

## RESEARCH ROUNDUP

**AFRICAN AMERICAN INNER-CITY TEENS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Research by Michelle Charles explores how young, inner-city African American youth define “civic engagement” and its relationship to mainstream civic institutions and civic life. The author argues that for the African American community the concept of “giving back to community” is an important component of civic engagement that has not been formally recognized. Further, she offers recommendations for youth-serving civic engagement professionals and researchers working with inner-city African American teenagers.

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Complete findings are contained in “CIRCLE Working Paper 38: Giving Back to the Community: African American Inner-City Teens and Civic Engagement,” which can be downloaded from CIRCLE’s Web site at [http://www.civicyouth.org/research/areas/race\\_gender.htm](http://www.civicyouth.org/research/areas/race_gender.htm).

The ethnographic study is based on interviews with 15-to-19 year-old African Americans in the most inner-city neighborhoods of West and North Philadelphia. In addition, the author interviewed a variety of local residents who work with young people, including professionals from “at-risk” youth-serving civic engagement organizations, community activists, and randomly selected African American adults. Both focus groups and individual interviews were used to gather the data.

**GIVING BACK TO THE COMMUNITY: A TYPE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

The study attempts to define the inner-city African Americans’ version of “civic engagement” and its relationship to mainstream civic institutions and civic life. The research begins by comparing the notion of “giving back to the community” with “civic engagement.” According to Ms. Charles, “As a Black American in my community life as well as in my life as a civic engagement professional, I have frequently heard African Americans in particular liberally use the phrase ‘giving back to the community’ to express efforts at strengthening and sustaining civic life in Black communities. From the contexts of my conversations over the years, there could be no doubt that the phrase intimated for African Americans the work of being involved and invested in the development of fellow citizens

and community environments for the purposes of contributing to and reaping the benefits of the collective functions of society.”

Her interviews revealed that the phrase “giving back to the community” is a distinctly adult term steeped in oral tradition, faith, and the success of individuals as well as the group. While young people are aware of the term, they do not fully understand the many meanings of the term. Ms. Charles notes, “The youth still have a life-long way to go in fully understanding the idea of ‘giving back to the community’ for themselves, and the adults of the African American community have not come to the point of recognizing their historical storehouse of knowledge for passing on to the youth for prosperity.”

In order to help young people understand and appreciate the concept of “giving back to the community,” Ms. Charles suggests that civic engagement organizations formally recognize the term “giving back to the community” as a form of civic engagement. This form would be similar to another type of civic engagement, service-learning, but it would differ in that it would place a distinct focus on the real life experiences of the service giver. “Giving back to the community” would differ from service-learning in that it would offer service opportunities for young, inner-city African Americans that are directly relevant to their lives. For example, service projects would be designed to focus on social problems that are unique to the inner-city African American population. According to the author, “As the organizational interviewees indicated, these youth are scarcely finding program activities that are seriously relevant to their lives.”

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**IMPROVING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS FOR INNER-CITY YOUTH**

Based on her research, Ms. Charles offers recommendations on how youth serving organizations and researchers can incorporate “giving back to the community” into their practice and research.

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Following are a few of the recommendations.

1. *Community adults are the gatekeepers of authentic youth engagement.* Because of the cultural norm of deferring to a generational hierarchy that exists within the African American community—one shared by both the adults and the youth alike—professionals in civic engagement organizations must actively work to seek out and maintain relationships with the various adult community members who are connected to the “at-risk” youth they seek to assist. They should not attempt to seek out long-term relationships with the youth only. People in these often volatile neighborhood environments demand adherence to a code of respect from outsiders, and approaching these community members respectfully as the rightful gatekeepers to the children of the community is a sign of cultural sensitivity that will likely be rewarded by trust and access.

The level of sustained trust needed for making progress in these inner-city communities can only be built through prolonged personal contact with the community’s decision-making adults. These activists are out working in the community (versus in an office) throughout the day and night—in accordance with the population’s schedule—so researchers should limit their use of voicemail and email when attempting to work with this population. Researchers must go out and meet people where they “are”—on the street, in the various sites throughout the community, at various community events—with a full knowledge that this initial process of relationship-building will be at least a month long.

2. *Recruit through faith-based organizations.* The level of civic mapping involved in recruiting the most marginalized inner-city youth for a formal program is immensely labor intensive. For efficiency’s sake, civic engagement professionals should focus on tapping faith-based groups’ program administrators, secretaries, program associates and program volunteers first and foremost when seeking to recruit non-academically inclined “at-risk” youth.
3. *Cultural differences can impede civic engagement work.* Some interviewees said that they observed African

American, inner-city students “thriving in their mentoring roles with younger children,” while White suburban students were observed as thriving in “project planning and organizing roles.” The African American students were said not to be as accomplished at such planning, organizing and follow-through activities. Perhaps the urban students objected to certain types of projects (such as “clean-ups”) as opposed to projects that enrich human capital, such “mentoring”—activities that are more frequently observed of neighborhood adults who are “giving back to the community.” Typical service projects may seem cosmetic to these youth and they may engage in a “silent protest” when asked to participate.

Along with expanding the list of legitimately considered types of civic engagement headings and corresponding actions to include “giving back to the community,” incorporating a degree of staff diversity training into organizational programming can help address the repeated communications breakdowns that occur between community members and program professionals. These breakdowns lessen the potentially wide-ranging impact of good, well-intentioned programs. ■

#### SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS LESS APPRECIATIVE OF THE FIRST AMENDMENT THAN STUDENTS IN URBAN AND RURAL AREAS

Suburban high school students are less appreciative of the First Amendment than their counterparts in urban and rural areas, according to recent analysis of a national survey of 112,000 students sponsored by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. The study, conducted by researchers at the University of Connecticut and released earlier this year, shows that educators are not giving high school students an appreciation of free speech and free press.

For more information, visit <http://firstamendment.jideas.org/index.html>.