

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

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WORKING COLLEGE STUDENTS POST HIGHEST RATES OF POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

BY EMILY KIRBY

Young people who both study and work are busier than students who do not work. Nevertheless, student-workers report higher levels of interest in politics, newspaper reading, talking politics with friends, engaging or practicing civic skills, having been asked to vote, making their views known, and political participation. Many student-workers appear to be pursuing bachelor's degrees, but they are also more engaged, more open to politics, and less likely to feel dissuaded by potential barriers to participation than their peers who are attending college full-time. Whether they work or not, students between the ages of 19 and 23 tend to be more politically engaged than their peers who are out of school and college altogether.

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These are among the results of a new CIRCLE-sponsored telephone survey of 1,000 youth between the ages of 19 and 23, conducted and analyzed by Sharon Jarvis, Lisa Montoya, and Emily Mulvoy of the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Participation, University of Texas-Austin.

ENGAGING NON-COLLEGE YOUTH: IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING CIVIC SKILLS THROUGH K-12 EDUCATION

Even though they are rarely studied, there are more non-college youth than college students in the United States. Data show that roughly one-fourth of Americans do not enroll in formal schooling after obtaining a high school diploma. Politicians and policy makers speak mainly of sending more people to college, but a steady third of adults 25 and older have only finished high school. Furthermore, of those young people who are currently enrolled in an educational institution, the majority also work. Thus, it is important to study working youth if we hope to increase political and civic participation.

Consistent with previous studies, this new poll found that non-college youth in the 19 to 23 age range report lower levels of political socialization and interest than college students, as well as fewer civic skills, group memberships and mobilization opportunities.

Non-college youth are less likely to engage in a set of political acts than their college attending peers. However, the data also reveal some opportunities. Non-college youth are more likely to participate if they have been raised in families that discuss politics and if they are themselves interested in politics. Those who belong to groups and express an interest in politics may be ripe for mobilization, since they already have a moderate amount of the social connections that motivate them to politics through group memberships. They possess and use the skills that can be helpful in politics, and they seem to possess the basic psychological antecedents that predispose people to participation in politics.

For non-college young people, the development of specific skills (e.g., writing letters, making decisions in meetings, chairing meetings and giving speeches) seems to promote participation. Indeed, each additional skill cultivated by a young worker appears to result in a small but significant increase in political participation—which is not true of college students in the same age range. Thus, the study supports the need to teach civic skills before people leave K-12 schools.

COLLEGE STUDENT WORKERS MORE LIKELY TO BE CIVICALLY ENGAGED THAN OTHER COLLEGE STUDENTS

Jarvis, Montoya, and Mulvoy also find interesting and positive connections between working and attending school and political activity. "Those young people who play the dual role of student and worker are, overall, more politically engaged. They are more likely to talk about politics, join political groups, and be asked to vote," Jarvis noted. This outcome is unexpected given the research that indicates that full-time students tend to be raised in households that offer more discussions about political life and where parents are more likely to be civically active. "One explanation could be that busy and involved parents raise busy and involved children," explains Jarvis. "Even though the full-time students had slightly richer political socialization experiences, student-workers may have received cues from their parents about being engaged, involved and working hard."


The project, begun in October 2003, conducted a phone survey of 1,012 young adults between the ages of 19 and 23 from three states to learn more about the political resources (education and civic skills), psychological predispositions (political socialization and political interest), social connections (personal relationships and

organizational memberships), political opportunities (mobilization efforts), schooling, work experiences, and political activity of these young people.

Two reports have emerged from the survey. The first divided the sample into two groups: "workers" (young people who claimed that they were not currently attending school and had their highest level of education as something less than a bachelor's degree) and "students" (young people who were seeking a bachelor's degree as well as those who had completed bachelor's degrees and were at the time of the survey pursuing advanced degrees). The full report, "CIRCLE Working Paper 36: The Political Participation of Working Youth and College Students," can be downloaded from www.civicyouth.org.

In the second report, Jarvis, Montoya and Mulvoy segmented their

youth respondents in a novel way, examining three categories: "students," "workers," and "student-workers." In this project, respondents were coded as "students" if they were not currently employed and if they were currently attending any educational institution (whether it was a two or four year college, or a certificate program); "workers," if they were not currently enrolled in any type of educational institution and if they had not completed a bachelor's degree; and "student-workers," if they were currently enrolled in any type of educational institution and were currently employed.

In general, student-workers proved more engaged than students who are not working. The report, entitled "CIRCLE Working Paper 37: The Political Participation of College Students, Working-Students and Working Youth," discusses the results in detail and can be downloaded from www.civicyouth.org. 

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From the outside, they would be identified as among the most highly

civic young people in the community, and indeed in many respects they are. But their motives are also complex, linked to both resume padding and social position.

4. A fourth type, religious young people, varied in their motives, some engaging in civic activity out of an explicit sense of religious duty, either to God or to their church community. For others, although religious motives and institutions were a significant part of the background and language, civic and community activity seemed to be linked to resume padding motives.
5. Another type the researchers identified were working- and lower-class young people, often minorities, that they encountered in community based-clubs, and neighborhood after-school centers. These young people had strong community orientations that seemed go beyond immediate self-interest to an expressed interest in "helping the community" and, specifically, helping the younger children, their brothers and sisters, and neighborhood children, to build a better life.
6. A subset of the sample were politically engaged youth, with explicitly anti-establishment orientations, that sometimes were ideological, but often seemed visceral, linked to an awareness of the unfairness of their life situation. Although the stereotype of radical youth may be

those who are from more privileged, middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds, many were from working and lower-middle-class families.

7. Finally, there was a loose type that Friedland and Morimoto call cultural rebels, with a loose cultural anti-authoritarianism that expressed itself in cultural identification with movements like hip-hop, or certain variants. Both motives and forms of engagement are diffuse.

TRANSMITTING CIVIC AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

The report concludes that the changing motivations behind volunteering could have implications for future civic capital. Dr. Friedland notes, "If the normative connections to community that may have characterized civic engagement in the past are, indeed, becoming hollowed out in a middle-class under enormous pressure to retain its position, the transmission of social and civic capital across generations may be more precarious than survey data alone indicate" The full report, entitled "CIRCLE Working Paper 40: The Changing Lifeview of Young People: Risk, Resume-Padding, and Civic Engagement," can be downloaded from www.civicyouth.org. 