

# **The Role of Civic Literacy and Social Empathy on Rates of Civic Engagement Among University Students**

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## **Abstract**

Civic engagement is pivotal to the health of communities. Through engagement in civic activities, people from diverse backgrounds come together to address community problems. Recent studies report declining rates of civic engagement among Americans. In particular, young Americans engage less frequently in activities central to democracy, such as voting and influencing legislation. This article examines the relationships between civic engagement, civic literacy, and social empathy among students enrolled at a public university in the western United States. Findings from this study indicate that increased civic literacy and social empathy correlate to higher rates of civic engagement among university students.

*Keywords:* Civic engagement, community engagement, civic literacy, social empathy

## **Introduction**

Americans have a long tradition of political participation and civic involvement. Skocpol (1997) argued that the freedom to associate politically, which is inherent to American democracy, extended beyond politics to many other civic matters, resulting in a rich and multifaceted history of civic engagement. From the voluntary associations described by Tocqueville to the participatory politics of the early nation, American democracy has depended on people coming together to solve problems of community living. Civic engagement, then and today, involves collective action to address problems or to promote specific interests within communities. Ehrlich (2000) describes civic engagement as efforts “to make a difference in the civic life of our communities. . . . It means promoting the quality of life in a community through both political and non-political processes” (p. vi).

Much has been written about the decline of civic engagement among Americans. Americans today vote less frequently and in smaller numbers than did past generations (File, 2013). They are less likely to belong to community organizations, to attend community meetings (Levine & Liu, 2015), or to contact public officials (AACU,

2012). In particular, the engagement of young adults, those 18 to 29 years of age, in civic matters has declined over the past four decades (AACU, 2012). Young people today are less likely to vote than were past generations at the same age (File, 2013). The decline in civic engagement among young adults is an important consideration, given the significant role these young people will have in shaping the future of American democracy. It also necessitates exploration of what encourages civic engagement among young Americans.

Understanding the basic processes and functions of government encourages more involvement in democratic processes (ISI, 2011). Unfortunately, this understanding of government, or civic literacy, has also declined over the last two to three decades (AACU, 2012). Whereas civic literacy provides the knowledge that might enable people to be active within their communities, another concept, social empathy, could provide the motivation for involvement. *Social empathy* refers to the ability to understand the life experiences of others within a context of social inequities and disparities (Segal, 2011). It also involves a sense of social responsibility (Segal, Wagaman, & Gerdes, 2012). To date, no published studies have explicitly examined the effect of social empathy on civic engagement. This study examined the relationship between social empathy, civic literacy, and civic engagement among students enrolled in a medium-sized public university in the western United States. Specifically, this study sought to explore the effect of social empathy and civic literacy on different forms of civic engagement.

## Literature Review

### Civic Engagement

Civic engagement includes a variety of activities falling into three not necessarily exclusive categories: (1) civic activities, (2) political voice activities, and (3) electoral activities (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002). Civic activities focus on voluntary associations that promote the health and wellbeing of a community. These activities include membership in fraternal organizations, religious organizations, clubs, or professional associations as well as volunteering, charitable fundraising, and community problem-solving. Political voice and electoral activities emphasize the role of citizenship in American democracy. Political voice activities involve efforts to shape social institutions through collective action. Examples of political voice activities include boycotting companies, signing petitions, protesting, expressing opinions to media sources,

and lobbying efforts such as writing letters or e-mails, testifying, and visits with policymakers. Finally, electoral activities include all those activities aimed at influencing the outcomes of the American electoral process, such as voting, campaigning, and registering other people to vote.

For democracy to function as such, community members must be engaged in civic matters (AACU, 2012). Moreover, they must engage in all three categories of activities: civic, political voice, and electoral. Through collective action, people from different backgrounds, who might not normally associate with one another, come together for a common purpose. As a result, civic engagement promotes an understanding of the connection between individual self-interest and the common good. Additionally, political voice and electoral activities help to hold decision makers accountable to the needs and interests of citizens.

Not only is civic engagement pivotal to democracy, it also correlates to positive community and individual outcomes. In a 2011 report, the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) reported that “civic health matters for economic resilience” (p. 6). The NCoC study found that communities with higher rates of civic engagement recovered faster economically after the recession. At the individual level, civic engagement can help develop habits and social networks that make people more employable. Furthermore, volunteering results in increased voting and feelings of empowerment as citizens (Greenblatt, 2012). NonProfit Votes (*n.d.*) reported that voters experience increased social connections, increased personal agency, and, perhaps as a result, better health and mental health outcomes. Political activism, in particular, correlates to higher reported life satisfaction, less stress, and greater overall wellbeing (Klar and Kasser, 2009; Sanders, 2001). Civic engagement plays a particularly important role in the experiences of college and university students. Civically engaged students have higher rates of satisfaction with college, higher GPAs, and higher retention rates; they are also more likely to complete degrees than are their less engaged peers (AACU, 2012).

Despite the numerous benefits, rates of civic engagement within the United States have continued to plummet. During his recent keynote address at the Campus Compact 30th Anniversary Conference, Robert Putnam derided the shrinking sense of community responsibility and civic belongingness among Americans in what he referred to as “a shriveled sense of we” (Putnam, 2016). Although rates of volunteerism have increased (largely as a result of initiatives to promote youth volunteerism), other forms of civic

engagement have declined over the last 50 years. Levine and Liu (2015) reported, "The proportions of Americans who say that they have attended community meetings, worked with neighbors to address problems, and belonged to organizations have fallen between 1975 and 2005" (p. 3).

In particular, engagement in political voice and electoral activities has fallen. In a seminal report on civic engagement published more than a decade ago, young Americans were less likely to contact an elected official (34%) than they were to engage in community service (61%) or fundraising activities (51%) (Portney & O'Leary, 2007). Only 23% engaged in political campaigning or attended any public policymaking meetings. This reluctance to become involved in the democratic process is evident in patterns of voting. Arguably one of the most basic civic duties in which citizens can engage, voting has steadily declined since the 1960s. During the 2014 interim election, only 41.9% of eligible Americans voted (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). In particular, voting among younger generations, which typically post high rates of voting, has declined nearly 12% over the past five decades (File, 2013). Although voter turnout among university and college students has historically been higher than voter turnout among the general population, this difference has leveled out in recent elections. According to a national study of college student voting, turnout among college and university students in most elections is 42% nationally (Thomas & Benenson, 2016). Most recently, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE, 2016) estimated that 50% of citizens age 18 to 24 voted in the 2016 presidential election. The decline in voting among young adults could relate to a lack of confidence in the effectiveness of voting in addressing social issues. Kiesa et al. (2007) reported that young adults view voting as minimally effective in promoting change.

Researchers have sought answers to the question "What factors lead to greater civic engagement among Americans?" Caputo (2010) found that education, income, and marital status correlated with higher civic engagement. Presence of children in the home and possession of college degrees correlated to nonactivist forms of civic engagement. Similarly, Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, and Keeter (2003) found that youth whose parents volunteered were more likely to be civically engaged themselves. Although these findings provide some prospects for encouraging civic engagement, they fail to adequately spur political voice or electoral activities. Levine and Liu (2015) concluded that we have been successful in building an infrastructure of volunteer service but have failed to

adequately address the other forms of civic engagement. We have thus neglected forms of engagement that aid in developing our ability to engage in difficult discussions, problem solving, and collaboration—that is, our ability to create and sustain healthy democratic communities.

## Civic Literacy

Just as levels of civic engagement have decreased over the last three decades (*Levine & Liu, 2015*), levels of civic literacy among U.S. citizens have also decreased. The lack of understanding of the most basic of governmental functions and processes has been widely publicized (“*Americans’ Grasp on Civic Knowledge*,” 2014; *Granderson, 2013*). A recent Annenberg Public Policy Center study (*APPC, 2014*) found that only 36% of U.S. adults could name all three branches of the federal government. Similarly, a Pew study (*Pew Research Center, 2012*) found that less than half of Americans could identify which political party held the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives, and *CIRCLE (2013)* reported that only 53% of their sample could identify the political party that represents a more conservative ideology.

Young Americans also evidence low levels of civic knowledge. In 2010, less than 24% of high school seniors scored in the proficient or advanced range of the National Assessment of Educational Progress’s civics exam (*NCES, 2011*). College and university students fare little better. The AACU (*2012*) reported that the average score on a civic literacy exam among 14,000 college seniors fell within the failing range. Similarly, *ISI (2011)* reported that among the 28,000 college students they surveyed, the average civic literacy score was 54%, or failing. Young Americans appear to have little understanding of how government functions, the complexities of the political process, or political ideology (*APPC, 2014*).

The lack of understanding of the basic functions and processes of American government raises the question, what does it mean to be civically literate? Although there is disagreement as to what civic literacy entails, most researchers agree that it includes “a basic understanding of the structure and functioning of government as well as the political process through which decisions are shaped” (*Hylton, 2015, p. 296*). It also includes an understanding of the values that form the foundation of the U.S. Constitution, such as liberty, freedom, and justice.

Preparedness for engaged citizenship requires a civically literate populace. For example, civic literacy has frequently been cited

as an important influence on civic engagement. ISI (2011) found that greater civic knowledge was the leading factor increasing rates of political engagement among Americans. When looking at specific indicators of civic engagement, CIRCLE (2013) found that young people with lower levels of political knowledge voted less than their more informed peers. The belief in the importance of civic knowledge to exercising citizenship can also be seen in the requirement that people applying for U.S. citizenship must pass a civics exam (10 randomly selected questions about the U.S. government) as part of the U.S. Naturalization Exam. Unfortunately, as further evidence of the lack of civic literacy among Americans, one in three native-born U.S. citizens can't pass the civics questions on the Naturalization Exam (*"Americans' Grasp on Civic Knowledge,"* 2014).

## **Social Empathy**

Social empathy provides a conceptual means by which to understand how people recognize social injustice as well as their role in relation to these injustices. Social empathy couples interpersonal empathy with an understanding of contextual factors and a sense of social responsibility (Segal et al., 2012). Segal (2011) defines social empathy as "the ability to understand people by perceiving or experiencing their life situations and as a result gain insight into structural inequalities and disparities" (p. 267). An understanding of historical and contemporary structural inequities and oppression are inherent to this ability. Segal et al. (2012) refer to the ability to understand these structural inequities without having experienced them firsthand as *macro-perspective-taking*. Such macro-perspective-taking enables people to transcend their own position within the social structure to better understand and empathize with groups in differing positions, including people in lower socioeconomic classes or people of different races, ethnicities, religions, gender identities, national origins, and sexual orientations.

Segal, Gerdes, Mullins, Wagaman, and Androff (2011) postulate that social empathy "fosters people's involvement in social change processes and increases civic engagement" (p. 442). Social empathy as a foundation of civic or democratic decision-making would, theoretically, lead to choices and solutions based on the wellbeing of all rather than being guided by self-interest. In discussing the potential of social empathy to influence democratic decision-making, Segal (2011) stated,

If we operate on a foundation of social empathy, of truly identifying cognitively and emotionally with others to fully comprehend their situation, and then act on that understanding, we can only create a more just society with fewer social and economic disparities. (p. 273)

She concluded that social empathy and civic engagement work together in a dynamic process, each encouraging the development of the other.

Although prior research has found a connection between empathy and the ability to transcend self-interest (*Hoffman, 2000*), arguably the focus has been on interpersonal empathy and not social empathy. Interpersonal empathy refers to the ability to identify and understand the emotions of other people with whom we interact. Social empathy has only recently been conceptually defined and recognized as a distinct form of empathy. As only one component of social empathy, interpersonal empathy may not, on its own, encourage civic thinking. Segal (*2011*) warned that interpersonal empathy lacks the contextual understanding inherent to macro-perspective-taking and can lead to “flawed” understandings of large-scale structural issues, such as poverty or racism. Segal (*2011*) argued that interpersonal empathy thus “is insufficient to motivate a society or community toward social justice” (p. 268). In contrast, social empathy, with its concordant contextual understanding and sense of social responsibility, may increase people’s willingness to engage in civic endeavors.

## Methods

This study employed a web-based survey to examine the rates of civic engagement, civic literacy, and social empathy among a sample of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in a medium-sized public university in the western United States. The study was declared exempt from Institutional Review Board review due to the lack of identifying information from participants. The question guiding this study was “Do social empathy and civic literacy influence rates of civic engagement?” It was hypothesized that civic engagement would increase with increased civic literacy or increased social empathy. In particular, it was hypothesized that two of the three civic engagement subscales, political voice and electoral activities, would be positively correlated to civic literacy. By contrast it was hypothesized that social empathy would be positively related to the third subscale, civic activities.

The web-based survey included the Civic Engagement Quiz (CIRCLE, *n.d.*), the Social Empathy Index, 20 civic literacy questions, and demographic questions. Developed by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, the Civic Engagement Quiz is a 26-item measure of civic engagement. The instrument uses indicators outlined by Keeter et al. (2002) and includes three subscales reflecting different dimensions of civic engagement: civic activities, electoral activities, and political voice. Respondents indicated their involvement in civic engagement activities by answering yes or no for each item. The Social Empathy Index (SEI) is a 40-item measure of social and interpersonal empathy developed by Segal et al. (2012). The SEI consists of two domains: interpersonal empathy and social empathy/contextual understanding. The instrument uses a 6-point Likert-type scale on which respondents indicate their level of agreement with statements indicative of empathy. Total scores for both subscales as well as the full SEI were calculated, with higher scores indicating higher levels of empathy.

The civic literacy measure included 15 questions from the National Assessment of Educational Progress's Questions Tool compiled by the US Department of Education (2014) and five questions addressing current national political leadership as well as state congressional representation. The questions from the Civic Assessment Database focused on principles of American democracy and constitutional issues. All of the questions were multiple choice. Scores on the civic literacy measure were calculated by adding the number of correct answers provided by individual respondents.

From a spreadsheet of all students enrolled at the university during the spring 2014 semester, 3,000 undergraduate students and 500 graduate students were randomly selected for participation. Via a SurveyMonkey e-mail, these students were sent an invitation to participate in the study and a link to the survey. Three follow-up e-mails were sent during the course of the semester. A total of 583 students started the survey, of which 168 had missing data and were excluded from the analysis. Exclusion of incomplete surveys left 415 completed surveys that were analyzed, resulting in a response rate of 11.8%.

## Results

The overwhelming majority of respondents identified as female (71%), 28% identified as male, and 1% identified as transgender.



Eighteen percent of respondents reported being in graduate programs, 28% identified as juniors, 30% identified as seniors, and the remaining 24% were nearly equally split between freshmen and sophomores. Over 84% of respondents reported being full-time students, and 73% of respondents worked either full or part time. Twenty-six percent of the sample were pursuing degrees in social work, and 31% reported pursuing degrees in health science fields, including nursing, medicine, speech pathology, public health, and allied fields. Nineteen percent were pursuing degrees in the hard sciences or in engineering, 11% were pursuing degrees in the liberal arts, 6% in education, 6% in counseling or psychology, and 1% were pursuing degrees in other fields.

## **Rates and Types of Engagement**

Participants in this study reported involvement in an average of 10 civic engagement activities over the course of their lives. Notably, all students reported engaging in some form of civic engagement activity, with nearly all respondents (99%) reporting engagement in three or more activities. As in previous studies, students reported higher rates of engagement in civic activities versus political voice or electoral activities. Students engaged in an average of five civic activities compared to an average of 3.7 political voice activities and one electoral activity (see Table 1).

Engagement in activities categorized as “civic” ranged from 95% (community service volunteering) to 31% (environmental work) of the sample. The most commonly reported civic activity in which students engaged was unpaid volunteer work. Students in this sample reported high rates of involvement in charitable fundraising and volunteer work for youth, children, or education. They reported far less involvement in environmental organizations. Engagement in political voice activities ranged from 72% of the sample (boycotting companies) to just 6% (contacting broadcast media). By far, the most frequent political voice activities in which students engaged involved exercising opinion in a fashion that minimized both time requirements and possibilities for confrontation or disagreement, such as boycotting or supporting companies and signing petitions. Students were far less likely to report involvement in activities that involved higher time commitments or more risk of disagreement or confrontation, such as expressing their opinions to either print or broadcast media or having served as a canvasser. Students reported low rates of engagement in electoral activities, ranging from 36% of the sample who always voted to 14% of the sample who had given money to a campaign. Only 16% of

**Table 1. Percentage of Engagement by Activity**

	%
<b>Civic Activities</b>	
Have you volunteered or done any voluntary community services for no pay?	95
Have you volunteered for an organization for youth, children or education?	76
Besides donating money, have you ever done anything else to help raise money for a charitable cause?	70
Have you ever worked together with someone or some group to solve a problem in the community where you live?	66
Have you personally walked, ran or bicycled for a charitable cause?	63
Have you volunteered with a civic or community organization involved in health or social services?	52
Do you currently belong to any voluntary groups, clubs or associations?	48
Have you volunteered with a religious group?	46
Have you volunteered with an environmental organization?	31
<b>Political Voice</b>	
Have you ever NOT bought something from a certain company because you disagree with the social or political values of the company that produces it?	72
Have you bought something because you have liked the social or political values of the company that produces or provides it?	68
Have you ever signed an email petition about a social or political issue?	65
Have you ever signed a written petition about a political or social issue?	63
Have you ever contacted or visited a public official at any level of government to express your opinion?	34
Have you ever taken part in a protest, march or demonstration?	28
Have you contacted a newspaper or magazine to express your opinion?	16
Have you worked as a canvasser going door to door for a political or social group or candidate?	16
Have you contacted broadcast media to express your opinion?	6
<b>Electoral Activities</b>	
We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Do you vote in both national and local elections? <sup>a</sup>	36
Have you volunteered for a political organization or candidate running for office?	23
When there is an election taking place, do you try to convince people to vote for or against one of the parties or candidates, or not?	16
Do you wear a campaign button, put a sticker on your car, or place a sign in front of your house?	15
Have you ever given money to a candidate, political party, or organization that supported candidates?	14

Note. N = 415. All percentages have been rounded.

<sup>a</sup>Participants were able to select "always," "usually," or "never" in response to this question. Only the "always" answers were used to calculate the percentage reported in this row to indicate regular voting.

students reported attempting to influence the votes of other people, and only 15% reported expressing their preference for candidates via buttons, stickers, or yard signs. Interestingly, 17% of students reported having never voted. All respondents were over the age of 18; however, it is possible that some students had not yet had the opportunity to vote in an election after turning 18. Furthermore, many respondents would have had fewer opportunities to vote or contribute to campaigns than they would have had to participate in other forms of civic engagement due to their age.

## Civic Literacy Scores

Students in this sample scored relatively well on the civic literacy questions. The average score on the civic literacy questions was 15.5 out of 20, or the equivalent of a C+. A slight majority of students (55.9%) scored in the A or B range, and 12.8% scored in the failing range (see Table 2). The question most often answered correctly asked students to identify the three branches of government, which 96% of students answered correctly. The question most often answered incorrectly asked students which branch of the federal government has the power to tax: 36% of the students answered this question incorrectly. Seven of the 20 questions were incorrectly answered by more than a quarter of the students (see Table 3). Three of the four questions about current political leadership were among these seven questions. Thirty-six percent of the students could not identify the current Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, and 34% could not identify the party holding the majority of members in the House.

**Table 2. Percentage of Students Scoring in Each Grade Range**

Grade	<i>n</i>	%
A (100%–90%)	155	37.3
B (89%–80%)	77	18.6
C (79%–70%)	73	17.6
D (69%–60%)	57	13.7
F (59% and below)	53	12.8

Note. N = 415.

**Table 3. Questions Most Often Answered Incorrectly**

	% Incorrect
Who is the current Speaker of the United States House of Representatives? <sup>a</sup>	36
Under the United States Constitution, the power to tax belongs to the...?	36
Which party holds the majority of members in the United States House of Representatives? <sup>a</sup>	34
Which of the following activities is an example of cooperation between state and national governments?	27
The number of electoral votes each state is allotted is based on the state's...?	28
Which party holds the majority in the United States Senate? <sup>a</sup>	25
In a democratic political system, which of the following ought to govern the country?	25

Note. N = 415. All percentages have been rounded.

<sup>a</sup> Items reflecting knowledge of current political leadership

## Social Empathy Scores

Scores on the Social Empathy Index (SEI) ranged significantly across the sample, with the lowest score being 114 and the highest being 238. The average score on the full SEI was 182. Scores on the SEI subscales of interpersonal empathy and social empathy/contextual understanding were similarly varied. Scores on the interpersonal empathy subscale ranged from 38 to 132, with the average score falling at 100. Scores on the social empathy/contextual understanding subscale ranged from a low of 7 to a high of 108, with the average falling at 82.

## Hypothesis Testing

The first hypothesis guiding this study predicted that civic engagement would be positively correlated with civic literacy and social empathy scores. A simple linear regression was calculated to test this hypothesis. A significant regression equation was found ( $F(2,408) = 17.681, p = .000$ , with an  $R^2$  of .075). The analysis shows that rates of civic engagement increased when levels of civic literacy ( $\beta = .221, p < .05$ ) and social empathy ( $\beta = .025, p < .05$ ) also increased.

To examine the subsequent study hypotheses, separate Pearson's correlations were run between each of the civic engagement subscales and the two independent variables, civic literacy and social empathy. There were weak but significant relationships between civic literacy and political voice activities ( $r = .250, n =$

415,  $p = .000$ ) and electoral activities ( $r = .236$ ,  $n = 415$ ,  $p = .000$ ). No significant relationship was found between civic literacy and civic activities ( $r = .016$ ,  $n = 415$ ,  $p = .016$ ). There were also significant relationships between social empathy as measured by the full SEI and two of the civic engagement subscales. Although significant, the relationship between social empathy and political voice activities was weak ( $r = .183$ ,  $n = 415$ ,  $p = .000$ ), as was the relationship between social empathy and civic activities ( $r = .161$ ,  $n = 415$ ,  $p = .001$ ). No significant relationship between social empathy and electoral activities was found ( $r = .087$ ,  $n = 415$ ,  $p = .078$ ).

A one-way ANOVA was run to determine whether or not academic major influenced rates of civic engagement. There was a statistically significant difference between students based on major ( $F(9,387) = 2.142$ ,  $p = .025$ ). Students majoring in social science disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, and philosophy, had the highest levels of civic engagement ( $m = 12.4$ ), and students majoring in social work reported the second-highest rates of civic engagement ( $m = 11.2$ ). A Tukey post-hoc test revealed that students in social science majors reported significantly higher levels of civic engagement than did students majoring in nursing ( $p = .034$ ), psychology and counseling ( $p = .025$ ), public health and pre-med programs ( $p = .021$ ), engineering ( $p = .009$ ), hard sciences ( $p = .002$ ), and the liberal arts ( $p = .002$ ). There were no statistically significant differences between students majoring in social sciences disciplines and those majoring in social work ( $p = .175$ ), education ( $p = .199$ ), or general studies ( $p = .300$ ). Furthermore, students majoring in social work reported significantly higher civic engagement rates than did students majoring in the liberal arts ( $p = .012$ ) or the hard sciences ( $p = .014$ ).

## Discussion

The civic engagement of students enrolled in this large public university in the western United States mirrored patterns of engagement evidenced in prior studies (Finley, 2012; Portney & O'Leary, 2007). These students were far more likely to have engaged in short-term volunteering than they were either to have engaged in a sustained commitment to civic matters or to have engaged directly with the democratic process. The most frequently reported activities involved a limited time commitment, such as community service volunteering, fundraising events, boycotting or supporting companies, or signing petitions. Respondents were less likely to have participated in civic activities that required a sustained time commitment, such as belonging to clubs or community organiza-

tions. Students were also less likely to have engaged in activities directly related to political processes, such as political campaigning, voicing support of candidates, attempting to influence the votes of others, lobbying policymakers in person, or participating in a march or protest. This finding is supported by prior research that indicates that young adults are dissatisfied with formal politics and are therefore less inclined to be involved in these activities (*Kiesa et al., 2007*). Importantly, the political voice and electoral activities in which students reported the least amount of involvement also often involved the potential for higher levels of conflict. For example, influencing the votes of others and testifying can involve persuading people who might hold differing positions.

As predicted, higher levels of both civic literacy and social empathy correlated to increased rates of civic engagement. More specifically, civic literacy appeared to encourage more involvement in electoral and political voice activities, and social empathy appeared to encourage more involvement in civic and political voice activities. These findings are important for efforts to encourage young adults to commit more fully to their communities through civic engagement activities. Educators who want to encourage young adults in the United States to engage either in the electoral process or in influencing policy may need to also focus on increasing opportunities for these young people to become civically literate. For example, three of the four questions that asked about current political leadership were answered incorrectly by over a quarter of participants. It shouldn't be surprising, therefore, that only 34% of these students reported "always voting." The connection between civic literacy and electoral and political voice engagement is particularly concerning given the low rates of civic literacy found in national studies (*AACU, 2012*). Expecting students to vote, campaign, register other people to vote, attempt to influence the votes of others, or lobby policymakers without ensuring that these students have a solid understanding of processes, functions, and laws governing these activities may be unrealistic.

Fortunately, research sponsored by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools indicates that civic engagement opportunities also build civic competence, including civic knowledge (*Gould, Jamieson, Levine, McConnell, & Smith, 2011*). In other words, civic literacy and civic engagement may have a mutually beneficial relationship. In addition, engagement in political voice and electoral activities specifically may also build civic literacy. Educators can begin to add opportunities for learning about governmental and political processes into civic engagement activities. Simply

ensuring that there are opportunities for students to engage in conversations about elections, and to explore candidates and election issues, has been shown to result in higher rates of voting among university students (Thomas & Benenson, 2016). Numerous types of civic engagement activities can offer college and university students opportunities to build civic literacy. For example, students can (1) coordinate candidate forums on campus and in the community, (2) coordinate and host mock elections and mock debates, (3) organize debate-watching parties, (4) engage in voter registration drives, (5) organize lobbying training on campus and in the community, and (6) engage in service-learning in community advocacy organizations.

As stated previously, increased social empathy also is correlated with increased civic engagement, particularly in civic and political voice activities. Based on these findings, the ability to recognize structural inequities and empathize with those groups subject to them appears to encourage university students to address such inequities through civic engagement. The increased engagement could reflect students' attempts to address these inequities via civic activities such as fundraising or issue-specific volunteering and political voice activities such as boycotting and petition signing. Therefore, educators may be able to encourage civic engagement by providing learning opportunities that facilitate the development of social empathy. Providing opportunities for students to learn about social structure, social institutions, social problems, structural oppression, privilege, power, and diversity can help them better understand social injustice and economic inequality. This understanding may help facilitate the development of empathy for people who suffer from economic inequality and social injustice. Furthermore, similar to the mutually reinforcing relationship between civic literacy and civic engagement, social empathy and civic and political voice activities might also work reciprocally. Engagement in civic and political voice activities that highlight social injustice and economic inequality may also strengthen the development of social empathy.

The higher rates of civic engagement among social science majors and, to a slightly lesser extent, social work students, may reflect various aspects of their academic programs, including more opportunities or even expectations for involvement in their communities; greater availability or requirements of service-learning within said majors; greater understanding of societal institutions, which leads to greater engagement; or simply greater interest in civic matters. It is not possible to ascertain why students in some

majors were significantly more engaged with their communities than students in other majors.

A significant limitation of this study is its lack of generalizability to other universities or colleges and beyond to young adults not enrolled in college. To better understand the relationships between civic literacy, social empathy, and civic engagement a broader sample of young adults from geographically diverse locales and educationally diverse backgrounds is needed. However, the findings of this exploratory study raise important possible directions of research for educators and organizers interested in increasing civic engagement. Future studies should investigate the direct relationship between civic literacy, social empathy, and civic engagement among a broader segment of the U.S. population. For example, how do civic literacy and social empathy interact to affect the engagement of young adults who aren't enrolled in college? Additionally, what types of activities encourage development of both civic literacy and civic engagement? As they may with civic literacy, researchers can begin to look for best practices in terms of integrating social empathy development into civic engagement efforts. For example, future studies could use a pretest–posttest design to examine how educational units on social empathy affect rates of civic engagement. Given the relatively recent conceptualization of social empathy as a specific theoretical construct, future studies could also look at the types of knowledge and experiences that build this form of empathy.

## Conclusion

To ensure that justice and freedom exist in balance for all members of society, Americans must be engaged in their communities and interested in the wellbeing of their fellow residents. To do so, they must be informed about the issues within their communities, empathize with those challenged by an unjust social structure (social empathy), and understand enough about the democratic process (civic literacy) to be able to engage in change efforts with their fellow community members. They must be willing to take on controversial issues and wade into conflict on behalf of their communities when issues threaten common values of democracy. This study illustrates that civic literacy and social empathy together may play a role in increasing civic engagement.

Young adults are reportedly ambivalent about formal politics, due in part to the polarized and confrontational nature of recent political discourse (*Kiesa et al., 2007*). Although it is encouraging to



see university students engaged in volunteering and fundraising activities, this pattern of engagement may reflect young adults' frustrations with the recent political climate as well as the limitations of current civic engagement efforts. The responsibilities and dispositions of citizenship or (for those who are not citizens) community membership are not time limited or conflict free. Arguably, true engagement in community requires a sustained interest in, attention to, and willingness to be involved with community efforts. It also requires a willingness to "fight," or to engage conflict, in order to do what is best for the community. Although volunteering and participating in fundraising activities might raise awareness of specific issues faced by segments of the community, these activities do not always engender a larger sense of community belongingness or responsibility, or prepare young adults to take on the difficult problems of democracy. Fortunately, according to a recent survey of incoming college freshmen, young adults are willing to engage conflict through protest and activism (Eagan et al., 2015). Educators can build on these inclinations by providing knowledge and training for effective engagement in political voice and electoral activities as well as cultivating opportunities for students to engage in sustained community involvement.

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