

## WORKING PAPER

---

No. 06-01 M

January 2006

---

### **Is Civic Engagement the Key to Bridging the Town-Gown Divide?**

By

**John J. Newbold, Ph.D.**  
Sam Houston State University

&

**Tamara Waggener, Ph.D.**  
Sam Houston State University

Copyright by Author 2006

---

The Working Papers series is published periodically by the Center for Business and Economic Development at Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas. The series includes papers by members of the faculty of the College of Business Administration reporting on research progress. Copies are distributed to friends of the College of Business Administration. Additional copies may be obtained by contacting the Center for Business and Economic Development.

## **Abstract**

Many higher education institutions take an active role in fostering mutually beneficial relations with their surrounding townships. Joint activities between towns and colleges have typically included student placements at local businesses, internship programs, field trips, volunteer projects, and service-learning projects. These activities have proven to be important components of the civic engagement movement being promoted by higher education and are generally embraced by local officials and residents. However, student voting initiatives, another important component of the civic engagement movement, are not always embraced by local officials and residents who doubt students' knowledge of local political issues, question students' long term interest in the community, and fear the power of a student voting bloc. This paper outlines the sources of conflict and outlines methods that may be deployed to defuse the conflict between students and their local communities.

## **Introduction**

Many higher education institutions take an active role in fostering mutually beneficial relations with their surrounding townships. Joint activities between towns and colleges have typically included student placements at local businesses, internship programs, field trips, volunteer projects, and service-learning projects. These activities have proven to be important components of the civic engagement movement being promoted by higher education and are generally embraced by local officials and residents. However, student voting initiatives, another important component of the civic engagement movement, are not always embraced by local officials and residents who doubt students' knowledge of local political issues, question students' long term interest in the community, and fear the power of a student voting bloc. Opposition to students registering to vote in their college towns was evident during the 2004 presidential election season. Students from colleges in several states including Arizona, New Hampshire, New York, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia encountered barriers when they attempted to register and vote in their college towns. In most of the cases, students were forced to take legal action to defend their right to register and vote in their college towns. The issue has taken on greater intensity recently due in part to the growing civic engagement movement on campuses as well as federal legislative mandates designed to increase political awareness and participation among college students.

Literature on the civic engagement movement has paid little attention to the unique set of issues raised by students registering and voting in their college towns. The effective resolution of these issues may be the key to the bringing together of students and residents in college towns to jointly deliberate local issues. It therefore behooves us to examine these issues more closely, as they may not be as insurmountable as they appear at first glance.

## **The Civic Engagement Movement on College Campuses**

Since the early 1970s, political knowledge and voter turnout has declined among youth. Youth's declining participation in political life served as the impetus for the current civic engagement movement. Leaders of the movement recognize the special role institutions of higher education can play in training youth to become politically active. Evidence of growing civic engagement on college campuses is plentiful. There is an

increase in the number of domestic and international conferences devoted to the theme of civic education and an increase in the number of scholarly articles and book length publications addressing its various themes. This has been accompanied by an increase in membership in academic associations committed to civic education. For example, membership in Campus Compact, a national non-profit organization dedicated to promoting civic activities, has grown from 548 in 1998 to 965 in 2005. 199 of the 400 colleges and universities with membership in the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) choose to participate in the AASCU's American Democracy Project (ADP), a project which seeks to encourage students to participate in the democratic process through leadership and activism. The federal government has also played a key role in the growing civic engagement movement. The Higher Education Act of 1998 "requires that all colleges and universities receiving federal funds make a good faith effort to distribute mail voter registration forms to their students, and to make these forms widely available to students at their schools." More recently, Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia inserted a provision into a 2004 spending bill requiring "every school and college that receives federal money must teach about the Constitution on Sept. 17, the day the document was adopted in 1787."

### **Students' Voting Rights and Voting Patterns**

In their 2004 report on college student voting, researchers from The Institute for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement (PACE) classified states as "restrictive" states or "student choice" states. Student choice states allow students to determine their own residency for purposes of voter registration. Thirty-seven states are classified as student choice states. For example, students in the state of Texas, a student friendly state, are allowed to determine whether their parental address or their college address is their permanent address for purposes of voter registration. However, the researchers noted that only five of the thirty-seven states had written students' right to determine their place of residency into state statutes. Restrictive states are those states that practice residency requirements that make it difficult for students to register to vote. For example, in Idaho, a restrictive state, several factors may be considered when determining a person's place of residency including: where the applicant's vehicle is registered, where the applicant keeps personal property, and where an applicant maintains savings and checking accounts.

For most students, voting in restrictive states means they must register to vote at their parental address and thus must return to that address to vote or cast an absentee ballot. In their 2004 report on college student voting, researchers from The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) concluded that students who register to vote in their college town have higher rates of voter turnout than students who register at their parental address. If we wish to see higher voter turnout rates among college students, we need to support their efforts to register to vote in their college towns. University and community relations must also be taken into consideration. It is in the interest of universities to address locals' concerns regarding student voting and seek out possible means for addressing those concerns. Students' participation in local elections should not, and need not, contribute to a hostile relationship between students and local officials and residents.

### **Addressing the Concerns of Local Residents and Officials**

There are three common arguments against students voting in local elections. One of the more common arguments concerns student's length of stay in their college towns. Most college students do not plan to live in their college town upon graduation and thus are viewed by locals as temporary residents with no long term investment in the community. This notion would appear to be somewhat myopic. First, students may leave their college town upon graduation, but many return more than occasionally. An important goal of universities is the building of an alumni base. Organizing events and activities designed to bring alumni back to their college town is an important component of alumni relations. Consider the economic impact of alumni returning to the college town for a typical Division I football game. At a major campus such as Notre Dame or the University of Miami, it amounts to hundreds of millions of dollars to the local economy annually. Secondly, although individual students may leave their university town upon graduation, students as a constituency will always have a permanent presence in the college town. It just happens to be a constituency that turns over more rapidly than most others. Regardless, this constituency typically maintains a long-term presence in the town, contributes to the local cultural life and usually represents a significant portion of the local economy. It deserves to be part of the civic processes of the town.

A second argument concerns students' level of political knowledge. Residents and local officials question students' ability to understand the local political issues and processes, as well as the needs of the community. As first time voters, many college students often lack political experience and knowledge. This problem can be addressed through forums designed to educate students about local political issues and inform students of the operation of local government. Residents, like students, may also benefit from forums dedicated to candidates, political issues, and local government.

A third argument relates to the potential voting power of students. In college towns with small populations, students can wield a relatively strong influence over local elections. However, according to Kenneth Eshleman, author of one of the most comprehensive studies of student voting in local elections, there is no data suggesting that students would vote as a bloc or, more importantly from the perspective of local residents and officials, vote in a manner foreign to the political composition of the community.

### **Conclusion**

Spurred by new federal programs and incentives and nurtured by university-sponsored centers and initiatives, college students' interest in civic activism, specifically voting, has experienced a renaissance after nearly thirty years of dormancy. Efforts should be made to encourage greater civic participation among our youth. This includes the removal of barriers to student participation in local elections. However, these efforts should not widen the town-gown divide. Rather civic engagement should reach across the town-gown divide, opening up opportunities for improving relationships between students and residents.