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Bridging the Gap

AWARENESS, PARTICIPATION, AND THE
CONDITIONS OF STUDENT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
IN INDIANA HIGHER EDUCATION.

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CENTRAL FINDING

Awareness Alone Does Not Lead to Action

The study's central finding is that civic engagement is shaped by the conditions that connect awareness to participation, not by a simple lack of motivation. Indiana college students broadly recognize civic engagement, value action-oriented forms of participation, and are aware of civic opportunities.

Yet participation remains limited and uneven because awareness alone does not lead to action. Whether students participate depends on how they interpret opportunities and whether those opportunities feel feasible, meaningful, socially supported, and worth the investment of time and effort.

Civic engagement therefore depends on the interaction of **exposure, feasibility, interpretation, campus climate, and institutional design.**



Why This Study Matters

The Civic Challenge in Indiana

This work responds to a broad civic challenge in Indiana. Recent civic health research shows persistent concerns related to political participation, civic voice, and young adult engagement, even as Indiana demonstrates strengths in volunteering and community concern. National higher education frameworks similarly argue that civic learning and democratic engagement are core purposes of postsecondary education, not optional add-ons to workforce preparation.

The Need for Student-Centered Evidence

This study, developed through Community-Engaged Alliance's Faculty Fellows Idea Lab, responds to a clear need for Indiana-specific, student-centered evidence about civic engagement in higher education. While colleges and universities often invest in civic programs, service opportunities, public events, and community partnerships, less is known about how students themselves define civic engagement, what opportunities they notice, what prevents them from participating, and what institutional conditions make engagement feel meaningful and possible.

Awareness Versus Participation

Students are aware of civic engagement opportunities, but awareness does not consistently translate into participation. Only about 12% of students reported no awareness of civic opportunities in the previous 30 days, while nearly 36% reported no participation. Students participated in roughly half as many civic activities as they were aware of.

The survey findings complicate deficit-oriented interpretations of low student participation. Rather than pointing to apathy, the data suggest a more complex and more actionable problem. Students often recognize and value civic engagement, but participation is filtered through time constraints, institutional context, perceived impact, belonging, safety, and whether opportunities feel feasible within students' lives.

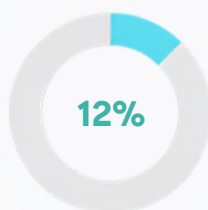


Key Data Highlights

The following statistics summarize the most notable patterns observed across the survey data, highlighting awareness, participation, key predictors, and barriers to engagement.

- **94%** of students identified voting as civic engagement.
- **88%** identified volunteering as civic engagement.
- **12%** reported no awareness of civic opportunities in the past 30 days.
- **36%** reported no civic participation in the past 30 days.
- Awareness was the strongest predictor of participation ($\beta = .510$, $p < .001$).
- Time constraints were the strongest reported barrier to participation.
- Indifference/disinterest was lower than the major time-constraint barriers.

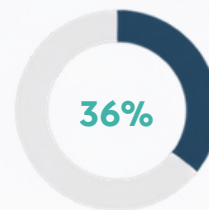
AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION COMPARISON



NO AWARENESS

of respondents were not aware of engagement opportunities

Past 30 Days



NO PARTICIPATION

of respondents did not participate in engagement activities

Past 30 Days



STRONGEST PREDICTOR OF PARTICIPATION

Awareness is the strongest predictor of participation.

Awareness $\beta = .510$, $p < .001$

BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

Barrier means (0-4)



Note: Higher scores indicate a greater perceived barrier.



Study Overview

The 2025–2026 Faculty Fellows Idea Lab cohort set out to answer one guiding research question.

Guiding Research Question

“ **What are Indiana college students’ current perceptions of, barriers to, and experiences in civic engagement?** ”

To answer this question, the research team developed a multi-campus, student-centered survey focused on how students understand, encounter, and participate in civic life.

DOMAINS

The survey was organized around four key domains:



1. Defining Civic Engagement

What students count as civic engagement and what forms they value most.



2. Civic Awareness and Participation

What opportunities students know about and how often they participate.



3. Civic Engagement Barriers and Supports

What prevents or encourages participation, including campus climate.



4. Civic Skills and Future Goals

What civic skills students report developing and what experiences they hope to gain before graduation.

Study Design & Methods

Survey Administration & Sample

The study used a multi-campus, student-centered survey administered across several Indiana higher education institutions, including Ball State University, Indiana University campuses, and private liberal arts institutions including Saint Mary's College and Holy Cross College. The final, cleaned dataset included more than 700 student responses representing a range of institutional contexts, including large public universities, regional campuses, and private colleges.

Mixed-Methods Approach

The project used a mixed-methods design combining quantitative survey analysis with qualitative review of open-ended student responses. Quantitative analyses examined patterns in civic definitions, awareness, participation, barriers, and campus climate, while qualitative coding explored how students described civic meaning, belonging, responsibility, public action, institutional support, and barriers to participation.

Study Intent

The study was designed to better understand how students experience civic engagement rather than to prescribe a specific institutional model or set of interventions. However, the findings do suggest that colleges and universities may benefit from creating clearer, more accessible, and more actionable pathways that help students move from awareness to participation.

The Awareness to Participation Pathway

How students move from recognizing civic life to acting within it

The data show five linked findings. Indiana college students are not simply unaware of civic life, nor are they best understood as apathetic toward public participation. Rather, the findings point to a more complex process: students recognize civic engagement, encounter civic opportunities, and often value participation, but their movement from awareness to action depends on whether engagement feels meaningful, feasible, socially supported, and worth the time and effort required.

Civic participation does not begin and end with opportunity. Students must first recognize an activity as civic, then encounter opportunities to participate, then decide whether those opportunities are realistic within the conditions of their lives. Along the way, campus climate, peer networks, perceived impact, and political or psychological safety shape whether participation feels possible.

“I volunteered during the pandemic, and it made me feel more connected to my local community in a time of uncertainty. It reminded me that society as a whole has lost community spaces. We need more.”

FINDING 1

Students Strongly Recognize Formal and Action-Oriented Civic Engagement

How students define and delimit civic participation

Students demonstrated a strong recognition of formal and action-oriented forms of civic engagement, particularly activities connected to institutional participation, public contribution, and visible community involvement. Voting, volunteering, attending public meetings, contacting elected officials, and jury service received especially strong endorsement as civic activities. At the same time, students were less likely to identify relational, expressive, or informal forms of participation, such as political discussion, social media engagement, or public art, as civic engagement. These patterns suggest that many students interpret civic engagement through a relatively narrow framework emphasizing formal participation, direct action, and publicly visible contribution rather than broader democratic practices of dialogue, relationship-building, cultural expression, or everyday civic interaction.

Qualitative responses reinforced this pattern. Some students explicitly associated civic engagement with formal governmental participation, describing civic value as "voting or anything directly involved with the government process." Others distinguished between civic engagement and broader community involvement, noting that youth mentoring, coaching, or public art may feel more like 'community engagement' than civic engagement. Several students also emphasized action and tangible impact: "Anything involving a boots on the ground approach holds more civic value," one respondent wrote, while another wrote "you have to be taking specific action of some kind to be engaged."

"Anything involving a boots on the ground approach holds more civic value."

"You have to be taking specific action of some kind to be engaged."



FINDING 1 – DATA VISUAL

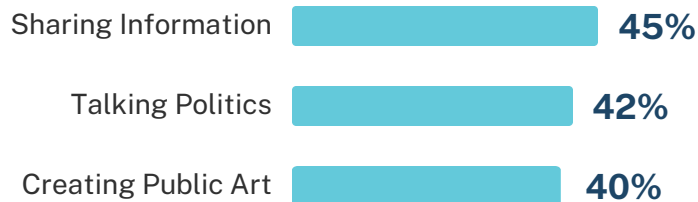
Students Strongly Recognize Formal and Action-Oriented Civic Engagement

Students endorse formal activities as civic engagement at significantly higher rates than informal or relational activities.

FORMAL ACTIVITIES



INFORMAL ACTIVITIES



Key Takeaway

"Informal" or less structured activities were rated significantly less regularly as "Civic Engagement" than traditional strategies to engage in community or political activities. Relational activities like public art feel more like "community engagement" than formal civic engagement.

94%
identify voting
as civic engagement

88%
identify volunteering
as civic engagement

40%
identify public art
as civic engagement

Source: CEA Faculty Fellows Civic Engagement Survey, 2025–2026. Percentages represent student endorsement rates.

FINDING 2

Awareness is widespread, but participation is uneven.

How students move from civic awareness to civic action

This pattern is central to the report: students reported substantially more awareness of civic engagement opportunities than actual participation. Only about 12% of students reported no awareness of civic opportunities in the previous 30 days, while nearly 36% reported no civic participation during the same period. On average, students participated in roughly half as many civic activities as they were aware of.

The issue is not simply that students do not know opportunities exist. Many students do know. In the study's regression models, awareness was the strongest predictor of participation ($\beta = .510$, $p < .001$). Students who were aware of more opportunities were more likely to participate.

Yet awareness alone did not solve the participation problem. Civic engagement remained unevenly distributed, with many students clustered in low-participation categories and a smaller group accounting for higher levels of involvement. In other words, civic opportunities may be visible, but they are not equally actionable for all students.

Student responses suggest that the participation gap should not be read as indifference. One respondent captured the tension directly: "I have wanted to do more... but have been limited by time constraints." In this sense, awareness may be necessary for participation, but it is not sufficient. Students may know opportunities exist and still experience participation as difficult to enter or sustain.

"I have wanted to do more... but have been limited by time constraints."



FINDING 2 – DATA VISUAL

Awareness Is Widespread, but Participation Is Uneven

Students were categorized by whether they participated in civic activities and whether they were aware of civic engagement opportunities.

PARTICIPATED

Unaware of Civic Engagement Opportunities

■ 3.4%

Aware of Civic Engagement Opportunities

■ 60.7%

DID NOT PARTICIPATE

Unaware of Civic Engagement Opportunities

■ 9.0%

Aware of Civic Engagement Opportunities

■ 26.9%

PARTICIPATION & AWARENESS BREAKDOWN

The majority of students (60.7%) participated and were aware of the civic engagement opportunities. Only 3.4% both participated despite being unaware. Among non-participants, 26.9% were aware but did not participate and 9.0% were unaware and did not participate.

Key Takeaway

Awareness is the strongest predictor of participation ($\beta = .510$, $p < .001$), yet awareness alone does not close the gap. Civic opportunities may be visible but not equally actionable for all students.

12.4%

Unaware of civic opportunities

35.9%

No civic participation

$\beta = .510 < .001$

awareness predicts participation

Source: CEA Faculty Fellows Civic Engagement Survey, 2025–2026. Percentages represent student-reported awareness and participation rates.



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FINDING 3

The strongest barriers are about feasibility, not apathy.

How constraints shape participation

The barrier data shift the interpretation of student disengagement. Time emerged as the strongest barrier to civic participation, followed by contextual barriers. Indifference/disinterest ranked below the major time-constraint barriers.

This hierarchy matters. If disinterest were the dominant barrier, institutions might reasonably focus on persuasion, motivation, or awareness campaigns. But the data point elsewhere. Students were more likely to report that participation was constrained by academic workload, employment, family or social obligations, transportation, location, event fatigue, uncertainty about impact, and concerns related to safety or belonging.

The question is not simply, "How do we make students care about civic engagement?" It is, "How do we design civic opportunities that students can realistically enter and sustain?"

This is especially important for equity. Civic engagement opportunities that require flexible schedules, unpaid time, transportation, social confidence, or preexisting campus connections may unintentionally privilege students who already have greater access to time, resources, and belonging. Students may value civic engagement and still find participation difficult to manage within the realities of college life.

Data note: Time-related barriers were highest. Academic time constraints averaged 2.52, work/job time constraints averaged 2.36, and family/social obligations averaged 1.83 on a 0-4 scale; the three-item time composite averaged 2.24. Logistical issues averaged 1.63. Indifference or disinterest averaged 1.38.



FINDING 3 – DATA VISUAL

Barriers Are About Feasibility, Not Apathy

Time constraints dominate reported barriers; indifference ranks well below structural feasibility issues on a 0–4 severity scale.

TIME BARRIERS (Composite: 2.24)



CONTEXTUAL BARRIERS



MOTIVATIONAL BARRIERS



Key Takeaway

These are feasibility issues, not motivation issues. Students report wanting to participate but facing structural constraints: time, logistics, and competing obligations. These barriers are addressable through institutional design (scheduling flexibility, embedded opportunities, reduced logistical friction) rather than messaging or awareness campaigns alone.

2.52

academic workload
(strongest barrier)

2.24

time composite
(3-item average)

1.38

indifference
(ranks lowest)

Source: CEA Faculty Fellows Civic Engagement Survey, 2025–2026. Mean scores on 0–4 barrier severity scale.



FINDING 4

Campus climate matters, but messaging alone is not enough.

How students experience support for civic engagement

Students generally reported moderately positive perceptions of campus support for civic engagement. However, the data suggest that campus climate works in nuanced ways.

Two forms of support emerged. Institutional support refers to visible university-level promotion and celebration of civic engagement. Affiliation support refers to whether students see peers, departments, organizations, and communities like themselves participating in civic life.

This distinction is important for administrators. Public messaging matters, but students do not experience civic engagement only through official institutional statements. They interpret opportunities through relationships, identity, belonging, peer norms, faculty encouragement, departmental culture, and perceptions of whether civic spaces are safe and welcoming.

Institutional support modestly predicted participation, while affiliation support predicted awareness more than participation. This suggests that seeing civic engagement represented in one's peer groups, major, department, or identity community may help students notice opportunities. But noticing opportunities is still not enough if participation remains difficult, risky, time-intensive, or disconnected from students' lives.

FINDING 4 - ILLUSTRATION

Campus support for civic engagement

Both institutional and affiliation support play a critical role in shaping students' awareness of and participation in civic engagement.

Our analysis highlights two distinct forms of campus support that influence student civic engagement: institutional support and affiliation support.



Institutional support refers to resources, programs, and messaging provided by the college or university itself—such as funding, staff, coursework, and campuswide initiatives.



Affiliation support comes from student organizations, faculty champions, peer networks, and community partners who encourage and enable civic engagement opportunities.



Institutions that invest in both structural support and community connections create an environment where students are more likely to engage and lead.



How support shapes civic engagement

The diagram below illustrates how institutional support and affiliation support work—independently and together—to increase both awareness of opportunities and participation in civic engagement.



FINDING 5

Civic engagement depends on meaning, belonging, and institutional design.

How awareness becomes meaningful public action

Taken together, the findings suggest that civic engagement is best understood as a pathway from awareness to participation shaped by exposure, feasibility, and interpretation. Students must encounter opportunities, but they must also understand those opportunities as meaningful. They must see participation as possible within their schedules and responsibilities. They must believe their contribution matters. They must feel that civic spaces are places where people like them can enter, speak, act, and remain connected to community.

Civic engagement is not only an individual choice. It is shaped by systems, environments, relationships, and institutional design.

For colleges and universities, the findings point beyond more advertising or more events. The task is to build civic pathways that are visible, feasible, meaningful, and socially supported. That means connecting civic opportunities to coursework, departments, student organizations, peer networks, community partnerships, and students' lived realities. It also means reducing barriers that make engagement costly, inaccessible, or difficult to sustain.

The study reframes the challenge facing Indiana higher education. Students are not disconnected from civic life. Many recognize it, value it, and encounter opportunities to participate. The question is whether institutions can create the conditions that allow civic awareness to become meaningful public action.



Civic engagement depends on meaning, belonging, and institutional design.

Civic engagement is a pathway from awareness to participation shaped by exposure, feasibility, and interpretation. People engage when they recognize an opportunity, see it as meaningful, feel they belong, believe it is feasible, and act.

FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION



CONCLUSION

Civic engagement is not a single act. It is a progression. Stronger engagement depends on designing institutions and experiences that foster meaning, belonging, and feasibility at every step.



Implications for Indiana Higher Education

Awareness Alone Does Not Drive Participation

The findings suggest that civic engagement in higher education cannot be understood simply as a problem of awareness, programming, or student motivation. Indiana college students demonstrated broad recognition of civic engagement, reported awareness of opportunities to participate, and frequently described civic life in terms of contribution, responsibility, and public action. Yet participation remained uneven because awareness alone did not determine whether engagement felt possible.

Across the study, students described civic participation through conditions of feasibility, belonging, legitimacy, and perceived impact. Participation depended not only on whether opportunities existed, but whether students experienced those opportunities as realistic within the context of employment, coursework, commuting, caregiving responsibilities, social trust, and institutional culture.

The responses reflect one of the report's central insights: students are not rejecting civic life. Rather, many appear to be searching for forms of engagement they perceive as tangible, meaningful, and consequential.

From Opportunity to Pathway

Embedding Civic Engagement Within the Student Experience

One implication emerging from the findings is that institutions may need to shift from a model of civic opportunity toward a model of civic pathway development.

Students encountered civic opportunities at substantially higher rates than they participated in them. Awareness mattered, but awareness alone did not consistently translate into action. This suggests that institutions should evaluate not only whether opportunities are visible, but whether students can realistically enter and sustain participation over time.

For many students, civic engagement competes with employment, academic workload, transportation, financial pressure, and family obligations. Participation therefore reflects more than interest or motivation alone. It also reflects access to time, institutional connection, flexibility, and social support.

The findings suggest that civic engagement becomes more sustainable when participation is connected to the structures students already inhabit:

- courses,
- majors,
- student organizations,
- peer communities,
- professional preparation,
- and community-based learning.

In this sense, civic engagement appears strongest when it is embedded within educational experience rather than positioned primarily as an additional extracurricular expectation.



Civic Engagement as Belonging

Cultivating a Culture of Civic Engagement

The findings also indicate that students interpret civic life relationally. Institutional support mattered, but affiliation-based support often shaped whether students noticed opportunities and imagined themselves participating.

The findings suggest that students encounter civic engagement less through institutional messaging alone and more through the relational environments of everyday campus life — peer networks, faculty relationships, academic departments, student organizations, and communities where students experience recognition and belonging.

This distinction matters because civic engagement operates partly through visibility and belonging. Students are more likely to enter civic spaces when participation feels socially legitimate, psychologically safe, and connected to communities they recognize as their own.

For institutions, this suggests that civic engagement is not only a programming issue. It is also a cultural and relational issue. Civic participation depends partly on whether students can see themselves — and people like themselves — within civic life.

Designing for Feasibility

Reducing Barriers Through Institutional Design

The barrier findings raise important equity considerations for Indiana higher education.

Time constraints emerged as the strongest reported barrier to participation, substantially exceeding disinterest. Students consistently identified workload, employment, commuting, transportation, fatigue, and competing responsibilities as constraints on civic engagement.

This finding complicates deficit-oriented interpretations of disengagement. Students may value civic participation while still experiencing engagement as difficult to sustain within the realities of contemporary student life.

Institutions therefore face a design challenge as much as a motivational one.

Civic engagement opportunities that depend heavily on discretionary time, unpaid labor, transportation access, or preexisting campus connection may unintentionally privilege students who already possess greater flexibility and institutional belonging.

The findings instead suggest the importance of:

- lower-barrier entry points,
- flexible participation structures,
- curricular integration,
- and civic experiences connected to students' existing educational pathways.

Beyond Programming

Connecting the Elements of Civic Life

Taken together, the findings point toward a broader institutional conclusion: civic engagement functions less as a discrete activity and more as an ecosystem shaped by exposure, feasibility, meaning, and institutional culture.

The challenge facing Indiana higher education is therefore not simply whether colleges and universities provide civic opportunities. The deeper question is whether institutions create conditions under which students can realistically recognize, enter, sustain, and experience civic participation as meaningful public work.

This shifts civic engagement beyond awareness campaigns or isolated programming alone. Civic participation becomes more likely when institutions build coherent civic environments that connect:

- coursework,
- relationships,
- public problem-solving,
- community partnerships,
- identity,
- and visible contribution.

The findings suggest that many students are closer to civic engagement than participation rates alone imply. They recognize civic life, value action, and encounter opportunities to contribute. The institutional challenge is whether higher education can create pathways that convert that awareness into sustained civic participation and civic identity.

Conclusion

The Future of Civic Engagement in Indiana Higher Education

This study suggests that Indiana college students are not disconnected from civic life. Many recognize civic engagement, value action-oriented forms of participation, and encounter opportunities to contribute. Yet participation remains limited and uneven because awareness alone does not make civic engagement feasible, meaningful, or sustainable.

The central finding is therefore not simply that students know more than they do. It is that civic engagement depends on the conditions that enable awareness to become participation. Students must be able to recognize civic opportunities, see them as meaningful, experience them as socially supported, and participate within the real constraints of academic workload, employment, commuting, family responsibilities, belonging, safety, and perceived impact.

For Indiana higher education, this finding is both challenging and hopeful. It challenges institutions to move beyond awareness campaigns, isolated events, and assumptions that low participation reflects apathy. But it also suggests that many students may be closer to civic engagement than participation rates alone imply. The opportunity is to build civic pathways that are visible, feasible, relational, and connected to students' lived realities.

If colleges and universities seek to prepare students not only for careers but for democratic life, civic engagement must be treated as part of the educational infrastructure. The findings do not point to a single institutional solution. Rather, they suggest the importance of designing clearer pathways that help students recognize opportunities, understand how to become involved, and sustain participation within the realities of college life. The challenge for Indiana higher education is not simply offering civic opportunities, but making civic engagement more visible, feasible, and actionable for a broader range of students.

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