

# The University and Student Political Engagement

James R. Simmons, *University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh*

Bryan Lilly, *University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh*

**ABSTRACT** Prior research has identified a substantial positive relationship between college attendance and civic engagement. This article examines student experiences with university academics and ancillary programs to determine which of these, if any, motivate increased student engagement. Various student characteristics were evaluated to determine their impact on student engagement. Data was obtained from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Current Population Survey (CPS). Results indicated that engagement is related positively to some student college experiences, unrelated to some experiences, and even negatively related to other experiences. Few individual characteristics relate to engagement, ACT scores and gender both impact engagement, and, surprisingly, engagement was higher among men than women.

**D**o college graduates express their political views more strongly and frequently than others because of specific social characteristics related to pursuing a degree in higher education and the occupations, associations, and incomes they will attain after graduation? Or do universities contribute anything to this higher-than-average tendency to express political views? And, if universities do promote student political engagement, what aspects of an undergraduate's academic career are responsible for these higher participation rates?

In this article, we examine the reported political participation of students at one regional comprehensive university and attempt to determine the extent to which the participatory behavior we find can be explained by the institution's contribution. The data we use in this study come from Indiana University's National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), conducted at the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh (UWO) in the spring of 2004. Although NSSE is primarily a survey of student learning experiences, Indiana University allowed UWO and the other University of Wis-

consin (UW) comprehensive universities to add their own consortium questions about student political participation to the instrument. These questions allow us to determine the links, if any, that may connect campus educational experiences and student engagement with the external community.

### INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE

All 13 of the UW four-year universities participate in NSSE as one of the systemwide steps in the performance assessment of Wisconsin's state universities. This survey project collects information biannually about various aspects of the undergraduate experience that a university can use to improve learning and personal development (Simmons 2006). Individual campuses can add questions to the survey instrument to measure their performance on items related to their distinctive missions. The Oshkosh campus supplemented its regular NSSE survey in 2004 with 20 experimental political questions to determine the extent to which it had been successful in achieving its select vision as a scholarly, progressive, public service university "engaging people and ideas for the common good" (University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh 2009). The added questions were developed to be comparable to questions posed on the Current Population Survey (CPS; Lopez and Elrod 2006; Lopez et al. 2006), and to allow us compare UWO student behaviors to national student behaviors.

One main focus of NSSE is to combine data from related questions to develop scores on five academic benchmarks that reflect core objectives shared by universities; these benchmarks are level

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James R. Simmons is a professor and chair of political science at the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh. He has written extensively on public policy, environmental issues, urban governance, and electoral politics for numerous journals and books. He is also co-author of *What Government Can Do with Benjamin I. Page*.

Bryan Lilly is a professor of marketing and Associate Dean of the College of Business at the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh. His research focuses on sales management and consumer behavior. He has also designed interactive simulations that test aspects of individual decision making.

**Table 1**  
**Student Engagement in Politically Oriented Activities**

ACTIVITY	UWO STUDENTS (%)	NATIONAL (%)
Regularly vote in elections	26	20
Canvassed for a political group or candidate	2	1
Recently worked on group community project	20	12
Recently volunteered in community service	43	25
Recently bought product due to political values	32	23
Boycotted a product due to political values	33	23
Participated in a charitable cause	14	10
Raised money for a charitable cause	29	25
Follow public affairs regularly	22	23

of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experience, and supportive campus environment. UWO fell below the national averages on all five of the desired academic outcome benchmarks and even below the averages for the other UW comprehensives on these key item clusters.

Despite their low scores on the academic questions, Oshkosh students reported levels of involvement in various politically oriented activities that were higher than national averages. The NSSE indicated that not only did UWO students vote at a relatively high frequency, but also that many were engaged in politics through community work, consumer behaviors, and efforts to contact officials to express their opinions on political issues (see table 1). UWO students surpassed the national participation rates of currently enrolled college students on eight out of nine activities.

Paralleling the relatively high rate of engagement in politically oriented activities, the survey also indicated that UWO students are active in expressing their political opinions. Specifically, the NSSE supplemental questions asked students whether they had voiced political opinions during the prior twelve months by contacting public officials or the media (see table 2). Once again, UWO students showed higher levels of political expression on four out of five items than did college students in the CPS and CPHNS studies.

NSSE findings also show value-added increases in participation by class rank. Although our first-year students fell below the participation levels on several items such as campaign work, community service, and voting, as found by the University of California, Los Angeles 2004 Freshman National Norms survey (Sax et al. 2004), Oshkosh seniors were more politically engaged than Oshkosh freshman on 13 out of the survey's 14 political variables. Although our freshmen were also generally less politically engaged than first-year students at other UW schools, UWO seniors responded with significantly higher levels of self-reported political participation on over half of the consortium questions as com-

**Table 2**  
**Percent of Students Expressing Political Views during Prior 12 Months**

TYPE OF EXPRESSION	UWO STUDENTS (%)	NATIONAL (%)
Contact public official to express opinion	10	8
Contact newspaper to express opinion	11	4
Contact radio or TV to express opinion	6	7
Sent e-mail petition on political issue	18	10
Signed written petition on political issue	25	12

pared with the engagement patterns for seniors at all other UW comprehensive universities.

### STUDY METHODS AND FINDINGS

To determine whether student political engagement at Oshkosh is produced by the institution's contributions or student characteristics, we created a summed scale of political activity. For each student, this scale added the number of types of political expression in which the student engaged (see table 2), with possible scores ranging from 0 to 5. Given the importance of the five NSSE benchmarks, we tested the association between our summed political expression scale and the five academic benchmarks using regression. We also used regression to test the association between our political expression scale and individual characteristics, such as a student's gender, parents' education, hours worked, socializing, class standing, fraternal or sports participation, spirituality, and academic quality, that might have been expected to either increase or depress student political participation.

Our findings for the institutional variables indicate a positive relationship between student political expression and two of the five academic engagement benchmarks. Active-collaborative learning and an enriching educational experience are both associated with higher levels of political expression (all  $p < .01$ ). Level of academic challenge is negatively associated with student political expression ( $p = .029$ ), and neither student-faculty interaction or supportive campus environment are significantly related to student political expression. The only student variable that is significantly related to student political expression is gender ( $p < .001$ ). When all the variables are combined in a stepwise regression, even student-faculty interaction drops out, and only gender, active learning, enriching educational experience, and student ACT scores prove to be significant (see tables 3 and 4). Analysis of  $R^2$  values indicate that variation in student political expression is more highly driven by institutional efforts associated with NSSE benchmarks than by individual characteristics. When student political expression was regressed solely on the NSSE benchmarks, the adjusted  $R^2$  was 13.9%, which fell to 10.4% when all individual characteristics were included.

One of our more surprising findings was that male students were more politically expressive than were the women. In fact, although female students reported engaging in higher levels of academic challenge than men, this benchmark had a negative association with our political scale. Equally surprising was that such factors as parents' education, class rank, hours spent socializing, extracurricular activities, and church attendance were not

**Table 3**  
**Regression Results, All Variables**

	BETA	t-VALUE	p-VALUE
Level of academic challenge	-0.035	-0.547	0.585
Active and collaborative learning	<b>0.149</b>	<b>1.905</b>	<b>0.058</b>
Student-faculty interaction	0.052	0.694	0.488
Enriching educational experiences	<b>0.158</b>	<b>2.080</b>	<b>0.038</b>
Supportive campus environment	-0.078	-1.251	0.212
Work for pay on campus (hr/wk)	0.078	1.377	0.169
Work for pay off campus (hr/wk)	-0.036	-0.564	0.573
Relaxing/socializing (hr/wk)	-0.007	-0.126	0.900
Caring for dependents (hr/wk)	0.045	0.822	0.412
Commuting to class (hr/wk)	0.050	0.906	0.365
Year	-0.054	-0.805	0.421
Gender	<b>-0.195</b>	<b>-3.487</b>	<b>0.001</b>
Fraternity or sorority	-0.033	-0.619	0.536
Student-athlete	-0.063	-1.163	0.246
Father's education	0.089	1.465	0.144
Mother's education	-0.021	-0.335	0.738
ACT total score	0.080	1.471	0.142
Spiritual participation	0.061	1.127	0.261

Note: For year, freshman = 1, senior = 0; for gender, male = 1, female = 2; for fraternity or sorority, no = 1, yes = 2; for student-athlete, no = 1, yes = 2; for spiritual participation, never = 1, very often = 4. Bolded numbers indicate statistical significance.

**Table 4**  
**Regression Results, Stepwise**

	BETA	t-VALUE	p-VALUE
Gender	-0.185	-3.574	0.000
Active and collaborative learning	0.156	2.381	0.018
Enriching educational experiences	0.130	1.981	0.048
ACT total score	0.113	2.194	0.029

Note: For gender, male = 1 and female = 2

significantly related to student political expression. It was less surprising to find that learning activities such as class discussion, presentations, and projects, as well as educational experiences such as internships, volunteer work, service learning, independent study, conversations outside the classroom, and culminating experiences were related to our political scale (these components of the two benchmarks were positively related to student political expression). Finally, the significant positive relationship between ACT scores and student political expression suggests that recruiting good students is likely to enhance a university's overall level of political engagement.

### SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

A substantial body of research has shown a strong relationship between college attendance and civic engagement (Hillygus 2005;

Rosenstone and Hansen 2002; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 2006). Most studies simply demonstrate a robust correlation between more education and political participation, but without identifying a causal effect or those aspects of the college experience that lead to civic returns to higher education. This positive association might reflect a number of explanatory factors: civically engaged students may be more likely to attend college, extracurricular social networks that develop in college may encourage engagement, or civic engagement might be a product of learning and curricular experiences in college. Our findings provide some support for the first of these three explanations, but even more evidence for the third. We found that participation levels increase with the quality of the student and the character of their "civic educational" experience.

Much good news can be culled from our study. First, faculty can use several classroom activities to encourage their students to become more politically active and expressive. Second, an institution can promote student participation through the range of educational experiences it provides. Furthermore, these instructional and institutional effects are likely to have a greater impact on student political participation levels than are most of the social and individual characteristics of the students that universities recruit. Thus, our findings suggest that an active and collaborative learning environment, along with an enriching educational experience, explains more about the civic engagement level of college students than the demographics or precollege experiences of the student body can.

Our more negative findings include that although our college women were more academically engaged and found the university more challenging than our men, with the exception of community service, UWO was not engaging its female students at a political participatory level approaching that of its male students. Lastly, it was also clear from our study that student quality does matter, and that political engagement at the Oshkosh campus might have been higher if the university had been more selective in the students it registers. ■

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