

Individual and Campus Assessment Tools

Background

Defining Civic Engagement

Assessment is always a critical feature of any effort to produce change. Thinking about assessment at the beginning of a project forces definition of the objective or outcome, as well as a delineation of the processes of measurement and evaluation. The term “civic engagement,” the core focus of the American Democracy Project, has different meanings to different people. In this brief article, we will examine the term and explore the ways that it has been measured in other settings.

Let’s begin with the definition. This project uses the definition of civic engagement proposed by Thomas Ehrlich and his colleagues in Civic Responsibility and Higher Education. Phoenix: Oryx Press, 2000.

“Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.” (Preface, page vi)

“A morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own; such an individual is willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate.” (Introduction, page xxvi).

Note the key elements in this definition. It begins with a conception that civic engagement should “make a difference in the civic life of our communities.” The definition of civic life seems fairly expansive: “promoting the quality of life in a community.” This definition of civic engagement requires knowledge, skills, values, and motivation. In other words, to be civically engaged means both having knowledge and a commitment to act. Finally, the definition calls on individuals to use “both political and non-political processes.”

It seems to me that this definition of civic engagement focuses primarily on behavior, but one could argue that without underlying attitudes, behavior will not follow. So some assessment might focus not only on what one does or has done, but also on what one believes.

Issues in the Measurement of Civic Engagement

Those that try to assess civic engagement sometimes focus on what most would describe as overt political acts: voting, joining political campaigns, and making campaign contributions. Others, however, look beyond the explicit political acts to a category of activities that might be described as “persuading others.” Still others, thinking about

civic engagement in the broadest way as “promoting the quality of life in a community” find volunteering to be an accurate indicator for civic engagement. Campus Compact has a website that contains a number of general articles that could be useful for individuals interested in this subject. See <http://www.compact.org/advancedtoolkit/measuring.html> for more details.

From a methodological perspective, there are many concerns with the process of measuring. Probably the greatest concern come from the widespread use of self-report data. A number of the surveys ask people to estimate the time they have volunteered or engaged in other civic activities. The NSSE even asks to what extent someone has done or plans to do an activity, further compounding the issue.

Some measures of engagement, and indeed community activity, may only predict extended self-interest. For example, participating in an organization of like-minded individuals, though a measure of volunteering, may not predict concern about the community as a whole, but only about that part of the community that the volunteer relates to. And the organization of like-minded individuals may be an extremist hate organization. Volunteering for such an organization, in the self-report instruments so frequently used, might increase the number of units of volunteer time (or other such measures) but that increased volunteerism would hardly be considered a measure of increased civic-mindedness. Putnam refers to this as “bonding” social capital, and while important, he argues that if a nation has only bonding social capital, it would look like Bosnia.

Yet where is the line that distinguishes one’s own interest from broader community interests? After all, when individuals engage in overt political activity, they often do so from a narrow focus on their own partisan interests. Do we condemn the individual who volunteers to work in a group of like-minded extremists but celebrate that same person’s participation in voting when they vote for extremist candidates? Perhaps the only reasonable goal of institutions is to build commitment to become informed and to act...and hope that the range of opinions and ideas represented by graduates, taken together, will be an expression of community. Our project seeks to be non-partisan, and maintaining that lack of partisanship creates an opportunity for all students to become engaged.

Yet some acts of civic-mindedness are more selfless than selfish. Some people reach out to those who are unlike themselves: poor, disadvantaged, homeless, etc. In the range of civic engagement indicators that will be shown below, there is usually little distinction made in the nature of the activity. Thus a person can report volunteering, and yet only be reporting the volunteering done to support a narrow, local and self-interest cause, while the same report of volunteering from another individual may reflect working with many others, in a large-scale and civically important initiative. Putnam calls this form of social capital “bridging.” I suspect that this distinction between bonding and bridging is what prompted Anne Colby and her colleagues to focus not only on civic engagement but also on moral issues as well. The current assessment strategies lack sophisticated means of interpretation. Many of the current measures of civic engagement, lacking precision and

nance, probably do not provide us with any definitive gauge of the health of a community.

An indirect way of gauging civic engagement that may be interesting and potentially useful involves measures of diversity. Learning about diversity, and becoming aware of the issues and concerns of people unlike oneself, may be a better measure of civic engagement than simply joining a narrow range of organizations comprised of people who think the same way. NSSE has a number of measures of diversity, including, for example, a question that asks: “To what extent does your institution emphasize... Encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds.”

Yet as the concept of civic engagement grows larger and fuzzier, it threatens to become so large as to be meaningless. At some point, almost everything that is not focused directly on oneself could be argued as contributing to “the quality of life in a community” and thus impossible to measure, becoming essentially useless. That is why the measures of political activity, as expressions of concern about the community, may be a narrow but useful approach to the issue of measuring civic engagement.

Finally, there are the mechanics of measuring civic engagement. Do you use local or national assessments? Do you measure the campus against national norms or some comparative sample of other institutions? Do you measure at a specific point in time, or try to set up a longitudinal process, gauging performance against last year’s data?

Measurement Tools (Measuring Individuals)

There are a number of tools used in measuring civic engagement, both among college students and the general population.

1. UCLA Survey

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute has surveyed more than 9 million incoming college freshman since the survey's inception in 1966. The UCLA survey is the most comprehensive assessment of student attitudes and plans. The survey asks about things such as voting in student elections, volunteering, and a variety of other behaviors.

http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/cirp_survey.html

2. Your First College Year

Your First College Year (YFCY) is a new survey that UCLA is doing in conjunction with the Policy Center for the First Year of College. Now in its fourth year, the survey complements the freshman survey by measuring students at the end of the first year of college. The survey includes questions about participating in demonstrations, discussed politics, and things like that. http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/yfcy/survey_instrument.html

3. National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is a tool that contains several civic engagement measures. Some are directly related to civic activity, such as the question that asks “To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas: Voting in local, state, or national elections?” Other questions on the NSSE are more indirect, yet may also prove to be useful indicators.

NSSE and the State of Kentucky The Council on Postsecondary Education in Kentucky uses four NSSE items to gauge civic engagement, including one that they added.

- participation in a community-based project as part of a regular course
- Extent to which college experience has contributed to...voting in local, state or national elections
- Extent to which college experience has contributed to...contributing to the welfare of the community
- Hours per week spent doing volunteer work (added by Kentucky)

Kentucky also uses items from an alumni survey to track civic engagement.

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4. Assessment of Individual Civic Assessment

The 19 Core Indicators of Engagement

Civic Indicators

1. Community Problem Solving
2. Regular Volunteering, non-electoral organization
3. Active membership in a group or association
4. Participation in fund-raising run/walk/ride
5. Other fund-raising for charity

Electoral Indicators

6. Regular voting
7. Persuading others
8. Displaying buttons, signs and stickers
9. Campaign contributions
10. Volunteering for candidate or political organization

Indicators of Political Voice

11. Contacting officials
12. Contacting the print media
13. Contacting the broadcast media
14. Protesting
15. E-mail petitions
16. Written petitions
17. Boycotting
18. Buycotting
19. Canvassing

5. Current Population Survey on Volunteering (with the Corporation for National and Community Service)

A national survey of volunteering by all Americans was first conducted in September 2003 by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in collaboration with the Corporation for National and Community Service. See Volunteering Survey in the Current Population Survey for September 2002. <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.toc.htm>

Measurement Tools (Measuring Institutional Engagement and Civic Engagement)

In addition to measurement tools for gauging the civic engagement of individuals, there are a number of assessments of civic engagement for campuses. The renewed focus on engagement, the focus on the scholarship of engagement, and various outreach initiatives such as AASCU's Stewards of Place document, have all addressed the civic contributions of higher education. As a result, there are various assessment strategies for assessing civic engagement of institutions.

My concern with measuring the civic engagement of institutions is that sometimes it substitutes for focusing on student outcomes. I can imagine a campus that is heavily invested in civic outreach and in various forms of civic engagement; indeed that same campus may embrace the scholarship of engagement for faculty. But I can imagine that those kinds of campuses might still not affect students in any fundamental ways. Yet I can't imagine a campus that focuses on student civic engagement outcomes without simultaneously focusing on the scholarship of engagement and the engagement of the campus in the life of the community. The engagement of a campus, and the engagement of faculty, are necessary but insufficient, if the core focus is to be on outcomes for students.

1. Dimensions of Engagement From the Kellogg Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good

A Report from the National Leadership Dialogue Series

1. Access to Learning
2. Enhanced Diversity
3. Civic Learning
4. Public Scholarship
5. Social Well-Being
6. Trusted Voice
7. Public Spaces
8. Community Partnership
9. Self-Governance
10. Public Accountability

http://www.kelloggforum.org/NDLSmaterials/ndls%20final%20reports/monticello_dialogue3.pdf

2. Indicators of an Engaged Campus From Campus Compact

1. Mission and purpose

2. Administrative and academic leadership
3. External resource allocation
4. Disciplines, departments, and interdisciplinary work
5. Faculty roles and rewards
6. Internal resource allocation
7. Community voice
8. Enabling mechanisms
9. Faculty development
10. Integrated and complementary community service activities
11. Forums for fostering public dialogue
12. Pedagogy and epistemology

<http://www.compact.org/advancedtoolkit/indicators.html>

3. Campus Assessment of Civic Responsibility From Campus Compact

<http://www.compact.org/presidential/plc/assessment.html>

I. Presidential Leadership

II. Campus Constituencies

A. Students

- A. Curriculum
- B. Co-Curricular
- C. Campus Culture
- D. Campus Diversity
- E. Student Careers

B. Faculty

1. Faculty Culture
2. Faculty Development and Rewards

C. Administrators and Staff

D. Trustees and Alumni

III. Institutional Role in Civic Responsibility

- A. Democratic Practice on Campus
- B. Campus/Community Partnerships
- C. Communications with the Community
- D. Community Improvement
- E. Campus Engagement

Measurement Tools
(Measuring Communities)

Measuring Social Capital in the American States

(Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, Simon & Schuster, 2000, p. 291, Table 4)

Components of Comprehensive Social Capital Index

Measures of community organizational life

- Served on committee of local organization in last year
- Served as officer of some club or organization in last year
- Civic and social organizations per 1,000 populations
- Mean number of club meetings attended in last year
- Mean number of group memberships

Measures of engagement in public affairs

- Turnout in presidential elections, 1988 and 1992
- Attended public meeting on town or school affairs in last year

Measures of community volunteerism

- Number of nonprofit (501[c]3) organizations per 1,000 population
- Mean number of times worked on community project last year
- Mean number of times did volunteer work in the last year

Measures of informal sociability

- Agree that "I spend a lot of time visiting friends"
- Mean number of times entertained at home in last year

Measures of social trust

- Agree that "Most people can be trusted"
- Agree that "Most people are honest"