

Civic Spirit Summer Institute: Evaluation Report **September 10, 2018**

Daniel Olson, an independent evaluator contracted by Civic Spirit, conducted an evaluation of Civic Spirit's *Summer Institute*. He observed all five days of the Institute, spoke with participants during the week, and administered anonymous questionnaires before and after the Institute in order to understand how Civic Spirit was setting up educators for success in teaching civics and helping students develop an attachment to the American project. The following is a summary of how the Summer Institute prepared educators for that work. A more detailed evaluation with programmatic suggestions is forthcoming.

»Building Relationships

Civic Spirit has already created a community of practice for individuals working to enhance civics education in their schools and has the potential to grow it even more. Nearly all Institute participants came away feeling that it was valuable to learn with other colleagues and that they wanted to stay connected throughout the year.

“I felt every day I was in a room with such talented, intellectual, passionate educators who are doing everything in their power to engage the next generation. It was a beautiful experience to share our stories, our hopes and dreams for our students, and, of course, the challenges we face as educators in the 21st century world we inhabit.”

»The Benefits of a Diverse Cohort

The diversity of the schools in the initial Civic Spirit cohort was also an opportunity for learning. They found engaging with one another to be valuable for their own learning and for their schools. For example, educators from a Jewish and a Catholic discovered a shared interest in using biblical prophetic texts to teach civics in their respective schools. **Six pairs of schools made some plan for collaboration during the academic year.**

“We explored how our populations may come from different religions and represent diverse socio-economic backgrounds, yet at the same time, common themes about belonging, the feeling of being ‘dual citizens’, and the role of faith in regard to civic engagement emerged. I know many of my students lack the opportunity to speak with people outside of our ‘bubble’ and see this as an authentic means to have real conversations about our civic life and faith traditions.”

“The institute was truly innovative in planting the setting for this learning among a heterogeneous group of faith-based schools that were distinct not only in religious affiliation, but also in the student demographics across the socioeconomic, national-origin- educational background, and race and gender spectra. This cross-section of the New York area further added multiple contours and lenses from which to approach the key essential questions such as what is civic responsibility and how can we link citizens with the democratic process?”

»The Value of Primary Sources and Literature

The response to the text-based sessions at the Summer Institute was overwhelmingly positive. Many participants say they plan to incorporate these texts into their own teaching. Some particularly enjoyed studying literature as a way to promote civic engagement.

“The text-based sessions, led by scholars in various disciplines provided a wide array of compelling anchors from which to propel a multi-layered approach to a civics course of study that would include foundational documents, literature, philosophy, and faith.”

“The use of literature was extremely appealing to me, as a non-expert in history, and I think will be easier to share with students than some of the very sophisticated historical texts.”

»Centering Emotion in Pedagogy

The Summer Institute also featured workshops on pedagogy. A common thread throughout these sessions was the need for students to feel an emotional connection to the American project in order to be civically engaged. Civic Spirit can be a laboratory for emotion-centered pedagogy in civics.

“Fomenting civic responsibility via action civics was modeled through truly enlightening techniques for fostering respectful dialogue, addressing how to ignite civic awareness and efficacy, and how to gain consensus amidst divergent agendas. I appreciated all aspects of this rich exploratory mission and truly gained from the invaluable contributions of the educators.”

“The sessions on pedagogy were fabulous and truly left me with a bounty of ideas to integrate into my Civic Spirit sessions.”

»Exploring Civic Belonging

During a particularly tense session about Thomas Jefferson’s legacy, one teacher shared how he reframes this history for his mostly minority students. He said:

“Being a history teacher has helped me love America a little more. I see America today as the reconstituting of a good idea. It started as a good idea but was only intended for a small group. But everyone wants that good idea. **Equality in the Declaration of Independence includes me whether you want that or not.** I recognize that I’m not perfect, but I want a perfect country. That’s what inspires me and maybe what will inspire my students.”

This comment raised the idea of *civic belonging* as an important goal for civics education. The idea came up again throughout the remainder of the Institute. During the Q&A portion of course presentations one teacher asked:

“I really appreciate what you have shared about your teaching philosophy, but I was curious how you would teach for belonging here in America to my students who are African American, who are undocumented, and who struggle feeling at home? How do you teach that feeling of belonging to your students who feel like Israel, not the United States, is their homeland?”

The teacher answered:

“I appreciated what another teacher said earlier this week about the need to belong, to authentically belong. When I teach for belonging I have to help students see these texts and to demand that they belong.”

»Overall Impressions

The average rating of the Summer Institute was 4.76/5 with no respondent rating it below 4. All but one respondent agreed or strongly agreed that they would be interested in attending a Civic Spirit Summer Institute next year while **all respondents** agreed or strongly agreed that other stakeholders from their school would benefit from attending.

“I honestly felt this Institute was one of the best professional experiences I have had. I felt a true community begin to form around our commitment to civic education and engagement.”

“One walked away from the week-long experience of immersion in civics thought with more questions, increased depth from which to ponder them, and a mosaic of ideas from which to pilot the formulation of projects that offer concrete and viable solutions for the community issues our students connect with.”