

Executive Summary

**Measuring Effectiveness of Civic Participation
at the University Level in Turkey:
A Case Study of the Civic Involvement Project
at Sabanci University**

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Measuring Effectiveness of Civic Participation at the University Level in Turkey: A Case Study of the Civic Involvement Project at Sabanci University

Sabanci University, located in Istanbul, Turkey, launched the Civic Involvement Project (CIP) in 1999 for students at the university level. Between 2000 and 2005, nearly 1,800 students have completed at least one project. In those 5 years, 194 projects have been completed. In addition, 180 students have worked in various positions of responsibility in the CIP program. Of those 180, 108 were supervisors once, 38 twice, 27 three times and 7 four times. This study examines the effectiveness of CIP, with the principle goals of measuring participants' perceptions and identifying the program's strengths and weaknesses. In addition, this research seeks to better understand how CIP compares to other youth involvement/participation programs. The impact of service-learning on several civic education variables (i.e. social awareness, social networking, political awareness, critical thinking, and personal development) and the effects of characteristics of service-learning experiences on the development of students are also explored.

Methods

The research used qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect information from those actively involved in CIP, including students, NGOs, and governmental organizations. The research integrated three methods to gather information and data. The first method included a systemic evaluation of the history of the program. Even though CIP has accumulated a considerable array of experience and expertise on civic engagement in Turkey, systemic documentation of the projects undertaken since the beginning of the program did not exist. In part, this research sought to fill that gap.

The second method was based on oral interviews. These interviews were conducted with two types of informants: students and representatives from organizations involved in CIP efforts. In addition to formal and recorded interviews with the representatives of some of these organizations, informal interviews with several project participants were also part of the research. These interviews provided contextual data for the quantitative findings presented in this executive summary.

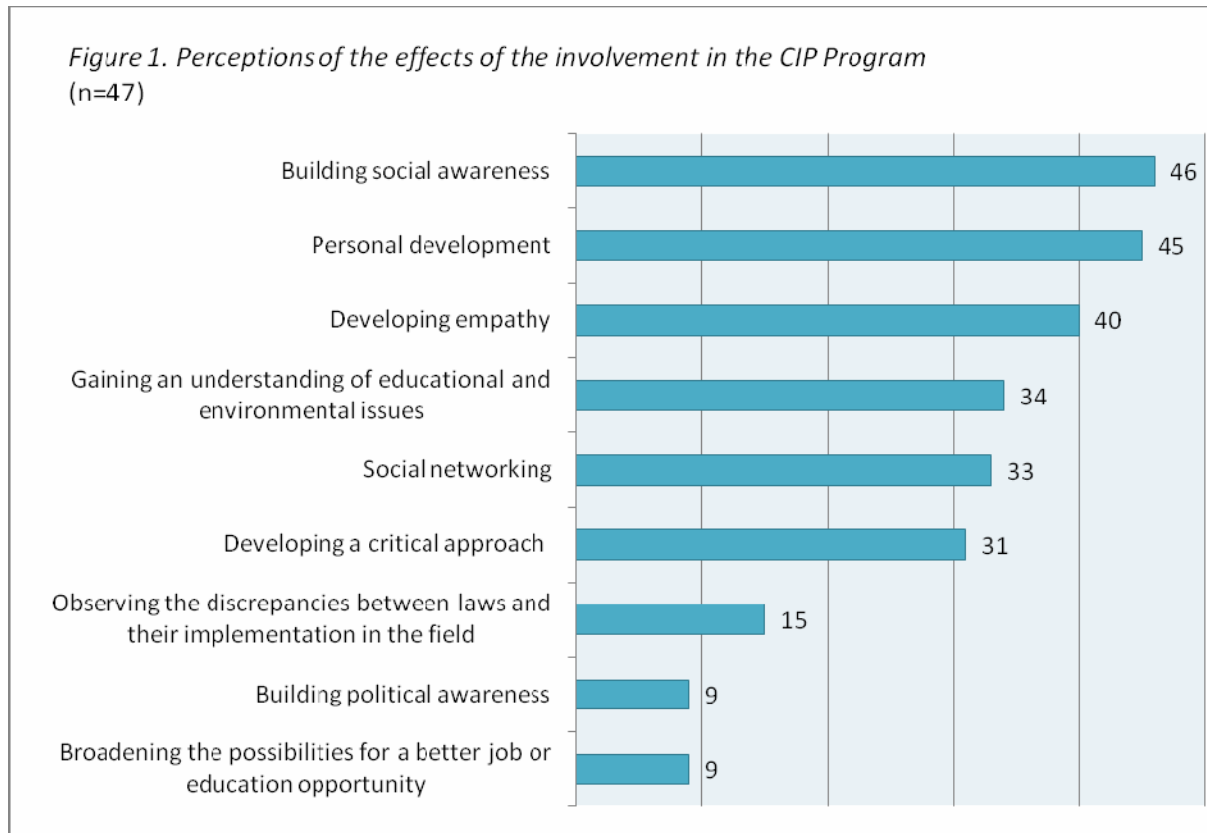
The third method was a questionnaire distributed to CIP students. Eighty-eight questionnaires were distributed among students participating in the program; 47 completed questionnaires were returned. The first section of the instrument included demographics, and questions about the respondents' civic engagement work and their perceptions of civic engagement. The second section aimed to collect information about the respondent's civic involvement practices at sites outside the program. The third section aimed to measure the change in the respondent's opinion about civic involvement after participating in the program. The fourth section measured the relationship between organizational structure and the respondent's perception and corresponding practice of civic involvement / engagement.

Main Findings

This section summarizes the findings from the questionnaire administered to 47 students who were participating in CIP. Information gathered during informal interviews and focus groups is also included in follow-up observations.

I. Perceptions of the effects of the involvement in CIP

Several questions in the instrument focused on identifying the effects of involvement in the program. Figure 1 illustrates a list of possible positive impacts and the count for each response.



The effects of “building social awareness” (46), “personal development” (45), and “developing empathy” (40) were agreed upon by nearly all of the 47 respondents. This result reflects the positive outcomes of the program. Participants perceived the other effects as follows; “gaining an understanding of the educational and environmental issues” (34), “social networking or acquiring a large, warm circle of friends” (33), and “developing a critical approach” (31). Fewer respondents noted such effects as “observing the discrepancies between laws and their implementation in the field” (15), “building political awareness” (9), and “broadening the possibilities for a better job or educational opportunity” (9).

According to student responses, CIP by its hands-on approach and student-led involvement, provides an important platform for students to develop their knowledge of themselves, the working world, and social issues. CIP students grappled with issues such as the

quality of education, schooling, and childhood in urban peripheries of Istanbul, and conditions in less developed parts of Turkey impacted by the recent civil war. Despite the disparities between students and CIP target populations, the respondents' recurrent emphasis on learning, sharing, and experiencing different worlds in their projects implies a horizontally-oriented form of social and critical engagement characteristic of a participatory democracy.

This appreciation of difference was characteristic of most students' perceptions of civic engagement work. As one of the respondents remarked during one interview, "the joyful and educative" aspect of work on both sides of the project "doubles the effect." The question of how students would describe their work in CIP was often answered in a similar fashion. As another puts it, "I want to save the world. CIP is my playground."

II. Dimensions of Participation: Mandatory vs. Volunteer

Since CIP's inception, its mandatory nature has been frequently discussed and sometimes criticized by those who believe CIP activities should be based on altruism. Part of the questionnaire addressed this question. Overall, respondents' perceptions about compulsory participation in the CIP projects were positive. Of 47 respondents, 63% said that they had not questioned the issue of mandatory participation. Almost all of these respondents agreed that their support of the mandatory nature of the program became more decisive after subsequent years of participation to the program.

Twenty one percent said that they have mixed feelings; expressing that they approved the idea of mandatory participation during their first project but were dubious of this aspect when considering long-term participation in the program. During interviews, some of them vividly portrayed how team members who were inattentive and indifferent at the beginning became committed members of the team and continued their participation after the required time period. Fourteen percent of the respondents, who commonly posited their own difficult dealing with

their team members' indifference, stated that they were questioning the mandatory aspect of the program even though they feel this aspect had played a directional role for their own participation and for providing them with such an opportunity.

III. CIP Participation and Academic Work

Approximately 31% of the respondents said that CIP work affected their school work, lessening the time they could devote to academic work and school activities. However, the majority of respondents (65%) reported that they had not experienced any negative effect on their academic work. Yet, 25% of them said they considered the work that they had done in CIP valuable to their personal, social, and intellectual development. During interviews, students noted that they have been able to improve their time-management skills while balancing CIP work and studying. Some respondents noted that they think of or situate CIP work more as a social activity that complemented their formal education.

The majority of students (59%) reported they had never participated in similar activities prior to university, while 40% said that they had. Many were familiar with the notion of civic involvement through their high school activities. Others noted that they had worked with children and elderly people in some capacity prior to university, and found this experience useful to their CIP work. These results imply that the notion of civic involvement is limited and uneven in high school curriculums, even though high schools seem like ideal venues to provide institutional framework to further civic service in Turkey. Despite their lack of prior knowledge, however, students were clearly influenced toward civic engagement by their experiences in CIP. For example, 44% of respondents noted that they were participating in other civic service activities while also participating in CIP.