

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE
University Of California, Los Angeles

RESEARCH REPORT

POST-COLLEGE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG GRADUATES¹

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A study currently underway at HERI reveals that engagement with the community declines sharply during the years immediately after students graduate from college. Compared to when they first entered college, college alumni also show less interest in community issues and in helping others. This research report examines specific forms of civic engagement among college alumni, explores gender difference in post-college activities and beliefs, and describes differences among different types of higher education institutions. In future reports we will discuss our longitudinal findings, with particular emphasis on how participation in service learning at the undergraduate level affects life after college.

Background

Historically, educational institutions have been expected to play a fundamental role in cultivating an educated citizenry in a democratic society (Barber, 1992; Dewey, 1944; and Saltmarsh, 1996). The nature of the role that higher education plays has come under increased scrutiny in the past two decades, in the form of renewed attention to examining the role of colleges and universities as ‘citizens’ in their communities (Kellogg Commission, 1999) and in preparing students to assume the responsibilities of citizenship in a democratic society (Astin, 1997; Barber, 2001; McDonnell, Timpane & Benjamin, 2000; and Saltmarsh, 1996).

Much of the discourse as to *why* and *how* institutions should be involved in preparing individuals for civic engagement is philosophical in nature (Astin, 1997; Boyte & Hollander, 1999; Dewey, 1944; Skocpol, 1999; and Saltmarsh, 1996), but there is also empirical evidence that higher education does indeed impact students’ civic engagement. College experiences (both curricular and co-curricular) have been associated with stronger civic values and dispositions during the college years (Astin & Sax, 1998; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). More specifically, research in political science documents that the *amount* of formal education one has is a strong predictor of post-college political engagement (Nie & Hillygus, 2001). However there are few studies that examine college experiences in detail *and* follow students into the post-college years.

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However, if institutions are committed to fostering environments that produce specific civic outcomes, it is important to achieve a fuller understanding of the relationships between students' own values and beliefs, their college experiences, and their subsequent involvement in civic life. This research report, by examining differences across institutional type and differences between men and women graduates, reflects the initial work of a larger study which seeks to better understand how student characteristics (such as gender) and institutional environments are related to whether and how the undergraduate experiences of any individual student shape their behaviors and beliefs in the post-college years.

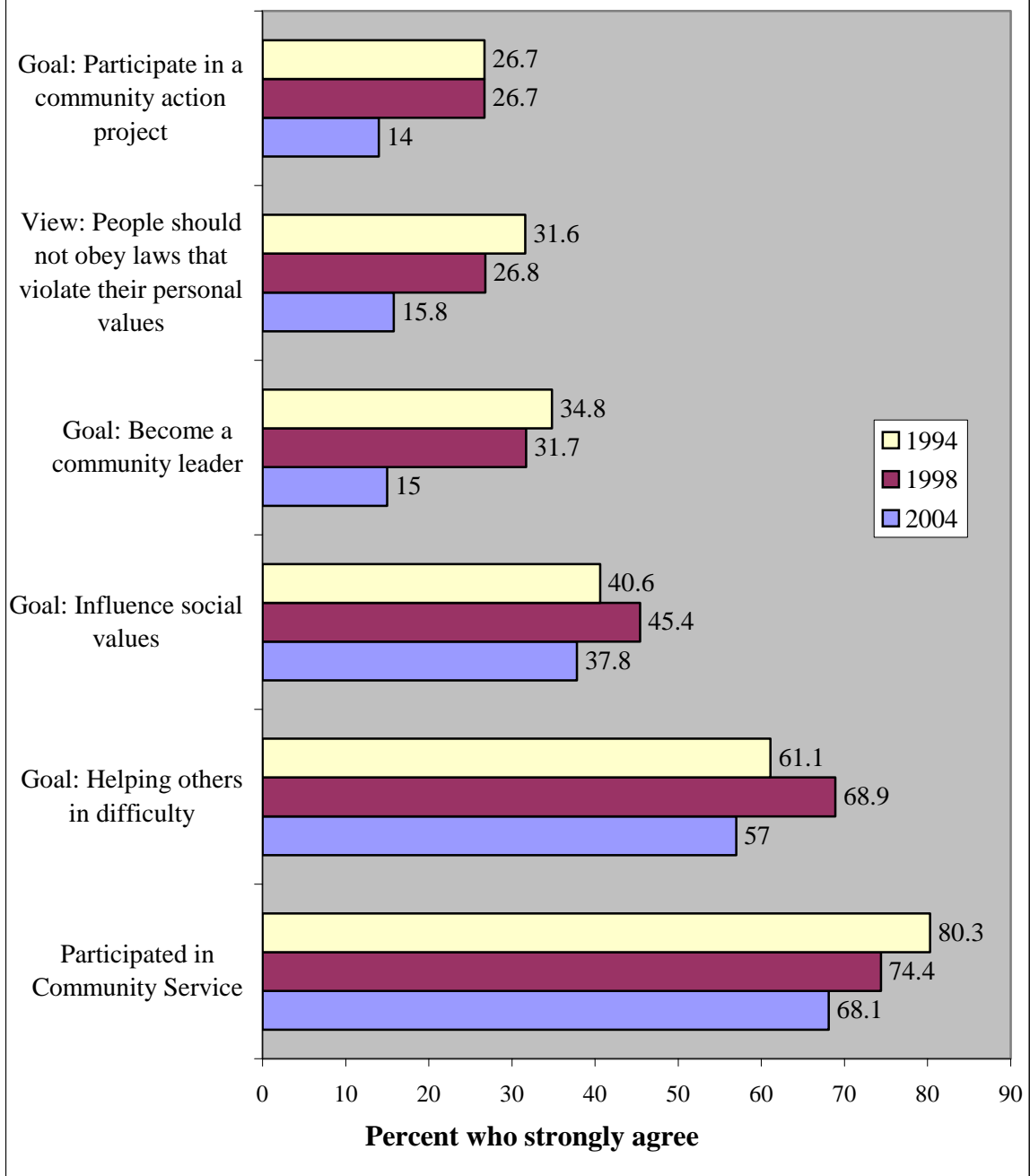
This report responds to the widespread concern over the lack of engagement among young adults in general, which has led to scrutiny of higher education's role in preparing graduates to participate in our democracy and to assume leadership roles in society. Using quantitative data from the Higher Education Research Institute's (HERI) longitudinal study of civic engagement in the post-college years, this report explores multiple dimensions of post-college civic engagement and other lifestyle choices. First, an overview of patterns of civic engagement is presented. Next, the report delineates differences between men and women college graduates, and those associated with the type of institution attended (public, private, etc.).

Patterns of Civic and Community Involvement among College Alumni

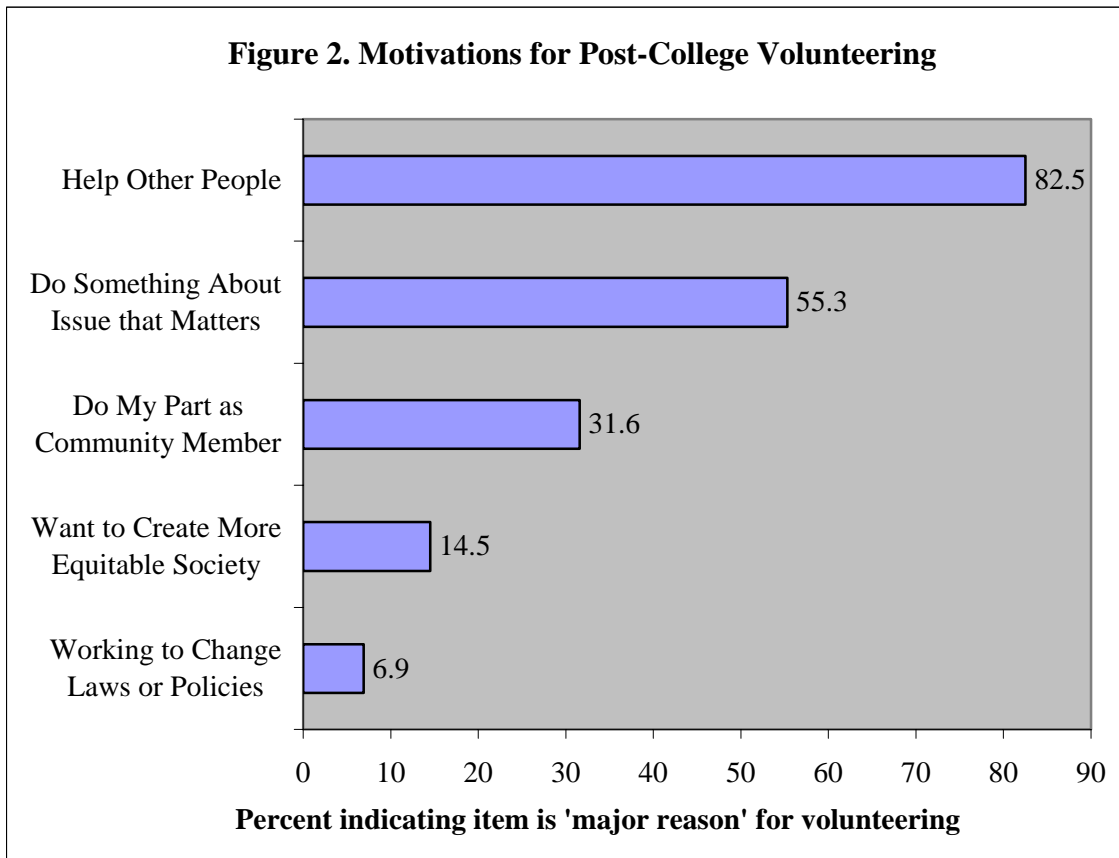
Although annual surveys of entering freshmen conducted in recent years have revealed increasing levels of engagement in community service during the senior year in high school, this current study shows decreasing service participation *during* and *after* the college years. Thus, while 80.3 percent of the students surveyed had participated in community service in the year prior to entering college, this figure declined to 74.4 percent by the senior year of college and to 68.1 percent six years after completing college.

These declines parallel a number of post-college changes in students' values (see Figure 1). Compared to when they were completing college in 1998, fewer alumni in 2004 embraced the values of "helping others in difficulty," "participating in a community action program," "becoming a community leader," or "influencing social values." There was also a substantial decline in agreement with the proposition that "people should not obey laws that violate their personal values."

Figure 1. Civic Values Before and After College



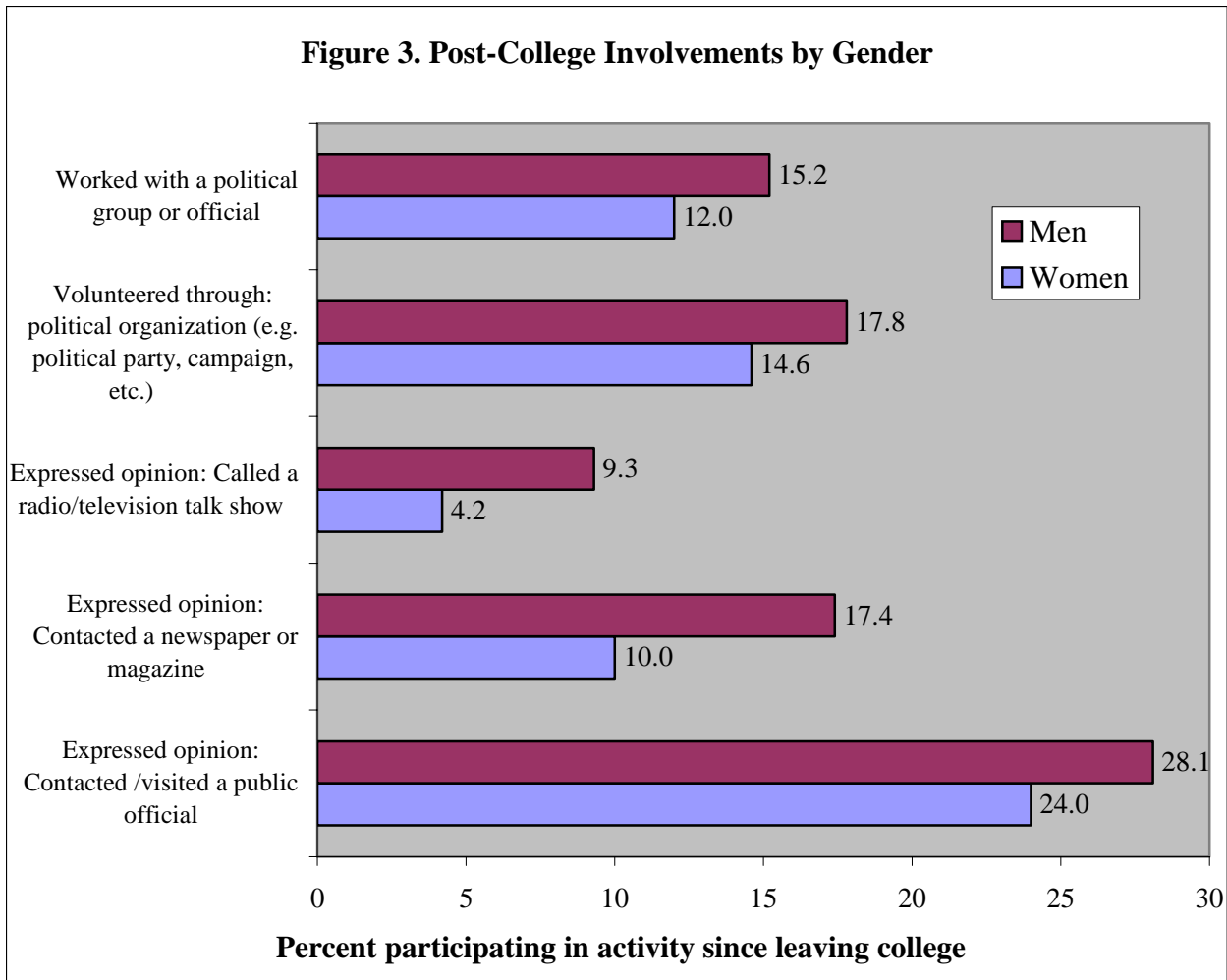
Among young adults who currently engage in volunteer work in their communities, their motivations are much more likely to be cast as helping others than working for social or political change (see Figure 2). Over 82% indicated that helping other people was a 'major' reason they decided to participate in volunteer activities, compared to only 14.5% who were motivated by the desire to create a more equitable society, and fewer than seven percent who were working to change laws or policies. Doing one's part as a community member was a major motivator for about one-third of the respondents, and doing something about an issue that matters to them was cited as important for well over half of the participants. It appears then, that motivations reflect an intent more towards 'doing/helping' at a local level than they do towards fundamentally *changing* society or laws.

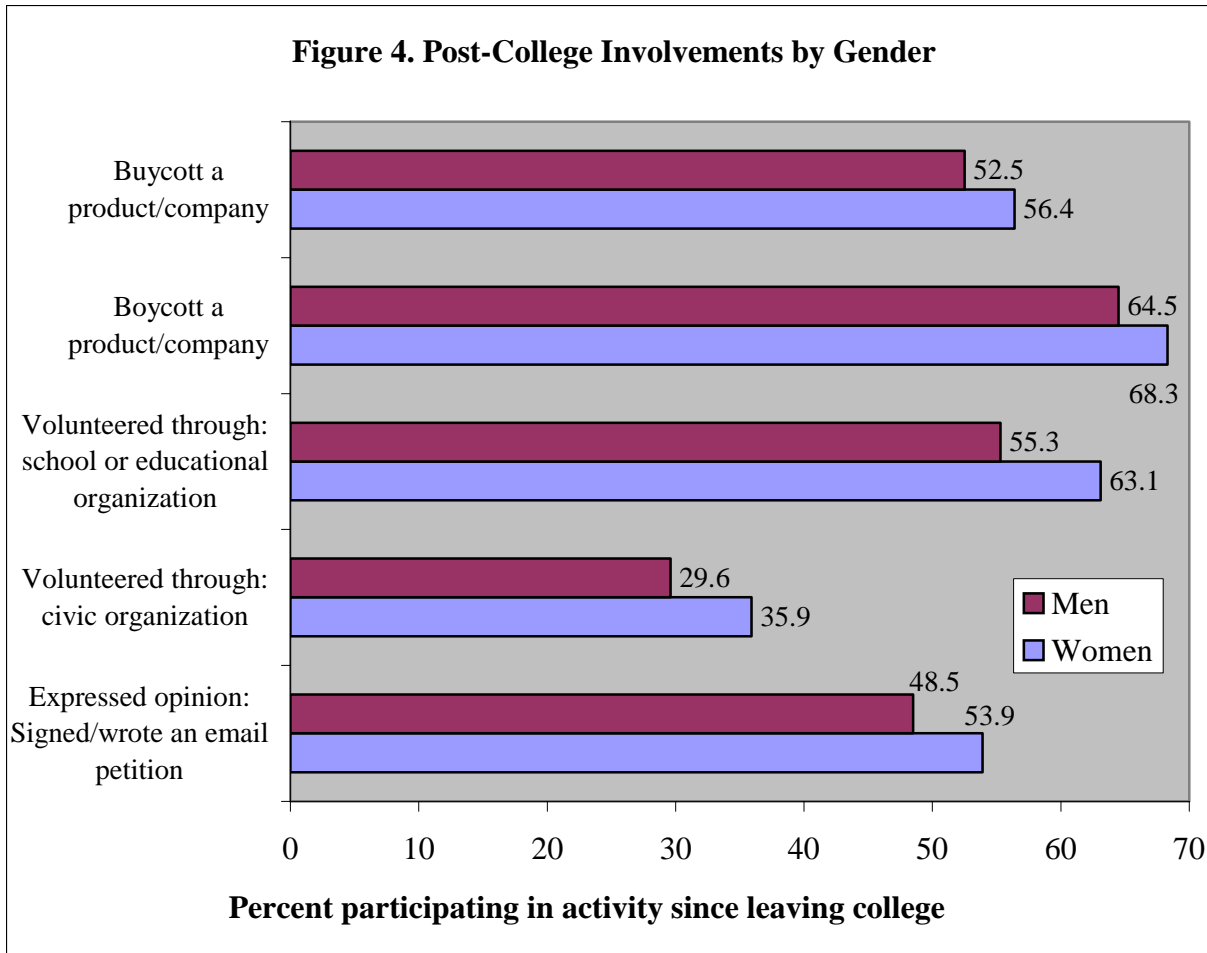


Alumni who are engaged in volunteer work are most likely to do so through a school or educational organization (59.7%), their employer (57.7%), a religious or faith-based organization (49.4%) or a sports or recreational organization (44.3%). They were far less likely to report being involved through a public/government agency (12.9%), a political organization (16.0%), or an advocacy/issue group (20.1%).

Gender

Studies have demonstrated that women and men participate in civic life somewhat differently (Schlozman & Brady, 2002). In addition to volunteer work, the HERI survey polled former students' engagement in numerous community/civic activities, such as donating money, expressing their opinion in public ways, and working with political structures. In general, men are more likely than women to say that they have worked with political groups or officials, and expressed their opinion by contacting public officials or the media (see Figure 3). Women report higher frequencies than do men of volunteering through civic and educational organizations, signing email petitions and expressing their opinion by choosing to buy from – “buycott” – or boycott companies based on the values of the company (see Figure 4). Though women are more likely than men to sign email petitions, men are more likely than women to see the use of internet and email petitions as an effective way to participate in the political process (71.3% vs. 67.7%). These numbers underscore the fact that women don't seem to identify the political implications of their actions as much as do men.





Religious Participation

This study reveals that these early-career college graduates are increasingly looking for meaning in their lives, but the decline in religious participation during the college years reflects their practices in the post-college years as well. While 86.8 percent of the students attended religious services during high school, attendance had dropped to 73.0 percent by the senior year in college. During the six years since college graduation the figure has risen only slightly, to 74.9 percent. It appears that students strengthen their convictions about a meaningful life, however. The data reveal a steadily increasing endorsement of the value of “developing a meaningful philosophy of life”: from 45.1 percent as entering freshmen, to 56.7 percent as graduating seniors, to 63.3 percent six years after college.

Religious participation is associated with higher levels of volunteer involvement for these alumni, supporting findings from studies of the general population that explored the

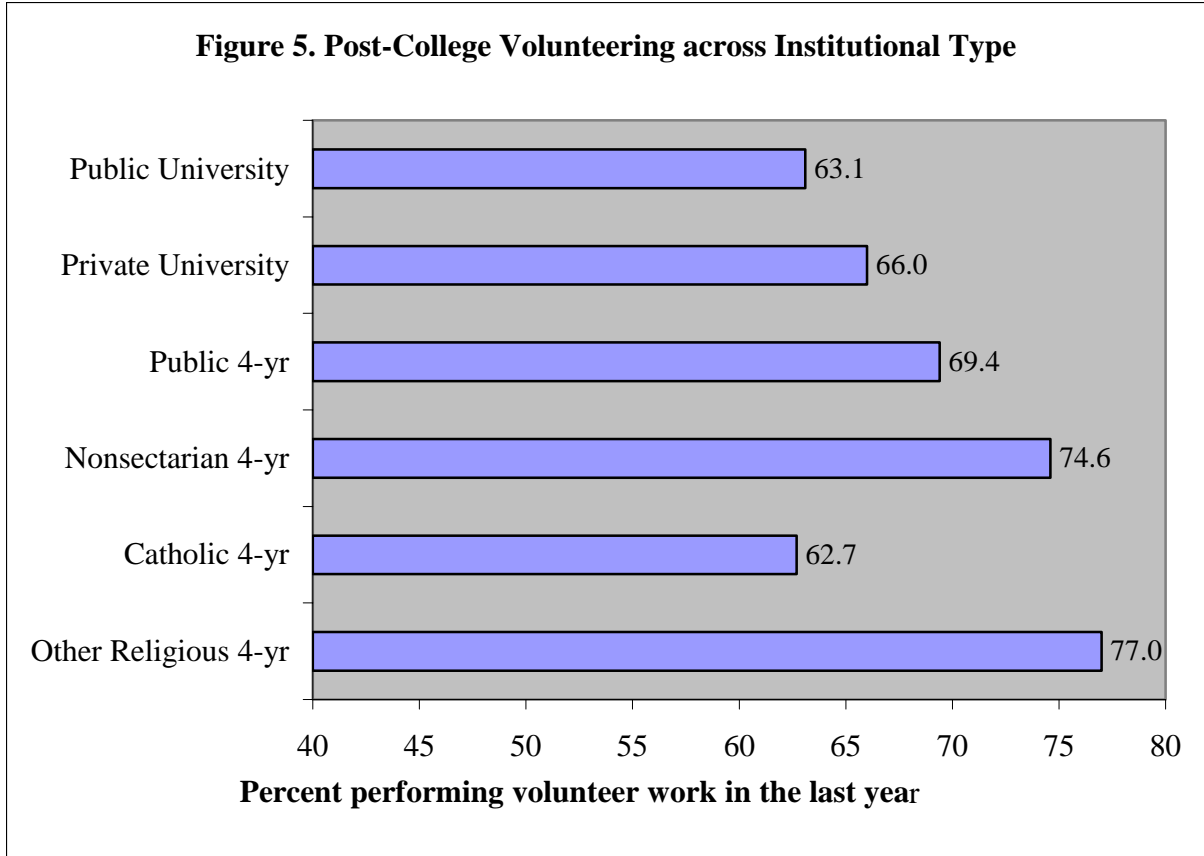
relationship between religious organizations and civic skills among adults (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995). Among the alumni in this study, those who attended religious services were more likely than their peers to be engaged in volunteer work (72.7% vs. 54.8%, respectively). Although women are more likely than men to volunteer (72.4% vs. 62.8%), and more likely to attend religious services (78.7% vs. 70.5%), men and women are equally likely to report that expressing their faith is a major reason for participating in volunteer work (23.0% and 23.5%).

Institutional Type

The data on post-college civic engagement and related values reveal interesting differences across institutional types. For this report, we examined public and private universities, as well as public and private four-year institutions. We also looked at differences among nonsectarian, Catholic and other (mostly Protestant) religious affiliations among the four-year private institutions.²

There is substantial variation in volunteering across different types of institutions. Although 68.2% of all alumni report volunteering at least occasionally during the past year, only 62.7% among Catholic college graduates report volunteering, compared to 77% of those at other religious colleges, and 63.1% of public university graduates (see Figure 5). Catholic college alumni are also less likely than others to vote in a national election (50.1% compared to 57.7% overall), or to discuss community issues (24.5% vs. 29.5% overall). Interestingly though, Catholic college alumni were *more* likely to report that participating in community service/volunteer work (during the college years) had a 'strong impact' on preparing them for life after college (22.4% compared to 16.1% overall).

² Religious *universities* are included in the group of private universities, not among the religious *four-year* institutions.

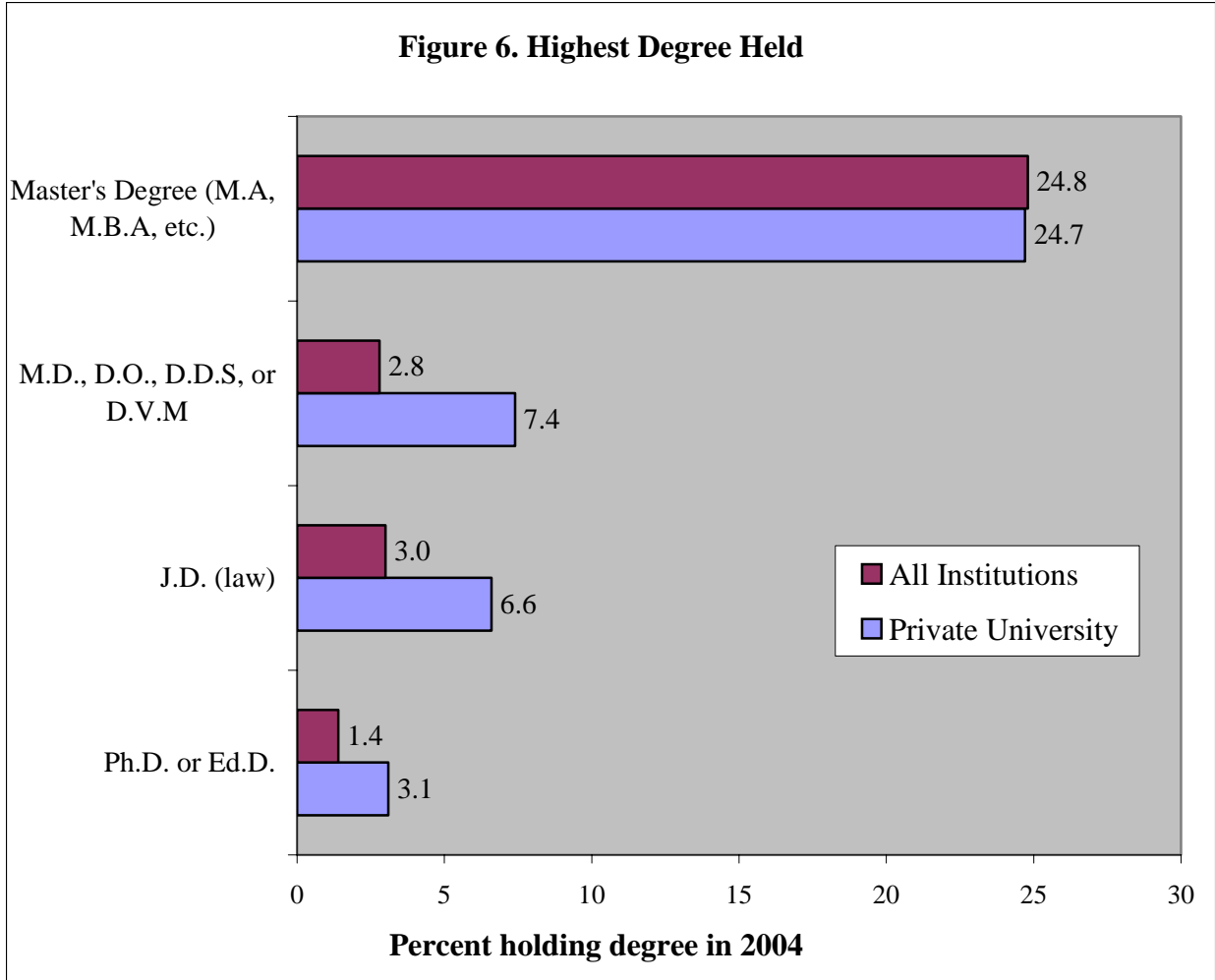


Public college graduates report voting in state/local elections at a somewhat higher rate than their peers at universities and at private colleges (50.1% vs. 47.1 overall), but they are less likely to engage in other political activities such as working with a political group, displaying a political sign of support (campaign button, sign in front of house, etc.), working as a canvasser, or working in a political campaign.

Alumni of nonsectarian four-year institutions report participating in volunteer work in high numbers (74.6% compared to 68.2% overall) and are slightly more likely than their peers to donate professional services on a pro-bono basis (8.0% vs. 6.0% overall), and to express an opinion on a community or political issue by contacting a public official (29.0% vs. 25.8% overall), work with a political group (16.6% vs. 13.4%), and to boycott based on the social or political values of a company (70% vs. 66.7% overall).

Private university alumni are more likely than other alumni to discuss politics frequently (48% vs. 37.2%), and to report that the following are ‘very important’ or ‘essential’ values: participating in a community action program (16.1% vs. 14.1%), keeping up to date with political affairs (48.9% vs. 39.4%), influencing the political structure (16.9% vs. 14.0%). However, when it comes to actual behaviors (voting, donating money, playing a leadership role in the community, etc.), these alumni participate at comparable rates to their peers. This may be due in part to their high levels of participation in

graduate studies since leaving college: private university graduates are more likely than all their peers to hold advanced degrees, especially Ph.D.s, and degrees in law and medical fields (See Figure 6). These alumni are also more likely than their peers to be working 50 or more hours per week (31.1% vs. 21.1%).



Public university graduates do not differ greatly from the average in their participation rates on most items, but some of their values and motivations were distinct. Public university alumni are less likely than their peers to say that influencing social values is an important goal for them personally (30.9% vs. 37.7%). And those that volunteer show an interesting difference in their motivations for volunteering: they are *more* likely than other graduates to say that a major reason for volunteering is to do their part as a community member (34.7% vs. 31.6%) but they are *less* likely to say that they volunteer because by getting involved they can influence what happens in their community (22.9% vs. 26.6%).

In sum, there are many differences across institutional types, and between men and women. However, there are not strong, consistent patterns of difference that would lead

one to generalize that particular institutional types are associated with any given motivation for civic engagement, nor could we say that graduates of any particular type of institution are more likely to be engaged overall than are their peers from other institutions. Rather, we see that institutional type is associated with different levels of engagement in particular behaviors (i.e. volunteering). Further analyses will control for individual characteristics and institutional differences to better understand the impact of a variety of institutional types and college experiences on post-college civic engagement.

Methodology for this report

These findings are part of a national study of former undergraduates who were surveyed in 1994 as they entered college, again as they completed college in 1998, and six years later in 2004. In the summer of 2004, HERI mailed surveys to 19,394 former students who had participated in the 1998 follow-up study. After deleting approximately 6% of the surveys (which were returned to us as non-deliverable) from the potential pool of respondents, the survey response rate in 2004 was 50%. This study included 8474 study participants who had completed college. The data reported here have been weighted to correct for non-response bias, and reflect the ‘population’ of first-time full-time college students who entered in 1994 and completed college within 6 years of enrolling. The descriptive analyses presented in this report are all based on weighted responses.

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Website: www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/understanding_service_learning.html

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