Civic Engagement and Black College Students: A Pilot Study

By Barbara Hewins-Maroney

Abstract

Anecdotal information indicated that many African American young adults in a Midwestern community were not engaged in organizations and institutions within the community. A pilot survey was developed and administered to thirty-nine college students ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-five to determine if the anecdotal information was accurate and what might be the causes of the lack of engagement. The pilot survey indicated that over 50 percent of the students had volunteered within a twelve-month period, but that their participation was not on-going. Students did not believe they were expected to participate in the affairs of their neighborhoods or in the overall community. They did, however, believe they were expected to participate in college activities. The initial survey indicated that the students had meager access to the leadership in the Black community and even less contact with local and state government officials. They did feel they had access to university staff and administrators. Implications of the pilot study point to the importance of a sense of belonging in defining one's community. A sense of belonging gives significance to engagement and empowers individuals to act in significant ways.

In many urban communities, the social and economic conditions of African Americans are being critically reviewed. Media and governmental reports detail the growing disparities in educational attainment, employment, poverty, health, housing, and crime. If conditions continue, the future of these communities will be in jeopardy. If youth are the future of this country, are our youth being prepared to assume leadership roles to effectively solve the problems and issues that confront their communities?

A group of researchers at the University of Nebraska at Omaha began investigating the engagement of Black youth a few years ago. Anecdotal information indicated that Black youth were marginally involved in community activities and organizations. They did not belong to or associate with activities sponsored by traditional Black organizations such as the NAACP or the Urban League. They did not volunteer for community initiatives or with community support groups such as the Girls Club or the Boy Scouts. They did not attend community meetings when issues such as crime or educational inequities were being discussed. They were noticeably absent from the churches. Several initiatives that focus on the plight of the Black community have been started in the city with little support from or engagement by Black youth and young adults. Where are they? What is the role of Black youth and young adults in helping to reshape and nurture their community? Why are Black youth noticeably absent in civic matters? Do Black youth believe they should be civically engaged and that they can

make a difference in how their communities are run? Is there behavior different than that of other racial/ethnic group youth?

In recent years, the Black community in Omaha has been scrutinized, criticized, and pitied by the rest of the city. Much of the scrutiny has come about, because the efforts to make positive change have been met with apathy by a significant segment of the Black community. Like most population groups, Blacks who are actively involved in community initiatives are older adults. They are either baby boomers or members of the "long civic generation," a generation born between 1910 and 1940 (Putnam 2000). Black leadership recognizes that young leaders must be developed to manage current programs, start new initiatives, and compete for future resources. In order to train the new leadership, they must be identified and then engaged.

Civic engagement is a relatively new term for an old concept—citizenship (Andolina et al. 2002). The concept and importance of citizenship were once taught in the public schools in the nation; however, in response to other curricular demands, the concept of civic education was marginalized and almost eliminated (Boston 2005). Civic education involves being educated to know what a citizen does in society and the importance of that involvement (Boston 2005). Since the mid-1990s, the need for a return to civic education has been recognized and national efforts have been underway to increase the engagement of youth and young adults (The Saguaro Seminar 2000).

Civic engagement goes beyond civic education. While civic education involves learning about what it means to be a citizen and how to act like one, civic engagement entails being educated about being a citizen at the same time one is involved in the activities of being a good resident or constituent of a community (The Saguaro Seminar 2000). In other words, civic engagement is learning while doing. Ehrlich (2000) described civic engagement as "working to make a difference in the civic life of one's community and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference" (vi). Much of the service learning theory and activities are based on the civic engagement construct.

Black Youth and Engagement

The civic engagement of Black youth has not been an area of interest to public officials and researchers for decades (Celestine 2007). Even when research in the 1990s began examining the importance of civic engagement by youth in the political and educational rebuilding of American institutions, Black youth were ignored from most of the studies. Perhaps public officials felt it important to focus on Hispanic/Latino(a) and Euro-American youth because of their political potential, while discounting the potential of African Americans (Celestine 2007). However, Black youth have traditionally been involved and concerned about their community (Carillo 2007). Did these researchers forget that the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s could not have been effective without the actions of young Black adults and youth throughout the country? Their actions triggered a social justice movement that swept the nation and rippled through every continent in the world (Ginwright 2006).

The engagement of young Blacks set a foundation for public policy and public discourse that continues into the twenty-first century.

The research that has been done involving Black youth engagement indicates that Black youth are more civically involved and have a greater sense of civic duty than youth of other racial/ethnic categories (Carillo 2007; Fridkin, Kenney, and Crittenden 2006; Lopez et al. 2007). Their engagement, however, has been tempered by the discrimination and segregation they've experienced or observed in their communities and their schools (Fridkin, Kenney, and Crittenden 2006; Sherrod 2003). The negative encounters with racially-focused and socially-based discrimination and prejudice have tainted their attitudes toward involvement in civic affairs. Besides, civic engagement was historically discouraged or even forbidden by the larger community, because it had the potential of challenging the dominant class in the society (Sanchez-Jankowski 2002).

Formal and informal exclusionary practices along with the cultural and structural influences of the family, the schools, and the government have negatively affected the engagement of Black youth and young adults (Bobo 1999; Rubin 2007; Sanchez-Jankowski 2002). Studies indicate that the attitudes of youth, especially youth of color, range from a sense of empowerment to discouraged resignation (Rubin 2007). A troubling facet within this range of attitudes is a bothersome sense of indifference and distrust toward civic involvement founded on the belief that one's efforts won't make a difference (Fridkin, Kenney, and Crittenden 2006; Hart and Atkins 2002). Social distrust reflects the disjuncture between the ideals espoused by society as a whole and the realities of being Black in America (Flanagan and Sherrod 1998; Rubin 2007).

Developmental Stages and Civic Engagement

Researchers contend that the attitudes toward civic engagement are developed in youth by their middle school years (Fridkin, Kenney, and Crittenden 2006). They report that civic and political attitudes and identities begin to form in early childhood as Black children hear the oral retelling of abuse and mistreatment in their environments (Flanagan and Sherrod 1998). It is the next stage of development, starting at about age fourteen, that is pivotal in the youth's assessment of civic knowledge and their learning of civic culture (Flanagan and Sherrod 1998). Between the ages of fourteen and twenty-five, individuals are open and flexible. They are receptive to change and less fearful of negotiating the tough socio-economic and political issues that may face them. This is also a time when youth and young adults question authority and examine their membership in their families and with their peers ((Brown and Mounts 2007; Flanagan and Sherrod 1998; Padilla-Walker and Carlo 2007). For African American youth and young adults, it is also a period of ethnic identification, learning to handle discriminatory incidents, and negotiating the racially-biased environment (Hill et al. 2007).

This is the period when peers become influential (Brown and Mounts 2007). Increased association with peers leads to increased conformity to the norms of the peer group, and more opportunity for independent thought and action (Hill et al. 2007). If the peer group does not favor certain actions and activities, then the youth must decide whether

to conform or act alone. Some studies indicate that African American youth and young adults have peer influences that mimic those of their parents (Padilla-Walker and Carlo 2007). This is good news, because when family members and role models perform community service, youth and young adults are more likely to be civically engaged (Andolina et al. 2003; Andolina et al. 2002; Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss, 2002; Yates and Youniss 1998;). Is it the influence of their parents or their peers that encourage the students to participate in their communities? What does appear to occur with adolescents is that their peers are highly influential. For African American adolescents, there is an indication that their peers may be more influential than their parents during this stage of their lives (Celestine 2007; Perkins et al. 2007). Fortunately for some families, this stage ends when the young adult believes that adulthood has arrived. Many African American young adults have indicated that adulthood is marked by the establishment of their own values and beliefs, when they have egalitarian relationships with their parents, when they are financially independent, and when they can accept responsibility for their own actions (Arnett 2003; Brown and Mounts 2007). This stage may not come until they are in their late twenties or early thirties.

The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) has studied youth and concluded that although Black youth may be more civically engaged than other racial/ethnic youth, they still are not overly supportive of civic involvement and civic education (Lopez 2002). African American youth along with Latino/a youth were less likely than White and Asian youth to favor requiring civic education in either the middle or high school curriculum. African American youth were less likely to favor requiring community service as a requirement for high school graduation than youth of other racial/ethnic groups. Black youth were supportive, however, of community service, if it meant being paid to offset their college expenses. Even with financial remuneration, Whites, Asians and Latinos/as were not overly interested in performing community service (Lopez 2002). Perhaps the attitude linking payment to civic engagement is a reflection of the socio-economic condition of Blacks in the country?

Resource Acquisition and Civic Engagement

The access to resources is an important variable in the acquisition of civic knowledge and civic responsibility. Resources are not just monetary, but for youth and young adults, the primary resource is their social capital or network and influence among their family, peers, and community. Social capital for this age group is generated first within the family by the amount of time youth spend with their parents and is then developed outside the family through networking with other youth and adult role models (White and Gager 2007). Youth and young adults from families with greater economic and social networks have greater social capital than youth and young adults from lower economic means (The Future of U.S. Civil Society 2006; White and Gager 2007). Youth with greater social capital have a greater knowledge of civic affairs and have greater social and political trust (Fridkin et al. 2006; Torney-Purta 2002). These youth come from families, whose conversations about local and national politics and whose habits, such as watching the news and reading the newspaper, provide a basis for the youth to

better understand their community and the dynamics of national and global politics and economics. Social capital begins to form with language development, understanding what is being communicated, and social interaction, which all help to build and strengthen family and group norms, values, and shared visions (Szreter 2002; Torney-Purta 2002). It is understandable then, why conversation in the home is so important in the development of youth civic responsibility and understanding. The conversation can also be extended to school curriculum and community programs that engage youth and young adults in discussions regarding citizenship and community growth as they transition into adulthood (Youniss and Yates 1999).

Putnam (2000) believes that the nation is being divided by the amount of resources and social networks that are available to some groups, but not to all (The Future of U.S. Civil Society 2006). He, like others, believes it is important that the schools take a greater lead in making resources and opportunities accessible to all students. If Black students do not have family structures to assist with the building of resources, then the schools are the next logical institution to help students develop their social capital and engage in opportunities that can provide civic practice (Sherrod 2003; Torney-Purta 2002). Participation in high school activities is a precursor to community engagement (Andolina et al. 2003; Planty, Boszick, and Regnier 2006; Sherrod 2003). If schools are not making these opportunities available to Black and low-income students, then the students may have limited opportunities to practice the skills of civic participation and become proficient in helping to build their communities. Youth and young adults need to learn how to act ethically on behalf of the public good; how to be task-oriented; how to effectively use their interpersonal skills; how to be an effective group member; and how to activate their vision (Hyman 2002; Manning 2006). In addition, civic practice and the concomitant interactions and networking can be instrumental in forging new links to their communities and building social trust.

Community Connectedness and a Sense of Belonging

Community connectedness is another factor that increases the civic involvement of youth (Evans 2007). If students feel they are connected to a community, they have group membership and are an integral part of the affairs of the community. With membership comes a sense of identity and a high value is placed on the shared emotional relationship with other residents (Columbo, Mosso, and DePiccoli 2001). They also have a strong appreciation for the personality of the area and its residents (Chavis and Pretty 1999). Community membership means a feeling of emotional safety, identity with the history and symbolism of the community, recognition of the shared boundaries and values of the community, and possessing a personal investment in the affairs of the people (Albanesi, Cicognani, and Zani 2007). Community membership allows an individual the opportunity to become involved in the affairs of the area and to use his/her influence in handling community affairs. The sense of belonging increases political participation and builds competence in the building of communities (Columbo, Mosso, and DePiccoli 2001). When students choose to belong

to a community, they have a stronger identity with that group and a stronger sense of belonging (Obst and White 2007). They are also apt to have higher levels of fulfillment and participation. The strong sense of belonging enables individuals to take active roles in engagement.

The pattern of engagement for all youth and young adults has changed over the decades. Andolina and others (2002) point out that all youth are now a part of the dot.com generation. They receive information in a different form than other generations and their social contact is highly mechanized via cell phones, computers, and other technical devices. Face-to-face discussions with their peers may only happen in social settings or in the classroom. There doesn't seem to be time for "over-the-fence" conversations with neighbors or time to watch the news on television, read a newspaper, or listen to the news and commentary on the radio. Their form of information comes in truncated electronic bursts. If information is to be exchanged, it is done quickly. This form of engagement has created a pace of life that leaves little room for the slow processes associated with civic betterment. It is also this type of communication that connects youth and young adults to their generation. There are questions, however, about the affect of the digital divide on the communication links used by African American youth and young adults to gain access to civic opportunities and civic knowledge.

One study (Evans 2007) indicated that communication between young adults and the older generation is an important key in the engagement of youth and young adults. Youth, in general, do not believe they have the power to be engaged in community affairs, even if they feel a sense of belonging to a community. They feel they lack voice in community affairs unless adults ask them to participate. The invitation to participate creates a meaningful role and allows space for the young adults and youth to experience the challenges of community betterment. The participation may simply involve a partnership between youth and adults. Youth and young adults want coaching, dialoging, and connections to the older generations (Camino and Zeldin 2002). Giving youth and young adults a voice and empowering them through dialog and asking for their assistance provides a critical link in activating and developing social capital and civic participation.

The Study

The Methodology and Participants

The researchers began looking at civic involvement of Black students at a Midwestern university. The results that are reported here are from the piloting of the study, so the participant numbers are small. The study is being developed to examine the civic engagement of African American youth and young adults. It was hypothesized that unless there is a sense of community and connectedness, Black youth may feel detached from or have limited access to community-shaping factors, thus jeopardizing their interest and participation in civic engagement.

The pilot study involved thirty-nine African American college students aged eighteen to twenty-four. There were twenty-six females and thirteen males. Participants were administered a fifteen-item survey instrument developed from the CIRCLE quiz. Additional questions were developed by the researchers. In addition, several of the students were part of a focus group to refine the questionnaire and provide deeper meaning to some of the responses found on the survey.

Results

Is there engagement?

Preliminary results from the piloting of the survey indicated that the students were engaged in the community. Fifty-six percent had helped a group or individual solve a community problem in the past year. Some 64 percent of that group had volunteered for a youth, children's or educational organization. Fifty-four percent had volunteered for a religious organization. Another 31 percent had volunteered for a health or social service organization. Students who had not been engaged cited two major reasons: no available time and work commitments.

Who influences students to participate?

When asked who influenced students to participate, the pilot study indicated that both parents and peers had equal influence on the students (56 percent). The second most influential group was individuals within the community (36 percent). The third group was teachers and ministers (26 percent).

Is there access to community leadership?

When asked do youth have access to city officials, 74 percent of the respondents said no. If they had access to state government officials, 84.5 percent of the participants said no. If the students had access to community and/or neighborhood leaders, 56 percent said there was no access. The only group the students felt they had access to was university administrators (72 percent).

Is participation in the community expected?

One set of questions asked the students about their perception of expected participation in the community. Only 38.5 percent of the students believed that they were expected to participate in community organizations. Fifty-nine percent believed they were expected to participate in school activities. Some 41 percent of the respondents felt there was an expectation that they participate in religious organizations. Another 28 percent believed they were expected to participate in neighborhood activities.

Discussion

Research had indicated that Black young adults were actively involved in their communities. The pilot study indicated that more than 50 percent of the students had been involved in their communities in the past year, and all of the students said that at some point they had engaged in activities that could be considered community

engagement. The amount of participation in religious organizations was lower than expected but reflects the trend among young adults of marginal involvement in religious activities.

The literature indicated that for Black youth, peers were more influential than parents. In this preliminary study, the influence of peers was equal to that of parents. Perhaps because the cohort group was college students rather than a combination of middle school, high school, and college students, parental influence may have been stronger than expected. The power of influence of individuals within the community was unexpected. Anecdotal information from the students indicated that individuals they had watched or admired or who worked with them when they were in youth groups like the Boys Scouts, Girls and Boys Clubs, and Girls Club had influenced their interests in being engaged. Adults are ghost mentoring, serving as role models without realizing their actions are being observed by the next group of future leaders. Teachers and ministers were the third group that the respondents identified as influential in their decision to be involved. Researchers assumed that this group would have a broader influence, given the importance of institutions like the schools and churches in educating students and providing opportunities for civic participation.

Regarding access to community leadership, the students overwhelmingly felt they did not have access to neighborhood, local, or state leaders. The only group of leaders they believed they had contact with was university administrators. The results support other research, which indicates that young adults and youth lack access to community leadership, especially if the youth are from minority groups or low-income populations. The lack of access is a resource issue. Resources are important in gaining opportunities for civic practice and acquiring civic knowledge.

Reflecting the literature, the students did not think they were expected to participate in the community. Only 28 percent felt they were expected to participate in neighborhood activities and 38.5 percent thought they were expected to participate in community organizations. Even in the churches, less than half of the students believed they were expected to participate. The university was the only institution in which more than 50 percent of the students felt there was an expectation for participation. Perhaps the students have a greater attachment to the university as their community than their neighborhoods or the city? Perhaps the university has given them a voice to be heard and has encouraged engagement and this has not happened in their neighborhoods?

Conclusion

As a pilot study, the initial information raises numerous questions and concerns. Public officials and community leaders should examine their engagement with African American students. Talking with the students and making them feel a part of the community may be an important first step. Discussion is a venue to empower young adults to begin thinking about their role in their neighborhoods and in the city. If there is no sense of belonging and empowerment, students may ignore the problems that the Black community is having and will create a leadership void.

Leaders need to understand the developmental aspects of leadership. Leadership has to be nurtured. Opportunities for civic engagement should be developed in the schools and in other institutional settings. These opportunities must be accessible to the students beginning in middle school and continue through college. The university has made inroads into getting the students involved, but there is always more that can be done. African American institutions like the churches should assess their role in the development of new leadership. The Black church has traditionally been an important vehicle in community development; it needs to reinvigorate that role and build civic skills among the young congregants.

The issue of resources will need to be addressed. Mechanisms to develop resources for African American students, especially those students who come from low-income households, will be a community challenge. Initiatives to encourage reading the newspaper, watching or listening to the news, following local and national politics, and developing opinions on the issues that affect the Black and overall community will have to be investigated. It will be important that the initiatives be comprehensive by not just instructing or telling young adults what should be done, but will also include modeling or demonstrating how civic engagement is an action activity. Techniques, such as negotiation, verbal and written actions, and community mobilization will have to be taught and practiced.

If belonging is important, what are communities doing to help young Blacks feel they are a part of a community? Has any leadership group asked the students to participate? The sense of community and belonging will need further exploration. As this study progresses, the political engagement of the students will be explored. With local and national elections looming on the horizon, do the students plan to vote? Do they think their vote will make a difference? Finally, study participants will be asked what suggestions they have to encourage young adults, and Black youth specifically, to become actively involved in community engagement.

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