Undergraduate Student Civic and Community Engagement:
2018-2019 Assessment

In 2018-2019, the University initiated a study of undergraduate students' civic engagement. A committee of faculty, representative of the undergraduate schools, determined the definitions, expectations, and methods of investigation to be applied. They advocated a comprehensive definition: whether framed as public service or self-governance, at UVA, "students who are competent in civic engagement demonstrate a combination of knowledge, skills, values, motivation and habits to make a difference in the civic life of their communities. They work to promote quality of life in their communities through political and non-political processes."[1] This report describes the assessment, from student learning opportunities through assessment results.

In 2019, the UVA 2030 Strategic Plan reaffirmed that "preparing students to be responsible leaders—committed to serving others—was part of our founding mission and should remain central to what we do." Thomas Jefferson had envisioned a college committed to educating citizens in public service and in practical affairs.

At UVA, students learn effective civic and community engagement through both academic and extra-curricular experiences.

Academic Experiences.
- Community-engaged courses devote substantial class time to community engagement theory and applications through partnerships with community organizations. In these courses, "faculty and students engage with a community partner for a mutually beneficial, reciprocal teaching and learning experience."[2] As of 2019, the schools of Nursing, Education, Leadership and Public Policy, Architecture, and Arts and Sciences offer 13 undergraduate community-engaged courses.
- Civic or community topical courses address underlying research, theory, and practice across a wide variety of topics. Examples of such courses include: *History of Human Rights*; *What is Engaged Citizenship?*; *Writing about Climate Change*; *Chinese Culture and Society*; and *Global Development--Theories and Case Studies*. For Spring term 2020, approximately 60 undergraduate civic or community topical courses are offered (this count is an estimate due to different definitions of such courses).
- The Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy offers a Bachelor of Arts degree in Public Policy and Leadership. Through this multidisciplinary liberal arts program, students learn not only

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[1] adapted from Civic Responsibility and Higher Education and AAC&U, Civic Engagement VALUE Rubric
[2] "Community-Based Courses," Engaged UVA, https://engageduva.virginia.edu/community-based-courses

public policy craftsmanship, but also "how civic leaders in government, non-profit organizations, and the private sector contribute to collective problem solving."[3]

- Research, internships, and study abroad: Students can participate in community-based research projects, internships, and study abroad.

Student self-governance and leadership.   Deriving their authority directly from the Board of Visitors, students own and manage the Honor System, the University Judiciary Committee, and the Student Council. Indeed, students act as an agent of the university through the Judiciary Committee, which has the power to expel students for violation of the honor code. The Student Council manages over 600 student organizations that contribute substantial community service to local, national, and international communities.

Assessment Questions and Sources of Data

The faculty committee, which had determined the methods of investigation, advocated a comprehensive set of learning outcomes. These outcomes were assessed within three broad expectations for competence:

- UVA students value public service as a personal goal—that is, they are ***motivated and committed*** to participate in civic and community matters. Fourth year students will demonstrate high levels of personal commitment, including attitudes of openness, interest in learning, and participation.
  Related learning outcomes:
  - o   Students will articulate their commitment to civic and social responsibility.
  - o   Students will seek, analyze and evaluate different points of view about civic issues.
- UVA students have the ***knowledge and skills*** to participate effectively in civic and community life. Fourth-year students will score 75% or higher on direct assessments of proficiency.
  Related learning outcomes:
  - o   Students will understand the conditions that foster or undermine healthy societies.
  - o   Students will seek, analyze and evaluate different points of view about civic issues
  - o   Students will work constructively with community partners to address important civic issues (for students participating in service-learning courses)
- UVA students ***participate***—that is, they actively work to promote quality of life in their communities. Fourth-year students will demonstrate high levels of participation, ranging from interpersonal to organizational to community-based.
  Related learning outcomes:
  - o   Students will demonstrate openness and curiosity about others, and empathy and humility when working with different people and communities
  - o   Students will work constructively with community partners to address important civic issues.

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[3] http://records.ureg.virginia.edu/content.php?catoid=47&navoid=3491

The assessment relies on multiple sources—student surveys, assessments of student work, and even voting records. Analyses employed both external comparisons with peer institutions and internal comparisons among subpopulations of UVA students. Three subgroups were of interest: first generation students, low-income students, and students from under-represented minority groups. Where differences among any of these subgroups and the larger population were statistically significant, this report describes those differences.

Primary sources for these analyses include:

- The *CIRP Freshman Survey*, administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, provided information on 1,354 incoming first-year students' attitudes, values, aspirations, and experiences in 2016. The results were compared with results from 16,622 incoming first-year students at five other highly selective public universities.
- The *Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey* asked undergraduate students in 2018 about the full range of their experiences in college. A total of 3551 UVA students completed the survey, of whom 984 were fourth-year students. A research consortium of 15+ AAU institutions manages and administers the survey.
- The *Civic Engagement Survey*, designed by IRA and the faculty committee specifically for this assessment at UVA in 2019, asked fourth-year students about their confidence and participation in civic and community endeavors. Some questions originated in the CIRP Freshman Survey (*) and the SERU survey (**) and were used with permission.
- The *National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE)* provides colleges and universities with information on rates of student registration and voting in federal elections from 2012 through 2018.
- Instructors in a set of *community-engaged and topical courses* in spring 2019 assessed students' knowledge and skills.

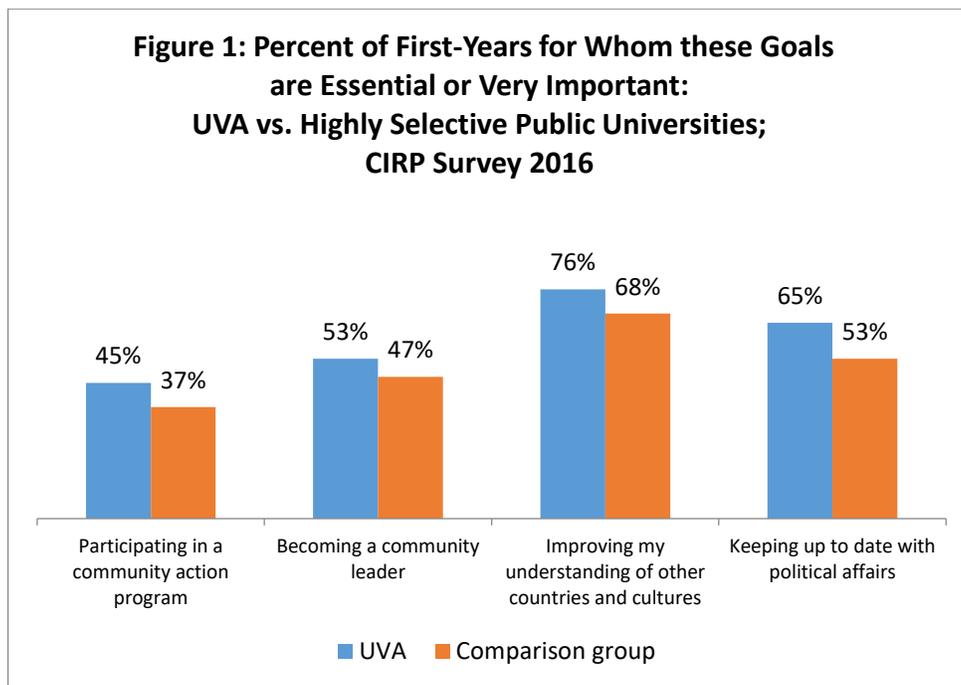# UVA Students Engage in Civic and Community Life

Motivation and Commitment to Public Service: Results

UVA students manifest a strong commitment to public service and civic engagement from when they arrive as first-year students to when they graduate. Multiple surveys illuminate the breadth and depth of students' interests and personal goals.

Incoming students are more likely to hold personal goals related to political and social involvement than are students at other highly selective public research universities. For example, 47 percent of UVA incoming first-years scored high on a scale of "social agency" on the CIRP survey compared to 36 percent of freshmen at peer institutions[4]. UVA CIRP respondents from under-represented minority groups and first-generation students reported even higher levels of social agency than did other UVA students, especially vis a vis helping to promote racial understanding. Moreover, 53 percent of UVA first-year repondents scored high on a measure of motivation and involvement in civic, electoral, and political activities (peer institutions: 42%).

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[4] The CIRP Freshman Survey provided information on first-year students' values, motivation, and commitment.

More specifically, 45 percent of UVA first-years reported through the CIRP survey that "participating in a community action program" was personally essential or very important to them (37% at other highly selective public universities) (Figure 1). First-year respondents cited the following goals as essential or very important: "becoming a community leader" (53%); "keeping up to date with political affairs" (65%); and "improving my understanding of other countries and cultures" (76%). In each case, peer comparison groups scored significantly lower.

Figure 1: Percent of First-Years for Whom these Goals are Essential or Very Important: UVA vs. Highly Selective Public Universities; CIRP Survey 2016

	UVA	Comparison group
Participating in a community action program	45%	37%
Becoming a community leader	53%	47%
Improving my understanding of other countries and cultures	76%	68%
Keeping up to date with political affairs	65%	53%

Among fourth-year students who completed the 2019 Civic Engagement Survey, large proportions hold these civic or community goals as personally essential or very important[5]:
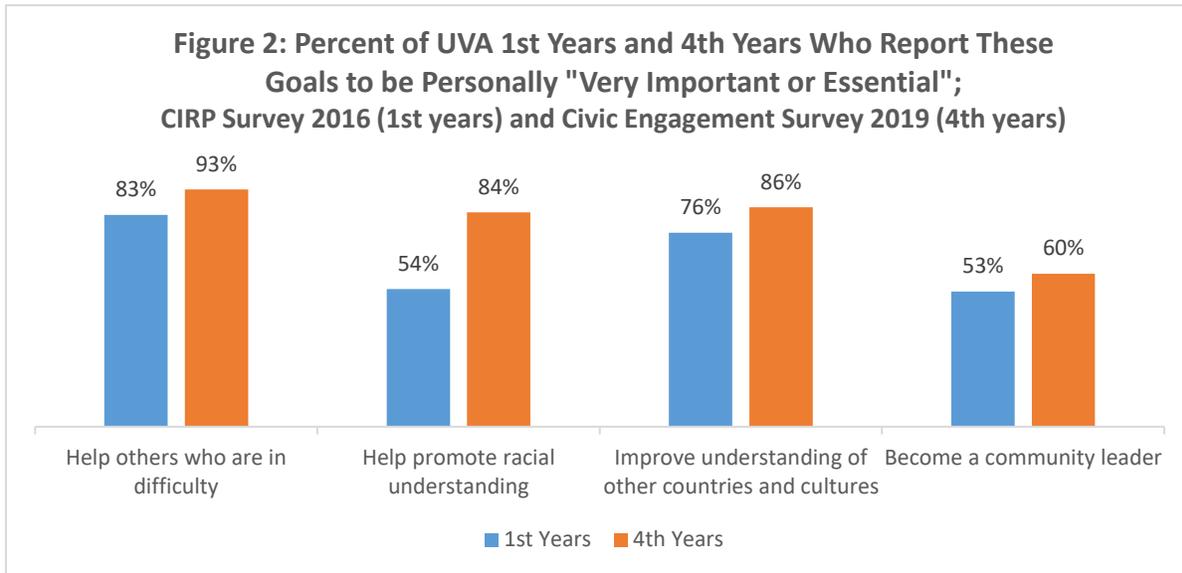- help others who are in difficulty* (93%)
- help promote racial understanding* (84%)
- analyze conditions that foster or undermine healthy societies (83%)
- promote environmental sustainability (78%)
- work with community partners to address civic issues (68%)
- become a community leader (60%)

Indeed, the same cohort of fourth-year students is committed to acquiring essential knowledge and skills to engage effectively in civic or community matters. Survey respondents held these goals as personally essential or very important:
- learn to work with people who are different than me (94%)
- improve my understanding of other countries and cultures* (86%)
- know how to seek and evaluate different points of view about civic and community issues (83%)

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[5] The SERU survey and the civic engagement survey (*using CIRP questions) were the sources of data for fourth-year students.

Moreover, the proportion of survey respondents expressing strong commitment appears to grow over the course of four years at UVA (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percent of UVA 1st Years and 4th Years Who Report These Goals to be Personally "Very Important or Essential"; CIRP Survey 2016 (1st years) and Civic Engagement Survey 2019 (4th years)

Goal	1st Years	4th Years
Help others who are in difficulty	83%	93%
Help promote racial understanding	54%	84%
Improve understanding of other countries and cultures	76%	86%
Become a community leader	53%	60%

Fundamental to effective civic engagement is students' understanding of themselves as citizens. According to the Civic Engagement survey, 84 percent of fourth-year respondents are confident or very confident in their "ability to understand their own identity, especially in terms of their commitment to citizenship and social responsibility." Notably, respondents from under-represented minority groups expressed higher levels of confidence (89% vs. 83% for students from non-URM groups).
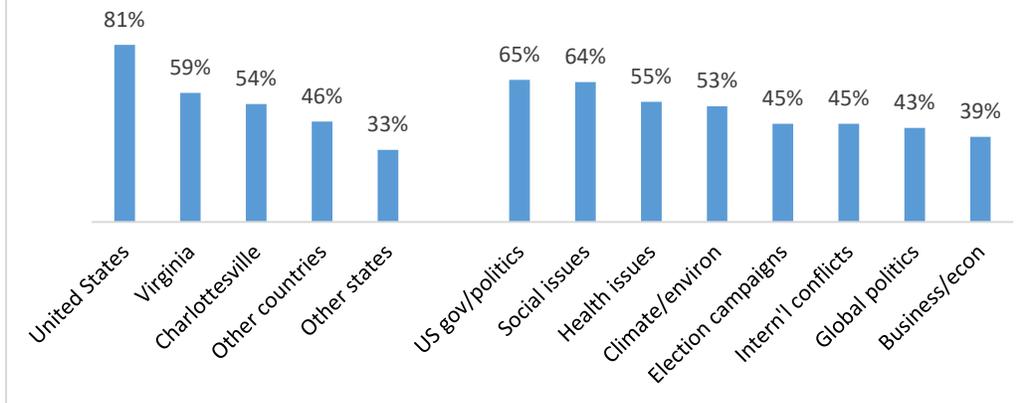
Knowledge and Skills: Results

Effective civic engagement requires knowledge, skills, and opportunities. Students need to understand the conditions that foster or undermine healthy societies and be able to seek and evaluate different points of view. They also need opportunities to connect academic work with community-based experiences. Fully three-quarters of fourth-year students who completed the Civic Engagement survey highly value such opportunities. Moreover, low-income students and students from under-represented minority groups were more likely to report that such opportunities were very important or essential to them (both groups: 84%).

One way that students acquire knowledge is by following the news. According to the Civic Engagement survey, fourth-year survey respondents reported that they follow the news often to very often (see Figure 3).[6] They focus primarily on news about the United States (especially about US government and politics), but they also follow social, health, and climate and environmental issues. Over half follow news about Virginia and Charlottesville.

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[6] Adapted from SERU survey question for use in Civic Engagement Survey.

Figure 3: Percent of 4th Year Survey Respondents Following the News Often or Very Often; Civic Engagement Survey, 2019

For another perspective on students' knowledge and skills, instructors of five civic/community topical courses were asked to rate students on two different learning outcomes. As judged by their instructors, eighty-eight percent of students were competent or highly competent at "understanding the conditions that foster or undermine healthy societies." Ninety-three percent of students were rated competent or very competent at "seeking, analyzing, and evaluating different points of view about civic or community issues."

To work effectively with different people and communities, students are expected to practice openness, curiosity, empathy, and humility. When asked to reflect on their own confidence in these areas, seventy percent or more of fourth-year respondents to the 2019 Civic Engagement Survey reported confidence in their ability to learn about and understand their communities. About half of fourth-year respondents reported that working cooperatively with diverse people is a major strength (53%). Notably, respondents from under-represented minority groups reported higher levels of confidence in their ability to work constructively with community partners (URM- 71% vs. non-URM- 61%). Less than half of fourth-year respondents, however, perceived their ability to see the world from someone else's perspective as a major strength (41%).

Students enrolled in community-engaged service courses learn and work directly with community partners. In spring 2019, instructors of seven such courses assessed 82 percent of their students as competent or very competent at "connecting and applying knowledge from their academic study to their community engagement experiences." They also rated 74 percent of students as competent or very competent at "communicating effectively in a civic or community context." Only 63 percent of students, however, were assessed as competent or very competent at "working constructively with community partners." Students' lower levels of competence in working with community partners may be a matter of length of exposure to instruction and engagement opportunities. Additional opportunities and classes in community service may improve students' capacity for effective engagement.

**Participation in their Communities: Results**

UVA students put into practice their commitment to public service and civic engagement by performing volunteer community service, participating in student organizations, and voting.

According to the SERU survey, UVA respondents spend significantly more time performing community service or volunteer activities than do students at other AAU research universities in the SERU AAU consortium. In 2017-2018, 50 percent of UVA respondents spent at least 1-5 hours/week in community service or volunteer activities while another 13 percent devoted over 5 hours/week.

Among fourth-year SERU respondents, more than eight in ten reported participating in volunteer community service within the past year. Almost two-thirds (62%) reported performing community service each week. Just over half of fourth-year respondents (57%) participated in community service off-campus during the year and 42 percent on campus. Participating students reported engaging in sustained volunteer service on their own (70%), through student organizations (63%), through academic courses (44%), and/or directly through community organizations (35%).

Based on the SERU survey, by their fourth year, 88 percent of UVA respondents had participated in student organizations, a rate significantly higher than at public AAU research universities (70%). Of those students participating, 52 percent have been an officer of an organization, also significantly higher than in AAU research universities (43%). UVA respondents who participated were more likely than students at other AAU research universities to be actively involved in their student organizations—chairing meetings, planning events, developing budgets, delegating tasks, and recruiting new members. Fourth-year respondents also reported devoting more time to participating in student clubs or organizations (82% at least 1-5 hours/week, 31% more than 5 hours/week).

Finally, according to the National Study of Learning, Voting and Engagement (NSLVE), UVA students are more likely to vote in federal elections than are students at other public research universities (Figure 4). Only in the "off-year" election in 2014 did UVA students not exceed voting rates at other institutions.

Fig 4: Eligible Student Voting in Federal Elections: UVA vs. Other Public Research Universities; NSLVE 2019
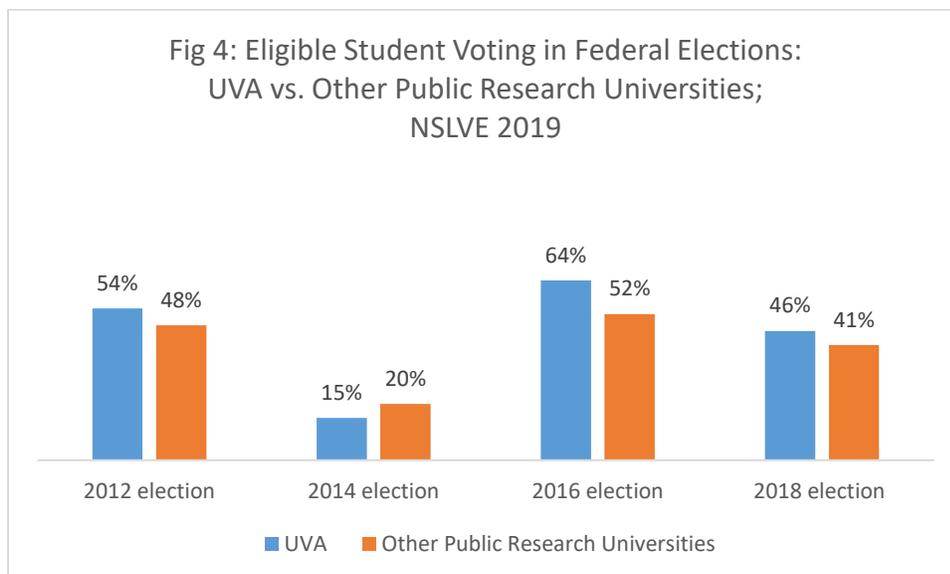
Student Civic Engagement Going Forward

In June 2019, the Board of Visitors approved a new strategic plan, "Great and Good: the 2030 Plan." The plan strongly affirms the University's commitment to "preparing students for a life of public service, broadly defined to capture the myriad ways in which our alumni can and do serve, regardless of their chosen professions or careers." The plan states:

> We will define the competencies necessary to pursue public service and identify both curricular and co-curricular opportunities for professional, graduate, and undergraduate students to meet those competencies. We will create and coordinate other opportunities, inside and outside of the classroom, to expose our students to a wide range of possibilities in public service. Also, we will explore the feasibility of creating a loan-forgiveness program for undergraduate students who enter public service.[7]

Key to this coordination is the Vice Provost for Academic Outreach, the institutional leader for academic community engagement. The Vice Provost, a recognized faculty leader in engaged pedagogy, holds long-standing relationships within the local community.

One purpose of this assessment was to inform the Vice Provost's work in planning and implementing the university's goals for student education in public service. The assessment yielded a deeper, more nuanced understanding of UVA students' commitment to and participation in community and civic service. It also highlighted areas where students' confidence and abilities are not as robust. Finally, the assessment introduced some new tools, still nascent, that may prove useful in ongoing assessments of student learning in UVA's growing number of civic and community-engaged courses.

Going forward, three initiatives are prominent on the Vice Provost's agenda:
1. Expand the number and quality of opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with community partners.
   - Embed community engagement opportunities into both first-year required courses and upper level courses, including professional development for faculty and graduate student instructors, theme modules tailored to different courses, and undergraduate student fellowships.
   - Conduct an ongoing rigorous inventory of community engaged courses, both undergraduate and graduate, to identify gaps in availability of courses and needs for instructor professional development.
2. Enhance support for faculty as they design and implement courses with embedded community engagement.
   - Develop workshops to train instructors and create modules that instructors can integrate into their syllabi.
   - Continue to recognize faculty for excellence in community engaged scholarship and instruction through the Annual Public Service Award
3. Refine assessment methods and evaluative feedback mechanisms to facilitate availability of rigorous and useful assessment results for course and program improvement.
   - Institutional Research and Analytics will collaborate to refine the methods created for this assessment, create new tools as needed, and provide up-to-date pertinent survey results.

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[7] 2030 UVA Strategic Plan, Key Initiative: Citizen-Leaders for the 21st Century

Conclusions

This assessment has demonstrated the high level of commitment many UVA students have to public service, whether defined as civic engagement, community service, or self-governance. As first years, UVA students arrive ready to learn about communities, cultures, societies, and countries and about how they can contribute effectively and make a positive difference in the world. While at UVA, they devote substantial time to developing leadership skills through coursework and participation in community service and student organizations.

This assessment also identified areas for improvement. More opportunities to work with community partners, especially with the instruction and guidance of faculty, would enhance students' ability to work constructively with diverse community members on a range of issues. With efforts currently underway, we expect opportunities for students to learn and practice effective civic engagement to increase across the university.

Finally, this assessment revealed the need for further development of good measures and tools. While survey and voting data clearly documented students' commitment to and participation in community and civic service, assessing students' knowledge and skills was more challenging. Refining the direct assessment measures designed for the 2018-19 assessment will be a priority going forward as the variety and number of community-engaged courses at UVA expands.

As this was the first attempt to define and assess student civic engagement at UVA, our appreciation for the richness and complexity of the topic grew substantially throughout the process. We are grateful to the many faculty and staff who guided and participated in this assessment. From initial planning discussions through development of new tools, data collection, analysis, and consideration of findings, they contributed their judgment, ideas, time, and feedback to design an informative and useful assessment.