

Promoting Democratic Engagement During College:  
Looking Beyond Service-Learning

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**Abstract**

Preparing students to be engaged participants in our democratic society has long been an important college outcome. Over the past few decades, postsecondary institutions have primarily attempted to improve civic outcomes by integrating service activities into their curricula. While research on the impacts of service learning is plentiful, research on how other educationally beneficial activities influences democratic outcomes is scarce. In this study, we find that service learning may not be a panacea for promoting democratic outcomes, as other high impact practices, most prominently learning communities, had greater or equivalent relationship to two dimensions of democratic engagement.

### **Promoting Democratic Engagement During College: Looking Beyond Service-Learning**

Preparing students to be engaged participants in our democratic society has long been an important college outcome (Boyte & Hollander, 1999; Ehrlich, 2000; The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). Some of our nation's founding fathers, such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, argued that educated citizens were necessary for our democracy to flourish and founded the Universities of Pennsylvania and Virginia. Similar beliefs were a rationale behind the Morrill Act of 1862 which led to the land grant colleges. As recently as the Truman administration, the President's Commission on Higher Education (1947) stated "The first and most essential charge upon higher education is that at all its levels and in all its fields of specialization it shall be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and processes" (p. 102). The commission also believed "it is imperative that American education develop a 'democratic dynamic' that will inspire faith in the democratic way of life, dispel doubt and defeatism about the future and imbue youth with the conviction that life has purpose and that they are active and responsible participants in that purpose" (p. 102).

However, over the past half century, higher education has transitioned from the public good espoused above to a private good. In 2014, over two-thirds of entering freshmen believed that increased earning power is the *chief* benefit of a college education (Eagan et al., 2015). Additionally, the percentage of freshmen who believed that keeping up with political affairs is essential or very important declined from 60 percent in 1966 to 35 percent today (Astin, Oseguera, Sax, & Korn, 2002; Eagan et al., 2015). These same trends are not isolated to college students. Over this same time period, civic life in America has declined in a multitude of forms ranging from voluntary association to voting in formal elections (Carpini, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Sax, 2000; Skocpol, 1997; Skocpol, Ganz, & Munson, 2000).

These trends have caused many institutions to reemphasize their responsibility to develop informed students that can contribute to our democracy. Over 1,100 institutions have become members of the Campus Compact, which seeks to promote higher education as a public good through promoting engagement in service activities (Campus Compact, 2015). Other initiatives such as the American Democracy and Political Engagement Projects have also sought to imbed service activities into the curriculum. In turn, an increasing number of institutions now offer courses with a service learning component designed to increase students' civic engagement. In 2014, 52 and 62 percent of first-year and seniors reported taking at least one class that included service learning, respectively (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2014).

While there has been much research that investigates the relationship between service learning and civic engagement (e.g., Astin & Sax, 1998; Conway, Arnel, & Gerwien, 2009; Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001), scholars have largely overlooked how other programs and activities can influence civic engagement. This oversight is concerning due to the failure to distinguish between differences in community service and the democratic responsibility to participate in politics and civil society (Bok, 2001). In this paper, we investigate the relationship between selected high impact educational practices and two dimensions of civic engagement: democratic awareness and democratic participation. High impact educational practices are activities that have been found to impact a variety of educational outcomes and require that students exhort a significant amount of time and effort, facilitate interactions with their peers and faculty, introduce students to diversity, provide responsive and meaningful feedback, and connect students to settings off-campus (Kuh, 2008). Using a large, multi-institution sample of seniors, we find that service learning may not be the best avenue to promote democratic awareness and participation.

### **Literature Review**

Civic engagement lacks a clear definition in the literature (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Finley, 2011); thus, it is important for us to begin by outlining our meaning of civic engagement. For the purposes of this study, we choose to utilize the term “democratic engagement,” rather than civic engagement as it encompasses participation in both civil society and polity. We adopted Michael X. Delli Carpini’s (2006) definition of democratic engagement: “the combination of democratic awareness and democratic participation” (para. 1). He defines democratic awareness as “cognitive, attitudinal, and affective involvement in BOTH civil society and the polity” (para. 1) and democratic participation as “individual and collective actions designed to address public issues through the institutions of BOTH civil society and the polity” (para.1). By using the term democratic rather than civil, we are able to account for the myriad of ways students participate in American society.

Democratic engagement is both an educational means and end. It is an end for participation in the democratic process. College degree holders vote at higher rates and are more engaged in their communities than their peers without postsecondary degrees (Marcelo, 2007). Democratic engagement during college is positively correlated with a wide range of desirable student academic and social outcomes. Service activities have been positively correlated with higher retention and graduation rates (Astin & Sax, 1998; Gallini & Moelly, 2003). Astin, Sax, and Avalos (1999) found that students who volunteer tend to be more socially responsible and committed to their communities and education. Service learning, the main institutional response to improve constructive participation in public life, has been positively related to students’ interpersonal development, sense of social responsibility, and leadership and communication skills (Astin & Sax, 1998; Cress et al., 2001). Additionally, a meta-analysis found that the effect

sizes of participation in a service learning course were .28, .36, and .30 for personal, social, and citizenship outcomes, respectively (Conway et al, 2009).

These outcomes may also be cultivated in democratic engagement activities outside of service learning courses. Colby (2003) notes that student participation in extracurricular activities requires action and reflection, enabling students to develop skills that may not be taught in the classroom but which contribute to civic mindedness and a sense of social responsibility. Similarly, interacting with diverse peers may also increase civic engagement (Bowman, 2011). Interpersonal interactions with a student of another race appear to be more impactful on democratic engagement outcomes than other diversity experiences such as a diversity course or an intergroup dialogue program.

In the literature there has been much debate over the assessment of democratic engagement and civic-minded attitudes. Beaumont (2005) claims that, “assessment remains one of the most significant challenges in college-level civic education, including questions about whether to assess various aspects of moral and civic learning as well as the difficulty of how to assess it” (p. 288). This assessment challenge is magnified because civic engagement has generally been operationalized in higher education as volunteering or community service. This research assumes that volunteering brings students into civil society and the polity. However, as Bok (2001) has highlighted, volunteering to help the poor is admirable, but the act fails to solve the problem of poverty. This point is buttressed by the high level of volunteering, but low interest in politics among undergraduates today (Eagan et al., 2015). Additionally, civic and democratic engagement research has been restricted to small samples and case studies, limiting the ability to generalize findings (Finley, 2011). The existing research has largely neglected to study how extracurricular activities influence civic/democratic engagement. Finley’s (2011)

literature review on civic engagement concluded: “the evaluation of civic engagement may be more accurately identified through the practices that accompany it than by identification through a single name or program label” (p. 18).

Furthermore, democratic engagement promotion differs by institutional type. It is believed that larger research universities have been more successful at incorporating civic engagement as a “regular feature of educational life” (Lounsbury & Pollack, 2001, p. 333). Other environmental factors, such as the collective attitude of the student body, influence students’ commitment to social activism and civic engagement (Astin, 1993; Sax, 2000). In addition, course structure and campus activities play a role in developing civic skills along with the cultivation of civic knowledge and values (Beaumont, 2005). Developing socially and civically responsible citizens does not appear to be a universal goal among postsecondary faculty, as 48 and 54 percent of faculty in 2013-14 believed that instilling a commitment to community service and encouraging students to become agents of social change was essential or very important, respectively (Eagan et al., 2014). In contrast, 82 percent of faculty believed that preparing students for employment after college was essential or very important. These factors are especially salient when looking at the disciplines comprising the academy, because as Zlotkowski (2001) claims, civic engagement is not part of the disciplines’ self-understanding. While this may ring true to some degree in all disciplines, some are more obviously affected than others. Engineering, in particular, is notorious for failing to encourage the development of democratic engagement in students while increasing their sense of materialism (Sax, 2000).

While much research has examined community service associated with a course, little attention has been devoted to assessing how other effective educational practices influence democratic engagement. A single study found no relationship between civic engagement and

learning community participation after controlling for other factors, but it relies on a relatively small sample (Rowan-Kenyon, Soldner & Inkelas, 2007). Literature on the impacts of study abroad and civic/democratic engagement focus on service learning overseas (e.g. Bringle, Hatcher, & Jones, 2010) or focus on building a global perspective (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009; Tarrant, Rubin & Stoner, 2014). We are unaware of any studies that examine the relationship between democratic/civic engagement, undergraduate research with faculty, and non-service-based senior capstone projects. Thus, to fully understand how the college experience influences and promotes democratic/civic engagement, researchers must look beyond service learning and examine other student experiences.

### **Theory**

Social capital theory guided this study. Social capital is essentially an individual's network of voluntary associations with sustained, trustworthy and reciprocal relationships (Portes, 1998). Social capital networks can be formal, such as members of a football team, or informal friendships among individuals living in the same dormitory. Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1993) contend that social capital has three main elements: moral obligations and norms, social networks, and social values.

There are two main types of social capital: bonding and bridging (Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 2000). Bonding social capital tends to form in networks where the individuals have a shared trait, such as members of a Black fraternity. In contrast, bridging social capital is more outward looking and connects heterogeneous students such as members of a volunteering group. Social capital is cultivated during the collegiate experience and used to leverage change throughout life. Its value lies in the potential to facilitate information sharing and collective

action, which individuals can leverage to implement solutions for collective problems and issues (Halpern, 2005).

Social capital has been studied from a variety of disciplinary perspectives including economics, sociology and political science (Halpern, 2005). Scholars have applied social capital theory to a wide range of social institutions and social dilemmas including corporations, family, government, public health, and most importantly here, education, civil society, and democracy. As Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson (2002) noted, “From churches and unions to social groups and reform crusades, membership associations have provided paths into active citizenship, allowing Americans to build community, pursue shared goals, and influence social and political affairs” (p. 527). Utilizing more recent quantitative data, Paxton (2002) found a reciprocal relationship between social capital and democracy.

### **Research Questions**

Guided by social capital theory, we investigated the following research questions on democratic engagement among senior college students:

1. How are student and institutional characteristics associated with democratic awareness?
2. How are student and institutional characteristics related to democratic participation?
3. How does participation in selected high impact practices influence students’ democratic awareness and participation?
4. How does the estimated effect of participating in selected high impact practices compare to the estimated effect for service learning on democratic awareness and participation?

### **Methods**

#### **Data**

To answer these questions, we utilized data from U.S. seniors who responded to the 2014 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). NSSE is a large multi-institutional survey administered annually that examines students' participation in educationally beneficial activities in- and out-side of the classroom, time-usage patterns, and satisfaction with the institution. Due to our focus on democratic engagement, we limited our sample to students who also responded to the NSSE Civic Engagement module, a set of questions participating institutions may elect to administer to their students. We also excluded part-time and distance-learning students and those enrolled at special-focus institutions (e.g., theological seminaries, art schools) from our sample.

After accounting for these exclusions, our data sample contained about 10,305 students who attended 46 institutions. Table 1 contains the characteristics of our sample. About two-thirds of the respondents were female. Approximately, three out of four students were White, while Asians and Latinos each comprised four percent of the sample. African Americans and foreign students represented seven and five percent of the sample. The largest major fields were business, social sciences, and the health professions; although, the respondents were well distributed across the disciplines. Three out of five students attended a public institution. A majority of students were enrolled in institutions that offered master's degrees, while 30 and 12 percent of the respondents attended doctoral universities and baccalaureate colleges, respectively.

Our outcomes of interest were democratic awareness and participation. We created these outcomes by applying Samejima's (1969) Graded Response Model (GRM) to items from the Civic Engagement module (see Appendix A). GRM is a generalization of the two-parameter Item Response Theory model for ordinal outcomes. The democratic awareness variable was derived from items asking how often the respondents informed themselves about or discussed

“local or campus” and “state, national, or global” issues. The democratic participation construct was created from items inquiring about how often the student “raised awareness about”, “asked others to address”, and “organized others to work on” “local or campus” and “state, national, or global” issues. We used GRM to score these variables as these activities require various amounts of effort and skill and GRM accounts for these variations. We checked the IRT assumptions of unidimensionality and local independence for both outcomes. The marginal reliabilities were .85 for both outcomes. We standardized both variables to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1.

We also used data on a number of student characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender, age, major field, transfer status, nationality, parental education, grades, Greek-life membership, and residing on-campus. To control for variations in the institutions attended by the respondents, we used data on the following institutional characteristics: institutional control (public vs. private), Basic 2010 Carnegie Classification (aggregated), Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, locale, residential character, undergraduate enrollment, Barron’s rating, and region. We also utilized data on student participation in a number of high-impact practices: learning communities, study abroad, research with a faculty member, senior capstones, and service learning. These activities have been dubbed “high-impact” as they have been frequently shown to improve student learning and development (Kuh, 2008). While these high-impact practices encompass a diverse array of activities, they share a number of traits:

- require students exert substantial amounts of time and energy
- necessitate interactions with peers and/or faculty about important topics
- typically introduce students to diversity
- provide frequent feedback

- allow students to apply their knowledge and skills in different settings, on and off campus
- provide opportunities for students to realize the importance of their knowledge and skills.

### **Analyses**

Due to the exploratory nature of this study, we began our analyses by examining the descriptive relationship between participation in high impact practices and democratic awareness and participation. We tested these relationships by performing two-group t-tests that grouped students who did and did not participate in each of the high impact practices. After examining these relationships, we investigated how they changed after controlling for both student and institutional characteristics. This entailed creating a series of multilevel models with random intercepts for each outcome. We used multilevel modeling due to the nesting of students within colleges and the random intercepts account for unobservable variation related to our outcomes due to the differences between institutions. The first models were one-way random-effects models that estimate the amount of variance between and within institutions. The second set of models investigated the relationship between the two outcomes and the student and institutional characteristics identified above, except for the high impact practices. Our third and final set of models added indicators of student participation in the high impact practices. With the final model, we performed post hoc tests that compared the estimated high impact practice coefficients to the estimate for service learning. The post hoc tests examined if the estimated high impact practice coefficient minus the service learning coefficient was significantly different from zero using a  $z$  test. As we standardized both of the outcome variables, the coefficients represent the estimated effect size for a one unit change in the independent variable.

## **Limitations**

This study suffers from a number of limitations. First, our sample contains students attending institutions that chose to administer NSSE's civic engagement module. Therefore, these institutions may not be representative of bachelor's-granting institutions nationally. Second, we rely upon students to accurately self-report which programs and activities they have participated in. We are also unaware of the *specific* programs and activities the respondents reported doing. For example, studying abroad in Africa may have a differential impact than in Western Europe. Similarly, a service learning course that requires service weekly and significantly involves students in the planning and operations of the service activity probably has a different effect than a service learning course that staffs a soup kitchen a handful of times. Our data also did not permit us to investigate or account for the degree of program implementation fidelity of the high impact practices. Simply, well or poorly structured programs may have effects that greatly deviate from our estimates. Additionally, we were unable to account for program effect diffusion which occurs when a participant interacts with a non-participant. Due to these limitations, our results should be viewed as broad average estimates and not be applied to a specific practice or program. Finally, this was an exploratory study designed to investigate how known effective educational practices influence democratic engagement. The study results should be replicated using random assignment or quasi-experimental methods, such as propensity scores, to confirm our estimated effects.

## **Results**

### **Democratic Awareness**

Table 2 contains the t-test results comparing engagement in democratic awareness activities by participation in selected high impact practices. The means were significantly

different on all five high impact practices examined. The magnitude of the mean differences ranged from .33 SDs for study abroad to .14 SDs for service learning.

The multivariate results can be found in Table 3. The first model indicates that nearly all of the variation of democratic awareness occurs within, not between, institutions. The subsequent models show that Asians and Latina/os are less likely to engage in democratic awareness activities than Whites holding other factors constant. However, adult and male students are more likely to engage in democratic awareness activities controlling for other variables. Substantial differences were observed by major field as nearly all fields were significantly lower than the social sciences. The exceptions, communications, media, and public relations and social service professions, had differences that were significantly higher and not significantly different from the social sciences after controlling for other factors, respectively. Students who earned mostly A's were significantly more likely to engage in democratic awareness activities than students with lower grades holding other variables constant. Democratic awareness did not vary much by parental education. The exception is for students with a parent who earned a doctoral or professional degree, as these students were more likely to take part in democratic awareness activities than students with a parental education level of bachelor's. Students who participated in Greek-life and/or lived on-campus were more likely to participate in democratic awareness activities after controlling for other characteristics.

Students attending highly residential institutions were less likely to engage in democratic awareness activities than their peers at non-residential institutions, holding constant other factors. Selectivity was positively correlated with democratic awareness activities and students attending Midwest institutions were less engaged with democratic awareness activities than students in the Northeast, after controlling for other characteristics.

Participation in the five high impact practices examined was positively correlated with democratic awareness, after holding other factors constant. The largest estimated effect size was for learning communities (.23), followed by study abroad (.17) and research with faculty (.15). The estimated effect sizes for service learning (.10) and senior capstone projects (.09) were lower. Table 4 compares the high impact practice participation estimates from model 3 to the estimated effect of participating in service learning. Learning communities and study abroad both had estimated effects greater than service learning. The effect size differences were .13 and .07, respectively. The estimated effects of undergraduate research and senior capstone participation were statistically equivalent to service learning.

### **Democratic Engagement**

The descriptive t-test results comparing democratic participation by participation in high-impact practices are located in Table 2. Like democratic awareness, the mean differences were all significant. The estimated effect sizes of the simple mean differences ranged from a high of .47 for learning community participation to a low of .14 for senior capstone projects.

The multivariate results for democratic participation can be found in Table 3. Model 1 demonstrates that the vast majority of the variation of democratic participation occurs at the student, rather than institution, level. The subsequent models show that, after controlling for other characteristics, foreign, Asian, Black, and the “other” racial/ethnic group students were more likely to participate in democratic participation activities than Whites. Males, Greek-life members, and on-campus residents had higher levels of democratic participation than their peers, holding constant other characteristics. Apart from communications, media, and public relations and the social service professions where the difference was non-significant, social science majors on average had significantly higher levels of democratic participation than their peers in other

major fields. Students who earned mostly B's had slightly higher levels of democratic participation than students who earn mostly A's, after controlling for other characteristics. After controlling for participation in high impact practices and other characteristics, students with a parental education level of high school or less were more likely to participate in democratic activities than students with parental education level of Bachelor's.

Students who attended Master's-granting institutions were more likely to participate in democratic activities than their peers at Doctoral institutions, holding constant other characteristics. Students at private institutions exhibited higher levels of democratic participation than students at public institutions, when controlling for factors. Additionally, students attending colleges located in the Midwest were less likely to engage in democratic activities than students in the Northeast.

Participation in high impact practices appears to be one of the best predictors of democratic participation. The estimated magnitude of participating in a learning community on democratic participation is .36 SDs, after controlling for other characteristics. The estimated effects of participating in a service learning course, research with faculty, and study abroad were smaller, but still sizable. However, working on a senior capstone project was not associated with democratic participation, when controlling for other factors. Table 4 shows the results when the high impact practice coefficients from the third model are compared to the service learning estimates. Participation in a learning community was associated with greater gains in democratic participation than taking a service learning course. The estimates for study abroad and participating in research with a faculty member were equivalent to service learning. However, service learning appears to have a significantly stronger relationship to democratic participation than participating in a senior capstone project.

### Discussion

Creating active citizens for our democracy is a cornerstone of higher education in the U.S. However, since the end of World War II, this outcome has been deemphasized due to the increasing importance society placed on the private benefits of higher education. Institutions have gradually recognized the problematic nature of this trend and responded by integrating service activities into their curricula. This response has assumed a strong linkage between community service activities and participation in democratic activities. While there is evidence that service learning improves democratic outcomes (Conway et al, 2009), leaders such as Derek Bok (2001) have cautioned against overemphasizing this connection. In this study, we investigated Bok's suspicion and examined if alternative educational practices, that have been demonstrated to impact other learning domains, have a stronger relationship with two types democratic behaviors: democratic awareness and participation.

Using data from a large multi-institutional sample of college seniors, our results comport with Bok's (2001) suspicions. We found that learning community participation and study abroad had a stronger relationship with democratic awareness than participating in a service learning course, after controlling for other student and institutional characteristics. This suggests that high impact practices, which create networks between individuals, do more to promote engagement in democratic awareness activities in students than service activities integrated into a course. We found a similar relationship for democratic participation as the estimated effect of learning community participation was significantly greater than service learning. Additionally, the estimates for undergraduate research and study abroad were statistically equivalent to the estimated effect of service learning.

However, despite the above findings, we must acknowledge that service learning was significantly and positively related to both democratic awareness and participation. Thus, integrating service learning into the curriculum helps improve undergraduates' democratic engagement and is not an activity that should be avoided. However, it may be possible to improve the efficacy of service learning on democratic outcomes. As Finley (2011) notes, "although service-learning by definition engages students' in a community, that engagement *may* or *may not* [italics original] be politically - oriented or intentionally structured to deepen the specific knowledge or skills associated with developing democratic participation or citizenship" (p. 3). Accordingly, institutions may be able to improve the effectiveness of service learning programs by taking steps to further connect the service activities to students' role in their communities and/or focusing on the community dialogue required for democratic governance.

We believe our most important finding is the relationship between learning communities and democratic engagement. Our model indicates that, after controlling for other factors, learning community participation increases in democratic awareness and participation by roughly a quarter and third of a standard deviation, respectively. These effect sizes are not trivial in education research (Lipsey et al., 2012) and we did not observe substantial reductions in the estimates after controlling for a variety of characteristics.

While the statistical results highlight the role of learning communities in promoting democratic engagement, the real world connection is not immediately clear. Learning communities are programs where a group of students take two or more classes (usually organized around a theme or common interest) together, typically in their first year. We believe learning communities help build bonding social capital, as they bring students with a common interest or shared trait together for a sustained period of time in courses emphasizing group work. They also

help integrate ideas and learning across the disciplines, frequently connect this learning to societal issues, and promote involvement in academic and non-academic activities outside of the classroom. Faculty teaching learning community classes prioritize working closely with their students, which helps integrate and socialize students into college. Learning communities have also been associated with persistence, increased exposure to diversity, more engagement in active and collaborative learning activities, higher levels of academic effort, and among other desirable learning outcomes (Inkelas, Szelenyi, Soldner, & Brower, 2007; Pike, 1999; Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2010; Stassen, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

When considering these features, we believe learning communities most likely influence democratic engagement by creating mini-democracies. The frequent interactions among the students over a sustained period of time build trust and community among the members, which when combined with their shared interest, form sub-communities within the school. The trust built within communities allows for open interaction and a free and open dialogue. This information sharing allows the learning communities to identify problems in their local community and beyond. Learning communities are natural locations to facilitate change by using the teamwork skills acquired by the students through their collaborative-centric course work and social networks to identify allies and build coalitions that advocate for change.

Unlike the other practices examined, learning communities are the high impact practice best positioned to create bonding social capital. Therefore, the strong relationships built within learning communities may be the genesis of our results. Bonding social capital also may explain the duration of the effects. As learning communities are typically a first-year program, we would have expected their effects to dissipate over time, as our sample is comprised of seniors. Rather,

it appears that the effects of learning communities either stay constant over time or possibly increase as students progress through college.

In addition to learning communities and service learning, other high impact practices appear to improve democratic engagement outcomes. Study abroad participation was associated with a non-trivial increase in both of our outcomes, after controlling for other factors. Thus, it appears that study abroad promotes learning about and discussing and enlightening others about issues. We observed a similar result for undergraduate research with faculty, as this practice was associated with higher levels of democratic activities holding constant other characteristics. The least effective of the high impact practices studied appears to be senior capstone projects. This activity was associated with a relatively trivial increase in civic learning and had no significant relationship to democratic engagement.

In addition to the above findings related to the high impact practices, we had a handful of other notable findings. Greek members had higher levels of democratic engagement than non-Greek members, holding other factors constant. Living on-campus was also correlated with both dimensions of democratic engagement. These findings may be a reflection of the social capital acquired with fraternity or sorority membership or by living in close quarters with other students in a residence hall. We observed no significant difference in the level of engagement in democratic awareness activities between foreign and White students, but the former reported significantly higher levels of democratic participation. This suggests that international students are able to either organize and lobby for changes that will benefit their education or frequently raise awareness about issues in their home communities. Finally, confirming previous research (Sax, 2000), we observed large differences in democratic engagement by major field.

**Implications for Research**

A primary goal of this study was to identify educational practices, other than service learning, that may increase students' democratic engagement. By focusing solely on service learning programs, researchers appear to have missed more organic episodes of democratic awareness and participation. Thus, looking beyond explicitly identified civic engagement programs may enable researchers to identify where else students are democratically engaged during their collegiate years. Our results suggest that multiple practices may be correlated with democratic engagement. Further research should confirm our results and design studies that are better equipped to estimate the unbiased effects of these programs.

Additionally, our interpretations of the learning community results indicate that friendship networks and other out of class activities influence democratic engagement. While democratic engagement is an educational pedagogy, the results of this education are likely to emerge and manifest themselves outside the classroom. This is where student agency regarding issues of democracy is less constrained and can be put into action. More research should examine how extracurricular activities foster democratic engagement.

**Implications for Practice**

All of the high-impact practices studied had positive effects on democratic awareness and all, except for senior capstone projects, had positive effects on democratic participation. Therefore, our results show that multiple activities can improve undergraduates' democratic engagement. As a result, institutions should be cautious about viewing service learning as a cure-all for providing the civic knowledge and tools necessary for democratic engagement. Institutions should emphasize dialogue and relationship building for their students. During that process students should be exposed to difficult ideas and controversial problems. As Kuh (2008)

indicated, exposing students to ideas of this sort within the context of a group that has built up trust, like a learning community, can result in a wide range of positive outcomes. Furthermore, our service learning findings may indicate that many service learning courses are not well structured and implemented. Institutions should seek to advise and assist faculty on how to structure their courses so students receive the maximum possible benefit.

### **Conclusion**

Undergraduates are the future leaders and inheritors of our democratic experiment. In this study, we attempted to address some of the literature gaps and investigate how postsecondary institutions can improve student outcomes related to democratic engagement. Identifying these practices is critical, as Harry Boyte (2008) asserts that institutions must both create an environment and develop students' skills to cultivate democratic engagement. Using data from a variety of institution types, we found a stronger relationship between learning community participation and democratic engagement than for service learning. Thus, it appears that multiple programs and practices may foster civic engagement and that postsecondary institutions have been overlooking these alternative practices to improving students' democratic engagement.

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Table 1. Sample characteristics (N=10,305)

	%
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	35
Female	65
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
Asian or Pacific Islander	4
Black or African American	7
Hispanic or Latino	4
White	73
Other	8
Foreign	5
<b>Major Field</b>	
Arts & Humanities	11
Bio. Sci., Agr., & Nat. Res.	10
Phy. Sci., Math, & Comp. Sci.	5
Social Sciences	14
Business	19
Comm., Media, & Pub. Rel.	5
Education	9
Engineering	5
Health Professions	12
Social Service Professions	5
All Other	4
<b>Control</b>	
Public	60
Private	40
<b>Basic 2010 Carnegie Classification (aggregated)</b>	
Doctoral Universities	30
Master's Colleges and Universities	58
Baccalaureate Colleges	12

Note: Percentages may not total to 100 due to rounding.

Table 2. Mean differences in civic learning and democratic engagement by high impact practice participation

	Democratic Awareness		Democratic Participation	
	Effect Size	Sig.	Effect Size	Sig.
Learning community	.31	***	.47	***
Study abroad	.33	***	.30	***
Research w/ faculty	.27	***	.31	***
Senior capstone	.22	***	.14	***
Service learning	.14	***	.31	***

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Note: Two-tailed t-tests.

Table 3. Mixed effects estimates of civic learning and democratic engagement

	Democratic Awareness (N=9,532)						Democratic Participation (N=9,527)					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Est.	Sig.	Est.	Sig.	Est.	Sig.	Est.	Sig.	Est.	Sig.	Est.	Sig.
<i>Fixed Effects</i>												
Race/ethnicity (White)												
Asian or Pacific Islander			-.25	***	-.25	***			.27	***	.26	***
Black or African American			.00		-.01				.19	***	.16	***
Hispanic or Latino			-.11	*	-.12	*			.01		-.01	
Other			-.03		-.04				.10	*	.08	*
Foreign			-.02		-.04				.34	***	.30	***
Adult			.15	***	.17	***			-.04		.00	
Male			.12	***	.14	***			.11	***	.14	***
Transfer			-.09	***	-.04				-.07	**	-.01	
Major Field (Social Science)												
Arts & Humanities			-.10	*	-.08	*			-.14	***	-.11	**
Bio. Sci., Agr., & Nat. Res.			-.20	***	-.17	***			-.13	**	-.09	*
Phy. Sci., Math, & Comp. Sci.			-.33	***	-.29	***			-.35	***	-.29	***
Business			-.16	***	-.12	**			-.21	***	-.14	***
Comm., Media, & Pub. Rel.			.10		.11	*			.02		.04	
Education			-.29	***	-.29	***			-.24	***	-.26	***
Engineering			-.34	***	-.34	***			-.31	***	-.30	***
Health Professions			-.29	***	-.28	***			-.14	**	-.16	***
Social Service Professions			-.07		-.04				.01		.04	
All Other			-.28	***	-.27	***			-.27	***	-.26	***
Grades (Mostly A's)												
Mostly B's			-.08	***	-.04	*			.00		.04	*
Mostly C's or lower			-.25	***	-.16	**			-.10		.00	
Parental Education (Bachelor's)												
Did not finish high school			-.01		-.01				.19	**	.17	**
High school diploma/G.E.D.			-.04		-.03				.05		.06	*
Some college			-.02		-.01				.00		.00	
Associate's degree			-.01		.00				.02		.04	
Master's degree			.05		.04				.06	*	.05	
Doctoral or prof. degree			.16	***	.13	**			.10	**	.06	
Greek member			.17	***	.14	***			.26	***	.22	***
Living on-campus			.15	***	.14	***			.17	***	.15	***
Basic Carnegie Classification (Doctoral)												
Master's			.00		.00				.11	*	.12	*
Baccalaureate			.07		.04				.14		.11	
Carnegie Community Engagement			.01		.00				.02		.00	
Locale (City)												
Suburb			-.08		-.07				-.03		-.02	
Town/Rural			.02		.02				.09		.08	
Residential Character (Nonresidential)												
Primarily residential			-.01		-.01				.03		.01	
Highly residential			-.13	*	-.13	*			-.08		-.08	

Table 2 (continued).

	Democratic Awareness (N=9,532)						Democratic Participation (N=9,527)					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Est.	Sig.	Est.	Sig.	Est.	Sig.	Est.	Sig.	Est.	Sig.	Est.	Sig.
Private			.09		.08			.13	*	.12	*	
UG Enrollment (1,000s)			-.01		.00			.00		.00		
Barron's rating			.07	**	.05	*		.02		.00		
Region (Northeast)												
Midwest			-.12	*	-.11	*		-.14	**	-.14	**	
Southeast			.02		.01			-.07		-.09		
West			.09		.07			-.01		-.06		
Learning community					.23	***				.36	***	
Study abroad					.17	***				.17	***	
Research w/ faculty					.15	***				.21	***	
Senior capstone					.09	***				-.01		
Service learning					.10	***				.22	***	
Constant	.01		-.02		-.31	*	.02		-.14		-.51	
<i>Random Effects</i>												
$\sqrt{\psi}$	.15		.07		.06		.16		.06		.05	
$\sqrt{\theta}$	.99		.97		.95		.98		.96		.93	
$\rho$	.02		.01		.00		.03		.00		.00	

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Note: Reference groups in parentheses.

Table 4. Difference in estimated coefficients of selected high impact practices and service learning

	Democratic Awareness	Democratic Participation
	<i>b</i> diff. Sig.	<i>b</i> diff. Sig.
Learning community	.13 ***	.13 ***
Study abroad	.07 *	-.06
Research w/ faculty	.05	-.02
Senior capstone	-.02	-.24 ***

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

## Appendix A. Graded response model parameter estimates for the civic learning and democratic engagement scales

Item	$\alpha$	$\beta_1$	$\beta_2$	$\beta_3$
<b><i>Democratic Awareness</i></b>				
Informed yourself about local or campus issues	1.60	-2.02	-.06	1.33
Informed yourself about state, national, or global issues	2.99	-1.98	-.37	.69
Discussed local or campus issues with others	1.91	-1.72	-.03	1.24
Discussed state, national, or global issues with others	4.03	-1.60	-.17	.82
<b><i>Democratic Participation</i></b>				
Raised awareness about local or campus issues	3.71	-.29	.72	1.40
Raised awareness about state, national, or global issues	3.04	-.42	.66	1.40
Asked others to address local or campus issues	5.14	-.03	.80	1.40
Asked others to address state, national, or global issues	4.51	-.03	.80	1.44
Organized others to work on local or campus issues	4.40	.24	.89	1.47
Organized others to work on state, national, or global issues	4.62	.32	.97	1.56