

Title of Project: Civic Synergy
Student Participants: Kiara Wahnschafft, Mallika Pajjuri
Country: United States
Implementation Dates: June 1st, 2021 to August 8th, 2021

Political polarization has ravaged the United States in these past four years, culminating in the attack on our country and on democracy on January 6th, 2021. This is a critical moment for our nation to heal - for Americans to rediscover each other as neighbors, to find our common principles, and to share a common truth. For that, we need to engage with one another as fellow citizens, hearing each other's backgrounds and stories and turning not inward towards each other but instead outward towards the social and economic problems we are facing as a country. Civic Synergy aims to foster productive cross-partisan problem-solving conversations, resulting in the crafting of bipartisan bills sent to congress.

Kiara Wahnschafft and Mallika Pajjuri are the two MIT students behind Civic Synergy. Kiara is a junior studying economics and mechanical engineering. She serves as the Chief of Staff of the Undergraduate Association, a position wherein she supports the eleven committees of the UA working on topics ranging from sustainability to education. Mallika is a sophomore studying materials sciences and engineering and bioengineering. She is the co-chair of the Undergraduate Association's Public Affairs Committee and the director of the Boston Intercollegiate Government's Governmental Affairs Committee, advocating for students at a school-wide, local, and federal level. Kiara and Mallika have a history of working together within the Undergraduate Association and have found that there's synergy (haha!) when they work together. They are both eager to dive into this project together this summer, empowering college students just like themselves from across the country to make the change they want to see in the United States.

Civic Synergy will foster virtual conversations on a wide variety of issues. To start, this summer, the first set of conversations will be around climate change and the second around healthcare. For each topic, Civic Synergy will leverage the Bridge Alliance's connections as well as the MIT Washington Office's connections to contact a congress member heavily involved in the topic at hand. For instance, we can look to the House and/or Senate committees to find representatives and/or senators well-versed in the topic and well-equipped to bring a bill on the topic to the floor. Kiara is particularly passionate about climate action and is doing policy-facing research at MIT, working with congressional members, and would thus leverage these connections as well. We will convey to that congress person that in exchange for a conversation with them, we will deliver at least one bill back to them, crafted by Americans from across the political spectrum. In the conversation with that Congress member, we will discern the few key problem areas in which Congress is struggling to find common ground, such as providing jobs for miners losing their jobs. Then, for each of these refined issues, we will craft a problem statement to be answered with proposed legislation. The line between red and blue is so thickly drawn in congress that congress members often relay that it's difficult to collaboratively produce creative solutions these days. Thus, the bill(s) we deliver will certainly be unique and potentially prompt congress to think about solutions to the issue from new angles.

Now, let's turn to the process for actually creating these collaborative, peace-building solutions. For each problem statement, we will disseminate the statement to politically oriented college organizations across the country, who will then pass it to their members (more on the communication strategy below). We will include a form to indicate interest in joining the cross-partisan conversation for the problem statement and to collect student information (to the extent they are comfortable) so that we can select a pool of politically, racially, ethnically and otherwise diverse students to discuss the problem at hand. The groups of students will undergo a training session on having productive cross-partisan conversation as well as on crafting legislation and will be given resources to learn about the topic from both angles. Then, the students will converse in a series of mediated conversations, with the end goal of crafting legislation that will be sent to the congress member we previously engaged with. Outside of the live discussion sessions, participants will be able to engage with one another in the online group we will have members join, with the Civic Synergy team moderating it to ensure healthy and productive conversation.

To source the educators for these training sessions, we will work with the Bridge Alliance's partners, such as the [Listen First Project](#), an organization with the aim to equip Americans with the skills to have

productive conversations with those across the aisle. To source the mediators most equipped to guide the conversation on the given topic, we will work with the Bridge Alliance's partners *Living Room Conversations* and *Mediators Foundation* as both organizations have a team of mediators. Another potential partner in this is the [Consensus Building Institute](#), founded by MIT Professor Larry Susskind, composed of a team of mediators that has 20 years of experience in conflict resolution on social, environmental, and economic issues. Kiara and Mallika will also employ their background knowledge around productive conversations in all of this work: for instance in learning from Jason Jay, the director at MIT's Sloan Sustainability Initiative, through conversations and his book "Breaking Through Gridlock: The Power of Conversation in a Polarized World."

To reach students for the sessions, we will leverage undergraduate student governments and student clubs to garner interest. Our team will identify target schools across the nation, paying specific attention to regional, political, ethnic, etc. diversity. We intend to implement a student ambassador program, wherein we will connect with the leaders of politically oriented on-campus entities such as Young Republicans chapters and College Democrats chapters. These ambassadors will serve as one channel for reaching thousands of students interested in engaging in political conversations. To further spread the word, we will work with ambassadors and their organization members to co-write opinion pieces for campus newspapers. Finally, we will utilize social media outreach strategies (e.g., organization Instagram accounts & Facebook pages) to widen our scope. We plan to leverage the Bridge Alliance's many member organizations geared towards colleges, such as the American Democracy Project, a network of over 260 universities.

In terms of timeline, if we were to receive the Davis Peace Prize, we would immediately connect with the organizations mentioned previously to detail our process for engaging congress members, training students, and mediating discussions. We will also begin aggregating background resources on productive conversations (such as Jason Jay's book mentioned previously). Throughout April, we will accumulate a list of interested school groups and students using the communications tactics described above. We will also engage congress members to create and refine our problem statements. With these refined problem statements in hand, we will aggregate background resources for our participants to learn from and shed light on the issue from a variety of perspectives. Finally, we will conduct research on current platforms to host our resources and discussions on for the summer (e.g., Zoom for live discussions, Discord for written communication). After this research, we will populate the platform we choose for the summer (e.g. Website, Discord) with all of the resources. In May, we will create the cohorts of students for the summer, bring everyone into the platform, and distribute the problem statements to them. In June, we will run our program focusing on climate change and in July on healthcare. Throughout the summer, we will gather feedback from our participants on the process and hold focus groups on the design of an online platform (e.g., website) to host that process. In September, after solidifying our platform and process in August, we will test these with a scaled-down version of the program. We eventually intend to expand beyond college students, encompassing more demographic groups, as well as expand our topic offerings.

Success will be measured across three pillars: engagement, problem-solving, and retention. On engagement, we will measure the diversity--politically, geographically, ethnically--of voices brought together to discuss. We aim to have two cohorts, one in June and one in July, each with 50 students engaged. The September cohort will have 20 students. On problem-solving, we will look to the bills proposed and interest from congressional members in those bills (including whether or not they were brought to the floor). On retention, we will survey participants on their program feedback and measure how many students remain engaged throughout a conversation series to identify areas to improve. We're incredibly excited about Civic Synergy and truly hope we will be able to make this organization a reality.