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# Civic Education Networks: Working Together with Universities, NGOs, Schools, and Policymakers to Advance Innovative and Effective Policies and Practices

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**Abstract.** For more than five decades, the Center for Civic Education has worked with organizations across the United States and worldwide to provide people with the civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to participate in and practice democracy actively. The Center and its partners have reached tens of millions of students and teachers worldwide. Partners in the Civitas International programs jointly develop and deliver civic education programs for young people worldwide. This unique network of educators, civil society organizations, educational institutions, and government agencies has operated in more than 80 countries and 30 U.S. states for more than two decades, developing quality teaching materials and training teachers throughout Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. In the United States, the We the People program network implements civic education programs in all 50 states. These programs include the We the People and Project Citizen curricula developed by the Center. The network also advocates for the development and sustainability of civic education programs. In addition, the Center supports a network of alumni who have completed the We the People program and continues to support civic education as they attend college and engage in professional careers.

Educators, professors, and NGO leaders in the United States and internationally join these networks. University partners are political science and law professors, pre-service teacher educators, and social science specialists. NGO partners come from various civic and legal education organizations. Teachers and school leaders are key members of these networks. It is essential to learn from each other's experiences and inform school leaders and educators about curricula. The network also involves education leaders and policymakers at all levels of government. The diversity of approaches and experiences in these networks increases their strength and effectiveness.

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**Keywords:** *civic education, responsible citizen, networking.*

## Openness and Collaboration

Among the many reasons the Center and its partners have been successful in providing quality civic education programs to millions of students and teachers worldwide are the openness, positivity, and determination shared among the partners. The networks have a common mission to promote an enlightened and responsible citizenry committed to democratic principles and actively engaged in the practice of democracy. Partners share experiences and resources as they work to implement and advocate for effective civic education programs. The networks do several things:

- 1 Communicate. Partners share successes and challenges to learn from one another. Network members question and affirm each other so that the field of civic education can grow and improve.
- 2 Collaborate. The networks work together to design new projects, develop new curricular materials, adapt existing materials and practices to new and evolving circumstances, improve teacher professional development, and inform educational standards and curricular frameworks to include elements of high-quality civic education.
- 3 Evaluate. Partners share evaluation tools, methods, and results to build better programs and advance civic education research.
- 4 Advocate. The networks draft and share legislative language to seek support and funding for civic education programs. In the United States, partners work together to contact legislators, other policymakers, and stakeholders to build and increase support for civic education legislation.
- 5 Support. Network members recognize the value of each person's role in improving civic education for all people. Partners promote each other's work.

## Working Together in the United States

Numerous educational leaders and stakeholders collaborate to advance civic education in the United States. Working with its networks, the Center has instituted nationwide civic education programs, developed standards and frameworks, expanded assessment and evaluation, and promoted the expansion of policies that support civic education.

From 1986 to 2011, the U.S. Congress authorized directed funding to the Center to implement We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution, Project Citizen, and the Civitas International Programs. The We the People programs reached more than 30 million students in every congressional district during that time and funded state partner organizations in all 50 states. These partners created networks within their states, trained teachers, provided classes with curricular materials, and conducted simulated congressional hearing competitions in which entire classes of students took part. To this day, many of these organizations continue to implement the We the People programs in their states.

The Center worked in concert with more than 40 scholars and with input from educators across the country to develop *CIVITAS: A Framework for Civic Education*, which is a comprehensive K-12 model for civic education that sets forth in detail the civic knowledge, skills, dispositions, and commitments necessary for effective citizenship in the 21st century. This comprehensive framework set the stage for expanded collaboration with scholars, educators, and the public to develop voluntary *National Standards for Civics and Government* in conjunction with more than 2,000 stakeholders across the country. Center staff then developed the Civics Framework for the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which is based on the *National Standards*. The Center also worked with national and international partners to develop *Elements of Democracy*, a resource that improves understanding of the range of ideas that make up the vocabulary of democracy.

Partners throughout the country have worked together to build the national movement to improve civic learning. The Center led the effort to establish “civics and government” as a core discipline in the national dialogue on improving student performance and has conducted four Congressional Conferences on Civic Education in conjunction with the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Center on Congress at Indiana University, and delegations from every state in the country. Advocacy efforts of the Center’s network have resulted in bipartisan letters of support from the U.S. House of Representatives to the U.S. Department of Education. The Senate has also passed resolutions by unanimous consent about the importance of civic education in schools. The Center is participating in national advocacy efforts of the CivXNow<sup>1</sup> coalition. This includes outreach to state and national policymakers to expand access to and strengthen civic education. For example, organizations across the country are encouraging their networks to support the Civics Secures Democracy Act, which will provide \$1 billion annually to states, school districts, non-profit organizations, universities, and researchers.

Beyond legislative advocacy, the Center has worked for years with other civic education networks in the United States to advance civic education best practices and policy. For example, the Center is a founding organization of the Civics Renewal Network<sup>2</sup>, which includes more than thirty nonpartisan, nonprofit organizations that provide online classroom resources for civic education. The network works together to make high-quality resources accessible to teachers. The Center also supports a current national effort called Educating for American Democracy<sup>3</sup>, which has developed a roadmap of civics content themes and design challenges to improve civic education for all learners.

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<sup>1</sup> Accessed: [www.civxnow.org](http://www.civxnow.org).

<sup>2</sup> Accessed: [www.civicsrenewalnetwork.org](http://www.civicsrenewalnetwork.org).

<sup>3</sup> Accessed: [www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org](http://www.educatingforamericandemocracy.org).

## Working Together Internationally

Internationally, years of U.S. government funding support for the Civitas International Programs provided the foundation for the Center and its partners to build the most extensive international civic education network in the world, capable of implementing high-quality civic education programs demonstrated by research to improve knowledge, skills, and democratic dispositions. Initial funding from the U.S. government advanced partners' goals to adapt high-quality curriculum to local contexts and build their institutional capacity to conduct and sustain civic education programs.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, Civitas BiH supports Foundations of Democracy, Project Citizen, and other civic education programs in all cantons of the country. Civitas BiH maintains a positive relationship with the U.S. Embassy and other in-country partners. They work with young people from preschool through high school and beyond and organize annual civic education festivals, showcases, and summer camps, adapting their activities to online methods, as necessary, during the pandemic.

From the beginning, Civitas International Programs partners have focused on learning from each other, collaborating, and adapting and evolving to meet the needs of the different populations. Partnerships have been established between countries, between U.S. and international sites, and among regional networks in Asia, Europe and Eurasia, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Civitas International Programs partners in countries such as Chile, the Philippines, Senegal, South Africa, and Thailand continue to implement local adaptations of Project Citizen and other civic education programs. For example, Boubacar Tall of Civitas Senegal works with Sencirk, a social circus organization that empowers youth being homeless with employable skills in the circus arts. These young people also participate in Project Citizen and incorporate policy education in their circus shows, informing the public about policy issues and solutions. This unique adaptation of Project Citizen empowers young people who are not in school and expands civic education in impoverished communities.

## Current Efforts and Approaches to Advance Civic Education Practice

The Center's latest efforts to advance civic education practice leverage technology and online tools. In addition to interactive eBooks versions of textbooks, the Center has created free online resources for educators and the public. This includes the Learn.civiced.org platform, which features free self-paced online courses about U.S. constitutional democracy, video interviews with scholars, a national Civics Forum for educators, and links to additional free teaching and learning resources. Learn.civiced.org provides educators with hours of high-quality educational resources to advance

their content knowledge and pedagogical skills. Another popular free Center offering is the daily 60-Second Civics podcast, which is accompanied by a quiz question on the Center's website.

The Center has also expanded its efforts to develop, implement, and research programs that work with high-need<sup>4</sup> students, such as students living in poverty, English language learners, and students with special needs. The Center's current research partner, the Civic Education Research Lab (CERL) at Georgetown University, has conducted rigorous research that demonstrates these student programs are highly effective at increasing high-need students' civic knowledge as well as improving their skills and dispositions. Among these programs is the Congressional Academy, a two-week intensive residential summer institute that incorporates place-based learning at historical sites in the Washington, D.C. area along with academic study with noted scholars and participation in a simulated congressional hearing.

## The Aim and Object of the Research

Recent independent research on the Center's elementary and secondary school civic education programs evaluates their effectiveness in achieving target outcomes for diverse learners that have a wide range of educational needs. These outcomes include:

- Improved student achievement of civic education standards, including standards that address democratic knowledge, intellectual and participatory skills, and civic dispositions
- Increased access to effective instruction that incorporates active-learning pedagogies

The research provides insights into civic education curriculum and practices. Lessons learned from the research have implications for advancing policy and practice. They may be useful to consider in designing research and programs for other countries and settings.

## Methods

CERL, led by Dr. Diana Owen, has conducted research on three unique and innovative programs of the Center that aim to empower young people with civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential for responsible democratic participation: (1) We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution, (2) Project Citizen, and (3) the Congressional Academy for American History and Civics.

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<sup>4</sup> High-need students are at risk of educational failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, such as students who are: living in poverty, attending high-minority schools, far below grade level, at risk of not graduating with a diploma on time, homeless, in foster care, incarcerated, disabled, or English learners.

Evaluations of middle and high school student and teacher outcomes in the We the People program involved three nationwide, large-scale randomized control trials and an intensive quasi-experimental study in the state of Indiana. The research compared students and teachers who participated in the We the People curricular program and its professional development with comparison groups who were not using the We the People curriculum. Surveys were administered prior to the start of the program and upon completion of a civics class. The researchers compared student and teacher measures of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Owen, 2015, 2018; Owen, Hartzell, & Sanchez, 2020).

CERL's 2019 international Project Citizen survey included 106 responses from educators in 15 countries: Armenia, Croatia, the Dominican Republic, Estonia, India, Jordan, Lithuania, Montenegro, Peru, Romania, Senegal, Slovenia, South Africa, Thailand, and the United States. The researchers asked educators about student engagement in core interactive elements of the Project Citizen curriculum, what public policy proposals the students developed, and how effective they felt specific aspects of the program were in helping students to develop a range of civic skills (Owen & Irion-Groth, 2020a).

CERL is currently conducting a study of Project Citizen throughout the United States. The study employs quantitative and qualitative methods. It includes multi-site, school-level, randomized control trials that use pre- and post-implementation surveys. Preliminary results from the first group of middle and high school students and teachers in the study supports prior research showing that the program increases students' attainment of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Owen, 2021).

To evaluate the Center's Congressional Academy for high-need high school students, CERL administered pre- and post-Academy surveys to all participating students to measure gains in knowledge, skills, and dispositions. In addition, the researchers conducted semi-structured personal interviews with a diverse sample of the students. More than 80% of the students attended Title I schools with significant concentrations of low-income students (Owen & Irion-Groth, 2020a).

## Results

### *We the People Curriculum and Professional Development*

CERL's three large-scale randomized control trials of the James Madison Legacy Project (JMLP), which provided middle and high school teachers with professional development in the We the People program, demonstrated that the curriculum is effective in increasing high-need students' attainment of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. More than 90% of teachers worked in Title I schools and districts and/or taught a high percentage of at-risk students. Teachers incorporated instructional activities from the We the People curriculum and demonstrated increased use of

active-learning and media-related pedagogies in civics instruction (Owen, Hartzell, & Sanchez, 2020; Gallo & Owen, 2021).

**Use of Active-Learning Pedagogies.** After participating in the Center’s traditional in-person or blended-learning professional development, more than 70% of JMLP teachers held simulated congressional hearings with their students, compared with very few in the control group. Middle school teachers demonstrated sizable, statistically significant increases in instructional strategies involving document-based questions, issue discussions, and debates. High school teachers were significantly more inclined to frequently incorporate issue discussions, debates, and current events into their classrooms (Owen, Hartzell, & Sanchez, 2020).

Table 1

*Active Learning Pedagogies  
JMLP Cohort 3 Middle School*

HIGH SCHOOL (Frequently)	Traditional			Blended			Control		
	Pre	Post	$\chi^2$ Sign	Pre	Post	$\chi^2$ Sign	Pre	Post	$\chi^2$ Sign
DOC-BASED QUESTIONS	39.4%	53.8%	.00	41.0%	49.1%	.05	52.0%	51.8%	n’s.
ISSUE DISCUSSIONS	45.2%	63.7%	.00	52.5%	68.8%	.00	80.0%	52.4%	.00
DEBATES	14.0%	38.5%	.00	9.9%	31.8%	.00	8.0%	9.5%	n’s.
CURRENT EVENTS	39.4%	37.8%	n’s.	45.5%	53.6%	.05	48.0%	52.4%	n’s.

Note. From Owen, Hartzell, & Sanchez, 2020, p. 66.

Table 2

*Active Learning Pedagogies  
JMLP Cohort 3 High School*

MIDDLE SCHOOL (Frequently)	Traditional			Blended			Control		
	Pre	Post	$\chi^2$ Sign	Pre	Post	$\chi^2$ Sign	Pre	Post	$\chi^2$ Sign
DOC-BASED QUESTIONS	46.9%	39.6%	.05	42.9%	41.5%	n’s.	40.4%	32.7%	.00
ISSUE DISCUSSIONS	60.1%	71.0%	.00	61.9%	74.0%	.00	59.6%	58.0%	n’s.
DEBATES	20.3%	34.8%	.00	17.2%	27.6%	.00	13.5%	18.8%	n’s.
CURRENT EVENTS	52.0%	62.3%	.00	47.8%	57.9%	.00	40.4%	47.9%	.07

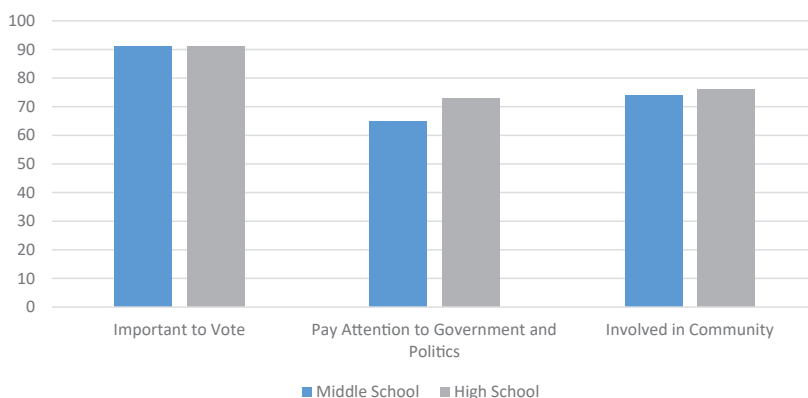
Note. From Owen, Hartzell, & Sanchez, 2020, p. 67.



**Media-Related Pedagogies.** The percentage of JMLP teachers who taught their students media literacy skills was notably higher than that of teachers in the control group. There was a significant increase in JMLP middle school teachers who regularly had students access online news sites and use e-government websites, whereas there was no gain among control group teachers. JMLP middle and high school teachers were more likely to teach their students to become critical consumers of news due to the intervention (Owen, Hartzell, & Sanchez, 2020, p. 70–73).

**Student Civic Knowledge.** On pre- and post-tests of knowledge of core concepts related to the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and central founding documents, foundational principles, the institutions of government, and elections and voting, JMLP students demonstrated greater civic knowledge gains because of taking a We the People class than students in the control group who took a standard civics, social studies, or American government class. All student groups in the study achieved statistically significant gains, regardless of whether their teachers received in-person or blended-learning professional development (Owen, Hartzell, & Sanchez, 2020).

**Student Civic Dispositions.** JMLP students demonstrated statistically significant increases in keeping informed and following government news and actions. Upon completion of the program, 91% of middle and high school students said that they thought it was important for people to turn out to vote, an increase from their pre-intervention responses. Middle school (66%) and high school students (73%) indicated that they paid more attention to what’s going on in government and politics after taking a We the People class. Three-quarters of middle and high school students felt more prepared to become involved in their community (Owen & Irion-Groth, 2020b).



*Note.* From Owen & Irion-Groth, 2020, p. 6

*Fig. 1.* JMLP Students' Civic Dispositions



## Project Citizen

In the 2019 international Project Citizen survey, most teachers stated that their students took part in the principal active-learning components of the Project Citizen curriculum. These include creating a portfolio of their public policy work (90%), presenting an action plan to their school or class (90%), working in their school or community to help solve a problem (78%), contacting public officials (73%), and presenting an action plan to community leaders (68%) (Owen & Irion-Groth, 2020a).

Public policy issues tackled by Project Citizen students included public health, respect for diversity, school, and public safety, reading initiatives, bullying, access to food, poverty, public amenities and services, preservation of cultural heritage, animals, climate change, other environmental concerns, and democratic processes.

The survey results confirm that Project Citizen is effective in promoting student civic empowerment. Figure 2, below, presents the percentage of teachers who responded that Project Citizen was very effective in supporting a range of civic skills in students.



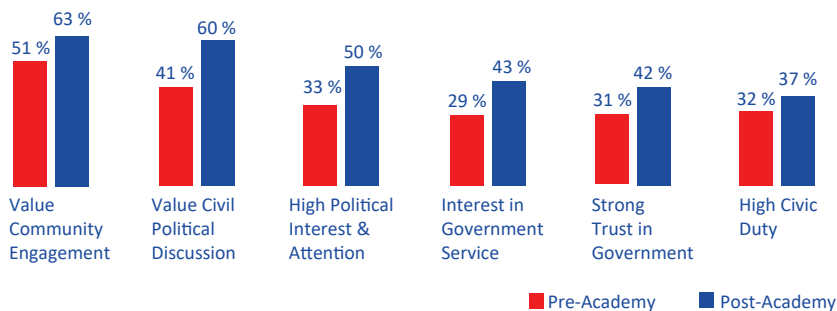
*Note.* From Owen, & Irion-Groth, 2020, p. 110.

*Fig. 2.* How effective is Project citizen in having students

Preliminary results from the current Project Citizen Research Program randomized control study in the United States are consistent with findings of international Project Citizen surveys to date (Soule, 2000; Vontz, Metcalf, & Patrick, 2000; Marx, 2011; Morgan, 2016). Project Citizen students gained significantly more content knowledge about government and the public policy process than students in the control group. Civic skills improved markedly because of participating in Project Citizen, and the gains were substantially larger than the control group. These skills include a range of social and emotional learning competencies. Project Citizen students became significantly more attentive to public policy issues after participating in the program. Nearly 80% of teachers taught in a school with a significant concentration of high-need students, and approximately half of participating students identified themselves as racial or ethnic minorities (Owen, 2021).

## Congressional Academy for American History and Civics

Students participating in the Congressional Academy two-week summer program improved their civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions. The increases were particularly notable for high-need students who had fewer prior experiences that supported their civic orientations, as compared to students in non-Title I school. All students gained significant knowledge and significantly enhanced their civic dispositions. Student scores increased significantly on measures of political interest and attention, political discussion, community engagement, government service, civic duty, and trust in government (Owen & Irion-Groth, 2020a).



Note. From Owen & Irion-Groth, 2020, p. 106.

Fig. 3. Students' Civic Dispositions Pre/Post Congressional Academy

As a measure of civic skills, students responded to a hypothetical situation. After participating in the Academy, student responses revealed increased confidence in engaging in activities that work towards solving community problems. The number of students responding "I definitely can" increased by 10 or more percentage points for the following participatory skills and actions: research a problem, create an action plan, get others to care about the problem, attend a meeting about the problem, and contact a public official (Owen & Irion-Groth, 2020a).

Student interviews reinforced the survey findings. Many students indicated that their most important takeaway from the Academy was a greater understanding of the foundations of American democracy and how government works:

*"I really was able to understand how our government works, and the history behind how we got to it."*

*"I think I trust our government a bit more now that I understand better how it works."*

Students particularly appreciated the opportunity to interact with diverse peers and have civil discussions on difficult topics:

*“I mostly liked being able to engage in advanced discussion on given topics. The Academy acts as an outlet for many teachers and students to express their beliefs and debate different opinions and viewpoints. The most important takeaway is that everyone is entitled to their opinion, and as a society we have the responsibility to respect said opinion.”*

Students also felt empowered to take an active role in their community, government, and politics:

*“I liked the community I built and how comfortable I felt sharing my ideas, views, and opinions. I think the biggest takeaway was not to be afraid to talk, share your ideas, ask questions and help others and yourself.”*

*“The most important takeaway for me was to get involved with our government and politics. I have a voice in society.”* (Owen & Irion-Groth, 2020a, p. 107–108)

## Conclusions and Discussion

Independent research demonstrates that the Center’s curricular and professional development programs are effective in increasing civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions among a wide range of learners, including diverse high-need students at risk of educational failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support. They also support teachers in incorporating active-learning methodologies that are effective in improving student learning and civic engagement.

The Center’s programs engage participants in the following instructional components that effectively and simultaneously build knowledge, skills, and dispositions while conveying civics content that aligns with standards:

- Examination of the purpose of government and how government works
- Critical thinking and discourse based on constitutional principles
- Dialogue that builds understanding among people with different backgrounds and points of view
- Analytical reasoning, research, and presentation lessons to prepare and deliver an argument or policy proposal that upholds constitutional provisions
- Inclusive hearing simulations whereby all students in a class or group learn how to work collaboratively to achieve a common goal while engaging in democratic practice
- Experiential and community-based learning through meeting with local resource people and representatives of government, interviewing peers and community members, and taking field trips to relevant sites/offices

The active-learning elements of the programs provide young people with experience and skills to responsibly engage with their communities and government while at the same time expanding their knowledge of history, government institutions, and political processes.

Networks are crucial in advancing innovative and effective practices and policy. The Center and its partners work together to design, implement, and innovate civic education programs. As the research indicates, collaboration among partners from higher education, K-12 schools, and civic education nonprofit organizations to design curriculum, professional development, and evaluation can result in effective programs capable of addressing diverse learner needs and empowering all young people for responsible civic engagement.

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# Pilietinė tinklaveikla: universitetų, nevyriausybinių organizacijų, mokyklų ir politikos formuotojų indėlis siekiant politikos ir praktikos veiksmingos pažangos

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## Santrauka

Daugiau nei penkis dešimtmečius Pilietinio ugdymo centras bendradarbiauja su organizacijomis visoje JAV ir visame pasaulyje, siekdamas suteikti žmonėms pilietinių žinių, įgūdžių ir nusiteikimų, reikalingų norint aktyviai dalyvauti demokratijos praktikoje ir tobulėti. Centras su savo partneriais dirba su dešimtimis milijonų studentų ir mokytojų visame pasaulyje. Pilietinio ugdymo tarptautinės programos (*Civitas International*) partneriai kartu rengia ir pristato pilietinio ugdymo programas vaikams ir jaunimui visame pasaulyje. Šis unikalus pedagogų, pilietinės visuomenės organizacijų, švietimo įstaigų ir vyriausybinių agentūrų tinklas veikia daugiau nei 80 šalių ir 30 JAV valstijų ir daugiau nei du dešimtmečius kuria mokymo medžiagą ir metodikas, mokydamas mokytojus visoje Rytų Europoje, buvusioje Sovietų Sąjungoje ir Afrikoje, Azijoje, Lotynų Amerikoje ir Karibuose bei Artimuosiuose Rytuose. Jungtinėse Amerikos Valstijose centro „We the People“ programų tinklas įgyvendina pilietinio ugdymo programas visose 50 Jungtinių Amerikos valstijų. Šios programos apima Centro sukurtas mokymo programas „We the People“ ir „Project Citizen“. Tinklas rūpinasi pilietinio ugdymo programų plėtra ir tvarumu. Be to, Centras palaiko ryšius su buvusiais savo seminarų ir kursų absolventais, skatina tolesnį bendradarbiavimą, skatina klausytojus, kurie baigė programą „Mes žmonės“, „Pilietis“ ir toliau remia pilietinį ugdymą, kai jie baigia universitetus ar pradeda savo profesinę karjerą.

Į šį tinklą Jungtinėse Valstijose ir tarptautiniu mastu jungiasi pedagogai, profesoriai ir NVO lyderiai. Iš universitetų tinkle aktyviausi yra politikos mokslų ir teisės mokslininkai, ikimokyklinio ugdymo mokytojų rengėjai ir socialinių mokslų ugdymo specialistai. NVO partneriai yra įvairios pilietinio ir teisinio švietimo organizacijos. Mokytojai ir mokyklų vadovai yra pagrindiniai šių tinklų nariai. Svarbu yra mokyti vieniems iš kitų patirties ir informuoti apie mokymo programas mokyklų vadovus ir pedagogus. Tinklas į savo veiklą taip pat įtraukia švietimo lyderius ir politikos formuotojus visais valdžios lygmenimis. Požiūrių ir patirties įvairovė šiuose tinkluose padidina jų stiprumą ir efektyvumą.

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**Esminiai žodžiai:** *pilietinis ugdymas, atsakingas pilietis, tinklaveikla.*

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