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## **CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG YOUTH**

### **Review of Literature Relevant to the City Year Alumni Impact Studies**

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City Year seeks to improve American democracy by promoting the idea and practice of national service. To this end, City Year runs a full time youth service corps, which “unites a diverse group of 17 to 24 year-old young people for a year of full-time, rigorous community service, leadership development, and civic engagement,”<sup>1</sup> reaches citizens beyond the corps-members through community service events, and promotes policy dialog on the importance of and benefits from service.

Clearly one of the ways that City Year will have its strongest impact on American society over the long run is through the lasting effects it has on its alumni. The direct community service that corps-members do during their year with City Year obviously has positive effects. However, one of the key reasons that City Year is more than simply a service-delivery organization, is that it aims to have significant longer-term effects on alumni. By taking the City Year ethos with them through their later lives, individual alumni’s lives will be affected. Even more importantly, if alumni continue their commitment to service and civic engagement in the decades following service, the effects of City Year will be multiplied, as those alumni communicate that ethos to others, and as they enact civic engagement and service in the far-flung institutions and communities to which they belong.

As part of a larger evaluation initiative, City Year has commissioned Policy Studies Associates to conduct a set of Alumni Impact Studies to assess the effects that City Year has, over the medium and long term, on its alumni.<sup>2</sup> The studies are exploring City Year’s effects on alumni through three interlocking components: a large-scale, one-time survey of a large cross-section of past alumni, a smaller-scale survey of the parents of younger alumni, and a more intensive, longitudinal series of interviews with a set of recent alumni and a set of matched non-participants. This document is designed to set the stage for these studies by reviewing the literature on the roots and effects of civic engagement.

We begin by stepping back somewhat to put civic engagement in the context of the literature from which it has evolved: that on social capital. Civic engagement is a critical component of the broader construct of social capital, and social capital, we will show, is a crucial resource for positive social, emotional, and intellectual development, which youth (and adults) can put to use throughout life. Most importantly for our purposes, understanding the ways that social capital is conceptualized and studied will help us organize the broader literature on civic engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotation from the City Year web site, <http://www.cityyear.org/about/index.cfm>.

<sup>2</sup> In addition to this set of studies of alumni, City Year is also pursuing studies of its effects on its partner organizations and on the communities in which it serves.

Next, we consider several models of how civic engagement develops in the course of a person's life: one model that emphasizes the *process* of developing engagement, and a second model that links civic engagement with the crucial task of positive identity development. These theoretical accounts, and associated empirical research, suggest how civic engagement develops over the life course; they also make clear how civic engagement can both enhance, and be enhanced by, positive youth development more broadly. The discussion then suggests that these developmental opportunities—and the civic engagement that can enhance them—are likely to be particularly lacking for people, including youth, who are disadvantaged in other ways.

Next, the discussion considers the ways that today's changing social and economic contexts are affecting civic engagement, and then explores the expected effects of civic engagement and social capital on youths' intellectual, psychological and emotional, and social development. These changing contexts, in light of the theoretical models of the development of civic engagement, suggest the sorts of effects we might expect City Year to have, and conversely, some effects we should *not* expect City Year to have. For example, we might not expect City Year to increase membership in "traditional" service organizations of the sort that has been declining over the last several decades. Rather, we should expect City Year to influence attitudes and behaviors related to civic engagement (such as social trust and voting), and memberships in organizations whose approach and style are consistent with the sorts of complex lives that City Year alumni (like other young Americans) lead.

This review also considers the research on the effects of civic engagement on other outcomes for individuals. Unfortunately, this is a question for which there is little research. For example, as we discuss below, in a recent review of studies on youth civic engagement, Child Trends found that there was little research on the topic, and the research that exists is generally not very rigorous. Moreover, this research frequently examines the effect of civic engagement programs on later engagement—there is even less research that links civic engagement with other developmental outcomes. It is important to keep in mind, of course, that a *lack of evidence* is not at all the same thing as *negative evidence*. That is, although we do not have strong evidence that civic engagement programs lead to positive outcomes in other areas, we have no reason to believe that they do not, especially because the initial evidence, discussed below, is generally positive. In this context, this document seeks to move beyond the limited research base to consider the insights that can be gained from a somewhat broader research base. While this document reviews what research there is that speaks directly to the outcomes fostered by increased civic engagement, it goes beyond this base to lay out an argument about how we should think about civic engagement in the broader context of fostering positive youth development.

Finally, we conclude by indicating the ways that City Year is extremely well-positioned to promote civic engagement, which should lead to better outcomes for alumni individually. In addition,



we discuss the important role for innovative programs, such as City Year's, in developing and promoting new and improved forms of citizen engagement for the 21st century.

## Civic Engagement in a Social Capital Perspective

Much of the current discussion and debate surrounding civic engagement has grown out of scholarship on *social capital*. In an early and influential discussion, Pierre Bourdieu argues against a purely economic understanding of capital, suggesting that capital be understood as taking three related forms: economic, human (including education, skills, and other attributes), and social. For Bourdieu, social capital “is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships...or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital” (Bourdieu, 1986). In other words, social capital is the set of *social* resources a person has access to, and on which they can draw.

James Coleman builds on this conception, and emphasizes that social capital, as opposed to economic and human capital, “inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors, rather than being an attribute of an individual” (Coleman, 1988, p. S98). Social capital facilitates interaction among people in a social setting. However, because social capital is a public good—one whose benefits accrue to everyone, not just those who invest in building it—there is a tendency for societies to under-invest in it, compared with the amount that would be socially optimal. As with any public good, individuals in a society receive the benefits of social capital regardless of whether they work to increase the overall stock; so they are less inclined to spend time building it themselves.

Coleman also identifies three forms of social capital: the trust fostered by social networks, which ensures that obligations will be repaid; the information that social networks make available; and the norms and sanctions that social networks enforce and that facilitate certain types of action and restrain others. He also distinguishes between family social capital, among members of a family, and social capital in the community, which exists among members of the broader community.

Robert Putnam recently popularized the concept of social capital, first in his exploration of Italian local government effectiveness (1993) and then in his examination of the trajectory of social capital in the United States (2000). Putnam defines social capital as a *community* level phenomenon, and focuses on the ways that community trust, norms, and social networks can improve the efficiency of social interaction by allowing actors to coordinate. Drawing on Tocqueville, Putnam emphasizes the role of civic associations in fostering the trust and norms associated with social capital:



Participation in civic organizations inculcates skills of cooperation as well as a sense of shared responsibility for collective endeavors. Moreover, when individuals belong to “cross-cutting” groups with diverse goals and members, their attitudes will tend to moderate as a result of group interaction and cross-pressures. These effects, it is worth noting, do not require that the manifest purpose of the association be political. Taking part in a choral society or a bird-watching club can teach self-discipline and an appreciation for the joys of successful collaboration (1993, p. 90).

When we are in a community with many social ties and networks, we can get information more easily, participate in commerce with less fear of dishonesty and fraud, and become better democratic citizens through our own civic engagement. Transaction costs are reduced, because trust reduces the need for systems of verification, impartial third parties to police transactions, and other formal and informal costs of engaging in social interaction.

### **Measurement Debates and Why They Matter**

Social capital, argue Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam, makes communities function better and facilitates individuals’ transactions within those communities. However, differences in precise definitions and emphasis have produced different strategies for measuring and analyzing social capital.

Those working in the tradition of Coleman have measured social capital at the individual level. Their focus has been on family characteristics, the links between parents and children, and measures of parents’ links with the broader community. Because Coleman was particularly interested in family social capital, he and those following him measure social capital through such indicators as parents’ presence in the home, the family’s mobility, church attendance, and the number of children present.

In addition, some researchers measure family social capital in terms of parents’ linkages with the broader community. This research tradition has generated many studies showing that children who grow up in families with greater social capital have better outcomes. (See, e.g., Buchel and Duncan, 1998; Coleman, 1988; Frank and Yasumoto, 1998; Furstenberg and Hughes, 1995; Hagan et al., 1996; McNeal, 1999; Parcel and Geschwender, 1995; Parcel and Menaghan, 1993; Schneider et al., 1997; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch, 1995; Teachman et al., 1996; and Teachman et al., 1997).

McDevitt and Chaffee (2000, 2002) have also found that children can affect their parents’ civic engagement. In their studies of the effects of a high-school civics curriculum, they found that in addition to affecting the students directly, the program led to increased political discussions at home, which increased parents’ interest in and information about politics as well.

Turning to studies of social capital in the political arena, social capital is measured and analyzed at several different levels: some measure and analyze individuals' levels of social capital, whereas others look to social capital as a characteristic of a community. At the individual level, cognitive approaches focus on psychological characteristics and skills of individuals (e.g., trust in others, skill at participating in public life, tolerance). In addition, given the interest in promoting good democracy, individual-level social capital is often measured in terms of political or quasi-political participation—in terms of voting, voluntary participation in political activity, such as working for a candidate running for office, and participation in local government activities, such as on a school board.

Krishna and Shrader (2000) divide strategies for measuring social capital into those that focus on cognitive factors and those that focus on structural factors. Those who focus on cognitive factors consider values, attitudes and beliefs, norms, and other aspects of what people believe and/or how they view the social world. Those who focus on structural characteristics consider the structure and extent of networks and of social norms (as they exist in society, as opposed to how people *understand* those norms), among other elements. They examine how many organizations, such as amateur sports clubs, church groups, social organizations, and hobby clubs, someone is involved in and how much they participate.

Putnam focuses primarily on structural social capital, although he considers cognitive measures as well, and he measures social capital at the aggregate level. Thus, he considers cognitive measures, including the average degree of social trust in society. Most of his focus, however, is structural, which he measures in terms of the aggregate organizational involvement of people in the community—what are the membership levels of the local soccer club, the PTA, and so on—and in terms of aggregate political participation rates. Hence, Putnam's title, *Bowling Alone*: he argues that bowling league memberships are down over the past half century, while bowling itself is up. We are now bowling alone (or with our families) rather than in bowling leagues. He argues that it is not so important whether any one person is a member of an organization—or which organizations they join. Rather, the overall density of organizational connections in *a society as a whole* is the key to understanding that society's level of social capital and thus its capacity for continual self-examination and renewal.

It is through these networks that people gain information about life beyond their narrow individual and family lives. Thus, for example, Putnam draws on extensive economic research that shows that these sorts of informal social ties “can influence who gets a job, a bonus, a promotion, and other employment benefits” (2000, p. 317) This builds on work by Mark Granovetter, who demonstrated the counterintuitive fact that “the ‘weak’ ties that link me to distant acquaintances who move in different circles from mine are actually more valuable than the ‘strong’ ties that link me to relatives and intimate friends whose sociological niche is very like my own” (2000, pp. 22-23). Individuals and society as a whole are better off when people have extensive networks of these “weak



ties” that connect them with information and opportunities they might otherwise not encounter. In addition, Putnam argues that membership and participation in this wide range of activities teaches social trust, which is the basis for collaboration and other forms of social cooperation.

### Simple Decline, or Fundamental Change?

Putnam has had such a large impact because he sounded an alarm, sparking the current focus on social capital and, more broadly, on civic engagement, by warning that declining levels of social capital have thrown America into crisis. Miller described Putnam’s basic argument:

Mr. Putnam marshaled empirical evidence to show that, for several decades, America had been depleting its stock of this "social capital." Since the 1950s and '60s, he wrote, the country had experienced sharp drops in voting, voluntarism, and confidence in public institutions. Fewer citizens were joining fraternal and service organizations such as the Shriners and the Boy Scouts. Membership in labor unions and the Parent Teacher Association had fallen, and church attendance had declined or, at best, stagnated. What's more, the percentage of Americans expressing some distrust of the federal government had risen from 30 per cent in 1966 to 75 per cent in 1992 (Miller, 1999).

There is much debate about these trends, however. Some analysts accept—more or less—Putnam’s definition of social capital but take issue with his reading of the evidence of decline. For example, Everett Carl Ladd argues that civic engagement is not, in fact, declining. Rather, people’s organizational affiliations are *changing*. While Americans may be less likely to join bowling leagues, the PTA, and the fraternal lodge, they are socializing at their children’s soccer games, joining local, non-PTA-affiliated school groups, and linking up with environmental organizations (Ladd, 1999).

Others argue that the 1950s, the baseline for Putnam and many others’ analyses, was a period with an abnormally high degree of membership in organizations, so the decline is really a return to the normal state. Schudson (1998) argues that the 1950s “surely reflected a moment of unusual consensus in American life held together by Cold War paranoia, middle-class complacency, postwar affluence, and the continuing denial of a voice in public life to women and minorities.” Thus, he suggests, we should not necessarily mourn the passing of this social structure.

Others counter, however, that some of these new sorts of interaction do not foster many of the benefits of traditional membership patterns. For example, Skocpol (1999) suggests that the new organizations, such as environmental lobbying groups, are not “real” organizations in the sense that they do not involve actual face-to-face membership activity beyond sending a check. These sorts of political involvements generally are focused on private—rather than public—concerns, and are often coordinated nationally, with little substantive grassroots involvement beyond financial donations.

Still others have criticized Putnam at a somewhat deeper level, suggesting that the very *definition* of social capital, or at least the ways in which social capital is manifested, has changed in fundamental ways over time. Robert Wuthnow (1998) agrees that membership in civic organizations such as Kiwanis has declined, but argues that we cannot understand the significance of those declines without understanding the social context in which they have occurred. Based on a combination of intensive interviews and broad, nationally representative surveys, Wuthnow argues that the nature of civic engagement has changed fundamentally over the last half century, making analysis of decline or increase more complex than Putnam's analysis suggests. Moreover, he suggests that those changes reflect broader changes in the society over that period; that "we cannot grasp the dynamic of civic participation today without viewing it in relation to the broader changes in families, communities, corporate structures, and government" (p. 4). Thus, service and fraternal organizations rose to prominence in the mid-twentieth century, in tandem with the growth of the middle-management sector in the American economy, precisely because those organizations address the need of middle managers.

Thus, Wuthnow agrees with Putnam that "all these structural changes in the workplace—shorter job tenure, more part-time and temporary jobs, and even independent consultancy—inhibit workplace-based social ties" (p. 90). However, Wuthnow suggests that:

a balanced assessment of how well the United States is prepared to face the next century requires a careful look at new forms of civic involvement. In the past, changes in social conditions were always associated with new forms of cooperation (p. 6).

and that:

Some Americans have begun to search for ways to combat their isolation and to connect with neighbors and like-minded people. They are trying to identify workable ways to help their friends and to receive help from them, to be responsible members of their neighborhoods, and to contribute to the betterment of their communities. They are experimenting with looser, more sporadic, ad hoc connections in place of the long-term memberships in hierarchical organizations of the past . . . busy men and women do the best they can, giving a little of their time, seeking to be responsible citizens in small ways, and being creative in the ways they relate to their neighbors and the nation (p. 5).

Similarly, Youniss and colleagues (2002) draw attention to the fact that the post-Cold War political order raises new issues in the role of democracy and the globalization of capitalism. These new issues, in turn, confront citizens—and especially youth—with a new set of challenges. These new patterns of challenges, they argue, are decreasing the relevance of old ways of relating to society and politics, and creating opportunities for new forms of civic engagement.



## **The Capital in Social Capital**

While Putnam gives us a basis for defining social capital and warns us about its decline, Coleman's conceptualization of family social capital helps link our thinking about civic engagement with youth development. As discussed above, civic engagement has its roots in specific skills that enable one to participate in public life and in social networks that both link one with public life and reinforce one's sense of identity as an engaged person. As the term "social capital" suggests, these civic skills and the networks that develop from civic engagement are a form of capital. While capital has value in its own right, the crucial role of capital—in general—is that it serves as a resource. Just as a large stock of financial capital can support all manner of economic projects, so a large stock of social capital serves as a resource to build up and draw upon throughout life.

Linking civic engagement back to the various conceptions of social capital makes clear how it can lead to better life outcomes for the individual as well. For the political theorist, civic engagement is an end in itself, insofar as it creates a stronger, more robust democracy. This, presumably, leads eventually to better lives for citizens in that democracy.

While we may view civic engagement as an end in itself, with positive benefits for society at large, we can also view civic engagement as an intermediate outcome for individuals. The path to civic engagement involves building a set of resources that have general value. As with any form of capital, once built, social capital can be deployed for a variety of purposes and individual ends. One's contacts can be put to use to find a job, to improve one's community, to provide assistance for a family crisis, or to help socialize one's child. (In this last regard, see the SEARCH Institute's survey of adult-child interaction [Scales et al., 2002]). Thus, insofar as we can help youth develop social capital, we give them a resource that will be useful in promoting positive outcomes throughout life.

## **Models of Civic Engagement**

Several models are available to depict the development of civic engagement, and thus to help us understand how to foster it among youth. In this section, we discuss two important models: the "civic voluntarism model," which focuses on the personal characteristics of individuals and the social networks through which they are recruited into civic service; and a model that focuses on the important place of civic engagement for positive individual and social identity development.

## Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's Civic Voluntarism Model

In *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) develop a comprehensive theory about political participation and present data from a large-scale national survey of Americans. Because they over-sample those who participate, they are able to examine the roots of political participation among the relatively rare individuals who participate at very high levels. They explore the roots of a broad array of types of political participation, including voting, financial donation, donation of time, and voluntary activities in religious and other non-political organizations.

The authors explain political participation in terms of the effects of three factors. First, those with greater *participatory resources* participate more. Not surprisingly, these resources include money and time: those with more available time participate in politics more than those who do not. Similarly, those with higher incomes participate more than those with lower incomes, holding other factors constant, a finding that holds both for financial donations and for other sorts of participation that are less directly tied to finances. Resources also include *civic skills*, such as literacy and verbal skill, organizational and leadership ability, and so on. Logically enough, those who have the necessary skills have an easier time participating, compared with those for whom the actual substance of participation is more challenging.

Second, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady identify *engagement with politics* as a factor that increases political participation. Not surprisingly, those who are more interested in politics and have more knowledge about politics are more likely to take an active role in participating politically. In addition to interest and knowledge, they find that those with a greater psychological attachment to the political system participate more. Thus, people who feel that they are personally qualified to participate in politics (i.e., those with higher political efficacy) and those who feel strongly attached to one of the political parties are more likely to engage in political activity, compared with those who feel less engaged or are less attached to a party.

In addition to personal characteristics, a third factor that plays an important role in promoting participation is recruitment. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady find that people do not simply choose to participate on their own. Rather, people are recruited into participation. This recruitment takes place through social networks: those who are more connected to those networks are more likely to be recruited into political participation. Rosenstone and Hansen (1992) also explore the role of recruitment into political activity. They show that, reasonably enough, politicians act strategically to recruit those citizens who are most likely to participate. Finally, Don Green and Alan Gerber have conducted a series of experiments, demonstrating that citizens are more likely to vote when they are contacted and encouraged to vote (Green and Gerber, 2001; Gerber and Green, 2000, 2001).



Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's "civic voluntarism model" links together these elements over a person's life course. They argue that resources, engagement, and connection with recruitment networks all develop through the life course, as (1) initial characteristics (e.g., race, gender, and parent's education) affect (2) access to pre-adult experiences (political discussion in the home, education, and high school activities), which affect (3) institutional involvements (job, religion, and non-political organizations), which affect (4) participation resources (income, time, civic skills, and political interest and information), which finally affect (5) participation itself.

### **Civic Engagement and Social Identity Development**

James Youniss and colleagues (Youniss and Yates, 1997; Youniss et al., 1999, 2001, 2002) present a somewhat different theoretical perspective on the development of engagement, which sheds additional light on the roots and consequences of social capital and civic engagement. They suggest that the research base on civic engagement is thin in part because the intellectual basis is thin:

In our view, the rationale for this movement [to increase youth civic engagement] is thinly based on slogans about combating ascendant individualism and repairing alienation between the generations. The majority of arguments seem to be solipsistic in asserting that service ought to benefit participating youth because service is, in itself, altruistic (Youniss and Yates, p. 2).

They go on to develop a model that embeds community service in a theoretical model of identity formation, in order to provide an intellectual basis for understanding the role of service. In particular, they develop

a theoretical conception of service that intertwines with the developmental process of identity construction . . . rather than focusing on the inward search for authenticity and self-validation, we emphasize adolescents' investment in social, political, and moral ideologies. Adolescents cannot survive as free-standing entities, but need to identify with transcendent ideas that provide the self with enduring sources of meaning. We propose, therefore, that community service offers opportunities for this crucial self-society linkage in identity construction (p. 3).

Building on Erik Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development, Youniss and colleagues are particularly concerned with the *social* side of identity development. Although Erikson's ideas on identity development have gained popularity, they argue, the social side of identity development has been largely ignored.

Social identity, in contrast to personal identity, is based on employing one's agency collaboratively in constructing a better world. Choosing an ideology and working to bring it to fruition . . . moves the identity process ahead. Erikson stressed youth's role in social

evolution, as youth expend their “loyalties and energies both to the conservation of that which continues to feel true and to the revolutionary correction of that which has lost its regenerative significance.” (p. 24; quotation is from Erikson, 1968, p. 134)

Only by engaging in society—and working to make it better—can youth come to terms with who they are, what they believe, and how they relate to others and to society as a whole. Thus, they suggest, *social* identity development is one of the crucial underpinnings for successful youth development in all domains.

Doug McAdam’s historical work on the civil rights movement (1988) illustrates this close link between social identity development and civic and political involvement. McAdam studied the participants in Freedom Summer 1964, in which a group of northern college students went to southern states to participate in voter registration drives. He found that Freedom Summer led to major changes in identity development of participants, compared with a group of applicants who did not ultimately participate. Those who participated became much more invested in political involvement long after the summer of 1964. Moreover, the long-term effects of participation were not uniform. McAdam found that one crucial predictor of long-term change, in both identity formation and behavior, was whether participants returned to a community that reinforced the social identities surrounding activism that they had developed. Those who returned to colleges where they interacted with other activists had their engaged identities reinforced and strengthened; those who returned to colleges where there were few others with interest in participation did not show such profound long-term effects.

As these theoretical discussions make clear, the institutions with which an individual is involved are vitally important to understanding that individual’s involvement with public life. These institutions are the place where people learn the skills that foster participation and position them to be recruited into an activity. In addition, institutional involvements are an important mechanism for the creation and reinforcement of psychological identity.

### **The Upshot: Cumulative Advantage and Disadvantage**

The inter-related effects of skills, institutional connections, and identity help to explain the big differences in participation rates among different people. One of Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s most important conclusions is that the various factors that lead to political participation—and to civic engagement more generally—tend to cumulate. That is, people with initial advantages early in life are most likely to be positioned to learn the skills, make the informal and formal connections, be recruited, and develop identities that incline them to become and stay engaged in public life. Because political engagement can translate into material outcomes—both through its effects on the decisions and choices of those in power, and through the positive effects of social capital directly on individuals—this



accumulation tends to reinforce other inequalities in society, in which those with initial resources are best positioned to improve their position.

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady identify some institutions that can mitigate this cumulative advantage and disadvantage. Most notably, religious institutions are a place where people gain participatory skills; these institutions are relatively more open than most to individuals without initial resources. In addition, although Verba and colleagues do not emphasize the role of identity, religious institutions' focus on religious and spiritual identity are also likely to reinforce the skills that can come from participating in religious institutions.

It should be noted, however, that there is important variation among different types of religious institutions. For example, Wuthnow finds that evangelical Protestant denominations have historically been much less likely to enhance their members engagement in the broader civic sphere, compared with the Catholic church and mainline Protestant denominations, probably because of the more inward-focused nature of many evangelical faith, and their frequent critiques of mainstream culture. More recently, evangelical denominations have become more engaged politically—as their demographic base has shifted from rural areas to the suburbs. However, given the continuing critique of mainstream culture inherent in religious right-wing activism, it is unclear how this activity will translate into the broader civic realm (Wuthnow, 1999; see also Putnam, 2000, chapter 5; Verba et al., 1995, chapter 13).

Nevertheless, the basic story of cumulative disadvantage generally holds: those individuals who are disadvantaged economically—including disadvantaged youth—are the very people who are likely to have few resources for civic participation and little access to broad, useful social networks. Their relative shortage of social capital simply compounds the challenges they face as they move through life. This is one of the reasons that programs such as City Year—which seek to enroll both relatively disadvantaged and more advantaged young people—are so important. By building social capital relatively early in life for people who might otherwise have relatively few such resources, City Year can help to set them on a “virtuous spiral,” in which the opportunities created by City Year lead to other opportunities that cumulate positively through the life course.

## **Changing Contexts**

As we think about ways to increase engagement and social capital generally, it is important to consider the ways that the changing contexts of contemporary life may affect those efforts. Wuthnow's (1999) argument about changing forms of engagement suggests that those seeking to reinvigorate civic engagement face a very different social and political context, compared with that of 20, 50, or 100

years ago. People are busier and their social networks more fluid. This increases the difficulty of mobilizing youth because there is no pre-existing network of institutional affiliations to draw upon.

Happily, reinvigoration of civic engagement among youth need not be based on the same institutional forms as in prior eras. In fact, Wuthnow argues in part that attempts to rebuild the past are prone to failure. There are some trends among current youth that suggest a potential reinvigoration of engagement with civic life, albeit manifested differently than in the past. These trends can serve as a foundation upon which programs designed to increase civic engagement can build.

In a recent study funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and presented in conjunction with the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), Keeter and colleagues examine the civic attitudes and behaviors of Americans, with a particular focus on the differences among different generations. They found that current youth (the “DotNet Generation,” age 15-25) do indeed participate less than older generations in traditional political activities, such as voting, writing letters to Members of Congress, and the like. In addition, interest in politics is down among youth. The DotNets have very low levels of engagement with politics and of efficacy regarding their ability to participate in traditional politics. Their levels of social trust are comparatively low as well. (Others have noted that levels of trust in formal political institutions—such as the presidency, Congress, and the courts—has been falling also.) In addition, younger Americans do not share older generations’ views about the responsibilities of citizenship. Overall, they find that nearly six in ten DotNets are *completely* disengaged from public life.

However, other measures show more positive signs. The DotNet generation is somewhat *more* likely than older generations to have engaged in volunteer activity, and they are almost as likely to participate in consumer activism, including boycotts and “buycotts,” in which they purchase from a company to reward it for some corporate behavior. In addition, young people are more socially tolerant, and, interestingly, are more favorable toward government intervention to solve problems, compared with older generations. Finally, the DotNet generation feels a strong sense of generational identity—69 percent say that their generation is unique, compared with 40-51 percent of those from prior generations. This contrast between political and non-political activism is reflected strikingly in a survey of students from the Kennedy School’s Institute of Politics, in which 60 percent said they were actively engaged in community service, whereas only 7 percent had been or planned to get involved in political campaigns (Mason and Nelson, 2000, cited in Galston, 2001).

These findings make some sense, given the political context in which youth have grown up. The members of this generation were all born after Watergate, and have grown up in an environment of near-constant political scandal, from the Iran-Contra affair through the impeachment of a president.



Thus, it is not entirely surprising that youth have retreated from the mechanics of formal politics and lost some faith in traditional political institutions.

At the same time, youth are concerned about problems in society, and reasonable numbers of them participate in activities designed to address those problems. These young people, as Galston notes, “characterize their volunteering as an alternative to official politics, which they see as corrupt, ineffective, and unrelated to their deeper ideals” (2001, p. 220). This strong sense of generational identity and relatively robust levels of non-political participation are resources that organizations and programs can build upon. City Year is very well positioned to do just this, because its programs and activities outside of the traditional, official political sphere. The challenge, for City Year and for Americans generally, is also to link this enthusiasm back to the traditional political sphere.

## **Outcomes: The Effects of Civic Engagement and Social Capital**

There is little research on the effects of civic engagement on later development and life outcomes. The research that exists—much of it summarized in a recent Child Trends research brief (Zaff and Michelsen, 2002)—generally focuses on the effects of civic engagement programs *on later civic engagement*, not on broader youth development outcomes. This research, therefore, could be considered research on the precursors of adult civic engagement rather than research on the effects—broadly conceived—of youth civic engagement programs.

A few exceptions to this pattern are noteworthy. For example, Youniss and colleagues (1999, 2001) have shown in several contexts that high school students who are involved in community service were less likely to exhibit “deviant orientations” (i.e., to report marijuana use), compared with other students. Similarly, Eccles and Barber (1999) found that involvement with church and volunteer activities was associated with positive educational trajectories and low rates of risk-taking.

However, the research base on this important topic remains severely limited. Therefore, in this section we sketch out some expectations about the ways in which youth civic engagement programs *are likely* to affect later developmental outcomes, theoretically speaking. Thus, the following section draws on the broader literature on youth development to identify the effects that might be expected for civic engagement. Then the final section draws together the lessons of this entire document to emphasize the importance of two factors in designing and implementing civic engagement programs: attention to civic skills and to networks of participation.

## Theoretical Expectations from Literature on Youth Development

There are several aspects of civic engagement that should lead us to expect it to be linked with an array of broader positive individual outcomes. On behalf of the National Research Council, the Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth has synthesized much of the research on preconditions for successful youth development (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). This research identifies a set of personal and social *assets* that facilitate physical development, intellectual development, psychological and emotional development, and social development. Several of these assets—and categories of assets—have clear linkages with civic engagement and social capital. Thus, although there is little research formally linking civic engagement programs with positive youth development outcomes, we should have strong theoretical expectations that successful civic engagement programs will, indeed, promote youth development more generally. This should occur because civic engagement itself is closely linked with some of the developmental assets and helps to facilitate others.

***Intellectual development.*** Eccles and Gootman cite developmental psychologist Erik Erikson's argument that the development of a self concept is one of the central tasks of adolescence "as young people consider what possibilities are available to them and try to come to a deeper understanding of themselves in the social and cultural settings in which they live" (p. 57). As discussed above, Youniss and colleagues have articulated a strong argument—and collected data to demonstrate—that civic engagement and civic engagement programs can play a powerful role in helping youth to shape positive, productive self concepts. More generally, Eccles and Gootman identify "'planfulness' and good decision-making skills" as important for successful development; both of these types of skills can be enhanced and practiced by participation in various civic activities (pp. 76-77).

***Psychological and emotional development.*** In this domain, Eccles and Gootman cite "quite strong longitudinal and cross-sectional support for the importance" of several factors that are likely to be enhanced when youth become civically engaged. These include self-regulation skills, and "confidence in one's self-efficacy and one's competence in valued domains." They also cite research on the importance of other characteristics, including a sense of personal responsibility and a sense of mattering and meaning in one's life (pp. 79-80). While none of these assets is uniquely linked with civic engagement, they are all likely to be enhanced by meaningful activities that enhance civic engagement.

***Social development.*** Eccles and Gootman find that youth connectedness, being valued by the larger society, and institutional affiliations are all related to positive youth development. These social assets predict students' school success, mastery of skills, long-term educational and employment attainment, good mental health, positive personal and social identities, confidence in one's efficacy, optimism, and good self-regulation skills. At the same time, these assets predict that youth will avoid



problem behaviors and move relatively smoothly into key adult roles as intimate partner, spouse, parent, worker, and active community member (p. 81).

Civic engagement, community service, and related programs should serve to enhance the connectedness, institutional attachments, and feeling of being valued among youth. Eccles and Gootman mention that there is little evidence of the direct effects of civic engagement and service, but point out that this is “not because the evidence is negative but because there have been so few studies focusing on these social development characteristics” (p. 82).

In addition, one of the great potential strengths of civic engagement as a general youth development strategy is its ability to draw youth into areas that are pertinent in their lives. Eccles and Gootman draw attention to the importance of developmental task being at the appropriate level of challenge for an individual. If a task is too advanced or hard, frustration ensues; if it is too basic or easy, the result is boredom. To promote positive development, activities must be in the “zone of proximal development,” in the words of developmental psychologist Vygotsky (cited in Eccles and Gootman, page 327). As youth move into and through adolescence, they will be best served by activities with clear importance and clear links with the broader world into which they are preparing to move. Thus, activities that focus explicitly on engaging with the community at large should be particularly important in this regard.

Finally, Eccles and Gootman review a framework for child development developed by Bronfenbrenner (1994), which helps to show the important potential role for civic engagement and social capital in successful youth development. Bronfenbrenner suggests that developing youth must negotiate systems at three levels: the “micro-system,” which refers to the activities and setting of daily life; the “meso- and exo-systems,” which include relationships with the community; and the “macro-system,” which includes the culture at large. Eccles and Gootman point out the critical role that social capital (i.e., linkages in and among these various institutions) can play for youth development. They note that Bronfenbrenner

draw[s] attention to the critical role of intermediate institutions—families, schools, places of work, and so forth—and particularly the interrelationships between these institutions . . . through [relationships with these different systems] youth gain access to educational opportunities, life skills, jobs, and support that give them an advantage in the adult world (Eccles and Gootman, p. 323).

Moreover, Eccles and Gootman reiterate the point about cumulative disadvantage: youth who are already disadvantaged in other ways are particularly likely to fall short in this area:

A critical point is that access to social capital is not universal. Some of the disproportionate social and economic disadvantage borne by urban or poor rural children can be related to limitations in social capital available in many inner-city neighborhoods or isolated rural communities (p. 324).

## **Lessons for City Year and the Alumni Studies?**

A vibrant and healthy civic sphere is one of the most important bases for a healthy democracy. In addition, this review has suggested that civic engagement is beneficial to those who are engaged, above and beyond the benefits for society as a whole, although the research base in this area is small and methodologically limited. That said, the results that exist are generally positive on the effects of civic engagement, and reinforce its importance for positive youth development. As far as we can tell, civic engagement as a youth leads to civic engagement in later life. Moreover, youth civic engagement appears to be linked with other positive developmental outcomes for individuals, and we have strong theoretical reasons for expecting civic engagement—and social capital more generally—to be linked with positive life trajectories. However, we cannot be as sure of these basic results as we might like, and the research record is not unmixed.

Nevertheless, the theoretical argument advanced in this review, along with the research that does exist, suggest two critical pathways for the fostering of civic engagement and the positive outcomes that flow from it. These pathways are the role of *recruitment networks* and of *civic skills* in the creation and sustenance of civic engagement.

### **The Importance of Recruitment Networks**

As discussed above, the literature on political participation makes clear that personal recruitment plays a major role in spurring participation. Rosenstone and Hansen (1999) and Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) both find that being asked to participate stimulates actual participation. Moreover, Verba, Schlozman and Brady find that former members of youth associations of various sorts are embedded in politically active networks, which positions them to be mobilized to further activity later in life. This mechanism plays an important role in creating the over-time developmental dynamic of participation that underlies their theory. Brady and colleagues (1999) follow up this insight with an account of the reasons that this occurs: in short, it is far easier for those who seek to spur activity to reach out to those they already know than to locate new people.

Unfortunately, little research has focused on the role of social networks in the development of civic engagement and social capital. One recent exception is a paper by Stolle and Hooghe (2002).



They argue that while most social capital research has focused on the attitudes associated with civic engagement, one important pathway to future civic engagement is through the social networks that are formed when youth participate in civic and political activity. They examine data from a study of American high school students in 1965, following them into adulthood through 1982, and find that while civic participation in youth has relatively few effects on later *attitudes*, it does lead participants to be embedded in social networks that can serve as the basis for altering social capital and civic engagement.

One of the most important ways for City Year to have impact on its alumni, then, is for those alumni to become enmeshed in social networks that connect them with other like-minded people. This can take place in networks created directly by City Year—when alumni stay in touch with each other and with the City Year organization itself. However, it can also take place less directly, when alumni become connected with people and social networks through their experiences as Corps Members, and then maintain those ties over time. This can occur through contact with people in partner organizations and through contact with people in the communities in which Corps Members serve during their year of service.

As discussed above, this can have positive effects for the individual alumni themselves, as when those networks facilitate a job search, provide support when moving to a new city, and so on. In addition, these networks are, of course, the very stuff of social capital and civic engagement. By being connected with networks of other civically-minded young people, alumni will find it easier to continue to take action to solve social and community problems, will be more likely to be recruited to solve those problems, and will, in turn, be more likely to mobilize others to take action as well. Moreover, as the work by Youniss and colleagues and by McAdam has made clear, one's social networks are vitally important for building and sustaining a sense of personal and social identity that encompasses civic engagement and civic action.

Thus, the impact on alumni—and ultimately on American society—will be increased insofar as City Year succeeds in connecting its Corps Members with a range of productive social networks, and as City Year continues to keep in touch with past alumni (and to facilitate alumni keeping in touch with each other). In addition, understanding the ways that useful social, professional, and personal networks are created and enhanced by the City Year experience is an important topic for the Evaluation of Alumni Impact as well as for studies of City Year's effect on service partners and communities.

## Civic Engagement Skills: the Lessons from Research on Service Learning

The literature and theoretical models of civic engagement also make clear that civic *skills* are the other important pathway to maintaining and increasing civic engagement. One area where the important role of skills has become clear is in the research surrounding service-learning initiatives. There are important parallels between service learning and efforts to boost civic engagement more generally, and between the research traditions associated with both subjects.

Unlike other initiatives aimed at increasing civic engagement, service-learning programs are based in schools. In most other ways, however, service learning and civic engagement have similar goals. The National Center for Education Statistics defines service learning as “curriculum-based community service that integrates classroom instruction with community service activities” (cited in Galston, 2000, p. 229). Like broader civic engagement efforts, the goal of most service learning initiatives is not only to do community service but also to help form engaged, effective citizens.

In his review of research on political knowledge and engagement, Galston characterizes the research on service learning:

Billig (2000), in the most recent survey of the evaluation literature, remarks, “Research in the field of service learning has not caught up with the passion that educators feel for it.” She goes on to catalog the deficiencies of this research. Few of the studies used control groups; few tracked whether short-term impacts were sustained over time; many relied on self reports; few specified theoretical models or tested hypotheses clearly linked to these models (p. 229).

Overall, Galston called the findings of this research “mixed but encouraging”—students who participate in community service are far more likely to participate and lead in later life (Youniss et al., 1997), “but relatively few studies are structured to distinguish the effects of youth participation from the effects of preexisting civic behaviors and attitudes” (p. 229). However, they note that other studies find rather limited or nonexistent effects. Similarly, in their review of the research on civic engagement sponsored by Child Trends, Zaff and Michelsen (2002) placed service learning programs in their “mixed reviews” category.

Kirlin (2002) finds a similarly mixed bag of research, and cites another review of service-learning programs that suggests that “while attitudinal changes were somewhat common there was no evidence of behavior changes” (p. 571). Kirlin goes on to argue that lasting effects should only be expected when programs are explicitly designed to increase students’ *skills* in civic behavior through participatory activities. She suggests, for example, that effective programs should be designed to:



facilitate[e] students' discovery of what problems exist, whom they need to contact to address the issues, and what types of projects they will undertake. Giving students the opportunity to identify fellow students with similar concerns and then to decide what they will do about it is an important first step. Underlying this relatively simple step are several skills including voicing one's opinion, expressing interests, identifying like-minded individuals, and reaching consensus about action (p. 573).

Moreover, her review of the research on service learning suggests that a substantial part of the inconsistency among findings can be explained by the degree to which programs include active student involvement in civic skill building. Those programs that emphasize the skills of civic participation and that get students to actually practice those skills seem to have much greater long-term impacts, compared with programs that do not. In cases where the "service" in service learning is simply a rote requirement, few long-term benefits accrue.

As with the case of social networks, City Year is clearly very well positioned to build the civic skills of its members. The service year is designed explicitly to train Corps Members in a wide variety of participatory skills and to build an appreciation of and commitment to service and other civic participation. Thus, the alumni impact study will focus heavily on the degree to which alumni have developed a wide range of participatory skills and attitudes that facilitate participation, and the degree to which they make use of those skills in their lives after leaving City Year.

## **City Year and Civic Engagement**

The design and implementation of City Year's programs, then, is well matched to the task of facilitating civic engagement among alumni. The year of service includes many elements designed to build the intellectual, psychological and emotional, and social assets necessary for effective citizenship and civic participation and entrepreneurship. In addition, the design of the service year is well-suited to broadening and strengthening Corps Members connections with a variety of important social networks, both among alumni, and between alumni and others outside the organization. Thus, City Year is well-positioned to increase the civic engagement of its alumni.

Even more important, however, is the potential impact of City Year and organizations like it on the nature of American civic engagement itself, as the context of civic and political participation changes. Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland (2001) argue that public problems have grown more complex, such that they are no longer soluble through traditional political means. They suggest, moreover, that reinvigorating civic life in America requires more than simply raising the levels of social capital possessed by Americans. Rather, in order to tackle pressing public problems, we need to develop new participation methods—participation that goes beyond the traditional forms of voting,

campaigning, and the like. Sirianni and Friedland argue that these new forms of participation are emerging, as people and organizations come together to tackle community problems and issues in creative, collaborative ways. However, these new forms of participation do not develop in a vacuum. Rather, current civic projects and strategies, which span public and private institutions, have been developed and nurtured by government agencies, by foundations and other non-profit entities, and by private sector organizations as well. Civically minded, engaged citizens are certainly important. However, for these citizens to be effective, new strategies must be incubated and supported by organizations.

Thus, the importance of City Year's role has two faces. First, City Year acts to increase the social capital and civic engagement of its alumni; and, through the alumni, of other citizens as well. In addition, however, as an "action tank" committed to developing, supporting, and promoting creative, collaborative strategies for problem solving in today's society, City Year serves a potentially even-more powerful role in the transformation of participatory strategies more generally.



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