# SCHEV Statement on Civic Engagement

Since 2017, SCHEV's *Policy on Student Learning Assessment and Quality in Undergraduate Education* has required all Virginia public colleges and universities to assess civic engagement, among other core competencies. The purpose of this statement is to provide greater clarity about how SCHEV understands civic engagement, as well as what we expect regarding assessment of this complex competency. We do not expect this document will answer every question. Please contact JodiFisler@schev.edu if you would like to discuss it further.

Here's how the SCHEV policy describes civic engagement:

Civic engagement -- an array of knowledge, abilities, values, attitudes, and behaviors that in combination allow individuals to contribute to the civic life of their communities. It may include, among other things, exploration of one's role and responsibilities in society; knowledge of and ability to engage with political systems and processes; and/or course-based or extra-curricular efforts to identify and address issues of public or community concern.

Before we expand on that a bit more, keep in mind that the policy language is a *description*, not a definition and not a statement of measurable learning outcomes. It is up to each institution to decide how to define civic engagement more precisely, given the institution's educational mission and student population. That is an intentional feature of the policy. Virginia's institutions are diverse, and education is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor.
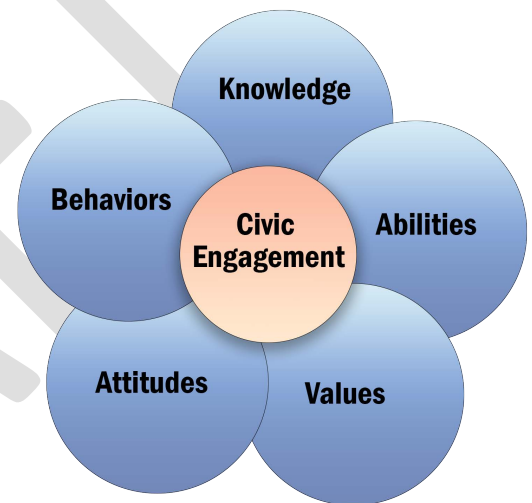
Civic Engagement Is More Than an Activity

The word "engagement" suggests action. Consequently, the description of civic engagement as a combination of "knowledge, abilities, values, attitudes, and behaviors"—largely passive attributes—may seem incongruous. That's a fair critique. The important point here is that civic engagement is not *just* about doing something. Effective civic engagement must be based in some level of knowledge (e.g., about ourselves and others, about issues that affect the community, about our political and social environment, about how to work within that environment to preserve or change conditions to benefit the community in accordance with our values and beliefs). In other words, learning—including knowledge acquisition, self-reflection, and skill-building—is implied within the term "civic engagement." That learning can take place in a variety of settings both in and beyond the classroom, using a wide range of pedagogical approaches. Regardless of the setting or the teaching method, inviting students to reflect formally on their knowledge and experiences can help them to make connections among the different dimensions of civic engagement and further deepen their learning.

Civic engagement also implies a desire to use our knowledge and skills to promote the public good (that is, to act beyond our own self-interest for the benefit of a larger community). A person may enjoy cooking, for example, but cooking in and of itself is not an act of civic engagement. Cooking meals for home-bound neighbors or volunteering to cook for a local shelter, however, transforms an enjoyable pastime into an act of civic engagement. Relatedly, working in a helping profession like nursing or counseling may not be civic engagement in the fullest sense, even though it involves working for the benefit of others. Some people see their job primarily as a source of income or personal achievement. It is largely the motivation behind the act that distinguishes civic engagement from a recreational pursuit or a professional obligation. Here again, having students reflect on the meaning of their learning experiences can be an effective way of helping them to see the broader significance of their activities.

Engagement Includes Voting *and* Volunteering

Many people hear "civic" and think "politics." Civic engagement, by that understanding, is primarily about skills and activities like media literacy (e.g., recognizing mis-/disinformation), voting, attending public meetings, and contacting elected representatives, to name just a few examples. SCHEV's description of civic engagement allows for these kinds of activities (as long as they make room for a wide array of political views and values), and SCHEV unequivocally supports educating students to become more effective members of a representative democratic society. The policy, however, does not limit civic engagement to its political forms, nor does it prioritize political engagement over what some might call "community engagement." Extra-curricular volunteer service, community-based research projects, service-learning, and other non-political types of engagement with community members and community issues are equally valid forms of civic engagement for SCHEV's purposes. In developing community-based opportunities, SCHEV reminds institutions to model the values they hope to instill and to ensure that community partnerships are built on a foundation of equitable collaboration, reciprocity, and respect.

Lead With Learning, Not Measurement

Are institutions required to incorporate all of these elements of civic engagement into their teaching and assessment strategies? No. SCHEV's description of civic engagement is intentionally broad, and it is meant to describe the range of what institutions *can* do, and perhaps ideally what they *would* do, but not what they *must* do. As for what they *should* do, there is a wealth of theoretical and applied literature about civic engagement that can help inform those decisions, as well as scholarly and professional networking opportunities where faculty and staff can share ideas about effective approaches. Although SCHEV's interest in civic engagement is expressed primarily through the assessment policy, it is important to remember that not everything that matters can be measured, and not everything that can be measured matters. With civic engagement—and in fact with all of the competencies required in the assessment policy—the learning is what matters, even if it can't be fully or easily assessed. Lead with what matters, then decide which aspects of that can be measured in a meaningful way.

The Bottom Line

In short, SCHEV asks institutions to make **intentional efforts** to develop in students those qualities that will allow them to contribute actively and responsibly to their professional and personal communities within the context of a democratic society. Assessment should provide **meaningful information** about whether and to what degree those efforts are achieving the intended aims. What and how you teach, and what and how you assess, is largely up to you. SCHEV is not asking you to teach or assess everything that might fall under the umbrella of civic engagement. We are, however, asking you to take this charge seriously and to consider what your institution can reasonably do to develop your students' capacity to be effective citizens and engaged members of their respective communities.

Source Frameworks

SCHEV's description of civic engagement borrowed from existing definitions and frameworks, most notably *A Crucible Moment* (2012). Newer frameworks affirm the multi-faceted nature of civic engagement in similar ways. Institutions are encouraged to use or adapt any of these (or other) frameworks to the extent they are helpful.

- Draft Framework for College Civic Learning for an Engaged Democracy (https://www.collegeciviclearning.org/learning-framework)
- Four Constructs of Civic Engagement (https://youth.gov/youth-topics/civic-engagement-and-volunteering)
- "A Framework for Twenty-First-Century Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement," from *A Crucible Moment*, p. 4, National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012 (free download available at https://www.aacu.org/publication/a-crucible-moment-college-learning-democracys-future)
- Points of Light Civic Circle (https://www.pointsoflight.org/civic-circle/)
- Social Change Wheel 2.0 (https://iamncampuscompact.org/resources/social-change-wheel/)