Overview of Civic Engagement at Rutgers University – New Brunswick

Introduction

Universities have historically been centers of civic engagement and political activity, as they have connected young adults with their communities and the larger issues facing the United States by instilling a sense of consciousness in students. Recently, attention has been paid to the extent of which universities encourage students to engage in real-world issues, at both the local and national level. Additionally, the importance of young voter turnout and voting habits in determining the outcomes of recent elections has put more emphasis on trends in students’ civic engagement (Galston and Hendrickson, 2016).

Community service, in particular is an important aspect of civic life. Community service often encourages students’ sense of moral responsibility and social concern (Soria, Nobbe and Fink, 2013). Research universities have a particular history of and opportunity to boost student participation in community service and other activities that encourage engagement in social issues (Lewis, 2014). Some scholars and higher education professionals would argue that universities have a responsibility to renew their civic mission (Boyte and Hollander, 1999) and foster an engagement culture (Lewis, 2014). As such, it is important that university administrators have a better understanding of the nature and reason for students’ involvement in community service.

When coupled with research regarding civic engagement, data on community-based engagement becomes more impactful. Research has demonstrated that community service opportunities can have a positive impact on students’ level of engagement in political issues, particularly by increasing their moral-political awareness (Yates and Youniss, 1996). Young adult participation in the American democratic system, through voting, has been in the spotlight following recent elections. Civic engagement data provides university leaders with a better understanding of the ways in which the university can foster the development of social and civic responsibility among students, and ultimately renew young adults’ commitment to a participative, democratic society.

Dan Lewis noted that, “university administrators and faculty understand that the American democracy depends on them for leaders. Academic leaders recognize the responsibility to prepare their students to be informed and active citizens. Indeed, it is not controversial to suggest that our democracy needs its very brightest citizens to be involved in the democratic process” (Lewis, 2014, p. 58). With this in mind, it is important for university leaders to remain
informed about the community service and civic engagement trends among the student body so that they can consider the university's role in developing engaged citizens.

Analysis

In the 2017 administration of the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey, data was collected that relates to the civic and political engagement of undergraduate students at Rutgers University. While the survey was administered to all undergraduate students, including those at Rutgers- New Brunswick, Rutgers-Newark, Rutgers-Camden, and Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences, this analysis focuses on the responses of Rutgers- New Brunswick students.

Analyses of students' civic and political engagement were based on responses to two sets of questions.

The first module focused on student experiences with civic engagement, particularly focusing on the nature of and motivations for students’ self-reported community service activities within the past academic year, amount of time spent on such activities, academic-based participation in community-related activities or service learning, and their awareness regarding social issues and community responsibility.

The second module focused on political engagement, specifically whether or not students voted in the 2016 presidential election. If they did not vote, they were asked why. Those students who reported that they did vote answered questions related to who they voted for, their level of involvement in the campaign process, their sentiments about their knowledge of policy issues and role in the political process, and what issues were most important to them as voters.
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Opportunities to engage in community service while a Rutgers University student are important to me
N=4,351

Opportunities to develop my leadership skills while a Rutgers University student are important to me
N=4,348

Opportunities to connect my academic work with community-based experience are important to me
N=4,339

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During this academic year, have you participated in community service?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Off Campus</th>
<th>On Campus</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=4,425</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>41.29%</td>
<td>34.46%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>58.71%</td>
<td>65.54%</td>
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</table>
Which of the following were significant reasons for getting involved in community service?

- Required as part of my academic program: 27.35% A significant reason, 72.23% Not a significant reason
- Required by my fraternity/sorority: 26.24% A significant reason, 72.70% Not a significant reason
- Unique/interesting opportunity arose: 69.81% A significant reason, 29.55% Not a significant reason
- Encouragement from friends or family: 51.97% A significant reason, 47.18% Not a significant reason
- Encouragement from RU faculty/staff: 31.85% A significant reason, 67.52% Not a significant reason
- Encouragement from other RU students: 48.11% A significant reason, 51.21% Not a significant reason
- Belief in particular cause: 77.54% A significant reason, 21.66% Not a significant reason
- Location of the work: 57.96% A significant reason, 40.93% Not a significant reason
- Opportunity to learn new things: 68.37% A significant reason, 30.66% Not a significant reason
- Opportunity to enhance academic achievement: 51.59% A significant reason, 47.47% Not a significant reason
- Opportunity to develop leadership skills: 65.27% A significant reason, 34.23% Not a significant reason
- Become better citizen & community participant: 80.21% A significant reason, 19.24% Not a significant reason
- Change conditions in community: 72.57% A significant reason, 26.79% Not a significant reason
- Strengthen resume for grad school/employment: 61.53% A significant reason, 37.88% Not a significant reason
- Other: 5.94% A significant reason, 28.92% Not a significant reason
What was the focus of the organization where you did this community service? (Select all that apply)

- Education: 914
- Health: 954
- Social Issues: 1,135
- Environment: 613
- Arts: 174
- Economic development: 129
- International development: 118
- Other: 132
Thinking about your participation in all forms of community service, which includes service through clubs, courses, and one-time events, please estimate how many total hours of service you completed this academic year:

N=2,338

- 1-10 hours: 44.40%
- 11-20 hours: 26.01%
- 21-50 hours: 19.33%
- 51-100 hours: 6.20%
- More than 100 hours: 4.06%

How many times have you enrolled in a Rutgers University course that had a service-learning component?

N=4,394

- Zero: 84.16%
- Once: 10.90%
- Twice: 1.38%
- More than three times: 3.55%

In considering all of the service-learning courses you took, what was the average number of hours of service you completed for a course?

N=686

- 1-10 hours: 56.71%
- 11-25 hours: 24.34%
- 26-50 hours: 13.41%
- More than 50 hours: 5.54%

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To what extent have you been involved in the following community-focused experiences during this academic year or last summer?

- **Study Abroad or other internationally-based experience with a service learning focus**
  - Not at all: 88.26%
  - Once: 9.39%
  - More than Once: 0%
  - N=4,303

- **Community-based capstone experience**
  - Not at all: 89.38%
  - Once: 8.69%
  - More than Once: 0%
  - N=4,294

- **Internship or clinical practicum**
  - Not at all: 76.39%
  - Once: 16.41%
  - More than Once: 7.19%
  - N=4,295

- **Academic field study**
  - Not at all: 83.17%
  - Once: 12.13%
  - More than Once: 4.74%
  - N=4,277

- **Community-based research**
  - Not at all: 87.24%
  - Once: 9.31%
  - More than Once: 3.45%
  - N=4,295

- **Other, please elaborate**
  - Not at all: 91.36%
  - Once: 7.99%
  - More than Once: 0.65%
  - N=1,840

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In considering your overall experience(s) with community-focused learning activities during this academic year, which of the following best characterizes the purpose of those experience(s)?

N=1,584

- Charity (providing help to individuals): 24.31%
- Empowering others: 14.14%
- Participatory Democracy (changing laws): 17.05%
- Social change (changing societal conditions or views): 14.08%
- Community development: 24.75%

To what extent has your participation in community-based activities at this campus influenced your desire to continue community-focused activities after you graduate?

N=1,595

- Not at all: 22.51%
- To some extent: 57.37%
- To a great extent: 20.13%

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2016 Election - During 2016 national election did you vote for President?

N=4,317

- Yes: 61.89%
- No: 38.11%

2016 Election - Which candidate did you vote for?

N=2,652

- Darrell Castle - Constitutional: 67.09%
- Hillary Clinton - Democrat: 12.48%
- Jill Stein - Green: 12.74%
- Gary Johnson - Libertarian: 2.31%
- Donald J. Trump - Republican: 0.94%
- Other: 0.00%
- Decline to State: 0.00%

2016 Election - Why did you not vote?

N=1,636

- I was eligible to vote but chose not to vote: 23.11%
- I was eligible and intended to vote but ran out of time: 10.94%
- I was registered but not where I go to school: 15.83%
- I was not registered: 21.52%
- I am not a US citizen: 25.37%
- I was not 18 at the time of the election: 0.00%
2016 Election -
During the last national political election did you...
(Select all that apply)

- Give money to candidate/cause: 310
- Try to influence other's vote: 1,572
- Wear campaign button, put sticker on car, or place sign at residence: 690
- Work on political campaign: 162

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Level of Agreement -

I have a role to play in the political process...

I am better informed about politics/government than most people...

When policy issues are discussed, I have something to say...

I am well qualified to participate in the political process...

I have a good understanding of political issues facing the country...
2016 Election-
Which of the following were the most important issues for you in the presidential election? (Select up to 3)
References


(2012, November 26). Young voters supported Obama less but may have mattered more. *Pew Research Center. Retrieved from* http://www.people-press.org/2012/11/26/young-voters-supported-obama-less-but-may-have-mattered-more/
