

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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National Conference on Citizenship



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 this 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, and
- embrace and position civic learning as part of a solutions set to address challenges, particularly social inequities and a lack of opportunity and support for young people to exercise their civic rights and responsibilities.

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. Our aim with this work is to encourage schools and educational institutions to engage with their communities around issues of inequity and lack of opportunity. In doing so, we suggest considering broad forms of civic learning that can take place in both school and community-based contexts.

This paper outlines key recommendations generated from our 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). These recommendations include:

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

This paper, originally released for discussion purposes in January 2018, seeks to describe each recommendation and visions for what it might look like to achieve it. These recommendations subsequently informed a March 2018 [working session](#), which discussed the recommendations and began considering possible strategies for implementation by philanthropy and other leaders who recognize the value and potential of civic learning as a pathway to equity and opportunity.

In this revised edition of the paper, we have we have incorporated key themes and feedback from the working session into the original discussion paper. These revisions include opportunities for the field to explore this intersection further; updated sections are denoted with this arrow: ➤.

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.

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, 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 ensures that 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.

During the working session in March 2018, we received some feedback that prompted us to highlight a few considerations more deeply, specifically regarding language and the role of race.

➤ A Shared Understanding of Language

While the definitions and vision statements provided offered a foundation to the recommendations, we heard that continued refinement and attention to language will be necessary in order to achieve a shared understanding of this work. We need to be even more clear about definitions of terms, make sure concepts are well articulated, and specifically name issues that might otherwise be open to varied interpretation. Additionally, some of the terms used in the recommendations have political and historical meanings which may convey different values to different audiences or result in varied interpretations. Race, power, and privilege are complex and challenging topics, which makes it all the more important to be clear and avoid coded language in discussions centering on these issues.

➤ The Role of Race and Racial Equity

We heard that conversations about equity and opportunity cannot be meaningfully advanced without acknowledging racial identity and experience, including how inequities along racial lines contribute to disparities in education and other systems. In order to overcome the inequities that impact the civic development of young people, systemic barriers rooted in racial inequality must be acknowledged and addressed.

Race is not only important when thinking about how civic learning can become a pathway to equity and opportunity, but also when looking around the room at who is a part of these discussions. Maintaining a focus on race equity requires intentionality in diversifying the voices and perspectives represented, as well as a willingness to disrupt the norms of existing power structures and exclusivity. How to achieve these efforts effectively and in partnership requires further consideration.

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 sectors with an emphasis on ensuring that all young people develop an understanding of their individual and collective 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.

➤ Strategies identified at the March 2018 working session:

- We can be more inclusive in our orientation about who is (and who can be) a civic leader by:
 - avoiding inequities in attention and support of students along lines of privilege
 - intentionally addressing the issue of representation in civic education: if young people don't have access to civic educators they can connect with, and activities they can find identity in, they will find it elsewhere--online, for example (which raises the issue of digital citizenship and literacy)
- Alternative education and workforce development programs are promising places to focus civic learning efforts, especially in reaching Opportunity Youth (those disconnected from both school and work). In addition, these programs and afterschool programs can explore more creative approaches to teaching and learning such as role playing, encouraging civic imagination and courage, and others which can enable young people to embody civic leadership.
- Encourage schools to use democratic approaches to solving their own challenges, and let students' voices be heard in the process (examples may include participatory budgeting and democratic decision making); also encourage teachers to lift up and integrate civic skills in the classroom.

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 can also welcome participants' complex and varied social identities, acknowledge difference, 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, 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.
- **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.

➤ Strategies identified at the March 2018 working session:

- Engage parents with community, teachers, and students in early education through tools such as interactive and television channels and early childhood programs focused on reading skill development to increase understanding across difference and teach history in more engaging ways.
- Employ practices that center young people, with a focus on social and emotional learning, youth media, constructive and civil dialogue, participatory research, and youth organizing as civic learning practices that promote engagement and appreciation of difference.
- Ensure that every community offers opportunities for civic learning for young people. Every classroom is a community where people co-create the rules of engagement. Civic learning can also engage youth and take place through other community institutions such as libraries, museums, and historical sites.

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 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.

➤ Strategies identified at the March 2018 working session:

- Integrate civic learning across disciplines (acknowledging it is a challenge due to standardized curriculum, as acknowledged in another recommendation) and institutionalize democratic practices by developing democratic, democracy-centered schools.
- Provide young people with the skills they will need for life (social/emotional learning) that crosses curriculum and age groups to bridge and align their college, career and civic readiness preparation.
- Utilize models of youth development such as mentoring, youth sports, and re-entry programs that engage the people most affected. A system-wide approach is worth consideration because youth development models cannot be one-off activities, but rather must be part of a broader system that is focused on youth development.
- Acknowledge that approaches to learning are as important as the strategy/tactic used to achieve them. The approach must create a sense of community and purpose as well as help students see where they fit in.

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 roles 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.

➤ Strategies identified at the March 2018 working session:

- Develop a framework to facilitate shared understanding of these concepts across sectors that presents civic learning as a pathway to equity and opportunity, and incorporates the for-profit sector as well.
- Conduct local listening events to surface challenges to civic learning and solutions to address them, supported by cross-sector resources and training. These events will provide community insight on the need for civic learning, grounded in place, and develop agency for those in the community to tackle the issues.
- Develop and publish standardized return on investment measures for corporate and public sectors so that investors and businesses can have a means by which to judge their investments, as well as possibly bring new resources to the table.

➤ Overall Needs to Advance this Work, Individually and Collectively:

During the March working session, we heard there are several important considerations to keep in mind as we advance this work:

Opportunities for Individual Organizations:

- The organizations engaged in this effort are under-resourced both in terms of capacity and financial means to sustain this work. They desire support to:
 - raise awareness about equity issues
 - find new partners to expand their reach
 - demonstrate to students and families how civic learning is a pathway to opportunity
 - secure funding to support their work
- The community struggles with diversifying the leaders engaged in these efforts and forging new relationships. They need support in ensuring conversations are inclusive and connect people across differences such as class, race, and education level.

- Some respondents believe that the problem is well understood but that the community of civic educators, community leaders and philanthropy need help in setting priorities on which solutions and strategies to advance, whereas others felt that more frameworks and resources are needed to lead these conversations.
- Some respondents need additional support in accessing influencers, including media and institutional leadership, to advance these efforts and ensure young people’s voices are heard.

Opportunities for Our Field:

- Improve systems and provide diverse programs that allow students both in school and in alternative programs equal opportunity to learn civics and engage in government.
- Promote community-based approaches that fulfill local needs and utilize organizational capacity to implement community strategies. Localizing efforts may also allow groups to select an issue to focus on together.
- Encourage working together across ideological divides to find opportunities for common ground and shared purpose.
- Foster broad interest in civics that supports individuals’ ability to feel pride in and embrace ideals of active citizenship.
- Bridge the gap between nonprofits and for-profits, bringing people together around a common cause and deepening their understanding of civic learning as a pathway to equity and opportunity.

Additionally, in order to focus on equity and opportunity, it is necessary to broaden these discussions to include community-based partners such as alternative education providers, workforce development agencies, and community renewal organizations who represent young people that rarely, if ever, have access to “traditional” civic learning given disconnections or lack of access. While traditional in-school civic learning and civic educators are critical to reaching many students, this effort could benefit by broader thinking to recognize that citizens more generally have the opportunity to be civic educators outside of classrooms and that all young people can be recognized as civic learners.

Conclusion

This project aimed to advance a dialogue about what philanthropy and other leaders can do to support civic learning and investigate its potential as a pathway to equity and opportunity. Through these efforts, we surfaced both opportunities and challenges to advancing the recommendations outlined in this paper.

Throughout this exploration some salient themes emerged, including:

1. Civic learning can take place both in school and in the community (they are not mutually exclusive). Community partnerships, particularly through alternative education, workforce development, and after school or out of school time programs, offer a key opportunity to reach young people.

2. Democracy-centered schools and community-based programs create the environment and conditions necessary to promote civic learning. Democratic education systems are especially important to ensuring youth voices are heard when engaging in civic practices.
3. Social and emotional skills may be critical to civic learning and can be embedded within civic experiences and used as a bridge across age groups and disciplines.

The discussions also surfaced several challenges to be aware of, including:

- Language can pose challenges and obstacles to productive dialogue, in particular through the use of generalizations to avoid difficult topics; using "equity and opportunity" more generally for a conversation that is really about race specifically. Clarity of language and shared definitions of equity, opportunity, and related themes are needed to create a shared understanding of these recommendations and to promote understanding throughout future discussions.
- Also with regard to language: Further clarity on the specific scope and understanding of civic learning may enable people to see themselves in this broader picture--both as civic learners and educators. The current definition of civic learning is "a range of experiences" that prepare people for informed and engaged participation in civic life. But civic learning is not a range of experiences--rather it takes place *through* those experiences. Civic learning is the knowledge, skills, agency, and dispositions that take place through those experiences.
- There are limitations to including civics across disciplines due to the boundaries of standard school curriculums. Alternative education and workforce development programs may have the ability to more easily incorporate civic learning experiences and can serve as opportunities to reach young people in addition to school-based civic learning.
- Both in-school and out-of-school civic learning strategies face their own set of challenges, but maintaining a focus on race and race equity may present an additional challenge because of a potential tendency to "default" back to traditional civic learning approaches that may not intentionally include an equity lens.

We also recognize that some critical questions remain about how to approach this work, including:

1. How do we achieve a common and shared understanding of civic learning and who is, and who should be, a civic educator?
2. How do we stay focused on integrating an equity lens, rather than defaulting to known fundamentals of civic learning practice?
3. How do we encourage schools and educational institutions to build partnerships and become a part of community without reducing the importance of classroom civics?
4. If/how do we reconcile the view of civic learning as worthwhile in and of itself and as a tool to promote equity and opportunity? Does not reconciling this tension undermine the value or efforts of either approach?

We heard from the field that this can't be just a civic learning initiative, rather, it's also about reconciling feelings of "civic disjuncture." When students' lives reflect a different reality than the one they're presented with in school, even the best civic learning programs won't be able to reach them. We need to simultaneously address social inequities as we send a message to young people that their voice matters--so they can see that it does; that they matter, and that their voice has the power to create change. As this collaborative effort concludes, NCoC is committed to continuing to serve as the

repository of information gathered through this project and a potential convener of future conversations.

By expanding the picture of who is a civic educator and who needs civic learning; increasing 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, we can strengthen the civic health of our communities now and in the future. 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 all young people for active and engaged civic lives.

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, priorities, or endorsements 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.

Recap of March 2018 Working Session

On March 1, 2018 the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) and Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE), in collaboration with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, hosted a working session “Exploring Civic Learning as a Pathway to Equity and Opportunity”. Approximately 65 participants including civic learning experts and program providers, funders, youth development and community-based leaders, researchers as well as civic engagement and service organizations gathered to discuss the four recommendations for civic learning as a pathway to equity and opportunity. Through this convening, we aimed to accomplish the following objectives:

- Define the value proposition of civic learning to address societal inequities, improve community outcomes, and find a place for everyone in the civic experience.
- Identify what is needed to make the case that civic learning is part of the solutions set that can influence equity and opportunity outcomes.
- Develop an action plan, based on recommendations from the field, for philanthropy and other leaders to support and invest in civic learning as a pathway to increased equity and opportunity for students, institutions, and communities.

More detailed and unsynthesized notes from the March 1 working session are available upon request. Please contact Kristin Cotter from NCoC at conference@ncoc.org.

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