

South Dakota Civic Engagement Roundtable

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Introduction

One of the great ironies of promoting democracy within the world is what is happening in the United States. While there is a concerted effort to support and explain how democracy works and how it can benefit the people of a particular country, American democracy is struggling to achieve a level of public participation and understanding of what it means to be a democratic society.

Many reasons have been given to explain the malaise and apathy for citizens participating in the democratic process. It ranges from the role of media, public displays of violence and incivility, scandals in business and politics, to the lack of trust in our elected officials and public institutions. Whatever the cause for this lack of civic engagement, there are many leaders interested in reversing the trend. The Center for Civic Education, the Congressional Conference on Civic Education, the Chiesman Center For Democracy, and the South Dakota Community Foundation joined to convene a roundtable on civic education and to explore three basic questions:

- Is civic education and engagement working in South Dakota?
- What resources and efforts are needed to get citizens to participate in the democratic process?
- What steps should be taken to implement or expand current civic education initiatives and public involvement in public policy issues and government?

When a citizen decides to be civically engaged in their community, state,

and nation, it can take on different forms. The individual could decide to run for an office, get involved in a political campaign, attend public meetings (forums, hearings, meetings, etc.), donate time and money, or serve on a board or council. Additionally, civic engagement can include obtaining information and discussing public policy issues within a circle of friends or neighbors, expressing opinion through letters to the editor in newspapers, and by reading documents and publications relevant to a particular issue or individual.

For those individuals who have made a decision to become civically engaged, they contribute to the sustainability of the democratic process. For those individuals who chose not to get involved many reasons are given and task to get them involved is as varied. The purpose of the roundtable was to start a discussion about what is being done and what further steps are needed. Statistics has shown that the number of people becoming involved in their communities, state, and nation is declining dramatically. Within an increasing population in some areas and a declining population in many rural areas, the need for more involvement becomes critical. Lack of time and interest are major reasons for not participating in public policy issues and government, but the danger is only the minority who have the time will dictate how people will be governed. There is a danger of exclusion and elitism - the many being ruled by a few.

The roundtable was held on August 30, 2006 at Oacoma (central location within the state). The one day conference brought

elected officials, civic educators, appointed government officials, college students, university and school teachers, non-profit organization leaders, and many interested citizens. The purpose of the roundtable was not to debate, but to deliberate on what issues educators, state leaders, policymakers, and citizens must address in the next two or three years if the state is to address the declining interest in public policy and governance. The participants were asked to enter the deliberative process with an open mind and to bring to the table their stories of success, failure, and concern. From this pool of experience and knowledge a set of possible action statements were developed and proposed for further study and implementation.

What is Working?

The participants reviewed and listed what activities and programs within South Dakota that are working towards providing civic education and providing an opportunity for individuals to become involved in the political and civic areas. The activities were divided into three groups:

- K-12: These are programs within public and private schools that foster civic education and involvement by students.
- Young adults (18-30): This group includes college and university students, recent graduates of high school and postsecondary schools, and work entrance.
- Adults (31+): These individuals have achieved some stability in their lives especially in the areas of family,

work, and personal goals. The largest percentage of voters come from this age group.

K-12 civic education takes place in variety of areas. Generally, it is found in the school through the social studies curriculum, student governance, extracurricular clubs, and service learning projects. The next area where students obtain civic education and engagement is in out-of-school organizations and activities. Other areas for civic education and engagement can be found in faith-based organizations, family, and political party organizations.

Table 1 shows the link between the location of the civic education program or activity and type of activity. The citizenship skills presented to young people in school are crucial to developing an interest in public life. Although there is a wide range of civic education in and out of schools there are still a high percentage of youth not participating in any meaningful civic education program. Teachers, civic educators, and program directors continue to focus on more skills-oriented and experience-based activities, it is noted that schools are not the only domain that can encourage young people to become citizens. There is an increasing public school emphasis on the “career” skills of reading and writing, and a commensurate decrease in emphasis on the arts and civics, lead many organizations such as the Boys Scouts, Girl Scouts, Girls Inc., and Boys & Girls Club to provide civic education to youth.

Table 1
K-12 Civic Education & Engagement

| | School-Based | Out-of-School | Community & Family |
|-------------------------|---|---|--|
| Curriculum | Kids Voting South Dakota Character Counts We the People National Mock Election Mock Trial | South Dakota Youth Congress | Faithful Citizens Congressional Youth Leadership Council |
| Service Learning | School-To-Work Teacher's Aide | Volunteering (nurse aide, nursing home, league coach, etc.) | Legislative Page Young Politicians of America |
| Clubs | Close-Up Student Government | Boys Scouts Girls Scouts 4-H Boys & Girls Club | Young Republicans Youth Democrats |
| Other Activities | Project Citizen Junior Achievement | South Dakota Rural Election Boys State Girls State | Letters to the Editor Leadership Camps |

Many researchers, with significant funding from foundations, have focused on the college student and young adult demographic to assess the civic and political health of the nation's new generations. Results show a generation that is both disconnected from conventional politics, and yet has much civic potential. There is widespread evidence, along with a general characterization in the media, that a majority of the college students and young adults under the age of 30 are cynical and apathetic about politics, with commentators even lamenting the return of the "silent generation" of young adults of the 1950s (Bennett and Bennett 2001). The roundtable participants identified many initiatives helping young adults (18-30) to become civically engaged. These included:

- College Republicans and Democrats

- Student Government
- Legislative & other governmental internships
- Political campaign workers
- Farber Center for Civic Leadership
- Leadership Development Programs (Chamber of Commerce)
- Campus newspapers
- Constitution Day (September)
- South Dakota Center for Economic Education

In addition to the youth focused activities, young adults and older adults (30+) have an opportunity to participate in many civically focused activities and organizations. Some of the activities highlighted by the roundtable participants included:

- South Dakota Issues Forums & National Issues Forums
- Democracy In Action or other lobbying group such as South Dakota Voices for Children, Sierra Club, South Dakota Peace & Justice, etc.
- Membership in the Republican, Democratic, Libertarian, and Constitutional political parties.
- Service organizations (Lions, Rotary, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, etc.)
- Letters to the Editor and guest editorials in newspapers, radio, and television
- Cracker-barrels and panel forums
- Special speaker events and rallies
- League of Women Voters
- Parent Teacher Association
- American Association of Retired People (AARP)
- Center for Civic Participation and Leadership Roundtables
- Farm Bureau and Farmers Union Camps
- Candidate for an elected position
- Serving as an elected official or as an appointed citizen to a committee or task force to study a specific public policy issue.
- Serving the South Dakota National Guard or other military active or reserve unit

In addition to the various organizations and activities that citizens can be engaged in, there are those civic behaviors that require a one-time or short-term volunteering commitment. These behaviors contribute to the betterment of the community or individuals requiring some level of immediate and concentrated effort. Some of the volunteering

activities included clean-up days, Habitat for Humanity, Meal on Wheels, serving on the volunteer fire department, etc.

What Is The Problem?

Although there are many citizens actively volunteering and engaging in civic activities and performing a wide variety of civic duties, the concern is that the number of individuals participating is declining and aging. The participants were able to divide the lack of civic engagement to three age groups. Although, many of the identified concerns overlap between the groups there were some areas that focus on a specific age group.

Another area of concern across the adult age group (18+) was the lack of viable candidates for local and state offices in certain regions within South Dakota. In locations with a large populations there appears to be no significant difficulty in the recruitment of possible candidates for offices. In smaller towns and counties, the number of individuals volunteering to run for an office diminishes especially in the recruitment of female and young adult candidates. Many of the barriers to this decline were identified above, but the top reasons given were time and trust. There is not enough time and there is a lack of confidence that individuals will do the job to the satisfaction of the majority. "Why do you want to take a low pay - no pay job and get rocks thrown at you all the time?"

Table 2
Lack of Civic Engagement

| Under 18 years old | 18 - 30 years old | 30+ years old |
|---|---|---|
| <p>Although civic education is part of the social studies standards, application of this component is not measured or emphasized in some schools. Lack of accountability</p> | <p>Many postsecondary schools do not have a civic education requirement for graduation. Some colleges have a service learning component, but it is not consistent for all colleges and universities.</p> | <p>Like the young people, many adults feel that their voices are not being heard and thus their input will not contribute to change or improvement.</p> |
| <p>Lack of interest in civic participation is modeled in homes and by adults.</p> | <p>Young people are focused on their education and careers and do not find the political or civic arena relevant.</p> | <p>Adults are too busy with their lives trying to make a living and deal with home issues. There is not enough time to participate in other activities such as social or political organizations</p> |
| <p>Hands-on activities require time and commitment of adult leaders and teachers.</p> | <p>There are a lack of young civic leaders activity engaged in recruiting and encouraging young adults to participate in civic life.</p> | <p>Elected officials do not appear to reflect the voice of the people and appear to act for self-interest rather than community building.</p> |
| <p>Membership in organizations that focus on civic participation and volunteerism is low. There is a lack of encouragement for youth to join these organizations (Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4H, etc.) or adult organizations to sponsor a local unit or chapter.</p> | <p>Older adult models are discouraging to many young adults - lack of ethical behavior, self-serving interests are highlighted by media.</p> | <p>Service and civic organizations are aging. There is a lack of succession or legacy building by many organizations. Therefore, there is a perception of status quo behavior.</p> |
| <p>Although there are many supplemental civic education materials (Kids Voting South Dakota, Project Citizen, We the People, etc.) training of teachers and faithful application of materials is not consistent or supported by administrators and community.</p> | <p>Although there is a movement to enhance civic engagement and participation on postsecondary campuses, implementation of the initiatives has been a challenge - only a few young adults and faculty members have taken the leadership to implement the initiatives.</p> | <p>There is not enough reflection, study and investigation of the national, state, and community issues in order to make decisions relating to public policy, initiatives, and candidates. Many adults do not feel empowered to be influential or heard even when they have an opinion or idea.</p> |

What Can Be Done?

The roundtable participants divided the action strategies for improving civic engagement into two major strands: K-16 civic education and adult civic participation. Across both strands was the acquisition of good data about the state of civic engagement and education in South Dakota. This data would be used to support and make decisions about what specific actions need to be designed and implemented. The research could be performed by university political science and social studies departments, the South Dakota Department of Education, the Chiesman Center For Democracy, the South Dakota Public Policy Institute, or another independent research organization. The emphasis for the research would be to determine the level of civic education and engagement within the state, identify the specific barriers to participation, perform a meta analysis of current civic education and engagement studies, and develop a framework for action.

If civic education and engagement initiatives are to be successful they must move beyond token involvement or volunteerism. True civic engagement requires a genuine and meaningful commitment of citizens to the betterment of their communities, counties, and state. There has to be an opportunity for citizen voices to be heard and respected. The participants believed that encouragement and support for everyone to become involved in the democratic process is critical if towns, counties and the state are to be places that reflect the will and desires of the people. Effective initiatives respect and recognize the value of the experience and knowledge of all

people who are involved in public problem solving.

The participants believed that K-16 civic education requires more accountability by educators and accrediting agencies. Just as the No Child Left Behind has influenced the importance of reading, writing, and mathematics in schools, so the same emphasis should be given to civic education. There is a need for more collaboration among the Board of Regents, South Dakota Department of Education, and local boards of education in the implementation of civic education initiatives including service learning, civic knowledge and disposition. There are many excellent programs available to schools and colleges, but implementation is limited. Colleges and schools of education should consider requiring a civic education course for all teachers. Additionally, "adults who work with youth should avoid making generalizations about youth apathy and realize that many youth care deeply about public issues and are interested in becoming involved in addressing society's problems. Just as youth may need training in leadership skills to be effective public problem-solvers, adults who work with youth may need training to learn how to listen to what youth have to say and to respect the experience, knowledge, and perspective youth bring to the table." (Pearson & Voke, 2003, p. 3)

The participants viewed increasing adult civic participation and engagement a challenge. Some of the recommendations for increasing adult involvement included the use of media through public service announcements, individual stories that made a difference in a community, county, and state, and more educational opportunities -

civic education for adults. There are many organizations that are able to provide public space and opportunities for public discussion of issues and for recruitment of individuals for public volunteerism, but they have limited financial resources for advertising and implementation. For example issue forums require space, media announcements, and materials to make them a reality. Some organizations sponsor specific forums, but it is done in a limited number of places and times. Therefore, it limits participation for many citizens. If civic engagement is to be successful, the participants believed there needs to be a public commitment to implementing more activities and opportunities for citizens to come together to discuss and act civically.



Conclusion

The roundtable participants were able to identify a long list of civic education programs and civic engagement activities throughout South Dakota. The difficulty was trying to identify or select one or more activities to respond for the improvement of civic engagement. Many of the participants believed it was a combination of attitude and behavior. The review of literature supports the participants' perception of how attitude about politics and the democratic process

impacts the civic behaviors. Hauptmann (2005) states that civic engagement is effective when citizens understand the current problems and are expected to solve the problems directly. But getting to understand the problem requires communication and invitation. A clear statement of the problem and the importance of individual involvement in deliberation, consensus building, and action are critical if citizens are to be civically active. Although not discussed in any detail, the roundtable participants recognized the importance of inviting citizens to be involved in their community, region, and state.

Civic engagement was recognized as a goal-centered activity in which citizens take ownership in the development of actions for solutions and results. It requires leadership and support on all levels to bring people together and to encourage them to participate in activities that contribute to the betterment of their community, region, and state. Schools, universities, and non profit organizations have to be models and risk takers in implementing civic education and encouraging civic participation of all citizens in self-governance. The support requires a combination of media, financial, and high individual expectations. Civic education and participation can be fostered and delivered by many of the existing organizations within South Dakota, but what is lacking is a shared vision about the approach for making civism a reality. The roundtable participants took the first step to build a civic engagement vision and asking for a concerted commitment from state leaders and citizens to achieve this goal.

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