

Becoming an Informed Citizen

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Whenever the people are well informed, they can be trusted with their government, for whenever things go so far wrong to attract their notice, they can be relied on to set things right.

—Thomas Jefferson

Americans celebrate more than 230 years of democracy since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The growth and development of our country is backed and guided by the process of citizen involvement and interest. As we look at the world stage and watch other countries employ news blackouts and restrictions to keep their people unaware and controlled, we celebrate the benefit of our first amendment rights to freedom of speech, press, religion, and assembly. Rather than taking these rights for granted, our responsibility as informed citizens is to understand and become involved in the issues facing our leaders at local, state, and national levels. Outlined here are three steps to becoming an informed citizen: *Be engaged, be curious, and be perceptive.*

Be Engaged

The community in which you live offers many chances for your involvement, whether through civic groups, faith-based organizations, charitable activities, organized sports, public meetings, special interest groups, or local school activities. The more active and engaged people are in their communities, the more interaction occurs and the more relationships develop. The value of this interaction has been called “social capital.” The term stresses the worth of strong social networks to the well-being of local citizens. Social capital is measured by the associations among people; these connections encourage trust and commitment.

Communities that have strong relationships and interaction among citizens show higher levels of social capital than those that have weak

social networks. Relationships that bridge many groups are more beneficial to the community and civic involvement than relationships among a small group of people. In fact, a broader network among many people and groups is one predictor of lower crime rates, better health, and higher learning.

To be an informed and effective citizen, become engaged in local organizations and interest groups to build relationships and bonds within the community. Membership in several groups within the community can lead to different points of view and build upon common interests to share ideas with each other. Through these networks, you will find chances to improve the community through joint ideas and action.

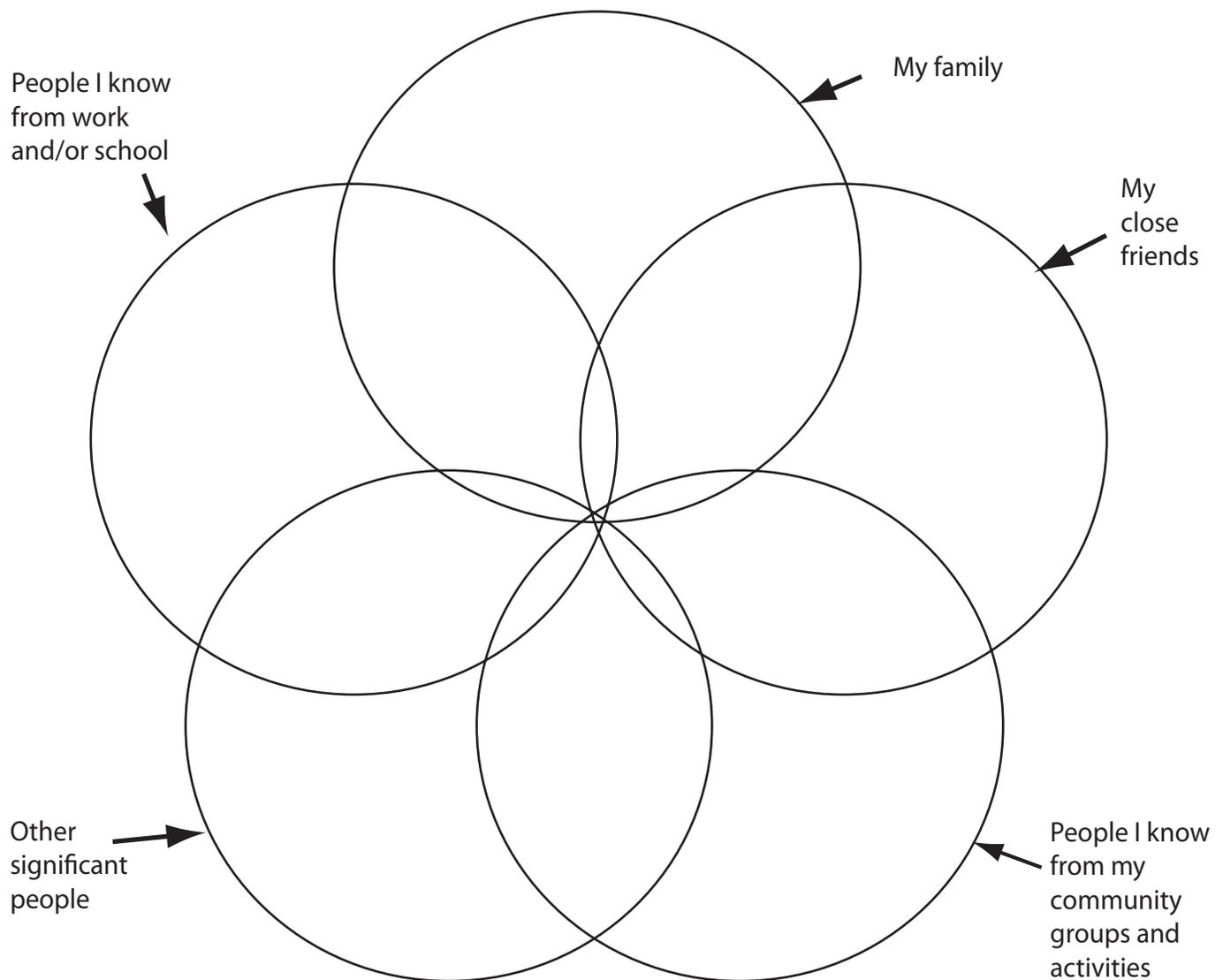
Identify the ways you build “social capital” in the community through this simple exercise. In the circles below write the names of people you know. Do you have more names listed in one area than another? This gives you an indication where your social capital is concentrated. Is your network small or broad based? Ask a family member or friend to complete the same exercise and compare answers. Where were your relationships the same? Where were they different? How have these relationships helped you to be more informed about your community?

The exercise shows how relationships and networks open the door to many opportunities to become an informed citizen. In a strong community network, information, ideas, and potential answers to community concerns are shared. With social support, people feel more empowered to seek solutions and affect positive changes.

Be Curious

With access to Internet and print resources we can rapidly link to our neighbor down the street or an Australian family living in Sydney. With

technology, our local news media reach us with rapid reporting. Local governments and organizations use local cable and Internet sites to host video downlinks of community meetings and programs. We have the world readily available at a moment’s notice. At no other time have we been able to readily find so many answers, viewpoints, and ideas. It is important to be curious about our community and our world. Because we are a rapidly changing planet, learning about each other and forming relationships and networks broader than just our neighborhood



Source: R. Edwards.

can help us to be better-informed local and national citizens.

Each morning Joan starts her day with coffee and the news. In the past five years this habit has not changed, but how she accesses the news has. No longer does the paperboy deliver the paper daily to her house, nor does she solely rely on the radio and television news. Instead, each morning she turns to the Internet for the latest news and world events. She has designed her browser home page to bring her up-to-the-minute links to local, national, and world news.

There are many ways to find answers to our questions in our communities: reading local governmental reports, attending town meetings, reading local online blogs, and watching area cable shows. Taking time to listen and read about current events is an important step in becoming an informed citizen. This step includes understanding issues that are of present concern to policymakers.

Within the Commonwealth there are organizations that provide information about state policy issues, committees, trends, and policy decisions. The Kentucky State Data Center (KSDC) provides state, county, and city information from data obtained through many resources including:

- U.S. Census
- Kentucky Vital Statistics
- Kentucky Department of Education
- Louisville Economic Monitor

The State Data Center offers online access to reports, publications, and trend reports for the state. The Kentucky Legislative Research Commission (LRC) is another service agency of state government that keeps the

public informed on state legislative decisions and discussions. Through this agency Kentuckians can learn about committee reports, pre-filed bills, legislative action, and legislator contact information. The LRC issues publications, reports, and news releases on legislative action of interest to the public and policymakers.

An important key to being an informed citizen is to take time to read many different sources of information to build an understanding of the issues close to home as well as in our global community.

Take a moment to note the sources of information you access to keep yourself informed. Circle the ones you rely on daily. Check those you feel provide accurate information. Place a star beside those that may be less accurate. What clues did you use to decide whether the information was accurate?

Be Perceptive

We can soon become weighed down with information, about not only local events, activities, and issues but also national news, gossip, and opinions. How do we know what to believe in order to be an informed citizen? The key is to be perceptive in identifying reliable information. Perception is knowing and understanding. Before you decide if a source is reliable, find out who wrote the article, the sponsor of the article, the basic reason for the article, and the timeliness of the article. Having the ability to judge the accuracy of information is an important skill to becoming an informed citizen.

National news online sources such as New York Times and Washington Post are viewed as reputable sources. However, blogs, personal websites, talk radio, and television talk shows are designed to voice opinions rather

than to report news and facts. If you are researching information online, note the extension at the end of the domain name.

Extension	Source
.gov	Governmental
.edu	Educational
.com	Commercial
.org or .net	Check the site sponsor

Information Reliability Checklist		
	Yes	No
1. Check the source of information		
a. Is it a reliable resource such as a credible government agency?		
b. Is the author clearly identified?		
c. Do the authors' credentials support their expertise to speak on the subject?		
2. Is the information timely (not outdated)?		
3. Are other sources quoted or linked also credible?		
4. According to others is the information credible (i.e. www.snopes.com , Librarian's Index at http://www.lii.org/ , and Infomine at http://infomine.ucr.edu/)?		

In all situations check the author of the information and his or her credentials. For example, an author who is a registered dietician (R.D.) has knowledge to share about nutrition. However, there could be opinion or bias from information sponsored by a food distribution company. You would want to look further to find others who have no direct interest in the issue.

Check the date of the information. Regardless if the basis of the information is a research or a popular interest source, the date is an important clue to reliability. Outdated or undated information is useless in trying to develop a current understanding of an issue.

Take the time to verify the information by confirming with other reliable sources the research that is quoted or linked to the information source you are reviewing. Sources such as National Institutes of Health or Food and Drug Administration lend confidence to the information source. One example of a source of information that may or may not be reliable is Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>). This site was designed as a collaborative encyclopedia—in other words, people from around the world are adding or deleting information at all times. There is no realistic way to know if the editors of the content are truly experts. Therefore, Wikipedia could be a place to start for general information about a subject, but you should seek further proof before trusting what you read there.

Summary

Being an informed citizen takes time and effort. Linking with others in the community through local groups and organizations is an important step to becoming informed. Information can be found through television, radio, newspapers, and web postings. Engagement with current affairs, curiosity about the world and your community, and the perception to differentiate between facts and opinions are important skills to develop to become an educated citizen ready to provide politicians informed advice about community issues.

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