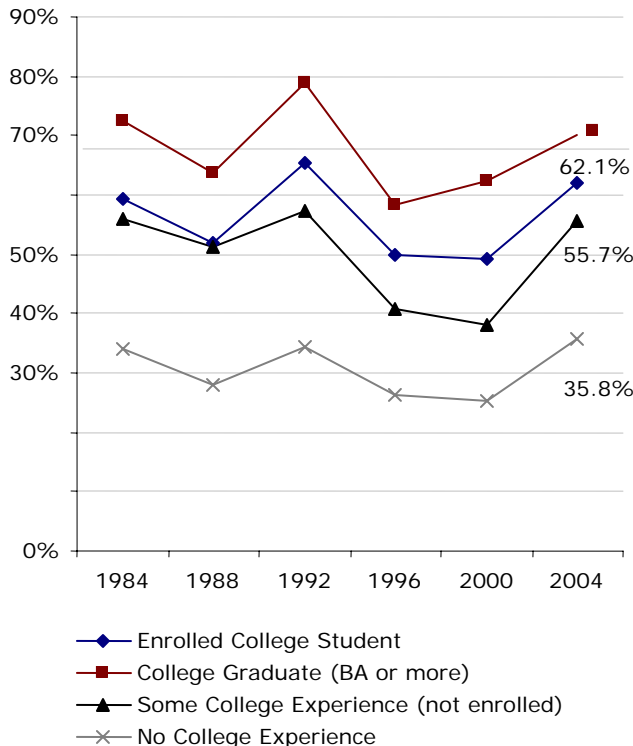
College attendance is highly correlated with voter participation. Since 1984, those who have completed college and those who are either enrolled in college or at least attended some college are more likely to vote than young people who have never attended college. However, while there is a positive relationship between college attendance and voting, all groups of young people in the 2004 election increased voter turnout compared to 2000.⁹ Similar patterns of voter turnout are evident for young men and women, with female college graduates leading all groups in voter turnout rates in 2004. See figures 4, 5, and 6.

Figure 4: Voter Turnout in Presidential Years Among 18-24 year old Citizens, by College Enrollment Status



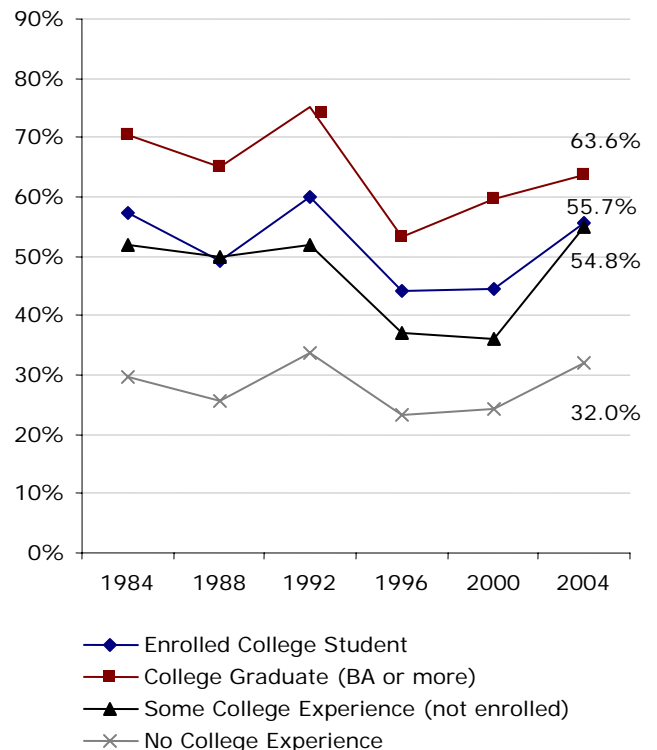
Source: Authors' tabulation from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements, 1984-2004.

Figure 5: Voter Turnout in Presidential Years Among 18-24 year old Female Citizens, by College Enrollment Status



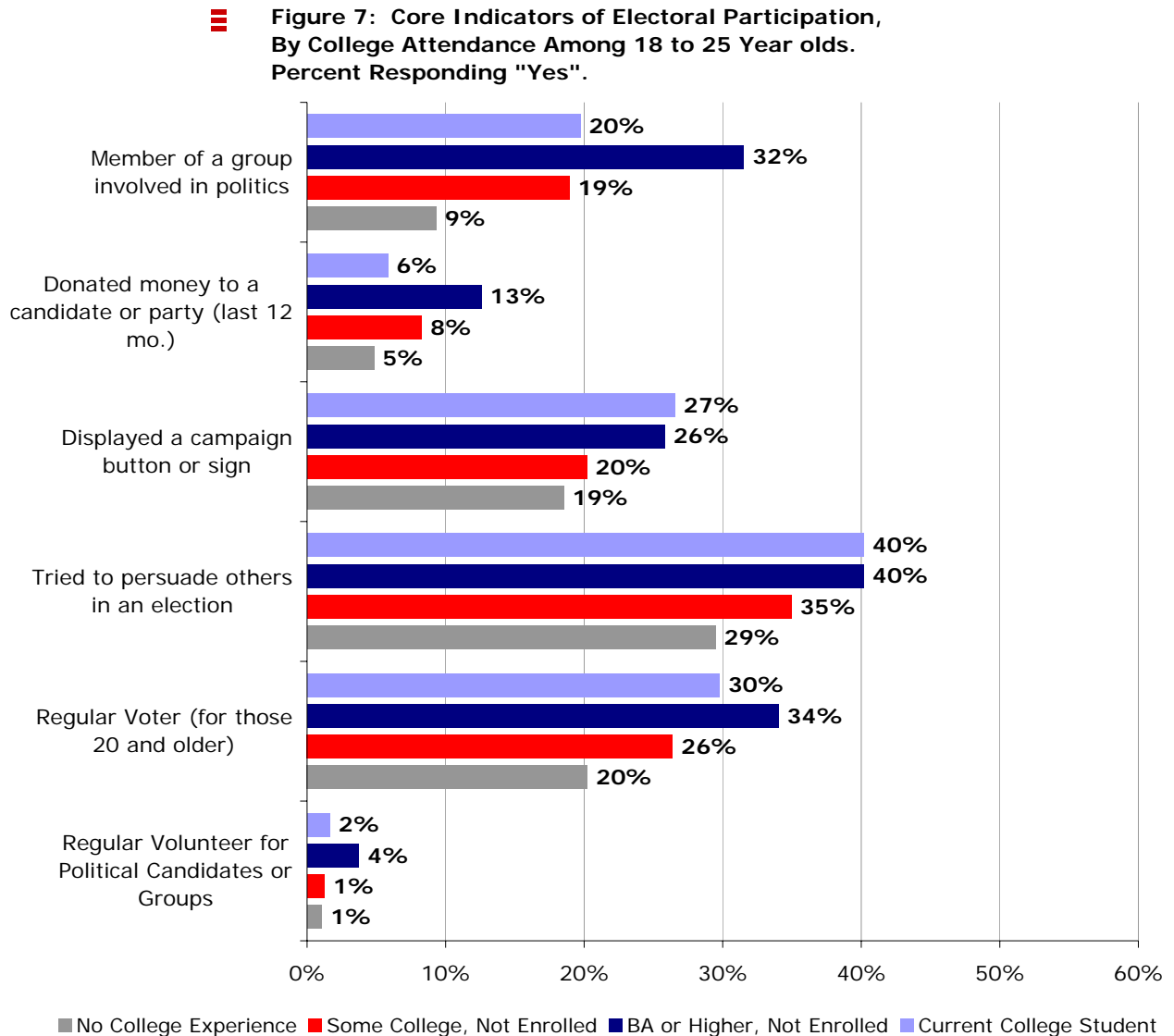
Source: Authors' tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements, 1984-2004.

Figure 6: Voter Turnout in Presidential Years Among 18-24 year old Male Citizens, by College Enrollment Status



Source: Authors' tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements, 1984-2004.

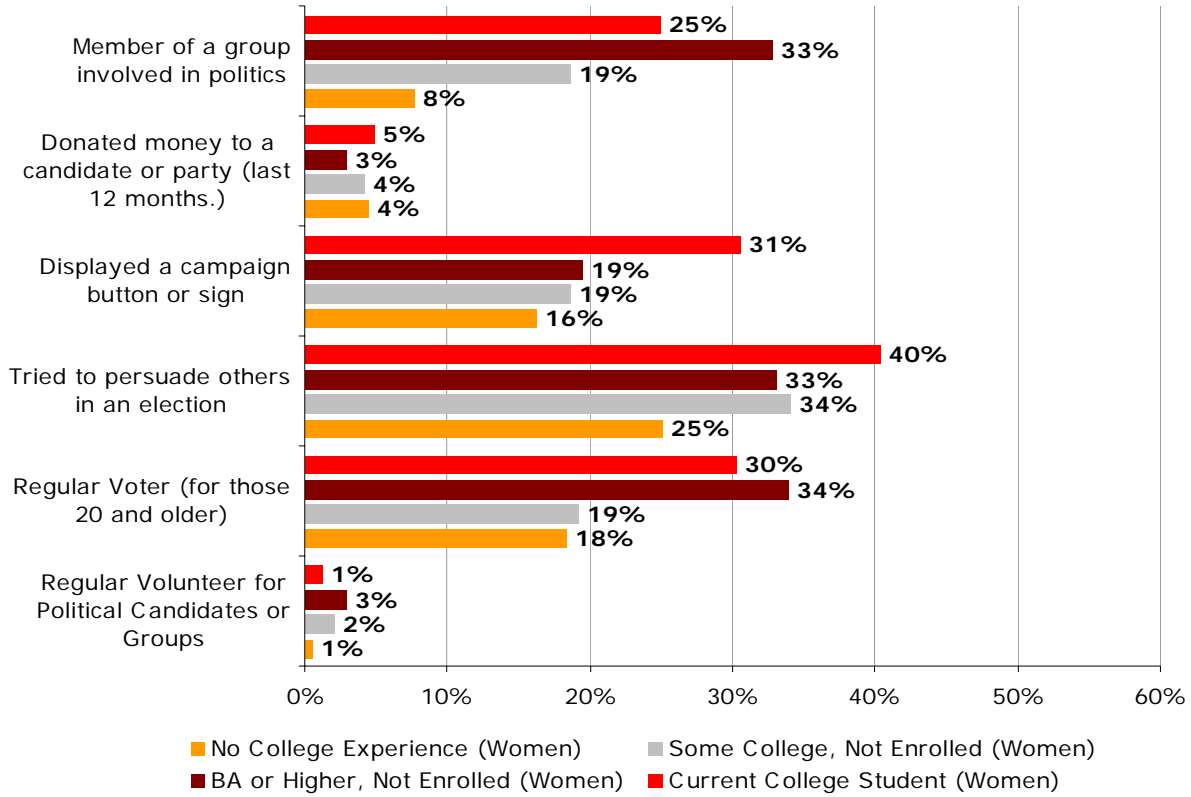
On other measures of electoral participation, 18 to 25 year olds with college experience are, overall, more engaged than their non-college counterparts. Across all groups, the single most common electoral activity that young people engage in is trying to persuade someone in an election. Among current college students and college graduates, 40 percent had tried to persuade others in an election, while 35 percent of young people with some college experience (but not currently enrolled), and 29 percent of those with no college experience tried to persuade others in an election. See figure 7.



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

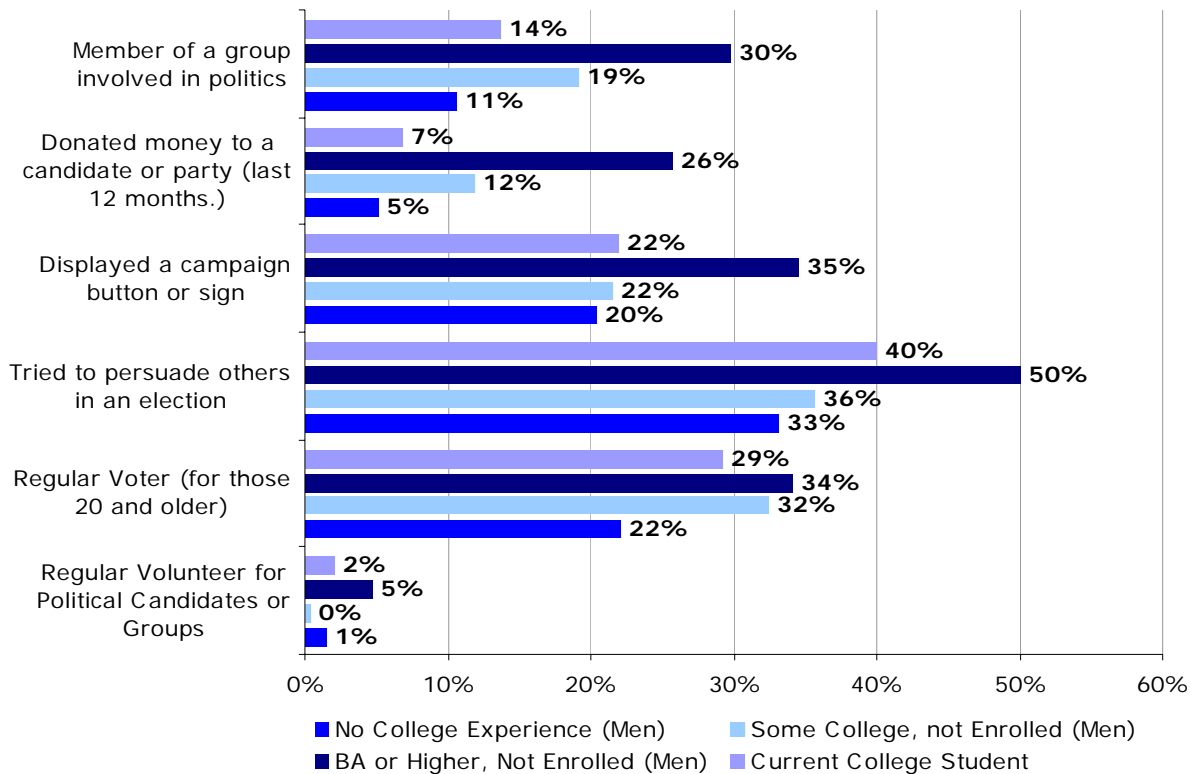
As with civic indicators, there are some differences in electoral engagement patterns by gender. First, in contrast to the findings reported for civic activities, young women do not uniformly surpass their male counterparts on all measures. In fact, only young women who are currently college students surpass their male counterparts who are currently college students on all measures. In contrast, young men with no college experience and those who have some college experience, but are not enrolled in school, surpass their female counterparts in all other electoral activities. See Figures 8 and 9.

Figure 8: Core Indicators of Electoral Participation, By College Attendance for Women 18 to 25 Year olds. Percent Responding "Yes".



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

Figure 9: Core Indicators of Electoral Participation, By College Attendance for Men 18 to 25 Year olds. Percent Responding "Yes".

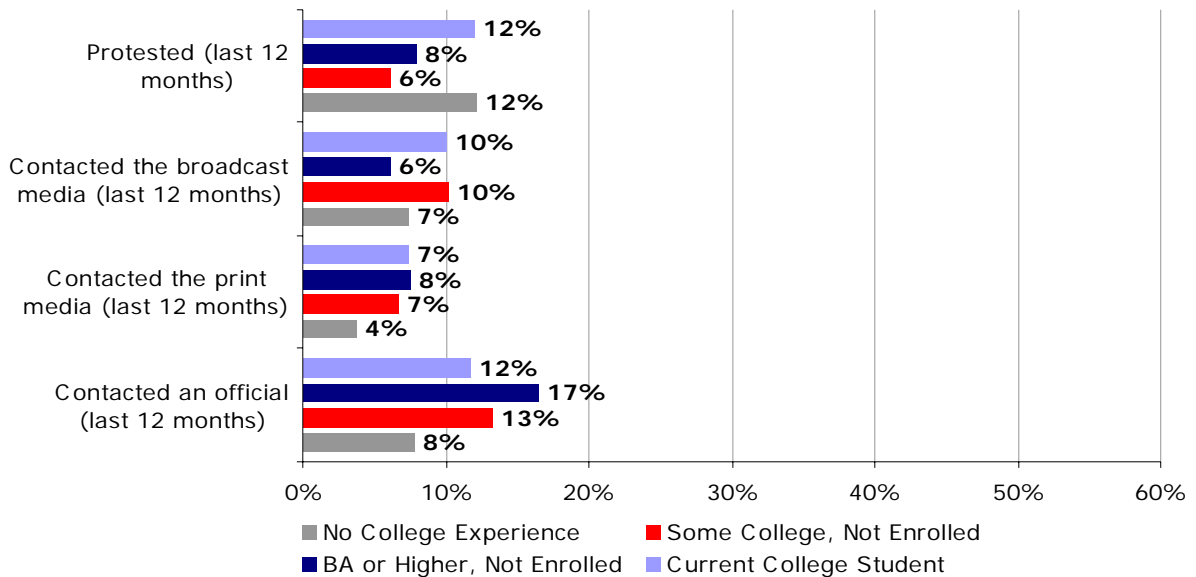


Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

Political Voice

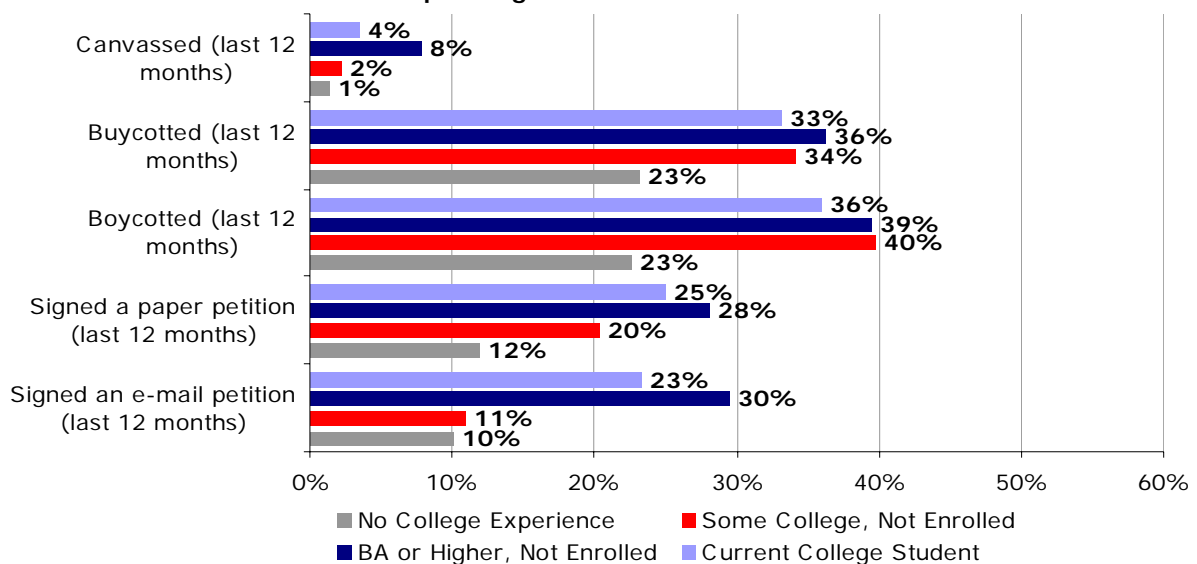
For 18 to 25 year olds, college attendance is associated with higher levels of engagement for indicators of political voice on all measures except protest activities. Non-college youth protested at rates that were double the rates of young people with some college experience who are not enrolled in school. This rate of protest among non-college youth matches that of young people currently enrolled in college. It is likely that this high level of protest was driven by young Latinos and immigrants during the immigration protest rallies of spring 2006. Among all young people, consumer activism activities (boycotting and buycotting) were the most common political voice activities reported. Among college graduates and current students, signing of e-mail and paper petitions were also relatively common activities. See Figures 10 and 11.

**Figure 10: Core Indicators of Political Voice (a),
By College Attendance Among 18 to 25 Year olds.
Percent Responding "Yes".**



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

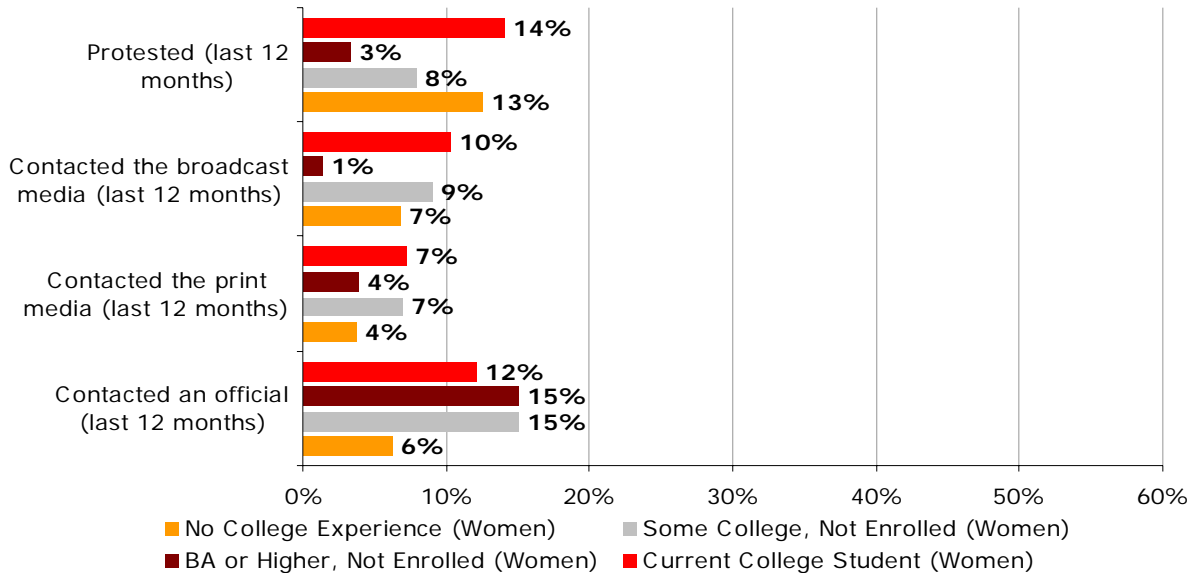
**Figure 11: Core Indicators of Political Voice (a),
By College Attendance Among 18 to 25 Year olds.
Percent Responding "Yes".**



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

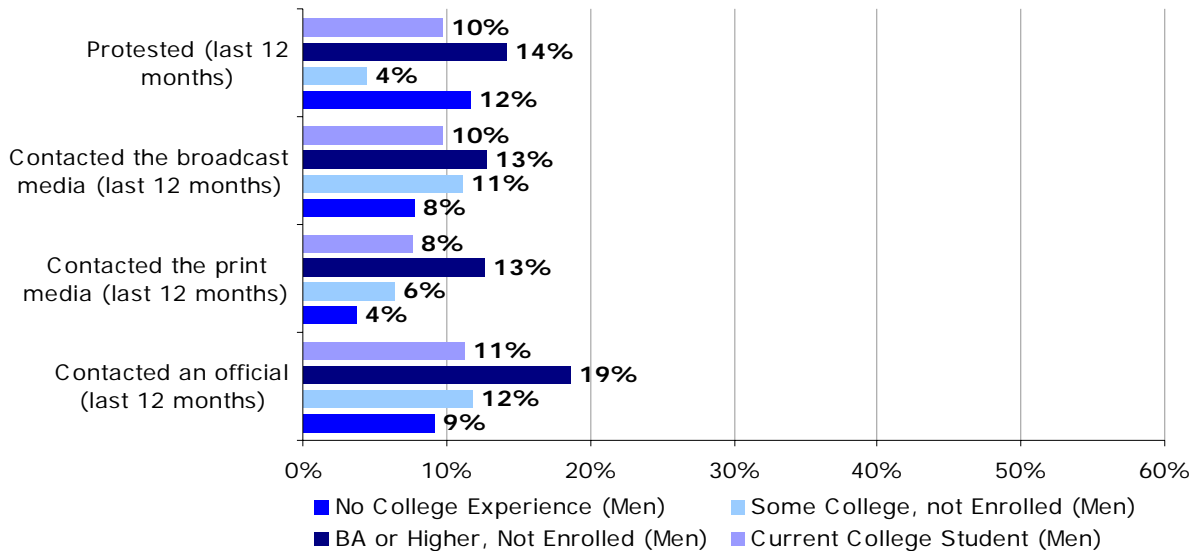
Overall, few differences between the genders are evident in the area of political voice, as was the case for civic and electoral measures of participation. However, there are several noteworthy differences. First, young women currently enrolled in college and those who have no college experience protested at rates that were much higher than their male counterparts. In contrast, male college graduates were more likely to participate in protest activities than their female counterparts by 11 percentage points. Second, generally, young male college graduates were more likely to contact the broadcast media, print media, or an official; canvass; and sign an email petition than their female college graduate counterparts. Across all other measures, patterns of participation are similar to those for the full sample. See Figures 12, 13, 14, and 15.

Figure 12: Core Indicators of Political Voice (a), By College Attendance for Women 18 to 25 years old. Percent Responding "Yes".



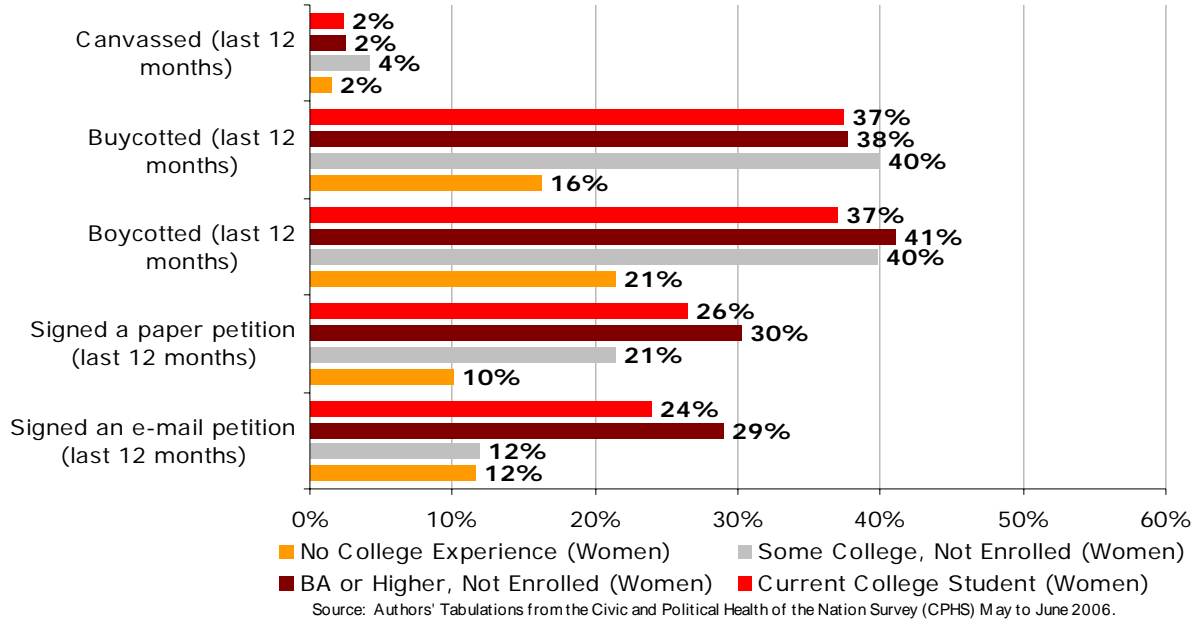
Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

Figure 13: Core Indicators of Political Voice (a), By College Attendance for Men 18 to 25 years old. Percent Responding "Yes".

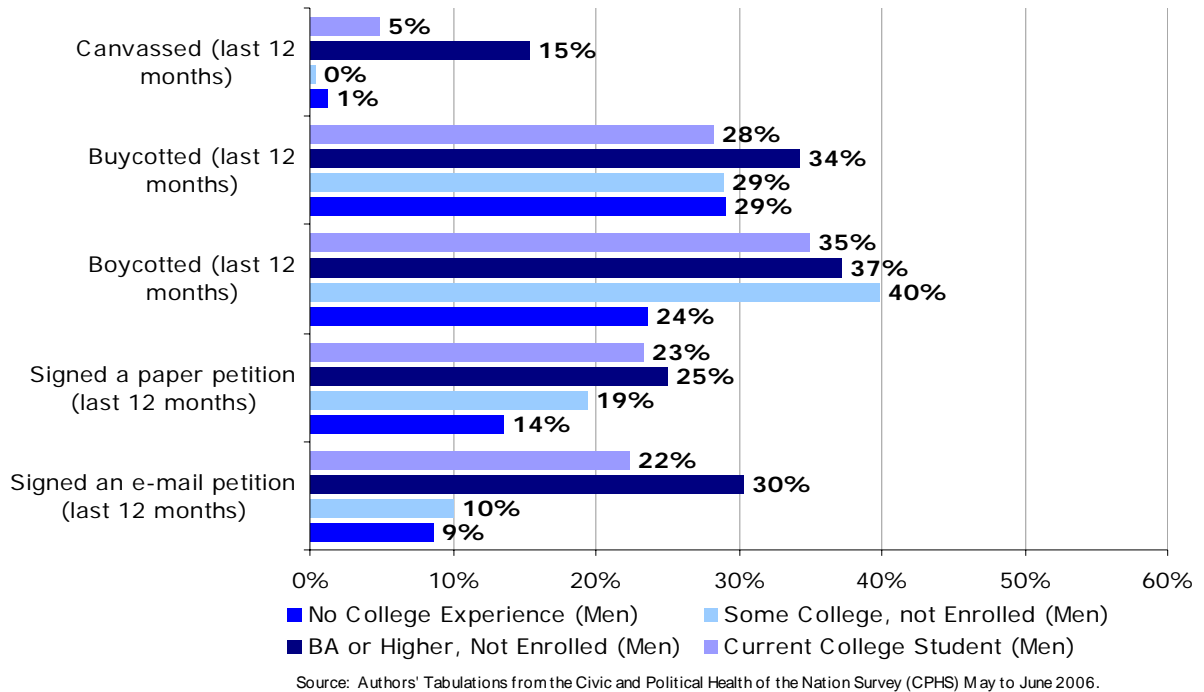


Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

**Figure 14: Core Indicators of Political Voice (b),
By College Attendance for Women 18 to 25 years old.
Percent Responding "Yes".**



**Figure 15: Core Indicators of Political Voice (b),
By College Attendance for Men 18 to 25 years old.
Percent Responding "Yes".**



Typology of Engagement

The 2002 Civic and Political Health of the Nation report provides a “typology of engagement.” This typology classifies individuals into four groups based on their participation in a range of civic and electoral activities. Individuals who engage in two or more civic activities are labeled *civic activists*. Civic activities encompassed in this classification are:

- Working to solve a community problem
- Volunteering regularly for a non-political group
- Active membership in a group
- Personally walking, running, or biking for charity
- Raising money for a charitable cause

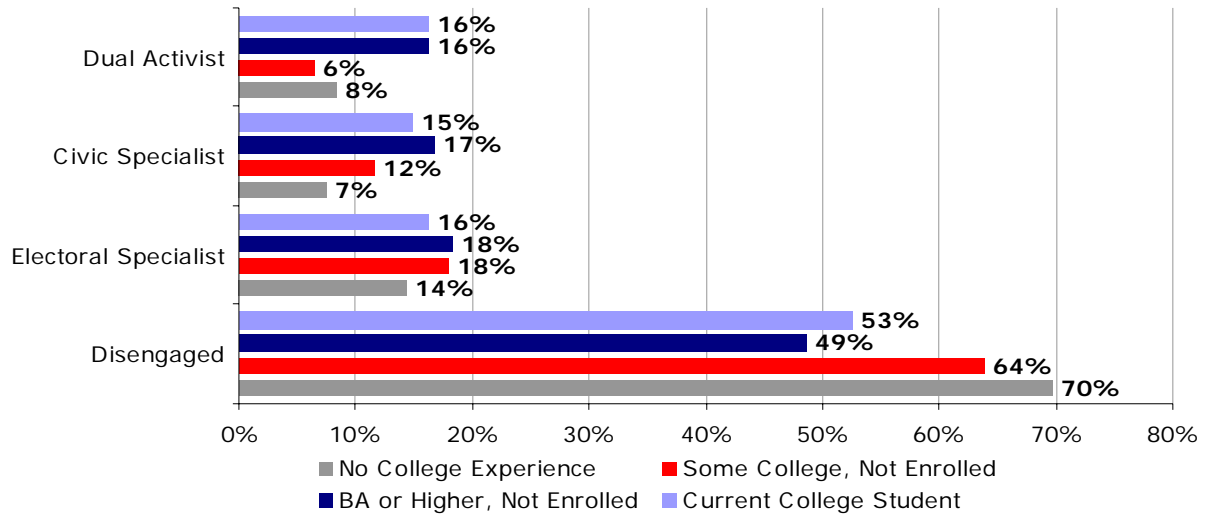
Similarly, individuals who engage in two or more electoral activities are labeled as *electoral activists*. Electoral activities that contribute to this classification are:

- Always voting in elections
- Volunteering for a political campaign or candidate
- Persuading others to vote
- Wearing a campaign button or putting a sticker on car
- Working or contributing money to a candidate, political party, or organization that supported candidates

Individuals who are both civic and electoral activists are identified as “dual activists.” Individuals who are neither civic or electoral activists are identified as “disengaged.” Figure 16 shows the distribution of the engagement typology by college attendance for 18 to 25 year olds. Young people who are currently in college are more likely to be classified as dual activists and civic specialists, while for those with no college experience or with some college experience, but not currently enrolled, are more likely to be electoral specialists than dual activists or civic specialists.

However, while a large portion of young people from all groups are involved in at least two civic activities, substantial numbers of young people are disengaged, no matter what their college enrollment and attendance status. Specifically, 70 percent of young people with no college experience are disengaged, and 64 percent of young people with some college experience, but who are not current students, are disengaged. Among current college students, just over half, 53 percent, are disengaged, while among college graduates, just under half are disengaged, 49 percent.

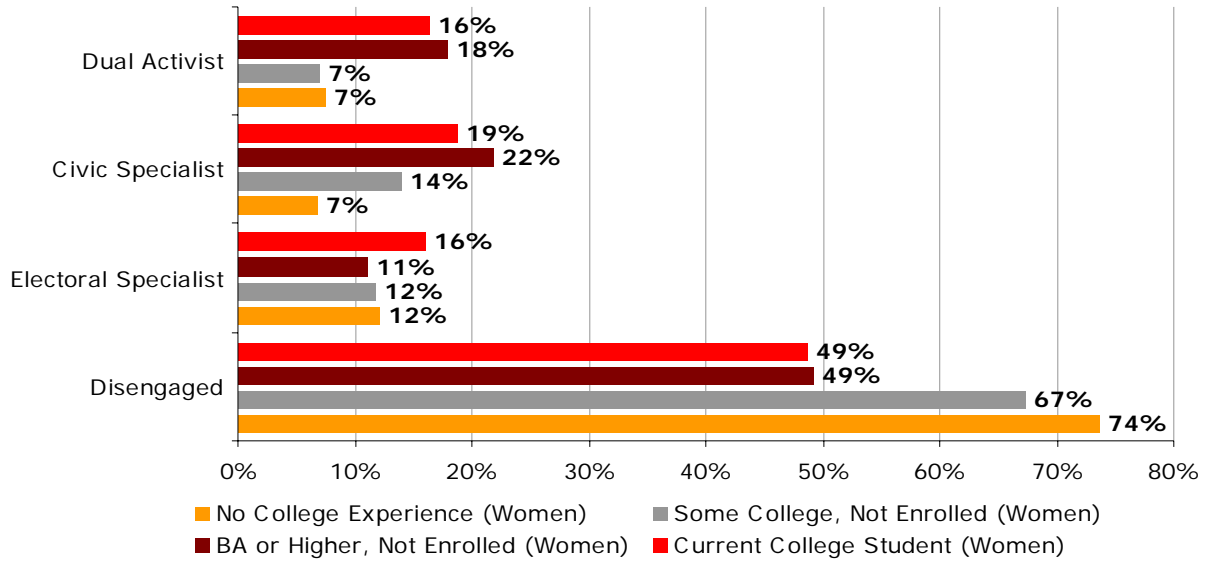
**Figure 16: Civic Typology,
By College Attendance for 18 to 25 Year olds.**



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

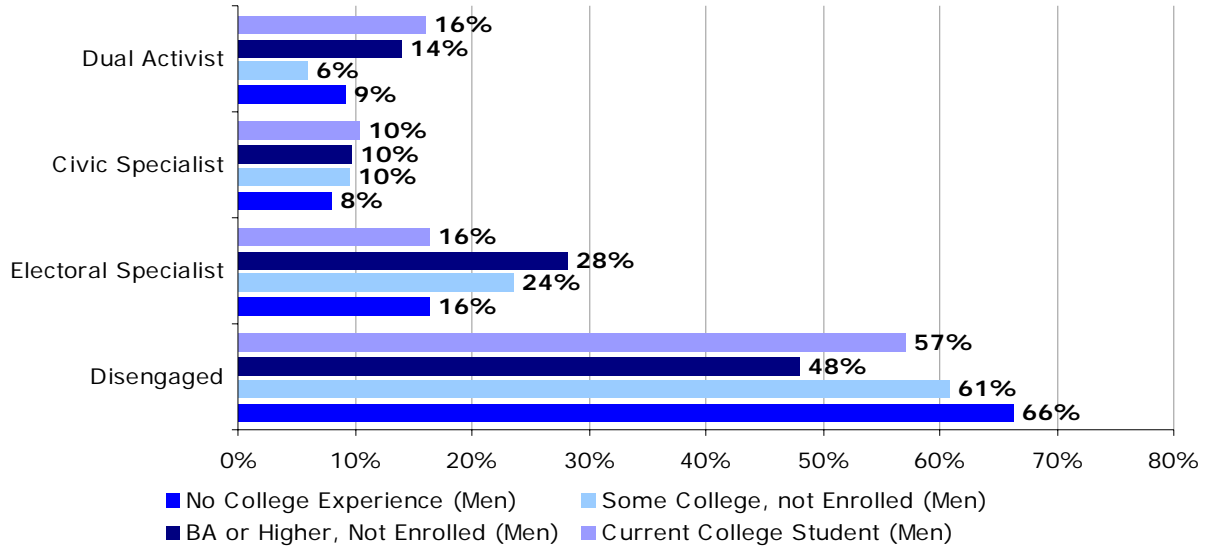
Similar patterns are evident among young men and women, though again, there are some differences in patterns of participation. First, among young women, the gap between those who are either currently in school or college graduates, and those with no college experience or those who have college experience, but are not enrolled, is larger than it is across the same groups for men. It appears that women are either very engaged, or are relatively disengaged. In contrast for men, gaps in engagement between all groups are relatively smaller. Second, male current college students are more likely to be disengaged when compared to their female counterparts. Third, men are more likely to be identified as electoral specialists, while women are more likely to be identified as civic specialists. Fourth, women with no college experience are more likely to be disengaged than their male counterparts. Last, the pattern of identification as dual activists is very similar for men and women across all college attendance groups. See figures 17 and 18.

Figure 17: Civic Typology, By College Attendance for Women 18 to 25 Year olds.



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

Figure 18: Civic Typology, By College Attendance for Men 18 to 25 Year olds.



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

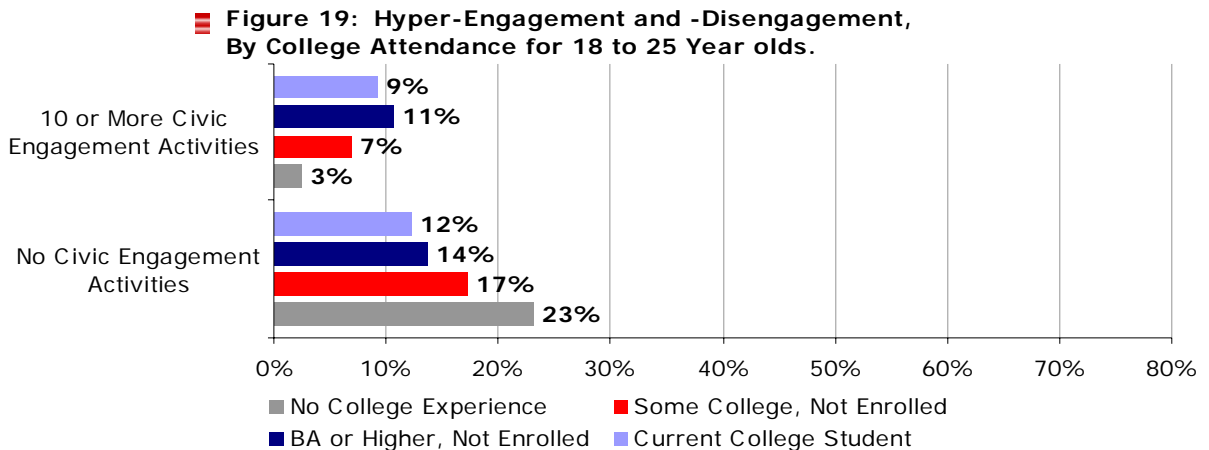
Hyper-Engagement and Hyper-Disengagement

While our civic typology is a useful tool for summarizing the level of civic engagement among groups, it only takes into account some of the civic activities we have measured in our survey. Specifically, political voice activities are excluded, along with some civic and electoral activities.

As an alternative, we have developed two additional summary measures of civic engagement that encompass all of the 19 indicators. First, we identify those who reported participating in *10 or more* activities. Second, we identify those who had said they did not participate in *any* of the 19 activities. We call these two groups the hyper-engaged and hyper-disengaged, respectively.

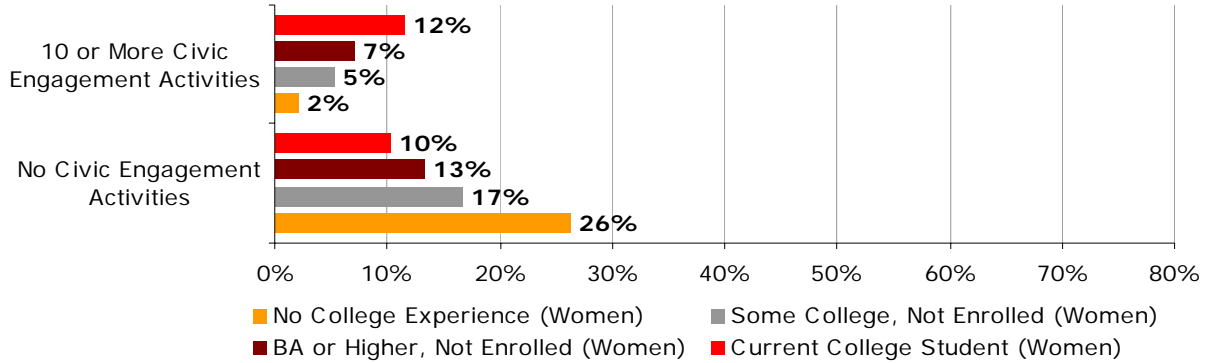
As we have shown throughout this fact sheet, those with college experience generally have higher levels of engagement. For our sample, relatively few young people are engaged in 10 or more activities. Specifically, only nine percent of current students and 11 percent of college graduates are hyper-engaged. Among those with some college experience, but who are not enrolled in school, seven percent can be identified as hyper-engaged, while only three percent of those with no college experience can be viewed as hyper-engaged.

For these same groups, the level of hyper-disengagement is higher than the level of hyper-engagement. For current students, 12 percent said they had not engaged in any of the civic, electoral or political voice activities we asked about. For college graduates, this figure was 14 percent, and for those with some college experience, 17 percent reported not participating in any activities. Among those with no college experience, almost one quarter reported no participation in the 19 civic activities we measured.



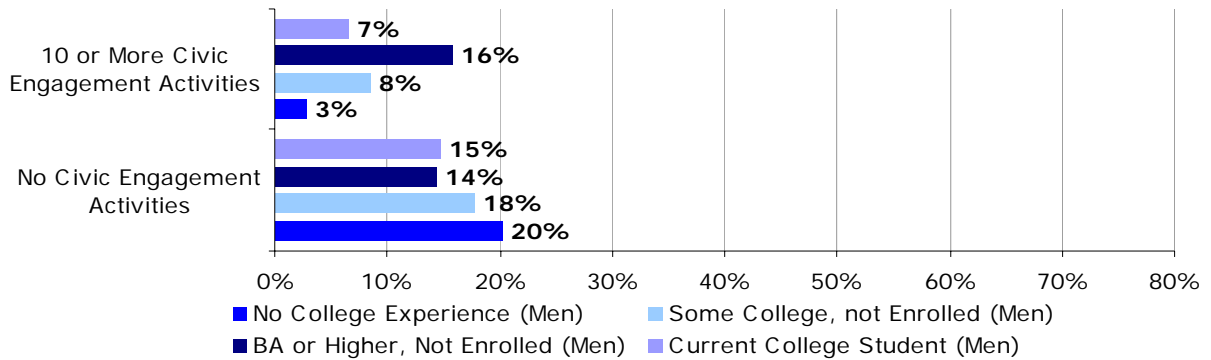
Patterns of hyper-engagement and hyper-disengagement among women and men are, however, somewhat different. First, young male college graduates have the highest proportion of hyper-engaged individuals, 16 percent, followed by young women currently in school, 12 percent. Second, young women with no college experience report the lowest percentage of hyper-engagement and the greatest percentage of hyper-disengaged individuals (26 percent). Third, overall, young males have relatively lower percentages of individuals reporting hyper-disengagement.

Figure 20: Hyper Engagement and Disengagement, By College Attendance for Women 18 to 25 Year olds.



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

Figure 21: Hyper Engagement and Disengagement, By College Attendance for Men 18 to 25 Year olds.



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS) May to June 2006.

**Appendix Table 1:
College Attendance and Civic Engagement Among 18 to 25 Year Olds**

	Core Indicators of Engagement (18-25 Year Olds)	Current College Student			College Graduate (BA or more), Not Enrolled			College Experience, Not Enrolled			No College Experience		
		Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
Civic	Community Problem Solving (last 12 months)	22%	20%	23%	26%	19%	31%	17%	19%	15%	12%	15%	9%
	Volunteered in the last 12 months (any type)	43%	37%	48%	45%	29%	56%	24%	23%	25%	24%	26%	21%
	Regular Volunteer for Non-Political Groups	25%	21%	29%	28%	13%	39%	14%	12%	17%	8%	8%	9%
	Active member of at least 1 group	23%	16%	30%	28%	21%	33%	20%	21%	20%	13%	16%	10%
	Ran/walked/biked for charity (last 12 mos.)	22%	15%	29%	15%	16%	14%	15%	10%	20%	13%	15%	10%
	Raised money for charity (last 12 mos.)	25%	21%	28%	29%	24%	33%	21%	19%	25%	20%	19%	21%
Electoral	Regular Volunteer for Political Candidates or Groups	2%	2%	1%	4%	5%	3%	1%	0%	2%	1%	1%	1%
	Regular Voter (for those 20 and older)	30%	29%	30%	34%	34%	34%	26%	32%	19%	20%	22%	18%
	Tried to persuade others in an election	40%	40%	40%	40%	50%	33%	35%	36%	34%	29%	33%	25%
	Displayed a campaign button or sign	27%	22%	31%	26%	35%	19%	20%	22%	19%	19%	20%	16%
	Donated money to a candidate or party (last 12 mos.)	6%	7%	5%	13%	26%	3%	8%	12%	4%	5%	5%	4%
	Member of a group involved in politics	20%	14%	25%	32%	30%	33%	19%	19%	19%	9%	11%	8%
Political Voice	Contacted an official (last 12 mos.)	12%	11%	12%	17%	19%	15%	13%	12%	15%	8%	9%	6%
	Contacted the print media (last 12 mos.)	7%	8%	7%	8%	13%	4%	7%	6%	7%	4%	4%	4%
	Contacted the broadcast media (last 12 mos.)	10%	10%	10%	6%	13%	1%	10%	11%	9%	7%	8%	7%
	Protested (last 12 mos.)	12%	10%	14%	8%	14%	3%	6%	4%	8%	12%	12%	13%
	Signed an e-mail petition (last 12 mos.)	23%	22%	24%	30%	30%	29%	11%	10%	12%	10%	9%	12%
	Signed a paper petition (last 12 mos.)	25%	23%	26%	28%	25%	30%	20%	19%	21%	12%	14%	10%
	Boycotted (last 12 mos.)	36%	35%	37%	39%	37%	41%	40%	40%	40%	23%	24%	21%
	Buycotted (last 12 mos.)	33%	28%	37%	36%	34%	38%	34%	29%	40%	23%	29%	16%
Canvassed (last 12 mos.)	4%	5%	2%	8%	15%	2%	2%	0%	4%	1%	1%	2%	

Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey (CPHS), May to June 2006. All results are weighted.

**Appendix Table 2:
College Attendance and Voter Turnout Among 18-24 Year Olds, 1984 to 2004**

Year	Enrolled College Student			College Graduate (BA or More)			Some College (Not Enrolled)			No College Experience		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
1984	58.4%	57.3%	59.5%	71.6%	70.6%	72.6%	54.2%	52.0%	55.9%	32.0%	29.8%	34.2%
1988	50.7%	49.3%	52.0%	64.3%	65.0%	63.7%	50.5%	49.7%	51.2%	26.8%	25.7%	28.0%
1992	62.9%	60.1%	65.5%	77.2%	75.1%	78.8%	54.8%	51.8%	57.3%	33.9%	33.7%	34.2%
1996	47.0%	44.1%	49.8%	56.1%	53.2%	58.3%	39.1%	37.1%	40.8%	24.7%	23.2%	26.3%
2000	47.1%	44.5%	49.2%	61.3%	59.6%	62.4%	37.1%	36.0%	38.0%	24.7%	24.3%	25.1%
2004	59.2%	55.7%	62.1%	67.4%	63.6%	70.1%	55.3%	54.8%	55.7%	33.7%	32.0%	35.8%

Source: Authors' Tabulations from the Current Population Survey, November Supplements 1984 to 2004.

Notes

- ¹ We identify college attendees as young people who have any schooling experience beyond high school, and have a high school diploma. Thus, the category of college attendees contains not only college attending students, but also college dropouts, and college graduates.
- ² Research Director and Graduate Assistant respectively, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, University of Maryland School of Public Policy. We thank Peter Levine, Chris Herbst and Emily Kirby for comments on previous drafts of this fact sheet. All errors in fact or interpretation are our own.
- ³ See, for example, *What Matters in College?* by Alexander Astin, or *Does College Make a Difference?* by William Knox, Paul Lindsay and Mary Kolb (both from 1993), which show a strong positive correlation between attitudinal shifts among college students regarding future social activism and community orientation. Additional evidence is found in the National Center for Education Statistics' "1996 National Household Survey: Adult Civic Involvement in the United States," which shows that higher levels of education increased civic involvement among American adults. More recently, Stephen Bennett and Linda Bennett, in their paper "Reassessing Higher Education's Effects on Young Americans' Civic Virtue," concluded that higher education generally has a positive impact on young people's "civic virtue," specifically greater psychological involvement in public affairs, increased campaign activism, and greater consumption of news and political information.
- ⁴ See [Lopez and Kolaczowski \(2003\)](#) for trends in voter turnout among non-college and college youth. This fact sheet presents some new evidence on voter turnout by college attendance status (see Figures 4, 5, and 6 and Appendix Table 2).
- ⁵ Other recent data may qualify the research presented here. Earlier in 2005, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) released "Post-College Civic Engagement Among Graduates," a preliminary report on a longitudinal survey of 8,634 college students. The report shows a negative trend for some civic values over the course of the college experience. For example, a higher percentage of students had the goal of becoming a community leader as freshmen than they did when they were college seniors, and their interest in community leadership had dropped ever more significantly six years after their graduation.

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- ⁶ Substantial research has been conducted on the relationship between college attendance and civic engagement, though almost no studies identify a causal effect, but simply a robust correlation between more education and civic engagement (See *Who Votes?* by Ray Wolfinger and Steven Rosenstone (1980), and *Voice and Equality* by Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry Brady (1995)). In contrast, Thomas Dee has found that more education leads to greater civic engagement. In his CIRCLE working paper 08 "Are there Civic Returns to Education?", Dee utilizes an instrumental variables method to exploit the natural experiment of variability in the geographic availability of college education. While there are some concerns about the assumptions behind his method, his findings are strongly suggestive that more education does lead to more civic engagement.
- ⁷ For a detailed description of the 19 Core Indicators of Civic Engagement, see [*The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*](#) (September 19, 2002) by Scott Keeter, Cliff Zukin, Molly Andolina, and Krista Jenkins. Published by CIRCLE, with funding provided by The Pew Charitable Trusts.
- ⁸ While college attendance is associated with greater voluntarism, it is unclear whether young people are bringing volunteer experiences with them to college or whether college is helping to instill a sense of voluntarism. According to the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), volunteering rates while in high school among incoming college freshman are rising (see the CIRCLE fact sheet "[Volunteering Among Young People](#)" by Mark Hugo Lopez, February 2004 for a broader discussion of volunteering among young people). However, as recent research by Lewis Friedland and Shauna Morimoto suggests, many young people who plan to attend college are engaging in volunteer activities in order to prepare their applications for college. See the [CIRCLE working paper 40 "The Changing Lifeworld of Young People: Risk, Resume-Padding, and Civic Engagement."](#)
- ⁹ For more on young voters in 2004, see the CIRCLE fact sheet entitled, "[The Youth Vote in 2004](#)" by Mark Hugo Lopez, Emily Kirby and Jared Sagoff (2005). Evidence from November of 2004 suggests that young people turned out to vote at their highest rate since 1992. Also, young people had the greatest percentage point increase in voter turnout of any age group.