

Civic Learning: Outcomes and Research Trends

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As higher education is increasingly called on to develop students as engaged members of their communities (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012), it is critical that schools have the ability to assess civic learning outcomes and the programs intended to facilitate those outcomes (Bringle, Hatcher, & Hahn, 2017). Many institutions and scholars selecting and defining what those outcomes should be (Torney-Purta, Cabrera, Roohr, Liu, & Rios, 2015), and the knowledge and skills considered essential to civic participation has shifted over time. While earlier iterations of civic education focused on knowledge of individual rights, government structures and U.S. history, those categories are no longer sufficient for preparing students for active citizenship; colleges and universities need to educate students on the political system and how to influence it (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012).

The purpose of this brief is to aggregate and synthesize recent definitions and findings on civic learning outcomes. It will examine scholars' definitions of outcomes, the growing focus on appreciating diversity, institutional factors that influence civic learning, and tools to assess civic outcomes.

Defining Civic Learning Outcomes

Numerous authors, schools, and organizations have defined civic learning outcomes and developed methods to measure them. This section summarizes the Civic-Minded Graduate, a frequently cited framework (Steinberg, Hatcher, and Bringle, 2011) and an Educational Service Testing research report which comprehensively reviewed more than two dozen related projects and articles (Torney-Purta et al, 2015).

Steinberg et al (2011) developed the Civic-Minded Graduate¹ conceptual framework and measurement tools to help scholars and institutions measure civic learning and evaluate programs. The authors summarized the characterizations of a civic minded graduate under the categories of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and behavioral intent.

- Knowledge includes understanding volunteerism and social issues and having academic knowledge relevant to issues in society.

- Skills include the ability to communicate and listen to opposing viewpoints, appreciation for a pluralistic society, and ability to solve problems across difference.
- Dispositions include feeling responsible for one's community and wanting to take action.
- Behavioral intention is a stated commitment to participate in community service.

More recently, Torney-Purta et al (2015) reviewed and synthesized about 30 assessment tools and frameworks to develop a civic learning framework that can be useful to a variety of institutions and disciplines. They propose two umbrella ideas which over arch definable outcomes:

- Civic Competency, which includes civic knowledge, analytic skills, and participation skills
- Civic Engagement, which includes motivations, attitudes, and efficacy; democratic norms and values; and participation and activities.

¹The three CMG evaluation procedures are described in the Tools section of this document

Trends in Civic Learning Outcomes

Using these frameworks and others, researchers are publishing findings on the value and/or efficacy of civic engagement in higher education. Authors find that students grow more engaged in solving community issues and improve in prosocial reasoning skills, perspective-taking, and intercultural competence (Whitely, 2014). Service-learning nurtures self-efficacy, moral development, cultural awareness, and altruistic attitudes (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). More broadly, Kilgo Pasquesi, Sheets, and Pacarella (2014) found service-learning to be a “significant, positive predictor for students’ political and social involvement” (p. 22). However, they did not find it to be significant predictor for critical thinking, moral reasoning, or intercultural effectiveness. This stands in contrast to a large body of evidence that supports claims that service-learning is associated with these outcomes (Bringle et al, 2017; Finley & Reason, 2016; Lies, Bok, Brandenberger & Trozzolo, 2012; National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012; Ryder et al, 2015; Whiley, 2014).

Civic learning outcomes mirror outcomes that support employability, like critical thinking, intercultural skills, civic knowledge (Hart Research Associates, 2013). Matthews, Dorfman, and Wu (2015) found that the starting salary for students with service-learning experience was statistically significantly higher than for those without service-learning experience. The wealth of research about the connection between civic engagement and employment outcomes stretches beyond the scope of this brief (see Aside 1).

Many researchers who examine service-learning focus on whether students value diversity and develop cultural awareness; they often narrow in on the outcome openness to diversity and challenge (ODC) as an essential skill for citizens. The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012) also said that knowledgeable citizenship requires the capacity appreciate and take on alternative perspectives.

Educators recognize community service as an opportunity to encounter difference. Moreover, authors examine the value of these outcomes to students, including “higher GPAs, increased retention, higher

Aside 1: Benefits Beyond Civics

Researchers find that civic engagement and service-learning benefit students beyond civic knowledge and skills. Among other outcomes, students show gains or improvement in:

- Academic performance (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011)
- Critical thinking (Cress, 2004)
- Empathy (Celio et al, 2011)
- Moral development (Lies, Bok, Brandenberger & Trozzolo, 2012)
- Resilience (Yeh, 2010)
- Retention (Cress, Burack, & Giles, 2010)

levels of interaction with faculty/staff, quality peer interactions, and good learning practices” (Reason & Hemer, 2015, p. 18). See Aside 1 for other benefits. The effects are lasting: Bowman and colleagues (2011) surveyed students 13 years after graduation and found that diversity experiences nurtured “personal growth, purpose in life, recognition of racism, and volunteering behavior” (p. 13).

Another notable trend in the research is scholars examining how institutional factors affect civic outcomes. A campus’s messaging on civic involvement can have a notable effect on civic outcomes (Barnhardt, Sheets, & Pasquesi, 2015). Using the Personal and Social Responsibility Institutional Inventory data from students at 23 campuses, Barnhardt and colleagues (2015) found that students recognized when their school encouraged civic engagement in theory but did not promote it in action (e.g. administrators not doing community service or campus authorities discouraging public advocacy). This misalignment makes students less likely to prioritize their own civic engagement. Overall, the study found that consistent messages on active citizenship “can exert a notable influence on improving [students’] overall civic commitments and skills” (p. 640). They also found that service-learning tied to coursework, as opposed to community service disconnected from the classroom, was much more likely to build civic skills. Still, other researchers have found participating in volunteering—whether that be a sustained interaction like service-learning for a semester or short-term participation in service days—made students more inclined to engage with their community or volunteer on their own time (Dey, Barnhardt, Antonaros, Ott, & Holsapple, 2009).

Tools

Reason and Hemer (2015) extensively reviewed the literature for assessment methods and tools that measure civic learning in higher education. After examining surveys, scales and other tests, they found that there are many tools that assess limited aspects of civic learning, with attitudes and behavioral expectations examined most often. Civic knowledge and skills were assessed less frequently.

Overall, the authors found that many tools covered parts of civic learning, and no single test measured them all (see Table 1). Moreover, “instruments that measure dimensions of civic learning are not often explicitly utilized for that purpose in empirical research” (p.6). It is important to note that this review is focused on civic learning in college students, and

not a comprehensive assessment service-learning outcomes, courses, or partnerships. This review also does not cover civic learning assessment in K-12 education. For more information on K-12 civic learning assessment, see the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools website on this topic.

Janke and Domagal-Goldman (2017) advocate for using data that already has already been collected, like the Personal Social Responsibility Inventory or applications for the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, to determine which institutional variables (programs, policies, structures, resources, etc.) influence student civic outcomes. For more information about publications and tools related to civic learning assessment, see Campus Compact’s Knowledge Hub on this topic.

Conclusion

There is a rich and growing body of research defining and examining civic learning outcomes. Moving forward, as institutions gather more data on student civic learning, the field is grappling with how to use these data for institutional improvement (see Aside 2). Campus Compact continues to be a convener for institutions to think through how these developments in the field can be applied to institutional practice and future research studies.

Aside 2: Visualizing the Data

As institutions collect data on student experiences and outcomes, it is important to put the information into a form that is easy to understand and can effect a school’s practice. IUPUI, for example, created interactive graphics for users to explore “key indicators associated with the strategic plan” on its Data Link website: <http://irds.iupui.edu/Institutional-and-Strategic-Planning/IUPUI-Data-Link> .

Table 1: Tools for measuring civic learning

Type	Name	Developed by...	Description & Purpose	Learn More
QUAL[1] & QUANT[2]	Civic Minded Graduate (CMG)	Steinberg et al (2011)	3 parts: (1) CMG Scale (quantitative, self-report), (2) CMG Narrative Prompt & Rubric (qualitative), (3) CMG Interview Protocol & Rubric (qualitative). Purpose: Program evaluation & institutional assessment.	All three tools are available online HERE
QUAL & QUANT	Teaching to Big Questions Assessment	Teagle Foundation / Community College National Center for Community Engagement	Developed for Student Learning for Civic Capacity: Stimulating Moral, Ethical, and Civic Engagement for Learning that Lasts project. Purpose: Improved assessment for student reflection essays and pre- and post- tests for service-learning experiences.	The components are available online HERE
QUAL	VALUE Rubrics	AAC&U (VALUE Rubric Development Project, 2017)	Civic learning was one of 16 learning outcomes included in the rubric project Purpose: To articulate various dimensions of civic learning; assist in assessment of student civic learning	Available online HERE
QUANT	Freshman & Senior Surveys	UCLA: Cooperative Institutional Research Program	Students rate the importance of things like participating in community action and promoting racial understanding (Reason & Hemer, 2015). Purpose: institutional assessment; assessment of civic learning	Available for purchase HERE
QUANT	Diverse Learning Environments	UCLA: Cooperative Institutional Research Program	A tool that examines campus climate, institutional practices, and student outcomes (Diversity Learning Environments Survey, 2017). Purpose: to address equity, diversity, and inclusion on campuses; institutional assessment.	Available for purchase HERE
TBD	HEIghten Assessment Suite	Educational Testing Service	Civic Competency/ Engagement is one aspect of this overall suite of assessments. Purpose: institutional assessment; improved assessment of student critical thinking, quantitative literacy, and written communication	Information will be available HERE and HERE

[1] Qualitative
[2] Quantitative

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