

# Centering Youth Voices: An Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Approach to Civic Engagement

**Kirstie Lynn Dobbs**  
Merrimack College, USA

**Laura M. Hsu**  
Merrimack College, USA

**Stephanie Garrone-Shufran**  
Merrimack College, USA

**Nicholas Barber**  
Merrimack College, USA

**Fatoumata Kourouma**  
Merrimack College, USA

**Yarielis Perez-Castillo**  
Merrimack College, USA

**Samantha Rich**  
Merrimack College, USA

**Abstract:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, many youth felt disconnected from on-the-ground engagement with their peers, their communities, and the wider society. School closures also impeded progress in some students' abilities to write, speak, and express themselves through various media. A team of interdisciplinary and intergenerational faculty and undergraduate students from Merrimack College in Massachusetts sought to investigate and redress these challenges by building young people's interest in engaged citizenship along with their writing, speaking, and team-building skills through a civic engagement program with middle school students, facilitated in collaboration with the local YMCA. In designing and delivering the program, we took an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach that centers the voices of youth in both research and action. Drawing on our team members' disciplines of biology, criminology, education, health sciences, history, human development, and political science, we developed a conceptual framework to

co-create a civic engagement curriculum for BIPOC and multilingual youth in a neighboring community that is currently ranked as having the lowest per capita income in Massachusetts. We made a point of incorporating the views of our youngest team members, our students, and also those of the middle school youth we hoped to serve. A focus group that we conducted with the undergraduate students after the first iteration of the program was completed revealed that their understanding of civic engagement and desire and capacity to pursue it were positively impacted as a result of the interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and intergenerational collaboration that we describe below.

**Keywords:** community engagement, youth participatory action research, activism, Generation Z, intergenerational, participatory citizenship

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created an environment where youth increasingly turned to online activism to voice their political views on various issues. In the United States, videos that circulated on social media of the brutal killing of a 46-year-old unarmed Black man, George Floyd, by a white police officer led to the largest civil rights movement in the United States, where young people joined older generations to march against racial injustice and police brutality (ACLEED, 2020; Buchanan et al., 2020). As another example, many young people heeded 16-year-old Greta Thunberg's call to move from #climatestrike to #climatestrikeonline during the pandemic to fight climate change (Calma, 2020). Other youth engaged in efforts specifically to combat the pandemic. For example, Chinese students mobilized to raise money via social media for frontline workers (Banerjee, 2020; Chinaculture.org, 2020). In Algeria, youth protestors converted their efforts to online platforms to encourage citizens to stay home, while teenagers worldwide engaged in the Ghen Cò Vy dance challenge on TikTok to encourage handwashing (Pelter, 2020).

Despite these prosocial efforts by youth, emerging research shows the devastating academic, social, and emotional toll of COVID-19 on youth in the United States (Chandra et al., 2020). During the pandemic, remote learning led to many youth feeling disconnected from their peers and wider society. School closures across the world also contributed to challenges in students' abilities to write, speak, and express themselves on issues of concern, either live or online. Testing data in the United States showed declines in both math and reading skills during the pandemic, with larger declines recorded among students of color and students from poorly funded schools (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; Kuhfeld & Lewis, 2021). Compared to 2019, there was a 31% increase in

the proportion of mental health-related visits to the emergency room from children ages 12 to 17 in 2020 (Einhorn, 2020).

Furthermore, the segregation imposed by the pandemic and the shrinking of public spaces where communities can gather have made it more challenging for young people to discover and understand differences (Tran, 2022), experience that is critical for civic engagement. Social skill sets that foster acceptance of diversity and an enhanced sense of belonging, most often developed in the classroom, do not develop as well in a remote learning environment. Moreover, these critical components of development are even more difficult to nurture in an online environment for students with limited access to the internet, often the case in underserved communities (Drane et al., 2020). Students' well-being and sense of value are best achieved when they are collaborating in person with other students and with a teacher (Cunninghame et al., 2020; Järvelä et al., 2016; Wang & Holcombe, 2020).

Community organizations focusing on disaster relief, such as Share Our Strength in the United States, compare the trauma and long-term consequences of the pandemic to those of natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina, and note that they have disproportionately impacted vulnerable populations and exacerbated inequities (Einhorn, 2020). Miriam Rollin, a director at the National Center for Youth Law, said that what is needed is a “‘massive mobilization’ of community leaders, elected officials, educators and parents to help children—especially the most marginalized, who’ve been affected most deeply by the pandemic—get back on track” (Einhorn, 2020, para. 64). We, a group of professors and students at Merrimack College, felt compelled to be a part of that effort and sought to address how educational and community groups centered on youth empowerment can support young people in their civic activism, while redressing the emotional, social, and academic challenges resulting from the pandemic.

We believed that increasing youth engagement and supporting youth development, especially given obstacles due to the pandemic, requires a holistic, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and intergenerational approach that centers the voices of youth in both research and action. The holistic approach considers the breadth of people, agencies and organizations, and contexts involved in any civic endeavor. One might need to consider the larger global political climate; national, state, and local governments; nonprofit organizations; social service agencies; K-12 schools; institutions of higher education; media organizations; cultural institutions; and, most importantly for a complex system, the humans who lead and populate each one of those components of the whole.

The work we committed to was interdisciplinary (involving input from those in many disciplines), transdisciplinary (involving non-academic stakeholders in the project), and intergenerational (existing or occurring across generations). A group of interdisciplinary faculty and students at Merrimack

College formed a research and teaching team that collaborated with the local YMCA located in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The goal of the partnership was to develop and implement a youth civic engagement program to strengthen academic skills and civic engagement among BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) and multilingual youth. Valuing the cultural knowledge, skills, and networks youth bring from their homes and communities as communal funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 1995; Yosso, 2005), and connecting youth to caring adults, community organizations, and local and state representatives who can advocate for their needs and interests, were to be important components of the program. We understood that “Community cultural wealth involves a commitment to conduct research, teach and develop schools that serve a larger purpose of struggling towards social and racial justice” (Yosso, 2005, p. 82). Our program was to serve as a continuation of this larger effort to empower youth in their communities and to redress learning opportunities lost as a result of the pandemic that were particularly pronounced among communities of color. Because of the importance of integrating community youth voices into curricular design, our approach was also transdisciplinary. Both before and while the program was delivered, academic researchers from different disciplines as well as nonacademic participants came together (Repko et al., 2019) to ensure we would focus on issues about which youth in Lawrence were concerned.

In this article, we (the aforementioned team of faculty and students from Merrimack College) describe our interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration designing and delivering the youth civic engagement program. We explain how we first came to a unified definition of *civic engagement* in order to establish common ground (Repko et al., 2019), that is, *the mutual understanding that would let us proceed to develop the program*. Second, we describe the Youth Voice curriculum. Finally, we share reflections from various team members on designing and implementing the curriculum across disciplinary boundaries.

## Creating Youth Voice: An Interdisciplinary, Transdisciplinary, and Intergenerational Collaboration

During the spring of 2021, three faculty members from different disciplines—political science, education, and human development—collaborated on a grant proposal to design and implement an in-person, summer civic engagement program called “Youth Voice” for middle school students in Lawrence, MA. Delivering the program in person was an important aspect of the design, as we sought to address the disconnect that youth were feeling during the pandemic and to avoid any problems caused by the fact that computer and internet access might be limited for participants. Lawrence has a per capita income of \$20,858, which is less than half the state average of \$43,761 (US Census Bureau, 2021a, 2021b), and about 81% of the population is Hispanic or Latinx (US Census

Bureau, 2021a). Lawrence is adjacent to North Andover, where Merrimack faculty members teach, and there is a history of collaboration between Merrimack College and several organizations in Lawrence, particularly those focusing on civic and community engagement. The college's longstanding connection with the local YMCA provided an opportunity to run the first iteration of the Youth Voice civic engagement program.

Recognizing the wisdom of co-creating Youth Voice with the youth who would be served by the program, the three faculty members first ran a focus group with five Lawrence youth. The Associate Executive Director of Youth Development at the YMCA assisted the faculty members in finding a sample of middle school and high school students to participate. The faculty members provided a summary of the goals for the program and asked the youth a series of questions about the kinds of topics and activities they would want incorporated in such a program. The responses from the youth informed the curricular decisions the faculty initially proposed. Recognizing the value of bringing still more interdisciplinary perspectives to bear in co-creating and running the program, the faculty selected the undergraduate students from four different schools at Merrimack College—Liberal Arts, Health Sciences, Science and Engineering, and Education and Social Policy. The four students were majoring in political science and history (a junior); health sciences (a freshman); biology (a senior); and criminology and criminal justice (a junior). Furthermore, they represented a racially diverse group: Of the undergraduate students, one identified as a Black female, one as a Latina, one as a white female, and the other as a white male. It was also important to the faculty that some of the students were from Lawrence, where Youth Voice would be run. Two were from Lawrence. One of these students is fluent in Spanish and assisted with translation of curricular and research materials and interacted in Spanish with some of the youth during the program. Of the three faculty members, one is a biracial (Asian and white) female and the other two are white females.

Before onboarding the four undergraduate students, the three faculty members met from February to May 2021 to co-create a plan for the six weeks in May and June 2021 when they would meet with the undergraduate students for training. First, the faculty members adapted a survey to disseminate to the undergraduate students before their training began in May 2021 and to the Youth Voice participants before the program ran in July 2021. The same survey was to be administered to both groups again after the Youth Voice program concluded at the end of July 2021 to assess any changes in their views and experience of civic engagement.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, the faculty members envisioned

1 Although presenting these results is outside the scope of this article, initial results showed that engaging in the Youth Voice program led to modest increases in a young person's probability of participating in civic engagement, and youth became significantly more likely to ask an adult for help on redressing a social or political issue.

the project as following a “train the trainer” model (Rolheiser et al., 1999), whereby the faculty members would train the undergraduate students in the activities to be run with the youth. The rationale was that having them serve as prominent facilitators with the youth would be transformative for their civic engagement as well.

Productive teamwork among the faculty members in political science, human development, and education, itself an excellent example of interdisciplinary endeavor, resulted in an interdisciplinary civic engagement curriculum for our program to enhance civic engagement that focused on the academic, social-emotional, and political engagement of Youth Voice participants. Political science provided many of the foundational theoretical frames within which to conceptualize civic engagement and political empowerment. Political science has consistently asserted the value of civic engagement for strengthening democracy, and identified it as an important outcome for both teaching and research (Matto et al., 2017; McCartney et al., 2013).

Insights from human development deepened our perspective on identity exploration, connecting one’s lived experiences with politics, broadly speaking. Human development takes an ecological approach to development (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), recognizing there are multiple spheres of influence on an individual that have reciprocal effects. Community influences comprise one of these spheres, and the extent to which an individual engages with one’s community can greatly impact a person’s feelings of belonging and help promote civic participation.

In both human development and education, an assets-based view, one that recognizes and reflects back strengths that the youth and their communities possess (Scales & Leffert, 1999; Scales et al., 2004; Zacarian et al., 2017), is emphasized. Historically, BIPOC communities have been perceived through a deficit lens that purports that individuals—particularly BIPOC and low-income individuals—underperform in school and/or are socioeconomically challenged due to internal deficits, such as cognitive and motivational shortcomings (Valencia, 1997). This deficit thinking has blamed individuals and communities for problems rather than examining how systemic discrimination constrains opportunities for economic and social mobility (Valencia, 1997). There has since been a shift from deficit to asset-based approaches to understanding and dealing with problems, simultaneously recognizing systemic inequities and the distinct and existing strengths that individuals and communities possess (Nobel, 2022; Valencia, 2010). For our project, this assets-based approach was exemplified by hiring Merrimack students from Lawrence to be part of the research and teaching team; inviting community partners and local representatives to speak to the youth in Youth Voice about their role in serving and strengthening the community; and visiting a museum to learn about the famous Bread and Roses Strike and the waves of immigration that contributed to the diversity of the area.

Views from the field of education helped us ensure the curriculum materials were accessible and inclusive, especially for emergent bilingual students who are learning English through schooling, and would provide appropriate pedagogical approaches and structures. The materials to be used were analyzed for comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985) and reading level. Familiarity with Massachusetts Common Core standards for literacy skills needed in history and social studies for middle school and high school students (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2022) and for elements of civic education (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018) also informed the curriculum. This discipline also reminded us to bear in mind matters such as adolescents' attention span and the impact of lived experiences on learning when deciding on particular curricular topics and approaches to teaching. Using our understanding of Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences, we incorporated a balance of engaging students via visual, auditory, and kinesthetic activities, along with arts integration to ensure that all learners felt supported.

This interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration in designing and implementing first the undergraduate training program, and later the Youth Voice program itself, was reflected in the plans for and execution of both programs. When the undergraduate students joined the research and teaching team, they added further insights from their own disciplinary perspectives and from discussions with their peers from other disciplines, which additionally informed curricular and pedagogical decisions.

## An Interdisciplinary and Intergenerational Definition of Civic Engagement

In May 2021, as we faculty began to work with the students chosen for the team, we felt it was an important first step to agree upon a unified definition of "civic engagement." A clear definition of terms often defined differently contributes to establishing common ground, a prerequisite for interdisciplinary integration (Bromme, 2000) such as we hoped to achieve in our project. And, given the range of ages as well as disciplines represented by the members of our team, integration of views was even more of a challenge than it might otherwise be. Our team consisted of four students representing Generation Z, one millennial faculty member, and two faculty members from Generation X. We soon found ourselves focused on how people across generational divides discuss what civic engagement is and is not. We examined definitions of civic engagement that are currently discussed in the literature. Then, the faculty guided the students in a conversation regarding whether any of these generally-accepted definitions resonated with them and their age cohort. The definition we arrived at, presented below, represents the product of generative

conflict between members of different generations (as well as different disciplines) in defining civic engagement.

Researchers studying cohorts typically define age groups based on unique or historical events that potentially shaped or socialized a cohort as they came of age, usually between the ages of 18 and 25 years old. According to Seemiller and Grace's (2019) typology derived from market research, Generation X was born between 1965–1980, and this cohort emerged with the rise of new media and a push for work-life balance, followed by Millennials (1981–1994), who are viewed as the “socially connected industry disruptors” (p. 9). The world's most recent politically socialized cohort, Generation Z (1995–2010), is just beginning to be understood as a cohort committed to social justice and digital activism due to the impacts of large-scale racial justice protests in 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic (Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

On the other hand, regardless of their generation, youth are historically less likely to be civically engaged (Putnam, 2000), especially in traditional politics, given their lack of interest in and knowledge about politics (Delli Carpini, 1996; Gidengil et al., 2003; Pammett & LeDuc, 2003; Rubenson et al., 2004; Wattenberg, 2008). As a result, youth are also less likely to vote and to possess a sense of civic duty tied to voting (Chareka & Sears, 2006; Henn et al., 2002). However, they are more likely to engage in protest on matters that concern them, regardless of whether the country they inhabit is a democracy or not (Dobbs, 2021). Youth over 18 are typically more focused on issue-area politics than voting in elections (Dalton, 2011). In other words, youth are more likely to act to address climate change or “save the whale” rather than vote. Youth are typically more cynical about politics, in general, but they are more likely to focus on volunteerism and service on behalf of causes they care about (Dalton, 2015; Kimberlee, 2002; Patterson, 2002a, 2002b).

Of course, such research findings raise questions about the generally accepted theory that youth are less likely to be civically engaged, questions related to the lack of consensus on precisely what civic engagement is and what it is not. According to youth.gov (n.d.), civic engagement involves any activity where people work “to make a difference in the civic life of one's community” (para. 1). This work can take the form of service-learning or volunteering (Bobek et al., 2009). Civic engagement might also be about an individual's sense of civic duty, such as voting, because casting a ballot is an act in which all democratic citizens ought to participate. Individuals might also civically engage by working with civil society groups like human rights organizations, women's and youth groups, or labour unions to make positive contributions to their community and/or to influence policy (youth.gov, n.d.). Ronan (2004, as cited in Adler & Goggin, 2005) at the Center for Civic Participation defines civic engagement as involving “work that is done publicly and benefits the public and is done in concert with others” (p. 238). Others also restrict the term to collective action. Hollister (2002, as cited in Adler & Goggin, 2005) at



Tufts University, states that civic engagement “is about collaboration, about intense joint activity, pursuing community issues through work in all sectors, not just government” (p. 238). Civic engagement might also include activities that shape a community’s future and improve conditions for its residents (Adler & Goggin, 2005).

How civic engagement is defined largely depends on the perspective and interests of the definer, with each generation offering its own interpretation. Scholars have noted that there is typically no single definition of civic engagement that suits everyone (Brabant & Braid, 2009). Furthermore, Barker (2011) argues that even those in higher education are at a conceptual *impasse* where “something is missing from the concepts of civic engagement that currently dominate the field” (p. i). Emerging research is only beginning to demonstrate the complexity linking online engagement and offline activism. Across various issue areas, Generation Z’s online activism may well encourage future offline engagement in ways that have not been systematically studied (Rice & Moffett, 2022).

When seeking a definition of civic engagement that would suit youth from Generation Z, as well as the rest of us, our research team developed new dimensions from our conversations with the undergraduate research team members representing the Generation Z cohort. The dimensions are presented in Figure 1. This intergenerational definition of civic engagement emphasizes both online engagements and “in real life.” It also includes both efforts to raise awareness about an issue related to social justice and efforts to redress social injustice. A further core component of this definition is that actions could occur individually or collectively.

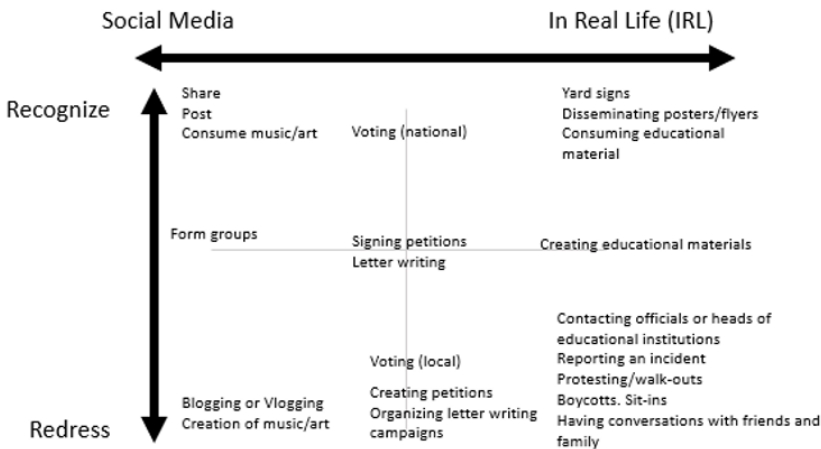


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Gen Z Civic Engagement

Through our conversations, we came to agree that young people can engage in activities that are exclusively online, that are exclusive to in-person instances, or that may take place both online and in real life (IRL) (e.g., forming groups, signing a petition, or writing letters). The Generation Z members of our team also felt like there is a difference between casting a ballot in a local versus a federal election. They see voting in national elections as a step towards recognizing injustice and voting for the appropriate candidate to address that issue, but perceive voting in local elections as an activity where youth can more directly redress an issue via candidates who are closer to home.

We also came to agree that there is a difference between consumption and creation in terms of the dimensions of recognizing versus redressing social justice issues. A young person can be civically engaged by *consuming* information, for example through social media, documentaries, museums, songs, art, and posters. Consumption is about seeing social injustice and becoming more personally aware of systemic issues. For the Generation Z members of our team, consumption and recognition are highly valued, but do not involve engagement deep enough to redress an issue. If young people engage by *creating* material through social media, such as blogs, videos, music, art, poetry, or by *organizing* a letter-writing campaign, they are deepening their engagement in a way that moves beyond recognizing an issue to directly redressing it (or trying to).

The research team also felt strongly that having conversations about ameliorating an issue with family and friends should be categorized as civic engagement. The Generation Z members of our team emphasized that they felt like people in their generation have served as conversation starters when it comes to redressing local, national, and global issues. They noted that talking about these issues with their friends and family was extremely intimate and private, but could also be incredibly impactful in solving community problems. This conception differs from civic engagement definitions that promote only collective action that is done in public (e.g. Ronan, 2004, as cited in Adler & Goggin, 2005). For Generation Z, civic engagement can include private actions initiated by an individual, such as conversations. And those conversations do not need to be in person; they may be virtual. Although Generation Z prefers face-to-face communication, they are more likely to communicate online rather than at an in-person town hall (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). In practice, the Generation Z members of our team felt that youth are not as interested in engaging in big public forums that bring a community together as they are in influencing their immediate social network, either online or in real life.

As our team discussions of the concept of civic engagement concluded, we decided to move forward with the Youth Voice project using a new definition of youth civic engagement that is centered upon digital activism, social justice, and individual and collective action. This definition states: *Youth civic*

*engagement represents a matrix of activities occurring either online or in real life, in the private or public spheres, and with others or individually. It is about recognizing or redressing a social justice issue through active community engagement that shapes, improves, or benefits society.* To participate in this form of engagement requires reflexivity in all actions, which will move individuals from recognizing to redressing social inequality and inequity. We believe that this definition, which served us well in the Youth Voice project, could prove useful for conceptualizing youth civic engagement across the world given its broad applicability. It includes both actions that are political in nature and general community involvement (Sherrod et al., 2002), hence applying to youth who may be highly involved in community activities like volunteering, but less involved in political ones (Flanagan, 2004; Galston 2001; Torney-Purta et al., 2007). This definition should also apply to immigrant youth for whom engagement with political and civic life is motivated by a complex identity rooted in *polycultural* or *flexible citizenship*; this type of citizenship includes aspects such as linguistic capabilities, national origin, race, obligations to their community, experiences with discrimination, spirituality, and the media (Jensen, 2010; Maira, 2004).

## Preparation for Youth Voice

On average, our team met twice per week from mid-May to the end of June 2021 before Youth Voice began. At the core, the collaboration between the students and faculty in the research portion of this project reflects youth participatory action research (YPAR), in the sense that the process developed our students, young people themselves who would be working with even younger members of Gen Z from the YMCA in Lawrence, into “critical co-investigators” (Freire, 1970), positioned as “capable and competent researchers” (Johnston-Goodstar & Krebs, 2016, p. 25). In YPAR, youth identify and study social issues that affect them while developing actions for redressing them (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Canella, 2008; Ginwright, 2003, 2008). This aspect of the project, along with the focus group discussions the faculty had conducted earlier with some of the younger youth of Lawrence, reflects the necessity we feel to center the voices of young people in identifying and redressing their own community issues.

After developing a unified conception of civic engagement, the three faculty members led the undergraduate students through a series of layered activities that included both individual and collective projects over the six weeks before Youth Voice began. Each undergraduate student researched civic engagement among youth in a particular area of the world using the World Values Survey Database ([worldvaluessurvey.org](http://worldvaluessurvey.org)). The areas researched included the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In addition, two

students were asked to research civic engagement programs across the globe and two students cross-checked transcriptions from a podcast that the faculty member in political science curates on civic and political empowerment of Generation Z.

For these projects, the students applied the political science discipline-specific framing for engaged research called *civically engaged research* (CER), which is *transdisciplinary by nature and seeks to resolve social and political problems* (Bullock & Hess, 2021). CER, when combined with YPAR as a research framework, is a powerful tool for creating research studies that serve a public good and address a systemic issue. In Youth Voice, the systemic issue being addressed is academic inequity and lack of civic skills among youth in a low-income community. Through research, the intended outcome is to produce a curriculum that addresses this issue and ultimately resolves the social and political problem of systemic inequity in low-income BIPOC communities by empowering youth to fight for social change.

In addition to the students' ongoing research projects, each week students were asked to read the same article or review the same website or activity assigned by one of the faculty members. These assignments reflected disciplinary perspectives that informed the curriculum and prepared us pedagogically for working with the youth in Youth Voice. For example, the faculty member in political science assigned a reading on immigrant youth in the United States who are coming of age among diverse civic cultures and another reading on LGBTQ+ youth activism. During another week, the faculty member in human development assigned a reading on developmental assets and strength-based approaches working with youth. And in another week, the faculty member in education assigned students to review a website that provides nonfiction texts at a variety of reading levels to learn more about how students at different grade levels and levels of English proficiency can access the same content.

The faculty members also assigned a reading from their respective disciplinary fields on talking across differences that led to a more comprehensive understanding of that topic and that informed Youth Voice activities. Lessons from the "talking across differences" readings were applied to two activities in which the undergraduate students participated and that would eventually be implemented in Youth Voice—a values continuum activity and a debate activity. In the values continuum activity, students walked to different areas of the room that reflected a spectrum of views on a range of controversial topics. After walking to a particular area, participants were asked to explain reasons for their choices. Visually seeing how people's views can differ and hearing them present their perspectives humanizes differences by eliciting personal and powerful testimonies from those involved. A debate activity was also particularly impactful in developing respect for another's point of view even while possibly disagreeing with that view, all in a civil interchange.

After engaging the undergraduate students in readings and activities, the faculty members debriefed and asked the undergraduate students to share their experiences and suggestions for improvement. Each faculty member also met individually with a different undergraduate student from the team every week to see if the student wanted to share any follow-up feedback on any of the readings or activities, to connect about individual projects, and to discuss tasks for the following week. These conversations were invaluable, as they provided the faculty members with feedback about what might be developmentally appropriate in terms of content and delivery, as well as what might be more appealing and promote more active learning among the even younger students we would be working with in the Youth Voice program itself. For example, in the values continuum activity, we initially included 20 statements. However, after the students did the activity with us, they suggested that we reduce the number of statements to better accommodate the attention span of the middle school students. The students also helped us faculty determine which statements to include. We were uncertain, for example, whether to include “Racism exists in the United States” as a values continuum statement because we questioned whether it was appropriate for a middle school audience and whether we had the capacity to support the potential emotional harm such a statement could elicit in the time we had. Ultimately, however, the students proposed we should because we should not avoid difficult topics and hard histories, especially if the youth are victims of systemic oppression. We felt we had a responsibility to discuss difficult topics as a conduit to counteracting such oppression.

The integration of readings, activities, and feedback from the interdisciplinary team reflects Rhoten et al.’s (2006) description of interdisciplinary studies as a

mode of curriculum design and instruction in which individual faculty or teams identify, evaluate, and integrate information, data, techniques, tools, perspectives, concepts, or theories from two or more disciplines or bodies of knowledge to advance students’ capacity to understand issues, address problems, and create new approaches and solutions that extend beyond the scope of a single discipline or area of instruction. (p. 3)

The process we adopted in our training sessions reflected the emerging form of knowledge production that Gibbons and his colleagues (1994) refer to as “Mode 2”—an increasingly context-driven, problem-focused, and interdisciplinary mode of thinking, where researchers are immersed in issues under study, acting as reflexive change agents, applying theory to practice in order to more adequately address the complexity of social problems (Gibbons et al., 1994). “Mode 2” contrasts with “Mode 1,” an approach to problems that is primarily academic, investigator-initiated, and discipline-based (Gibbons et al., 1994). Indeed, the Youth Voice curriculum was a product of Mode 2

thinking, informed by multiple disciplinary theories as well as research into the kind of community engaged practice we planned to pursue. The result was an informative, interactive, and enriching program interconnected to people and organizations that are leaders of change in the community that support young people's engagement with their world.

## The Youth Voice Curriculum

The Youth Voice program that we designed and implemented supports the empowerment of young people by sharpening their tools for enacting advocacy in their communities. In this, it is responsive to the Massachusetts-mandated history and social studies framework, in which the rights and responsibilities of citizens are part of the grade 8 curriculum, including a focus on opportunities for citizens to participate in the political process. It also supports the Common Core standards for middle and high school students that list many literacy skills students need in history and social studies, such as discerning authors' points of view and using technology to produce and publish writing (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2022). As a result of this Youth Voice program, participants are able to use their written and oral communication skills to participate in open-minded engagement with others, voicing their views in a variety of ways (including art, music, and media). A sub-goal of the program is to equip participants with digital literacy skills that help them navigate information on social media. Young people overwhelmingly receive their information via social media, which is potentially problematic in terms of their participation in civic life given the widespread presence of mis/disinformation online. Through Youth Voice, young people improve their ability to identify false information online, which empowers them to develop their own ideologies and enhances their ability to form evidence-based opinions.

We should also note that Youth Voice centers on experiential learning given that engaging students in experiences, rather than offering them traditional lectures, "de-academizes" the program and better connects the community to the academy (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xxvi). It thus is more likely to lead to an increased propensity for civic and political engagement (Elder et al., 2007; Glover et al., 2021), which in turn helps to improve educational and societal outcomes (Gould et al., 2011).

The Youth Voice program was designed to run in-person for four days per week for four weeks, as the morning programming for 30 middle school students in the YMCA's summer program. Each week's curriculum and activities were focused on a particular topic and/or mode of expression. In week one, activities were focused on the topics of identity and community. First,

participants were guided to consider how their identities have been and continue to be shaped by themselves and the world around them. Definitions and explanations of the terms “equity” and “equality” were presented and participants were asked to use photography to capture images of both assets and inequities in their communities. After discussing the photographs, participants decided on a few issues they would discuss for the remainder of the program: quality of school lunches, access to swimming pools, and commitment to recycling. Additionally, local youth activists visited to discuss ways they are civically engaged in local and national communities.

In the second week, the activities were designed to teach the students about using writing to effect change, as, for example, in creating petitions. In addition, two state representatives visited, leading to an opportunity for the participants to write testimonials on issues they felt were most pressing in their communities. These testimonials were later sent to one of the representatives.

The mode of expression of views emphasized in week three was speaking. Activities related to speaking included a moderated debate. Students were split into two groups and each group debated a different topic. The first group debated whether school personnel should be allowed to search student backpacks if school personnel suspect a student brought something that could be a potential threat to themselves or others. The second topic was whether standardized testing (specifically, the MCAS) should continue. The students also participated in the recording of a podcast about COVID-19, a process that enabled them to learn more about identifying mis/disinformation online. The final week emphasized the power of visual and performing arts. Participants took a walking tour of murals that had been created by a local activist group and, during a workshop led by members of that group, designed protest signs for the causes about which they felt strongly. They also created chalk drawings and statements on the pavements outside the YMCA with social justice themes.

In both the design and implementation of the Youth Voice program, interdisciplinary and intergenerational collaboration was central in achieving its objectives. While a faculty member or undergraduate student sometimes took the lead in our sessions, all participants were encouraged to make contributions during many discussions and activities. Many disciplinary views and also non-academic views were represented. Overall, the “train the trainer” model of faculty training undergraduate students to facilitate and provide support for a number of Youth Voice discussions and activities strengthened the interest in and capacity for community engagement for the Generation Z cohort and for the middle school youth with whom we were working.

## Reflecting on Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Collaboration for Youth Voice

After Youth Voice was completed, the faculty leaders conducted a focus group with the undergraduate students on how engaging in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research, designing the curriculum, and delivering the program enhanced their understanding of civic engagement. Analyses of the focus group data revealed that the interdisciplinary conversations not only enhanced understanding of content surrounding civic engagement, but also allowed students to appreciate the diverse styles of thinking that come with different disciplines. Each discipline contributed a different style or mode of inquiry to assess challenges and strategies geared at solving social and community problems. For example, the students spoke of one of the training sessions with the undergraduate students in which they engaged in a civil debate exercise about safe injection sites for people addicted to heroin. While the faculty did not intend to use this topic with the middle school students, it was a useful thought exercise for the undergraduate students. Yarielis (health sciences) and Fatoumata (biology) were paired during the debate, and during the focus group, Yarielis explained the value of discovering another disciplinary insight.

We were talking about safe injection sites for people addicted to heroin. I volunteer with the homeless and I came at this topic from a health sciences perspective. However, when I listened to Fatoumata, who had biological explanations for her arguments, it opened my view. I went home later and looked up more information. Not only did it help me understand my own disciplinary understanding of addiction, but it expanded my understanding of others' perspectives.

This example illustrates how insights from multiple disciplines added to an increased understanding of complex problems for some of the undergraduate students (Repko et al., 2019). Yarielis also recalled how Fatoumata's biology background helped her and others better understand the complexity of the issues that were discussed in Youth Voice. For one of the activities, the Youth Voice participants generated a list of problems that they were passionate about addressing in their communities. Improving the quality of school lunches was a prominent one. Fatoumata explained to everyone how the hormones present in milk, salads, and other school lunches pose potentially hazardous risks to the students' health and well-being. Thus, we all came to understand that the issue of school lunches was about more than general health and nutrition but had much deeper consequences to long-term well-being.

Fatoumata also emphasized the value of considering different disciplinary insights when discussing social justice issues, especially those related to racial injustice and police brutality.



I feel that my background in biology contributed to conversations. Nick's background in political science and history helped in the debates because it was important to understand the laws that helped move arguments forward. Sam's criminology major also helped when talking about the legality of certain topics and policies around immigration. Sam also explained the training involved with becoming a police officer.

Nick also noted how distinct elements of a discipline can inform attempts to resolve a problem. He explained that those with mathematical and science backgrounds generally focus on finding a single right solution, while those in the liberal arts or the social sciences may not seek one right solution, but multiple possibilities for solutions. As Newell (2013) notes, by learning and integrating insights from several disciplines, students can construct the fullest possible understanding of an issue and become more open-minded and tolerant about ways of dealing with issues. Other perspectives than those they began with begin to be valued as students start to seek multiple causes of and solutions to complex problems (Newell, 2013).

In our focus group discussion, some of the undergraduate students also noted that the interdisciplinary collaboration that characterized the regular interaction among our team created a comfortable atmosphere for them to share their ideas without fear of judgment—a crucial element for a successful interdisciplinary collaboration (Newell, 2013). Yarielis stated,

[In] one of my [other] classes, I was one of the only [people] of color and it felt so uncomfortable. I felt like I couldn't talk about what I really wanted to talk about. But seeing you guys and understanding that you guys have different perspectives and it isn't just like everyone's gonna come after me if I say something.

Sam noted that,

When Stephanie (education) brought up information about ESL students and Kirstie about politics, this made me more comfortable contributing my own perspectives and experiences to what we were researching and discussing. Comfort level matters in interdisciplinary collaboration. Just because we don't major in politics doesn't mean we can't be civically engaged.

When asked what made this project different, if it was, from “regular group work,” Nick said, “I feel like all of us genuinely cared and genuinely wanted to make this program really successful, so I think that's why this collaboration works better than I think any other collaboration I've done.” Yarielis, a first-year student, also mentioned the positive influence of working with both the faculty members and students who were older than she.

They were a motivation to keep going. I'm trying to work harder because I'm paired with these people that have been in college longer. Being surrounded by them, or being around you guys [faculty], I always just wanted

to work harder and be like, yes, I can do this, you know they're doing it, I can do it as well.

Overall, the interdisciplinary research team noted that knowing one another's backgrounds actually enhanced one's knowledge in their own discipline. After learning about civic engagement from a political science perspective, others gained a better understanding of how one with their own disciplinary background could engage civically, appreciating that one does not have to be highly knowledgeable about politics to make civic contributions. It is about connecting disciplinary content with community priorities and needs that is key. Nick was thrilled to see that the young people in the Youth Voice program cared about civic engagement as much as he did.

So I think part of the reason I was so excited for this program at the beginning was seeing other kids equally excited about things that I was really passionate about. . . . [B]y the end, like, seeing the way that they got excited about doing posters, about talking about what they thought about, you know, some of the things that they put in their testimonials. I think it was really cool to see how they do care, and it really just takes you know, showing them, they have a voice in that. You know there's ways that they can amplify that voice out there [more] than just voting.

Yarielis remarked that not every activity in the program had a political perspective tied to it; just caring about other people is key, a point reiterated by Laura (human development) who said,

I think that's such an important point, and because this is such a polarizing moment in our country, I think it's even more important to make that explicit. I mean really a lot of the things we talked about were on a humanitarian level, I feel like universal human rights.

Nick also highlighted the broadly humanitarian values inherent to interdisciplinary collaboration. "[T]his past year especially I've really been trying to hone in on other people's perspectives and the way that my perspective influences the way I think about things . . . and I think this helped that a lot." This metacognitive insight about perspective taking is a hallmark of interdisciplinarity (Repko et al., 2019) which helps young people to develop empathy and to thereby communicate more effectively with others.

Ultimately, the experiences of the research and teaching team that designed and delivered the Youth Voice program seemed to influence all participants' desire and capacity to redress problems in their own communities, which was one of the primary objectives of the program. Sam said that she learned to "speak up more about smaller issues like in my community." Yarielis recalled,

So I was talking about how I didn't like what one of the things that was going on in Lawrence and Nick brought up the fact that you have to look

into like the city representatives and actually find out what's going on and things like that, so it helped me want to vote in the next city election.

Civic engagement involves activities in which interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are enormously valuable (Repko et al., 2019), and the reflections of our team illuminated how interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration (and, in our case, intergenerational collaboration, too), enabled all involved in the Youth Voice program to integrate disciplinary perspectives and insights to address complex problems. Embracing different disciplinary insights and valuing the comprehensive predictive and prescriptive power they can collectively have is, in and of itself, an act of civic engagement. As Newell (2013) notes, interdisciplinary studies deserves recognition as a significant source of civic learning about democratic values and acting to support those values.

## Conclusion

Our research and teaching team found that interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives were key in the development and implementation of Youth Voice. In future iterations of the program, we intend to more directly address the social and emotional well-being of the students, given that it is just as important as their academic well-being. The initial results show this program has the potential to re-engage youth—including those feeling academically alienated as a result of the pandemic—in learning, especially in regards to reading and media literacy, and to reconnect youth with adult allies like their teachers. Yet, it is not enough to simply educate young people on politics and procedures of how to engage in their community and act to address its problems. There is a strong human developmental aspect to encouraging youth participation in civic life. When speaking of these developmental components, Barker (2011) states “the civic spectrum recognizes the importance of beginning with students where they are, but also of connecting them to robust conceptions of citizenship” (p. iii). This was our main intent when developing the curriculum for Youth Voice.

Overall, our interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and intergenerational approach led to the conclusion that youth programming needs to be youth-led, with those in older generations providing support and structure. The Generation Z participants—both youth from the community and the undergraduate students on our team—helped determine what issues we focused on throughout our time together. Once issues were identified, it was critical that the community cultural wealth that already existed be incorporated into the curriculum in various ways, including visits from state representatives, presentations from high school youth engaged in the community, and workshops led by local youth development organizations. In sum, we argue,

a holistic approach to youth development that is youth-led and incorporates input from those in the wider community, is a “trifecta” approach to the design and delivery of youth programming that promotes the social, emotional, and academic well-being of young people while building their capacity for participatory citizenship.

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## Biographical Notes

**Kirstie Lynn Dobbs**, PhD, is an assistant professor of practice in political science and public policy and in the Early College Program at Merrimack College. Her research analyzes various modes of youth political participation, such as voter behavior, involvement in political parties, and civic engagement through protests and civil society. She may be reached at [dobbsk@merrimack.edu](mailto:dobbsk@merrimack.edu).

**Laura M. Hsu**, EdD, is an associate professor and program director of human development and human services at Merrimack College. Her research focuses on how relationships influence identity development and in the role of identity in learning processes. She may be reached at [hsul@merrimack.edu](mailto:hsul@merrimack.edu).

**Stephanie Garrone-Shufran**, PhD, is an assistant professor of education at Merrimack College. Her research is focused on the preparation of teachers to teach language across the curriculum and the impact of teacher candidates’ field experiences on their practices and beliefs regarding English learners. She may be reached at [garroneshufs@merrimack.edu](mailto:garroneshufs@merrimack.edu).

**Nicholas Barber** is an honors student and a double major in political science and history with minors in pre-law; women & gender studies; and law, ethics, and society. He also serves as President of Student Government and as an Admissions Ambassador for Merrimack College. He is a member of the class of 2023 and may be reached at [barbern@merrimack.edu](mailto:barbern@merrimack.edu).

**Fatoumata Kourouma** graduated with a B.S. in biology and a minor in Environmental Science and Sustainability at Merrimack College. She is a member of the class of 2022 and may be reached at [kouroumaf@merrimack.edu](mailto:kouroumaf@merrimack.edu).

**Yarielis Perez-Castillo** holds a major in health sciences at Merrimack College. She is a member of the class of 2025 and may be reached at [perezcastily@merrimack.edu](mailto:perezcastily@merrimack.edu).

**Samantha Rich** is a Pioneer Scholar at Merrimack College. She holds a major in criminology and criminal justice and a minor in psychology. She is a member of the class of 2023 and may be reached at [richs@merrimack.edu](mailto:richs@merrimack.edu).

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