

# NSSE Civic Engagement Module Findings

Spring 2023

## Executive Summary

In spring 2023, all currently registered undergraduate students (N=16,915) were invited to participate in the civic engagement module of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) survey. A total of 1,113 students responded to the survey (response rate of 6.58% percent), with 968 completing the quantitative component of survey and 521 completing the full survey (completion rates of 86.97% and 46.81%, respectively).

The survey included five groups of closed-ended rating questions, two open-ended questions, and two demographic questions. The four groups of rating questions asked students to rate their level of civic skills, their perception of how Illinois State University emphasizes civic engagement, where they felt they most practiced civic engagement, and the frequency with which they participated in civic engagement in during that school year. The open-ended questions asked students to describe a meaningful civic experience at ISU and share an ISU faculty or staff member who motivated them to make a difference in their community.

### Key Findings:

#### 1. Civic Skills:

- Students rated their civic skills on a 1-5 scale, with average scores on each item ranging from 3.40 to 4.05.
- No significant changes were observed compared to 2021 data.

#### 2. Emphasis on Civic Engagement:

- Students rated ISU's emphasis on civic engagement on a 1-4 scale, with average scores on each item ranging between 2.37 and 3.03.
- Statistically significant decreases were noted in all items compared to 2021, possibly due to reduced national attention to social and political issues in 2023 compared to 2021.

#### 3. Encouragement to Address Issues:

- Students rated ISU's encouragement to address issues in various contexts on a 1-4 scale, with average scores on each item ranging from 2.35 to 2.50.
- Significant decreases were observed compared to 2021, also possibly due to the reduced national attention to social and political issues in 2023 compared to 2021.

#### 4. Frequency of Engagement with Campus and Local Issues:

- Engagement frequency was rated on a 1-4 scale, with average scores on each item ranging between 1.64 and 2.61.
- Particularly low averages were noted on "Asked others to address campus or local issues" (1.80) and "Organized others to work on campus or local issues" (1.64).
- No significant changes were found compared to 2021.

#### 5. Frequency of Engagement with State, National, and Global Issues:

- Engagement frequency was rated on a 1-4 scale, with average scores on each item ranging from 1.58 to 2.91.
- Particularly low averages were noted on "Asked others to address state, national, or global issues" (1.86) and "Organized others to work on state, national, or global issues" (1.58).
- Significant decreases were noted in all items compared to 2021.

## 6. Meaningful Experiences with Civic Engagement:

- *Response Analysis:* 470 qualitative responses about meaningful civic engagement experiences were content analyzed and categorized using strategies for social change from Seed Coalition's [Social Change Wheel](#).
- *Top Strategies Identified:*
  - Deliberative and Reflective Dialogue: 21.70%
  - Advocacy and Raising Awareness: 19.79%
  - Community Building: 15.53%

## 7. Motivational Faculty/Staff:

- *Total Responses:* 521 students identified faculty or staff who motivated them to make a difference in their community. Of those responses, 445 identified a specific individual or unit.
- *Top Categories Identified:*
  - Academic Department: 81.12%
  - Student Affairs: 8.99%
  - Multiple Units: 3.37%

## 8. Limitations:

- *Self-Reported Data:* Responses reflect students' personal experiences and perceptions.
- *Demographic Representation:* Respondent demographics do not fully match the overall student population, with underrepresentation differences ranging from 1.19% to 5.5%.

## Implications

Quantitative findings described in numbers 1-5 above suggest that students perceive a decrease in ISU's emphasis on civic engagement, ISU's encouragement to address issues, and students' frequency of engagement with state, national, and global issues in 2023 compared to 2021, potentially influenced by the differences in the national climate regarding social and political issues. Re-implementing this assessment in spring 2025 will provide a more comparable data set for the 2021 data and can help identify if differences are related to the election cycle and onset of major social movements.

Particularly low average scores were noted on the following items:

- Frequency of asking others to address campus or local issues.
- Frequency of organizing others to work on campus or local issues.
- Frequency of asking others to address state, national, or global issues.
- Frequency of organizing others to work on state, national, or global issues.

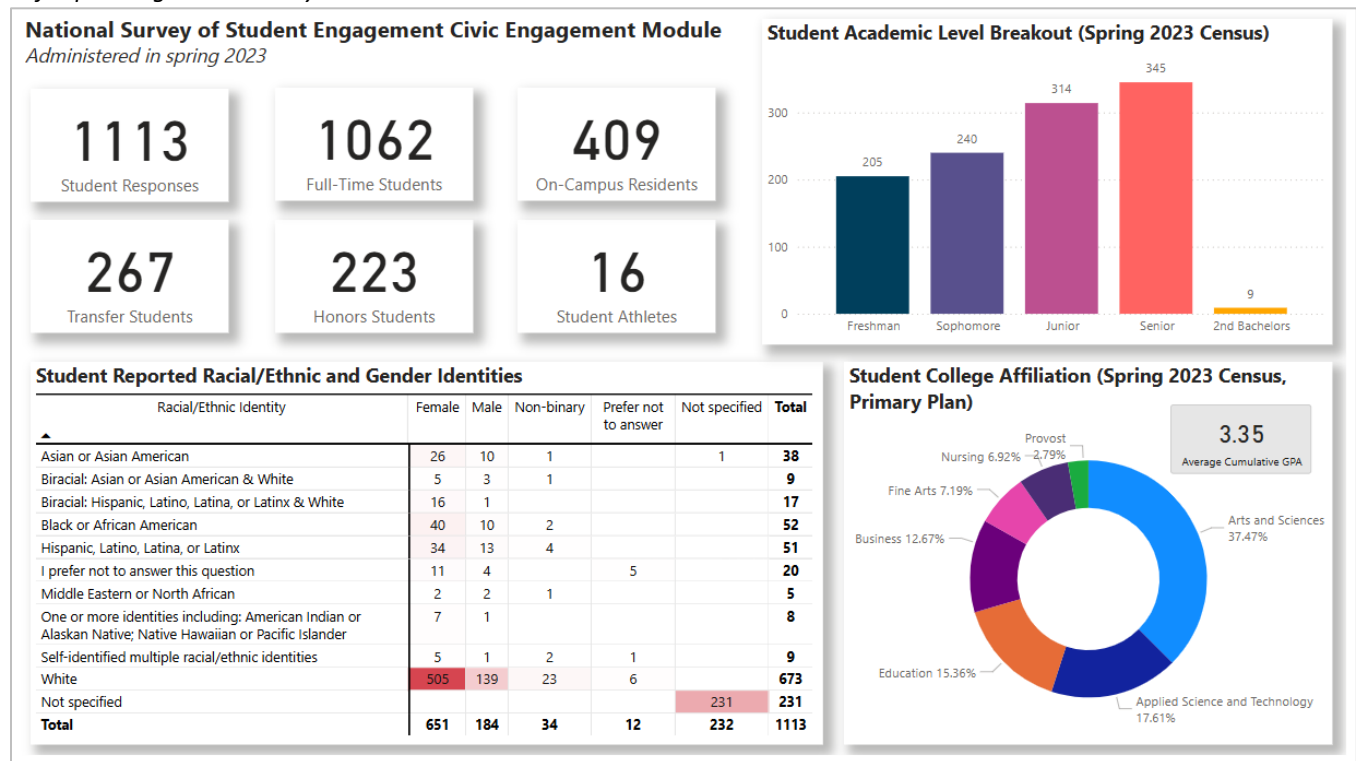
Based on these low averages, offering opportunities for students to develop skills in activism, advocacy, and community organizing may be beneficial.

Qualitative findings highlight the significant role of deliberative and reflective dialogue, advocacy and awareness building, and community building in students' civic engagement experiences, with faculty and staff playing a crucial motivational role. Social change strategies that were infrequently mentioned and are thus potential areas of growth include fundraising and philanthropy, mutual aid, and social innovation and enterprise. Faculty and staff in academic departments were identified in over 80% of responses, highlighting the crucial role that these individuals play in encouraging students' civic engagement.

## Closed-Ended Responses and Comparisons with 2021 Data

A breakdown of all closed-ended results can be found in the [Power BI report](#), which is accessible to anyone with an ISU-affiliated Office 365 account. External users can request access using the link above. All questions can be filtered by college, department or school, student year in school, student gender identity, and student race/ethnic identity (Figure 1). All demographics aside from gender and race/ethnic identity were retrieved from spring 2023 Census Day data.

Figure 1. Participant demographics, including the following categories: full-time students, on-campus residents, transfer students, honors students, student athletes, academic level, College affiliation and major, self-reported racial identity, and self-reported gender identity.

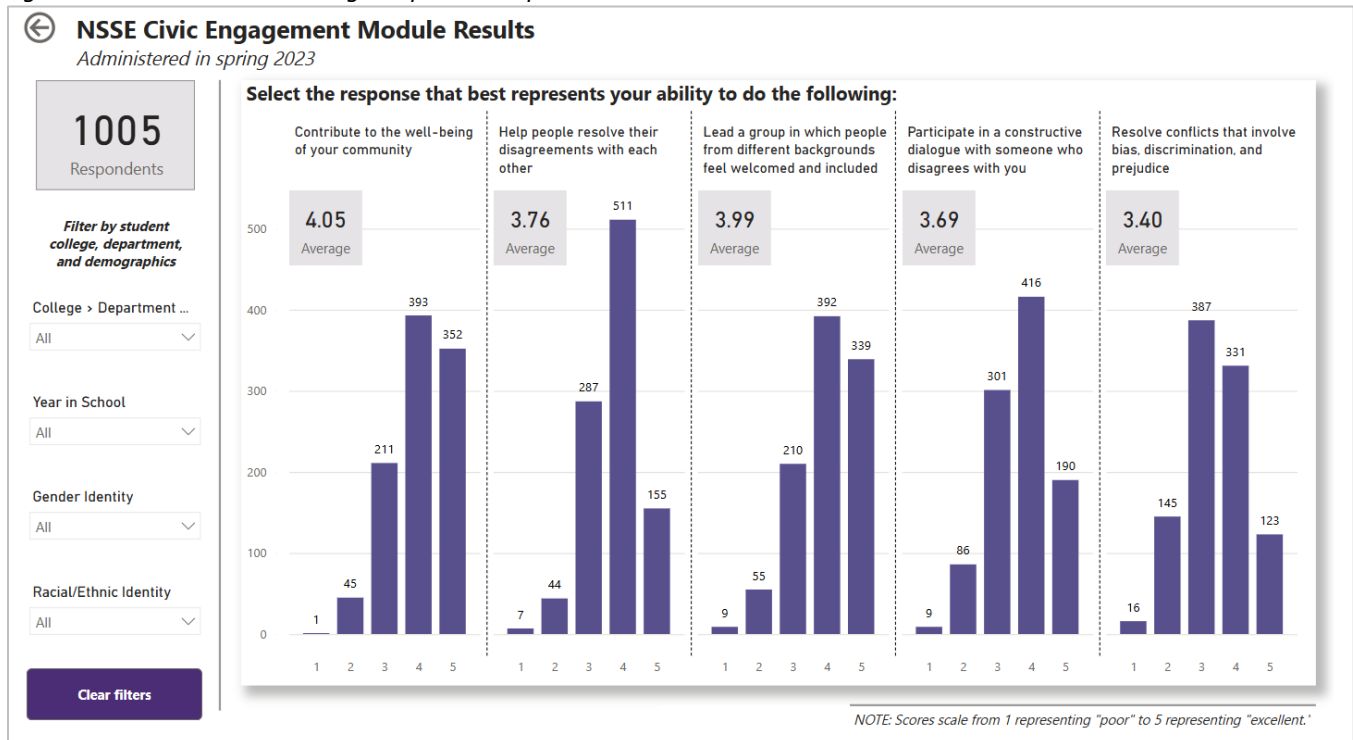


## Civic Skills

The Civic Skills module asked students to select the response that best represents their ability to engage in civic skills on a 1-5 Likert scale, with 1 representing “poor” and 5 representing “excellent.” The items and average student response are listed below and visually presented in Figure 2.

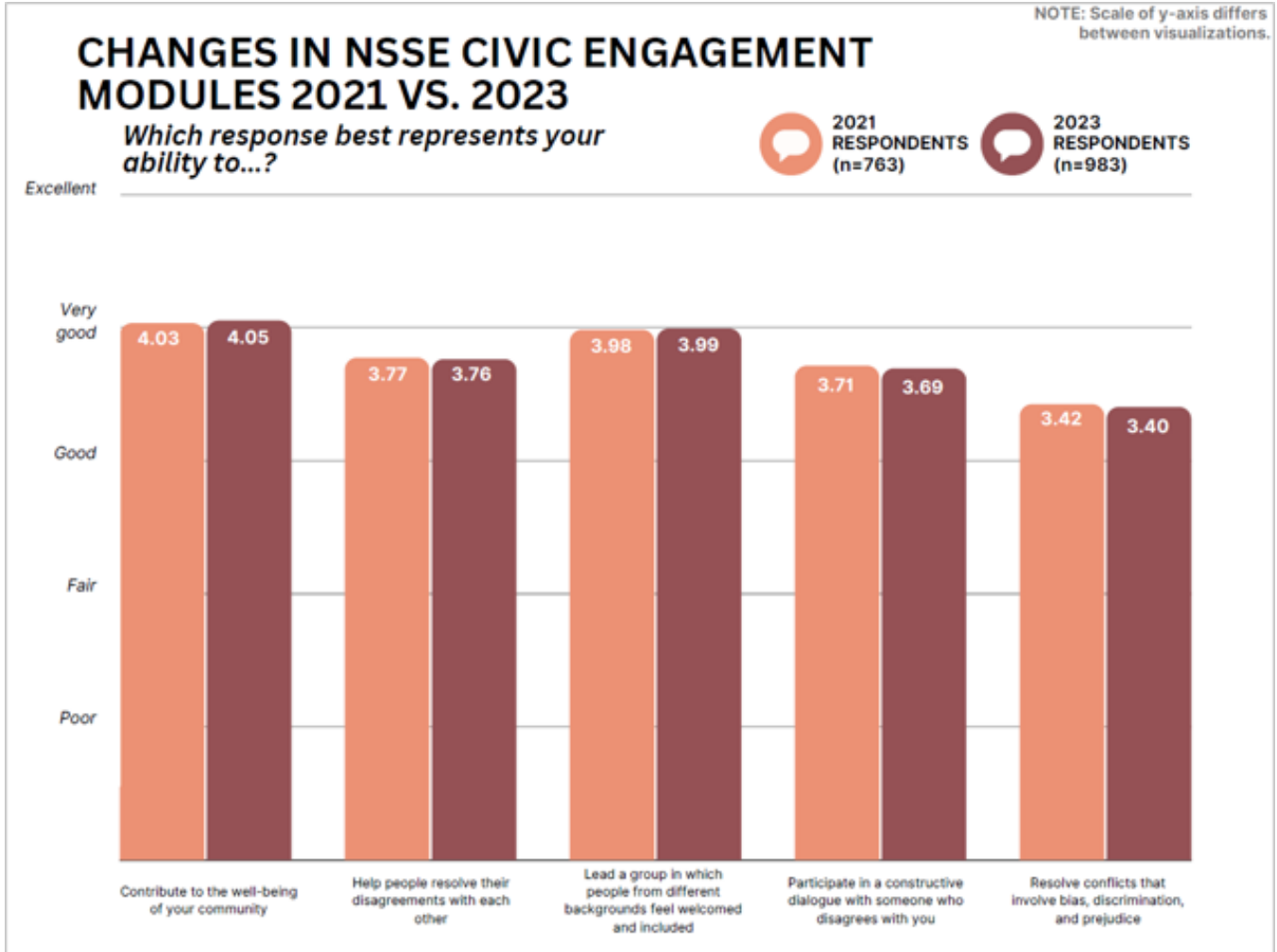
- Contribute to the well-being of your community (average = 4.05)
- Help people resolve their disagreements with each other (average = 3.76)
- Lead a group in which people from different backgrounds feel welcome and included (average = 3.99)
- Participate in a constructive dialogue with someone who disagrees with you (average = 3.69)
- Resolve conflicts that involve bias, discrimination, and prejudice (average = 3.40)

Figure 2. Distribution and average responses to questions in the “Civic Skills” module.



Responses to the items were compared with responses from the 2021 administration using a *t*-test at a significance level of 0.05. No significant changes in student responses were present. (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Changes in responses in the “Civic Skills” module. None of the items showed a statistically significant difference at  $\alpha=0.05$ .

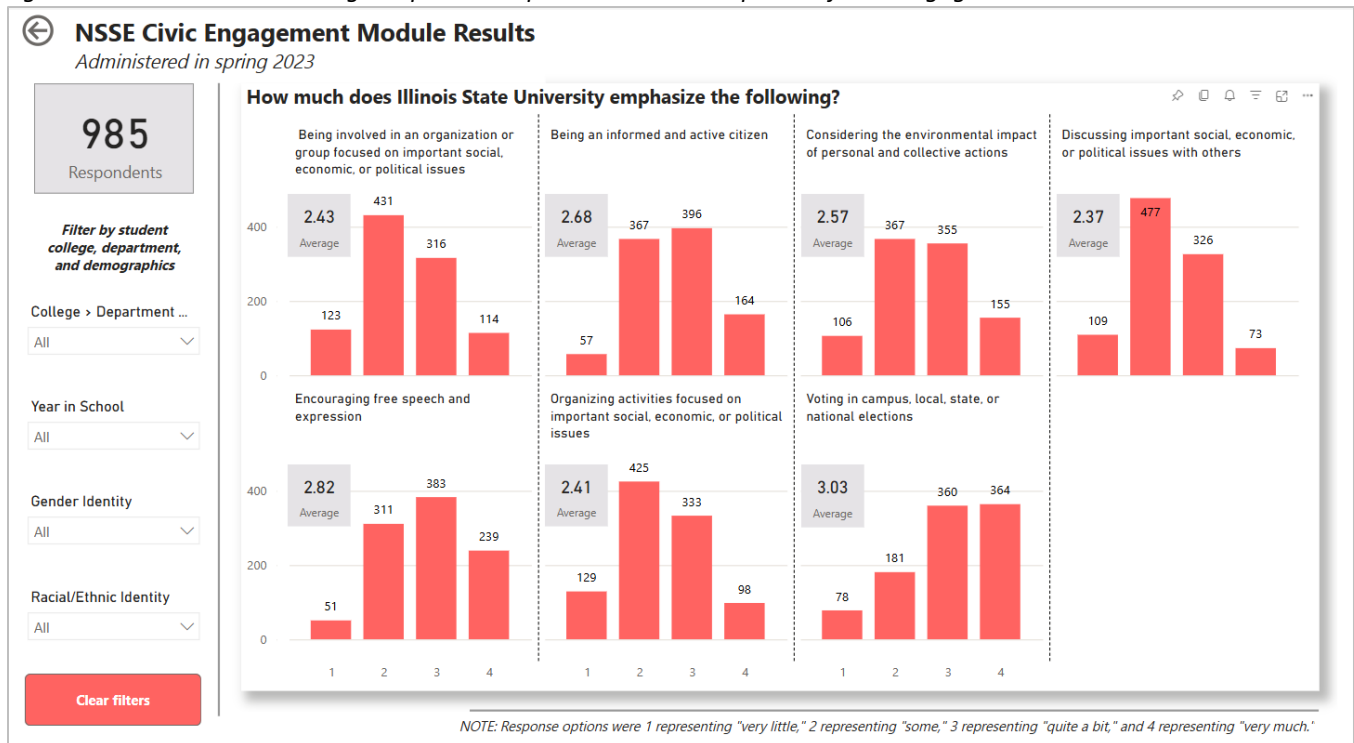


## Emphasis of Civic Engagement

The Emphasis of Civic Engagement module asked students to identify the extent to which ISU emphasizes specific types of civic engagement on a 1-4 Likert scale, with 1 representing “very little” and 4 representing “very much.” The items and average student response are listed below and visually presented in Figure 4.

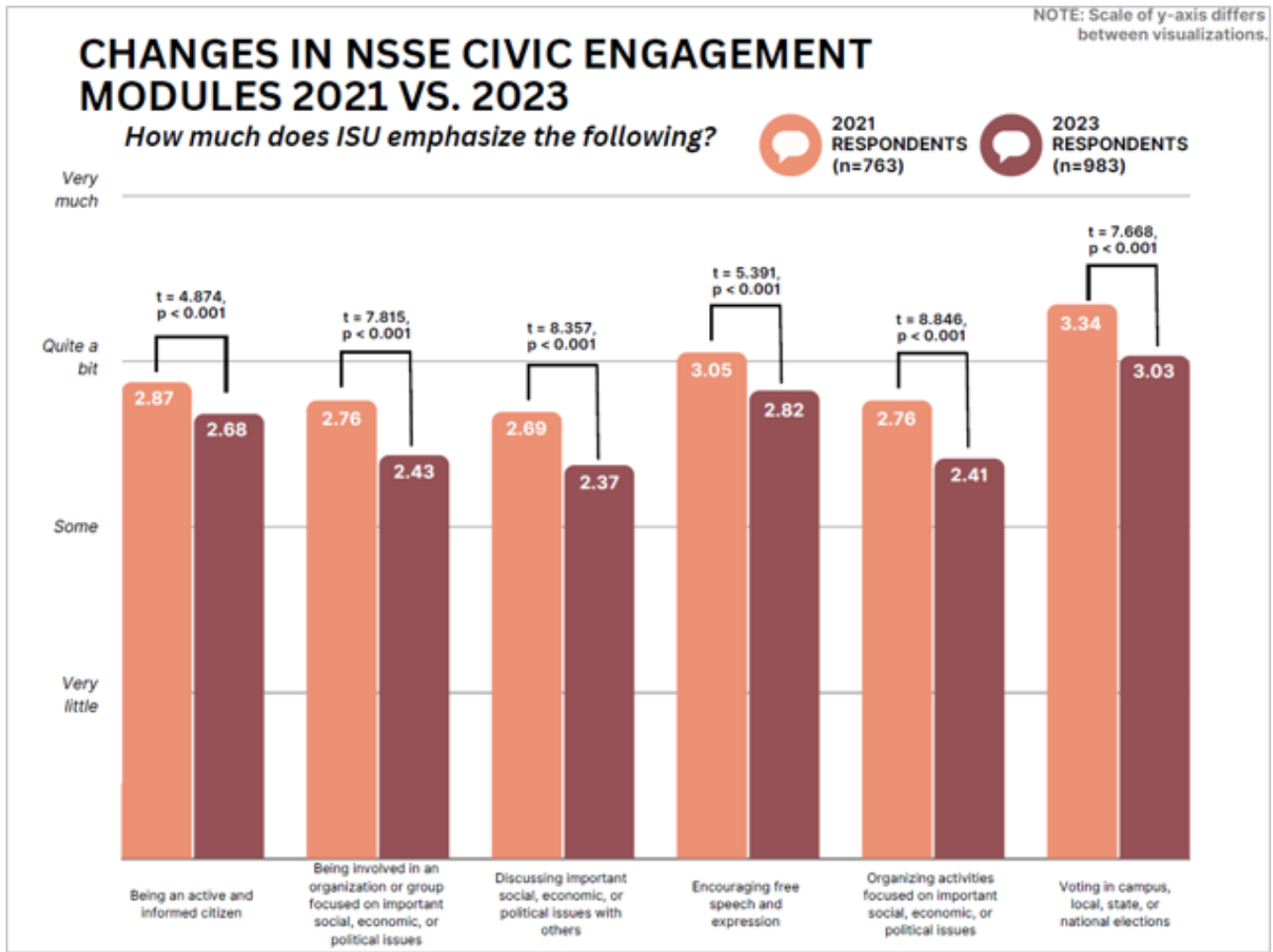
- Being involved in an organization or group focused on important social, economic, or political issues (average = 2.43)
- Being an informed and active citizen (average = 2.68)
- Considering the environmental impact of personal and collective actions (average = 2.57)
- Discussing important social, economic, or political issues with others (average = 2.37)
- Encouraging free speech and expression (average = 2.82)
- Organizing activities focused on important social, economic, or political issues (average = 2.41)
- Voting in campus, local, state, or national elections (average = 3.03)

Figure 4. Distribution and average responses to questions in the “Emphasis of Civic Engagement” module.



Responses to the items were compared with responses from the 2021 administration using a *t*-test at a significance level of 0.05. Students reported statistically significant decreases on all items (Figure 5). However, none of the differences exceeded a magnitude of 0.35 points on the 1-4 Likert scale. We suggest that student may perceive a lower emphasis on civic engagement in 2023 compared to 2021 because the atmosphere in the fall semester of 2020 was very politically and socially charged surrounding topics such as the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 U.S. presidential election, greater attention to racial and social justice, and decreasing trust in democracy and institutions. As national attention to these topics decreased over time, students may have perceived a decrease in ISU institutionally emphasizing attention to social, economic, and political issues.

Figure 5. Changes in responses in the “Emphasis of Civic Engagement” module. Students reported statistically significant decreases on all items at  $\alpha=0.05$ .

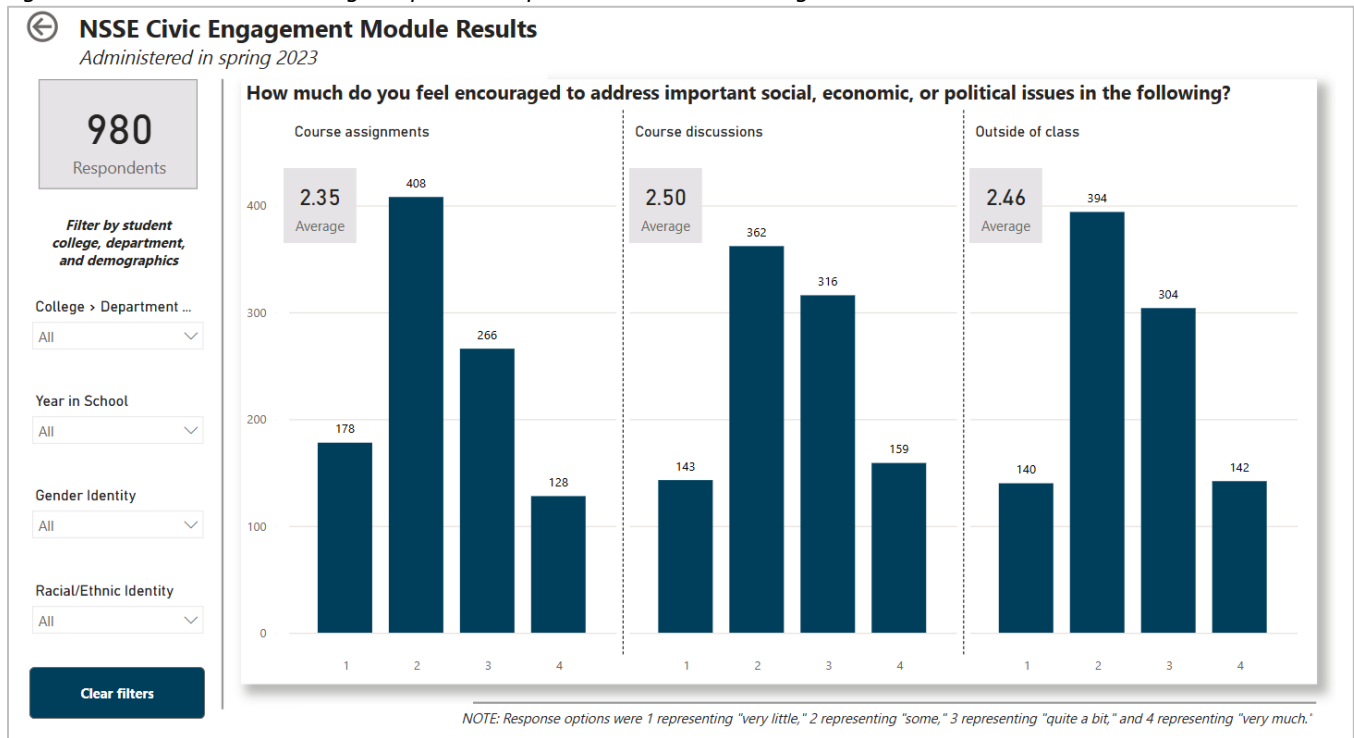


## Encouragement to Address Issues

The Encouragement to Address Issues module asked students to identify the extent to which they feel encouraged to address important social, economic, or political issues in various contexts on a 1-4 Likert scale, with 1 representing “very little” and 4 representing “very much.” The items and average student response are listed below and visually presented in Figure 6.

- Course assignments (average = 2.35)
- Course discussions (average = 2.50)
- Outside of class (average = 2.46)

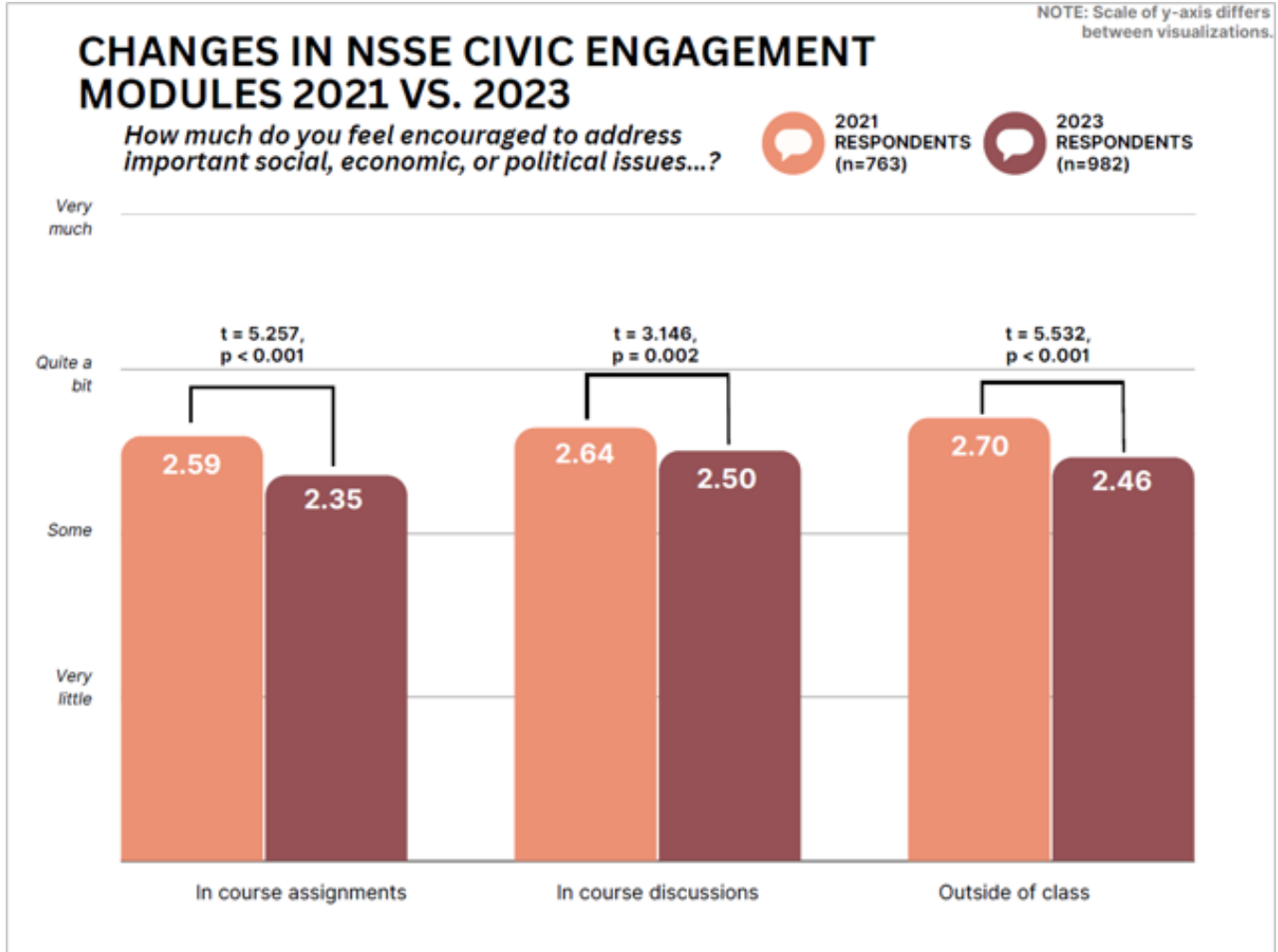
Figure 6. Distribution and average responses to questions in the “Encouragement to Address Issues” module.



Responses to the items were compared with responses from the 2021 administration using a *t*-test at a significance level of 0.05. Students reported statistically significant decreases on all items (Figure 7). The decreases ranged from 0.14 to 0.24 points on the 1-4 Likert scale. Similar to the “Emphasis on Civic Engagement” module, we suggest that this decrease may be related to the national attention to social, political, and economic issues in the 2020-2021 academic year compared to the 2022-2023 academic year.



Figure 7. Changes in responses in the “Encouragement to Address Issues” module. Students reported statistically significant decreases on all items at  $\alpha=0.05$ .

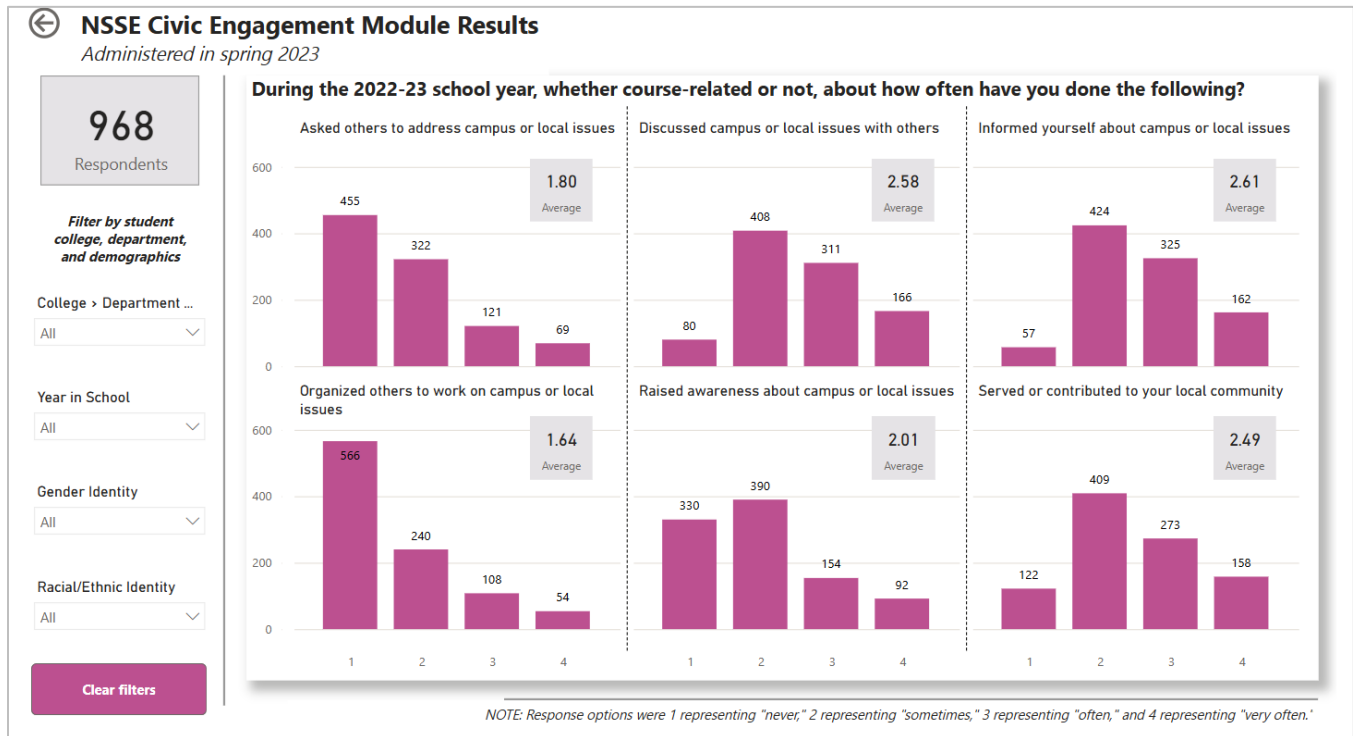


## Frequency of Engagement with Campus and Local Issues

The Frequency of Engagement with Campus and Local Issues module asked students to identify how often they had engaged with campus and local issues in various contexts on a 1-4 Likert scale, with 1 representing “never” and 4 representing “often.” The items and average student response are listed below and visually presented in Figure 8.

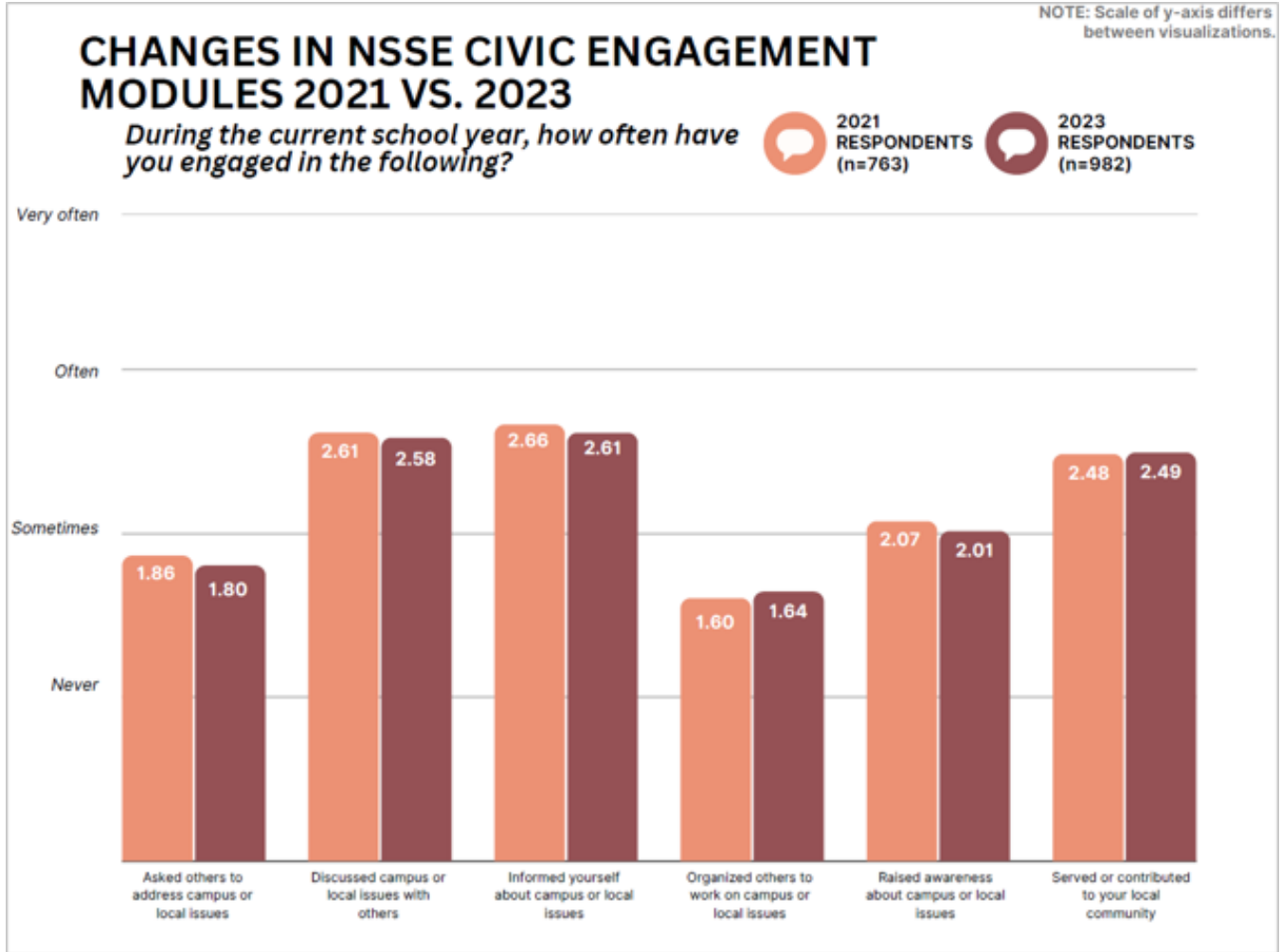
- Asked others to address campus or local issues (average = 1.80)
- Discussed campus or local issues with others (average = 2.58)
- Informed yourself about campus or local issues (average = 2.61)
- Organization others to work on campus or local issues (average = 1.64)
- Raised awareness about campus or local issues (average = 2.01)
- Served or contributed to your local community (average = 2.49)

Figure 8. Distribution and average responses to questions in the “Frequency of Engagement with Campus and Local Issues” module.



Responses to the items were compared with responses from the 2021 administration using a t-test at a significance level of 0.05. No significant changes in student responses were present (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Changes in responses in the “Frequency of Engagement with Campus and Local Issues” module. None of the items showed a statistically significant difference at  $\alpha=0.05$ .

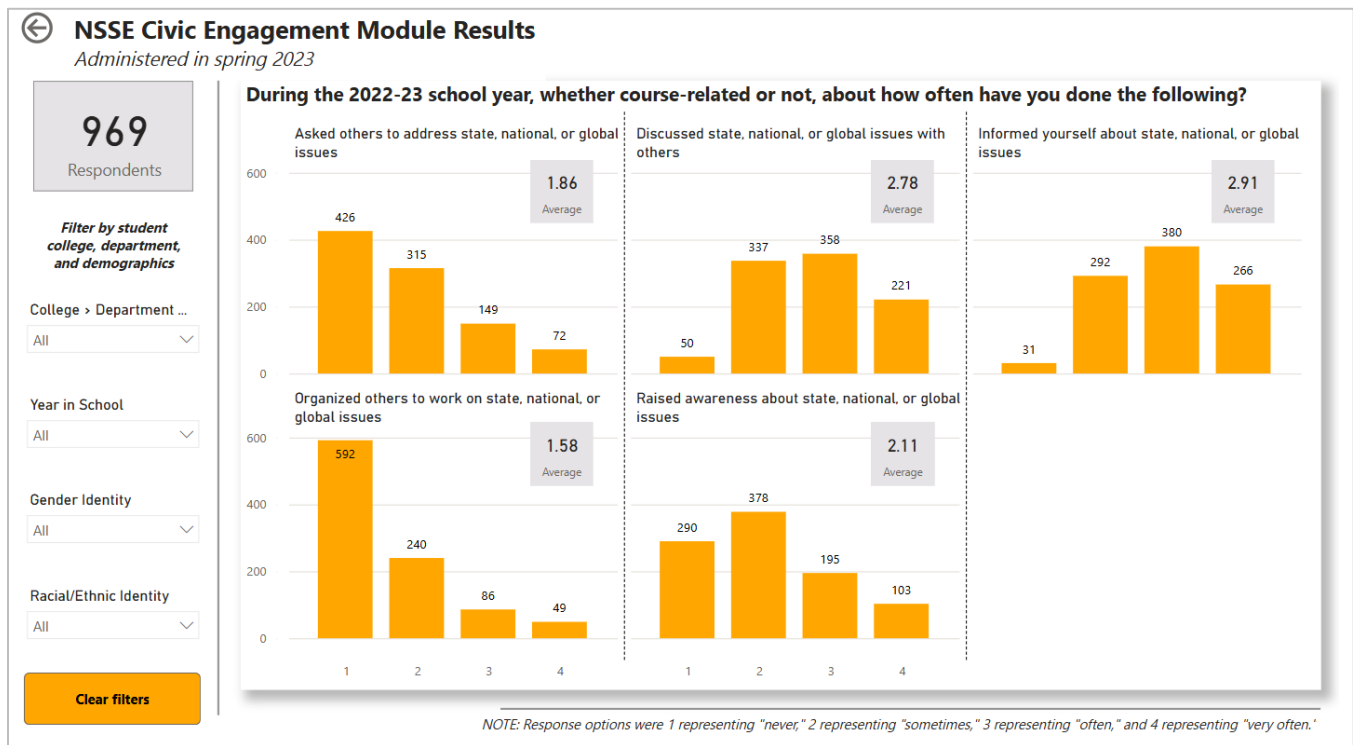


## Frequency of Engagement with State, National, and Global Issues

The Frequency of Engagement with State, National, and Global Issues module asked students to identify how often they had engaged with state, national, and global issues in various contexts on a 1-4 Likert scale, with 1 representing “never” and 4 representing “often.” The items and average student response are listed below and visually presented in Figure 10.

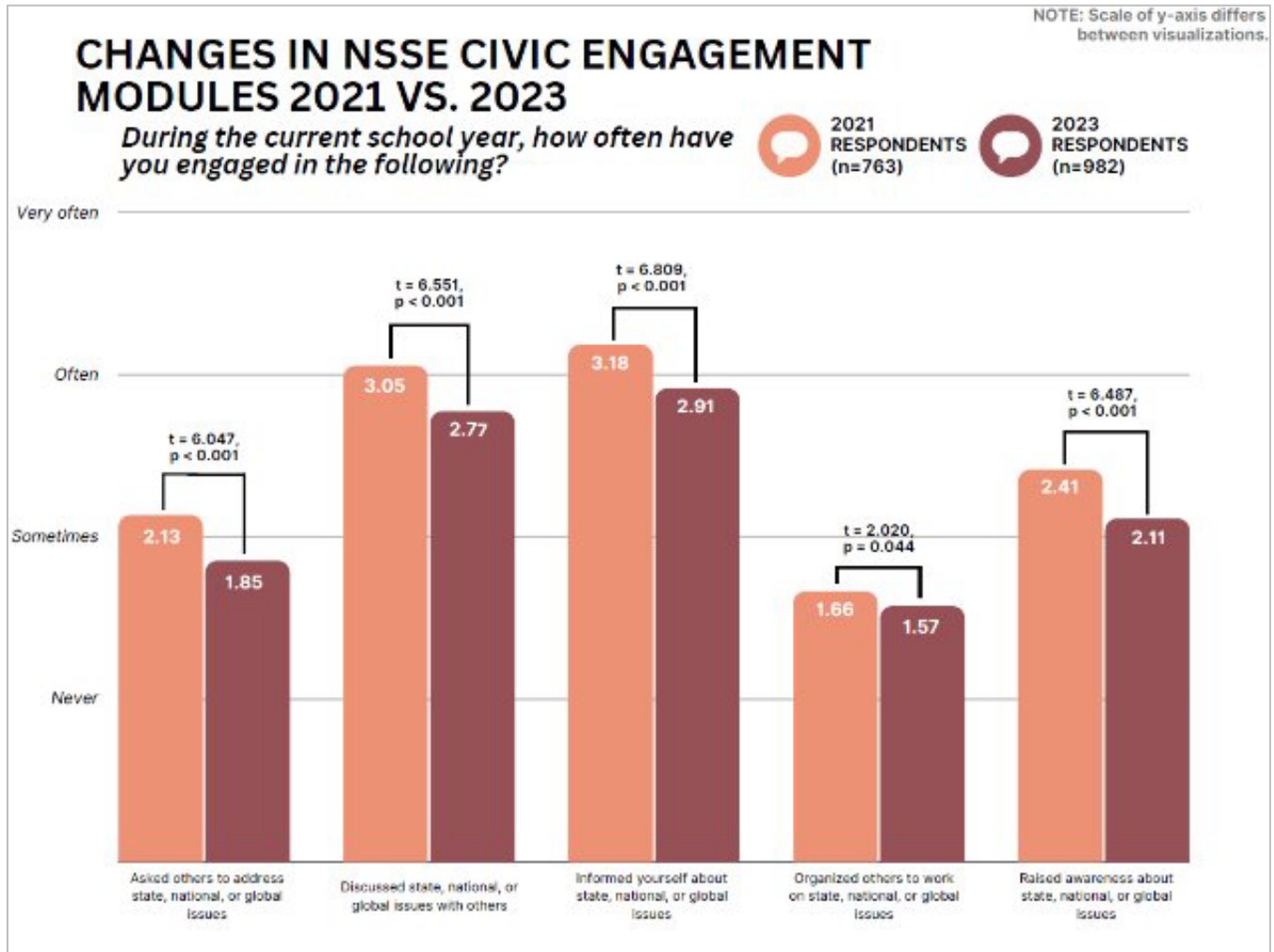
- Asked others to address state, national, or global issues (average = 1.86)
- Discussed state, national, or global issues with others (average = 2.78)
- Informed yourself about state, national, or global issues (average = 2.91)
- Organization others to work on state, national, or global issues (average = 1.58)
- Raised awareness about state, national, or global issues (average = 2.11)

Figure 10. Distribution and average responses to questions in the “Frequency of Engagement with State, National, and Global Issues” module.



Responses to the items were compared with responses from the 2021 administration using a *t*-test at a significance level of 0.05. Students reported statistically significant decreases on all items (Figure 11). The decreases ranged from 0.09 to 0.30 points on the 1-4 Likert scale. Similar to the modules discussed above, we suggest that this decrease may be related to the national attention to social, political, and economic issues in the 2020-2021 academic year compared to the 2022-2023 academic year.

Figure 11. Changes in responses in the “Frequency of Engagement with State, National, and Global Issues” module. Students reported statistically significant decreases on all items at  $\alpha=0.05$ .



## Open-Ended Responses

The two open-ended questions were coded, thematized, and analyzed. The findings from that analysis are provided below.

### Meaningful civic experiences at Illinois State

The first question asked students: “Think about the experiences you may have had with campus, local, state, national, or global issues while at ISU. What about these experiences has been most meaningful to you?”

A total of 526 students answered this question. Of these responses, 470 provided information on a specific experience. These responses were content analyzed, coded, and categorized using the Seed Coalition’s [Social Change Wheel](#) as *a priori* categories (coding scheme in Table 1, results in Table 2). Responses were also coded for the scale of the experience as campus, local, state, national, or global (Table 3).

Table 1. Coding scheme using strategies for social change detailed in the Seed Coalition’s Social Change Wheel.

Social Change Strategy	Description
<i>Advocacy and Raising Awareness</i>	Supporting an idea or cause through public and private communications, and collecting evidence to support one’s position.
<i>Community and Economic Development</i> (note: this strategy was not identified in student responses)	Acting to provide economic opportunities and improve social conditions in sustainable ways
<i>Community Building</i>	Strengthening the capacity of local residents and associations to work together by supporting opportunities for interpersonal connection.
<i>Community Organizing</i>	Bringing people together to act collectively in their shared interest or toward a common goal.
<i>Deliberative and Reflective Dialogue</i>	Exchanging and evaluating different ideas and approaches around particular issues in a public setting. Learning about the experiences and stories of others by listening fully and actively.
<i>Fundraising, Giving, and Philanthropy</i>	Donating money to increase the well-being of humankind, advance another social good, or support non-profit or community organizations.
<i>Mutual Aid and Informal Association</i>	Unpaid, collaborative work and/or sharing of resources by people seeking to improve their collective quality of life.
<i>Protests and Demonstrations</i>	Expressing public, visible disagreement with a situation or policy, often in a large group setting.
<i>Social Innovation and Enterprise</i>	Social innovation focuses on fairer and more sustainable solutions to social problems. Social enterprises are organizations using market-based solutions to address social problems.
<i>Socially Responsible Daily Behavior</i>	Acting on one’s values and civic commitments in one’s personal and professional life.
<i>Volunteering and Direct Service</i>	Addressing immediate needs by providing assistance, often through churches, schools, social service agencies, and nonprofits.
<i>Voting and Formal Political Activities</i>	Mobilizing others to participate in and influence public policy through formal political channels – and participating yourself!

Table 2. Experiences classified by social change strategy using definitions from the Social Change Wheel.

Social Change Strategy	N	Percent
Advocacy and Raising Awareness	93	19.79%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I appreciate that both the Provost and President are prompt and specific in their communication with the university when local and national issues of conflict arise.</li> <li>Last semester when there was a problem within the LGBTQ+ community a lot of people spoke about the issues. I liked how everyone that supported the cause came out and spoke. Even though I'm not a member, I do support and that was nice seeing people stand up for this cause.</li> <li>I attended a panel on the war in Ukraine and it was extremely beneficial. It was meaningful to me because I am able to stay in my own town and learn about the world around me.</li> <li>Seeing how they change the community. Many of the issues have caused positive and negative change whether it's a more inclusive environment or safety issues for all. It's made me realize the impact people have on communities.</li> </ul>		
Community Building	73	15.53%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being a student involved in student media, it's more likely that I cover an event that addresses campus or national issues rather than participate. But because of this, it's been very meaningful to see people my age vocalize the need for change. It gives me hope for the future.</li> <li>They have created a sense of community for rallying around the issues that truly matter to the student population. It helps show students that they are not facing these issues alone.</li> <li>I think my experience with Alternative Breaks has been the most meaningful to me. I was able to build connections with other people at ISU and apply the lessons and information I've learned about culture and community while abroad to my own community. I served as a trip leader for Alternative Breaks, which provided me with additional leadership skills.</li> </ul>		
Community Organizing	48	10.21%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One of the most meaningful and eye-opening experiences was during a discussion. When having a discussion on the difficulty of issues on campus, when talking about this I realized that I need to be doing more in order to make an impact on this campus. So, I joined three clubs where I am able to make that change little by little.</li> <li>Getting to work with local activists as well as local officials has been really beneficial, just improving my ability to work in diverse groups with differing opinions to try to come together on an issues that have effects on all of us.</li> </ul>		
Deliberative and Reflective Dialogue	102	21.70%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I am currently taking CJS 318 (Schools, Crime, and Social Policy) and my opinions due to my experience as a recent high school student and current college student are valued and important to the discussion. My professor makes our worries and fears seem validated and talks to us in a very straight forward matter, and I can tell he is passionate about this topic.</li> <li>On campus, clubs have been most meaningful to me because they discuss topics, and you create a community of people within the group to discuss, have agreements and disagreements, and options around situations to gain information from.</li> <li>Being able to connect with professors and students who range from a multitude of backgrounds, exposing me to thoughts, ideas, and nuances to the human experience I didn't before consider.</li> <li>The most meaningful experiences I've had at ISU that involve major issues is in deliberative dialogues. These dialogues have opened my mind to other ways of thinking and allows me to get insight on how other people think and why they think what they think.</li> </ul>		
Fundraising, Giving, and Philanthropy	3	0.64%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I liked helping out with the Polar Plunge for Special Olympics in Bloomington. I have raised over \$300 in 2 years for this local organization and I had a lot of fun during the plunge itself.</li> </ul>		
Mutual Aid and Informal Association	3	0.64%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helping others and providing relatable experiences to others.</li> </ul>		

Table 2 continued. Experiences classified by social change strategy using definitions from the Social Change Wheel.

Social Change Strategy	N	Percent
Protests and Demonstrations	15	3.19%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>I have had many experiences of seeing different political/social protests or informational stuff while on campus. It was fascinating to see, no matter what issue or topic was being discussed. It really showed how the campus emphasizes free speech on issues that matter to you.</i></li> </ul>		
Social Innovation and Enterprise	2	0.43%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>I learned about Regenerative Agriculture in one of my classes</i></li> </ul>		
Socially Responsible Daily Behavior	55	11.70%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Taking POL/GEO 103 has opened my eyes to the issues our world faces with water in ways they've never been opened before. It has caused me to become more conscious of my water use and sustainability in my day to day life.</i></li> <li><i>As a civic engagement minor, I have been exposed to a lot of local and campus issues. These experiences have really opened my eyes to see how much we really can do to get involved and help people. These are meaningful to me, because I was able to learn how to help and how to get involved in my community. I would love to expand to state, national, and global help after college.</i></li> </ul>		
Volunteering and Direct Service	36	7.66%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>My most meaningful experiences were volunteering for the Special Olympics and donating blood. I am making an impact in my community, even though very small, it still is helping those around me.</i></li> <li><i>I think the most meaningful thing is when you know you are helping, even if it is a very little amount. The feeling you get when you are helping to better others' lives, you can't ask for much more. I think it is also very meaningful when others at ISU also want to help and spread awareness.</i></li> </ul>		
Voting and Formal Political Activities	40	8.51%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Voting at the bone student center has been the most meaningful to me. Making voting accessible to all students at ISU was a great way to make my opinion feel valued.</i></li> <li><i>I have been able to work first-hand with the constituents of McLean County who requested assistance from their elected government official. Being on the front line and helping make a difference has meant the most to me.</i></li> </ul>		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>470</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3. Experiences classified by scale at which they occurred. Many experiences were classified at multiple scales, causing the total N in this table to exceed the N of Table 1. Percent is defined as percent of individual responses and is calculated as N/470 and therefore sum to more than 100%.

Scale	N	Percent
Campus	407	86.60%
Local	150	31.91%
State	38	8.09%
National	75	15.96%
Global	47	10.00%



### Motivational faculty/staff at Illinois State

The second open-ended question asked students: “Please tell us about one ISU faculty or staff member who motivated you to make a difference in your community.”

A total of 521 students provided responses to the second question asking about a faculty/staff member that motivated them to make a difference in their community. Of those responses, 445 identified a specific individual or unit. Table 4 provides a breakdown of the units of individuals whom respondents identified in their answers to this question.

Table 4. Units of individuals identified by students as motivating them to make a difference in their community.

Category	N	Percent
Academic department	361	81.12%
Facilities	3	0.67%
Multiple units	15	3.37%
Other University department	13	2.92%
Student Affairs	40	8.99%
University College	13	2.92%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>445</b>	<b>100%</b>

In total, 284 faculty/staff members were identified by name, and 68 of those faculty/staff members were listed by more than one student. There were also more generalized responses in which students reported a professor of an identified class or provided a broad response such as “my advisor,” “my RA,” or “the entire department.”

## Limitations

As with all surveys, these data are limited by the fact that they are self-reported and consist of students reflecting on their own experiences as opposed to external analysis of student outcomes. Further, the demographics of respondents do not directly reflect the demographics of all ISU students, as shown in Figures 12 and 13 below. All groups shown are underrepresented by differences of 1.19% - 5.5%.

Figure 12. Representation of first-year students, transfer students, seniors, men, and off-campus residents.

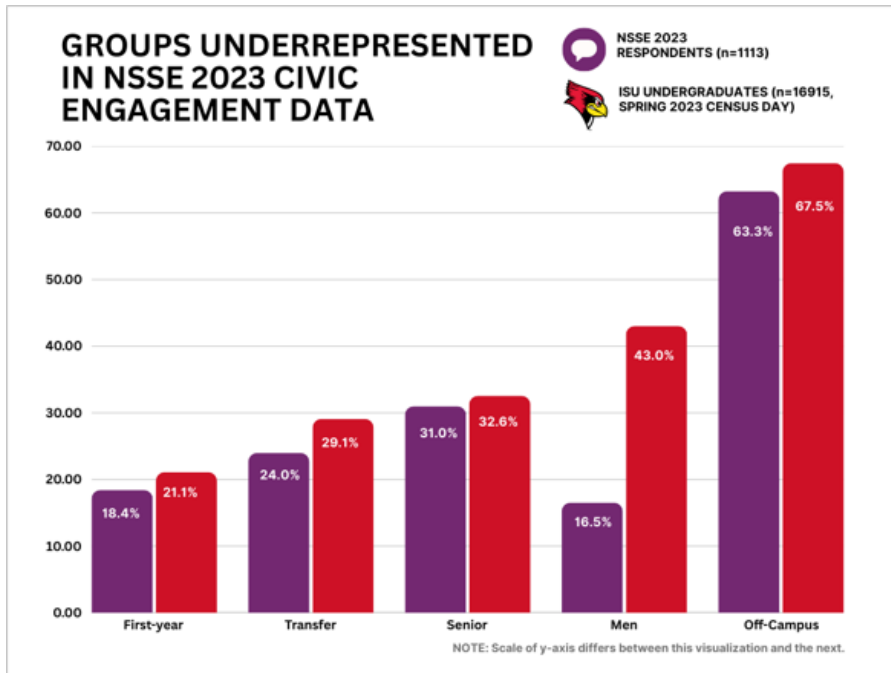


Figure 13. Representation of student athletes, part-time students, students identifying as Black/African American or Hispanic/Latine, and students with majors in the College of Business or College of Applied Science and Technology.

