StudentVoice Civic Engagement Benchmarking Project

StudentVoice, in partnership with the NASPA Assessment and Knowledge Consortium, administered a survey of civic engagement practices among college students (N=22,000), and Alfred University was a participant. The assessment was administered in a web format in Spring 2011 to a sample of AU students; there were 205 respondents. Our outcomes were then compared with the national and regional groups.

Among our respondents, 83% were white, 79% live on campus, 23% play intercollegiate sports (the national average was 7%), and 18% were first-generation college students. 28% were seniors, 26% juniors, 23% first year students, and 22% sophomores.

As a general finding, our students are far less engaged than the national sample in activities that generally lead to greater civic engagement. Even though our students are more likely than the national group to be involved in student organizations (75% vs. 63%), there is a double-digit negative difference in the percent of students who voted in recent national, state and local elections, our students are less likely to have completed volunteer work as part of a class, and they are less likely to have engaged in community service of any kind.

The students who had reported participating in service-related activities of all kinds tended to have done them while affiliated with an AU group, rather than within a group not affiliated with their college/university (67%, vs. 48% in the national group). This is encouraging news which demonstrates that even though participation is less than our peer group, AU is providing opportunities that students hadn’t taken advantage of in their home communities. When our students do participate, they tend to gravitate in greater percentages to service within arts and culture and the environment, rather than more traditional service areas such as homelessness, community development and health. Youth programs were the third most popular area of service among our students. Students who reported participation in environmental causes were far more likely than those who participated with other causes to consider themselves as having leadership roles.

There were no questions that resulted in a significant positive difference from the national sample.

**AU’s top ranked items overall (5-point scale; 5 is highest)**

I plan on being an active part of the community in which I live after college.  

3.95

I often use the content I am learning in class outside of the classroom.  

3.94

Participating in volunteer and/or service work with this college/university has taught me how to work collaboratively with others.  

3.88

Participating...has helped me to take initiative.  

3.88
Participating…has helped me to improve my leadership skills. 3.83

Participating … has helped me to tailor my communication style to effectively express, listen and adapt to others. 3.78

Participating…has made it easier to see things from other people’s perspective. 3.77

Participating … has contributed to my sense of who I am as a person. 3.75

Areas of statistically significant negative difference from the national sample

Participating in volunteer and/or service work with this college/university has helped me to learn about people with different backgrounds and perspectives. -0.25

Participating … has provided me with “real-life” experience for the skills I have learned in the classroom. -0.23

I often connect what I am learning in my courses to the programs and activities that I am involved in. -0.21

Participating … has made me realize my own role in providing solutions to various issues and challenges impacting my community. -0.19

Additional areas of negative difference (significance not noted):

Percentage of students who report never having participated in a service-oriented group: 66% vs. 49% nationally.

Percentage of students who report never having participated in a one-time service project: 66% vs. 52%.

Percentage of students who report never having served an active role in solving a community issue or problem: 70% vs. 58%.

Summary

If the University is to move toward a hallmark of civic engagement, community service, global citizenship, or whatever we end up defining as one of our four pillars, we have some work to do. Our traditional-aged population most likely has not had much life experience with which to begin engaging in community service, so we must work harder than our peer institutions to provide students with the appropriate learning opportunities.

Based on these findings, the establishment of the Gary Horowitz Service Learning program and the continued work of the Children and Youth Learning Initiative seem even more important, as we need a vehicle by which to provide not only community service, but curriculum-based service learning.

While it was encouraging to see that our students are more likely to participate in clubs/organizations in general, these results show that if we are hoping to interest students in civic engagement, participation alone is not the key. We have to be more intentional about the quality of the experiences.

Last, it appears that we have opportunity within the curricular offerings at AU to incorporate service learning for academic credit, if we wish to increase our outcomes in relation to our peer institutions.