



How the Educational Network for Active Civic Transformation ("ENACT") Involves College Students in Democratic Governance in the U.S. States

Melissa Ellen Stimell, Brandeis University

David J. Weinstein, Brandeis University

Across the country, faculty and administrators at colleges and universities are concerned about how to better engage students in U.S. democracy. The Educational Network for Active Civic Transformation — called ENACT for short — is a promising national program that engages undergraduates in furthering state-level legislative changes. Students in the program learn to work with state legislators, staffers, and community organizations to advance state-level policies. Across the country, young people involved in the program are given the opportunity to take part in civic activism grounded in knowledge, cooperation, and a quest for social justice.

Origins and Scope of the Program

In ENACT, students learn through direct engagement with actual state legislation. Participating students travel to the state capital, meet with and lobby legislators, strategize with advocacy organizations, and create outreach materials to advance specific bills.

ENACT originated from a course called "Advocacy for Policy Change" I taught as a professor of the practice at Brandeis University. In the spring of 2009, I embarked on an experiment with 13 dedicated Brandeis undergraduates. My goal was to encourage my students to think deeply about the complex process required to shape laws for constituents who hold diverse viewpoints about what is right and good for society. With my students, I explored how to advance bills through the legislative process.

The results of the program have been impressive. At Brandeis alone, more than 200 students have engaged with the state legislative process on behalf of dozens of bills. Seventeen of those bills have been signed into law in more than two dozen policy areas, dealing with matters of immigrant rights, health care, poverty, homelessness, criminal justice reform, and domestic violence.

Building on the success of Advocacy for Policy Change, Brandeis expanded ENACT to a national network of colleges and universities located in or near state capitals. The program now reaches 29 colleges and universities and has plans to reach all 50 states. Participating institutions include: the University of Alabama at Birmingham; Hendrix College (in Arkansas); the University of California Sacramento Center; the United States Air Force Academy (in Colorado); the University of Hartford (in Connecticut); Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University; Emory University (in Georgia); Boise State University (in Idaho); the University of Hawaii; Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis; Drake University (in Iowa); the University of Louisville (in Kentucky); the University of Maine; the University of Maryland; Brandeis University (in Massachusetts);

Metropolitan State University (in Minnesota); the University of Mississippi; Lincoln University of Missouri; the University of New Hampshire – Manchester; Rutgers University-Camden (in New Jersey); Siena College (in New York); the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Cleveland State University (in Ohio); the Oregon State University; Penn State University (in Pennsylvania); Providence College (in Rhode Island); the University of Utah; Bennington College (in Vermont); and Randolph-Macon College (in Virginia).

How Are Students and Other Participants Affected?

Currently, a small group of ENACT fellows working in Connecticut, Maine, New York, and Virginia have pursued research to better understand the impact of these experiential courses on student political engagement — including on students’ knowledge, efficacy, civic action and online action. ENACT courses, they have found, yield an increase in self-reported civic engagement, political knowledge, and political efficacy among students. Comparing students in ENACT to other socially similar students enrolled in other, non-experiential courses, the investigators find that ENACT enrollees show significant positive effects for engagement, efficacy, and civic action. Although this study represents only the first effort to understand the impact of ENACT, the results are promising.

ENACT is building a national online network of students, faculty, activists and legislators. This allows the ENACT Network to serve as a strategic information hub — a resource for state-level players — that enables participants to connect with counterparts throughout the country, with guidance from the team at Brandeis University. The online network enhances participants’ learning and provides opportunities for them to share their work and inspire and instruct others who want to learn how to influence civic life and legislation in the United States.

By reaching out to serve students and teachers across the United States, ENACT expresses the commitment to citizen participation embodied by Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis, who once explained that “the most important office, and the one which all of us can and should fill, is that of private citizen.” Engaged citizens can, and should, know how to shape legislation in all American states.