



## CIRCLE

The Center for Information & Research on  
Civic Learning & Engagement

### College Attendance<sup>1</sup> and Civic Engagement Among 18-25 Year Olds

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In 2004, an estimated 53 percent of 18-25 year old U.S. citizens (or 15 million) had college experience while an estimated 47 percent (13.4 million) had not attended college. This is an increase of more than 7 percentage points since 1972. In October of 2003, 31 percent of 18-25 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.

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1 – Educational Attainment Among 18-25 Year Old Citizens**

	All 18-25s	Age Group				All Adults 26 and older
		18-19	20-21	22-24	25	
<b>1972</b>						
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
<b>2004</b>						
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.

In this fact sheet, we present evidence on the correlation between a wide range of civic engagement measures and college attendance.<sup>5</sup> Our two primary sources of data are the Current Population Survey November Supplements (1984 to 2004) for voting statistics, and the National Civic Engagement Survey I conducted in 2002.<sup>6</sup> Our findings suggest that college attendance does relate to the “Core Indicators” of young people’s civic interest.<sup>7</sup> Compared to their peers who have not attended college, young people who have some college experience show a positive increase across several measures of civic involvement, electoral participation, and political voice.

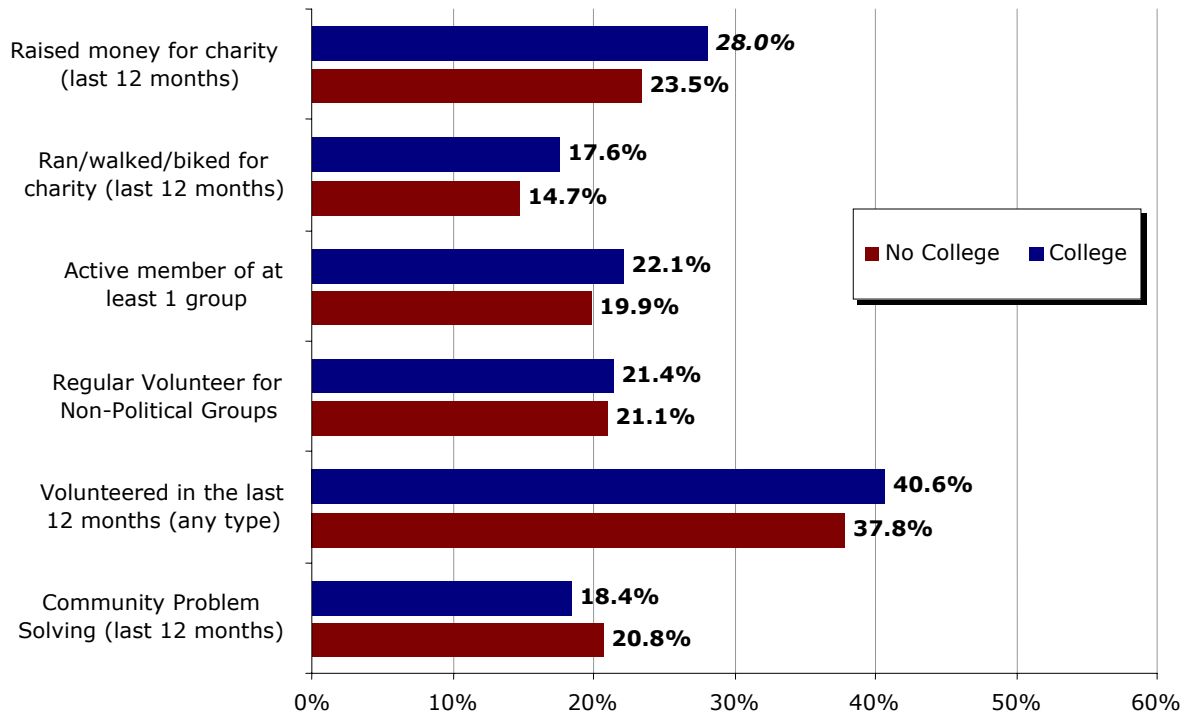
There are some important exceptions, however: forms of civic engagement in which the non-college-attending young people surpass their peers who have experienced college. These survey data also suggest that college attendance does not influence women and men uniformly; on a handful of engagement measures, men and women with college experience exhibit different areas of civic engagement.

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***

In four of the five core indicators of “civic involvement,” young people with college experience show a higher participation rate compared to their peers who have not attended college. Specifically, college attendance appears to be associated with increased voluntarism<sup>8</sup>, active membership in at least one group, running, walking, or biking for a charity, and other types of charity fundraising. However, college attendance is also associated with a lower likelihood of working to solve a community problem. See Figure 1.

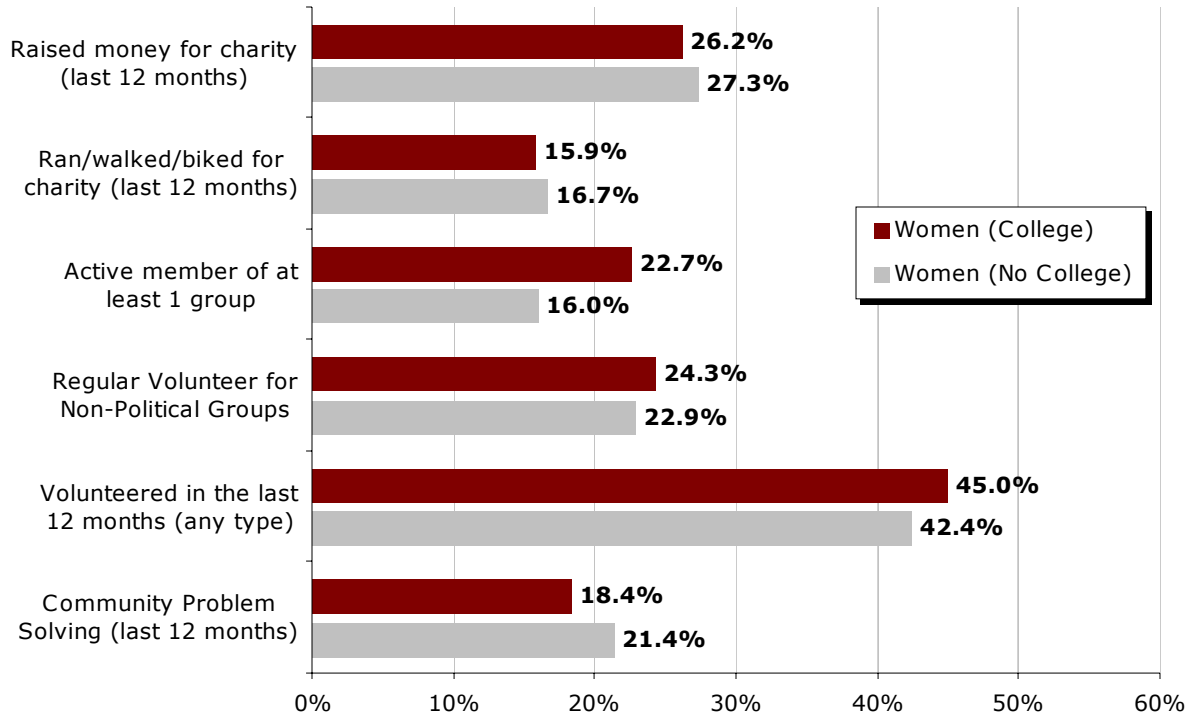
**Figure 1: Core Indicators of Civic Involvement, By College Attendance Among 18-25 Year olds. Percent Responding "Yes".**



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES I), April-May 2002. Italicized figures are statistically significant at .05 or lower.

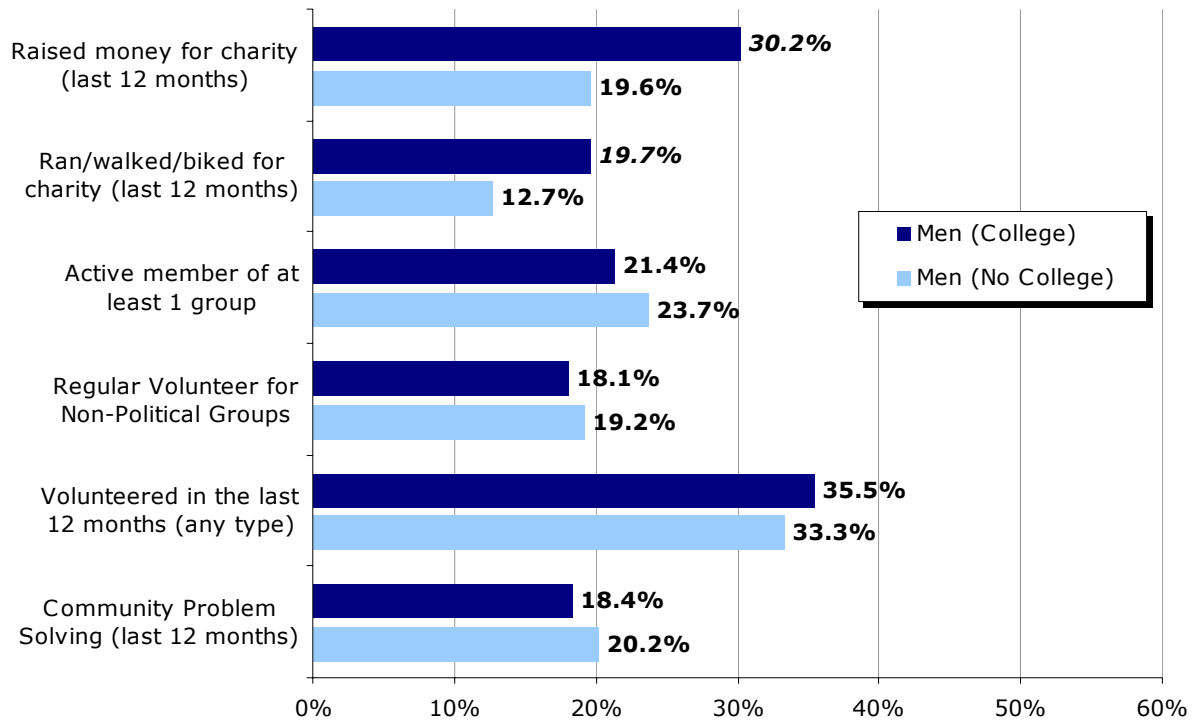
While college students are more likely to be civically involved along civic dimensions (except in community problem solving) than their non-college counterparts, patterns of participation are different across gender groups. Young men and women who have college experience show different participation rates in three aspects of civic involvement: active membership in a group, running, walking, or biking for charity, and raising money for charity. Young women who have attended college show a higher willingness to participate actively in at least one group compared to young men, whose group membership rate is lower whether they attend college or not. At the same time, young men who have some college experience show a much higher participation rate in charity runs, walks, or bike rides—as well as other charity fundraisers—compared to all young women, whose participation in those activities is lower if they have college experience. Both young women and men demonstrate a similar increase in voluntarism if they have attended college, but women show a greater willingness to volunteer, overall, than men do. See Figures 2 and 3.

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



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES I), April-May 2002.

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



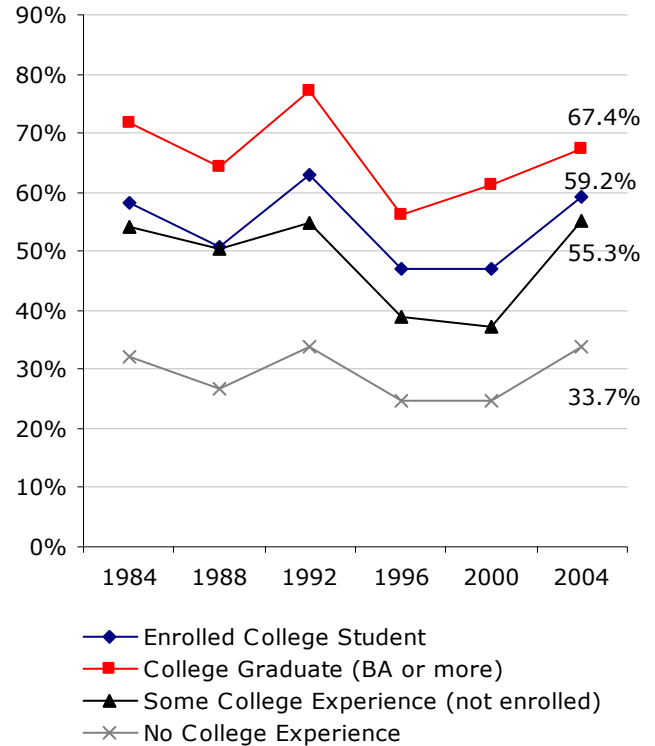
Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES I), April-May 2002.

*Italicized figures are statistically significant at .05 or lower.*

### Electoral Participation

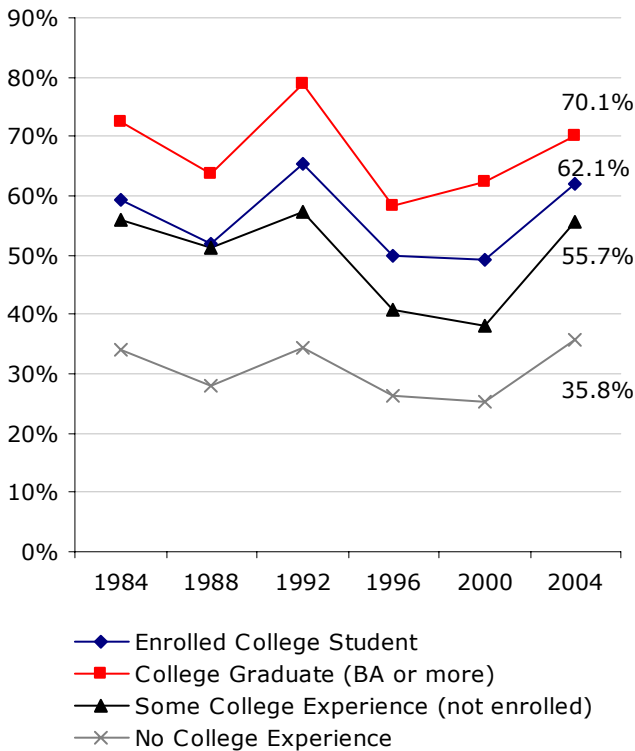
College attendance is highly correlated with voter participation. Since 1984, those who have completed college and those who are either enrolled in college or at least attended some college are more likely to vote than young people who have never attended college. However, while there is a positive relationship between college attendance and voting, all groups of young people in the 2004 election increased voter turnout compared to 2000.<sup>9</sup> 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**



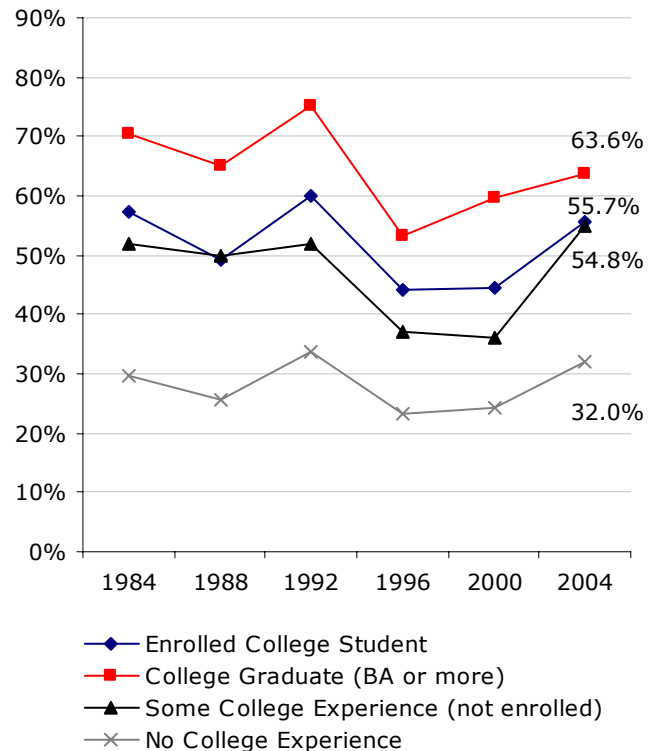
Source: Current Population Survey, November Supplements, 1984-2004.

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



Source: Current Population Survey, November Supplements, 1984-2004.

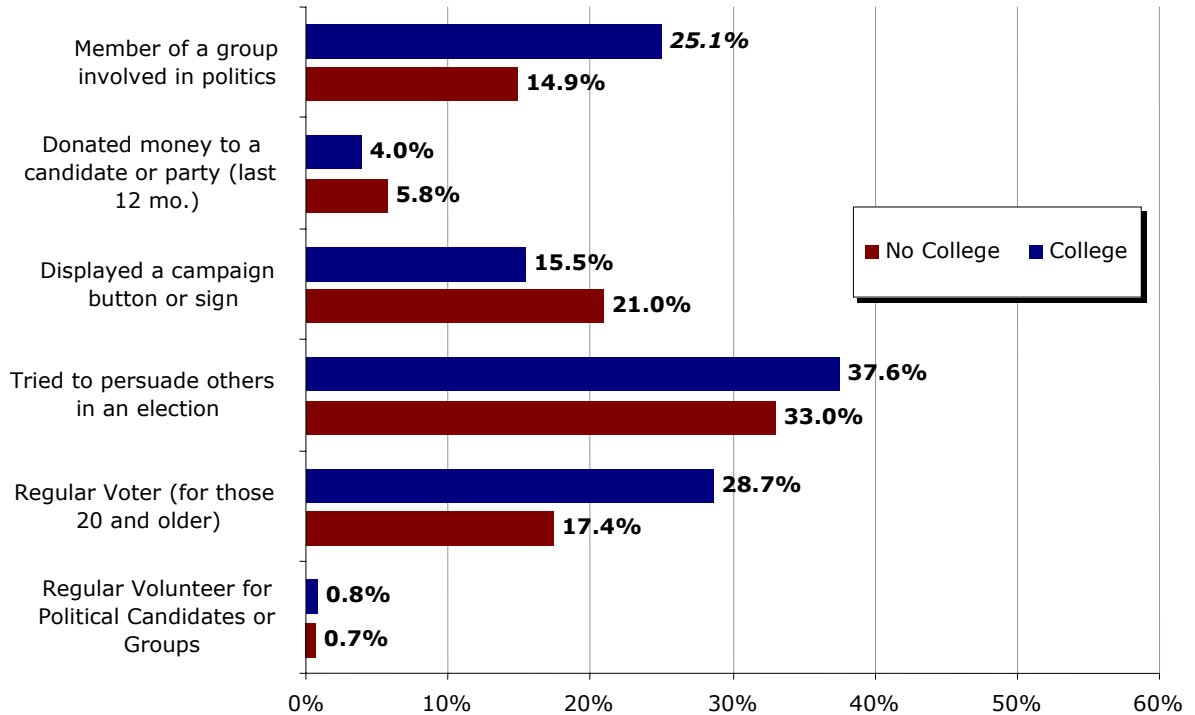
**Figure 6: Voter Turnout in Presidential Years Among 18-24 year old Male Citizens, by College Enrollment Status**



Source: Current Population Survey, November Supplements, 1984-2004.

On other measures of electoral participation, 18-25 year olds with college experience are more willing to try to persuade others in an election compared to their peers who have not attended college. Young people who have attended college also show a much higher interest in joining a group involved in politics. However, college experience is also associated with lower campaign donation rates and a lower percentage who display campaign signs or buttons. See Figure 7.

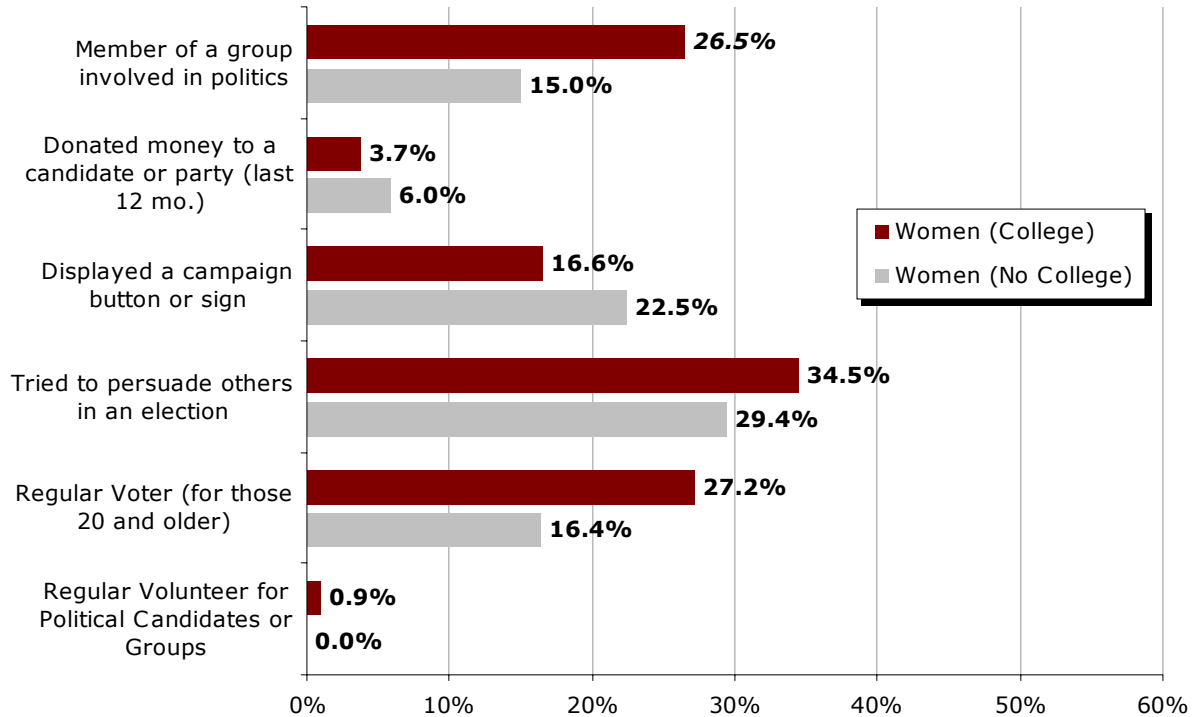
**Figure 7: Core Indicators of Electoral Participation, By College Attendance Among 18-25 Year olds. Percent Responding "Yes".**



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES I), April-May 2002.  
 Italicized figures are statistically significant at .05 or lower.

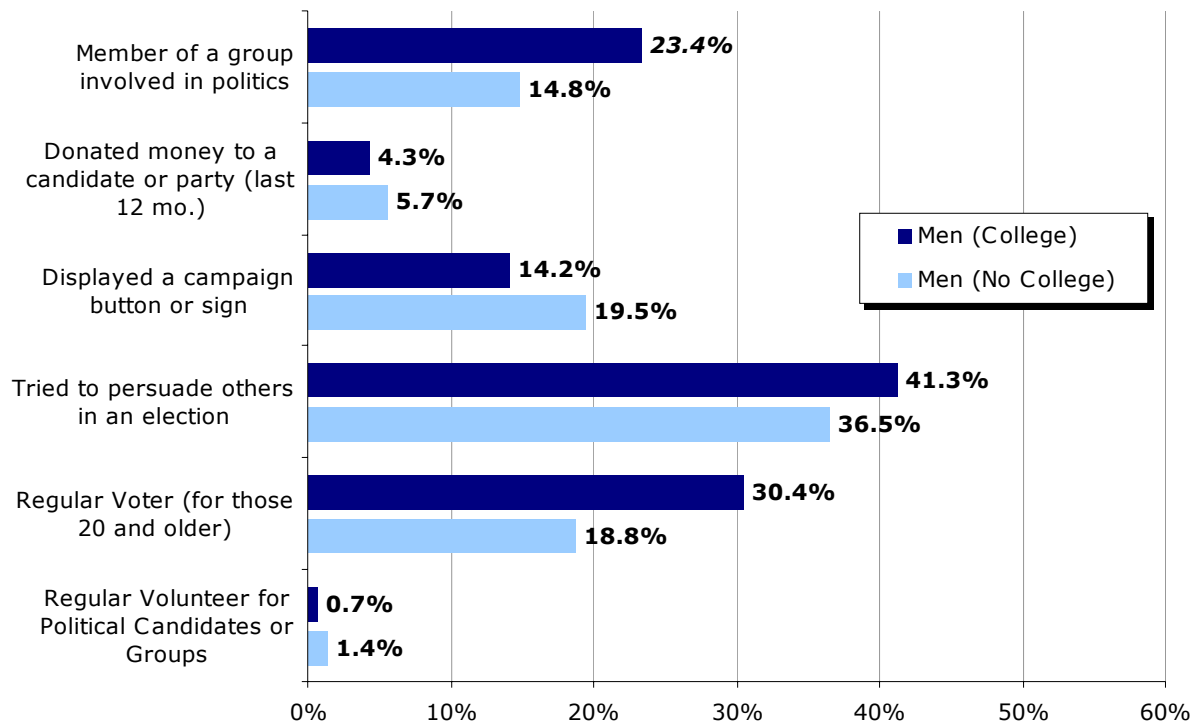
While the interplay of college attendance and gender is important for other categories of civic engagement, there are no important differences in the electoral participation of young men and women with college experience. See Figures 8 and 9.

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



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES I), April-May 2002.  
 Italicized figures are statistically significant at .05 or lower.

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

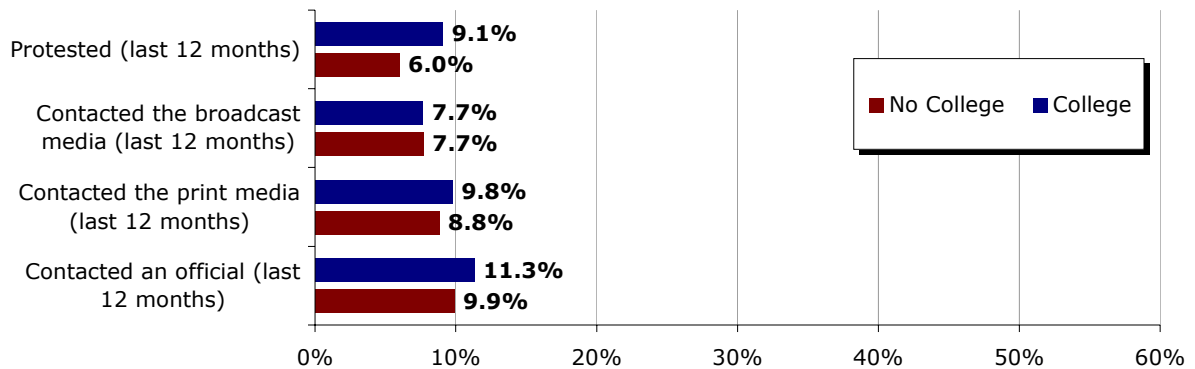


Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES I), April-May 2002.  
 Italicized figures are statistically significant at .05 or lower.

## Political Voice

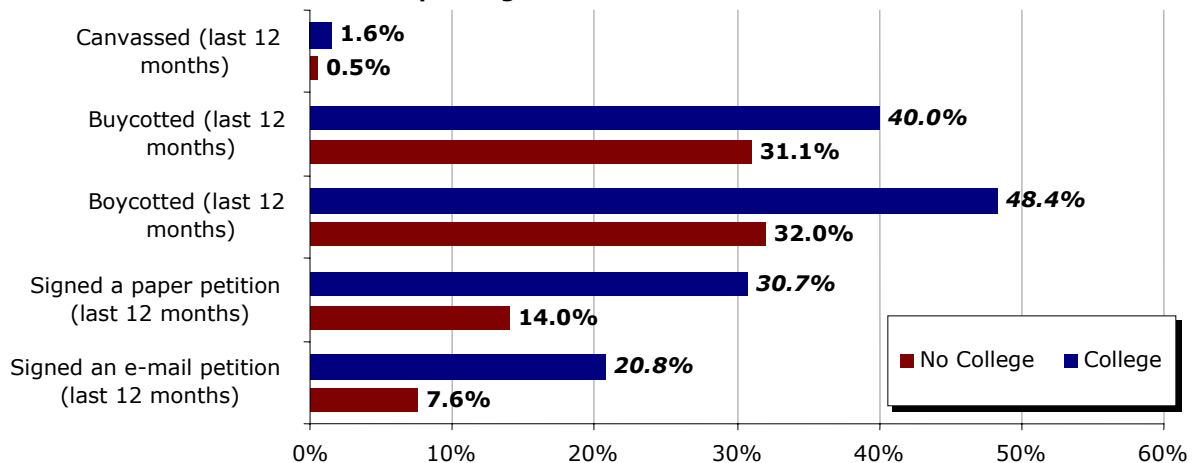
For 18-25 year old men and women, college attendance is associated with much higher indicators of political voice. Specifically, college attendees are statistically more likely to report signing an email petition, signing a paper petition, boycotting, buycotting, and protesting than non-college attendees. For other measures of political voice, 18-25 year old women and men who have some college experience appear equally or slightly more interested in participating than do their peers who have not attended college. See Figures 10 and 11.

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



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES I), April-May 2002.

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



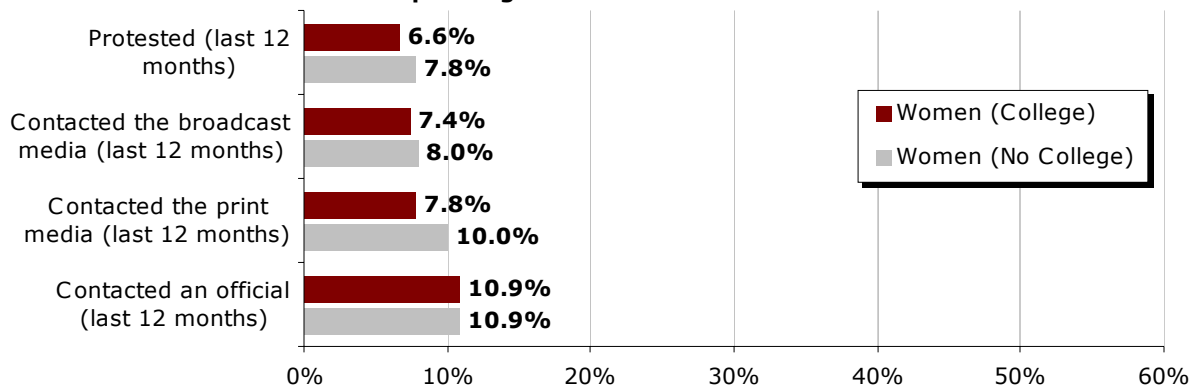
Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES I), April-May 2002.

*Italicized figures are statistically significant at .05 or lower.*



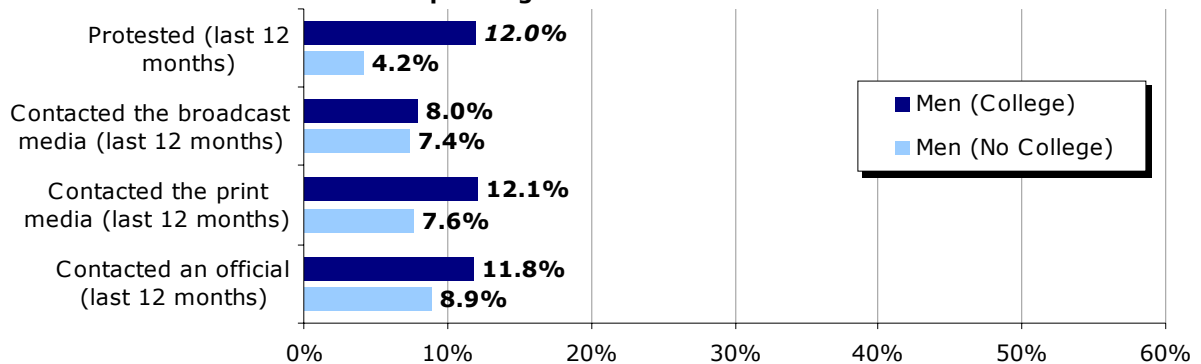
Young women and men do not reflect identical changes in their political engagement, however. On four measures (contacting an official, contacting the print media, contacting the broadcast media, and protesting), young men with college experience show a greater likelihood to participate compared to their male peers who have not attended college. Young women who have attended college, on the other hand, show equal or less interest in these areas compared to their female peers with no college experience. Also, while men and women with college experience show increased interest in boycotting and signing email petitions, young men show a higher interest than women do in boycotting and young women show a higher interest than men do in signing email petitions. See Figures 12, 13, 14, and 15.

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



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES I), April-May 2002.

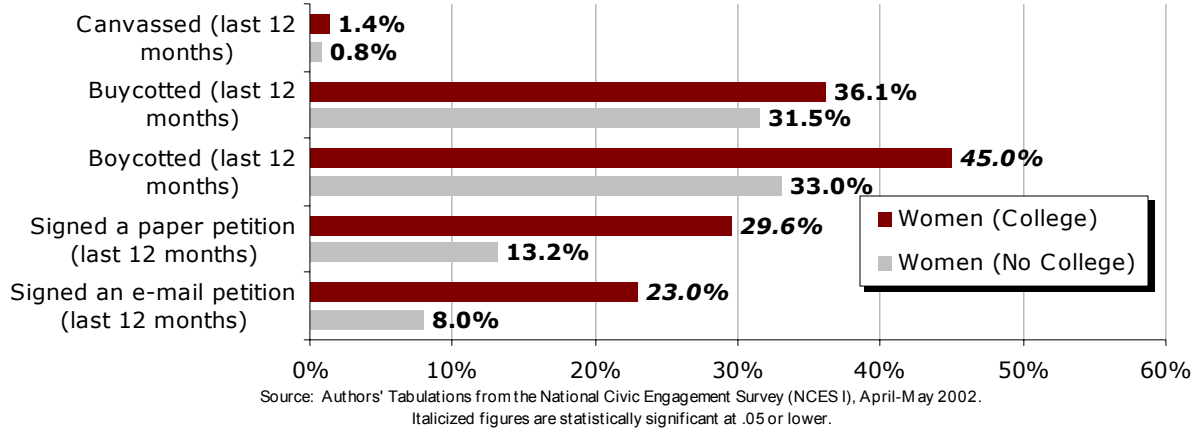
**Figure 13: Core Indicators of Political Voice (a), By College Attendance for Men 18-25 years old. Percent Responding "Yes".**



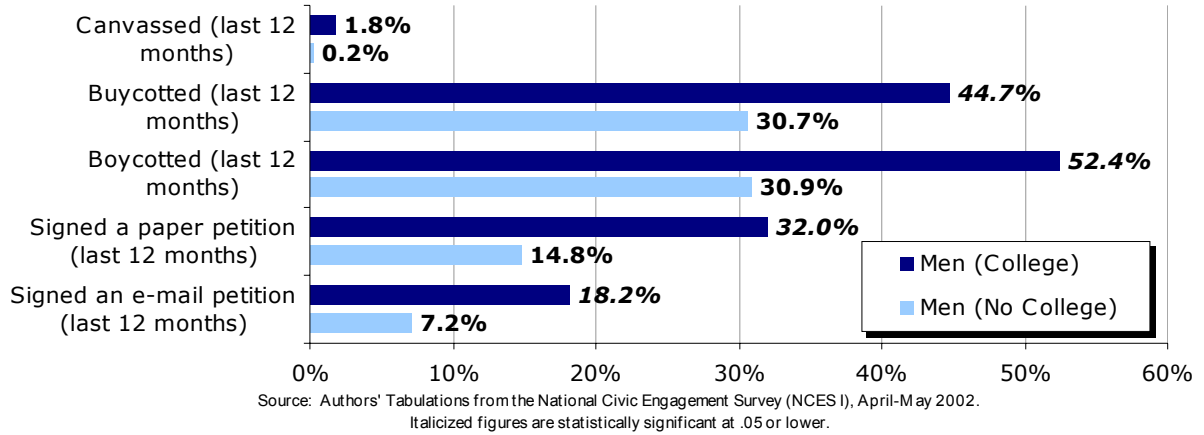
Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES I), April-May 2002.

Italicized figures are statistically significant at .05 or lower.

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



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



**Typology of Engagement**

The *Civic and Political Health of the Nation* report provides an innovative “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:

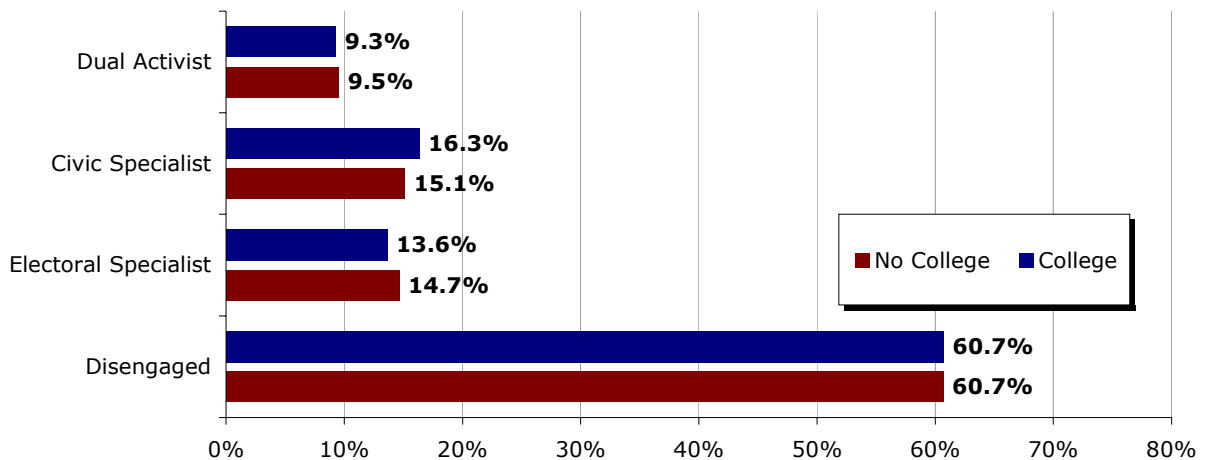
- Working to Solve a Community Problem
- Volunteering Regularly for a non-political group
- Active Membership of a Group
- Personally walking, running, or biking for charity
- Raising Money for a Charitable Cause

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 below shows the distribution of the engagement typology by college attendance for 18-25 year olds. While young people who attended college are more likely to be civically engaged on some dimensions of civic engagement, overall there is little difference in the distributions of civic typology between young people with college and no college experience.<sup>10</sup>

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



Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES I), April-May 2002.

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

Core Indicators of Engagement (18-25 Year Olds)		Total	No College			College		
			Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
Civic	Community Problem Solving (last 12 months)	19.6%	20.8%	20.2%	21.4%	18.4%	18.4%	18.4%
	Volunteered in the last 12 months (any type)	39.2%	37.8%	33.3%	42.4%	40.6%	35.5%	45.0%
	Regular Volunteer for Non-Political Groups	21.2%	21.1%	19.2%	22.9%	21.4%	18.1%	24.3%
	Active member of at least 1 group	20.9%	19.9%	23.7%	16.0%	22.1%	21.4%	22.7%
	Ran/walked/biked for charity (last 12 mos.)	16.1%	14.7%	12.7%	16.7%	17.6%	19.7%	15.9%
	Raised money for charity (last 12 mos.)	25.7%	23.5%	19.6%	27.3%	28.0%	30.2%	26.2%
	Regular Volunteer for Political Candidates or Groups	0.8%	0.7%	1.4%	0.0%	0.8%	0.7%	0.9%
Electoral	Regular Voter (for those 20 and older)	24.0%	17.4%	18.8%	16.4%	28.7%	30.4%	27.2%
	Tried to persuade others in an election	35.2%	33.0%	36.5%	29.4%	37.6%	41.3%	34.5%
	Displayed a campaign button or sign	18.3%	21.0%	19.5%	22.5%	15.5%	14.2%	16.6%
	Donated money to a candidate or party (last 12 mos.)	4.9%	5.8%	5.7%	6.0%	4.0%	4.3%	3.7%
	Member of a group involved in politics	19.8%	14.9%	14.8%	15.0%	25.1%	23.4%	26.5%
	Contacted an official (last 12 mos.)	10.6%	9.9%	8.9%	10.9%	11.3%	11.8%	10.9%
	Contacted the print media (last 12 mos.)	9.3%	8.8%	7.6%	10.0%	9.8%	12.1%	7.8%
Political Voice	Contacted the broadcast media (last 12 mos.)	7.7%	7.7%	7.4%	8.0%	7.7%	8.0%	7.4%
	Protested (last 12 mos.)	7.5%	6.0%	4.2%	7.8%	9.1%	12.0%	6.6%
	Signed an e-mail petition (last 12 mos.)	14.0%	7.6%	7.2%	8.0%	20.8%	18.2%	23.0%
	Signed a paper petition (last 12 mos.)	22.1%	14.0%	14.8%	13.2%	30.7%	32.0%	29.6%
	Boycotted (last 12 mos.)	39.9%	32.0%	30.9%	33.0%	48.4%	52.4%	45.0%
	Buycotted (last 12 mos.)	35.4%	31.1%	30.7%	31.5%	40.0%	44.7%	36.1%
	Canvassed (last 12 mos.)	1.0%	0.5%	0.2%	0.8%	1.6%	1.8%	1.4%

Source: Authors' Tabulations from the National Civic Engagement Survey (NCES I), April-May 2002. 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

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- <sup>1</sup> 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.
- <sup>2</sup> Research Director and Graduate Assistant respectively, Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, University of Maryland School of Public Policy. We thank Chris Herbst and Emily Kirby for comments on previous drafts of this fact sheet. All errors in fact or interpretation are our own.
- <sup>3</sup> 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.
- <sup>4</sup> See [Lopez and Kolaczkowski \(2003\)](#) 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).
- <sup>5</sup> Plenty of research has been conducted on the relationship between college attendance and civic engagement, though almost all do not 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.
- <sup>6</sup> 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.
- <sup>7</sup> Other recent data may contradict 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. 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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- <sup>8</sup> 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.”](#)
- <sup>9</sup> 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.
- <sup>10</sup> We also explored the civic typology by gender, and found very little difference in the distribution across typology categories for young women or men by college experience.