Civic Skill Building: The Missing Component in Service Programs?*

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What are the best ways to instill democratic values and create civically engaged citizens? Much political, public, and scholarly attention has recently been paid to these and similar questions. Service learning and community service for adolescents and young adults have received the most attention (Perry and Katula 2001). Civic education has also been studied but does not draw the same attention as service learning (Niemi and Junn 1999). The September 2000 issue of *PS: Political Science & Politics* addressed service learning in higher education, but service for high school students is also receiving increasing amounts of attention. Estimates are that 83% of high schools nationally offer community service opportunities (Westheimer and Kahne 2000), that half of all community colleges have service learning courses and that nearly two million college students at four-year institutions participate in service learning (Hepburn, Niemi, and Chapman 2000). While specific articulated outcomes vary widely, researchers suggest that students who participate in service programs will become more civically engaged (Yates and Youniss 1998), understand and become more tolerant of our diverse society, and improve classroom learning (Hepburn, Niemi, and Chapman 2000). Empirical research suggests some positive outcomes from service learning relative to student cognition and classroom learning but little evidence supports expectations that service learning encourages civic behaviors such as voting, contacting elected officials, and being active in community affairs (Perry and Katula 2001).

This paper suggests one reason for the weak empirical results relative to civic engagement is that many service and volunteer programs have failed to sufficiently address development of fundamental civic skills such as expressing opinions and working collectively to achieve common interests as part of their design. As a result, while some studies of service learning participants show enhanced compassion and interest in social problems generally, those attitudinal changes do not consistently translate into behavioral changes (Eyler, Giles, and Braxton 1997; Perry and Katula 2001). This paper reviews recent empirical studies of community service, service learning, and volunteering, and then frames the consistently strong evidence that participation in clubs and organizations during adolescence leads to higher levels of civic engagement during adulthood within the political participation model developed by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995). I suggest that the reason such participation is linked to later civic engagement is less related to civic identity development as suggested by some (Yates and Youniss 1998; Youniss, McLellan, and Yates 1997), than it is to development of fundamental civic skills necessary for civic engagement.

I am interested in how adolescents learn to become active adult members of their communities—to become "engaged," not only in political activities such as voting and campaign work, but also in community improvement activities via civic and volunteer associations (similar to Campbell 2000). I focus on how adolescents learn the *doing* of democracy, that is, active *participation*, not simply cognitive knowledge of political systems. Building upon the premise that adolescence is a critical time for socialization and development (Erikson 1968), I ask, "What activities during adolescence lead to long-term civic engagement?"

Community Service, Service Learning and Volunteering Impact Civic Engagement Weakly

Service learning, community service, and volunteering have been put forward as mechanisms to increase civic engagement of individuals (Yates and Youniss 1998). Community service programs typically consist of requirements for students to volunteer a given amount of time in their community. Hepburn, Niemi, and Chapman (2000) remind us that service learning is similar to community service in its volunteer component but has explicit links to classroom curricula.

Perry and Katula (2001) produce interesting results with their comprehensive review of 219 empirical studies of the relationship between service (including service learning and community service) and citizenship. After cautioning that limited empirical studies, small sample sizes, and differing objectives and methodologies affect the ability to draw concrete conclusions, they conclude that a) service appears to favorably influence citizenship related cognitive understanding; b) service and volunteering appear to positively influence later volunteering and giving; and c) the type of service that produces the most consistent positive results is service learning. However, they find that existing research does not address the relationship between citizenship skills and behaviors sufficiently to draw conclusions. While attitudinal changes were somewhat common there was no evidence of behavior changes. Perry and Katula (2001, 15) observe that "given the centrality of active citizenship in most theories and proposals for service, the paucity of research about citizenship outcomes, particularly behaviors, is noteworthy."

Hunter and Brisbin's (2000, 625) evaluation of college student's service-learning experiences in three locations is exemplary of the mixed findings common in empirical research in this area. Their study confirms that service-learning participants "learn about their community, further develop some academic skills and feel that they have helped members of their community." However, little to no change was indicated for self-reported attitudes towards political engagement.

Similarly, empirical evidence indicates volunteering has positive results for individuals on cognitive and attitudinal measures but weak results for increasing civic engagement of participants. A 1996 survey found approximately 60% of teens volunteered during the previous 12 months (Independent Sector 1997). Adolescent volunteers reported their experience helped them understand people who are different than themselves (48%) and to understand more about good citizenship (37%); but only 18% said they

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learned how to help solve community problems (Independent Sector 1997). A longitudinal study of the long-term effects of volunteering in college (Astin, Sax, and Avalos 1999) finds a positive—though tenuous—relationship between volunteering during college and later volunteering. Those who volunteered extensively in high school and college were twice as likely to be volunteering nine years later than those who did no volunteer work. However, among those that volunteered during high school and college, one-third were doing no volunteer work nine years later; of those who did no volunteer work in high school or college, 31% were volunteering nine years later.

Perry and Katula (2001, 27) ask why the relationship between attitudes and behavior in service programs does not appear to be strong. "Is the attenuation a result of service-learning pedagogy that does not translate into enough hands-on experience . . .? Or is it a function of institutions that do not reinforce service experiences?" Morgan and Streb (2001) suggest that students' voices in service learning projects are critical to achieving positive political engagement impacts. Other scholars suggest that service may not create an understanding of social interdependence or a sense of community responsibility (Raskoff and Sundeen 1998), or that motivations for service may be associated more with an individual's desire to help another rather than in a broader social or political understanding or commitment (Scrow 1991).

Civic Skill Development During Adolescence is Critical

Basing their work on surveys of 15,000 adults, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) argue that adult participation in civic life requires three "participatory factors": desire to get involved (motivation); the ability to contribute something to the effort (capacity and skills); and some connection to the networks of individuals who ask others to become involved (networks). In a complex model, the authors trace "roots of participation" back to "initial characteristics" including gender, race and parent's education. They then identify three "pre-adult experiences" that affect later civic participation: education, discussion of politics at home, and participation in an extracurricular organization as an adolescent. The model continues with adult experiences that affect participation, but for purposes of this article, the "pre-adult" experiences are critical.

One reason for the weak empirical results relative to civic engagement is that many service and volunteer programs have failed to sufficiently address development of fundamental civic skills such as expressing opinions and working collectively to achieve common interests as part of their design.

The pre-adult experiences affect the three participatory factors in the following manner. Education can lead to increased understanding of the importance of civic participation (motivation); provide money or time to contribute to civic endeavors (capacity); and introduce one to others concerned with civic life (networks). Discussion of politics at home can enhance the motivation to get involved. Finally, participation in organizations and clubs during adolescence can teach skills necessary for adult civic participation (capacity).

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) find that participation in high-school student government and other clubs was strongly associated with later civic engagement, and suggest that such membership teaches skills that are necessary for later involvement including "hands-on training in communication and organization skills." With the exception of sports, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady find this to be true regardless of the underlying nature and type of the club; participation in the chess or Spanish club is as effective for teaching civic skills as participation in student government.

Additional empirical research supports participation in organizations during adolescence as a predictor of future civic engagement. Like studies of service, the samples are sometimes small, but unlike service research, the five studies conducted between 1976 and 1995 came to similar conclusions, finding that individuals who were active in organizations during adolescence are two to four times more likely to be active in civic and political life than those who had not participated in organizations during adolescence (Beane et al. 1981; Hanks and Eckland 1978; Ladewig and Thomas 1987; Otto 1976; and Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Adolescent participants were also two to four times as likely as their nonparticipating colleagues to be officers in organizations as adults. Adults were studied 12 to 30 years after their adolescent participation. In most studies, they were asked to recall their participation; although in two of the studies, participants were drawn from a pool of those known to be alumni from particular organizations (4-H and a school-based community planning project). Organizations that predicted future activity included participation in 4-H, student government, and school-based clubs such as yearbook, debate team, and a course where students helped the community with long-term planning efforts.

A more recent empirical study confirms and expands these findings. I analyzed a statewide California YMCA high school model-legislature program to find that the 1,069 alumni (ages 18 to 72) were statistically significantly more likely than the general population to be involved in several civic engagement behaviors. Specifically, 96% are registered voters, 87% voted in the 2000 presidential election, 47% have contacted an elected official about an issue, 45% have attended a local board or council meeting, 43% have gotten together with others informally to work on community problems, 35% have contributed to a campaign, and 36% have served on a board or been an officer in a group (Kirlin 2001). To control for income and education effects, I examined the civic engagement behaviors of three groups of alumni: those over 25 years of age who make less than $25,000 per year; those over 25 years of age who do not hold at least a bachelor's degree; and those whose parents held jobs that did not require a college degree (largely service or trades). All three groups of alumni were statistically significantly more involved than the general population on all measures of civic engagement except making

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campaign contributions. At least in this case, participation in extracurricular activities positively affected adult civic engagement, regardless of the income and education of the participants or their parents.

Glanville (1999) investigated whether individuals who were active in organizations as adolescents had "self-selected" into organizations based on preexisting personality characteristics or political attitudes. She finds that sociability, leadership attitudes, and interest in and awareness of political issues only partially account for the association between participation in organizations and later political and civic engagement. The remainder is attributed to the participation itself. Self-selection based on predisposition to politics did not seem to affect my (2001) study either. I asked 263 alumni why they became involved in the YMCA model legislature program; only 32% indicated they liked politics and government, while 65% said their friends got them involved.

Conrad and Hedin's (1982a, 1982b, 1989) research demonstrates the role experiential and participatory education play in preparing students to be active civic-minded citizens. School-based experiential learning has a positive impact when, among other things, student decision making is encouraged by teachers. Similarly, a recent international study finds that high school students who reported "an open classroom environment where they were encouraged to discuss issues and take part in shaping school life" showed greater civic knowledge and were more likely to indicate they expected to vote as adults (Torney-Purta et al. 2001, 8).

These findings begin to knit together the consistent conclusions about the importance of adolescent participation. Involving students in many levels of the learning process may facilitate the development of civic skills important for later civic engagement.

Some researchers argue that these studies suggest enhanced civic identity among adolescents increases adult civic engagement. Yates and Youniss (1998, 496) argue that adolescent participation in organizations creates "reference points that aid in the formation of political understandings and engagement," norms of participation that become imbedded in identity, leading to engagement in civic life. Hepburn (2000) suggests that research linking adolescent participation in clubs and organizations to later civic engagement creates a rationale for community service in high school, agreeing with the Yates and Youniss premise of civic identity development as a key component.

However, research indicates that the impact of adolescent experiences is more plausibly attributable to enhanced civic skills. Adolescents' participation in organizations matters for later civic engagement not because it creates a civic identity but because it teaches concrete skills critical for civic engagement. Returning to the Verba-Schlozman-Brady model (1995), recall the three factors necessary for political participation: motivation, networks and capacity/skills. Because the types of organizations yielding future civic engagement were not always political or civic in nature, it does not appear that the primary benefit of adolescent participation in organizations is creating either the motivation for involvement (Verba's terminology) or civic identity development (Yates and Youniss's terminology). While network development is a plausible explanation for some of the relationship, and deserves research attention, the most logical explanation is that students are developing and practicing civic skills through their participation in organizations.

This argument is consistent with two additional findings from Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995). First, they find that participation in high school sports was negatively associated with later civic engagement. Conway and Damico (2001) have similar findings. While providing other benefits, organized sports provide little opportunity for civic skill development: the goal (winning) is predetermined, and adults undertake the planning for the season, organize the matches, and do most of the coaching. Opportunities for students to organize themselves, decide on objectives, and collectively make decisions are limited. The same may be increasingly true for service learning and community service; adults may have organized students too well, taking the fun (and civic skill learning) out of the effort.

The second important finding is that church participation, whether in adolescence or adulthood, is positively associated with civic engagement. Depending upon the particular institution, church can provide motivation and networks, and may also provide opportunities to learn and practice civic skills. Members have the opportunity to set goals (a new childcare program or building), organize fellow members (a picnic or bazaar), and negotiate with others to determine the common good. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) find church participation to be an equalizer for economic and education factors that would otherwise predict low levels of civic engagement.

Participants in Community Service and Service Learning Can Gain Civic Skills

Democratic society inherently demands collective decision making. Thus, young adults must practice the skills necessary for civic engagement; cognitive understanding of democracy is not sufficient. Adolescent participation in organizations provides the opportunity for hands-on development of foundational civic skills such as working in groups, organizing others to accomplish tasks, communicating, and working out differences of substance or process on the way to accomplishing a goal. Patrick (2000, 5) suggests participatory skills of citizenship in democracy include "interacting with other citizens to promote personal and common interests, monitoring public events and issues, deliberating about public policy issues, influencing policy decisions on public issues and implementing policy decisions on public issues." The list is particularly useful because it is based on actions that infer skills, not simply knowledge. However, to be competent in Patrick's civic skills, several very basic underlying skills must be mastered. Table 1 makes some preliminary suggestions as to what those skills might be. Some of these are cognitive in nature but many must be practiced in order to develop mastery. The premise that civic skill building can be important for later civic engagement has implications for program design and for research. Some relatively simple changes might greatly enhance the long-term civic-engagement effects of service and volunteer programs.

The most significant step is rethinking the front end of service and volunteer programs so that students have as much latitude as possible to learn and practice civic skills through the process of designing and organizing their activities themselves. This does not mean disengaging the service experience from the classroom content. Rather, it means facilitating students' discovery of what problems exist, whom they need to contact to address the issues, and what types of projects they will undertake. Giving students the opportunity to identify fellow students with similar concerns and then to decide what they will do about it is an important first step. Underlying this relatively simple step are several skills including voicing one's opinion, expressing interests, identifying like-minded individuals, and reaching consensus about action. Service and volunteer programs that provide preapproved lists of organizations ready to

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Table 1
Underlying Skills Necessary for Civic Skills

Civic Skill	Underlying Skills
Monitoring public events and issues	• Understand distinctions between three sectors of society (public, nonprofit and private) • Understand context for events and issues (what happened and why) • Capacity to acquire and thoughtfully review news (read the local newspaper)
Deliberating about public policy issues	• Think critically about issues • Understand multiple perspectives on issues
Interacting with other citizens to promote personal and common interests	• Understand democratic society (collective decision making as norm) • Capacity to articulate individual perspective and interests • Work with others to define common objective • Create and follow a work plan to accomplish a goal
Influencing policy decisions on public issues	• Identify decision makers and institutions • Understand appropriate vehicles for influencing decisions

accept students for predetermined volunteer roles immediately remove several learning opportunities including understanding local events and identifying decision makers, stakeholders, and providers. Adults should facilitate learning by asking questions, and providing support and encouragement, but not prepackaged experiences.

Similar adaptations of classroom efforts may benefit civic learning in the classroom. I have begun testing this approach in an introductory undergraduate public affairs course. At the beginning of the term, students identify a public issue they would like to influence (by reading the local newspaper) and work in small (self-selected) groups to identify background, stakeholders, decision makers, and important timelines for the issue they have chosen. They then actively work to influence the outcome by writing letters, meeting with officials, attending and speaking at public meetings, and generating interest from others through media and other means. Requiring the students to practice civic skills led one student to observe, "Everyone thinks they know how to be involved but I didn't really know until I did it." Students have anecdotally reported increased understanding of the newspaper and local events, a much clearer understanding of who makes decisions and how to access them, and most importantly, confidence that they could get involved in an issue that interests them.

Important research questions arise from this argument. The identification of specific civic skills is crucial to understanding their roles in future civic engagement and to increasing our ability to build civic skill development into programs. Patrick's (2000) list is a starting point, and I have begun to identify some of the underlying skills, but further refinement is needed. Researchers can then fill the gaps in research on civic skill and behavior development in service programs by testing and identifying successful service programs.

Confirming the hypothesis that civic skill building can crosscut many types of organizations and lead to later civic engagement is fundamental. It is important to understand both the activities of current adolescents and the structure of programs intended to increase civic engagement. Currently there is inadequate information on the variety of possibly relevant programs offered by schools and nonprofit organizations, as well as the experiences individual students have. My efforts to collect information about programs, and attributes and numbers of participants from high schools in one Indiana county revealed very good data on numbers of students participating in sports but fragmented and incomplete information about students participating in nonsports activities. Some high schools had athletics directors with assistants while nonsports programs were assigned somewhat haphazardly to faculty and staff with no central coordination. Not surprisingly, schools reported approximately twice as many opportunities for sports participation as all clubs and organizations combined. Understanding what programs are available through schools and the broader community will help us to understand where civic engagement efforts may best be enhanced.

Additional research into the question of whether service and participation in organizations and clubs provide networks (as defined by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) will also be helpful. As people are increasingly mobile, networks developed during adolescence may be less important although practicing the skill of network development may still have importance for long-term civic engagement.

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