

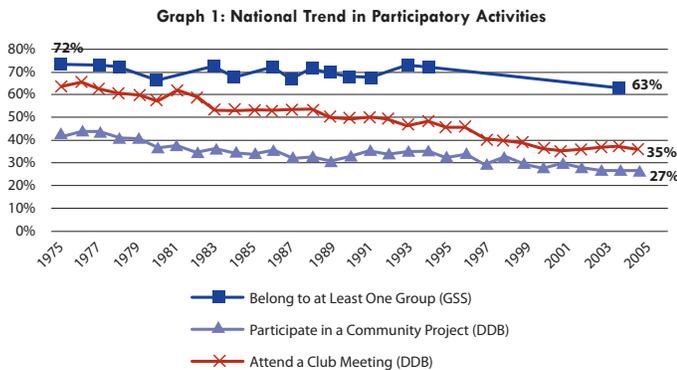
FEDERAL POLICY AND CIVIC SKILLS

Citizens can improve their communities, their government, and the nation through active civic engagement and collaboration. To do so requires skills, notes the new CIRCLE fact sheet entitled “Civic Skills and Federal Policy.” The fact sheet adds that educational programs and other government-supported initiatives have been shown to enhance Americans’ civic skills and their levels of engagement. But these programs and other opportunities are scarce and unequal, and are often provided to people who are already the most likely to be engaged. A lack of civic learning opportunities not only inhibits Americans’ civic participation, but also has harmful consequences for their academic and economic progress.

The fact sheet was publicly released in concurrence with a conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on April 29, 2010, where seventy-five scholars, civic leaders, and federal officials from the United States Department of Education, the Corporation for National and Community Service, Department of Interior, Department of Justice, Environmental Protection Agency, and the Federal Transit Administration met to develop a federal policy agenda for civic skills. The conference was convened by CIRCLE and was co-sponsored by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools (CMS) and Strengthening Our Nation’s Democracy (SOND). In collaboration with the participants, CIRCLE will draft and publish a report presenting federal policy recommendations discussed at the meeting.

TRENDS SHOW DECLINE IN NATIONAL CIVIC PARTICIPATION

As described in the fact sheet, the closest that surveys come to measuring civic skills is to measure the frequency of civic activities – activities which generally require skills. For instance, participation in groups both strengthens and requires skills. Americans, however, have become less likely to attend meetings, work on projects and belong to groups since the 1970s.



Source: GSS (General social survey), DDB (DDB Needham lifestyles surveys)

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Jonathan M. Tisch
College of Citizenship
and Public Service

JULY 2010

THE RESEARCH ROUNDUP COLUMN HIGHLIGHTS RECENT RESEARCH FINDINGS COMMISSIONED OR GENERATED BY CIRCLE. ALSO INCLUDED IS AN UPDATE ON NEW CIRCLE PRODUCTS SUCH AS FACT SHEETS, RESEARCH ARTICLES, RESEARCH ABSTRACTS, BIBLIOGRAPHIES, AND DATASETS.

New CIRCLE analysis, using various national and federal datasets, shows that this declining trend in participation may be due to declining and unequal opportunities to gain civic skills in various settings, such as K-12 schools, higher education, home, communities and neighborhoods.

GAP IN ENGAGEMENT CAUSED BY LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES, NOT LACK OF MOTIVATION

Both adolescents and adults have unequal opportunities to develop civic skills. In addition to the aforementioned settings, people of all ages can learn and practice skills in the workplace, churches and religious congregations, and voluntary organizations. CIRCLE's analysis focuses primarily on opportunities through home and K-12 education.

Civic skills built at home, through parental influence. CIRCLE's research shows that the levels of household income and parental educational attainment predict whether there is political discussion among family members and peers and other access to information (*Civic and Political Health Survey*, 2006). According to CIRCLE analysis of the *Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS)*, 10th graders from a lower socioeconomic background are less likely to have access to a daily newspaper at home and discuss current events with their parents.

CIRCLE RESEARCH SHOWS THAT THE LEVELS OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME AND PARENTAL EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT PREDICT WHETHER THERE IS POLITICAL DISCUSSION AMONG FAMILY MEMBERS AND PEERS AND OTHER ACCESS TO INFORMATION (*CIVIC AND POLITICAL HEALTH SURVEY*, 2006).

Children with fewer home civic opportunities receive unequal civic learning opportunities through their schools.¹ A study by Kahne and Middaugh² (2008) shows that schools located in affluent areas were more likely to offer service-learning than lower-income area schools. This gap could imply that higher SES youth are more likely to be exposed to peers who perform service, which

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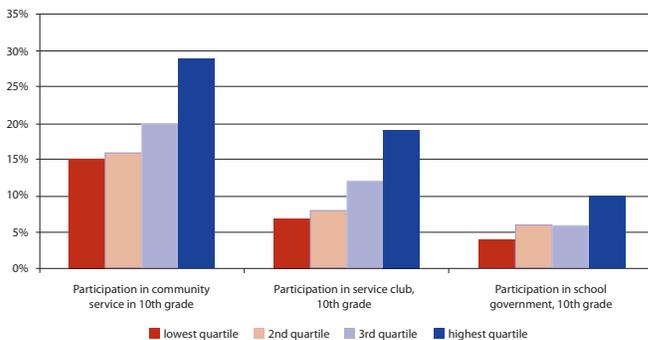
Shawn Ginwright,
University of California San Francisco



could be another venue for higher SES youth to be involved. A person's racial/ethnic background and immigrant status have shown to be relevant in predicting civic learning opportunities; non-Hispanic white youth and US born youth have shown higher levels of opportunity and participation compared to their Hispanic and/or immigrant counterparts.

DATA SUGGEST THAT YOUNG PEOPLE OF ALL BACKGROUNDS ARE MOTIVATED TO ACT CIVICALLY. YOUTH FROM LOWER SES BACKGROUNDS, WHO HAVE FEWER OPPORTUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE, ARE MOTIVATED TO WORK ON CIVIC ISSUES.

Graph 2: Socioeconomic Status and HS Civic Opportunities (ELS 2002;2004)



Source: Education Longitudinal Study 2002;2004

Data suggest that young people of all backgrounds are motivated to act civically. Youth from lower SES backgrounds, who have fewer opportunities to participate, are motivated to work on civic issues. For example, data from the *Educational Longitudinal Study* (ELS) show that young people from lower socioeconomic quartiles are more likely to think that being an active citizen by supporting environmental or social justice causes is “very important.”

STUDENTS WITH CIVIC LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES MORE LIKELY TO FOLLOW A POSITIVE ACADEMIC TRAJECTORY

CIRCLE analysis of the ELS data shows that the opportunity to participate in community service through school also has academic benefits. Students who participate in community service

as 10th graders are more likely to have stayed in school by 12th grade and to have taken college entrance exams compared to those who did not participate. Furthermore, Davila and Mora (2007) indicate that “civic activities undertaken during high school are related to significantly higher odds that individuals graduate from college in later years, when controlling for a host of socio-economic and demographic characteristics.”

The fact sheet can be found at <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=375>. ★

ENDNOTES

- 1 Civic learning opportunities are defined as opportunities provided by the school to participate in student government, service clubs, newspaper/yearbook or community service.
- 2 Kahne, J. & Middaugh, E. (2008) “Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School.” (CIRCLE Working Paper No. 59). Medford, MA: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.
- 3 Davila, A. & Mora, M.T. (2007) “Civic Engagement and High School Academic Progress: An Analysis using NELS Data” (CIRCLE Working Paper No. 52). Medford, MA: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.



SCHOOLWIDE CIVIC INTERVENTION MAY HELP TO INCREASE COMMUNITY SERVICE PARTICIPATION AMONG STUDENTS OF ALL BACKGROUNDS

CIRCLE Working Paper #70 “A Five-Year Evaluation of a Comprehensive High School Civic Engagement Initiative” describes an evaluation of a high school program designed to encourage schoolwide democratic deliberation. The intervention involved, in part, organizing the school into clusters of 100 to 150 students that met for one hour each week to discuss governance and other school-related issues, perform community service, and pursue other cluster-related activities. The researchers, Hugh McIntosh, Sheldon Berman, and James Youniss, found that over the five-year evaluation, the rate of participation in community service increased by 23 percentage points. The qualitative findings from this study support the idea that adult support plays an important role in building youth civic engagement.

THE QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FROM THIS STUDY SUPPORT THE IDEA THAT ADULT SUPPORT PLAYS AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN BUILDING YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

In the fall of 2003, the Hudson school began its experiment to encourage student involvement in school governance. The experiment included launching two new programs—clustering and a schoolwide governance program—and moving to a new building designed with ample “public space” to encourage democratic deliberation.

Qualitative findings from the evaluation suggest that overall, the attempt to involve students in school governance worked but some changes need to be made to address specific issues. For example, clusterwide meetings did not always function well due to the large number of students; some students and teachers were disengaged; and there was a general lack of resources including both time and money to support teacher training and program development. According to the authors, “Changes have been made to address some of these issues. For example, deliberation has evolved away from clusterwide meetings to small groups, where students feel more comfortable expressing their opinions. In addition, a policy has been

developed to hold students accountable for using their time productively during cluster meetings.”

The evaluation report also outlined several of the program strengths. First, while clusterwide meetings were less effective, smaller meetings called “student interest groups” showed promise. The interest groups were smaller groups within the clusters where students chose a community issue to focus on. The groups performed various activities such as raising funds for charity, doing community service projects, locating guest speakers, and planning trips and other events. They provided smaller settings for students to develop leadership skills and a sense of community. Furthermore, the quantitative findings from the study suggest that the cluster/governance programs were associated with major improvements in the political knowledge, community service, and school-wide civic engagement of twelfth graders.

CLUSTERING PROGRAM IMPROVES COMMUNITY SERVICE RATES

Opportunities for community service were built into the design of the clustering program, and the proportion of twelfth graders performing community service in 2007 was 23 percentage points higher than in 2003. The authors attribute this increase to the clustering intervention, since 17% of all seniors (28 of 169) in 2007 reported that the only service they performed was in their cluster. In addition, they note that the increase in community service participation spread widely throughout the student population, including males and females, Whites and non-Whites, high- and low-SES students, highly active students, and students who seldom get involved in non-academic school activities.

ADULT SCAFFOLDING: A POWERFUL THREE-STEP PROCESS

“Adult scaffolding” is a concept that many community programs use to help young people learn to engage the political system. The idea is that adults provide youth with the support and resources they need to navigate the political system to bring about changes they want to see in their communities. According to two of the lead evaluators, Hugh McIntosh and

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James Youniss, "In the realm of real-world politics, adult scaffolding of youth involves at least three major components: training, access to a political system, and support while participating in that system."

At Hudson High School, these scaffolding components were used to engage students in community service but were not used when teaching students about how governance works. For example, students received step-by-step training on how to conduct a community service project in their required 9th grade civics course. Students then had access to real-world community service via the clustering program. Teachers leading clusters and interest groups provided support for students while they performed their community service project. The authors note, "Conversely, the absence of scaffolding, in

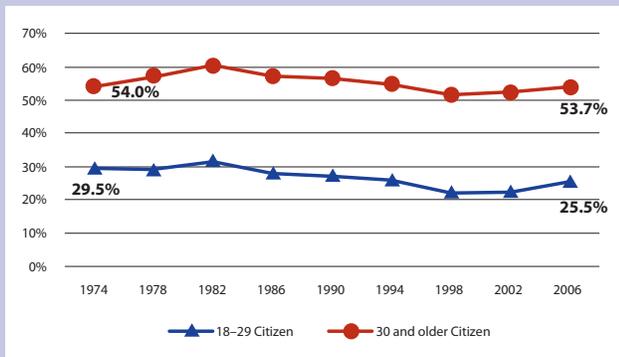
terms of formal training on how a school district is governed, may have contributed to the relative lack of engagement in schoolwide governance among students not sitting on the Community Council. These findings suggest that the type of adult scaffolding that has been successful in helping youth in community programs engage the political system may also work in schools to help students engage in community service and other forms of civic activity."

For a complete copy of CIRCLE Working Paper #70 "A Five-Year Evaluation of a Comprehensive High School Civic Engagement Initiative" please visit <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=371>. ★

QUICK FACTS ABOUT YOUNG VOTERS IN THE 2006 MIDTERM ELECTIONS

- As we approach the 2010 midterm elections, 2006 is the best comparison year. In the 2006 midterm election, turnout among 18–29-year-olds increased for the second major election in a row—up 3 percentage points in 2006 (25 percent) from 2002 (22 percent).

Graph 1: Voter Turnout Midterm Years Among Citizens, by Age



Source: Current Population Survey (CPS), November Supplements, 1974–2006

- In 2006, young adults voted for the Democratic candidate over the Republican candidate in races for the House of Representatives (58 percent vs. 38 percent), the Senate (60 percent vs. 33 percent) and governor (55 percent vs. 34 percent).
- Young people were more likely than adults 30 and older to identify as strictly independents (26 percent vs. 18 percent) and less likely to identify as Republicans (28 percent vs. 35 percent). Compared to 2002, more young adults identified as independents (up 2 points) though slightly fewer identified as Democrats (down 1 point).

- The youth voter turnout rate was highest in Minnesota (43 percent), Wisconsin (40 percent), and Montana (49 percent). The states with the lowest turnout were West Virginia (16 percent), Texas and Utah (tied at 17 percent).

- The metropolitan areas with the highest turnout in 2006 were the Twin Cities (Minneapolis-St.Paul, 47 percent), Milwaukee (39 percent), and Detroit (38 percent).

Want to know more about young voters in the mid-term elections? Visit http://www.civicyouth.org/?page_id=241 to learn more.



CIRCLE'S SOCIAL MEDIA EXPERIMENTS

CIRCLE is involved with two experiments that combine social media and civic engagement. One project, called BLink, is designed to “link organizations, issues, and people in the Greater Boston Area for social change.” BLink is an open network, usable by college students and anyone else in the community to support their volunteering and activism. The other project, called Legislative Aide, involves high school classes in Tampa, Florida. There, students use custom-designed software as part of a high school curriculum.

BLINK IS AN OPEN NETWORK, USABLE BY COLLEGE STUDENTS AND ANYONE ELSE IN THE COMMUNITY TO SUPPORT THEIR VOLUNTEERING AND ACTIVISM.

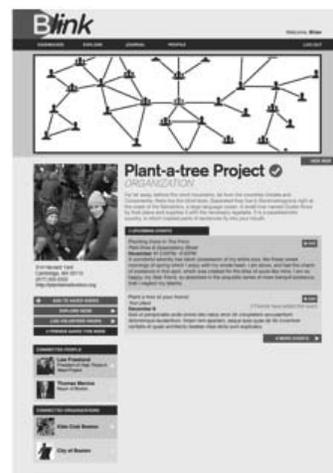
These two experiments share an emphasis on learning to analyze and use networks, both online and in the community. Both projects use specialized network-mapping software designed by CIRCLE’s partner, Community Knowledgebase, LLC of Wisconsin. University of Wisconsin professor Lewis A. Friedland and his colleagues have been working closely with CIRCLE throughout. A Learn & Serve grant from the Corporation for National and Community Service is funding BLink. A Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) contract from the United States Department of Education has funded the development phase of Legislative Aide.

BLink is an open social network, comparable to Facebook or Twitter (see myblink.org). In fact, users of BLink can elect to receive notifications through a network like Facebook and do not have to return often to BLink if they prefer not to. But BLink differs from other social networks in two important ways. First, the main nodes of the network are not people, but organizations and issues. Any member can set up a page for a local nonprofit, a government agency, an informal group, or an issue such as homelessness or global warming. Any member can then edit and augment those pages and link them together.

Second, the BLink network is transparent. The nodes and links are displayed visually on the site, whereas the network structure of Facebook is private. Being able to see and edit a public diagram of Boston’s civil society is useful for anyone involved in community organizing. A visitor can see which groups have many links

and are therefore important to contact about an issue, which groups seem marginal and need to be linked better, how clusters are segregated by geography, demographics, or ideology, who serves as important bridges between communities, and much other information that is useful for civic work.

Figure 1: Mockup of a BLink page, showing an imaginary organization with the network map at the top of the page. Clicking on a different node re-centers the map and opens a new node.



STUDENTS USE NETWORK MAPS TO UNDERSTAND COMPLEX COMMUNITY ISSUES

The Tampa project, Legislative Aide, is an example of what Wisconsin Professor David Williamson Shaffer, who was a principal on the design team, has called an “epistemic game.” High school students role-play adult jobs—in this case, aides in a fictional U.S. Congresswoman’s field office. The class meets in a computer lab or a school library. Students log onto a password-protected Web site that simulates the office network of their Congresswoman. Fictional employees send them assignments and feedback in the form of emails, and the students are able to email one another and share documents.

The fictional characters are ultimately controlled by the teacher, who makes judgments about students’ performance and the appropriate pace to set for the group as a whole. The fictional Congresswoman represents a real district in the Tampa Bay and seeks real information and guidance about a problem in that community. Students leave the fictional, online environment when they are assigned community-research tasks, such as interviews

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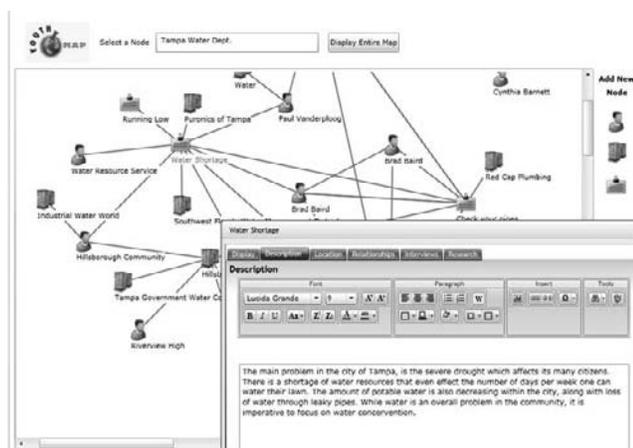


with adults. The class develops a plan for addressing that issue, and they may implement part of their plan through a service-learning project once the game is over.

The common element shared by BLink and Legislative Aide is the network map. Students in Tampa use proprietary software from Community Knowledgebase to build a shared diagram of issues, people, and organizations relevant to their project. Although real aides to a U.S. Representative would not use such software, political professionals do develop implicit models of issues, people, organizations, and their relationships. A class of students can quickly produce a sophisticated map if they work together online, and this becomes a representation of the mental model of an adult professional.

Before its public launch, BLink has been used by college students at Tufts University, University of Massachusetts-Boston, and Suffolk University, who have built an initial network map of the Boston area that will be expanded when the network becomes publicly accessible. Our colleagues at UMass Boston (including faculty and students) have been closely involved in designing BLink. Massachusetts Campus Compact is CIRCLE's other major partner, responsible for recruiting additional users.

Figure 2: Example of student work from Legislative Aide in Tampa. The emerging network map is shown in the background. The node entitled “water shortage” is open to show a student’s overall description of that problem.



INITIAL RESEARCH FINDINGS

BLink is a research opportunity, and we have fielded pre-test and post-test surveys in the participating classes. Though the survey samples have been small so far, the findings indicate substantial

increases in the proportion of students who spend time volunteering, work with other people in the community to fix problems or improve conditions, interact with people of other racial backgrounds, and interact with students from other colleges.

THOUGH THE SURVEY SAMPLES HAVE BEEN SMALL SO FAR, THE FINDINGS INDICATE SUBSTANTIAL INCREASES IN THE PROPORTION OF STUDENTS WHO SPEND TIME VOLUNTEERING, WORK WITH OTHER PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY TO FIX PROBLEMS OR IMPROVE CONDITIONS, INTERACT WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER RACIAL BACKGROUNDS, AND INTERACT WITH STUDENTS FROM OTHER COLLEGES.

Like BLink, Legislative Aide is a research project. We have collected data in the form of student work, pre-and post-test surveys, and classroom observations and interviews. The most striking finding from the pilot phase was a significant increase in the quality of students' writing about social issues. We hypothesize that the combination of service-learning (academic work tied to community service) plus an epistemic game may prove especially valuable. The epistemic game gives students a challenging, immersive environment in which they are able to achieve successes. The service-learning experiences allow them to work in the real world and make an actual difference.

Future steps for CIRCLE and its partners include refining and re-testing Legislative Aide in Tampa, publicly launching and continuously improving BLink in Boston, making Legislative Aide portable to other communities, and developing new epistemic games (such as possibly a classroom simulation of running an environmental organization). ★



2009 CIVIC HEALTH STATE REPORTS REFLECT UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS AMONG STATES

Through partnerships with local universities and nonprofits, the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) expanded *America's Civic Health Index* in 2009 by providing localized data in state-specific indices, including California, Florida, Illinois, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and Ohio. CIRCLE contributed in the analysis of the state-specific data.

IN MANY STATES, THE ECONOMIC RECESSION SEEMS TO HAVE EXACERBATED THE CIVIC INEQUALITIES THAT ALREADY EXIST AMONG LOW-INCOME, NON-COLLEGE-EDUCATED, AND MINORITY POPULATIONS.

As seen in the 2009 *America's Civic Health Index*, the economic recession has caused Americans to draw back from civic life. State-specific data show that this is more so the case with certain states in comparison to others. In many states, the economic recession seems to have exacerbated the civic inequalities that already exist among low-income, non-college-educated, and minority populations. Additionally, the findings show a shift in citizen engagement from institutionalized engagement to more personal forms. Individual factors beyond the economic recession – such as trust in government – may also be impacting civic participation. The 2009 index is based on a survey of 1,518 Americans and an additional oversample of 2,371 respondents in six states. For more information see www.ncoc.net.

MINNESOTA AND NEW HAMPSHIRE REPORT STRONG CIVIC TRADITION

Two of the states – Minnesota and New Hampshire – fared comparatively well in civic health. Both states ranked above the national average on a variety of civic indicators including: volunteering during the past year (NH 43%, MN 60%, National 35%), and working with people in their neighborhood to solve a community problem (NH 19%, MN 16%, National 15%). Moreover, citizens in both states were more likely than citizens in other states to view their state's civic tradition as strong. According to Harry Boyte and Nan Skelton, the authors of the Minnesota report, "When it comes to the combination of voting, volunteering and trying to institute change in their own neighborhoods, no state

in the country has had more engaged citizens over the past few years than Minnesota." Minnesota led the nation by its citizens' overall engagement level. Moreover, New Hampshire showed a strong commitment to volunteering: 43% of New Hampshire residents volunteered within the past year, compared with the national average of 35%.

IN OHIO AND CALIFORNIA NON-COLLEGE AND IMMIGRANT RESIDENTS HELP IN ALTERNATIVE WAYS

In Ohio, demographic groups responded differently to the economic downturn. Similar to the national trend, Ohioans with college experience were more likely to engage in traditional civic behaviors, such as attending public meetings or volunteering, than those with no college experience. Fifteen percent of adults with college experience said they participated in community projects, compared to the 11% of non-college educated adults. Ohioans without college experience were more likely to give food or money to a relative in need (57%) compared to those with some college experience (44%) or those with a college degree (29%).

NEW IMMIGRANTS IN CALIFORNIA WERE MORE LIKELY THAN NON-IMMIGRANTS TO HAVE ATTENDED A CLUB OR COMMUNITY MEETING (34% VS. 27%) OR WORKED WITH OTHERS ON PRESSING ISSUES IN THEIR COMMUNITY.

California – the state with the largest immigrant population¹ – has also seen a shift from traditional forms of service to more personal contributions. New immigrants in California were more likely than non-immigrants to have attended a club or community meeting (34% vs. 27%) or worked with others on pressing issues in their community; minorities also showed higher levels of confidence in the federal government than non-minorities (48% Black, 35% Hispanic, 22% White).

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CIRCLE IN THE NEWS

- **"REALITY CHECK: OBAMA'S BASE LIKELY TO DISAPPOINT DEMS,"** BY DAVID PAUL KUHN, *REALCLEARPOLITICS*, 5/17/2010
- **"MILLENNIAL, ISSUES AND POLITICS,"** BY DEMFROMCT, *DAILY KOS*, 5/16/2010
- **"OPPOSITE OF RADICAL: TODAY'S YOUTH TRUST UNCLE SAM,"** BY TOVIA SMITH, *NPR'S MORNING EDITION*, 5/11/2010
- **"INSIDE THE BELTWAY,"** BY JENNIFER HARPER, *WASHINGTON TIMES*, 4/29/2010
- **"LESS POLITICAL ACTIVITY THAN '08,"** BY EMILY SCHULTHEIS, *DAILY PENNSYLVANIAN*, 4/29/2010
- **"PONDERING MILLENNIAL POLITICAL VIEWS,"** BY BEN GODDARD, *WIRETAP MAGAZINE*, 4/17/2010
- **"CIVIC EXAMS MIGHT NOT BE A BAD IDEA" BY JAMES BURNETT,** *MIAMI HERALD*, 4/9/2010
- **"SKEPTICISM GROWING AMONG YOUNG AMERICANS" BY KERRI MILLER,** *MINNESOTA PUBLIC RADIO*, 3/24/2010
- **"YOUTH AND POLITICS,"** BY ANONYMOUS, *BOSTON GLOBE BLOG*, 3/7/2010
- **"WILL THE NEXT GENERATION BE AS CIVIC-MINDED,"** BY CHUCK RAASCH, *ARGUS LEADER*, 3/4/2010
- **"PROGNOSIS NEGATIVE,"** BY JESSE SINGAL, *NEWSWEEK*, 2/3/2010

ILLINOIS AND FLORIDA STRENGTHEN POLICIES TO ENGAGE YOUTH IN CIVIC LIFE

Civic culture in Illinois was hit hard by both the economic recession and several events that caused severe political distrust. Citizens of Illinois did, however, have high levels of trust for their fellow Illinoisans and also showed support for a federal civic agenda: 72% of Illinoisans support policies to implement civic education assessments, compared to 66% nationwide. In addition, 76% of Illinoisans support a service-learning requirement, five percentage points higher than the national average. Within the past year, steps have been taken in Illinois to improve civic education. Specifically, the Illinois Reform Commission asked Governor Pat Quinn to make recommendations for political reform – identifying civic education as a top priority.

Similarly, Florida, a state that is suffering from a civic depression, is looking to strengthen civic life. According to the report, the state has one of the worst civic cultures, ranking 46th in the entire nation. Engagement among youth has been a concern; data show that Floridian Millennials (15–29 years old) are less likely than Seniors (65 and older) to be engaged in their community (7% vs. 21%). In 2010, the Florida State Legislature passed the "Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act." This act adds social studies, including civics, to the list of subjects tested in the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.² To download reports for Minnesota, New Hampshire, California, Ohio, Illinois and Florida, please visit the National Conference on Citizenship's Web site at www.ncoc.net. ★

ENDNOTES

1 <http://www.cis.org/articles/2007/back1007.pdf>

2 <http://www.ncoc.net/index.php?tray=content&tid=top41&cid=2kc45>



FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE, A COLUMN DEDICATED TO RECOGNIZING SUCCESSFUL “BRIDGES” BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS, REPORTS ON RESEARCH WITH PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

FOUR YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE WORKING TO BUILD CIVIC SKILLS

In 2003, CIRCLE published work by Dr. Mary Kirlin, who conducted a comprehensive literature search for measures of civic skills among young people. This search led her to split “civic skills” into four major categories: collective decision-making, critical thinking, organization and communication.¹ The following article provides examples for how today’s youth organizations are trying to build skills in these major areas, using Kirlin’s list of measures in each category as a guide.

COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING

The United Teen Equality Center (UTEC) in Lowell, MA provides one example of a youth organization that works to build collective decision-making skills. It hosts a statewide initiative called Teens Leading the Way (TLTW). According to Geoff Foster, Youth Civic Engagement Specialist at UTEC, the purpose of TLTW is to bring together the “minds, opinions and individual backgrounds of the young people in the group to address statewide issues which effect teens across the Commonwealth.” Foster suggests that “the teens in Teens Leading the Way own a new identity,” a group identity. “That identity,” Foster continues “teaches humility, care for others, and responsibility for fixing problems that they once didn’t own.”

Foster says that when initiating new projects, “the group goes through a long process of debate and deliberation to decide where they would like to spend the next year focusing their energy.” Each meeting is facilitated by a small group of young people, allowing each member of the group to take ownership, build facilitation and other communication skills, but ultimately contribute to making decisions as a full group who represent various cities around the state. “Teens Leading the Way has two major successes thus far: the creation of the first ever Governor’s Youth Council and...getting a bill as far as the House Ways and Means Committee increasing mental health resources in youth centers.”

CRITICAL THINKING

Kirlin’s review of research found a handful of skills that she labeled as critical thinking. These included:

- Identifying and describing information about political and civic life
- Analyzing and explaining information about political and civic life
- Synthesizing and explaining information about political and civic life
- Evaluating, taking, and defending positions on public events and issues
- Thinking critically about conditions of political and civic life
- Thinking constructively about how to improve political and civic life²

Many of these skills are integrated into an international program involving hundreds of teachers in Europe and the United States. “The Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago (CRFC), The Constitutional Rights Foundation in Los Angeles (CRF) and Street Law, Inc. are conducting a major six year teacher-based initiative, Deliberating in a Democracy (DID), designed to improve teaching and learning of democratic principles and the skills of civic deliberation.”³

CAROLYN PEREIRA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS FOUNDATION CHICAGO, SUGGESTS THAT “NATURALLY THE DISCUSSIONS ARE MUCH RICHER IF TEACHERS TAKE A LONGER TIME AND EMBED [THE DISCUSSIONS] INTO [THE] CURRICULUM.”

DID provides teachers with materials and training to lead discussions of controversial issues in the classroom.

The materials are constructed with European partners so that the problem and the information is relevant to multiple sites. Each topic area includes a short article, a concrete public policy question that poses a choice between two values important in a democracy (such as liberty and equality), and is designed for one or two class periods. However, Carolyn Pereira, Executive Director of Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago, suggests that “naturally the discussions are much richer if teachers take a longer time and embed [the discussions] into [the] curriculum.”





The program involves opportunities for students in the U.S. to interact with students in European countries through video conferences, web forums and international exchanges. Lena Morreale Scott is the Senior Program Director at Street Law, Inc. She says that this “adds a dimension that isn’t normally accessible...[and a] human dimension of people who you may never get to talk to.” She says that students were interested in what other students in other countries thought about them and that this encouraged students to think “‘why in the world would there be so much difference’—[an] added piece that makes [DID] deeper.” Understanding multiple perspectives is an important skill that the DID program tries to build.

ORGANIZATION

The Citizenship and Public Service (CPS) Scholars program is an opportunity for Tufts undergraduates to “work on projects to create positive change and build capacity in Tufts’ partner communities, as well as throughout the world.”⁴ The program is based at Tufts’ Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service (CIRCLE’s home) where CPS Scholars can participate for either three or four years. Participants begin the program by taking a class called ‘Education for Active Citizenship’ and work on a community-based project each year. “The developmental program consciously builds new levels of knowledge, skills and behaviors year-by-year and brings together a mentoring community of peers.”⁵

“THE DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAM CONSCIOUSLY BUILDS NEW LEVELS OF KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND BEHAVIORS YEAR-BY-YEAR AND BRINGS TOGETHER A MENTORING COMMUNITY OF PEERS.”

Melissa DeFreece, the CPS Scholars Program Coordinator, believes the intended outcomes of the program are broad in helping students become active citizens while learning organizational skills such as time management, event planning, grantwriting, facilitation, and program and curriculum development. Scholars develop a workplan with a Community Supervisor at their partner organization and use the skills they have learned at CPS Scholars’ meetings and through other campus activities to implement this plan. DeFreece says that in addition, “some partners train and work with [CPS Scholars] on different skills because they have to work at least eight hours a week during the academic year.”

While these skills are critical for a CPS Scholar to move forward with their projects, DeFreece says that the crux of the program “is that we want them to be able to assess ‘where can I fit in?’, ‘what can I do to

help?’; and ‘I am interested in X and I want to help with a viable solution.’” She wants students to “look at communities wherever they are at and say ‘what are the assets in this community and how can students think about how they can be involved in community work.’”

COMMUNICATION

A project of the Bus Federation Civic Fund, Trick or Vote was launched in 2004 in Portland, OR and is now a national event with a significant number of partner organizations. “Trick or Vote is a massive non-partisan get-out-the-vote canvass, aimed at getting new people engaged in the political process.”⁶ According to Matt Singer, Executive Director of the Federation and CEO of the Forward Montana Foundation, this year Trick or Vote is going to reach 200,000 voters through the participation of several thousand volunteers, all of whom will have “intense one to one interactions with voters.”

For Singer, Trick or Vote has “figure[d] out ways to get people back to what we know is the single most successful form of communication” with voters. On top of this, Trick or Vote “has been an outlet for people’s first time being involved,” said Ryan Joseph Davis Christensen, Trick or Vote’s National Director. Singer believes that Trick or Vote “takes advantage of this giant cultural opportunity.” He says it’s a “canvass with training wheels [because it] meshes with something you’ve done before” and establishes volunteers’ communication with voters and their confidence. “[Trick or Vote] lowers the bar,” Singer adds, “someone dressed up as Dracula...makes it funny [and a] good voter interaction. People are ready to smile and laugh at you.” Christensen says that “monster invasions” will start in September. ★

ENDNOTES

1 This CIRCLE Working Paper: The Role of Civic Skills in Fostering Civic Engagement can be found at <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP06Kirlin.pdf>

2 Kirlin found these skills cited in two sources: 1) Patrick, John J. 2003. Defining, Delivering, and Defending a Common Education for Citizenship in a Democracy. Patrick, John J., Gregory E. Hamot, and Robert S. Leming (eds) Civic Learning in Teacher Education International Perspectives on Education for Democracy in the Preparation of Teachers, Vol. 2; and 2) Center for Civic Education. 1994. National Standards for Civics and Government. Calabasas, CA: Center for Civic Education

3 <http://www.deliberating.org/index.php/about-us-topmenu-19/about-us-topmenu-336>

4 <http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/?pid=19&c=14>

5 <http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/Students/ScholarsProgram>

6 <http://trickorvote.org/>



CIRCLE
Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship
and Public Service
Lincoln Filene Hall
Tufts University
Medford, MA 02155

