

The Impact of Cultural Centers on Civic Engagement Outcomes in Higher Education

Olivia Copeland, Steven Feldman, Allison BrckaLorenz
Indiana University Bloomington

The data for this study comes from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) between the years 2019 and 2022. The NSSE looks at first year and senior students’ activities and experiences at four-year colleges and universities. In addition to a core set of questions that all students receive, participating institutions can also select optional sets of items centered around different topics that may be of interest to institutions. This study focuses on the 16,988 student respondents from the 27 institutions that chose to add the Civic Engagement and Inclusiveness & Engagement with Cultural Diversity topical modules. The Civic Engagement module includes questions that ask students about their skills and abilities for conflict resolution, as well as their engagement with campus, local, state, national, or global issues. The Inclusiveness & Engagement with Cultural Diversity module includes questions that ask students about topics such as: inclusive teaching practices, institutional values and commitment regarding diversity, and participation in diversity-related coursework and activities.

We measured students’ skills and abilities using five individual items from the Civic Engagement module. To supplement this, we also measured students’ frequency of civic engagement using ten individual items from the Civic Engagement module. See Table 1 for full details and descriptive statistics for this civic engagement outcome.

Table 1
Scale Descriptives and Component Items for Outcome Variable

	Count	Range	Mean	St. Dev.	Cronbach’s α	ICC
Civic Engagement - Skills and Abilities	16,960	1-5	3.74	.75	.85	.03

Select the response that best represents your ability to do the following:

Response options: Poor (1) to Excellent (5)

- a. Help people resolve their disagreements with each other
- b. Resolve conflicts that involve bias, discrimination, and prejudice
- c. Lead a group in which people from different backgrounds feel welcomed and included
- d. Participate in a constructive dialogue with someone who disagrees with you
- e. Contribute to the well-being of your community

Civic Engagement – Frequency of Engagement	16,841	1-4	2.14	.67	.92	.01
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During the current school year, whether course-related or not, about how often have you done the following?

Response options: Very often, Often, Sometimes, Never

- a. Informed yourself about campus or local issues
- b. Informed yourself about state, national, or global issues
- c. Discussed campus or local issues with others
- d. Discussed state, national, or global issues with others
- e. Raised awareness about campus or local issues
- f. Raised awareness about state, national, or global issues
- g. Asked others to address campus or local issues
- h. Asked others to address state, national, or global issues
- i. Organized others to work on campus or local issues
- j. Organized others to work on state, national, or global issues

Table 2

Regression Coefficients for Civic Engagement Based on Demographic Identification and Cultural Center Involvement (CCI)

		Count	Civic Engagement - Skills and Abilities		Civic Engagement – Frequency of Engagement	
			Without CCI B Sig.	With CCI B Sig.	Without CCI B Sig.	With CCI B Sig.
Sexual Orientation	Straight	13,308 (78.7%)		.192***	-.146***	.441***
	Bisexual	1,421 (8.4%)	.106***	.190***	.110***	.388***
	Gay	310 (1.8%)		.202***		.434***
	Lesbian	250 (1.5%)		.170**		.492***
	Queer	244 (1.4%)		.194***	.301***	.417***
	Questioning or Unsure	277 (1.6%)	-.286***	.297***	-.222***	.399***
	Another Sexual Orientation	318 (1.9%)		.260***		.399***
Gender Identity	Man	5,572 (32.8%)	.96***	.206***		.490***
	Woman	10,929 (64.3%)	.148***	.188***		.403***
	Another Gender Identity	226 (1.3%)		.211***		.479***
Racial Identity	American Indian or Alaska Native	47 (0.3%)	-.29*			.432***
	Asian	2,117 (12.5%)	-.289***	.201***	-.097**	.703***
	Black or African American	1,073 (6.3%)		.196***		.462***
	Hispanic or Latina/o	3,340 (19.7%)		.200***		.439***
	Middle Eastern or North African	215 (1.3%)	.217***	.156*	.132*	.420***
	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	53 (0.3%)		.492**		.380*
	White	7,603 (44.8%)		.195***	-.071**	.436***
	Another Race or Ethnicity	108 (0.6%)	.444***		.275**	.436***
	Multiracial	1,926 (11.3%)		.204***		.391***

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. We only present statistically significant coefficients here (p < .05). We standardized outcomes so that unstandardized B could be interpreted as an effect size. All models included controls for international status, academic class year, and geographic region. Gender identity, sexual orientation, and race were controlled for in the models where they were not the variable of interest.

Without consideration for cultural center involvement, some identities already reported significant relationships to civic engagement skills and abilities. **The majority of students who had participated in cultural center activities reported significantly higher civic engagement skills and abilities.** A similar pattern to civic engagement skills and abilities occurred in reported frequency of civic engagement. **Upon participating in cultural center activities, all students showed significantly higher frequencies of participation in civic engagement.**

Our results present several significant findings for research on both civic engagement and the role of cultural centers on campus. As our results indicate, all students’ civic engagement – regardless of identity – was positively benefitted by involvement in cultural centers. In a time where DEI efforts, including those of cultural centers, are being targeted in discourse and legislation, this finding provides a counterargument to the concern that cultural centers and other identity-specific campus programs balkanize campus and detract from the “true” mission of higher education.