

Civic skills and federal policy

On April 29, 2010, I had the honor of participating in a day-long *Forum on Federal Policies, Programs, and Civic Skills*, hosted by [CIRCLE](#) (the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement). About 80 people from various federal agencies, universities, and civic organizations came to the National Press Club in Washington to talk about the federal policies and programs needed to enhance civic skills. The conference was framed by CIRCLE's fact sheet, [Civic Skills and Federal Policy](#), which was released the same day.

There are lots of reasons to care about enhancing civic skills. We know that the Obama administration wants to involve more Americans in policy making at the federal level, and that citizens (used in the broadest, not legalistic, sense) can improve their communities, government, and nation through active engagement. But do they possess the skills to do so effectively? Researchers at CIRCLE measured the frequency of civic activities that usually require skills of:

- Communication (both expressing and understanding facts and opinions)
- Democratic deliberation/collective decision-making
- Critical analysis of political information

They found that over the past thirty years, levels of engagement have fallen for all Americans, and that education, income, ethnicity, and immigration status are all strong predictors of civic participation and civic skill acquisition. People, particularly youth, are motivated to participate, but they lack opportunities to do so, particularly if they are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Many studies have found a correlation between civic learning and academic success – *students who are provided with civic learning opportunities are more likely to stay in school and do well academically*. Civic learning and skill development can decrease disparities in access and opportunity.

The demand for this skill set is solid. We also know from [AACU's LEAP initiative](#) that employers require of their employees the same communication, critical analysis, reasoning, decision making, and intercultural skills. And we know from our learning exchanges last summer at [No Better Time](#) that civic leaders and community organizers want colleges and universities to teach the skills needed for their work in building communities and fostering a more just and deliberative democracy.

One more thing: most (about 80%) colleges and universities say that they are educating for social responsibility and that learning outcomes in civic engagement, ethical reasoning, intercultural skills, information literacy, oral communication, and diversity are essential to all students. Yet fewer than half of students say that these were emphasized during their first year of college, and the number drops to about one-third by senior year, again according to [AACU's research](#). In short, campuses aren't doing what they say they are doing for a majority of students (not to mention those who don't graduate).

CIRCLE will be publishing a report on the conference, which is good because I couldn't attend all of the concurrent sessions and opted to attend those relevant to higher education. I was a panelist in the higher education session, and here are a few foundational comments for both policy makers and educators from that panel:

- **Close the gap!** We absolutely must help more students complete not just high school, but college. Closing the educational achievement gap (the subject of the [last missive](#)) is critical. Closing the gap is a challenge facing colleges and universities, not just policy makers and schools.
- **Keep priorities straight:** With budget crunches at both the institutional and state levels, most campuses are cutting programs, increasing class sizes, offering fewer courses, raising tuition, reducing enrollments, and “just trying to get people through.” In times like these, it’s easy to abandon or put on hold the important goal of developing citizens. Civic learning needs to be viewed as essential and integral to learning, not an add-on or option.
- **Strengthen citizen, not just matriculated student, civic skills:** Any strategy for increasing civic skills that relies on college attendance as the primary catalyst for democratic renewal is unsatisfactory and may even exacerbate already unacceptable disparities between social classes. The solution has to include a commitment from the academy to help nonstudents develop civic skills and to build the capacity of communities to work to close disparities in access and opportunity.
- **Play a convening role to strengthen democratic principles and practices:** Colleges and universities should serve as sites for political engagement and regional public problem solving and play a convening role as “keepers of democracy” on big issues (e.g., preemptive war, civil rights, torture, sustainability, the economy).
- **Create programs that are pathways to careers in civic and public life**
- **A stated goal of government programs should be increasing public capacity to strengthen communities and democracy** – activities like volunteerism, service, and community-based research are all means to *the real goal of strengthening democracy*. Colleges and universities also need a little reminding of higher education’s greater purpose. The government needs to revisit, revise, and then be clear about the goal of its programs. Change the language, but change more than the language.

A small group tasked with coming up with specific recommendations for federal policy/programs regarding higher education made these recommendations (the first two emerged as the highest priorities):

- Redirect service programs so that they focus not simply on promoting volunteerism, service-learning or university/community collaboration as strategies for learning civic skills. Change the language, move off of service.
- Require that the programs have certain criteria: real community-based problem solving, practice of civic skills, dialogue and deliberation, intercultural communication, a community review board, student learning *before* community work, faculty-student-community research, a policy dimension, potential for replication at a large scale and a strong evaluative component, cross-sector engagement (government, teachers, law enforcement), community workshops and reciprocal learning experiences (e.g., organizing for change, facilitation, leadership, structural racism), faculty development, and classroom learning in the underlying cause of the problem.
- A mandate like Constitution Day – attach the requirement of civic learning to the receipt of federal funds (but don’t tell campuses *how* to do it)

- Graduate students in professional education should have civic skills built into the program; fund certificate programs.
- Mini-grant programs aren't all that helpful – the programs die after the funding runs out. Make long term investments.
- A Spelling Commission-like report for civic learning
- A national conversation, something like Clinton's dialogues on race
- Revamp FIPSE, which appears to be loaded up with congressmen's pet projects that seem narrow, not innovative, and partisan.
- Loan forgiveness for student civic engagement
- Extend AmeriCorps to high school students who then get assigned a mentor college AmeriCorps student; agencies get "two-fors"
- For federal research grants, tighten reciprocal learning (researcher-practitioner or community)

There's no reason that your campus must wait for federal mandates or grant opportunities – share this with your academic administration to help you make your case. We'll let you know when CIRCLE's complete report is released.