

HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS FROM JMU'S UNIVERSITY-LEVEL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ASSESSMENTS¹

Since 2017 James Madison University has administered various assessments (e.g., Political Engagement Project Survey, NSSE-Civic Engagement modules, Civics Quiz, News Quiz) using institution-wide data collection procedures (e.g., Assessment Day, Continuing Student Survey). Assessments were administered to assess civic engagement programs and also to better understand JMU students' civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. Data have been collected on thousands of students and for some instruments, we've measured the same students repeatedly allowing us to explore change over time and across cohorts. Findings have been created and disseminated through reports, presentations, and publications.

CIVIC LEARNING AND DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT: RESULTS FROM THE LONGITUDINAL ASSESSMENT OF THREE STUDENT COHORTS AT JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

As part of a collection of assessments used to inform the civic engagement initiative at JMU, the Political Engagement Project Survey² (PEPS) was administered to a random sample of students twice across multiple cohorts: once as incoming first-year students during Assessment Day in August (Pre) and again as students with 45-70 credit hours during Assessment Day in February (Post). Because the same students in different cohorts took the PES twice during their undergraduate career, we were able to investigate how civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and actions change across time (within a cohort) and whether changes differed across three cohorts³ (FA17/SP19, FA18/SP20, FA19/SP21).

When considering cohort differences in change over time, we were particularly interested in the FA19/SP21 cohort. While every cohort has its unique challenges, the FA19/SP21 cohorts' initial years at JMU were marked by several noteworthy events likely to have impacted their civic learning and democratic engagement. In addition, more recent cohorts are more likely to have benefited from the programs and changes in campus culture provided by the [James Madison Center for Civic Engagement \(i.e., JMU Civic\)](#), founded in 2017.

The main findings below suggest more favorable changes in civic learning and democratic engagement during students' initial years at JMU for the FA19/SP21 cohort.

- Across cohorts and time, students more frequently discuss and pay attention to political issues at the national level than at the international, state, or local levels. Only the FA19/SP21 cohort increased over time in how often they discussed and paid attention to political issues.
- Across cohorts and time, students reporting feeling more knowledgeable about political issues at the national level than at the international, state, or local levels. The percentage of students who reported feeling knowledgeable about local, state, and national issues increased over time only for the FA19/SP21 cohort. No cohort reported a sizeable increase in knowledge about international issues.

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² The PEPS was created by Beaumont, Colby, Ehrlich, and Torney-Purta (2006)² for use in the Political Engagement Project, a 2007 multi-institutional study of the effectiveness of 21 higher education programs and courses focused on promoting political understanding and involvement. The original and modified versions of the PEPS have been administered during several Assessment Days at JMU. The reference for the citation above is: Beaumont, E., Colby, A., Ehrlich, T., & Torney-Purta, J. (2006). Promoting Political Competence and Engagement in College Students: An Empirical Study. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 2, 249-270.

³ Because not all cohorts completed all items, some cohort comparisons were not possible.

- Students are somewhat more inclined to believe they will engage in electoral activities (e.g., voting) in the future than political voice activities (e.g., protesting). Only the FA19/SP21 cohort increased over time in their expectations to engage in political activities in the future.
- Across cohorts and time, political participation is rare. Students were asked how often during the past 12 months they had participated in 21 political activities. The average scores for 18 activities across cohorts and time indicated that students, on average, had either not participated in these activities or had participated, but not within the past 12 months. On average, students participated in these four activities the most often in the past year (but still only 0 to 1 times): community service/volunteer activities for generally non-political organizations or programs, political consumerism (buycotting/boycotting products because of the company's political or social values) and promoting a cause on social media. For both cohorts, engagement in political consumerism and social media promotion increased over time, while community service/volunteer activities decreased.
- Students were asked to rate their competence with respect to the following general political skills: collaboration/teambwork, communciation/leadership, political analysis/judgment, and political influence/action (e.g., knowing whom to contact, developing strategies, and organizing people for political action). Across cohorts and time, students felt the least confident in their political influence /action skills. Cohort differences in change over time were observed for three of the four skills, with only the FA19/SP21 cohort increasing in these skills over time.
- Students were also asked to rate how well they could do each skill from [JMU's Civic Engagement learning outcomes](#). Across time and cohorts, over 50% of students claimed they could do 10 of the 12 skills well or very well. Skills in which the fewest students feel competent are those having to do with speaking and writing effectively in forums appropriate to civic life and public affairs. Change over time was similar across cohorts, with the exception of skills pertaining to ethical reasoning. The percentage of students confident in their ability to apply ethical reasoning skills to political life increased over time, but only for the FA19/SP21 cohort.
- Across cohorts and time, students reported moderate levels of current events knowledge and foundational knowledge (e.g., political organizations, theories, institutions). Only the FA19/SP21 cohort reported significantly higher levels of knowledge at posttest.
- Students were also asked to rate their level of knowledge for each knowledge outcome from [JMU's Civic Engagement learning outcomes](#). For all outcomes, at least 44% of students across time and cohorts claimed moderate or in-depth knowledge. Across cohorts, a slighter larger percentage of students claimed they were knowledgeable at posttest for 7 of the 12 outcomes. On the remaining 5 outcomes, larger percentages were found at posttest, but only for the FA19/SP20 cohort.
- Although all cohorts begin JMU considering political involvement as somewhat central to their sense of self, only the FA19/SP21 cohort considers political involvement to be *more* central to their sense of self over time.
- Although both the FA17/SP19 and the FA19/SP21 cohort began their career at JMU feeling moderately confident in their ability to comprehend and influence politics, only the FA19/SP21 cohort feels *more* confident over time.
- Strategies to influence political outcomes include those used to inform others, collaborate with other people, or bring public or institutional attention to issues. Although all cohorts perceive these strategies to be fairly effective when they begin JMU, only the FA19/SP21 cohort perceives these strategies to be *more* effective over time.
- While the FA17/SP19 cohort decreased over time in how important they felt various influences (e.g., passion, perceived impact, personal satisfaction) were in motivating their political or social action, the FA19/SP21 cohort either did not change or felt the influences were *more* important over time.
- Across time and cohorts, students feel the JMU faculty, staff, or administration would pay a fairly considerable amount of attention to their concerns, the local government would pay a moderate amount of attention, and that the national government would pay almost no attention. With respect to cohort differences and change over time, perceptions regarding JMU faculty, staff, or administration did not differ across cohorts, but did decrease over time. Perceptions regarding the local government decreased over time for all cohorts, except the FA19/SP21 cohort who remained stable. Perceptions regarding the national government decreased over time for the FA18/SP20 cohort, but remained stable for the FA17/SP19 and FA19/SP21 cohorts.

Although we do not know for sure why the FA19/SP21 cohort changed in more favorable ways relative to the other cohorts, we anticipate it is a function of noteworthy events, on campus and beyond, that

occurred during this cohort's initial years at JMU. The full report includes results of additional analyses that suggest changes over time for the FA19/SP21 cohort are more favorable for those who engaged in activities promoted and provided by the [James Madison Center for Civic Engagement \(i.e., JMU Civic\)](#). Thus, a contributor to the more favorable changes for the FA19/SP21 cohort might be the presence of a center whose mission is to educate and inspire people to address public issues and cultivate a just and inclusive democracy. Although the center existed at JMU for all cohorts, time was needed to fully establish the center and for its influence on the campus culture to take hold. For these reasons, the FA19/SP21 cohort may have reaped more benefits from the center's existence than earlier cohorts.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT ITEMS ADMINISTERED ON THE CONTINUING STUDENT SURVEY: FALL 2018 & FALL 2019

- Items inquiring about JMU students' civic and political participation were administered on the Continuing Student Survey to Freshman, Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors in Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 to 1246 students.
- Results indicate infrequent attention to and discussion about government and public affairs by the typical JMU student. The majority (or near majority) of students make attempts to stay informed and discuss issues with others only once a month or less.
- Responses to items about staying informed and discussing issues did not differ by class level (e.g., freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), admission type (transfer vs. non transfer), race (white vs. non-white), or sample (Fall 2018 vs. Fall 2019). Some gender differences were found; males stay informed more often than females, but males and females do not differ in how frequently they discuss issues. Political party affiliation only distinguishes how often students stay informed about *local* issues, with Independents engaging more often in this activity than Republicans or Democrats.
- Students were also asked how frequently they engaged in 22 other civic and political activities (beyond voting, staying informed, and discussing issues). We found the majority of students (>50%) have *never* participated in most (20 out of 22) behaviors.
- Although very few students have taken civic or political action, for those who have, participation differs depending on political party affiliation (with Independents participating more frequently in most activities) and to a lesser extent on gender (with males participating in different ways than females). Participation is less dependent on race, when the data were collected (i.e. sample), class level (e.g., freshman, sophomore, junior, senior), and transfer student status (i.e., admission type).

NATIONAL SURVEY FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT (NSSE): 2020 CIVIC ENGAGEMENT MODULE RESULTS

- ~1037 Freshmen and ~985 Seniors volunteered to complete the survey in Spring 2020; when possible, results were compared to those obtained in 2014
- *How do students rate themselves with respect to their civic skills?*
 - On average, students rate themselves as above mediocre with respect to their civic skills, which include resolution skills, leadership skills, constructive dialogue skills, and ability to help their community. Seniors rate themselves slightly higher than Freshmen. (Results are similar to those in 2014.)
- *What are students' perceptions of JMU's emphasis on engagement?*
 - About 50% or more of students perceive JMU as emphasizing civic engagement. Freshmen perceive greater institutional emphasis than Seniors. (Results cannot be compared to 2014.)
- *What are students' perceptions of encouragement to address social, economic, or political issues?*
 - Over half of students report that they are encouraged to address social, economic, or political issues in course assignments, in course discussions, and outside of class. (Results cannot be compared to 2014.)
- *What is the nature of students' civic engagement?*
 - The vast majority of students report informing themselves about campus/local/state/national/global issues and discussing issues with others. They engage far less frequently in the more effortful activities that involve raising awareness, asking others to address issues, or organizing others to work on issues. (Results are similar to those in 2014.)
- *Do Seniors differ from Freshmen with respect to the frequency with which they engage?*

- Seniors and Freshmen do not differ in the frequency with which they engage with local or campus issues. This differs from 2014, where Freshmen engaged less often than Seniors with local or campus issues. The departure between the 2014 and 2020 results are driven by differences between the 2014 and 2020 Freshmen, with 2020 Freshmen engaging more often with local or campus issues.
- Seniors more frequently stay informed and discuss state, national, or global issues relative to Freshmen. Freshmen and Seniors engage equally in the extent to which they take action to address state, national, or global issues. Relative to 2014, 2020 Freshmen and Seniors are engaging in all of the activities more frequently. Freshmen in 2020 are also more likely than Freshmen in 2014 to take action to address state, national, or global issues.
- *Do students care equally about campus/local issues and state/national/global issues?*
 - Both Freshmen and Seniors report more frequently discussing, informing themselves, and raising awareness about state, national, or global issues than about campus or local issues.
 - Both Seniors and Freshmen ask or organize others to address campus or local issues as frequently as they ask or organize others to address state, national, or global issues.
 - These results differ from those in 2014 in that 2020 students, particularly Freshmen, are placing a greater emphasis on state, national, and global issues than campus or local issues.

CIVICS QUIZ RESULTS – SPRING 2018

- Results are provided for 371 students with 45-70 credit hours who completed the [Civics Quiz](#) during Assessment Day in Spring 2018.
- On average, students are correctly responding to 7 of the 10 items. Because the items are easy, the average 70% correct score is underwhelming.
- Readers can take the Civics Quiz, obtain feedback on their performance, and see the results of JMU students by accessing this [link](#).

NEWS QUIZ RESULTS – SPRING 2018

- Results are provided for 371 students with 45-70 credit hours who completed the News Quiz during Assessment Day in Spring 2018. The News Quiz is a modified version of the [New York Times' 2017 in Review Special News Quiz](#)
- On average, students are correctly responding to 5.82 of the 10 national news items and 2.72 of the 10 international news items. Such results suggest less than ideal levels of staying informed, particularly to international news events.
- Readers can take the News Quiz, obtain feedback on their performance, and see the results of JMU students by accessing these links: [national news quiz](#) and [international news quiz](#).

NATIONAL SURVEY FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT (NSSE): 2014 AND 2017 RESULTS OF CORE SURVEY ITEMS RELATED TO JMU'S CIVIC ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

- Results are provided on NSSE core survey items identified by Kinzie and Thomas (2017)⁴ as being related to civic learning and democratic engagement. analyses considered whether item responses differed by class level (First-Year student vs. Senior) and/or cohort (2014 vs. 2017).
- In both 2014 and 2017, over half (54-70%) of First-Year students reported frequently trying to understand someone else's views, connecting their learning to societal problems/issues, or including diverse perspectives in their course materials/lectures. A significantly larger percentage of Seniors (62-81%) reported the same.
- Over 70% of both First-Year students and Seniors in 2014 and 2017 reported having discussions often or very often with people who differ from themselves in political views, religious beliefs, race/ethnicity, or economic background.

⁴ Kinzie, J., & Thomas, N. (2017, June). *Educational practices that relate to civic gains and voting rates: Lessons from NSSE & NSLVE*. Presentation at the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement conference, Baltimore, MD.

- In both 2014 and 2017, about 70% of First-Year students perceived JMU as frequently encouraging contact among students from diverse backgrounds. Fewer seniors (54-60%) felt the same way.
- 10% more students in 2014 (63%) than in 2017 (53%) felt JMU frequently emphasized attending events that address important social, economic, and political issues. Within both cohorts, 10% more First-Year students than Seniors felt encouraged to attend such events.
- In both 2014 and 2017, about 55% of First-Year students and about 73% of Seniors felt their experience at JMU contributed to their ability solve real-world problems.
- In both 2014 and 2017, slightly more seniors (71%) than First-Year students (65%) felt JMU contributed to their development as an informed and active citizen.
- Across cohorts and classes, 65% of students felt JMU contributed to their understanding of people of other backgrounds.

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