

# Evaluation for the Field of Civics Education



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# Introduction

The following document, prepared by an independent evaluator, tells the story of one of Civic Spirit's first initiatives: the Summer Institute. It also documents the signature pedagogies for civics education that emerged from it.

The Summer Institute, run by Civic Spirit together with the Jack Miller Center, took place in New York City and was attended by representatives from all thirteen of Civic Spirit's first-year partner schools. Talented faculty taught sessions on primary source texts about democracy and American government, expert pedagogues shared techniques for how to make the material of civics come alive for students in classrooms, and educators worked together to plan for the coming year.

Those elements were all planned well ahead of the Institute by Civic Spirit and Jack Miller Center staff. But the story of the Institute as it actually took place contained much more. Educators connected with one another about their shared interest in civics, their faith backgrounds, and their commitment to their students' learning. The week had an emotional arc. Conversations about the nature of American history and identity could at times grow heated, but by the end of the week, participating educators felt a renewed sense of commitment to doing the complex work of civics education. These conversations also revealed a new goal for civics education: to promote a feeling of civic belonging in students.

The Summer Institute combined a number of promising educational approaches for participating educators, what this report refers to as signature pedagogies. The educators studied primary sources with expert faculty. They experienced civics through the arts: short stories, music, and textiles. They participated in sessions emphasizing the importance of emotion in teaching and learning. Civic Spirit staff facilitated learning by beginning each morning with reflective and personal opening questions, by regularly checking in with and nurturing participants, and by making sure the faculty taught in a way that recognized the intellectual and educational talents of the participants. These signature pedagogies could prove useful for civics education beyond the Civic Spirit/JMC Summer Institute but more research is required to understand how they might be associated with desired outcomes in student civic behavior.



# Methodology

The design of Civic Spirit's evaluation is developing alongside Civic Spirit as a program. At this early stage, the primary goals of the evaluation are to tell the story of what Civic Spirit is learning as it continues to define its desired outcomes. It does not yet seek to prove that a particular model of civics education will result in positive student outcomes like voting or other kinds of civic action, but rather it attempts to document what Civic Spirit has discovered about the perceived successes and remaining gaps in civics education at its partner schools.

To begin telling that story, an independent evaluator, NYU doctoral candidate Daniel Olson, attended all of Civic Spirit's Summer Institute. He did so as a participant-observer, writing detailed field notes on each session, talking regularly with participants throughout the week, and also contributing to the conversations about primary source texts and pedagogy. As an embedded evaluator, Daniel had a front-row seat to the story of Civic Spirit that was already emerging during the Institute.

In addition to observing all Summer Institute sessions, Daniel asked participants to fill out pre and post-Institute questionnaires. The pre-Institute questionnaire focused on the educators' current perceptions of civics education in their schools as well as their own comfort level teaching civics. A number of the questions were adapted from the [International Study of Civic Education](#). A follow-up survey asking the same questions, to measure change in perception and confidence, will be sent out at the end of Civic Spirit's first academic year, in May or June of 2019.

The post-Institute questionnaire, which was sent out to participants about a week after the Institute, measured their satisfaction with various aspects of the week: session content and usefulness, overall impressions, and food and logistics. The questions were written by Daniel with input from the Civic Spirit staff. Participants filled out the questionnaires anonymously. Questions that measured satisfaction with specific sessions and faculty members were used internally by Civic Spirit to prepare for future summer institutes, but teacher responses to more open-ended questions are used here to tell Civic Spirit's developing story.

To tell that story, Daniel reviewed his field notes, the survey responses, and additional feedback provided to Civic Spirit staff and examined them for shared themes. What emerged from this examination of themes were a number of Signature Pedagogies used throughout the week of the Summer Institute. These pedagogies are suspected to both enhance educators' confidence and to be successful for use in classrooms. Further evaluation will be needed to test this hypothesis, but the developing approaches to civic education being considered and tested by Civic Spirit and its partner schools are already worth sharing with the larger field.



# The Story of the Summer Institute

The Civic Spirit Summer Institute took place from July 30th-August 3rd, 2018 at Macaulay Honors College in New York City. Twenty-four participants joined from thirteen different schools: seven Jewish and six Catholic. Most of the participating schools were high schools, with two middle schools represented. Two, one Jewish and one Catholic, were all-girls schools, and two, one Jewish and one Catholic, were all-boys schools. Before the Institute began each participant received a 200-page Reader, which contained the primary source texts that would be discussed during the Institute. Three main threads stood out in the story of the Summer Institute: relationship building, an emotional arc, and the emergence of civic belonging as an important goal for civics education

**24 Participants**

**13 Schools**

7 Jewish

6 Catholic

## Relationship Building

The Institute was planned in such a way to promote interactions between the participants. Daily breakfasts, lunches, and snack breaks were opportunities for discussion, fellowship, and relationship building. Jack Miller Center staff assigned seats each day to make sure participants were sitting next to new colleagues each time. Smaller breakout groups met for an hour at the end of the first four days of the Institute to discuss their plans for implementing Civic Spirit in their schools.

Prior to the Institute, it was not an explicit goal of Civic Spirit to have schools collaborate with each other beyond the Civic Spirit Day to be held in May of 2019. All of these opportunities for relationship-building during the Institute resulted in participants making plans to partner with one another during the coming academic year. The Summer Institute helped form a community of practice around civics education. Even those participants who did not make specific plans to partner with another school came away from the Institute feeling that it was valuable to learn with colleagues and that they wanted to stay connected during 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 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 school discovered a shared interest in using biblical prophetic texts to teach civics in their respective schools. Six pairs of schools made some kind of 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?”

Improving civics education is a complex and difficult task. Civic Spirit has learned that collaboration and relationship-building among educators across schools—even schools from different faith traditions—can inspire and motivate them to do this work.

## An Emotional Arc

The Institute mostly consisted of sessions facilitated by:

1. College professors who taught primary source texts on democracy
2. Expert pedagogues who shared strategies for making the material speak to students
3. Panelists from a variety of backgrounds ranging from faith leaders to alumni of a high school program run out of Columbia University called “Freedom and Citizenship,” to some of the teachers themselves.



The first session of the Institute made the emotional stakes of teaching civics in a democracy immediate and real. Peter Nelson, a pedagogy expert who had previously worked with Facing History and Ourselves, had the participants read from three different texts about life in non-democratic societies (Kafka's "The Trial", 1984, and testimony from North Korea) and asked the participants how they felt reading those texts. This session touched on a theme that came up over and over again throughout the Institute: that in order for students to actively participate in civic life, they must feel connected to the material of civics.

But the Institute also demonstrated some of the potential perils of emotion in civics education. The Summer Institute did not take place in a vacuum. Competing ideas and narratives about the American past and present divide large swaths of America and some of these debates entered the Summer Institute in ways that ultimately proved fruitful for learning but also could have derailed it. Even in the early session on life in authoritarian societies, tensions over the United States as a democracy emerged when one participant compared the texts to the way prisoners are held at Riker's Island.

These tensions would continue to be brought up in nearly every session. Participants engaged in heated discussions over the legacies of the founding fathers, particularly Thomas Jefferson whose status as both the author of the Declaration of Independence and as a slave-owner proved contentious. These conversations could at times feel frustrating to some of the participants. One participant shared that during these difficult conversations he found himself forced into a posture of being apologetic for the American experiment. Another explained in a questionnaire response that he wished participants' personal political views about blemishes in the nation's history had not overshadowed what he considered to be the more important goal of fostering civic spirit in the students. Other participants would likely have disagreed, asserting that acknowledging such blemishes is necessary for fostering a complete and honest civic spirit. One even shared that in her school they have struck a balance between honestly criticizing and embracing their religious tradition but have not found that balance when discussing American issues.

Perhaps one explanation of this dynamic is the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the different kinds of schools. This is an area that requires some further research.

A goal of some of the participants who said they worked at schools with wealthy student bodies was to help their relatively privileged students examine with a critical eye how the American experiment has benefitted some while leaving others behind. For those teaching at schools with low income student bodies, an important goal was to help their students feel like there was a place for them in this country. For them, it was still important to be honest about the shortcomings of the founding documents and fathers, but they wanted to maintain a sense of optimism about the promise of America.



The Civic Spirit staff noticed this dynamic and took some important steps to help keep the Institute on track. They had individual conversations with the participants who seemed particularly upset with the discussions, they gave faculty more explicit direction for how to treat the participants as not just students of text but also as expert teachers, and they began each day by asking participants to share more personally about some of the controversial topics that had come up the previous day. These strategies will be described more thoroughly under **Signature Pedagogies**.

They also amplified a more moderate position that teachers from both Jewish and Catholic schools shared as a strategy for how to teach America's complex past: namely, to emphasize how individuals throughout history have demanded the expansion of America's founding ideas to include more groups.

Perhaps had participants been given time at the beginning of the Institute to explain to the group what their students and schools are like, what motivates them to teach, and what assumptions they bring about primary source texts that would have mitigated some of these tensions. Not only would such a conversation have allowed colleagues to kick-start relationship building, it also might have led to discussions with greater understanding and empathy.

But the tension itself was part of the arc of the week for the participants. In an early conversation during the Institute, one participant shared that her daughter felt cynical and angry about America. Two days later she reported back to the group that, inspired by the Summer Institute, she had a meaningful, adult conversation with her daughter about what she does appreciate about America.

At the very end of the Institute an opera singer came to sing "God Bless America" in English, Yiddish, and Spanish. Civic Spirit staff framed the performance by reading an [op/ed](#) about the various interpretations of and reactions to that American hymn. They also asked the performer to sing the song as a question. The resulting performance was quite moving and would not have been as powerful without the arc of the week.

Finally, this tension excavated what could be an important, even a necessary goal, for successful civics education: civic belonging.

## Exploring Civic Belonging

During the 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. One of the opening questions on the fourth day was "**Where and when do you feel like you belong?**" One participant shared how she associates teaching a feeling of belonging with teaching students how to approach challenging situations in their lives with wonder. The story about the participant's teenage daughter also emerged from this conversation. One person said simply that he felt a sense of belonging at Citi Field when the scoreboard showed the Yankees losing another game. Participants also shared that they do not feel a sense of belonging, either in their religious communities or in a polarized United States.

The idea of civic belonging also came up during the final panel of the week, where teachers presented what they planned to do for their Civic Spirit courses. During the Q&A portion at the end, one participant asked of one of the panelists:

"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?"

She 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."

Those in the field of civics education should continue to explore and research the pedagogy of civic belonging. They should thoroughly describe some of the strategies for teaching it and determine if indeed helping students feel a sense of civic belonging is associated with positive outcomes for civic behavior.

It is important to fully acknowledge that teaching democracy, American history, and civics can be difficult and emotional work. The Summer Institute demonstrated the value of letting educators and students authentically grapple with those challenges, while still providing support and encouragement. Those supports could also be described as the four **signature pedagogies** of Civic Spirit.





# Signature Pedagogies

1. Primary Sources from across the Humanities
2. Emotion-Centered Learning
3. Contemplative Questions
4. Responsive Leadership

Civic Spirit used a number of what could be described as signature pedagogies during the Summer Institute. Some of these educational approaches were planned long in advance of the Institute. Others emerged as reactions to some of the tensions that emerged during the week, described in the previous section.

This evaluation of the Summer Institute does not rigorously test each educational approach for effectiveness in promoting desired outcomes for student civic behavior—that is a task that remains for future evaluations of Civic Spirit—but it is suspected that these methods can both motivate teachers of civics and be used effectively in civics classrooms.

## 1. Primary Sources from across the Humanities

About a month and a half before the Summer Institute, Civic Spirit colleagues were emailed a Reader prepared by the Jack Miller Center, a 200 page or so PDF that contained the primary source materials that would be discussed during the Institute. Included were excerpts from Plato and Aristotle, the Founding Fathers, some secondary sources on citizenship, and short stories by American authors about civic themes. Most sessions that used the Civic Spirit Reader were facilitated by guest faculty brought in by the Jack Miller Center.

The responses to these sessions from Civic Spirit colleagues in the post-Institute questionnaire were overwhelmingly positive. A large majority of colleagues agreed or strongly agreed that the content of each session was engaging, that the instructor of each session was engaging, and that the texts used in each session were useful for their schools.

“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.”

Some particularly enjoyed studying literature as a way to promote civic engagement.



“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.”

A few participants mentioned in their questionnaire responses that they wish there had been more texts in the Reader that spoke more directly to their student population, perhaps from a Hispanic perspective or from a more explicitly religious perspective. But the overall feedback is clear: participants in the Summer Institute enjoyed learning these primary texts together and plan to use at least some of them in their schools.

The Institute also allowed teachers to engage with the arts beyond literature. Already this report described how it closed with the singing of “God Bless America” in English, Yiddish, and Spanish, sung not with confidence in American exceptionalism but rather with sincere and thoughtful questioning.

Additionally, at the end of the fourth day of the Institute, participants were invited to the home of Rabbi Robert and Virginia Hirt, the founders of Civic Spirit, for a reception. During the reception, Virginia Hirt spoke about her grandmother, the textile designer Marguerita Mergentime, whose designs were popular in the 1930s and are now part of a number of prominent museums’ permanent collections. She showed a design Mergentime had done of various political slogans used throughout American history printed in their original fonts. The piece was striking and spoke to the discussions that had happened over the previous four days. A number of questionnaire responses specifically listed this presentation as a highlight of the week.

It is also worth mentioning that the musical “Hamilton” was mentioned by a number of educators during the Institute. The popularity of that show as well as its producers’ commitment to using it for educational purposes have been a boon for civics education, at least in New York. Indeed, one of the Civic Spirit schools used Hamilton’s music as a way to begin the program with students. The tremendous success of Hamilton along with the warm feedback and engagement elicited by the arts-based moments during the Summer Institute demonstrate how the arts can be an effective teaching tool for civics.

## 2. Emotion-Centered Learning

Over the course of the week there were 5 sessions about the pedagogy of teaching civics and citizenship. Three of the sessions were run by Peter Nelson, who also attended the entire Civic Spirit Institute. The other two were led by Caroline Mehl from Open Mind and Brooke Wallace from Generation Citizen, two outside organizations also looking to enhance civics education in schools in various ways.



Participants also responded well to these sessions. Many said that the sessions focused on pedagogy were a top three highlight for them. A majority agreed or strongly agreed that the content of each session was engaging, that the instructor of each session was engaging, and that the material was useful for their schools.

“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.”

Peter Nelson’s three sessions, which were focused on how to center emotion in civics education, got particularly strong feedback. One participant called him “a star [who] showed by example with his expert pedagogy”.

This evaluation already described Peter Nelson’s opening session on life in authoritarian societies. Another of his sessions asked participants to think explicitly about to whom they feel a sense of obligation and how they might help themselves and their students expand or change the people to whom they feel that responsibility. He then asked teachers to think about where they would place the more abstract concepts of democracy and the Constitution in their ‘hierarchy of obligation’. He concluded by explaining that when teaching this material “there needs to be a there there and a care there.” In other words, even the richest content will not affect students’ personal commitments if they are not made to feel some kind of attachment towards that content.

“These sessions were terrific. Peter Nelson showed his pedagogical expertise in practicing what he preaches by modeling some great lessons for us. Again, I reiterate, how important a role pedagogy plays in the education of high school students and the need to push our teachers to think differently about their praxis and their role in the classroom.”

These sessions and the reaction to them demonstrate that the primary sources, however fascinating, cannot do the work of civics education by themselves. They must be



accompanied by emotion-centered pedagogy. A number of different schools are experimenting with different pedagogical approaches to civics education and future evaluations of Civic Spirit will be able to describe more thoroughly the specific strategies those schools are taking to spark students' civic emotions.

### 3. Contemplative Questions

In response to some of the challenging conversations that took place on the first two days of the Institute, Civic Spirit staff decided to begin each of the remaining three days with a reflective question, inviting participants to share in a more personal way some of the difficult discussion topics from the previous day. During the session on James Madison a debate emerged about the value of venerating America's founding documents such as the Constitution. Should it be a goal of civics education to teach students to venerate these texts? The question prompted honest reflection from participants. Some pointed out that these texts were not always venerated as they are now. Others said we might teach students to venerate the process of writing and amending texts but not necessarily the texts themselves. A few teachers made connections to veneration in their religious traditions, raising the question of how veneration might look different for 'secular' and 'religious' ideas.

The next morning, Civic Spirit staff opened the day by asking the participants to share what they venerated. One shared that he venerated God before saying that he also valued his history, his US citizenship, his country, and his family. He reflected that 'venerate' was a tough word. A second participant shared that she venerates both God and her own sense of wonder in front of things. A third shared a sweet custom she learned from a rabbi of hers: that instead of touching the Torah with the fringes of his prayer shawl and then kissing the fringes, he would instead touch the student carrying the Torah with the fringes, as a recognition of the divine spark in him or her. She explained that she had a reverential relationship to searching for those divine sparks in her own students. One last participant quoted the Brothers of his church tradition and explained that the care that people give each other will "speak with vitality of the gift of life".

This opening question and the answers it evoked allowed for a bridge to be built between the previous day's conversation about venerating American texts and the most precious values and beliefs of the participants in the room. It offered a peaceful moment for personal reflection and sharing. It gave people of different faiths the opportunity to talk about what mattered most to them. It was a chance to live out the kind of emotion-centered pedagogy that was such a focus of the week.

The final two days also began with contemplative questions, one about belonging which was already discussed and one about what participants were going home to. Most participants who shared said they were going on vacations to see the wonders of the



country: National Parks like Acadia and Yosemite and amusement parks like Disney World and Sesame Place. Another said the civic spirit would be continuing for him at...jury duty. This question was a little more lighthearted than the previous two but was appropriate for a closing day and still elicited some reflection on ways to experience being American.

## 4. Responsive Leadership

Civic Spirit staff were paying close attention to the reactions of participants during the Institute sessions, especially those sessions that became heated. They noticed when participants seemed particularly passionate or disengaged or upset by the direction of the conversation. The staff regularly checked in with those participants, talking to them during breaks and meals, emailing them at the end of the day, and also speaking on the phone with them to better understand their concerns and to reassure them that Civic Spirit staff would support them in their work. The outreach was appreciated, with participants offering praise in their questionnaire responses and at the end of the Institute to the staff. Taking the time to support and care for educators doing the difficult work of bringing civics education to their schools is necessary. Civic Spirit and other educational organizations working on civics education, beyond providing content and pedagogic skills for the classroom, can be resources for this kind of nurturing support.

Civic Spirit staff also spoke to faculty throughout the Summer Institute to help them better understand the audience of educators and their needs. They asked the professors to avoid too much frontal presentation and to read from the primary source texts out loud. Most importantly, they were reminded that the educators attending the Institute were both serious intellectuals and talented pedagogues. These reminders helped faculty, especially later in the week, lead discussions that were more like Socratic seminars than lectures. They made sure faculty were modeling a way of teaching primary source material that educators could then bring into their own classrooms. They enhanced feelings of mutual respect between the educators and the faculty.

## Recommendations and Remaining Questions for Civics Education

The following lists contain recommendations and remaining questions for the field of civics education based on the story and signature pedagogies that emerged from the Civic Spirit/JMC Summer Institute.



## Recommendations for the Field

- Plan courses in civics that spark students' emotional connection to the material. Make primary source texts come alive for students by helping them draw connections to the things toward which they already feel an emotional attachment. Expanding the canon of founding documents to include short stories, art, and music is one option.
- Explore and research the pedagogy of civic belonging. It was clear from the Institute that a number of teachers feel like their students do not feel like they have a meaningful stake in the American project.
- Recognize that civics education can be difficult because of how competing American narratives exist among different individuals and communities and can heighten emotions. Give educators opportunities to share about their personal, religious, and school contexts, their student bodies, what motivates them to teach, and what assumptions they bring about the United States and its founding texts to promote conversations about civics education with even more understanding and empathy.
- Offer more intensive, multi-day learning and professional development opportunities for civics teachers. The educators at the Summer Institute found discussions on primary sources on democracy and pedagogical approaches valuable and useful both personally and professionally. Most of all though, they appreciated the chance to work with and learn from other educators confronting similar challenges in civics education.
- Beyond intensive professional development, offer opportunities for civics educators to interact during the year. Those could be pedagogy workshops, reading groups, web conferences, and more.
- Work closely with educators to document the work they do in their schools and make it a resource for other schools seeking to enhance their teaching of civics.



## Remaining Questions

- What exactly is civic belonging? What should researchers look for when trying to measure civic belonging in students? What pedagogical approaches facilitate the development of a feeling of civic belonging? Is a higher level of civic belonging associated with desired action-oriented outcomes like voting?
- What resources do educators need to go beyond just teaching content to also helping students make an emotional connection to the material of civics education? What strategies have worked? Do they work differently in different school contexts?
- Which components of Civic Spirit will prove to be most valuable to schools? Once those components are identified, what will be needed to scale Civic Spirit beyond its original cohort of 13 schools?

