



Civic Education in the Era of COVID

Evaluation of the Civic Spirit @HOME Program

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By: Abigail Lieber, *Civic Spirit Student Alumnus & Intern*

Background

As COVID-19 broke out in the New York area during the start of March, it became clear that Civic Spirit would not be able to run its annual in-person student convening, [Civic Spirit Day](#). This event is a cherished part of Civic Spirit's curricular programming and community building, as students from across the diverse Civic Spirit network come together to design solutions to contemporary civic issues and form authentic relationships, learning to collaborate across their demographic differences.

Recognizing the importance of this event, Civic Spirit Day was redesigned into Civic Spirit @HOME—a virtual month-long "Civic Spirit Day." The program consisted of three sessions and over 100 students joined over the course of the three weeks.

Session Logistics

Each session began at 2:00PM EST and students were encouraged to log on at 1:55 to answer questions in the chat box. This encouraged dialogue between students and facilitators and kept students occupied during the "waiting time" for everyone to log on. After introductory remarks by *Civic Spirit Director* Lindsay Bressman, *Director of Pedagogy* Tiphonie Shoemaker introduced each of the 10 schools in attendance at the program and encouraged the students to cheer for their schools when announced. Following introductions, Marc Kramer, who is the *Educational Consultant for Civic Spirit Day*, ran a virtual ice breaker to encourage deeper conversations and help everyone feel comfortable in the technological space.

Session 1:

The goal of the first session was to ensure that the student participants understand the origins and function of the census in a representative democracy and census' data's impact on federal funding across states. Prior to Civic Spirit Day, students were asked if they had heard of the U.S. Census and what they knew about it. While 94% of students indicated that they had heard about the census, many were unable to elaborate on its role and submitted incorrect or incomplete answers.

Q: If you have heard of the U.S. Census, what do you know about it?

- "Not much. Only that citizens have to fill out a paper to make sure they count."
- "The main objective of the U.S. Census is to count all people living in America; it is a way that the government allocates funds to districts, helping with schools, hospitals, fire depts, etc. It also allots seats in the House based on each state's proportional size."
- "I have heard about it, but I don't know much about it."
- "It helps the government get basic statistics of the country."
- "It has something to do with taxes."
- "It's taken every 10 years to count all Americans and it is used to allocate funds to different counties and groups and helps with the redistricting of Congress."

Students were assigned to Zoom breakout rooms for small group discussions with a teacher facilitator. The facilitator shared his or her screen with the students and went through an interactive slideshow, during which students were encouraged to ask questions and participate throughout. Content included:

1. [Reference to the U.S. Census in Article 1, Section 2 of the Constitution](#)
2. [House of Representative seat map](#)
3. [State-by-state federal budget receipts and expenditures.](#)

Session 2:

The focus of the second session was to take the students' newfound knowledge on the census and apply it to the challenge of low completion by hard-to-count-communities. After reviewing census participation numbers from a [real-time national census database](#), students learned in their breakout groups about the [different categories of hard-to-count-communities](#) and considered barriers to completion.

Each small group was assigned a specific hard-to-count-community; students discussed and brainstormed specific strategies to reach their group using a [thought chart](#). Many students found this part of Civic Spirit @Home the most engaging and enjoyable. Following the second session, students were encouraged to create their own census-related PSAs and memes.

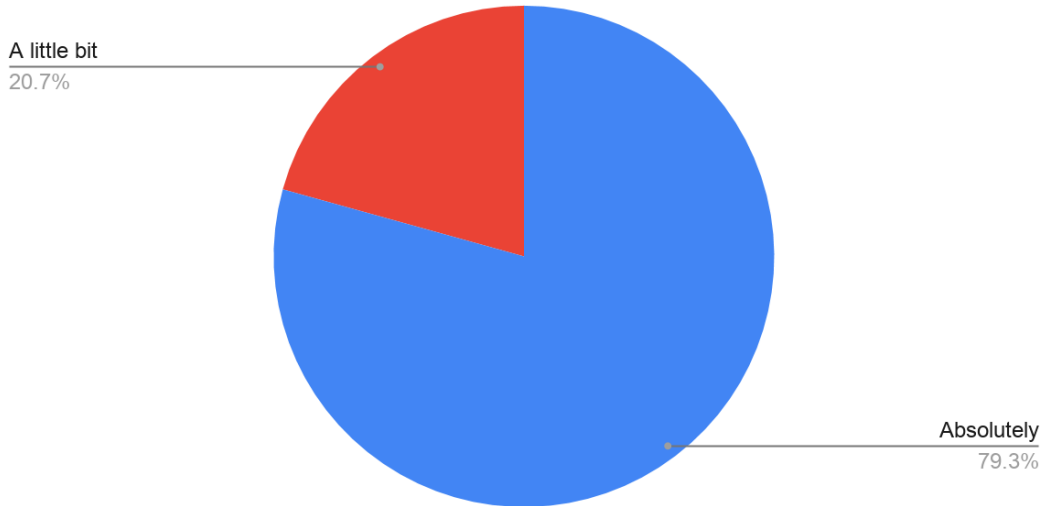
Session 3:

In the third session, students reviewed official and student-created census PSAs in their breakout rooms and further discussed how they could be used to reach hard-to-count-communities and encourage completion of the census. After this activity, students from the [Civic Spirit Delegates program](#) presented their civic inclusion projects to all the students participating in Civic Spirit @HOME.

Findings

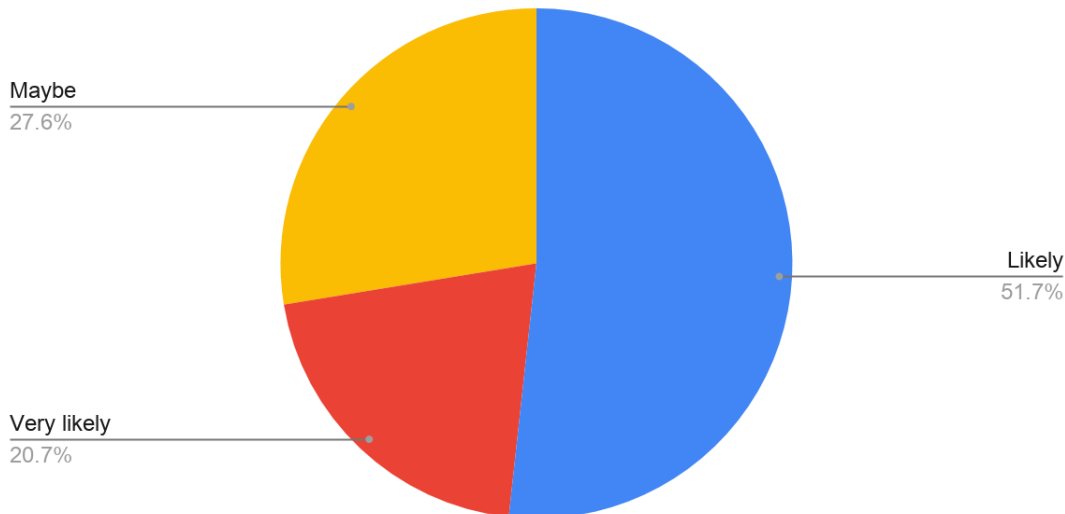
Overall, students felt that Civic Spirit @Home was beneficial, interesting, and a good use of their time. Almost 80% of students said that they “absolutely” learned something valuable at Civic Spirit @HOME.

Count of Do you feel you learned something valuable by attending Civic Spirit @HOME?



The majority of the participants liked the programming, with some students saying it was the best activity they had done during the pandemic began in early March. In addition, almost two-thirds of students responded that they would be interested in attending a fourth session if offered.

If we hosted a fourth session, how likely would you be to attend it?

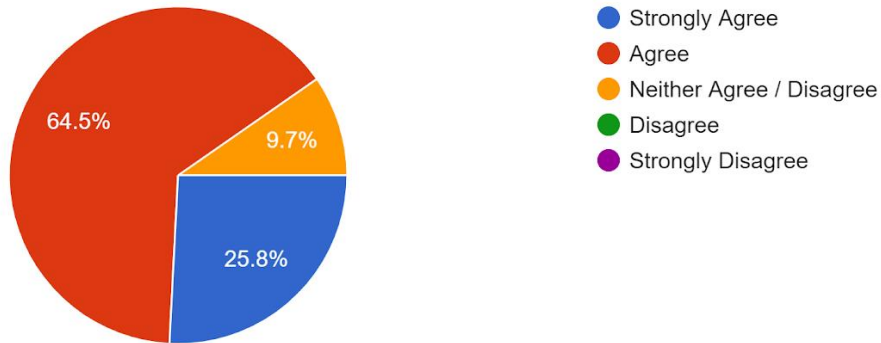


Participation in Civic Spirit @HOME appeared to increase students' confidence with understanding the benefits and challenges of a representative democracy.

BEFORE Civic Spirit @HOME

I understand the benefits and challenges of a representative democracy.

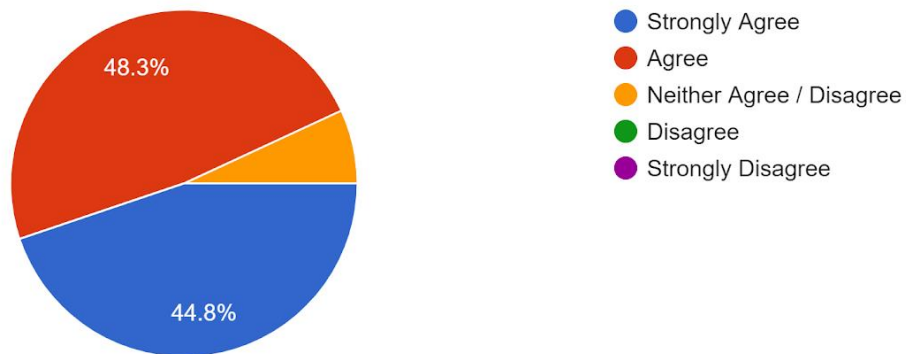
31 responses



AFTER Civic Spirit @HOME

I understand the benefits and challenges of a representative democracy.

29 responses



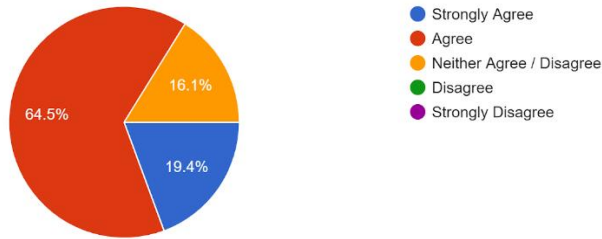
Rooted deeply in Civic Spirit's methodology and approach to civic education is the concept of belonging--a socio-emotional connection to community, state, and country. Extensive research and experience indicate that belonging is a necessary building block in building civic responsibility, commitment to civic participation, and the civic health of a society. As such, Civic Spirit evaluated students' understanding of "belonging" before and after joining for the Civic Spirit @HOME program, which appeared to increase over time.

[*The Healthy People 2020 Social Determinants of Health, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion](#)

BEFORE Civic Spirit @HOME

I can identify barriers to belonging that I face or others experience.

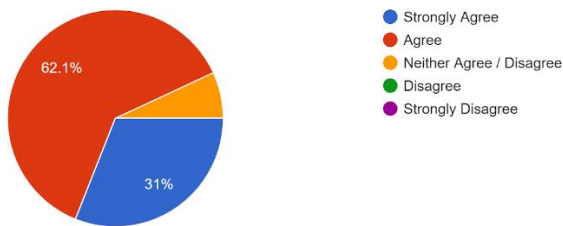
31 responses



AFTER Civic Spirit @HOME

I can identify barriers to belonging that I face or others experience.

29 responses



Lessons Learned

- The primary civic engagement activity chosen for Civic Spirit @HOME was to design PSAs with the assumption that this would be fun and easy for students to complete during distance learning. Yet, the majority of students did not choose to create their own PSA. Based on this behavior and the feedback in the surveys, it appears that the students preferred activities that were more collaborative and team-oriented, rather than individual-based.
- Many students were only able to attend one or two out of the three sessions due to school-related conflicts like exams or class programming. Typically, Civic Spirit Day runs for 6 hours on one day, and so students and teachers are able to carve out time to join for the entirety of the program. Given distance learning parameters, it was chosen to run Civic Spirit @HOME over three days; however, that decision inevitably limited students' ability to join for all the three sessions.
- One of the key objectives of Civic Spirit Day is to bring together students from distinctly different backgrounds to collaborate on projects together and foster authentic relationships. These friendships often develop during the more casual moments of the day, such as lunch, snack, and chatting in between activities. The need to run Civic Spirit Day online and reducing the amount of time the group spent together greatly reduced if not eliminated the opportunity for these informal interactions to occur. That said, almost 70% of students indicated in the follow up survey that "meeting students from other schools and backgrounds" was a highlight of the program.
- Many students cited technical difficulties as an obstacle to enjoying Civic Spirit @HOME. Over the course of the three sessions, the Civic Spirit team gained expertise with managing a Zoom-based program, yet Wi-Fi and connectivity issues continued to cause slight delays in communication, which is an external challenge that is hard to prevent.