CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
among HIGH SCHOOL JOURNALISTS

In the spring of 2015 we surveyed more than 900 high school journalists in Kansas and Missouri about their civic engagement. We wanted to learn about **media-civic efficacy**, that is, how confident student journalists felt about using their school media to promote change in their communities.

KEY FINDINGS

Students' confidence about effectively using the media for civic change—what we are calling media-civic efficacy—appears to be an important stepping stone toward lifetime civic engagement. Journalism can help students be better citizens by teaching them how to use the media tools at their disposal to better their communities. Here is how journalism programs with students scoring higher on media-civic efficacy distinguish themselves:

- Media-civic efficacy flourishes in supportive school environments. The entire school, not just the journalism teacher, fosters a community in which student journalists feel they can use their media to address important issues.

- Student support of free expression goes hand-in-hand with their media-civic efficacy. Students who endorse a greater number of First Amendment free-expression rights are more confident that they can express themselves through their media to promote social change.

- Teachers who exert less control over their students' content advise more civically confident students. While most teachers report reading content before it is published, they tend not to prohibit, lecture against, or worry about their students tackling controversial topics in their student media.

- Students with more journalistic experience, in terms of years in a program and contributing to a news publication, express greater confidence in using the media for civic action.

POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATES FOSTER CIVIC JOURNALISM
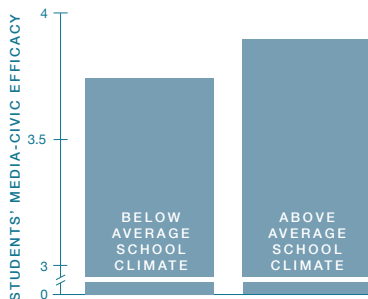
A positive climate means that teachers and students respect and listen to one another, that teachers set a high standard for their students, and that students feel supported by their teachers. Ten survey questions asked students about these school qualities.

On average, students agreed slightly (4.4 on a 6-point scale) that their schools fostered positive climates. Journalists in schools with above-average climates expressed greater conviction in using the media for civic change, compared to journalists in schools with below-average climates.

SUPPORT OF FIRST AMENDMENT EMPOWERS STUDENTS
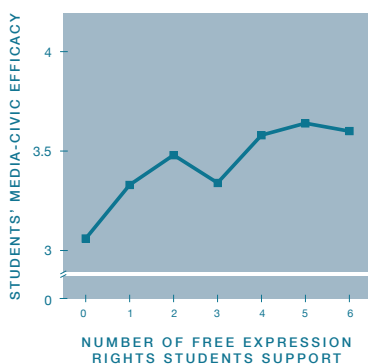
Students rated their support for the freedom of expression with five questions about First Amendment rights: the rights to voice unpopular opinions, use offensive lyrics, deface the flag, criticize the government, and publish controversial content. They also indicated if they think First Amendment rights go too far.

Most students endorsed at least four of the five rights and disagreed that the First Amendment goes too far.

Student journalists who supported a greater number of free expression rights were also more likely than those who supported fewer rights to feel that they can use their student media for civic change.

WHAT ARE THE JOURNALISTS' CIVIC ISSUES?

We asked student journalists to name school or community issues that should be addressed or changed. These are the issues they identified:

attendance | backpack policy | being green | bullying | censorship | college prep | class schedule | class offerings | class sizes | closed lunch | school spirit | community service | discipline | dress code | drinking | drugs | education system | facility quality | food | grading | hallway policy | homework | honor code | ID cards | mental health | money and budgeting | parking and traffic | public displays of affection | room temperature | school administration | school start time | security | sexual assault | snow days | student input | student involvement | study hall | teacher accountability | technology | testing | voting and politics | women's issues

LIGHTER TEACHER CONTROL YIELDS GREATER STUDENT CONFIDENCE

Students are more confident in their own ability to use the media as a tool of civic change when their journalism teachers exercise less direct control over their news publications and websites.

To estimate the level of control, teachers reported how frequently they worried about their students publishing controversial content, discouraged their students from covering controversial topics, re-wrote articles their students had written, or prohibited their students from publishing an article.

On average, teachers indicated that they exerted little control over their students' work. Teachers' responses clustered between "never"

STUDENTS' MEDIA-CIVIC EFFICACY
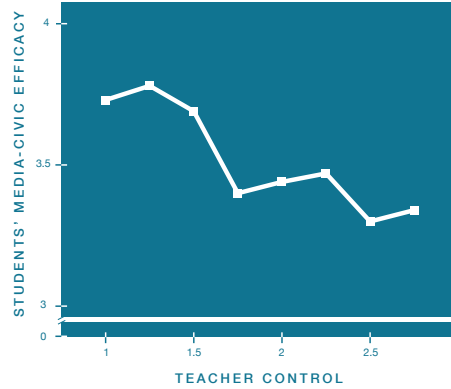
TEACHER CONTROL

(1) and "rarely" (2). Still, teachers who scored higher on control taught students who were less likely to use the media for civic change than teachers who scored lower.

## EFFICACY RISES WITH JOURNALISM EXPERIENCE

The civic payoff is greater for students who take more journalism classes and for those who contribute to a news publication.

Students who have taken journalism for more than a year and those who contribute to a news publication are more likely than less experienced journalists and those who do

STUDENTS' MEDIA-CIVIC EFFICACY

| ONE | TWO OR MORE | NO | YES |

YEARS IN JOURNALISM   CONTRIBUTING TO A NEWS PUBLICATION
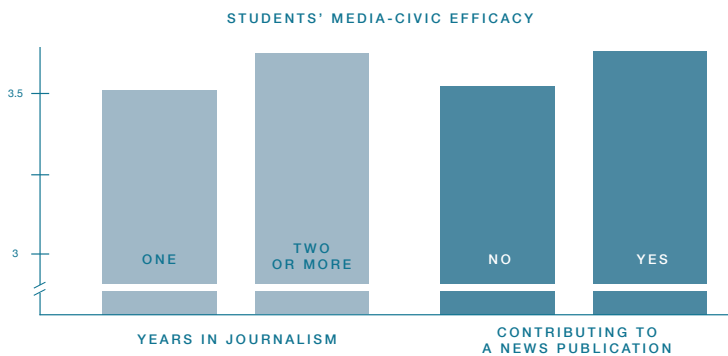
not contribute to a news publication to feel confident about using the media to address a community issue.

WHY THIS MATTERS: FORGING LIFETIME CITIZENSHIP

FUTURE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

STUDENTS' CIVIC-MEDIA EFFICACY
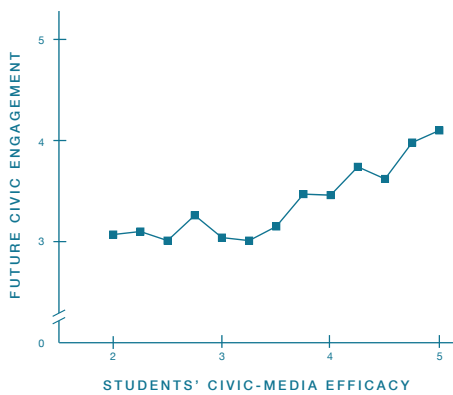
Journalists answered 15 questions about being civically engaged in adulthood. They rated how likely they will be to express their opinions using conventional and social media, contact elected officials, sign petitions,

promote issues and candidates, and vote in elections.

Those who scored higher on media-civic efficacy also said that they anticipate being more civically engaged in adulthood.

This is why this study is meaningful: It shows that media-civic efficacy is related to—and may be a stepping stone toward—lifetime civic engagement. Journalism can give students the tools to be better citizens.
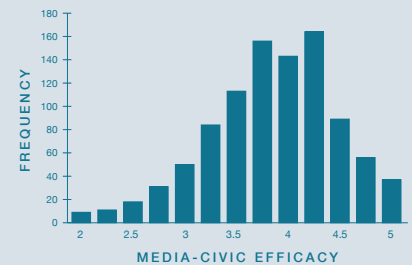
Supporting journalism means supporting programs that can produce civically aware individuals who can use the media to address important issues in their schools and neighborhoods, strengthening their communities.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

KU THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS