

Democracy's Colleges: Expanding Civic Engagement, Volunteering, and National Service

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Background

Community colleges, often referred to as “democracy’s” colleges, offer non-selective admissions and access to college, educating nearly 40% of all undergraduates. The students are more likely to be first-generation/minority and have lower incomes than students enrolling at selective admission colleges. These student demographics are highly correlated with lower civic participation, yet insufficient research exists on community college civic engagement. The study investigates the relationship between community college attendance or credential completion and civic engagement or volunteering outcomes, how opportunities for civic engagement vary by community college type and geography across the United States, how AmeriCorps recruits and places members in community colleges, and how the AmeriCorps stipend and benefits impact student financial aid awards. The study is important as an expansion of higher education institution type in the AmeriCorps recruitment strategy.

Research questions

The study broadly examines community colleges' current and potential contributions to civic engagement, volunteering, and AmeriCorps national service through four questions:

1. What is the relationship between community college attendance/credential attainment, employment outcomes, and civic engagement/volunteering?
2. How does AmeriCorps engage with community colleges in recruitment and placement?
3. How does civic engagement/volunteering vary by community college type and geography?
4. How do AmeriCorps benefits and stipends impact student financial aid awards?



Key Findings

- **This study fills a gap in the literature on community college civic engagement and provides actionable insights for both AmeriCorps and community colleges.**
- **The study found no statistically significant difference in two- and four-year degree graduates in response to the CPS CEV item "I contribute to the community through my work." The workplace may be acting as a proxy for social interaction noted in decline by Putnam in *Bowling Alone*. An additional workplace question is recommended for the next administration of the CPS CEV. The question could be "My workplace supports civic engagement as corporate social responsibility."**
- **AmeriCorps can expand recruitment of members and program sites at community colleges and use the *Guide to AmeriCorps Programs for Community Colleges as an entry point*.**
- **AmeriCorps can use the findings to chart a future research agenda focused on equity and inclusion of students served by community colleges.**

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Research design and data

The study uses a mixed-methods research design to address the four research questions (RQs). RQ1 used a quantitative approach incorporating a multivariate regression model to analyze publicly available data from the 2021 U.S. Census Current Population Survey Civic Engagement and Volunteering Supplement (CPS CEV) dataset to determine the relationship between level of educational attainment/employment type associated with community college credentials (degree, diploma, certificate) and civic life or volunteering outcomes. For RQ2 and RQ4, researchers used qualitative interviewing. For RQ3, researchers constructed a nationwide database of over 1,000 community colleges and conducted a survey. Response data will be analyzed using exploratory factor analysis to develop a typology of community colleges' civic engagement.

What are the potential opportunities to apply the study findings?

This study documented differences in levels of civic engagement across some college/no degree, two-year degree, and four-year degree completion. Researchers found no statistically significant difference between two- and four-year degree completers in response to “I contribute to the community through my work.” This phenomenon deserves additional research as the workplace may be a larger contributor to civic health than previously thought especially in the era of corporate social responsibility. AmeriCorps may add a follow-up question to the CPS CEV to probe how the workplace supports civic engagement. The RQ3 database can assist AmeriCorps in recruitment of community college students to AmeriCorps as well as recruitment of community colleges as program sites. The *Guide to AmeriCorps Programs for Community Colleges* can be used by AmeriCorps recruiters. Lastly, AmeriCorps can use the findings to guide future research priorities to focus equity and inclusion efforts on lower-income, minority, and immigrant populations at community colleges and to plan for recruitment of community colleges as program sites for national service initiatives.