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The Center for Information & Research on
Civic Learning & Engagement

Higher Education and Civic Engagement: Summary

By Peter Levine and CIRCLE staff
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Previous research finds that college attendance is positively associated with civic engagement. For example, since 1972, voter turnout in presidential elections for young people who have some college experience has been 15 to 20 percentage points greater than voter turnout rates among young people with no college experience.¹ This pattern may reflect a combination of at least three explanatory factors: the learning that occurs in college; the fact that more civically engaged students are more likely to succeed in school and then attend college; and the income, networks, and status that come from higher education.

CIRCLE has recently published three detailed fact sheets that update, refine, and in some respects complicate, our knowledge of the links between college education and civic engagement (see "College Attendance and Civic Engagement Among 18 to 25 Year Olds," "Civic Engagement among Recent College Graduates," and "Civic Engagement among 2-year and 4-year College Students"). The present fact sheet is a summary of key points from those other three documents.

Positive Correlation between College Attendance and Civic Engagement

The expected pattern of civic engagement is for college graduates to surpass current college students, who will be more engaged than people with no bachelor's degrees but some college experience, who, in turn, will be more involved than people with no college experience at all.

Recent evidence for Americans age 18 to 25 finds that the expected pattern applies to the following forms of civic engagement:

- volunteering,
- regular volunteering for non-political groups,
- active membership in any groups,
- raising money for charity,
- working with others on community problems,
- membership in political groups,
- giving money to parties and candidates,
- regular voting,
- contacting officials,
- canvassing,
- signing e-mail or paper petitions,
- and being "hyper-engaged" (involved in at least 10 different activities).

However, there are some significant exceptions to the standard pattern:

- Current college students are the *most* heavily involved in the following activities: running, biking, or walking for charity; displaying a campaign button or sign; trying to persuade others about an election (tied with the college graduates); protesting (tied with the non-college youth); and contacting the broadcast media (tied with people with only some college)
- Young adults with no college experience are the *most* likely to protest (tied with college graduates) and are just as likely to volunteer as those with some college experience.²

Differences in Civic Engagement among College Graduates

A separate analysis of college graduates from the class of 2000/2001 finds that they are generally quite involved. However, some differences are evident among recent college graduates:

- African American, and Native American and Native Alaskan college graduates are more highly engaged than Whites;
- graduates of private universities are more engaged than those who graduate from public institutions;
- Verbal SAT scores correlate with political participation;
- and graduates with degrees in law, public administration, planning, or the humanities are more engaged than their peers in other fields.³

Differences in Civic Engagement by Institution Type

Finally, we are able to report civic engagement among community college students on three measures for which there are relatively recent survey data: volunteering, voting, and following the news. Here the expected pattern is that young people with associate's degrees will be more engaged than those with no higher education, but less engaged than people with bachelor's degrees or more. The expected pattern applies to voting and volunteering, but not to following the news. Those with no college are the most likely to report daily viewing of television news. In contrast, there is no clear relationship between higher education and reading newspapers or magazines.⁴

Notes

¹ See Mark Hugo Lopez, Emily Kirby and Jared Sagoff, "The Youth Vote 2004," CIRCLE Fact Sheet (July 2005) for trends in voter turnout among non-college and college youth.

² Mark Hugo Lopez and Brent A. Elrod, "College Attendance and Civic Engagement Among 18 to 25 Year Olds," CIRCLE Fact Sheet (September 2006), based on CIRCLE's *2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey*. This finding is likely due to the large number of Latino and Immigrant youth who have no college experience, yet were very involved in immigration policy protests in the spring of 2006.

³ Mark Hugo Lopez and Brent A. Elrod, "Civic Engagement among Recent College Graduates," CIRCLE Fact Sheet (May 2006), based on the Baccalaureate and Beyond survey.

⁴ Mark Hugo Lopez and Benjamin Brown, "Civic Engagement among 2-year and 4-year College Students," CIRCLE Fact Sheet (October 2006), based on the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, following the high school graduating class of 1992.