A wide body of research exists on how participation in community-based and civic engagement affects students while in college. However, the research is limited in two key ways. First, most studies examine evidence drawn from a single campus or a single program, with relatively small samples. While the contributions of such studies are valuable, their scope constrains their applicability beyond the specific contexts under which they were conducted.

Second, existing research most often examines a single community-based practice, primarily service learning. This narrow conception of community-engaged or civic practices has resulted in a paucity of evidence related to a range of practices that contribute to students' development.

So, despite ample research, we wanted to gather the specific evidence that would enable colleges and universities to make broad claims about the efficacy of civic and community-based experiences on student outcomes. We also wanted to understand the degree to which those claims could be made across a range of community-based practices and associated outcomes. Our resulting synthesis identified a sizable number of studies that would allow such claims to be made.

Nevertheless, the synthesis of these findings illustrates that there is still a need for studies with the scope and scale for extrapolation to general populations of students. The findings also point to a relative dearth of evidence related to effects for underserved students engaged in these community-based and civic experiences, along with opportunities for the incorporation of a broader spectrum of community-based experiences into these types of studies.

—Jessica Chittum, director of assessment and pedagogical innovation at the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U); Kathryn Enke, senior advisor for leadership, strategy, and governance at AAC&U; and Ashley Finley, vice president for research and senior advisor to the president at AAC&U

How we chose the studies
To be included in the synthesis, studies had to meet specific parameters:

- Multi-institutional studies or single-institutional studies that were longitudinal or included data from multiple cohorts/academic years
- Analysis of at least one of a range of outcomes at the student and institutional levels
- Meta-analyses and analyses of original data
- Published between 2011 and 2021
- Inclusion of at least one of a range of civic or community-based engagement experiences
- Available as a full-text version, in English, and for download via institutional library databases or open-access resources

Research on outcomes of community-based practices remains almost entirely based on indirect or self-reported measures—we need more evidence of students’ demonstrated abilities related to civic outcomes.
The connection to high-impact practices

High-impact practices have been shown to benefit college students from many backgrounds. They include campus-based practices, such as undergraduate research, first-year seminars, capstones, and community-based practices. Though it is possible to separate high-impact practices according to locale (those that occur mainly on campus versus those that occur mainly off campus in community settings), it’s important to recognize that any high-impact practice could include a community-based and/or civic component.

28

Number of studies included in the synthesis that investigated outcomes related to personal and social responsibility—the largest number of studies across any of the examined outcome categories.

11

Number of studies in the synthesis that specifically addressed outcomes for historically underserved students. These studies focused almost exclusively on retention and graduation outcomes.

What we found

The studies in the synthesis showed that students who engage in community-based and civic experiences enjoy a range of positive outcomes:

- **Personal and social responsibility** (28 studies)
  - Increased civic attitudes and civic mindedness
  - Increased civic and community-based engagement (desire/goals, behaviors during and after college, perceived value)
  - Perceived civic and social responsibility
  - Moral and ethical reasoning and actions

- **Learning gains** (10 studies)
  - Improved grades and GPA
  - Improved test performance and scores on assignments
  - Greater self-perceived gains in learning

- **Mindsets and dispositions** (17 studies)
  - Increased openness to and understanding of diversity
  - Increased awareness of social issues and social justice
  - Increased adaptability
  - Increased positive self-perceptions of socially responsible leadership
  - Increased positive attitudes toward coursework and enjoyment of challenging tasks
  - Increased self-efficacy and sense of belonging

- **Graduation, retention, and other institutional outcomes** (13 studies)
  - Increased likelihood to graduate
  - Increased likelihood to attain higher levels of credit toward degree completion
  - Increased retention and persistence rates

- **Career preparation** (4 studies)
  - Better career exploration skills
  - Increased career exploration in a field related to public service

- **Intellectual and practical skills** (9 studies)
  - Improved interpersonal skills: communication, collaboration, and teamwork
  - Increased problem-solving and critical thinking skills
  - Increased academic content learning and skills, such as research, writing, and mathematical analysis

- **Focus on equity**

  More needs to be done to understand how high-impact experiences, and particularly community-based and civic experiences, support college success—such as belonging, persistence, and agency—for underserved populations of students (including minoritized racial groups, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and first-generation students).

What’s next?

Assess civic skills

Educators still need to assess students’ demonstrated abilities to apply civic skills. The evidence base, therefore, would be significantly expanded with the consistent incorporation of the direct assessment of students’ civic and community-based skills using rubrics intended to assess complex skills, such as AAC&U’s VALUE rubrics.

Focus on equity

More needs to be done to understand how high-impact experiences, and particularly community-based and civic experiences, support college success—such as belonging, persistence, and agency—for underserved populations of students (including minoritized racial groups, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and first-generation students).

Think outside the box

Educators must expand conceptions of students’ community engagement, which can include internships, fieldwork experiences, clinical requirements in the health sciences, community-based research projects within STEM disciplines and other fields, and global learning experiences that go beyond study abroad to focus on cultural humility and understanding across a range of local, national, and international contexts.