



Bridging Civic Engagement
and Mental Health:
Proceedings from the National
Symposium for Civic Engagement and
Mental Health

March 16-17, 2008
University of Michigan

The symposium is part of
Bringing Theory to Practice
An independent project funded by the Charles Engelhard
Foundation

In partnership with the
Association of American Colleges and Universities



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Suggested citation:

Pasque, P. A. (2008). *Bridging Civic Engagement and Mental Health: Proceedings from the National Symposium for Civic Engagement and Mental Health*. Washington DC: Charles Engelhard Foundation and Association of American Colleges and Universities.

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Introduction

The **National Symposium for Civic Engagement and Mental Health** is a part of Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP), an independent project funded by the Charles Engelhard Foundation in partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Bringing theory to practice is a project that seeks to advance engaged student learning and determine how it might improve the quality of students' education, development, health, and commitment to civic engagement. The BTtoP project,

Explores and promotes how engaged forms of learning requiring active student involvement and reflection contribute to the resiliency and health of students. The Project encourages faculty and academic leadership to strengthen an essential focus on learning, and thereby to strengthen the health, as well as the individual and civic development of today's college students. (Bringing Theory to Practice, 2008)

The purpose of the National Symposium for Civic Engagement and Mental Health furthered the BTtoP mission by exploring the relationships between "civic engagement" and the "mental health and well-being" of "college students" and other "young people." Thirteen scholars involved in various aspects of research and practice regarding civic engagement and/or mental health gathered to discuss the complexities of these relationships.

The symposium began with an initial statement written by Barry Checkoway, Professor of Social Work at the University of Michigan and Don Harward, the Director of Bringing Theory to Practice.

We assume that if students "participate in the community" or "engage in democracy," that they and their community will be healthier. Because terms are unclear and research is sparse, we expect that bringing together a small group of specialists will help clarify concepts, generate new ideas, and visualize possibilities.

In order to facilitate a focus on the bridge between civic engagement and mental health, participants were provided with an annotated bibliography of research on civic engagement and/or mental health and well-being, two journal articles, one research report, and biographies of the participants. The following monograph is a synthesis of the symposium proceedings.

It is important to note that in the spirit of true dialogue and deliberation (National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation, 2008), the participants engaged in a process where we shared research and information, each adding to the collective knowledge and thinking of the large group. In this sense, the symposium was a collaborative process where each participant was an important contributor to the whole of the symposium. This monograph provides a summary of these contributions, and undoubtedly, there are topics of conversation not captured in this brief synthesis. Continued dialogue, research, and practice regarding the synergy between civic engagement and mental health are encouraged.

Definitions of Civic Engagement & Mental Health

Guiding questions for this session: What is meant by “exploring the relationship between “civic engagement” and the “mental health and well-being” of “college students” and other young people?

Civic Engagement

Barry Checkoway unpacked definitions of civic engagement and related topics in order to initiate an understanding of the complexities of the terms and Connie Flanagan added to these definitions. Barry Checkoway stated that “civic engagement is a process where people join together to conduct public work.” Together, they further operationalized various terms as shared below:

Civic Engagement – Civic engagement includes community participation, political activism, consciousness raising, and mobilization. Civic engagement may be conducted through helping the homeless, community organizing, changing one’s home, or changing the system.

Volunteering – Volunteerism is work for others without payment. As with the definitions of civic engagement and community service, volunteering may often include making social connections.

Community Service – Community service is direct service at a community level where the primary emphasis is on the service provided (as opposed to making change on a community or system level). The service is not necessarily provided for free as people may be paid a stipend or receive course credit for their work.

Service-Learning – Service-learning is to serve the community and learn from this intentional pedagogy both in- and out-of-the-classroom.

Social Responsibility – Social responsibility is to make decisions for action based on one’s responsibility to others.

Mental Health and Well-Being

Daniel Eisenberg defined the mental health problem among college students in the US. He stated that when counseling center directors were surveyed, 90% reported an increase in 1) the severity of problems of college students and 2) the total number of problems of college students. In addition, 20% of students in a random sample indicated that they suffered from depression and/or mental health issues. Further, out of 1,500 suicide attempts on college campuses per year, 1,000 students had never visited a college counseling center.

Each participant shared his/her own interest in the topics of civic engagement and/or mental health and well-being as related to the elderly, students, or youth.

This introductory session ended with questions to be discussed further during the symposium. For example, what are the negative consequences for the 20% of college students that are depressed? Are there interventions that may be helpful for students? Could civic engagement be an intervention for students with depression (knowing that civic engagement may not necessarily be an option for students who are clinically depressed)? Civic engagement for what? By whom? What do we mean by disengagement? What are the “skeptical” questions that need to be answered?

*“Civic engagement is
a process where
people join together
to conduct public
work.”*

~ Barry Checkoway ~

Current Information: What Do We Know?

Guiding questions for this session: Based on your own experience or expertise, what do you yourself know – scientifically or anecdotally – about the relationship of civic engagement and mental health?

What scientific knowledge is available and what might be learned from it?

Are there general propositions on which you think there is relative agreement and unresolved questions which remain for future work?

Penny Pasque synthesized the outcomes from the civic engagement and/or mental health literature. From a review of the literature, we know that volunteer work in people over 65 decreases depression, anxiety, and mortality, as well as increases happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, a sense of control over life, and physical health (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988; Sabin, 1993; Musick & Wilson, 2003; Oman, Thoresen, McMahon, 1996; Thoits, 1983; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). In one study, it was found that volunteer work does not decrease depression in college age students (Musick & Wilson, 2003).

Numerous research studies on civic engagement, community service and/or service-learning with college students have found that it increases academic success, career direction and self-esteem, provides a positive connection with others, and serves as an important factor in social identity development (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Kerrigan, in press; Galura, Pasque, Schoem & Howard, 2004; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993). Studies on civic engagement and/or service-learning with high school youth or college students have found that it increases civic outcomes, GPA, intellectual engagement, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and the ability to make change in communities or organizations (Cheadle, Wagner, Anderman, Walls, McBride, & Bell, 1998; Cheadle, Wagner, Walls, Diehr, Bell, & Anderman, 2001; Finlay, Flanagan, & Black, 2007; Maton, 1990; Markus, Howard, & King, 1993; Yates & Youniss, 1996). Further, if young people’s voices are heard, they regenerate organizations and contribute to social change (Flannigan, Syversten, & Wray-Lake, 2003).

*“We need to capture
the ripple effects of
this work.”*

~ Michele Kelley ~

Daniel Eisenberg urged that the relationship between mental health and civic engagement be explored through quantitative measures, which requires a randomized study. Ashley Finley followed up on this research emphasis and asked the group to consider, “How much effect is enough?” “Is there a plateau?” In addition, she encouraged any future study to disaggregate by an ecological model or “levels” of civic engagement on the campus level, community level and national level. In addition, measurements across gender difference are

imperative as women attempt suicide more often however, men succeed more often.

John Wilson continued to further operationalize measurements of civic engagement vs. volunteering. He articulated a definition of volunteering from his book, *Volunteers: A Social Profile* (2007), that includes a continuum of “informal helping” (private, individual) and “formal helping” (public, political). He encouraged the group to clarify a realist definition of volunteering vs. a constructivist definition of volunteering. In addition, attention to the number of organizations (diversity), amount of time (intensity) and time across years (consistency) is needed.

Michele Kelley encouraged the use of indigenous theories when defining volunteering because questions such as, “what am I doing?” and “why am I doing it for my own community” are relevant to the discussion.

The institutional role was identified as important in the context of actualizing a bridge between civic engagement and mental health. It was noted that many institutions feel pressure to depoliticize civic engagement and political action in order to seem “objective” in the face of criticism. Participants also noted that if colleges and universities decouple politics from civic engagement, then they will not prepare students to deal with politics and become sophisticated political thinkers.

The session ended with questions about how to address the quantitative (variables) and qualitative (meaning making, motivation) definitions of civic engagement. The group also asked, what are the avenues for people in disadvantaged communities to be heard on this topic? The voices of some community members are often silenced. In addition, does college attendance (and going away to college) foster engagement and mental health? Does being on a college campus help engaged difference?

Civic Engagement as an Intervention

Guiding questions for this session: What would you think about the recommendation of civic engagement as a form of mental health promotion, prevention, or limited intervention for mental health problems?

Danny Silverman explained that civic engagement will not cure clinical depression, so he re-framed the guiding question about civic engagement as an intervention to specifically address “preventing” depression or “curbing” alcohol use. He explained the idea of flourishing vs. languishing as written about by Corey Keyes (2005). Flourishing is a state of positive social well-being measured across 13 dimensions. A person may have a mental illness and still flourish, or not have a mental illness and be in the languishing state. This measurement, or a form of it, could be used across institutions in a pre- and post- civic engagement research study. Barry Checkoway noted that this is a measure of the individual and that a measurement of the individual as a member of a group or community would still be needed. Questions could be added to a questionnaire for example, “Do you engage with others in addressing social issues?” “Do you feel as though you could address oppression in society?” “Do you feel that you can create a more socially just world?”

Jim Youniss described the intervention between the town and gown as being about identities; the individual student (with various social identities around race, class, gender, etc.), in society (with various identities), and the university (with various identities such as public, private, large, small, secular, religious, land grant, etc.).

The discussion focused on, “what are the college outcomes and how do we measure them?” An ecological model that measures changes in the individual, campus, local and national community may be needed. In this case, how do we measure “civic health” or individual *and* civically engaged flourishing?

Shawn Ginwright asked the group to define, “What constitutes engagement?” For example, are we including political action such as Russell Simmon’s Hip Hop Summit Action Network (Hip Hop Summit Action Network, 2007)? Are we inclusive of engagement as defined by all diverse communities? Ashley Finley followed up on this line of inquiry and asked the group to be sensitive about how we frame the orienting questions. More specifically she asked, “What are the core elements of civic engagement and how do we measure this with today’s technologically savvy and diverse student?” Connie Flanagan furthered that institutions and researchers have a responsibility to reach out and hear directly from students about how they have worked to make change and become civically engaged.

“I don’t see civic engagement as an intervention. I see the college experience as an intervention and somewhere in there [the students’ college experience] is civic engagement.”
~ Jim Youniss ~

Civic Engagement, Mental Health, & Social Justice

Guiding questions for this session: What happens when we view civic engagement and mental health through a social justice and diversity learning lens? How does it affect this work as a field of practice or subject of study?

In areas which are simultaneously becoming more segregated and more diverse, what are some strategies for thinking about civic engagement, mental health, and social justice? What are some advanced ideas for thinking about civic engagement and mental health in a diverse democracy?

Shawn Ginwright framed the discussion by offering two assumptions: 1) civic engagement is a process to produce an outcome for the common good and 2) we fundamentally live in an unequal society. These assumptions lead to ways to make change via institutional means (i.e. voting, legal systems, and other means that are blocked to disenfranchised people) and non-institutional means (i.e. protests, collective mobilization). He furthered three different concepts based on these assumptions as ways to make change. First, power can be exercised through institutional or non-institutional means. Second is the concept of justice; we live in

*“Anger is a passionate
emotion when you
realize there
is injustice.”*

~ Connie Flanagan ~

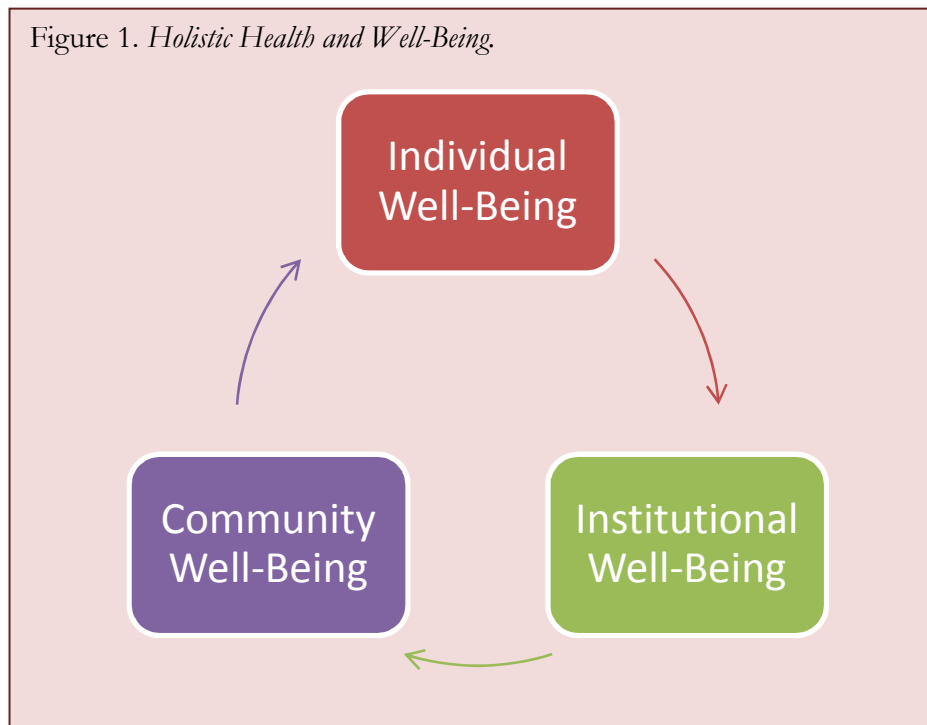
an unequal society and we can change it. Third, social equality argues for an equitable distribution of opportunities and resources.

Shawn Ginwright went on to explain that negative social capital has consequences including “social trauma,” one focus of his research. Civic organizations can play a role in addressing social trauma. In addition, civic organizations operate on a continuum from “prevention” (including survival) through “active mobilization” (including social change).

Connie Flanagan added that there is an intergenerational conversation that needs to take place in relation to the connections between civic engagement, mental health, and social justice. More specifically, there is mobilization going on throughout the US with the immigration movement, hip hop and spoken-word communities, and numerous communities around various social identities and political perspectives. Our surveys are not tapping into the mobilization strategies of these social movements.

Michele Kelley addressed the connections between civic engagement, mental health and social justice issues in relation to service in students’ own communities with indigenous leaders where activism and resistance are distinct from volunteering. She mentioned one scholar’s work on naturalistic inquiry where empirically supported intervention (ESI) is separate from community supported intervention (CSI) and that research may be an activist type of intervention. In order to conduct research that focuses on the synergy between civic engagement, mental health and social justice, we need to stretch our paradigms.

The large group discussion focused on redefining the research questions so we are measuring the correct attributes between civic engagement, mental health, and social justice. A model for research was discussed by a number of participants and the figure form is offered in Figure 1: *Holistic Health and Well-Being*. Research on volunteering and/or mental health has typically been conducted at the “individual well-being” level. In addition, there is some research on civic engagement in communities that focuses on the community level. In this model, individual well-being is connected to the larger environments of the institution and community. Further, if an institution or community is not healthy, this will negatively impact the entire ecological model.



The group furthered that democracy is a contested domain and there are a number of different underlying logics that one could use to further research and practice on civic engagement, mental health and social justice. As related to the interconnections of this model, Shawn Ginwright pointed out that achieving shared power and equality creates a healthy community and Michele Kelley talked about the negative consequences of being an oppressor.

Barry Checkoway wrapped up the conversation by defining that dilemmas exist when two things are true, but they cannot be bridged. The connections between civic engagement and mental health are not such a dilemma.

Building a Field

Guiding questions for this session: If we were to advance this work as a field of practice or subject of study, what would it be?

As a way to stimulate this work, what difference would it make to have a synthesis of the literature, or a special journal issue, or a book, or a demonstration project?

Who are some of the people that should be involved in moving this work forward?

Shawn Ginwright shared that there are three things needed in order to build a field. First, an infrastructure is needed such as national associations, products, and support services. Next, products that are connected to practice are needed; a set of tools. Finally, resources are needed. This includes philanthropic support and funding, institutional resources, and national resources.

Connie Flanagan shared that there is a larger conversation happening across the nation in national associations. For example, ASCU, NASULGC, Campus Compact and others are talking about this issue. How can we learn from these other organizations and connect with them? Also, what can we learn from practice that will enhance theory?

The group went on to discuss the various connections between groups that may enhance future Bringing Theory to Practice efforts. They included:

- Association of State Colleges and Universities (ASCU).
- National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC).
- Johnson Foundation, Wingspread Conference Series – a follow-up gathering at Wingspread, or a similar setting could be held in order to bring a larger group of people together to further the bridge between civic engagement and mental health.
- Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) – At a recent event, Barbara Schneider spoke about civic engagement in terms of jobs. In addition, there is a civic engagement group in AACU.
- Spellings Commission has driven much of this conversation in terms of the metrics of success and accountability.
- The Carnegie Commission has a new category of “Community Engagement” that is encouraging campus communities to become more engaged (or to intentionally acknowledge the current and varied ways in which campuses are engaging with community partners).
- College Outcomes Project measures various outcomes.
- American Educational Research Association (AERA) – the 2008 conference is entitled, *Research on Schools, Neighborhoods, and Communities: Toward Civic Responsibility*.
- Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE).
- Kettering Foundation.

- The Corella & Bertram F. Bonner Foundation.
- Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation.
- The Spencer Foundation.
- Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing.
- The Justin W. Jennings Foundation.
- William T. Grant Foundation
- Connect with larger foundations in the mental health area in order to leverage foundation support.

In addition, the group discussed connecting with various youth and student groups, understanding that Bringing Theory to Practice is about bringing in the students who are not as engaged. These student groups included:

- United Students Against Sweatshops (national headquarters at Harvard).
- Anti-Nike.
- Student union organizations.
- Students for Social Action.
- Bringing Theory to Practice student leader's conference.
- Training the trainers programs at colleges and youth training groups.
- Research Collaborative on Youth Activism.

Shawn Ginwright asked the group to think through researcher – participant issues of voyeurism as future research and collaborations are designed. Mutually beneficial studies that may be collaborative in design between the researchers and community members should be a priority.

Barry Checkoway mentioned a retrieval conference where the 60 grantees from Bringing Theory to Practice could come together to share what they are doing and take additional information back to their home campuses and communities.

Ashley Finley suggested a cost study analysis as a potential next step to measure healthy college environments. For example, do we have the resources (i.e. funding, buildings, and staff) for youth and college students to come together in the / with the community?

What have we learned? What are the next steps?

Guiding questions for this session: What have we learned? What are the priorities? What are the next steps?

You will have a chance to indicate what you plan to do upon returning home. Is there something on which you'd like to work?

Danny Silverman mentioned that the “flourishing” concept seems to resonate with people. The current scale may not be exactly what is needed in this case, but it is useful as a starting point. He also mentioned that there are questions about volunteering on the current College Outcomes Project (and on the CIRP national questionnaire for college students through the Higher Education Research Institute [HERI] at UCLA) that may be useful. It may be important to look at behavior as opposed to perceptions as a predictor of mental health.

Connie Flanagan asked the question – what is the role of adults on campus to foster civic engagement? Are there models of how faculty and administrators are doing this across campus in nursing, political science, education, social work, etc.? What is the critical role of adults on campus?

Shawn Ginwright talked about the connections between social equality and social health. What is the relationship between these two? What are the strategies to get youth to college? Once young people are in college, are there “spaces” for this dialogue that help toward retention?

Michele Kelley encouraged us to consider pipeline programs where faculty are currently working with youth from high school to college.

Ashley Finley articulated that the unit of analysis is key as these issues are framed. In addition, “health” may be defined differently by different types of diverse students (across race, gender, religion, etc). Further, “health” may be defined differently when the unit of analysis is a college or university environment.

“Civic engagement cannot be defined by only middle-class definitions.”

~ Connie Flanagan ~

Daniel Eisenberg mentioned that mental health is important in its own right; however, it is also connected to other issues such as retention, graduation and income. The same is true for civic engagement. John Wilson thought we should define civic engagement and mental health as constructs as this would be useful for clarity in future research studies.

Barry Checkoway urged for a paradigmatic change in terms of how we link civic engagement and mental health and well-being. What would be useful would be to frame the literature on young people, adults working with them, and mental health and well-being would be useful.

In Summation

Closing comments for the **National Symposium for Civic Engagement and Mental Health** were offered by Michele Kelley and Jim Youniss.

Michele Kelley reminded the group that we each bring a different set of paradigms to the conversation about the synergy between civic engagement and mental health and well-being. She urged participants to focus on the positive impacts of this synergy and not simply the problems. Methodological issues, she furthered, are paramount to this discussions. Administering surveys and capturing the voices and choices of youth are each important as we further understandings of the complexities of these issues. She reiterated that we need to focus on the ripple effects of the ecological model for future research: The individual, relational, and social effects of civic engagement with and for youth need to be considered.

Jim Youniss focused on the numerous bridges between civic engagement and mental health that we had discussed during the symposium. First, research needs to consider the individual, the individual in relationship to others, and the individual in relationship to community/society. Second, there is a distinction between volunteering vs. volunteering as political action. Third is the concept of justice: A robust democracy is a healthy democracy. Fourth, he reiterated the methodological question of clearly defining an issue prior to measuring it. Flourishing is one such measure. Fifth, reforming the campus environment to be ripe for a bridge between civic engagement and mental health is crucial. Sixth, knowing ones' self in relation to others may be helpful in terms of civic engagement. Finally, he noted that the group talked about civic engagement more than we discussed mental health and well-being. As dialogue and research moves forward, there must be a focus on the bridges between civic engagement and mental health and well-being.

*Civic engagement is a
process to produce an
outcome for the
common good.*

~ Shawn Ginwright ~

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