

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION AND DEMOCRATIC OUTCOMES

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In May of 2017, Nigel Hayes, one of the stars of the University of Wisconsin-Madison men's basketball team, published an unofficial commencement speech in an online journal for sports fans. The title of the piece is, "Don't Just Shut Up and Play," and in it Hayes reflects on his four years as a Badger. He argues that college athletes should speak up about social issues and not "shut up and play" as fans had often suggested to Hayes when he added his voice to oppose racist incidents on campus and in the United States.

In the piece, Hayes (2017) reflects on how his education transformed him from someone who saw college as "a means to an end—more basketball" into someone who is civically and politically engaged. Hayes explains that before college, he was "never heavy into politics" and had decided to major in finance. Then, in his sophomore year, he "started to discover books that sparked my interest in history and politics, especially books about African history, civil rights, and the African-American experience." This—in addition to headlines about police shootings of African American men—made him more interested in following the news. Next, Hayes (2017) explains:

I started to realize that I needed to develop my own beliefs and then be able to defend them with facts. One of the best things about Wisconsin is that you've got thousands of students from different backgrounds and they all seem to want to debate ideas. I remember more than a few times when I found myself walking behind groups of students walking around campus just to listen in on their political conversations. (p.1)

As a result of this interplay between coursework, the student body, and events outside of campus, Hayes has become politically vocal. To his critics who tell him to shut up and play, he

responds that he has done exactly what was expected of him in college; he "[learned] how to think critically about [his] role in society."

We begin with this story of Nigel Hayes (2017) because it highlights several important starting points for a discussion of the relationship between the liberal arts and democratic engagement. First, being educated in the liberal arts can happen while pursuing professional majors and letters and science majors. Hayes completed a professional degree, but was politically transformed by courses outside of his major, some presumably taken to fulfill general education requirements. Depending on their majors, some students will get heavier doses of humanities, social science, and natural science, but all get some. As Gutmann (2015) argues, it may be a "mistake...to accept the conventional boundaries of a liberal arts education as fixed" and blurring the boundaries between professional training and the liberal arts might better prepare students for democratic life (p. 15). In this essay, we view the liberal arts as an integral component of the bachelor's degree. For that reason, we focus on the relationship between the bachelor's degree and democratic outcomes.

Second, Hayes's story highlights two of the central aims of the liberal arts: to see the world with clearer eyes and to see one's place in that world differently. Ideally, when these aims are realized, the student is motivated to act in ways that positively affect the world. In the case of Hayes, he feels an increased responsibility to stay politically informed, he uses his visibility to speak out about issues he cares about, and he encourages others to do the same.

Finally, Hayes's story touches upon an aspect of a liberal arts education that is often overlooked: It is best understood as a social activity. Part of that activity requires students to interact with people who hold diverse points of view and who are differently positioned in society. One can be transformed by reading a book, but schooling has the advantage of allowing

us to hear how others respond differently to that book. Hayes's discussion of conversations with his teammates, classmates, and the broader student body highlights that a liberal arts education is not sufficiently realized by mastering curricular content; it also requires having college experiences that facilitate exchanging ideas with others.

In this paper, we examine what is and is not known about the influence of a liberal arts education on the civic and political engagement of students, both while in school and after matriculation. Given the difficulty of defining what constitutes a liberal arts education and our interest in casting a wide net, we focus on students who are studying for or have earned a bachelor's degree in a residential institution—regardless of the type or size of institution they attended or their major. Our objective is to highlight where future research could be directed. Since the literature on the liberal arts is relatively small, we also draw from the related literature on the general impact of educational attainment on democratic engagement. As we will explain, the burgeoning literature on education and democratic engagement provides a template for research into the liberal arts specifically.

There is a vast literature on what constitutes civic and political engagement, and there are important ways in which the two intersect. For our purposes, we define civic participation as practices aiming to promote the public good through non-governmental organizations and informal community work. For example, participation in voluntary service in a local community organization is civic participation. Political engagement, in contrast, generally refers to practices aiming to influence the state – either through elections or policy. Voting is an obvious and important example of political engagement, but participating in a protest of a campus policy or attending a political meeting would also be considered practices or forms of political engagement (see Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995; Zukin, 2006). When referring to both civic

and political participation, we use the term “democratic engagement”. This framing is in-line with recent work by Thomas (2010) and participants of The Democracy Imperative who use democratic engagement “to describe experiences that teach the knowledge, principles, and practices valuable to a democracy as both a form of government and a culture” (p. 4).

Our analysis is situated in the current political climate, in which American democracy is fraught with challenges. Therefore, we focus not just on what we know about the influence of a liberal arts education on civic and political engagement, but on what relationship those outcomes may have with elements of contemporary American democracy, such as rising political polarization and lowering levels of social trust.

### **Declining Engagement; Rising Polarization**

Democracy is the rule of the people and, to effectively function as a form of government as well as a mode of society, it entails civic and political engagement. It was thus alarming when Robert Putnam (2001) exhaustively cataloged a broad decline in engagement of virtually every type over the second half of the 20th century, encapsulated by the metaphor that Americans are increasingly “bowling alone.”

More recently, the dominant theme in the study of U.S. politics has been the rise of political polarization, both among the leadership class (Fiorina, Abrams & Pope, 2011) and, increasingly, among voters (Abramowitz, 2010; Levendusky, 2010). While in the past, each party had ideological diversity within its ranks, increasingly ideology and party identification have come into alignment (McCarty, Poole & Rosenthal, 2006). Bipartisan common ground is thus harder to find, which only hardens partisan attitudes further (Abramowitz, 2010; McCarty,

Poole & Rosenthal, 2006). Partisanship has come to be seen as an identity, which only fosters distrust and animosity between Republicans and Democrats (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

There are many reasons to think that the decline in engagement documented 20 years ago is a major contributing factor to the recent surge in political polarization. Civic engagement builds networks of reciprocity and trust—social capital. Diminishing social capital means fewer people interacting face to face in collective efforts, including cooperation with people who identify with the other party or who have an opposing political perspective. There is limited cooperation, discussion, and deliberation across partisan lines. Instead, people rely on the media, including social media, to paint a caricature of those who have different political views (Levendusky, 2013).

It is important to note that not all forms of engagement have decreased, as our age of polarization has also brought a resurgence in some forms of political participation, particularly among young people. While still low by international standards, voter turnout in the U.S. has rebounded from the lows of the 1990s, although recent state laws that make voting more restrictive may reverse that trend.<sup>1</sup> Other research suggests that youth are increasingly engaged in protesting, voting, leading, and increasing cultural understanding (Eagen et al., 2016), as well as turning to new forms of engagement (Dalton, 2016; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Hollander & Burack, 2009)—including the increasing use of social media as a means of political mobilization (Bennett, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> The literature awaits scientific consensus on the precise effects of voter identification laws. While one recent study concluded that “strict identification laws have a differentially negative impact on the turnout of racial and ethnic minorities in primaries and general elections” (Hajnal, Lajevardi, & Nielson, 2017), critics have questioned that analysis on methodological grounds (Grimmer, Hersh, Meredith, Mummolo, & Nall, 2018). See (Burden, 2018) for a discussion of the issues in the debate.

A focus on trends in civic and political engagement, though, risks confusing quantity for quality. While aggregate trends are an important indicator of overall engagement, the simmering political tensions in the country suggest that the *manner* in which citizens engage in civic life also matters. Civility, tolerance, and a willingness to consider alternative points of view are essential to a strong social fabric.

### **Debates in the Field**

While there are many factors that contribute to both the quantity and quality of democratic engagement, education—and higher education in particular—plays an especially important role (see e.g., Dewey, 1916). In recognition of the role of higher education in democratic engagement, the U.S. Department of Education recently convened a National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE). Forums on the topic culminated in the 2012 release of a report entitled, “A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future” (AAC&U, 2012). The report called for “strengthening students’ civic learning and democratic engagement as a core component of college study” (AAC&U, 2012, p. vii). Specifically, it called on U.S. higher education institutions to affirm their democratically civic mission and to formally include civic education for democratic purposes in programs of general education, the course of study for all majors, student life activities, campus/community partnerships, and as an area of scholarly investigation for faculty from all disciplines (for spin-off reports and initiatives see, AAC&U, 2012).

In short, the time is ripe for increased attention to the role of higher education in fostering a healthy democratic society. Further, the liberal arts—including but not limited to courses in history, philosophy, social science, and the arts—are an integral component of



educating democratic citizens. It is in liberal arts courses that students are most likely to learn about democracy, competing theories of justice, the causes of social and political problems, and the possible solutions. Currently, however, there is relatively little research on the liberal arts and democratic engagement.

In contrast, there is a mountain of research on the broader question of whether and how education—in general—affects civic and political engagement. Indeed, the correlation between educational attainment and civic participation is one of the most consistent and robust in the social sciences. Writing in 1972, Philip Converse described education as the “universal solvent,” as it seemingly always has a positive correlation with every form of democratic engagement (p. 324). In the years since, nothing has changed. No matter the context, the form of participation, or the measure of educational attainment, more education predicts greater civic engagement (Shields & Goidel, 1997, as cited in Hillygus, 2005; Verba et al., 1995; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980).

While this *correlation* is universally recognized, there is not consensus on whether the relationship is causal. The question of whether there is truly a causal relationship between education and participation is hotly contested, and trying to answer this thorny question has resulted in innovative approaches. While there is less literature on the specific question of whether a liberal arts education, in particular, facilitates civic engagement, the existing evidence nonetheless suggests a correlation with at least some of the liberal arts. For example, Nie and Hillygus (2001) find that undergraduates who take a social science curriculum are more likely to be civically engaged after college than those who concentrate in other subject areas, including the humanities. While they find that some of this effect is related to the verbal aptitude of students who pursue the social sciences, as verbal proficiency is itself a strong correlate of

political engagement, the social science curriculum appears to have an independent impact as well. In their words:

Our data clearly suggest that creating a more vibrant and attractive social science curriculum to attract more students will create a more participatory, engaged, and public-regarding citizenry (at least among young college graduates). This connection seems particularly true for those types of social science courses most likely to attract those with exceptional verbal aptitude—that is, history, Western civilization, sociology, political science, macroeconomics, and the like. (Nie & Hillygus, 2001, p. 51)

Likewise, the recent National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement found that, in the 2016 presidential election, students majoring in the social sciences had the highest level of voter turnout and those in the STEM fields had the lowest—with the health professions, humanities, and business in between (Thomas et al., 2017).

While illuminating, the link between social science curriculum and civic engagement is nonetheless riddled with the same concern about the general link between educational attainment and participation—is it causal or correlational? Or it could be a combination of both, as students with greater interest in public affairs select into a social science curriculum, perhaps because of their high verbal aptitude, and then have that interest reinforced through the courses they take.

Our contention is that the questions regarding a causal link between the liberal arts—or social science, in particular—represent an opportunity for future research. Just as the unresolved causal relationship between educational attainment and democratic engagement has spurred research that is equal parts rigorous and creative, so can the study of the civic and political consequences of the liberal arts.

Broadly speaking, there are three lines of inquiry in the existing literature on educational attainment and democratic engagement, including but not limited to, voting. Each can inform the potential for research into the liberal arts:

1. Is the relationship because of self-selection?
2. Is the relationship because education leads to higher socioeconomic status?
3. What are the mechanisms linking education and engagement?

We discuss each of these in turn.

### **Self-Selection**

The causal revolution in the behavioral sciences has brought renewed attention to the well-established correlation between education and civic engagement. The fundamental problem in determining whether correlation is actually causation is that the very same factors that lead people to have a high level of education are also likely to lead them to have high levels of civic participation. The ideal solution to this problem would be a controlled experiment, as in a drug trial. But instead of a drug, people would be randomly assigned to receive more education. If the assignment were truly random, we could be confident that any increase in civic engagement was solely because of the “dose” of education they received. However, educational attainment cannot be randomly assigned. Instead, many creative strategies have been employed to determine whether the education-engagement relationship is causal. Some even include randomized interventions designed to increase the odds of greater educational attainment.

These include:

- Matching people who do and do not attend college on a wide array of characteristics in order to isolate the impact of college, i.e. propensity score matching (Kam & Palmer, 2008, 2011; Mayer, 2011).
- Comparing identical (monozygotic) twins who obtain different levels of education, which controls for both genes and a common familial environment (Dinesen et al., 2016).
- Searching for factors like proximity to a college that may nudge students into going to school longer, but which have no connection to the “pre-existing condition” of their civic engagement. If students who receive such nudges wind up more civically engaged than those who live further away, that provides evidence that college itself is causing greater civic engagement. Several such “nudge factors” (called “instruments”) have been tried:
  - Proximity to a community college (Dee, 2004).
  - Adoption of compulsory education laws, which also led to greater educational attainment (Dee, 2004; Milligan, Moretti, & Oreopoulos, 2004).
  - The draft lottery for the Vietnam War (Berinsky & Lenz, 2011).
  - A program to eradicate hookworm disease in the early 20th century, which led to a higher likelihood of young people finishing school (Henderson, 2014).
- Randomized educational interventions have also been studied. These include intensive preschool for low income children, a college readiness and scholarship program for at-risk youth, reducing class sizes, and school vouchers (Carlson, Chingos, & Campbell, 2017; Sondheimer & Green, 2010).

Our point is not to evaluate the merits of these studies, as each has both flaws and virtues. Rather, we stress that the challenge of determining the “holy grail” of a definitive causal

relationship between education and civic engagement has led to a blossoming of rigorous and innovative research. While the question is not settled, the most convincing studies, particularly those employing randomized educational interventions, suggest that there is a causal link between greater educational attainment and higher levels of civic engagement. In other words, these studies find that the long-observed correlation between education and engagement is not simply because the sort of people who obtain more education are also the sort of people who are most likely to be civically engaged. Receiving a greater dose of education itself leads to greater civic involvement. Nonetheless, caveats apply. In particular, the studies based on randomized educational interventions focus on economically disadvantaged youth for whom educational attainment is comparatively low. It is not clear whether increased educational attainment has a comparable effect in populations starting with a higher average level of education.

The lesson for research on the liberal arts and political engagement is to encourage similar attention to the knotty question of causation. Granted that this is an area where random assignment is not possible, the same was said about the study of educational attainment and democratic engagement. While it is true that educational attainment itself cannot be randomly assigned, inventive scholars have nonetheless found ways to get leverage on the issue of causation. We are confident that similar creativity could be found in the study of the liberal arts. For example, perhaps analytical leverage could be found in the differing general education requirements across universities, as some require more liberal arts content than others. Alternatively, it could be that within a given university, a change in general education requirements presents a natural experiment in either increasing or decreasing liberal arts

content. No doubt there are still more creative ways to study the broad question of whether there is a causal relationship between the liberal arts and civic engagement.

### **Socioeconomic Status**

A second and related line of research has examined the question of whether education has a positive relationship with civic engagement solely because it leads to higher socioeconomic status. This literature is motivated by a puzzle. Given the strong individual-level relationship between education and civic engagement, why, in the aggregate, has engagement fallen while the average level of education has risen? The most sweeping explanation is offered by Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry (1996), who argue that education's impact on civic and political participation is through socioeconomic status. More education *relative to others* means more status, which leads to greater participation (Persson, 2011, 2014, 2015). Since the key is relative, not absolute, levels of education, an aggregate-level increase in educational attainment does not lead to greater democratic engagement overall. Instead, it means that one needs a higher level of education in order to maintain the same place in the social hierarchy.

Fifty years ago, when college degrees were relatively rare, a college degree conferred greater social status than today, when such degrees are more common. Educational attainment has undergone inflation. Just as inflation means a dollar has less purchasing power over time, education inflation means a college degree is “worth less” as a marker of social status. In the wake of Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry's (1996) seminal work, other scholars have tested and refined their argument, showing that it does not apply to every form of democratic engagement (Campbell, 2009; Helliwell & Putnam, 2007; Tenn, 2005)

According to this line of research, if education is causally related to democratic

engagement, it is only through its effect on socioeconomic status. Alternatively, its effect may not be truly causal, but is instead a means to reinforce existing class differences. It may not seem obvious that this literature has an analog with the study of the liberal arts. After all, if education only has an impact on engagement through socioeconomic status, it implies that the content of the education does not matter. A degree is merely a credential to establish social status and, if anything, liberal arts degrees lead to lower social status relative to fields such as professional degrees in STEM and business.

Nonetheless, a close read of this literature suggests a mechanism that might apply to the liberal arts. One overlooked aspect of Nie et al.'s (1996) argument is their explanation for why high socioeconomic status—which, recall, is a function of one's relative level of education—leads to greater civic engagement. Nie et al. (1996) argue that greater education leads to what they call “social network centrality” or, in other words, social connections with community leaders. It is plausible that a background in the liberal arts might foster social networks among people in positions of public authority, not solely through wealth and status, but through career paths and community involvement. Therefore, another fruitful area of research is how the liberal arts might foster civic engagement through the social networks that majoring in the liberal arts might develop, both in and beyond college.

## **Mechanisms**

Admittedly, research limited only to causation and social networks would be largely devoid of what is presumably most interesting about the liberal arts, namely the substance of what is taught. Does the content of the education matter? Again, there is an analog to the literature on educational attainment. Recent years have seen a boom in research into what it is

about education that might foster its strong correlation with engagement. Not surprisingly, much of this research has focused on high school civics classes (Campbell, 2008; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Kahne & Sport, 2008). Although research in the 1960s led to the conventional wisdom that civics courses had little impact on civic outcomes (Langton & Jennings, 1968), a wave of more recent research has shown that classroom instruction does have a positive impact on whether young people are more civically knowledgeable, engaged, or both (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Kahne & Sport, 2008; Torney-Purta, 2002). In particular, civics courses—at least in states that require a civics exam for high school graduation—lead to greater political knowledge among students who are immigrants or whose parents are immigrants (Campbell & Niemi, 2016). A wealth of research into specific pedagogical practices finds that classroom discussion is an especially effective method of fostering democratic engagement (Campbell, 2008; Campbell, Levinson, & Hess, 2012; Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Torney-Purta, 2002).

While most of this literature has focused on secondary education, there are nonetheless lessons that could potentially be applied to postsecondary education as well. In particular, many of the practices that have been identified as fostering greater engagement are common in the liberal arts and often emphasize discussion and debate. There is tremendous potential for scholarship on the civic consequences of both the content and methods of liberal arts education. Just as the literature on secondary education has profited from multiple methodologies—observational, experimental—so too would research into the liberal arts at the post-secondary level.

A first step in that direction is to identify what ought to be measured. Measurable outcomes of “quality democratic engagement” have been recommended by Thomas (2010) and



others. These outcomes define democratic modes of communication, judgment, analysis, literacy, and integrity. This list draws upon many of the aims of liberal arts, but the group appeals to universities to see these as skills that ought to be infused throughout the university. The paper argues for three practices that universities ought to commit to—all of which draw upon the ideals of deliberative democracy. Here, we focus on the appeal for pedagogical practices that teach public reasoning skills, which they define as:

A process that is not only designed to shape political decisions but that can also be used to promote social action and build communities in ways that are cooperative, not adversarial. [Public reasoning] is a form of respectful and open-minded inquiry that leads to individual and common commitments to shared solutions. (Thomas, 2010, p. 8)

The authors point to our opening claim, that a liberal arts education (like democracy) is inherently social: It requires students to discuss ideas and reason through their political and ethical differences.

In what follows, we discuss three areas of research that investigate curricular mechanisms that might contribute to this set of democratic outcomes: classroom discussion, course content, and service learning.

### **Classroom discussion**

There is a large body of literature in secondary and postsecondary education that argues that classrooms are important democratic spaces, because it is in classrooms that students can learn to discuss and deliberate ethical and political issues with diverse peers, practice giving reasons to each other, and develop the skills of persuasion, argumentation, and perspective taking that are considered important to democratic life (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich

& Stephens, 2003; Gutmann, 1999; Hess, 2009; Hess & Gatti, 2010; Parker, 2006; Thomas, 2010). Much of this work is theoretical (i.e., working out exactly what discussion is) or advocacy (i.e., convincing others that discussion is good practice). Very few studies investigate whether classroom discussion actually affects political beliefs or behavior.

One challenge to studying this relationship is that discussion in higher education is quite rare. In a review of the handful of studies that observed classroom practices in higher education from the 1970s-1980s, Nunn (1996) concluded that learning in the college classroom is a “spectator sport” (p. 245). These studies overall found that instructors talk nearly 80% of the time and that when students were allowed to talk, participation was generally low (Ellner, 1983; Karp & Yoles, 1976; Smith, 1983). Nunn (1996) contributed to this literature with a mixed method study triangulating observations and recordings of 20 professors at a large public university with surveys given to the 579 undergraduate students in their courses. The instructors had “very good” teacher ratings prior to the study and represented nine liberal arts disciplines. Again, findings showed that professors gave students little opportunity to participate. On the high end, two instructors engaged students in discussion 20% of the time, but Nunn found that, on average, less than 3% of instructional time involved discussion. Further, only four instructors had more than 40% of students participating in discussion, while the group average was just 25%. Given this and other studies that show that discussion is rare, it is important that future research on classroom discussion confirm that discussion is happening through observation or other reliable measures and includes an assessment of the quality and quantity of that discussion.

Given the overall lack of discussion, one research strategy often employed is to focus on particular deliberative programs and study their effects (typically all positive). There are many

such studies that focus on a single university and program. In a more ambitious example, The Carnegie Foundation's Political Engagement Project (PEP) identified 21 colleges and universities that have established institutional expectations for developing democratic skills and dispositions as part of the undergraduate experience. Part advocacy and part research, this initiative identified common institutional practices that these institutions used to promote the development of civic responsibility. One feature identified was using "student-centered pedagogies" such as problem-based learning and other discussion-rich approaches (Colby et al., 2003, p.134).

Building from this work, Beaumont, Colby, Ehrlich, and Torney-Purta (2006) investigated what effects some of these practices had on the political engagement of students. They identified 21 undergraduate courses and programs offered by the PEP colleges. The courses had promoting *political* engagement as an aim (these were not service learning courses) and used deliberative pedagogies. The team collected a range of data from 481 students, including: pre-post student surveys, phone interviews with a subset of students, a writing exercise given to participants across all campuses, and faculty surveys and interviews. They found that these programs were particularly impactful for students who reported low political interest on the pre-surveys. On the post-survey, students with low political interest showed significant positive changes in their political identity (seeing oneself as someone who is engaged), political knowledge, and expectation to be engaged in the future. This study is an example of how researchers might connect pedagogical practices with fine-tuned measures of political outcomes.

## **Courses and content**

The content of a liberal arts curriculum is another possible contributor to democratic engagement. As previously mentioned, there is evidence that majors matter for electoral engagement. Less is known about how course content or the demographic make-up of courses influence democratic dispositions and behaviors.

There is a growing body of research that looks into the democratic effects associated with interacting with diverse others (race, social class, gender, sexuality, regional, political, religious, ethnicity, national origin, etc.) in courses and through coursework that expose students to diverse perspectives and engage them in critical reflection-sometimes referred to as “diversity coursework.” Such coursework has become more common across the country (Misa, Anderson, & Yamamura, 2005), and there is research that shows that it can positively contribute to intercultural sensitivity (Mahoney & Schamber, 2004), and positively change attitudes about cultural and racial differences (Chang, 2002; Hurtado, 2003). Given the segregation that exists in K-12 schools (Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012) and the growing racial distrust in the United States (Cohen, Fowler, Medenica, & Rogowski, 2017; Gallup, 2015) thinking about whether or how liberal arts courses prepare people to live in a diverse society is an important democratic outcome.

One of the most ambitious studies of the relationship between campus diversity and democratic outcomes is the Preparing Students for a Diverse Democracy project, led by Sylvia Hurtado. This longitudinal data set drawing from nine public universities assessed “how students’ exposure to diversity, through both classroom and interactional diversity, influenced their cognitive, social-cognitive, and democratic learning and development (Hurtado, 2003, p. 12). The survey used three scaled indexes to look at the relationship between diverse

experience, including coursework, and Perspective-taking, Beliefs that Conflict Enhances Democracy, and Importance of Social Action Engagement. Even though much of the variance on these measures seen in the first two years of college was attributed to pre-college experiences and background characteristics, the model still showed that positive experiences with diversity in the classroom and within coursework and the frequency of those experiences is positively correlated with change on these measures.

The study has limitations (low response rates, self-reported data, choice of university sample), but the findings suggest that looking at course content and the demographic make-up within courses, as well as the overall student body, may help identify features of the liberal arts that deepen democratic commitments and motivate engagement.

### **Service learning**

Much research on *civic* engagement and outcomes has focused on service learning, with many such studies relying on student self-reported data (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Eyer & Giles, 1999; Hurtado, 2003; NSSE, 2012). Indeed, the often cited “Crucible Moment” report identifies service learning as an instructional strategy that positively affects civic engagement (AAC&U, 2012). Courses using service learning typically require students to volunteer with community organizations that address issues related to the course. Additionally, service learning is pointed to as a “high impact” practice that can be adopted by colleges and universities (Kuh, 2008), and Misa et al. (2005) note that it is one of the most studied practices related to civic engagement.

That said, we mention this literature with some hesitation, because it is not clear to us whether this practice falls within the practices of a liberal arts education. Answering that

question often depends on the extent to which service learning is connected to the curriculum and studies of service learning are not often fine-grained enough to make that distinction. With that caveat, we include service learning as a possible mechanism because the practice aims to strengthen social capital by developing community relationships. For example, in an innovative study, Spezio et al. (2006) demonstrate that the pedagogy of service learning and the democratic classroom approach to course management are associated with measurable and statistically significant changes in student learning outcomes relevant to the practice of engaged citizenship. However, from a social work perspective, Forenza and Germak (2015) contend that educators have a propensity to overemphasize service-oriented community engagement as opposed to activist-oriented engagement (for this critique, see also Checkoway, 2012; Yates & Youniss, 1999).

### **Further Recommendations**

Given the Mellon Foundation's interest in promoting the development of a richer and more accurate understanding of the relationship between liberal arts education and democratic outcomes, we turn to recommendations for lines of research that respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by the current political climate in the United States. We present broad recommendations for new lines of inquiry focused on exploring three overarching questions:

- I. Can/should/does a liberal arts education mitigate the current trends that show having a strong partisan identity predicts participation *and* high levels of political intolerance (Mutz, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2016)?

2. Could changing requirements for specific courses and ways of teaching make it more likely that students in majors that correlate with low levels of political participation, such as engineering, enhance equality of political participation?
3. Assuming that there is at least a plausible connection between the pedagogy used by instructors and political and civic outcomes, what mechanisms/processes for changing teaching practices are most effective?

### **Partisanship and Intolerance**

While there has been a connection between pronounced partisan views and political participation for decades, it is clear that the most politically engaged among us are much more likely to be strong, perhaps even rabid, partisans than in the past (Abramowitz, 2010). A strong partisan identity consistently predicts political participation now—which would not necessarily be problematic, except that it also predicts powerful antipathies toward people with different views. Recent research by the Pew Research Center (2016) shows that not only do strong partisans dislike people who have different views, but partisans also believe their political opponents are dangerous to the body politic. This strong relationship between political participation and intolerance is concerning for a number of reasons. First, when the most partisan among us are most likely to participate electorally, they elect political leaders with the most extreme views, which make it unlikely that coalitions can be formed to develop solutions to major problems (Abramowitz, 2010; McCarty, Poole & Rosenthal, 2006). Second, if political participation becomes the province of only those with the most firmed up partisan identities, it is less likely that we will have broad participation and vast swaths of the body politic will have no meaningful voice in influencing local, state, and national political decisions. Finally, the kind of

intolerance that is both the cause and effect of the strong connection between partisanship and participation bleeds over into the social realm—fostering low levels of social trust and balkanization into isolated social spheres (Bishop, 2008; McCarty, Poole & Rosenthal, 2006). Consequently, it becomes much less likely that people who have political views that are different from one another will encounter authentic difference uttered by people for whom they otherwise have affection and trust.

Given that people in the U.S. are increasingly likely to live in communities surrounded by politically-like minded others (Bishop, 2008; Hess & McAvoy, 2015), we are interested in whether institutions of higher education can purposely create opportunities for students to experience what is uncommon: to be exposed to and meaningfully engage with people who hold different political views in ways that mitigate the strong relationship between a strong partisan identify and antipathy for others with different views. In theory, institutions of higher education could and should be the ideal setting for encountering difference in ways that do not breed intolerance. In reality, we are concerned that the deliberative asset of built-in difference is either wasted (because as we noted earlier, students are given few opportunities in many courses to learn how to meaningfully talk), or are encouraged to opt into sub-communities within the university where they are surrounded by others who hold the same views.

Because of the strong connection between pronounced and sharply held political views and antipathy toward others with different views, we are interested in research that could investigate the ways in which this relationship is fostered by current approaches to liberal arts education, and more pointedly, the ways in which liberal arts education could be shaped to break this problematic connection. One promising study in progress is The Interfaith Diversity Experiences & Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS), a nationally representative survey of



undergraduates, which has found that college experiences temper partisan animosity (Mayhew, Rockenbach, Selznick & Zagorsky, 2018). Looking at more fine-grained effects by major may shed light on the role that the liberal arts play in developing particular democratic attitudes. More of this sort of research would help answer the question: Is it possible to use liberal arts education as a tool to engage people who have different political views, life experiences, and regional concerns in discussions that promote participation and develop social trust?

### **Participation and Selection of Major**

The ambitious study of the voting behaviors of college students that has been conducted by a research team housed at Tufts University (NSLVE) has demonstrated that electoral participation varies by major (Thomas, et. al., 2017). In 2012, there was a 20% difference between education majors, who had the highest turnout at 55%, and students in STEM, who were the least likely to vote, with only a 35% turnout (Wexler, 2016). There are likely self-selection explanations. It could be that the very reasons that students decide to select a particular major are driven by prior interests that are linked to political (and perhaps civic) outcomes. We are unaware of research that would help us understand whether this difference between majors and political participation continues post-graduation, but we suspect that the difference they have identified is important and deserves more inquiry. Two questions seem most important: What is the cause of the difference? What can be done to mitigate it?

### **Teaching and Learning**

Many of the civic and political outcomes we have described throughout this paper are at least somewhat dependent on improving the quality of instruction that students experience in

their liberal arts classes. For example, for discussions to expose students to differing perspectives that could promote tolerance of those with opposing views, it is necessary that such discussions are both relatively frequent and high quality. As previously explained, there is little evidence to suggest that most students currently are in classes where high quality discussion is the norm. This is especially true at large, public universities.

In the relatively rare classes in which students are experiencing high quality discussions, we know little about what caused an instructor to learn how to plan and facilitate them or what motivated their desire to do so in the first place. Moreover, there has been little research on how instructors in higher education could develop the pedagogical skills to create discussion-rich courses. It is important to better understand the characteristics of approaches to professional development that lead to instructors improving their ability to plan and facilitate high quality discussion. In particular, what sequences of what kinds of experiences help instructors better understand the critical attributes of high quality discussion, how much instruction does it take, does coaching matter, and if so, for what reasons? Given that many instructors begin their higher education teaching careers as teaching assistants, it may also prove fruitful to assess how early in one's teaching career high quality professional development could make the most difference.

## **Conclusion**

We began this paper by describing how one student at a large land-grant institution described what caused him to care about political issues. Nigel Hayes is exceptional in many ways—a star athlete who came to care about the political world as a consequence of his experiences on campus. Hayes's story is likely not typical, but it is an exemplar of what is

possible. What would it mean to create institutions of higher education where it is the norm for students to say that their experiences inside and outside of the classroom moved them to care about society and their place in it in a more enlightened way than when they arrived? Clearly, there is much more to be known about the relationship between a liberal arts education (even as broadly as we have defined it here) and potential civic and political outcomes. That said, the very fact that the terrain is both ill-defined and lightly researched speaks to why this terrain is so fertile—and deserves serious and sustained work.

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