Civic Engagement Across Postsecondary Education

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American public higher education has long been described as having a democratic purpose, and a great deal of civic work is taking place on college campuses today. This report explores how postsecondary education is teaching people to be civically engaged, answering the questions: which strategies are effective at engaging people to participate in democracy, what skills are being taught, and where would philanthropic investment have the greatest leverage? **In short, civic engagement opportunities are distributed unevenly across institution types and programming tends to be delivered in a co-curricular model, which excludes students based on their availability to participate. Civic outcomes are difficult to measure and compare without a common definition and framework**.

Key findings

- **Measuring civic engagement as voting excludes some students and many civic actions**. Voter turnout and intent to vote are the field's two most common outcome measures; the largest data source captures turnout in national elections only. Students unable to vote due to age, citizenship, or other factors are not counted as engaged. Neither is a student who testifies at a school board meeting or organizes tenants in her building.
- **Programs designed to build specific skills produce different kinds of citizens, depending upon what is taught and how.** A food drive can teach a student to donate, to organize, or to ask why people are hungry. The difference is in how the program is designed.
- **Young people report high interest in civic engagement.** Roughly 3 in 4 young people report high interest in community leadership and in current-issue conversation, and reported interest exceeds reported engagement on every activity measured. Community college leaders name limited resources and a lack of faculty to teach civic courses as barriers to offering civic engagement programming.
- **Opportunity and evidence are concentrated where students are not**. A large, well-funded higher education civic coalition is composed of 69 percent private institutions and seven percent community colleges, even though community colleges enroll roughly 4 in 10 American undergraduates. Of 17 national programs inventoried, most do not report outcomes other than reach or implementation.
- **The civic engagement gap in career and technical education has more to do with labeling and designation**. Some civic learning occurs in clinicals, practicums, and apprenticeships, but it is rarely designated as civic learning, so it is not counted or assessed.

Why civic engagement in postsecondary matters

Students learn more than skills from civic engagement programming; they learn what kind of political actor an institution takes them to be. A student whose campus offers sustained dialogue across difference and a required civic course learns that engaging in deliberation is something that people like them do; a student whose campus offers a voter registration table in the quad learns that participation is something to opt into. Opportunities for postsecondary civic engagement differ across sectors. The consequence of the uneven distribution of civic opportunity is a population of graduates who may differ in whether they believe their voice matters and participation works, sorted by how they engaged in postsecondary.

Where philanthropic investment could have leverage

1. **Invest in a research agenda that prioritizes understudied student populations and the institutions that serve them.** Regional public universities enroll 47 percent of bachelor's-seeking students, yet they barely appear in the literature; community college evidence is even thinner.
2. **Build disaggregation, designation, and measurement into what is already funded.** Adding a program of study variable and a designation requirement to existing instruments would show where civic learning happens, since only 18 percent of community college survey respondents say they specifically designate civic engagement.
3. **Invest in the staffing structure that delivers civic engagement programming.** Programs that depend on one person's commitment are vulnerable when that person leaves, and staffing limitations in community colleges are well-documented.
4. **Invest in curricular civic learning at community colleges and pay for students' time where curricular delivery is not yet possible.** Curricular delivery reduces the discretionary time a student needs to participate in activities outside of the classroom, and paid internships, stipends, or credit can also help.
5. **Extend funding and successful models to open access institutions.** Investment and research are concentrated at more selective four-year institutions while students concentrate at community colleges, in career and technical programs, and at regional public universities.
6. **Align investments with accreditation and state or system policy.** Accreditors are beginning to write civic learning into their standards, and state and system policies are mandating civic requirements. These levers reach institutions that might not have apply for grant funding.

This summary is followed by a postsecondary civic engagement decision and measurement tool that funders can use as they weigh investment decisions. The tool outlines four questions to consider and provides suggestions for how to approach learning and measurement.

Funding Postsecondary Civic Engagement

A DECISION AND MEASUREMENT TOOL

As funders weigh investment decisions, consider these four questions:

1. Which skill does it build?

Why it matters	Civic engagement by itself is a vague outcome to measure.
Strong answer	Names one or two of the six skill categories + specific activity that builds each one.
Weak answer	Names civic engagement or democratic participation broadly as the outcome.
Ask to see	Program outline or syllabus.
What to measure	**Learning in the named skill.**

2. Who is designed out?

Why it matters	Assumptions of discretionary time; mismatch between time and interest.
Strong answer	Curricular or institutionally required; or co-curricular with time cost paid through stipends, credit, or covered course costs.
Weak answer	Co-curricular and voluntary.
Ask to see	Meeting times, whether participation is required, and whether it is compensated.
What to measure	**Who participates and completes.**

3. What kind of institution is it at?

Why it matters	Where a program is implemented determines who it reaches and what the field will learn.
Strong answer	Community colleges, RPUs, CTE programs, or MSIs. If a partnership between 2- and 4-year, then the 2-year has a meaningful budget share.
Weak answer	Partnership without defined roles or budget.
Ask to see	Student enrollment profile; for a partnership, roles and budget shares.
What to measure	**How this grant will produce evidence and outcomes for the field to learn from.**

4. What evidence or outcome metrics will you ask for?

Why it matters	This decision influences what will be measured and how it will build knowledge.
Strong answer	Student outcomes, measured behaviorally, when possible, with a baseline before the activity starts.
Weak answer	Participation counts, satisfaction data, or broad sectoral evidence attributed to the program.
Ask to see	A measurement plan.
What to measure	**See Step 2.**

Step 2 – Measurement Suggestions

Sample indicators funders can use to measure outcomes. *Data production* indicates how data are produced. *Feasibility for grantee* indicates whether the data collection effort would be routine, would require some additional effort, or would present a challenge and likely require additional funding to complete after the program ends.

Outcome measured	Indicator	Data production	Feasibility for grantee
Implementation	Contact hours, number of sessions, timespan	Record	Routine
	Delivery method: credit-bearing, required, elective	Record	Routine
	Which of the six skills was practiced? Time spent on each?	Record	Routine
	Who delivered program: faculty, staff, students, partner	Record	Routine
	Fidelity to design	Observation	Some Effort
Reach	Participants as share of eligible population	Record	Routine
	Completion within the program	Record	Routine
	Composition by enrollment intensity, employment, programs of study, first-generation status	Record	Some Effort
Learning	Skill-specific pre and post, tied to category name in Q1	Survey	Some Effort
	Direct assessment of artifact or observed session, scored on a rubric	Observation	Some Effort
Disposition	Entering-student survey data as a baseline, if collected by institution	Survey	Routine
	Internal efficacy items, pre and post	Survey	Some Effort
	Whether students believe people like them can influence decisions	Survey	Some Effort
	What students say changed, and what convinced them	Interview	Some Effort
Behavior	Participation outside the program during grant period	Survey	Some Effort
	Student success metrics: persistence, completion, credential awarded	Record	Some Effort
	What students did after the program; what prompted it	Interview	Some Effort
	Follow-up twelve months after program ends	Interview or record	Hard

Portfolio review questions

Additionally, funders might consider the following questions when looking across their civic engagement funding portfolio. These questions can support reflection in how the portfolio shapes equitable opportunity and participation in civic engagement activities.

Where is it concentrated? Community colleges enroll roughly four in ten American undergraduates and regional public universities enroll 47 percent of bachelor's-seeking students.

Is the skill balance lopsided? Deliberation and bridging have several dedicated national organizations, but programs that build civic agency are concentrated in four-year institutions. Consider the balance of skills across a range of investments.