

Understanding College Students' Civic Identity Development: A Grounded Theory

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a study designed to understand the development of college students' civic identity—that is, an identity encompassing their knowledge, attitudes, values, and actions regarding civic engagement. Grounded theory was used to examine the experiences and attitudes of 19 college seniors who manifested strong civic identities. The resulting developmental model of civic identity includes five “positions” that represent identifiable progressions of civic identity development and mediating “key influences” that promoted or hindered students' growth between these positions. Implications for research and practice are also discussed.

Keywords: civic identity, civic engagement, college students, higher education

Introduction

Preparing students to be engaged members of society is a vaunted outcome of American higher education (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007; Jacoby, 2009). Through myriad civic engagement experiences such as volunteering, service-learning, study abroad, and alternative breaks, educators work toward building college students' civic identity, which can be thought of as an identity category comprising one's knowledge, attitudes, values, and actions regarding civic engagement. This definition aligns with common depictions of identity, which conceptualize development as occurring across three dimensions: epistemological (meaning-making capacity), intrapersonal (sense of self), and interpersonal (relationships with others) (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Kegan, 1994). The intent, of course, is for the cumulative effect of civic experiences to positively influence students' civic identity, and for that effect to endure postcollege, whereby students continue to build their civic knowledge, value involvement in their communities, and remain actively engaged in civic matters throughout their lives (AAC&U, 2002; ACPA & NASPA, 2004).

Two major problems exist regarding the civic tradition of American higher education and its intended outcomes outlined above. First, civic identity is rarely conceptualized as such; that is,

within the broad work of civic engagement, the effect on students is seldom described as shaping an underlying identity construct.

Instead, attention is focused on separate outcomes related to civic engagement (e.g., behaviors, attitudes, or knowledge) as opposed to a holistic construct integrating these different dimensions. Remarking on this curious supposition, Knefelkamp (2008) argues that educators should consider “civic identity as an identity status in its own right—one that can become as integral to individual identity as race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, or any other deeply claimed aspect of self” (pp. 1–2).

Directly related to the issues of failing to acknowledge the impact of civic engagement efforts on the construct of civic identity is a second problem: little is known about how one’s enduring civic self—or civic identity—forms, develops, and endures before, during, and after college. Researchers have a strong sense of the effects of various civic engagement efforts on different outcomes; however, lack of understanding of the developmental trajectory of one’s civic identity remains a troubling limitation in civic engagement research. Although some researchers conceptualize civic identity as a construct (Lott, 2012; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997), their work falls short of mapping how its development occurs. By considering the cumulative effect of civic experiences as influencing an underlying identity construct, researchers and practitioners can gain a better understanding of how civic identity develops over time and could shape environments more effectively to bolster its development.

Literature Review

Jacoby (2009) argued that civic engagement is a “big tent” under which myriad community-based experiences fall. Eyler and Giles (1999) offered a taxonomy to classify civic engagement efforts, which includes political participation (e.g., voting, holding public office), participation in voluntary associations (e.g., volunteer groups), and the generation of social capital (e.g., connections with and between individuals and groups). Under these broad conceptualizations, several researchers have established connections between participation in civic engagement experiences and various outcomes. Many demographic variables are important mediating factors in the development of aspects related to civic identity, including gender (Dugan, 2006; Gimpel, Lay, & Schuknecht, 2003; Lott, 2012), race (Cruce & Moore, 2007; Rowan-Kenyon, Soldner, & Inkelas, 2007), and socioeconomic status (Jones & Abes, 2004; Jones & Hill, 2003). Several

studies have also examined the effects of precollege experiences on civic identity development. Campbell (2006) found that where young people grow up matters for their future civic participation. Kiesa (2012) found that civic identity is influenced by early opportunities for involvement in civic life, the nature of involvement opportunities, and whether students had civic role models. A study of 96,973 college students highlighted the importance of involvement with community service and leadership positions in student organizations in high school for attitudes and values related to civic identity (Johnson, 2014).

Many college experiences can build aspects of college students' civic identities, and several studies have substantiated this relationship. Peer interaction during college (Astin, 1993), service-learning (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Fullerton, Reitenauer, & Kerrigan, 2015; Pryor & Hurtado, 2010), involvement in activism (Lott, 2012), taking ethnic or women's studies classes (Lott, 2012), studying abroad (Lott, 2012), and conversations about and across differences (Hurtado, 2007) have all been shown to be positively linked to stronger civic knowledge, values, attitudes, and behaviors. Despite these studies, little is known about how these characteristics impact an enduring, underlying identity construct (i.e., civic identity). The current study seeks to address this gap by exploring the developmental trajectory of civic identity.

Study Design

Methodology

I used a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), which is a series of “systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories from the data themselves” (p. 1). Grounded theory allows for a “unified theoretical explanation” (Corbin & Strauss, 2007, p. 107) of a process. Constructivist grounded theory features coconstruction of data analysis through shared experiences and relationships with participants (Charmaz, 2014). In addition to how data are collected and analyzed, constructivist grounded theory acknowledges that the resulting theory is an interpretation mediated by context and the researcher's understanding. Charmaz's approach to grounded theory focuses on unearthing ideologies, multiple realities, and complexities of particular words, views, and actions.

The research question guiding this study was, “How does civic identity form and evolve over time?” I chose participants from a

midsized, 4-year public predominantly White institution (PWI) located in the Midwest region of the United States, pseudonymously called Academy University. I selected this institution because of its large variety of civic experiences and local and national reputation for strong civic experiences. Once I identified the institution and secured IRB approval, I sought information-rich participants who had strong civic identities. I compiled a list of university employees who were uniquely situated to recommend study participants who valued civic involvement, were engaged in their communities, and were reflective of their experiences. I solicited recommendations of college seniors who fit the above criteria via e-mails to 85 university employees, which netted 120 unique student recommendations. I e-mailed all of the recommended students and asked two initial screening questions: “What does the term civic identity mean to you?” and “What civic experiences have you been involved with while in college?” Their answers informed my decisions about who to initially interview based on the depth of experiences and understanding of their civic identity. Aligning closely to grounded theory methodology (*Charmaz, 2014*), I interviewed students, transcribed the interviews, and analyzed data throughout the process of theory building. I added additional participants to the study to refine the data and interpretations, which ultimately led to interviewing 19 college seniors twice; both interviews lasted approximately 60–75 minutes. Interviews occurred over the course of 4 months to allow for sufficient data collection and simultaneous analysis. Ten students identified as White, and the other nine identified as students of color or multiracial. Thirteen identified as women and six identified as men. More information about participants can be found in Table 1; salient identities and significant involvements were chosen by participants.

Table 1. Participant Table

Name	Major(s)	Significant College Involvements	Salient Identities
Sara	Sociology	Civic Engagement Center, AmeriCorps	White, woman, lower middle class
Shane	Sports Management	Gear Up, Phi Beta Sigma, AmeriCorps Vista	Black, man, first gen, middle class
Carrie	Psychology	Honors, Study Abroad, Special Olympics	White, middle class, woman
Sadie	Biochemistry	Global Brigades, Pre-Med Society, Study Abroad, Honors	Woman, middle class, Lebanese, Polish, Italian, Catholic
Gabrielle	Spanish and Sociology	Honors, Diversity Scholar Program	Female, White and Latina, middle class, first gen
Antoinette	Sociology	Gear Up, Diversity Scholar Program	Biracial, female, first gen
Colleen	Special Education	Alternative Breaks, Disability Awareness Project, Special Olympics	White, female, Christian
Wendy	Physical Therapy	Civic Engagement Center, Honors	White, middle class, woman, Catholic
Oliver	Human Resources	Hall Council, RHA, Alternative Breaks	White, upper middle class, gay
Cameron	Marketing and Logistics	Civic Engagement Center, Alternative Breaks, On-campus employment	White, gay, lower middle class
Thomas	International Business	Diversity Scholar, Sexual Aggression Prevention & Advocacy Group, Men's Group	Black, male
Lydia	Public Relations	College Access Programs, Society of America	Black, woman
Amber	Political Science (Public Administration)	Student Government, Take Back the Tap, Environmental groups	Female, White and Hispanic, lower SES
Sandra	Pre-med	Honors, Pre-Med, Global Brigades	Mexican and White, Christian
Vance	Industrial Technology Management	Alternative Breaks, Residence Hall Council	White, male, heterosexual, upper middle class
Stephanie	Geology	Slam Poetry Club, Resident assistant	White, female, heterosexual, upper middle class
Janice	Elementary Education	Sorority, Student Activities Office, Cohort Leadership Program	White, female, heterosexual, middle class
Samuel	Integrative Public Relations	Public Relations Society, Alternative Breaks	Gay, male, lower middle class
Kyla	Political Science (Public Administration)	Diversity Scholar Program, Pre-law fraternity, Student Activities, Study Abroad	Latina, middle class, female

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I followed Charmaz's (2014) recommendations for coding, which involved three phases: (1) an initial phase involving naming each line or segment of data; (2) a focused, selective phase that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to synthesize large amounts of data; and (3) theoretical coding. In this inductive analysis, the initial phase generated 1,087 unique codes. This heuristic approach allowed me to uncover and make meaning of smaller pieces of information and make more intentional connections to other, smaller pieces of data. In this initial phase, I relied on breaking up the data into small segments, interpreting their meanings, crystalizing significant meanings, comparing data, and identifying gaps in my understanding. In the second, more analytical phase, I compared the initial codes to reveal patterns, gaps, and connections. These comparisons helped generate larger theoretical categories and patterns through an iterative process, which was the third phase.

In theoretical coding, researchers take the larger focused codes derived in Phase 2 and examine how they "may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory" (Glaser, 1978, p. 72). In this phase, I engaged in an iterative process of theorizing how civic identity developed for the participants in the study, since theoretical coding helps "weave a fractured story back together" (p. 72). In each phase of data analysis, I employed memoing, which allowed for capturing emerging connections, questions, and thoughts as I analyzed the data.

A central challenge in grounded theory is the tendency to generate theory that is too far removed from participants' experiences and perhaps too strong a reflection of the theorist's ideas. I took several precautions to help mitigate these potential misrepresentations. I adhered closely to Charmaz's (2014) recommendations for data analysis, including following the process outlined above and revisiting initial codes frequently. Additionally, I employed two layers of member-checking. First, I e-mailed a draft of the grounded theory model to participants to see how well it fit with their experiences and gathered feedback. Second, during the second interviews, I asked participants for additional feedback about the model. Students' feedback was incorporated into the manuscript, and there were no irreconcilable issues. To further bolster trustworthiness (Charmaz, 2014), I also debriefed my interview protocol with two experts in the field and presented the results at two national conferences to gain feedback. I also offer my own positionality here, because as Bourke (2014) argues, a researcher's beliefs, values,

and sense of self guide their research from study design through reporting findings. I hold many privileges as a White, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle class, Christian man. I came to the question of civic identity development partly because it is my story. Before I attended college, civic engagement and social change were not important personal values; at the end of college, they were so central that they mediated my career, relationships, and scholarly interests. My political ideology is progressive, meaning that I value equity and equality and believe institutions such as higher education and state and federal governments play a vital role in shaping a just society.

Limitations

Despite these steps to ensure rigor and quality, several limitations exist. Grounded theory seeks to generate theory based on participants' experiences; the degree of transferability to other contexts is likely limited, especially since civic experiences undoubtedly differ by campus. Given the limited research in this area, this study is not designed to position a definitive model; rather, it serves as an important starting point for conceptualizing civic identity development. Future research should seek to replicate this study with different participants. Additionally, this phase of the study did not employ a longitudinal design, which forced students to retroactively assess their civic identity development over their lifetime.

Results

The civic identity developmental model in Figure 1 depicts the developmental process of civic identity formation grounded in participants' experiences. Each of the five distinct themes is referred to as a *position*, a term that I chose for several reasons. First, positions depict a point or place in participants' development from which they seek to engage in the world. Second, positions affect one's power to act as well as points of view or attitudes. Finally, characterizing these themes as positions allows for more fluidity between them since positions are mutable. These civic positions were largely mediated by the *key influences* (described before the next sequential civic position) that either provided necessary support for participants to advance to the next position or posed undue challenge that constrained movement. Although there was considerable fluidity in how students passed through each position and manifested elements of earlier and later positions simultaneously, as illustrated by the openness between them, there was also distinct consistency

Civic Identity Development Model

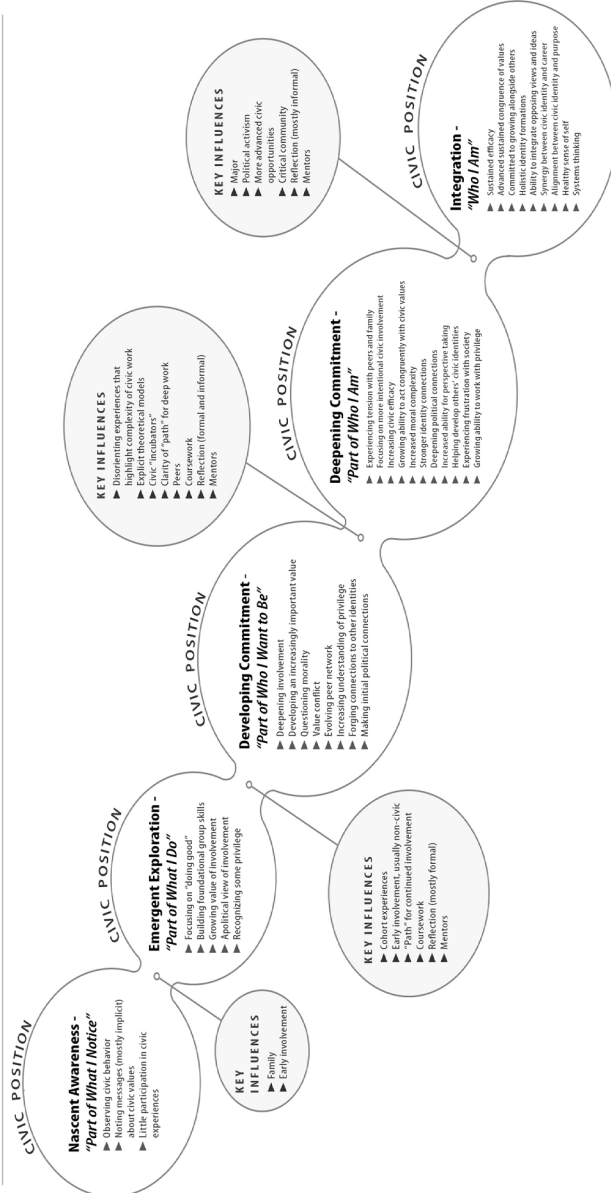


Figure 1.

in these positions. This diagram of the model illustrates maturity and increased sophistication of civic identity development going from left to right, with deepening of civic identity depicted by the downward slope of the model.

Nascent Awareness—“Part of What I Notice”

In this initial position, participants started to observe civic behavior. They began to recognize that among the many ways in which people invest their time, doing civic acts was one of them. They recalled noting their parents donating money or items to charity and volunteering. These acts were rarely discussed in their homes, and seldom included explicit messages about the values embedded in them. Participants noted these civic acts but participated in them on a limited basis. For most students, this position occurred around middle school, somewhere between the ages of 8 and 11. Janice “tagged along to everything” with her mother, who was very involved in their community. Kyla recalled, “I would always see her doing those things, which is sort of what got into my head that, ‘Oh, it’s actually fun to like be involved and do these kinds of things.’”

For all but four of the students, religion provided their introduction to the civic domain, and in many cases, actually served as the impetus for civic involvement. Mission trips, food pantries, fund raisers, and canned food drives, all connected to their places of worship, were students’ first civic experiences. For many students, like Antoinette, these activities were “purely focused” on religion. Lydia had a similar experience, joining a youth group in the eighth grade. Sandra recalled, “All of the service I can think of doing before college was either based some way, shape, or form around my church or a church-based group.” Just like the students who developed a nascent awareness of civic engagement outside a religious context, very few of the students recalled specific, explicit messages from church officials or their parents about the purpose or value of participating in these experiences.

Other students had a more deliberate introduction to civic participation. Thomas said that community work was not something he stumbled into through church or a student group in primary school. It was a deep and meaningful part of his family. His family has roots in the civil rights movement, and they impressed the lessons from this time into the fabric of their family:

My mother especially really drilled into me not only my history but the whole civil rights movement, because I

didn't learn a lot of it in school. A lot of it was taught by my parents, especially my mother. She taught me a lot about the rights and being involved.

The same was true for Stephanie. Both her mother and stepfather were educators and were always involved in political causes, especially those connected to education. She remembers community theater, writing letters to Congress, and wearing campaign buttons, which were accompanied by several conversations with her family about the importance of involvement.

Key influences. Participants described two main influences that formed this position and helped form the necessary foundation to move to the next one: family and early involvement experiences. After watching their family take part in civic experiences, they, too, began to participate in them more. Early involvement experiences in organizations for young people (e.g., student council, yearbook club, church group) provided an important laboratory to develop group skills and, often, to continue civic engagement.

Emergent Exploration—"Part of What I Do"

At this civic position, participants became involved in various groups; some of these groups had inherently civic missions (e.g., National Honor Society, Girl Scouts), but most did not. Those groups that had civic aims were mostly focused on "doing good" through volunteering—organizing canned food drives or volunteering at a soup kitchen. In these groups, which were mostly high school student organizations, students built foundational skills for working in groups and began to value involvement. Many of these groups had mandatory volunteer hour requirements. Cameron's involvement with National Honor Society in high school required him to acquire 10 hours of community service, so he volunteered with a Little League baseball team. Even though it was a short time commitment, Cameron had an epiphany. "I was like, wow, there's a lot more to do that you don't really see on a day to day basis." Additionally, students viewed their involvement as apolitical—completely disconnected from politics. Through these experiences, students grew in their awareness regarding their privileges (e.g., they had necessities, while others did not). For students who held privileged identities, especially around race and class, their awareness of privilege was often an initial realization of privilege related to race or class. For students of color, for instance, this position did not mark a realization of privilege since they were already aware of privilege and oppression; instead, this position marked a deepening

in their understanding and helped them better understand other privileges they hold.

Students' early experiences with social and civic groups continued once they went to college, although civic engagement was not on the minds of most students when they chose to attend Academy University. Scholarships and reputation of specific academic programs were the two biggest factors in their college choice. Civic engagement was either not on their radar at all or an ancillary factor once they made their decision. Ophelia and Lydia were the only two who were heavily influenced by the strong emphasis Academy University placed on civic engagement. The opportunity to maintain involvement in honors and college access programs—things they were involved with in high school to which they attributed a lot of their success—was a large factor. But for most students, civic engagement was not a driving factor in college choice. Several cited cohort-based programs as important because of the financial assistance they provided. These experiences also provided the critical bridge from high school involvement to collegiate involvement, but they were not the motivating factor in these students' decisions to enroll at Academy University. Janice said,

I was very lucky in the fact that I was involved with [cohort leadership program], because right from the get-go, I was surrounded by people who were like me, who were involved in high school, who most of them wanted to continue that involvement.

All of the cohort-based programs in which the students were involved, such as the honors program or the multicultural leadership fellows, included mandatory service hours, which were critical to fostering civic identity. Having a requirement to complete a mandated amount of volunteer hours sent a clear message to students that community involvement was important and provided the necessary motivation to get involved. Gabrielle, a member of the honors program, said the required hours gave her “a path for continued involvement.”

As students reflected back on the service hour requirements in their cohort-based programs, they had mixed feelings. Carrie panned the stipulations in the honors program that students could fulfill only a limited percentage of their requirements in one category. Gabrielle was critical that her diversity cohort program required all service hours be performed within the city where Academy University was located. Because Carrie and Gabrielle

already had a strong direction for their desire to serve, this stipulation hindered their ability to deepen their civic identity. Gabrielle argued these restrictions “dampened my passion to volunteer.”

For other students who were not in a cohort program, their involvement in community work emerged from prior, general involvement in college without a lot of thought put into it. Oliver’s friend asked him to accompany him to a Residence Hall Association meeting on a whim, which led him to value cocurricular involvement. Vance “tagged along” with his resident assistant to a hall council meeting, where he later got involved. This was the case for most students—casual early, seemingly noncivic involvement eventually led them into more civic work. Colleen stated, “I chose [Academy University] because of the special education program and then it just felt like a fit. It didn’t really ever cross my mind about service as just something I think in the back as like I’ll find it if it was there. Luckily I just fell into what happened here.”

Key influences. Several important influences helped propel students into the next civic position, including cohort-based experiences, peers, early involvement (usually noncivic), a clear path for continued involvement, coursework, reflection (mostly formal), mentors, and study abroad. Each of these experiences provided the necessary support for moving students from general civic involvement toward becoming a person who valued civic engagement.

Developing Commitment—“Part of Who I Want to Be”

In this position, participants deepened their involvement. Being involved in their communities became an increasingly important value. Participants wanted to increase their civic involvement as a result of early exposure to civic experiences. Having volunteered in high school in some capacity, most students wanted to continue that during college, although for most students, it was not a pressing priority. Only two students identified opportunities to continue civic involvement as a primary reason for attending Academy University. Some students, like Carrie, did not even identify as someone who did civic or community work until attending college.

Two experiences stood out as vital to students’ civic identity development early in college as they were beginning to develop a commitment to civic work: alternative breaks and study abroad. Ten of the students participated in alternative breaks early in their college career. Academy University offers one of the largest alter-

native break programs in the United States, with opportunities for spring, summer, winter, and weekend trips. Oliver's coworkers had been on alternative breaks and encouraged him to apply. He responded, "Okay. This is really cool. Volunteering isn't something that I really know a lot about but this is interesting." His comments capture what many students expressed: Making an initial commitment to go on an alternative break was not fueled by a deep civic desire to become more engaged, but rather a small commitment to getting more involved in civic work.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, studying abroad was another important experience for building students' civic identities. Colleen, Gabrielle, Carrie, Wendy, and Janice all discussed how the chance to visit another country was critical for broadening their understanding of social issues and developing their commitment to do more civic work. Janice said study abroad "led me down a more other-focused path" for the rest of her college and postcollege involvement. Colleen's experience in Peru highlighted the injustices happening there in education, which deepened her commitment to combating injustice through education. Gabrielle's extensive travel to Latin America strengthened her understanding of social justice issues and their connections to issues closer to where she grew up.

Because study abroad and alternative breaks happened earlier in these students' collegiate careers, these experiences acted as important catalysts for exploring civic and social justice issues. These were key moments where students developed a broader understanding of social issues and committed to addressing them through gaining a deeper understanding and taking action where they could. They were critical for developing commitment for their civic identities.

As students began to make civic commitments, important shifts started within all three dimensions of their identity. Participants started to question previously stable beliefs of morality as they gained a more complex understanding of social injustices. This questioning allowed for emergent connections to the political sphere in which these injustices were taking place. The students faced value conflict within themselves. Their peer network evolved as they began surrounding themselves with others pursuing more civic and community work. They began forging connections between their emerging civic identity and social identities they held, which made understanding privilege and oppression more salient. A connection to political contexts in which civic work is embedded started to take shape.

Key influences. As students began developing civic commitments, several influences helped them deepen these commitments, which included disorienting experiences that highlighted the complexity of civic work, explicit theoretical models that helped frame and give language to their experiences, civic incubators (i.e., holding environments that allowed students to deepen their civic identity), clarity of path for deep work, coursework, reflection (formal and informal), and mentors.

Deepening Commitment—“Part of Who I Am”

In this civic position, participants underwent the most marked transition in all three dimensions of development. Overall, they experienced a strong increase in civic efficacy (i.e., confidence and ability to work effectively with others toward a more just society) and a growing ability to act congruently with evolving civic values. This transformation brought on tension with peers for most and tension with family for some. Students demonstrated increased moral complexity largely driven by a strengthened capacity for perspective-taking. Students voiced a strong desire for helping others develop their civic identities, as well as a demonstrated ability to work with privilege and work toward social justice, despite mounting frustration with inequity, discrimination, and injustice.

In this position, students articulated a growing belief that they could make a difference in the world, and they could be civic “change agents,” as Sara said. After dealing with considerable uncertainty brought on by experiences in their previous position, students at this position felt as though they could work with others to promote positive societal change. They experienced a shift in their values as they began to make lasting commitments to civic work. This shift had a significant impact on not only how they spent their time, but also with whom they spent their time. As civic identity became more central to who they were, students discussed how their relationships with others continued to shift. Carrie spoke of the difficulty of going back home:

I’m from a small town, so a lot of people are very small-minded, very small thinking, and so it is really hard for me when I go home to go back to that kind of setting just because I view it so differently. I’m a very outspoken person, so I will express if I don’t agree with what you’re saying or if I think you’re being rude, so it’s hard for me to try to go back.

Oliver said he often feels like a “black sheep” since he values civic engagement and social justice work. Like Oliver, Vance and Thomas discussed feeling different from so many of their peers as their civic identities became central to who they were. Every student in the study discussed the difficulty in relating to their peers and family members at this position and how it caused strife for their sense of self.

In deepening his commitment to his civic identity, Cameron talked about the importance of explicit theoretical models such as the active citizen continuum to help make meaning of his experiences. Vance discussed how the social change model of leadership, which he was introduced to early in his civic engagement, helped frame his role in what was a much larger ecosystem of social and political issues. “It helps me see what is necessary to make change,” he said.

In this position, students cited a strong ability to engage in reflection—both formally and informally—regularly. Oliver cited the alternative breaks program as being helpful for perspective-taking. “One of the components of alternative breaks is education. Learning more about social issues and how to have conversations about social issues and everyday life, how to have conversations with people and being mindful.” Samuel said,

The reason that I loved the alternative breaks program is because of the fact that we do reflection, and we really get deep down into how social issues indirectly or directly affects you. I think that's what really . . . it started to click really for me when I started to really have those deep thoughts about how do these social issues affect me.

Students unequivocally stated that being able to reflect critically on civic, social, and community issues was a direct result of engaging in formal, facilitated reflection early in their civic identity development. Experiencing an intentionally designed and facilitated reflection led to an ability to engage in deep, meaningful reflection later in their development. Sadie noted the formalized reflections that were part of Global Brigades. Stephanie noted the reflections as a resident assistant. Vance discussed how formal reflections helped deepen his internal processing, which he does often as an introvert. “I think it's that type of internal processing on your own that really made me think that sort of thing is just as important or maybe even more important than the formalized opportunities to

make meaning and think things through.” Without taking part in effective reflections prior to this position, students said they would not have achieved deepening of their civic identities. For most students, ongoing discussion of civic and political issues seeped into their virtual interactions as well. Students described having “group chats” (i.e., ongoing conversations through text messages). Shane’s fraternity had a group chat in which, alongside messages about meeting times and event reminders, were discussions about racial justice. Cameron had the same experience with his closest friends, who were involved with the civic engagement center.

These intentionally developed reflections were the building blocks for students to engage regularly in reflection and perspective-taking. Sara attributed a lot of her development to the daily interactions with people from the civic engagement center, who helped her grow “as an advocate to address a lot of social issues.” She cited these informal interactions as key for her to develop a strong civic identity. Vance had similar experiences in the civic engagement center. Those students involved in Global Brigades and honors described a similar network of peers where they could regularly interact and develop their civic identity.

As informal reflection and perspective-taking became frequent, the role of mentors and peers became more important. Amber discussed the importance of a more advanced peer whom she had met through her various involvements to help her make the connections:

For me, I’m really slow at learning. Especially with a lot of these big concepts, I have a good friend, she’s a peer but she’s kind of like my mentor in a way and she’s the one I’d be like, ‘What? School to prison pipeline? What?’ And she was like, ‘Yeah,’ and she would spell it out for me and go to a PowerPoint. She has really helped me grasp bigger concepts.

Gabrielle found trying to sort out the interconnections of social issues “overwhelming for a little bit just thinking about all. Poverty, homelessness, hunger, these racial tensions. All these issues and they’re global.” She cited mentors in some of the programs in which she was involved as key to helping her make sense of these interconnections.

As increasing complexity of understanding social issues marked this position, so, too, did the recognition that there were limited opportunities for students to explore them at a deep level.

Amber discussed the difficulty and narrowing of opportunities to deepen students' civic identity at this position:

I am going to these events and to these different civic experiences, but that's it; instead of them being a stepping stone to something bigger, most people just call it good because there isn't much beyond the introductory stuff like alternative breaks.

Her poignant comment highlighted an important barrier to arriving at this position: once students have exhausted the civic experiences designed to raise awareness and help develop commitment toward civic and community life, what do colleges and universities offer to deepen those experiences?

For many students, coursework was invaluable to strengthening their commitment to civic identity and to growing in this identity. Courses that explored structural racism, political movements, oppression, coalition building, and other aspects of civic life were critical to almost all students in this position. Sara, Gabrielle, and Antoinette all mentioned their sociology coursework as helping them develop their civic identities by supporting a more complex understanding of social issues. However, finding courses that deepened their civic identity was a challenge, especially when those courses focused on issues related to people of color, indigenous populations, or civil rights. Antoinette posited, "There's a large lack of classes focused on minorities. I took my political science class for civil rights movement and African American politics. I don't know the department but I'm pretty sure there's only three professors that teach those courses." Not having these widely offered, she said, "draws less attention to what the needs are and people feel like it's not their responsibility."

The lack of supportive coursework hindered students' ability to articulate connections between their civic work and the larger political domains in which they were situated. Oliver discussed how difficult it was to connect his civic experiences to the larger political context at a deep level. "I think it's challenging. In my mind, it's easier for me to connect different issues but it's hard to talk about." In fact, 10 additional participants similarly failed to articulate much connection between their civic identities and the political sphere. Like Wendy, who said, "I know there are political connections but I can't really describe them well," students struggled with this aspect of their civic identity.

Largely because of their greater understanding of the complexity of civic work and social issues, the long-term sustainability of their civic involvement became more important to students. They were better equipped to see the limitations and potential harm of one-time service experiences and sought ways to deepen their impact so that it addressed structural issues. After several civic experiences, Carrie remembered thinking, “Okay, well, how are we going to make this sustainable? How are we going to keep this going? Because you can’t be everywhere.”

Key influences. Those experiences that helped students integrate their civic identities into who they were included their academic major, political activism, more advanced and complex civic experiences, sustained reflection, critical community, and mentors.

Integration—“Who I Am”

The last civic position was marked by many aspects: demonstrating systems thinking, including a robust understanding of political dimensions, privilege, institutions, structures, and oppression; sustained civic efficacy (i.e., enduring confidence in skills to make a difference); a commitment to growing in one’s civic identity alongside others; a critical community; and a healthy sense of self that often included harmony with religion or spirituality. Only three students showed significant evidence of inhabiting this position, but those who did regularly acted on their ability to integrate opposing views and ideas into their worldview and experienced synergy between civic identity and career.

Central to this position was students’ ability to understand the complexity in civic work, which is most readily categorized as systems thinking (*Senge, 2006*). Systems thinking allowed students to see the interplay and connections of institutions, policies, and processes in society that mediate social and civic issues. Unlike the previous position where students struggled to see the political connections of their work, this position was characterized by considerable clarity in comprehending the myriad factors mediating social issues. Several sources of support aided in students’ ability to engage in systems thinking. Antoinette found faculty from her major to be critical influences on this more complex way of thinking. As she began to grow in her civic identity, she pondered, “Now I need to know how are these things working. How are things lined up? How does the system work? How does it relate to me and my life?” For Amber, mentors fueled her systems thinking. “It wasn’t because of school, which is so mind boggling to me. I am thankful I had the

individuals and those kind of people surrounding me, but really to make the connections around environmental issues being worse in the places of the lowest class.” Amber’s comments highlight the earlier finding that Academy University offered these students few opportunities to grow in their civic identity in more advanced positions.

Students also articulated a strong sense of civic efficacy and an enduring belief that despite the complexity and difficulty of community work, they could make a difference. Amber knew that staying involved in community work and pursuing systemic change would not be easy, but that “it would make a difference, even for one person. And I know I can do more beyond that.” Sara said that even though larger societal change is no doubt difficult work, she found daily interactions to be sites for making a difference. She knew they “wouldn’t solve the world’s issues” but could be opportunities to help others in becoming more other-oriented.

Central to students’ enduring beliefs and civic efficacy is what Henderson (2007) calls “critical community,” which is a group characterized by “critical theorizing, reflection, and a clear commitment to working for social justice through empowering and transformative practice” (p. 1). To engage in critical community, participants must understand the complexity of social issues and work in community with others to address them over time. Creating or finding space for critical community while in college was predictably difficult. Although participants noted making deep, meaningful friendships while in college, few felt a level of kinship with their peers that would be described as critical community. Samuel and Thomas both described examples of critical communities, however. Samuel found that his friend network was “very focused on social issues,” and they discussed them in person and online through social media. Thomas found community in both his men’s group and sexual aggression prevention and advocacy group. “Change occurs when you’re working with a group of people, not just one,” he opined. These groups and networks were much more than peers with common interests—they were “life-giving” communities that nurtured participants’ civic identities and sustained them.

Integrating a strong civic identity with postcollege plans was an incredible struggle for students. Now that their civic identity was so heavily intertwined with their sense of self, finding an internship, job, or graduate school, or even choosing a career proved difficult. Cameron, who was seeking an internship that aligned with his civic identity, said, “I think that’s why it’s been difficult for me to find an internship because none of it really excites me because it’s just not

what I'm looking for." When thinking about a career, Sara realized she didn't want "to do all this [civic] stuff on the periphery that I really love to do, I want to make that the center of my life and go into a career that I could focus on that." She changed her major to sociology because that was what an influential teacher taught. She "related to it and felt like it was a better field of study to prepare me as a social advocate because we discuss things like power structures, social inequalities and those kinds of things." Carrie described how she used to see her career and civic identity as separate:

It used to be physical therapy, that is my job, I'm going to get money, it's going to be awesome, I'm going to love my job, and then more of volunteering was more on the side. Now I see physical therapy as a way to help people in meaningful ways.

Antoinette described her thinking between career and civic identity similarly. "They're not two separate identities anymore. Now they're just one big clash of identity." Sadie, like all but one of her peers, was not thinking of civic experiences when she came to college. However, now that she was applying to medical school, it was at the forefront. "I'm looking at what types of free clinics are there? Can I do anything like mission trips or work abroad? Can I do research that's related to help disparities?"

Many students, like Colleen and Vance, expressed a desire to have their civic identities and careers in harmony, but were not sure how to make that happen. "I would love to get more involved with them, so I can intermesh the two of them so they can still do stuff of what's going on, but I don't know what that looks like right now," Colleen said. Oliver felt similarly, saying, "It's really challenging for me right now to see the relationship between the two. I guess between my coursework that's not really something. . .civic identity isn't discussed, and service isn't really something that's discussed either."

Many students faced resistance and sometimes hostility as they integrated their civic identities into their careers, especially in the business school. Oliver cited a lack of support from his human resources coursework in supporting finding meaningful employment that aligned with his civic identity. Cameron, another business major, argued that there is a mantra in the business school: "You got to keep reading if you want that corner office and that Mercedes." He felt that the business school had a culture "geared towards being successful, climbing the ladder." The context offered

him limited guidance, "so it's just trying to figure out what's the right path at this right time." Cameron felt that the business school devalues civic engagement as well. "They stress that internships are important and volunteering looks nice but it's not an importance, which is probably something that people don't really pay that much attention to." Thomas, also a business major, corroborated this statement. His civic identity was heavily intertwined with social justice work. He said that concerns important to him were overlooked: "race, diversity, gender equality. They've never even come up in [business school building]. So no . . . no civic stuff is being discussed over there."

The business school was not the only source of tension for students seeking to integrate their civic identities into their careers. Stephanie discussed the draw of eschewing civic identity and following money:

Being a geology major, I have a plethora of opportunities to work for big oil. It's very attainable and it is compensated extremely well. I mean, they will pay for my masters and after that I can be making \$100,000 easily working for Shell. You are treated so well.

Colleen, who maintained significant involvement in working with people with special needs, said she often incurred pushback from professors when she informed them about absences because of her necessary attendance at related events. "My math professor said to me, 'Why would you want to do that?'" Even when academic colleges were not hostile toward students, more often than not, they displayed a general ambivalence toward promoting students' civic identity development. Samuel said that "not a lot of people ask" about his challenge in integrating his civic identity into a meaningful career. Vance and Shane shared similar sentiments. For many students, the notion of integrating one's civic identity into one's career was not supported by their majors or the larger Academy University community. Thus, students' majors acted as key influences that hindered their development into the integration position.

In addition to unsupportive majors, some students found the administration at Academy University supportive of some aspects of civic identity (e.g., supporting volunteering, joining student organizations) but not others (e.g., sustaining civic efficacy, addressing oppression, acting politically). Sara remarked,

I think our administration here . . . as a whole, who may, on a face value promote these kinds of values, like in our mission statement for the university. Social responsibility and all these different types of things, but I don't think that that's necessarily what we're actually aiming for as an institution. I don't think it's just [Academy University], I think overall in society.

She also said, "Some of my really good friends were in a meeting with [Academy University's president] recently. He said we're all going to evolve once we graduate and not care about these issues anymore." Kyla, through her involvements on campus, was able to see this disconnect between Academy University's espousal of diversity and social justice and how the institution enacted its ostensible values. Having a strong passion for social justice, she was upset to find how "chronically underfunded" diversity efforts were at Academy University. She found it hard to deepen her involvement and identity around these issues when the relevant offices "ran in the red every year" and "couldn't do what they needed to do." The lack of advanced opportunities for civic engagement was a key influence that hindered students' growth.

Knefelkamp (2008) surmised, "By developing an active, integrated civic identity, individuals begin to find wholeness and psychological balance within themselves and with others in the world" (p. 3). When I asked students if this quote resonated with their experiences, they all unequivocally agreed. As students grew in the later positions of civic identity—and especially in this final position—a strong, integrated civic identity was associated with an overall healthy and enriched sense of self. Students were filled with a sense of purpose and psychological balance that allowed them to remain committed to civic and community work. Additionally, regardless of what students were dealing with in their lives, an integrated civic identity helped them feel at peace with it. Sara said that "being in community with others" who have a strong civic identity helped her feel balanced in her life despite mental health challenges. Amber found that being surrounded by others who had strong civic identities helped her fight the "alienation and isolation we all face in this world."

Discussion

The civic identity development model provides five distinct civic positions and the corresponding key influences that spurred their development. Consistent with other holistic development

models such as Baxter Magolda's (2001) self-authorship journey, Mezirow's (2000) theory of transformative learning, and Kegan's (1994) self-evolution theory, students in the current study progressed from simplistic, fixed, certain positions of civic identity to more complex, mature, and integrated ways of being, knowing, and relating to others and their environments. Spurred by key influences that provided a necessary balance of challenge to their identities and support to grow in more sophisticated ways, each civic position evidenced a transformation in how students were positioned to participate in civic engagement. Later civic positions reflected greater cognitive complexity, increased centrality of civic identity to their sense of self, and an increased ability to incorporate other perspectives and work effectively with others. This depiction is also consistent with Abes, Jones, and McEwen's (2007) revised model of multiple dimensions of identity, which showed how students' meaning-making filters mediate their self-perceptions of their various identities. The resulting grounded theory model details this process, which is specifically related to civic identity development and what influenced students' growth.

Consistent with prior research (Campbell, 2006; Johnson, 2014; Kiesa, 2012), precollege experiences were critical to forming participants' civic identities. Demographic variables played important roles, too, but were not as salient as they were in prior research. Most participants saw their civic identity development as inclusive of their social identities, but not necessarily spurred by them. Women in the study were not driven to deeper levels of civic identity because of their gender, for instance, but most saw important connections between their civic identities and other social identities. Participants of color were able to draw greater connections between their racial and civic identities, largely driven by the salience of their racial identities and emerging racial justice movements such as Black Lives Matter.

College involvement was also critical to civic identity development. The "usual suspects" (e.g., service-learning, peer interactions, student organizations, reflections, conversations about and across differences, mentors) were prominent influences on participants' civic identity development. The current study affirmed the importance of these factors and disclosed greater nuance to their nature, particularly surrounding the nature of reflections, peer influence, and paths for continued involvement. The model also highlights additional influences such as explicit theoretical models, civic incubators, and a critical community, which are not prominently reflected in current scholarship.

Implications for Practice

The implications for practice from this study suggest a strong need to view civic identity as a developmental construct. As Knefelkamp (2008) argued, educators ought to view the impact of civic experiences on students as contributing to an identity construct because doing so centers how knowledge, values, and behaviors coexist and influence each other. Building on Abes et al.'s (2007) model, the current study illustrates how civic identity is an additional identity dimension category that follows a developmental trajectory and can become more salient for students over time. This perspective can enable educators to develop a stronger understanding of how their work impacts student learning and development, with a particular emphasis on what promotes or hinders growth. Educators would be better positioned to structure developmentally appropriate interventions along students' civic identity trajectory if they conceptualized civic identity as such.

Critical to structuring developmentally appropriate and sequenced experiences are the key influences that were shown to be instrumental and powerful for promoting growth along the positions outlined in the model. These influences serve as tangible ways in which educators can support students' development of civic identities. Educators can take several specific types of action to help students reach more complex positions of civic identity. First, educators must help students critically reflect on their experiences through formal, guided reflections. Reflections were the most commonly cited influence in every position of the model. Highlighting the importance of reflection in civic work is nothing new, of course, but it merits reiteration. A finding unique to this study was that formal reflection, when modeled effectively, built students' capacities to engage in informal, unstructured reflection individually and with others. This capacity was critical for growth in later positions.

Next, educators should anchor their work in explicit theoretical models that help students interpret their experiences and promote growth. Students' civic identities can also be deepened through administrator and faculty partnerships. Many students found that faculty were instrumental in understanding social issues, structural racism, and community issues. Faculty expertise was key in helping students achieve a more complex understanding of civic issues. Relatedly, students need a clear path for increasingly complex and developmentally appropriate civic experiences. Several students in this study discussed how they felt stuck in their civic identity development after they experienced several of the

common civic experiences afforded to them (e.g., service-learning, alternative breaks). Educators should be readily equipped to provide students with a sequencing of more advanced civic opportunities so they can deepen their civic identities. Providing a smattering of disparate and disconnected civic experiences is likely insufficient for reaching more mature civic identity development.

Another implication of this model is the critical importance of helping students connect their civic identities to the larger political contexts of their work. Most students in this study had difficulty discussing the relationships between their civic identity and the political sphere. Even when their experiences were rife with political dimensions, they had difficulty connecting them with issues of power, agency, institutions, laws, and policies. They are not unlike many contemporary college students who have eschewed political involvement for volunteering (Colby *et al.*, 2007; Long, 2002). The perils of divorcing political identity from civic identity are many; most notably, students are unprepared to address structural issues that almost always mediate these civic experiences. Educators who wish to develop civic experiences should look to partner with academic affairs departments such as political science, anthropology, or sociology.

Educators can help further development of civic identity by reframing early involvement experiences (e.g., living in a residence hall, membership in a student organization) as civic involvement. Participants in the study rarely discussed their early involvement as inherently civic, despite prominent civic undertones in their involvement. These early involvement experiences require students to negotiate community norms and practices, interact with diverse people, and make investments of time and energy into their community. These experiences are, of course, undoubtedly and inherently civic, but students fail to recognize them as such. If educators recast these experiences as having civic dimensions, students might better understand the importance of building community, learning from and working with others, and other vital democratic lessons. Recasting these experiences as civic might also help intentionally lead more students into further civic work. When students are part of cohort-based experiences, they have a critical bridge to more civic experiences—when they are not, further civic engagement seems to rely on chance. Students described the happenstance occasions that sparked their involvement in activities leading to civic identity development. Colleen was “lucky” to have been plugged into the civic work taking place at Academy. Vance “tagged along” to a meeting. If the message is clear to students that

early experiences are inherently civic, they may pursue more civic experiences later.

Educators might also consider providing support for students to sort through evolving morality and to negotiate evolving relationships as these arise from increasing civic identity development. Much as students in study abroad have experienced reentry shock (*Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010*), students whose civic identities became more salient to them experienced evolving friend and peer networks. As their values shifted, so, too, did their peer network. Educators should include space for students to explore these occurrences in their postexperience follow-ups. They might also provide more informal opportunities for students engaged in civic work to meet socially to build their social networks with peers who share similar values.

Conclusion

Given higher education's mission of fostering students' holistic engagement in a democratic society, educators ought to consider the impact of their work holistically, including its impact on an underlying identity construct, civic identity. From this perspective, educators can better understand the cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development of students along their journeys toward a strong, mature civic identity. This research sought to provide a developmental map of this process as a starting place for educators to think about how students' civic identities evolve. A better understanding of the process will allow educators to design and tailor experiences to promote growth along different positions in the model. Educators should leverage the key influences described in this study to deepen students' civic identities, particularly through more intentionally scaffolded civic experiences; build stronger partnerships with academic affairs to strengthen political and structural understandings of social issues; and develop sustainable communities among students who are involved in civic work.

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Methodological Addendum

Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory aligns closely with my worldview of multiple realities and truths. A grounded theory methodology was used for this study because it is particularly well-suited for investigating a process or trajectory. Additionally, colleagues who have utilized grounded theory to investigate similar developmental progressions influenced this study.

Being able to “stay close” to the data was the biggest strength, meaning significant time was spent with rereading the transcripts, generating codes, piecing them together, and reworking them. Constant comparative data analysis, while time intensive,

helped in the creation of a developmental theory that was close to participants' unique experiences while still creating a usable framework. The biggest limitation was that some nuance was lost in generating a developmental model, which was hopefully mitigated at least somewhat by the narratives.

About the Author

Matthew R. Johnson is an associate professor of educational leadership at Central Michigan University. His research focuses on the intersections of leadership, civic engagement, and social justice. He received his Ph.D. in college student personnel from the University of Maryland.