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# Experiential Civic Learning for American Democracy

## A PORTRAIT OF THE FIELD


**TASK FORCE ON THE VALUE OF EXPERIENTIAL CIVIC LEARNING**

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## ABOUT THE TASK FORCE ON THE VALUE OF EXPERIENTIAL CIVIC LEARNING

The Task Force on the Value of Experiential Civic Learning sought to better understand the scope of practice-based civic learning programs being offered both within and outside of school settings. This report is intended to serve as a companion to the *Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy* (*EAD Roadmap*) and the *Pedagogy Companion to the Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy* (*EAD Pedagogy Companion*). The Task Force comprised a group of experts from across the field of civic learning with a diversity of experiences and viewpoints. The ideas and analyses in this report are theirs alone and do not necessarily reflect those of their home organizations.

The Task Force was a project of the Council on Civic Strength, an informal, cross-ideological coalition of some of the nation's leading experts and thought leaders on civic education. The coalition advocates for universal civic learning to strengthen American democracy—building bridges among the K–12, higher ed, and lifelong learning sectors and across political divides.


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## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

A healthy constitutional democracy always depends on reflective patriotism. The need to unite a deep love of country with a clear understanding of its strengths and shortcomings becomes even more urgent in times of transformation. The ability to see both the good and the bad in our past equips us to navigate the future; commitment to our constitutional democracy and to one another empowers us to find solutions together in our pluralistic society. In recent decades, we have neglected to adequately prepare younger generations for the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. As a result, our nation—the oldest constitutional democracy on Earth—has grown vulnerable, weakened by both disillusionment and a longing for the past as it nears its 250th year. Meanwhile, deep political divisions among adults have deprived young people of the meaningful civic education they need and deserve.

Yet resources abound for overcoming this challenge in communities across the nation, and the time has come to recommit to educating our young people for informed, personally meaningful, and engaged citizenship. The 2021 release of the *Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy* (*EAD Roadmap*) and the *Pedagogy Companion to the Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy* (*EAD Pedagogy Companion*) addressed some fundamental aspects of civic education—in particular what and how to teach. The *EAD Roadmap*, however, also left some questions unaddressed, including the question of when, where, and how experiential learning might be a valuable part of civic education.

Intended as a companion to the *EAD Roadmap* and the *EAD Pedagogy Companion*, this white paper offers basic definitions of experiential learning, a taxonomy of types, an analysis of barriers to participating in experiential learning opportunities, and approaches to evaluation, including how to address effectiveness. This allows for an articulation of the breadth, diversity, and value of practice-based approaches to civic learning as well as parameters for quality in this space. While our focus in this paper is primarily on K–12 civic education, the characterization of experiential civic learning that we offer here is also of relevance to higher education and other adult learning contexts.

The authors are all practitioners in this field. We work in widely varied locations, from Utah to Massachusetts to North Carolina, and brought a diversity

### Survey Results

To understand the national landscape of experiential civic learning programs better, the authors of this paper shared an online questionnaire with civic learning program leaders and asked them to forward it to peer organizations.[1] Representatives of any program could reply and thirty-one programs responded to the request. The qualitative nature of this research methodology means the results are not generalizable to the population of all experiential civic learning programs. Nevertheless, the data collected mark an important development in the field. This is the first attempt to understand the breadth of experiential civic learning experiences being offered and to describe the range of program designs, goals, and evaluation mechanisms being used.

Ten of the responding programs operate nationally; the other twenty-one operate in specific states or school districts. Most of the programs (28) are offered in school but many of these also involve the use of other spaces, including community centers (4), government buildings (3), museums (3), libraries (3), parks (1), church (1), and home settings (1). The three programs offered outside of school settings are based in museums.

All grade levels are represented in the field with thirteen programs serving the elementary grades (PreK–6), fourteen programs serving middle school (grades 7–8), and twenty-three serving high school (grades 9–12). The questionnaire also captured five programs serving adult learners and ten programs that also serve college and university students. In other words, the field is developing a valuable lifelong learning pipeline for civic education.

There is great variability with regard to program length and time structure. Thirteen operate at the level of a semester or yearlong program. Among the nine short-term programs, programming includes "one-off" events such as daylong or weeklong events. Four programs are multi-year or ongoing commitments, and six programs have offerings of variable lengths.

of experiences and viewpoints to the conversation. In addition, to develop a more fully informed characterization of experiential civic learning and criteria for excellence, we conducted a survey of organizations in the ecosystem that self-identify as operating experiential learning programs. Results of the survey demonstrated that experiential civic learning is pursued in a diversity of contexts—from youth programs for the armed services to community-based hands-on civic learning at all age levels to roles working the polls on election day.

In this white paper, we articulate what unites the best across this broad terrain, so that collectively we can strengthen our approaches to civic education. We also seek to draw lessons about common challenges to doing this work well: a major challenge is the assumption that experiential civic learning will inevitably be politicized such that it indoctrinates students in specific ideologies. In reality, many on-the-ground program teams work hard to offer experiential civic learning that is not politicized and that supports students' development of their own independent perspectives. We can learn from them. Experiential civic learning programs can be designed to respect the pluralistic nature of our society—where we are both diverse in our identities and divergent in our ideologies. By developing an account of experiential learning and best practices that can unite practitioners across diverse ideological contexts, we hope to open access to experiential learning to more students and, in so doing, to contribute to depolarizing the nation.

## SECTION 2: EXPERIENTIAL CIVIC LEARNING–WHAT IS IT?

The purpose of civic education lies ultimately in putting the understanding developed through civic learning to work in the practice of citizenship and civic participation. We follow the *EAD Roadmap* and the EAD report *Excellence in History and Civic Learning*, in terms of how we think about the two concepts of *citizenship* and *civic participation*.

Students should learn about the formal meanings of citizenship in the United States in the past and today, and (to some extent) in other countries, so that they understand who is included or excluded and what rights, privileges, and duties come with citizenship. They should be prepared to evaluate the current structure of official, legal U.S. citizenship and proposals to change it.

> *Students should also learn about citizenship and civic participation in the informal and aspirational sense. What have various thinkers argued about the value of citizenship in local communities, in institutions like schools, or at the global level?*
>
> *We are aware that the two senses of the words do not always name the same people. An individual may hold legal citizenship in a given country, such as the United States, without exercising any civic responsibility or while actually undermining the community. An individual who is not born or naturalized in the United States may yet serve as a paragon of citizenship in various important venues. For this reason, we commonly use the phrase "citizen [or] civic participant" to capture both those who have the legal status of citizen and those who do not. It is a notable and indeed distinctive feature of American history that those without full citizenship rights have often been among the country's most active, effective, and inspiring civic participants.*[2]

Civic learning depends on important bodies of knowledge—about the institutions of constitutional democracy, the philosophical foundations of self-government, the social movements and practices that have driven changes in American institutions over time, and the many histories that weave together into a shared story of the American people. Yet in the context of civic learning, we do not pursue knowledge solely for its own sake. While knowledge has value in itself, in the case of civic learning we also pursue knowledge in order to support lives as responsible and effective citizens and civic participants. This means that excellence in civic learning requires fusing education in core knowledge with learning about how to put that knowledge to work in the practices of citizenship and civic participation. Knowledge must

be fused with the development of the skills and the civic dispositions and virtues of effective citizenship. Achieving this fusion for learners can be enhanced by experiential civic learning, in which knowledge and understanding are put to work.

In the context of civic learning, we use the following definition for experiential learning: *Education that delivers civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions and virtues that support participation in our constitutional democracy AND that is carried out by actively practicing democracy (for instance, by choice-making, decision-making, community problem-solving, and negotiation and dispute resolution), whether through real or simulated civic action*. The contrast between real and simulated does not designate a contrast between in-school and out of school but between whether there are or can be lived consequences affecting others that flow from the actions. Real civic actions can occur in a school setting, but the impacts depend on what group is being interacted with and who is affected by the actions.[3] For example, the scale of impact is different for a real civic action through student government, which impacts the students, versus real civic action through student interactions with a municipal government, which can impact the broader community.

Several key features of this definition are worth noting. First, it expresses an aspiration to support all three components of civic learning—knowledge, skills, and civic dispositions and virtues. This aspiration is found not only in experiential civic learning but also in the best classroom variants of civic learning.[4]

Second, good experiential civic learning will bring more intentionality and explicitness to the development of civic skills and of civic dispositions and virtues than may be the case in many classroom contexts for civic learning.[5]

Third, experiential civic learning is committed to a method whereby students actively inhabit civic roles (whether real or simulated) that require them to carry out the kinds of actions that define the practice of democratic citizenship. The civic skills and civic dispositions and virtues that they learn while inhabiting these roles are connected to the successful exercise of those roles.[6]

Fourth, those civic actions include (but are not necessarily limited to) *choice-making, decision-making, community problem-solving,* and *negotiation and dispute resolution.*

Fifth, those roles can be inhabited either via real-life roles (writing a petition to an actual elected official or a letter to the editor of an actual newspaper or serving as a poll worker on Election Day or serving as an officer in student government) or via simulation.[7] These roles can also be wide-ranging. They can include city design programs and science-based experiential programs that are connected to learning how public policy is made.

Sixth and finally, to the extent that games are included under the umbrella of experiential learning, it is specifically *social* games, which require interaction with real humans (and not bots), that are appropriately considered to be in the terrain of experiential learning. This last point is important because it drives home the idea that at the core of the practice of democratic citizenship is excellence in how we interact with fellow human beings to find common purpose and solve shared problems.

We recognize that the scope of the definition is broad, and it will be important to clarify edge cases. It is also important to note that issue advocacy is not a purpose of experiential civic education and experiential learning organizations. Student learning outcomes—again, focused on knowledge, skills, and civic dispositions and virtues—are the purpose. Nonetheless, in some experiential learning programs, students may engage in issue advocacy. It can be the case that organizations whose purpose is issue advocacy also

**Survey Results**

Despite a range of program designs, geographies, and learner ages, among the thirty-one programs we surveyed, intended learner outcomes generally align with at least one of the goals articulated in section 3, Goals of Experiential Civic Learning, of this paper. Eleven of the programs studied seek the development of civic knowledge and thirteen build civic skills; ten include the development of civic dispositions and virtues. Several programs specifically work to engage and train teachers. In several cases, meeting state requirements are also critical program goals.

offer learning opportunities for young people. While those young people would indeed experience experiential civic learning in those contexts as a byproduct of activities whose purpose is in fact advocacy, such advocacy programs are not our concern here. We limit our consideration to programs whose purposes are the student learning outcomes and where issue advocacy is not an end in itself.

Experiential civic learning supports the development of young people into informed, engaged civic actors who experience civic participation as personally meaningful. It balances support for the development of knowledge, skills, and civic dispositions and virtues. In the next section, we discuss the goals of experiential civic learning in further detail.

## SECTION 3: GOALS OF EXPERIENTIAL CIVIC LEARNING

Experiential civic learning seeks to deliver civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic dispositions and virtues via practicing democracy (for instance, by choice-making, decision-making, community problem-solving, and negotiation and dispute resolution). The outcome goals of experiential civic learning are therefore aligned with the outcome goals of civic learning more broadly. By virtue of focusing on a specific method of instruction and context for learning—namely, practicing democracy—experiential civic learning also introduces a pedagogic goal of engagement. The expectation of those who develop experiential learning programs is that experiential learning offers distinctively engaging forms of learning, as well as forms of learning that put understanding to work.[8] Experiential civic learning offers students the opportunity to perform a civic role and thereby put their understanding of civic practices to work, confirming that they have developed understanding. Finally, experiential civic learning delivers many secondary benefits as well, since individuals' growth in knowledge, skills, and civic dispositions and virtues converts into a variety of social benefits.

In this section, we review the place of engagement in experiential civic learning, address how experiential civic learning supports civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic disposition and virtues, and review the secondary benefits of experiential learning.

### The Aims of Engagement

Civic education can be delivered in many different ways. Civic learning can occur in a history class that puts democracy and individual rights and responsibilities in the context of the development of the Constitution and the judicial system. Or courses may focus on activism and the quest for change, such as the history of personal, civil, and voting rights, and the contexts of legislation and constitutional amendments. Some civics classes align with state standards; others, with the Educating for American Democracy framework; and others, with both.

The value of student engagement—including experiences of flow, positive motivation, and effort—to learning is undisputed. Cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement supports memory, motivation, peer-to-peer collaboration, and transfer of learning beyond the school context.[9] Experiential learning in a variety of disciplines, when coupled with guided instruction, has been shown to deliver impactful levels of student engagement and to support recall and knowledge transfer.[10]

In the context of civic education, experiential learning brings the same benefits for engagement as in other disciplines. It is one variant of active learning, alongside problem-based learning and inquiry-learning, all modes of instruction that have been shown in many contexts to increase recall and the ability to transfer learning outside the classroom.[11] Through active engagement, students do not passively receive knowledge; they engage and participate, imprinting the knowledge in a more significant way. Also, they experience a sense of agency and the embodiment of the civic roles they can play tied to government, justice, community service, and more.[12] Thus, the engagement made possible by experiential learning is not just a vehicle for learning; it also develops key components of being an active participant in democracy.

Engagement is both a formative and a summative goal. Engagement assists in the learning process, but is also the goal of the process. In experiential learning

**Table 1.** Experiential Civic Learning Goals and Objectives

| | |
|---|---|
| **Primary Goals** | |
| Build civic knowledge | • Core civic knowledge, including about the institutions of constitutional democracy, the philosophical foundations of self-government, changes in American institutions over time, and the many histories that weave together into a shared story of the American people<br>• Awareness of community relationships and resources<br>• Awareness of public service career opportunities |
| Develop civic skills | • Ethical decision making<br>• Civil discourse and conflict resolution<br>• Career and college skills, such as communication and teamwork |
| Foster civic dispositions and virtues | • Self-efficacy and agency<br>• Reduced apathy and cynicism<br>• Optimism, and a sense of belonging in community and country<br>• Decreased prejudice/increased tolerance<br>• Empathy and understanding |
| **Secondary Goals** | |
| Strengthen constitutional democracy | • Reductions in affective polarization allow for bridge-building<br>• Decreased civic empowerment gap<br>• Increased civic engagement for young people with school, community, and government in meaningful way<br>• Participatory citizenship |

programs, the fact that students are engaged is proof that the learning is working. When they leave the program ready to be engaged citizens and civic participants, ready to determine where they can make a difference, the programs have also delivered the goal of engaged citizens.

As a formative experience, engagement delivered through experiential learning supports growth in knowledge, skills, and civic dispositions and virtues. These are the primary goals of experiential civic learning. As a summative goal, engagement by citizens and civic participants is one of the characteristics we need from a healthy democracy. This is the secondary goal of experiential civic learning. In our ideal for experiential civic learning, experiential teaching of civics engages students to meet the primary and secondary goals detailed in table 1.

## Types of Civic Knowledge

Civics is the study of citizenship—the rights, duties, and privileges of being a citizen—as well as the structure of government and the distribution of power. Civic knowledge includes foundational democratic principles, the rights and responsibilities of citizens, America's constitutional structure, and America's role in the world. The *EAD Roadmap* traces the arc of this content in seven themes: Civic Participation, Our Changing Landscape, We the People, A New Government and Constitution, Institutional and Social Transformation, A People in the World, and Contemporary Debates and Possibilities. The body of civic knowledge represented by these themes incorporates knowledge from many disciplines: history, political science, economics, law, sociology, psychology, anthropology, geography, international relations, and others.

With reference to the programs in our survey, we can say that experiential learning programs tend to focus their support for knowledge development in four areas, as shown in table 2.

Also, twelve of the programs surveyed report that they intentionally work to help learners apply that newly learned disciplinary knowledge about history, government structures, and constitutional design to

**Table 2.** Experiential Civic Learning: Areas for Knowledge Development

| Principles of Democracy | U.S. Position in the World |
|---|---|
| • Recognize the fundamental worth and dignity of every person<br>• Respect the equality of all persons<br>• Respect for freedom<br>• Faith in majority rule, insistence on minority rights<br>• Accept the necessity of compromise | • Treaties and alliances<br>• The UN<br>• The military |
| **Governmental Institutions/Political Processes** | **Rights and Responsibilities of Citizens** |
| • The three branches of the federal government and how laws are developed and implemented<br>• State and municipal governments<br>• Public education<br>• Elections<br>• Interstate trade<br>• Infrastructure<br>• Taxes | • Right and duty to vote<br>• Freedom of speech and expression<br>• Freedom of religion<br>• Freedom of assembly<br>• Right to petition<br>• Right to a fair trial<br>• Right to participate in your community<br>• Right to run for elected office<br>• Jury duty<br>• Support and defend the country and U.S. Constitution<br>• Follow the law<br>• Pay taxes<br>• Respect others and their opinions |

being active citizens. For instance, they seek to help students understand firsthand how their communities work (10), how to engage in the legislative and policy-making process (11), how to apply analytical skills (8), and to connect their civic identity and values to engagement (9). The connection of civic identity and values to engagement supports students in connecting their personal identity—whether that means their demographic, cultural or perspectival background—to the civic roles available to them to inhabit, and which they will have learned about as part of their core knowledge acquisition.

## Civic Skills

Civic skills are critical for students to navigate and influence the civic world effectively. These skills allow individuals to participate in democratic processes, solve problems, and work collaboratively with others. Experiential learning plays a significant role in developing civic skills, which are essential for active and informed participation in society. It provides hands-on, real-world learning opportunities that help individuals understand their roles and responsibilities as citizens.

The *EAD Roadmap* invokes the importance of skills to civic life. For instance, Theme 1, Civic Participation, explores the relationship between self-government and civic participation, drawing on the discipline of history to explore how citizens' active engagement has mattered for American society and on the discipline of civics to explore the principles, values, habits, and skills that support productive engagement in a healthy, resilient constitutional democracy. Yet the *EAD Roadmap* does not say much about the specific skills needed for successful citizenship and civic practice. Experiential learning in civic education aims to develop many skills supporting ethical decision-making, civil discourse and conflict resolution, and career and college skills such as communication and teamwork. A partial list of those supportive skills is presented in table 3.

Through experiential civics learning, students not only acquire knowledge but also develop the skills necessary for active, responsible citizenship—preparing them to contribute meaningfully to society and democracy at large. The programs surveyed report that communication (15), critical thinking

**Table 3.** Civic Skills Developed via Experiential Civic Learning

| | |
|---|---|
| **Critical Thinking** | Analyzing information and arguments to make informed decisions |
| **Effective Communication** | Expressing ideas clearly and listening actively, including through public speaking and debate |
| **Community Engagement** | Participating in local activities, understanding community needs |
| **Collaboration** | Working with others to achieve common goals |
| **Problem-Solving** | Identifying issues and developing solutions |
| **Perspective Taking** | Seeking out alternative perspectives on situations and issues and inhabiting the perspectives of others |
| **Structuring Agendas and Running Meetings** | Understanding how to shape a deliberative process and drive toward resolution |
| **Negotiations and Compromise** | Understanding how to work through conflicting interests to a resolution |
| **Digital Competence** | Understanding how to use digital tools to navigate the information landscape and communicate and to protect oneself from the misuse of those tools |
| **Civil Disagreement** | Sharing one's own values and views effectively, understanding and engaging charitably with the values and views of others, and making progress toward mutual understanding and identification of shared solutions |

(11), collaboration (9), leadership and agency (8), empathy and self-awareness (7), and inquiry and problem-solving (6) are the civic skills to be developed through their experiential civic learning. These skills—particularly those concerned with collaboration, empathy, and self-awareness—are especially important to civic participation in a pluralistic society.

## Civic Dispositions and Virtues

Civic dispositions and virtues refer to the attitudes, habits, and values that individuals should cultivate to engage in and contribute to civic life effectively. These qualities are essential not only for participating in democratic processes but also for fostering a healthy, functioning democracy. Experiential learning plays a critical role in developing these dispositions and virtues by connecting students' actions with real-world outcomes, bridging academic knowledge with practical engagement in their communities and broader society. While we found that few practitioners used the vocabulary of either dispositions or virtues, these are important terms in the academic literature about civic education, with overlapping meanings. The term *dispositions* captures qualities of character and habit, while the term *virtues* captures qualities of character and habit that we aspire to have. When we refer to *civic dispositions*, we are likewise identifying dispositions that one should aspire to have and that support success as a citizen and civic participant. The disciplines of education, psychology, and philosophy tend to use one or the other term. Here we use both terms in order to draw those disparate conversations together.

Civic dispositions are the mental and emotional frameworks that guide how citizens interact with the world and participate in public life. They reflect the underlying values and attitudes that support democratic governance, civil society, and community well-being. In this context, the development of these dispositions through experiential learning is closely tied to both academic achievement and the broader health of society.

Experiential learning is particularly effective in nurturing these dispositions because it moves beyond theoretical knowledge and involves students in direct, hands-on experiences. Through participation in civic activities, such as volunteering, engaging in community projects, or simulating democratic processes, students develop not only the skills necessary for

**Survey Results**

Experiential civic learning programs that teach civic dispositions and virtues report that they seek to advance leadership and resilience (14), understanding of civic duty and justice (12), empathy and perspective taking (9), and accountability and stewardship (8). Notably, experiential civic learning programs rarely utilize the terms virtues or dispositions to describe their own programming. While these terms are much debated among scholars, practitioners rarely use them. Five programs report using the label dispositions to describe program content, one program utilizes both terms; by contrast, twenty-five programs either did not indicate what labels they utilize or do not utilize these labels at all in describing their programming.

citizenship but also the deeper values and commitments that underpin those skills.

This approach connects the development of civic virtues to real-life actions, enabling students to see the tangible effects of their involvement and better understand their role within a larger democratic framework. As Aristotle described in his virtue ethics, virtue is a disposition—a habit or inclination towards the good. For civics education, this means that students do not just learn about the rules and structures of democracy; they also internalize the values that support those structures, gradually shaping themselves into responsible, engaged citizens.

Experiential learning in civics focuses not only on the knowledge of democratic systems or the acquisition of skills but also on the growth of key civic dispositions and virtues—attitudes and habits that help individuals navigate the complexities of democratic life. These civic dispositions and virtues are developed through active participation and reflection on one's actions within a community or political system. Through this process, students can internalize a commitment to the common good and learn to practice civic engagement in ways that benefit both themselves and society. The *EAD Roadmap* recommends three civic dispositions and virtues in particular: respect for pluralism, reflective patriotism, and responsible agency.

A *respect for pluralism* entails the habit of respecting, relating, and cooperating with others in contexts where people are diverse in their identities and divergent in their ideologies, and where the concept of identity ranges broadly across race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, faith, viewpoint, geographic background, and the wide variety of experiential characteristics, and where there is diversity within groups, cultures, and religious traditions, as well as between and across them.

*Reflective patriotism* entails love of country, and appreciation for the accomplishments of generations of Americans of all backgrounds, coupled with clear-eyed assessments of where the country has fallen short, including through acts of injustice, and where improvements are still needed.

*Responsible agency* entails developing a sense of civic self-confidence in one's ability to take part and make a difference, while also connecting that self-confidence to an understanding of how to enter into and make use of the complex institutional structure used for shared decision-making in the U.S.

Beyond the civic dispositions and virtues recommended by the *EAD Roadmap*, experiential civic learning programs tend to focus on a broader set of supportive dispositions for successful civic practice. Precisely by engaging students in actions, experiential learning does more than traditional classroom learning to cultivate habits of citizenship. Participating in democracy and experiencing the outcomes of that participation promotes the virtue of "good citizenship." It provides not just the structure and rules of civics, but also an awareness of consequences and the building of habits necessary to participate in and make a difference in one's community. There are two paths towards conceptualizing "good citizenship": you can either have citizens understand the necessary habits and goals, which draws from virtue ethics, or you can give them rules of behavior, which is the deontological approach. Aristotelian insights lie behind the value of experiential learning. In an Aristotelian framework, virtue is disposition—or habit—towards the good.

The following additional virtues and dispositions are key to effective civic participation:

1. Commitment to the Common Good: A core value for any citizen is a commitment to the common good—an understanding that individual actions should contribute to the well-being of the broader community. This involves balancing

personal interests with the needs of others, fostering a sense of shared responsibility. Experiential learning helps students develop this commitment by involving them in activities that directly impact their communities, such as service projects or community improvement initiatives.

2. Respect: Respect for others, regardless of differences in opinion, culture, or background, is a cornerstone of democratic society. Experiential learning encourages students to engage with diverse perspectives, helping them understand and appreciate differing viewpoints while practicing respectful dialogue and debate. Through participation in civic activities, students come to see respect not as an abstract value but as a necessary tool for creating a collaborative, inclusive society.
3. Tolerance: Tolerance involves accepting and coexisting with individuals who hold different beliefs or who come from diverse backgrounds. It is essential in a pluralistic society, where people must work together despite their differences. Experiential civics education exposes students to various community members, fostering empathy and understanding in ways that textbooks alone cannot achieve.
4. Civility and Civic Friendship: Civility refers to polite, respectful behavior and discourse, especially when dealing with difficult issues or opposing viewpoints. Practicing civility is crucial in maintaining a productive and peaceful democratic society. Through experiential learning, students are encouraged to participate in debates, discussions, and other forms of civic engagement that require them to model civility, even in the face of disagreement. The most robust forms of civility constitute civic friendship—where we are able to act toward strangers as if they are friends, regardless of our emotional state, and thereby work to cultivate trust by proving our own trustworthiness.
5. Courage and Responsibility: Civic responsibility involves fulfilling one's duties as a citizen, whether by voting, following laws, or participating in community life. Experiential learning encourages students to take on responsibilities in a practical, real-world context, helping them understand how their actions affect the community and the nation. Often fulfilling one's responsibilities can require courage, the virtue that enables all the others.
6. Empathy: Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. In civic life, it is crucial for building understanding and solidarity across social, cultural, and political divides. Experiential civic learning activities, such as community service or collaborative problem-solving projects, offer students the opportunity to engage with people from different walks of life, fostering a deeper sense of empathy and compassion.
7. Ethics, Honesty, and Justice: Ethical decision-making and honesty are fundamental to a healthy democracy, as is justice, understood simply as the commitment to do what is just. Citizens must make choices that are not only legal but also morally sound, and be truthful in their engagement with others. Experiential learning challenges students to reflect on the ethical dimensions of their actions, helping them internalize honesty and integrity as core civic virtues.
8. Self-Discipline and Good Judgment: Self-discipline is essential for maintaining personal responsibility and making thoughtful, informed choices in public life. It involves controlling impulses, adhering to ethical standards, and following through on commitments. By participating in civic activities, students learn the value of self-discipline in meeting their obligations as citizens and community members. They also learn how to make decisions in conditions of uncertainty, which requires weighing competing values, goals, and interests, and seeking to resolve conflict in the direction of the common good.
9. Humility: Humility involves recognizing the limitations of one's own knowledge and being open to learning from others. In civic life, humility helps citizens engage with differing perspectives and work together to solve complex problems. Experiential learning encourages students to approach civic challenges with an open mind, acknowledging the contributions and insights of others.

The civic virtues and dispositions the experiential civic learning programs surveyed say they seek to advance include leadership and resilience (14), understanding of civic duty and justice (12),

empathy and perspective taking (9), and accountability and stewardship (8). Notably, experiential civic learning programs rarely utilize the terms *virtues* or *dispositions* to describe their own programming. While these terms are much debated among scholars, practitioners rarely use them. Five programs report using the label *dispositions* to describe program content, one program utilizes both terms; by contrast, twenty-five programs either did not indicate what labels they utilize or do not utilize these labels at all in describing their programming.

## SECTION 4: TEACHING PRACTICES

A wide range of teaching practices can effectively support the goals of experiential learning in civics. Each category below has distinctive value in actively engaging students in real-world issues and governmental processes. From structured debates and simulations to community-based projects and case studies, these approaches encourage students to apply their knowledge in authentic contexts, with performances of understanding. By fostering critical thinking, collaboration, and civic responsibility, these diverse methods help prepare students for meaningful participation within a constitutional democracy.

1. Structured Discussion: Structured discussion practices focus on fostering critical thinking and meaningful dialogue around current events and controversial issues. It emphasizes the use of structured discussion strategies and models, such as Paideia Seminars, where students engage with timely and relevant topics linked to core curricular goals. With clear ground rules for respectful and productive conversation, students are encouraged to explore multiple perspectives, debate arguments from multiple perspectives, and apply their learning to real-world problems. Supportive materials are provided to deepen understanding and facilitate informed discussion. The goal is to cultivate students' ability to critically analyze complex issues while fostering a collaborative and respectful learning environment.
2. Simulations: Simulations engage students in hands-on experiences that mimic real-world civic processes. Activities such as mock elections, mock trials, model Congress, model UN, and simulated congressional hearings (e.g., We the People) allow students to actively participate in decision-making, negotiations, and legislative processes. These simulations provide students with a deeper understanding of civic institutions, the complexities of governance, and the importance of collaboration, while developing critical thinking, public speaking, and problem-solving skills.
3. Project-Based Learning: Project-based learning allows students to engage in long-term real-world projects that address current civic issues. Through collaborative efforts, students research, design, and even implement solutions to community problems. To conduct such a project, students often work together on activities like interviewing community members, writing to or meeting with elected officials, presenting project material to peers, local leaders, and/or decision makers, and importantly, reflecting on their project experience.
4. Service Learning and Community Service: Service learning and community service activities are designed to have sufficient duration and intensity to achieve specific civic outcomes that tangibly benefit a community, while being directly linked to the curriculum to ensure relevance

### Survey Results

In terms of the practices employed, among the thirty-one programs surveyed, twenty programs offered both preparation for participation and real-world participation. Nine offered preparation only. Two offered real-world participation only. The most commonly referenced practices were Simulated congressional or legislative hearings (I8 programs), Advocacy or campaign activities (7), and Community involvement or service (10). Many of the programs involved external stakeholders, for instance community members or public officials (14), but seven were limited to school staff only.

and coherence. Through ongoing reflection, progress updates, and support for independent problem-solving, students engage in meaningful service that encourages them to explore political responses to community challenges. Programs like Junior ROTC and Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts are important here.

5. School Governance: School governance involves student participation in decision- making processes within their school community. It stimulates engagement by involving large numbers of students in service activities that benefit both the school and the broader community. This participation provides a platform for students to express their voices on issues that directly impact them. Additionally, school governance fosters the development of a wide range of essential skills, including digital literacy, financial literacy, and environmental awareness, all of which contribute to students' growth as informed, responsible citizens.
6. Citizen Awareness Campaigns: Citizen awareness campaigns provide students with the opportunity to understand how to use their voice on issues of public concern. They have to learn to understand their audience and the ethics of contributing to public conversation. Students can use a variety of means—from blogs to videos to letters to the editor—to persuade others on a civics topic of their choice.
7. Extracurriculars: Extracurricular activities can encompass structured opportunities for students to engage beyond the classroom. Activities like speech and debate, as well as involvement in school clubs and community organizations, provide students with platforms to develop leadership, communication, and collaboration skills. Through these experiences, students actively contribute to their communities, gain a deeper understanding of community issues, and build competencies that support their growth as engaged, civic-minded individuals.
8. Self-Governing Youth Programs: Self-governing youth programs, such as Youth Court and Boys/Girls State, and clubs offer students immersive experiences in leadership, governance, and civic responsibility. In these programs, students take on active roles in decision-making processes, either by serving as judges, jurors, or attorneys in Youth Court or by participating in the simulated governance of Boys/Girls State. These experiences help students understand democratic principles, the justice system, and the importance of civic engagement while developing skills in leadership, collaboration, and problem-solving. As a category of civic experiential learning, self-governing youth programs empower students to actively shape their communities and prepare them for future roles as informed, engaged citizens.

This list of practices of experiential learning is not exhaustive but does capture commonly used strategies. There is still much to be learned about the specific benefits of each of the civic learning practices listed above, but evidence of student outcomes taken from other disciplines demonstrates the impact hands-on civic learning experiences may have. For example, in their review of project-based learning (PBL) research, Condliffe et al. compile evidence from multiple

**Edge Cases**

Experiential learning is a spectrum that encompasses a wide range of activities and experiences, often creating edge cases for particular activities. Many of these edge cases present open questions in terms of what qualifies as true experiential learning within the context of civic education. For instance, how do we define sustained engagement, given that effective civic learning often requires long-term involvement, far exceeding the duration of a classroom activity, field trip, or day of service? Similarly, there is ambiguity around the primary locus of learning—while some activities, such as field trips or community service, may offer valuable lessons, impactful civic education is often supported with instruction within the school system itself, where students are able to engage in deeper, ongoing processes of reflection and learning. For that matter, it seems likely that preparation, reflection, and reinforcement scaffolded by educators best ensure the benefits of project-based learning. These open questions challenge educators and researchers to refine their understanding of what constitutes meaningful civic experiential learning.

studies that confirm a positive relationship between PBL and students' development of knowledge and cognitive skills in science, math, the humanities, and social studies.[13]

## SECTION 5: BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Given the value of experiential civic learning to student engagement, and therefore to deeper civic learning, it is also worth reviewing the barriers that currently limit access of students to these opportunities. We see barriers in four categories: policy regime, civic culture, resource disparities, and polarization. We take each one in turn.

### Policy Regime

Bringing experiential civic learning to students faces several barriers rooted in the current policy regime. The beauty and challenge of federalism as it applies to civic education is that states and localities vary greatly in how they approach civics instruction. While some states have mechanisms to recognize civic learning, others do not. In almost every instance, however, the current incentives within the American policy regime bring a lack of parity for civic education compared to other subjects.

In many school systems, the pressure to cover core subjects like math and reading often crowds out time for civics. This is in large part because state-based assessments and public accountability ratings measure math, ELA, and science, but rarely measure specific capacities in civics. Such a dynamic makes it especially difficult to implement more time-intensive, hands-on learning experiences. Standardized assessments, which dominate educational accountability, are also not well-suited to being used solo to evaluate the outcomes of experiential learning. Civic education emphasizes critical thinking, discussion, and real-world application, and standardized tests can be useful here. But experiential learning—in cultivating skills and dispositions—also requires additional assessment and alternative assessment methodologies to capture the contributions of experiential learning to their growth.[14]

The variability of state standards further complicates the adoption of experiential learning in civics. Each state sets its own standards, and while some may encourage civics skills, others do not prioritize it. This variability in standards, compounded by the decentralized nature of U.S. education, creates inconsistency in how civics—and particularly experiential civics—are taught across the country.[15] As a result, civic education often lacks the resources and support it needs to thrive, particularly when it comes to integrating experiential learning approaches that require additional time, funding, and instructional support.

Teacher preparedness is another critical barrier to bringing experiential learning into the civics classroom. Many civic educators have not been trained in the methods and strategies required for experiential learning, such as project-based learning, community partnerships, or simulations of democratic processes. For teachers who are already stretched thin with traditional curricula and assessment pressures, incorporating experiential learning can feel overwhelming without proper support or professional development.[16] Furthermore, schools may struggle with the logistics of partnering with outside organizations to provide real-world civic experiences, creating a steep learning curve for both educators and administrators. The lack of exposure to experiential teaching methods and the time required to build partnerships with community organizations are significant obstacles.

The current educational policy regime poses barriers to bringing experiential learning into civics education in a multifaceted way, involving constraints on instructional time, lack of parity within state standards and assessments, and a dearth of teacher training and resources. These challenges underscore the need for systemic changes that prioritize civics education, support teacher development, and create structures for community partnerships to make experiential learning more feasible in the classroom.

### Lack of Civic Culture

The lack of civic culture in America is increasingly evident in declining participation in democratic processes and community engagement. According to Eric M. Uslaner, professor of government and

**Survey Results**

Few of the programs examined in the survey require parental consent for student participation. Of the thirty-one programs surveyed, four require parental consent for program participation; one does so for participation in research studies; and one has optional usage of parental consent depending on the school chapter.

politics at the University of Maryland, College Park, "young people are less involved in virtually every type of social and political engagement" and this lack of a foundation for civic engagement means that they are more likely to remain unengaged through adulthood, reflecting an ever-growing apathy toward civic issues in this country.[17] This detachment often stems from a lack of understanding of the importance of civic engagement. Many citizens feel disconnected from political processes, believing their voices do not matter, which further perpetuates this cycle of disengagement. This apathy can also be exacerbated by a political climate characterized by polarization, where constructive discourse has become rare, leading people to think that collaboration across differing viewpoints is impossible.

This decline in community participation has significant implications for civic education outside traditional school settings. Participation in many conventional voluntary associations has been declining for decades along with many measures of collective political participation such as attending a rally or speech, attending a meeting on town or school affair, or working for a political party, showing a reduction in informal civic learning.[18] Social media participation may have replaced participation in conventional voluntary associations in many people's time allocations, but it does not deliver the same goods of social capital as face-to-face chapter associations once did.[19]

The involvement of parents also plays a crucial role in shaping their children's civic engagement. Both over-involvement and under-involvement of parents can hinder their children's understanding of civic issues. Over-involved parents may dominate discussions, leaving little room for children to form their own political opinions, while disengaged parents may fail to instill values such as the importance of civic participation. This duality creates an environment where young people may either feel pressured to conform to their parents' views or lack the motivation to engage in civic matters altogether. Such dynamics can diminish the likelihood of children participating in civic activities, perpetuating the disconnect from civic culture.

Finally, the civic engagement of decision- makers and educators themselves is vital to fostering a robust civic culture. According to one study, "Only one in five social studies teachers in U.S. public schools report feeling very well prepared to support students' civic learning."[20] Unprepared, disengaged teachers create a reduced expectation for civic involvement among students, further entrenching the cycle of disengagement. As civic culture declines, the need for comprehensive civic education becomes ever more critical. Without concerted efforts to enhance civic learning both at home and in schools, America risks continuing down a path of apathy and disconnection from the democratic process, leaving future generations ill-equipped to engage as informed citizens.

## Resource Disparities

Civics education is fundamental to cultivating informed and engaged citizens, yet it receives comparatively little federal funding. In 2019, Marketplace.org reported that for many years, the federal government invested a mere 5 cents per K–12 student in civic education compared to 50 dollars per K–12 student for STEM.[21] A recent 2023 investment in civics and history raised the per pupil investment modestly, yet there is still relatively little funding from the federal government in this field. It is also important to note that there is significant substantive disagreement within the field about whether federal funding should have a role in education.

Further, disparities in education funding present a barrier for access to high quality and experiential civics education in many communities. Disparities in funding exist at various levels—interstate, intrastate, and intra-district. These disparities create systemic barriers that hinder equitable educational opportunities for all students, contributing to alarming gaps in civics proficiency.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 22 percent of eighth grade U.S. students reach the "proficient" standard in civics assessment.[22] The inequity is further compounded by race and socioeconomic status: white, affluent students are four to six times more likely to exceed the proficiency level compared to their Black and Hispanic peers from low-income households.[23] Many observe that this disparity is not coincidental; rather, it reflects the disparate investment in trained educators, comprehensive curricula, and extracurricular civic engagement activities in schools.

Beyond the differential funding by school subject that is a barrier for the discipline, there are additional funding disparities that impact the amount and quality of civic learning across the nation.

### Interstate Disparity

There is a notable inequity in school funding among different states. From New York's expenditure of $29,873 per pupil to Utah's $9,552, it is easy to observe different levels of spending.[24] There are many variables that account for these differences, but even where schools may have equal desire to cover certain topics, they may not be equally able to spend money on additional teacher training or student field trips to complement cure curricula. This interstate disparity can exacerbate a fragmented educational landscape around social studies, making schools' geographical location a driver of access rather than educator interest or student need.

Examples from the Education Law Center's 2021 report *Making the Grade: How Fair Is School Funding in Your State?* further highlight the problem. According to a chart of expenditures by state, fourteen states spend more per pupil in districts with low poverty levels and less in poorer districts, while for other states spending is higher in poorer districts. For example, Nevada spends $12,798 per pupil in districts with a low poverty level but spends only $8,731 in high-poverty areas, a difference of 32 percent. The disparity of greater funding for better-off areas than for poorer districts is 18 percent in Illinois, 17 percent in Missouri, and 14 percent in Connecticut, to pick a few examples. In contrast, at the other end of the spectrum, numerous states spend more on poorer districts. Alaska and Utah, for example, spend 57 percent more on poorer areas than on wealthier areas.[25]

**Access**

What are the consequences of disparate access to high quality civic learning? Resource disparities can result in educational disparities that can cause additional barriers to participation in civic education. As addressed throughout this paper, these additional barriers can include lack of civic knowledge, decreased civic engagement, perpetuation of inequalities, underrepresentation of certain groups in civic life, and increased political polarization.

### Intrastate Disparity

Within individual states, education funding inequalities persist. In many states, these intrastate disparities can stem from variations in local tax bases, which often favor wealthier communities. As a result, affluent districts can fund enriched civics curricula, experiential learning opportunities, and extracurricular civic engagement programs, while poorer districts may lack even basic civics instruction. This is not true everywhere. As we have seen, some states do spend more on poorer districts. But in general, this discrepancy in tax bases exacerbates the educational divide, as students in less affluent areas receive inadequate preparation for civic participation.

### Interdistrict Disparity

Even within the same state, funding can vary dramatically across districts. This inter-district disparity is particularly pronounced in urban areas where schools serving predominantly Black, Latino, and Native students often receive significantly less funding compared to those in wealthier neighborhoods. For example, districts with the most students of color can receive up to $2,700 less per student than their counterparts with fewer students of color. This translates to a staggering $13.5 million shortfall in resources for a district with 5,000 students, directly impacting the quality of civics education offered.[26]

The Education Trust's report "Equal Is Not Good Enough" highlights this issue by analyzing funding patterns that disproportionately disadvantage schools serving students of color, those from low-income backgrounds, and English learners. The

failure of state funding mechanisms to provide equitable resources perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage, leaving many students ill-prepared to engage in civic life effectively.[27]

## Polarization

Polarization can act as a barrier to experiential learning. As a country, America is polarizing faster than any other developed democracy.[28] This polarization is evident in cultural sorting, political group homogeneity, political gridlock, and (most noticeably and relevant to experiential education) in declining levels of trust in out-groups and institutions associated with them. Levels of affective polarization, in which political identities lead one to actively dislike other political groups, continue to increase, according to polls.[29] The impact of polarization has made teaching, and the educational space generally, more complex and more fraught. The breakdown in trust we are seeing in America is accompanied by and reinforced by a decline in shared authorities, making it more difficult to appeal to mutually agreed-upon evidence, knowledge, and information—all of which are important to the educational exercise.

Classrooms naturally depend upon students and their parents trusting teachers—their competency and their motives. In cases where teachers and their institutions (K–12 schools) are viewed, fairly or not, as politically homogeneous, students and their parents, subject to polarizing effects, can mistrust teachers or question their ability to teach (or to organize and oversee experiential education) in a neutral, balanced manner that is fair and open to diverse political perspectives.

Polarization's negative impact on the state of civil discourse can also act as an indirect barrier to experiential civic learning. When citizens perceive an inability for a pluralist population to deliberate and collaborate in a healthy and productive manner, they are liable to be less interested in (or less hopeful about the outcomes of) entering into processes like experiential education that are likely to require such conversation and cooperation among politically diverse parties. A resulting apathy can cause some students to resist full and active participation in experiential learning opportunities.

In addition, there is some danger in education for core civic knowledge being seen as a project of the right while education in civic practice is seen as a project of the left. In fact, both core civic knowledge and civic practice are fundamental to successful civic learning, which is recognized across the political spectrum. The work of depoliticizing education in order to depolarize the nation includes achieving the right fusion of emphasis on knowledge and practice.

Another issue also drives polarization around civic learning: the question of how to understand youth agency, both its value and its developmental stages. Simulated learning experiences may be premised on less controversial ideas than practiced learning experiences. Experiential learning itself incorporates a variety of activities, such as a science class doing a hands-on experiment or an English class going to watch a performance of Shakespeare at a local theatre. It is the *civic* part of experiential civic learning that invites controversy, especially around experiences that conceive of students as already participating political actors. Conservative commentator Stanley Kurtz, for example, writes in a critical piece on civic education initiatives, "Required adventures in 'action civics,' **student protest and lobbying** for course credit, will eventually be paired with **a push to lower the voting age** to 16 or 17 . . ."[30] (emphasis added). The worry is that experiential civic learning is merely cover for training activists. Notably, that concern brings with it an additional worry about lowering the voting age. In other words, the worry expressed by Kurtz seems to be not just about politicized education but also about the appropriate role for youth agency. Do young people have a place in the public square? Should they be considered to lack political agency until age eighteen? Do educational institutions hold the important role of merely *preparing* students rather than encouraging them to participate in the present? Even when experiential learning programs avoid politicization, which most do, they do nonetheless place a premium on youth agency. Few programs actively support youth voting, but all help young people to see avenues to civic participation that are available even to those who have not yet reached the age of political maturity.

Simulated learning experiences can support a conception of education as "preparation" and foreground continuation rather than disruption. Jennifer Light, in her study on "junior republics" (simulated communities where children play roles such as mayor, jury member, etc.), notes that these supervised and curated spaces were "participatory performances of adulthood" that promoted the "idealized character and behavioral norms associated with native-born middle class whites . . . rather than learning alternative forms of democratic participation to advocate for change."[31] This is not to say simulations are less worthwhile, but rather that they may sometimes stand *in contrast* to real-world learning experiences and reflect differing conceptions of youth agency and the developmental pace at which young people should be integrated into real world civic action.

Our survey of thirty-one programs suggests that most of these programs are concerned to avoid politicization related to fears about the development of activists while also providing robust supports for youth agency. A significant majority (21) of the programs surveyed have guardrails in place to prevent the delivery of politicized or ideologically slanted perspectives. These guardrails include facilitator trainings, the engagement of experts from different points of the ideological spectrum in curriculum development or program implementation, and the establishment of community norms prior to commencement of activity. Relatedly, twenty-one of the programs offer substantial student choice. Only three have limited choice for students or teacher-selected experiential topics for the area of focus. The former approach ensures that the full range of student perspective and viewpoint can inform the experiential learning projects that are undertaken. Alongside choice the decision to use individual or group work also has an impact on the degree of viewpoint diversity that can be supported. Most of the programs employ both individual and group work. Seven offer only group-work experiences. In order to depoliticize civic learning, this is an area where the field should strive toward universal participation in the practices that provide guardrails against politicization.

## SECTION 6: APPROACHES TO EVALUATION

In contrast to English language arts (ELA) and STEM education, the field of civic learning has no broadly standardized approaches to measuring, documenting, and reporting on student learning. This is true both for traditional classroom-based, non-experiential instruction and for experiential learning.

Assessment modes have, however, been developing around the country in experimental forms. Several states have introduced civic seals that can be earned through specific course work or experiences. Several states, including Indiana, Florida, and Massachusetts, have recently developed high-quality civic knowledge exams. They do not yet, though, have modes of evaluating experiential learning with regard to skills and civic dispositions and virtues.

Many states have also adopted the U.S. citizenship exam (USCIS exam) as an assessment tool. While the intentions behind the introduction of the test are good, there are two problems with this instrument. Evaluations have shown that the test "lacked a coherent research and test development plan for collecting the necessary data to build a test that allows valid, reliable, and fair inferences about whether applicants have the required knowledge of English and U.S. history and government."[32] In addition, the use of this test, which is formally connected to the right to vote, for existing U.S. citizens risks reintroducing literacy tests for voting, a measure used to dramatically restrict the franchise for African-Americans in the mid twentieth century. Despite this, recent presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy, currently candidate for governor in Ohio, made just such a policy a plank of his campaign.[33] In the domain of civics assessment, it is important that a **strict privacy firewall** be maintained between the data an individual teacher can access about the performance of individual students and the aggregate data that would be available to districts and states. However good the intentions of educators and assessment professionals may be in introducing the use of the USCIS exam, its use carries substantial risks, and we can do better.

Having effective tools for measuring, documenting, and reporting on student learning in the experiential learning space is a critical need. Such tools can build on existing tools for evaluating growth in civic knowledge—for instance, those in use in Indiana, Florida, and Massachusetts—but need to be supplemented by tools that also measure growth in skills and civic dispositions and virtues. All three domains can be assessed by other means including:

- Portfolio Construction and Presentation. For example, the Project Citizen's Portfolio approach includes a portfolio rating sheet and guidance on supporting portfolio creation.[34]
- Performance-Based Assessment/Authentic Assessments. For example, the Democratic Knowledge Project provides a rubric for assessment of non-partisan, student-led civic action projects and an assessment toolkit.[35]
- Competency-Based Assessment. For example, New Hampshire's Performance Assessment of Competency Education (PACE) "is an innovative assessment and accountability system grounded in a competency-based educational approach designed to ensure that students have meaningful opportunities to achieve critical knowledge and skills."[36] In addition, the Aurora Institute helped Chicago public schools develop performance-based assessment for competency-based learning, including in the civic domain.[37]
- Scenario-Based Assessment. In this methodology, students are given hypothetical scenarios that require them to apply their knowledge in novel real-world reasoning contexts. This mode of assessment specifically measures how successful learners are at transferring knowledge from instructional contexts to real-world applications.[38]
- Survey-Based, Public Sector Assessments/ Accountability Systems. For example, the Democratic Knowledge Project developed an assessment of the civic dispositions of civic self-care, civic reciprocity, and civic self-confidence.[39]

Assessment practices are not yet universal in the field, reflecting the general gap in robust assessment instruments in the civic learning space. Only fifteen of the thirty-one programs that we surveyed use pre- and post-surveys to evaluate outcomes. Ten use assessment of capstone projects. But six had no specified mode of evaluation. An important next phase for this work would be to collect and evaluate the assessment instruments from these programs, and to develop a field-wide project to create robust, reliable, valid, and privacy-protective forms of measurement.

## SECTION 7: CONCLUSION

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first paper to define the field of experiential civic learning. Our survey is incomplete but does provide an initial landscape of the kinds of programs offered. Our conceptualization stands on its own as a theoretical proposal for how to analyze the field of experiential civic learning. Through many conversations in the development of this white paper, we sought to forge a shared language across contexts that might help establish standards of quality in the experiential civic learning field. The *EAD Roadmap* provided a useful starting point for our efforts. We hope we have expanded its realm of application and provided a cogent case for how well-structured experiential learning programs can advance its goal of excellence in history and civic learning for all pre-K–12 learners, both in and out of school, in our pluralistic society. We recognize that there is still a great deal of empirical and conceptual work needed to transform this area of practice and nascent field of inquiry into a well understood domain of civic education.

## APPENDIX

### EXPERIENTIAL CIVIC LEARNING PROGRAM QUESTIONNAIRE: RESULTS

The questionnaire was available online from June 20, 2024, through October 10, 2024.[40] Of the nineteen questions, seven were multiple choice (two were single-select and five were multi-select); twelve of the questions were open ended. ChatGPT was used to help identify thematic trends in the open-ended question responses. Representatives of thirty-one programs responded to the questionnaire.[41]

**1. In what setting or context is the Program offered? (Select all that apply.)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| School | 28 |
| Community center | 4 |
| Government building (state house, mayor's office, town administration, etc.) | 3 |
| Library | 3 |
| Church | – |
| Museum | 6 |
| Home | – |
| Online | 8 |
| Park | – |
| Other: | – |

**Other takeaways:**

- 13 programs are ONLY in a school
- 8 programs are both in a school and online
- 8 programs are in a school and also in-person at some other location
- Only 3 programs are not offered in school at all

**2. What level of learner is the Program intended to engage? (Select all that apply.)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Pre-K | 1 |
| Kindergarten | 5 |
| Grade 1 | 7 |
| Grade 2 | 8 |
| Grade 3 | 8 |
| Grade 4 | 8 |
| Grade 5 | 10 |
| Grade 6 | 11 |
| Grade 7 | 11 |
| Grade 8 | 14 |
| Grade 9 | 22 |
| Grade 10 | 23 |
| Grade 11 | 22 |
| Grade 12 | 21 |
| College | 10 |
| Adult learners | 5 |
| Other | 1 |

**Other takeaways:**

- 2 programs for elementary learners only
- 1 program for middle school learners only
- 7 programs for high school students only
- 4 programs for college students only
- 1 program for adult learners only

**3. Is parental or caregiver consent required for a learner to participate in the Program?**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Yes | 4 |
| No | 23 |
| Other | 2 |
| No reply | 2 |

**Other takeaways:**

- 1 program is dependent upon school chapter
- 1 program requires consent at IRB stage

4. **What is the length and time structure of the Program? (Please share both length of program [e.g., week, month, semester, year, ongoing] and hours per basic unit of participation [day, week, month].) (Example: one semester, 2 hours per week) (Open-ended)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Short-term engagements (single sessions to a few weeks) | 9 |
| Semester-long programs (implemented over several months) | 7 |
| Yearlong commitments (comprehensive programs spanning an academic year) | 6 |
| Multi-year and ongoing commitments | 4 |

5. **Please describe the Learner outcomes the Program is intended to advance. (Open-ended)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Civic skills | 13 |
| Civic knowledge | 11 |
| Civic virtues and dispositions | 10 |
| Teacher support | 6 |

6. **What types of Civic Knowledge are supported by the Program? (Open-ended)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Foundational civic knowledge (basic understanding of government structures, democratic principles, and key civic concepts) | 12 |
| Applied civic knowledge and real-world engagement (active participation in civic processes, leadership, and advocacy) | 11 |
| Civic processes (how laws, policies, and government functions operate in practice.) | 10 |
| Civic decision-making and critical analysis (analytical skills for evaluating civic issues, policies, and governance) | 8 |
| Civic identity, responsibility, and democratic values (understanding, community belonging, and civic responsibility) | 9 |

7. **What types of Civic Skills are supported by the Program? (Open-ended)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Communication skills | 15 |
| Critical thinking and analysis | 11 |
| Collaboration and teamwork | 9 |
| Leadership and agency | 8 |
| Empathy and self-awareness | 7 |
| Inquiry and problem-solving | 6 |

**8. What types of Civic Dispositions and Virtues (e.g., justice, integrity, courage, habits of association and participation, reciprocity, resilience, grit, etc.) are supported by the Program? (Open-ended)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Leadership, resilience, agency | 14 |
| Civic duty, justice, integrity | 12 |
| Empathy, respect, and perspective taking | 9 |
| Accountability, stewardship, and citizenship | 8 |

**9. Does your Program use the label of "virtues," "dispositions," both, or neither to describe the habits named above? (Select all that apply)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Virtues | – |
| Dispositions | 5 |
| Both virtues and dispositions | 1 |
| Neither* | 25 |

*Neither = different language or no answer

**10. Which of the following best describes the Program?**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Preparation for civic activity | 9 |
| Participation in real-world civic activity | 2 |
| Both preparation for and participation in real-world civic activity | 20 |

**11. If applicable, please describe how the Program PREPARES learners for the Civic Activity. (Open-ended)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Skills, competency, and project development | 16 |
| Personal reflection, values, and motivation | 11 |
| Simulations and role playing | 9 |
| Civic knowledge and understanding | 9 |

**12. Is the Civic Activity simulated (e.g., role playing), practiced (e.g., rehearsing a speech but not in a role-playing setting), or carried out in real-world settings? (Select all that apply.)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Simulated (e.g., role playing) | 10 |
| Practiced (e.g., rehearsing a speech but not in a role-playing setting) | 2 |
| Carried out in real-world settings | 12 |
| Mixed simulation and real world | 7 |

**13. Please describe the TYPES of Civic Activity or Activities learners simulate, practice, or carry out in real-world settings. (Open-ended)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Civic simulations and role playing | 7 |
| Issue advocacy/community action | 6 |
| Research and communication | 6 |
| Community service and volunteering | 6 |

**14. Please describe how much discretion the teacher/facilitator has in implementing the Program. (Open-ended)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Broad discretion | 14 |
| Structured with some flexibility | 9 |
| Strict guidelines, minimal discretion | 8 |

**15. Do students/learners have individual choice in selecting the focus of their civic simulation, practice, or real-world activity? (Open-ended)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Substantial student choice | 21 |
| Limited choice/teacher-selected topics | 3 |
| No choice specified | 7 |

**16. Do students/learners work individually, in groups, or both as they carry out their civic simulation, practice, or real-world activity? (Select all that apply.)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Students work on their own | 1 |
| Students work in a group | 7 |
| Students work on their own and in groups | 23 |

**17. Are other stakeholders (elected officials, public sector employees, non-profit program staff, community members, business leaders, etc.) engaged in the implementation of the Program, and if so, what are their roles? (Open-ended)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Community leaders or public officials | 14 |
| Limited to school staff, no external stakeholders | 7 |
| Variable, depending on the program | 10 |

**18. Are guardrails in place to ensure the Program avoids operating in a politicized or ideologically slanted fashion? (Open-ended)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Guardrails in place | 22 |
| No specific guardrails | 9 |

**19. How do you evaluate learner outcomes for your Program? (Open-ended)**

| | # Programs |
|---|---|
| Using pre- and post-surveys | 15 |
| Assessments and capstone projects | 10 |
| Combination of surveys and assessments | 7 |
| No evaluation specified/no evaluation | 6 |

## NOTES

1. The questionnaire was available online from June 20 through October 10, 2024. Representatives of thirty-one programs responded. Researchers at the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation at the Harvard Kennedy School Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation organized the distribution of the questionnaire, collected the data, and assisted with the analysis. ChatGPT was used to help identify trends in the open-ended question responses.
2. EAD, *Excellence in History and Civics for All Learners*, 27.
3. The term *experiential learning* in the civics domain seems to be most commonly used among political scientists and others working at the college level. When used, the term usually involves students engaging in service learning or some other out-of-class activity. In this way, it can be considered a form of active learning. In the K–12 context, terms like *project-based learning*, *service learning*, and, more broadly, *active learning*, are more often used to describe the same sorts of educational programs that are labeled *experiential learning* in the higher education literature.
4. For research on the link between effective learning and children's dispositions, see Da Ros-Voseles and Fowler-Haughey, "Why Children's Dispositions Should Matter to All Teachers."
5. For example, Perkins, Jay, and Tishman ("Beyond Abilities: A Dispositional Theory of Thinking," 17–18) argue that opportunities to set goals, develop plans and carry them through, and engage socially will help students develop important dispositions. These activities are often reflected more in experiential rather than traditional civic learning.
6. Meira Levinson (*No Citizen Left Behind*, 236–44) argues that experiential learning allows students to experience motivation internal to the process rather than externally imposed by testing standards or grades.
7. For examples of direct youth organizing through schools, see Arthurs, "Now More Than Ever: Why Youth Organizing Work Belongs in Schools and What That Means in Theory and Practice." For a discussion of simulated civic learning in the university setting, see Siegel-Stechler and Gee, "Political and International Affairs Simulations and Civic Engagement on Campus."
8. ". . . understanding something is a matter of being able to carry out a variety of 'performances' concerning the topic," Perkins, "Teaching for Understanding," 29.
9. Center for Innovation in Teaching & Learning, "Three Dimensions of Student Engagement"; Boykin and Noguera, *Creating the Opportunity to Learn*; Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, "School Engagement: Potential of the Concept State of the Evidence."
10. Owen and Phillips, "Toward an Accessible Civics Curriculum: Adapting We the People for High-Need Students"; Owen, "Project Citizen Research Program"; Stock and Kolb, "The Experiencing Scale: An Experiential Learning Gauge of Engagement in Learning"; Michael, "Where's the Evidence that Active Learning Works?"; Cason and Gillis, "A Meta-Analysis of Outdoor Adventure Programming with Adolescents"; Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark, "Why Minimal Guidance during Instruction Does Not Work"; Hattie, "Visible Learning."
11. Karaçalli and Korur, "The Effects of Project-Based Learning on Students' Academic Achievement, Attitude, and Retention of Knowledge: The Subject of 'Electricity in Our Lives.'"
12. Meira Levinson (*No Citizen Left Behind,* 50–55) argues that experiential learning can better help close the civic empowerment gap than traditional civic instruction because of the opportunities to develop a sense of civic identity and agency.
13. Condliffe et al., "Project Based Learning: A Literature Review."
14. Ladson-Billings, "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix."
15. Willeck and Mendelberg, "Education and Political Participation."
16. Niemi and Junn, *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn.*
17. Uslaner, "Civic Engagement in America: Why People Participate in Political and Social Life," 8–9.
18. Putnam, "The Strange Disappearance of Civic America," 3.
19. Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*.
20. RAND Corporation. "Most U.S. Social Studies Teachers Feel Unprepared to Teach Civic Learning, a Gap That Could Contribute to Truth Decay."
21. Adams, "What Funding for Civics Reveals about American Political Discourse."
22. National Assessment of Educational Progress, *NAEP Report Card: Civics [2022].*

23. Litvinov, "Forgotten Purpose: Civics Education in Public Schools."
24. U.S. Census Bureau, "Public School Spending per Pupil Increased in 2024."
25. Farrie and Sciarra, *Making the Grade*, 11.
26. Education Trust, "School Districts That Serve Students of Color Receive Significantly Less Funding."
27. Morgan, "Equal Is Not Enough."
28. Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro, "Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization."
29. ANES, "Time Series Cumulative Data File (1948–2020)."
30. Kurtz, "Democrats Plot Path to Dominance."
31. Light, *States of Childhood: From the Junior Republic to the American Republic, 1895–1945,* 149–50.
32. Elliott et al., "Using the Standards to Evaluate the Redesign of the U.S. Naturalization Tests: Lessons for the Measurement Community"; Kunnan, "Testing for Citizenship: The U.S. Naturalization Test." See also Torney-Purta et al., "Assessing Civic Competency and Engagement in Higher Education: Research Background, Frameworks, and Directions for Next-Generation Assessment."

    Winke ("Investigating the Reliability of the Civics Component of the U.S. Naturalization Test") reported that items vary widely in difficulty and do not all reliably measure civics knowledge, that individual items on the test are not interchangeable, and that it is possible that not everyone takes an equally difficult test, and concluded that test scores contain construct-irrelevant variance that undermines the overall reliability and validity of the instrument.
33. Ramaswamy, "Civic Duty Voting."
34. See Center for Civic Education, "Project Citizen." The website includes resources for middle school and high school level, including educational materials, worksheets, portfolio criteria checklist, scoring rubrics, and professional development resources.
35. See Democratic Knowledge Project, "Assessment Toolkit" and "Assessment: Civic Thinking Summary."
36. NH Department of Education, "Performance Assessment of Competency Education."
37. Medina, "Showcase, Share, Inspire: Performance-Based Assessment and Competency-Based Learning in Chicago Public Schools."
38. Valencia, Parker, and Lo, "Assessing Deeper Learning of High School Civics."
39. Democratic Knowledge Project, "Assessment Toolkit" and "Assessment: Civic Thinking Summary."
40. Researchers at the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation at the Harvard Kennedy School Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation organized the distribution of the questionnaire, collected the data, and assisted with the analysis.
41. The qualitative nature of this research methodology means the results are not generalizable to the population of all experiential civic learning programs. Nevertheless, the data collected mark an important development in the field. This is the first attempt to understand the breadth of experiential civic learning experiences being offered and to describe the range of program designs, goals, and evaluation mechanisms being used.

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