

**Assessing the Impact of Political Engagement Activities on
Students' Levels of Political Interest and Efficacy**

by

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I. Context for Political Engagement

A. Concerns about Civic Education in this Nation

Lack of Interest (16-25 year olds)
Lack of Knowledge (16 –21 year olds)
Increased Cynicism (18-25 year olds)
Increased Feeling of Powerlessness (18 - ?)
**Increased Concern for Individualized Material Gains,
Decreased Concern for General Good**
Increased Volunteerism, No Change in Voting Participation

[Is Democracy in Peril?]
[What, if anything, can colleges/educators do about it?]
[Should colleges/educators do anything about it?]

B. Disciplinary Concerns in Regard to Civic Education

Exclusive purview of political science departments
Form of indoctrination [Horowitz's charge]
Not sufficiently "scientific" [civics v. political science]
Higher education not appropriate place

C. Faculty Concerns in Regard to Civic Education

Contribution to professional goals [tenure and/or promotion]
Too much time for little, if any, reward

D. Challenges in regard to students

Thinking beyond voting and registering to vote
Acting apart from presidential elections
Infusing political engagement into volunteerism

E. Political Engagement Project (PEP) [ADP 400+ to 219]

It is a collaborative project sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the New York Times, and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities that is designed to promote the political engagement of students on campus, particularly first-year students. The desire of the project is to enhance the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that promote political engagement, and to pursue that desire through the curriculum, co-curriculum, and campus-wide activities especially directed at first-year students.

F. Illinois State University's Role in PEP

ISU is one of eight colleges and universities that have agreed to participate in a pilot effort of PEP. ISU was chosen partly because it is recognized to be a leader in the American Democracy Project [ADP], and is anticipated to become a leader in PEP. ISU has created a PEP Task Force, will sponsor attendees to the ADP conference in June to discuss PEP, and has chosen two Carnegie Fellows to facilitate infusing political engagement activities into certain first-year courses [Communications 110 and Individual and Civic Life courses, including CJS 102-Society and Justice, Philosophy 104-The Ideal of Democracy, POL 101-Citizens and Government, and POL-106-U.S. Government and Civic Practices]

II. Infusing Political Engagement in the Curriculum

A. Step 1 [Awareness of the Challenges]

Three different disciplines offering courses.
Different faculty within disciplines.
How to infuse political engagement?
Assessment
Allocation of course time
Linkage to other university programs and initiatives [LinC /
Electoral Voice Initiative]

B. Step 2 [Meeting with Likely Participants]

Discussion of PEP
ISU's role in PEP
Curriculum challenges
General approaches

C. Step 3 [Communication with Actual Participants]

Provide conceptual definition of political engagement
Provide discussion of specific facets of political engagement
[civic skills]
Provide options for infusing political engagement into courses
Provide web sites for further resources

D. Step 4 [Communication with Actual Participants]

Provide details of specific tactics on political engagement
Format / Approach / Outcome
Discussion of survey

E. Implementation

Six classes of four different courses

Two disciplines [criminal justice & political science]

Range in size of class from 30 to 300

Variance in activities

Political campaign journaling

Attending events & speeches

Going to local government functions

Focus on current affairs

Involvement in contemporary justice issues

Survey administered toward start of semester and at end of semester

III. Preliminary Findings [based on survey results]

Students' confidence in having an understanding of government went up

Students' discussion of politics went up

Students' perception of the relevance of an assortment of political issues to their lives went up [deficit-22% to 36% / Social Security Reform-34% to 42%]

Aggregate shift in students' self-identified political orientation [more than 20% increase in liberals and very liberals]

When level of political engagement introduced, those in high political engagement course settings, political orientation did not shift

IV. Future Activities

More administrations of survey

Judge performance assessment project

Infusion into upper level courses

Table 1
Student Political Orientation by Level of Political Engagement:
Pre Survey Fall 2006

		Level of Engagement			Total
		Low Civic Engagement	Medium Civic Engagement	High Civic Engagement	
very liberal	Count	18	41	13	72
	Column%	8.9%	8.0%	10.9%	8.6%
liberal	Count	50	137	44	231
	Column%	24.6%	26.8%	37.0%	27.7%
middle of the road	Count	74	212	34	320
	Column%	36.5%	41.5%	28.6%	38.4%
conservative	Count	50	103	24	177
	Column%	24.6%	20.2%	20.2%	21.2%
very conservative	Count	11	18	3	32
	Column%	5.4%	3.5%	2.5%	3.8%
Total	Count	203	511	119	833

Table 2
Student Political Orientation by Level of Political Engagement:
Post Survey Fall 2006

		Level of engagement			Total
		Low Civic Engagement	Medium Civic Engagement	High Civic Engagement	
Very Liberal	Count	108	31	13	152
	Column%	40.4%	7.8%	11.9%	19.6%
Liberal	Count	121	130	40	291
	Column%	45.3%	32.6%	36.7%	37.5%
Middle of the road	Count	25	152	36	213
	Column%	9.4%	38.1%	33.0%	27.5%
Conservative	Count	6	76	17	99
	Column%	2.2%	19.0%	15.6%	12.8%
Very Conservative	Count	7	10	3	20
	Column%	2.6%	2.5%	2.8%	2.6%
Total	Count	267	399	109	775

Table 3
Student Understanding of Government by Level of Political Engagement:
Pre Survey Fall 2006
Based on Responses to 'I feel that I have a pretty good understanding
of how the political system works.'

		Level of Engagement			Total
		Low Civic Engagement	Medium Civic Engagement	High Civic Engagement	
strongly agree	Count	18	22	18	58
	Column%	8.9%	4.3%	15.1%	7.0%
agree	Count	95	157	47	299
	Column %	46.8%	30.7%	39.5%	35.9%
neither agree or disagree	Count	33	169	25	227
	Column%	16.3%	33.1%	21.0%	27.3%
disagree	Count	45	140	24	209
	Column%	22.2%	27.4%	20.2%	25.1%
strongly disagree	Count	12	22	5	39
	Column%	5.9%	4.3%	4.2%	4.7%
Total	Count	203	511	119	833

Table 4
Student Understanding of Government by Level of Political Engagement:
Post Survey Fall 2006
Based on Responses to 'I feel that I have a pretty good understanding
of how the political system works.'

		Level of engagement			Total
		Low Civic Engagement	Medium Civic Engagement	High Civic Engagement	
Strongly Agree	Count	18	15	18	51
	Column%	6.7%	3.8%	16.5%	6.6%
Agree	Count	142	175	51	368
	Column %	53.2%	43.9%	46.8%	47.5%
Neither Agree or Disagree	Count	71	107	23	201
	Column%	26.6%	26.8%	21.1%	25.9%
Disagree	Count	33	79	13	125
	Column%	12.4%	19.8%	11.9%	16.1%
Strongly Disagree	Count	3	23	4	30
	Column%	1.1%	5.8%	3.7%	3.9%
Total	Count	267	399	109	775

Table 5
Student Amount of Political Discussion by Level of Political Engagement:
Pre Survey Fall 2006
Based on Responses to 'In the last week how often did you discuss current
political events with family and friends?'

		Level of Engagement			Total
		Low Civic Engagement	Medium Civic Engagement	High Civic Engagement	
never	Count	82	218	20	320
	Column%	40.4%	42.7%	16.8%	38.4%
on one or two days	Count	88	243	49	380
	Column%	43.3%	47.6%	41.2%	45.6%
on three to six days	Count	19	31	30	80
	Column%	9.4%	6.1%	25.2%	9.6%
daily	Count	13	19	20	52
	Column%	6.4%	3.7%	16.8%	6.2%
Total	Count	203	511	119	833

Table 6
Student Amount of Political Discussion by Level of Political Engagement:
Post Survey Fall 2006
Based on Responses to 'In the last week how often did you discuss current
political events with family and friends?'

		Level of engagement			Total
		Low Civic Engagement	Medium Civic Engagement	High Civic Engagement	
Never	Count	46	141	19	206
	Column%	17.2%	35.3%	17.3%	26.5%
On One or Two Days	Count	166	219	42	427
	Column%	62.2%	54.8%	38.2%	55.0%
On Three to Six Days	Count	43	25	29	97
	Column%	16.1%	6.3%	26.4%	12.5%
Daily	Count	12	15	20	47
	Column%	4.5%	3.8%	18.2%	6.0%
Total	Count	267	400	110	777