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# Student Attitudes Towards and Impressions of Project Citizen

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## Student Attitudes Towards and Impressions of Project Citizen

Sara Winstead FRY<sup>1</sup> & Adil BENTAHAR<sup>2</sup>

### *Abstract*

Project Citizen is a civic education curriculum used across the United States and internationally, yet research about its impact on students is lacking in the literature. This article reports the results of a preliminary study designed to answer the following questions: What are students' attitudes toward and perceptions of Project Citizen? How do their attitudes and perceptions compare to those of students who completed senior projects? Ten high school students and 23 first-year college students completed a questionnaire designed for this study. Our findings indicate that the high school students had positive perceptions of Project Citizen, and they self-reported an understanding and high levels of efficacy regarding civic responsibility. In contrast, the first-year college students had lower levels of efficacy regarding civic responsibility. Our findings suggest the importance of specific learning experiences to help students develop civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, and indicate the need for further research into civic programs such as Project Citizen.

*Keywords:* Student attitudes, project citizen, civics education

### **Özet**

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Vatandaşlık Projesi, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri genelinde ve uluslararası alanda uygulanan bir vatandaş eğitimi programı olmakla birlikte projenin öğrenci üzerindeki etkisi hakkında literatürde eksik kalan bir konudur. Bu makale, şu sorulara yanıt bulmak için tasarlanmış bir ön çalışmadır: Öğrencilerin Vatandaş Projesine karşı tutum ve algıları nelerdir? Bu projeye katılan öğrencilerle daha önceki projelere katılan öğrencilerin tutum ve algıları karşılaştırıldığında ortaya çıkan sonuçlar nelerdir? 10 lise öğrencisi ve 23 üniversite birinci sınıf öğrencisine bu çalışma kapsamında bir anket uygulanmıştır. Çalışma sonuçları lise öğrencilerinin Vatandaşlık Projesine yönelik olumlu algıları olduğunu göstermektedir. Ayrıca bu öğrenciler uygulamanın sivil sorumlulukla ilgili üzerlerinde önemli bir etki ve konuyu anlama yetisi geliştirdiğini ifade etmişlerdir. Buna karşılık, projenin birinci sınıf üniversite öğrencilerine yönelik sivil sorumluluk ilgili etkisini sınırlı kaldığı görülmüştür. Sonuçlar, öğrencilerin yurttaşlık bilgi, beceri ve eğilimlerini geliştirmeye yardımcı olmak için özel öğrenme deneyimlerinin önemli olduğunu ve bu Vatandaşlık Projesi gibi sivil programların daha fazla araştırılması gerektiğini göstermektedir.

*Anahtar Kelimeler:* Öğrenci tutumları, vatandaşlık projesi, vatandaşlık eğitimi

## **Introduction**

*High school graduates should know how to be active citizens, the difference between talking about an issue and actually promoting change. Government doesn't run the country, people do.* Jaime, High School Senior.

Jaime shared this reflection while participating in an elective social studies course titled *Citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Project Citizen was an integral component of the course, and through this curriculum, Jaime and classmates spent more than a month studying an issue or problem in their community, conducting research, developing alternative solutions, and creating a proposal for public policy to address the problem. These high school students produced an action plan about how to influence policy makers to implement the suggested public policy and presented their findings to a panel of educators and community decision makers through a formal showcase. Project Citizen is a curriculum designed to help students learn that citizens' participation in government "is not just a slogan. Government of, by, and for the people is obtainable, if citizens acquire the knowledge, use their skills, and have the will to effect change" (Branson, 1999, p. 6). Jaime's reflection that high school graduates should know how to be active citizens suggests that the Project Citizen experience was effective in helping shape this young citizen's understanding of civic responsibility. Perhaps more importantly, the Project Citizen curriculum seemed to influence Jaime's belief that citizens should be active individuals who "stand up for [their] opinions and find an outlet for [their] concerns that will foster change."

Project Citizen has been implemented across the United States and internationally. A survey of teachers who participated in Project Citizen training suggested the curriculum was well-received by educators (Nairne, 2008). However, research about Project Citizen's impact on students is undeveloped in peer-reviewed literature. In order to address this gap, we designed this study of

students' attitudes toward and perceptions of Project Citizen. It is important to note that our sample size was small; thus, we present this as a preliminary study that contributes to reducing, but by no means eliminates, the gap in the literature. Our work was influenced by scholarship about the goals of civic education, which we review in the subsequent literature review section.

### **Literature Review**

Our commitment to civic education provided the impetus for this investigation, and the goals of civic education provided a framework for our work. Therefore, in the following literature review we describe the goals of civic education and some of the challenges to its implementation in the United States and internationally. We examine efforts to promote civic education worldwide and describe one program specifically: Project Citizen. In the final section of the literature review, we present information about the goals of Senior Projects.

### **Goals of Civic Education**

Through civic education, teachers strive to ensure that students have the skills and dispositions needed to participate as active citizens in adulthood. As a result of an effective civic education, students should have the knowledge and understanding of “opportunities for participation and engagement in both civic and civil society” (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010, p. 14). In a democratic system, civic education plays a role in sustaining self-government through “citizen participation based on informed, critical reflection” (Quigley, 1995: 6).

As a result of civic education, citizens should be able “to think for themselves” and “criticize tradition” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 2) with the goal of creating a better future by helping shape their communities and societies (Landsman & Gorski, 2007; Schulz et al., 2010). The preparation of effective, responsible citizens requires knowledge of democratic principles as well as the ability and willingness to be an informed participant (Pepper, Burroughs & Groce, 2003). Thus, civic knowledge

and skills are important components of civic education, but the process is incomplete without experiences that help students develop the disposition for political interest, civic engagement, and commitment to the common good (Black, 2000; Hyslop-Margison, Hamalian & Anderson, 2006; Niemi & Junn, 1998). Accordingly, schools have the potential to nurture a propensity for democratic participation among students through civic education.

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) presented a framework of three perspectives of citizenship: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen. Personally responsible citizens are honest, recycle, obey laws, pay taxes, and volunteer or make donations in times of crisis. Participatory citizens “actively participate in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state, and national level” (p. 241). Citizens who have adopted a justice orientation “must question, debate, and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 240). While the personally responsible citizen would donate food for the hungry, the participatory citizen would be the person who organizes the drive; the justice-oriented citizen “ask[s] why people are hungry and act[s] on what they discover” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 242).

The behaviors of personally responsible citizens such as honesty, voting, and obeying laws are important; however, such behavior does not necessarily advance democratic ideals. Indeed, curriculum designed to “foster personal responsibility [may] undermine efforts to prepare both participatory and justice-orientated citizens” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 264). Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963) illustrated the potential for tension between personal responsibility and democracy when he wrote,

We should never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was “legal”  
and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was “illegal”

to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. (para. 18)

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words provide a powerful reminder of the need for a balanced civic education that promotes democratic ideals (Ochoa-Becker, 2007; Parker, 2003). Although “the historic national goal of education in the United States has been to educate youth for the purpose of democratic citizenship” (Hinde, 2005, p. 105), implementing civic education is often fraught with challenges, both in the United States and internationally.

### **Implementation of Civic Education: Challenges**

In spite of essential nature of civic education, implementation is often a challenge. For example, in the United States social studies is the academic discipline dedicated to citizenship education (National Council for Social Studies, 1994), but the time allotted for social studies education at the elementary level has declined precipitously in recent decades (Cawelti, 2006; Davis & Davis, 2007; Leming, Ellington, & Schug, 2006; McEachron, 2010; Rock et al., 2006). For example, Davis and Davis studied elementary classrooms and found that only 15% of elementary students are getting five hours or more of social studies instruction per week. Gutierrez (2010) indicated that civic educators need to improve their inadequate instructional approach by going beyond weighing students' knowledge about government and civic matters, and pose serious questions such as “Is the American social landscape littered with incidents of incivility?” (p. 24).

Potential or real problems resulting from inadequate citizenship education may have already begun. Pepper et al. (2003) identified a prevalence of disengagement from public life on the part of young people and a decline in Americans' participation in the democratic processes. Low levels in students' civic education performance could be a consequence of three factors: “insufficient

curriculum requirement for civic education, poor teacher preparation, and lackluster instruction in civics and government” (Black, 2000, p. 49). In regard to teacher preparation and as a result of increased training to raise standardized test scores on math and reading, researchers have found that time allotted to practicing teachers for professional development in social studies has decreased in the past several years as well (Von Zastrow, 2004; Smith & Kovacs, 2011). Black (2000) reported that, in the United States, only 29 states require students to pass a government or civics courses for graduation from high school. Since nearly half of the states do not require such a course, it is no surprise that students lack “civic engagement and civic literacy” (Black, 2000, p. 49).

Although Black (2000) wrote about the United States specifically, challenges with implementing civic education are not limited to American schools. In England, for example, citizenship education became compulsory in secondary schools in 2002, yet its implementation was problematic and researchers found civics was “not necessarily being taught explicitly” (Davies, Fulop, Hutchings, Ross, & Berkics, 2004, p. 368). Challenges with the implementation of civic education extended to other countries around the world as well.

Mason (2009) explained that given differences in historical and contemporary circumstances in emerging democracies, civic education faces a different set of challenges. For example, during the era of the Soviet occupation in the Baltic countries and in the Soviet Union, instead of encouraging and reinforcing privacy, justice, and freedom as civic values, civic education was meant to instill Marxist/Leninist ideology and promote allegiance to the state. Such practices could bring about a sense of skepticism and distrust in civic education (Mason, 2009). Although some reformers in former communist countries interested in developing governments based on democratic ideals may seek assistance from the United States (Pepper et al., 2003), initiatives to foster civic education through projects in emerging democracies have been met with criticism for being a tool for the West



to exert hegemonic control (Craddock, 2007). Perhaps, one of the challenges of civic education implementation internationally is that the West's dilemmas are simply passed to its international partners (Craddock, 2007).

*An International Resource for Civic Education: Civitas International and Project Citizen*

In the midst of challenges with implementation of civic education and an international interest in fostering civic education in schools, Civitas International is a promising program that provides resources and support worldwide. As part of the United States-based Center for Civic Education (2011a), Civitas International is charged with gathering and sharing exemplary civic education curricula with students and teachers through partnerships in eighty countries. Civitas also provides teacher training and connects the efforts of educators, governmental agencies, civil society organizations, and educational institutions (Center for Civic Education, 2011a). United States and international educators work together to develop lessons in comparative government for American students (Center for Civic Education, 2011b). Membership in this international network does not require adoption of identical civic education programs and activities, allowing each country to develop curricula that are uniquely suited to their respective civic education needs.

This flexibility may have contributed to widespread adoption of Civitas programs in the Middle East. In 2000, Jordan was the first nation in the Middle East to implement Civitas International programs with support from the regional network of Arab Civitas (Glaser Consulting Group, 2004). Egypt and Palestine joined shortly after, and by 2004 the network included educators from other Arab countries of Bahrain, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen (Glaser Consulting Group, 2004). Project Citizen is one Civitas program that has been successfully implemented in these countries.

Project Citizen is a civic education curriculum for middle- and secondary-level students used across the United States and the world. The curriculum was developed in the mid-1990s by educators working for the Center for Civic Education with the overarching goal of promoting “competent and responsible participation in local and state government” (Center for Civic Education 2011b: para. 1). Experiences with Project Citizen also help students acquire “life skills such as citizenship, problem solving, oral and written communication, and research” (Medina-Jerez, Bryant, & Green, 2010, p. 71). The curriculum allows students to study current public policy issues. Project Citizen also reinforces and equips students with “skills for success in the collegial and workplace environments; civic engagement; and effective communication and collaborative skills that identify and utilize social, emotional, and academic strengths” (Idaho Human Rights Education Center, 2011, p. 2). Project Citizen emphasizes active citizenship and public policy; working together, the participating students “identify, research and pose public policy solutions to local problems” (Pepper et al., 2003, p. 47). Students then present their projects in local, state, and national showcases to leaders who may be in a position to implement their suggestions for reform.

Educators with the Center for Civic Education (2011b) estimated that, since Project Citizen was developed, nearly 2 million students in the United States have been taught the curriculum. Over 32,000 teachers in the United States have been trained in to teach Project Citizen. The curriculum is used internationally in 80 different countries, and materials have been translated into 40 different languages.

Given the potential of Project Citizen to be an effective model for civic education internationally as well as in the United States, we were surprised when our search for scholarship about Project Citizen in peer-reviewed journals uncovered few studies about this civic education curriculum. Searching for the keyword “Project Citizen” in ERIC, Academic Search Premier, Psych

Info, World Cat, Education Research Complete, and Web of Science, we found four articles specifically about Project Citizen. The authors of the articles all described effective experiences students or educators had with Project Citizen; however, none utilized empirical methods to examine the program's impact on students. We describe the results of the four scholarly articles about Project Citizen in the subsequent paragraphs.

Laguardia and Pearl (2009) described Project Citizen as one of the community development projects that help middle- and high-school students collaboratively contribute to bringing about positive change in classrooms and schools, thereby making the world a better place. Although the two researchers did not delve into the steps or learning outcomes of Project Citizen such as designing a research-based binder or portfolio, they stressed the importance of the program as a “component for citizenship” (p. 360). They also pointed out that community development projects, such as Project Citizen, call for policy involvement, a requirement that service learning does not necessarily meet (Laguardia & Pearl, 2009).

While Feldmann's (2010) article on the creation of an effective pilot course in high school civics used the term 'Project Citizen' only once to exemplify public policy-oriented projects, Medina-Jerez, Taylor, and Bryant (2009) emphasized the merit of Project Citizen in a more elaborate manner. As a program newly introduced to Bolivian schools, Project Citizen, through the Wyoming-Bolivia Partnership, is hoped to engage American and Bolivian youth to improve the quality of life in their societies (Medina-Jerez et al., 2009). Their work reported findings of some case studies that were conducted by three teacher educators in social studies, modern languages, and science. The three educators explored Project Citizen as a tool that empowers Bolivian students working on Project Citizen to effectuate positive change in both their schools and communities. In fact, the work of Medina-Jerez et al. (2009) did stress Project Citizen, but primarily from the perspective of the

three educators not the participating students, which perhaps paved the way for another endeavor with Project Citizen.

Medina-Jerez, Taylor, and Bryant (2010) explored Bolivian students' experiences with Project Citizen. The researchers followed a chronological development of the students' project based on four core steps of Project Citizens: identifying a problem, identifying solutions, policy statement, and action plan. The article emphasized one important aspect of Project Citizen, that of linking students with the community. Specifically, the Bolivian students had the opportunity to present their work before not only the city council in the American Embassy in La Paz, but also an audience comprised of local student presenters, teachers, and members of Educators for Democracy. The latter served as evaluators of the students' project (Medina-Jerez et al., 2010).

### **Senior projects**

In the midst of the decline of social studies education, and a growing critique of the contemporary approach to civic education in the United States (Gutierrez, 2010), an interdisciplinary experience has gained momentum for high school students: the senior project. Designed as an authentic assessment, senior project guidelines often involve research about a topic selected by a student, a project, portfolio documentation, and a presentation in front of community members with expertise in the topic (Shaunessy, 2004; Senior Project Center, 2010).

Senior projects have become common across the United States, with many states requiring them for graduation from high school. In 2007, our state legislature approved this change that must be in place by 2013 (Idaho State Department of Education, 2010). However, senior projects were implemented earlier in many school districts. Senior projects are designed to be an authentic assessment, and they are becoming more common as a graduation requirement across the United States.

That the use of senior projects has grown while civic education has declined seems ironic considering that a civic education curriculum already exists: Project Citizen; the curriculum involves many of the same steps as senior projects. From our perspective, the most notable differences between the two are 1) Project Citizen is completed in small groups, while senior projects sometimes are completed by individual students, and 2) students are able to choose from a wide variety of topics while completing senior projects, whereas Project Citizen topics are limited to public policy issues. Otherwise, the two learning experiences seem to have a convergent goal of helping students develop important citizenship, research, and presentation skills. Thus, we had two goals for this study: 1) identify student attitudes toward and perceptions of Project Citizen, and 2) compare the attitudes toward and perceptions of students who completed Project Citizen with those of students who completed senior projects.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Ten high school juniors and seniors who recently completed Project Citizen in an elective social studies course participated in this study. Interest in participating in the study seemed high when the 29 students in the course were introduced to the opportunity, but only one-third of the class returned a letter of informed consent that was signed by their parents or guardians. We refer to these students as “PC participants,” and they helped us answer the research question: What are students’ attitudes toward and perceptions of Project Citizen?

A second group of participants enabled us to answer our second research question: How do their (Project Citizen students’) attitudes and perceptions compare to those of students who

completed senior projects? Referred to as SP (Senior Project), this convenience sample consisted of 23 first-year college students who completed senior projects in high school. These participants attended a university with an enrollment of approximately 20,000 students. We obtained a list of email addresses for a random sample of 150 first-year students who graduated from high school within the last two years. Thirty responded and 23 met the selection criterion of having completed a senior project during their final year of high school.

### **Data Collection**

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, participants were asked to complete questionnaires (see Appendix) that included four open-ended questions and 10 Likert items with two subscales (civic responsibility and research process). We developed the questionnaire specifically for this study. The four open-ended questions were: (1) What do you think high school graduates should know about civic responsibility? (2) What is the most important thing you learned through completing Project Citizen? (3) What was the most challenging part of your Project Citizen experience? (4) Do you have any other comments?

The civic responsibility subscale consisted of four Likert items that addressed civic skills and dispositions that Project Citizen was designed to help students develop and which ideally all high school graduates possess. The second subscale included six Likert items that addressed participants' confidence with the research process, including written and oral communication. These six items addressed skills that students should refine through completing Project Citizen and use to complete a senior project. We developed the Likert items based on existing literature about Project Citizen and senior projects. Then we shared the questionnaire with three experts in the field: educators who have experience as social studies teachers as well as overseeing the implementation of Project Citizen and/or senior projects. We made changes based on the recommendations these experts provided.

PC participants completed paper versions of the questionnaire in their social studies class on the day of their Project Citizen showcases – the event in which students share their research and policy recommendations in a simulated legislative hearing. For the questionnaire administered to the SP group, “Project Citizen” was replaced with “a senior project.” Apart from word changes to reflect the different learning experiences, the questionnaires administered to each group were identical. SP participants completed the questionnaire online during their first year in college. The difference in administration of the questionnaire was due to necessity; we lacked face-to-face access to the SP participants and the PC participants lacked computer access for the questionnaire. See the Limitations section for further discussion of this issue.

### **Data Analysis**

Analyzing the open-ended question responses involved a multi-step process. First, we read and re-read the open-ended question responses to obtain a sense of the data. Then we used open coding to analyze the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) for each question, progressing line by line through the data and developing summary terms for each statement. Once all of the responses to each question were summarized, common categories were identified. There were three categories that were prevalent enough to constitute themes. However, four responses from SP participants were relatively unique, meaning they were only shared by two participants. These were not prevalent enough to consider themes. However, as these comments provide insights into SP participants’ thinking, they are included in Table 1 in the Findings section.

Although our sample size was small (see Limitations for further discussion), we conducted statistical analyses of the data to determine the reliability of the scales and explore differences in responses from the two sets of participants. As this is a preliminary study of Project Citizen, we determined that it was appropriate to explore the possible differences in the populations. We

conducted a reliability analysis of the civic responsibility and research skills scales. Reliability was high (above 0.6) for both scales despite the small sample size. Cronbach's Alpha was 0.92 for the six items which dealt with the research process, and the four items related to civic responsibility yielded a coefficient of 0.75. We analyzed the Likert items by determining means for the civic responsibility items and the research process subscales. We then conducted an independent samples *t*-test to determine if the differences in the means for PC and SP participants were significant.

### **Limitations**

This study was a preliminary investigation of student impressions of Project Citizen. Our sample size was limited. A nationally representative sample may yield different results as would a more robust sample with statistical power. Although our reliability values were acceptable, this was surprising for a small sample size. Our sample size constrains confidence in the reliability values as well as the significant difference in the *t*-test results. Despite these limitations, the aforementioned lack of empirical evidence about Project Citizen's impact on students in peer-reviewed literature provides justification for this study, as does the need for responsible citizens to address complex 21st century issues (Cawelti, 2006).

Another limitation of our study design is the PC participants completed the questionnaire in a class taught and supported by a teacher who is highly respected and adept at Project Citizen while the SP participants completed the questionnaire online. It is possible that the PC participants were more thoughtful in their responses than the SP participants given their personal connection. Our participants were also selected from two different populations. Additionally, we used self-reported data as measures; assessments of civic responsibility and research skills may yield different results.

### **Results**

The open-ended questions, which were analyzed through qualitative data analysis, indicated



that PC participants were more articulate and definitive in their writing about what high school graduates should know about civic responsibility. Table 1 provides a summary of the answers to the question “What do you think high school graduates should know about civic responsibility?” Six out of 23 SP participants did not answer the civic responsibility question. We present the results using percentages rather than frequency, so that the unequal sample sizes can be compared.

Table 1

*Comparison of PC and SP Participants’ Beliefs about Civic Responsibility*

<i>Category of Answer</i>	<i>PC (n = 10)</i>	<i>SP (n=17)</i>
Contribute to making a change in local community and/or the world.	40%	0
Detailed explanation of specific knowledge/skill set (e.g. “know how to develop informed opinions and take action”).	40%	0
Vague comments that did not indicate specific knowledge or understanding (e.g. “We should know about it” and “It’s important”).	20%	53%
	0	12%
	0	12%
	0	12%
	0	12%

Through our analysis of the responses to the question “What is the most important thing you learned through completing a senior project or Project Citizen?” we identified nine categories of responses (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Comparison of Most Important Learning for PC and SP Participants*

<i>Category of Answer</i>	<i>PC (n = 10)</i>	<i>SP (n = 21)</i>
How citizens can help make (policy) changes in their communities	80%	0
Discussion/listening skills (group skills)	20%	5%
Research skills and/or writing skills	0	29%
Work ethic/time management	0	24%
Learned nothing and provided critical comments about the experience.	0	19%
Knowledge of government	0	14%
Insights about life after HS/college	0	10%

Responses to the question “What was the most challenging part of your senior project experience?” varied greatly among participants (see Table 3). Five PC and 12 SP participants offered additional comments about their experiences with senior projects, and we present a summary in Table 4.

Table 3

*Comparison of Challenges for PC and SP Participants*

<i>Category of Answer</i>	<i>PC (n = 9)</i>	<i>SP (n = 22)</i>
Group work/group dynamics	44%	4.5%
Time management	22%	14%
Presenting	11%	18%
Drawing conclusions from research	22%	4.5%
Writing	0	23%
Research process	0	14%
Critical of entire experience	0	9%
Inconsistent feedback from evaluators (teacher vs. principal)	0	4.5%
It was easy (no challenges)	0	4.5%
Experience took student out of comfort zone/normal routine	0	4.5%

Table 4

*Additional Comments Shared by PC and SP Participants*

<i>Category of Answer</i>	<i>PC (n = 5)</i>	<i>SP (n = 12)</i>
Praise for the learning experience and/or class in which PC/SP work occurred.	80%	17%
Critiqued SP compared to PC as student had completed both learning experiences.	20%	0
Critical comments about SP experience.	0	50%
Explained what she or he did for SP.	0	25%
Appreciated chance to share opinion through survey.	0	8%

There were significant differences between the subscale means for civic responsibility and research skills for the PC (n = 10) and SP (n = 23) participants. Table 5 presents the mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and standard error of the mean (SEM) for each group. Table 6 presents the *t*-test results. These results indicate that there was a significant difference at the .01 level between PC and SP participants' self-reported understanding of civic responsibility and confidence with research

skills. However, these quantitative results must be interpreted cautiously given the small sample size.

Table 5

*Subscale Means*

Measurement Subscale	Group	M (SD)	SEM
Civic Responsibility	PC	3.35 (.54)	.17
	SP	2.16 (.39)	.08
Research Skills	PC	3.25 (.45)	.14
	SP	1.85 (.49)	.10

Table 6

*Independent Samples t-test for Subscale Means*

Measurement Subscale	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	95% CI
Civic Responsibility	7.14	31	.00	.85-1.53
Research Skills	7.68	31	.00	1.03-1.77

## Discussion

The results of this preliminary study suggest that Project Citizen helped the students in our study develop beneficial research skills, civic skills, and civic understanding. Eight out of 10 PC participants indicated the most important concept they learned was how citizens can help make policy changes in their communities. The significant differences between the subscale means suggest the PC participants were more confident about their research skills and had stronger beliefs than the SP participants. The participants' responses to the open-ended questions provide additional insights into the nature of the PC participants' higher subscale means. We discuss the results in the two sections that follow: Civic Responsibility and Comparing Project Citizen and Senior Projects.

### Civic Responsibility

Eight out of 10 PC participants provided rich, compelling responses to the question “What do you think high school graduates should know about civic responsibility?” Not one of the 17 out of 23 SP participants who answered this question provided a robust answer. The fact that two SP participants provided critical comments about civic responsibility is nothing short of alarming. The statement, “I’ve never been one for civic responsibility. If I know to do something is the right thing to do, then I will do it. That’s about it” suggests a lack of understanding regarding civic responsibility. The response “little to no information” may also reflect a lack of understanding. The follow-up request, “Please tell me why you wrote this answer” can lead to additional information about this problematic belief that civic responsibility is unimportant. Understanding the perspectives and background experiences of those who are not disposed toward civic engagement may yield valuable information that can help educators identify ways to reverse the trend of complacency.

It is also noteworthy that the PC participants articulated more detailed answers that suggested a propensity toward participatory citizenship and justice-orientated citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). In contrast, the SP participants’ answers were vague or described what Westheimer and Kahne classified as personally-responsible citizenship, which indicates a narrower understanding of the complexities of citizenship. We encourage social studies educators working with secondary and post-secondary students to remember that students may have had inadequate early experiences with civic education as a result of a national trend toward reducing the already insufficient time allocated for social studies at the elementary level (Davis & Davis, 2007; Leming et al., 2006; McEachron, 2010; Rock et al., 2006). While it is vital that we attempt to reverse this trend, it is also more essential than ever before that we proactively provide secondary and post-secondary students with opportunities to develop civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, especially that secondary education instruction should equip students with the appropriate civic knowledge and skills

(Gutierrez, 2010). Since our findings suggest that Project Citizen had a favorable impact on the PC participants' beliefs about and understanding of civic responsibility, this curriculum offers one such opportunity.

### **Comparing Project Citizen and Senior Projects**

#### **Student Learning**

Participant responses to the question "What is the most important thing you learned through completing a senior project or Project Citizen?" identified valuable aspects of both experiences. Eight out of 10 PC participants indicated the most important thing they learned had to do with bringing about community improvements or policy reform, an outcome consistent with Project Citizen's primary goals. In contrast, the SP participants provided more varied answers. This result was not surprising, because senior project requirements vary greatly among school districts. Nonetheless, in their responses to this same question, it was noteworthy that 15 SP participants indicated that they developed one or more of the following skills: knowledge of government, group interaction skills, time management, as well as research, writing, and presentation skills. Each of these skills is also necessary to successfully complete Project Citizen.

Two SP participants indicated that their most important learning pertained to insights about life after high school, including a future career choice. Perhaps, this positive outcome for these participants reflected the nature of the senior project requirements in their school districts. Participating in Project Citizen seems less likely to help students directly identify career options since that is not a goal of the curriculum.

Two of the four critical responses from SP participants indicated they did not learn anything from their senior projects. One wrote:

The only thing I learned is how to bullshit well and become more independent and reliant

upon myself. It is really pathetic to be honest. The project is a complete joke; I did it in under 5 hours and got an advanced grade.

Beneath this strongly-worded comment is the tacit suggestion that higher expectations or more structure could make the experience more meaningful. The other two participants explained specific aspects of their senior project that made the experience a negative one, such as unclear expectations and difficulty attaining community support.

### Challenges for Students

The answers to the question “What was the most challenging part of your senior project or Project Citizen experience?” had the greatest amount of overlap between PC and SP groups. Nine students in each group explained how one or more of the following four skills was challenging: effectively working with a group, time management, presenting, and drawing conclusions. We are reminded of an African proverb about the importance of facing and overcoming challenges: “Smooth seas don’t make strong sailors.” Indeed, the nine SP participants who considered one of the four skills mentioned above challenging also reported one of those skills to be the most beneficial thing they learned through the senior project. In contrast, only two of the PC participants identified one of the challenging skills as their most important learning. Eight of the PC participants identified the importance of knowing of how to make changes in their communities.

The high school senior who completed a senior project as well as Project Citizen praised the latter and criticized the former, stating “as a simple research paper, it lacks the skills needed in life and college: critical thinking, recognizing problems, and working with a group.” Two of the six participants who provided critical comments about their experience with completing a senior project offered similar critiques, indicating the senior project process did not help them develop new skills or perspectives; they indicated that it felt like another high school assignment. The six participants who

provided critical feedback about senior projects described multiple and varied concerns. Two participants were critical of the inconsistencies across school districts in terms of senior project expectations, suggesting that some district requirements were too easy while others were too difficult. Another participant was critical of evaluation practices within one school that seemed inconsistent and unfair. Two participants were critical that senior projects are a graduation requirement, with one stating, “It doesn't make sense for 4 years of time and work to come down to a semester long project determining graduation or not.” Finally, one participant offered scathing criticism of his or her entire high school experience as well as senior projects, indicating that the tasks were too easy.

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

The open-ended responses to the civic responsibility question highlight an opportunity for future studies that involve interviews with high school graduates regarding their beliefs about civic responsibility. They can be asked “What do you think high school graduates should know about civic responsibility?” The follow up request, “Please explain your answer” can lead to additional insights, particularly if participants articulate the belief that civic responsibility is unimportant. Understanding the perspectives and background experiences of those who are not disposed toward civic engagement may yield information that can help educators identify ways to develop an interest in active citizenship among students.

Follow-up questioning of high school graduates who provide answers that confuse civic responsibility with personal skills like “respect others. Being honest could take you further in life” could also yield valuable information about a perspective that seems problematic. As advocates for civic education, we were concerned about why six first-year college students did not answer the question. One of those six did not answer any of the open-ended questions, but the other five



provided compelling answers to other questions. While it is possible that these five students simply were apathetic about answering, it is also possible that they lacked the knowledge to answer. One possible way to improve the implementation of data collection in future studies would be to gather data in person rather than electronically.

In contrast, eight of the PC participants described the importance of high school graduates knowing how to become informed about issues, form opinions, and take action. Their responses suggest these young citizens have benefited from an education that is consistent with “a fundamental goal of schools in this democratic nation, [which] is to educate citizens so that self-governance can flourish” (Ochoa-Becker, 2007: xi). Hence, we recommend longitudinal studies examine whether adults who completed Project Citizen as students use their civic skills to participate as engaged, active citizens in their communities.

In this preliminary study, we identified a partial overlap of learning and skill development for PC and SP participants. PC participants also seemed more confident about their research skills than the SP participants, and all PC participants had a positive reaction to their learning experience while many SP participants were critical of the experience. Based on these comparisons, we encourage educators seeking to implement senior projects to consider whether Project Citizen is an appropriate option for students in their school district. Since teacher training is available for the curriculum, along with teacher and student guides, and trained teachers often participate in state-level networks for ongoing collegial support (Center for Civic Education, 2011b), Project Citizen can be relatively easy to implement.

The SP participants who provided a critique of their experience highlighted the importance of well-designed, clear, and meaningful senior project requirements. Since expectations for senior projects vary among school districts and states, we cannot make one broad recommendation for how

to improve senior projects based on these critical comments, nor would it be appropriate to do so given our limited sample size. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suggest that ensuring student buy-in and engagement with senior projects is essential. We encourage educators and school district administrators to evaluate their senior project design and requirements based on feedback from recent graduates. We also recommend a national study of senior projects to identify best practices.

### **Conclusion**

Since the goal of a public school education in the United States is to prepare youth to assume the responsibilities of citizenship, learning experiences should provide adequate preparation. The consequences may be dire if educators fail to do so. As Ochoa-Becker (2007) explained:

Self-governance is an imperative; citizens who are uninformed, who lack complex thinking processes, who lack commitment to democracy and its social justice values as well as those who lack social and political abilities will spell its demise unless they receive stronger education for their role as citizens. (p. 3)

The results of this study suggest that our PC participants were prepared to be active citizens who participate in self-governance. The results also revealed that PC participants developed many of the same academic skills associated with senior projects. While our sample size was too small to generalize these findings, our results suggest that Project Citizen is an effective citizenship education that may also be a viable option as a senior project.

We recommend that educators designing the requirements for high school graduation consider the importance of ensuring that high school graduates develop civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Jaime's words about high school graduates needing to know "the difference between talking about an issue and actually promoting change" serve as a reminder of the importance of an education in developing informed, active citizens. A high school diploma is insufficient—the United

States and the world need citizens who, like Jaime, are willing to “stand up for [their] opinions and find an outlet for [their] concerns that will foster change.”

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## Appendix

### *The Impact of Project Citizen*

Directions: Please respond to the statements below using the following scale by circling the number that best represents your response. Circle only one answer; do not circle between numbers or indicate a fraction or a range.

	<b><u>Strongly Agree</u></b> [SA] <b>4</b>	<b><u>Agree</u></b> [A] <b>3</b>	<b><u>Disagree</u></b> [D] <b>2</b>	<b><u>Strongly Disagree</u></b> [SD] <b>1</b>
1. I know how to contribute to positive change in my community.	<b><u>SA</u></b> 4	<b><u>A</u></b> 3	<b><u>D</u></b> 2	<b><u>SD</u></b> 1
2. When I am concerned about an issue in my community, I get frustrated if elected government officials don't share my concerns.	4	3	2	1
3. Most high school students are unconcerned about community issues.	4	3	2	1
4. When I am concerned about an issue in my community, I know how to contact policy makers to suggest changes.	4	3	2	1
5. When I am concerned about an issue in my community, I know how to research the issue so I can understand it better.	4	3	2	1
6. If I disagree with someone about an issue, I can discuss the issue with him or her and use factual information to support my opinion.	4	3	2	1
7. I am confident presenting my ideas in writing.	4	3	2	1
8. I know how to select reliable websites when I conduct research.	4	3	2	1
9. When I conduct research about an issue, I know how to find books relevant to the topic.	4	3	2	1



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10. I am comfortable presenting the results of research I conduct to an audience	4	3	2	1
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II. Directions: Please answer the following short-answer questions, being as detailed as possible.

11. What do you think high school graduates should know about civic responsibility?

12. What is the most important thing you learned through Project Citizen?

13. What was the most challenging part of your Project Citizen experience?

14. Do you have any other comments?