CIVIC AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT DEFINED

Civic engagement and community engagement are related but distinct terms, and both are central to the Gephardt Institute’s mission. Generally speaking, civic engagement is an overarching term that encompasses a broad range of civic activities. Community engagement is one form of civic engagement that focuses on purposeful mutually developed partnerships that address community needs and priorities. The institute has adopted the following definitions:

**CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

“Any act intended to improve or influence a community. Often, the phrase has positive connotations, so that engagement is viewed as ‘civic’ to the extent that it meets such criteria as responsibility, thoughtfulness, respect for evidence, and concern for other people and the environment.”

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Community engagement describes collaborations and partnerships within a context, spanning from the local to the global, with shared goals, planning, and outcomes. These collaborations and/or partnerships should be purposeful with articulated lifecycles, benefits, utility, and actions for all parties involved.

Engagement should also contain one or more of the following elements:

- Focus on mutually articulated needs and/or priorities within the community
- Equity, inclusion, and human rights lens
- Include elements of assessment, evaluation, and/or tracking to document outcomes and impact

This definition for community engagement was written and adopted by the Community Engagement Task Force at Washington University in April 2019.
WHAT IS CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?

Civic engagement encompasses multiple civic activities, including community engagement, civic dialogue, public problem-solving, deliberation, volunteerism, philanthropy, advocacy, and political engagement. The commonality across these various forms of civic engagement is the active participation of citizens committed to affecting change in their communities.

A healthy democracy depends on engaged citizens who actively participate in the “public square” of community life and civic life, working together to realize solutions to public challenges. Whether we envision a public square, town hall, commons, or community meeting, the essence is people coming together in the public sphere to debate, deliberate, and take action to move a community forward.

Citizen participation alone is not the goal. When all citizens participate in a process that is collaborative and inclusive, with clear purpose and impact, the full promise of democracy is realized. Civic engagement is the vehicle for how individuals contribute to a thriving democracy, working with others to find solutions to public problems. Engaged citizens are critical for creating sustainable, equitable change in communities, ranging from neighborhoods to nations.

Civic engagement is critical not just for social cohesion, but also for personal fulfillment. Engaging in civic life is associated with a higher sense of purpose, well-being, and lifelong engaged citizenship. Given higher education’s pivotal role in transitioning students into adulthood, civic engagement is a core function of colleges and universities to foster civic participation, societal progress, and individual well-being.

EXAMPLES OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

- Advocating for or against policies
- Attending candidate forums or debates
- Attending public meetings
- Collaborating with neighbors to solve community challenges
- Communicating with elected officials
- Creating public art
- Discussing news, politics, and current events
- Donating goods
- Donating money
- Evaluating information for credibility
- Giving blood
- Participating in protests
- Running for elected office
- Serving in the government or armed forces
- Serving on a board
- Spending at local businesses or social enterprises
- Volunteering
- Voting

Higher education’s goals should be aspirational, not for the democracy we have but for the democracy we need.”

—Nancy Thomas, Director, Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, Tisch College of Civic Life, Tufts University