

Project Title: Cultivating Youth Advocacy: Civics Education in Colorado

Country: United States

Participating Institution: Colorado College

Student Participants: Deksyos Damtew, United States, Colorado College and Ben Gellman, United States, Colorado College

Project Date Range: May – August 2021

**Project Introduction:** Civics education or “the study of the rights and obligations of citizens in society” (Oxford English Dictionary) has been systematically eliminated since federal and state funding has decreased (Jeffrey, 2019). A strong civics education helps students “understand public issues, view political engagement as a means of addressing communal challenges, and participate in civic activities” (Winthrop, 2020). However, students with inadequate civics education are less likely to participate in community service, face higher dropout rates, and are less likely to engage in the democratic process (Baumann & Brennan, 2017). In the current moment within the United States, political polarization has normalized and legitimized violence as a way of challenging American democracy. This project hopes to encourage youth to engage in policy reform and structured civil disobedience—moving towards a peaceful resolution to political disagreements.

In 2019, Deksyos Damtew took a Colorado College class on multicultural education and went to Mitchell High School to talk with students about their experience in the public education system. One student reflected on her desire to discuss politics in the classroom. She expressed how she found few places to explore the importance of community-engaged research—an application of civics education that uses public problem-solving to produce knowledge relevant to social change. After discussing with numerous students, educators, and community members within Colorado Springs, we learned that the problem was not unique to Mitchell High School, but rather a reflection of the systemic elimination of civics education in the country. Minority, rural, and urban students who receive high-quality civics education participate more in community engagement than their counterparts (Gould, 2011). Students can use their understanding of policy, governance, and activism to address the inequality and violence they see in their communities—ultimately fostering peace. Policy proposals will address issues such as poverty, climate change, and racial injustice within students’ communities and move towards a democratic solution.

The project will occur in one urban location, Colorado Springs, Colorado, and one rural, Bayfield, Colorado. In the past three years at Colorado College we have both had the opportunity to build a relationship with students in the Colorado Springs community. We have observed first-hand the need and desire for better civics education from students. After Ben Gellman spent a couple of weeks living with two educators in Bayfield last summer, we identified Bayfield as our second location. These educators expressed a desire to promote civics education programming for students in rural areas like Bayfield. According to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, 60% of students in rural areas live in “civic deserts”—communities where there are few or no opportunities to learn about policy and governance, and to participate in activism. We chose to implement our project in Bayfield and Colorado Springs because it allows us to give students the unique and valuable experience of sharing their diverse perspectives with one another. Social psychologists have found that dialogue between youth from different communities is critical for students to understand that they are not suffering alone (Kirshner, 2015).

**Community Partners:** We are working closely with Project VOYCE, a youth-driven leadership group based out of Denver, Colorado that works with traditionally underserved youth to help them engage with their community through youth advocacy training. Deksyos met Vanessa Roberts, the Director of Project VOYCE, this year during his class on youth social change and developed a partnership focused on youth activism across Colorado. A number of workshops will serve as a stepping-stone for a long-term relationship between Project VOYCE and areas outside of Denver. Additionally, we will work with a Colorado College Sociology student researcher who will collect data and write a paper to encourage the

replication of the workshops in other rural and urban areas. We will work with *Our Courts*, a Colorado non-profit of lawyers and judges aimed at educating the public about the role of government. We are working with high school teachers in Bayfield and Colorado Springs to recruit students for the workshops.

**Project Implementation:** The format of our project will be a series of 3 workshops, replicated in both locations, for 10-30 students in each, Bayfield and Colorado Springs. The workshops will lead up to a culminating convening with all the students. Each workshop will focus on one of the three coequal branches of government: the legislative, the executive, and the judicial. At the beginning of each workshop, we will deliver a lesson on ways to create change through policy and activism and begin to teach students how to write a policy proposal. Then, a judge or lawyer from *Our Courts* will talk about the structures of government and civic engagement to address creating change within the system. Following each speech, Project VOYCE will facilitate a dialogue for youth in each location to build skills in community-engaged research to create change outside existing political structures. Students will leave the final workshop tasked with creating a policy proposal to address a social issue such as poverty, homelessness, or climate change and receive our guidance over zoom in crafting their proposals. The students will then have the opportunity to bring their policy proposal draft to the final combined convening, for which we will bring the students from Bayfield to Colorado Springs to facilitate a dialogue between student participants and listen to their policy proposal drafts. Afterwards, we will be available over zoom to help the students finalize and actualize their policy proposal, presenting them to Colorado legislatures.

**Qualifications:** Deksyos is an International Political Economy major and captain of the Speech and Debate team at Colorado College. Deksyos interned at the Colorado Court of Appeals working closely with the organization *Our Courts*. Ben is a History major and worked as a Public Achievement Coach at North Middle School in Colorado Springs during his first two years at Colorado College. Public Achievement is a program where college students teach civics and community organizing to middle schoolers. Both Deksyos and Ben are interested in pursuing careers in public interest law, so they have a personal interest in improving civics education in the United States.

**Timeline:** May 2021: Develop workshops with judges and Project VOYCE tailored towards specific community needs and recruit high school students for workshops  
June 2021: Finalize civics education workshop plans, begin conducting workshops in Bayfield  
July 2021: Conduct civics education workshops in Colorado Springs and facilitate dialogue between students in Colorado Springs and Bayfield  
August 2021: Help students find a sponsor for their policy and propose it to state legislatures

**Safety and Contingency:** Due to the nature of the pandemic, we recognize that our project has to be adaptable to the changing circumstances. Our workshops can easily be adapted to online formats. We will use our planning time in the Spring and June to prepare ourselves and all of our guest speakers for both online and in-person formats. In the case that students are unable to present their policy proposals in person, they will be responsible for scheduling a meeting with state legislatures when COVID regulations are lifted. We both plan on living in Colorado Springs and are fully committed to following the local health and safety regulations—ensuring that the project is conducted with the health and safety of our participants in mind.

Name: Deksyos Damtew and Ben Gellman

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School: Colorado College

Student Expenses					Project Expenses				
Travel (Including Airfare)	Lodging	Communications	Food	Miscellaneous	Non-Student Travel and Lodging	Direct Equipment and Supplies	Marketing and Event Support	Staffing Costs	Miscellaneous
\$115	\$2,200	\$0	\$1440	\$0	\$ 1300	\$910	\$35	\$3,000	\$1,000

Total Student Expenses:  
\$3,755

Total Project Expenses:  
\$6,245

Calculations - Student Expenses	Calculations - Project Expenses
<p><b>Travel (Including Airfare):</b> Gas - 3 workshops (Bayfield) (294 miles/ 35 miles per gallon) x \$2.30 per mile x 6 trips = \$115</p> <p><b>Lodging:</b> Rent (Colorado Springs): \$515/month/person x 2 people x 2 months=\$2060 Utilities: \$35/month/person x 2 people x 2 months=\$140</p> <p><b>Food:</b> \$90/week/person x 2 people x 8 weeks= \$1440</p>	<p><b>Non-Student Travel and Lodging:</b> (Main Event - Culminating Convening in Colorado Springs) \$100/hotel room x 8 rooms=\$800 \$250/day for student transportation to and from Colorado Springs x 2 days=\$500</p> <p><b>Direct Equipment and Supplies:</b> \$170 to cater breakfast from Einstein Bros for main event + \$400 to buy pizza for lunch &amp; dinner=\$570 \$40 for snacks/workshop x 6 workshops=\$240 \$100 for books, pens, paper, and other supplies</p> <p><b>Marketing and Event Support:</b> \$35 - (flyers, social media marketing)</p> <p><b>Staffing Costs:</b> \$1,500 Student Summer Researcher \$1,500 Project VOYCE support fee</p> <p><b>Miscellaneous</b> Funding for policy proposal implementation \$500 x 2 locations=\$1,000</p>