

## **Community College Impact on Student's Civic Engagement**

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## Introduction

There is an increasing apprehension that modern democracy is being threaten because members of society are not interested in politics and lack information about political affairs and policy issues<sup>1</sup>. In 2012, the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement released “A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future” calls for higher education to increase the civic capital of this nation. Robert Rodriguez, Deputy Assistant to the President for Education, stated that the nation needed “Informed, engaged participants in democratic life.”<sup>2</sup> The commitment to foster foundational knowledge about the US democracy is not an expectation for every college student. However, civic involvement positively correlates with increased retention and completion rates<sup>3</sup>.

The literature on civic engagement rarely assesses civic engagement among community college students. However, Newell (2014) states that there is “a critical need” for assessment of community colleges due to the context in which community colleges educate students.

The purpose of this study was to assess community college students’ civic agency, behavior, and knowledge using the Civic Outcomes Assessment. The research question examined was what civic outcomes do community college students demonstrate after at least one year of attendance.

## Methodology

The civic outcomes survey was administered by The Democracy Commitment in Spring of 2016. The survey sample was 996 randomly selected students who had attended Piedmont Virginia Community College (PVCC) for at least one year. Students were contacted through email by the Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness. Results of the survey were provided

### Sample Size

Of the 996 students, 143 responded. This provided a response rate of 14%.

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<sup>1</sup> Delli Carpini, M. X., & Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.; Kinder, D. R. (2002). *Pale democracy: Opinion and action in post-war America*. In E. D. Mansfield & R. Sisson (Eds.), *The Evolution of Political Knowledge: Theory and Inquiry in American Politics* (pp. 104–162). Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.; Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

<sup>2</sup> For Democracy’s Future: Education Reclaims Our Civic Mission (Part 1). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbMwzAs8d3c> Jan 10, 2012

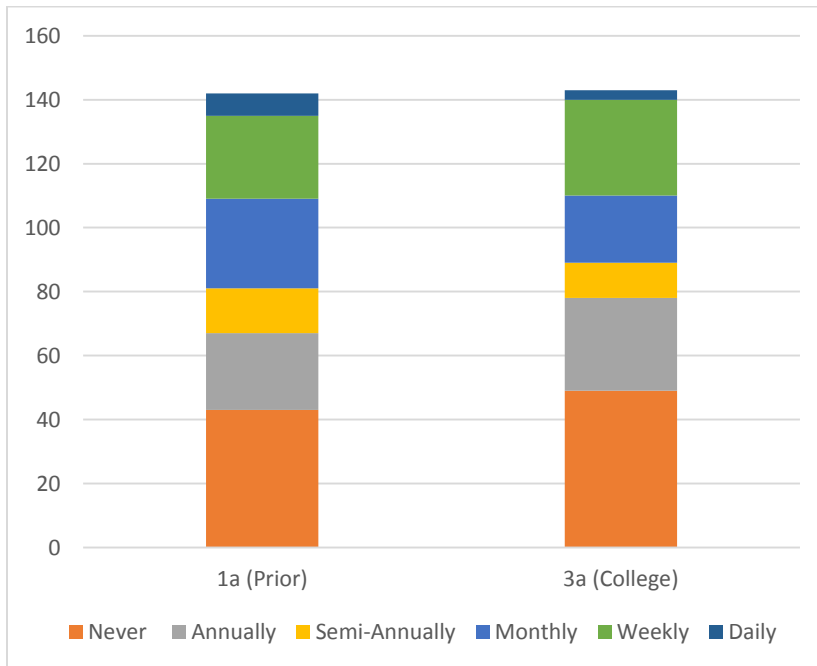
<sup>3</sup> Brownell and Swaner 2010; Campus Compact 2008

## Results

The survey requested data on how frequently (never, annually, semi-annually, monthly, weekly, daily) students participated in certain activities prior to entering PVCC and since entering PVCC. A comparison between prior activity and current activity was conducted.

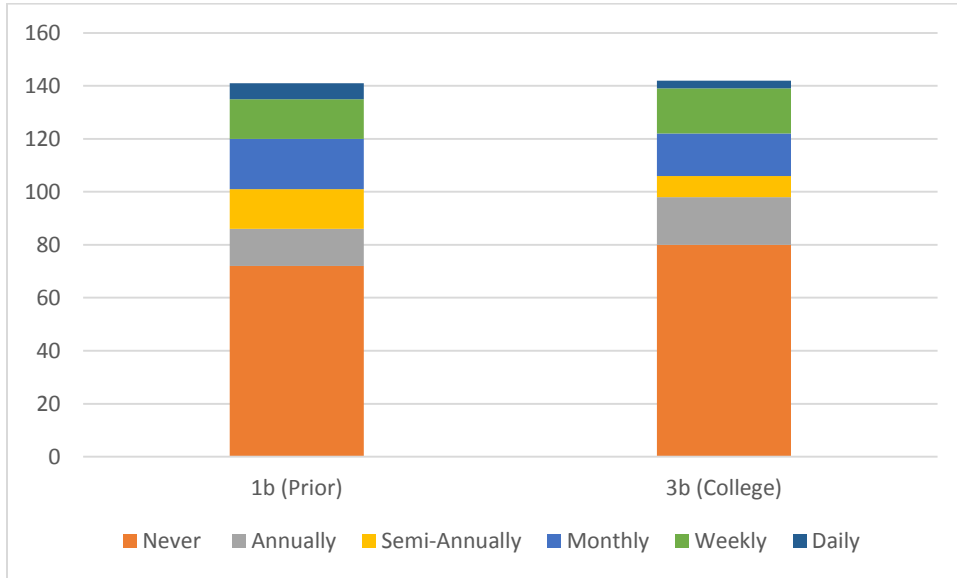
When comparing prior to college and college activity, less students in college (67%, n=94) are participating in groups and based on the frequency of participation (Figure 1) they are participating less often.

Figure 1 Group Participation



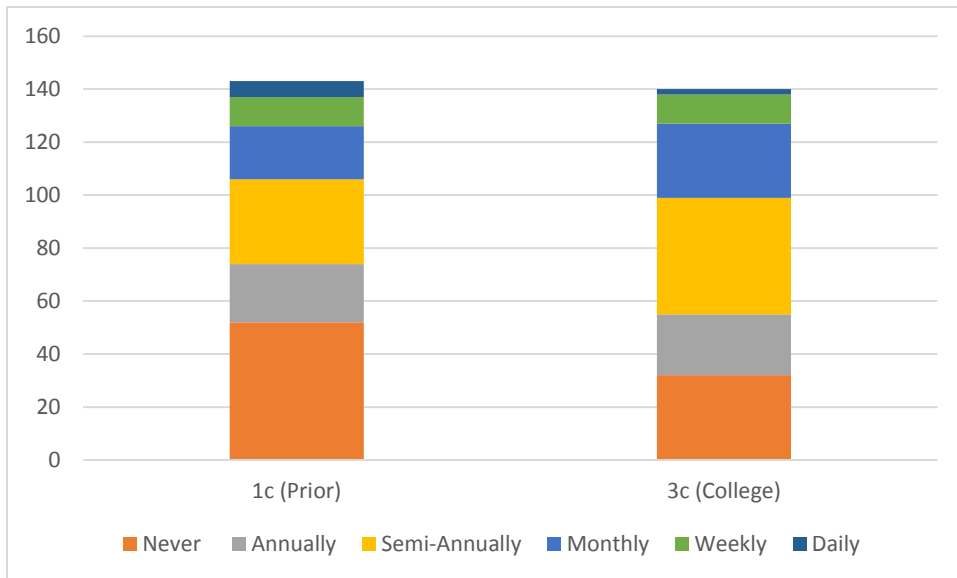
When comparing prior to college and college activity, less students in college (56%, n=80) are performing a leadership role in an organization or club.

Figure 2: Performing a leadership role



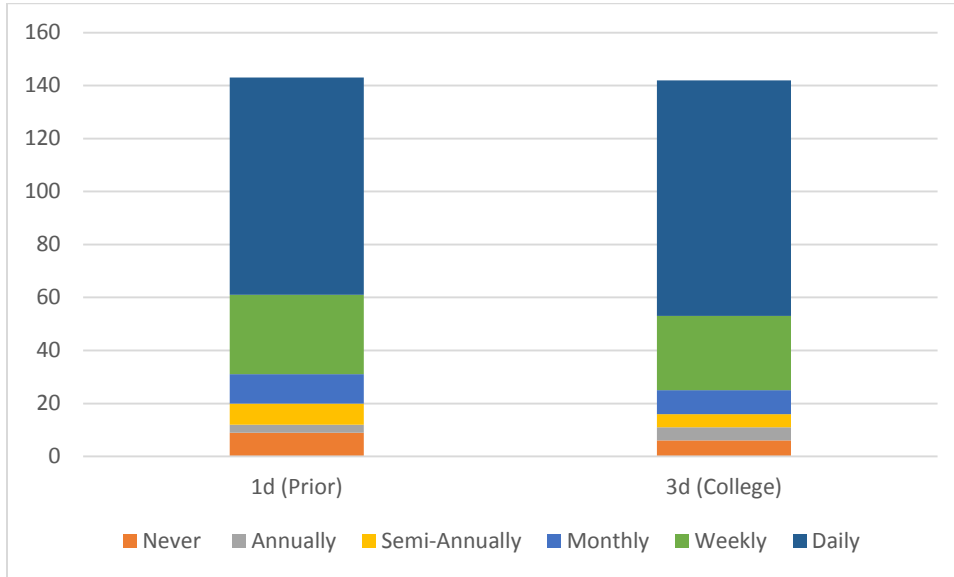
When comparing prior to college and college activity, students in college are making speeches or presentations more often. Seventy-seven percent (77%, n=108) have made speeches or presentation at college and based on the frequency distribution they are making speeches or presentations more often.

Figure 3: Making a speech or presentation



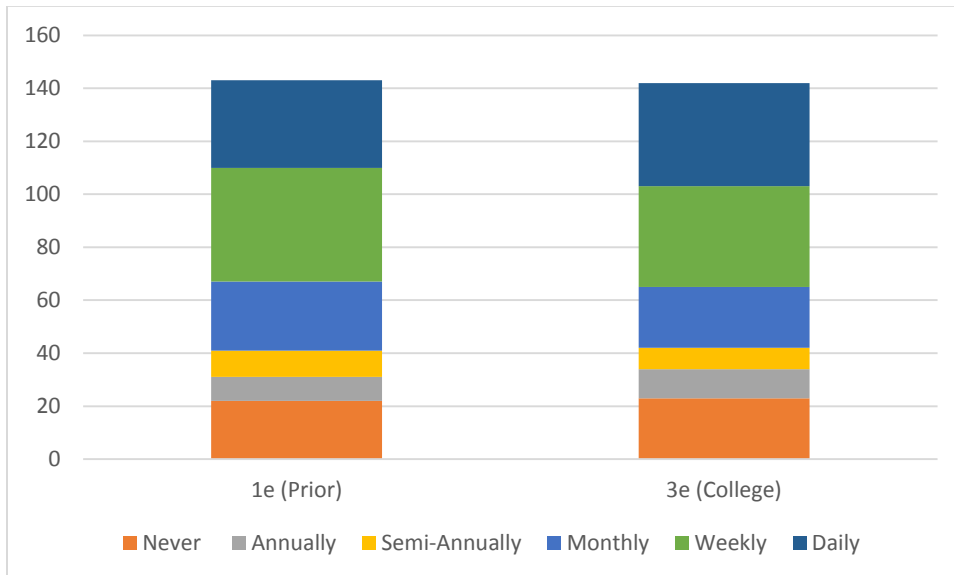
When comparing prior to college and college activity, 96% (n=135) of students in college are obtaining news often. Sixty-three percent (n=89) are obtaining news daily. This is an increase of six percentage change points when compared to prior to college activity.

Figure 4: Obtaining news



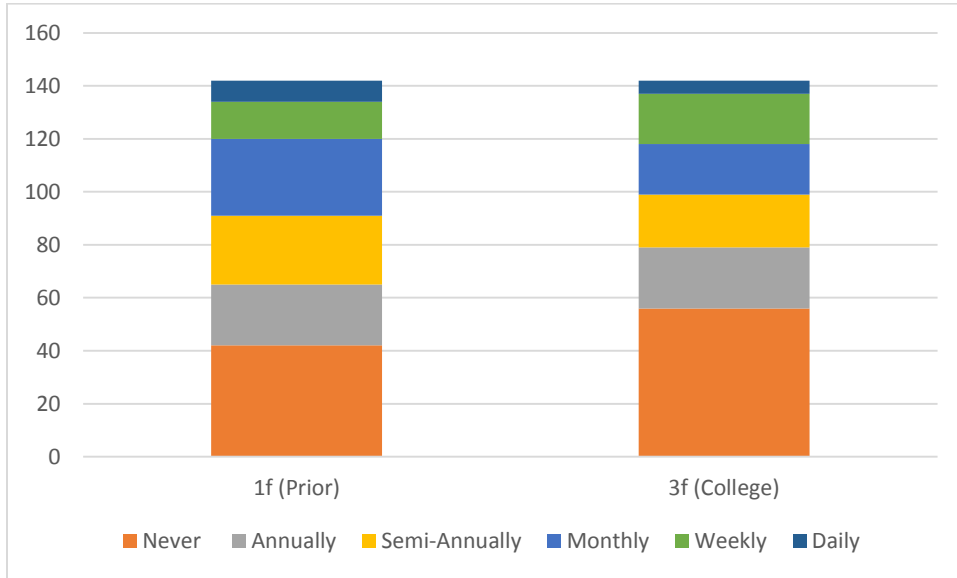
When comparing prior to college and college activity, students in college are discussing politics, social, or community issues about the same as prior to college (In college: 16% never discuss; Prior to college: 15% never discuss). However, students in college are discussing politics, social, or community issues more often. Twenty-seven percent (n=39) discuss civic engagement matters daily, this is a five percentage point increase from prior to college.

Figure 5: Discussing politics, social, or community issues



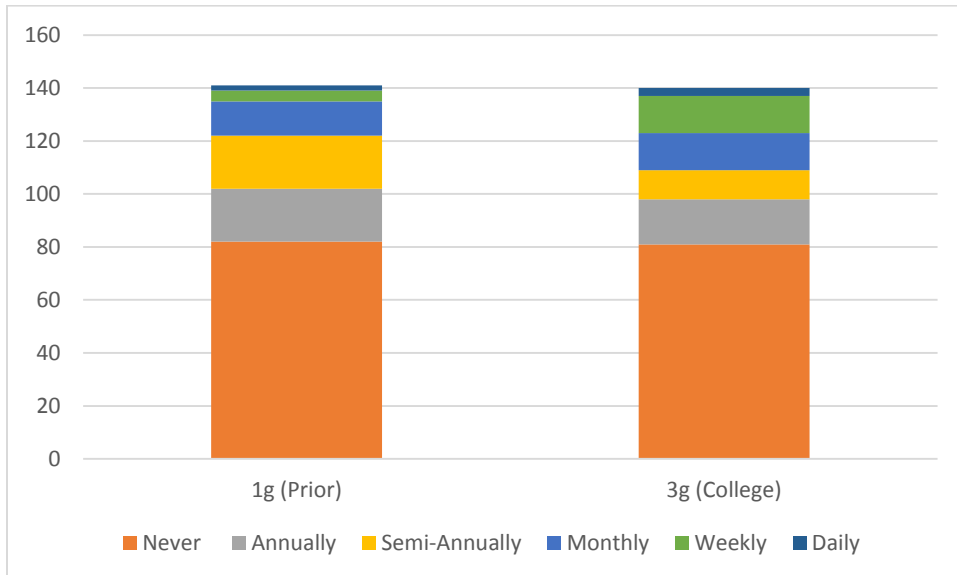
When comparing prior to college and college activity, less students in college (39%, n=56) are volunteering in their community.

Figure 6: Volunteering in the community



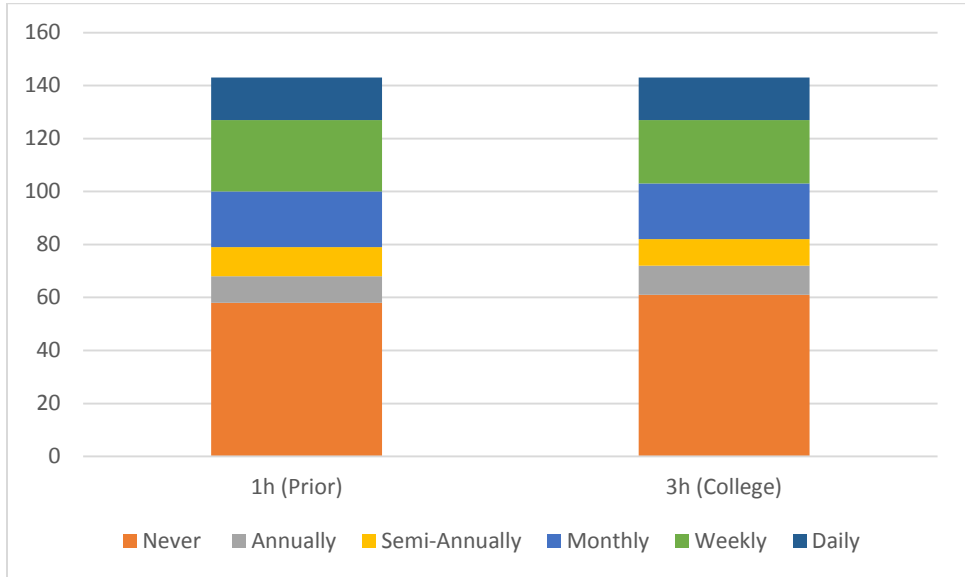
When comparing prior to college and college activity, students in college are engaging in service learning about the same as prior to college engaging in service learning. Those students that engage in service learning are engaging more often with increases in percent change for month, weekly, and daily responses.

Figure 7: Engaging in service learning as a part of a class



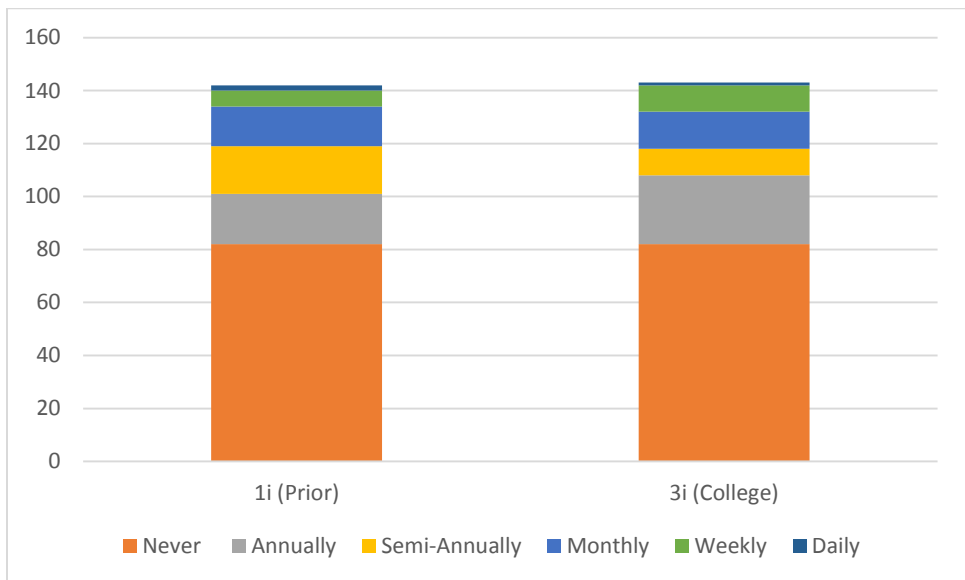
When comparing prior to college and college activity, students in college (43%; n=61, never express) are expressing their opinions on issues or policies through social media or the Internet less often than prior to college.

Figure 8: Expressing opinions on issues or policies through social media or the internet



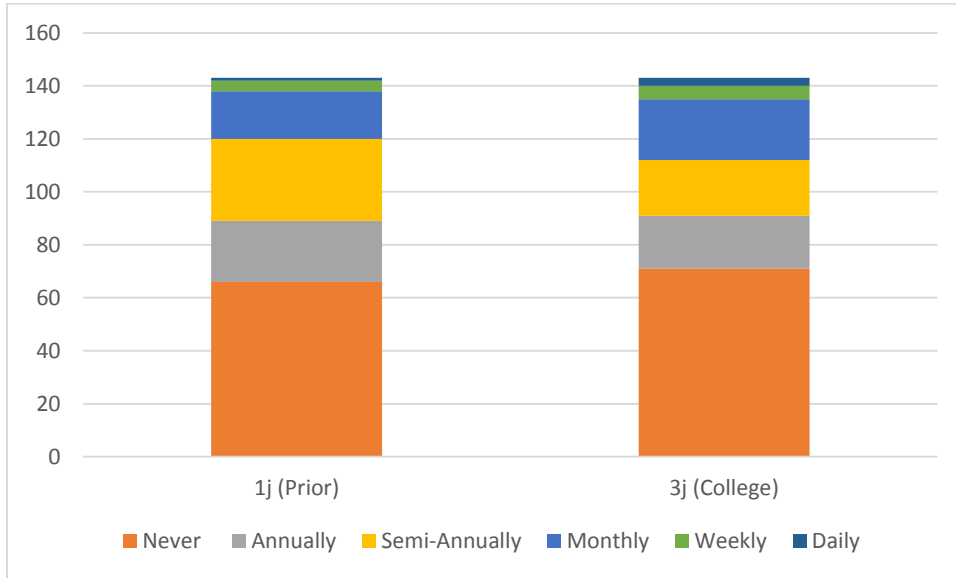
When comparing prior to college and college activity, students in college are recruiting others to participate in a community or civic activity about the same as prior to college. Those students that recruit others to participate in a community or civic activity are recruiting more often with increases in percent change for annually and weekly responses.

Figure 9: Recruiting others to participate in a community or civic activity



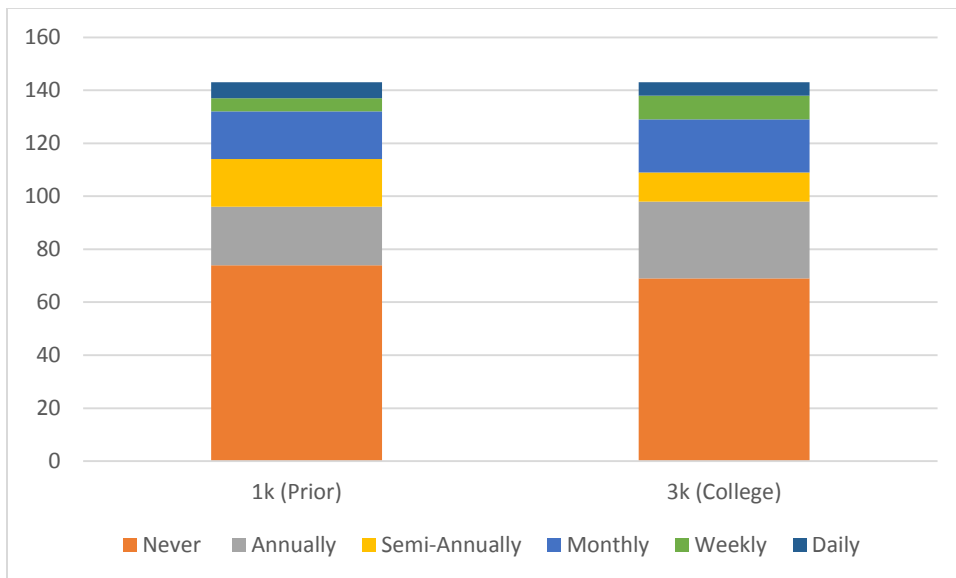
When comparing prior to college and college activity, less students in college (50%; n=71) are signing online or paper petitions.

Figure 10: Sign an online or paper petition



When comparing prior to college and college activity, 52% (n=69) of students in college are raising awareness about an issue, campaign, party, or group. This is an increase of four percentage points compared to prior to college.

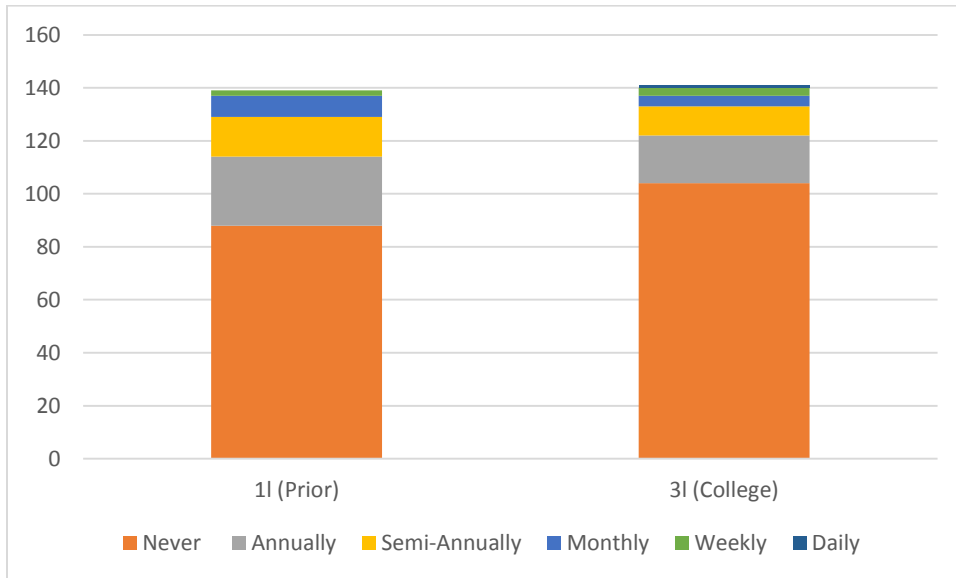
Figure 11: Raise awareness about an issue, campaign, party, or group





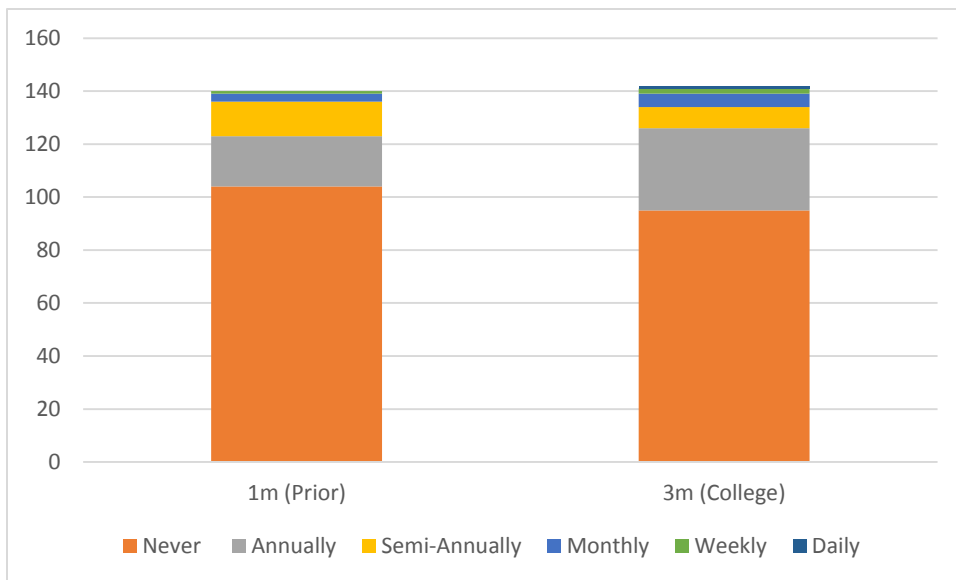
When comparing prior to college and college activity, less students in college (74%, n=104) are raising money for an issue, campaign, party, or group.

Figure 12: Raise money for an issue, campaign, party, or group



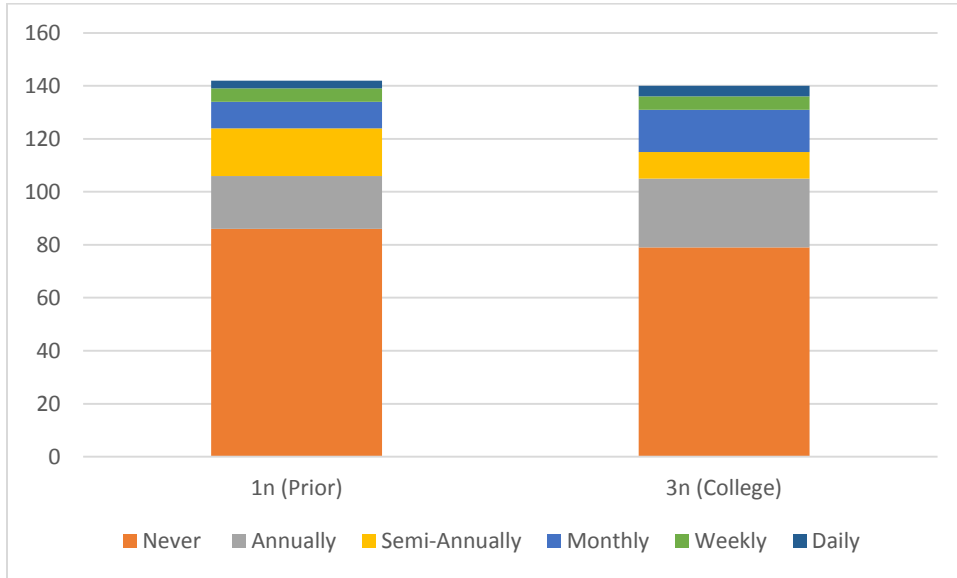
When comparing prior to college and college activity, more students in college (43%, n=47) are participating in a local, state, or national campaign with the greatest frequency increase in the area of annual participation (n=31, 22%).

Figure 13: Participate in a local, state, or national campaign



When comparing prior to college and college activity, more students in college (44%, n=61) persuade others to vote for a particular issue, candidate, or party.

Figure 14: Persuade others to vote for a particular issue, candidate, or party



## Voting

When comparing prior to college and college activity, 70% (n=99) of students in college were registered to vote, this is two percentage change points less than those students prior to college (72%, n=102). There was an increase in the percentage of students who voted in a local, state or federal election where 67% of college students voted compared to 62% that voted prior to college.

## Civic Coursework

When asked if students had taken a political science or government course at college, 69% (n=99) stated that they had not. When asked if students had taken a course that deals with social, political, or economic inequality, 47% (n=68) stated that they had not.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Understanding the impact of the college experience on civic engagement is important to determine if an institution of higher education is increasing the civic engagement capital. The results of this study depict a sample population that has increased the number of speeches and/or presentations given; obtained news frequently, discussed politics more often, recruited others to participate in community and civic activities, persuaded others to vote, and participated in local, state, or national campaigns more frequently than they did prior to college.

A problem with the study is that the sample size was lacking. The sample size was 143 respondents out of 996 students. The response rate was 14%. The relatively small number of participants is problematic in that the size is not a representative distribution of the population and cannot be considered representative of groups of people.

The study conducted is the first of its nature at Piedmont Virginia Community College and the research instrument "TDC Civic Engagement Survey" has been used for two years. Therefore, there is scarce literature and research as it relates to measuring civic engagement at community colleges. As is the nature of self-reported data, the data could contain several potential bias<sup>4</sup>. These include but are not limited to selective memory, telescoping, attribution, exaggeration, social desirability<sup>5</sup>.

Further research comparing these benchmark results to subsequent results would establish a trend and provide more valid results to improve representation across a population.

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<sup>4</sup> Donaldson, S.I. (2002). "Understanding self-report bias in organizational behavior research." *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 17:245-260.

<sup>5</sup> Nederhof, A. J. (1985). "[Methods of coping with social desirability bias: a review](#)". *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 15: 263-280

Fisher, R. J. (1993). "[Social desirability bias and the validity of indirect questioning](#)". *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20, 303-315.

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