

DEFINING CITIZENSHIP AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Citizenship and civic engagement are commonly used terms and expressions and yet they both resist simple definitions. Sometimes they are used interchangeably, other times as separate and distinct concepts. One dictionary defines citizenship as, “the status of a citizen with attendant duties, rights, and privileges.” There is, unfortunately, no dictionary definition for “civic engagement.” But the dictionary does define the words “civic” and “engaged,” and these definitions could be combined to provide a framework for understanding. That definition might read:

Civic: relating to community; connected with the duties and obligations of belonging to a community; and

Engagement: to involve someone in an activity, or to become involved or take part in an activity.

Or simply, “Civic engagement is the involvement in an activity related to community, often connected with duties and obligations.”

So, if citizenship can be thought of as an understanding of certain “duties, rights, and privileges,” civic engagement can be thought of as the activities associated with those particular duties, rights, and privileges.

The following definition summarizes the broader scope of citizenship and civic engagement adopted in *A Roadmap to Civic Engagement*.

*Citizenship or civic participation consists of **behaviors, attitudes, and actions** that reflect **concerned and active membership** in a community. This includes the more traditional electoral citizenship activities, such as **voting, serving** on nonprofit boards or school boards, as well as less traditional forms of political participation, such as **community organizing and social activism**. It includes participation in **small neighborhood-based efforts** and the larger **national and international movements**.*

*Adapted from *the State of Service-Related Research* and *the Grantmaker Forum on Community and National Service*

DEFINING CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Attempting to define civic responsibility can be a daunting task because of frequently overlapping constructs, values, and interpretations. Indeed, the very mention of the term *civic responsibility* evokes notions of what it means to live in a democracy, in addition to the complementary ideas of citizenship, social responsibility, civic engagement, and community

involvement.

In constructing a working definition of civic responsibility for this guide, we chose to depict it as an overarching concept that encompasses civic engagement and what it means to be a citizen:

Civic responsibility means *active participation in the public life of a community in an informed, committed, and constructive manner, with a focus on the common good.*

We encourage you to work with your students to reshape or change this definition entirely to formulate one that works for your class. For example, is anything missing from the definition? What about concepts such as social justice, social change, or respecting the rights of others? Who decides what the "common good" is? Does the notion of the common good include respecting and protecting the rights of others? Does this definition only work in a democracy? Given the working definition, how can faculty make civic responsibility an integral part of their curriculum and potentially affect student learning outcomes?

Other definitions of civic responsibility often exhibit some or all of the following characteristics:

- Addressing society's problems in an informed manner.
- Showing respect as well as dissent for laws.
- Recognizing the difference between legally defined and culturally defined citizenship.
- Engaging in an active process that goes beyond passive citizenship.
- Establishing a balance between rights and responsibilities.
- Understanding the concept of the common good and who defines it.
- Being able to negotiate differences.
- Involving the community in decision-making processes.
- Embracing the concept of participatory democracy.
- Questioning governmental policies and practices.
- Determining ways to alter public policy.
- Exhibiting stewardship, i.e., being responsible for one's community.
- Recognizing the value and human dignity of each person.
- Reaching varying degrees of political awareness and advocacy, ranging from basic knowledge (e.g., knowing the local mayor's name) to developing a voice and making oneself heard.

*Adapted from *A Practical Guide for Integrating Civic Responsibility into the Curriculum*, Karla Gottlieb and Gail Robinson, editors, 2002