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Education through Engagement and Empowerment: The Impact of An Action Civics Program on Student Academic Engagement Outcomes

Ridley-Kerr, Abby

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Boston University
Education through Engagement and Empowerment: The Impact of An Action Civics Program on Student Academic Engagement Outcomes

Undergraduate Senior Thesis in Political Science

Abby Ridley-Kerr

Adviser: Professor Graham Wilson

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Abstract: There has been relatively little research on the effectiveness of civic engagement programs at promoting student achievement. This thesis attempts to provide some context for the potential of civic engagement programs like Generation Citizen. It examines the link between student participation and attendance and student achievement for those students enrolled in the Generation Citizen program. It builds on previous academic studies around absenteeism and student participation to determine more conclusively the potential benefits of civic engagement programs on student academic achievement.

Keywords: action civics, academic achievement, civic engagement gap, civic skills, political participation
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“We in America do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate.”-Thomas Jefferson

**Introduction**

It’s 8 am on an overcast Wednesday morning inside the Massachusetts State House. All is quiet. Slowly, a rumble of voices and activity fills the cavernous halls. Young people from across Boston are descending on the State House for Civics Day. They have spent the last 10 weeks working to develop an action plan and make a change in their communities. They have campaigned, lobbied, and canvassed. Today, they are here to present their work and share their stories of civic engagement and participation in the Generation Citizen program.

One class speaks of their fight to keep their school open. They attended school rallies, wrote letters to their local newspaper, and met with school and community leaders. They circulated a petition to keep the school open and got their peers signed on board. They stood up for what they believed in and gave their school a voice.

Another class speaks of their proposal to increase job opportunities for young people. They made calls to local politicians and lobbied for the introduction of a teen jobs program in their community. They designed a job-training curriculum and met with school administrators. They took the issue of teen unemployment and implemented their own solutions.

Leaders in the local Boston community urge the students to keep engaged and share their own stories of public service. The students sit, and listen, bright-eyed. Then the students themselves speak. They talk of the challenges they encountered and how they overcame those struggles. They share their insights and newfound appreciations for the political process.
The day comes to a close and the empowered and inspired babble dies away. Local community members return again to their lives of public service and the students’ return to their schools and communities. Civics Day is over. Although these students have “graduated” from the Generation Citizen program, they continue to engage in their communities and develop their projects further.

Their story becomes a greater story: a story about the power of civic engagement and its ability to uplift and inspire communities. What happens to these young people as they graduate from high school? Does the insight and civic engagement they gained on that Wednesday morning in the State House and over the course of their Generation Citizen experience spill over into their academic engagement? What makes these students academically unique from their peers?

These are the questions that I will attempt to dissect in the following pages. I posit that participation in civic engagement programs, like Generation Citizen, is associated with positive educational outcomes.
Relevant Literature

A large body of research on the association between educational attainment and political participation exists (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Nie Junn & Stehlik-Barry, 1996). Converse (1972) goes so far as to call education the “universal solvent” by which an individual’s level of political participation is always positively affected. The relationship has not gone unnoticed by lawmakers. Indeed, historically, the purpose of schooling was civic development (Cohen & Chaffee, 2012). According to Lewis (1914), the original purpose of public schools was to prepare youth to be future democratic citizens. A major goal of the public school movement was to provide young people from across the United States with core civic, political, and social values (Anderson, Avery, Pederson, Smith, & Sullivan, 1997). Since the founding of the United States, the logic behind substantial investment in education has been to promote good citizenship and enhance civic engagement (Campbell, 2009).

Although the link between education and civic engagement is well documented, the logic behind the relationship is less clear-cut. There are three major competing hypotheses used to explain the correlation: the indoctrination hypothesis, the socialization hypothesis, and the civic education hypothesis (Glaeser, Ponzetto, & Shleifer, 2007; Hillygus, 2005). The indoctrination hypothesis suggests that the main function of a nation’s educational system is to promote the political participation of its citizens. It cites evidence that the original public school movement in the US emphasized preparing students for participation in democracy (Hillygus, 2005). The socialization hypothesis suggests that schooling lowers the costs of social interactions. As the primary aim of schooling is to promote socialization, the hypothesis predicts that education should
impact all forms of social involvement (Hillygus, 2005; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

The civic education hypothesis suggests that education provides citizens with both the
skills to become politically engaged and the knowledge to comprehend democratic
principles. In this model, civic education—and education generally—expands the
capacity of citizens to engage in the democratic process (Galson, 2001; Hillygus, 2005;
Niemi & Junn 1998). Taken together, these three hypotheses come to the same general
point: education provides individuals with the social capital necessary to participate in the
political process and be successful, engaged citizens.

**Achievement gap**

Unfortunately, the success of these hypotheses is curtailed in the United States by
wider societal disparities. Socioeconomic and racial disparities in educational
opportunities and educational attainment exist (Gamoran, 2001; Hallinan, 2001; Sirin,
2005). These disparities stem inherently from the unique nature of American society
(Gottfredson, 1985; Hallinan, 2001). In the United States, social position is determined
in part by both individual achievement and ability and social status (Gottfredson, 1985).
The public school movement was born out of a desire to equalize American society.
Horace Mann, 19th century education reformer, saw universal public education as the
ultimate societal “balance-wheel.” He referred to education as “the great equalizer of the
condition of men” that would bring order and equality to society (Kendall, 1968). This
philosophy formed the foundation for the early public school movement in the United
States.

The flaw in that philosophy was that for many decades after their institution,
public schools enrolled predominantly white, non-minority students (Hallinan, 2001).
Even after the inclusion of non-white, minority students in the public education system, the school system was heavily segregated. The effects of school segregation were not insignificant. Various researchers have noted the link between individual background characteristics and school body composition on individual student achievement (Gamoran, 1992; Jencks & Mayer, 1990).

The desegregation of schools was initiated in 1954 with the famous Supreme Court case Brown versus Board of Education. The Court ruled that the segregation of white and African American children in the public schools of a State solely on the basis of race denied African American children equal protection as required under the Fourteenth Amendment (Brown v. Board of Ed, 1954). Although the Brown decision took about a decade to take real effect at the state level, it set a striking new precedent for educators to follow (Ravitch, 1983).

Another significant event in the history of school desegregation in the United States was the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. Among many other provisions, the act guaranteed equal treatment under the law for every American, regardless of race. The ruling was particularly significant in the case of school desegregation because it provided for the constitutional protection of all citizens in public facilities—chiefly public schools. The Civil Rights Act gave legitimacy to the Brown decision and mandated equal protection under the law (Clotfelter, 2006).

The final significant ruling in the history of school desegregation was the 1968 Green versus New Kent County case. The case brought forward flaws the mandates of the Brown ruling and tightened the regulations surrounding the application and implementation of school desegregation at the district level. The Green ruling led to
forced busing campaigns and other subsequent attempts at mandated school integration (Clotfelter, 2006; Ravitch, 1983).

These three rulings formed the historical backbone for the modern day education system. Hallinan (2001) goes so far as to claim that the minority-majority gap in achievement remains the “defining mark” of racial inequality in the American public education system today. The discrepancies in access to education and educational achievement across racial lines are a direct effect of the fragmented history of school desegregation and racial discrimination in the United States.

There are a variety of theories and viewpoints used to justify the persistence of the achievement gap in the United States. The theories presented here are merely illustrative of several of the major theories in circulation. They range from narrow, individual-level justifications to wider, societal-level justifications. Many of the individual-level theories—biological determinism (Gobineau, 1915) and background differences (Sewell and Hauser, 1975)—have lost social and political traction in recent decades. They have been replaced with societal-level theories like the cultural deprivation theory (Gottfredson, 1985; Wilson, 1987) and the social stratification theory (Gottfredson, 1985). The cultural deprivation theory suggests that the achievement gap is due to negative and self-defeating attitudes of minority students. This theory claims that minority families fail to provide their children with the skills and educational attitudes that support and encourage success in school (Gamoran, 2001; Bankston III & Caldas, 1998). Another societal-level theory that comes to the forefront when discussing the achievement gap is the social stratification theory (Gottfredson, 1985; Wilson, 1987). This theory puts the onus of blame for the achievement gap on schools. Proponents of
the social stratification theory suggest that the role of a school is to prepare students for placement in a stratified society—they achieve by categorizing students by skill and ability along racial lines.

**Civic Engagement Gap**

The civic engagement gap is just as prevalent as the achievement gap. Despite huge increases in the formal educational attainment of the US population during the last 50 years, levels of political knowledge have remained constant (Galston, 2001). As with the achievement gap, there is a pronounced gap in civic knowledge between students of low socio-economic status and students of high socio-economic status. Levinson (2007) cites strong evidence of a civic achievement gap between poor, minority, and immigrant youth and adults, on the one hand, and high earning or wealthy, white, and native-born youth and adults on the other. Poor and minority individuals are much less likely to develop, and utilize, civic skills (Levinson, 2007; Levinson, 2012).

The theories behind the civic engagement gap relate back to the theories surrounding the achievement gap and the noted link between education and civic engagement. Principally, there is a large gap in the sense of political and personal efficacy among minority youth (Levinson, 2007). Minority individuals of low socio-economic status are less likely to feel as though social movements in which they participate can influence the government, hindering their development of a civic identity and sense of civic duty (APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, 2004).

This socio-economic and racial gap in civic identity and civic duty is supported by the social capital theory. Davila and Mora (2007) suggest that participation in civic
engagement and the opportunity costs of civic participation are related. The social capital theory predicts differences in civic engagement across groups to the extent that the returns and opportunity costs of participation vary across different groups (Davila & Mora, 2007). In other words, the more benefit an individual gains from political participation, the more likely that individual is to engage in the political process. Poor, minority, immigrant youth and adults are less likely to engage because they are the first social groups to be overlooked by the political process (Wilson, 1987).

Others have suggested that the civic engagement gap may be affected by the quality of civic education different groups receive. Discrepancies in civic knowledge and skills and insufficient opportunities for civic participation are associated with the quality of civic education (Balsano, 2005; Hart, 1992; Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998) and contribute to low civic engagement among historically marginalized groups (Hart et al., 1998; Kahne and Sporte, 2008). This perpetuates the cycle of civic disengagement in minority communities.

**Linking the Achievement Gap and the Civic Engagement Gap**

These issues have come to light in the last few decades and civic engagement is once again prominent on the education policy agenda. There is new evidence to suggest that traditional classroom-based civic education can significantly raise political knowledge (Galston, 2001). Although most scholars agree that education is critical component in determining political knowledge, new evidence supports the notion that there is a direct link between civic education and political knowledge and participation (Galston, 2001; Kahne, 2009).
Civic knowledge is key to a functioning democracy. The more knowledge an individual acquires, the better that individual is equipped to understand the impact of public policies (Galston, 2005). An individual with political knowledge can advocate for his or her own interests through the political process. It is also suggested that political and civic knowledge increases the consistency of political views over time (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Political and civic knowledge provide individuals with a bridge between ideology and involvement. As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) note, participation in the political process connects a disengaged individual’s opinions with their actions. It gives those individuals a vehicle to engage in the political process. The more civic knowledge an individual has, the more likely he or she is to trust the political process (Galston, 2005).

These noted benefits of civic knowledge are not dissimilar to the noted benefits of education. Low achieving, minority students are reluctant to engage in the educational process because they have not been taught to see the benefit of education (Gamoran, 2001). These students fall behind and, subsequently, fall prey to the “self-fulfilling prophecy” of low achievement that society has laid for them (Jones, 1972). The students with low academic achievement become the adults with low civic knowledge, who are never provided with the tools to engage in the political process.

There is evidence to suggest that civic engagement counters this “self-fulfilling prophecy” by providing youth with a critical outlet for positive social development (Balsano, 2005; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). This positive social development is associated with many of the indicators of high academic achievement—social
development, personal development, and future occupational development (Balsano, 2005; Yates & Youniss, 1996).

There is a parallel hypothesis that suggests that the civic skill instruction—central to civic engagement—is not standard practice in American public schools. Kahne and Westheimer (2004) suggest that this is due to discrepancies in opportunities for civic skill development in public schools. The scholars suggest that one way to think about civic skill pedagogy is to use a “justice-oriented” method. This method works on the premise that effective, engaged citizens need opportunities to interpret the forces that make up the American political structure. Justice-oriented educators expose students to the realities of social, economic, and political forces and emphasize the importance of social movements and social action (Kahne & Westheimer, 2004). Curriculums with a justice-oriented focus often emphasize analysis of collective strategies for change and consideration of the root causes of issues.

Some scholars have suggested that these justice-oriented strategies are most effective at promoting youth civic engagement (Barber, 1998; Boyte & Kari, 1996; Levinson, 2009; Levinson, 2012). The implementation of justice-oriented curriculums takes significant support and resources, however. Many schools and educators—often those in majority-minority districts with limited resources and support—opt for less direct, action-based approaches to civic education (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003). As a consequence, poor, non-white students in underserved urban school districts are less likely to develop into justice-oriented citizens (Levinson, 2009).
Given this disparity, it is interesting to consider whether there is a link between civic education and educational attainment. In particular, is it possible that civic education promotes educational outcomes for historically disadvantaged students?

There is less research on this score, but Davila and Mora (2007) found evidence of a relationship between the two variables. Their study noted several key findings. First, that low civic participation rates among students were driven by low educational expectations and time constraints. Second, those students who were more civically engaged made greater scholastic progress and acquired more education, on average, than their peers. Students with the highest rates of community participation are also the students with the strongest academic achievement levels (Nolin, Chaney, Chapman, & Chandler, 1997). Third, civic education was effective at reducing the social and human capital differential between racial and socio-economic groups often associated with educational attainment. Davila and Mora (2007) suggest that civic education has positive effects on not only acquisition of political knowledge, but also educational attainment.

**Avenues for Reform**

Traditional avenues of reform for the achievement and civic engagement gaps, respectively, have involved enrichment programs that target at-risk students. These programs provide systems for at-risk students to engage in their learning and guide those students towards improved academic outcomes (MENTOR, 2006; Wheeler Keller & DuBois, 2010). Typically, this involves some type of *school-based mentorship* or *action-based learning* program with a *peer-mentoring* component.
School-based mentorship

School-based mentoring programs have become an immensely popular intervention to improve the lives of disadvantaged and at-risk youth (Walker, 2007; Wheeler Keller & DuBois, 2010). The main distinguishing factor of such programs is that meetings between youth and their mentors are structured to take place in a school setting. These programs help to foster interpersonal relationships between participating students and mentors (Wheeler Keller & DuBois, 2010). School-based mentoring programs, in particular, have been shown promote “resiliency” among youth from at-risk backgrounds (Rhodes, 1994).

High-quality mentor programs have been shown to improve youth academic achievement outcomes and school engagement (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). The key markers for a successful mentoring program are: sustained, positive mentor-youth relationship (MENTOR 2006; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006); youth life-skill building activities (Ebay, Rhodes & Allen, 2010; MENTOR, 2006); and youth participation and leadership of valued community activities (Keller, 2010; MENTOR, 2006). Mentor programs that encompass all of these qualities play an important and vital role in youth development and youth academic outcomes (MENTOR, 2006).

Action-based learning

One enrichment program that has gained recent traction is action-based learning. These programs, sometimes placed under the umbrella of service learning, promote reflective learning through service participation (Lee & Espino, 2010). Service learning and action-based learning affect a myriad of student outcomes, including: grade point average, writing skills, and critical thinking skills (Austin et al., 2000). Such programs
also play an important role in promoting student development and civic engagement (Lee & Espino, 2010). Billig, Root, and Jesse (2005) found that students who took action on political or civic issues—petitioning, organizing community forums, etc.—gained substantial civic knowledge. This action-based model of learning may also promote political literacy in conjunction with civic engagement (Dudley & Gitelson, 2002). Likewise, students who reported strong engagement in a service-learning program also reported high levels of academic engagement (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005).

The benefits of action-based, service-learning programs are particularly magnified for low-income students of color (Lee & Espino, 2010). Scholars have concluded that the best way to counter the civic engagement gap is through the implementation of action civics-type, community-based, student-centered, and rigorous programs (Cohen, Waters, & Brown, 2012; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Torney-Purta, 2002; Pope, Stolte, & Cohen, 2011). This style of learning specifically targets marginalized, at-risk students. It allows a disengaged student to take control of her or her own learning and validate his or her personal educational experience. There is evidence to suggest that young people, particularly young people of color, are more drawn to community-based forms of participation than to participation in traditional politics (Junn, 1999; Long, 2002; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002). Evidence shows that action-based, service-learning is a valuable approach to developing an educated and informed citizenry (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Lee & Espino, 2010).

Peer mentoring component

The introduction of a student mentor is key to any enrichment program. DuBois, Halloway, Valentine, and Cooper (2002) see the mentor component as crucial. The
extent to which those mentoring relationships are consistent and sustainable has a lasting impact on the effectiveness of the program (DuBois, Halloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). Wheeler, Keller, and DuBois (2010) conclude that introducing positive peer role models into the lives of at-risk youth positively benefits their school-related behaviors and outcomes.

**Generation Citizen: Fusion of these reforms**

Individually, these reforms work well to combat the achievement and civic engagement gaps. I suggest that the key to closing both the civic engagement gap and the academic achievement gap, then, may lie in academically engaging students.

For the purposes of this paper, I operationalize and quantify student engagement in two ways: reported unexcused absences and class participation. Studies have shown that students who *attend class more regularly* and *participate more regularly in class* tend to be more engaged in school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Finn, 1989; Wehlage et al., 1989; Voelkl, 1995).

*Student attendance* has been shown by many scholars to have a significant impact on student academic outcomes (deJung & Duckworth, 1986; Laffey, 1982; & Voelkl, 1995). Students who attend class regularly receive more hours of in-class teacher instruction, and are better equipped to succeed in school. Student absenteeism and academic achievement appear to be inversely related (Barrington, Hendricks 1989; DeKalb, 1999; Roby, 2004).

*Student participation* has also been shown to have a positive effect on student achievement. Finn (1989) suggests that students who participate actively in school and other classroom activities exhibit a stronger sense of school identity, which translates into
positive academic performance. Finn, Pannozzo, and Voelkl (1995) found that students rated as “inattentive” by instructors were less academically successful than their “attentive” peers.

As described above, there are a variety of solutions as to how to best address the achievement gap. Those with the most effective youth outcomes are school-based mentorship programs (Wheeler, Keller, & DuBois, 2010) that promote strong emotional bonds between students and mentors (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006), and employ an action-based curriculum (Lee & Espino 2010, Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005). The Generation Citizen program works within these parameters to create a concrete, school-based bond between students and mentors and engage students their local communities through an action-based curriculum (Pope, Stolte, & Cohen, 2011).

I posit that action civics programs like Generation Citizen may affect student engagement. Generation Citizen’s action civics curriculum (Pope, Stolte, & Cohen, 2011) empowers public school students with the knowledge, skills, and motivation to engage in community issues. The organization employs a student-centered, standards-aligned, peer-to-near-peer mentoring approach wherein trained college student volunteer mentors partner with classroom teachers to implement and facilitate a guided civic experience.

Previous studies have found that participating in Generation Citizen is associated with increased civic engagement (Cohen et al., 2012; Cohen, Stolte, Pope, & Warren, 2011), but the potential spillover effects on student academic engagement have not yet been studied. Other student-centered and project-based models (Junn, 1999; Long, 2002; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002) have had positive effects on student engagement, attendance, and participation. It is therefore plausible to expect that the
Generation Citizen program will yield the same outcomes. This paper will examine the overall effectiveness of Generation Citizen’s approach at improving the academic engagement of program participants, as measured by student absenteeism and student classroom participation.

There has been relatively little research on the effectiveness of civic engagement programs at promoting student achievement. When considering the importance of education for citizenship, scholars have typically focused on the ability of civic education to promote a well-informed and engaged populace (Kahne 2009; Kahne & Sporte 2008). This paper will attempt to provide some context for the potential of civic engagement programs like Generation Citizen. It will examine the link between student participation and attendance and student achievement for those students enrolled in the Generation Citizen program. It will build on previous academic studies around absenteeism and student participation to determine more conclusively the benefits of civic engagement programs on student academic achievement.
Research Design

Generation Citizen Program Overview

For the purposes of this study, I examine the impact of Generation Citizen on student academic engagement outcomes. The mission of the organization is to expand democratic participation among youth populations that have been historically under-represented or actively excluded from the political process (Generation Citizen, 2012). They achieve this goal through training volunteers from local-area colleges and universities to enter under-served and under-represented classrooms and teach their targeted, action-based civics curriculum. The aim of the ten-week program is to aid middle and high school students in designing, researching, and implementing their own community action plan. Generation Citizen program participants are exposed to civic skills that run the gamut from public speaking and effective lobbying to identifying decision-makers and writing opinion editorials (Millenson, 2012).

Design Specifications

The data analyzed in this study comes from a systematic random sample of Generation Citizen participants from the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 academic years (for more information, see Cohen, Pope, Stolte, Ridley-Kerr, & Wong, pending). The student participants (n=789) surveyed represent a systematic random sample from twenty-three middle and high schools across three Generation Citizen program sites in Boston, MA, Providence, RI, and New York City, NY.

The control group (n=520) consists of students who have not participated in Generation Citizen. These students were administered pre-surveys in the January and
February immediately before their participation in the spring semester Generation Citizen program.

The intervention group (n=269) consists of students who have recently participated in Generation Citizen. These students were administered post-surveys in December immediately after their participation in the fall semester Generation Citizen program.

**Outcome variables**

I was interested in academic engagement as an outcome. I measured two facets of academic engagement: classroom participation and absenteeism. Student survey participants were asked to respond to two ordered categorical response questions regarding classroom participation and absenteeism.

I asked respondents to characterize the frequency of their classroom participation. Students were given the option to select from one of five categories: two or more times per class; once per class; a few times each week; a few times each month; or I don’t usually speak in class.

I coded these five response categories into individual binary variables. I categorized students who classified themselves as infrequent classroom participants (a few times each month or I don’t usually speak in class) as those with “low participation.” As Table 1 reveals, survey respondents with low participation accounted for roughly 13% of the sample.

I also asked students to estimate the number of times in the last semester they were absent from school without an excuse. Students were again given the option to
select from one of five categories: 0 unexcused absences; 1-5 unexcused absences; 6-10 unexcused absences; more than 10 unexcused absences; or I don’t know.

Again, I coded these five response categories into individual binary variables. I categorized students with one or more unexcused absences (1-5, 6-10, or more than 10 unexcused absences) as those who were “chronically absent.” This one or more unexcused absence break off was determined after examination of Department of Education definitions of absenteeism in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York, respectively (NCSL, 2006). Again, Table 1 reveals that approximately 40% of survey respondents were classified as “chronically absent.”

Explanatory Variable

The explanatory variable of interest to this study was participation in Generation Citizen. I coded Generation Citizen as a binary variable, with a value of 1 for students who completed the post-survey after their participation in the Generation Citizen program and a value of 0 for students who completed the pre-survey before their participation the Generation Citizen program.

Covariates

In order to develop a more precise prediction of the effect of Generation Citizen participation on student academic engagement, I controlled for several other variables associated with academic achievement.

Given the quasi-experimental nature of the design I was able to assume that all student participants have the same likelihood of involvement in extracurricular activities outside of Generation Citizen—that might alter their academic performance. Indeed, some of the classes observed were Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (JROTC)
classrooms. Students in this highly structured, rigorous program with significant extra-curricular demands reported pre and post program outcomes similar to students in regular classrooms. With that in mind, I specifically controlled for variables that I felt might contribute to my parameter of interest, individual academic success.

I controlled for two self-reported demographic features: gender and race/ethnicity. Gender was coded as a binary variable with female respondents coded with a value of 1 and male respondents coded with a value of 0 (no other gender categories were reported). Race/ethnicity was coded as a binary variable with non-white respondents coded with a value of 1 and white respondents coded with a value of 0. I decided to generate a non-white variable—from the five initial race/ethnicity categories—to more effectively analyze the discrepancies between white and non-white students.

I controlled for gender because studies have shown that gender is a strong predictor of academic achievement (Hubbard, 2005). Likewise, many studies have shown that race/ethnicity heavily influence academic success in school (Gamoran, 2001; Hallinan, 2001; Lee, 2002; Sirin, 2005).

I also controlled for three academic features: enrollment in academically advanced courses, self-reported aspired educational attainment, and level of schooling (middle or high school).

Enrollment in academically advanced courses was coded as a binary variable with respondents who were currently enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) or honors courses coded with a value of 1 and respondents who were not currently enrolled in AP or honors courses coded with a value of 0.
Aspired educational attainment was coded as a categorical variable with six responses. Respondents were asked to indicate the highest level of education they intended to complete: some high school classes, high school degree, some college classes, two-year college degree, four-year college degree, or a graduate degree. I converted the educational attainment categorical responses into one binary variable with respondents who indicated a desire to complete college (four-year college degree or graduate degree) were coded with a value of 1 and respondents who did not indicate a desire to complete college were coded with a value of 0.

I also controlled for the level of schooling of the respondent. I generated a binary variable with middle school respondents coded with a value of 1 and high school respondents coded with a value of 0.

I controlled for these three academic features because both AP participation (Sadler, Sonnert, Tai, and Klopfenstein, 2010; Slavin, 1990) and aspirations to attend college (Michael et al., 2012) are strongly associated with high academic achievement and engagement. Likewise, I controlled for level of schooling because studies have shown that academic attendance and class participation rates vary greatly from middle school to high school (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Marks, 2000).

Finally, I controlled for three school-level variables that characterize the school’s overall academic and demographic characteristics. These data are publicly available online through district websites.

I measured overall school achievement by considering the individual school’s performance on the most recent (2011-2012) Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) report. I coded school performance as an categorical variable, with schools that passed both the
English/Language Arts and Math AYP coded with a value of 1, schools that passed either the English/Language Arts or Math AYP (but not both) coded as 0.5, and schools that did not pass either the English/Language Arts or Math AYP coded as 0.

I measured school demographics by considering the overall demographic breakdown of each individual school. I coded demographics as an interval level variable of the proportion of non-white students in the school, ranging from 0 (no non-white students) to 1 (all non-white students).

Controlling for these variables allowed me to better adjust for any potential demographic and academic characteristics at the school level that could affect student academic engagement.

Given that I was conducting analysis on two separate waves of data, collected over a two-year period, I also included a dummy variable to control for any differences between students who participated in the 2010-2011 academic year and students who participated in the 2011-2012 academic year.

**Analytic Approach**

In order to analyze the effect of Generation Citizen participation on academic outcomes, I conducted a logistic regression with robust standard errors to account for clustering of students at the school level. I tested the effect of Generation Citizen participation on both student participation and absenteeism while holding constant both individual level variables—gender, race/ethnicity, AP courses, education attainment, and grade level—and school level variables—Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) reports, percentage of non-white students, and percentage of free/reduced-price lunch eligible students.
Logged odds (classroom participation) = \( a + b_1(GC) + b_2(female) + b_3(aspirecollegegrad) + b_4(nonwhite) + b_5(survey characteristics) + b_6(acadvanced) + b_7(nonwhite) + b_8(middleschool) + b_9(annualyearlyprogress) + b_{10}(youthofcolor) + b_{11}(freereducedlunch) + e \)

Logged odds (absenteeism) = \( a + b_1(GC) + b_2(female) + b_3(aspirecollegegrad) + b_4(nonwhite) + b_5(survey characteristics) + b_6(acadvanced) + b_7(nonwhite) + b_8(middleschool) + b_9(annualyearlyprogress) + b_{10}(youthofcolor) + b_{11}(freereducedlunch) + e \)

**Qualitative Analysis**

In my qualitative analysis, I asked students at the conclusion of their participation in fall 2010 (n=130) and fall 2011 (n=231) to respond to two open-ended questions. The question of interest to this present study asked students to identify two skills, facts, or other elements they were exposed to over their ten-week participation in Generation Citizen.

The data collected were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) and classified into categories that emerged through reading responses and were also informed by the coding of previous survey waves. Student responses were double-coded and placed into appropriate categories according to their responses.
Results

Descriptive Statistics

Due to missing individual level data regarding race/ethnicity and gender and other school-level variables, the final dataset for the complete analysis is 789 student observations, or 80% of the original sample of 962 students. The descriptive statistics analyzed below use a complete case sample of n=789. There were 23 schools included in the dataset, with a mean of 33 students surveyed per school.

Table 1. Sample characteristics: student-level variables.

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<th>Generation Citizen student participants</th>
<th>Generation Citizen non-participants</th>
<th>Total participants</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sample size</td>
<td>n=269</td>
<td>n=520</td>
<td>n=789</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absenteeism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero unexcused absences</td>
<td>61.3%</td>
<td>57.2%</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One to five unexcused absences</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
<td>33.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than five absences</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>One or more unexcused</strong></td>
<td><strong>38.7%</strong></td>
<td><strong>42.9%</strong></td>
<td><strong>41.4%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>70.6%</td>
<td>65.1%</td>
<td>67.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low participation (once a month or less)</strong></td>
<td><strong>13.0%</strong></td>
<td><strong>13.0%</strong></td>
<td><strong>13.0%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Individual-level self-reported demographic and academic variables**

|                |                                        |                                     |                    |
| Gender         |                                        |                                     |                    |
| Female         | 49.8%                                   | 51.7%                                | 50.7%              |
Table 2. Sample characteristics: school-level variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Generation Citizen student participants</th>
<th>Generation Citizen non-participants</th>
<th>Total Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/Hispanic</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial and/or Other</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taking Advanced Placement or Honors classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational aspirations</th>
<th>Generation Citizen student participants</th>
<th>Generation Citizen non-participants</th>
<th>Total Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in at least one</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>52.1%</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aspires to graduate from college or more

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Generation Citizen student participants</th>
<th>Generation Citizen non-participants</th>
<th>Total Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>23.2%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/Hispanic</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial and/or Other</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>18.4%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although there is no reason to expect differences between participants and non-participants given the study’s quasi-experimental design, due to finite sample size,
differences can exist. I observed differences across race/ethnicity, school-level demographic characteristics and academic variables (Table 1 and 2).

One clear example of these unanticipated differences is enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors classes. Overall, 37.7% of the sample is enrolled in AP and Honors courses but only 9.3% of Generation Citizen participants reported enrollment in such courses, versus 52.1% of Generation Citizen non-participants.

This was also exhibited in responses regarding anticipated academic achievement—90.3% of participants versus 96.0% of non-participants reported an aspiration to complete college or more, respectively.

A similar discrepancy presented itself in the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) data. According to merged AYP data from the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 school years, 25.6% of Generation Citizen schools failed to meet AYP standards whereas 71.7% of non-Generation Citizen schools failed to meet AYP standards. Overall, 56.2% of classes failed to meet AYP standards. Similarly, there was a marked difference between GC and non-GC schools when it came to meeting partial AYP standards. Over a third, 39.4% of GC schools met AYP standards in either Math or English Language Arts whereas only 8.3% of non-GC schools met AYP standards in either Math or English Language Arts. Overall, 18.8% of classes met partial AYP standards.

In the above three contexts, these descriptive differences could bias any findings towards the null, since it appears that Generation Citizen participants are less academically inclined than members of the control group. As with any quasi-experimental design, the study is subject to some concern regarding internal validity. I argue, however, that because the majority of the observable and unobservable
characteristics are evenly distributed between the treatment and control groups, the above discrepancies are a result of chance.

My first outcome variable, absenteeism, was fairly uniform among Generation Citizen participants and non-participants. Participants reported one or more unexcused absences at a rate of 38.7% whereas non-participants reported at a rate of 42.9%, and Generation Citizen participants exhibit lower levels of absenteeism with 61.3% reporting zero unexcused absences versus 57.2% of non-participants reporting no unexcused absences.

My second outcome variable, classroom participation, was likewise uniform among Generation Citizen participants and non-participants. Participants reported low participation (participating in class once a month or less) at a rate of 13.0%. The non-participant rate of low participation was nearly equal to that of participants at 13.1%. As with absenteeism, participants exhibited higher levels of classroom participation at the descriptive level than non-participants. 70.6% of participants reported participating often (once or more per class) while 65.1% of non-participants reported participating often.

*Classroom Participation*

In my first regression model, I explored the relationship between student classroom participation and participation in Generation Citizen (Table 2).

I was able to reject the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant association at the p=0.05 level between student classroom participation and participation in Generation Citizen. However, the point estimate was negative (participation in Generation Citizen is associated with a 64.1% increase in the odds of low participation).
This finding contradicts my hypothesis that participation in Generation Citizen is negatively associated with low participation.

**Table 3. Logistic regression: Classroom Participation.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>95% confidence interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation in GC</td>
<td>1.641*</td>
<td>1.039, 2.590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Covariates</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual-Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.582*</td>
<td>1.086, 2.304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advancement</td>
<td>.506*</td>
<td>.320, .800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Attainment</td>
<td>.968</td>
<td>.443, 2.183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>2.091*</td>
<td>1.248, 3.501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>.421*</td>
<td>.246, .722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School-Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AYP</td>
<td>.589*</td>
<td>.419, .827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth of Color</td>
<td>.098*</td>
<td>.030, .319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>2.406</td>
<td>1.079, 5.362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.361</td>
<td>.129, 1.005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05

**Association between Covariates and Classroom Participation**

Several of the covariates exhibited a significant relationship to classroom participation. At the individual level, the first of these significant relationships was gender. There was a significant relationship between female respondents and classroom participation. I found that female students increased the odds of low participation by 58.2%. The second significant relationship was academic advancement. There was a significant relationship between respondents who reported enrollment in AP/advanced courses and classroom participation. I found that AP/advanced courses decreased the odds of low participation by 49.4%. The third significant relationship was non-white students. I found a significant relationship between non-white students and classroom participation. Specifically, non-white students increased the odds of low participation by 109.1%. The forth, and final, significant relationship was middle school. There was a
significant relationship between middle school respondents and classroom participation. I found that being in middle school was associated with a 37.7% decreased odds of low participation. At the school level, I found a significant relationship between AYP reports and low participation. Schools that met both AYP assessment standards decreased the odds of low student participation by 41.1%. I also found a significant relationship between youth of color and low participation. Youth of color increased the odds of low participation by 81.4%.

Absenteeism

In my second regression model, I explored the relationship between absenteeism and participation in Generation Citizen (Table 3). I predicted that participation in Generation Citizen would be associated with reduced absenteeism. I measured this variable by assessing the number of unexcused absences student participants reported.

I did not observe a significant relationship between students with no unexcused absences and participation in Generation Citizen, and the point estimate suggested that participation in Generation Citizen was associated with a decreased odds of a student recording no unexcused absences by 6.3% (not-significant at the p=0.05 level).
Table 4. Logistic regression: Absenteeism (No unexcused absences)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>95% confidence interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation in Generation Citizen</td>
<td>.937</td>
<td>.576, 1.524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Covariates</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual-Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.231</td>
<td>.958, 1.580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advancement</td>
<td>1.868*</td>
<td>1.169, 2.985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Attainment</td>
<td>2.046</td>
<td>.781, 5.360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>.877</td>
<td>.478, 1.611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>1.932*</td>
<td>1.074, 3.476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School-Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AYP</td>
<td>.558*</td>
<td>.327, .952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth of Color</td>
<td>.092*</td>
<td>.018, .473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>4.627</td>
<td>.521, 41.128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.243</td>
<td>.393, 33.927</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05

Association between Covariates and Student Absenteeism

Several of the covariates exhibited a significant relationship. At the individual level, the first of these relationships was AP/advanced courses. There was a significant relationship between anticipated academic attainment and students who reported no unexcused absences. I found that anticipated academic attainment increased the odds of a student reporting no unexcused absences by 86.8%. The second significant relationship was middle school students. There was a significant relationship between middle school respondents and students who reported no unexcused absences. I found that middle school respondents increased the odds of no unexcused absences by 93.2%. At the school level, I found two significant relationships. The first significant relationship was meeting AYP. I found that schools that met both AYP standards decreased the odds of a respondent recording no unexcused absences by 44.2%. I also found a significant relationship between youth of color and no unexcused absences. Youth of color decreased the odds of no unexcused absences by 90.8%.
Qualitative Results

My qualitative analysis revealed that student participants are indeed learning specific skills through participation in the Generation Citizen program (Table 4).

**Table 5. Qualitative Categorical Analysis: Two Things Learned Through Participation in Generation Citizen (Fall 2010 and Fall 2011)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Two Things Learned</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents in Each Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Categories</strong></td>
<td>Fall 2010 (n=130)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Project Issue Knowledge</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Community Knowledge</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Can Make a Difference</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility to Fix Issues</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civics Action Methods</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political/Government Knowledge</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Advocacy</td>
<td>13.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students from fall 2011 reported learning skills in a wide range of categories. Over one fifth (22.1%) of students reported gaining local community knowledge through participation in the program. Another group of students (14.3%) gained political and government knowledge. Additionally, over one quarter of students (27.3%) gained knowledge specific to the issue on which they took action in their communities. Others reported learning civic action methods (13.9%) and effective advocacy tools (9.5%), respectively.

Students from fall 2010 reported similar trends. One tenth of students (11.5%) indicated an increase in political awareness and government knowledge. Another tenth of students (13.1%) expressed that the Generation Citizen program allowed them to develop and hone their effective advocacy skills. Another portion of students (8.5%)
indicated an increase in civic action methods and knowledge. Finally, 6.9% of students expressed a greater appreciation for group work and the power of collective action.
Discussion

My multi-level regression analysis of survey data, using a systematic random sample within a quasi-experimental design, finds no evidence of an association between participation in Generation Citizen and academic achievement, as measured by absenteeism. However, my multi-level regression does find a significant (negative) association between participation in Generation Citizen and classroom participation. These results remained constant when I accounted for other student demographic, academic, and school-level factors.

Theoretical Context of Study

My findings fit with the current civic engagement literature. Although there is substantial literature to suggest a link between increased educational attainment and an increase in a variety of forms of civic engagement (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Nie Junn & Stehlik-Barry, 1996), there is little literature to suggest the reverse. Many of the previous studies on the relationship between civic engagement programs and academic achievement have focused specifically on the acquisition of political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) and political awareness (Zaller, 1992).

My findings suggest that civic engagement programs may be more effective at promoting civic engagement and civic knowledge than direct academic outcomes. Although student participants in the Generation Citizen program are not exhibiting immediate academic improvements, they are exhibiting significant increases in future tendencies towards civic engagement (Cohen et al., under review). In some respects that finding is encouraging.
Analytic Limitations

There are several limitations to this analysis. One key shortfall is that student-reported absenteeism and student participation may not be the soundest measures of academic achievement. It is true that high attendance rates (DeKalb, 1999; Gottfried, 2009; Robins & Ratcliff, 1978) and active participation (Finn, 1989) are both indicators of high achievement. However, the true effect of these outcome variables is best measured in longitudinal studies and reveals the long-term influence of an in explanatory variable (Platt, 2012). For example, tracking high school graduation could be a more useful summary measure when assessing potential impact on academic engagement.

I also acknowledge that it may be unreasonable to expect such an impact of such a relatively short program. Generation Citizen’s ten-week program has a limited scope of influence. Intensive, action-based, mentoring programs are highly effective at improving academic outcomes for students (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Torney-Purta, 2002). The Generation Citizen program certainly combines some features of each of those elements, but it lacks the sustainability critical to improving student academic prospects (DuBois, Halloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Smink & Reimer, 2005).

One final shortfall of the study is that the absence and participation rates are self-reported by the student. It is important to note that this adds a deal of uncertainty to the data. Although both measures are imperfect and potentially susceptible to social desirability bias, it is possible that there are more primary shortfalls of my analysis (Grimm, 2010).
Implications of Qualitative Analysis

Although overall my quantitative analysis did not support my proposed hypothesis, my qualitative results provide an interesting analytic perspective. The data reveal that students are learning new skills and knowledge specific to their participation in Generation Citizen. My qualitative analysis provides reassurance of the validity of the program. It is not directly affecting classroom participation rates or attendance rates, but students are coming away with new skill and knowledge sets.

The qualitative data provides support for the claim that Generation Citizen—and other civic engagement programs—may be more effective at promoting civic engagement and civic knowledge than direct academic outcomes.

Organization Level Challenges

A central aim of the Generation Citizen program is to engage young people in the political process. The program envisions a democracy in which every citizen is an active participant. Increased academic engagement is potentially a welcome benefit of the program, but ultimately, Generation Citizen serves a larger purpose. The organization purposely selects classrooms in the most under-served and under-represented communities. One major impediment to program assessment of academic outcomes is that academic disparities and low achievement are already endemic to Generation Citizen schools.

Generation Citizen appears to “level” the democratic playing field and equips all individuals—even those less academically inclined—with the tools to engage in the political process (Cohen et al., under review). Kahne (2009), Levinson (2012), and Sporte (2008) suggest that these tools are critical additions to the advancement of civics
education in the United States. However, my evidence suggests that Generation Citizen must adopt programmatic changes to have positive academic spillover effects.

Currently, the primary challenge of a study like this is that Generation Citizen is a relatively young organization. The organization has just completed its third full year of program implementation. Each year of implementation has brought great expansion and program alteration. Although these alterations have lead to significant program improvement, they have made institutionalization and standardization of program implementation difficult.

As Phillips (2012) suggests, timing of evaluation is dependent on the program in question. The timing of optimal evaluation varies with the time needed for program implementation, data collection, and application of acquired skills. For evaluations gauging changes in performance over time, measurements must be taken after sufficient time has passed for trends to appear (Phillips, 2012). It is possible that there is simply not enough data to make conclusive claims about the academic benefits of the Generation Citizen program.

**Implications for Future Research**

The limitations of my analysis—and the inconclusiveness of my study—provide clear implications for future research.

In order to get a more accurate read of the effect of participation in Generation Citizen on student academic outcomes, it is necessary to conduct some manner of longitudinal study. Such a study would require several key components: long-range data collection on student participants, institutionalization of the Generation Citizen program within a school or district, and standardization of program implementation.
Generation Citizen involvement in the Boston suburb of Malden, Massachusetts provides ground for a combination of those three elements. The program has been running district-wide in Malden middle and high schools for two years now. It could be possible to expand on the findings of this study by conducting a time series study of Generation Citizen involvement in Malden schools. The key with a Malden study would be to consider both Generation Citizen survey specific questions and district wide academic achievement data.

As the organization expands and fosters long-term school partnerships it will become more feasible to implement longitudinal studies at all program sites. Assessment of district-wide Generation Citizen programming, like Malden, will provide accurate case studies for the overall implementation of the Generation Citizen program.

Another avenue for future research is to conduct a cross-analysis of Generation Citizen and other related civic engagement programs. The Generation Citizen organization is part of a wider coalition of groups united around expanding the practice of education reform through action civics. The National Action Civics Collaborative (NACC) coalition, like Generation Citizen, is relatively new. It was founded by six organizations in 2010, with the intent of examining and implementing reforms to help low income youth acquire the motivation, skills, knowledge and behaviors necessary for constructive civic and political participation. These organizations include: CIRCLE (The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement), Earth Force, Mikva Challenge, The University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia (UCCP), and Youth on Board. With a larger pool of data from across the six NACC organizations it
might be possible to more precisely gauge the academic effects of action civics and civic engagement programs.

In order to conduct an effective analysis it would be necessary to generate a standardized survey across all participating organizations. Such a survey would have to consider differences in programmatic implementation, as well as demographic and geographic differences across each program. If designed and distributed in a precise manner, the data could be used to conduct a meta-analysis of the six NACC programs. An analysis of that nature would both provide a context for this initial study and allow for a more complex analysis of the relationship between action civics and education.

**Political Feasibility**

Ultimately, the success or failure of Generation Citizen and other action civics reforms relies on developing and maintaining political viability. As with any educational reform, action civics organizations and related programs will only be successful if they can earn a stamp of political feasibility. The most secure way to establish this support is by providing statistical context for the educational benefits of civic engagement programs.

Both of the above proposals for additional research would greatly improve the political feasibility of implementing civic engagement programs as education reform. Although the benefits civic education programs have received notice among those in the field of education policy, such programs still lack the political clout to become widespread reforms.

A district-wide analysis of Generation Citizen, like the Malden case presents, would provide a solid case study for the institutionalization of an action-civics project
curriculum. It would provide local, state, and federal lawmakers with the analytic leverage to consider systematic civics reform in the United States.

A meta-analysis of the educational effectiveness of NACC organizations would provide similar context, on a broader scale. It would allow for a comparison of relevant action civics reform and establish groundwork for effective reform strategies.
Conclusion

At the outset of this paper I sought to examine one key question: does Generation Citizen have positive spillover effects on students’ academic engagement? Although my findings were not consistent with my hypothesis (i.e. there is not significant relationship between Generation Citizen and key academic outcomes) they were not entirely insignificant. As I see it, there are three major conclusions to draw from my study.

Firstly, the civic engagement gap and achievement gap are both at play in Generation Citizen schools. Although my findings did not reveal a significant relationship between participation in Generation Citizen and improved academic outcomes, both the civic engagement gap and the achievement gap play a prominent role in Generation Citizen schools.

Secondly, more data is needed to conduct accurate analysis of the effectiveness of the program. The markers present in Generation Citizen that identify successful academic enrichment programs (intensive mentoring and action-based learning) are best measured over multiple years of program implementation. The program’s short implementation period currently makes this level of analysis infeasible.

Finally, the Generation Citizen program is improving civic knowledge outcomes for its participants. The program was not designed with the strict aim of improving academic outcomes. It was established to engage young people in the democratic process and address the civic engagement gap. Although there are theoretical grounds for anticipating a link between civic engagement and academic success, it is possible that the two warrant separate consideration.
At the most basic level, Generation Citizen participants are unique from their non-participant peers. These students are given the opportunity to learn directly about government and civics, take action in their community, and become effective advocates and change-makers. Each participant interacts one-on-one with a near-peer college mentor and learns to work effectively with classmates. They are provided the tools to enhance their civic knowledge and become active civic participants.

Generation Citizen generates a perceptible change in student attitudes. Their attendance and participation rates may not immediately improve, but their perceptions do shift. To quote one student participant from fall 2010, “[Generation Citizen] has changed the way I look at community. I know I can [do more than] just volunteer. I can change something.” That sentiment is not uncommon among student participants. The Generation Citizen program reaffirms notions of efficacy and provides historically under-represented students a collective purpose.

The goal of future research will be to measure the long-range effects of sustained program participation. For now, suffice to say that each Generation Citizen student participant comes away from the program more educated, engaged, and empowered.
References:


Coleman, J. S. Equality of Educational Opportunity (COLEMAN) Study (EEOS), 1966. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research.


Appendix A: Amended Paper for Presentation at the 2013 American Educational Research Conference (AERA)

The Impact of An Action Civics Program on Student Academic Engagement Outcomes
Abby Ridley-Kerr(1) & Alison K. Cohen(2,3)
(1) Boston University, abbyrk@bu.com
(2) University of California Berkeley, akcohen@berkeley.edu
(3) Generation Citizen

Abstract: There has been relatively little research on the effectiveness of civic engagement programs at promoting student achievement. This thesis attempts to provide some context for the potential of civic engagement programs like Generation Citizen. It examines the link between student participation and attendance and student achievement for those students enrolled in the Generation Citizen program. It builds on previous academic studies around absenteeism and student participation to determine more conclusively the potential benefits of civic engagement programs on student academic achievement.

Keywords: action civics, academic achievement, civic engagement gap, civic skills, political participation
Introduction

Socioeconomic and racial disparities in educational opportunities and educational attainment exist (Gamoran, 2001; Hallinan, 2001; Sirin, 2005). Hallinan (2001) goes so far as to claim that the minority-majority gap in achievement remains the “defining mark” of racial inequality in the American public education system today. The discrepancies in access to education and disparities educational achievement across racial lines are a direct effect of the fragmented history of school desegregation and racial discrimination in the United States.

The civic engagement gap is just as prevalent as the achievement gap. Levinson (2007) cites strong evidence of a civic achievement gap between poor, minority, and immigrant youth and adults, on the one hand, and high earning or wealthy, white, and native-born youth and adults on the other. Poor, minority, immigrant youth and adults are less likely to engage because they are the first social groups to be overlooked by the political process (Wilson, 1987).

Others have suggested that the civic engagement gap may be affected by the quality of civic education different groups receive. Discrepancies in civic knowledge and skills and insufficient opportunities for civic participation are associated with the quality of civic education (Balsano, 2005; Hart, 1992; Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998) and contribute to low civic engagement among historically marginalized groups (Hart et al., 1998; Kahne and Sporte, 2008). Scholars have concluded that the best way to counter the civic engagement gap is through the implementation of action civics-type community-based, student-centered, and rigorous programs (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Torney-Purta, 2002; Pope, Stolte, & Cohen, 2011; Cohen, Waters, & Brown, 2012).

There is evidence to suggest that civic engagement provides youth with a critical outlet for positive social development (Balsano, 2005; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). This positive social development is associated with many of the indicators of high academic achievement—social development, personal development, and future occupational development. (Balsano, 2005; Yates & Youniss, 1996).

Less research has been done regarding the extent to which civic education that promotes civic engagement may affect academic engagement among under-resourced students. Davila and Mora (2007) found that students who were more civically engaged made greater scholastic progress and acquired more education, on average, than their peers. Students with the highest rates of community participation are also the students with the strongest academic achievement levels (Nolin, Chaney, Chapman, & Chandler, 1997).

We consider the potential impact of Generation Citizen, a school-based, action civics education program with peer-to-near peer mentoring, on academic engagement (Pope, Stolte, & Cohen, 2011). Previous research has demonstrated that Generation Citizen increases students’ civic engagement (Cohen, Pope, Stolte, Ridley-Kerr, & Wong, pending), so this study considers potential spillover effects into academics. High-quality mentor programs have been shown to improve youth academic achievement outcomes and school engagement (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). Students who reported strong engagement in a service-learning program also reported high levels of academic engagement (Billig, Root, and Jesse, 2005).

For the purposes of this paper, we operationalize and quantify student engagement in two ways: reported unexcused absences and class participation. Studies have shown
that students who attend class more regularly and participate more regularly in class tend to be more engaged in school (Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey, 1997; Finn, 1989; Wehlage et al., 1989; Voelkl, 1995).

**Methods**

The data analyzed in this study comes from a systematic random sample of Generation Citizen participants from the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 academic years (for more information, see Cohen, Pope, Stolte, Ridley-Kerr, & Wong, pending). The student participants (n = 789) surveyed represent a systematic random sample from twenty-three middle and high schools across Generation Citizen program sites in Boston, MA, Providence, RI, and New York City, NY. The control group (n = 520) was administered pre-surveys in the winter (i.e., January and February) immediately before their participation in the spring semester Generation Citizen program. The intervention group (n = 269) was administered post-surveys in the winter (i.e., December) immediately after their participation in the fall semester Generation Citizen program.

**Outcome variables**

We were interested in academic engagement as an outcome. We measured two facets of academic engagement: classroom participation and absenteeism. Student survey participants were asked to respond to two ordered categorical response questions regarding classroom participation and absenteeism.

We asked respondents to characterize the frequency of their classroom participation. Students were given the option to select from one of five categories: two or more times per class; once per class; a few times each week; a few times each month; or I don’t usually speak in class. We coded these five response categories into individual binary variables. We categorized students who classified themselves as infrequent classroom participants (a few times each month or I don’t usually speak in class) as those with “low participation.” As Table 1 reveals, survey respondents with low participation accounted for roughly 13% of the sample.

We also asked students to estimate the number of times in the last semester they were absent from school without an excuse. We categorized students with one or more unexcused absences as those who were “chronically absent.” This one or more unexcused absence break off was determined after examination of Department of Education definitions of absenteeism in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York, respectively (NCSL, 2006). Again, Table 1 reveals that approximately 40% of survey respondents were classified as “chronically absent.”

**Explanatory variable**

The explanatory variable of interest to this study was participation in Generation Citizen. We coded Generation Citizen as a binary variable, with a value of 1 for students who completed the post-survey after their participation in the Generation Citizen program in the fall and a value of 0 for students who completed the pre-survey before their participation the Generation Citizen program in the spring.

**Covariates**

In order to develop a more precise prediction of the effect of Generation Citizen participation on student academic engagement, we controlled for several other variables associated with academic achievement. We controlled for two self-reported demographic features—gender and race/ethnicity—that have been found to be associated with
academic outcomes (Hubbard, 2005; Sirin, 2005). We also controlled for three academic features: enrollment in academically advanced courses, self-reported aspired educational attainment, and level of schooling (middle or high school). We controlled for these three academic features because both AP participation (Sadler, Sonnert, Tai, and Klopfenstein, 2010; Slavin, 1990) and aspirations to attend college (Wang & Eccles, 2012) are associated with high academic achievement and engagement. Likewise, we controlled for level of schooling because studies have shown that academic attendance and class participation rates vary greatly from middle school to high school (Barber & Olsen, 2004; Marks, 2000). Finally, we controlled for three school-level variables that characterize the school’s overall academic and demographic characteristics: if the school met adequate yearly progress in English/Language Arts and Math; the % of students at the school who are non-white; and the % of students at the school who participate in free or reduced-price lunch. These data are publicly available online through district websites.

Given that we were conducting analysis on two separate waves of data, collected over a two-year period, we also included a dummy variable to control for any differences between students who participated in the 2010-2011 academic year and students who participated in the 2011-2012 academic year.

**Analytic approach**

In order to analyze the effect of Generation Citizen participation on academic outcomes, we conducted a logistic regression with robust standard errors to account for clustering of students at the school level. We tested the effect of Generation Citizen participation on both student participation and absenteeism while holding constant both individual level variables—gender, race/ethnicity, AP courses, education attainment, and grade level—and school level variables—Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) reports, percentage of non-white students, and percentage of free/reduced-price lunch eligible students.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Due to missing individual level data regarding race/ethnicity and gender and other school-level variables, the final dataset for the complete analysis is 789 student observations, or 80% of the original sample of 962 students. The descriptive statistics analyzed below use a complete case sample of n=789. There were 23 schools included in the dataset, with a mean of 33 students surveyed per school.
Table 1. Sample characteristics: student-level variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Generation Citizen student participants</th>
<th>Generation Citizen non-participants</th>
<th>Total participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sample size</td>
<td>n=269</td>
<td>n=520</td>
<td>n=789</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Outcome

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Absenteeism</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero unexcused absences</td>
<td>61.34%</td>
<td>57.17%</td>
<td>58.57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One to five unexcused absences</td>
<td>31.97%</td>
<td>33.77%</td>
<td>33.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than five absences</td>
<td>6.69%</td>
<td>9.06%</td>
<td>8.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>One or more unexcused</strong></td>
<td><strong>38.66%</strong></td>
<td><strong>42.88%</strong></td>
<td><strong>41.44%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                   |                                           |                                     |                    |
| **Participation**  |                                           |                                     |                    |
| Often             | 70.63%                                   | 65.09%                             | 66.96%             |
| Sometimes         | 23.77%                                   | 21.56%                             | 23.03%             |
| Never             | 7.81%                                    | 9.25%                              | 8.76%              |
| **Low participation (once a month or less)** | **13.01%**                         | **13.08%**                         | **13.05%**         |

### Individual-level Self-Reported Demographic and Academic Variables

<p>| | | | |</p>
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<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>49.81%</td>
<td>51.70%</td>
<td>50.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                  |                                           |                                     |                    |
| **Race/Ethnicity** |                                           |                                     |                    |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 20.07%                          | 18.87%                             | 19.27%             |
| Black/African American | 20.82%                            | 23.21%                             | 22.40%             |
| Latino/Hispanic   | 20.82%                                   | 20.57%                             | 20.65%             |
| Multiracial and/or Other | 16.89%                          | 18.36%                             | 17.90%             |
| White/Caucasian   | 21.56%                                   | 18.87%                             | 19.77%             |

|                  |                                           |                                     |                    |
| **Taking Advanced Placement or Honors classes** |                                   |                                     |                    |
| Enrolled in at least one | 9.29%                                  | 52.08%                             | 37.67%             |
Although there is no reason to expect differences between participants and non-participants given our study’s quasi-experimental design, due to finite sample size, differences can exist, and we observed differences across race/ethnicity, school-level demographic characteristics and academic variables (Table 1). One clear example of these unanticipated differences is enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors classes. Overall, 37.7% of the sample is enrolled in AP and Honors courses but only 9.3% of Generation Citizen participants reported enrollment in such courses, versus 52.1% of Generation Citizen non-participants. This was also exhibited in responses regarding anticipated academic achievement—90.3% of participants versus 96.0% of non-participants reported an aspiration to complete college or more, respectively. In both of these contexts, then, these differences could bias any findings towards the null, since it appears that Generation Citizen participants are less academically inclined than members of the control group.

Our first outcome variable, absenteeism, was fairly uniform among Generation Citizen participants and non-participants. Participants reported one or more unexcused absences at a rate of 38.7% whereas non-participants reported at a rate of 42.9%, and Generation Citizen participants exhibit lower levels of absenteeism with 61.3% reporting zero unexcused absences versus 57.2% of non-participants reporting no unexcused absences.

Our second outcome variable, classroom participation, was likewise uniform among Generation Citizen participants and non-participants. Participants reported low participation (participating in class once a month or less) at a rate of 13.0%. The non-participant rate of low participation was nearly equal to that of participants at 13.1%. As with absenteeism, participants exhibited higher levels of classroom participation at the descriptive level than non-participants. 70.6% of participants reported participating often (once or more per class) while 65.1% of non-participants reported participating often.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational aspirations</th>
<th>90.33%</th>
<th>96.04%</th>
<th>94.12%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School-level Demographic and Academic Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Annual yearly progress (AYP)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not meet AYP</td>
<td>25.65%</td>
<td>71.70%</td>
<td>56.20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Met AYP in either English or math</td>
<td>39.41%</td>
<td>8.30%</td>
<td>18.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Met AYP in both English and math</td>
<td>34.94%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
<td>25.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch: mean (SD)</td>
<td>59.60% (SD: 19.52%)</td>
<td>60.12% (SD: 14.73%)</td>
<td>59.95% (SD: 16.49%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of non-White students: mean (SD)</td>
<td>70.99% (SD: 19.30%)</td>
<td>76.19% (SD: 14.57%)</td>
<td>74.44% (SD: 16.49%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Classroom Participation

In our first regression model, we explored the relationship between student classroom participation and participation in Generation Citizen (Table 2). We were able to reject the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant association at the p=0.05 level between student classroom participation and participation in Generation Citizen. However, the point estimate is negative (participation in Generation Citizen is associated with a 64.1% increase in the odds of low participation). This finding contradicts our hypothesis that participation in Generation Citizen is negatively associated with low participation.

Table 2. Logistic regression: Classroom Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>95% confidence interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation in Generation Citizen</td>
<td>1.641*</td>
<td>1.039, 2.590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Covariates</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual-Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.582*</td>
<td>1.086, 2.304</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advancement</td>
<td>.506*</td>
<td>.320, .800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Attainment</td>
<td>.968</td>
<td>.443, 2.183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-White</td>
<td>2.091*</td>
<td>1.248, 3.501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>.421*</td>
<td>.246, .722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>School-Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AYP</td>
<td>.589*</td>
<td>.419, .827</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth of Color</td>
<td>.098*</td>
<td>.030, .319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>2.406</td>
<td>1.079, 5.362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.361</td>
<td>.129, 1.005</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<0.05

Absenteeism

In our second regression model, we explored the relationship between absenteeism and participation in Generation Citizen (Table 3). We predicted that participation in Generation Citizen would be associated with reduced absenteeism. We measured this variable by assessing the number of unexcused absences student participants reported. We did not observe a significant relationship between students with no unexcused absences and participation in Generation Citizen, and the point estimate suggested that participation in Generation Citizen was associated with a decreased odds of a student recording no unexcused absences by 6.3 % (non-significant).

Table 3. Logistic regression: Absenteeism (No unexcused absences)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>95% confidence interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation in Generation Citizen</td>
<td>.937</td>
<td>.576, 1.524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Covariates</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual-Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Female & 1.231 & .958, 1.580 \\
Academic Advancement & 1.868* & 1.169, 2.985 \\
Educational Attainment & 2.046 & .781, 5.360 \\
Non-White & .877 & .478, 1.611 \\
Middle School & 1.932* & 1.074, 3.476 \\
**School-Level** \\
AYP & .558* & .327, .952 \\
Youth of Color & .092* & .018, .473 \\
Free Reduced Lunch & 4.627 & .521, 41.128 \\
Constant & 1.243 & .393, 33.927 \\

*p<0.05

**Discussion**

Our multi-level regression analysis of survey data, using a systematic random sample within a quasi-experimental design, finds no evidence of an association between participation in Generation Citizen and academic achievement, as measured by absenteeism and student classroom participation. These results did not change when we accounted for other student demographic, academic, and school-level factors.

Our findings fit with the current civic engagement literature. Although there is substantial literature to suggest a link between increased educational attainment and an increase in a variety of forms of civic engagement (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Nie Junn & Stehlik-Barry, 1996), there is little literature to suggest the reverse. Many of the previous studies on the relationship between civic engagement programs and academic achievement have focused specifically on the acquisition of political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) and political awareness (Zaller, 1992). Similarly, although student participants in the Generation Citizen program do not appear to be exhibiting immediate academic improvements, they are exhibiting significant increases in civic knowledge and future tendencies towards civic engagement (Cohen et al., under review).

There are several limitations to this analysis. One key shortfall is that student-reported absenteeism and student participation may not be the soundest measures of academic achievement, and may be subject to social desirability bias (Grimm, 2010). It is true that high attendance rates (DeKalb, 1999; Gottfried, 2009; Robins & Ratcliff, 1978) and active participation (Finn, 1989) are both indicators of high achievement. However, the true effect of these outcome variables is best measured in longitudinal studies. For example, tracking high school graduation could be a more useful summary measure when assessing potential impact on academic engagement.

We also acknowledge that it may be unreasonable to expect such an impact of such a relatively short program. Generation Citizen’s ten-week program has a limited scope of influence. Intensive, action-based, mentoring programs are highly effective at improving academic outcomes for students (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Torney-Purta, 2002). The Generation Citizen program certainly combines some features of each of those elements, but it lacks the sustainability critical to improving student academic prospects (DuBois, Halloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Smink & Reimer, 2005).

Generation Citizen appears to “level” the democratic playing field and equips all individuals—even those less academically inclined—with the tools to engage in the political process (Cohen et al., under review). Kahne (2009), Levinson (2012), and
Sporte (2008) suggest that these tools are critical additions to the advancement of civics education in the United States. However, our evidence suggests that if Generation Citizen must adopt programmatic changes to have positive academic spillover effects. Currently, the primary challenge to a study like ours is that Generation Citizen is a relatively young organization. Each year of implementation has brought great expansion and program alteration. Thus, we recommend revisiting this topic in future years. Given that a new curriculum has recently been institutionalized, it is possible that in future years, Generation Citizen will affect student engagement.

Phillips (2012) suggests that timing of evaluation is dependent on the program in question. The timing of optimal evaluation varies with the time needed for program implementation, data collection, and application of acquired skills. For evaluations gauging changes in performance over time, measurements must be taken after sufficient time has passed for trends to appear (Phillips, 2012).

The shortfalls of our analysis—and the inconclusiveness of our study—provide clear implications for future research. In order to get a more accurate read of the effect of participation in Generation Citizen on student academic outcomes, it is necessary to conduct some manner of longitudinal study. Such a study would require several key components: long-range data collection on student participants (including, ideally, district-reported absenteeism and teacher-reported participation, to avoid student-reports), institutionalization of the Generation Citizen program within a school or district, and standardization of program implementation.

References


Smink, J., & Reimer, M. S. 2005. Fifteen Effective Strategies for Improving Student


