

Title of Project: Civic Synergy

Country of project implementation: United States of America Sponsoring College: MIT

Project Website: <http://civicsynergy.live>

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Section I: Narrative (Ideally two pages, not to exceed three pages. Please incorporate answers to the following questions within your narrative.)

Civic Synergy aims to foster productive cross-partisan conversations resulting in the crafting of tractable policy solutions sent to Congress. Young Americans are given the opportunity to discuss pressing current events with equally passionate peers in hopes of developing cross-partisan solutions. This project was primarily funded by the Davis Projects for Peace Fellowship without any other external funding sources.

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, 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. Thus, we developed Civic Synergy to tackle this issue.

Deeply rooted political polarization is pervasive in the current state of our nation. Social media, in particular, has negatively affected our generation's ability to reach across the aisle to seek common ground. Posts exist in echo chambers, in which young Americans can only access one side of political opinions dependent on algorithmic determination. When we are restricted by 140 characters to express opinions, it is extremely easy to simply speak in absolutes to get the point across; more often than not, this leads to animosity between oppositional stances and furthers the divide.

Our project was virtual, so we decided to focus on the continental United States in order to execute our project. That way, all participants could reap benefits by talking to members of Congress as well as peers who have similar concerns for their governing systems. We reached out to young Americans across the United States with a special focus on Wisconsin considering multiple representatives from the state were particularly excited about the project. Trying to outreach to the continental United States was a difficult task since there were so many potential avenues of sourcing students and members of Congress. To find Congressional representatives, we reached out to specific caucuses -- such as the Problem Solvers Caucus -- to find interested members of Congress. On the students side, we utilized multiple avenues of outreach, such as press releases, influencers, professor contacts, in order to get applicants.

There were multiple times in which I personally thought the project would fail. From not getting the projected number of applicants, to having members of our team drop out last minute, running the pilot program was stressful. We originally intended for around 100 students to participate, but ended up only getting 33 applications. Additionally, we were hoping to get more conservative students, but ended up with a vast majority of left-leaning students. It was especially challenging to hold team members accountable to work considering we were running on such a short timeline with such a small team; team members ended up having to hold up double their weight in work at times. However, we quickly learned how to outreach and how to communicate best within the team, whether it be through informal texts and meetings for team members or department mailing lists at various universities.

After participating in this pilot project, my definition of peace has drastically changed. Peace, in my head, used to equate to silence, to calm, to tranquility. Now, peace is the ability to approach contention with mutual understanding. Seeing how students from across the nation, with differing backgrounds, could reach a consensus on topics such as no-till farming helped to reignite hope through consensus building. The representatives we spoke to were also optimistic about the future of our nation, seeing how students in Gen Z could best come together to solve national issues. Civic Synergy

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contributes to long term peace because it offers young Americans a platform to connect with those around the country in a safe space that encourages productive dialogue. The current platforms available -- such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram -- are ridden with deeply rooted issues as it pertains to political bias and polarization. Mediated discussions over the course of the month over limited restrictions in how students express their opinion, while creating ground rules for conversation that ensure students' safety. We also made a point to invite speakers to discuss negotiation tactics and consensus building tricks, offering students a tangible skill set that they could employ in their lives. Over the summer, the students in the cohort reflected on how the program positively affected their ability to approach difficult conversations:

“Prior to the program, I definitely had reservations about working in a bipartisan way because I think that when it comes to very pressing issues such as climate change, it can be a long process and can water down legislation. Throughout this program, I realized that change can be much more lasting if it is bipartisan, and that communicating about where you're coming from can bridge the gap between party lines. One thing that really changed my perspective on people with different beliefs than me is the idea of interests vs positions and that in general, we all want similar things and have different ideas of how to get them. My uncle, who is conservative, recently said something to that effect to my mom who leans liberal, and I thought it was cool to see this connection to what we learned in our program.

Anticipating the future, we hope that students take lessons learned to become true leaders in their respective communities. As we grow our organization, we anticipate an exponential growth in the focus on depolarization amongst our generation. Young Americans will ultimately recognize the importance of empathy, negotiation, and compromise in leadership, turning our heads in the more peaceful direction as a country.

The project has both helped us grow tangible organization-building skills as well as affect our vision for the near future. Personally, our personal relationships have blossomed as contentions turned into opportunities for mutual understanding. Our positions in other leadership positions have also benefited as we prioritized compromise and common ground over contention and drama. Our project was only minimally affected by the pandemic; if anything, our project was bolstered by the pandemic. The online component allowed for students to meet people from across the country without many barriers to entry, aside from time zone differences. In the future, we hope to maintain this format and utilize online platforms to accomplish our goals.

Participating in the Davis Projects for Peace Fellowship has been nothing short of wonderful, and we have a few tips to impart on future participants. Firstly, future participants should really make the most of their connection to their community partner. We learned most from the past successes and mistakes of our community partner, while being connected to students, organizations, and professors that could best help us reach our goals. Next, really honing in on KPIs for the project would have been better for our project execution, especially in figuring out when we needed to reroute or figure out an alternative plan of action. Finally, be sure to have fun with it and keep your goals in mind! It was really easy for us to lose sight of our goals and get drenched in the stress of our project, but circling back to this idea that we were doing our part to make the world a better place was humbling and kept us excited about our work. We are so fortunate to have participated in the program and are excited to keep pushing this project along. We thank everyone who has supported us thus far, including the MIT PKG Center and Dr. Allison Hynd, the Davis Projects for Peace organization, and our community partners, the Bridge Alliance and Bridge USA.

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“Our generation is filled with creatives, with activists, and with visionaries. By participating in the Davis Projects for Peace Fellowship, we learned how to tap into their ideas, turning our roundtable discussions into Congressional solutions. What better way for our voices to be heard, than to speak loudly and with support from all sides of the political landscape?”

- Mallika Pajjuri, Co-Founder, Civic Synergy

Section II: Photographs

- Screenshots of an example Zoom discussion room

