5 Teams To Explore Civic and Political Engagement among Young People

By Dian Schaffhauser | 11/04/15

A multi-institutional research project will explore how to measure the quality of youth civic and political engagement, whether face-to-face, in writing or online. The study will delve into such questions as how well young people can verify what's true or not on the Internet, how often they use divisive dialog or abusive commentary when discussing political topics and how much empathy and understanding they have for others with different viewpoints and from different backgrounds.

The $2 million effort is being funded by the Spencer Foundation, whose mission is to fund projects that investigate ways to improve education around the world.

Five research teams at four universities — MIT, Stanford, U California at Berkeley and U Colorado Boulder — will each receive $400,000 to investigate the effectiveness of different educational practices. They'll also create tools to measure the effectiveness of programs that promote civil discourse and assess the credibility of online content, among other areas.

The beneficiaries of the project will be anybody seeking to strengthen civic education, particularly teachers and policymakers.

Historically, the research in this area "has focused on the quantity rather than the quality of civic and political engagement," said Joe Kahne, a senior advisor to the New Civics Measures initiative and a professor of education at Mills College. "We don't just want young people to be active. We want them to be informed and thoughtful, to be able to engage with people who have different opinions."

The MIT team will study online course forums, specifically assessing the nature of interactions and discussions between students.

The University of Colorado at Boulder will run a project to assess how students of different political and demographic backgrounds interact and debate.

A second team at U Colorado will assess how effectively students or groups of students communicate their viewpoints and the quality of evidence they provide to support claims made in presentations.

The National Writing Project at UC Berkeley will develop a rubric to help educators in using teaching methods that help students write more effectively for political and civic purposes.

The Stanford team within the Graduate School of Education will examine how well students discern the credibility of information online and consider ways to improve their digital media literacy skills.
An outcome of the overall initiative is to develop "indicators" that can be used to guide reform of policy, curriculum and coursework.

"These projects will breach new territory by providing calculable measures of civic and political engagement," said Diana Hess, who led the Civics Measures project at the foundation and currently serves as dean of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education. "We've never had measures like this before, and the results here will help educators train the next generation in civil, evidence-based debate, preserving the platform of democracy in this country."

Spencer's Civics Initiative was launched in 2008 to fund research that asks important questions about how education can support civic and political development among students. "Democracy only works," said Spencer President Michael McPherson, "if people think that there can be multiple and competing answers to national issues, and that we need to listen carefully to one another and learn from one another. It's the way the marketplace of ideas is supposed to work."