



Self-Directed Learning/Reflection Guide and Syllabus All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Civic Engagement

CIRCLE released “[All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Civic Engagement](#)” in October 2013. This report by CIRCLE’s Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge summarizes recent research and makes a set of recommendations to improve the civic education and participation of all young people in America.

Since releasing the report, we have deepened our discussions and begun new conversations with a wide range of stakeholders about the next steps toward achieving those goals. In January and February of 2014, CIRCLE developed and hosted an [online seminar](#) that gave a range of stakeholders (e.g. youth workers, researchers, educators) the opportunity to discuss issues, share resources, and benefit from each other’s experience.

For those unable to participate in the online conversations, we have gathered the seminar topics and questions into this self-directed learning guide. We also welcome you to use this document could as the skeleton of a syllabus for short-term group conversations.

The guide is broken into five sections that can be tackled all at once or one at a time. Each section began as a blog post on our website. Throughout the document, you will find links (in red) to additional resources and supporting materials.

Section 1:	Fundamental Goals	Pages 2-3
Section 2:	State of Youth Engagement	Pages 4-6
Section 3:	Youth Civic Engagement Practice	Pages 7-8
Section 4:	Collaboration for Youth Civic Engagement	Pages 9-10
Section 5:	Taking Reflective Next Steps	Page 11

Section 1: Fundamental Goals¹

To begin, we encourage you to read at least through page 24 of the *All Together Now* document. In addition, you can view a [presentation](#) by CIRCLE's Director, [Peter Levine](#), and Deputy Director, [Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg](#) as they provide an overview to the general narrative and goals of the report:



There are two fundamental goals named which the Commission suggests that we strive for in working towards improving youth engagement:

- 1) ***Free expression and civil deliberation***
Young people need the space and encouragement to form and refine their own positions on political issues, even if their views happen to be controversial. Adults, schools, political officials, and youth themselves must adopt a generally tolerant and welcoming attitude toward this process of developing and expressing a political identity.

- 2) ***Equity and quality of political engagement***
The electorate should represent the people in the U.S. as a whole. However, low-income young people, people of color, and young people from recent immigrant backgrounds receive less effective civic education, both inside schools and in families and communities. Low-income and Latino youth participate at much lower rates. Meanwhile, Republican youth have been disproportionately disengaged in the past decade. Young women are less encouraged, and are less confident in their abilities, to seek leadership roles in public life.

¹ This section was adapted from a CIRCLE blog post: <http://www.civicyouth.org/circle-online-seminar-orientation-introduction/>

Civic education is relevant to these gaps because, when done well, it can motivate and excite students to participate. Besides, political influence requires knowledge. Voting confers no power unless the voter understands issues, candidates, and political institutions at the local as well as state, national, and global levels. Thus the quality of engagement (in this case, defined in terms of knowledge) is closely related to equality; both are essential.

Guiding Questions

Thinking about these two overarching goals, as well as other elements in the *All Together Now* report, and using your own understanding and experience, consider these questions:

- ★ In what ways do you agree and disagree with the fundamental goals for youth civic engagement (pp. 22-24) laid out in the report?
- ★ How do these goals compare to your organization's, group's or community's goals for your youth efforts?
- ★ In what ways does your work promote and/or challenge these two fundamental goals?
- ★ Is there another overarching goal that you believe (always or occasionally) trumps these goals for youth civic engagement?
- ★ What barriers or challenges might arise from prioritizing the two goals named in the report?

Section 2: State of Youth Engagement²

The *All Together Now* report combined existing research, knowledge, and expertise in the youth civic engagement field. In all, we surveyed or interviewed 6,913 people and scanned the relevant laws of all 50 states plus the District of Columbia. The details of these efforts can be found on page 9 of the report. Additionally, the Commission scanned countless other reports and studied current trends. A range of unique challenges and opportunities emerged in roughly these four areas (citation information for the data below can be found in the full report):

1. Deep polarization and ideological conflict are causing young people to distrust government

- ★ 76% of registered voters said that American politics had become more divisive and 74% believed this was a bad trend
- ★ 55% agreed that political parties were more divided than the public
- ★ Communication environment is confusing; dialogue and deliberation are not modeled in our national politics

2. Growing inequality of civic opportunities

- ★ 40% of 18-29s have never taken a college-level course of any type
- ★ Children of families in the top 25% of the income distribution have an 80% chance of attending college; it is 17% for the bottom quarter
- ★ Youth with ANY college experience are twice as likely to vote than non-college youth
- ★ White, wealthy students are 4 to 6 times more likely than Hispanic or Black students from low-income households to exceed the “proficient” cut-off in the NAEP Civics Assessment
- ★ Only 9 states require students to pass a social studies test in order to graduate high school

3. An increasingly diverse youth population

- ★ Thirty-eight percent of young Americans (ages 18- 29) are people of color

² This section was adapted from a CIRCLE blog post: <http://www.civicyouth.org/circle-online-seminar-what-is-the-state-of-youth-civic-learning-and-engagement/>

- ★ More than one quarter of 18-29s have at least one parent who was born in a country other than the United States
- ★ Only 15.2% of White public school students attend multiracial schools, those with at least a tenth of their students coming from three or more groups
- ★ Students who attend multiracial schools are least likely to discuss current events with families and friends; young adults are less likely to vote if they attended racially diverse schools
- ★ Young people who attend diverse schools AND experience discussions of current events, or belong to extracurricular groups that address social problems, are more engaged and knowledgeable

4. *A powerful role for social media*

- ★ In 2012, 92% of youth (18-29) in the United States used at least one social media site, up from just 8% in 2005.
- ★ 40% of young adults who used a social media site promoted political material by posting or “liking” it.
- ★ 94% or more youth have Internet access and it varies only a fraction among racial groups.
- ★ Recent research shows that participation in social media empowers Latino youth as information leaders in immigrant communities.

Additional Resources

CIRCLE has performed other studies designed to inform those interested in engaging youth in civic and political life.

- Despite the over-simplified portrayal of young Americans in the news media, **their political engagement is diverse.**
- Survey data show that civic engagement is **highly unequal among young Americans.** One of the primary divisions is between young people who have ever attended college and those who dropped out of high school or did not continue their education beyond high school.
- There is a **crucial role for higher education** in building youth civic engagement.
- Turning engagement into civic and political leadership **among young women.**

Guiding Questions

- ★ In what ways do the main findings/messages of the report resonate with or depart from your experiences?
- ★ What is the state of youth engagement where you are?
- ★ *All Together Now* and several other resources highlight the dramatic inequality of opportunity among youth at the K-12 level, and between youth who do and do not have college experience. As a result, the report focuses a great deal on the importance of strengthening K-12 civic education as a way to close the civic opportunity gap. In no way does this focus mean that higher education has less of a role.
 - ★ If you work in higher education, what civic experiences and skills do your students bring to college?
 - ★ How do those experiences and skills (or lack thereof) influence higher education's efforts?
 - ★ Can higher education do anything to assist in narrowing the civic opportunity gap?

Section 3: Youth Civic Engagement Practice³

The report shares many recommendations for developing a more intentional system to build democratic participation across different contexts. These main practical strategies are highlighted:

- ★ **Create diverse and accessible opportunities for civically disadvantaged and non-college youth.** CIRCLE's [report on disconnected youth](#) showed that young people are more likely to get involved if they are directly asked to do so. Many of the respondents in the report had never been asked to participate. This was the case for many of the youth, and especially the case for young men.
- ★ **Engage in controversy and disagreement that promotes youth voice/expression, information seeking, and deliberation.** CIRCLE found that discussion of controversial issues is unfortunately less common in racially diverse schools, but when discussion occurs in those schools, it is very helpful.
- ★ **Lower barriers to youth political participation and increase transparency of the political system.** Analysis for the *All Together Now* report found that allowing people to register to vote on the same day that they vote had a positive effect on youth turnout in 2012, and that finding is consistent with previous research.
- ★ **Provide high-quality civic learning experiences and assessments that develop higher order knowledge and skills in the context of real-life issues.** As one of many examples, [CIRCLE found that the iCivics Drafting Board module](#) had a significant and positive impact on students' argumentation skills development. The free module engages students in challenging tasks of researching an issue and constructing a logical argument in an engaging and relevant way. Check out appendix B of the report for other examples.
- ★ **Build systems or networks of opportunities and support.** The report highlights efforts in California, Florida, and Illinois (pp. 45-46) where multi-sector groups are working toward policy changes in civic education.

³ This section adapted from a CIRCLE blog post: <http://www.civicyouth.org/circle-online-seminar-exploring-the-practice-of-engaging-youth/>

Guiding Questions:

In order to expand our collective understanding of what is happening in the field and what seems to be working in different contexts, we ask that you consider the five broad areas noted above in answering these questions:

- ★ How are you applying (or would apply) the five strategies mentioned above to your practice?
- ★ Youth Radio **responded to the report findings** from a youth point of view, which talked about positive civic outcomes that accrue when young people discuss current and controversial issues that included a diversity of perspectives in a meaningful and productive way. How are you thinking about diversity and a diversity of perspectives in your work? What strategies, efforts and/or resources are needed to create environments that can incorporate diverse perspectives in a civil way?
- ★ What additional strategies are you using? Do you have any research to share that supports the effectiveness of that strategy?
- ★ What else is working in your context? (i.e. challenges, successes, lessons learned)

Section 4: Collaboration for Youth Civic Engagement⁴

The key recommendations from *All Together Now* (pp. 27-36) center on the idea that improving youth civic and political engagement is a multi-sector endeavor, which includes not only educators and policy makers, but also families and community leaders. In fact, research for the report showed us that one sector cannot change these dynamics alone. Individual sectors need to strengthen and build upon “what works.” Cross sector collaboration, communication, and learning are vital to significantly improving youth engagement levels.

Individuals and groups working across sectors should:

- ★ Pull together a **set of helpful policies**
- ★ Work to improve and **support teacher practice** so that more promising practices can be delivered to young people
- ★ **Address the unevenness** of high-quality civic education available, especially to low-income and minority youth
- ★ **Promote innovation**, including a broader range of assessments that can measure not only civic knowledge but civic skills
- ★ Establish **stronger collaboration**, which will help focus in on common areas and concerns

CIRCLE has not fully explored recommendations for reaching families and individual youth. We continue to look to the field for what is working in these sectors.

Additional materials for various sectors:

- **How Civic Leaders Can Use the report:** A one-page summary of the major takeaways of the report and what can be done in response.
- **How Education Organizations Can Use the report:** A one-page list of reasons why education organizations should make civic education their concern, and how other efforts in the field can incorporate discussions of civic education.
- **Individual Teacher Reflection Guide:** Gives teachers the opportunity to compare their experiences to those of teachers in our national survey, and to consider what could strengthen support or further their efforts.
- **Information Literacy in High School Civics**
- **Crucial Role for Higher Ed in Building Youth Civic Engagement**

⁴ This section was adapted from a CIRCLE blog post: <http://www.civicyouth.org/circle-online-seminar-stitching-together-a-field-of-diverse-efforts/>

Guiding Questions:

- ★ How can you see these recommendations playing out in your own work? Do you see barriers that may arise? What might help further the recommendation?
- ★ Given what people are doing in the field and what is recommended in the report, how do we collaborate and work together across venues?
- ★ How might you and your organization promote and benefit from these collaborations?

Section 5: Taking Reflective Next Steps⁵

Now that you have given some thought to the research findings and recommendations, what might they mean for you?

WHO HELPS AND HINDERS YOU: When thinking about your work or interest in youth engagement, what groups or individuals are your key supporters/helpers? Who may be hindering your work? (Specific names are not necessary)

KEY DIFFERENCES: What do you think are the key differences between those who support/help your work and those who may hinder it?

IDENTIFYING NEEDS: If you think any of the individuals or groups above hinder your work, what do you think they need in order to be more supportive? Are you in a position to provide this?

RECOMMENDATIONS: Which of the report's recommendations (pp.26-36) have you previously implemented or may want to implement? What is a first step you could take to do so?

SUPPORT AND RESOURCES: What additional support or resources might you need to implement specific recommendations? Who might provide that support or resource?

BARRIERS: Are there recommendations that you aren't considering? What keeps you from implementing them? Are you connected with someone who you think could act on those recommendations?

Guiding Questions:

- ★ What information, ideas, or actions discussed here do you see being most productive or of highest priority for youth civic engagement?
- ★ In your view, what additional questions need answers or what research still needs to be done?

⁵ This section was adapted from a CIRCLE blog post: <http://www.civicyouth.org/circle-online-seminar-revisiting-the-past-and-looking-to-the-future/>