



From Inspiration to Participation



A REVIEW OF PERSPECTIVES
ON YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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FROM INSPIRATION TO PARTICIPATION:

A REVIEW OF PERSPECTIVES ON YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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OVERVIEW

The heart of a healthy democracy is a citizenry actively engaged in civic life—taking responsibility for building communities, solving community problems, and participating in the electoral and political processes. This ethos has permeated American society since the founding of the nation. In recent decades, there has been concern that increasing numbers of Americans are less involved in the institutions of our democratic society. This trend is particularly evident, some say, among our nation’s youth. The shifts in participation have stimulated a debate among academic leaders across disciplines about whether there is, in fact, a problem with civic engagement in America and, if so, where the solutions lie.

Political scientists often cite declining voter participation as evidence of a disengaged populace. Their solutions rest with voter education and mobilization efforts. Many educators believe that declining rates of political participation among young people is a consequence of an absence of standardized civics and formal education related to the institutions of democracy. Some of these educators argue for service-learning as a solution to civic disengagement, an approach that combines classroom instruction with community service and community problem-solving.

Some view skyrocketing rates of volunteering among young people as both a positive trend and a cause for concern. They believe that these young people are relying on the power of their individual and episodic contributions to address social problems, and that they are disengaged from traditional political action and systems of government. These observers believe that this behavior stems from a fundamental distrust of the institutions of government. Their solution lies in linking the volunteer experience with an orientation to the socio-political issues that underlie the problems the volunteer is aiming to address.

Youth development advocates see civic engagement as a developmental process. They believe that over time young people will grow to be active citizens so long as they are provided with a strong sense of identity, self-worth, responsibility, and confidence, all of which are required to successfully navigate the responsibilities of active citizenship.

Despite a shared interest in creating opportunities for youth to become active citizens, members of these var-

ious disciplines tend to talk past each other because of their differing assessments of what should be done, how, and by whom. Political scientists focus on the political; educators focus on what happens in or near the classroom; service-learning advocates focus on service and volunteering; youth development specialists focus on the developmental experience of the young person. In short, there is common interest, but no common ground.

This paper summarizes the different perspectives on the issue of youth civic engagement, including a review of the proposed solutions. These perspectives were culled from a review of the literature and from personal interviews. The paper concludes with a proposal to pursue a melded approach that combines the best of what each discipline has to offer.

There are eight areas for additional work and support by those interested in youth civic engagement:

- Encourage interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Conduct rigorous and longitudinal research.
- Develop and disseminate integrated school-based civic education curricula.
- Provide training for teachers.
- Make schools more democratic.
- Use the media, including the Internet, to enhance media literacy and encourage civic engagement among youth.
- Develop civic engagement/education programs outside of schools (in community-based and youth oriented organizations).
- Encourage efforts to return higher education to its civic mission.



IS THERE A CRISIS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?

DEFINING AND MEASURING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Although *engaged citizenship*, *civic participation*, *civil society*, and *democracy* are terms that often are used synonymously, they can have different meanings, depending on who is using them and why.

Some conceive of civic engagement as being a good neighbor, obeying the rules, respecting community values, and volunteering. Others think of civic engagement as distinctly connected to political processes such as voting, being involved in political campaigns, and understanding current issues and policies.

Discussions about the definition of civic engagement and related terms often dovetail into debates about how it should be measured. Political scientists often focus on voting as a measure of civic engagement or democratic participation. Others argue that voting and knowledge of democratic and government procedures are insufficient measures of civic engagement¹ because they “assume a limited view of citizenship” that may underestimate the responsibilities and challenges for citizens in a participatory democracy². Schudson³ and Peirce⁴ suggest that civic engagement should begin with being a good citizen who stands up for the rights of fellow workers/neighbors, supports Little Leagues, joins block associations, and recycles trash—efforts that “build the human networks that make ‘public good’ more than an empty phrase.” These networks provide

incentives for responsible citizens to be alert to “danger signs” on the public scene so if and when they emerge, citizens not only vote but also join political groups and make civic noise.

These and other definitions suggest that civic engagement may be a broader construct—one that goes beyond a focus solely on the procedural aspects of democracy (voting or joining a political party) to one that embraces the many facets of a *deliberative* democracy. This includes what Putnam has called the ability to engage in a “civic conversation,” through which people are able to weigh one another’s views fairly and civilly, take responsibility for their own views, and test them in a give-and-take with others⁵.

PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL PROCESSES

Declining youth involvement in political issues and matters is frequently used to illustrate a crisis of disengagement among America’s youth. According to numerous studies, from 1972 (when 18 year-olds were first given the chance to exercise their right to vote in a Presidential election) until 2000 (with the exception of 1992, when there was a slight increase), there has been a steady decline in the proportion of young people (ages 18-24) who vote. In 1972, 42% of this age group voted, but by 2000, only 28 % of the same cohort did; since then, this cohort has shown the largest and steepest decline in voting of any age group.⁶

1 Checkoway, B., “Renewing the Civic Mission of the American Research University,” The 1999 LeFrac Lecture, 1999.

2 Torney-Purta, J. and Amadeo, J., “Civic Education at the K-12 Level: Review and Recommendations for a Role for the Carnegie Corporation,” 2000, 3.

3 Schudson, M., *The Good Citizen* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

4 Peirce, N., “‘Damaged’ Democracy? Not so Fast Folks,” *Washington Post*, February 28, 1999.

5 Putnam, R., *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

6 Gans, C. (1998), Final Report on the 1996 Election, Center for the Study of the American Electorate and personal interview, August 31, 2001; National Association of Secretaries of State, “New Millenium Project - Phase I: A Nationwide Study of 15-24 Year-Old Youth” (Lexington, KY: Author, 1999).

Voting is not the only area of declining youth interest and involvement. A poll taken by Peter D. Hart and Robert Teeter for the Council for Excellence in Government showed that 68% of 18-34 year-olds said that they feel disconnected from government in its entirety⁷. According to a 1999 survey conducted by the National Association of Secretaries of State, only 26% of young people between the ages of 15-24 believe that “being involved in democracy and voting” is “extremely important.” Compared to 59% of college freshmen in 1996, only 27% of college freshmen in 1997 believe that “keeping up to date with political affairs is important.”⁸

Young people also appear to be less knowledgeable about fundamental democratic principles and processes. In their “Civics Report Card for the Nation,” the National Assessment of Educational Program (NAEP) concluded that one-third of high school seniors lack a basic understanding of how American government operates.⁹ Only one in ten young people ages 18-29 is able to name both their United States Senators, compared to one in five of those ages 30-45 and one in three of those over the age of 45.¹⁰

Some believe these trends to be the result of schools committing insufficient, and in many cases decreasing, resources toward educating young people about politics, government, and civic processes. Others argue that young people’s low participation rates reflect a more pervasive decline of trust in public institutions and public leaders among all Americans. As documented by Robert Putnam and others, increasing numbers of Americans—not only young people but also their parents—are disengaging from institutions such as public meetings, churches, and community-based organizations as well as political and electoral processes such as voting and being informed about important public issues.¹¹

In some cases it is true that young people lack the knowledge to participate in the political process. They hesitate to vote because they do not know where or

how to do so, or they are unaware of sources of factual information about candidates or issues.¹²

Even when young people do want to engage in traditional ways, they may not have opportunities to do so because many of the formal institutions of public life either ignore young adults and the issues that matter to them or are not equipped to provide meaningful access into the process. Delli Carpini suggests that if young people are viewed as disengaged, it is “not because they are satisfied with the current state of affairs or because they do not care about their fellow citizens, [but rather] because they are alienated from the institutions and processes of civic life and lack the motivation, opportunity and ability to overcome this alienation.” He adds that traditional civic organizations and interest groups are dominated by “issues, governing structures, policy solutions and/or civic styles that are anathema to younger Americans [who have been] raised in a faster-paced, entrepreneurial, mass-mediated, and global environment.”¹³

Young people’s refusal to vote or keep abreast of political issues, therefore, may stem less from an unwillingness to engage and more from distrust of a political system or process that is seen as corrupt or unresponsive to citizens’ concerns. This is hardly surprising, given that most young people have grown up in a culture in which government and related institutions have little meaning or are tangential to the influence and power that the private sector, technology, and the media appear to have. Less than 20% of 18 to 29 year-olds, for example, say they are very proud of how democracy works in the United States, compared to over 50% of those 50 years old or older.¹⁴ A recent Newsweek survey found that most young people view today’s two-party system as “irrelevant, corrupt or worse” and doubt that there’s a connection between voting and “addressing a problem that matters.”¹⁵

These and other findings suggest that until we explain to young people why it matters to be politically

7 Hart Research Associates, P. & Teeter, R., “America Unplugged: Citizens and Their Government,” Poll conducted for Council for Excellence in Government (<http://www.excelgov.org/publication/excel/pressrelease.htm>), 1999.

8 Mann, S., “What the Survey of American College Freshmen Tells Us About Their Interest in Politics and Political Science,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, June 1999, 263-8.

9 Dionne, E.J., 2000., “Effective Citizenship and the Spirit of Our Time,” Paper prepared for the Surdna Foundation.

10 Delli Carpini, M. & Keeter, S., *What Americans Know About Politics and Why it Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

11 Putnam, 2000.

12 Aspen Institute, “30 Million Missing Voters: A Candidate’s Toolkit for Reaching Young Americans,” (Washington, DC: Author, 2000).

13 Delli Carpini, M., “The Disengaged Generation: Evidence and Potential Solutions,” Keynote address at the President’s Leadership Colloquium, University of Pennsylvania, June 26, 2000, 7.

14 Rahn, W., “Generations and American National Identity: A Data Essay,” Paper presented at the Communication in the Future of Democracy Workshop, Washington, DC, 1998. Cited in Delli Carpini, 2000.

15 Fineman, H., “Generation Y’s First Vote,” *Newsweek*, July 17, 2000.

engaged, there is little incentive for them to vote. As one participant at a recent funder's briefing on youth civic engagement commented, "The older generation views voting as a sacrament, but to young people, it's tangential. That's because the older generation hasn't made the case for it by their words or actions. They focus on voting instead, but that blames the victim rather than a deeply flawed system." Speaking at another conference about youth voting patterns, a young political leader noted, "Young people have found ways to break the glass ceiling the Baby Boomers had on the economy by working in and launching dot-coms and other Internet start-ups and to 'make change' by establishing new and innovative non-profits. But they haven't found a way to make their voices heard in a very daunting political system that they see as beholden to special interests, unethical, and unable to achieve real outcomes."

More young people will be interested in participating in the political process if and when they are exposed to political figures or candidates who "talk straight" or "real" with them—a quality that numerous studies have documented as extremely important to a media-savvy generation able to see through the exorbitant amount of spin that now dominates government politics and public life.¹⁶ Dionne notes, "When candidates behave differently, young people notice and respond. When a candidate like [John] McCain calls on them to think of something beyond their own self-interest, they're prepared to listen. But when politicians shout at each other, or when the news media and academia send a steady stream of signals that nothing in politics can ever be inspiring or on the level, they turn off and tune out."¹⁷ One only has to look at the excitement that the campaigns of Jesse Ventura, John McCain, and Bill Bradley generated among young people, who were inspired by these candidates' positive messages about the system. Rather than characterize politics as evil, they argued that "politics should be more honorable and inviting than it is."¹⁸

VOLUNTEERING RATES

Young people are volunteering and participating in community activities at unprecedented high rates.

Many experts agree that this generation appears to be among one of the most engaged in history, evidenced by the growing number of young people involved in community-based civic renewal or volunteer projects. A 1998 national study conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates found that nearly 70% of young Americans are involved in activities such as volunteering, belonging to an organization, or helping to solve a community problem. Hart concludes, "Contrary to the portrayal of today's young Americans as self-absorbed and socially inert, the findings of this survey reveal a portrait of a generation not searching to distance itself from the community but instead actively looking for new and distinctive ways of connecting to the people and issues surrounding them."¹⁹

Others agree, arguing that portraying youth as disengaged is a top-down, finger-pointing stance that fails to acknowledge this parallel and more positive trend of youth service and volunteering: young people's willingness and desire to be civically engaged through direct, one-on-one service in and on behalf of their communities. Critics, however, charge that such efforts, while laudable, may not necessarily lead to political involvement and/or collective action that focuses on broad social or institutional change. Charity and/or voluntarism may not be enough, Delli Carpini notes, to fulfill the citizenship responsibilities of future generations. The problem, he writes, is that "civic engagement has become *defined* as the one-on-one experience of working in a soup kitchen, clearing trash from a local river, or tutoring a child once a week. What is missing is an awareness of the connection between the individual, isolated problems these actions are intended to address and the larger world of public policy."²⁰

AN OPTIMISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Some observers suggest that youth disengagement may be a matter of perception and thus, more measured concern is appropriate.²¹ In a paper about youth civic engagement commissioned by the Surdna Foundation, Dionne suggests that an alternative to viewing youth as disengaged would be to accept the latest generation of young people as simply "unlike its activist 60s brethren, and also unlike the image that we

16 Dionne, 2000; Rosenthal, J., "Beseechmen," *New York Times Magazine*, July 30, 2000; Ventura, J., "Young Adults Will Weigh in Politically - if Engaged," *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 2000.

17 Dionne, 2000, 14.

18 *Ibid.*, 12.

19 Hart Research Associates, Peter D., "New Leadership for a New Century: Key Findings from a Study on Youth Leadership and Community Service" (Washington, DC: Author, 1998), 1.

20 Delli Carpini, 2000, 8.

21 Mattson, K., "Higher Education and Civic Renewal: A Report for the Carnegie Corporation of New York," 2000.

older adults impose on it.”²² This is bolstered by the 1998 Peter Hart poll indicating that young people are quite engaged but in ways that reflect the different views they have about leadership and civic participation. In contrast to their 1960s predecessors, today’s young Americans prefer direct, one-on-one individual service that leads to results, especially in their own communities, and a bottom-up—rather than top-down—leadership model through which small groups of people work collaboratively.

Also unlike their predecessors, young Americans see leadership as an exercise available to and a responsibility of all Americans, not just to a select group of charismatic individuals. Thus, they do not respond to many of the organizations and institutions on which citizens traditionally have relied to solve social problems. The Hart poll underscores how many of the leaders of these institutions tend to speak a language that is confusing to young Americans, who are more attuned to messages that stress inclusiveness, view situations from multiple perspectives and help others directly and actively.²³

Rapid changes in society may demand this participatory form of leadership which, in turn, may lead young people who are now approaching service in their communities to develop new ways of engaging in politics. As Dionne notes, this is a generation that is also extremely civic-minded and dedicated to social change through direct service. These experiences, he suggests, may better equip them to sort out “the conundrums of democracy” than their predecessors, since “the great reforming generations are the ones that marry the aspirations of service to the possibilities of politics and harness the good work done in local communities to transform a nation.” Thus, rather than

wringing our hands over the “sorry state of youth” and/or pandering to or admonishing them, Dionne suggests that we treat young people as a “community of serious citizens” attempting to respond to serious challenges with new models that they have developed and strategies that encourage youth to live up to their own social commitments so that they can reform a system they view as ineffective.²⁴

Some believe that any problem of youth disengagement may even resolve itself, given that people’s involvement in politics tends to deepen with age.²⁵ As Craig and Bennett assert: “Eventually, young people will find their political voices and take their place, naturally enough, at the table of power.”²⁶ Already, there are indications that there may be an upswing in youth activism, as evidenced by the anti-sweatshop movement on America’s college campuses and demonstrations in Seattle at the World Trade Organization meeting in 1999. Politicized courses added to college curricula in recent years are also contributing to the development of new activists.²⁷

The most optimistic perspective is expressed by those who see political involvement as a relatively sophisticated form of engagement that emerges over time as a result of a developmental process. This process begins with young people having opportunities to develop a strong sense of identity, self-worth, responsibility, and confidence through peer and other positive norm-instilling group experiences. These positive experiences develop in the young person a sense of personal efficacy that can be applied to community and/or political activities. From this perspective, one does not start the process of civic engagement with political activism, but rather ends there.

22 Dionne, 2000, 10.

23 Hart Research Associates, 1998.

24 Dionne, 2000, 3.

25 Rosenstone, S. & Hansen, J., *Mobilization, Participation and Democracy in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1993). Cited in Mattson, 2000.

26 Craig, S. & Bennett, S., *After the Boom: The Politics of Generation X* (Lanham: Roman Littlefield, 1997), 104. Cited in Mattson, 2000, 2.

27 Hedges, C., “New Activists are Nurtured by Politicized Curriculums,” *New York Times*, May 27, 2000.

FOUR APPROACHES TO FOSTERING YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The perspectives on how to increase youth civic engagement tend to fall into four categories:

- Civic Education
- Service-Learning
- Political Action, Advocacy, and Social/Community Change
- Youth Development



CIVIC EDUCATION

In recent years, there has been a movement toward strengthening school-based civics education²⁸—a back-to-basics approach that emphasizes instruction in the fundamental processes and instruments of democracy and government. Until relatively recently, educating young people in the skills needed to participate in public life and appreciate and commit to democratic values was a critical part of public school experience. Today, however, attention to civic education has decreased substantially, with fewer than half of all states requiring high school students to complete even a one-semester course in government or civics.

Many political scientists attribute the decreased attention to civic education during the past three decades to

parallel decreases in young people's level of civic engagement over the same time period.²⁹ This concern, along with surveys showing that most Americans continue to believe that civic education is a “very important” educational aim, led to the creation of the National Commission on Civic Renewal in 1998, co-chaired by William Bennett, former Secretary of Education under President Reagan, and Senator Sam Nunn. A report by the Commission, *A Nation of Spectators: How Civic Disengagement Weakens America and What We Can Do About It*,³⁰ called for age-appropriate instruction in civic knowledge and skills focused on founding documents, e.g., the Declaration of Independence, the Federalist Papers, the Constitution, and other significant political and social history writings. It also recommended that students master basic civic information as a condition of high school graduation and that more resources be devoted to teacher training in this area.

Several other organizations have since been formed to address this issue. Funded in part by the U.S. Department of Education through an act of Congress, the Center for Civic Education disseminates model

28 It is important to note that “civic education” is a phrase that can have dual meanings. To some, civic education is a fundamental part of the school curriculum that teaches young people the roots and history of our system of government and the importance of civic engagement. Others equate civics education with classroom-based rote learning that is limited to topics such as “how a bill becomes law.” The Education Commission of the States (2000), distinguishes between “civic education” and “education for citizenship.” The former is concerned with learning facts about and related to democracy and democratic processes. The latter focuses on organizing schools in ways that give students opportunities acquire a “democratic self” or a “civic self-understanding,” as well as specific civic skills.

29 Niemi, R., “Trends in Political Science as They Relate to Pre-College Curriculum and Teaching,” Paper presented at the Social Science Education Consortium, Woods Hole, Massachusetts, June 22-25, 2000.

30 National Commission on Civic Renewal, *A Nation of Spectators: How Civic Disengagement Weakens America and What We Can Do About It*, (College Park, MD: University of Maryland, 1998).

civics and government curricula to every U.S. congressional district and produces national standards for civics and government for students in grades K-12. The National Alliance for Civic Education works with existing civic education groups to help assess the status of civic education in each state and press for rigorous civic curricula and graduation requirements. The American Political Science Association's "Civic Education for the Next Century" project develops frameworks for educating young people about politics and government.

While these and other organizations have made progress in producing and disseminating civic education materials, including Web-based information and curricula, their constituencies—academic professionals, school teachers, and administrators—have yet to coalesce in ways that generate enough widespread attention and influence to make civics a required part of school curricula. This is critical because an effort to revive civic education must go beyond the schools to be successful. As Boone notes: "It is not enough to rely on the schools to guarantee that [young people are civically educated]... We must awaken the American public to the importance of serious education for democracy among young people. This will require development of a clear message about the requirements of effective citizenship, the current state of civic education, and the implications of this problem for a nation that is attempting to lead developing countries toward democracy."³¹ Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, agrees: "Success depends on the general recognition throughout society that civic interest in the United States is weak and growing weaker and that our government and our democracy cannot succeed without a comprehensive effort to build a stronger sense of citizenship throughout a population."³²

In the meantime, the back-to-basics approach has its critics who charge that there is little or no evidence

indicating that a curriculum-based approach to civics actually leads to increased levels of civic engagement.³³ Michael Hartoonian, former president of the National Council for the Social Studies, calls the research findings on traditional school-based civic education "dismal."³⁴ A review of research on school-based civic education by Hahn found that despite a positive correlation between students' knowledge of civics and their having a high school courses in civics, the positive contribution of these courses "virtually disappears when it comes to the development of democratic attitudes and behaviors."³⁵ A July 2001 article in the *New York Times* examining the issue claims that "no research confirms that students who know more about [history and civics] are more likely to vote."³⁶ Other studies have found that "as young people grow older, they become more cynical and less willing to take part in government regardless of the number of civics courses they have taken."³⁷

No matter their conclusions, a growing number of studies underscore the importance of distinguishing between civic *knowledge* and civic *competence*.³⁸ Civic knowledge, Smiley says, has been the predominant focus of many political scientists who ask, "What kinds of political knowledge are necessary for democratic participation?" rather than, "What standards (of civic behavior) should we use to judge whether individuals have acquired an acceptable level of political knowledge?"³⁹

This distinction is particularly important in discussions about civic education. Horwitt points out: "Students don't need as much detailed knowledge as they need to be inspired with a 'love of democracy'. A heavy focus on knowledge may not get to the bigger picture... When the kids have a chance to discuss [and get involved] in civic issues, then real learning can occur."⁴⁰ According to Torney-Purta, "Simply requiring more hours of the same kind of instruction is unlikely to be an adequate solution to the problem we have identi-

31 Boone, R., "Education for Democracy: Basics for Young Americans," Draft planning paper, Santa Barbara, CA, Project for Participatory Democracy, 2000, 17.

32 Bok, 2000, 19.

33 Alt, N., & Medrich, E., "Student Outcomes from Participation in Community Service," Paper prepared for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Research (Berkeley, CA: MPR Associates, 1994); Hamilton, S. & Zeldin, R., "Learning Civics in the Community," *Curriculum Inquiry*, 17 (4), 1987, 407-420; Boyte, H., "CIVITAS: A Framework for Civic Education (book review)," *College Record*, 85 (3), 1994, 414; and Bok, 2000, 19.

34 Cited in Horwitt, S. "Report on Civic Education," Paper prepared for the Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1997, 5.

35 Hahn, C., et al. (1998). IEA Civic Education Project, Phase I, The United States-A Review of the Literature, V. 1, ERIC Document Reproduction Service. ED 444 885.

36 Rothstein, R., "What Produces a Voter? Seemingly Not Civics Class," *New York Times* (July 11, 2001).

37 Hamilton, et al., 1987. Cited in Alt, 1994, 9.

38 Smiley, M., "Democratic Citizenship: A Question of Competence," In S. Elkin & K. Soltan (Eds.) *Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions* (Pittsburgh, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 371-384.

39 *Ibid.*, 373.

40 Horwitt, 1997, 9-10.

fied. Schools need to go beyond the transmission of knowledge to foster skills...of citizen involvement among all students.”⁴¹

Traditional civics education also suffers from an image problem. As Bok notes, the teaching tends to be “didactic and dull...[with] most of the standard texts describ[ing] how policy issues will affect students’ lives or how the legislative process actually works in practice. Rights are emphasized more than civic responsibilities.”⁴² Van Til adds: “One hears echoes of parental voices in these injunctions—‘Clean your room, read your newspaper’.”⁴³ No wonder, says Boone, that most young people “sigh and roll their eyes when reflecting on their personal experience with civics and government courses in middle and high schools,” commonly characterizing these experiences as “deadly boring.”⁴⁴ Others suggest that the organizations trying to develop civic education materials and curriculum are part of the problem—a “group of ivory tower scholars whose tunnel vision is riveted on theory, abstract political doctrine, and the workings of the three branches of government, all of which are remote and of little interest to middle- and high school students who are required to plow through such material.”⁴⁵

SERVICE-LEARNING

8


Service-learning, an approach that combines a community service experience with classroom instruction and reflection, has been suggested as an opportunity to bring to life important political and social issues and thereby encourage youth activism and engagement. Specifically, service-learning emphasizes the experiential component of civic education by providing opportunities for young people to engage in community-based activities that integrate and put in context what they learn in the classroom. Students, for example, may volunteer at local shelters, help clean up parks or rivers, organize rallies about an issue, and/or tutor.

With its roots in the writings of John Dewey, who argued that school instruction should not be isolated from life experiences, service-learning brings together student curiosity, classroom-based instruction, and community activities. Thus, proponents argue that service-learning is a natural training ground for civic education in democracy because it enables students to move beyond simply reading and talking about democracy to actually participating in it.⁴⁶

Though first suggested a century ago, more formal and widespread implementation of service-learning did not begin until the early 1970s. It is only in the past decade that service-learning has begun to flourish. The catalyst for this growth was the National and Community Service Act of 1990, President George Bush’s initiative that established the Points of Light Foundation and established the first funding stream for K-12 and higher education service-learning programs. Three years later, under the Clinton Administration, this legislation was extended through the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993, known primarily for its establishment of the AmeriCorps national service program which provides a small stipend and post-service education benefit to enable members to participate in a year-long service experience.

Although the service-learning concept has begun to catch on at both the K-12 and higher education levels—so much so that several states now have educational policies requiring it—definitions of service-learning vary considerably.⁴⁷ The most common problem is confusion about the difference between service-learning and community service or volunteering. Hepburn defines *community service* as all types of service including individual and organized volunteer work that may be encouraged, arranged, and even required by the school but is not connected to school course work. *Service-learning* is a particular form of community serv-

41 Torny-Purta, J., et al., “Creating Citizenship: Youth Development for a Free and Democratic Society,” Executive Summary: Conference Consensus Document, Stanford Center on Adolescence, 1999, 6.

42 Bok, 2000, 6.

43 Van Til, J., “Moving to Define an Ambiguous Tradition,” in *Growing Civil Society: From Nonprofit Sector to Third Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 133.

44 Boone, 2000, 20.

45 Horwitt, 1997, 14.

46 Hepburn, M., “Service-Learning and Civic Education in the Schools: What Does Recent Research Tell Us?” in S. Mann and J. Patrick, eds., *Education for Civic Engagement in Democracy: Service Learning and Other Promising Practices*. The ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education and the Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Service Learning in Association with the Task Force on Civic Education of the American Political Science Association. Indiana University; Bloomington, Indiana, 2001.

47 Westat, R.S. & Chapman, C., *Service-Learning and Community Service in K-12 Public Schools* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999).

ice that is *curriculum-based*, i.e., the service experience is related to objectives in the curriculum and is connected to classroom studies by written activities and discussions.⁴⁸ In short, community service or volunteering is an add-on to the curriculum, while service-learning programs have explicit educational goals and use the service experience to enhance classroom learning.⁴⁹

Clarifying and standardizing these definitions is important to understanding research on the prevalence of service-learning in American schools. For example, a survey by the National Center for Education Statistics⁵⁰—the first to provide reliable national estimates of the percentage of K-12 students incorporating service-learning into their course curriculum—found that although 83% of high schools and 77% of middle schools in the United States were participating in community service, only 46% and 38% of these schools, respectively, had students in curriculum-based *service-learning* programs.

A literature review conducted by Hepburn identified four general components needed for effective service-oriented, school-based programs:⁵¹

- They integrate service into the content and activities of school courses because students gain more from the experience when it is carefully tied to courses in the school curriculum;
- They provide periods of reflection (e.g., journal writing, group discussions, papers) on the service experience to allow students to contemplate their service experience and its implications;⁵²
- They require service throughout the school years because very short periods of service have been shown to have little or no effects on students;⁵³ and
- They involve students, teachers, administrators, and community agencies in the design of the curriculum.

To help promote effective service-learning using these criteria, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) established the Compact for Learning and Citizenship. This group issued a comprehensive report calling for schools across the country to implement programs that combine community service with strong academic content and structured opportunities for reflection in the classroom. ECS also recommends that schools emphasize “education for citizenship,” rather than traditional civic education, which it defines as curriculum that is primarily concerned with pure academic skills. Too many schools, ECS argues, have been caught up in the “reform mill” and have forgotten about the social and civic aims of education and a concern for “social justice, caring, inclusiveness, and participation,” which are just as important as academic skills in helping young people acquire a “democratic self” or a “civic self-understanding.”⁵⁴

Service-learning also has taken hold among many higher education institutions, many of which have created or expanded these kinds of programs. Despite this growth, however, there is a tendency for these programs to be cut off from the wider life of the institution. A study by the Rand Corporation, for example, found that service-learning is often marginalized from the rest of the academic environment.⁵⁵ Moreover, involvement in service-learning within higher education is not seen as integral to academic life, and, in particular from the perspective of the academic leadership, it is viewed as “irrelevant to promotion and tenure decisions.”⁵⁶

A primary obstacle to institutionalization of service-learning at all levels of education is a dearth of empirical data about its benefits or long-term effects. Even leaders in the service-learning community acknowledge that they have not been as self-critical as they

48 Hepburn, 2001.

49 Myers-Lipton, S.J., “Effect of a Comprehensive Service-Learning Program on College Students’ Civic Responsibility,” *Teaching Sociology*, 26, 1998, 243-58.

50 Westat, et al, 1999.

51 Hepburn, 2001.

52 Wade, R. & Saxe, D., “Community Service-Learning in the Social Studies: Historical Roots, Empirical Evidence, Critical Issues,” *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 24 (Fall), 1996, 332-359.

53 Niemi, 2000.

54 Education Commission of the States, “Every Student a Citizen: Creating the Democratic Self,” Denver, CO, Compact for Learning and Citizenship/National Study Group on Citizenship in K-12 Schools, 2000, 4.

55 Gray, M., Ondaatje, E. & Zakaras, L., “Combining Service and Learning in Higher Education: Summary Report for the Corporation for National and Community Service,” (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation, 1999).

56 Mattson, 2000, 13.

should be and that more independent research is needed. As one service-learning expert notes: “The people who have been involved in service-learning have tended to be the ones evaluating it.”

While there is some evidence that service-learning can lead to changes in educational attitudes and school performance,⁵⁷ most of the research done to date is not rigorous. Few studies have used control groups or random sampling and the studies that do tend to focus on one or two programs and are, therefore, not able to be generalized to larger populations.⁵⁸ In short, most of the support for service-learning derives from beliefs and experiences, rather than from research.⁵⁹

The Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service sponsored an analysis of research related to service and service-learning and found, in general, that the research was lacking both in quantity and quality. Only 39% of the 2,559 records examined were associated with even a *low* level of methodological rigor. Moreover, the studies reached across many disciplines—psychology, political science, public affairs, business, and education—that were not in conversation with one another about service. As a result, most studies lacked standard definitions, language, and common expectations even among works from the same discipline.⁶⁰

Critics also take aim at a tendency of most service-learning research to focus on personal growth or academic indicators or outcomes, rather than on outcomes associated with institutional sponsors, the people served, and/or the community. When, for example, the Corporation for National Service was founded, it defined the elements of successful youth service almost exclusively in terms of individual gains, e.g., increases in skills or knowledge. In these kinds of programs, “benefits to the organization and/or to the community are suggested and sometimes achieved, but these do not seem to be the...primary evidence of success offered.”⁶¹

Of particular concern to those who believe that service-learning could be a strategy to boost knowledge of

civic affairs and encourage greater civic engagement, is that there are almost no definitive studies that support that hypothesis.⁶² Studies that do incorporate civic engagement variables such as a person’s sense of civic responsibility, political efficacy, or inclination toward civic action, have rendered less than encouraging conclusions. The National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS), for example, found that performing voluntary service does not increase the likelihood of youth being involved in or connected to politics in a significant way.⁶³

Service-learning proponents argue that because these programs are relatively new, it will take more time and longitudinal studies to glean more definitive findings. Moreover, as a former executive of the Corporation for National Service notes, most service-learning programs were not designed to create political engagement, so it is unfair to criticize them for not getting these outcomes.

POLITICAL ACTION, ADVOCACY, AND SOCIAL/COMMUNITY CHANGE

Concerned by the lack of evidence demonstrating that participation in service-learning programs leads to changes in civic participation, behaviors, and attitudes, some community leaders have suggested that service assignments be intentionally linked to political or social action. Similarly, some educators describe themselves as effectively “beyond service-learning,” arguing that the best way to engage young people politically is to involve them in projects that encourage political advocacy or activism.

As Hepburn states, “Student service is often focused on improving students’ personal feelings of relevance and belonging in the community. If educators do not move instruction beyond personal development to an interest in participation and meeting the community’s needs, then service is unlikely to contribute to civic responsibility and students may fail to interpret that responsibility in terms of participatory citizenship.”⁶⁴ Proponents of this approach are often fond of citing the “soup kitchen” analogy. That is, while it is commend-

57 Center for Human Resources, “Summary Report: National Evaluation of Learn and Serve America,” Waltham, MA: Brandeis University, 1999; Alt, et al., 1994; Gray, et al., 1999; Mattson, 2000; and Markus, G., et al., “Integrating Community Service and Classroom Instruction Enhances Learning,” *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 15, 1993, 410-9.

58 Alt, et al., 1994; Myers-Lipton, 1998.

59 Myers-Lipton, 1998.

60 Grantmaker Forum on Community & National Service, *Opportunities to Build a Field: The State of Service-Related Research*. (Berkeley, CA: Author, 2000).

61 Pittman, K., Irby, M. & Ferber, T, “Youth As Effective Citizens: A Background Report and Recommendations to The Surdna Foundation,” International Youth Foundation, 2000, 14.

62 Hepburn, M., 2001; and Myers-Lipton, 1998.

63 National Association of Secretaries of State, 1999; Wade, et al., 1996; and Mattson, 2000.

64 Hepburn, 2001, 6.

able to volunteer in a soup kitchen, doing so may not always involve learning about why there are soup kitchens in the first place nor about ways to take action to address the underlying issues that may perpetuate poverty and other social problems.

This perspective grows out of a recognition that service-learning can be “decidedly nonpolitical, perhaps even anti-political”⁶⁵ when it emphasizes charity rather than justice and social change.⁶⁶ Labeling most service-learning as an alternative to politics, Boyte and others argue that a feel-good or caring motive is an insufficient rationale for service. Service, they argue, should be designed in ways that involve youth in a “problem-solving politic.”⁶⁷ Barber agrees, stating that service-learning programs are most justified when they use a “language of citizenship” rather than a “language of charity.”⁶⁸ Kahane and Westheimer point out that all service-learning projects can have political dimensions and it is important to sort out “the goals and motivations that underlie the spectrum of service-learning projects emerging in schools.” They suggest that rather than assume all educators have the same vision of service, educators and policymakers should start asking, “In service of what?,” to determine whether the goal is charity or social change.⁶⁹

The Philadelphia public schools undertook one of the few large-scale attempts to engage students in service linked to democratic practice, within a curriculum that provides time for reflection on these experiences and emphasizes academic achievement. Under the leadership of former Philadelphia Public Schools Superintendent David Hornbeck, students were required to participate in “service-learning that furthers academic goals, addresses a real community need and imparts the habits of active citizenship” before they graduate high school. Although there was concern initially about this program, especially its definition of citizenship as the ability to engage in purpose-

ful public action, Philadelphia school officials have since gone on record saying that advocacy is an important part of citizenship.⁷⁰

Engaging youth in this type of service experience may be particularly important at the higher education level since studies show that college-age students have greater interest in social and political issues and being involved in the political process. Yet, “higher education institutions rarely are mentioned as potential problem solvers.”⁷¹ Bok attributes this to higher education’s lack of attention to its civic purpose, noting that colleges and universities seldom define the goals of civic education or consider what courses and forms of instruction might best fulfill them.⁷² Nor have most made any effort to link community service to coursework; to encourage students to register and vote; or to reach students who do not choose to take courses related to civic education, most of which are voluntary.

Other higher education leaders have echoed Bok’s concern that universities are disassociated with the civic missions on which they were founded—missions that assumed responsibility for preparing students for active participation in a democratic society and developing student knowledge for the improvement of communities.⁷³ Currently, it is “hard to find top administrators with consistent commitment to this mission; few faculty members consider it central to their role, and community groups that approach the university for assistance often find it difficult to get what they need.”⁷⁴ In short, the university has primarily become “a place for professors to get tenured and students to get credentialed.”⁷⁵

There are a considerable number of higher education leaders who have begun to embrace civic rhetoric as reflected in their membership in Campus Compact, an organization that encourages students to become involved in community service. Today, Campus

65 Niemi, 2000, 9.

66 Kahane, J. & Westheimer, J. “In the Service of What? The Politics of Service Learning.” *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 1996, 593-599.

67 Boyte, H., “Community Service and Service Education,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 72, 1991, 765-67; and Boyte, H., & Far, J., “The Work of Citizenship and the Problem of Service-Learning,” *Campus Compact Reader*, 1(1), 2000, 1, 4-10.

68 Barber, B., *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Cited in Van Til, 2000, 132.

69 Kahane & Westheimer, 1996.

70 Epstein, R., “There’s More to Effective Citizenship than Brotherly Love: The Philadelphia Service-Learning Story.” Paper prepared for the Surdna Foundation, 2000.

71 Mattson, 2000, 5.

72 Bok, 2000.

73 Mattson, 2000.

74 Checkoway, 1999, 1.

75 Mattson, 2000, 7.

Compact includes hundreds of college presidents and chancellors who, by their association, champion civic renewal as important to their missions.

Some universities, such as the University of Pennsylvania (Penn), have begun to explore expanding traditional service-learning programs in ways that encourage broader community and social change. Led by Ira Harkavy, the Center for Community Partnerships was established at Penn in the 1980s as a traditional service-learning model but quickly expanded to a larger-scale effort to address social problems by engaging communities in the process. In 1985, the university held a series of public forums and then helped to create the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps, a coalition of churches and civic groups that has since worked with Penn to improve local schools and community organizations. The center has also worked closely with the Philadelphia school district to develop community schools in Penn's neighboring West Philadelphia area. Currently, it lists more than 70 academically based community service courses in the various departments and colleges at Penn (many offered by its best-known faculty) and oversees scores of separate university projects serving the community.⁷⁶

The center's work drew the attention of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which developed an Office of University Partnerships through which universities are supported for conducting research that helps civic organizations. An initial beneficiary of this program was Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, one of America's poorest cities. When Trinity's new program dedicated to urban renewal needed a director, the university looked to the community itself (an important principle in creating an engaged campus) to find a leader for the project who, in turn, engaged faculty in research projects that promote local organizing efforts.⁷⁷

These efforts, however, are still the exception rather than the rule. In addition to systemic and institutional barriers within the university—including a reward and incentive structure that prioritizes academic research, rather than public service⁷⁸—there are often concerns that social change initiatives may be too controversial to incorporate beyond a single course or program.

Critics of these approaches express concern that youth involved in political advocacy programs sometimes can be used as nothing more than vehicles for organizations and/or more powerful individuals to promote a particular political or partisan agenda. According to one youth development specialist, "It is important to discern whether programs are really interested in helping to bolster all young people's civic engagement or only those that adhere to a particular agenda."

There are also questions as to whether these programs motivate civic engagement among youth in general or whether they meet the needs of young people who already are predisposed to be civically engaged. Some studies indicate that young people who have an intrinsic interest in social change or political action start with a higher sense of civic idealism and are more willing to participate in these kinds of activities.⁷⁹ There is a concern, therefore, that forcing young people, the majority of whom do not see policy-related institutions or activities as salient, to participate in these kinds of programs before they are ready to understand and appreciate this experience may actually prohibit future interest.⁸⁰

As with service-learning and civic education programs, there also are questions as to whether these kinds of approaches actually increase long-term involvement in politics. Thus far, only a few researched school programs have students learn civic participation as a means to influencing public policy and fewer have been studied as to whether they led to gains in students' political efficacy or inclinations toward citizen action.⁸¹

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Youth development experts⁸² view civic engagement as a developmental process—one in which developing a strong sense of personal identity, responsibility, caring, compassion, and tolerance are essential first steps toward being engaged politically or at the community level. As Pittman et al. note: "Defining youth outcomes in terms of skills, behaviors, knowledge that we would like them to have but not in the terms of the broader psychosocial components that make them confident young men and women limits our strategies and undermines our chances of success...Skills can go unused

76 Van Til, 2000; and Mattson, 2000.

77 Mattson, 2000.

78 Ibid, 2000.

79 Gray, et al.,1999.

80 Torney-Purta, 2000.

81 Hepburn, 2001.

82 Included in this category are psychologists, child and human development specialists, and sociologists.

or be used in unproductive, antisocial ways if not anchored by confidence, character, and connections.”⁸³

Those who share this view charge that searching for the structural causes of youth disengagement and recommending solutions without the input of the young people themselves is a top-down strategy that blames young people rather than supports them as individuals with a wide range of assets and strengths. “There is a tendency to blame contemporary youth, even to demonize them, for the sorry state of civil society...[when] a more productive remedy is to recognize the older generation’s duty to support youth’s quest for identity.”⁸⁴ Rather than search for causes, youth development advocates focus on what is known already about generating civic engagement in youth, specifically, that the formation of civic identity is developmental across time.⁸⁵

Yates and Youniss argue that in order for youth to acquire sound moral judgment, they must have opportunities to reflect on—rather than simply internalize—experience. As society becomes more globalized and diverse, there is little consensus about norms and values; thus, cognition is essential to youth’s making sense of the conflicting realities in which they live. In addition, parents and adults are not always in a position to convey a clear and authoritative view of what society is or ought to be. In immigrant families, for example, parents’ experiences in their culture of origin do not necessarily prepare them for the culture to which they have moved, and in some cases, youth become the conveyors of values. Finally, socialization is grounded in “doing” and that is what leads to habitual practices later in life.⁸⁶

For these reasons, youth development proponents claim that the current debate about youth disengagement is backward. Specifically, there is too much emphasis on “documenting knowledge of formal political systems” rather than on “investigating ways in which [young people] come to understand how politics works and how they, as individuals, come to define themselves as political agents.”⁸⁷ Community service and volunteering are worthwhile in and of themselves because they often are the first opportunities for young

people, particularly youth in disadvantaged communities, to see themselves as empowered and in control of the forces of their lives. As Youniss and Yates claim, “community service offers opportunities for this crucial self-society linkage in identity construction.” Turning the “soup kitchen” analogy around, they claim that there would be little point to feeling passionate about eliminating homelessness if there were no opportunities to actually visit a homeless shelter and, even better, to volunteer or participate in its activities.⁸⁸

Youth development experts also argue that politically-oriented programs tend to target youth who are already predisposed to this interest and that there needs to be more focus on enhancing the ability of all youth to be meaningfully involved in society. Thus, rather than target “only those young people who adhere to a particular view of the world and what it should be and/or teach an ideology for life, youth development programs [should] engage young people in reasoning they can extend, reject, or amend as they develop.”⁸⁹

Membership organizations such as 4-H clubs or community-based youth organizations, for example, offer young people the chance to become involved in community projects such as tutoring, peer mediation, and other efforts. In addition to providing a sense of possibility about one’s own efficacy, these programs provide young people with the chance to make real choices, as well as to interact with and become respected role models. Some of these organizations are finding ways to enhance respect for social diversity with a meaning constructed by the youth themselves (and not forms of tolerance dictated by adults), while others are involving young people in political or quasi-political activities.⁹⁰

Youth feel that they have a stake in these organizations because they offer opportunities to participate in projects that have concrete benefits and results, which they value. Moreover, these organizations offer youth the chance to be involved in institutions that have mutually set rules, allow individuals to dissent, and offer avenues through which to resolve conflict—a way of operating that is rarely seen in formal political organizations.⁹¹

83 Pittman, et al., 2000, 9.

84 Youniss, J. & McLellan, J., “A Developmental Approach to Civil Society.” Unpublished Paper, 2000, 19.

85 Ibid.

86 Yates, M. & Youniss, J., *Roots of Civic Identity: International Perspectives on Community Services and Activism in Youth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

87 Youniss, J. & Yates, M., *Community Service and Social Responsibility in Youth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1.

88 Ibid., 3.

89 Ibid., 78.

90 Torney-Purta, 2000.

91 Torney-Purta, 1999; and Torney-Purta, 2000.

A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

Despite a shared interest in creating opportunities for youth to become civically engaged, representatives of different disciplines tend to talk past each other because of their differing assessments about what should be done, how, and by whom. Political scientists focus on the political, procedural, and institutional aspects of civic life. Youth organizations promote youth development as their winning strategy. Social and community change organizations may actually ignore young people as a population to be organized and engaged politically. Civic education programs tend to emphasize classroom instruction, sometimes leaving out the experiential component needed to achieve the full integration of knowledge.

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There are signs, however, that those representing the various perspectives are beginning to acknowledge the need for a more comprehensive, holistic, hybrid model that would include components of some of the best of all approaches in ways that complement rather than compete with one another toward the overarching goal of “engaged citizenship.” This approach would also balance meeting the individual needs of youth with achieving larger educational, community, and societal goals.

Bok asserts: “Developing a more informed, deliberative, active citizenry requires adopting a holistic strategy that will make a lasting difference. Each measure should fortify the rest.”⁹² Doing so will require greater understanding of the differences among various approaches—differences that are sometimes exacerbated by tensions among and misperceptions about various play-

ers—so as to facilitate more useful dialogue and, ultimately, more effective strategies for engaging youth in American democracy. Left unaddressed, what interest has been created will most likely splinter, generating factions that support one form of civic engagement over another, or dissipate, settling for the lowest common denominator definitions of civic engagement.⁹³

The current interest in youth civic engagement among myriad players and organizations, as well as the growing number of programs focused on this issue, suggests that there is now an opportunity to craft such a hybrid approach to enhance or address (depending on one’s perspective) youth civic engagement. Such an approach transcends institutional and ideological silos by situating program or institutional goals within a broader context of youth needs, contributions and values.⁹⁴ It also conceptualizes political participation and civic identity broadly to include a wide range of indicators such as voting; knowledge and understanding of the political processes and issues; development of attitudes supporting democratic practices; critical thinking skills; ability to use information sources, including the news media; interaction and deliberation skills related to democratic processes; and participation in civic activities such as volunteering, service, and fundraising for local causes.⁹⁵

At a 1999 conference held at Stanford University, more than 40 researchers and specialists in youth development called for this broad conceptualization—one that takes into account that political identities develop over

⁹² Bok, 2000, 19.

⁹³ Pittman, et al., 2000.

⁹⁴ Pittman, 1991.

⁹⁵ Torney-Purta, 2000; Torney-Purta, et al. (forthcoming). Principles of Subject-Specific Instruction in Education for Citizenship. In J. Brophy (Ed.) *Advances in Research on Teaching*, 8, JAI Press.

time and result from social interactions and activities—to be incorporated in efforts to encourage youth civic engagement. The conference consensus document states that in order to prepare young people to contribute to a society “where democratic governance and civil discourse thrive and where the psychosocial development of members of that society is fostered, opportunities to engage in civil society and in the political system should be widely available.”⁹⁶ Specifically, youth need opportunities to:

- have face-to-face interpersonal experience in contexts and organizations that are meaningful to them;
- take part in groups and engage in activities that both advance the public good and incorporate them into reciprocal social networks; and
- acquire knowledge and competencies that will prepare them to understand and actively participate in the political system.⁹⁷

Among the qualities and capacities conference participants identified as essential to achieving the above goals are:

- a commitment to a larger sense of social purpose;
- an awareness that public policy decisions affect private lives and futures;
- the capacity to acquire information needed to navigate the social and political world;
- an understanding of democracy and how its institutions function, as well as ways to participate in it;
- the capacity to engage in discourse that is tolerant of other opinions;
- the ability to respect others;
- cooperation and negotiation skills; and
- a willingness to assume leadership.

As Torney-Purta notes, considering these factors to be as important to civic engagement as voting or political behavior takes into account knowledge, competence, individual skills, community involvement, and, above all, the quality of participation.⁹⁸

In addition to embracing a broader conceptualization of civic engagement, a hybrid approach requires under-

standing that there is no single institution, organization or program that can or should be responsible for helping young people to be civically engaged.⁹⁹ School-based programs, for example, are necessary but not sufficient, and should not be the sole focus of interest, investment, or attention. Families, religious institutions, community organizations, peer groups, and the media also play a role in youth civic engagement.

Nor is a focus on one strategy to the exclusion of others likely to produce long-term results. Torney-Purta writes: “It would not be of much value if schools fostered knowledgeable individuals who had no intention of voting or people heavily involved in volunteering who neither knew or cared about how the social problems they tried to solve were related to government policy.”¹⁰⁰ Delli Carpini agrees: “It is fair to assume that most political science instructors believe there is a connection between understanding government and politics and being an effective citizen, even if they never ask students to experience public life as part of their coursework. Similarly, few advocates for service-learning...would deny the importance of putting one’s real-world experience into the broader context provided by readings, lectures, discussions, and writing. The challenge...lies in clarifying the relationship between classroom and experiential learning.”¹⁰¹

Despite the apparent consensus about the importance of collaboration and melded strategies, individual researchers and practitioners generally continue to promote only one approach. Moreover, these approaches “seem to be solidifying in a way that creates advocates who speak past each other...”¹⁰² A lack of understanding about the distinctions and tensions among various strategies, as well as of the strengths and weaknesses of each, has been a major impediment toward the development of an approach comprising a range of strategies that complement, rather than compete with, one another toward larger shared goals.¹⁰³

Harbingers of change

There are harbingers of change, however. Advocates for a stronger civics curricula such as the American



96 “Creating Citizenship: Youth Development for a Free and Democratic Society.” Conference co-sponsored by the Stanford Center on Adolescence and the University of Maryland’s (College Park) Civil Society and Community Building Initiative, June 1999.

97 Torney-Purta, 1999.

98 Torney-Purta, 2000.

99 Pittman, 1991; and Torney-Purta, 2000.

100 Torney-Purta, 2000, 4.

101 Delli Carpini, M., “What Should be Learned Through Service Learning?,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 33 (3), 2000(a), 635-638.

102 Torney-Purta, 2000, 5.

103 Pittman et al., 1999.

Political Science Association have recommended that school-based civics or social studies classes include experiential components to enrich cognitive learning. Service-learning proponents have called for a curriculum that combines service, classroom instruction, reflection, and critical analysis in ways that link service with larger policy and community contexts. Social change advocates are realizing that volunteering in a soup kitchen can be the first step toward political participation if these experiences are linked with policy-related information. Youth development professionals are working with community-based organizations to incorporate youth-led social change activities within their programs.

There is also growing awareness of the necessity to provide youth with *ongoing* education and experiential opportunities throughout the school years, including college, indicating that more work needs to be done in finding ways to work cross-institutionally. As Pittman et al. note, the convergence of interest in youth engagement among those with different perspectives on this issue and the overall increase in youth action “increases opportunities and raises expectations.”

The fields represented in the various perspectives on this issue “will not and should not merge [because each has] its own goals, perspectives and approaches. But they combine to create an opportunity to secure public awareness and public support of youth as significant actors in their communities that would be far less dramatic if the opportunities were being opened by one field alone.”¹⁰⁴ As Bok notes, educating young people to become more civically engaged will accomplish little if it receives no reinforcement throughout the school years, including college.¹⁰⁵ Service, knowledge, and/or activism will help youth develop an increased understanding of their membership within a societal framework only if these experiences are integrated into young people’s lives.

104 Pittman et al., 2000, 2-3.

105 Bok, 2000, 18.

CONCLUSION

The lack of consensus on what constitutes civic engagement and whether and to what extent young people are engaged has led to disagreement about which strategies are effective in helping young people become active and long-term participants in our democracy. Exacerbating this fragmentation is the tendency for those interested in this issue to adhere to and promote particular views about it, rather than to come together and engage in a thoughtful dialogue about how to enrich youth civic engagement.

There is growing acknowledgement, though, that future attempts to help young people learn about and become full participants in our democracy will only be successful if and when those committed to this issue transcend the silos of cultural perspective and the circular debates that flow from them. One way to achieve this goal is to support research and promote programs, policies, and systems that will help youth-serving and educational organizations implement and sustain programs that reflect a more comprehensive approach.

This approach combines:

- instruction in the fundamentals of democracy;
- experiential opportunities—including community service, service-learning, and/or political activism—that are integrated into school curricula *and* that allow students to be direct actors or change agents in addressing community or social issues and problems; and
- time for reflection and analysis regarding these experiences.

Most important, this approach is applied throughout the school-age years, rather than being a “one-time-only” experience.

The adoption of this kind of hybrid approach toward youth civic engagement also reflects a set of theoretical assumptions that can help bring consensus to this issue. Specifically, it assumes that:

- both political involvement and community service are critical to strengthening civic engagement and democratic participation;
- service has the potential to serve as a springboard for future political participation if young people have the opportunities and information needed to make the link between service and civics; and
- civic engagement is a developmental process in which participation in politics or political activism is one of many indicators of civic engagement.

Experts agree that the biggest challenge will be moving beyond public statements supporting hybrid approaches and transforming rhetoric into reality. The challenge, therefore, is to shift the focus of everyone interested in this issue to finding balance, cooperation, and collaboration toward the overarching goal of supporting and strengthening young people’s participation in the civic and political processes of American life.

TOOLS FOR FUTURE WORK

What can those who are interested in youth civic engagement do to turn their ideas into action? According to numerous experts, scholars, funders, community leaders, educators, and others interviewed or cited for this paper, there are several areas in which additional work and support is needed to ensure that young people are able to participate fully in the instrumental and deliberative processes essential to a healthy democracy.

Encourage interdisciplinary collaboration.

Interdisciplinary collaboration is critical for developing an integrated approach to youth civic engagement. As noted, the lines between different ideologies and approaches are conceptually murky, with those involved in this issue often unable to explain and define what they do, and the similarities to and differences from other efforts. This has led to a lack of understanding about and standardizing of best practices, taxonomy, and/or theoretical frameworks. In addition, there is little or no infrastructure to support the rapidly growing field of youth civic engagement, which remains somewhat fragmented and rootless.

Experts who have attempted to generate more dialogue among the various players in this area believe that collaboration will be difficult without clearer definition of the issues, including the term “civic engagement.” The lack of clarity about the language that is currently used has created confusion and, in some cases, stalemates among potential collaborators. As Karen Pittman, a youth development expert, points out, *governance, organizing, advocacy, service, leadership, and engagement* are all words used to describe a broad continuum of ideas, perspectives, goals, and programs that—while linked—are different in ways that influence strategies to promote youth civic engagement. She and others assert that it will be difficult to make a case for youth “civic engagement” without a shared vocabulary.¹⁰⁶

More opportunities must, therefore, be available for key leaders representing different approaches to convene and discuss these issues in more depth. The goal of these meetings would be to identify areas of common ground, agree on common goals, discern among various strategies (particularly the strengths and weaknesses of each), and clarify terms so that a common language can be created and standardized for others working in this area. Ultimately, this group would be responsible for developing and disseminating a consensus document, policy or educational recommendations, and/or other materials that outline and promote components of more integrated approaches to youth civic engagement and education. These materials should also clarify terms and codify good practices in ways that could be standardized across a variety of institutions and constituencies.

Conduct rigorous and longitudinal research.

There is a dearth of research as to whether any approach actually increases the level of young people’s civic engagement, particularly engagement *over time*. In addition, researchers use different measures of civic engagement, which makes conclusions or generalizations about these studies difficult, if not impossible. Some studies, for example, use indicators related to citizens’ knowledge of politics and government, voter turnout rates, and/or levels of youth service participation while others focus on individual-level measures such as academic achievement, self-esteem, and sense of responsibility. Often overlooked in many cases are important indicators such as a tolerance for diversity (of people and ideas), the ability and willingness to engage in civil discourse, and the ability to critically analyze news and information.

Thus, it will be important to commission and conduct research that helps to define and develop standardized indicators of “civic engagement,” especially those that expand the meaning of citizenship and take a broader view beyond voting, grade point averages, or self-esteem. There also are considerable gaps in the research as to best practices or promising models that might be replicated. It is also not clear how schools define service-learning or civic education, what these programs comprise, and their benefits to students and/or their communities. Those studies that have been done either tend to look at a small number of similar programs without building in control groups for comparative purposes or lump a large number of programs together without controlling for differences among them.

Additionally, there is a need for more independent research, particularly studies that evaluate programs in ways that illuminate which programs are effective and why. Research using multiple methods (surveys or interviews of students and teachers, as well as observations in classrooms and communities) is in short supply. Finally, there must be more analysis of civic engagement programs across heterogeneous populations, particularly identification of programs that are effective with young people who experience disproportionate amounts of marginalization and discrimination.

Develop and disseminate integrated school-based civic education curricula.

Numerous experts representing a wide range of disciplines, fields, and perspectives are acknowledging the need to develop an integrated school-based civic education curriculum. Such curricula would include components that research shows are effective in instilling civic behaviors and activities among young people. These components are:

- basic information and instruction about democratic processes,
- an experiential component that would allow students to integrate this instruction in “real-world” organizations and/or situations, and
- time for reflection and critical analysis (e.g., peer group discussions, papers, discussion about current events or issues) that would place volunteer or community service experiences in a larger policy context.

Preferably, this curriculum would be ongoing, rather than a one-time experience. Some, for example, have

suggested the development of civic education programs that would be incorporated throughout the school-age years, similar to “Writing Across the Curriculum,” which has been adopted by schools across the country. Organizations working to promote and develop this kind of curriculum, therefore, need more support and public exposure. The Education Commission of the States (ECS), for example, recently issued a report outlining specific recommendations of a national study group of school administrators, public officials, journalists, and teachers for schools, state government, and the federal government to consider toward the goal of engaging all students in active citizenship and helping education leaders meet schools’ academic and civic mission. To help implement the recommendations, ECS will work with state and local policymakers over the next three to five years in assessing the state of citizenship education in their schools and providing technical assistance in incorporating the recommendations.

More work also needs to be done to scale up model civic education projects or programs—particularly those that include the components listed above—at the school or school district level. Although there are demonstration efforts underway in a few states, most have focused on service-learning rather than on incorporating service as part of a broader curriculum that stresses basic civic education and tying the service experience to larger policy or community-related contexts. “We need more model or demonstration projects that incorporate all these elements into civic education,” according to one leading service-learning advocate, “so that we can benchmark and evaluate the dimensions of good practice and, ultimately, assess whether an integrated approach is more effective than more discrete strategies and approaches.”

There is also a need to expand existing or develop new civic engagement efforts at the state level. The North Carolina Civics Education Consortium, for example, has created an alliance of community and business leaders, educators and politicians to transform the way in which civics is taught. In addition to bringing community leaders into the schools, they are drawing students into the public issues of their communities. Sponsored by the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, the New Jersey Civic Education Consortium is forming partnerships among schools, educators, corporations, nonprofits, and political leaders to expand and strengthen civic education and politi-

cal participation in New Jersey. Other states-including Pennsylvania, Colorado, and California-are engaged in planning or implementing similar efforts.

Provide training for teachers.

Nearly every person working on this issue agrees that better and more teacher training is needed if young people are to understand the importance of becoming active citizens. “Teacher training in this area is terrible,” one expert stated, and with basic teacher education requirements being waived in some areas, “there will be an even greater shortage of teachers prepared to teach the basics of civics and constitutional democracy.”

The diminishing number of teachers able to teach the basics, however, is not the only concern. Service-learning proponents say that few teachers are trained in creating settings in which education about democracy *and* democratic education can and does occur. Others assert that because most teachers lack an interest in politics or government themselves or do not understand it, they may simply be unable to teach it or teach it in a way that is interesting to students. Those teachers interested in discussing current events or civic systems rarely are supported in these efforts and/or have few professional development opportunities to enhance their skills or learn how to better incorporate these approaches into curricula. As a result, the most common teaching approach continues to be teacher-led lectures and some discussion using the primary tool of instruction textbooks, most of which devote little attention to exploring social issues or critical reflection.¹⁰⁷ Only a small number of teachers use a hybrid approach, supplementing the didactic model with simulation and group projects.

Resources might, therefore, be directed toward establishing or expanding programs targeted to either existing teachers or teachers-in-training (or both). Programs for new teachers might include training in both basic civic education instruction and service-learning approaches, opportunities to participate in service and in reflection activities that link these experiences to academic coursework, opportunities to observe “master teachers,” and peer-to-peer mentoring. Professional educators also need additional training, including periodic supplemental assistance and summer workshops with cooperative universities to help teachers upgrade

their knowledge and skills. A retired political scientist professor, for example, said that her university used to hold summer camps for civics teachers. These camps gave teachers the opportunity to interact with state and federal policymakers and other public officials who were able to convey their excitement about politics directly. As a result, teachers came back to their classrooms energized and engaged, which they, in turn, conveyed to their students.

Public recognition and awards could also be made to teachers, schools, and producers of educational materials who excel at educating young people about these issues.

Make schools more democratic.

Some believe that schools must be transformed into more democratic institutions that embody and model the principles of democracy, specifically, by allowing students the opportunity to practice democratic decision-making while they learn. Currently, few schools use civic education as an organizing principle; instead they emphasize control, which runs counter to creating a democratic atmosphere and helping students to learn that their contributions can make a difference where it counts and in a place that matters to them.¹⁰⁸ As John Hale notes: “Teaching civics should not just be in the curriculum. It should be the way the school operates, the way the rules of the game are established and practiced.”¹⁰⁹ Rothstein agrees: “If schools play a role in promoting civic behavior, the history and civics curriculum may not be the only place for reform, or even the best place. Students who get to practice responsible citizenship in their schools may turn out to be those most likely to exercise it later.”¹¹⁰

Use the media, including the Internet, to enhance media literacy and encourage civic engagement among youth.

Many young people know a great deal more about the new communications and information media than their elders, and they are often enthusiastic about using this knowledge to mobilize or engage their peers. Television and the Internet are particularly interesting to young people, the majority of whom now obtain most of their news and information from these sources. Almost all children have TVs in their homes, 97% have VCRs, and 74% have access to cable television.¹¹¹



107 Torney-Purta, 2000.

108 Education Commission of the States, 2000.

109 Cited in Horwitt, 1997, 10.

110 Rothstein, 2001.

111 Graves, S.B. (1999). “Television and Prejudice Reduction: When Does Television as a Vicarious Experience Make a Difference?” *Journal of Social Issues*, 55 (4), 707-725.

The considerable research showing the powerful influence of these media in shaping young people's perceptions about politics and government and their civic attitudes has led many experts to recommend more use of them in helping young people learn about and practice civic knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes. The Internet, in particular, needs to be more thoroughly explored as a tool since almost 95% of U.S. schools have Internet access.¹¹² Few studies, however, have been conducted as to the effectiveness of using the Internet in the classroom, especially in teaching citizenship. There is also little research as to whether curriculum materials produced for the Web are used and whether they are effective.

Civic engagement messages and story lines could also be incorporated into the television scripts of programs popular with youth, a strategy that will require increased dialogue with the producers or network executives of these shows. The Henry J. Kaiser Foundation's Entertainment Media and Public Health Program division, for example, persuades mainstream television programs and other broadcasters to make important health messages part of programs that can reach tens of millions of viewers at once. The foundation also conducts its own research projects, including public opinion surveys, about the amount and nature of health-related information on television and then works with publications, newspapers, and magazines to ensure that the results are published widely. This kind of strategy might be used with television shows, which tend to negatively and comically portray public officials and are often young people's primary source of information about public officials and careers in public service.

Many experts also have called for the addition of media studies and/or media literacy courses into curricula at both the K-12 and college levels. These courses would provide instruction to young people about how to evaluate information, separate opinions from reality, and apply the information they acquire from television and the Internet constructively and usefully.

Develop civic engagement/education programs outside of schools.

Community-based and youth-oriented organizations (e.g., 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, Girl Scouts) have the potential to serve as venues through which young people can have opportunities to learn about the link between service and politics, social change, and/or government. These organizations, for example, might offer reflection sessions that give participants a chance to discuss and explore issues related to volunteer or community service experiences.

These programs also could provide venues through which youth can stay connected after they graduate and/or engage young people who are not necessarily college-bound or those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds—constituencies that are virtually overlooked in or tangential to planning youth civic engagement initiatives or programs. Currently, most civic engagement programs target young people who already are likely to be strong adult contributors or those who already have exposure to or interest in civic-related issues. Analyses of the NAEP data, for example, show poorer performance of students from African American and Latino groups and those in schools where many students are below the poverty line.¹¹³ Other studies have revealed that students from urban and immigrant communities have fewer opportunities to engage in discussion of political issues.¹¹⁴ Finding ways to help organizations working with underserved young people to encourage their sustained civic engagement will, therefore, be an important issue to address.

Encourage efforts to return higher education to its civic mission.

In recent years, there has been a movement to encourage colleges and universities to become reconnected with their civic mission, but much of this, Mattson says, "is still rhetoric."¹¹⁵ To transform the rhetoric into reality, college or universities that are attempting to inculcate a civic mission ethos institutionally must be supported and promoted.



112 Boone, 2000.

113 Torney-Purta, 2000; Torney-Purta, et al. (forthcoming).

114 Conover, P. & Searing, D., "A Political Socialization Perspective," in L.M. McDonnell, P. Timpane & R. Benjamin (Eds.), *Rediscovering the Democratic Processes of Education*, (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 2000).

115 Mattson, 2000.

Checkoway¹¹⁶ suggests that higher education institutions can, and should, make this happen on several levels.

At the student level, higher education institutions can

- involve students in faculty research projects that address important issues in society,
- encourage them to participate in for-credit service-learning courses that link students with the community,
- help them learn from these experiences, and
- offer co-curricular activities with a strong civic purpose.

At the faculty level, universities can

- encourage faculty to conduct research that involves and improves communities,
- employ methodologies that treat communities as partners and participants rather than as human subjects and passive recipients of information, and
- provide technical assistance to community projects.

At the institutional level, universities can

- consider restructuring themselves in ways that would make the knowledge they generate more accessible to the public,
- employ two-way information exchange strategies,
- develop collaborative partnerships with community groups, and
- appoint a leadership cadre that embraces the civic mission and facilitates its achievement.

Experts concede, however, that these efforts will require major changes in the reward and incentive structure in higher education institutions. Specifically, new structures and systems would have to be developed that would reintegrate research, teaching, and service; document and assess civic activities; and broaden the criteria for evaluating excellence in scholarship—all areas ripe for future exploration.

There is also a need for a more comprehensive and integrated civics curriculum at the college level. Although some liberal arts colleges have interdisciplinary courses such as “Community and Leadership,” most of these are electives and/or one-time experiences. This would require convening and facilitating discussions among experts and practitioners from a wide variety of university departments and disciplines and, ultimately, testing and evaluating model curricula across different types of institutions.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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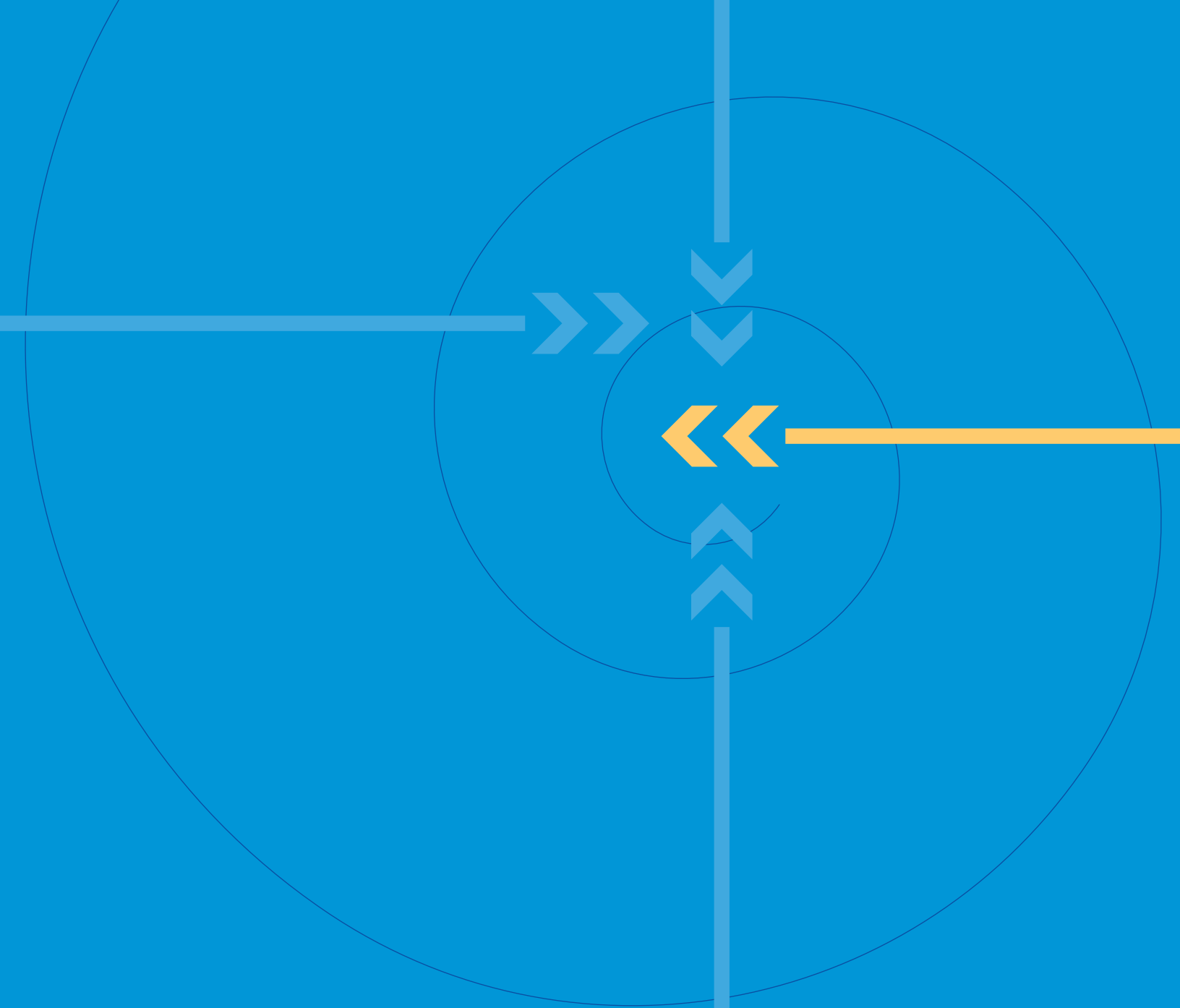
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