



Practicing What You Preach

Gauging the Civic Engagement of College Graduates

Many Americans share an intuitive sense that there has been a lessening of the nation's commitment to civic engagement. One touchstone is Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, which traces the decline of activities and organizations that brought earlier generations of Americans into broader spheres of social, political, and civic participation. A second can be found in the increasingly explicit promises made by colleges and universities to rekindle the values of community service, volunteerism, and political awareness in their students.

This issue of *The Landscape* transforms impressions about civic commitment—in this case, the engagement of college alumni—into facts. It answers the question, “To what extent does the pursuit of civic and volunteer activities play a major role in the lives of college graduates?” These measures represent first results from the Collegiate Results Instrument (CRI), a new national survey of college alumni that details, among other aspects of their lives, how graduates of the 1990s feel about civic engagement, as well as how often they do—or do not—participate in civic activity.

Capturing Collegiate Results

Developed by the Institute for Research on Higher Education (IRHE) for the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NCPI), the CRI derives from the work of Robert Zemsky and Susan Shaman on the nature and contours of the market for undergraduate education. The CRI asks recent college graduates about their occupations and incomes, their post-baccalaureate education, the kinds of skills they use on the job, the kinds of tasks they feel most confident performing, and a set of personal values that includes community and civic engagement. In part, the CRI was designed as a kind of *Consumer Reports* for postsecondary education, one that offers an alternative to ranking systems that assess institutions in terms of their student and financial inputs rather than the



nature and quality of their educational results. And in part, the CRI is meant to benefit institutions by helping them understand how well the lives of their graduates reflect the educational promises and claims they make when recruiting new students.

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Chart 1.
CRI Item: Keeping Informed About Local and National Politics.

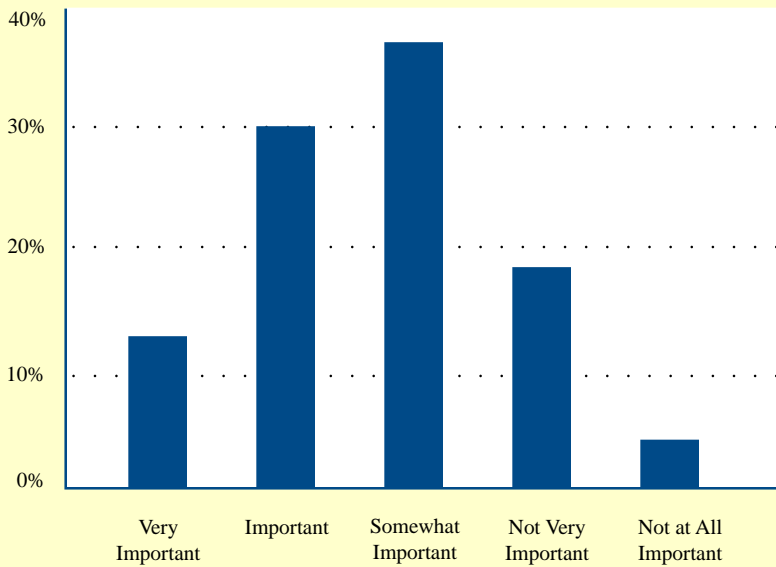
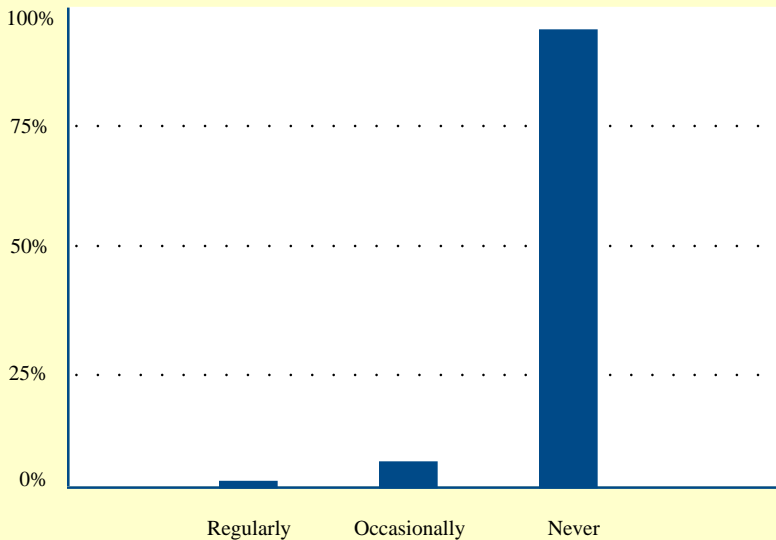


Chart 2.
CRI Item: Worked in a Political Campaign.



First field-tested in 1998, the CRI was administered in the fall of 1999 to graduates of the Class of 1992-93 from 80 four-year colleges and universities belonging to the Knight Higher Education Collaborative. While the sample of institutions was not randomly chosen, the distribution of occupations of the more than 33,000 graduates who responded to the CRI mirrored the overall distribution of college graduates aged 27 to 30 in the workforce.

Actions Speak Louder Than Words

The CRI’s most basic finding is that substantial differences exist between what Class of 1992-1993 graduates believed about the importance of civic engagement and what they actually did in support of those beliefs. While the graduates participating in the study reported that keeping informed about political developments was an important pursuit, they rarely participated in the political process, with the exception of voting. Chart 1 displays the distribution of their responses to the question, “How important to your personal well-being is keeping informed about local and national politics?” Graduates rated their responses on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating “not at all important” and 5 indicating “very important.” A modest percentage of respondents said that keeping politically informed was a very important component of their lives; two-thirds said it was either important or somewhat important; and a mere fraction (just 4 percent) viewed it to be not at all important.

These graduates also voted. Just over 80 percent indicated they had voted in the 1996 presidential election—an impressive rate, given that election’s relatively poor voter turnout. On the other hand, only one graduate in 20 reported having worked in a political campaign in the past year, and only 1 percent said they did so regularly (Chart 2).

The same disparity arose when alumni reported their views on

volunteerism or working for a social/political cause and the frequency with which they participated in these activities. When asked, “How important to your personal well-being is participating in volunteer work?” 6 percent reported that it was very important (Chart 3), and 59 percent said it was either important or somewhat important. The distribution of alumni responses to the question, “How important to your personal well-being is working for a political or social cause?” was slightly different, although the overall pattern of responses was the same (Chart 4). While a higher proportion of students (34 percent) rated working for political and social causes as being not very important, a majority (just over 50 percent) indicated that this kind of activity ranged from somewhat important to very important for their personal well-being.

As Chart 5 demonstrates, however, when it came to volunteering, these college graduates were more likely to talk the talk than to walk the walk. While 15 percent reported they regularly performed volunteer work, half said they volunteered only occasionally, and a third said they never volunteered at all.

To help place these responses in context, IRHE generated a series of analyses asking, “Does either the nature of the curriculum or the type of institution attended help predict whether a graduate was likely to be more or less politically or socially engaged?” The answer, in general, was no. The best explanation for the values and practices reflected in the CRI is that commitment to civic engagement probably predated college. Within this overall pattern, the analysis suggested that civic engagement most often comes from those who have a strong attachment to a social cause, who are female, who are employed in a teaching profession, or who majored in one of the helping professions while in college.

Chart 3.
CRI Item: Participating in Volunteer Work.

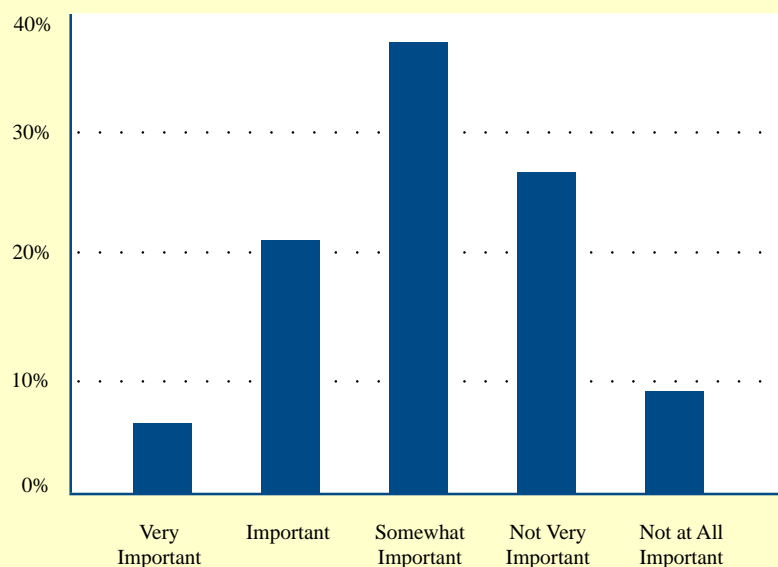


Chart 4.
CRI Item: Working for a Political or Social Cause.

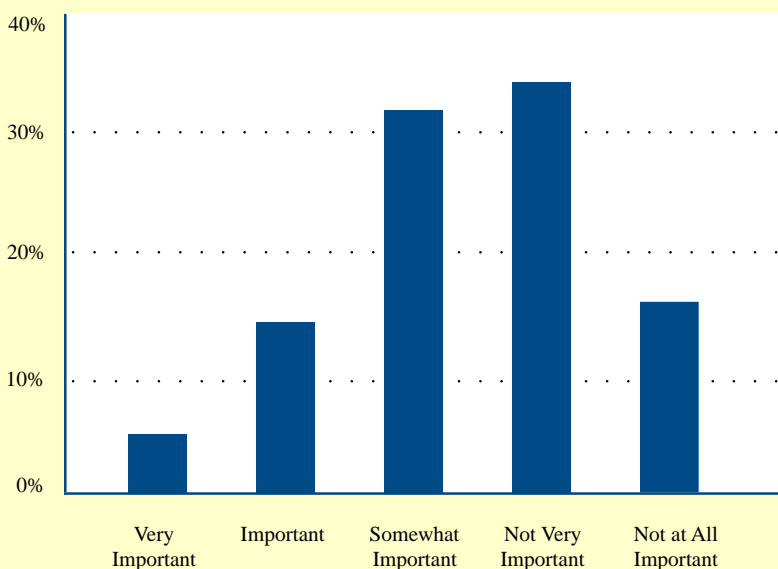
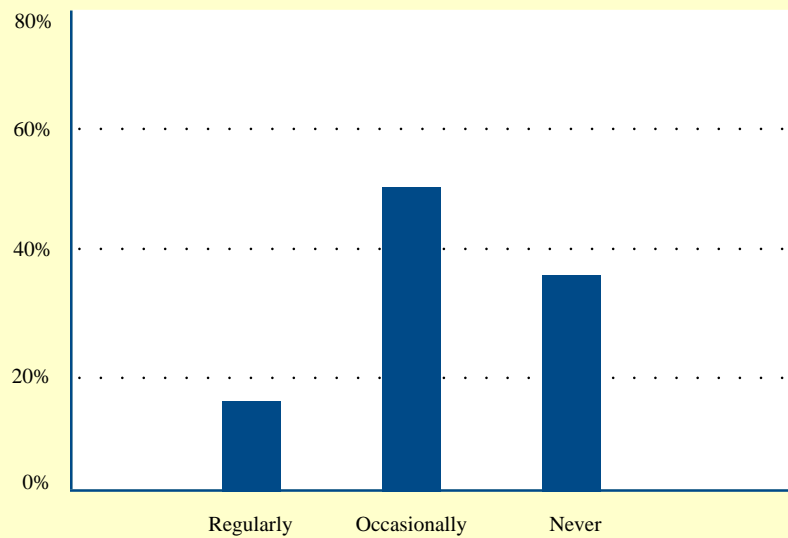


Chart 5.
CRI Item: Performed Volunteer Work.



A Generational Perspective

Can or should colleges and universities be expected to promote a more active brand of citizenship? History teaches us that higher education has never been either particularly good or bad at preparing students for lives of civic and political engagement. If college graduates of the 1950s and 1960s exhibited greater involvement in civic and political affairs, the cause probably had less to do with their collegiate experiences than with the nation's political climate following World War II.

On the other hand, it is not wrong to ask, "Why do so many of today's recent college graduates acknowledge

the importance of civic engagement without translating that commitment into action?" To what extent is the rising cost of a college education responsible? Or the work-dominated lives that most of today's young college graduates lead? Or the more general shift in the social climate away from public and toward private goods and responsibilities? And to what extent have the institutions' own behavior added to the fragmentation and individualization of the nation's social and political cultures? The most generous answer may be to render colleges and universities harmless—though not necessarily blameless. □