

Recommendations for Exploring Civic Learning as a Pathway to Equity and Opportunity

A collaboration between National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) and Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE)

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Introduction

The [National Conference on Citizenship \(NCoC\)](#) and [Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement \(PACE\)](#) have undertaken a collaborative exploration to understand the potential of civic learning as a tool to equip communities in addressing the challenges and divisions they face. The goal of the exploration is to see if and how we might:

- open a dialogue about how to reimagine, re-incorporate, and maximize the potential of civics during this divisive time
- enable communities to build an inclusive foundation of engaged citizens
- embrace and position civic learning as part of a solutions set to addressing challenges, particularly inequity and lack of opportunity.

This exploration seeks to expand the dialogue around civic learning as a means to promote equity and opportunity by complementing the important work already being done to build civic knowledge and skills in their own right. This paper outlines key recommendations generated from the exploration so far, incorporating diverse input from individual interviews with field leaders as well as a salon session at the [2017 Annual National Conference on Citizenship](#) (see appendix). The recommendations include:

1. Expand the picture of who is a civic educator and who needs civic learning;
2. Utilize civic learning as a tool to increase understanding and engagement across lines of difference, while ensuring a shared foundation of knowledge about history;
3. Ensure civic readiness is a critical component in the college and career preparation pipeline; and
4. Support cross-sector collaboration to advance civic learning. Ensure it is not just the responsibility of our education system, but of the entire community, to prepare young people for their role in enhancing civic life toward the goal of improving the civic health of their communities.

These recommendations will inform a March 2018 working session, which aims to discuss the recommendations and begin transforming them into tangible action plans for philanthropy and other leaders who recognize the value and potential. In this effort, we are placing an emphasis on young people (those in childhood through early adulthood), though there is value in considering these concepts across all stages of life. We hope this paper sparks a conversation among our colleagues and we invite responses via email submission to Adiel Suarez-Murias at PACE (adiel@pacefunders.org).

Working Definitions and Vision Statements

There are a multitude of ways to approach, define and frame this conversation from both a values and process orientation. For the purposes of this effort, we offer some working frames to guide our exploration. These working definitions are meant to establish a common understanding of our language and promote understanding among diverse audiences. We hope they will offer resonance or a new level of understanding, especially for those who seek to become involved in these conversations and practice but may not already be immersed in this space.

Working Process Definitions (the strategies/approaches we are seeking to explore):

- **Civic Learning:** the range of experiences that prepare people for informed and engaged participation in civic life and the democratic process (which can occur in classrooms or in out-of-school contexts, and at all stages of life).

- **Pathway:** a series of opportunities that facilitate a person’s journey toward achieving successful outcomes.
- **Civic Life:** a life in which civic engagement activities have an important value to and for individuals. For a community, civic life is the culmination of all the acts of civic engagement and associated norms and values of its members.
- **Civic Health:** the manner in which communities organize to define and address public problems.

Working Vision Statements (what we’re hoping to achieve through those strategies/approaches):

- **Equality:** fair and impartial treatment of all people
- **Opportunity:** the ability to positively influence one’s economic and social mobility
- **Equity:** equality and opportunity fully realized

These concepts are distinct but closely related, and it is important to understand how they build on each other. For those that may be new to the space, here’s a metaphor that may be helpful. Equality might be thought of as ensuring a level playing field to which everyone has access. Opportunity is ensuring when you’re on the field, you can play according to your skills and ability, and can become stronger through hard work over time. Equity is ensuring that your outcomes aren’t determined before you walk onto the field due to biased, discriminatory, or rigged systems.

Recommendations for Discussion

Recommendation #1: Expand the picture of who is a civic educator and who needs civic learning.

Civic learning is an effort to teach individuals about their ability--and responsibility--to positively influence the conditions in which they live and work. Building on traditional civic education (primarily in the classroom or online), civic learning should incorporate an intentional community wide approach welcoming all ages and all sectors with an emphasis on ensuring that all young people develop an understanding of their individual and collectively ability to positively impact their communities. This sense of individual and collective responsibility can be fostered across educational experiences (both in school and out of school) and viewed as an interdisciplinary activity rather than a single class subject. Current methods of civic learning are often limited to traditional social studies classes, creating the presumption that only designated educators can teach civics, whereas science or math educators (as well as community leaders) can also educate around civics. Civic learning can be a bridge between academic concepts and life experiences; this can empower young people to understand the conditions in which they live and work, understand their responsibilities, and positively influence their circumstances and those of their community. Parents are also civic learners and educators who can acknowledge youth, draw them into civic structures particularly outside of classrooms, and enhance their own understanding of new forms of civic learning such as digital engagement. Today, many adults also lack civic knowledge, skills and dispositions. Creating a culture of civic learning that spans ages and generations can make civic learning ubiquitous: not limited to school settings, not limited to certain classes or courses, and also, not limited to young people.

What it could look like to achieve this vision:

- **Equality:** Civic learning is embraced as a multidisciplinary and multigenerational experience that fosters individual and collective responsibility to improve the civic health of communities.

- **Opportunity:** Civic learning curriculum, programs, and initiatives (in school and out of school) highlight opportunities to improve individual conditions as well as those of peers and community members.
- **Equity:** Measurements or indicators are utilized to understand how all individuals are equipped with civic knowledge and skills, and ensure outcomes against those indicators are proportionate to that community's demographics.

Recommendation #2: Utilize civic learning as a tool to increase understanding and engagement across lines of difference, while ensuring a shared foundation of knowledge about history.

Civic learning can offer a way for young people to develop and articulate their opinions and ground them in an understanding and shared knowledge of America's history. Educators (broadly defined, per recommendation 1 above) can recognize that individual experiences have been different and help students develop the knowledge and skills to "seek first to understand." By learning about history, students can contribute to developing solutions to public problems, contextualized by the longstanding challenges their communities and peers may have faced. The civic learning environment must also welcome participants' complex and varied social identities, acknowledge differences, and navigate controversial issues in ways that lead to productive and constructive dialogue. In order to facilitate engagement across lines of difference and foster this meaningful civic dialogue, teachers (including experiential learning educators and community leaders) must help young people explore their civic identities, learn their civic responsibilities, and formulate their viewpoints. In doing so, educators may bring their perspectives and other points of view as well as lived experiences into classrooms and projects in order to model engagement for students and ensure facilitation is as comprehensive, neutral, and objective as possible. Furthermore, in order for students to feel heard, these educators need support to foster affirming and inclusive spaces for dialogue that encourage conversations about civic issues and students' lived experiences. This could include professional development for teachers, and training and leadership development for experiential learning educators and community leaders.

What it could look like to achieve this vision:

- **Equality:** Civic educators foster a learning environment where students develop a shared basis of knowledge about history, feel equally heard and valued despite their differences, and are equally empowered to ask difficult questions.
- **Opportunity:** Civic educators, without assumptions of bias or undue influence, engage their students in civic dialogue across lines of difference and students grow in confidence and willingness to constructively engage with each other across difference.
- **Equity:** Civic educators have equal access to the resources and administrative support needed to equip all young people with shared knowledge and skills to navigate controversial issues. Therein, young people possess an increased sense of agency and familiarity engaging in this way, and tools to understand and measure that agency are utilized.

Recommendation #3: Ensure civic readiness is a critical component in the college and career preparation pipeline.

Preparation pipelines for young people often center on a goal of “college and career readiness.” We suggest “civic readiness” is another dimension of preparation that should be integral to that pipeline-- that is, a preparation to engage in civic and democratic processes. Civic readiness can be integrated with existing common ways of teaching, learning, and outcomes that are already central to college and career dimensions of readiness; all three would likely be reinforced by one another. Civic readiness is critical to giving young people a pathway to opportunity, and to make their voices heard, but it requires a cultural shift in our approach to preparation. An individual’s circumstances should not limit their ability to succeed and should not be a pre-determinant of their college, career, or civic future. By integrating civic readiness into the preparation pipeline, young people can have a better chance at improving their socioeconomic position.

What it could look like to achieve this vision:

- **Equality:** The readiness system fully articulates how it will prepare all individuals equally for college, career, and civic life.
- **Opportunity:** The preparation pipeline is redefined to include civic readiness and increases opportunities for individuals to achieve social and economic mobility through active engagement in civic life.
- **Equity:** Measures and indicators of civic readiness are utilized and integrated into existing pipelines with the goal of ensuring overall outcomes are representative of the community; not disproportionate based on race, gender, ethnicity, or other demographics.

Recommendation #4: Support cross-sector collaboration to advance civic learning. Ensure it is not just the responsibility of our education system, but of the entire community, to prepare young people for their role in enhancing civic life toward the goal of improving the civic health of their communities.

Civic learning is maximized when it is a shared student and community experience, with schools and community organizations both acting as facilitators. Civic learning is often viewed as taking place strictly within formal classrooms; however, all aspects of community including family, school, workplaces, and faith-based organizations can embrace their role of positively engaging (or re-engaging) young people and collaborate to prepare them for civic life. Cross-sector collaboration can take the shape of public-private partnerships or other similar joint activities to promote and foster civic learning through nonprofit, government, corporate and philanthropic efforts. Organizations and individuals from different industries and sectors can work together to:

- Create a culture of civic learning that is inherently equitable, in which high-quality civic learning is available and accessible to all young people, providing the tools and support to effect change in their communities.
- Bring people together where they are, and ensure civic learning curriculums and initiatives are culturally competent and inclusive. Meeting people where they are may mean convening in places where they already gather and have built trusted community, and it can also mean engaging and programming in a way that speaks to their frame of lived experience.
- Promote an individual as well as collective sense of civic responsibility.

- Advance diversity and inclusion, as well as an intersectional lens that embraces a spectrum of social identities, including race, class, and gender.

What it might look like to achieve this vision:

- **Equality:** Every sector and institution identifies their role and articulates their commitment to fostering civic learning opportunities.
- **Opportunity:** Every sector and institution develops and implements plans to engage in and support community members in civic learning.
- **Equity:** Every sector and institution utilizes measurements or indicators to ensure that the practice and impact of their civic learning initiatives are representative of the people and community they serve.

Conclusion

Our intent with this project was to advance a dialogue with the field about what philanthropy and other leaders can do to support civic learning and investigate its potential as a pathway to equity and opportunity. We hope these recommendations invigorate further discussion and deeper thinking about what it could look like to achieve these visions of equality, opportunity, and equity for communities and to prepare young people for active and engaged civic lives. Through an expansion of the picture of who is a civic educator and who needs civic learning; increased understanding and engagement across lines of difference with a shared knowledge base grounded in historical contexts; development and integration of civic readiness into the college and career preparation pipeline; as well as cross-sector collaboration across the education system and community, NCoC and PACE believe that we can strengthen the civic health of our communities now and in the future. We look forward to further conversations with our colleagues at the March 1 working session as well as following that meeting as we begin to launch action plans on these recommendations.

Appendix (Review of process employed in the exploration to-date)

Background

Since the [release of their publication](#) “Civic Pathways Out of Poverty and Into Opportunity” in 2010, PACE has been interested in the potential of civic engagement, service, and civic learning to foster greater opportunity for youth and young adults. PACE has long held the viewpoint that civic engagement is key to building and strengthening communities. PACE and its members have also recognized that civic learning is necessary to prepare young people with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need to become civically engaged. This ongoing body of work has led to the development of a [civic learning primer](#) and the undertaking of this collaborative project with NCoC to further unpack the potential of civic learning as a pathway.

The recommendations in this paper are offered after a series of discussions with field leaders, practitioners, funders, and community members, and PACE hopes they may inform continued discussions and activity; however, they do not necessarily represent the views or priorities of all PACE member institutions.

Individual Interviews

Beginning in July 2017, NCoC and PACE launched this collaborative exploration by seeking partner input and recommendations for a field-wide discussion about civic learning as a pathway to equity and opportunity. Interviews were conducted with sixteen partner organizations representing civic learning advocates and practitioners as well as civic engagement researchers and leaders. The interview explored the central question “Can civic learning be a pathway to increased equity and opportunity for students, institutions, and communities?” and informed the vision statements for equity and opportunity as well as the discussion questions for a salon session at the NCoC Conference in October 2017.

Recap of October 2017 “Exploring Civic Learning as a Pathway to Equity and Opportunity” Salon Session

The opening session of the 2017 National Conference on Citizenship kicked off with a reflection from Temple University student Maya Branch, about how her civic learning experiences empowered her to find her voice. Maya challenged the adults in the audience to think about what young people are capable of, how they are ready and willing to participate if given the opportunity and reminded us that our youth are not just the future; they are the present too. Maya set the stage for our panelists, Rebecca Burgess (American Enterprise Institute), Decker Ngongang (PACE), Verdis Robinson (The Democracy Commitment), and Robert Sainz (City of Los Angeles), to discuss how civic learning supports vibrant communities and makes engaging civic life possible. Whether civic education takes place in classrooms or through experiential learning programs, on community college campuses, or in political rallies and discussions, young people who positively engage in their communities shape their identities through civic experiences.

Systems and institutions can either reinforce inequities or foster greater opportunity. Our goal is to foster greater opportunity. It is up to us to create the conditions for young people to become active, engaged citizens by empowering and supporting them as well as giving them access to the skills, knowledge and opportunities to participate. In order for young people to understand and enact their individual civic rights and collective responsibilities, we must understand and embrace both their

individual and collective voices. While the panelists agreed civic learning is ripe with the potential to do this, the conversation also raised several challenges, including the role adults play in facilitating or sometimes hampering youth engagement, the polarized and inequitable environment in our education system, and a fear of being politically active during these divisive times.

In addition to the panel, we also heard from the audience about how to strengthen communities by enhancing civic learning both inside and outside of the classroom. When young people are equipped with the skills to discuss and analyze controversial issues, learn about the history and systemic causes of inequities, and are invited to be part of solutions, they have the opportunity to find their voice, to become a part of something bigger than themselves, and become forces for good. The session closed with observations from Keesha Gaskins-Nathan (Rockefeller Brothers Fund) on the honesty, urgency, creativity, and imagination required to do this work. Civic learning has the power to address hard questions about racial and economic inequities in our society, and to create better opportunities for all people.

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