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Civic Learning in College: Our Best Investment in the Future of Our Democracy
By Carol Geary Schneider

General education has long been regarded as part of American higher education’s responsibility to the success of our democracy. Throughout the twentieth century, the rationale for general education was that higher education educates citizens, and educated citizens need a rich understanding of the larger context in which they live, work, and contribute. Unhappily, many college students get no such thing.

What are some strategies for strengthening the relationship between “civic engagement” and the “psychosocial well-being” of college and university students, as part of the core mission of higher education?

What Do We Know about Civic Engagement?

By Peter Levine

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Civic Learning in College:
Our Best Investment in the Future of Our Democracy

This issue of Liberal Education emerges from the work of AAC&U’s partner project, Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP). Funded by the Charles Engelhard Foundation and wonderfully led by Don Harward, president emeritus of Bates College, and Sally Pingree, trustee of the Charles Engelhard Foundation, BTtoP has been a force for civic good across hundreds of colleges and universities and within higher education as a whole. The BTtoP project shows higher education at its best, restlessly striving to improve its own practices, making a transformative difference in the lives of students, and—optimally—creating productive community partnerships to solve long-standing and often festering societal problems. It is rare to see a philanthropic organization make such a comprehensive and long-term commitment to an important area of higher education reform. We at AAC&U are very grateful to be part of this highly productive partnership with the Engelhard Foundation and with Sally Pingree.

Collectively, BTtoP and several related projects—such as Campus Compact, Project Pericles, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities’ American Democracy Project, and AAC&U’s Core Commitments initiative—are building new social and civic capital for our society and for the future of our democracy. In addition to these bright stars, however, there are some dark clouds on the horizon. The good work so many are doing to make civic learning integral rather than marginal in college may yet be eclipsed.

The role of general education

General education, the “breadth” component of the curriculum that emerged virtually in tandem with the invention of disciplinary majors, has long been regarded as part of American higher education’s responsibility to the success of our democracy. This observation is frequently missed in discussions of college-level civic learning. Throughout the twentieth century, the rationale for general education—most fully articulated in General Education in a Free Society, the Harvard “Red Book” report of 1945—was that higher education educates citizens, and educated citizens need a rich understanding of the larger context in which they live, work, and contribute. This sense of a larger civic purpose has long animated AAC&U’s work, including our approach to general education. It was foundational to our 1990s work on the intersections between diversity and democracy, and reaffirmed in both of our signature twenty-first-century reports on college learning, Greater Expectations (2002) and College Learning for the New Global Century (2007).

If citizens need a “big picture” understanding of the context within which they make consequential choices, then the fields of study best suited to provide it include the liberal arts and sciences. It is these disciplines, primarily, that help individuals engage the larger world in all its complexity: physical foundations, societal landscapes, cultural diversities, and human quests for meaning and purpose. This is not to say, of course, that students must major in one of the liberal arts and sciences disciplines. Most don’t, and society needs graduates who are competent in engineering, health, technology, business, education, and the various occupational fields. It is to say, however, that every college student needs and deserves a well-constructed set of studies in the humanities, social sciences, arts, and sciences—with concerted attention to the intellectual, institutional, and societal foundations of constitutional democracy.
Unhappily, many college students get no such thing. In the occupational fields, many students experience only a dollop of the arts and sciences, with no particular attention to history, global issues and trends, or democracy. The much-admired economic “efficiency” of the for-profits comes, in the great majority of cases, from their having dispensed with general education altogether. Moreover, in the current policy rush to move students more swiftly and efficiently through their educational paces, many states are encouraging “double duty” for high school courses in the arts and sciences, with the result that the same course—say, a dual enrollment course in biology or history—may meet the general education requirements as well. In a report titled *Degrees for What Jobs?*, no less a force than the National Governors Association has recently weighed in with a recommendation that, since more job-related training is important for the economy, higher education will have to be weaned from its “long-established emphasis on broad liberal arts education.”

And so it is that, at a time when many more students are heading to college, the United States is in danger of squandering the opportunity to develop the liberally educated citizenry that both our economy and our democracy so urgently need, a citizenry possessed of that fuller understanding of the world—and of the global challenges we face. As many higher education leaders have noted with regret, we now treat higher learning as a kind of “private benefit” that is useful mainly for the added income graduates may expect.

**Can we turn back the tide?**

Just after World War II, the Truman Commission’s report on higher education in the United States declared that one of its “principal goals” was “education for a fuller realization of democracy in every phase of living.” One can hardly imagine our elected leaders making any such affirmation today. Yet there are hopeful developments on the horizon. One of these is the recent decision of the Lumina Foundation to throw its weight (and funding) behind the development of a “national qualifications profile” that will bring clarity to the meaning of the college degree—the associates’ degree, the bachelor’s degree, and the masters’ degree. The framework was released in “beta form” in January 2011 at AAC&U’s annual meeting, and will be vigorously tested through a family of funded national projects involving states, accreditors, and higher education associations—as well as hundreds of campuses and thousands of faculty. (I was one of the several authors of the initial draft.)

The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) reaffirms the centrality of general education in the arts and sciences to high-quality postsecondary degrees. But it goes even further in its embrace of civic learning by making it one of five essential elements in a postsecondary degree at all levels, from two-year to the master’s—and, by extension, beyond. Recognizing the historical role of general education in educating citizens, the authors of the DQP deliberately built from this foundation but took civic learning to a much higher level, tying it to civic dialogue, active engagement, and collaborative problem solving.

Given the daunting nature of the challenges we face, surely what our society needs most are well-educated people who can richly connect—as the DQP proposes—their content learning in the arts and sciences to active engagement in societal problem solving. Our democracy faces difficult days ahead, and we will need all the civic wisdom we can muster. Civic learning in college is the investment we need to make in the future of our grand experiment in this twenty-first century.—CAROL GEARY SCHNEIDER
This issue of *Liberal Education* draws from a national symposium convened in November 2009 by the Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) project. Titled “Civic Engagement, Public Work, and Psychosocial Well-Being,” the symposium brought together leading researchers, educators, and practitioners to assess the effects and affects of civic engagement and public work on the psychosocial well-being of college students.

In partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the BTtoP project was developed in 2003 by the Charles Engelhard Foundation as a response to widespread behavioral, emotional, and civic disengagement on the part of undergraduate students. At the time, increasing manifestations of behavioral and emotional disengagement—exhibited as substance abuse, for example, or as self-reported episodes of depression—were not being adequately addressed, as most colleges and universities sought on an ad hoc basis to relieve symptoms, address security concerns, and avoid liability. Simultaneously, the alarming extent of student disengagement from, and even disinterest in, civic life was being revealed by a host of accumulating statistics. BTtoP’s founding insight, based on the recognition of important connections among these seemingly disparate patterns of disengagement, was that by strengthening students’ academic engagement, campuses could positively affect students’ behavior, well-being, and civic development.

By 2008, the project had, through a “preponderance of the evidence,” decisively confirmed and documented the connections among engaged learning, civic development, and psychosocial well-being. It had also begun to identify successful strategies for maximizing the achievement of specific student outcomes—cognitive, behavioral and emotional, and civic. Some of the fruits of this work were on display at the 2009 symposium.

The articles collected here examine the interrelatedness of civic engagement, psychosocial well-being, and engaged learning. I am especially grateful to Don Harward, director of the BTtoP project, and Barry Checkoway, director of the project’s demonstration site program, for their support for, and assistance with, this special issue.—DAVID TRITELLI
News and Information

National Action Plan for Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement

Through Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, an initiative of the US Department of Education, Global Perspective Institute Inc. and AAC&U are jointly leading the development of a national action plan to promote civic learning and democratic engagement. Beginning in December 2010, the initiative has so far sponsored five national roundtables that have brought together leaders and practitioners from colleges, community colleges, universities, associations, disciplinary societies, and civic organizations. Based on feedback gathered during these events, initiative leaders are revising a draft policy paper and action plan. These will be released in fall 2011 and featured at AAC&U’s fall Network for Academic Renewal meetings and at the 2012 annual meeting. The Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement initiative will also be featured in the fall 2011 issue of Diversity & Democracy.

To learn more about the initiative and the roundtables, visit www.aacu.org/civic_learning.

AAC&U Names New Directors and Board Officers

At the 2011 annual meeting of the association, Helen Giles-Gee, president of Keene State College, was elected chair of AAC&U’s board of directors. As past chair, David Oxtoby, president of Pomona College, will continue to serve on the board’s executive committee. Bobby Fong, president of Butler University, will serve as vice chair of the board. Robert Sternberg, provost and senior vice president of Oklahoma State University, will serve as treasurer of the board.

In addition, seven new directors have been appointed: Carol Christ, president of Smith College; James P. Collins, Virginia M. Ullman Professor of Natural History and Environment at Arizona State University; Dianne Harrison, president of California State University, Monterey Bay; Alex Johnson, president of the Community College of Allegheny County; Edward Ray, president of Oregon State University; Sidney A. Ribeau, president of Howard University; and Theda Skocpol, Victor S. Thomas Professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard University.

Upcoming Meetings

- October 13–15, 2011
  Educating for Personal and Social Responsibility: A Twenty-First-Century Imperative
  Long Beach, California

- November 3–5, 2011
  Arts & Humanities: Toward a Flourishing State?
  Providence, Rhode Island

  Shared Futures/Difficult Choices: Reclaiming a Democratic Vision for College Learning, Global Engagement, and Success
  AAC&U Annual Meeting
  Washington, DC

AAC&U Membership 2011

1,244 members

- MASTERS 31%
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WHAT ARE SOME STRATEGIES for strengthening the relationship between “civic engagement” and the “psychosocial well-being” of college and university students, as part of the core mission of higher education? This question is significant, especially at a time when there is concern about the engagement and well-being of college students. Too many of today’s undergraduates disengage from democracy to the extent that there are questions about its future, and too many experience depression and psychosocial conditions that interfere with their academic work. This special issue of *Liberal Education* is based on the beliefs that civic engagement and psychosocial well-being are interrelated, that colleges and universities are strategically situated to strengthen the relationship, and that strategizing for this purpose will complement the educational mission and democratic purpose of higher education.

**Defining the problem**

“Civic engagement” occurs when people participate in public work to address issues and create change in their community or society. It can include initiatives to “organize” for social and political action, “participate” in the proceedings of government agencies, “advocate” issues at school board meetings, or other forms of public work. There is no single form of civic engagement that characterizes all approaches to practice.

There is growing concern about the uneven levels of civic engagement among young adults, although the findings are contested. For example, some studies show that the youngest voting-age citizens are less likely than earlier generations to attend public meetings, contact public officials, or vote in elections, although these findings derive from research based upon “formal” measures of “normal” democracy; whereas other young people—often from disinvested and segregated areas—participate with fervor, but in ways that are consistent with their location in society, rather than through voting in elections.

BARRY CHECKOWAY is professor of social work and professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Michigan, and directs the demonstration site program of the Bringing Theory to Practice project. The author wishes to acknowledge Sally Engelhard Pingree and Donald Harward, colleagues and friends, without whom this work would not be.
“Psychosocial well-being” refers to such characteristics of positive mental health as are measured by purpose in life, supportive social relationships, feelings of efficacy, and optimism about the future. As a central and growing component of “positive psychology,” psychosocial well-being places emphasis on the conditions that enable people to flourish, rather than focusing on what is wrong with people, and tries to cure what ails them. In a society dominated by curative medicine, mainstream mental health tends to be defined in terms of an absence of mental illness and to address the conditions that require practices to restore health by curative medicine and the treatment of illness.
There is growing concern about the health and well-being of college students. Almost 40 percent of today's undergraduates self-report experiences of depression sufficient to interrupt their academic work, and an increasing number of them are being diagnosed with clinical depression. More than 25 percent of undergraduates report self-abusive use of alcohol and drugs for the purpose of approaching or achieving unconsciousness. College counseling centers are busier than ever, and most of them lack the resources to meet the demand for services.

Mainstream physical and mental health providers differ from those who focus on psychosocial health and well-being, but both groups view as their unit of practice the individual, rather than colleges and universities—or the society of which they are a part.

Yet if students are disengaged from educational institutions and democratic practices, and if disengagement is a phenomenon associated with education and democracy, then there is reason to view the civic engagement and psychosocial well-being of students in institutional as well as individual terms. I and the other authors represented in this issue believe that civic engagement and psychosocial well-being are interrelated, and that this has significance for higher education.

Colleges and universities are ideally positioned to strengthen the relationship of civic engagement and psychosocial well-being. First, they are civic institutions whose educational mission often expresses a strong public purpose. Second, they have a stake in psychosocial well-being because, simply stated, students who have purpose in life and optimism about the future can be expected to learn more than those who do not. Third, they have intellectual and institutional resources to engage students in education and democracy.

However, too many institutions do not necessarily perceive themselves in this way. They often expressed a public purpose as part of their original mission, but many of them have since taken on multiple purposes, of which civic engagement is only one. A few institutions have reputations for civic engagement, but they are exceptional, not typical in the field.

In addition, many institutions lack sufficient services to strengthen active civic engagement, engaged learning, or the psychosocial well-being of students. They have courses but without the words “civic” or “engagement” in their titles; pedagogical programs but without emphasis on engaged learning; and counseling services but without psychosocial well-being as their focus. It is not surprising that scientific knowledge about these phenomena, and their relationship, is limited.

**Bringing Theory to Practice**

With funding from the Charles Engelhard Foundation and in partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) project has stepped forward to develop the relationship among civic engagement, engaged learning, and psychosocial well-being, as fields of practice and subjects of study. BTtoP has formed advisory groups of technical experts, organized national conferences for institutional representatives, and commissioned papers and publications with case studies and empirical evidence. It has supported demonstration projects, conducted cross-site meetings, and built a mutually supportive learning community.

BTtoP assumes that colleges and universities have a level of responsibility for civic engagement and psychosocial well-being, and that they can formulate strategies for addressing them as part of their core mission. It assumes that civic engagement and psychological well-being are not simply about students as individuals who have personal problems that require clinical treatment, but rather about college students as a group that will benefit from active engagement in education and democracy. It does not assume that civic engagement always has positive benefits—indeed, some studies suggest that it does not—or that civic engagement should substitute for clinical care needed for students with severe depression or mental illness. However, it does assume that if institutions are more systematic about strategy, both on campus and in the community, it will affect students’ psychosocial well-being and, in so doing, will contribute to education and democracy.
Special issue
This special issue of Liberal Education provides perspectives on civic engagement and psychosocial well-being. It provides definitions and conceptual frameworks, includes case studies and best practices, and identifies general propositions and unanswered questions from empirically based practice. It includes educators, faculty, administrators, and a student, each of whom has a distinct voice, all of whom care about liberal education.

What do we know about civic engagement? Peter Levine begins the issue by providing definitions of key terms and a conceptual framework for analyzing approaches that strengthen voluntary service, promote positive youth development, and engage young people in social change—such as Freedom Summer, which had long-term psychosocial effects on participants. Each approach has its own assumptions, activities, and outcomes, all under the umbrella of civic engagement.

Constance Flanagan and Matthew Bundick frame the topic in a different way: democracy requires citizens who will engage in government and politics, and because students spend substantial time in colleges and universities that make civic engagement part of the undergraduate experience, these institutions are in a position to affect their democratic behavior and psychosocial wellbeing. They draw upon research studies about civic engagement and psychosocial well-being, and discuss some of the opportunities for higher education.

James Youniss also distinguishes among approaches, which he views from a developmental perspective. Specifically, he draws distinctions between community service and public work, both of which have the potential to promote personal development and enable individuals to enter into civic and political life as confident and competent. Like Flanagan and Bundick, he believes that colleges and universities are ideally positioned for this work.

Shawn Ginwright also examines forms of civic engagement with developmental effects, but writes about urban youth, especially African American youth who face racism, poverty, and injustices in their everyday lives. These youth have less faith in conventional civic engagement, but they do engage, such as when they address police harassment, advocate for classroom heaters, or express themselves through art and poetry. These expressions are appropriate to their situations, and strengthen psychosocial well-being. Most scholars do not study young people like these, most educators do not teach about them, and most college administrators do not consider them—because they are not usually in college but instead remain outside its walls—as the responsibility of higher education. Their civic engagement usually derives from everyday experience or community agencies, rather than through higher education. Do colleges and universities have responsibility for their civic engagement—and, if not, who does?

The next two articles provide case studies of particular programs that integrate civic engagement and psychosocial well-being. First, Jill Swiencicki, Chris Fosen, Sofie Burton, Justin Gonder, and Thia Wolf describe their work at Chico State University, where teachers and administrators use “public-sphere pedagogy” and a “town hall meeting” that combine civic engagement and psychosocial well-being in general education. They conceive of the English composition course required of all entering students as an approach to “writing in the public sphere.” Students select a public policy issue that concerns them, research the issue, and prepare a paper that they present at the

Bringing Theory to Practice

The Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) project explores and advocates the academic community's support of engaged learning and the relationship of such learning to student health and civic development. The project is guided by an interdisciplinary planning group of scholars, researchers, practitioners, and institutional leaders. Currently, there are over three hundred colleges and universities across the nation connected to the project, many supported by grants, and many in discussion of these topics on their campuses.

BTtoP was developed in partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities. The project is sponsored by the Charles Engelhard Foundation of New York City and by the S. Engelhard Center, a nonprofit public charitable foundation established in 2007 to help young people become independent, fully contributing adults in their communities.

For more information about the Bringing Theory to Practice project, visit www.aacu.org/bringing_theory.
town hall meeting to which all campus and community members are invited. The authors analyze this innovative approach, and assess its effects on students.

Second, Patricia Gurin, Biren (Ratnesh) Nagda, and Nicholas Sorensen describe intergroup dialogues that originated at the University of Michigan to enable college students to communicate and collaborate in community projects that usually cross racial, social class, and other differences. They draw upon a national study of nine institutions—Arizona State University, Occidental College, Syracuse University, University of California–San Diego, University of Maryland, University of Massachusetts, University of Michigan, University of Texas, and University of Washington—whose students enrolled in intergroup dialogue courses that were carefully evaluated. They found that dialogue students increased in their intergroup action; openness to intergroup situations; intergroup empathy and motivation to bridge differences; understanding of race, gender, and income inequality; and commitments to social and political action—all elements of civic engagement and psychosocial well-being.

Sarah Yu writes about her experience as a participant in Youth Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity in metropolitan Detroit, a campus-community collaboration of the University of Michigan. As a high school student, she participated in dialogues with other young people of African, Asian, European, Middle Eastern, and Latin American descent. Next, she became a youth policy leader and addressed issues of residential segregation and educational inequalities. Then, while an undergraduate at the University of Chicago, she became an evaluator of the program, before trying to start one of her own in college. Yu believes that the overall effects of her involvement were truly transformative.

What issues arise in assessing the outcomes of civic engagement and psychosocial well-being? Ashley Finley draws upon her experience with both BTtoP and AAC&U, and returns us to basic questions: What is civic engagement? What is psychosocial well-being? What outcomes are important, and what criteria are appropriate for assessing them? Her questions are a reminder that this promising work—to which we hope that this issue will contribute—is still in the making.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the author’s name on the subject line.
A DECADE AGO, research on the civic engagement and learning of young people was still in a “bear market” (Cook 1985). The body of literature was strikingly small, considering that the future of our democracy depends on the preparation of young citizens. A few fine scholars wrote on this topic, but they were scattered among political science, developmental psychology, and educational research, with little interdisciplinary dialogue and few inroads into other relevant disciplines, such as sociology and communications. Their scholarship had little impact on practice.

Today the situation is dramatically different. There is a torrent of research on youth civic engagement, ranging from highly technical articles and monographs to popular magazine articles and books. Last year saw the publication of the 706-page Handbook of Research on the Development of Citizenship: A Field Comes of Age, comprising twenty-four chapters by fifty-three authors, most of whom write frequently on related topics (Sherrod, Torney-Purta, and Flanagan 2010). The press now pays attention to youth as citizens. Youth civic engagement was a significant theme in the national election of 2008, with (for example) both major party presidential nominees taking time out on 9/11 to endorse youth service programs.

We might define the field of youth civic engagement as comprising all the programs that engage young people to be active citizens, plus relevant research and evaluation. This field is not monolithic but instead consists of several distinct projects. Each project has its own objectives for social reform that depend on facts about how young people are engaging in public life, hypotheses about what kinds of programs or strategies would enhance their engagement, moral premises, and strategic analysis about how

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about Civic Engagement?
to change large-scale policies and priorities. In the following sections, I describe several such projects in turn.

Improving society through youth service
In April 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, which (among other provisions) authorizes tripling the number of full-time federal civilian service positions to 250,000. Not all of these slots will be reserved for youth, but a large majority will be filled by young Americans who will work as volunteers for federally funded nonprofits. To implement this law, the administration has requested $1.416 billion in fiscal year 2011. Judged by the numbers, the Kennedy Act represents by far the most important policy intervention in youth civic engagement.

The explicit theory of the act is that social problems can be addressed by enlisting people as volunteers: noncareer workers who are unpaid or low-paid. The bill’s sponsors and supporters spoke eloquently and prolifically about the power of service to address education, energy conservation, health care, and economic opportunity for “disadvantaged individuals.”

In fact, very little empirical evidence exists about the impact of youth service on the recipients or their broader communities. With a few exceptions (e.g., Hahn, Leavitt, and Aaron 1994), the research is not comparative—it doesn’t ask whether voluntary youth service works better than professionalized government programs or market solutions—not does it consider what economists would call opportunity costs and externalities. For instance, service might sometimes be more cost-effective than government programs, yet expanding service might reduce the number of secure government positions, with negative consequences for communities. Shirley Sagawa (2010) provides a good current summary of the research, but I think much more evidence would be required to justify Congress’s faith that service effectively solves social problems. One virtue of the Kennedy Act is its support for evaluation; we will find out whether its empirical premise is valid.

Meanwhile, political theorists have criticized “service” as a core component of citizenship, arguing (among other things) that it encourages a distinction between the active server and the passive recipient, that it marginalizes civic engagement as something to be done temporarily and unprofessionally, not as an aspect of one’s life work, and it ignores questions of power (e.g., Boyte and Kari 1996). Some service programs, however, clearly avoid these drawbacks.

Helping young people thrive by enlisting them as contributors to society
A second stream of research and practice focuses not on the impact of civic engagement on the recipients of services, but rather the benefits for those who engage. The theory and practice of Positive Youth Development (PYD) provides considerable evidence that young people develop in healthier ways when they are given
opportunities—or even mandates—to be civically engaged (Eccles and Gootman 2002; Lerner 2004). Longitudinal studies show that young people who serve their communities and join civic associations succeed in school and life better than their peers who do not engage, even once one adjusts for other factors and even if one considers only mandatory service programs (Dávila and Mora 2007). Those findings are bolstered by randomized field experiments using PYD programs (e.g., Hahn, Leavitt, and Aaron 1994).

Overall, the empirical evidence supports the thesis that at-risk teenagers benefit from service and membership opportunities, and the return on investment can be quite impressive. Two major empirical questions have received less attention. First, would these results generalize to other young populations that face different kinds of challenges? Students at selective, four-year colleges and universities are an example. They are not at risk for the same problems faced by low-income teenagers (such as dropping out of high school), but they still have psychosocial problems. There is some evidence that community service at the college level can reduce binge drinking (Weitzman and Kawachi 2000), but much more research should be done.

Second, the PYD literature focuses on the effects of positive and rather noncontroversial activities, such as joining sanctioned voluntary associations and giving one’s time or money to mainstream causes. But “civic engagement” can also mean adversarial, critical, and contentious political behavior. That kind of engagement is rarely measured in PYD studies (see the measures in Zaff et al. 2010), let alone correlated with indicators of thriving or flourishing.

Doug McAdam showed rigorously in his book Freedom Summer (1988) that the successful college students who went to Mississippi to fight de jure segregation in 1964 paid a severe psychological price for their acts. They had higher divorce rates, lower employment rates, and less happiness and satisfaction by the mid-1980s. They were heroes for their contribution to civil rights, but their kind of “civic engagement” was bad for their psychological well-being (not to mention that three of them were tortured to death within the first week of the summer).

There is some risk that the default justification for civic engagement may become its psychological or developmental benefits for participants; resources will then be directed to noncontroversial “helping” and “joining” activities, and youth engagement will become largely therapeutic. Once again, the field faces fundamental philosophical questions that cannot be settled with empirical data alone. Does our present society merit supportive youth engagement, in the form of volunteering and membership, or does it demand radical critique? And if critical engagement is appropriate, how must we weigh the benefits of social reform against the costs to those who engage?

Making politics more equal by engaging disadvantaged young people

Virtually every form of political influence in the United States is unequal. For example, voting is strongly correlated with social class, with college-educated adults at least 22 percentage points more likely to vote than their counterparts who have never attended college (Nover et al. 2010). Equalizing political influence would require changes in formal institutions and processes, such as campaign finance laws. But there is also a case for educating and organizing lower-income and marginalized people so that they get in the habit of speaking, advocating, and voting within the system that exists today and thereby helping to reform it. Evidence strongly suggests that such efforts should be focused on young people, because habits of participation (or nonparticipation) form in youth and are then difficult to change (Levine 2007, 70–74).

Some educational programs have been found to have lasting, positive effects on the propensity to vote, especially for low-income students who start with lower levels of engagement. Kids Voting USA is an example: it combines assigned readings of political news with classroom discussions, student journalism and research, and a mock election, and it achieves increases in knowledge and commitment to participate in politics (Meirick and Wackman 2004).

Unfortunately, the educational experiences that motivate young people to engage politically—discussions of controversial issues, participation in school governance, uncensored
student media, field trips, and other interactive political activities—are much more common in schools that enroll privileged students than in schools that serve poor and minority populations. Within diverse schools, these activities are dominated by the more advantaged and academically successful students (Kahne and Middaugh 2009; Levinson 2007). In short, K-12 education—a government-funded, public institution that was created to equalize political voice—tends to have just the opposite effect, increasing gaps by social class.

Although large-scale surveys of young Americans show a correlation between studying politics and political engagement, we should ask whether the quest for political equality can rely primarily on civic education. Educational programs have smaller effects than political processes and such factors as poverty and segregation do (Niemi and Junn 1998; Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht 2003). A related question is whether the state has a right to mobilize young people for politics, even if it does so in an ideologically neutral way.

Reforming society by mobilizing the next generation

A fourth project that contributes to the field of youth civic engagement is social reform with a generational angle. The central idea is that the members of today’s younger generation, often called the Millennials (born 1985–2004), have distinctive and admirable attributes that will help to remedy the problems that we older people have created for them. Chief among their distinctive characteristics are a propensity to serve (marked by record-high volunteering levels), appreciation of diversity, creativity and entrepreneurship, and resistance to the dead-end ideological debates and culture wars of the previous decades.

The portrait is controversial. I keep on my shelf the following pair of books. Generation We by Eric Greenberg and Karl Weber (2008) is subtitled, How American Youth are Taking Over America and Changing Our World Forever. Norman Lear provides one of many enthusiastic endorsements on the back cover: “The Bible tells us, ‘a little child shall lead them.’ . . . Greenberg and Weber chronicle today’s wonderful young people as they push, pull, and propel us toward global salvation.” But I also own The Dumbest Generation by Mark Bauerlein (2008), subtitled How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future, or Don’t Trust Anyone Under 30. The back cover warns: “If they don’t change, they will be remembered as fortunate ones who were unworthy of the privileges they inherited. They may even be the generation that lost that great American heritage, forever.”

If these books are witnesses for the defense and the prosecution, I would give my ultimate vote to the defense. I think the positive trends (rising volunteering rates, strong turnout in 2004 and 2008, and tolerant attitudes) outweigh the negative ones (record-low interpersonal trust and news media use), while other measures of civic engagement (such as students’ knowledge of politics) are remarkably flat. Although there is nothing inevitably good about youth movements—European fascism was an important example—this generation inspires somewhat more hope than fear in me.

On the other hand, the whole business of making a case for or against a generation should be viewed with suspicion, for four reasons. First, generations are arbitrary constructs: babies are born every second, and all the important trends in civic engagement are smoothly continuous, not broken suddenly at twenty-year intervals. Second, there are many aspects of civic engagement, and some rise while others fall. Third, people born around the same time can have totally different formative experiences. For example, about one third of young Americans are not graduating from high school today, and they come of age in very different circumstances from their contemporaries who attend four-year colleges. The gaps in volunteering and voting rates by educational experience are vastly larger than any differences among generations. Almost three quarters of young college graduates voted in 2008, compared to 26 percent of young high school dropouts (Nover et al. 2010).

Finally, we do not know how the current generation of younger adults will turn out over their life course. The children of post-War suburbs who bought Davey Crockett hats and acted like Charlie Brown and Lucy were wearing dashikis and love beads a decade later. Today’s younger generation had early experiences with peace and prosperity, but more recently have faced the longest war in American history and the deepest recession since the Great Depression. To the extent that they have
typical formative experiences, we cannot yet say what those experiences will be. Notwithstanding all those caveats, there is something to the idea of social reform through generational mobilization. In the 1920s, Karl Mannheim (1952) argued that younger adults have valuable roles as critics, reformers, and renewers of society, even as elders contribute experience, and people in their middle years hold most of the managerial responsibility. Thus one does not need a strongly positive evaluation of the Millennials to motivate a commitment to youth civic engagement. It is always valuable to get younger people constructively involved, and to do so effectively requires careful attention to their particular traits. Each generation has distinctive assets and challenges that one must understand in order to develop strategies for civic renewal.

With regard to the current generation of young people, the most salient characteristics appear to be fondness for online social networking, experience with volunteer service, comfort with diversity, unprecedentedly high levels of support for the winning presidential candidate (in 2008), low interpersonal trust, low levels of formal group membership, and particularly wide economic disparities and divergence of experiences by social class. This is the mixture of which something valuable can and must be made.

Other strands of research and practice
The four research agendas that I have outlined above seem the best developed, with the largest base of literature and the deepest influence on practice. There are, however, other agendas that contribute to the field. Some character education programs put their emphasis on ethical, political, or civic engagement. For example, Dennis Barr, evaluation director of Facing History and Ourselves, writes that the program “integrates the study of history and ethics in order to promote young people’s capacity and commitment to be thoughtful and active participants in society who are able to balance self-interest with a genuine concern for the perspectives, rights and welfare of others” (Barr 2005, 156). Facing History and Ourselves is a well-evaluated program that draws mostly on moral development and character education, but the link to civic engagement is also strong. Some efforts to enhance racial, ethnic, or cultural diversity in educational contexts (K-12 schools, colleges, and universities) are also relevant to civic engagement, because they treat cultural diversity as an asset for building better knowledge, culture, and social institutions. That premise implies that it is not enough to enroll diverse students, hire a diverse staff, and assign diverse texts in class; one must also engage diverse people in creative, collaborative work. Independent studies have found positive effects from various programs with diversity themes (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005).

Yet another strand of work comes out of “deliberative democracy.” The theory originally emerged as a critique of the premise that politics is nothing but the clash of interests. People do not merely advocate and negotiate interests; they also discuss values and thereby form ideas about who they are, what they want, and what is right. Some kinds of talk are better than others, and the marks of quality typically include the diversity of the participants, their equality of influence, lack of coercion, freedom of speech, openness and transparency, reasonableness, and civility (Mansbridge et al. 2010 provides a critical summary). The application of deliberative democracy to youth civic engagement has not been thoroughly explored, but the clear implication is that young people should learn to deliberate. Various projects and experiments suggest that they can learn from direct experience as deliberators (Hess 2009).

If deliberative democracy is a critique of politics as mere negotiation among interest groups, then the theory of “public work” can be introduced as a critique of deliberative democracy. Public work theorists say that deliberation is too narrowly concerned with discussion, reflection, and judgment. Politics also involves making things together: direct, hands-on work that can be woven into people’s paid employment and not just reserved for community meetings and seminars (Boyte and Kari 1996). The theory of public work strongly influences certain youth civic engagement programs, notably Public Achievement and Earth Force, both of which involve teams of high school students in projects.
Conclusion
I have briefly summarized several empirical research programs that seek not to celebrate, but to critically evaluate their research subjects. Nevertheless, an obvious goal is to make the practical work succeed by identifying and demonstrating positive impacts and by helping sort out the effective strategies from the ineffective ones. Underlying these intellectual efforts is some kind of hope that the practical programs, when done well, succeed.

That hope is largely hidden, because positivist social science cannot handle value commitments on the part of researchers; it treats them as biases to be minimized and disclosed, if they prove impossible to eliminate (Levine and Higgins-D’Allesdandro 2010). But we can look for researchers’ motives in an appreciative spirit, believing that an empirical research program in the social sciences is only as good as its core values.

Note that it is not at all obvious why we should hope that youth service, Positive Youth Development, political education, social reform through generational mobilization, or deliberative democracy will succeed. These are expensive and tricky strategies. For instance, the core empirical hypothesis of PYD is that society will get better outcomes for youth if we help them contribute than if we use surveillance and remediation. But it would be cheaper and more reliable if we could cut crime with metal detectors in every school instead of elaborate service-learning programs. So why should we hope that PYD is right?

I think part of the reason is simply that things are not going very well in the world, and scholars seek alternatives that may be obviously better (more efficient or sustainable, less corrupt and wasteful). That is part of the reason, but it doesn’t fully explain the focus of these research projects. If you’re worried about violence in American high schools, you should look for something new that works. But why should that new approach include service and leadership programs, instead of better metal detectors and video cameras?

Ultimately, all of my examples are anchored in philosophical commitments that I would describe as partly Kantian. Immanuel Kant argued that the individual is a sovereign moral agent, and our responsibility to others is always to help them develop their capacities for autonomy and voluntary cooperation. Real Kantians are willing to defend autonomy even if the consequences for health and welfare turn out to be bad. But pure Kantianism does not influence power, nor does it satisfy most people’s intuitions. So the research projects I have mentioned here are motivated by a kind of moderate or strategic Kantianism, similar to the philosophical view developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum under the heading of the “capabilities approach” (Alkire 2002).

The best initiatives, on this view, are the ones that achieve efficient and reliable improvements in tangible human welfare by enhancing people’s autonomy. Strategies like PYD and political education stand out as worthy of study because of their Kantian values. They do not manipulate youth but assist them in developing their autonomy. Yet these strategies deserve critical scrutiny on utilitarian grounds. If they fail to deliver the promised practical outcomes, they should be improved before they are abandoned. The same attention should not be given to surveillance systems or top-down managerial structures. In theory, those solutions might produce just as good outcomes, but helping them succeed would not enhance the participants’ autonomy. That is the implicit moral theory behind these research programs.

Today, it is a risky strategy for scholars to admit their core moral commitments. The smartest move is to pretend that a research program is simply scientific and that all the outcomes of interest are utilitarian. But those assumptions are indefensible philosophically, and they distort research in various subtle but damaging ways. For example, if we try to justify youth service programs because they cut dropout rates and teen pregnancy, we are likely to shift those programs in the direction of noncontroversial service, when the real (but undisclosed) motive may be to make young people into political leaders. If as researchers, educators, and practitioners we spell out our actual reasons, we can analyze them critically, take responsibility for them, and make them more complex and persuasive.

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REFERENCES


By definition, democracies depend on citizens’ involvement in their governance. Laws and institutions are necessary but insufficient for sustaining such systems; democracies also depend on certain psychological dispositions in the people, with an ethic of civic participation, trust in others, and tolerance of dissenting views topping the list (Sullivan and Transue 1999). The late adolescent/young adult years are a formative period for developing such dispositions, but experiences are critical. In the past few decades, colleges and universities have made engagement in community service and public affairs a more common part of the undergraduate student’s experience. In this article, we explore whether students’ psychosocial well-being is likely to benefit from such engagement.

Relationships between civic engagement and psychosocial well-being

We cast a broad net in our definition of psychosocial well-being, including in our review both the absence of mental health problems and more affirmative conceptualizations—intra-individual ones such as optimism, self-esteem, happiness, meaning and purpose in life and inter-individual ones such as social connectedness and social trust (Keyes 2002). We also cast a broad net in the work we considered relevant to civic engagement. Such engagement presumes some sense of connection to others and to the common good. Thus our net includes research on the psychosocial benefits of helping familiar others; donating time, money, blood; volunteering; and engaging in civic or public action, community service, or voting. The common denominator is transcending self-interest and contributing to an other’s well-being or to the collective (common) good.

Multiple studies of adults point to positive relationships between subjective well-being and various forms of charity, voluntarism, or kindness toward others—both in the short and the long terms. However, it is not always clear which comes first: Does volunteering or donating to charity increase a person’s well-being, or are happier, more optimistic, or outgoing people more likely to volunteer? Since so many studies are correlational, this question is hard to answer.

Both genes and personality play a role in selecting individuals into civic action. For example, volunteers are more likely than non-volunteers to exhibit positive emotions and social skills including openness, agreeableness, and extraversion (Matsuba, Hart, and Atkins 2007). Even genetic bases of political participation, such as voting or leading community groups, have been identified in research using national longitudinal samples and twin registries (Fowler, Baker, and Dawes 2008).

By definition, volunteer work entails a selection bias: people with better mental health, financial, and psychosocial resources are more likely to select into such engagement. In addition, recruitment into most forms of civic and political action occurs via organizational contexts (e.g., work or education settings) and thus selects for the socially advantaged and socially adept. Nonetheless, in their analyses of national panel data, Thoits and Hewitt (2001)
found both that people with greater well-being invest more hours in volunteer work and that engaging in volunteer work further enhances life satisfaction, self-esteem, sense of control over one’s life, physical health, and happiness, and lowers depression.

In general, studies of adolescents and young adults confirm the associations found for older adults: benefits to mental health, well-being, and thriving have been documented. Other things being equal, anxiety and distress are lower among youth engaged in helping and volunteering (Rietschlin 1998; Schwartz et al. 2003), with more mixed results for the effects of volunteerism on depression (Musick and Wilson 2003). Volunteerism is also negatively associated with engagement in antisocial behavior (Eccles and Barber 1999), pointing to the positive norms associated with volunteer networks.

In studies of adolescents and young adults, voluntarism and collective action are also associated with various indicators of psychosocial well-being, including self-efficacy, hope, and optimism (Uslaner 2002); collective efficacy and self-confidence (Astin and Sax 1998); sense of meaning (Astin, Sax, and Avalos 1999); self-esteem (Thoits and Hewitt 2001); and satisfaction with one’s daily activities (Pancer and Pratt 1999). Similarly, studies of service learning in high school and college settings find relationships with students’ feelings of agency, efficacy, purpose and meaning in life; their interpersonal skills; and their sense of living up to one’s potential (Astin et al. 2000; Markus, Howard, and King 1993; Youniss and Yates 1999).

Various studies have found positive relationships between participation in the political process, such as voting or protesting, and feelings of personal control and empowerment, efficacy, and feelings of connectedness to one’s community (for a review, see Julian et al. 1997). But once again, the fact that these are correlated does not mean that political participation is the cause. At the same time, political activism can raise awareness about the seemingly intractable nature of some social issues. People who dedicate their lives to fighting injustice may do so at a cost to their psychosocial well-being. One example is provided in McAdam’s (1988) retrospective interviews with forty participants in what was known as “Freedom Summer.” In 1964, students from elite Northern universities volunteered to register voters in Mississippi. Compared to those who were interested in the project but did not participate in Freedom Summer, those who engaged in this intense encounter with injustice in America ultimately became more cynical about the government. Afterward, some had social adjustment problems including loneliness, isolation, and loss of emotional control; one in ten became estranged from loved ones in subsequent years. Such intense political activism is not the typical form of civic engagement for most undergraduate students. Nonetheless, it is a reminder of the importance of continuing social support as young people grapple with unjust social conditions and seek to make change.

**Mechanisms linking civic engagement to psychosocial well-being**

What may be the mechanisms whereby engagement in civic action leads to psychosocial well-being? First, helping others may be psychologically rewarding in and of itself since knowing that one is contributing time, money, and/or effort to the provision of the public good is internally self-rewarding (Post 2005). Those rewards may derive from the sense of benevolence one feels from helping, from the social benefits and the networks that form, or from the feeling of attachment and identification one derives from connecting with others in the community. Second is a normative argument, namely, participating in the political process and engaging in civil society through volunteering are advanced by our social and educational systems as civic duties (Levine and Higgins-D’Alessandro 2010). Engagement in some form of voluntarism or community contribution is now considered a sine qua non for getting into most four-year colleges. People tend to feel better when they feel that they fit in, and certainly when they feel recognized or reinforced for their actions.

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, 102) summarize the social rewards and personal satisfactions of public engagement voiced by adults in their national study:

Joint activity can bring social rewards—the chance to interact with other people or to gain respect from others involved—or can be fun or exciting. Moreover, performing the act may be intrinsically gratifying: participants may derive a sense of satisfaction from promoting a cause in which they believe, doing their share, or fulfilling a civic duty.
These benefits are sometimes termed “expressive” rather than “instrumental”—the benefit deriving from the performance of the act, not the consequences of the act. In these cases, costs and benefits are hard to disentangle, for paying the cost becomes itself a benefit. . . . When the benefit derived from political activity includes—and we show that it does—the satisfaction of performing a civic duty or doing one’s share to make the community, nation, or world a better place, the greatest reward is not necessarily achieved by the least cost.

A third reason for the personal benefits derived from helping others comes from research on happiness, which indicates that relationships and responsibilities are more psychologically beneficial for people than are independence and freedom (Kasser and Ryan 2001). Fourth, there may be biological processes that account for the psychological benefits of helping others. Engagement in altruistic behavior has been linked to decreases in stress hormones (Field et al. 1998). Experimental work shows that even witnessing helping behavior can boost the immune systems of college students (McClelland, McClelland, and Kirshnit 1988).

Fifth, exposure to the plight of others, whether through service or helping behavior or through involvement in civil society, may induce a realization of relative privilege and consequent gratitude (Emmons and McCullough 2003). That is, people may not consider how good they have it until they are prompted to compare their lot to that of those who face greater challenges. Feelings of relative privilege are frequently noted in reports, for example, on the experiences of Peace Corps volunteers or even undergraduate students after some study abroad experiences.

Sixth, engagement in collective civic action toward a common purpose increases connectedness among individuals in a community, and connections to fellow human beings satisfy a basic human need for belonging (Baumeister and Leary 1995). At a minimum, social connections stave off social isolation and the depression that typically accompanies it (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008). For adolescents, it is not merely membership in but also affective ties to fellow members of community institutions, such as schools, that are protective...
against a host of physical and mental health problems (Resnick et al. 1997). Those ties also increase the likelihood that youth from different racial/ethnic backgrounds will be committed to serving their communities and will be active in the political process in the early adult years (Duke et al. 2008; Flanagan et al. 2007; Smith 1999). It is important to remember that, for youth, identification with an organization and its goals is a developmental process. For example, research with youth engaged in social activism shows that, initially, they join an organization for social reasons or out of friendship. Over time, they develop an affinity and identification with the mission and cause of the group, a change that sustains their involvement (Pearce and Larson 2006).

The collective nature of public work is also likely to benefit individuals due to an awareness that many problems that we feel are personal, in fact, have political roots and require collective solutions. Even when facing seemingly intractable social problems, the shared experience of tackling them together is likely to reduce anxiety: by acting collectively, people are more likely to feel empowered and efficacious (Bandura 2000), and a sense of collective efficacy, in turn, may reduce psychological stress (Jex and Bliese 1999). Furthermore, collective action and the sense of common purpose engendered by it may build social trust; it may increase one’s faith in humanity. Collective action toward a shared goal brings one into contexts in which one would “see the best in others” as opposed to seeing others as out for their own gain (Flanagan and Stout 2010). This may, in part, be due to the opportunities for perspective taking and intergroup understanding that many types of civic engagement afford. In fact, research does indicate that it is
participation in certain types of organizations (i.e., those with a diverse membership or with weak ties, and those that engage in charity work) that provides a boost to social trust (Stolle 1998; Uslaner 2002).

In this regard, mandating community engagement or public service as part of the undergraduate experience could have benefits for individual young people and for democracy. According to longitudinal work, high-school mandates for community service increase subsequent volunteering and community engagement (Hart et al. 2007). Furthermore, compared to interest-based groups, the more typical venue for undergraduates’ leisure time, civic engagement projects are more likely to expose youth to a heterogeneous group of others. Consequently, these projects have more potential than other extracurricular activities for extending the boundaries of the community with whom students feel connected and for whom they feel responsible. Longitudinal work with high school students found that, after a year of working in projects that served the needs of the poor, students were less likely to blame individuals and more likely to see the systemic bases of poverty (Metz and Youniss 2003). As contact theory would predict, personal contact with members of stereotyped groups increases the likelihood of giving members of those groups the benefit of the doubt.

Heterogeneous encounters also are likely to improve the perspective-taking capacities of undergraduates. Young adulthood is an optimal period for reflective thinking, but that capacity is more likely to develop when ideas are challenged by opposing information or points of view (Fisher, Yan, and Stewart 2003). In other words, any undergraduate student should have the innate capacity for reflective judgment. However, reflective judgment is likely to reach an optimal level in the context of Socratic dialogue, where ideas that are taken for granted are examined, or in encounters with heterogeneous groups, where different views are aired. Experimental research also shows that simply by increasing the racial or opinion diversity of a group, it is possible to increase college students’ abilities to see multiple sides of issues (Antonio et al. 2004). It can be unsettling to have your views challenged. But it also helps young people to clarify and crystallize their beliefs. In the face of challenging information, they may or may not accommodate or change their views, but they are more likely to examine them and to clarify where they stand. Longitudinal studies that compared students who attended college in the 1960s with their peers who did not, for example, revealed that political attitudes were shaken up by the college experience but that in midlife those who went to college were clearer about where they stood on issues (Jennings 2002).

Rethinking higher education

Becoming an independent adult is more challenging today than it was for the parents and grandparents of the current generation of undergraduate students (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005), with the shifting demands of the labor market being a major contributor. Training for a particular field can be an elusive proposition, and, not surprisingly, many undergraduates are hedging their bets by pursuing double or triple majors. However, there are psychological costs of investing one’s identity and time in jobs as the only source of personal meaning.
These new conditions can be an opportunity for higher education to rethink its mission (Flanagan 2006; Flanagan and Levine 2010). Besides their role in preparing future employees, colleges and universities have also played a key role in preparing citizens to participate in the governance of democracy. There are benefits to democracy, of course, but there also are likely to be psychosocial benefits to young people when universities take this role seriously. When universities encourage students to get involved in civic affairs, they offer them an alternative to jobs or careers as the major source of personal identity and meaning. Their sense of themselves as citizens with a vested interest in public goods and affairs also becomes an important source of meaning. In their civic role, they can exercise their voice, address common concerns, set goals, and experience a sense of collective efficacy in achieving outcomes.

The conditions of the “new economy,” where more jobs involve short-term contract work and where retraining or retooling is a fact of life, are likely to induce uncertainty, anxiety, self-doubt, and stress in younger generations. Coping with uncertainty is part of the human condition, but it produces more anxiety when we face those uncertainties alone. In civic engagement work, we learn that many challenges that we experience as personal are, in fact, public issues that we share. And feelings of social support and connectedness make it easier to live with uncertainty. As Bandura (1997, 491) has pointed out, “many of the challenges of life center on common problems that require people to work together with a collective voice to change their lives for the better.”

When universities engage students in civic action, they are also nurturing the democratic dispositions of the next generation and inviting them to claim the “spirit of liberty” that Stephen Breyer, associate justice of the United States Supreme Court, described as his interpretation of the “American idea”:

> The future of the American constitutional idea, then, is the future of a shared set of ideals. This implies a shared commitment to practices necessary to make any democracy work: conversation, participation, flexibility, and compromise. Such a commitment cannot guarantee success in overcoming serious problems . . . But it does imply a certain attitude toward finding solutions—a willingness to explore options, to search for consensus, and not to be “too sure” of oneself, a habit of mind that Judge Learned Hand once defined as the very “spirit of liberty.” (2007, 55)

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REFERENCES


Service, Public Work,
JAMES YOUNISS

Public work is a type of service that potentially promotes healthy individual development as well as identities of active citizenship. In this type of service, both volunteers and recipients engage in political action and policy formation. Although public work comprises only some portion of all youth service, it is relevant to contemporary political-economic conditions and important for the civic and mental health of young people. We are at a historical moment of deep economic crises, ill-defined but persistent wars, a continuing flux of immigration, and an atmosphere of distrust of politicians. The future calls for strong leadership, yet recent generations of youth have sent mixed signals about their commitment to sustain our democracy. Public work is not the only antidote to this state of affairs, but it is especially promising insofar as it can promote the kind of informed, committed, and participatory citizenship the nation needs.

Encouragement of service as public work is one strategy higher education can use in fulfilling its civic mission to socialize society’s future leaders

Service as public work
Recent scholarship on the civic mission of higher education distinguishes among types of service, while noting the rarity of public work. Colby et al. (2007) cite evidence that most service by college students involves helping others in states of need but is nonpolitical in nature. For example, fraternity brothers are more apt to spend a day serving food at a soup kitchen than to participate in ongoing campaigns for affordable housing or programs for job retraining. Estimates are that of all youth service, perhaps 5 percent involves political policy or action. This is not an indictment of youth, but rather a commentary on the design of service programs that do not seek to mobilize youth politically.

Musick and Wilson cast the distinction more sharply. Whereas most service provides “instruction in volunteering not activism,” public work can lead students to ask why poverty persists or why schooling results in rampant illiteracy. Musick and Wilson fear that emphasis on helping deserving others might mask probing the causes of inequalities. The “damage inflicted by promoting volunteer work as a solution to social problems can be quite severe if it results in the neglect of political solutions” (2008, 520). This leads to speculation that program directors may be inadvertently deterring the kind of student activism that instills participatory habits and fosters civic identity.

Boyte has strongly advocated for service as public work. He also views most service as encouraging acceptance of the world as it is. In distinction, public work would empower people to take action on behalf of their own interests “so that they have the opportunity to find health, happiness, and security through the democratic way of life” (2004, 46). The translation of this charge to college campuses would encourage young people to move beyond offering help by emboldening them to participate in democratic life as political actors. This would counteract the current tendency to cede the solution of social problems to technical experts. The danger of nonparticipation is that “citizenship is purified, stripped of power, interests, and institutional foundations needed for serious civic work” (58).

Boyte contrasts the goal of knowledge for individual economic advancement with the aim of political and moral betterment of society. An obvious referent is the current economic crisis, which emanated in part from an ideology of the unfettered free market of amoral individualistic competition. The main architects of the causative, risky financial instruments were not struggling to rise from impoverished backgrounds, but were graduates of our elite institutions who assiduously applied the theories of their prestigious professors (Lewis 2010; Patterson 2010). These traders and fund managers utilized sophisticated quantitative methods to generate personal wealth, with little interest in producing public goods. All proverbial ships did not rise, but millions sank into unemployment and lost income.

Public work is well within the grasp of contemporary youth. Consider, for example, the
& Respectful Public Citizens
cross-campus coalitions to ban the sale of sweatshop-produced clothing in campus bookstores (Danaher and Mark 2003), grassroots youth involvement in the 2008 Obama campaign, or youth who seek educational justice by teaching in disadvantaged schools (Youniss 2009). These and other cases suggest that if some young people can make the leap from doing good to doing public work, many more could do the same if they were given adequate resources.

**Mediating institutions**

Some universities have the capacity to target social problems and to organize students to address them (Colby et al. 2003), but most do not. Thus, most service occurs off campus at sites that are operated by service-providing organizations. These organizations assist people in need—battered women, say, or disadvantaged youth—or they seek to resolve persistent issues such as environmental conservation or affordable housing (Sirianni 2009). Service sites operate 24/7 and are typically managed by small professional staffs that rely on community volunteers for assistance.

Musick and Wilson (2008) point out that service typically starts in organizations that solicit volunteers from their own or affiliated groups. Many organizations represent long-standing local or national civic traditions. Many are religious and frame service according to theological principles. Others are based in ethnic societies, fraternal clubs, or charitable leagues in America’s rich civil society traditions. Additionally, social movements arise to target specific problems such as locating a waste facility or supporting a local school initiative.

Mediating institutions offer moral and conceptual resources at an opportune moment when young people are developing civic and political identities. This is important in light of young people’s declining membership in civic and political groups (Pew Research Center 2010; Zukin et al. 2006). Historically, volunteer organizations have served as civic classrooms where the fundamentals of democracy are acquired—for example, debating skills and public-speaking abilities (Skocpol 2003). Direct experience of democratic practices has followed a local-to-national structure

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Service has the potential to alter self-understanding in relationship to diverse others and to society more broadly

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**Catholic University**
and allowed interests to coalesce through collective effort.

Youth membership in civic organizations has been in decline for several decades. Today, a minority of young people avow membership, whereas the majority are active in informal social networking (Pew Research Center 2010; Zukin et al. 2006). Aversion to membership applies even to religion; a historic high of 25 percent say they belong to no denomination, although they are personally spiritual (Smith 2009). Public work through civic organizations does not resolve nonmembership, but it does allow youth to experience the ideology of civic democracy and the power of organized collective action.

Understanding society and one’s citizenship
Youth frequently say that service awakened them to the lives of unfamiliar others—illiterate adults, for example, or homeless families. Students learn about others what they had not seriously considered previously (Bickford and Reynolds 2002). Volunteers also gain insights into facets of themselves that hold implications for their futures as they start to think of themselves as blood donors, conservationists, or advocates for affordable housing (Piliavin, Grube, and Callero 2002). Hence, service has the potential to alter self-understanding in relationship to diverse others and to society more broadly.

These findings are germane to Allen’s (2004) analysis of citizenship in contemporary America. Allen points to a basic shift in perspective that was forged by the civil rights era. Previously, it was possible to speak of one America with equality and justice for all. After the 1960s, it became necessary to acknowledge that we are a nation of diverse groups bound by relationships in which benefits accruing to some are coupled with sacrificial costs for others.

An unexamined sense of oneness must now be replaced by striving for wholeness. The new polity recognizes differences among individuals and groups held together by the democratic ideal. For Allen, attainment of wholeness requires the cultivation of political friendships dependent on reciprocal bonds. This is not a friendship of tit-for-tat or intimacy, but a relationship that acknowledges interdependence and the uneven distribution of costs and gains bounded by fair rules. It is proper that youth discover others and come to see potential relationships with them. It is even better when service brings understanding that civic relationships empower both volunteers and recipients because benefits are coordinate with costs in an ever-shifting social ecology.

Newmann (1987) offered a similar insight by coupling recognition of diversity with a sense of justice. He built his analysis on the past four decades of immigration that have changed our ethnic complexion. Newmann proposed that we need a new kind of civic education for this reality because maintenance of trust in our democracy requires a cultivated sense of fairness that recognizes status disparities, yet seeks balance in social relationships. Public work is clearly one way to advance this form of socialization.

Entering the public domain
Youth have adapted quickly to the digital revolution in communication, and unlike older age groups, their preferred social media are digital. People under thirty tend to be more regular users of digital media than those over thirty (e.g., Pew Research Center 2010; Zukin et al. 2006). This is both promising and concerning.

Promise lies in the possibility that the digital world will provide multiple sources of information that are accessible to everyone. Young people can gain immediate access to information and learn to produce it for themselves and others without editors intervening to filter information. Because anyone can receive and also produce information digitally, each person can exchange with others in creating and critiquing ideas (Shirky 2008). The power of social connections is equally promising. Digital media’s potential for raising money, registering voters, and framing issues was glimpsed in the 2004 presidential campaign of Howard Dean. His campaign faded, but young people came alive again digitally in Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. As a result, the youth vote (ages eighteen to twenty-four) reached proportions not seen since the 1970s (CIRCLE 2008).

The concerns, however, are several. First, of all Internet traffic only a miniscule portion involves the acquisition, production, or exchange of political information (Hindman 2009). Second, although the Internet allows access to varied and unfiltered sources, there may be a loss of shared sources across interest
or age groups. In the past, younger and older generations consumed and discussed together the same daily newspapers and nightly network news programs (Wattenberg 2008). This is no longer the case. Third, access to information is not the same as exchanging ideas about information (Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini 2009). Whether posting comments is the equivalent of face-to-face discussion is an open question. Fourth, Gladwell (2010) has suggested that the weak ties spawned by the Internet may be weak substitutes for strong relationships required of collective political action.

Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini (2009) describe why the dynamics of public speech are conducive to debate. Public expressions put speakers on the spot to justify and defend utterances, when walking away would be costly to a speaker’s prestige and credibility. A person who wants to be taken seriously needs to respond to challenges that call for reflective responses. Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini also report that members of organizations are more likely than nonmembers to engage in such political exchanges, supporting Skocpol’s (2003) claim regarding membership and democratic skills. In theory, individuals could provide themselves with challenging feedback through calculated self-reflection. However, for deeply held stances regarding, say, abortion or gay marriage, emotions tend to make individuals impervious to self-doubt.

These considerations support Allen’s thesis that political relationships can be clarified through talking and dialogue. While anyone might imagine being in another’s shoes, there is no adequate substitute for direct interaction and dialogue. Doing public work with and for others is one way of learning how to talk to strangers. Public action is open to inspection and criticism. Overt expressions about issues of common concern risk disagreement, while also allowing for modification. Thus, it is

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important that the Internet not become another private haven where like-thinking people join in echoing one another. If public work can bring young people into the realm of public discourse, it will have advanced citizenship development decidedly.

**Conclusion**

Encouragement of service as public work is one strategy higher education can use in fulfilling its civic mission to socialize society’s future leaders. The diversity of American higher education includes large land grant state universities, small liberal arts colleges, religiously sponsored institutions, and local community colleges. This array helps explain the many legitimate forms of service that social scientists have observed within and across campuses. But not all types of service are equally likely to promote participatory citizenship and instill lasting civic identities. This article offers a rationale for public work that fits our contemporary economic and political times. The mediating institutions that sustain our civic traditions are in place. Young people’s sense of fairness and justice has not diminished. The question, then, is whether higher education will make the effort to bring the promise of public work to fruition.

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The existing literature on youth civic engagement presents two challenges. On the one hand, insofar as it fails to account for class and ethnic differences, current theory generally conceptualizes youth civic and political participation too broadly. Much of the focus is on conventional civic engagement, which Westheimer and Kahne (2004) describe as citizenship through individual acts of volunteering and the like. On the other hand, insofar as it does not account for the ways in which historical, community, and social forces shape civic activities, current theory frames civic participation too narrowly. The singular focus on citizenship forms of engagement overlooks other civic activities such as protests, hunger strikes, and civil disobedience. These forms of civic engagement address issues related to injustice and are directed toward social change.

In addition to the challenges presented by the literature on youth civic engagement, a growing body of research suggests that measures used to assess traditional forms of engagement—such as volunteering at the neighborhood youth club or campaigning for a local politician—may be inappropriate for assessing civic engagement among youth in urban communities (Lang 1998; Sanchez-Jankowski 2002). Research also suggests that urban youth have less faith in traditional forms of political engagement and may participate in civic life in ways that go unrecognized by social science researchers. These forms of participation may include activities such as addressing police harassment when traveling to and from school (Fine et al. 2003), encouraging a school to purchase new classroom heaters during cold winters, and advocating for free bus passes for transportation to and from school for students who receive public assistance (Mediratta and Fruchter 2001). Moreover, research suggests that “engagement” for urban youth may include unconventional forms such as financial assistance for family survival or artistic expression through music, art, and poetry (Cammarota and Fine 2008). These activities invite questions about what constitutes civic action among urban youth, and about the ways in which the social, economic, and political context of urban communities shapes the contours of civic engagement.

As Sullivan (1997, 241) notes, “in cities ravaged by alcohol, cocaine, heroin addictions, and the nexus of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, networks of care, support, and counseling are some of the strongest, most vibrant, and most visible civic infrastructures existing in poor communities and neighborhoods.” Long-term exposure to poverty, violence, and social marginalization threatens aspects of civic life and community well-being. Over time, these forms of oppression can rupture the psycho-social fabric that forms
communities of care and that fosters collective and individual well-being and purpose. These issues have in many ways threatened modes of care and justice that historically have played an important role in African American social networks and activism. Increasingly, neighborhood-based organizations in black communities have come to recognize the role that healing, hope, and care play in developing young people as well as fostering strong, vibrant community life.

Civic dimensions of healing, hope, and care

Healing is the process of restoring health and well-being to individuals and communities. Conceptually, healing is an important dimension of civic engagement given the ways in which poverty, racism, and violence have threatened vibrant community life in black neighborhoods. Daily trauma, hopelessness, and nihilism “prevent us from participating in organized collective struggle aimed at ending domination and transforming society” (hooks 1993). Healing requires a critical consciousness, a way of understanding the social world through political resistance that prepares African American youth to confront racism and other forms of oppression. Ward (2000, 50–51) suggests that it is important to develop intimate spaces where young people “cultivate resistance
against beliefs, attitudes, and practices that can erode a Black child’s self-confidence and impair her positive identity development."

The healing process fosters hope, which is an important prerequisite for meaningful civic engagement and social change. Together, healing and hope inspire youth to understand that community conditions are not permanent, and that the first step in making change is to imagine new possibilities. For young people, healing fosters a collective optimism and a transformation of spirit that, over time, contributes to healthy, vibrant community life.

By integrating issues of power, history, self-identity, and collective agency, healing rebuilds hope and political possibilities for young people. This process acknowledges the ways in which the effects of joblessness, poverty, violence, and poor education have been toxic to black communities. At the same time, this process also fosters new forms of political and community life. By rebuilding collective identities (racial, gendered, youth), exposing youth to critical thinking about social conditions, and building activism, black youth are able to heal; they remove self-blame and act to confront pressing school and community problems.

**Community organizations rebuilding forms of youth civic life**

Community organizations can play an important role in healing and in responding to neighborhood and community problems (Ginwright 2010). These organizations often provide opportunities for urban youth to connect with peers and adults, as well as to address pressing social and community problems. Community organizations provide young people with a sense of purpose, important relationships, and skills necessary to create neighborhood or school change. In Oakland, California, for example, both Urban Peace Movement and Leadership Excellence work with youth of color not only by supporting them as they heal from trauma, but also by organizing to bring peace to their schools and communities. In New York, Brotherhood/Sister Sol has developed innovative strategies to support the spiritual and physical health and well-being of youth in Harlem. In Los Angeles, Homeboy Industries combines spirituality, mental health services, and entrepreneurialism in order to foster health and well-being among gang members.

Community organizations often provide three pathways to healing and restoring civic life in black communities. First, they provide *pathways to critical consciousness*, or to social and political awareness of the root causes of quality-of-life problems. Often, community-based organizations facilitate the healing process by developing among youth the social and political awareness that is necessary for activism. This awareness encourages young people to take action in order to address social and community problems. Critical consciousness enables youth to see the world—and to act—from the perspective of agents rather than victims.

Second, community organizations provide *pathways to action*, which compel individuals and collectives to claim power and control over sometimes daunting social conditions. Providing pathways to action involves preparing young people to address school and community issues that they wish to change and improve. Through these pathways, young people are involved in strategizing, researching, and organizing in order to change school policies, state legislation, and police protocols that create problems in their daily lives. Action pathways focus on root causes of social problems and make explicit the complex ways that various forms of oppression work together.

Third, community organizations provide *pathways to well-being*. Well-being is a result of power and control over internal and external forms of oppression (Prilleltensky, Nelson, and Peirson 2001; Watts and Guessous 2006). Building pathways to well-being requires collective power and control in order to create the conditions that foster a higher quality of life. In this sense, well-being involves a sense of purpose, optimism, hope, agency, and direction that may result in community organizing and other action to bring about social justice.

Addressing forms of injustice can contribute to a sense of well-being and to improved mental health among African American youth. Civic opportunities for young people of color, therefore, must enable youth to develop the skills...
required to address the issues that affect their lives and their communities (Ginwright and Cammarota 2002; Ginwright and James 2002). These skills include the capacity for young people of color to respond to issues that they experience as unfair (Daiute and Fine 2003), for example, and the capacity for young people of color to participate and exercise agency in neighborhood and school contexts (Hegtvedt, Clay-Warner, and Johnson 2003). Scholars have also reported that a strong and positive racial identity acts as a protective factor for youth of color (Thomas, Davidson, and McAdoo 2008; Ward 2000). Janie Ward (2000, 58) notes that “addressing racism and sexism in an open and forthright manner is essential to building psychological health in African American children” who have been failed by schools, social supports, and traditional youth development programming. Similarly, Watts


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**Conclusion**

Issues such as joblessness, violence, and substance abuse have threatened some forms of civic life and community well-being in African American urban neighborhoods. And for young people, a diminished capacity for hope is one of the most significant threats to civic engagement. Community organizations are responding to this crisis by creating opportunities for healing through caring relationships, strong social networks, and action taken to improve social conditions. These organizations are weaving together threads of hope that, ultimately, form the fabric of civic life.

Given the vibrant role of young people in the civil rights, free speech, Black Power, and other movements, additional research is needed to provide a more nuanced understanding of the contours of activism and civic engagement among African American youth. Further, a more robust understanding of how social settings and political contexts influence civic opportunities would help explain why youth of color seem to be disconnected from political life today. Future research should unpack less-known dimensions of civic engagement by focusing on issues such as hope. Such research would expand the boundaries of civic engagement and increase investments in those civic pathways that can lead to a better quality of life for young people, ourselves, and our society.

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What lasting impact could a required general education writing course have on students’ well-being? We examined this question in the context of the California State University–Chico Town Hall Meeting, a campus event sponsored jointly by the Academic Writing Program and the First-Year Experience Program from 2006 to 2009. In the Town Hall, first-year students in over twenty sections of our required writing course gathered together in small groups with upperclassmen, faculty, staff, and community members to share their research on pressing public issues. They emerged from that required first-year writing course, Academic Writing: Writing in the Public Sphere, having experienced the intertwined processes of inquiry, dialogue, writing, and action that we believe are central to the formation of rich civic, academic, and emerging adult identities. The Town Hall component of this writing course is just one example of an approach to teaching we call Public-Sphere Pedagogy (PSP), which focuses on developing student well-being through purpose-driven dialogue and democratic participation.1

The Town Hall Meeting was developed during a revision of our university’s first-year writing course that aimed to move students’ classroom research into public spaces for discussion and reflection. The public space of the Town Hall Meeting was also the linchpin in our efforts to support collaborative relationships among faculty, staff, and administrators around pressing issues in our local community and larger issues of policy and social inequity affecting individuals and groups at the state, national, and international levels. The assignment sequence in our Academic Writing course was built around this public work.

Each semester, students in multiple sections of the course began their work by researching issues of local, national, or international importance, producing writing that helped them make sense of the difficult sources they encountered, talking back to those sources and each other while synthesizing information. Along the way, students wrote annotated bibliographies of their research, formed research teams with peers working on related questions, crafted research narratives to tell the stories of how they began to answer their questions, and outlined “impact work” that they could undertake in order to turn their writing and research into action. After the first Town Hall, the enthusiasm of students and teachers led to a remarkable increase in the number of participants from across campus in the second Town Hall: from 150 student participants and 55 faculty, staff, and community member participants in fall 2006 to a total of 300 participants in spring 2007. The largest Town Hall during the years it was part of the writing course took place in fall 2008, with over 700 participants.
Overview of the Town Hall format
At the Town Hall, students and all other participants attended an opening plenary session with speakers drawn from our campus’s administration or faculty as well as student speakers who returned from prior Town Halls to describe the impact the experience had on them. The middle segment of the Town Hall offered breakout sessions where students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community members divided into groups of roughly thirty to fifty participants focused on particular issues the students had researched. Typically, these breakout sessions started with brief student presentations and the framing of key questions connected to a public issue. Discussion by all participants was then encouraged, and was focused on three basic questions: What do we know about this issue? How do we know this? What can we do individually and collectively about what we know?

The concluding segment of the Town Hall asked students to imagine new opportunities for practical, engaged work in small roundtables of eight to ten participants. Student representatives from each research collective met with expert consultants who helped them discuss next steps and “action plans.” Based on these discussions, students worked together after the Town Hall to choose meaningful paths for action, including activities such as distributing pamphlets and flyers on campus or at farmers’ markets, organizing demonstrations, volunteering at local shelters or in clean-up efforts, building websites and viral campaigns to publicize social and political issues, writing or petitioning people of influence, and working with existing on-campus programs and groups.
Example of a Town Hall breakout session

In the spring 2008 semester, the guiding question for all students’ research was, what matters in the 2008 election? One particular breakout session featured students who were researching gender, race, and sexuality in the 2008 election season. In this session, a claim made by one white male student, who opposed Hilary Clinton’s bid for the presidency, ignited the entire room: “The president of the United States should not cry in public.” Those of us who were present heard a flurry of mumbled voices rise in the standing-room-only classroom; students squirmed in their seats, craning their necks to see their neighbors’ reactions. Voices rose in response to the gender assumptions that lay beneath the claim of the student and of a faculty member who thought to ask him if he had ever cried after losing a football game in high school (he admitted he had).

People listened, people took turns; one person’s comment got booed, and a student facilitator said, “No, that’s not how we do it here.” Standing beside the male facilitator was another student, an African American female, who managed to shift the focus in the room to her research, telling people that black women would be a powerful force in the election and that data she found during her research indicated this population did not mind a candidate with emotional range and vulnerability. Another student talked about reading Simone de Beauvoir’s discussion of binaries that privilege men as rational and women as emotional and the costs of that thinking for both genders.

This kind of informed discussion around contested views was not unusual for Town Hall breakout sessions. Often students in such sessions started sentences by saying, “In my research I found that…” and asked “Where did you get that idea? What have you been reading?” Students arrived at the breakouts with paper and writing implements at the ready to make notes about each other’s sources. The conversation in the breakout session described above became a robust analysis of our unstated sexist and racist assumptions about public figures. The last speaker that day was a student from the previous semester who enjoyed her Town Hall experience so much that she decided to come back and participate again. She was from southern Sudan, and lived without her family in a refugee camp before emigrating from Africa to the United States. “This is why I came here,” she said. “I came here to have talks like this, about things like this.”

Near the end of the evening, the young man who had spoken out against “crying presidents” referred to the challenges he had faced during the breakout session and said, “That woman [the faculty member who had questioned his own habits of crying] really did me a favor.” He told his teacher that he was starting to “see this woman candidate thing from a whole new angle.”

The emergence of positive possible selves

Multiple studies, many of them focused on first-year college students, indicate that psychological and social well-being are directly affected by the ways individuals think about their “possible selves,” a concept introduced by Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius in 1986. These imagined selves are defined as “individuals’ ideas of what they would like to become, what they are afraid of becoming, what they could become” (Penland et al. 2000, 963). Research indicates that students with well-developed negative possible selves and/or few strategies for imagining positive possible selves in the university environment are significantly more at risk than their counterparts who have a repertoire of positive possible selves (Christie et al. 2008; McElwee and Haugh 2009).

These studies suggest that positive possible selves are effective not only in providing an individual with an optimistic self-view, but also in creating a motivating method for achieving a desired future identity. Given students’ positive responses both to the experience of the Town Hall and to their own roles within the event, it is not surprising that many students wrote in follow-up reflections about “eye-opening” experiences, newly positive views of self and of their generation, and emerging confidence that they could make a meaningful difference in the world. These comments, captured in written civic reflections following the event, provided early indications that, following the Town Hall,
students begin to leave their high school identities behind, replacing these with possible selves that are competent to face a world fraught with difficulties.

The Town Hall provides students with a range of possible selves both modeled for them by more experienced participants (i.e., faculty and community members) and directly, if inexpertly, experienced by them: the identities of scholar-participant, community participant, activist, public speaker, involved citizen, successful college student, voter, and engaged and contributing adult. Students entered some of these roles first in the familiarity of the classroom setting, where sequenced research and writing assignments deepened their understanding of scholarship and introduced them to the ways reading and writing created dialogues that constructed new knowledge.

Fortified with information, sources they could cite, and a semester of reading, thinking, writing, and discussion focused on a particular public issue, students found that the Town Hall afforded them a place where they could let their voices be heard.

As one student noted in a written follow-up reflection, “I feel like the short two hours I spent in the discussions made me really open my eyes to [the fact] that there is a world out there and we can make it a better place . . . . [the Town Hall Meeting] has made me want to be a more educated person about current events.” The self-view expressed here indicates a sense of civic efficacy—the belief that one can participate in public life in ways that make a positive difference. The student’s description of the Town Hall experience “opening his eyes” serves as an indicator that this point of view is new, and the content of the insight correlates with an emerging positive possible self: a person with a future in the world, who can contribute to the larger good in the company of others, and who has an understanding of and a stated commitment to an ongoing process of remaining informed about current events as part of the path to reaching and becoming this future self.

Assessments show that students’ positive engagement and identity development correlated with some features of well-being.

Short- and long-term impacts

Assessments show that students’ positive engagement and identity development correlated with some features of well-being. One recurring assessment—a survey about academic engagement, civic engagement, and wellness (as measured by Keyes’s languishing/flourishing scale) given at the end of each semester to students in PSP and non-PSP versions of the same course—revealed that Town Hall students were more academically engaged than their counterparts.

Town Hall students' written reflections help us understand these measurable differences. Frequently (at the rate of nearly 70 percent in our random sample of reflections written in spring 2009), students' reflections show signs of at least one change event. We define a “change event” as a narrative moment when students express either an altered view of themselves or of the meaning of their studies, as in this statement: “I was given a chance to discuss a subject, once out of my league, with my peers; each of us was able to expand our minds while contributing to the discussion as well. This meeting meant a lot to me.” The references to “inspiration” we frequently see in students’ work following the Town Hall capture the moment when students’ perspectives change. A statement like “[this] was once out of my league” reveals rising self-esteem. Students frequently mention plans for more research or
for civic participation as a member of an organization or movement, indicating emerging possible selves that are purposeful, adult-like, and well-suited to a college environment.

The effects on students’ writing—the content focus of the original PSP course in English—were also positive, as revealed in a campuswide direct assessment of student writing from both Town Hall and non-Town Hall entry-level writing courses. This assessment showed that students in Town Hall sections ranked significantly higher than other students in summarizing and responding to sources in their writing. Educational Opportunity students (first-generation, low-income students), who three years prior to the assessment had the highest failure rate of all first-year writing students (23 percent), had a failure rate of just 6 percent in the Town Hall sections.

Our first longitudinal study, a civic survey delivered to all seniors in spring 2010, sought to capture and compare any long-term results of Town Hall participation among students who were in the first graduating cohort to have started college with a Town Hall experience. In this survey, students responded to nationally normed questions about civic and political participation and civic dispositions. For every statement, students who experienced a Town Hall Meeting responded affirmatively to a higher degree than did those without experience of a Town Hall Meeting. Overall, sixteen of the twenty-one statements showed a significantly different response pattern between the two groups: those who experienced a Town Hall Meeting and those who did not. The response pattern indicates a better-developed sense of civic engagement, of citizenship, and of agency. Possible selves constructed around ideas of citizenship, staying informed, engaging in issues-oriented dialogues, and participation exhibit enhanced staying power for students who began their college career with a Town Hall experience.

The Town Hall Meeting and other examples of PSP have had positive effects on the students, community members, faculty, administrators, and staff who have participated in them. The experiences students have in the Town Hall, or in PSP activities and events attached to other first-year classes, encourage students and faculty alike to conceive of learning and change not in the chunks of a week or semester but over years, in both formal and informal environments, according to no particular set pace. They encourage us to recognize the tremendous change processes happening for first-year college students of many backgrounds, and to take seriously those processes as not just correlated with but central to the academic work they accomplish during their college years. Students’ positive emerging selves in PSP courses are civic in nature, with scholarship seen as purposeful when used in public dialogue and linked to plans for action. A college education means more than the promise of a job; it becomes the foundation for participating in multiple communities for the public good.

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NOTE
1 California State University–Chico now offers several kinds of courses with a PSP approach: the entry-level political science course adopted the embedded Town Hall after its three-year run in English; two entry-level communication studies courses offer a day of presentations and debate in our city council chambers; an entry-level economics course provides a two-day economic challenges series examining state and national budget crises; and the first-semester orientation course includes a civic dialogue museum with exhibits and dialogue tables. For an overview of these, see: http://www.csuchico.edu/fye/.
2 The full results of the 2010 longitudinal study are available online at http://www.csuchico.edu/fye/thm/thm_results_table_sp2010).
INTERGROUP DIALOGUE provides what students need in order to relate and collaborate across differences, something they have to do in community projects that usually involve interactions across racial, social class, religious, and geographical divides. In this article, we demonstrate the efficacy of intergroup dialogue, drawing from a multi-university study involving fifty-two parallel field experiments in which students were randomly assigned either to dialogue courses or to control groups. The results show that, as compared with the control groups, the dialogue students experienced greater increases in their understanding of race, gender, and income inequality; their intergroup empathy and motivation to bridge differences; and their commitment to postcollege social and political action. Moreover, they also experienced greater increases in the efficacy and frequency of their intergroup action during college, as well as in their cognitive openness and positivity in intergroup situations.

What is intergroup dialogue?
Intergroup dialogue brings together students from two or more social identity groups that sometimes have had contentious relationships with each other, or at the very least students who have lacked opportunities to talk about important social issues in nonsuperficial ways. Moreover, they also experienced greater increases in the efficacy and frequency of their intergroup action during college, as well as in their cognitive openness and positivity in intergroup situations.

The sustained intergroup dialogue process provides college students a space for civil engagement with a clear purpose of fostering greater civic engagement.
The multi-university research study

Initiated in 2006 and completed in 2009, the multi-university intergroup dialogue research study involved fifty-two parallel field experiments in which students applying to enroll in intergroup dialogue courses on race and gender were randomly assigned either to a dialogue course (the experimental group) or to a wait-list control group. Twenty-six of these experiments focused on race, and twenty-six focused on gender. Twelve to sixteen students comprised each dialogue group and each control group. Over the fifty-two experiments, 1,463 students—equally representing white men, white women, men of color, and women of color—participated by responding to a survey instrument administered at the beginning of the term, another at the end of the term, and yet another a year after the dialogue had ended.

In addition to the quantitative assessments that the surveys provided, an intensive qualitative study was carried out in ten race and ten gender dialogue courses in which early, middle, and late sessions were videotaped. Further, all students in these twenty dialogues were interviewed at the end of the class. Finally, qualitative assessments were also provided through content analysis of the final papers of students in all fifty-two dialogue courses. These papers represented responses to an assignment that was part of a standard curriculum for the courses across the nine participating universities.

The study addressed two major questions: Does participation in race and gender intergroup dialogue have educational effects not attributable to a predisposition to participate in diversity programs? What processes transpire within and between students in intergroup dialogue that account for demonstrated effects?

Effects of intergroup dialogue:

The quantitative study

The educational effects that were predicted to result from intergroup dialogue represent its three goals: intergroup understanding, intergroup relationships, and intergroup collaboration and action. Intergroup understanding was measured by responses to questions asking students what accounts for racial and gender inequalities and for poverty in the United States. Intergroup relationships were measured by scales for intergroup empathy and motivation to bridge differences. Intergroup action and collaboration were measured by responses to a standard survey question posed by the University of California–Los Angeles’ Cooperative Institutional Research Program that asks about postcollege commitments to participate in civic and political activities, as well as by other questions focused specifically on the students’ efficacy and actual involvement in educating themselves, educating others, and collaborating with others to address issues of race and gender. The project also assessed the impact of dialogue on psychological processes that have been emphasized in social-psychological studies of intergroup relations, namely, cognitive openness (indicated by consideration of multiple perspectives, liking of complex thinking, active thinking about society, and cognitive involvement in their social identities), and positivity in intergroup interaction (indicated by positive emotions and positive experiences across difference).

Immediate effects are demonstrated when the change between the beginning and the end of the term were significantly greater for the dialogue students than for the control-group students. The value of random assignment is that it nearly always means that the experimental and control groups are equivalent to one another at the beginning of the term. If the two groups differ at the end of the term and the experimental groups show greater increases than the control group, then there is a high degree of certainty that this difference is due to participation in the intergroup dialogue course.

There were significant effects of dialogue on twenty of twenty-four multiple-item measures of the key outcomes and processes. Three other sets of findings add to the overall picture of robust impact. First, the results demonstrate that the experimental effects involving the dialogue and control groups applied to both race and gender dialogues on all but four of the twenty measures that showed an overall effect of dialogue. Second, these effects also applied generally across all four demographic groups.
(white men, white women, men of color, and women of color) on all but four of the measures. Third, the effects of dialogue were also revealed in a longitudinal follow-up survey that was conducted with both the experimental and control group students a year after the end of the course.

The response rate (82 percent) for the longitudinal survey is impressive and, moreover, did not vary by the race/ethnicity of the students or based on whether or not they had been in a race or a gender experiment. The immediate effects in the experimental study found at the end of the term persisted over the following year. Significant effects of dialogue were present after a year on twenty-one of the twenty-four measures of outcomes and processes. This evidence of long-term effects is especially noteworthy because studies of the impact of intergroup contact, the area of research most comparable to our study, rarely investigate longitudinal effects. In what is the most comprehensive review of intergroup contact studies, fewer than ten of the over five hundred studies that Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) reviewed in a meta-analysis of intergroup contact involved follow-up assessments of immediate impact.

**Processes that account for these effects:**
Theoretical study
The theoretical process framework guiding both intergroup dialogue and the research project reported in this article starts with the pedagogy of dialogue: its emphasis on substantive learning through readings, assignments, and papers; its use of active learning through in-class structured exercises and interactions to promote learning across differences; and its use of facilitators who guide learning by asking questions, engaging all students in the dialogue, challenging assumptions, and reinforcing collectively developed guidelines to ensure dialogue rather than debate and argumentation.
These pedagogical features are expected to foster four communication processes: (1) engaging self by sharing one’s own perspectives, experiences, and reactions to readings; (2) appreciating difference by listening to others, asking questions, and probing their perspectives; (3) reflecting critically by considering how one’s own identity and the identities of others help shape views of various groups, including one’s own, as well as perspectives on political and social issues; and (4) alliance building by dealing with conflict, discovering common ground within differences, and practicing being allies for each other.

These communication processes are expected to promote both positivity in interacting across difference and cognitive openness—two psychological processes that students experience in intergroup interactions. Together, the communication processes and the psychological processes are expected to lead to increased intergroup understanding, positive intergroup relationships, and intergroup action and collaboration by the end of the dialogue.

The process framework was supported by structural equation modeling of intergroup empathy, understanding of structural causes of inequalities, and action. As expected, pedagogy was highly related to the communication processes, which, in turn, were related to increased positivity and cognitive openness. The psychological processes then related to increases in the intergroup outcomes. Both increased cognitive openness and positivity related to increased intergroup empathy and increased frequency and efficacy action. Cognitive openness was especially influential in accounting for the impact of dialogue on increased understanding of structural causes of intergroup inequalities. (For more specific analysis demonstrating these relationships that support the overall process framework, see Gurin et al., forthcoming).

A closer look at processes within dialogues: The qualitative study
The qualitative study further supported the theoretical process framework in that analyses of the student interviews showed that students described the importance of engagement in intergroup dialogues by speaking (engaging self), listening engagement (appreciating difference), and active insight (related to both critical reflection and cognitive openness). The interviews and final papers also provided an especially nuanced depiction of intergroup empathy, and of how students subjectively accounted for greater commitment to civic engagement and action through participation in the dialogue course.

The videotapes provided a behavioral examination of how facilitators guided the dialogues and, in very large measure, support the guiding principles of facilitation. Facilitators are expected to support, redirect, and guide, not to teach in a didactic manner. And indeed, they did support, redirect, and guide. (For an examination of facilitator and student behaviors in the videotapes, see Meier 2010). Half of the facilitator behaviors involved repeating or rephrasing what a participant said, making a responsive comment, or redirecting the flow of conversation either by changing or rephrasing topics or by going over dialogue guidelines again. These behaviors were related to greater student engagement, as indicated by listening to what was being said by others and by smiling, nodding, and leaning forward toward the speaker.

Facilitators are also expected to ask clarifying questions, probe for elaboration, and inquire about why participants think and feel as they do. A fifth of facilitator behaviors were coded as involving inquiry, which was also related to student engagement. Further, facilitators are expected to pay attention to group dynamics by listening attentively and engaging in a supportive manner, sometimes by offering personal examples of a group process that is evident in the dialogue. Another fifth of facilitator behaviors were coded as supportive, attentive, and listening. These behaviors were related not only to greater student engagement but also to greater student openness (as indicated by sharing a personal story or perspective), critically questioning or examining their own biases and assumptions, and showing interest in the perspectives of others. These supportive and attentive behaviors were also related to less student anxiety. In contrast, greater student anxiety occurred when facilitators took an advocacy position or supported one side of a disagreement. Advocacy, which facilitators
Connecting intergroup dialogue to psychosocial well-being

What do the effects and processes that take place within this particular educational practice suggest about the impact of intergroup dialogue on psychosocial well-being? The results address two critical aspects of psychosocial well-being. First, intergroup dialogue provides what students need in order to relate and collaborate across differences, something they have to do in community projects that usually involve interactions across race, social class, religion, and geography. This is what we argued in the University of Michigan affirmative cases—namely, that an intentional educational use of diversity beyond the mere presence of diverse peers on the campus will promote intercultural competencies and democratic commitments (Gurin et al. 2002).

Second, we emphasize here the effects of participation in intergroup dialogue on thinking more complexly about people and the world, building meaningful relationships across differences—through developing trust, being open to others, being excited, and being engaged—and becoming active in shaping contexts toward more equality and justice. All these qualities denote a healthy, adaptive orientation to self and others as students deal with complexity and diversity within their institutions and deal with being future leaders in an increasingly diverse and complex world. Thus, as evident in the effects of intergroup dialogue on both psychological processes and intergroup outcomes, participation in intergroup dialogue is an educational experience that builds social as well as personal responsibility for a more just society.

Intergroup dialogue is inherently a joint psychological and social engagement process that illuminates the connection between the personal and the political, the intellectual and the affective, and the focus on personal relationships as well as on power and privilege. The sustained intergroup dialogue process provides college students a space for civil engagement with a clear purpose of fostering greater civic engagement. Through civil engagement guided by facilitators, students develop a passion for thinking, relating, and acting not only for personal fulfillment but also for a larger social project of effective collaborations across differences to enhance community life. Intergroup dialogue students continually extend their learning beyond individual enrichment to the world beyond themselves. In everyday conversations with family and friends, involvement in campus and community organizations to promote greater justice, participation in constructive civil protests and action, or actual policy formulation that promotes justice, students need a social space and a learning process that help them appreciate the rewards and challenges of civil and civic engagement. Intergroup dialogue provides such a social space and such a learning process that allow students to connect what they learn psychologically and socially in the dialogue class to engagement both on campus and beyond the educational context.

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How can the linkages between students’ civic development and their psychosocial well-being be meaningfully defined and assessed at the campus level?

Get a definition

Given that the multidimensionality of civic engagement and psychosocial well-being provide opportunities for measuring many different things, it is essential that the process of assessment begin by interrogating the concepts themselves. For institutional or programmatic assessment, it is helpful to understand both how these concepts are used on campus and the ways in which they have been defined and contextualized within existing documents (e.g., mission statements, strategic plans, and syllabi). The following three questions offer starting points for interrogation.

1. What does it mean to be civically engaged? Civic engagement can mean many things on a campus. The term may be nonexistent, consistently conflated with service learning or community-based learning, enmeshed with the language of social or political action, or distinctly articulated. In order to identify a valid measure of students’ civic engagement, it is necessary first to understand what the term means within particular contexts. Is the presence of civic engagement equated with the performance of service learning or volunteer work on campus? If a student is in a service-learning course, does this mean he or she is civically engaged? What are the boundaries of civic action? Is it enough to know about students’ engagement in the context of their civic obligations (e.g., voting behavior) or is engagement also—or instead—an exercise of civic opinion (e.g., organizing a protest, writing a petition, convening a meeting)?

2. What counts as a definable community for civic action? Webster’s dictionary defines a community as a “unified body of individuals.” Therefore, it is important to assess, or at least to consider, the proximal range of civic involvement that defines students’ engagement. For example, the disaggregation of attitudes and behaviors across a range of community contexts—campus, local community, national,
or international—may be helpful for understanding the breadth and depth of students’ civic engagement.

3. What is psychosocial well-being? As Lynne Friedli notes, “there is widespread agreement that mental health is more than the absence of clinically defined mental illness” (2009, 10). In other words, we cannot fully assess the dimensions of psychosocial well-being by, for example, deploying a standardized scale to determine whether students are depressed. Psychosocial well-being, like civic engagement,

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is defined by many interlocking components drawn from elements of an individual's short-term and long-term affect, outlook, and social functioning. Keyes (2002), for example, defines psychosocial well-being, or positive mental health, through the lens of “flourishing,” a combination of an individual's hedonic tendencies (positive feelings) with their eudemonic behaviors (positive functioning).

Get operational
After defining what the “thing” is, the next step is to use those defining qualities to choose an appropriate form of measurement. To “operationalize” a concept is to untangle dimensions until there is clarity on what can actually be measured or assessed. For example, the notion of “time spent” is often a central measure by which to assess degrees of civic engagement. But is it enough to ask how frequently one engages in community life, either by asking how often or by counting the number of hours? Or is it also important to know what happened during that time? There is no right answer, but the substantive difference between these questions changes the nature of the measure from one that equates engagement with time to one that equates it with characteristics of time.

Is civic engagement a behavior or an attitude? To be civically engaged is to be what exactly? The concept connotes ways of doing, knowing, perceiving, and ways of planning for future action. It is not possible to measure every aspect of civic engagement, but measurement should, at a minimum, account for both behavioral and attitudinal expressions of engagement. Responding to the following questions can help account for behavioral expressions of engagement:

- In addition to time spent, what are the types and/or amount of civically oriented or focused activities students are engaged in?
- What plans do students have for future engagement?
- How and in what ways have students’ engagement in civic affairs or community life changed over time?

Similarly, responses to these questions can help account for attitudinal expressions of engagement:

- How have these experiences affected students’ views or perceptions of social issues, processes, or the role of individuals within society?
- How have students’ civic experiences affected their moral or ethical development?
- In what ways have student attitudes toward diverse groups, or people unlike themselves, changed as a result of the experiences?

Next, what qualities of students’ psychosocial well-being are relevant for assessment? The answer is likely “all of them.” The real puzzle for researchers, faculty, and institutions is more specific: which of the qualities of positive mental health and social functioning are most connected to the civic engagement experiences students will have? On campuses, where discussions of mental health are often left to student affairs, defining psychosocial well-being means ascertaining the applicability of this concept within a larger discussion of students’ civic engagement and, more broadly, in relationship to student learning. With regard to students’ civic engagement, there are several important questions to ask:

- What impact does this experience have on students’ sense of hope?
- How does engagement in the community affect students’ feelings of self-efficacy or resilience?
- In what ways do these experiences broaden students’ sense of diversity and comfort working with people unlike themselves?
- How have these experiences changed, deepened, or developed students’ connections with peers, faculty, and community members?

Get a map
Any good assessment plan starts with a map showing where you are and where you want to go. An evaluation of the relationship between civic engagement and psychosocial well-being should also be mapped in order to better understand the direction and conceptualization of these terms in relation to each other. One could imagine a causal map, but establishing causality is not—and really should not be—the goal. Instead, the idea is to confront assumptions about how the mechanisms of civic engagement and psychosocial well-being work, and realistically to evaluate where assessment of each should occur.

Is civic engagement a program or an outcome? When assessing civic engagement, it is critical for campuses to distinguish the capacity in which civic engagement will be expressed. Is civic engagement assumed as a quality of a program (e.g., a service-learning course or
community-based-learning project) in order to assess other outcomes (specifically psychosocial well-being, but also other outcomes like retention, persistence, and depth of learning)? Or is civic engagement the outcome of a program or group of experiences after or during which qualities of civic engagement will be assessed (e.g., civic-mindedness, moral development, openness to diversity, and attitudes toward social or political action)? The differences among these assumptions are paramount to how instruments should be chosen and how the evaluation should be conducted.

How can psychosocial well-being be fully captured, given the expanse of student life and interaction on campus? Far more than civic engagement will impact students’ psychosocial well-being while in college. Moreover, it is impossible to control, or perhaps even to account, for all the potential influences on psychosocial outcomes within the noisy social and emotional realm of college life. A well-developed programmatic map can, however, detail the ways in which students are being engaged civically and are engaging with others around civic issues. With greater knowledge of the multiple areas in which civic participation, action, or collaboration is being borne out in students’ lives, we can more discernibly connect the degree and dimensionality of these occurrences with psychosocial outcomes. Engaging the knowledge base and resources of those in student affairs can be a vital part of the outcomes mapping process.

Should outcomes related to civic engagement and psychosocial well-being be assessed before, during, or after the program? Both civic engagement and psychosocial well-being are closely connected with processes of student development. The manifestation of an outcome associated with either concept will not occur neatly or linearly upon completion of an experience, course, or academic year. Ideally, assessment should be attentive to student development by carefully mapping, over time, a protocol for formative evaluation that incorporates multiple outcome dimensions for exploration in the context of developmental learning and growth. At a minimum, quantitative instruments should be aligned with qualitative reflection throughout the experience(s) and gathered in a way that enables students to self-evaluate outcomes. One way to build both formative and summative assessment around critical reflection and other products of student work (e.g., papers and group assignments) is to enlist rubrics as part of the assessment plan. Rubrics on civic engagement, ethical reasoning, and dimensions of social development (e.g., teamwork and intercultural competency) provide opportunities for direct assessment of student learning, and are also an accessible means by which to engage students in their own self-assessment of these outcomes.

Whatever approach is taken with regard to the assessment of civic engagement and psychosocial well-being, the goal should be to tell a coherent story about the ways in which these experiences shape students’ lives and learning. The aforementioned suggestions are simply guides for developing the story in ways that attempt to capture both the richness of the experiences and the attention of the campus audiences who will be privy to the storytelling. And we must also remember that despite the reliability of our scales and the impressiveness of our data, the best storytellers are often the students themselves. Any really good assessment plan should leave sufficient space for the inclusion of student voice on these matters.

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REFERENCES
I still remember being surprised when Barry Checkoway, a professor at the University of Michigan, asked me to speak at a Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) national conference on civic engagement in Washington, DC. After all, my image of civic engagement was of Peace Corps members, Teach for America volunteers, and New Deal workers planting trees for the Civilian Conservation Corps. Despite my active involvement in the Michigan Youth and Community Program (see sidebar on page 58) during both high school and college, I wasn't sure what I could contribute as a panelist. Barry told me to sit down, reflect, and write from my own experience. I did. And while the conference went well, it wasn't until months later, while writing this article, that the lessons finally clicked.

For five years, the Michigan Program's Youth Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity in Metropolitan Detroit involved me in intergroup relations and taught me about segregation and diversity. However, the changing nature of my role within the program, from participant to evaluator, also affected my understanding of civic engagement.

As a high school student, I initially participated in the dialogues program, learning about metropolitan Detroit, the changing nature of my own identity, and how to communicate with others on sensitive issues of race and ethnicity. Building on this experience, my role quickly transitioned into that of a civil rights advocate. Specifically, I became a member of the Youth Leadership Team, analyzed issues such as affirmative action and educational disparities, and—after two years of work with neighborhood leaders, parents, and other adult allies—went to Lansing, Michigan, and Washington, DC, to meet with elected officials and policy makers.

My role in the program changed once again after graduation from high school, when I began to evaluate the program. For three summers, I worked as a youth evaluator to assess the changes that participants experienced as they progressed through the program. This not only allowed me to gain formal insight into how campus-community dialogues affect the well-being of young adults, but it also gave me a chance to reflect on my own experiences.

**Summer dialogues program**

During the spring of my freshman year of high school, I was approached by the adviser of my school's Asian-Pacific American Club and asked to join the University of Michigan's summer program that facilitates dialogues about race and ethnicity issues between students of different social identities throughout metropolitan Detroit. I had recently become acquainted with issues concerning Asian Americans, and participation in the program seemed like a good bridge to learning about issues in metropolitan Detroit as a whole.

As a summer dialogues participant, I was placed in a group of five students with similar racial backgrounds from my community. For the first few weeks of the program, we focused on discovering and coming to terms with our own racial backgrounds and identities, and only later did we interact with young people from another part of the metropolitan area.

My group was paired with a group of African American students, all of whom belonged to a youth theater troupe in Detroit. Despite not knowing anything about the other group at the beginning.

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Sarah Yu is an undergraduate student at the University of Chicago.
of the summer, we all soon became close friends with the help of our college-aged facilitators. We delved deeply into such issues as stereotypes and segregation, and got to know each other on a personal basis.

Without doubt, the structured curriculum and trained facilitators enabled us to learn how to talk about difficult issues. My group’s college-aged facilitator had just graduated from the same high school that I myself was attending, her background was similar to mine, and because of this, we had a close connection. She easily introduced me to unfamiliar concepts, helped me to learn about the history of Detroit and its role in race relations in the United States, and played an important role in piquing my interest in the subject.

**Youth Leadership Team**

My enthusiasm for the dialogue process did not stop when the summer program came to an end. Because I wanted to continue to play a role, I, along with a few other participants, decided to help create the Youth Leadership Team for those who wanted to take the knowledge and skills learned from the dialogues and apply them to the community as a whole. For three years, we met at the University of Michigan’s Detroit Center in the heart of the city and worked together on long-term projects, including community action projects and reaching out to local and state elected officials.

This work helped me to clarify my definition of “civic engagement.” At the time, affirmative action was an important issue, and there was a ballot proposition to ban it in Michigan. Because the issues relating to the ballot proposition were intricate and resulted in confusion for some of the people who supported it, I decided to hold a community workshop to educate family, friends, and neighbors on the subject. I facilitated the meeting by using the tools and modeling the discussion in ways we had done during the summer dialogues program. I felt pride and a sense of accomplishment in my ability to apply the knowledge that I’d gained and connect with community members—and be taken seriously.

As my participation with the group grew, we began to branch out into other forms of communication and dialoguing. Some of my best memories from the Youth Leadership Team are of the conversations we had with each other and with prominent adult leaders. I learned that adults will listen to young people, if we speak knowledgeably and with passion. Our mentors emphasized that, especially with civic engagement projects, support from adult allies is crucial to successful action. Since the program was part of the University of Michigan, we had the additional benefit of interacting with people on campus, and they provided advice, time, and other resources.

One of my favorite projects was Down Woodward, an art exhibit that resulted from several long discussions on segregation and the changing structure of the suburbs. From our extensive travel in the inner city and outer suburbs, we noticed the changing face of the whole metropolitan area. As we traveled down Woodward Avenue, which extends forty miles through the area, we noticed a significant difference in the quality of buildings, the types of shops, and the overall atmosphere of the communities. As a result of this observation,
our group decided that by doing a visual display we could have a significant impact on the differences in people’s quality of life.

With mentorship and resources from our facilitators, we completed the art installation at the Detroit Center and held an opening reception for members of the community. While this project might not be considered a traditional form of civic engagement, it was still a way for young people to start dialogues and to engage with the surrounding community. Although I was aware of the socioeconomic differences among Detroit neighborhoods, the implications did not fully hit me until I had viewed the exhibit as a whole. To me, civic engagement not only implies interacting with the community, but also a thorough understanding of what people in the community are trying to accomplish. When young people are passionate about an issue, their civic engagement may be especially effective.

**Evaluation team**

After a few years as a youth leader, I again changed roles within the program. I was particularly fascinated by the evaluation process. As a member of the evaluation team, I facilitated focus groups and survey questionnaires, and began to understand the effects of civic engagement on the psychosocial well-being of young adults.

Although I had personally experienced the effects of participation in the dialogues, I was fascinated to gather quantitative data showing the effects on the group as a whole. From our research, we learned that through the dialogues, young people increased their knowledge about their own racial and ethnic identity as well as about that of others. They increased their awareness and understanding of racism and racial privilege. More importantly, they were able to “find their voice” and to feel competent enough to talk about these issues, build relationships, and work across differences. That
young people learned to develop leadership and increased their actions to address issues of racism in their community suggested that young people had also developed an increased sense of civic responsibility. Post-test surveys showed that a significant number of young people were more likely to object vocally and to take action in response to racist statements or jokes. As young people decided what positions to take on certain issues, their active involvement in the community became more likely.

While I was working on the evaluation team, it became apparent to me that there are numerous forms of civic engagement. My interviews with each of the groups about their community service projects led to a wealth of ideas about how young people can become more actively involved within their communities. The participants were essentially establishing long-term relationships with their respective communities. I have also come to realize that my own growth in the dialogues program is a result of my own civic engagement. While my role as a youth evaluator was not directly connected to improving the community, the fact that I had stayed involved with the program as a whole is a sign of the impact the dialogues had on me.

College and beyond
Although my involvement with the program decreased once I got to college, I have not forgotten the lessons learned. My interest in race relations has remained strong, and I have made it a priority to become involved with my university’s surrounding community. Although my time in the community has decreased due to the constraints of college, I supplement my hands-on education with sociology and urban studies classes, campus organizations, and other activities.

However, the dialogues program affected me so strongly that it has remained my conviction that all students should have this learning experience. After speaking at the national BTtoP conference, I was inspired by the optimism of university administrators and professors around the country and their commitment to improving the lives of college students. So, recognizing the need for campus-community dialogues at my own university, I urged administrators in the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs to establish a version of the dialogues on our campus, and we initiated a pilot class in the 2010–2011 school year.

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