Civic Engagement and Psychosocial Well-Being in College Students

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 promises 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 Bies 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 are also 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
Connecting the Dots

A Methodological Approach for Assessing Students’ Civic Engagement and Psychosocial Well-Being

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As the saying goes, there are more ways than one to skin a cat. The same goes for assessment. Choosing one of the myriad instruments by which to measure civic engagement and psychosocial well-being is relatively easy. The hard part is choosing the one—or two, or three—that will actually connect the most salient elements of civic engagement and psychosocial well-being to the goals of a particular course, project, or institution. The important thing to remember in any discussion of the connection between civic engagement and psychosocial well-being is that neither of these concepts is unidimensional. Each is a composite. One’s civic engagement, like one’s psychosocial well-being, is an amalgam of multiple strands of measureable outcomes related to individual thought, perception, and action. How, then, 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 provides 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,
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 two 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:

- 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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