



# RESEARCH PROJECT OUTLINE

Research and Graduate Education ♦ College of Agricultural Sciences  
The Pennsylvania State University ♦ University Park, Pennsylvania

**Title:** Youth Civic Engagement: Roots of Personal Well-Being, and a Healthy Civil Society

**Probable Duration:** 60 months (July 1, 2004 through June 30, 2009)

**Personnel:**

*Project Leader:*

Constance Flanagan, 75%  
Agricultural and Extension Education

*PSU Collaborators:*

Leslie S. Gallay, Social Science Research Institute  
Mary Beth Oliver, College of Communications  
William Boyd and Dana Mitra, College of Education  
Kimberly Powell, College of Agricultural Sciences and College of Education

Dr. Flanagan is responsible for coordination of the overall program of work and for oversight and management of each individual project. Gallay is responsible for data management of one project. Each of the PSU collaborators will be working on one specific part of an individual project.

**Justification, Relevance, and Expected Outcomes or Impacts:**

In recent years concerns have been growing that younger generations may be disengaging from the political process. Although large numbers of younger generations are engaged in community-based organizations and service learning projects, they appear to be less interested in politics and government. In past generations community work was often a bridge to politics but there is some concern that young people today see it as an alternative (Galston, 2001). Trends in recent years also indicate that younger generations are less trusting of institutions and of fellow human beings than past generations of youth (Smith, in press). The disengagement is especially acute among lower-income and ethnic minority groups. These trends bode poorly for the health and well-being of individual young people but also undermine the health of Civil Society. Low levels of social trust are related to lower levels of participation in decision making about public affairs. Public goods such as the environment or public programs tend to erode when the public is not attentive to protecting them (Flanagan, 2004).

This project will look at ways that communities and organizations can reverse such trends. Specifically, the project will look at practices in schools and community-based organizations that a) connect younger generations to community work; b) help them see the connections of their local community work to larger public purposes and to governance and decision-making processes in society and c) improve the health and well-being of individual youth and the organizations and communities they are in.

The project is important to agriculture because it will address problems of community development and the general public at the state and national level. Insofar as educating an informed and participatory public is central to the mission of land-grant universities and the Cooperative Extension mission, the project addresses research and extension priorities. With respect to the five CSREES national goals, it is related to national goals 3 – 5: a healthy population; the protection of natural resources and the environment; and enhanced quality of life for Americans.

**Previous Work (Background) and Present Outlook:**

Scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds (sociology, political science, psychology, education) have been studying these issues but, typically within disciplinary silos and typically with little appreciation of issues of human development and community context (Putnam, 2000). This study will take a broader youth development approach to the issue of civic engagement and will integrate work from across the disciplines. It will also take a more applied approach than previous work by addressing how community organizations and the institutions that are meant to meet the needs of youth can accommodate their practices to enhance young people's civic engagement.

Because the theme of youth civic engagement has currency both across scholarly disciplines and also in public discourse, there is every indication that this project will have a wide and interested audience. Several foundations have made this theme a high priority for funding and there are a number of curricula being used in formal and non-formal educational settings. The National 4-H, the Innovation Center for Youth Development, and several states have made youth civic engagement high priorities of programming. We are already involved with many of these groups.

**Objectives:**

1. To determine elements of school- and community-based practices that enhance the health and well-being of young people and their inclinations to intervene to enhance the health and well-being of friends and fellow citizens. To provide research-based guidance about program elements that enhance young people's civic engagement and interest in public affairs
2. To develop valid and reliable measures of civic values, knowledge, skills, and engagement that can be used by organizations working with primary and secondary age students and young adults.

**Procedures:**

1. Conduct a longitudinal study of approximately 1500 early through late adolescents, their parents, and teachers to determine developmental trajectories of trust, social responsibility, participation in the community, and attitudes towards intervening to help friends and fellow members of the community. Collaborate with teachers in Pennsylvania's schools, with the State Department of Education, especially the service learning and social studies areas. Disseminate findings through professional publications and outreach with the public.
2. Work with several projects in the field (within the state and nationally) to develop and test survey items to measure civic values, knowledge, skills, and engagement with children, adolescents, and young adults. Conduct evaluations of some programs in the field including the Student Voices and Democracy Lab projects. Collaborate with other members of the MacArthur Network on the Transition to Adulthood and MDRC on development of civic measures.

**Stakeholder Engagement:**

School district superintendents, principals, and teachers will provide input into the design of the studies and the interpretation of results. The director of Annenberg's Student Voices project will use the results of the evaluation to improve the Student Voices program and the Democracy Lab program.

**Scope of Impact:**

State specific and multi state research

**Integrated Activities:**

The studies will be conducted in the field (primarily in schools) and will have direct relevance for curricular, classroom, and whole school organization. Regular feedback/outreach will be provided to participating schools in school specific reports and information on project website.

**Milestones:**

- Summaries of research will be published in refereed publications, presented at professional and outreach meetings, and summarized for public consumption on project website.
- Final evaluations of specific curricula (Student Voices, Democracy Lab) provided to sponsor.

**Literature Cited:**

Flanagan, C.A. (2004). Volunteerism, leadership, political socialization, and civic engagement. In R.M. Lerner & L. Steinberg, (Eds.), Handbook of adolescent psychology (pp. 721-746). NY: Wiley.

Galston, W.A. (2001). Political knowledge, political engagement, and civic education. Annual Review of Political Science, 4, 217-234.

Putnam, R.D. (2000). Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community. NY: Simon & Schuster.

Smith, T. (in press). Generation gaps in attitudes and values from the 1970s to the 1990s. In R. A. Settersten, Jr., F. F. Furstenberg, Jr., & R. G. Rumbaut (eds.), On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.