WHY FLORIDA COMMUNITIES SHOULD STRENGTHEN CIVIC CAPACITY

November 2014

Florida, now the fourth largest U.S. state, is a place of unique beauty, diversity, and growth. Resident population has exploded from 9.4 million in 1980 to 19.3 million in 2012. Today, Florida’s population is uniquely diverse: 35% are native born, 19% are foreign born, 17% are over 65 (tops in the nation), 23% are of Hispanic descent, and 16.5% are African-American.

In light of Florida’s growth, it is no surprise that its civic capacity has lagged. Research shows that among states, Florida is 32nd in voter turnout, 40th in citizens helping neighbors, 44th in philanthropy, and 47th in volunteering and attending public meetings. A study of civic health in 50 U.S. cities ranked Miami 50th, Orlando 48th, and Jacksonville and Tampa at 47th. In addition to these studies, there are numerous indicators of dissatisfaction with government and community leaders, cases of incivility, intergroup and interracial conflicts, and conflicting views and visions for Florida’s future.

By strengthening civic capacity, Florida communities can better address big civic challenges including:

- **Growth.** Florida is predicted to grow by 25% by 2040, so communities will need to bring citizens together to create a shared vision, values, and plans to guide growth and protect life quality.

- **Funding and Investment.** Florida local governments do not have adequate funds to address all their needs, so multi-sector partnerships and resource sharing are important strategies to help the community.

- **Complex Challenges.** The most difficult challenges communities face (such as crime, poverty, health care, education, and economic development) cannot be solved by government or governments alone and require inter-government and multi-sector collaboration.

- **Incivility.** Incivility, extreme partisanship, and distrust make governance difficult. Local governments need to work with other institutions, including higher education, to address these negative forces and create positive opportunities for community celebration, deliberation, and shared service to strengthen community ties and civic life.
• **Collaborative Leadership.** Florida cities and towns need leaders who can work effectively with all elements of their community to craft policies and successful solutions to problems. Citizenship education, student service-learning, and leadership training programs are essential in creating a pool and a pipeline of new community leaders.

In the face of these challenges, there is a growing recognition of the importance of measuring civic health in order to build and tap community capacity.¹ A recent National Research Council report, for example, emphasizes the importance of such assessment because, “civic engagement, social cohesion and other dimensions of social capital affect social, economic and health outcomes.”

There is also increasing evidence that through collective impact initiatives² citizens can improve their communities by taking stock of their civic health, identifying gaps and weaknesses, and working collaboratively and inclusively to pursue civic solutions to difficult community challenges. Entrepreneurial creativity and innovation can further enrich collaborative approaches to community engagement, social cooperation and civic advance.

The Florida Civic Advance, a project involving a collaborative network of over 25 local, regional and statewide organizations, is working to help Florida communities:

- Build or strengthen multi-sector collaborations to assess their civic health and tap community assets;
- Develop targeted plans for civic improvement; and
- Collaborate in a range of civic action projects.

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Dedicated to building strong Florida communities, the Florida Civic Advance encourages excellence, connections and collaboration in civic life and seeks to support, strengthen, and improve a range of areas in civic life including:

- Voter Education and Participation
- Collaborative Economic Development
- Community Education and Deliberation
- Community Visioning and Planning

- Volunteering and Philanthropy
- Civic Education and Student Service Learning
- Intergroup and Intergenerational Connections
- Multi-Sector Partnerships

- Citizen Engagement with Government
- Civility, Neighborliness, and Community Pride
- Nonprofit Community Impact
- Community Inclusion Activities and Programs

By testing ideas and sharing the results in these areas, by developing better measurement tools that can provide ongoing feedback on civic improvement strategies, by convening citizens, leaders and tapping the power of community partnerships to solve problems, and by sharing civic skills and best practices, Florida’s communities can become safer, stronger, smarter, more sustainable, and responsive to its citizens.

For more information on the Florida Civic Advance, contact Robert Jones, Director of the FSU FCRC Consensus Center and Network secretariat at rmjones@fsu.edu.