

Sari Haime

PS 115 Final Paper

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Educational Levels and Degree of Civic Engagement: Are They Connected?

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I. Introduction

The evident decline of civic engagement among college-age students has attracted political scientists, survey researchers, sociologists, and other experts to examine the causal roots of this trend. I, like other scholars, was drawn to the lack of interest of college-age students to contribute to their communities and wanted to explore this issue. In order to do so, I participated in the conduction of a survey at Tufts University with a sample of 500 college students and 500 non-college students throughout the US who are not in the military. In this essay, I want to prove the following hypothesis: **Better educated young adults will be more likely to feel a desire to give back to their communities than less educated young adults.** First I will present an overview of the trends of civic engagement among young adults. Then I will describe my hypothesis as well as the questions I utilized and carefully express my findings. Lastly, I will provide a critique of the survey as it relates to my hypothesis.

II. Decline in Civic Engagement among Young Adults

As an active citizen, I noticed a lack of enthusiasm among college students to get involved in their communities. I posited that college educated students are more involved in their communities than their non-college counterparts. Before analyzing the results of our study, I investigated other scholars' observations of the subject matter. Other experts, such as program developers and policy planners are interested in obtaining a better understanding of the role of young adults in the community development process. Once they gain a greater comprehension of

the causal roots of this trend, they hope to modify their strategies as an attempt to increase young adults' civic engagement.¹

Moreover, it has been previously suggested that high school involvement increases the likelihood of college attendance (Eccles & Barber, 1999), leading to greater campus engagement (Lamborn, Brown, Mounts, & Steinberg, 1992), and greater community involvement (Youniss & Yates, 1997).² Factors that have been attributed to an individual's level of civic commitment include various aspects:

A. Political Activism: Those who vote and are involved in other forms of political behavior, regardless of their specific political inclinations, are more likely to participate in civic activities.³

B. Parental Involvement: Young adults whose parents play a role in their community feel a stronger desire to give back to society (Chan & Elder, 1999). Some argue, however, that individuals whose parents are not involved may still be involved in civic activity since supportive parental relationships is ultimately more influential than parental modeling (Fletcher & Van Horn, 2000). Hence, parents play an imperative part in creating the connections between their children and adolescents and their communities (Parke & Ladd, 1992).⁴

¹ Brennan, MA. "Youth Involvement in Community Development: Implications and Possibilities for Extension" *Journal of Extension*. 5 December 2007. <http://www.joe.org/joe/2007august/a3.shtml>

² Sherrod, Lonnie R. "Promoting the Development of Citizenship in Diverse Youth," from *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 2. (Apr., 2003), pp. 287-292. 10 December 2007. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=1049-0965%28200304%2936%3A2%3C287%3APTDOC1%3E2.0.CO%3B2-%23> Pg 287

³ Sherrod, Lonnie R. "Promoting the Development of Citizenship in Diverse Youth," Pg 288

⁴ Sherrod, Lonnie R. "Promoting the Development of Citizenship in Diverse Youth," pg. 290

C. Passion: Individuals who have a particular interest are more likely to participate in community activities that connect to their passion. Therefore, when college students find a passion for a social issue, they are more likely to create a concrete platform toward social change, conveying their dedication to social responsibility.⁵

D. Particular Institutional Characteristics: Political scientists have found direct correlations between the degree of students' civic involvement and the size of their institutions. Due to the closer-knit feel of smaller institutions, students are better informed of community service opportunities than those at large institutions. Students at smaller institutions highlighted how easy it was to get involved in community activities. Conversely, those at large institutions described how challenging it was to find community service opportunities on campus. It is also noted that specifically within these institutions, liberal arts students conveyed a wider range of activities in which they participated.⁶

E. Other Possible Factors: Experts have researched a wide variety of other possible causes for an individual to get involved, including particular feelings like usefulness (Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002), which increases young adult's self-esteem (Flanagan & Van Horn, 2001), and feeling a responsibility toward society (Independent Sector, 2001). Moreover, the desire to be recognized and honored by the community is a goal many volunteers strive for (Scales & Leffert,

⁵ Jones, Susan R, and Hill, Kathleen E. "Understanding Patterns of Commitment: Student Motivation for Community Service Involvement" from The Journal of Higher Education, Vol. 74, No. 5. (Sep. - Oct., 2003), pp. 516-539. Ohio State University Press. 10 December 2007. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0022-1546%28200309%2F10%2974%3A5%3C516%3AUPOCSM%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Y>

⁶ Jones, Susan R, and Hill, Kathleen E. "Understanding Patterns of Commitment: Student Motivation for Community Service Involvement"

1999).⁷ Other factors that could affect the levels of civic engagement among young adults include an individual's religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, communal duties and requirements, demographics, et al.

III. Hypothesis Description

As mentioned in the introduction, I would like to prove that college students are more likely to be involved in their community than their non-college counterparts. My inverse hypothesis would be that people who are in college are less likely to be engaged in their communities.⁸ In other words, people who have not attended some sort of higher education display higher forms of community engagement. If this is the case, then my hypothesis is incorrect.

Variables: Education Level and Civic Involvement

The two measurable concepts or variables in my hypothesis are *education level* and *civic engagement*. The first variable is independent, since the respondents level of education is the explanation or cause of their civic engagement.⁹ I suggest that people's community involvement is directly correlated to their level of education. Thus, higher educated people (college students as well as those who already earned their degrees) are more likely to be involved in their community than those who are not in college or never obtained a higher education. Assuming this is true, then the second variable, *civic engagement*, is the dependent variable, since it is the

⁷ Sherrod, Lonnie R. "Promoting the Development of Citizenship in Diverse Youth," pg. 290

⁸ Nardi Peter, "Doing Survey Research" pg. 46

⁹ Nardi Peter, "Doing Survey Research" pg. 44

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outcome I am seeking to understand, and I am claiming that it depends on a specific explanation.¹⁰

Survey Questions Pertaining to my Hypothesis

These are the central questions I analyzed to confirm my hypothesis:

Wsb216: Are you currently enrolled full-time in a four year college or university? Yes or No

Wsb103: How would you describe your level of community involvement: Very Involved, Moderately involved, somewhat involved, Not very involved, I don't know.

Wsb100: Please briefly describe any factors the influence your level of community involvement: open-ended.

Wsb88: How many hours were you involved with this organization or program in the last twelve months? None, 10 hours or less, 11-25 hours, 26-60 hours, 61-120 hours, more than 120 hours.

IV. The Survey

In order to investigate my claim, I participated in the conduction of a study. Along with other students from Professor Kent Portney's "PS115:Public Opinion and Survey Research" class and a few other scholars, we conducted The Civic and Political Attitudes of Young People Study pt. 2. A similar survey was conducted last year, allowing one to compare results over time should one be inclined to do so.

Questions Selection and Wording and Best Surveying Method

Adopting last year's survey as our blue print, we modified some of the questions, added some and deleted others. The subject-matters of the questions ranged from income levels, race, civic engagement, and Facebook groups to whether or not the respondent smoked. We consulted

¹⁰ Nardi Peter, "Doing Survey Research" pg. 44

literature in order to structure our questions in the most accurate way to avoid biases. We determined that our sampling size would be the same as the first survey, thus 1,000 young adults, aged 18-24. These individuals cannot be in the military. Subsequently, we chose the most accurate sampling method. Due to the high moving rate of our target pool, we decided not to use land lines, mail, or personally handing out the surveys, since all of these methods would yield high biases. Although one could argue that not all young professionals have internet access, this has been the most accurate way to reach a large sample size, and has also yielded the largest response rate. Thus, the most effective way to reach our target surveying pool, composed of adults 18-24 years old, would be through the internet. Due to our limited surveying capabilities, we hired Polimetrix, an internet-based survey company to choose a random sample.

Sampling Pool

We chose a target sample of 1,000 respondents aged 18-24 from the American Community Study conducted by the Bureau of the Census. The sample had to include 500 individuals who are college students and 500 who were not. Polimetrix conducted a total of 1,629 interviews with panelists, selecting the 1,000 respondents who most accurately met our prerequisites. In order to select those 1,000 individuals for our target sample, respondents were ranked in two categories. The first weight portrayed the sample marginal characteristics of the college vs. non-college respondents separately. Alternatively, the second set illustrated the 18-24 population as a whole based on population marginals for age, race, education and gender.

Furthermore, there were two sets of respondents: The first was composed of 993 individuals from the set of active panelists. Of these, 95.2% met the requirements for our study. The within-panel response rate was 31.2%. The remaining 636 interviews were conducted through screen outs from studies occurring simultaneously with ours. Of the eligible individuals who were selected to participate in our survey, 66.7% completed.

Strengths and Weaknesses of our Survey

Strengths: Many people may be attracted to our results, due to the popularity of themes connected to our subject-matters and age ranges. In addition, the internet was the most effective method to conduct our survey, because of its ability to reach a large sample size and deliver large response rates. Furthermore, because of our limited resources at Tufts University, hiring survey experts Polimetrix to conduct our survey would allow us to reach individuals throughout the nation and collect the results in the timeliest and most sophisticated manner.

Weaknesses: Even though Polimetrix claims to have provided us with a random sample, they targeted 1,000 individuals who are a part of the American Community Study conducted by the Bureau of the Census. In addition, our pool was composed of active panelists, and although 95.2% met the requirements for our study, we only obtained a 31.2% within-panel response rate. The remaining 636 (66.7% completed) interviews were conducted through screen outs from studies occurring simultaneously with ours—this is clearly a group of people that is not random at all, since they enjoy participating in surveys and are doing more than one at a time.

By limiting our respondents to members of the American Community Study, we are limiting our surveying pool, since there are many more students who *do not* belong to the American Community Study. This limitation creates significant biases in our results not only because these individuals are more likely to participate in survey research, but also because it is not a random representation of *all* individuals aged 18-24. Although our results are less biased than a phone or mail survey would be, since it is very challenging to reach a wide-variety of young adults through these methods and obtain high response rates, our results are also biased. Thus, the main weakness of our survey is that it is inevitable biased.

V. The Results

In order to obtain a clear comprehension of the results of our study, I created a bivariate crosstabulation the questions wsb216 and wsb103. I also analyzed the open-ended questions to formulate the following conclusions:

Bivariate Crosstabulation: Full-Time vs. Not Full-Time Student and Community Involvement

Community Involvement	Full-Time Student	Not Full-Time Student	Total
0 I don't know	8 (1.6%)	36 (7.3%)	44 (4.4%)
1 Not very involved	210 (41.9%)	256 (51.6%)	466 (46.7%)
2 Somewhat involved	152 (30.3%)	123(24.8%)	275(27.6%)
3 Moderately involved	104 (20.8%)	71 (14.3%)	175 (17.6%)
4 Very involved	27 (5.4%)	10(2%)	37(3.7%)
Total	501 (100%)	496(100%)	997(100%)

The full-time student question was a yes or no question, creating two categories. In order to ask the level of community involvement, we implemented a four-point Likert scale. First I compared the extremes, composed of *very involved*(4) versus *not very involved*(1). The total amount of full-time college students who are *very involved* is 5.4% and non-college is 2%. This proves that my hypothesis is correct, since more college students are involved than non-college. Furthermore, 51.6% of non-college students are *not very involved*(1), while 41.9% of college students answered 1, once again in favor of my hypothesis. These comparisons, however, do not take the neutrals(*I don't know*) or the moderates(*somewhat* and *moderately involved*) into account. Thus, I decided to condense this table in order to obtain a deeper analysis. As illustrated in the following table, I *combined I don't know* with *Not very involved* (0 and 1) and *moderately involved* with *very involved* (3 and 4). This is based on the assumption that I don't know signifies I don't care. Moreover, since I wanted to gain a better understanding of the extremes in relation to the neutrals, I left *somewhat involved*(2) as its own category. In addition, I emphasized the percentages rather than the number of people. Based on these combinations, I designed the following table:

Condensed Crosstabulation

Community Involvement	Full-Time Student	Not Full-Time Student	Total
0 I don't know 1 Not very involved	43.5%(218)	58.9%(292)	50.1%(510)
2 Somewhat involved	30.3% (152)	24.8% (123)	27.6% (275)
3 Moderately involved 4 Very involved	26.2%(131)	43.5%(218)	21.3%(212)
Total	100%(501)	100%(496)	100%(997)

The level of *not very involved* for non full-time students continues to exceed the number of full time students with percentages 58.9% vs. 43.5 % (highlighted in red). The other combination, however, changes dramatically. When combining the *moderately involved* and the *very involved* (highlighted in magenta), non full-time individuals are more involved than full-time students (43.5% vs. 26.2%). Based on this table, my hypothesis is incorrect, since non-college individuals are much more involved with their communities.

Other remarkable results include the large response rate for *somewhat involved* (in blue). The amount of college students involved is slightly higher (30.3% vs. 24.8%). This 5.5% difference is not very significant, suggesting that respondents, both full-time and non-full time, participate in some form of community service.

Another result, confirming the claim that the level of civic engagement of young adults has declined, is that the majority (50.1%) of respondents are uninterested in giving back to their community. Although I believed that attending a higher educational institution would propel the desire to give back to the community, the survey suggests the inverse. Thus, my hypothesis was incorrect.

Explanations to Open-Answered Questions

In addition to the degree of civic engagement among young adults, I was also interested in learning specific reasons why individuals were inclined or not inclined to participate in communal activities. After reading the open-ended answers for wsb100, I observed the following trends:

Those who are Involved: Civically engaged respondents provided a variety of justifications.

The most prevalent validations include: religion and religious groups, politics and political coalitions, a specific passion for diverse fields, part of Greek system at their University, and a personal desire to contribute to the community.

Those who are not involved: Those who are not involved offered rationalizations such as: not enough time, availability, work, lack of awareness of events, laziness, stress, overly committed already, lack of sense of community, being a minority within their community and feeling excluded, and waiting to graduate and settle down.¹¹

Types of Involvement

Furthermore, I was interested in distinguishing the types of involvement individuals were most likely to engage in(wbs88series). The most common types included: wearing pins or slogans to portray political views, participating in online political discussion, attending charity fundraisers, and doing community service. The less popular activities incorporated: N policy research, political campaign, and contacting public officials. The vast majority of those who expressed which types of activities they were involved in the last twelve months explained that they did it mainly out of personal interest.¹²

¹¹ For more detailed results, please refer to [Analysis for Sari Haime](#) pgs 2-30

¹² For more detailed results, please refer to [Analysis for Sari Haime](#), pgs 30-41.

Conclusions on my Data Analysis

When superficially comparing extremes, the results proved that my hypothesis was right, since more college students were civically involved than non-college students. However, once I combined and condensed my table, the results suggested that, ultimately, non-college respondents were more involved (43.5% vs. 26.2%). These results justify experts' desire to research the decline of civic engagement of young adults. These scholars hope that by obtaining the roots for the decline, they will be able to improve their methods of reaching out to young adults, and consequently, increase the level of civic involvement of young adults. Based on the surprisingly high number of respondents who claimed they were moderately involved, I would also suggest focus on increasing their involvement, rather than simply target those who are just not involved at all.

VI. Survey Critique and Conclusions

What could I have done better to examine my hypothesis?

Although I attained the data I wanted to examine my hypothesis, the following factors could have improved my overall analysis and would have provided me with a more comprehensive explanation for the connection between young adults and their levels of civic engagement:

A. Create Another Category: I would have liked to create a third category in order to make a distinction between individuals who are no longer in college but already earned a higher degree

of education. In this survey they were placed in the non-college category, even though they have attained a degree. The lack of this category affected my results and the depth of my analysis.

B. Explore other Variables: I would explore other factors that could be related to the levels of civic engagement mentioned in my research such as political activism, parental involvement, passion, socioeconomic status, minority, leadership skills et al. I believe that if examined all of these themes, I would obtain a comprehensive scheme of the relationship between civic engagement and young adults.

C. Include other types of involvement: The survey did not measure the total essence of the respondents' civic engagement because there may be some other activities that they take part in that are not mentioned in the survey. They may play in a band whose profits go to public parks or they may coach a soccer league. Since there is no accurate definition of community involvement in the survey, respondents may not include these activities as part of their community involvement, and consequently my data analysis was flawed.

D. Highlight size of their colleges and specific location: I would have also liked to gain a better understanding of the size of the institution and the levels of community involvement. In addition, I would have liked to know the differences in engagement levels in urban vs. rural settings.

E. Follow college students after they settle down: Many students responded that they were waiting to settle down. At that point they would feel stronger ties to their communities and

consequently become more involved. I would like to follow our respondents and find out if this claim is true.

Conclusions

In general, I was satisfied with the entire survey process, from the creation and the implementation to the analysis. The questions and results provided me with the necessary information to prove that my hypothesis was incorrect. Furthermore, I observed many trends explaining why young adults participate or do not participate in community service. The size and age of our sample was directly related to my hypothesis. Although using Polimetrix as our implementation mode did create some biases, I do not think we could have realistically obtained more accurate results. We could have collected emails of all young adults throughout the nation instead of focusing on members of the American Community Study, but perhaps then we would have had to face other biases. In addition, we did not have the capabilities to conduct our own survey, and that is the pool that Polimetrix offered us. Thus, I am satisfied with the results of my data analysis and hope that we can find a way to encourage young adults to give back to their communities.

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