

SERU Consortium Research Paper\*

**STUDENT EXPOSURE TO SOCIAL ISSUES AND CORRELATIONS WITH VOTING:  
Gauging the Impact on Economically Disadvantaged Students at  
Major Public American Universities\*\***

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**ABSTRACT**

Higher levels of civic and community engagement in higher education are positively associated with students' academic performance and they also build upon citizenship skills such as informed voting. Yet, while these are worthy and important outcomes of higher education, students from disadvantaged backgrounds can have more difficulty navigating civic engagement. Focusing on students at thirteen major public universities in the United States, and utilizing survey data generated by the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium, this study suggests social perspective-taking has a significant positive effect on all students' probability of voting and participating in community service. Students who were asked to identify challenge/solutions to social problems and reflect/act on community issues in the classroom were also more likely to participate in community service. Additionally, Hispanic students and students from lower-income households are significantly less likely to vote and perform community service—findings corroborated by previous research. Females are more likely to vote and participate in community service—findings also corroborated by prior research. Hispanic students and students from low-income backgrounds were more likely to participate in voting and community service if they had increased rates of social perspective-taking. These results suggest that increased opportunities to connect with classmates in the classroom and develop perspective-taking skills (e.g. appreciating the world from someone else's perspective, acknowledging personal differences, interacting with someone with views that are different from your own, and discussing and navigating controversial issues) are potentially quite powerful ways to foster civic engagement among students who traditionally have the lowest civic engagement rates compared to their peers.

**Keywords:** Civic Engagement; Voting; Community Service; Classroom Engagement; Economically Disadvantaged Students

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Civic engagement is an essential component for maintaining an effective participatory democracy. How well are major public universities in the United States promoting civic engagement, and are there differences among socioeconomic and racial groups in what they experience at these institutions? This study briefly explores these issues by focusing on the students who experience classes that focus on social issues, and the correlation with voting at thirteen public universities that are part of the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium. All are members of the Association of American Universities (AAU).

Voting is a critical component of civic engagement. Yet, in the United States, many eligible individuals do not vote or may vote without being fully informed. Higher education should play a role in improving knowledge and engagement that will better prepare eligible citizens to make informed voting choices (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). Student political civic engagement is not, of course, limited to voting. Higher education can and does prepare students for roles as leaders in their community

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\* Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) Consortium is an academic and policy research collaboration based at Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California – Berkeley (CSHE) working in partnership with the University of Minnesota, the International Graduate Insight Group Ltd (i-graduate), the Higher School of Economics – Moscow, and member universities.

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Once at the university, students from disadvantaged backgrounds—particularly students from low-income households and underrepresented minorities—appear to be less likely to vote and engage in civic activities (Pasek et al., 2006). The reasons, it appears, are multifaceted, including a lack of exposure to the concept of being civically engaged, opportunities to be politically active, family dynamics and the need to find employment (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). Kawashima-Ginsberg and Levine (2014) surveyed over 4,000 American citizens between the ages of 18-24 and found students who reported to have higher quality civics education in high school were from wealthier districts and had significantly higher levels of electoral engagement and informed voting. Since students from wealthier backgrounds are more likely to be civically involved before going into the university setting, they are less likely to be impacted by the decline of civic engagement in higher education. In turn, this may have detrimental effects that could affect their academic development, civic responsibility and life skills (Astin & Sax, 1998).

This study focuses on a narrow question to test the correlation of student who vote and have classroom experiences that focus on social issues, and the linkage with the socioeconomic background of students, their race, and their gender. From this analysis, socioeconomic factors play a significant role in the experience and activities of students, and also indicate that classroom activities can enhance civic engagement among students from disadvantaged backgrounds

## DATA COLLECTION

The Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey is based at the Center for Studies of Higher Education at the University of California-Berkeley. The SERU survey is administered via email to all undergraduate students in participating institutions during the spring semester. Each student responds to a series of questions that evaluates the student's major, time use, campus climate and satisfaction, which are followed by questions from one of four randomly assigned modules. This analysis used information from the community and civic engagement module from the 2013 administration that included questions regarding the 2012 Presidential election.

A total of 109,065 students over the age of 18 from 14 major research universities completed the SERU survey. This included the campuses of Universities of Minnesota, Texas, Florida, Michigan, Pittsburgh, Oregon, Southern California, North Carolina, Virginia, Iowa, and Indiana, as well as Texas A&M, Rutgers, and Purdue Universities, all members of the SERU Consortium. The response rate for the overall survey was 30.6%, reasonable for most student web-based surveys. However, this trend is a persistent limitation in its ability to perfectly predict the behaviors of the entire student community (Groves et al., 2009). The community and civic engagement module was completed by 10.0% of all undergraduate students ( $n = 10,886$ ). International students ( $n = 426$ ) were removed from the dataset because they are not eligible to vote in the United States.

### Respondent Profile

A description of students in this sample used for this study is reported in Table 1.

### Dependent Variables

- Voting. Students were asked whether they voted in the 2012 Presidential election. The variable was dummy coded to indicate whether a student voted (1 = Yes, 0 = No).
- Community service. Students were asked whether they performed community service during the academic year. The variable was dummy coded to indicate whether a student performed community service (1 = Yes, 0 = No).

Category	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	4,049	38.9%
Female	6,391	61.1%
<b>Class Level</b>		
Freshmen	1,198	11.5%
Sophomore	2,053	19.6%
Junior	2,639	25.2%
Senior	4,570	43.7%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Black	515	4.9%
Hispanic	1,128	10.8%
Other	1,889	18.1%
White	6,928	66.2%
<b>Parent Education</b>		
No parent went to college	545	5.2%
At least one parent went to college	9,915	94.8%
<b>Household Income</b>		
Under \$50,000	2,228	21.3%
\$50,000- \$99,999	3,381	32.3%
\$100,000-\$199,999	3,406	32.6%
More than \$200,000	1,445	13.8%
<b>University Regions</b>		
Southeast	3,665	35.0%
Midwest	2,613	25.0%
South	1,976	18.9%
West Coast	971	9.3%
Northeast	1,235	11.8%

### Factor Analysis Variables

The survey included items that were related to activities students might do in the classroom that would foster greater civic engagement. Researchers have found evidence for the importance of social perspective-taking among college students, for example, in fostering their appreciation of diversity, community engagement, and engagement in creating social change (Johnson, Dugan, & Soria, 2015; Soria, Nobbe, & Fink, 2013). In the survey, students were asked, "In the classroom, how often do you..." and responded to ten items on a frequency scale of one (never) to six (very often). A factor analyses was conducted on these 10 items with an oblique rotation (varimax).

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure verified the sampling adequacy for the analyses (KMO = .92). Three components were retained with an eigenvalue greater than .7 and explained 83.6% of the variance. These three components were identified as social perspective-taking, identifying challenges and solutions, and reflection and action on community issues. Factor loadings are in Table 2, values above .60 are bolded.

Each component had high reliability with Cronbach's alpha  $\geq$  .90. Factor scores for each component were computed using the regression method and standardized to have a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one. The range of the factor scores for social perspective-taking is (-3.88, 3.59), identifying challenges and solutions is (-3.97, 3.64), and reflection and action on community issues is (-3.92, 3.21).

**Table 2 Summary of rotated factor pattern for classroom activities**

Item	Social perspective-taking ( $\alpha = 0.90$ )	Identifying challenges and solutions ( $\alpha = 0.92$ )	Reflection and action on community issues ( $\alpha = 0.91$ )
Appreciate the world from someone else's perspective	<b>0.820</b>	0.265	0.326
Acknowledge personal differences	<b>0.779</b>	0.153	0.371
Interact with someone with views that are different from your own	<b>0.756</b>	0.435	0.138
Discuss and navigate controversial issues	<b>0.663</b>	0.443	0.366
Implement a solution to an issue or challenge	0.176	<b>0.846</b>	0.330
Reflect upon the solution of an issue or challenge	0.335	<b>0.811</b>	0.334
Define an issue or challenge and identify possible solutions	0.440	<b>0.789</b>	0.204
Act on community or social issues	0.236	0.237	<b>0.886</b>
Reflect on your responsibility for community or social issues	0.422	0.394	<b>0.741</b>
Reflect on community or social issues as a shared responsibility	0.454	0.439	<b>0.674</b>

### Covariates

The demographic variables used in analyses were dummy-coded. Students were considered to come from low-income households if their annual household income was less than \$50,000, which is the maximum household income for most Pell recipients (Baum et al., 2013). The variables of particular interest are the race/ethnic groups, first generation students, and students from low-income households as these students are traditionally considered to come from disadvantaged backgrounds (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Morimoto & Friedland, 2013; Pasek et al., 2006). Contextual effects, such as the specific university in which students were enrolled, were also of interest.

### Analytic Methods

A series of logistic regression models were estimated to predict the probabilities of voting and community service participation. Models were estimated to examine the effect of focal independent variables on the probability of voting and community service while controlling for relevant covariates, which should help make the model estimates more precise. For each dependent variable, three models were run with each model incrementally including more variables in an effort to determine how the effect of the focal variables change across models and improvements in model fit. The first model included all the focal independent variables, and the second model included all focal independent variables and all demographic covariates. The final model displayed below included regional fixed effects that control for all the unmeasured, time invariant factors within university region.

Results were reported in the form of raw coefficients, odds ratios, marginal effects, and predicted probabilities. Regression coefficients and standard errors for each variable and the corresponding odds ratios for voting and community service behavior models were computed. Since the third model included all the relevant covariates and the regional fixed effects, and produced the highest pseudo R<sup>2</sup> for both voting and community service behavior, it was retained for interpretation. Table 3 shows the output for the third model for voting and community service.

**Table 3: Logistic Regression of Voting and Community Service Participation**

	Voting		Community Service	
	Coefficient (SE)	Odds ratio	Coefficient (SE)	Odds ratio
<b>Classroom Activities</b>				
Social perspective-taking	0.14 (.02)**	1.15	0.17 (.02)**	1.19
Identifying challenges and solutions	0.04 (.02)	1.04	0.04 (.02)*	1.04
Reflection and action on community issues	0.02 (.02)	1.02	0.23 (.02)**	1.26
<b>Demographics</b>				
Female	0.21 (.05)**	1.24	0.59 (.04)**	1.80
Freshmen	-0.28 (.07)**	0.75	-0.16 (.07)*	0.85
Sophomore	-0.10 (.06)	0.90	0.03 (.06)	1.03
Junior	-0.06 (.05)	0.95	0.01 (.05)	1.01
Black (non-Hispanic)	-0.05 (.11)	0.93	0.13 (.10)	1.14
Hispanic	-0.43 (.07)**	0.65	-0.15 (.07)*	0.86
Other Race/Ethnicity	-1.20 (.06)**	0.30	0.02 (.06)	1.02
First Generation College	-0.15 (.10)	0.86	-0.05 (.10)	0.95
Students from low-income households	-0.43 (.06)**	0.65	-0.27 (.05)**	0.76
<b>Regional Factors</b>				
Southeast	0.37 (.08)**	1.44	0.46 (.07)**	1.58
Midwest	0.27 (.08)**	1.31	-0.04 (.07)	0.96
South	-0.42 (.08)**	0.66	0.70 (.08)**	2.02
West Coast	-0.08 (.09)	0.93	-0.00 (.09)	1.00
<b>Constant</b>	1.15 (.07)**		0.15 (.07)*	
<b>Pseudo R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.08		0.05	
* Indicates statistically significant at .05 < p < .01				
** Indicates statistically significant at p < .01				
Note: Unstandardized coefficients are reported.				

Predicted probabilities (shown in Table 4) were calculated to estimate the probability of an outcome occurring (voting or community service) for each independent variable based on the model. Predicted probabilities were calculated for each discrete variable holding all other variables at their means (for example, the probability of voting for the typical female when average scores on all the other variables is 73.9%). Predicted probabilities for the factor scores (i.e., the focal variables) show the probability of voting for students engaged in social perspective-taking, or identification of challenges and solutions or reflection/action on community issues holding all other independent variables at their means. Marginal effects are also computed (Table 4) for each independent variable, and are interpreted as the change in the probability of voting/community service for a small change (for continuous variables) or a discrete change (in dichotomous variables) in the variable.

Additionally, predicted probabilities for ideal types of students were computed to summarize the effects of key variables. The predicted probabilities of voting and community service by student type were calculated using the significant predictors in the regression models. Due to the indistinguishability of the other ethnic/race category, these students were removed from this analysis. The maximum and minimum factor scores of classroom activities were used to determine whether these activities had an effect on civic engagement, particularly among Hispanic students and students from low-income households.

## RESULTS

The results are reported in the form of raw coefficients, odds ratios, as well as marginal effects and predicted probabilities. The reported results had similar trends and revealed that certain classroom activities enhanced voting and community service activity. Social perspective-taking had a significant positive effect on both voting and community service. The other two factor variables—identifying challenges and solutions and reflection/action on community issues—have positive significant effects on community service behavior, but these factors did not appear to contribute to voting behavior. According to the calculated odds ratios in Table 3, social perspective-taking increase the odds of voting by 15% and the odds of community service participation by 19%. Identifying challenges and solutions in the classroom increases the odds of community service participation by 4% and reflection and action on community issues in the classroom increases the odds of community service participation by 26%.

Additionally, predicted probabilities in Table 4 demonstrate that students who engaged in social perspective-taking are predicted to have a 72.3% probability of voting and 67.1% probability of engaging in community service. All other independent variables are set at their mean when calculating these probabilities. The marginal effects show a unit increase in social perspective taking increases the probability of voting by 2.7% and that of community service participation by 3.8%. Also, a small increase in engaging in identifying challenges and solutions in the classroom increases the probability of community service by 1.0%, while small increases in reflection and action on community issues in the classroom increases community service by 5.1%.

The results of the model also suggest that Hispanic students and students from lower-income households are both significantly less likely to vote and perform community service. Additionally, younger students (freshmen) are also significantly less likely to perform these activities. Students from other non-White backgrounds are also much less likely to vote. On the other hand, females are significantly more likely to vote and perform community service.

	<b>Probability of Voting (Y=1)</b>	<b>Marginal effect (SE)</b>	<b>Probability of Community Service (Y=1)</b>	<b>Marginal effect (SE)</b>
<b>Classroom Activities</b>				
Social perspective-taking	.723	.027(.005)**	.671	.038(.005)**
Identifying challenges and solutions	.723	.007(.005)	.671	.010(.005)*
Reflection and action on community issues	.723	.004(.005)	.671	.051(.005)**
<b>Demographics</b>				
Female	.739	.043(.010)**	.719	.132(.010)**
Freshmen	.670	-.060(.016)**	.639	-.036(.016)*
Sophomore	.706	-.021(.013)	.675	.006(.012)
Junior	.715	-.010(.012)	.672	.002(.012)
Black (non-Hispanic)	.709	-.015(.022)	.698	.029(.022)
Hispanic	.639	-.093(.017)**	.640	-.034(.016)*
Other Race/Ethnicity	.493	-.271(.013)**	.674	.003(.013)
First Generation College	.693	-.031(.021)	.661	-.010(.022)
Students from low-income households	.651	-.090(.012)**	.622	-.062(.012)**
<b>Regional Factors</b>				
Southeast	.768	.072(.014)**	.733	.098(.015)**
Midwest	.762	.053(.015)**	.664	-.009(.012)
South	.650	-.089(.018)**	.783	.142(.015)**
West Coast	.701	-.016(.020)	.670	-.000(.020)
* Indicates statistically significant at .05 < p < .01				
** Indicates statistically significant at p < .01				

The results of the predicted probability of voting based on student characteristics of interest and classroom engagement that were significant are shown in Table 5. Students who are Hispanic and from low-income households are least likely to vote when compared to students from less disadvantaged backgrounds, but their probabilities are affected by the amount of classroom civic engagement. For instance, the probability of voting for a Hispanic student from a low-income household who reported low levels of social perspective-taking was approximately 44%, whereas the same type of student who reported high levels of social perspective-taking had a 69% chance of voting. As the level of classroom civic engagement went from low to high, the probability

for a Hispanic student from a low-income household to vote increased by 25% where the level of engagement had less of an effect on a White student that was not from a low-income household (19%).

**Table 5: Predicted Voting Rates Based on Classroom Engagement for Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds**

Classroom Activity	Level Participation	Not Low Income		Low Income	
		White	Hispanic	White	Hispanic
Social perspective-taking	High	0.84	0.77	0.77	0.69
	Moderate	0.76	0.67	0.67	0.57
	Low	0.65	0.54	0.54	0.44

The results of predicted probabilities of community service participation based on the same type of students profiled in Table 5 are shown in Table 6. Similar to voting results, students from Hispanic and low-income households are least likely to perform community service when compared to students from less disadvantaged backgrounds, but their probabilities are affected by the amount of classroom civic engagement. However, the probabilities for all student types increased at the same relative rate across all three types of classroom activities separately and combined.

**Table 6: Predicted Community Service Participation Rates Based on Classroom Engagement for Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds**

Classroom Activity	Level of Participation	Not Low Income		Low Income	
		White	Hispanic	White	Hispanic
Social perspective-taking	High	0.66	0.60	0.62	0.56
	Moderate	0.51	0.45	0.48	0.41
	Low	0.35	0.29	0.32	0.26
Identifying challenge and solutions	High	0.55	0.48	0.51	0.44
	Moderate	0.51	0.45	0.48	0.41
	Low	0.47	0.41	0.44	0.37
Reflection and action on community issues	High	0.69	0.63	0.65	0.59
	Moderate	0.51	0.45	0.48	0.41
	Low	0.30	0.25	0.27	0.22
All Classroom Activities	High	0.82	0.78	0.80	0.75
	Moderate	0.51	0.45	0.48	0.41
	Low	0.16	0.13	0.14	0.11

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest social perspective-taking has a significant positive effect on all students' probability of voting and participating in community service. Students who were asked to identify challenge/solutions to social problems and reflect/act on community issues in the classroom were also more likely to participate in community service. Additionally, the results of this study suggest Hispanic students and students from lower-income households are significantly less likely to vote and perform community service—findings corroborated by previous research (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, 2008).

Females are more likely to vote and participate in community service—findings also corroborated by prior research (Higher Education Research Institute, 2010). Hispanic students and students from low-income backgrounds were more likely to participate in voting and community service if they had increased rates of social perspective-taking.

These results suggest that increased opportunities to connect with classmates in the classroom and develop perspective-taking skills (e.g. appreciating the world from someone else's perspective, acknowledging personal differences, interacting with someone with views that are different from your own, and discussing and navigating controversial issues) are potentially quite powerful ways to foster civic engagement among students who traditionally have the lowest civic engagement rates compared to their peers.

For the most part, the findings in this study suggest that classroom activities can enhance civic engagement among students from disadvantaged backgrounds; however, the current study has some limitations. The declining response rates of college undergraduate surveys have made the ability to predict the behaviors of the entire student community more questionable. Although the current response rate is in line with that of many web-based undergraduate surveys, it is important to address the limitation and its potential effect on the quality of student representation. The findings also did not yield significant negative results for Black students and students who are the first in their families to attend college—a finding likely due to the relatively low number of students in these categories, as well as the larger Black voter turnout during the 2008 and 2012 elections (Higher Education Research Institute, 2010; Taylor, 2012).

As the data in this study and previous research shows, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to be civically engaged; however, these students appear to yield greater gains in voting rates when exposed to a high level of classroom civic engagement and are also likely to increase their probability of performing community service by a substantial amount. These findings suggest that students from disadvantaged backgrounds can be greatly impacted by the university environment, particularly civically engaging activities in the classroom.

The current study demonstrates the importance that university classroom activities have on fostering overall civic engagement. Although the focus on this study is on students from disadvantaged backgrounds, it is also evident that civically engaging classroom activities enhances voting rates and community service rates for all students. The significant positive effect of all three classroom activities on community service participation as well as the significant positive effect of social perspective-taking on voting suggest that the quality of classroom activities are essential to enhance civic engagement among undergraduate students. Therefore, incorporating aspects into a classroom that can foster greater civic engagement such as discussions among students where issues are defined, reflected on, and/or acted on is encouraged whenever possible.

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