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Dissertation

Chapter 6: Civic Engagement, College Experience, and Social Network Composition

This chapter contains an analysis and discussion of the empirical findings from 63 interviews[1] with college students and college dropouts. Respondents completed a civic engagement questionnaire, which asked them to indicate whether or not they had participated in ten civic activities within the last four years.[2] They were also asked a series of questions designed to assess the impact of their college experience and the educational composition of their social networks. All college students were interviewed in person; most college dropouts were interviewed over the phone.[3] Interviews ranged from approximately nine minutes to a little over an hour.

The strength of qualitative approaches is that they "…seek to arrive at an understanding of a particular phenomenon from the perspective of those experiencing it" (Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas 2013, 398). If higher education increases civic participation but most Americans with college experience and/or degrees exhibit low levels of civic engagement, then it is safe to say that there are some broken links in the theoretical chain that connects college experience with civic behavior. By talking to college students and dropouts, I develop a better understanding of what people learn,

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[1] This number includes the individuals in the two focus groups I conducted. Without these group members, I completed a total of 51 interviews with college students and college dropouts.

[2] During the past 4 years, have you: (1) Joined a protest, march, rally, or demonstration? (2) Attended a meeting of a town or city government or school board? (3) Signed a petition on the Internet about a political or social issue? (4) Signed a petition on paper about a political or social issue? (5) Not counting a religious organization, given money to any other organization concerned with a political or social issue? (6) Called a radio or TV show about a political issue? (7) Sent a message on Facebook or Twitter about a political issue? (8) Written to a newspaper or magazine about a political issue? (9) Contacted or tried to contact a member of the U.S. Senate or U.S. House of Representatives? (10) Did you vote in the 2016 Presidential Election (Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton)?

[3] I interviewed two in person and two respondents answered the interview questions via email.

remember, and internalize from college and gain critical insight into whether any of it impacts civic engagement for the better.

Findings

Civic Engagement

The aggregate results from the civic engagement questionnaires reveal that the level of civic engagement amongst college students[4] varies according to college type. As a whole, most college students indicated that they had signed an Internet petition about a political or social issue, or sent a message about a political issue on Facebook or Twitter within the last four years. There are large discrepancies in the number of students who did or did not attend a city/town government or school board meeting; sign a petition on paper about a political or social issue; call a radio or TV show about a political issue; and write to a newspaper or magazine about a political issue. As Table 1 shows, students at Ivy Tech and IUSB were far less likely to indicate that they had participated in civic activities than students at IU Bloomington and Notre Dame. For example, whereas none of the students from Ivy Tech and 25% of the students from IUSB had joined a protest, march, or demonstration at the time of the interview, approximately 67% of the students from IU Bloomington and 74% of the students from Notre Dame had done so in the last four years. As a whole, civic engagement was the lowest amongst students from Ivy Tech and the highest amongst students attending Notre Dame.

Table 1 shows that college dropouts are less likely to be civically engaged than college students. The way in which age impacted these results is evident from the types of activities that the significantly older college dropouts were more inclined to engage in.

[4] This includes focus group members.

Table 1. Civic Engagement Questionnaire (College Students and College Dropouts)

		IUSB	IU Bloomington	Ivy Tech	Notre Dame	Total: College Students	College Dropouts
Join Protest/March							
	Yes	2	6	0	14	22	4
	No	8	3	8	5	24	13
Attend Meeting							
	Yes	0	4	0	11	15	10
	No	10	5	8	8	31	7
Sign Internet Petition							
	Yes	4	7	4	17	32	12
	No	6	2	4	2	14	5
Sign Paper Petition							
	Yes	2	5	0	0	7	9
	No	8	4	8	19	39	8
Give Money to Organization							
	Yes	4	5	1	14	24	8
	No	6	4	7	5	22	9
Call Radio/TV							
	Yes	0	0	0	1	1	0
	No	10	9	8	18	45	17
Send Message on Social Media							
	Yes	2	6	3	14	25	9
	No	8	3	5	5	21	8
Write to News/Magazine							
	Yes	3	4	0	5	12	3
	No	7	5	8	14	34	14
Contact U.S. House/Senate Member							
	Yes	2	7	2	9	20	5
	No	8	2	6	10	26	12
N =		10	9	8	19	46	17
Voted in 2016 Presidential Election							
	Yes	4	5	1	7	17	8
	No	2	0	5	9	16	7
N =		6	5	6	16	33	15

Note: Not all students were eligible to vote; those who were indicated whether or not they voted.

Compared to college students, signing a paper petition about a political or social issue is the only activity that college dropouts were more likely to have done in the last four years (Table 1). Because my recruitment strategy resulted in an older pool of college dropouts[5], it is reasonable to expect that a younger sample of college dropouts would not have indicated participation in these forms of civic engagement. However, although the findings of this research should be interpreted with this caveat about age in mind, it is unlikely that the age difference between respondents in this study undermine the validity of the more general conclusions that I derive from their interviews.

Ultimately, in cohesion with the results in Chapter 3, college dropouts were less likely to be civically engaged and far less likely to engage in explicitly political activities than college students (Table 1). However, on nearly half of the ten measures of civic engagement, the differences between the engagement of college students and college dropouts are nearly negligible, which suggests that civic and/or political activity is much more prevalent amongst the former group than the conventional wisdom implies.

College Experience

In an attempt to evaluate the impact of college experience on civic engagement, I focus on student perceptions of learning, general perspectives and attitudes about higher education (as a result of college attendance), and the extent to which college-related relationships, activities, or events have contributed to the formation of a civic ethos. These findings suggests that what students take away from college is heavily influenced by their motivations for attending in the first place. Because motivational attributes affect students' initial commitment to their college institutions and to their academic goals

[5] While every college student was between the ages of 18-24, all of the college dropouts in this study indicated that their age fell between the ages of 25-34, 45-54, and 55-64.

(Tinto 1988, 1993), I found that whether respondents were receptive to acquiring the type of information that increases civic engagement was highly dependent on how they directed their focus inside and outside of the classroom. To crosscheck the information I acquired about student learning in undergraduate courses, I asked the college students to pontificate about what they had learned in college thus far.[6] As evidenced by the following examples, most of what students "learn" from college is not factual information; they seem to retain wise but rather mundane "life lessons" instead:

> *I've learned how to manage my time really well. I've learned how to make different connections outside of the school. And how to…put myself out there so that people know who I am.*
>
> *I think just the biggest thing that I've learned at college is when to be open and when to be closed with people…kind of learning how to be an independent adult.*
>
> *What I've learned so far is that it's okay to cut people out of your life that aren't good for you.*

Although the vast majority of students indicated that they were learning abstract and factual information in class (e.g., math, the content of constitutional amendments), opinions varied about whether this information could be of use in real world settings:

> *Once you get to the higher-level classes, it's a little more applicable to your real life, but I feel like lower-level classes—since everyone has to take [them]—it's not really working…because everybody just wants to get through the course.*
>
> *I guess on one level—on a degree level—I've learned there's not much I've really retained in terms of knowledge. But I think [that] I definitely learned some theories—skills that I can use in other aspects of my life. So I think if anything, it's broadened my skills horizons, I guess.*

The student interviews also reveal that most undergraduates are juggling busy schedules. However, whereas non-working students seemed to focus on achieving a work-life

[6] This is purposefully vague to allow respondents to give their perspective as organically as possible. Students were encouraged to talk about what they had learned inside and outside of the classroom environment.

balance, the schedules of working students seemed to revolve around their jobs. In the paragraph below, Liam—a non-working student—describes a typical "day in his life:"

> *I've been waking up at 6:30, and then lifting in the morning. My roommate also likes to work out, so we'll wake up at 6:30, lift, smoothie, shower, and then I'll eat breakfast and go to class. I have classes from 9:25 [AM] to 2:50 [PM] on Monday, Wednesday, [and] Friday. Tuesday [and] Thursday, I have labs, and I'll eat lunch and go to my other class. But it's still Tuesday and Thursdays, 9:30 to 3:15. I started with a [class at] 8:20 [AM] first semester of last year and I was dying. I had to drop it 'cause I was not getting enough sleep.*

Compared to Liam, Zora schedules her week to ensure that she has enough time to focus on her job in addition to her schoolwork:

> *I have a full load kind of. I have two online classes. I have three classes on Monday and [they start] at 10:00 [AM] and then [end] at 3:45 [PM]. Then after 3:45, I go home, probably do homework and study. Tuesdays [and Thursdays], I only have [one] class at 2:45 [PM]. Then Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, I'm working all day, like 12 hours.*

Amongst the students with jobs, some had ample time to complete assignments at work while others did not. Students in the former category typically worked on-campus and/or were employed through work-study programs[7]; those in the latter group were often employed at jobs with few student workers if any at all. Interestingly, no working students indicated that the responsibilities associated with their employment undermined their interest in school or their willingness to engage in classroom discussions.

Undergraduates from all four institutions expressed that the quality of their college experience was heavily affected by perceptions of inclusivity and institutional fit. Of all the minority students that I interviewed, only those at Notre Dame expressed issues related to inclusivity. Given the fact that most racial minorities were underrepresented at

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[7] "Federal Work-Study provides part-time jobs for undergraduate and graduate students with financial need, allowing them to earn money to help pay education expenses. The program encourages community service work and work related to the student's course of study." (Source: https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/types/work-study).

every case study site, feelings of alienation by minorities at Notre Dame may be attributed to the fact that this institution has more students from the top one percent of the income distribution than the bottom sixty percent (Opportunity Insights 2017). In other words, economic exclusion may contribute to the fact that that the racial minorities at Notre Dame felt more alienated than their counterparts at IUSB, IU Bloomington, and Ivy Tech.

Most of the college dropouts that I interviewed recalled their college years with fondness. Even though they did not complete their degrees, the vast majority espoused the practical and intrinsic benefits of attending college:

> *I loved it. In the beginning it was so much fun. I did all the extracurricular stuff there. You get to try new things and learn new things.*
>
> *I definitely got to meet some amazing people. I learned a lot. It wasn't all terrible.*
>
> *I think that it was all valuable. Just the transition from being a high school student to a college student in [and of] itself is a great growing experience. It is a time when you start to become your own human being, and [I] just think that's an invaluable experience for anyone. In any courses or classes that you take, if you don't take something away from it, you really weren't present.*

Most dropouts indicated that financial hardship, family conflict, academic struggles, job obligations, and/or waning interest contributed to their decision to leave college. Surprisingly, for the majority of the dropouts in this sample, this decision was a personal choice that could not have been altered by the efforts of others. Below are some examples of the types of responses I received when I asked respondents whether there was anything that could have been done to help them stay in college:

> *No, I don't think so. I feel like the support systems and all that were pretty good in school. It really was just my personal situation that changed that pushed me out of the school.*

> *I'm guessing; I really didn't put a lot of thought into it. I just figured, well, this wasn't meant to be, and I need to work.*
>
> *I dropped out because it really truly wasn't working for me…I was like, "This is not me. This is not who I am."*

For many college dropouts, trying to hold down a job while attending college had a negative impact on their college experience. Kurt's perspective demonstrates how part-time employment and long commutes can undermine the quality of college experience by limiting the ability to socialize with fellow undergraduates:

> *I didn't enjoy [college] because I stayed local as opposed to going out of state or going to a different city, and I worked the entire time. I'd go to class in the morning, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, 7:30 [AM] to 10:30 [AM]; Tuesday and Thursday 7:30 to 10:30, and then I went to work immediately after. So, I was commuting. I'd commute instead of hanging out and [getting] involved with campus activities because I was there first thing in the morning and left as soon as I [could]*.

In spite of the fact that most college dropouts had a positive view of higher education in general, their college experiences were plagued with misinformation, confusion, and difficulties of all kinds. One respondent lamented about how her "mutual hate-hate relationship" with math was her ultimate downfall. Another dropout, Jake, was half-way through the final semester of his senior year before the registrar's office informed him that he was missing a prerequisite for graduation; although he was given the option to complete the course during summer school, he quit out of anger and frustration. As a veteran, Noah's college was paid for in full. However, in spite of the fact that college costs were not a significant factor in his experience, Noah attended and dropped out of college seven times before he stopped trying to obtain an undergraduate degree. While research shows that increasing financial aid should boost college retention and completion amongst low-income students (Millea et al. 2018), these interviews reveal

that, many times, money was a secondary or even tertiary factor in the decision to dropout. As a whole, college seemed to be a primarily positive experience for most students and college dropouts. However, evidence derived from their interviews suggests that higher education was either mentally, financially, or logistically unfeasible for them in ways that may not be helped by policies that simply focus on increasing college access as opposed to the quality of educational experiences (Herzog 2017; Gansemer-Topf and Schuh 2009; McKinney and Backscheider Burridge 2014).

Does college attendance transform students into better citizens? To assess the extent to which higher education aids in the development of a civic identity, college students and dropouts were asked to discuss the ways in which college had changed their view of the world and how they viewed their role as an American citizen. Unfortunately, the ambiguity of the responses to the first inquiry prevents me from advancing any conclusions about the way in which college shapes civic identity if it does so at all.[8] However, in my conversations with both college students and college dropouts, it became clear that the vast majority of them had never conceived of themselves as having collective "duties" as a result of their citizenship status. The word "collective" is important to emphasize here. The few respondents who managed to explain what being a citizen "meant to them" rarely mentioned engagement in collective activities. Rather, they all suggested that taking control of individual responsibilities was the best way to be a "good citizen:"

[8] Some respondents felt as though college made them "more open" to certain perspectives, which, in turn, changed their view of the world but just as many did not think that college changed their worldview (i.e., personal opinions, philosophical positions, or ideological beliefs about a wide range of subjects).

> *I just feel that if I'm here and I'm in this country, I should be able to provide the most that I can. It's my obligation whether it's here or anywhere, if I'm living [there], then I should contribute, do the best [that] I can.*
>
> *At this point in my life, my role as an American citizen is to strive for experience. My goal right now as an American citizen is to get experience to develop my life until I have enough where I can be a full American citizen.*
>
> *As an American, it's my job…to not only be self-[sufficient] for my community or my country, but I feel like…I should be creating jobs for other people as well.*
>
> *My role as a citizen is to do the right thing: don't commit crimes, don't be a terrorist. I don't think of it as a role. I'm a parent. I'm divorced—I have a whole list of things in front of me every day before [citizen]. I never think, "What is my role as a citizen?"*

Of course, "creating jobs for other people" is an inherently communal endeavor but even though its purpose is to help others, many spoke of the need to create jobs as an individual feat to accomplish as opposed to one that could be achieved with others.

Some respondents did indicate that democratic citizenship requires participation in collective activities, but this revelation was often followed by confessions about how they could not engage in them because of time constraints from family, work, and school obligations.[9] While many aspects of the college experience can be leveraged to foster the development of a civic identity amongst students, the mass confusion that I encountered when I asked both college students and dropouts to think of themselves as citizens suggests that there is much to be desired when it comes to civic education.

Social Network Composition

To assess the educational composition of the respondents' social networks, I asked them to indicate whether or not (1) the majority of their friends were in college,

[9] Generally speaking, most respondents' assessment of their civic behavior can be summed up by this quote from one of the college students in the sample: "Well, my personal role—I haven't been as active, though I've had opinions on the matters. Although I do see it as an important role that I should probably take advantage of…I really haven't."

whether they (2) had any friends who never went to college, and (3) whether they had any friends who dropped out of college. If college students[10] indicated that they had friends who dropped out of college, I inquired about how frequently they stayed in contact with them. When interviewing college dropouts, I reversed the question: if they indicated that they remained friends with college students or graduates, I inquired about how often they spoke to one another. All respondents were asked to disclose how they stayed in contact with their friends, family, and acquaintances, and they were also asked to disclose whether the conversations that they have with college students or graduates differ from the conversations that they have with college dropouts or high school graduates.[11]

While every college dropout indicated that college graduates made up a significant proportion of their friendship groups, thirteen college students indicated that they did not know anyone who had dropped out of college.[12] On one hand, this means that the vast majority of the college students in this sample knew people who had dropped out of college. However, further inquiry about the frequency of communication between the students and their peers who dropped out uncovered further differences by college type. Most of the undergraduates at Notre Dame were not close to the dropouts that they knew; of the four students who indicated that they remained in contact with

[10] Because the nature of the conversation within the focus groups made it difficult to acquire information about the social networks of individual group members, the students in the focus groups are left out of these analyses. The social networks of 34 college students are evaluated as a result.

[11] Because of the fluid nature of these interviews, not every respondent was asked every question in exactly the same manner. Depending on their responses, some respondents were not asked some of the questions at all. Therefore, my conclusions are based on a thematic analysis of the answers that respondents gave to the questions that they were asked.

[12] Of the students who indicated that they did not have any college dropouts in their social networks, five of them attended IUSB, two attended IU Bloomington, three attended Ivy Tech, and three attended Notre Dame.

college dropouts, only one was in frequent contact with his friend who had dropped out. Conversely, most of the students attending IUSB and Ivy Tech were in frequent contact with the college dropouts in their social networks. About half of the college students at IU Bloomington remained in frequent contact with college dropouts and about half of them did not. College dropouts, on the other hand, not only assessed their social networks as being comprised of "a good mix" of people with and without college experience, but they were also more likely to say that they remained in frequent contact with their friends who had dropped out or never attended college. Similar to the nature of their relationships with college dropouts, although most college students said that they had "friends" who had never attended college, most of them also indicated that they did not speak to those people very often:

> *I mean there's only one friend that I [have] that hasn't gone to college and I only talk to him every once in a while. So it's not like I talk to him much, because, I mean, he's not around so I don't see him at school. I don't really talk to him about school; you know, it's hard to relate.*
>
> *Once I left high school, I was just like, "These really aren't good people for me." 'Cause we were really only friends 'cause they were around. So I'd say that the friendships and connections [that] I have through the University—they've been stronger because they're based more on common interests rather than just physical location.*
>
> *We still care about each other but I don't know what's going on [with them].*

Respondents remained in contact with the members of their social networks via social media, phone calls, texting, or in person. In spite of the abundance of digital media in their lives, most college students and college dropouts expressed that they communicate with their friends in a variety of ways.

When it comes to topics of conversation, the vast majority of college students indicated that they talk about similar subjects with their friends regardless of what level of education they have:

> *[We talk about] a lot of the same stuff. Some people are still connected [to] campus with their businesses, so they can still connect and talk about it. I don't really talk about class too often with my friends but I might talk about something that happened on campus or throughout the school…. The conversation varies.*
>
> *[The topic of conversation] feel like it depends on the individual. [I] have friends who never went to college, but I have way more intellectual conversations with them than my friends who are in college or went to college and dropped out. So, I think it depends on the individual.*

Those who felt that the conversation differed depending on whether or not their friends had completed or attended college indicated that they could have more serious conversations with their friends who had college experience. Many also expressed that it was often difficult to relate to friends who had never attended college:

> *If I'm friends with people in college, usually [our conversations are] related to, "Oh, hey, this happened in class the other day. Do you remember that?" whereas [with my friends who are not in college], we sit there, and we talk about what we saw on T.V.*
>
> *"I think with most friends that have completed college, I'm more able to talk about more grown-up things like future plans. I have some friends that haven't went to college, but they do nothing with their lives."*
>
> *The friends that have completed college talk a lot about work related things and shared hobbies. The friends that have not completed college talk more about social news, sensationalized news, and gossip from Facebook.*

In light of the dichotomous nature of the perspectives above, it would be unwise to jump to any conclusions about whether an individual's level of education affects the content of the conversations that they have with others. However, because the transmission of politically relevant social capital requires individuals to discuss politics with the people in their networks, it is difficult to assess the extent to which this transmission is occurring

without knowing whether college students and college dropouts are talking about politics in particular. Therefore, I asked the following question in an attempt to further conversation about the respondents' perceptions of American politics at the time: when you here the word "politics," what comes to mind for you?

In *Why Americans Hate Politics,* E.J. Dionne argues that the false choices presented by an ideologically driven "either/or" politics that emphasizes "issues" over "problems"[13] has caused many citizens to mistrust politics and "…sometimes come to hate it" (Dionne 1991; 2004, 10). The predominately negative undertones that emerge from my interviews with college students and dropouts confirm that American citizens are jaded and resentful about most aspects of the political system. When asked what comes to mind when they hear the word politics, respondents offered primarily cynical views about the state of American politics[14]:

> *Right now, if I were to throw a certain word out: scary. I think we're in a stalemate instead of trying to do the best for the constituents. It's [just] battling amongst parties or battling amongst individuals…politics has currently lost focus.*
>
> *Losing. I've worked for all [of] these people and I've yet to win. It's pretty rough. I'm really big into health care—that's like my number one issue—and it feels like it's always being taken away.*
>
> *I think what sticks out to me the most is just…poor communication. There's too much happening for anything to get done.*
>
> *Currently, it's a total disaster.*

[13] According to Dionne (1991, 2004), issues are used at election time to divide voters while problems demand solutions after the election is over.

[14] Importantly, the historically contentious nature of the 2016 presidential election undoubtedly contributed to respondents' negative perceptions of American politics in the fall of 2017. There were some affect-neutral views about politics as well. Many respondents also indicated that they think of terms like the "government", the "judicial system," the "economy," or "the president" when they hear the word "politics."

Subsequent conversation about the nature of democratic practices in the United States revealed that college students and dropouts often refuse to participate in political activities in order to alienate themselves from the "dumpster fire" of political conflict. Thus, an analysis of the interviews included in this study leads to the conclusion that one of the biggest barriers to the transmission of politically relevant social capital is the nature of American politics itself. The following quotes demonstrate how its fundamentally contentious character and the possibility of offending someone in discussions about political issues causes many people to avoid political conversation with the people within their networks:

> *I just try to stay away from [politics] because I fell like it's so much trouble. I [am] always scared to get into [a] conversation [about politics] with somebody.*
>
> *I don't like politics. Keep away. Yeah. That's all I'll ever say.*
>
> *I really don't pay attention to that 'cause I really don't care. I…don't pay attention because it's just gibberish…*
>
> *Either everyone feels the same way on certain topics, or they don't necessarily want to discuss it because some people are like, "Politics and friends don't mix, and it's not something that we [want to] discuss, 'cause we're not going [to] agree on it"…*

The fact that most Americans "hate" politics will not come as a surprise to the majority of political scientists. What is jarring is the great extent to which this negativity stifles conversation about politics altogether. The former finding suggests that even if highly educated people within the networks of college dropouts possess pertinent information that can be transferred to marginalized groups, the likelihood of this happening is very low not because the odds of acquiring it are too small but, rather, because Americans dislike politics so much that most of them are simply unwilling to talk about it.

Discussion and Conclusion

On March 6, 2019, Randy "Iron Stache" Bryce announced the founding of a political action committee dedicated to recruiting and supporting working-class congressional candidates (Marans 2019). Bryce, a former Democratic congressional candidate in Wisconsin, may have failed to secure a Congressional seat in the 2018 mid-term elections, but his campaign "…inspired massive grassroots support from Democrats galvanized by his progressive message and unusual pedigree" (Marans 2019). Iron Stache Bryce is unusual because, if he had won, he would have been one of the very few Congress members who did not graduate from college.[15]

In the last chapter, I argued that people like "Iron Stache" Bryce might be an untapped source of potential when it comes to political mobilization efforts. In many respects, Bryce is an effective mobilizer because he understands the ways in which the current political system "…leaves people like me who know what it's like to live paycheck to paycheck with less of an opportunity to actually become involved" (Marans 2019). As an ironworker, army veteran, and cancer survivor (Marans 2019; CNBC 2018), Bryce was able to mobilize many marginalized groups primarily because he is a member of those communities. It is unclear what role that higher education had in Bryce's decision to become politically active. However, it is clear that his understanding of political processes is a combination of both operative and factual knowledge, which he is using to practice what is, arguably, the highest form of civic behavior: organizing fellow citizens to elect representatives who will fight for collective interests instead of elite advantages.

[15] "In 2017, just 5 percent of House members didn't have a four-year degree, compared with about two-thirds of the country, according to Census Bureau data" (Marans 2019).

Bryce's leadership is a clear example of how the transmission of politically relevant social capital can occur in the most ideal way: people who are a part of marginalized communities (and, as a result, have legitimacy amongst the members of these communities) can use the knowledge that they acquire from networks in which politically relevant social capital is shared to increase the socioeconomic diversity of political institutions in the United States. Unfortunately, the results from my interviews reveal that many steps in the transmission process are simply not happening.

A subtle but important revelation from these interviews is that the vast majority of the lessons that college students learn from college are decidedly apolitical. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with this fact, when it comes to civic engagement, the connection between learning "when to be open and when to be closed with people" and volunteering for a shelter or political campaign is rather weak. Even though students are learning skills that they can use outside of the college environment, as Chapter Four shows, institutional emphasis on training undergraduates for gainful employment can undermine the acquisition of operative knowledge and, thus, effective participation in civic or political activities. Therefore, when thinking about the relationship between higher education and civic engagement, these interviews show that there is often a disconnect between what educators think that students are learning and what students are actually taking away from their courses. There is limited evidence that shows that the information gained in the classroom setting increases civic engagement amongst college students. Students may remember certain facts here or there after college, but these findings suggests that they are far more likely to recall formative experiences, especially those that helped them mature and grow into adults.

Ultimately, there is no evidence to suggest that college type is related to individual levels of civic engagement. However, institutional differences in the socioeconomic makeup of the student body may undermine the transmission of politically relevant social capital. Although the students at Notre Dame said that they had friends who had dropped out of college, they also indicated that they were rarely in contact with them. Conversely, students at IUSB and Ivy Tech were not only more likely to say that they had friends that had dropped out or never been to college, but they were also more likely to remain in frequent contact with these friends. Therefore, these interviews confirm that politically relevant social capital is concentrated amongst elite citizens who are entrenched within social networks in which almost everyone has a college degree (Lake and Huckfeldt 1998). Because of the high-income status of the undergraduates who tend to attend elite, private colleges, the students at Notre Dame have substantially more access to politically relevant social capital. However, in spite of this, these students were the least likely to be in contact with people outside of their academic bubbles. Conversely, whereas students like the ones who attend IUSB and Ivy are in constant contact with marginalized groups, they are attending institutions in which a substantially lower level of politically relevant social capital is circulating amongst their peers and instructors.

The substance of these interviews imply that one of the biggest barriers to the transmission of politically relevant social capital is the lack of constructive conversation about the state of American politics, which the evidence suggests stems from deep-seated disappointment with the political system and the national government. The college students and dropouts that I interviewed not only indicated that they rarely talked about

politics with their peers, acquaintances, or close friends, but, more importantly, many also divulged that they actively avoided conversation about politics. This is a simple but powerful finding that helps explain why mobilization efforts often fall on deaf ears. No amount of research, coaxing, advertisement, or education is going to mobilize citizens who are largely averse to or apathetic about politics. Until there is a resurgence in a "politics of remedy,"[16] it is unlikely that the current downward trajectory of trust in government will result in a more knowledgeable and involved citizenry (Pew Research Center 2017).

[16] "To appeal to an increasingly alienated electorate, candidates and their political consultants adopted a cynical stance that, they believed with good reason, played into popular cynicism about politics and thus won them votes. But cynical campaigns do not lead to 'remedies.' Therefore, problems got worse, and the electorate became more cynical…" (Dionne 2004, 11).