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## News

### The Civic Engagement Gap

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There is strong support among students and faculty members for the idea that colleges have a role to play in encouraging civic engagement and promoting good citizenship. But there are real doubts about whether colleges are actually carrying out that role.

These are the key findings of a survey being released today by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. The survey results are from 23,000 students at 23 colleges and universities; the survey is part of the association's [Core Commitments](#) project, supported by the Templeton Foundation, to encourage educational goals related to personal and social responsibility.

Because there is self-selection among colleges in the project -- in that they think colleges do have a role in encouraging civic engagement -- the results may suggest that colleges on average might receive even lower grades in promoting civic education.

Among the institutions in the survey, it appears that the longer a student is on campus, the less likely he or she is to think that such issues are a key part of the campus culture. Consider these results:

#### Perceptions of Institutional Commitment to Civic Engagement

|                                                                                              | % of Freshmen Who Strongly Agree | % of Seniors Who Strongly Agree |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Contributing to a larger community is a responsibility that this campus values and promotes. | 50.5%                            | 41.1%                           |
| The campus actively promotes awareness of U.S. social, political, and economic issues.       | 44.8%                            | 34.1%                           |
| The campus actively promotes awareness of global social, political, and economic issues.     | 43.3%                            | 22.9%                           |

Caryn McTighe Musil, senior vice president of the association, said she was alarmed by the idea that only minorities of students see their campuses engaged in these issues. "As students progress and move [in college], the commitment either starts to be depressed, erased or submerged," she said.

It should worry educators that students don't perceive that their colleges are helping them to consider "What are my responsibilities with the knowledge I have gained?" or "What should I be asking as a citizen?" she said. Musil stressed that she wasn't suggesting a particular answer to those questions, and that providing such answers might be indoctrination. But she said it was vital for colleges to encourage such discussions. "This isn't about telling students what to believe, but what kinds of questions to pose," she said.

Other questions -- including comparative samples of various college and university employees -- show that the gap between expectations and reality on civic engagement extends beyond students.

#### Perceptions of Institutional Commitment to Civic Engagement, by Group

|                                                                                              | % of Students Who Strongly Agree | % of Academic Administrators Who Strongly Agree | % of Faculty Who Strongly Agree | % of Student Affairs Professionals Who Strongly Agree |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Contributing to a larger community is a responsibility that this campus values and promotes. | 45.0%                            | 54.8%                                           | 50.0%                           | 51.8%                                                 |
| The campus actively promotes awareness of U.S. social, political, and economic issues.       | 40.4%                            | 42.0%                                           | 37.7%                           | 37.0%                                                 |
| The campus actively promotes awareness of global social, political, and economic issues.     | 39.0%                            | 44.6%                                           | 38.7%                           | 38.2%                                                 |

One problem the survey suggests is that everyone on campus seems to think that they are more visible in promoting civic engagement to students than the students actually perceive that group to be.

#### Perceptions on Who Backs Students' Active Citizenship

|                                                                                                              | % of Students Who Believe... | % of Academic Administrators Who Believe... | % of Faculty Who Believe... | % of Student Affairs Professionals Who Believe... |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Senior campus administrators publicly advocate the need for students to become active and involved citizens. | 33.0%                        | 49.4%                                       | 42.4%                       | 46.7%                                             |
| Faculty publicly advocate the need for students to become active and involved citizens.                      | 35.8%                        | 49.5%                                       | 42.0%                       | 41.3%                                             |
| Student affairs staff publicly advocate the need for students to become active and involved citizens.        | 43.5%                        | 56.8%                                       | 47.7%                       | 58.4%                                             |
| Students publicly advocate the need for students to become active and involved citizens.                     | 47.8%                        | 42.2%                                       | 30.3%                       | 35.9%                                             |

Eric Dey, author of the report AAC&U is releasing and a professor of higher education at the University of Michigan, said that the results suggest a "leadership gap," with students wanting to be encouraged, but not finding what they are looking for on campus. He said campuses with service-learning programs, in which public service is linked directly to courses or the curriculum, have shown that there are models that work. "Students want exposure to these kinds of programs, but many places don't seem organized to provide it."

The survey was conducted before the economic downturn of the last year that has left many colleges pressed for funds. Dey said that in light of these changes, it's probably not a good time for advocates of civic engagement to push for the creation of new offices or programs. But he said much of what is needed would not cost much if any money, and he said that the economic downturn may motivate many students to want a closer tie to various communities.

— **Scott Jaschik**

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