

Introduction to Civic Engagement

Overview: Through this workshop, younger students will explore the concept of civic engagement. They will learn the roles of three major components to service – direct service, advocacy, and activism. They will gain knowledge of the political system and its workings. Finally, the students will identify the areas of greatest concern for them and will explore ways that they can be engaged in those issues.

Category: Civic Engagement/Policy, Public Education/Advocacy

Level: Explore

Learning Goals:

- To understand the basic concept of civic engagement
- To learn the three major components of service
- To learn the basic components of the political system
- To develop a plan for involvement in areas of interest

Materials:

- Newsprint or dry erase board
- Markers
- Paper
- Pens
- Stamped Envelopes
- Listing of political addresses (state and Federal)
- Copies of state and Federal political structures
- List of state representative's addresses
- Copies of Just Add Consciousness: A Guide to Social Activism

How to Prepare:

- Facilitator may write quotes and/or definitions on newsprint in advance

How to Do/ Brief Outline:

The outline has the following parts:

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| 1. Introduction | suggested time 5 minutes |
| 2. Direct Service, Advocacy, and Activism | suggested time 15 minutes |
| 3. The Democratic Process and You | suggested time 30 minutes |
| 4. Letter Writing | suggested time 10 minutes |

Part 1) Introduction

Suggested time: 5 minutes

1. Facilitator should introduce:
 - The definition of civic engagement – to participate intentionally as a citizen in the democratic process, actively engaging in public policy and direct service
 - The purpose of the training – to learn about the democratic political system, how our work at Union ties into the greater good, and to intentionally plan on being involved in important issue areas

Part 2) Direct Service, Advocacy, and Activism

Suggested time: 15 minutes

1. Give each student a piece of paper and a pen
2. Ask students to write down issues that they have a vested interest in (i.e., veteran's benefits, mining rights, fair wage, national defense initiatives, roads going through community, welfare, economic development, school vouchers, etc.)
3. Have students each report to the group their top three issues, writing each one on newsprint
4. Ask students what they have been able to do to make an impact in these areas
5. Transition with the following quote: "To make a difference is not a matter of accident, a matter of casual occurrence of the tides. People CHOOSE to make a difference." -- Maya Angelou
6. Begin to describe the three types of service that relates to civic engagement:
 - a. Direct Service – serving the community good, what we typically describe as community service
 - b. Advocacy – An advocate is a person who is responsible to a defined issue and who helps address that issue through collective action that uses the instruments of democracy to establish and implement laws and policies that will create a just and equitable society (Advocacy Institute).
 - c. Activism - An activist is a person who is responsible to a defined issue and who helps address that issue through mobilizing a base of people to take collective action. Activists are accountable to themselves as moral actors on a specific issue. Democratic structures are a utilitarian consequence of activities designed to win on the defined issue (James Mumm – anarchist).
7. Write each type of service on newsprint.
8. Ask students, "How do these three types of service interact with each other? What are their relationships?"
9. Explain the basic relationships of direct service, advocacy, and activism – you need each to complete social change – each deals with same issue on different levels.

Part 3) The Democratic Process and You

Suggested time: 30 minutes

1. Read the following quote: “It is from the numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.” --Robert F. Kennedy in South Africa, during Apartheid
2. Ask how many students understand the structure of the state government. Ask a volunteer to sketch out the structure quickly on newsprint.
3. Ask how many students understand the structure of the Federal government. Ask a volunteer to sketch out the structure quickly on newsprint.
4. Explain that knowledge of the systems that create laws in the United States is the first step of civic engagement. Understanding the political process and being knowledgeable about what is happening in the world starts a ripple when educated debate and discussion can take place.
5. Pass out copies of the State and Federal government structures to students.
6. Ask how many students are registered to vote. Ask those who are not registered why they are not registered. Write responses on newsprint.
7. Ask how many students, who are registered to vote, voted in the last election. Ask those that did not vote why they did not vote. Write responses on newsprint.
8. Refer to the list of issues that the students created at the beginning of the workshop. Are any of those issues the result of laws that have been passed? Are there any issues that they have seen in their service work that are the result of laws that have been passed?
9. Explain that being an active participant in the democratic process entails a number of options for involvement by the students:
 - a. **Being knowledgeable** – understanding how laws are passed, the structure of government, and keeping updated on current events
 - b. **Voting** – Researching candidates on the local, state, and national levels and their stances on issues that are important to you. Vote for the candidate who’s values and, if applicable, past voting record, best aligns with your personal values and ideals for the office
 - c. **Being involved** – Volunteer for the issues that are important to you; be active in your community and help on the local level to make things better
 - d. **Be heard** – Write, call, or visit your representatives. Your vote means something to them, so they will listen, especially if you have a constituency on your side
 - e. **Be seen** – If necessary, peacefully protest, hand out flyers, organize a teach-in.

10. Transition by telling students, “not only can your actions have a ripple affect in the political process, but by getting others involved and/or allowing others to see you, you empower them to create their own ripple effects.”

Part 4) Letter Writing

Suggested time: 10 minutes

1. Give each student a piece of paper, a pen, and a stamped envelope
2. Give each student Oxfam’s “Letter Writing Campaign” sample from page 3 of Just Add Consciousness: A Guide to Social Activism
3. Give each student a copy of their state representative’s addresses
4. Have each student write a letter to his/her congressman, senator, the governor, or the president about an issue that is important to them
5. Be sure that students follow the tips presented by Oxfam
6. Have students address and seal the envelopes and turn them into the facilitator
7. If a student needs to send on his/her own after researching facts, allow it