

Project Title: Cultivating Youth Advocacy: Civics Education in Colorado

Project Country: United States

Sponsoring College: Colorado College

Project Leaders: Ben Gellman (United States, Colorado College) and Deksyos Damtew (United States, Colorado College)

## **Section 1: Narrative**

Our initial project goals were to create a civics education project for high school students that emphasized the practical application of civics education. We set out to try to make this project available for students in a rural community in Colorado and a more urban community in Colorado. We initially came up with the inspiration for this project in a college class that we took together where we talked about the gaps in the traditional history education that students receive in high school. In high school science classes, teachers often talk about how their material can be applied to situations in everyday life, but the same conversations often do not occur in government and civics classes. Another phenomenon that we observed is the fact that students are often not exposed to different backgrounds before going to college. With each of us growing up in different environments, one rural and one urban, we aimed to make the civics education workshops available to both these audiences and to facilitate dialogue between these places. The problem of lacking civics education in many parts of our country in many cases comes down to a lack of funding for civics education in recent years. We chose Colorado Springs, Colorado as the host site for our first series of workshops because of the myriad of connections in the Colorado Springs community that we developed while attending Colorado College in the area. We chose Durango, Colorado as our second host site because we had connections with middle school and high school teachers there who could be useful in our recruitment process. Later on, we expanded the project by offering a couple of virtual workshops that we primarily marketed to students in the Denver/Lakewood, Colorado area since Deksyos is from the Denver/Lakewood area and could use his connections to recruit participants. We were also bringing a speaker to Greencastle, Indiana because Ben is from Greencastle and was able to use his connections with teachers and community members there to organize the event. Expanding the project to Greencastle also allowed us the opportunity for students from the rural Indiana community to engage in critical dialogue with students from the more urban community of Colorado Springs.

When our partnership with the Stroud's Scholars program in Colorado Springs and the two clubs at Bayfield high school in the Durango area fell through almost simultaneously, we were nervous that we wouldn't have students to attend the workshops. We were quick to take action, developing a new partnership with Peak Education in Colorado Springs, connecting with youth organizations in our local area, as well as recruiting students from the pre-college program at Fort Lewis College in Durango. Communication over the summer with teachers and students proved difficult as many were away from their emails, so we reached out directly to students who were already involved in some sort of summer programming.

We define peace as not only the absence of violence, but the development of safety and security for all. In the short-term our project contributed to peace by equipping students with tools such as civics terminology and experience in writing policy proposals to address inequities in society that promote violence and deter safety, including but not limited to, inadequate resources for student mental health support, LGBTQ+ rights, and homelessness. In the long-term, students have been connected with Colorado College resources such as professors on campus and youth activists in the Denver area where

they can actively engage in fostering peace through political or social activism. The report written about our research will be given to civics organizations in the Denver area to replicate the workshops in hopes of improving upon our practices. As these workshops progress, we hope to encourage students to look towards civics through the lens of the coequal branches of government in addition to informal avenues that encourage dissent and civil disobedience. We are hopeful that this workshop will not be constrained to Colorado and has the potential to cross interregional boundaries.

This project has caused us to think a lot about the effective pathways to create change. We received very positive feedback from the partners that we worked with and students about our workshops and their impact. But, we repeatedly struggled to successfully get students to actually attend our workshops. This made us think about how to offer useful resources to people in a way that will actually allow them to take advantage of the opportunity. Another thing that it made us think about is the effects of factionalism and polarization. We were told by one of our partners that they wouldn't be comfortable sending their students to the Durango area because of the potential danger they faced as a result of being exposed to people from a more conservative area.

COVID 19 required us to offer both webinar style workshops as well as in person options. The demand for webinar style workshops appeared to take away from the in-person opportunity as it likely led to students feeling more comfortable about the COVID 19 risk and eliminated the barrier of transportation to our workshops. The advice we would give to future grant recipients is to make any virtual opportunities widely available, as the normal barriers of transportation and the inequities that come with having to show up in a physical space are alleviated.

There were advantages and disadvantages to conducting some of our workshops virtually. Conducting workshops virtually allowed us to recruit students from a wider geographical range--which allowed us to ensure that we had a sufficient audience for our guest speakers. However, there was obviously a bit of quality that we lost when workshops were conducted via zoom. Students were less likely to participate actively in the discussion and students also lost the opportunity to ask questions to the speaker in a casual setting after their planned talk.

Creating and facilitating civics education workshops taught us the power of youth engagement across rural and urban spaces. Equipped with resources on the dynamism of civic participation, high schoolers can come together to create avenues for social change in spite of political division across our nation. (Ben Gellman & Deksyos Damtew)

**Section 2: Photographs**

