



CULTIVATING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC VALUES TO SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDENTS¹

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Introduction

In contemporary society, the concept of civic engagement appears as an essential condition for the functioning of democracy and social well-being. Civic engagement transcends simple participation in the electoral process and encompasses a wider spectrum of activities: civic and community participation, activism, and public dialogue. Thus, cultivating civic engagement is a mission, duty, and responsibility for universities, particularly for social science programs. They derive from the need to form and shape not only professionals but also responsible and involved people from a civic and social point of view. However, the mechanisms by which higher education institutions can effectively cultivate such engagement among students remain a subject of debate and investigation. This study seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the strategies used by universities to promote civic awareness among students. Methodologically, this article proposes a study on one of the most important universities in the field of social, political, and administrative sciences in Romania. By analyzing the perceptions and experiences of students, the research provides new empirical data on how educational practices influencing civic and political engagement are evolving, or, conversely, reveals institutional shortcomings in fulfilling the mission of promoting civic engagement among students. In this sense, a standardized questionnaire was distributed to the students from the political science bachelor's degree program to analyze their perceptions and experiences regarding how the study programs and the teachers'

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activity incorporate the component of civic and political involvement. Data analysis highlights how and if higher education programs cultivate and shape student engagement through academic programs, extracurricular activities, or community partnerships.

Contextual shifts in higher education

The environment of higher education is undergoing significant upheaval, marked by technological innovation, dwindling public investments, shifting demographics among students, and a growing realization of the inadequacy of traditional educational approaches to prepare learners for the challenges of modern society (Gleason N. W. 2018: 5–8; Mtawa N. N.–Nkhoma N. M. 2020: 112–13). Despite these challenges, there is a resounding call to reimagine higher education as more than just a platform for workforce preparation. In the European Higher Education Area, the promotion of civic engagement has consistently been highlighted as a key aim in fostering a „Europe of knowledge“ under the EHEA framework (Arrufat, A.–García-Ramos, D., 2020: 6–8). This endeavor aims to equip individuals with the essential skills needed to confront the evolving demands of contemporary times while fostering a sense of unity through shared values and collective identity within a shared social and cultural milieu. The significance of education and collaborative educational efforts in nurturing and reinforcing stable, peaceful, and democratic societies is widely recognized as crucial (The Bologna Declaration, 19. 06. 1999). However, the critical question remains: Can civic engagement be effectively promoted and institutionalized within academic settings to ensure meaningful and sustainable outcomes for all stakeholders involved? Academic programs dedicated to civic engagement and social action offer a promising avenue. These programs provide a dedicated space for students, faculty, professors, and community partners to engage in a deep, critical, and systematic exploration of the complexities inherent in community-based teaching, learning, and research. By fostering interdisciplinary activities, such programs enable participants to cultivate the skills and knowledge necessary to become informed and engaged citizens. However, these goals and strategies are not always easy to implement. At the macro level, there are a multitude of barriers that make the mission of universities difficult. Today, the students are multitasking and possess a global mindset. They feel more connected to the world than ever before. While many of today’s students are members of different organizations and teams, the act of participation in such groups cannot be seen as civic engagement or genuine concern for the good of the community (Bauml, M.–Davis, Smith–Blevins, B. 2022). The tide of volunteerism among the youth of today is not as great as many would hope, although voluntary participation in different organizations contributes to the formation of practical skills necessary for involvement in community life (Putnam 2000: 367) and shapes civic attitudes through socialization as an explanatory mechanism (Angi et al. 2022: 255).



More often, some students volunteer as a method of obtaining scholarship money, rather than their want to improve society. The need for leadership is evident as there are many issues to be dealt with in the world. Who then will be those to deal with such issues? And by what means will they do so? These are all questions that must be taken into consideration when pondering what civic engagement means and what it means to cultivate civic engagement among students. On the other hand, the mission of universities becomes all the more difficult as the civic engagement of youth is decreasing. (Putnam, R. 2000: 284) highlighted a decline in civic engagement during the latter part of the 20th century, evident in reduced political involvement, charitable contributions, and community engagement. This trend extended to college students, with entering first-year students displaying lower political engagement but increased involvement in volunteer work (Astin-Sax 1998: 256–258). This has been evidenced by the steady decline of voter participation in most Western democracies (Ezrow–Krause 2023) and, to a certain extent, the rise of anti-social behavior and violence among youth. When apathy and disengagement occur in society, it can lead to an erosion of social capital and the very fabric that holds society together. This has led to a wide range of negative social indicators that a lack of civic engagement has produced (Macfarlane, 2005). These include poor educational standards, low trust levels in public institutions, a breakdown in family and community networks, a rise in anti-social behavior and crime, and a general decline in the overall health of a nation’s democracy (Putnam, 2000: 325–33). From this perspective, providing a good education in citizenship and the value of being an active and informed member of society is a way to ensure a better future for the next generation of citizens.

Dimensions of Civic Engagement

Civic engagement encompasses a broad spectrum of behaviors, values, and skills aimed at making a positive impact on society (Ehrlich 2000). The definition of civic engagement spans from traditional political activities to social justice orientation, leadership skills, and intercultural understanding (AACU apud Bowen 2010: 1–2; Smith et al. 2017; Campbell D. E. 2006: 29–31). Civic engagement is an umbrella concept, which includes a series of attitudes and behaviors with effects in the political or non-political area of society. In the political sense, it involves working towards improving one’s community by having an active role in the political decision-making process. This can be done by directly influencing government policy by encouraging others to get involved and take an active role in public life or by participating in different activities such as volunteer work, education, mass media, community service, and advocacy. It is important to note that civic engagement in political activism cannot exist without the non-political side and vice versa. It is a combination of the two that positively affects the community and creates social capital. Ehrlich (2000: VI) defines civic engagement as “working to make



a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes. This is a very involved definition that suggests that individuals must be engaged at all times to better society. In the education area, a simpler definition would be that university students take the time to contribute to society in various forms. This can be done in a multitude of ways, but the main goal is to examine ways to be an active member of the community. For David Crowley, civic engagement must encompass the dimensions of social change. The author states that an active citizen contributes to the life of the community and influences the future through her actions. (David Crowley (n.d.) apud in Adler–Gogin 2005: 239).

Putnam’s definition of civic engagement provides a foundational understanding of the concept.

The author’s emphasis on social capital and civic engagement underscores the value of informal social activities, associational involvement, and political participation in fostering community cohesion and collective action² (Putnam 1995: 664–667). Even though the author did not give an exact definition of civic engagement, his thesis regarding the meaning of the concept becomes much clearer when he discusses „civic disengagement“ which he sees as an „equal opportunity affliction. The sharp and steady declines in club meetings, visits with friends, committee service, church attendance, philanthropic giving (...)“ which have steadily declined over the last few decades. (Adler–Goggin 2005: 239; Putnam 2000:185). For Elisa Diller, civic engagement is “any activity where individuals unite in their capacity as citizens” (Diller 2001 in Adler–Goggin 2005: 238).

In conclusion, civic engagement is a dynamic blend of both political and non-political efforts that work together to improve community life and build social capital. This active participation not only includes traditional forms of political activism but also involves volunteer work, educational outreach, advocacy, ONG-s membership, etc. illustrating that an effective civic engagement is deeply rooted in a commitment to both political processes and social change. Moreover, students’ civic engagement reflects a broader trend in which citizens are increasingly engaged in issues they believe should be addressed not only by politicians or parties of the left or right but also by civil society in assembly (Loia 2023: 103). Furthermore, the perspectives shared by authors like Elrich, Putnam, or Diller underline the transformative power of civic engagement in shaping social structures and influencing individual or collective actions in public life. This holistic approach demonstrates that the efforts of civic engagement are inclusive and address the diverse needs and challenges of the community/society.

2 <https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/putnam-on-social-capital-democratic-or-civic-perspective/>



Research Methodology

This study used a structured questionnaire distributed to students across the Faculty of Political Science who explored both institutional frameworks and student perspectives on civic engagement in higher education. In the context of this study, the role and actions of higher education institutions in supporting and facilitating civic engagement form a critical dimension of the analysis. This dimension assessed how universities undertake and fulfill their mission to cultivate civic engagement among students. It also included a short evaluation of the faculty curriculum regarding the inclusion of civic and political engagement courses, which equip students with essential knowledge about societal structures. Additionally, it examined the availability of experiential opportunities such as volunteer work and internships in non-governmental organizations that allow students to apply theoretical knowledge practically. This dimension also considered the extent to which universities organize extracurricular events that promote civic engagement and foster a proper environment to open discussions and debates on civic and political issues. The second dimension of the questionnaire used Thomas Ehrlich's model of civic engagement, which is particularly suited for demonstrating and measuring students' civic engagement through distinct constructs such as *knowledge, attitude, behavior, and democratic participation*. To evaluate these constructs, specific items from the questionnaire have been selected and categorized according to these dimensions.

Study sample

The questionnaire was completed by 94 students from 3 different specializations within the Faculty of Political Sciences. The students had 14 days at their disposal and the degree of completion was low, out of a total of 440 students, only 94 (approx. 21.36%) responded to this request. This dataset provides a comprehensive overview of the demographic and academic characteristics of students. The sample is primarily female, with 67% of the participants, and male students representing the remaining 33%. This indicates a higher engagement or selection bias towards female students in the study. In terms of academic standing, the majority of the students are in their second year, accounting for 56.4% of the sample, with first-year students comprising 33%, and third-year students making up 10.6%. This distribution suggests a concentration of younger undergraduates, particularly those in the earlier stages of their academic careers. Regarding their backgrounds, a significant majority, 78.7%, come from urban areas, while 21.3% hail from rural environments, reflecting a strong urban influence in the sample. In terms of employment status, the vast majority (72.3%) are not employed, aligning with typical full-time student status, whereas 11.7% work in the private sector, and 6.4% are employed in the public sector.



Findings

Role of Higher Education Institutions

The findings offer a clear indication of the university's commitment to its role, as reflected by significant student participation in civic engagement initiatives. Curricular inclusion of civic engagement is confirmed by 74.5% of students which states that their study programs include courses dedicated to civic and political engagement. For 45.7% of students civic and political subjects are integrated directly into the content of their courses., while 25.5% noted that these subjects are introduced through specific courses. Also, the presence of extracurricular activities related to civic engagement is substantial, with 69.1% of students acknowledging that debates and discussions on social and political issues are an integrated part of the course content. The distribution of resources for civic information is diverse and well-distributed, with 31.9% of students utilizing guides and informational materials, and another 30.9% turning to the university's web resources.

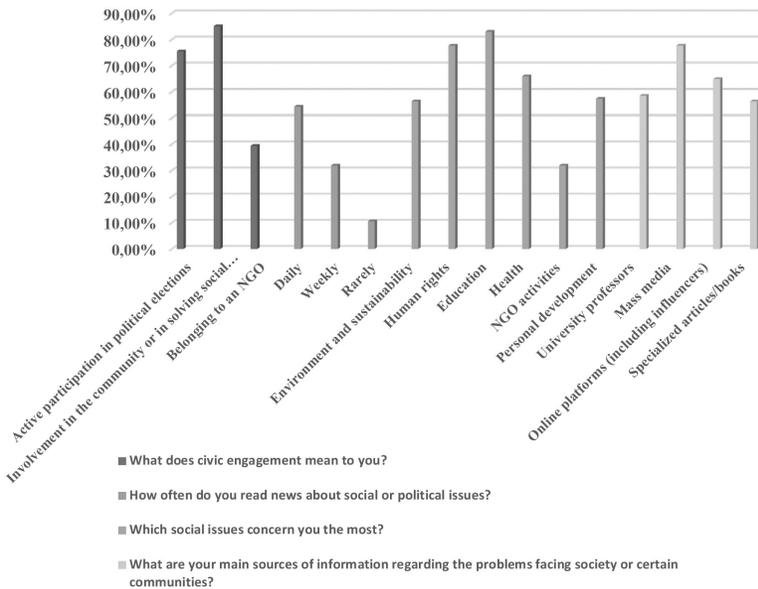
Student Civic Engagement

Knowledge

Students' knowledge of civic engagement is reflected in their concerns about social issues. Their answer to the question „What does civic engagement mean to you?“ reveals a strong recognition among students of the importance of being involved in community and political elections, with 85.1% and 75.5% agreement, respectively. This suggests that students associate civic engagement with proactive community involvement and democratic participation. However, affiliation with political parties or NGOs is less commonly associated with civic engagement, indicated by lower percentages of 12.8% and 39.4%, respectively. Student responses imply that while they appreciate the importance of civic actions, their perception of engagement is broader and potentially more practical than formal political affiliation. Moreover, students are overly concerned about education (83%), human rights (77.7%), and health (66%). Additionally, most students (57.4%) read about social or political issues daily, suggesting a considerable level of engagement with current events. This consistent exposure to information informs their concerns and shapes their understanding of the key areas where civic engagement is vital. Regarding the sources from which students receive information about societal challenges, mass media stands out as the primary source (77.7%), followed by online platforms (64.9%) and faculty (58.5%). The reliance on mass media and online platforms may indicate a modern approach to information gathering, where students actively seek out information beyond the traditional academic setting. However, the significant role of faculty as information sources underscores the value of educational institutions in shaping students' civic understanding.



Figure 1. Students' knowledge



Source: Analysis developed by the author based on data collected from students, in 2024

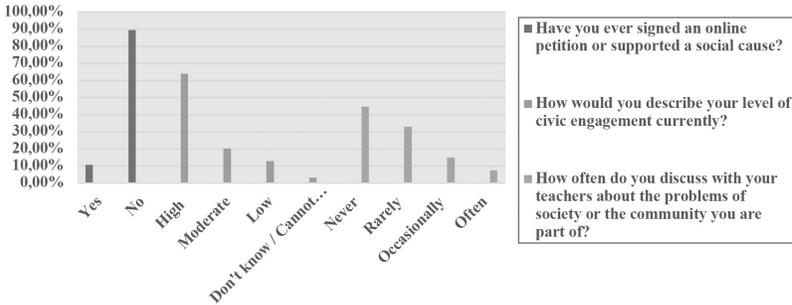
Attitude

The student's attitude towards civic involvement results from their actions, but also from their self-assessed level of involvement. 89.4% of students indicate that they have signed an online petition or supported a social cause at least once. This significant majority reflects a willingness to engage with civic issues, suggesting a translation of civic awareness into concrete actions. However, the simple act of signing a petition does not necessarily equate to deep civic involvement, which is echoed in the literature. For instance, Putnam's concept of 'bowling alone' might suggest that while modern technology facilitates certain types of civic action, it does not always lead to sustained, in-depth participation or replace the social capital built through more traditional forms of communal engagement (Putnam 2000). Other answers further clarified this view, revealing that only 12.8% of students describe their level of civic engagement as 'high,' while a larger portion, 63.8%, rate their involvement as 'moderate.' This implies a certain level of caution or self-awareness among students regarding their civic activities. It is a reflection that aligns with the perspectives described by (Ehrlich, 2000), which advocate for educational institutions to play a more substantial role in fostering not just civic actions, but a deeper sense of civic responsibility. Moreover, the frequency of discussions with professors about society or community issues, shows that only 7.4% of students frequently engage in these conversations, whereas 44.7% never do.



This disparity suggests that while students may be informed and nominally active, there is a gap in dialogue with professors on these topics, which could otherwise enhance their understanding and commitment. Perrin and Gillis (2019) argue that it is vital for higher education to provide an environment where such discussions are norms rather than exceptions, thereby encouraging a more robust civic identity among students.

Figure 2. Student attitudes



Source: Analysis developed by the author based on data collected from students, in 2024

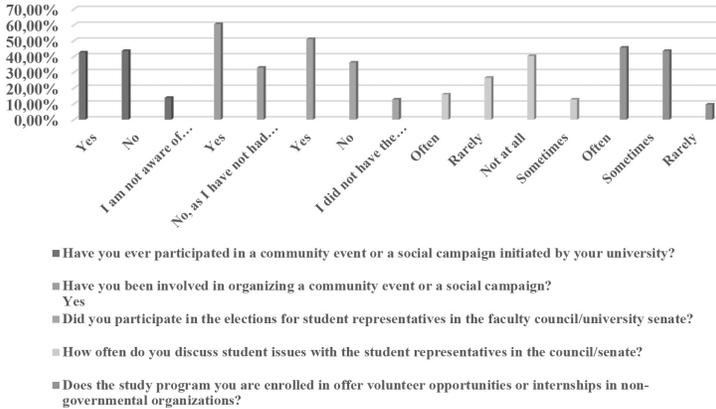
Behaviors and democratic participation

Student answers represent a mixed picture regarding civic engagement behavior and democratic participation. The evidence of civic engagement is proved by a considerable proportion of students (89.3%) who reported access to volunteering opportunities through their programs. Regular discussions with representatives are for 40.4% of students, which indicates some level of engagement. However, 43.6% of students are not aware of the activities offered by the university which indicates evidence of limited civic engagement. Only 36.2% of students participated in council elections, suggesting potential apathy or lack of awareness about the council's importance. A substantial number of students (over 60% across categories) felt their programs lacked adequate integration of civic engagement. In terms of democratic participation, 51.1% of students state that they participated in the elections for the appointment of student representatives, but there is variable awareness regarding the decisions made in faculty councils, with 30.9% feeling relatively informed (score 3 on a scale from 1 to 5) which indicates that students' perceptions of their level of information are not uniform. Some feel more informed, others less so, which shows a variety in the level of knowledge or interest of students in the decision-making processes of the faculty or university. In addition, almost half of the students occasionally discuss their problems with student representatives and 45.7% indicate that their degree program offers volunteer op-



portunities or internships in non-governmental organizations, which is a positive indicator of a culture of engagement.

Figure 3. Student behavior



Source: Analysis developed by the author based on data collected from students, in 2024

Conclusions and recommendation

The data illustrates a robust inclination towards civic engagement within the student body, showing a blend of curricular and extracurricular participation that reflects a strong institutional commitment to civic values. This finding aligns with scholarly discussions on the role of higher education in fostering civic engagement, such as those by Thomas Ehrlich (2000), who highlights the transformative potential of integrating civic responsibility into the curriculum. However, there is a gap between student involvement in civic activities and their participation in more structured political processes, such as council elections. Recommendations for universities should include enhancing structures that facilitate deeper, more sustained civic participation. This could involve more integrated courses on civic and political engagement, increased opportunities for dialogue with faculty, and fostering environments where democratic participation is both encouraged and valued.

The insights into students' knowledge and attitudes towards civic engagement highlight a dynamic interface between academic influences and personal initiative, with a significant reliance on mass media and online platforms for information. This suggests a modern, yet fragmented approach to civic education, where students are active but potentially lack depth in their civic understanding. To address this, it is recommended that institutions invest in more robust academic resources and training that encourage critical engagement with civic topics (Fernandez 2021: 678). Enhancing faculty-student interactions and providing more forums for dis-



cussion could bridge the information gap and promote a more nuanced understanding of civic issues. Furthermore, aligning with findings from Putnam (2000) and Perrin–Gillis (2019), institutions should consider fostering a community culture that goes beyond cursory involvement, to cultivate a deeper sense of civic identity and responsibility.

Finally, the behavioral data and students' self-assessment of their civic engagement suggest variability in their experience and engagement levels. While many are involved to some degree, there appears to be a lack of uniformity in the depth and effectiveness of this engagement. This underscores the need for tailored approaches to civic education that consider diverse student backgrounds and engagement levels. Recommendations might include more personalized civic engagement pathways like using socioscientific issues. Socioscientific issues in education, particularly in science education, help students understand the broader impacts of science on society and the diverse perspectives that can inform decisions about scientific and technological developments. (Dauer et al. 2021; Hodson D. 2020: 595–596). It encourages students to engage in debates, analyze data, consider multiple viewpoints, and understand the values and ethics underlying scientific debates. The goal is to prepare students not only to understand scientific content but also to become informed, critical consumers of scientific information, and responsible citizens capable of making decisions about complex scientific issues that affect their lives and communities (Ratcliffe–Grace 2003; Birmingham–Calabrese 2014 apud in Dauer et al. 2021: 2).

Moreover, the results of this research are comparable to the conclusions of other recent studies that explore the role of higher education in promoting civic engagement. For example, in Europe, there is an advocacy for a university curriculum that integrates specific components of civic engagement into academic programs, along with mechanisms for evaluating and monitoring the impact of these activities on students (European Parliament, 2021), while research from the US underscores the broad effectiveness of community and civic experiences in higher education, it highlights the need for larger, multi-institutional studies that focus on diverse outcomes to fully understand the impact of these practices on civic engagement. (Chittum, J. R.–Enke, K. A. E.–Finley, A. P. (2022). Therefore, the evaluation of the impact of university study programs is an ongoing task that contributes to the continual adjustment of educational strategies, ensuring that civic engagement among students becomes a consistent practice, a fundamental goal, and a deeply held belief.



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