

The Concept of Institutional Civic Responsibility: A General Observation*

The necessity of performing one's civic responsibility beyond the call of any obligation was recognized very early by civilized societies around the world. Laws and regulations were necessary to uphold reasonable expectations of members of society by fellow members, elders, leaders, and rulers. However, history has repeatedly shown us that no society can achieve the goal of well-being for its citizens by depending solely upon mandatory legal compliance. The only way a civilized society will move forward is if its members individually and collectively perform their civic responsibilities.

In the United States, the term "civic responsibility" includes duties, services, and obligations to all fellow members of society derived from the precious gift of US citizenship or from the privilege of living, learning, working, or doing business in the United States. American society has traditionally encouraged and supported the concept of performance of individual civic duties. In recent years, however, a new focus has been developed around the need for institutions—not just individuals—to do their part in fostering and performing civic engagement activities. For example, several business entities, including major corporations and non-profit groups, such as religious charities, community organizations, educational institutions, and professional forums, encourage their members to work collectively to perform their civic responsibilities for the betterment of all people within their own communities. Furthermore, several government agencies have recognized the value of such voluntary services and have supported various efforts of these groups.

In the United States today, many private and public institutions often play supportive roles in the process of civic engagement by informing employees of volunteer opportunities within their local communities. These employers give their employees a certain number of paid days off each year to volunteer with community organizations of their own choosing, reward employees and the organizations in which they serve for giving back to the community, and encourage retired employees to donate their services to the community. Some corporations also make pro-bono work and/or community service a requirement for their employees and executives. Despite this, there is a sense that civic responsibility is not a top priority for many businesses.

Generally, people in the business sector identify their voluntary activities with the term “social responsibility.” “Social responsibility” programs are admirable and beneficial, though there is a growing feeling among the general public that these programs originate from an attitude of “nice to have” on the part of business entities as public relations tools. However, an increasing number of business and NGO leaders believe that institutional civic responsibility flows from moral or ethical obligations derived from the institutions’ very existence as legal entities, incorporated or established under the laws of the land. These laws, enacted by the elected representatives of all the people, also protect the interests of all of those corporations and NGOs. In short, “civic responsibility” embodies a “must do” commitment while “social responsibility” is considered as something “nice to have.” Further, the concept of “civic responsibility” includes the term “social responsibility.”

Many institutions, whether charities, cultural associations, ethnic groups, business entities, professional forums, government agencies, or any other profit or non-profit groups, have acquired valuable domestic or global experiences from their diverse civic engagement activities. We all have much to learn about civic engagement by observing and learning from the successful, and unsuccessful, experiences of various institutions. Many profit-making entities can learn from the experiences of other profit-making entities and even from the experiences of non-profit institutions. In the same way, non-profit groups can learn from the experiences of other non-profit groups, as well as from various profit-making entities. In particular, “new Americans” who are forming community groups and joining professional organizations might benefit from the institutional civic responsibility experiences of others. As such, the knowledge derived from the experiences of these diverse institutions can be developed into a concept of institutional civic responsibility for adoption and implementation by a number of similarly situated entities.

Too often today many institutions reinvent the wheel and waste enormous human and financial resources rather than learn from others. The Association of Americans for Civic Responsibility (AACR) believes that there is a need for an effective learning process about institutional civic responsibility programs through sharing information among organizations committed to civic engagement, irrespective of their fields, function, structure, size, or specific mandates.

The time has come to gather information about appropriate civic engagement experiences of all American institutions functioning here and abroad. AACR would like to disseminate information about civic responsibility programs and help organizations learn from one another. Upon request, AACR can provide appropriate information on civic responsibility experiences to both private and public institutions. If AACR succeeds in this effort, it can help interested groups avoid unnecessary duplication, and save money and time. AACR would fulfill its civic responsibility by helping others make an indelible impact for the commonweal (public good) of their communities and our nation.

*This paper was developed by Dr. Joy Cherian, president & CEO of AACR, in consultation with Ms. Monika Wargo, executive director of AACR, Dr. Michael Schneider, director of the Maxwell-Washington International Relations Program, Syracuse University, and Mr. Chad Tragakis, Vice President at Hill and Knowlton, an international public relations firm.
