



THE CENTER FOR INFORMATION & RESEARCH ON CIVIC LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT
www.civicyouth.org

September 2009

CIRCLE Working Paper #67

**Making Educational Progress: Links to Civic Engagement
During the Transition to Adulthood**

Andrea Finlay* & Connie Flanagan

*akf134@psu.edu

Penn State University

Education beyond high school is generally considered important for access to good jobs. Education is also a route to civic incorporation; people with more years of education tend to be more engaged in community affairs. This working paper looks at the educational progress over four years of a national sample of young adults and the relationship between educational progress and four forms of civic engagement (voting, volunteering, civic media use, and motivation to serve society). Educational progress refers to those young adults who either had achieved a 4-year college degree at the beginning of the study or who achieved any increase in education during the course of the study. The transition to adulthood, the period between late adolescence and the achievement of adult independence, has become increasingly protracted as markers of adulthood (completing education, full time work, and parenting) occur at later ages for more recent generations of young people. This extended transition offers opportunities for civic and educational exploration and engagement; however, such opportunities are less available for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Many of the so-called “risk factors” that impede educational progress are well known. For example, youth from lower income families have fewer financial resources and are also less likely to have adult mentors available to encourage and advise them about educational options after high school. We looked at factors that may impede educational progress in young adulthood, including lower family income, early parenthood, or marital dissolution. The more unique aspect of this working paper is whether the educational progress of youth from less advantaged families is linked to their civic involvement and motivation.

Methodology

The data are drawn from a longitudinal study of young adults with an interest in community service. Originally, the data were collected as part of an evaluation of AmeriCorps programs; the young adult respondents either had participated in AmeriCorps¹ State and National programs, or were comparison group individuals who had not participated but had investigated the program. Respondents are drawn from a nationally representative sample of over 1,700 full-time Corps members who participated in AmeriCorps and approximately 1,500 comparison respondents. The study was designed to be representative of all full-time first-year AmeriCorps members. Details of the larger AmeriCorps study are summarized in reports prepared for the Corporation for National and Community Service (2004; 2008).

In this data set, comparison group members were individuals who demonstrated an interest in AmeriCorps by calling to get information about the program. However, they never actually applied to the program. Throughout this report, we use the following terms: *respondent* refers to anyone who answered the surveys (AmeriCorps members, as well as comparison group members); *Corps members* refers to respondents who were in AmeriCorps and *comparison group* refers to respondents who did not join the Corps.²

Both Corps members and comparison group members were followed from Summer/Fall 1999 through the next eight years during which time a total of four waves of data were

¹ AmeriCorps is a national service program comprised of community-based service programs open to all Americans over the age of 16. While enrolled in AmeriCorps, participants receive a small living stipend and at completion of a year of service receive an educational award that can be used for vocational training or higher education.

² All AmeriCorps and comparison group members were combined in analyses.

collected. All surveys were conducted over the phone. The first survey (Wave 1) was conducted in the Summer/Fall 1999. A second survey (Wave 2) was conducted 1-year after baseline. Wave 3 was collected 4 years after baseline, and Wave 4 was collected 8 years after baseline. Participants were surveyed about their attitudes and behaviors in the domains of civic engagement, life skills, education, and employment. For the purposes of this working paper, a select sample of respondents was utilized, i.e., those who were between the ages of 16 and 30 at the beginning of the study and who reported family income at baseline (N = 1,666). All of the measures in the present study are based on respondents' self-assessment. Data analyses for the study reported in this working paper are drawn from Wave 1 (also referred to as baseline) and Wave 3 (4 years later). It is important to note that this working paper is NOT an evaluation of AmeriCorps. Rather, we look at the educational progress and civic engagement of all of the respondents, whether they were in AmeriCorps programs or not.

Demographics of the full sample

Based on the respondents' reports at Wave 1, 74% of the sample was female, 88% were single, and 17% were parents. We determined each respondent's financial resources based on reports of his/her family's annual family income in the year prior to Wave 1. These responses were coded such that individuals whose families earned \$40,000 or less in that year were coded as having fewer financial resources and those whose families earned more than \$40,000 were coded as having greater financial resources. A cutoff of \$40,000 was chosen for two reasons. First, this cutoff aligned with the national median income in 1999 which was \$40,816 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). (\$41,000 could not be chosen due to the response categories presented to respondents). Second, we did not choose to define financial hardship based on the poverty level because that cutoff would have radically reduced the numbers of youth in this category. Furthermore, insofar as the costs of post-secondary education are rising faster than inflation and Pell grants are covering less of the costs of college, families who earn less than median income are hard pressed to afford their daughter or son's education.

Based on this coding, at baseline 1,002 of respondents had fewer financial resources (60%) and 664 (40%) had greater financial resources. Respondents were asked about their race and ethnicity and were coded into seven categories. The sample was comprised of 14.1% Hispanic, 4.7% Multiracial, 1.6% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 4.0% Asian, 21.4% Black/African American, 0.8% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 53.4% White. The percentage of respondents of each ethnicity grouped by those with fewer and with greater financial resources is displayed in Figure 1.

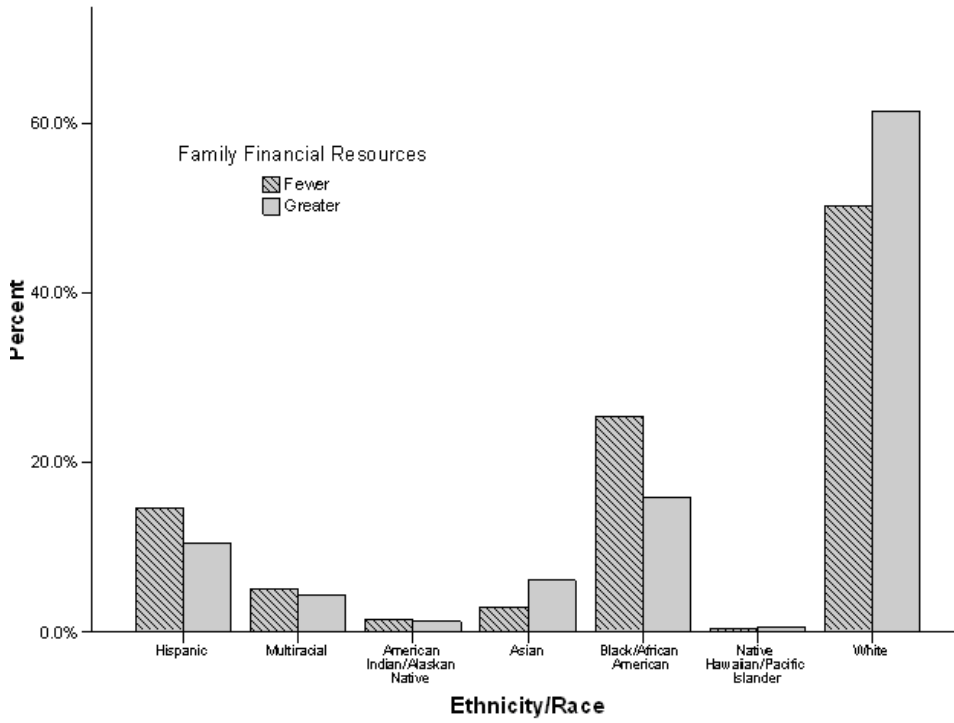


Figure 1. Percentage of each racial/ethnic group whose families were above or below median income at Wave 1.

As seen here, there was a relationship between race/ethnicity and family income: African Americans, Hispanics, and those respondents reporting multiracial heritage were more likely than White or Asian respondents to come from families with lower incomes.

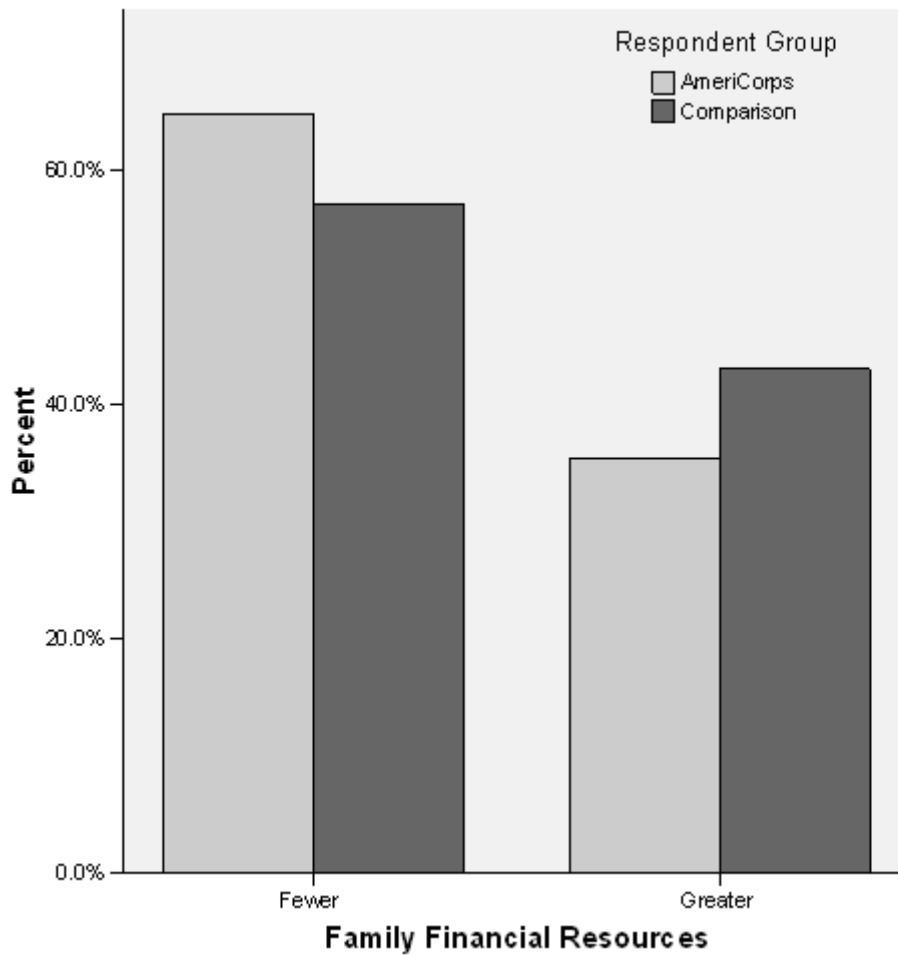


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents in AmeriCorps and comparison group by family financial resources

Figure 2 illustrates the number of respondents in the AmeriCorps and comparison groups who reported fewer or greater family financial resources. As the figure shows, a greater proportion of youth in the AmeriCorps group came from families with lower financial resources. This working paper does not deal with the potential benefits of AmeriCorps for youth from financially pressed families. It is important to note, however, that these youth consider AmeriCorps an option as they make the transition to adulthood, and thus it is important to learn more about the potential of Corps programs as developmental opportunities for youth from financially pressed families.

Respondents who made some vs. no educational progress

During the four years that transpired between Wave1 and Wave 3, 66% of the respondents either reported some progress in their educational attainment or already were college graduates at baseline. We refer to this group as the *progress*. The other 34% reported no change in their educational attainment over the four years. Since they

remained in the same educational state, we refer to them as the *static education group*.³

What factors were related to being in the *progress* vs. *static* group with respect to educational attainment? Not surprisingly, educational progress was related to the individual's financial resources: youth whose families made less than the median income were less likely to make educational progress over the four years. The remaining analyses were conducted separately for youth from families with fewer (i.e., \$40,000 per year or less) and families with greater (i.e., more than \$40,000 per year) financial resources.

Regardless of financial resources, young adults who had children were less likely to make educational progress. In other words, even for young adults from more advantaged family backgrounds, the responsibilities of children were a barrier to educational progress. In addition, respondents with greater financial resources failed to make educational progress if they were Hispanic or African American/Black. Respondents whose families had fewer financial resources were less likely to make educational progress if they were separated or divorced during the four years of the study, or if they were Hispanic, African American/Black, or American Indian/Alaskan Native.

Next we looked at whether educational progress was related to three forms of civic engagement (voting, volunteer service, media use for civic purposes) and civic attitudes (motivation to serve their community and reduce inequality). There is a sizable literature documenting the positive links between educational attainment and forms of civic participation such as political interest and voter turnout (Brown, Moore, & Bzostek, 2003; Bynner, 2005). There also is a considerable body of work documenting the cumulative civic disadvantage of growing up in low income communities and school districts. Youth growing up in such circumstances have lower rates of civic knowledge, fewer opportunities for engagement, fewer adults as civic role models, and lower rates of participation in voting (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Brown et al., 2003; Hart & Atkins, 2002; Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2004; Skocpol, 2004; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 2004).

Our question was whether civic engagement was associated with a young adult's educational progress *whether or not that young person had grown up in more or less advantaged circumstances*. Thus, analyses were run separately for individuals with fewer and with greater financial resources.

Civic Variables

The civic engagement and attitude variables were based on items asked at Waves 1 (baseline) and 3 (4 years later). Some items were asked at both waves, others only at one wave. *Voting behavior* was measured by the respondent's report of whether s/he had voted in the most recent national election at Waves 1 and 3. *Volunteer service* was based on the respondent's reports of whether s/he had performed service prior to Wave 1 and if s/he had served in the last 3 years at Wave 3. *Civic media use* was measured at Wave 3 with one item tapping whether s/he had accessed email or the Internet for

³ As we will report, with only one exception, the results were the same whether respondent who had attained a college degree by the first wave were removed from these analyses or maintained in the analyses.

information on current events. *Civic attitudes* were measured at Wave 3 with two items tapping the respondent's report of the personal importance s/he attached to contributing to the greater good, i.e., personal motivations to serve his/her community and desire to reduce inequality.

Results

Here we summarize the relationships between each form of civic engagement and motivation and the educational progress made by the young adult. Note that educational progress was based on progress between Waves 1 and 3 (i.e., over four years) and that civic engagement for the progress and static groups is analyzed at each wave that the item was asked in the survey.

The first set of results is for those youth whose families earned less than median income. The second set of results is for those whose families earned more than median income. All results reported were statistically significant at a $p < .05$ level.

Respondents with fewer financial resources – whose families earned *less than median income*:

- Voting behaviors
 - Respondents who made educational progress over four years were more likely to vote both at Wave 1 and at Wave 3.
- Volunteer service
 - Respondents who made educational progress over four years were more likely to engage in volunteer service both at Waves 1 and 3.
- Media use
 - Respondents who made educational progress over four years were more likely to say they accessed the media for information on current events (measured only at Wave 3).
- Civic Attitudes
 - Respondents who made educational progress were more likely to say that contributing to the greater good (serving their community and reducing inequality) were reasons that had influenced them to consider joining AmeriCorps (measured only at Wave 3).

Respondents with greater financial resources – whose families earned *more than median income*:

- Voting behaviors
 - Respondents who made educational progress over four years were more likely to vote both at Wave 1 and Wave 3.
- Volunteer service
 - Respondents who made no educational progress (i.e., the *static* group) were less likely to engage in volunteer service at Wave 1. In addition, educational progress was not related to engagement in volunteer service at Wave 3 – for youth whose families earned above median income.

- Media use
 - Respondents who made educational progress over four years were more likely to say they accessed the media for information on current events (measured only at Wave 3).

- Civic Attitudes
 - Respondents who made educational progress were more likely to say that contributing to the greater good (serving their community and reducing inequality) were reasons that had influenced them to consider joining AmeriCorps (measured only at Wave 3).

National Voting

Young people who moved forward with their education during the four years of this study were more likely to vote than those who did not make any educational gains over the same four year period. Figure 3 shows the voting rate for those who made progress and those who did not (*static*) at two points in time (W1 and W3) from families who earned less than the median income. Both at the beginning of the study, and four years later, they were more likely to report that they voted. The opposite pattern was reported by those who made no educational progress – they were less likely at Wave 1 and at Wave 3 to have voted. **Importantly, this relationship between voting and educational progress was true for youth whose families had fewer financial resources (i.e., reported less than median income) as well as those whose families had more.** In summary, voting and educational progress were positively linked regardless of whether a young person came from an advantaged or less advantaged family. The positive relationship between voting and educational attainment is consistent with previous research. The unique findings reported here are: First, that this positive relationship was found for young people from less as well as more advantaged backgrounds. Second, that the group who made educational progress over the four years of the study were more likely than their peers who made no progress to vote at the beginning and at the end of the study.

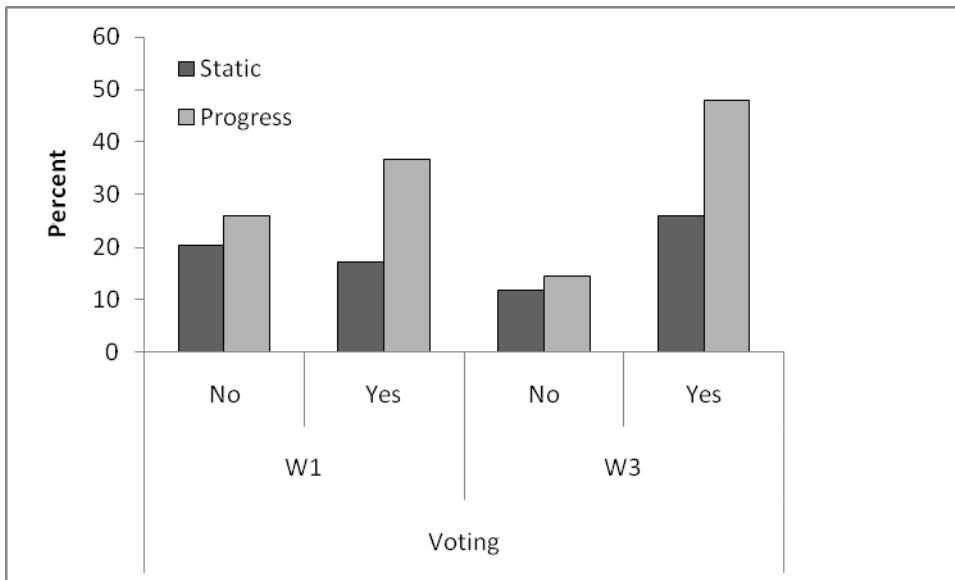


Figure 3. Relationship of voting at Wave 1 and Wave 3 and educational progress over four years for youth whose families earned less than the median income.

Volunteer Service

As with voting, engagement in volunteer service was positively related to being in the *progress* group over the four years of the study. Moreover, this positive relationship between educational progress and engagement in volunteer work was true whether young people had grown up in families that earned more or less than median income. Among youth whose families earned below median income, there was a positive relationship between educational progress and volunteer service at both Waves 1 and 3. However, for youth whose families earned above median income, educational progress was related to engagement in volunteer work only at Wave 1. At Wave 3 when the youth were older, volunteer service was unrelated to educational progress for youth in more financially advantaged families. In other words, youth from more advantaged backgrounds made educational progress over four years regardless of whether they were involved in volunteer service or not. However, for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, sustained engagement in volunteer service was positively related to the likelihood that they would progress with their educations over the four year period. This suggests that for youth from less advantaged backgrounds, volunteer service may be an important venue for maintaining motivation and connections related to educational achievement.

Figure 4 presents data ONLY for those respondents in the survey whose families earned less than \$40,000. It shows the relationship between volunteer service at two different time points (Wave 1 – baseline and Wave 3 – four years later) and the educational progress made by the young adults over those four years (*progress* referring to that group that attained some increase in education over those years or who had a college degree at baseline and *static* referring to that group whose educational attainment did not increase over the four years).

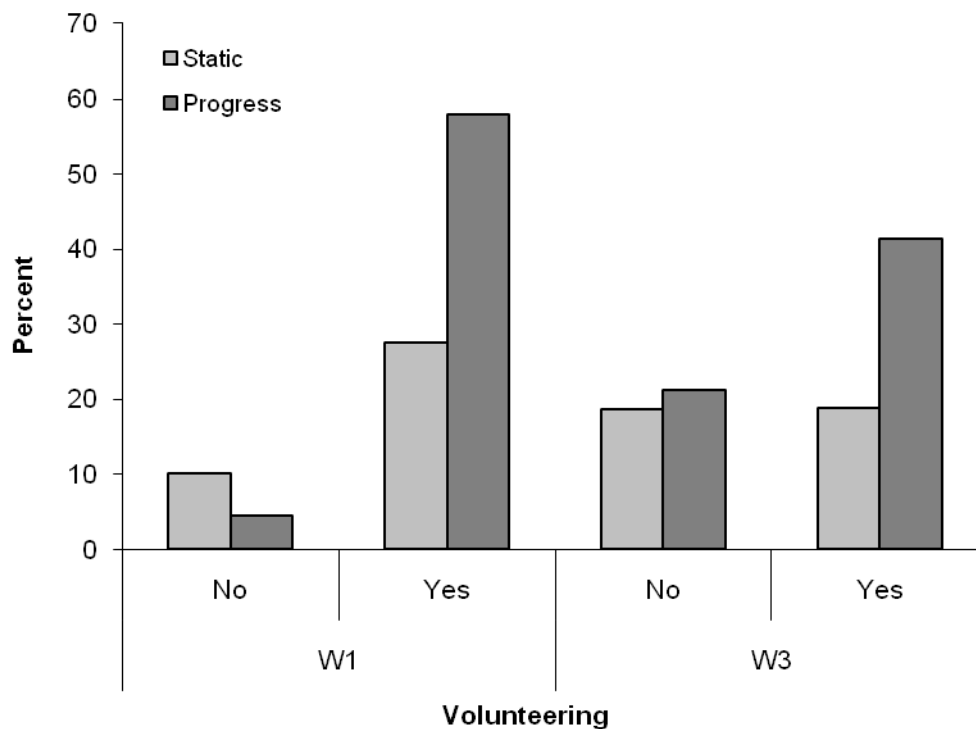


Figure 4. Relationship of volunteering at Wave 1 and Wave 3 and educational progress over four years for youth whose families earned less than the median income.

Youth who reported that they volunteered at wave 1 or wave 3 were more likely to be in the *progress* education group. It may be that more motivated youth both engage in service and make educational progress. It also may be that volunteer work in the community keeps youth engaged and connected to social and educational institutions. (We cannot make a causal argument in the current study). There was no increase in educational attainment for the sub group of 254 young people from less advantaged families who had NOT done service at Wave 1 and DID report service at Wave 3. Thus, the data support a stronger case for a relationship between sustained voluntarism and educational progress than for episodic voluntarism and educational progress.

Civic Media Use

There was a positive relationship between civic media use and educational progress. Youth who reported that they used the media for civic purposes (i.e., accessing email or the Internet for information on current events) also obtained more education over four years. In contrast, those youth who made no educational progress were more likely to report that they never accessed the media for civic purposes. Again, these results were true regardless of the income level of one's family. Figure 5 plots the civic media use for respondents with fewer financial resources. It shows that, although most young adults report utilizing email or the Internet for information on current events, those who never access the media are disproportionately comprised of individuals who make no educational progress, i.e., the *static* education group. There may be many reasons for this correlation. For example, young adults in the *static* education group may not be in settings with easy access to computers (e.g., not in classrooms or libraries that have computers) or they may be trying to handle work or other responsibilities and do not

have time to engage in civic media use or they may be less interested in current events. (N.B. Civic media use was asked at Wave 3 only.)

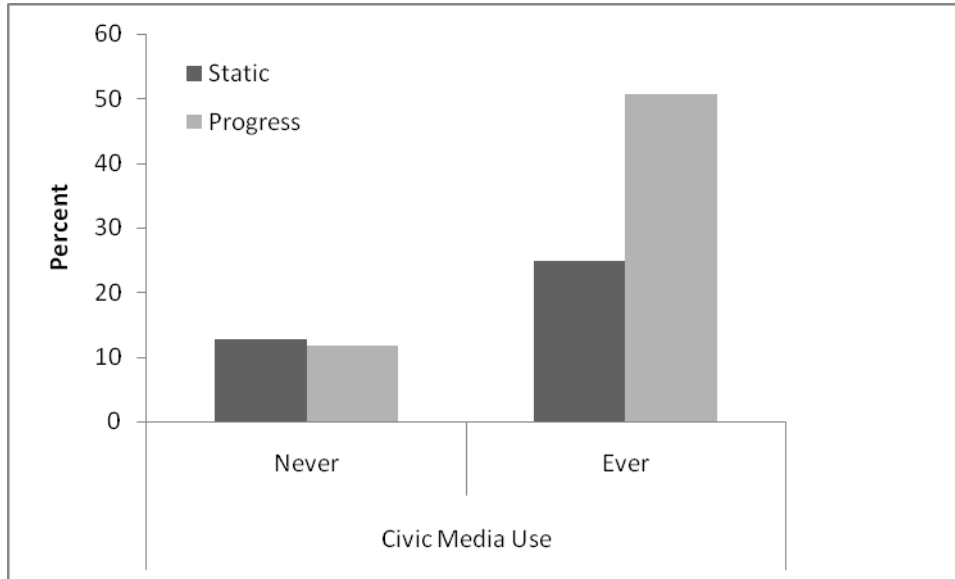


Figure 5. Civic media use and educational progress at Wave 3 for young adults whose families earn less than median income.

Civic Attitudes/Motivations for Investigating AmeriCorps

The pattern of civic attitudes is similar to the patterns for the other civic behaviors: Respondents in the educational *progress* group were more likely to say that contributing to the greater good (i.e., serving their community and a desire to reduce inequality) were relevant reasons why they had investigated AmeriCorps. This was true for individuals whose families had fewer financial resources as well as for those who had more financial resources. Figure 6 is limited to individuals with fewer financial resources. This shows that, for those who made educational progress over the four years of the study, reducing inequality was a moderately or very important motivation for their looking into AmeriCorps. In contrast, for those who made no educational progress (the *static* group), reducing inequality was a less important reason for why they investigated AmeriCorps.

The same pattern of results was exhibited for the civic attitude of serving one's community, i.e., regardless of financial resources, those young people who made educational progress over the four years were more likely than peers who did not to say that serving their community was an important reason why they had investigated AmeriCorps. In summary, there were stronger "common good" motivations for investigating AmeriCorps reported by those young people who made educational progress. (N.B. Civic attitudes were asked at Wave 3 only.)

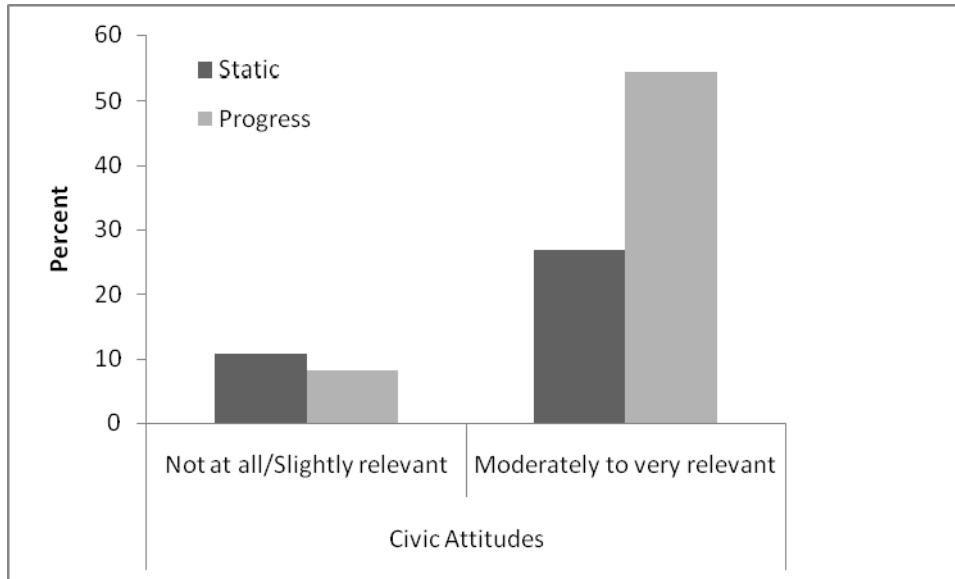


Figure 6. Percentage of respondents at Wave 3 whose families earned less than median income who value contributing to the common good through a desire to reduce inequality.

In general, youth who made no educational progress over four years tended to show a pattern of civic disengagement both in their behaviors (e.g., voting, volunteer work) and in their attitudes (e.g., valuing contributing to the greater good). Even when respondents who had attained a college degree by the first wave were removed from these analyses, the results (with the exception of voting behavior) were the same.

Conclusions

Disadvantage and Impediments to Educational Progress

Examining the demographic characteristics of disadvantaged respondents reveals that individuals who did not make educational progress (the *static* group) over four years were, by and large, dealing with several factors that impede educational progress. For example, among those whose families earned less than median income, youth who did not make educational progress (21.6%) were more likely to be divorced (2.4%) at Wave 3 and more likely to have children at both Wave 1 (13.9%) and Wave 3 (17.1%). Having young children at Waves 1 (4.5%) or 3 (6.6%) also impeded the educational progress of the group of young adults whose parents earned more than median income. Undoubtedly, having young children poses demands on time and financial resources. Scheduling classes and completing homework assignments compete for time and energy with child care responsibilities.

Educational progress also varied by the respondent's race/ethnicity. Among youth whose families earned less than median income, Hispanics, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and African American/Blacks made less educational progress than other ethnic groups, that is, they were more likely to remain *static*. In the group whose families earned more than median income, Hispanics and African American/Blacks also made less educational progress.

Educational Progress and Civic Engagement

Overall, four forms of civic engagement and attitudes were positively linked with educational progress, regardless of whether one's family of origin made more or less than the median income. Although the direction of these relationships is unclear, there are several possible interpretations. First, there may be basic differences between respondents in the educational *static* and *progress* groups and that may account for these differences. For example, respondents who made educational progress over the four years may be more motivated to learn and to get civically engaged. The fact that they also report higher civic engagement may mean that they also are motivated to contribute to the common good by voting, volunteering, or staying informed about public affairs. The fact that they were civically engaged throughout the four years – rather than episodically, i.e., at one time but not at another – points to a pattern of sustained civic engagement. They may have been spending more time in educational settings where they could access or get recruited into civic activity and where their interest in current events was encouraged. It also is possible that by staying civically engaged, they were apprised of educational opportunities or connected to adults who could help them navigate the process of applying and paying for education or to others who encouraged their educational aspirations. At the same time, our analyses do not support causal claims about episodic volunteer service and its connection to educational attainment. We found no educational progress over the four years for the one sub group of respondents in the study who had not reported any volunteer engagement at baseline but did report that they had done some volunteer work by Wave 3.

There has long been a stubborn relationship between social class and civic participation and education plays an important role in this relationship. Research with older adults shows that education has multiple direct and indirect effects on civic participation (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). For young adults, there may be civic advantages of being in educational settings because of the resources, recruitment possibilities, and normative pressures for civic engagement. In addition, sustained civic involvement such as volunteer service may be a means whereby young adults (especially those who grew up with fewer advantages) are encouraged to continue their education and helped with navigating hurdles to educational progress.

This working paper documents the challenges to educational attainment in young adulthood that are well known in the literature – financial disadvantage, parental responsibilities, and racial/ethnic minority status. The working paper also shows that, regardless of the financial advantages in which a young person grows up, there are significant positive relationships between a young adult's civic engagement and the likelihood of his/her educational achievement. Future research should delve more deeply into the opportunities for social connection and social capital formation that sustained civic engagement might afford and the potential of such engagement for enabling the educational achievement of young adults.

References

- Atkins, R., & Hart, D. (2003). Neighborhoods, adults, and the development of civic identity in urban youth. *Applied Developmental Science, 7*, 156-164.
- Brook, T., & Richburg-Hayes, L. (2006). *Paying for persistence: Early results of a Louisiana scholarship program for low-income parents attending community college*. New York: MDRC.
- Brown, B., Moore, K., & Bzostek, S. (2003). *A portrait of well-being in early adulthood: A report to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.
- Bynner, J. (2005). Rethinking the youth phase of the life course: The case for emerging adulthood? *Journal of Youth Studies, 8*, 367-384.
- Corporation for National and Community Service. (2004). *Serving country and community: A longitudinal study of service in AmeriCorps*. Washington, DC: Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development.
- Corporation for National and Community Service. (2008). *Still serving: Measuring the eight-year impact of AmeriCorps on alumni*. Washington, DC: Office of Research and Policy Development.
- Hart, D., & Atkins, R. (2002). Civic competence in urban youth. *Applied Developmental Science, 6*, 227-236.
- Jastrzab, J., Blomquist, J., Masker, J., & Orr, L. (1997). *Youth Corps: Promising strategies for young people and their communities* (No. 1-97). Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates Inc.
- Nie, N. H., Junn, J., & Stehlik-Barry, K. (1996). *Education and democratic citizenship in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rhodes, J. E., & DuBois, D. L. (2006). Understanding and facilitating the youth mentoring movement. *Social Policy Report, XX*, 3-19.
- Scales, P. C., & Roehlkepartain, E. (2004). *Community Service and Service-Learning in U.S. Public Schools (Growing to Greatness 2004)*. St. Paul, MN: National Youth Leadership Council.
- Schochet, P. Z., McConnell, S., & Burghardt, J. (2003). *National Job Corps study: Findings using administrative earnings record data* (No. MPR Reference No.: 8140-840). Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research.
- Skocpol, T. (2004). Civic transformation and inequality in the contemporary United States. In K. Neckerman (Ed.), *Social inequality* (pp. 729-767). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-209, *Money Income in the United States: 1999*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 2000.

Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (2004). Political equality: What do we know about it? In K. Neckerman (Ed.), *Social inequality* (pp. 635-666). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Youniss, J., & Hart, D. (2005). Intersection of social institutions with civic development. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 109, 73-81.

This material is based upon work supported by the Corporation for National and Community Service under Agreement No. 08BIHPA001. Unless otherwise stated, opinions or points of view expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of, or a position that is endorsed by, the Corporation.

CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) conducts research on the civic and political engagement of Americans between the ages of 15 and 25.

CIRCLE was founded in 2001 with a generous grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts and is now also funded by Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and several others. It is based at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service at Tufts University.

