

FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE, A COLUMN DEDICATED TO RECOGNIZING SUCCESSFUL “BRIDGES” BETWEEN RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS, REPORTS ON RESEARCH WITH PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT.

FOUR YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE WORKING TO BUILD CIVIC SKILLS

In 2003, CIRCLE published work by Dr. Mary Kirlin, who conducted a comprehensive literature search for measures of civic skills among young people. This search led her to split “civic skills” into four major categories: collective decision-making, critical thinking, organization and communication.¹ The following article provides examples for how today’s youth organizations are trying to build skills in these major areas, using Kirlin’s list of measures in each category as a guide.

COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING

The United Teen Equality Center (UTEC) in Lowell, MA provides one example of a youth organization that works to build collective decision-making skills. It hosts a statewide initiative called Teens Leading the Way (TLTW). According to Geoff Foster, Youth Civic Engagement Specialist at UTEC, the purpose of TLTW is to bring together the “minds, opinions and individual backgrounds of the young people in the group to address statewide issues which effect teens across the Commonwealth.” Foster suggests that “the teens in Teens Leading the Way own a new identity,” a group identity. “That identity,” Foster continues “teaches humility, care for others, and responsibility for fixing problems that they once didn’t own.”

Foster says that when initiating new projects, “the group goes through a long process of debate and deliberation to decide where they would like to spend the next year focusing their energy.” Each meeting is facilitated by a small group of young people, allowing each member of the group to take ownership, build facilitation and other communication skills, but ultimately contribute to making decisions as a full group who represent various cities around the state. “Teens Leading the Way has two major successes thus far: the creation of the first ever Governor’s Youth Council and...getting a bill as far as the House Ways and Means Committee increasing mental health resources in youth centers.”

CRITICAL THINKING

Kirlin’s review of research found a handful of skills that she labeled as critical thinking. These included:

- Identifying and describing information about political and civic life
- Analyzing and explaining information about political and civic life
- Synthesizing and explaining information about political and civic life
- Evaluating, taking, and defending positions on public events and issues
- Thinking critically about conditions of political and civic life
- Thinking constructively about how to improve political and civic life²

Many of these skills are integrated into an international program involving hundreds of teachers in Europe and the United States. “The Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago (CRFC), The Constitutional Rights Foundation in Los Angeles (CRF) and Street Law, Inc. are conducting a major six year teacher-based initiative, Deliberating in a Democracy (DID), designed to improve teaching and learning of democratic principles and the skills of civic deliberation.”³

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DID provides teachers with materials and training to lead discussions of controversial issues in the classroom.

The materials are constructed with European partners so that the problem and the information is relevant to multiple sites. Each topic area includes a short article, a concrete public policy question that poses a choice between two values important in a democracy (such as liberty and equality), and is designed for one or two class periods. However, Carolyn Pereira, Executive Director of Constitutional Rights Foundation Chicago, suggests that “naturally the discussions are much richer if teachers take a longer time and embed [the discussions] into [the] curriculum.”





The program involves opportunities for students in the U.S. to interact with students in European countries through video conferences, web forums and international exchanges. Lena Morreale Scott is the Senior Program Director at Street Law, Inc. She says that this “adds a dimension that isn’t normally accessible...[and a] human dimension of people who you may never get to talk to.” She says that students were interested in what other students in other countries thought about them and that this encouraged students to think “‘why in the world would there be so much difference’—[an] added piece that makes [DID] deeper.” Understanding multiple perspectives is an important skill that the DID program tries to build.

ORGANIZATION

The Citizenship and Public Service (CPS) Scholars program is an opportunity for Tufts undergraduates to “work on projects to create positive change and build capacity in Tufts’ partner communities, as well as throughout the world.”⁴ The program is based at Tufts’ Jonathan M. Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service (CIRCLE’s home) where CPS Scholars can participate for either three or four years. Participants begin the program by taking a class called ‘Education for Active Citizenship’ and work on a community-based project each year. “The developmental program consciously builds new levels of knowledge, skills and behaviors year-by-year and brings together a mentoring community of peers.”⁵

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Melissa DeFreece, the CPS Scholars Program Coordinator, believes the intended outcomes of the program are broad in helping students become active citizens while learning organizational skills such as time management, event planning, grantwriting, facilitation, and program and curriculum development. Scholars develop a workplan with a Community Supervisor at their partner organization and use the skills they have learned at CPS Scholars’ meetings and through other campus activities to implement this plan. DeFreece says that in addition, “some partners train and work with [CPS Scholars] on different skills because they have to work at least eight hours a week during the academic year.”

While these skills are critical for a CPS Scholar to move forward with their projects, DeFreece says that the crux of the program “is that we want them to be able to assess ‘where can I fit in?’, ‘what can I do to

help?’; and ‘I am interested in X and I want to help with a viable solution.’” She wants students to “look at communities wherever they are at and say ‘what are the assets in this community and how can students think about how they can be involved in community work.’”

COMMUNICATION

A project of the Bus Federation Civic Fund, Trick or Vote was launched in 2004 in Portland, OR and is now a national event with a significant number of partner organizations. “Trick or Vote is a massive non-partisan get-out-the-vote canvass, aimed at getting new people engaged in the political process.”⁶ According to Matt Singer, Executive Director of the Federation and CEO of the Forward Montana Foundation, this year Trick or Vote is going to reach 200,000 voters through the participation of several thousand volunteers, all of whom will have “intense one to one interactions with voters.”

For Singer, Trick or Vote has “figure[d] out ways to get people back to what we know is the single most successful form of communication” with voters. On top of this, Trick or Vote “has been an outlet for people’s first time being involved,” said Ryan Joseph Davis Christensen, Trick or Vote’s National Director. Singer believes that Trick or Vote “takes advantage of this giant cultural opportunity.” He says it’s a “canvass with training wheels [because it] meshes with something you’ve done before” and establishes volunteers’ communication with voters and their confidence. “[Trick or Vote] lowers the bar,” Singer adds, “someone dressed up as Dracula...makes it funny [and a] good voter interaction. People are ready to smile and laugh at you.” Christensen says that “monster invasions” will start in September. ★

ENDNOTES

1 This CIRCLE Working Paper: The Role of Civic Skills in Fostering Civic Engagement can be found at <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP06Kirlin.pdf>

2 Kirlin found these skills cited in two sources: 1) Patrick, John J. 2003. Defining, Delivering, and Defending a Common Education for Citizenship in a Democracy. Patrick, John J., Gregory E. Hamot, and Robert S. Leming (eds) Civic Learning in Teacher Education International Perspectives on Education for Democracy in the Preparation of Teachers, Vol. 2; and 2) Center for Civic Education. 1994. National Standards for Civics and Government. Calabasas, CA: Center for Civic Education

3 <http://www.deliberating.org/index.php/about-us-topmenu-19/about-us-topmenu-336>

4 <http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/?pid=19&c=14>

5 <http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/Students/ScholarsProgram>

6 <http://trickorvote.org/>



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