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What's a Degree Got to Do With It? The Civic Engagement of Associate's and Bachelor's Degree Holders

Mallory Angeli Newell

Abstract

This study explored the civic engagement of adults holding an associate's degree compared to those holding only a high school diploma and those holding a bachelor's degree. Most prior research has focused on individuals who hold 4-year degrees; the present study, however, sought to understand differences between holders of 2-year degrees and 4-year degrees. Descriptive statistics showed that associate's degree holders exhibited higher rates of civic engagement than high school graduates but lower rates than bachelor's degree holders; the regression analyses showed that associate's degree holders were significantly less likely than bachelor's degree holders to be civically engaged, but more likely to be engaged than high school graduates, suggesting gains in engagement from a 2-year degree.

Introduction

American higher education has "typically had among its primary goals not only the development of the individual intellect, but also the fostering of a sense of one's moral and civic responsibility" *(Pascarella, Ethington, & Smart, 1988, p. 412).* Fostering civic engagement on college campuses has been a concern of numerous higher education associations, including the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the American Association of Community Colleges, and the American Association of Higher Education *(Perry, 2005; Saltmarsh, 2005; Van Stephenson, 2010)*. These organizations focus chiefly on the engagement of students at 4-year universities, leaving large gaps in the literature on the engagement of students at 2-year colleges, also known as community colleges. The recent partnership of the Association of American Colleges and Universities' 4-year initiative, the American Democracy Project, and the Democracy Commitment, a 2-year college initiative, has begun to shed light on the important contributions the 2-year segment can make in developing the civic capacity of college students.

The U.S. Department of Education has emphasized the importance of civic learning and engagement in higher education

through a number of recent publications, including *Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy: A Road Map and Call to Action (2012)*, "Civic Learning for Democracy's Future" *(Kanter, 2012)*, and the flagship publication, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future (AACU, 2012)*. These publications offer a strong call to action, as well as provide steps the Department will take to advance civic learning and ways colleges can assess civic learning and promote engagement on their campuses. Sadly, there is no explicit mention of the important role community colleges play in advancing this goal. For example, *A Crucible Moment* argues that it is time to add to the current national priorities for higher education—career preparation and increased access—the priority of fostering informed, engaged, responsible citizens. The focus on increased opportunities for engagement, however, largely lies within the 4-year sector.

Long before the Department began to focus on the importance of civic learning, adolescents were increasingly engaged in community-based activities *(Sax et al., 2003)* that enabled them to work with others to solve community problems and make an impact on their surroundings. Colleges have subsequently focused their attention on this area by developing programs aimed at increasing community-based and political engagement *(Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003)* through volunteer opportunities, learning communities, service-learning, and "get out the vote" rallies.

Service-learning is one area that has clearly been linked to positive outcomes for students. Service-learning has been found to be what George Kuh *(2008)* called a high-impact activity linked to deep learning and personal as well as academic gains within the first and senior years of college, as exhibited in the results of the National Survey of Student Engagement. Kuh noted that historically marginalized students, particularly Black and first-generation college students, tended to benefit more from engaging in high-impact activities than majority students. However, marginalized students were less likely to participate in service-learning. This research highlights the benefits of service-learning and the disproportionate access to activities for marginalized students; however, it is based solely on findings from 4-year colleges and universities.

Astin, Volgelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee *(2000)* obtained similar results regarding the benefits of service-learning. In a longitudinal study of over 22,000 undergraduates at 4-year colleges and universities, Astin et al. found that participation in service-learning yielded gains in 11 positive outcomes including academic performance, leadership, and self-efficacy. They further found that ser-

vice participation had the strongest effect on whether a student would pursue a service career later in life. Although this study provided additional research on the value of service-learning, it also was limited to the 4-year realm.

A survey of the literature makes it clear that there is limited research on service-learning at community colleges. However, in a 2003 national survey of community colleges conducted by the American Association of Community Colleges, Prentice, Robinson, and McPhee *(2003)* found that the number of service-learning programs at community colleges had increased over the past few years. These authors noted that service-learning course offerings had increased, faculty involvement in these types of courses had increased, and more community colleges were creating service-learning offices with a designated director. They also indicated that community college faculty may have been less engaged in service-learning projects because many of them were part-time faculty; however, colleges can be proactive in inviting part-time instructors to try service-learning in their classrooms. In addition to benefiting students, this type of encouragement may engage part-time faculty members with activities on campus and thus increase their sense of inclusion.

Research has already shown that young adults with a college experience were more civically engaged than those who did not attend college *(Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Kirby, Marcelo, & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009; Lopez & Brown, 2006)*. These differences reflect differing opportunities and backgrounds from childhood on; however, colleges and universities play a distinct role in strengthening students' civic skills and knowledge *(Flanagan & Levine, 2010)*. That is why it is so important to better understand the difference between the engagement of adults with associate's degrees versus bachelor's degrees. Due to the many differences between 2-year and 4-year colleges, results from research on 4-year institutions cannot be easily applied to 2-year colleges. The greatest difference is that community colleges serve all individuals regardless of their past education, educational ability, or income status. Many 4-year colleges and universities can set a level of selectivity, but community colleges open their doors to all who wish to enter. Not only do community colleges operate under open-access policies, they are low cost to attend and conveniently located within driving distance of students' homes, making them a viable option for upward mobility for individuals from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. Most of these students attend a community college to obtain an associate's degree, enter into a skilled career, gain additional job training,

or transfer to a 4-year university to further their education. If community colleges do not teach students the skills necessary for engagement later in life, a very large segment of American higher education will continue to place some individuals at a disadvantage, leading to their underrepresentation in our political system and giving minority and low socioeconomic status groups less of a voice in the political process *(Kahne & Sporte, 2008)*.

As a result of their admissions policies, community colleges serve a much more diverse student population than 4-year colleges. According to the American Association of Community Colleges *(2013)*, half of all undergraduate students are enrolled at a community college. More than half of all women in college and the majority of Black and Hispanic undergraduate students in the United States study at a community college. Since community colleges serve a wide variety of students with an array of educational goals, largely from minority and low-income backgrounds, and the habits learned while in college may last well beyond the college years *(Putnam, 1995)*, it is important that community colleges commit to fostering civic engagement on their campuses. To further reinforce this argument, longitudinal studies showed that adolescents who performed community service and were part of civic organizations succeeded in school and life at a higher rate than their counterparts who did not engage, even after controlling for other factors *(Davila & Mora, 2007)*.

Furthermore, the majority of students who attend community colleges commute, have jobs off campus, and are on campus only during the time of their classes. This limits the colleges' ability to create a sense of community on campus *(Minkler, 2001)*, which can be detrimental to the development and practice of civic engagement. Research does indicate that community colleges can foster a sense of community on their campuses by focusing on teaching their students how to participate effectively as citizens of a democracy while in their classes *(Tinto, 1997)*.

In one of the few studies of civic engagement and community colleges, Lopez and Brown *(2006)* acknowledged a lack of available data focused on the large group of Americans who study in community colleges and either finish their education with an associate's degree or transfer to a 4-year college. Using National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 data, Lopez and Brown found that community college students fell below 4-year students but above high school graduates in their levels of civic engagement as reflected in voting, reading the newspaper daily, and watching TV news daily. Community college students, largely those who intended to

transfer to a 4-year college, were almost equal to bachelor's degree holders in rates of volunteering and registering to vote.

Civic engagement, however, does not begin in college; it occurs throughout life as a cumulative process in which the college years play an important role and which results in individuals expressing varying levels of civic engagement over time. Therefore, this study explored the differences in civic engagement of adults with an associate's degree and adults with only a high school diploma or with a bachelor's degree while controlling for the influence of background characteristics. Due to the differences between 2-year and 4-year students, it was hypothesized that adults who graduated from a 2-year college would exhibit significantly lower levels of civic engagement than adults who graduated from a 4-year college, but higher rates of engagement than adults with only a high school diploma, even after controlling for background characteristics.

Factors Leading to Civic Engagement

Background Characteristics

Research shows that immigrants and limited-English speakers are less civically engaged than nonimmigrants and native English speakers, and Whites exhibit higher rates of civic engagement than Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. Although ethnicity and citizenship have been found to predict certain areas of civic engagement, these demographic factors may mask other important differences *(Foster-Bey, 2008)*. For example, Blacks and Hispanics have lower average incomes and levels of education than Whites and Asians. Similarly, in a study of the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey conducted by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), Lopez and Marcelo *(2008)* found that young immigrants were less engaged than their native-born counterparts in activities such as volunteering and voting, though children of immigrants were often among the most engaged group of young people.

Cultural differences among ethnic groups also influence civic engagement. For example, research suggests that students from urban communities may have less faith in traditional forms of political engagement and thus participate in civic activities in ways that go unrecognized in contemporary literature. Such activities may include artistic expression via art, music, dance, and poetry, or providing financial assistance for family survival *(Ginwright, 2011)*. Surveys on volunteering may also exhibit cultural or class

bias by leaning toward unpaid service in formal, nonprofit organizations. Many ethnic groups may engage in helping activities outside formal settings by such means as helping a neighbor or family member *(Foster-Bey, 2008)*. These activities may not be captured by traditional survey tools.

Differences in engagement by men and women exist in the types of activities in which young men and women participate. Women and men have been found to be equally civically engaged but in different types of activities, with men more likely to be engaged in political activities and women more likely to be engaged in community-based activities *(Jenkins, 2005; Marcelo, Lopez, & Kirby, 2007; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995)*. However, in a study of the Census Current Population Survey November Supplement, CIRCLE *(2013)* found that the rate of voter turnout for young women ages 18–29 was 7 percentage points higher than that for young men. Over the past 30 years, a gap has emerged such that women's turnout rate for presidential elections exceeded that of men.

School Environment

The environments individuals experience while growing up, as well as in high school and college, are considered an important influence on civic engagement *(Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006)*. Research posits that students who attend schools that provide civic training in the classroom or reward service opportunities are more involved than students whose schools do not provide opportunities for engagement. Just requiring students to pay attention to politics did not result in greater civic engagement; rather, when teachers and campuses encouraged open discussions about politics, facilitated volunteer work, and made volunteering a requirement, students' levels of engagement increased *(Zukin et al., 2006)*.

High schools play a key role in the developmental process. For example, high school juniors who reported their community as one in which adults cared about youth and made the community better were more likely to report high levels of commitments to civic participation *(Kahne & Sporte, 2008)*. However, these opportunities may vary depending on the average socioeconomic status of the student body. Research suggests that a student's ethnicity and academic track and the student body's average socioeconomic status determine the availability of school-based engagement, with opportunities more readily available to White and higher socioeconomic status students *(Kahne & Middaugh, 2008)*.

Because higher education has grown to be the primary institution for civic engagement of younger generations, it has been argued that no comparable institution exists for young adults who do not attend college. As research has found for high school environments, activities that lead to student engagement are more common in colleges that enroll privileged students than in schools that serve poor and minority populations *(Flanagan & Levine, 2010)*. It can be argued that more selective colleges and universities provide greater opportunities for students to be engaged than do community colleges, which tend to serve lower income, minority students. Thus, it is argued in this study that students' school environment will influence their level of engagement, be it a high school, community college, or 4-year college environment.

Conceptual Model

The conceptual model used in this study is based on the work of Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins *(2002)*. Keeter et al.'s 19 measures of civic engagement have become widely accepted for operationalizing and assessing adolescent civic engagement. Keeter et al. divided civic engagement activities, or indicators, into four categories: civic, political voice, cognitive, and electoral activities. Drawing upon their work, this study focused on the development and testing of a conceptual model that identified key experiences and characteristics that fostered civic engagement in adults who had attained their ultimate level of education.

Students come to college with individual background characteristics that provide a baseline in their development and influence the activities they participate in while in school. Other preexisting influences include the socioeconomic status of a student's family and individual socialization experiences. Individuals also attend varying higher education institutions with diverse cultures and different opportunities for engagement that may affect their level of engagement while in college and later in life. Other individuals do not attend a higher education institution, limiting their exposure to the opportunities that might have been available to them on a higher education campus, and this absence likewise affects their engagement throughout life. Further, some individuals, on a college campus or not, may have less time to devote to civic or political activities due to other responsibilities, such as supporting and caring for a family.

The background characteristics students bring with them to college or life after high school form the starting point of their

development. The time and opportunities they have to engage in activities affect their development of civic engagement. The level of education that an individual attains also affects their opportunities for engagement. Therefore, levels of civic engagement will be different for individuals with varying levels of education. Using this conceptual model as a basis, the following section explores the differences in civic engagement of these groups.

Data

Current Population Survey (CPS) data were used to explore the differences in civic engagement of adults who likely had attained their ultimate level of education. The CPS data included the Volunteer Supplement survey for September 2008 *(U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2008b)* and the Civic Engagement Supplement survey for November 2008 *(U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2008a)*, both nationally representative and weighted samples. The CPS Volunteer Supplement survey is administered yearly to a sample of respondents in conjunction with the annual CPS. Because the Civic Engagement Supplement survey was administered only in 2008, the 2008 sample for the Volunteer Supplement was used in order to include responses from the same time frame.

The survey was administered to a sample of the U.S. population. The data offered information on community-based, volunteer, and political indicators. Background characteristics available in the data included highest level of school completed or degree received, gender, ethnicity, citizenship status, and family income. The survey respondents used in this study indicated that their highest level of education was a high school diploma, an associate's degree, or a bachelor's degree. Adults who were currently enrolled in any type of school were removed from the data.

As shown in Table 1, the distribution of ethnicity in the population surveyed was consistent across education levels with that of the U.S. population. However, there were more female respondents with associate's degrees than in any other group, and the sample contained a slightly lower percentage of Black adults than the U.S. population.

Table 1. CPS Sample Compared to U.S. Population of Adults

Background Characteristics	U.S. High School	CPS High School	U.S. Associate's Degree	CPS Associate's Degree	U.S. Bachelor's Degree	CPS Bachelor's Degree
White	84%	83%	67%	83%	72%	85%

Black	10%	11%	12%	8%	7%	6%
Asian	4%	3%	5%	3%	5%	5%
Hispanic	8%	7%	12%	10%	8%	7%
American Indian	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%
Female	52%	51%	62%	57%	56%	52%
Male	48%	49%	38%	43%	44%	48%

Source: (NCES, 2009)

Measures

The inclusion of variables was based on Keeter et al.'s *(2002)* comprehensive measurement of civic engagement, which categorized 19 indicators of civic engagement into civic, political, political voice, and cognitive behaviors. To measure each of the categories, Keeter et al. developed indicators that fell within each group. Using the data available, this study attempted to explore civic and political indicators. It should be noted that Keeter et al. included volunteering as a civic activity but due to the availability of the volunteer indicators in the Volunteer Supplement survey as opposed to the Civic Engagement Supplement survey, these indicators were analyzed and reported separately from the other civic indicators.

Four questions from the CPS data related to community engagement were used to measure civic engagement, and these variables were combined to create an additive community-engagement index. Ten questions from the CPS data were used to measure volunteerism, and these indicators were combined to create an additive volunteer index. Political engagement indicators were measured using four questions from the CPS data to create the additive political index. Each of these indices had the same weight.

Background characteristics were added to each model as controls. The variables for background characteristics that were used included ethnicity, gender, U.S. citizenship status, and family income. Table 2 presents the full list of variables used in the study.

Tabel 2. List of CPS Survey Variables

Variable Name	Description
Background Variables	
High school diploma	Dichotomous
Associates degree	Dichotomous
Black	Dichotomous
Hispanic	Dichotomous

Asian	Dichotomous
Pacific Islander	Dichotomous
American Indian	Dichotomous
Gender (Male)	Dichotomous
Citizenship status	Dichotomous
Family income ($ per year)	Dichotomous
Community-Based Engagement Variables	
Participated in a service organization	Dichotomous
Participated in sports or recreational org.	Dichotomous
Attended a church or synagogue	Dichotomous
Participated in any organization	Dichotomous
Volunteer Variables	
Volunteered	Dichotomous
Tutored or taught	Dichotomous
Mentored youth	Dichotomous
Ushered, greeted, or ministered	Dichotomous
Collected, made, or distributed clothing, crafts, or goods other than food	Dichotomous
Fundraised or sold items to raise money	Dichotomous
Provided counseling, medical care, fire/EMS or protective services	Dichotomous
Engaged in music, performance, or other artistic activities	Dichotomous
Engaged in labor, supply, or transportation for people	Dichotomous
Political Engagement Variables	
Attended a political march or rally	Dichotomous
Supported a political candidate	Dichotomous
Attended a political meeting	Dichotomous
Boycotted or buycotted a product	Dichotomous

Note: Dichotomous: Yes= 1, No= 0; Family income interval: 1 = < $5,000, 2 = 5,000 to 7,499, 3 = 7,500 to 9,999, 4 = 10,000 to 12,499, 5 = 12,500 to 14,999, 6 = 15,000 to 19,999' 7 = 20,000 to 24,999, 8 = 25,000 to 29,999, 9 = 30,000 to 34,999, 10 = 35,000 to 39,999, 11 = 40,000 to 49,999, 12 = 50,000 to 59,999, 13 = 60,000 to 74,999, 14 = 75,000 to 99,999, 15 = 100,000 to 149,999, 16 = over 150,000

Data Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the CPS Civic Engagement Supplement survey was administered only in 2008, limiting the time frame of data available on the civic engagement of adults from this survey. Only a limited number of measures for civic engagement were available in the 2008 survey; it is particularly disappointing that no indicator addressed whether individuals

voted in any election. Therefore, the overall conclusions that could be drawn about the civic engagement of adults who had attained their ultimate level of education reflected the limitations on the data available for this study.

Additional background variables that have been linked to civic engagement, such as parents' education and income, socialization experiences, and elements of the college environment, were not included in the CPS data, thus limiting the variables available for in this study that have previously been linked to increased civic engagement of adults.

Even though the CPS data were obtained from large, weighted, representative samples of the U.S. population, there is always concern about generalizing the results on a wide scale. Since it is a representative sample, one would think the findings could be generalized to the U.S. population, but one would be hesitant to generalize to individuals who attended non-U.S. educational systems. It is believed that the results from the CPS data can be applied to the national context since U.S. Census Bureau data has been used to generalize about the U.S. population for centuries. Lastly, the variables included relied on self-reported information, which may have resulted in overreporting. Since self-reported data are common in research, especially in the use of U.S. Census Bureau data, this limitation can be applied to many other surveys and therefore is not just a limitation of this study.

Methods

Descriptive statistics using simple cross tabulations were used to identify differences between the civic engagement of adults with an associate's degree compared to adults with a bachelor's degree or a high school diploma. Ordinary least squares regression analyses were used to test the influence of educational attainment on community-based engagement, volunteering, and political engagement. A multiple regression model was then used to explore the influence of the background characteristics on the indicators. The standardized coefficients and adjusted R^2 values were reported for each of the regression models.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics showed that adults who attained an associate's degree exhibited lower rates of civic engagement than

adults who attained a bachelor's degree, but higher rates of civic engagement than adults who attained only a high school diploma. This was the case in all variables available within the data.

For community-based activities, the distribution of individuals who participated in a service organization was highest for bachelor's degree holders (7%), followed by high school graduates (6%) and associate's degree holders (3%). The distribution of engagement with a sports or recreational organization was 11% of bachelor's degree holders, 8% of associate's, and 4% of high school graduates. For attending a church or synagogue on a weekly basis, there were positive responses from 18% of bachelor's degree holders, 16% of associate's degree holders, and 9% of respondents with a high school degree. Overall participation in any organization had the highest response rate from bachelor's degree holders (6%), followed by associate's degree holders (4%) and high school graduates (3%). The results of this analysis showed that adults with a bachelor's degree attended religious services at the highest rate, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Differences in Civic Engagement of Adults Who Attained Their Ultimate Level of Education

	High School	Associate	Bachelor
Community-Based Engagement Variables			
Participated in a service organization	3%	6%	7%
Participated in sports or recreational org.	4%	8%	11%
Attended a church or synagogue	9%	16%	18%
Participated in any organization	3%	4%	6%
Volunteer Variables			
Volunteered	11%	16%	28%
Tutored or taught	2%	4%	8%
Mentored youth	2%	3%	9%
Ushered, greeted, or ministered	1%	1%	3%
Collected, made, or distributed clothing, crafts, or goods other than food	2%	2%	4%
Fundraised or sold items to raise money	3%	3%	6%
Provided counseling, medical care, fire/ EMS, or protective services	1%	2%	4%
Provided general office services	1%	2%	2%
Engaged in music, performance, or other artistic activities	2%	3%	5%
Engaged in labor, supply, or transportation for people	3%	6%	7%

Political Engagement Variables			
Attended a political march or rally	1%	2%	3%
Supported a political candidate	6%	10%	16%
Attended a political meeting	3%	6%	10%
Boycotted or buycotted a product	4%	6%	10%

For volunteering, the type of organization for which individuals volunteered varied by education level. Over 70% of respondents at all education levels did not volunteer at all. Of the respondents who did volunteer, individuals with a high school diploma volunteered by fundraising or selling items to raise money for people or engaging in labor, supply, or transportation for people at the highest rate (3%). Of the respondents with an associate's degree, 6% volunteered by engaging in labor, supply, or transportation for people, followed by tutoring or teaching (4%) and mentoring youth (3%). Bachelor's degree holders volunteered largely by mentoring youth (9%) tutoring or teaching (8%) and engaging in labor, supply, or transportation for people (7%).

The distribution of engagement in political activities followed a pattern similar to that of the other indicators, with bachelor's degree holders exhibiting the highest rate of engagement, followed by associate's degree holders, then high school graduates. The percentage of respondents reporting that they attended a political march or rally within the last 12 months also increased as education level increased, with positive responses from 1% of high school graduates, 2% of associate's degree holders, and 3% of bachelor's degree holders. Rates of respondents reporting that they supported a political candidate within the last 12 months were highest for bachelor's degree holders (16%), followed by associate's degree holders (10%), then high school graduates (6%).

For attending a political meeting, bachelor's degree holders made up the largest percentage (10%), followed by associate's degree holders (6%) and high school graduates (3%). For boycotting or buycotting a product, bachelor's degree holders once again participated at the highest rate (10%), followed by associate's degree holders (6%) and high school graduates (4%). These findings were consistent with the literature, which showed that individuals with no college experience exhibited lower levels of engagement in all areas than individuals with higher levels of education *(Lopez & Brown, 2006)*; however, these results further disaggregate the college experience into 2-year and 4-year degrees, reflecting added

value not only in a 2-year degree over high school alone but also in a 4-year degree over a 2-year degree for these indicators.

Regression Analyses

Community-based engagement index. A regression analysis was used to explore the relationship between community-based engagement and highest level of education achieved. In the first model, the ordinary least squares regression model for community-based engagement, with no controls, showed that adults who attained an associate's degree were significantly less likely than bachelor's degree holders to engage in community-based activities.

A multiple regression model was then used, which added the background characteristics as controls. Significant differences between the groups remained with the addition of the background characteristics, which indicates that background characteristics do not explain the differences between the groups and their engagement in community-based activities. Therefore, something other than ethnicity, gender, income, or citizenship status is a better predictor of the differences in community-based engagement of individuals with varying levels of education. However, differences did exist between ethnic groups, with Asian (.078), Black (.045), Hawaiian (.007), and Hispanic (.060) adults being significantly less engaged in community-based engagement activities than White adults (See Table 4). For gender, male (.031) adults engaged in community-based engagement at a lower rate than their female counterparts. In regard to citizenship, U.S. citizens (.018) engaged in community-based activities at a higher rate than noncitizens. Though the overall relationship within the model was significant at the .000 level, the adjusted R^2 explained only 2.5% to 6% of the variance in the model. Therefore, between 94% and 97.5% of the variance within the model was explained by variables that were not available within this analysis.

Table 4. CPS Community-Based Engagement Index Regression Results

Variable	(1)	(2)
		+ Background
High School	-.170***	-.139***
Associate's degree	-.035***	-.033***
Background		
American Indian		.003***
Asian		-.078***

Black		-.045***
Hawaiian		-.007)
Hispanic		-.060**
Other		.040***
Citizenship		.018***
Gender		-.031***
Family Income		.136**
Adjusted R^2	.025	.059
N	150,999	150,999

Note. Standardized coefficients, p<.001 (***) and p<.01(**)

Volunteer index. The second linear regression analysis was used to explore the volunteer index. With no controls, high school graduates and adults with an associate's degree were again significantly less likely to engage in volunteering activities than adults with a bachelor's degree. The standardized coefficient for high school graduates with no controls was greater at –.191 compared to –.096 for associate's degree holders (See Table 5). These differences indicated that individuals who had attained only a high school diploma engaged in volunteer activities at a lower rate than associate's degree holders since the standardized coefficient is a larger negative number. This pattern remained with the addition of controls for background characteristics, again indicating that the background characteristics included in this study did not explain the differences in volunteering between the groups and, therefore, other variables not included in this analysis would better explain the differences.

The results further showed that only adults who identified as Black (.031) were significantly less likely to engage in volunteering activities than White adults. Differences between all other ethnic groups were not statistically significant, meaning no conclusions could be drawn regarding the relationship of membership in these ethnic group with volunteering. Citizenship was also not significant in this model. Gender was significant at the .01 level, with males being less engaged in volunteer activities than females. Family income (.059) was significant, with higher income families engaging in volunteer activities at a higher rate than lower income families. This measure exhibited the highest standardized coefficient in the model, suggesting it explained the greatest amount of the differences between adults who volunteered and those who did not volunteer. Again, the overall relationship was significant at the .000 level, but the adjusted R^2 explained only 3% to 4% of the vari-

ance within this model; therefore, variables outside the scope of this study explain 96% to 97% of the variance.

Table 5. CPS Volunteer Index Regression Results

Variable	(1)	(2)
High school	-.191***	-.173***
Associate's degree	-.096***	-.094***
Background		
American Indian		-.008
Asian		-.020
Black		-.031*
Hawaiian		.000
Latino		-.028
Other		.012
Citizenship		.027
Gender		-.029**
Family income		.059***
Adjusted R^2	.026	.035
N	150,799	150,799

Note: Standardized coefficients, , p<.001 (***), p<.01(**), and p<.05(*)

Political engagement index. The final regression explored the relationship between political engagement and the educational attainment of adults. The results were consistent with the two previous models in that adults with only a high school diploma or with an associate's degree were less likely to engage in political activities than adults with a bachelor's degree. This pattern continued with the addition of controls for background characteristics. In this model, all background characteristics were significant at the .001 level. Asian (.051), Black (.012), Hawaiian (.002), and Hispanic (.045) adults were found to engage in politically based activities at a lower rate than White adults (See Table 6).

As for citizenship status, U.S. citizens (.034) engaged in political activities at a higher rate than noncitizens, and males (.020) engaged in political activities at a lower rate than females. Family income data also indicated that higher income families are significantly more engaged in political activities (.127) than lower income families. This variable again exhibited the highest standardized coefficient in the model. The standardized coefficients in the first model, without controls, showed that associate's degree holders were 0.146 standard deviations less likely to engage in political activities; the standardized coefficient for high school graduates was again greater at .171, indicating they were less likely to engage

in political activities than bachelor's degree holders or associate's degree holders. The overall relationship was again significant at the .000 level, and the adjusted R^2 explained between 2% and 4% of the variance within this model.

Table 6. CPS Political Index Regression Results

Variable	(1)	(2)
		+ Background
High school	-.171***	-.146***
Associates degree	-.065***	-.065***
Background		
American Indian		.002***
Asian		-.051***
Black		-.012***
Hawaiian		-.002***
Latino		-.045***
Other		.001***
Citizenship		.034***
Gender		-.020***
Family income		.127***
Adjusted R^2	.024	.048
N	150,799	150,799

Note. Standardized coefficients, p<.001 (***)

Discussion

This study focused on the differences between individuals with an associate's degree compared to those with only a high school diploma and those with a bachelor's degree. Since the data for adults reflected a nationally representative, weighted sample of the U.S. population, the findings may be applied to high schools, community colleges, and 4-year universities within the United States. It should still be considered that the measures of civic engagement and factors linked to increased civic engagement were limited. The full range of civic indicators developed by Keeter et al. *(2002)* were not available in the data. This may have impacted the outcome of the regression analyses as there were no electoral indicators and a limited number of political indicators.

It would be ideal if future research could include all 19 civic, electoral, political voice, and cognitive indicators as outlined in *The*

Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait (Keeter et al., 2002) as well as a wide range of demographic information including family socioeconomic variables and high school engagement activities. With the inclusion of a wider range of background characteristics, the models would likely predict a larger amount of the variance between education levels, and the wider range of engagement variables would enable a better understanding of differences in the types of engagement by education level.

For the limited number of variables available in the data within this study, the descriptive statistics and regression analyses did show that individuals with a bachelor's degree had higher rates of engagement than associate's degree holders and high school graduates, but associate's degree holders had higher rates of engagement than high school graduates in all measures. These results confirmed what we already knew: that education has a tiered effect, with levels of civic engagement increasing as education increases. What is unique to this study is that the results suggest a positive correlation between an additional 2 years of college and gains in an individual's level of engagement, at least for the measures examined. Conversely, these results indicate that an individual who does not obtain any additional education beyond high school is at a disadvantage in a participatory democracy. These findings highlight the importance of an additional 2 years of education at a community college, which apparently augment students' skills for lifelong engagement. This is particularly important for those who do not go on to obtain a bachelor's degree.

Implications

The linear regression analyses indicated that background characteristics did not explain the differences in engagement for the indicators included in this study. Rather, additional factors outside the scope of this study came into play, which may include parents' income and education. These additional factors could result in individuals from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds attending a 4-year college and obtaining a bachelor's degree at higher rates than lower socioeconomic status individuals. These variables were not available in the data but should be added in future research. The variation in engagement by education level may also be attributed to the cumulative nature of civic engagement: that is, as education increases, so does civic engagement. Even so, if individuals with an associate's degree are more likely to engage in civic activities than individuals with a high school diploma, these findings have important implications for community colleges concerned with the civic

engagement of their graduates throughout life. Since an associate's degree may be the terminal degree for many adults, community colleges should focus on teaching students the skills necessary to be engaged citizens and provide opportunities for them to practice these skills in case they do not obtain higher levels of education. Since adults with an associate's degree exhibit lower levels of civic engagement than bachelor's degree holders but higher rates of engagement than high school graduates, community colleges may be able to provide interventions to students between high school and the workforce that can foster civic engagement in college and throughout life. Community colleges may choose to promote policies and practices as well as provide strong leadership toward creating a culture of civic engagement on their campuses. If students are provided opportunities to engage in civic activities while in school, they will likely develop the foundation needed for future engagement, thus limiting their disadvantage in our democratic system.

American education systems should join forces to increase the civic engagement of their students at all levels. Many 2-year and 4-year colleges are already participating in Campus Compact, a coalition of over 1,000 colleges and universities committed to fulfilling the civic purpose of higher education. The Democracy Commitment similarly focuses on civic engagement at community colleges, and the American Democracy Project is dedicated to producing civically engaged graduates at 4-year colleges and universities. These groups have joined together with a shared mission of engaging students in civic learning and democratic practice for the benefit of all students.

Unfortunately, many of the civic reform movements in higher education are optional rather than part of students' educational requirements for completion. They are usually an additional component rather than the central theme of the pathway to success. A recent movement, however, has challenged educational systems at all levels—K-12, community colleges, and 4-year colleges and universities—to commit to putting civic learning at the core of education. It is argued that if this challenge is met, the benefits can be far-reaching for the country and the economy *(AACU, 2012)*. The state of Massachusetts has already stepped up to this challenge by mandating that civic engagement at all 2-year and 4-year colleges be measured along with other more traditional standards such as graduation rates *(Smith, 2012)*.

In order for citizens to have equal opportunity to engage in the democratic processes that govern our country, regardless of their

level of educational attainment, all educational institutions need to share the responsibility. Broader dialogue may result when a larger number of educational institutions bring their voices and perspectives to the table. A result may be a comprehensive pipeline that offers students civic engagement training throughout their educational experience, thus leading to lifelong engagement regardless of level of education.

As mentioned previously, future research should explore the additional factors beyond the background characteristics included in this study that may be linked to the graduated levels of civic engagement for adults not enrolled in school. Parents' education and income as well as individuals' activities in high school were not included in this study and have been found to be strong predictors of civic engagement in school and later in life *(Kirlin, 2003)*. Therefore, future research should explore these variables and their link to the civic engagement of high school graduates and associate's degree holders. Future research should also include a wider range of civic engagement indicators, especially registering to vote and voting, often the most accessible form of engagement in terms of money and time.

Community college leaders should use these comparative findings to better understand their student populations. Since the engagement of associate's degree holders is lower than that of bachelor's degree holders, community colleges should provide greater support, training, and opportunities to their students while they have them on campus. Additional support and greater opportunities for civic engagement cannot do harm, but will likely have benefits for students while in college and later in life, serving to lessen the gap in civic engagement between educational attainment levels.

Conclusions

This study supports the case for America's colleges to continue their commitment to educating a citizenry that can be well informed and thus better face the challenges of a participatory democracy. If community colleges and 4-year colleges and universities commit to this cause, the political inequality within the United States may be lessened. By educating and organizing their students, community colleges are providing opportunities to low-income, minority, and often marginalized individuals so they can build the habits of advocating for their rights and the rights of others, persuading others, communicating effectively, and voting, to name a few. These efforts may lead to a change in the system that has historically oper-

ated more favorably for high socioeconomic status individuals. In addition, focusing on adolescents while in school helps develop these habits of engagement, which then become more firmly established later in life *(Levine, 2007)*. If colleges at all levels provide equal opportunities for students to engage politically in and out of class as well as in their community, the voices of all citizens may have a chance of being heard in the roar of the crowd.

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About the Author

Mallory Angeli Newell is the supervisor of institutional research and planning at De Anza College in Cupertino, California. In addition to her research on civic engagement of community college students, she also focuses on student success and equity for community college students. She holds an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from California State University, Sacramento, a master's degree in political science and a bachelor's degree in communication studies from California State University, Chico.