

# 2026 NSSE Shorts: Civic Engagement

## Open-Ended Comments Summary

In Spring 2026, a randomly selected half of the student body received a survey comprising three [NSSE Shorts](#) modules, one of which asked about their experiences with civic engagement. Overall, 529 students (34% of those invited) responded to the survey. This report summarizes the comments<sup>1</sup> shared by 191 of these respondents to the question: “Think about the experiences you may have had with campus, local, state/provincial, national, or global issues. What about these experiences has been most meaningful to you?”

### Meaningful Experiences

Many students described particular experiences, others more general types of situations that they found impactful; not all shared why these experiences were meaningful. Forty-two students specifically named the ICE/Operation Metro Surge activities that were taking place in Minnesota around the time of this survey, and this will show up across the example quotes shared below.

- **78 (41%) talked about direct actions they had taken**, such as protesting, volunteering in the community, or contributing to mutual aid funds or other efforts.
  - “By far the most relevant experience I have had regarding wider issues while on campus has been in the last month. While I have always held strong beliefs about political issues, I have never been moved to actually act on them before to nearly the extent that I have been in response to ICE’s presence near campus...it has finally gotten me to get involved in local issues and find ways to do the activism that I often cheered from a distance. I think the most important thing about this experience has been the conviction it gave me that I actually can do something to make change.”
  - “Donating to funds to support residents in Northfield who are impacted by ICE has been very meaningful to me, as it feels like I am actually doing something useful with my time and money and helping those who need it.”

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<sup>1</sup> Aside from light editing to spelling and grammar, quotes shared here are copied verbatim. Many comments addressed more than one of the themes discussed in this report. Sometimes, just excerpts are shown to highlight a specific theme.

- “Going to protests have been the most meaningful to me because it shows me that other people also care about these issues and it gives me hope that things will get better if we keep protesting and using our free speech.”
- “Helping with charity runs or volunteering has been something that I've done that has been impactful. I think it's easy to ignore these issues especially if they don't directly affect you however most people here can probably take some time out of their days to help others less fortunate than them.”
- “I've volunteered my time to organizations like the YMCA as access care is a huge issue in the US. I've participated in protests regarding ICE in Northfield, I've donated to environment Minnesota and I also frequently donate to local democratic campaigns that I believe in.”
- “I participated in an ICE protest in my town and seeing all of the people come together to support abolishing ICE was really powerful to me. While that one protest might not have done much in terms of legislation change, it was part of a larger picture and encouraged others in this community to stand for what they believe in.”
- “Out of my experiences with social issues, the most meaningful part has been realizing the myriad of ways I am able to help. From signing petitions and leaving notes on the Stav feedback board, to organizing my own civic engagement project through Common Good Fellows, I've learned that civic engagement doesn't have to be some grandiose global movement in order to create change.”
- **66 (35%) felt that expanding their own awareness** on particular issues or raising awareness for others was the most meaningful. This frequently happened through discussions with peers.
  - “I had a very meaningful experience attending an on-campus vigil for the many lives destroyed by ICE in Minnesota. This experience, particularly hearing heartfelt testimonies from members of my community who live in fear of their loved ones being kidnapped by ICE, was extremely sobering and humbling for me, reminding me of how crucial it is for me to use my privilege to help those in need.”
  - “I have really found the conversations I have had with other students on campus about politics and global events informative and eye-opening. I think it is a simple and concise way to learn more about what my community believes in while also supporting my beliefs and ideas.”

- “I participate with the student newspaper, and so most of my experience centers around learning about new information and then communicating that with the public. I find it so incredibly valuable when I learn that an article was read and appreciated, which in turn leans into a more informed student body. I think the most meaningful thing is how I and others have communicated with others in the community, and I feel more connected.”
- “I think all of the issues I've been exposed to have been meaningful, and have compounded into a desire and motivation to think, change, and grow towards the kind of person who effectively and meaningfully interacts with others, builds community, works to better myself for ALL of those around me, and understands their own biases (and works to challenge them).”
- “I think it is meaningful to use any platform you have to bring awareness to all issues. Personally, social media is the most accessible form for me, although I don't think it's always the most effective. I find it to be meaningful when I engage in conversations with friends or family and can understand different viewpoints and walk away more informed.”
- “I haven't really had any direct experiences with campus, local, state, national, or global issues in the sense of doing anything about them -- it's mostly been from reading the news and what I've heard about from others. Things have been meaningful to me when we discuss them in class and professors recognize that these issues exist and are going on, or when my friends and I discuss them. This just shows that people realize the issue is important.”
- **47 (25%) noted experiences where they could connect with others**, including those who shared similar values and convictions, or those in the community where students were serving.
  - “For me it was going to an ICE out rally in town with my fellow peers as we united on this common belief. It was incredible to get together with people and stand up with our local community for what is right. To become more than just a college student and join with my community as a fellow human being.”
  - “The most meaningful experiences I have had have been volunteering in the community. Working with youth and volunteering at food banks are activities I have participated in and I feel like they have strengthened my connection to my local community and made me more aware of challenges people face outside of our bubble on the hill.”

- “Developing a sense of community and purpose is the most meaningful part. Connection with others during crisis and making efforts to protect the lives and rights of others helps to alleviate the feelings of doom.”
- “I am in an organization that works to address global issues. Not only was I able to address issues that bothered me, I found a community and people who I could talk to and be supported by. It gives me purpose and makes me feel seen and heard”
- “I think the most impactful thing about these experiences is the ability to talk and work with other people. If you can't communicate effectively with a wide variety of people, it will be very hard to get much done.”
- **39 (20%) described experiences at St. Olaf**, such as classes, participation in student organizations or other co-curriculars, or the college’s generally supportive atmosphere.
  - “Taking classes that have prepared me to deal with these kinds of issues and allowed me to work with others to provide hypothetical solutions have been my most meaningful experiences. The government is wildly complex, and knowing enough to understand the issues we're experiencing, let alone actually change them, is difficult. Examining these issues through different perspectives is very valuable, and working with others has been extremely rewarding.”
  - “I have had a lot of experiences with campus organizations, such as SGA, Leftists, Habitat for Humanity, etc, as well as outside of college. They have been very meaningful as they provide an opportunity to learn more about the current issues while also contributing to the cause.”
  - “I appreciate my professors engaging with the effects of local and global issues. As an educational institution, I believe that St. Olaf should be doing more to support its students in these difficult times, and I appreciate my professors holding open spaces for students to learn and speak about what matters to them.”
  - “That my community has always been there to support me in troubling times. Especially in political conflicts going on in Minnesota, St. Olaf has done what it can to assure that I feel safe and supported here.”
- **25 (%) said that seeing actions or organizing from others** was particularly meaningful.

- “I felt like that when it came to voting, especially for our next president last year. I have seen way more political participation than in any institution that I've heard of. I know that St. Olaf had the highest percentage of Voting participation for the last few years, but I thought it was amazing seeing that. Other than that, I see a bunch of organizations from the school setting up in the main atrium, just promoting or supporting an issue that they care deeply about. I am happy to see them doing so.”
- “I think it is great to see other St. Olaf students involved in educating themselves and helping the community in regards to current issues, both on and off campus. Hearing about their experiences has encouraged me, and I believe that it is important to know more about what is happening both around us and farther away.”
- “It is incredibly meaningful to me when I hear and see people around me all unafraid to talk about what they believe in. For example, seeing anti-ICE signs, art, posts, talk, etc. all the time everywhere makes me feel such a sense of optimism and community.”
- “Seeing students be organized for awareness of geopolitical issues is meaningful to me in the sense that in my community at home topics like that are never expressed, and I feel able to express myself more when other students exercise those rights.”
- **17 (9%) said they had had no or minimal** meaningful civic engagement experiences, sometimes intentionally.
  - “I strive to remain unformed of campus, local, state, national, and global issues for my own peace of mind.”
  - “I think St. Olaf has a strong community of like-minded folks, which makes it feel like somewhat of a safe haven. It's been great to engage in conversations with those around me, but I haven't felt much need for much protest or advocacy-not anyone's fault, just the facts of the matter in a liberal, small-town college.”
  - “Personally, I want to do more in my community but do not know where to start and how to fit it into my schedule as an in-season athlete. For now, talking with peers and classmates has been the most meaningful for me.”