Civic Spirit Day Evaluation

CIVIC SPIRIT DAY 2019
Our democracy needs you

Prepared by Daniel Olson
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Introduction

On May 1st, 2019 Civic Spirit held its first ever Civic Spirit Day at the JCC of Manhattan. Civic Spirit is a new initiative that seeks to help schools of various faith traditions enhance civic belonging and responsibility in their student, faculty, and parent communities. The organization launched just prior to the 2018-19 school year, initially working with 13 Jewish and Catholic schools in the New York City area. Civic Spirit Day was the culmination of a year’s worth of civic activity at the schools. Depending on how Civic Spirit was implemented in each school, it took the form of electives, clubs, assemblies, debates, or parent outreach.

Civic Spirit Day was an opportunity for students and teachers from all of the schools to gather together for a day of learning and collaboration across difference through the theme of citizenship as service. **Over 140 students from 10 different schools (6 Catholic and 4 Jewish; 8 high schools and 2 middle schools) attended.** Though there were more Catholic schools represented, there was about an equal number of students from Jewish and Catholic schools. They were split up into 13 different groups: 10 for high school students and 3 for middle school students. Each group was assigned an adult facilitator from outside the schools. Teachers and chaperones mostly sat separately from students, observing from the sidelines.

After Civic Spirit Day, students were sent a questionnaire to offer feedback on their experiences: 70 filled it out— a response rate of around 50%. The feedback from students on the questionnaires was overwhelmingly positive, with a huge majority strongly agreeing or agreeing that they enjoyed Civic Spirit Day. There were no statistically significant differences across categories of race, gender, or religious affiliation of school for any of the scale-type questions.

*Chart shows the distribution of student responses to the question: I enjoyed attending Civic Spirit Day.*
The Arc of the Day: Civic Building, Civic Belonging, Civic Spirit

The arc of Civic Spirit Day was deliberately designed to first build up a sense of community and belonging and only then to collaborate on a shared civic project. The Civic Spirit team wanted to foster sentiments of belonging between students before they embarked on the project, believing that these emotional connections would develop a sense of responsibility to the shared aims of the group.

The first activity, focused on civic building, had each table of students silently build towers from objects they brought with them. The second activity, focused on belonging, provided students an opportunity to share and listen to stories about their lives, centered on themes of belonging, influence, and collaboration. During this activity each table also designed a group ritual that they would return to throughout the day, which would serve to bind the group in celebration.

After lunch, the main activity commenced: designing a three-month long service program for graduating high school seniors in New York City. Each group was responsible for coming up with the idea for a program as well as designing a subway advertisement and a radio spot to promote it. While clearer instruction and role definition could have made for a smoother start to this activity, by the time it got rolling, students from across schools were energetically collaborating on their subway ads and radio spots. At the end of the activity, each of the thirteen groups presented an idea for a service program to the entire room. Civic Spirit intends to work with a select group of student attendees to present some of the ideas generated during the day to NYC Service, Office of the Mayor.

The vast majority of students either strongly agreed or agreed that during these activities their thoughts, skills, and talents were recognized by others in their group.

In my group, my thoughts, skills, and/or talents were recognized and valued.

- Strongly Disagree: 1.4%
- Disagree: 7.1%
- Strongly Agree: 52.9%
- Agree: 38.6%
In questionnaire responses, students reported feeling increasingly comfortable at their tables over the course of the day, suggesting that the arc worked as intended. One student reported, “As my group got more comfortable with each other they were really able to take my ideas and tweak them to better suit all of our members’ visions.” And a second remarked, “In the beginning, it was a bit awkward for everyone to try and get ideas up and we were all not even taking ourselves seriously. However, it was when we came to discover how to mesh all of our ideas together that we took ourselves seriously.”

Marc Kramer, the expert facilitator hired by Civic Spirit to design and run the program, led reflective conversations in between each activity, allowing students to think out loud about what they experienced and why they think they did each part of the day.

Collaborating Across Difference

A major highlight for students participating in Civic Spirit Day was the opportunity to collaborate with students from different schools, different religious backgrounds; different racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds; and different political orientations. The largest proportion of students strongly agreed that attending Civic Spirit Day allowed them to work with students who they otherwise would not encounter.

Questionnaire responses reinforced this finding. One student remarked on working with students from different religious backgrounds: “It was really awesome. Sometimes it can feel like religion can put up a wall between us but we’re all just a bunch of teenagers going through the same experiences in different ways. Religion was just another fact about us like having brown hair or blue eyes but everyone had such wonderful personalities.”

A second wrote, “It was super cool, very fun, and really eye opening to work on projects and tasks with people who, unfortunately, I don’t think I usually work with. I was very pleasantly
surprised at the amount of respect as well as interest everyone had in the other people in
the group. I loved talking about my hobbies like fishing. It was a great feeling when, during
the breaks, other people from my table or other tables approached me and casually began
having conversations with me.”

These findings align nicely with the findings from Civic Spirit’s Summer Institute, which
suggested that relationship building was a major highlight for teachers too.

**Citizenship as Service**

One goal of Civic Spirit Day was to help students understand a vision of citizenship beyond
rights granted to people meeting a certain legal category. The day focused on citizenship as
a sense of responsibility to serve and contribute to students’ communities. The main
activity’s focus on service elevated this goal along with two presenters who spoke about
service between student activities about service from separate sectors: Professor Roosevelt
Montás from Columbia University and Marissa Shorenstein of AT&T.

Students’ post-Civic Spirit Day questionnaires asked them to offer a definition of citizenship
and to share whether the day had changed their definition. A majority of attendees said
that their definition of citizenship changed or was enhanced as a result of attending Civic
Spirit Day and a majority of students’ definitions of citizenship concerned service or
contribution in some way.

**Two notable student responses were:**

“Being at Civic Spirit Day gave me the definition of being a citizen, a real
acting citizen. Civic Spirit Day metaphorically took me to the front of the
gate and said, ‘Now it’s your turn. Don’t let us down,’ and now I’m better
prepared for it.”
“To be a citizen means to allow yourself to open your mind to making United States better, not only for yourself but for your community. It means to belong and if you feel that you don’t, citizenship can create things to help you feel like you belong. [Civic Spirit Day] increased my knowledge and understanding on American citizenship. I was challenged to understand different views aside from my own and be able to come together as one to make something work for the whole group.”

Future Civic Spirit Days

Civic Spirit Day has great potential to continue as a program. Student and teacher responses were overwhelmingly positive and there is a hunger for students to get outside of their school bubbles and meet new people.

I would recommend a program like Civic Spirit Day to other students at my school.

Civic Spirit Day provided that opportunity. The vast majority of Civic Spirit Day attendees said they strongly agreed or agreed that they would recommend attending a program like Civic Spirit Day to other students at their schools.

Methodology

The design of Civic Spirit’s evaluation is developing alongside Civic Spirit as a program. In the program’s first year, the primary goals of the evaluation are to tell the story of what Civic Spirit is learning as it continues to define the aims it wants Civic Spirit schools to share. Emerging shared aims include Civic Belonging, Democratic Fluency, and Civic Skills. At the upcoming Summer Institute, these aims will get refined as consultants from Knead Partners run workshops with teachers from Civic Spirit schools.

The evaluation plan 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. Rather, it
attempts to document what Civic Spirit has discovered about the perceived successes and remaining gaps in civics education at its partner schools and in programming that it directly runs like the Summer Institute for educators and Civic Spirit Day for students.

To tell that story, an independent evaluator, NYU doctoral candidate Daniel Olson, observed Civic Spirit Day as an embedded evaluator. He spent the day taking detailed notes on what was happening in the room--joining the facilitator training in advance of the day, standing from the side viewing the entire room, sitting at a particular table of students watching them work together, and speaking one-on-one with Civic Spirit staff, facilitators, and teachers throughout the day--trying to understand their observations and impressions in the moment. In this way, Daniel had a front-row seat to the story of Civic Spirit Day.

In addition to observing the day, Daniel asked students and facilitators to fill out a questionnaire. The questionnaire for students contained four sections. The first included 6 Likert-type scale questions asking students to share the extent to which they agreed about various aspects of the day. Some of these questions were adapted from a tool developed by Harvard School of Education post-doctoral fellow David Comer Kidd to assess participants’ experiences in civics education programming. In other sections students were asked to respond to open-ended questions allowing them to express their reactions to Civic Spirit Day in more detail, to share their satisfaction with various logistical aspects of the day, and to share information about their backgrounds: gender, race/ethnicity, grade, and school. Teachers at Civic Spirit schools will also be asked to reflect on Civic Spirit Day in a questionnaire to go out shortly. This evaluation may be edited to incorporate their responses.

Civic Spirit Day was built around three different activities. The first two focused on relationship building. The first was a fun, collaborative exercise while the second aimed to enhance the feelings of belonging and connection within each table. These led to the final activity, the main event of the day, which had each table design a three-month service program for graduating high school seniors in New York City. Peppered in between these activities were presentations from outside guests and reflection exercises facilitated by Marc Kramer, who also designed the programming for the day.

**Details and Logistics**

The day was held in the auditorium at the Manhattan JCC. Thirteen round tables were set up in the middle of the room for students and facilitators, with smaller café tables in the back for teachers. Banners with the names of all Civic Spirit schools hung from the balcony level. On the back wall, there were big posters giving definitions of words like polis, civitas, and demos. A screen hanging at the front of the room displayed pictures taken at Civic Spirit schools. A small stage was set up just beneath the screen.
As students arrived, they were greeted in the auditorium’s lobby and given a nametag with their table number. Breakfast food was set out at tables in the back for them to eat before the program began. Throughout the day, students were given the opportunity to grab snacks. In between the second and third activities, a boxed kosher lunch was served with a few different non-meat sandwich options.

On the questionnaire, students were asked to share their feedback on how well their needs were met during the day. A majority felt all or almost all of their needs were met by the physical accessibility of the space, the ability to hear presenters, and the location of the Day at the Manhattan JCC. Some noted that it was a long trip for them but recognized the need to have it at a somewhat central location for all the schools, while another from New Jersey said the location and early start time of 8:30 am meant they had to stay in the city the night before in order to make it on time.

Areas that could use some consideration for future Civic Spirit Days are food, room size, and set-up. Many students commented that they would have preferred a greater variety of food options, with some finding the sandwiches unappetizing. Others noted the tight space between tables in the room. While most could hear the presenters just fine from the stage, when all groups were talking and brainstorming at once, it could be hard for some to hear across their tables.

Please rate how well your needs were met on a scale of 1-5 for the following program components:
Civic Spirit Day opened with prayer. Tamara Tweel, the director of Civic Spirit, invited up a student from a Jewish Day School to read a prayer he had written for the United States. The words of his prayer were projected onto the screen. His prayer included these words: “We will not allow the comfortable walls of our past experience, our familiar communities, and our long-held beliefs and ideologies restrain us.” His prayer was followed by a teacher from one of the Catholic schools reading a poem from a student who was unable to attend Civic Spirit Day. It included these words: “Citizenship used to mean more. And it’s making a comeback.”

These prayers expressed the goal and theme of Civic Spirit Day: to collaborate across difference around the idea of citizenship as service.

Marc Kramer, the expert facilitator hired to design and run Civic Spirit Day, took the stage. Before beginning the first activity, he asked students to hold their hands together and to pay attention to the placement of their thumbs. He then told them to switch their thumb position and to call out how that felt. Students shouted out “Uncomfortable!” “Ew!” “Strange!” and “Annoying!” Marc then told them to switch back to the original position and asked students to comment on how that felt. One student said, “It feels better, but still a little different.”

Marc, as he would do over and over again during Civic Spirit Day, asked students to share what they thought the purpose of the exercise was. In a questionnaire response, one student remarked that they felt their ideas were taken most seriously when Marc engaged and invited students to share them during these moments. One student said, “to help us start to get out of our comfort zone.” Another said to “start with a small activity.” A third offered, “To show that we all have thumbs, but might employ them in different ways.”

After taking these responses, Marc added that over the course of the day students might sometimes feel totally comfortable, like they did when their hands were in their original position, but other times they might feel some discomfort, like when they moved their thumbs. He promised the students that they would always be able to metaphorically go back to their first thumb, encouraging them to pull back from the table if they found themselves in conversations that started to feel bad.
This simple exercise set a positive tone for the rest of the day, explicitly acknowledging the discomfort some students might feel working with people of different backgrounds and asking them to try it out anyway.

This opening exercise of ‘civic building’ continued in a more literal way. Marc told the students to be silent, to clear everything off the tables, and then to put five things of theirs back on the table.

He then instructed the groups to take three minutes to, in silence, build the tallest structure they could using all of objects on the table. The room mostly remained silent as students started building their structures. Occasionally, the silence was broken by laughter and smiles when a tower collapsed. There was a sweet energy throughout the room. Folders, phones, bags, pens, markers, and keys were used as building materials at the various tables.

After the three minutes were up, some tables had high towers built of folders while other towers collapsed at the last minute. Marc asked, “Who won?” Some students initially pointed to the tallest tower. One girl shared that she thought her group won because even though her table’s tower wasn’t the tallest, they used most of their materials. Marc said, “Who thought this was a competition?” and most students raised their hands. He clarified that it was never explicitly framed as a competition and asked the students why they thought it was. Responses included: “This is a cultural thing. Everything is about being number one, being the best”, “You said to make the tallest structure, which must mean taller than something else.” Marc reminded the room that he said to build the tallest thing you can build, not necessarily in relation to others.

The next question he posed to the students asked them to reflect on what they would do differently if they could do the exercise again. Student responses included looking at all objects before building, not being in competitive mode, thinking of a plan in advance, trying out different ideas to build the tallest tower, using all the resources, and choosing different resources. Marc followed up by asking which objects they would have used instead, and the room had a collective chuckle at some of the responses: their chairs, the podium, even the students themselves!

Marc suggested that another way the students could think about their objects was as ‘resources’ and encouraged them to bring resources from their lived experiences into the work of Civic Spirit Day. He told the room that they would not be building any more towers and then asked what they would be doing for the remainder of the day. Students
responded: “Have a more open mind,” “Build relationships with other people,” and “Gain teamwork and communication skills.” Marc finished this section of the day by sharing with students his goal of building a community: one where all students in the room can help their outside world because of the new ideas developed to solve problems.

Civic Belonging

Roosevelt Montás

After the first activity Tamara introduced Professor Roosevelt Montás from Columbia University, the Director of the Center for the Core Curriculum. Professor Montás was one of the guest instructors at the Summer Institute for teachers in July 2018 and was well-received.

Professor Montás began by explaining that civic tasks are about how people live lives as themselves in the world and then contribute something of those selves to society. He spoke of his own background as an immigrant who moved to the United States from the Dominican Republic at age 12. He asked if anyone in the room was Dominican. About a dozen student hands went up. He commented that you cannot go far in New York City without encountering others with Dominican backgrounds. This moment in Professor Montás’ speech signaled to students in the room from immigrant backgrounds that their stories and contributions were welcomed in the space. Marc had mentioned to me that students from Jewish day schools may have already felt that sense of comfort from the familiarity of the JCC setting. Montás’ sharing of his personal story widened the circle of belonging, which is necessary for collaboration.

Montás’ speech continued with explorations of the origins and meanings of civic ideas like polis, civitas, and demos. He explained how English words like politics, citizenship, and democracy developed from these Greek and Latin terms, emphasizing that in a democratic society, citizens are members of political communities whose voices matter.

He concluded with two quotes: one from the philosopher Cicero and the other from the biblical book of Micah. Cicero said that “the search for truth and its investigation are peculiar to man” and that the “discovery of obscure and wonderful things is necessary for a blessed life.” Montás interpreted this to mean that an ingredient of living well is the capacity to discover new things, and that an important goal for civic communities is ensuring that this pursuit be available to all.

He asked how this could be done and answered with Micah’s famous words: “live justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” He asked students to imagine God (whatever that means to them) as “your highest notion of good in the world”. He encouraged the students to aspire to have a humble attitude, and to never be so sure of their own
correctness. That is how, he explained, students could temper their quest for justice with their love of mercy.

Montás’ speech reinforced the main themes of Civic Spirit Day with its focus on citizenship as contribution, employing the language of faith to talk about civic engagement, and valuing the diverse life experiences of all the students in the room.

That final theme was the main focus of the day’s second activity which began after the short snack break that followed Montás’ remarks.

**Sense of Community**

Before the second activity began, facilitators joined the students’ tables. Civic Spirit recruited *facilitators* from their personal and professional networks:

Facilitator demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Men</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People of Color</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who identify as Jewish</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who were raised Catholic</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tbody>
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Many facilitators worked in the Jewish non-profit space while others had experience in education and social work. Nine facilitators were women, four were men, three were people of color, ten identified as Jewish, and two were raised Catholic. In future iterations of Civic Spirit Day, staff might consider building in more time to recruit a group of facilitators that better reflect the demographics of the participants. They all participated in a training webinar with Marc Kramer and Civic Spirit staff to prepare them for their role. During that session Marc explained the **goals of the second activity to them:**

1. To create a sense of community at the table and to demonstrate core concepts of membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection.

2. To extend the bonding that began with the civic building activity

3. To develop shared language as a foundation for the afternoon program

4. To provide a platform for telling personal stories
The three components of the activity helped achieve these goals. First, students were given a piece of paper with a picture of a hand with a question in each finger. The questions were:

1. Where do you belong?
2. Who has influenced you?
3. Who have you influenced?
4. When did you do something good?
5. What is an activity that you regularly do with other people?

These questions were chosen to help students grapple with the big themes of Civic Spirit Day: being a contributing member of a community and believing that each individual can have influence for doing good work for their community.

After students finished writing down their answers, the facilitators helped their students design a table-wide ritual that they would collectively do after each student shared one of their answers. Creating that ritual was the second component of the activity. These rituals ranged from table-banging, to hand-waving, to clapping. Marc would have the tables return to these rituals over and over again throughout the rest of the day.

Facilitators gave each student one minute to share their answer to one of the five questions on the hand. They emphasized the importance of listening closely as each person shared, even letting the timer run for one minute before anyone spoke to give them a sense of how long they would be listening each time. When each student finished sharing, the tables did their rituals.

In questionnaire responses, students indicated that they felt their ideas were taken seriously during this exercise. One wrote,

“When we were talking about our individual selves (the fingers activity) I felt as though I was heard and understood.” And another responded, “During the first bonding exercise with the hand I really felt listened to and heard.”

After students finished sharing, they discussed a series of questions about the components of belonging and about civic engagement. One facilitator reported that this more ‘academic’ section of the program resulted in less student engagement than other parts of the day. The facilitator wrote:
“The academic explanations of communal belonging in [this activity] felt pretty distant and the students offered that unsolicited feedback to me right away. They all shared that they didn’t see the point of answering those questions and instead wanted to share more of their personal stories with the new people they were meeting around the table.”

For students, the way they wanted to enhance feelings of belonging was not by reading about it, but by actually doing it through sharing stories about themselves.

After each group finished, Marc got back up on the stage and led the entire room in an extensive reflection exercise. He started by asking each table to do their ritual one by one. He asked students to notice what the rituals had in common. Students said that many of them involved clapping, using hands as a primary vehicle, that people did not use their voices, and that table members seemed happy when performing their rituals. A final student shared that there seemed to be a sense of identification. Marc asked the room to offer suggestions for other ways they could describe that identification. Responses included “community,” and that “everyone could trust and participate.”

He asked the room how they would feel if everyone at their table did the ritual except for them. Students said they would feel excluded, awkward, even betrayed. This led to a conversation about group dynamics in which students shared that the groups should have their members’ backs, should care about one another, should be respectful of individuals’ ideas and of group norms, should be committed to the group as a whole, and should be on the same page of working towards a common goal.

Marc followed up by asking how differences within a group can generate better results. Students explained that differences can allow for opposing views to be heard, for building from a larger set of ideas, and to find creative ways to mix together multiple ideas.

While facilitating whole-group portions of Civic Spirit Day, Marc made a conscious effort to switch up who he called on to speak. Some of the students raised their hands over and over
again and while Marc often called on these students to speak, he would also wait for, and encourage, other students who had not yet spoken to offer a comment. Marc privately expressed the possibility that because of differences in school cultures, some students felt more empowered to speak up in a big room, but he did an effective job of making sure that those he called on represented the gender and racial diversity of the participants. The combination of individual, small, and large group work also made space for students to participate in ways that were comfortable for them.

Marc continued the full group discussion with a reflection on what it was like to share personal stories at the tables. Students who spoke said it was scary to let themselves be vulnerable, and that they had to take down their walls and lower their own boundaries. One shared that at first they felt nervous, but after doing it, it didn’t feel that bad. Another shared that she wanted people to listen to her, not to ignore her, and that she did feel listened to. Another said it was comforting to hear the different stories and that they were relatable. Finally, a student shared that the exercise helped break down stereotypes. “Before someone opens their mouth,” she said, “we might unintentionally judge them. Once someone opens their mouth, that can change.”

Marc concluded this reflection by asking the students to think about what it was like to listen to others at their tables. Students replied that listening helped build their sense of trust and made them feel motivated to maintain the relationships they had started to build.

**Marissa Shorenstein**

At the end of Marc’s discussion, Tamara introduced Marissa Shorenstein, the President of the northern region of AT&T. She shared her family’s immigration story as well as a story about activism she took on as a student to reverse the expulsion of one of her African American classmates. She had organized a group of students to do a sit-in outside of the headmaster’s office. Though it was ultimately unsuccessful, she used the story to encourage students that making their voices heard matters in spite of the outcome. She also talked about her commitment to service, from her work in both the public and private sector.

She finished by taking questions from students. One asked what she majored in in college while others asked her about some of the challenges presented by her work at AT&T. The final question was if she would run for office.

Facilitators reported that students enjoyed hearing from her and a few of them who had asked questions gathered around her for follow-ups once she was done. The idea behind having her present was to demonstrate the many ways that the private sector plays a role in service and civic life. Once she finished her Q&A, Tamara announced lunch.
Continuing questions about this exercise for Civic Spirit:

Vocabulary used at Civic Spirit Day

In the middle of the exercise, Marc reported to me an interaction that stood out to him: an exchange between two students, one from a Jewish day school and the other from a Catholic school, about feeling a sense of belonging in places other than their regular living spaces. The student from a Jewish school shared that they felt most safe at their family’s vacation home, where their parents put away their cellphones and the family could be fully present together. The student from the Catholic school shared that she felt most comfortable at her aunt’s house, a place where her aunt treated her, even though she did not have much money. Marc did not believe that the Jewish student intended to brag, but wondered if they could have been more aware of their privilege, knowing that students from different socio-economic classes would also be at the table.

Marc’s observation raises an important question about how to best prepare students for encounters across axes of difference, particularly those around class and race. The organizers of Civic Spirit Day deliberately chose not to begin this exercise with explicit discussions of systemic racism, privilege, or oppression, even as those ideas find an increasing presence in some classrooms, including in some of the Civic Spirit schools. They did not want to impose a vocabulary onto the students that may or may not resonate with them. Students were welcome to bring up those ideas organically, but they were not centered as part of the program.

To be sure, conversations about these topics occur frequently during Civic Spirit’s Summer Institute for educators. And the reactions from students across backgrounds to Civic Spirit Day were generally positive, suggesting some merit to Civic Spirit’s approach. No student (except for one Middle schooler—see the next section) reported feeling like their ideas were not being taken seriously during this exercise. A Civic Spirit Day that did explicitly mention these topics might also have been successful, though organizing and then gauging student response to such an alternative is beyond the scope of this evaluation.

Middle School participation

During the exercise, I observed a table of Middle School students. Only two middle schools participated, so students at these tables were surrounded by a higher proportion of their own classmates. When asked to share their answers to the questions on the hand-outs, some of the students said in a joking way that the person who most influenced him was another student at the table. Some of the students were on their phones and not paying attention as others spoke, even as a student tried to share a meaningful answer about feeling a sense of belonging in the classroom at school.
In the follow-up questionnaire, one student noted that, “By the hand activity where we wrote a place we feel safe, our positive influences, etc I felt like nobody in my group was taking anything seriously.”

While the middle schools tables did manage to complete the afternoon’s activity, their struggle in the morning raises a question about whether it is appropriate to include 7th and 8th grade students in future Civic Spirit Days. Perhaps more intensive preparation beforehand, more careful selection of students, or modifying the activity to be a better fit for younger students are ways to better prepare for their inclusion in future years.

Civic Service

Before the final activity was announced, there was a fun transition from lunch back into the program. Tommy Russell, an arts educator who had done work with a Civic Spirit School, Central High School in Queens, came on stage dressed as King George III from Hamilton and sang one of the songs from the musical. He was then joined by two other actors dressed up as American revolutionaries who sang two other songs from the show. One of them concluded by saying, “If you really want to connect to the people, you have to have a certain spirit, a civic spirit.” Some of the students were singing along and clapping during the performance.

Lindsay Bressman, one of the two Civic Spirit staff members, then introduced the New York City Chief Service Officer Patricia Eng to announce the third activity of the day. She gave the students a brief: to design a three-month service program that would inspire a sense of commitment to democracy and civic participation in New York City’s youth. She thanked the students for being part of democracy now and forever.

Marc Kramer returned to the stage to give more detailed instructions, explaining that each table would be designing a program as well as a subway ad and a thirty-second radio clip. A timeline of when all the steps in the exercise needed to be accomplished was projected onto the main screen. He then encouraged facilitators to lead the group through the instructions.
Brainstorming a Service Program: Challenges and Opportunities for Improvement

Facilitators began by asking a student to read the memo included in the handouts and then through the step-by-step instructions. The first step was to assign each participant one of the following roles for the activity: facilitator, time-keeper, scribe, docent, voice-over artist, artistic team coordinator, communications team coordinator, manager, and liaison. After the roles were assigned, the student facilitator was meant to take over the conversation, guiding the group through questions meant to evoke potential ideas for the three-month service program: what are the goals of the program, who would participate, what the daily rhythm of the program would be like, and so forth.

Some of the tables struggled during this initial brainstorming portion of the activity. Student facilitators encountered some difficulty in moving through the conversation. One student with this role wrote in their questionnaire: “I was in charge of guiding my group through the questions. It turned out to be a way more dustbins job than I expected, because when people didn’t chime in I was expected to come up with the answer on my own and keeping the group moving was hard.”

The adult facilitators had to step in to clarify the tasks at hand and to keep the conversations moving forward. One reported in a questionnaire response, “I was wary of calling in new voices too many times, as I wanted to empower the student in the role of Facilitator. That said, the student Facilitator was not able to do this alone, and so I attempted to help steer at times.” A second responded, “I was simultaneously trying to let the student lead, and also trying to step in to make sure that dissenting opinions were honored (something the student clearly didn’t understand to be part of their role) - but always felt like I was stepping on the student facilitator’s toes.” In conversations during the day, facilitators mentioned that they had a hard time of knowing where to start with the exercise, that the peer facilitator at their table struggled to take charge, and that there was some confusion about the premise of a service program.

A quote from a facilitator’s questionnaire response captures that confusion: “It was clear to me that my table really didn’t know how to brainstorm and work as a team to create ideas. There was so much focus on unimportant details rather than the big ideas that I think the exercise was meant to focus on.”

This portion of the third activity garnered some critical feedback from students in their questionnaires too. While the large majority of respondents indicated that they felt their ideas were being taken seriously throughout Civic Spirit Day, a handful noted that during these initial conversations it was hard to be heard.

One wrote, “In my main group a couple of kids took charge and preferred to input their own ideas and didn’t listen to mine sometimes.” Another remarked, “When everyone was
shouting ideas about their thoughts on the program, my ideas were less heard and taken less seriously.”

Some students noticed an arc to this third activity, reflecting on early struggles or slowness but then feeling satisfied with the final product. One shared, “At the beginning of the discussion to make a plan nobody in my group had any ideas and I felt bad imposing all of my ideas on the group because I did not want them to feel pressure to use them as a default. However, I feel like as my group got more comfortable with each other they were really able to take my ideas and tweak them to better suit all of our members’ visions.”

Improvement Opportunities

1. The vocabulary around service could have been clearer, perhaps with some specific examples shared by either the representative from the mayor’s office or from Marc Kramer.
2. The role of the student facilitator could have emphasized the need to really hear everyone’s contribution and to keep the conversation going.
3. One facilitator suggested working in groups smaller than 10-12, finding that the tables were too big to have meaningful brainstorming conversation.

And a second remarked, “In the beginning, it was a bit awkward for everyone to try and get ideas up and we were all not even taking ourselves seriously. However, it was when we came to discover how to mesh all of our ideas together that we took ourselves seriously.”

While each group ultimately succeeded at completing the exercise, finishing their subway ads and radio spots on time and then presenting them to the room, this initial brainstorming exercise could be improved upon in a few ways.

Splitting in Groups for Subway Ad and Radio Spot

Once whole tables generated ideas for service projects, they split in two, with half the group working on the subway ad and the other half of the group writing the radio spot. The groups working on the radio spot mostly stayed in the main space and were given a time to rehearse in one of four ‘recording studios’ set up adjacent to the room. Those working on posters could use the JCC’s art room a floor below the main space.

When students worked in these smaller groups on the concrete task of making a poster and writing an advertisement, they felt like their ideas were being taken seriously by their peers and that their relationships were continuing to develop. While some tables broke up along lines of school or gender, other tables had students from different schools working closely together and talking to one another about their backgrounds, including some cultural exchange. A facilitator shared that she heard a student talk about her Step Team and the Caribbean cuisine that she likes while they were working on this component of the
activity. The facilitator of the difficult middle school group also mentioned some cohesion and collaboration from group members during this work time.

Facilitators noted that the radio spot groups finished earlier than the poster groups. At some tables, the radio students joined the poster students once they finished, while other tables’ radio groups used the open time to socialize or relax. Future iterations of Civic Spirit Day might consider ways to even out the timing of activities running parallel to each other. Facilitators called on the groups to return to the main room, hang their posters on the wall, and prepare to deliver the radio ad.

**Final Presentations**

The docent from each group stood by the poster as Civic Spirit staff quickly took pictures of each one to project on the screen as the radio ads were recited. Marc called up the voice-over artists one by one to read out their ads. Groups came up with a variety of ideas for service programs, some involving tutoring, park clean-up, meeting with local officials, preparing for college, and more. One of the subway ads featured the proposed weekly schedule of the program.

The voice-over artists read their ads with enthusiasm and when each person finished, Marc had the room turn their attention toward the docent standing by their poster. Then the remaining members of the group sitting at the table did their ritual from the morning once more. A highlight of this section of the day was when one of the groups read their subway ad in both English and Spanish. After the student read her ad in Spanish, the entire room burst into raucous and supportive applause.

Marc led one final reflection conversation, first asking how students experienced the activity. One student shared that at first they were shy but then it was fun to see people’s personalities shine through. Another mentioned that working within the limited time frame was stressful. A third said working as a team once they landed on their idea was a highlight. Marc’s final question was, “Why did we do this?” Students gave answers suggesting they understood the larger goals of Civic Spirit Day. One said, “No one had a full idea alone. The collaboration all together is what made the project.” Another remarked, “To show that we can make a change in the world with our own ideas.” A third said, “To get on the same page, to achieve a goal, and to demonstrate teamwork, which were all needed to achieve something great.”

A further opportunity for Civic Spirit Day participants is the invitation for students to present to the staff in the Mayor’s NYC Service Office some of the ideas for service programs that were generated. Students were asked to express interest to their teachers if they want to participate, and a small group of about ten will be selected. It is not clear yet exactly how these next steps will play out, but it is a nice idea for how to turn the short-
term outcomes of Civic Spirit Day (the ideas, the posters, and the ads) into something possibly more long lasting.

Tamara returned to the stage one more time and concluded Civic Spirit Day with words of blessing: “May God bless and protect our democracy.”
Collaboration across Difference

The vast majority of students expressed strong agreement or agreement that Civic Spirit Day gave them an opportunity to collaborate with people that they would not normally encounter. This was a major goal of Civic Spirit Day. In their questionnaires, students expanded on what it was like to work across lines of difference. A few themes emerged across responses. Students enjoyed working together, they described it as an eye-opening experience, they learned about their peers, and they grew more comfortable with one another as the day progressed.

Enjoying working with one another

The most prominent theme that showed up in students’ responses to the open-ended question of how they found working with others was a sense of enjoyment. Responses include:

“It was really refreshing hearing different opinions from different people especially from people who do not share the same background, financial status and religion.”

“I really enjoyed because it was a different experience than usual. We talked about different topics and respected each other’s differences. Overall I really enjoyed the day.”

“It was amazing. I love hearing other people’s opinions that aren’t like my own. Everyone was so nice and welcoming.”

These responses were also reflected in teacher remarks during and after Civic Spirit Day. A teacher from one of the Catholic schools enjoyed watching the social interactions unfold and said that for him the process of working on the service project together was more important than the final product. Another teacher from a different Catholic school said that any opportunity to get outside the classroom and to interact with new people was a positive thing. One of the teachers from a Jewish school mentioned hearing from students...
on the subway ride back to school how much they enjoyed getting to know students from different backgrounds.

**An eye-opening experience**

A few students specifically mentioned that the experience of working with others was “eye-opening,” suggesting that collaborating across difference gave students a chance to break out of their silos and learn about the life experiences of others. They wrote:

“This experience was very eye opening for me and I very much enjoyed it. The perspectives brought to the table were ones that I would not have been able to get from my school just because everyone was raised with such different backgrounds and beliefs. Everyone was always very respectful despite the differences in upbringing.”

“It was refreshing and eye-opening. Up until this experience, the topics which we discussed I’d largely only discussed with those within my own environment and from my own background. I became familiar with that and it kind of became predictable and comfortable to an extent. Encountering new narratives and perspectives was a refreshing break from that.”

**Encountering specific cultural information**

When describing what it was like to collaborate across difference, two students mentioned learning specific cultural information about Orthodox Jews that they did not know before:

“I was able to learn new things about different religions, specifically the Jewish religion. It was interesting to learn that Orthodox Jewish people take a gap year in Israel in order to further submerge themselves in their religion.”
Growing sense of comfort

Some students did not initially feel comfortable being around new people, but over the course of the day became increasingly open:

“It was challenging at first, I honestly thought I wouldn’t get along with the other people due to our different backgrounds and also being strangers at the moment too. But then after getting to know about then and figure out what they are good at and their opinions on the world and other topics I really found similar beliefs and interests and it was really eye opening”

“It was very interesting to work with other students who looked and belonged to a completely different background than me. At first we all were kind of shy but as the day progressed we were able to open up and make a new friendship.”

One student mentioned feeling a stronger connection once students were working in smaller groups on the service project:

“I’m a shy person so it was a little uncomfortable, and then it was annoying because I tried to voice my opinion and I wasn’t being heard. They kinda took over and were overthinking the project but when we split into two groups, I opened up and made a Jewish friend, Honduran friend and multi-racial friend which I was happy about. We talked and got to know each other.”

A very small minority of students said they did not enjoy attending Civic Spirit Day, but even one of these students mentioned the relationship-building as a positive outcome: “Even though I did not enjoy or have a positive experience at Civic Spirit Day it was very interesting working with other students who were not just Orthodox Jews.”
Broadening Idea of Citizenship

The theme of Civic Spirit Day was “citizenship as service”. This theme came through in multiple ways during the day. It was present in the student prayers that were recited at the beginning, the guest presenters Professor Roosevelt Montás and Marissa Shorenstein talked about service, and of course the main project of the day was designing a service program for graduating high school seniors in New York City.

On the questionnaires, students were asked to give a definition of citizenship and to share if that definition had changed after attending Civic Spirit Day. Fifty-one students indicated in their answer if their definition had changed and a majority of those indicated that it had or that it was enhanced.

Citizenship and Service

The definitions students offered of citizenship by and large centered service or contribution to a community:

“A citizen is someone who contributes to our community in a positive way in one way or another. As a community we have to work together with other individuals from various different backgrounds in order to push your community towards a successful path which is something we were able to do during Civic Spirit Day.”
“[Citizenship] means being engaged and taking on an active role in our community no matter how big or how small. [Civic Spirit Day] definitely helped shape my definition, especially the program we created—it allowed me to have a better sense of community and what values I take priority in.”

“I would say being an American citizen means spend your time being a part of the civic process which can be done by volunteering, making our voices heard, and being involved in or supporting local and national government. The day opened my eyes to what one person can do, and it gave me a new understanding the power of each person to uplift a group.”

“I would define being a citizen as being part of a community in which you give back as well as receive certain benefits. Being a citizen implies working as a whole to reach a common goal and having the backs of the rest of your community. Having participated in Civic Spirt did change the way that I viewed being an American citizen, it made me realize that we are in this together and the best way to achieve a goal is to work together and incorporate the many ideas that may surge.”

**Citizenship and Belonging**

Some definitions also captured a sense of belonging as an important component of citizenship, connecting to a hallmark of Civic Spirit’s objective to enhance civic belonging:

“A citizen is a person whose voice matters. A citizen is a person who belongs in where they are— not only as an inhabitant but as [someone with] an important role in the future of their country. I think that participation [in Civic Spirit Day] added to my definition and enhanced it way more.”
“To me, what it means to be a citizen of the United States is to accept and celebrate all people. To have integrity, optimism, open-mindedness, and find ways to contribute to the community. I believe that your race, background and beliefs should not dictate if you belong and everyone can be a citizen of the United States if they respect others and have strong character.”

“To be a citizen means to allow yourself to open your mind to making United States better, not only for yourself but for your community. It means to belong and if you feel that you don't, citizenship can create things to help you feel like you belong. [Civic Spirit Day] increased my knowledge and understanding on American citizenship. I was challenged to understand different views aside from my own and be able to come together as one to make something work for the whole group.”

For students who expressed a more rigid, legalistic definition of citizenship, Civic Spirit Day helped them break down stereotypes and encounter alternative perspectives:

“I think Civic Spirit Day didn’t change my idea of what a citizen is. Although I still think that citizens need to become citizens through and only through, legal channels, the day definitely made me realize that not everyone is as fortunate as me. Additionally, the day showed me that I may be wrong about certain stereotypes as I was amazed at the many amazing ideas and contributions everyone around was making.”

These ideas about citizenship were also expressed by teachers. A teacher from a Catholic school shared with me at the end of Civic Spirit Day that many of her students felt like their voices were heard and that the day gave them the chance to contribute in ways they dreamt about doing. Indeed, a majority of students strongly agreed or agreed that Civic Spirit Day made them feel more confident that they have ideas for their communities that are worth listening to.
Civic Spirit Day represents just one small step for achieving the larger civic goals of living respectfully in a pluralistic democracy and closing the distance between principles and politics. Student reactions to the day suggest a readiness and enthusiasm for the kind of relationship building and commitment to service that might help achieve those larger visions.

**Notes of Gratitude**

A week following the day’s activities, the Civic Spirit Team received handwritten thank you notes from the participants of La Salle Academy with reflections of gratitude.
Dear Civic Spirit Team,

I thank you for

Dear Tamara, Lindsay to the Civic Spirit Team,
Thank you for an amazing Civic Spirit Day. It was incredible to witness students from such diverse backgrounds work so well together. The entire day was the epitome of the goals of Civic Spirit. It was filled with hope for our Country and our future. I can’t thank you.

Dear Civic Spirit Team,

Thank you for the opportunity to meet new people. Thank you for putting Civic Spirit Day together. My favorite parts were the food and communicating with other people I never met before.

Sincerely,
[Signature]

Dear Civic Spirit Team,

Thank you for making Civic Spirit Day for us. I had a great day and met a lot of new people and learned a few things from them as well. The group work was a lot of fun and got me to talk to people which I don’t really like to do. I even made some friends along the way. Overall it was a great day.

Sincerely,
Justin Rodriguez
Dear Dr. Tweel,

Thank you for everything that you have done for me and my class. Your joyful smile always filled me with complete happiness and bliss, and I hope that I can meet you again in the future.

Sincerely,

Concere

Dear Civic Spirit Team,

The program at Lasalle is very important because it gets the whole school involved. We taught the underclassmen about the effects of bullying. We also helped out the homeless at a food pantry. Thank you for creating this program.

Sincerely,

Justin Binning
Dear Civic Spirit Team,

I would like to thank you guys for organizing the Civic Spirit event. It was an amazing experience that I'll never forget. It was one of the highlights of my time at high school, and I hope the program continues to thrive and expand.

Sincerely,

Raul BRanner

Dear Civic Spirit team,

Thank you for putting Civic Spirit Day together for us, and letting us make new friends and letting us make new communication skills. My favorite parts about this day were working on the poster with other people and having fun sharing each other's creative ideas.

Sincerely,
Dear Civic Spirit Team,

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to connect with other schools from a variety of different backgrounds and allowing us to share this educational experience with different people whom we are unfamiliar with. I learned to work in a group setting with people I just met which really is an opportunity not everyone gets to endure. I can use this experience of working with unfamiliar faces in the real world. Thank you so much for this eye opening experience!

Sincerely,
David Matos

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Dear Civic Spirit Team,

I want to honestly thank you for an eye opening experience. I was taken out of my comfort zone, which was fine. Later on my team worked well together as if we all knew each other prior. Each activity had us on our feet, constantly thinking and doing. I had a good time thinking out what our three month summer program would be and writing the script for our radio ad. I would like to do it again if I ever had the chance. Thank you for inviting La Salle Academy to take part in such an experience.

Sincerely,
Nicholas A. Ramirez