

## **Civic Outcomes Assessment – Project Narrative**

The purpose of this project is to nationally administer a survey that assesses community college students' civic agency, behavior, and knowledge, using colleges participating in The Democracy Commitment (TDC is a national initiative of 125 community colleges working to increase civic learning and democratic engagement among their students; for more information, see [www.thedemocracycommitment.org](http://www.thedemocracycommitment.org)). A gap exists between educators' beliefs about the importance of civic engagement at community colleges and our current ability to measure the civic capacities of our students. This project will help to span this gap, assessing students' civic outcomes and identifying the institutional characteristics that contribute to greater civic capacity, which is essential for developing and expanding effective civic learning on community colleges.

The research questions at the heart of this project are:

1. What civic outcomes do community college students demonstrate after at least one year of attendance at a TDC member institution?
2. What demographic and other input variables contribute to greater civic agency, behavior, and knowledge among students?
3. What institutional characteristics and modes of civically engaging students contribute to greater civic agency, behavior, and knowledge among students?

## **Literature on Community College Civic Outcomes**

While there is a growing body of literature addressing civic engagement (in particular, service learning) on college campuses, a much smaller set of studies examines the outcomes of civic programs, and few of these assess civic engagement among community college students. Newell (2014) notes a critical need for such studies, pointing out that institutions of higher education

play a distinct role in strengthening students' civic skills and knowledge (Flanagan & Levine, 2010) and that the context in which community colleges educate students is different than that at residential, four-year universities.

In one of the few studies examining civic engagement at community colleges, Lopez and Brown (2006) found that community college students were more likely than high school graduates—but less likely than four-year college students—to vote or obtain news on a daily basis. They were about as likely as four-year college students to register to vote or volunteer. Newell (2014) similarly concluded that community college students were somewhat more civically engaged than high school graduates, but less engaged than their counterparts at four-year colleges and universities.

These comparative studies offer some sense of the civic landscape among institutions of higher education, but provide little information about the effects of various community college programs aimed at developing students' civic capacity, perhaps because most colleges do not directly assess civic outcomes. Indeed, AASCU and AACU recently collaborated to collect instruments used by postsecondary institutions to assess civic learning. The inventory they collected (Reason & Hemer, 2014) shows that civic learning is typically assessed solely through one or two questions appearing on a larger survey, such as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement.

Because our survey focuses exclusively on civic outcomes, and because it incorporates community college characteristics and modes of civically engaging students, this project not only helps to fill the gap in the literature noted above, but also has the potential to lead to institutional improvement. Furthermore, the project's focus on community college students (who are, in general, more diverse, less privileged, and more likely to be immigrants or first-generation

Americans than students at four-year colleges) allows us to assess—and, ultimately, improve—the civic learning and democratic engagement of these populations.

### **Conceptual Framework and Methods**

The research questions outlined above will be answered through the administration of a civic outcomes survey at community colleges participating in TDC. Initially developed at De Anza College (California), TDC and the Center for the Study of Community Colleges (CSCC) have collaborated to review and refine the survey questions—the first step in validating the instrument—and have piloted it twice, once in California in 2014 and once nationally in 2015. The Civic Outcomes Survey contains questions about students’ civic behavior (including their participation in specific civic activities as well as self-assessments about their ability to engage in diverse environments); civic agency (the sense that they can make a difference in their communities and in the world); and civic knowledge (on national, statewide, and local levels).

#### *Conceptual Framework and Literature Informing Survey Questions*

Individual questions included in the civic outcomes survey were informed by cross-disciplinary literature, but the instrument’s overall development was largely guided by Astin’s (1977, 1993) theory of college impact or Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) Model. The I-E-O model takes into account student characteristics at time of initial entry to the institution, the environment and experiences to which students are exposed, and finally, students’ characteristics or outcomes after exposure to that environment. Thus in the civic outcomes survey, questions reflect the facts that students arrive at community colleges with individual background characteristics—both demographic and behavioral—that provide a baseline for their civic development, and that

within the community college environment there are multiple programs, practices, people, and cultures that affect students' civic agency, behavior, and knowledge.

Demographic characteristics or inputs positively linked to civic behavior include socioeconomic status, parents' education levels, race or ethnicity, citizenship, and gender (Burns, Scholzman and Verba, 2001; Foster-Bey, 2008; Jenkins, 2005; Kahne and Sporte, 2008; Lopez and Marcelo, 2008; Marcelo, Lopez, and Kirby, 2007). Other background characteristics or activities shown to influence college students' civic attitudes and behaviors include: volunteering, engaging in political discussions, taking service learning courses, joining extracurricular clubs or community organizations, participating in student government, working on a student newspaper or yearbook, planning or chairing meetings, and making speeches or presentations (Astin, Sax & Avalos, 1999; Gaeke, 2009; Keeter, et al, 2002; Kirlin, 2002, 2003; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997; Zukin, et al, 2006). Multiple survey questions address these background characteristics and behaviors, which will allow us to isolate the personal variables leading to greater civic capacity from those under the institution's control.

While there is scant literature on community college characteristics shown to increase students' civic capacity, researchers examining civic attitudes and behaviors at high schools and four-year institutions have linked the following variables to greater civic engagement: the diversity of the student body, student bodies with higher than average levels of socioeconomic status, campus commitments to civic engagement and/or social activism, open political discussions, and campuses that foster a strong sense of community (Astin, 1993; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Prentice, 2007; Sax, 2004; Zukin, et al, 2006). Furthermore, Astin (2002) advises that institutional size, location, percent of faculty employed full-time, and percent of

expenditures dedicated to instruction, academic support, and student services all contribute to greater student engagement on campus.

In order to obtain data related to these institutional characteristics, each college participating in this survey will also be asked to fill out a short institutional questionnaire (see appendices). Part 1 of the questionnaire focuses on institutional characteristics associated with student engagement, and Part 2 focuses on the specific ways in which the college emphasizes and provides opportunities for civic engagement. (Part 2 of the institutional questionnaire was adapted from a broader Civic Inventory developed by TDC.)

### *Survey Administration and Analysis*

The civic outcomes survey and accompanying institutional questionnaire will be administered online at TDC community colleges each spring. Each participating college will be expected to administer the survey to a sample of their student body, and to fill out the institutional questionnaire. Results from the survey and questionnaire will be analyzed using descriptive, multiple stepwise regression, and factor analysis techniques to identify students' civic outcomes and to determine the demographic, behavioral, and institutional variables that contribute to greater levels of civic capacity.

### **Expected Outcomes**

Results from the survey will provide much useful information about the ways in which community colleges contribute to the development of students' civic agency, behavior, and knowledge. In particular, the identification of institutional variables affecting students' civic capacity can lead to the development and improvement of civic programs and practices in TDC

member schools, and ultimately at all community colleges. This project will also contribute to the nascent literature on civic outcomes at community colleges. This project also ties in with the national push to better understand and improve student outcomes. Because students completing the survey will be asked to provide their student ID, participating colleges can link civic outcomes to more traditional outcomes such as persistence, attainment of credit thresholds, movement from developmental to college-level courses, and transfer or certificate/degree attainment, providing a broader picture of the ways in which civic and academic outcomes interact.

In our current era of accountability, much attention is being paid to the outcomes of college. If we want civic outcomes to be valued as highly as those related to academic learning and workforce preparation, we need to assess students' civic capacities and use the results from those assessments to develop, improve, and promote civic opportunities at all of our postsecondary institutions.

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