



2025–2026 FELLOWS RESEARCH

Understanding the Role of Civic Engagement in Supporting Community College Workforce Development

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Published September 2026 by the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement.

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Introduction

Community colleges provide postsecondary access for 40% of undergraduates across the United States, including large populations of marginalized learners (e.g., racially/ethnically minoritized, adult, first-generation, and low-income students) (Kisker et al., 2023). While these colleges serve multiple functions to support student mobility and achievement, an increasing priority of these institutions comes in the form of providing technical and skill training for students. Specifically, community college Career and Technical education (CTE) programs provide skills development for employment, thereby preparing students for the workforce, meeting a critical mission of community colleges and ultimately contributing to the economic vitality of regional and state communities (D'Amico, 2016). With their focus on workforce development and strong connections to the communities they serve, community colleges hold great potential in developing informed and civically conscious citizens.

To deliver on the promise of community colleges in providing technical training and regional and state development, civic engagement can serve as a strategy to do so through the offering of activities that tightly couple democratic appreciation with workforce development preparation (Chittum et al., 2022). Broadly, civic engagement refers to an understanding of the connection between individual action and systemic and societal issues (Delli Carpini, 2001), prompting the cultivation of training, disposition, and attitudes toward impacting the civic aspects and livelihood of communities (Ehrlich, 2000). Civic actions may or may not be political, but they work to enhance the livelihood of communities and their citizens. Civic engagement aligns with the democratic, broad-access mission and goals of community colleges to serve the public (Kisker et al., 2023), as well as the idea that these institutions serve as “civic incubators” by providing access, experiential learning, and relationships with local partners (Creamer, 2026).

Yet, the possibility of cultivating civic engagement is under threat as persistent and heightened political pressures inform colleges' curricular offerings and students' motivation to participate in civic activities (Throntveit & Boyte, 2024). Further, threats to free expression (Behrent, 2019) and censoring of teaching related to diversity, equity, and inclusion create a chilling effect on pedagogical practices and student interactions and learning (Epstein, 2024; Quinn, 2025). These challenges coexist as nationwide demand for CTE programs to drive workforce development grows, particularly as states indicate goals for responding to workforce needs and aligning academic programs with employer demands (Atwell et al., 2022). Combined, these forces frame and present pressures on college leaders' work in providing localized opportunities for community engagement.

As such, an exploration of how community colleges support CTE students' civic engagement can provide important insight for institutional leaders seeking to strengthen workforce development and communities served amidst restrictive political environments.

Community College CTE Programs, Workforce Development, and Civic Engagement

Community colleges are well poised to support students' preparedness for the workforce by providing a variety of academic programs and professional development pathways (such as noncredit training programs) within the scope of Career and Technical Education (CTE). These offerings provide short-term, accelerated opportunities for training and skills development, ultimately contributing to the economic development of regional and state communities (D'Amico, 2016) by preparing graduates for employment, promotion, and increased earnings (Dortch & Skinner, 2026).

While CTE programs may vary across states, programs offered typically include career clusters such as agriculture, construction, hospitality, digital technology, supply chain and transportation, public service and safety, and advanced manufacturing, among others (Dortch & Skinner, 2026). These programs vary in length, ranging from less than a year (for short-term certificates), a semester or two (for vocational programs), and upwards of two years (for associate degree programs; Soliz, 2023). Colleges collaborate with industry partners to identify, build, and modify academic programs to respond to workforce needs and create educational economic opportunity for local citizens (Jacobs & Cormier, 2020). CTE programs and college/workforce partnerships often integrate experiential learning opportunities into students' coursework and program requirements through internships, apprenticeships, practicums, and other applied learning activities (Weiss, 2025). These trainings strengthen connections between the academic and technical training students develop and their interactions with organizations and communities that students will serve upon program completion. As such, CTE programs provide multiple possibilities to foster students' civic engagement, including reflection on and recognition of the impact their actions and work in society.

Understanding how community colleges extend opportunity in meaningful and relevant ways to foster civic learning during workforce preparation can help educators and leaders identify strategies for a stronger democracy. This exploration is particularly significant for community colleges as they increasingly focus on post-completion success, including student employment after program completion (Wyner, 2016). Further, civic engagement can bolster these outcomes: curricular and co-curricular civic engagement initiatives support student persistence toward their professional goals by enhancing their knowledge of political processes, understanding of how sociopolitical forces inform communities, and perceptions of the importance of equity and the social good (Chittum et al., 2022; CLDE Coalition, 2024).

Community colleges across the U.S. have demonstrated innovative ways civic engagement may be embedded across students' experiences, including through courses and community partnership centers (ACM, n.d.; KCC, n.d.), specific student learning outcomes that prioritize civic awareness (SLCC, n.d.), and co-curricular activities for open dialogue and voting

participation (PVCC, 2019). Extending a focus toward enhancing connections between CTE programs and civic engagement can also heighten benefits to students, as civic engagement instills greater appreciation of and valuing of diversity and inclusion among colleagues and strengthens desire to drive communal and social change within workplaces. In turn, organizations also benefit from civically engaged students, whose appreciation of diversity and civic mindedness builds leadership skills and interpersonal development and motivates them to embed themselves more actively within their communities (Hamilton, 2026; Kisker et al., 2016).

Research Design

To understand how community colleges provide civic engagement opportunities for students in CTE programs and the impact of this on workforce training, I used a case study approach, focusing on community colleges in North Carolina. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do community college CTE leaders understand civic engagement?
2. How do leaders understand the role of civic engagement in students' workforce preparation?

North Carolina is an apt site to conduct this research given that in its 2025-2027 business model, Propel NC, the North Carolina Community College System articulated a goal of "invest[ing] in reclaiming the #1 state for business and workforce development" (NC Community Colleges, n.d.). The NCCCS is comprised of 58 schools, and community colleges across the state offer a variety of CTE programs that vary based on regional employer demand and geographic landscape. In addition, high school students can pursue CTE programs and earn college credit for coursework taken through the state's dual enrollment known as Career and College Promise (CCP) (NCCCS, n.d.).

For this project, I conducted semi-structured interviews with community college leaders across North Carolina. I used publicly available information from institutional websites and online directories to identify individuals whose professional positions required some knowledge of and responsibility for CTE or workforce programs and/or student engagement initiatives. Individuals from each of the 58 community colleges and the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) Office were invited via email to participate, and ultimately 11 leaders from 10 institutions and the NCCCS office participated in this study. These participants held titles such as dean or director of workforce learning, director of student life, vice president of workforce development/continuing education, and vice president of student engagement. In addition to interviews, I also searched for and analyzed documents and webpages related to the system's goals for workforce development, co-curricular programs and initiatives for CTE students and civic engagement, as well as information about individual college goals and initiatives, including institutional strategic plans, catalogs, mission statements, and program learning outcomes. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed, and the transcripts along

with the documents and webpages were coded inductively and deductively (based on a review of the scholarly literature) to aid with data analysis.

Findings¹

Civic Engagement is Inherent, Varied, and Undefined

Overall, community college leaders perceived civic engagement to be a valuable construct for the development and sustainability of students and communities. However, perspectives on the meaning of civic engagement varied as did understandings of how participating in civic activities could be tied to supporting students' technical training and preparedness for the workforce. Among leaders, there was much consensus that as an institution, colleges are inherently civically engaged by nature of them serving and responding to their communities. Such response was done by providing citizens with relevant academic programs and supports to address individual goals (such as being competitive candidates for high-wage careers) as well as local and state workforce economic needs. Nearly all college institutional mission and vision statements affirmed this sentiment, as community and civic mindedness were articulated as functions or goals of colleges.

While participants understood and were aware of these aims, they questioned how to actively utilize civic engagement to achieve institutional strategic goals and CTE program outcomes. Multiple leaders broadly defined civic engagement as a strategy or means to serve their college and (in turn) local community and noted that they witnessed their college doing this in several ways. Perceived ways that colleges facilitated civic engagement included volunteering opportunities for students to participate in at the college or within the community, voter registration efforts, and service-learning activities. In addition, some leaders underscored the significant role that colleges played in providing space for students and community members to convene and interact, which was also described as a way to support civic engagement. Leaders grappled with ways that CTE programs enhanced civic engagement, with some indicating that they did not believe their programs did so instructionally. Among those that perceived civic engagement to be occurring in CTE classrooms and assignments, examples of such work included volunteer work in the community (such as aiding with residential construction projects), site visits to local workplaces, and interactions with career services advisors on campus (including participating in mock interviewing and other activities designed to bolster students' preparedness for employment).

¹ For the sake of length for this research brief, findings are summarized and briefly reviewed.

CTE Student Engagement is Unique and Presents Distinct Challenges

While participants identified their institutions as playing an important role in fostering civic learning and engagement, they also contended that it is not the role of colleges and leaders to enforce participation in civic activities. This hedging was described as a respond to multiple challenges encountered with increasing students' engagement at the college. For example, leaders pointed to disparities in access and opportunity students experience (such as a lack of transportation to campus for activities). In addition, CTE programs serve a large proportion of adult learners, who juggle multiple responsibilities and roles outside of the classroom. Leaders indicated that requiring or encouraging students to participate in civic engagement could take time and attention away from existing demands students face. They also highlighted that there may be assumptions among colleagues that students are not engaging civically. Yet, students may already be involved in activities outside of the college environment, and challenges with gleaning this information exist. More specifically, CTE student engagement is unique given the short-term nature of their programs, with some lasting a few days or a few weeks. Students' interactions are primarily with their faculty (which often only includes one faculty member teaching their course) and their cohort. As such, CTE student engagement is often specific to places that they have embedded themselves, primarily classroom spaces. Given CTE students' engagement, information about how students are involved in their communities as well as messages about civic engagement and encouragement to participate often come from program faculty, and co-curricular involvement is primarily driven by student interest.

Challenges with Embedding Non-Technical Training into CTE Coursework Exist

Leaders described a tension between fostering civic engagement and providing students with valuable skills development needed for the workforce. CTE programs, true to their purpose and curriculum, emphasize technical training to meet student and industry needs. Several participants expressed hesitation with incorporating civic and community-focused activities into CTE courses, as they perceived that such opportunities could potentially take instructional time away from technical and skill development. Further, leaders indicated a desire to be cognizant of supporting students' intentions for enrolling in CTE programs. They described many of the students enrolled are adult learners and goal oriented. If civic engagement activities were included in a course and students did not understand the relevance of this to their training, there was a fear among leaders that students may be deterred from enrolling. In sum, participants overwhelmingly emphasized was that the purpose of enrolling CTE students was not to foster engagement with the institution but instead to provide them with the certificate or credential for which they applied.

Considerations for Decision Makers

Insight from North Carolina community college leaders in CTE programs underscored the importance of colleges in supporting the civic vitality of local and state communities. Leaders expressed that civic engagement is an important ideal to uphold, both as a larger goal for the college and for the long-term success of their students. Participants perceived that their work serving CTE students directly impacted the local workforce and positively impacted communities by providing students with valuable skills to serve society. Ultimately, CTE programs aligned with and served as a function of broader college goals of serving the public good.

While the desire and motivation to enhance civic engagement exist, ideas for moving toward action were challenging to identify. Leaders faced multiple structural constraints and disincentives that constrain their abilities to contextualize a definition of civic engagement within their college, develop academic program outcomes and activities that implement civic learning, and assess how forms of civic engagement impact student success. Given a national movement of states investing in community college workforce development programs, including in North Carolina, leaders could benefit from identifying and implementing specific strategies to leveraging civic engagement to support workforce development, especially in light of the benefits these activities provide for students and the direct and quick impact community colleges and their graduates can make.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

I offer the following actionable steps that leaders can take to leverage civic engagement as a mechanism that supports students, the institution, communities, and states.

- Construct a definition of civic engagement in CTE programs that aligns with the context you and your colleagues serve. Your context may include your college and its students, faculty, and staff. It may also include local community partners and industries. As you develop this, determine what your college's "why" is in relation to civic engagement—why is it important, and how can it enhance the college's role in workforce development?
- Utilize community members, employers, and peers from across other colleges to engage in ongoing and routine conversations about civic engagement. Convening faculty, staff, and leaders can prompt discussions about how to allocate attention and funding to promote civic engagement in community college CTE programs. Additionally, best practices and ideas for successful and high-impact engagement can be shared in these conversations (Kisker et al., 2016).
- Review institutional goals, such as those articulated in college mission and vision statements and strategic plans, to determine how civic engagement can support these. While an emphasis on technical training is needed to meet student and industry needs, consider how civic engagement can be complementary rather than counter to skill development. How can these aims be coupled together in a meaningful way to boost student outcomes and post-completion success? A review of literature and data related to civic engagement's potential to boost student learning and meet the needs of local communities and workforce/industry partners should foreground this conversation

(Chittum et al., 2022). Resources from the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the Higher Education Democracy Exchange (HEDEX), and Campus Compact provide useful evidence, exemplars, and reflective questions for college leaders, faculty, and staff seeking information about civic engagement. Discussions should also consider the unique challenges CTE programs present to engagement goals, including how the short-term nature and technical focus of these programs impact faculty members' ability to envision and create civic-focused student learning outcomes and experiences.

- After creating a definition of “civic engagement,” establishing associated learning outcomes and goals, and identifying opportunities in CTE programs to achieve these, collect data to understand the impact of civic engagement on student learning (Hatcher, 2011). The Civic Engagement VALUE Rubrics from AAC&U (n.d.) may be a useful resource for faculty and administrators seeking to assess student learning across multiple components of civic engagement. In addition, college leaders may also utilize qualitative methods, such as interviews with CTE students, to further understand perspectives on civic engagement and what curricular and co-curricular experiences students perceive to be valuable and relevant to their learning and career readiness.
- Encourage and embed possibilities for employees to participate in civic engagement. If faculty, staff, and administrators experience the impact of this work, they can bring this learning back into their teaching and support practices. Institutionalized initiatives, such as paid employee leave for volunteering, can help create opportunities for faculty and staff to become engaged (Brisbin & Hunter, 2003).

Conclusion

In conclusion, community colleges provide significant benefits to a diverse range of students, organizations, and local and state communities through specialized CTE programs. The potential and capacity of community colleges to deliver on their promise can be strengthened through examination of the relationships between practical training for careers and students' participation in activities that expose them to ways to build equitable and socially conscious communities of practice. Neglecting to mediate these aims has long reaching effects on the impact of colleges as sites for democratic learning and drivers of regional and state development (D'Amico, 2016; Kisker et al., 2016). College leaders can utilize several means to enhance civic engagement at their institutions. These include determining how civic engagement aligns with and complements existing college priorities and goals and constructing a definition of engagement that is contextualized to the needs of the students, citizens, and communities served. In addition, routine data collection efforts and storytelling can help build buy-in and interest in incorporating civic mindedness and learning in workforce preparation programs.

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