

Cultivating Collaboration: Understanding Motivations and Overcoming Barriers in Civic Education Partnerships

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Abstract

This study examines the motivations, expectations, and barriers experienced by community stakeholders who participate in a civic education summer camp designed for middle school students. Using Self-Determination Theory and the Collaborative Advantage Framework, the research draws on qualitative data from interviews, reflections, and observations to understand why organizations and individuals engage with the program. Findings reveal that stakeholder participation is influenced by intrinsic motivations such as civic duty and youth empowerment, as well as extrinsic motivations like advancing organizational missions and increasing public visibility. Stakeholders also expressed expectations for meaningful engagement, cultural relevance, and clear communication, while identifying logistical challenges, power imbalances, and sustainability concerns as persistent barriers. The study contributes to the field of civic education by offering insight into how effective and equitable community partnerships can be fostered, highlighting the importance of aligning stakeholder values with program design to sustain collaborative impact.

Civic education is essential to fostering democratic participation and cultivating an informed, responsible citizenry. Programs aimed at engaging youth, especially middle and high school students, have been widely recognized as critical avenues for developing civic agency, responsibility, and political awareness (Jacoby, 2014). These initiatives emphasize the importance of equipping young individuals with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for active participation in their communities. However, the success of such programs is deeply intertwined with the partnerships they forge with community organizations (Fatherly et al., 2020). These collaborations serve as essential bridges between theoretical instruction and practical application, creating opportunities for meaningful engagement and advocacy (Davis et al., 2017; Busara, 2023).

Despite their potential, partnerships in civic education are often fraught with challenges. Generally, research shows that partnerships between institutions and communities across many fields are often hampered with challenges such as external disruptions, misaligned expectations, logistical constraints, and power imbalances (Annette, 2010; Bates, 2016; Stewart & Alrutz, 2012). Research indicates that successful collaborations in civic education require mutual trust, shared goals, and effective communication to thrive. For instance, Clarke and Winslade

(2019) documented a reciprocal school-university partnership that prioritized shared responsibility and mutual learning in teacher education. Also, Avila (2017) illustrates how the principles of community organizing—rooted in relationship-building, reciprocity, and critical reflection—can be adapted to civic engagement in higher education to foster democratic culture, institutional transformation, and more equitable partnerships between universities and communities.

We situate this study within this broader discourse, exploring a civic education program where stakeholders from the community played central roles in co-creating and delivering educational content. By examining these partnerships, this research seeks to uncover motivations, expectations, and challenges, offering insights into how such collaborations can become more authentic and impactful. Community engagement learning programs, such as the summer camp hosted annually since 2013 at a private university in southern United States (we will call the program “iEngage” for the purpose of this paper), exemplify the transformative potential of experiential civic education. As suggested by civic educators and action civics scholars, iEngage, which is a one-week-long summer camp designed for elementary and middle school students, focuses on enhancing civic competence and encouraging political engagement through inquiry-based

learning and participatory democracy (Colby et al., 2009; Giles & Eyler, 1994). Through programs like iEngage, participants engage with real-world problems in their communities, fostering critical thinking and collaborative problem-solving skills (Levinson, 2012; Ramaley, 2016; Thelma, 2024).

Existing scholarship shows the importance of community engagement learning in fostering civic identities and social responsibility. Civic innovative programs like iEngage have demonstrated the capacity to enhance students' understanding of civic processes, improve critical thinking, and instill a sense of agency to address societal challenges (Billig & Waterman, 2014, p. 8; Hart & Atkins, 2002; LeCompte et al., 2020). Beyond individual growth, these initiatives also address systemic educational challenges by bridging the gap between classroom learning and real-world applications. For example, they provide students, especially those from diverse backgrounds, with opportunities to view their communities as spaces of potential and empowerment, challenging deficit narratives that often portray these communities as places to escape (Blevins et al., 2021). This is particularly significant given the demographic disparities within the teaching workforce, which remains predominantly White and female (Sleeter, 2016). By incorporating culturally relevant approaches and emphasizing community collaboration, civic education programs create inclusive spaces that resonate with students' lived experiences, fostering leadership and a sense of belonging (Brummer, 2024). Community collaborations within citizenship education enrich the curriculum, offering students practical insights into civic life and empowering them to engage directly with societal issues (Brooks & Holford, 2009; Ramaley, 2016).

Moreover, while recent research highlights the positive outcomes of these programs for students, there remains limited understanding of the motivations and experiences of the individuals and organizations that support and sustain these initiatives in recent times. Much of the foundational research on motivational factors for community engagement was conducted decades ago, reflecting the sociopolitical and cultural realities of an earlier era. Factors such as alignment with organizational missions, personal values, and perceived community impact have traditionally been identified as key drivers (Astin & Sax, 1998). However, contemporary shifts, including heightened attention to social justice, increasing political polarization, and digital transformations

in civic activism necessitate a reexamination of these motivations. Barriers such as logistical challenges or mismatched expectations, previously identified in the literature (Stukas et al., 1999), may now intersect with new complexities, such as resource inequities, digital divides, and evolving community dynamics.

The study focuses on understanding the motivations of stakeholders involved in community engagement learning programs like iEngage. It builds on the premise that middle school students represent a critical demographic for civic education, as they are developmentally primed to grasp complex social and political concepts and engage in advanced moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984; Piaget, 1972). Programs targeting this age group rely on sustained partnerships with community organizations, which enrich the curriculum and enhance students' sense of agency and commitment to the common good. These partnerships ensure that civic education initiatives remain inclusive and culturally relevant, fostering environments where students can connect their lived experiences to broader societal issues.

By revisiting and reexamining the motivational factors underlying these partnerships, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature. It recognizes that America's sociopolitical landscape has shifted significantly since much of the foundational research in this area was conducted. Programs like iEngage have the potential to address systemic disparities in education, but their success hinges on understanding the motivations of those who design, support, and participate in them. Without updated insights, civic education risks being shaped by outdated assumptions, limiting its reach and impact. We seek to contribute actionable insights into the design and sustainability of civic education initiatives by analyzing the motivations and experiences of stakeholders. By exploring these dynamics, we aim to advance the goal of nurturing informed, active citizens while ensuring that civic education programs remain relevant, effective, and responsive to today's societal challenges. Therefore, these questions were asked:

1. *What diverse motivations drive resource speakers, volunteers, and organizations to participate in community engagement programs like iEngage?*
2. *How do the expectations and interests of participants, including resource speakers and community representatives, shape their decision to support programs like iEngage?*

3. *What barriers or challenges do volunteers and community representatives identify as causes for breakdown in community partnership endeavors towards citizenship advancement?*

Literature Review

Civic education initiatives, particularly those involving schools and broader societal efforts, thrive on the collaboration of community partners and stakeholders who bring diverse resources, perspectives, and expertise (Thomas et al., 2021). These partnerships form the backbone of impactful programs, enhancing both their reach and substance. Underlying these collaborations are motivations tied to shared values, capacity building, community empowerment, organizational benefits, and evolving societal priorities (Annette, 2010; Scheepers et al., 2023). The shifting dynamics of these motivations highlight the importance of reciprocal relationships and equitable frameworks to sustain long-term partnerships.

Community partners are often driven by shared values and a commitment to fostering informed, engaged, and responsible citizens. Many stakeholders view civic education as an essential tool for promoting equity and inclusion in democratic life, with schools acting as critical sites for nurturing future leaders (Levine, 2013 ; Valli et al., 2018). Recent research reflects a shift toward mutual learning and shared responsibility, enabling stakeholders to pursue common objectives while addressing the nuanced realities of modern communities (Clarke & Winslade, 2019). Capacity building is a central feature of these partnerships. Schools often rely on community partners for funding, real-world learning opportunities, and specialized expertise. In turn, external organizations gain access to new networks, enhanced credibility, and opportunities for influence (Bryson et al., 2006; Putnam, 2000). Programs like iEngage, which integrate inquiry-based learning with participatory democracy, show how partnerships foster environments where students engage meaningfully with societal issues while developing agency (Colby et al., 2009).

Community empowerment also motivates collaboration. Stakeholders view civic education as a means of equipping youth with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for democratic participation, which strengthens social cohesion and resilience (Dushkova & Ivlieva, 2024; Thelma, 2024). Recent scholarship highlights a “civic learning ecosystem” where schools, community organizations, and policymakers work collectively

to address systemic inequities in civic engagement (McLean, 2023; Rubin, 2024). These inclusive models amplify community voices and foster partnerships grounded in shared impact. From an organizational perspective, civic partnerships often align with strategic goals. For nonprofits, such collaborations may secure funding and enhance legitimacy. Corporations see such efforts as opportunities to fulfill social responsibility commitments and boost public image (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Busara, 2023). Local challenges, such as poverty and political polarization, frequently push stakeholders toward more community-rooted forms of civic education that connect lived experience with formal instruction.

Programs like iEngage extend students’ capacity to lead and think critically during a pivotal stage in their development. These initiatives are most impactful when grounded in culturally responsive and participatory frameworks that center marginalized communities as innovators and knowledge-holders. These efforts are most effective when they adopt culturally responsive and participatory approaches that position marginalized communities as sources of strength and innovation (Blevins et al., 2021).

These partnerships also face significant challenges. Logistical barriers, resource inequities, and power imbalances can create friction between schools and community organizations. Schools may prioritize policy goals, while community partners emphasize local impact, leading to tensions that undermine collaboration (Bates, 2016; Davis et al., 2017). Other issues include limited recognition, inconsistent outcome data, and inadequate tools for evaluating long-term effects (Gajda, 2004; Stukas et al., 1999). Addressing these disparities requires intentional trust-building, clear communication, and aligned expectations (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). Emerging strategies highlight the role of narrative and storytelling in building connection and trust within partnerships. By grounding civic education in lived experience, storytelling makes abstract principles relatable and allows emotional connection around shared goals (Hajisoteriou et al., 2022; Romero, 2013). This humanizing process is especially critical for inclusive, culturally relevant engagement (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006). In Nigeria, informal civic socialization through family structures and daily experience significantly influences youth values and participation (Okunloye, 2017). Programs that incorporate culturally embedded approaches are better positioned to sustain equitable, inclusive

partnerships.

This review has explored motivational factors that drive government and nonprofit stakeholders toward civic collaboration. These motivations are evolving in response to shifts in social awareness, technology, and post-COVID civic life. Technology has redefined how people interact and coordinate, while heightened awareness of racial and systemic inequalities has transformed institutional relationships. Although many organizations contribute to civic education, few explicitly identify this role as central. Understanding what drives their involvement—particularly in initiatives like iEngage—remains an important and underexplored area. As Janke et al. (2022) note, changing social conditions demand ongoing reevaluation of partnership structures and values.

Conceptual Framework

This study integrates two complementary frameworks—Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the Collaborative Advantage Framework (CAF)—to provide a comprehensive lens for understanding the motivations of community stakeholders participating in the iEngage summer camp program. The combination of these frameworks allows for an analysis that bridges individual psychological factors with organizational collaboration dynamics, offering a deeper understanding of what drives and sustains partnerships in civic education initiatives.

Self-Determination Theory, developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (1985), emphasizes the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering sustained engagement. It offers a valuable framework for understanding the psychological needs of individuals participating in civic education partnerships. Autonomy involves stakeholders experiencing a sense of agency in their roles; competence reflects their drive to feel effective and capable in their contributions; and relatedness captures the importance of building meaningful connections with both program participants and fellow collaborators. Applying SDT in this study allows for an examination of how these intrinsic and extrinsic motivations shape stakeholders' decisions to participate, their levels of commitment, and their overall satisfaction with the collaborative process.

This integrated approach is particularly relevant in today's civic landscape, where post-pandemic shifts in communication, the rise of digital activism, and renewed focus on social justice have introduced new layers of complexity into

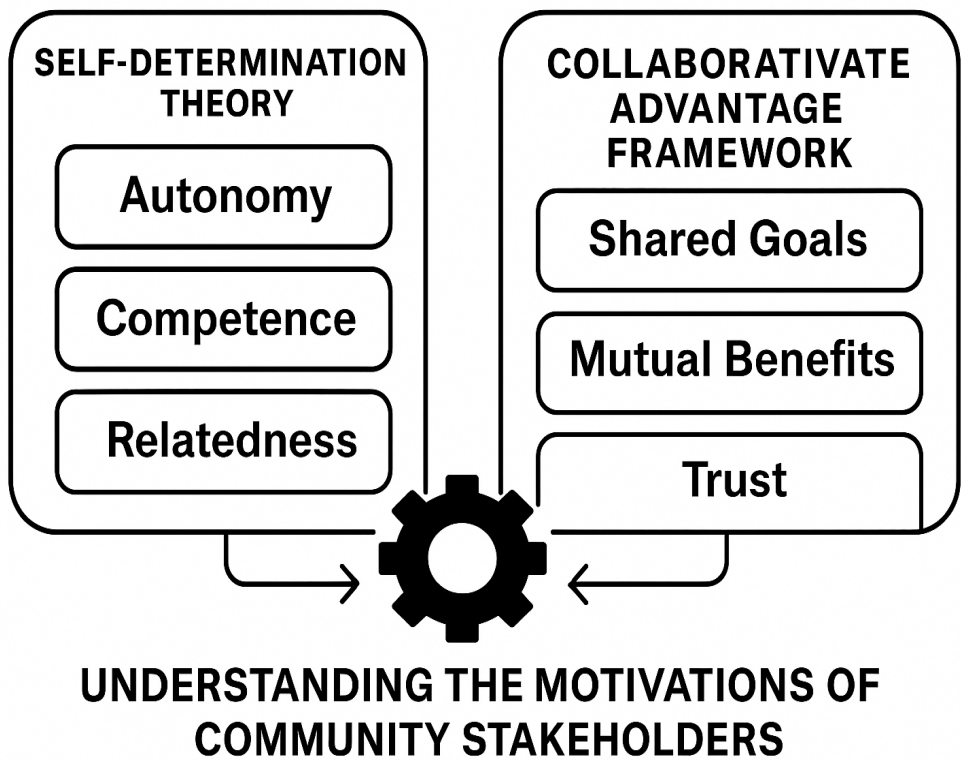
partnership work. To respond to these evolving dynamics, this study draws on two complementary frameworks—Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the Collaborative Advantage Framework (CAF)—to offer a multi-level analysis of civic collaboration. While SDT focuses on individual motivations such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, CAF provides a lens for understanding the organizational and systemic structures that shape collaboration. Developed by Chris Huxham and Siv Vangen (2005), CAF highlights how shared goals, mutual trust, and aligned missions can drive collective value, while also acknowledging the challenges posed by power imbalances, misaligned expectations, and logistical barriers.

By bringing these frameworks together, the study bridges a gap in the literature, which often isolates psychological from structural explanations. This dual-lens approach enables a more holistic analysis of how personal commitment, professional identity, and institutional conditions interact to support or undermine sustained civic engagement. It allows for insights not only into why individuals choose to engage in programs like iEngage, but also into how broader organizational ecosystems influence that engagement. In doing so, it offers practical guidance for designing and sustaining civic education partnerships that are both responsive to individual needs and attuned to systemic realities.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative single case study design to examine the motivations of community partners—both governmental and non-governmental organizations—who collaborated with the 2024 iEngage summer camp. A case study approach enabled an in-depth exploration of a defined group of stakeholders engaged in civic work within a shared geographic context. According to Yin (2017), such designs are particularly useful when investigating unique, real-life phenomena, making this approach well-suited for understanding recurring collaboration in civic education. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the study's civic-engagement focus. Recruitment involved direct invitations to returning partners, referrals from past participants, and outreach to local organizations known for youth-centered work. The final sample included representatives from 12 organizations engaged in diverse focus areas such as food insecurity, sustainability, housing, veterans' affairs, media, and children's advocacy.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of SDT and CAF



This provided a cross-section of nonprofit, government, and grassroots organizations serving the community.

The study followed three phases: pre-camp (open-ended questionnaires and preliminary reflections), during camp (community issues fair, classroom engagement, and observations), and post-camp (interviews and written reflections). The camp’s first day featured 18 resource persons from the 12 organizations who participated in a community issues fair. These individuals shared with students the nature of their work, the societal issues they address, and the challenges they encounter. These presentations served as an entry point for students’ civic learning and project development. The case study focused on the experiences and motivations of these resource persons, capturing their preparation, contributions, and reflections. Their shared public service roles and local engagement framed the study’s context-specific exploration of civic partnership dynamics.

Data collection included four qualitative sources: semi-structured interviews, observational field notes, participant reflections, and a pre-camp open-ended questionnaire. The interview protocol

asked questions like, “What motivated you to engage with the camp?” and “What expectations did you have going in?” Observations followed a semi-structured framework emphasizing tone, student engagement, and civic issue framing. Field notes were taken daily during the camp. The questionnaire provided early insight into participants’ civic values and motivations. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Initial open coding was conducted across all data types to identify recurring phrases and ideas. Codes were then organized into broader categories and refined through two iterative rounds of analysis. Themes were selected based on recurrence across sources and conceptual significance, especially in relation to SDT and CAF. For instance, the theme of “Shared Ownership” was conceptually important, though not mentioned by all participants.

Throughout the process, the research team conducted analytic memoing and engaged in peer discussions to validate coding and mitigate bias. Triangulating across interviews, reflections, observations, and questionnaires strengthened the study’s trustworthiness and provided a

multidimensional understanding of stakeholder motivations in civic education collaboration.

Researcher Positionality

As members of the instructional and research team for the iEngage program, we held dual roles as both facilitators and investigators. This close involvement in the camp's planning and daily activities provided us with valuable insider perspectives on stakeholder interactions but also presented the risk of bias. To mitigate this, we engaged in reflexive journaling, triangulated multiple data sources—including interviews, reflections, and observations—and collaborated with peer researchers to cross-check coding and interpretation.

Our backgrounds in civic education informed how we interpreted participant narratives, especially regarding themes of empowerment, equity, and collaboration. Acknowledging this positionality is essential to ensuring transparency and strengthening the trustworthiness of our findings. Our direct engagement with community partners during the camp shaped our understanding of their experiences, which were approached with sustained reflexivity and collaborative sensemaking.

Findings

The analysis employed a rigorous thematic coding process to examine motivations, expectations, and barriers among stakeholders involved in the iEngage civic education camp program. Primary data sources included pre and post camp interviews, reflective essays, and post-program evaluations from resource speakers. An inductive approach allowed for the emergence of themes directly grounded in participants lived experiences. Data triangulation was used to validate findings across sources, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of stakeholder dynamics. Codes were iteratively refined, with significant emphasis placed on capturing the nuanced interplay of motivations, expectations, and challenges.

Research Question 1: What diverse motivations drive resource speakers, volunteers, and organizations to participate in community engagement programs like iEngage?

Stakeholders expressed diverse motivations rooted in personal, professional, and institutional aspirations, with these motivations often deeply interconnected. Participants were driven by both intrinsic factors, such as personal values

and social impact, and extrinsic factors, such as organizational alignment and the opportunity to develop civic identities. These motivations collectively underscored the significance of the iEngage program as a meaningful platform for fostering civic engagement and education.

A strong commitment to fostering civic responsibility among youth emerged as a prominent motivator. Many stakeholders viewed their involvement as a way to inspire the next generation to become active, informed citizens. One participant poignantly stated, “I see civic education as a way to plant seeds for the future. If we can teach these kids to think critically and care about their communities, we’re shaping a better tomorrow.” This belief in the transformative power of civic education was shared across various participants, including volunteers who expressed a moral obligation to counter societal challenges like political disengagement and social apathy. For these individuals, participation in iEngage was not just an opportunity to educate, but a means to address systemic issues by empowering youth to envision and work toward positive change in their communities. These expressions of moral duty and civic responsibility align with the SDT component of *relatedness*, where stakeholders experience a sense of connection to the broader mission of youth empowerment. Feeling part of a meaningful cause increases their willingness to engage consistently and authentically with programs like iEngage.

In addition to personal values, professional and institutional alignment played a crucial role in motivating stakeholders. Organizational representatives often framed their involvement in iEngage as an extension of their broader missions. One community leader explained, “Our organization has always championed education that uplifts marginalized voices. Partnering with iEngage allowed us to directly contribute to that mission while reaching a younger demographic.” This perspective highlights how iEngage served as a conduit for organizations to connect with younger audiences and promote their causes. For many institutions, the program also provided an invaluable opportunity to gain visibility and establish themselves as leaders in civic advocacy. The alignment between the goals of iEngage and the missions of participating organizations created a mutually beneficial partnership, reinforcing the importance of shared values in fostering effective collaborations. From the perspective of CAF, these professional motivations reflect a strategic alignment where partnerships offer mutual

Table 1. Themes Identified from Data

Theme	Description
Empowering Youth Through Civic Education	Stakeholders’ intrinsic motivation to educate youth on civic responsibilities and societal change.
Professional and Organizational Growth	Opportunities for organizations to promote their missions and grow professionally through engagement.
Cultural Relevance and Inclusive Practices	The expectation of culturally responsive programming that aligns with students lived experiences.
Logistical and Operational Challenges	Barriers like time constraints, communication gaps, and sustainability concerns.
Shared Ownership and Value Alignment	The need for equitable partnerships and collaborative decision-making processes.

Note. Themes were developed through inductive thematic analysis of qualitative data from interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and participant reflections.

benefit—organizations fulfill their public mission while gaining visibility and reputational value. Such alignment strengthens long-term collaboration when both parties perceive added value.

The development of civic identity among students was another significant motivator for stakeholders. Several resource speakers emphasized the unique developmental stage of middle school students, viewing it as an ideal period for engaging in transformative education. One speaker remarked, “Middle schoolers are at a crucial developmental stage. They’re old enough to understand complex issues and young enough to remain idealistic. It’s inspiring to witness their curiosity and growth.” This perspective reflects the potential of programs like iEngage to shape students’ civic identities, providing them with the tools and confidence to navigate and address societal challenges. For resource speakers, working with middle schoolers was not only rewarding but also reaffirmed their commitment to fostering civic education as a catalyst for long-term societal impact.

These motivations—spanning personal values, professional alignment, and the opportunity to shape civic identities—illustrate the multifaceted appeal of the iEngage program for stakeholders. By providing a platform that aligns with their aspirations and values, the program not only strengthens community partnerships but also enhances its capacity to inspire meaningful civic engagement.

Research Question 2: How do the expectations and interests of participants, including resource speakers and community representatives, shape their decision to support programs like iEngage?

Expectations among stakeholders revealed nuanced perspectives on the roles and responsibilities inherent in civic education programs, reflecting their diverse motivations and the challenges of aligning organizational goals with program objectives. A recurring theme was the emphasis on authenticity and cultural relevance. Community representatives stressed the importance of creating programming that resonates with students lived experiences, arguing that abstract or generic instruction often fails to engage students meaningfully, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. One participant noted, “It’s not enough to teach abstract concepts. The program must connect to students’ lived experiences, showing them how civic engagement matters in their own communities.”

Representatives from organizations like a Children Advocacy Center emphasized the value of integrating local challenges and success stories into the curriculum. One explained, “When we discuss topics like housing insecurity or social justice, we try to show how these issues play out right here in the city. That’s what gets students thinking about their role in addressing these challenges.” This perspective aligns with a broader push for equity-focused approaches in civic education that highlight the relevance of civic responsibilities to students’ immediate social contexts. The desire to see youth thrive in culturally grounded programs reflects both SDT’s emphasis on autonomy—students and stakeholders alike having voice in the learning process—and CAF’s focus on trust and reciprocity as mechanisms for deepening collaboration.

Another critical expectation was the demand for interactive engagement. Resource speakers and volunteers underscored the importance of hands-

on activities, which were seen as essential for fostering critical thinking and maintaining high levels of participation. One speaker reflected, “The lectures were great, but what really stood out were the debates and group projects. Those moments of exchange were where the real learning happened.” An organization that works on city visioning incorporated simulations to make their sessions more dynamic. For example, a representative described a mock urban planning project that allowed students to envision the impact of their decisions: “They loved it because it was tangible, and they could see how their decisions would shape the community.” Another partner representing the Veterans Program noted the value of youth-centered activities, saying, “We used storytelling exercises where students could share their perspectives. It wasn’t just us teaching them—they were teaching us, too.” These interactive formats were widely viewed as effective tools for engaging students and empowering them to think critically about their potential roles as change-makers.

Structured communication and clear alignment of goals emerged as another significant expectation. Stakeholders expressed that clarity around program objectives and logistical details was critical for their sustained involvement. As one volunteer noted, “We all want to make a difference, but there needs to be clarity about how our efforts fit into the larger picture. Without that, it’s easy to feel disconnected.”

Some stakeholders reported instances where unclear communication led to confusion about their roles and responsibilities. A participant from an organization working on poverty in the city recounted, “We were ready to contribute, but we needed more specifics on how our work aligned with the day-to-day activities of the camp. When things are unclear, it’s harder to be effective.” Similarly, pre-event coordination was highlighted as a recurring challenge. A representative from the Veterans Program suggested, “Providing clear schedules and expectations ahead of time would go a long way in helping us prepare better.” Such insights underscore the necessity of transparent communication and well-defined roles to optimize collaboration and ensure that participants feel valued and effective in their contributions.

Taken together, these expectations reflect stakeholders’ desire for civic education programs to be impactful, inclusive, and collaborative. Addressing these dimensions can enhance the alignment between program objectives and stakeholder needs, ultimately fostering an

environment where all participants feel equipped to contribute meaningfully to civic engagement initiatives.

Research Question 3: What barriers or challenges do volunteers and community representatives identify as causes for breakdown in community partnership endeavors towards citizenship advancement?

Despite the program’s successes, stakeholders identified several challenges that have impacted in the past and still impact the efficacy and sustainability of partnerships, reflecting the complexities of coordinating a multifaceted initiative like iEngage. Logistical constraints were among the most commonly cited issues, with time and resource limitations presenting significant barriers to effective collaboration. One organizational representative explained, “We wanted to do more, but the timeline was so tight. It felt like we were constantly playing catch-up.”

Community partners similarly noted that scheduling conflicts often hindered their ability to fully engage, suggesting that tighter coordination and advanced planning could alleviate these pressures. The demand for resources, including materials and personnel, further strained some organizations, highlighting the need for robust logistical support to sustain such partnerships.

Power imbalances and inequities in decision-making processes also emerged as critical challenges. Several participants expressed frustration over feeling sidelined in discussions, with one community partner remarking, “Sometimes it felt like we were just there to tick a box. Our input wasn’t always taken seriously.” This sentiment underlines the importance of fostering a more inclusive and equitable environment where all stakeholders’ contributions are valued and integrated into program planning and execution. Without addressing these power dynamics, the potential for genuine collaboration and mutual benefit is diminished, undermining the program’s overall effectiveness (Blouin & Perry, 2009).

Misaligned expectations added another layer of complexity to these partnerships, occasionally leading to friction between participants. Disparities in understanding program goals and individual roles created confusion and, at times, tension among stakeholders. As one resource speaker reflected, “There was a lot of passion, but not always a shared vision. That made collaboration harder than it needed to be.” This lack of alignment highlights the importance of clear and consistent communication, as well

as the need for a shared framework that aligns stakeholders' diverse objectives and perspectives under a unified mission. Cronley et al. (2015) similarly identified how unclear expectations and a lack of mutual understanding at the outset often erode the potential for effective partnerships in service-learning settings.

Sustainability challenges were another area of concern, particularly regarding the long-term viability of partnerships forged through the program. Participants noted that while the energy and engagement during the camp were high, maintaining that momentum beyond the event proved difficult. A resource speaker articulated this challenge, stating, "The energy is great during the camp, but what happens afterward? There needs to be a follow-up to keep the momentum going."

This aligns with findings from Tinkler et al. (2014), who noted that the sustainability of partnerships is closely tied to the extent that community partners are involved in co-designing and reflecting on the civic learning process. This feedback suggests the necessity of implementing mechanisms for ongoing engagement, such as follow-up activities, regular check-ins, and sustained collaboration opportunities, to ensure that partnerships remain active and impactful over time. Collectively, these challenges illustrate the complexities of sustaining effective and equitable partnerships in civic education, emphasizing the need for continuous evaluation and adaptation to address logistical, relational, and strategic barriers.

Discussion

Our findings reinforce and extend current literature on the diverse motivations that shape civic engagement partnerships (Annette, 2010; Stewart & Alrutz, 2012). In line with prior studies, participants described intrinsic motivations rooted in civic duty and a desire to serve, as well as extrinsic motivations related to organizational visibility and mission fulfillment. What makes our study distinctive is its focus on community partners engaging with a youth-centered civic education initiative, particularly at the middle school level in a southern U.S. city. Much of the existing research tends to emphasize higher education or adult-focused partnerships, leaving a gap in understanding how grassroots and public organizations support early adolescent civic development.

By exploring how participants viewed their involvement as both a personal calling and a strategic investment, we deepen our understanding

of how values and institutional missions intersect. This alignment demonstrates the importance of civic programs that speak to both personal convictions and professional objectives. The iEngage model offers a compelling example of how these two spheres can be integrated in ways that support long-term collaboration and mutual benefit. Participants consistently called for civic learning that is relevant, interactive, and culturally responsive. They emphasized the importance of connecting civic concepts to students' real-life experiences, especially for those from historically marginalized communities. By focusing on local issues and community narratives, stakeholders sought to make civic learning more meaningful and accessible. These priorities reflect a shared desire to support identity development and agency among youth, which aligns with the central tenets of both Self-Determination Theory and the Collaborative Advantage Framework.

The importance of interactive pedagogy also emerged clearly. Activities such as storytelling, debates, collaborative projects, and simulations were viewed as powerful tools for cultivating critical thinking and civic imagination. These strategies helped students see themselves as capable of making a difference while also offering partners an opportunity to connect more deeply with young people's perspectives. This reciprocal engagement strengthened the value of the experience for all involved.

At the same time, participants identified clear challenges. Many described difficulties related to communication, coordination, and role clarity. In some cases, vague expectations or limited preparation led to confusion and reduced engagement. Others spoke about structural barriers such as time constraints, limited resources, and insufficient staffing. These challenges sometimes made it difficult for organizations to maintain the level of involvement they desired. Several participants also noted instances where they felt excluded from key decision-making processes, raising concerns about power imbalances and limited voice. These dynamics hindered the development of shared ownership and limited the potential for truly equitable collaboration.

The concern about sustaining relationships beyond the camp was also prominent. While many partners expressed enthusiasm for continued engagement, they also pointed to the lack of clear follow-up mechanisms and pathways for long-term partnership. This signals the need for intentional strategies to maintain momentum and deepen

relationships after the immediate event ends. Addressing both logistical and relational barriers is essential for fostering partnerships that are not only impactful but also enduring.

Taken together, these findings illustrate the complex and dynamic nature of community engagement in civic education. By intentionally aligning stakeholder motivations with program goals and creating space for inclusive planning, initiatives like iEngage can strengthen both student learning and community relationships. The dual application of SDT and CAF offered a robust lens for understanding how personal values and institutional objectives shape participation. These frameworks also helped illuminate how civic learning environments can be structured to meet the needs of diverse stakeholders.

In our current sociopolitical climate, shaped by the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising civic polarization, and increased attention to systemic inequities, this study offers timely insights. It highlights how community organizations are navigating new constraints while remaining committed to youth engagement and civic renewal. The lessons drawn from this study provide practical guidance for designing more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable civic education programs. They also contribute to the ongoing conversation about the role of community partners in preparing the next generation of civic leaders.

Conclusion

Our study underscores the critical role of stakeholder motivations, expectations, and challenges in shaping the success and sustainability of community-engaged civic education programs like iEngage. Civic education initiatives are powerful vehicles for fostering informed, active, and responsible citizens. They also create vital opportunities for collaboration between schools, nonprofits, government agencies, and community members, bridging theoretical learning with real-world application (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002; Davis et al., 2017). The findings reinforce that such initiatives thrive when they align with both the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of diverse stakeholders—including resource persons, volunteers, and organizational representatives. Personal commitments to equity and community impact often intersect with institutional missions, creating shared purposes that strengthen collaboration and amplify the effectiveness of programming.

Expectations across partners emphasize

the need for culturally relevant, interactive, and inclusive civic education approaches. Programs like iEngage benefit from participatory methods that foster critical thinking and empower students to see themselves as civic actors and agents of change. At the same time, the study reveals notable barriers to partnership sustainability—such as logistical constraints, power imbalances, and misaligned goals—echoing persistent challenges in the literature (Annette, 2010; Bates, 2016; Stewart & Alrutz, 2012). These barriers highlight the need for intentional strategies that cultivate mutual trust, establish transparent communication, and clarify shared commitments early in the partnership.

The dual use of Self-Determination Theory and the Collaborative Advantage Framework offers a powerful lens for analyzing these dynamics. SDT helps explain how civic education can nurture individual agency, while CAF draws attention to systemic conditions—like trust, resource sharing, and goal alignment—that shape effective collaboration (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Vangen & Huxham, 2005). This integrated framework enables a deeper understanding of how personal and institutional motivations converge or diverge, shaping both short-term success and long-term sustainability in civic initiatives. Although this study is grounded in the iEngage program, its insights are broadly transferable. Strategies such as co-educator models, culturally responsive engagement, shared ownership, and asset-based narratives can inform civic learning efforts in schools, nonprofit programs, after-school initiatives, and local government partnerships. For decision-makers—including school administrators, municipal leaders, and youth program coordinators—this research suggests the importance of embedding these principles into policy and practice to build more equitable, youth-centered civic ecosystems.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the broader discourse on citizenship education by illuminating how community partnerships can be designed to cultivate student agency, honor local expertise, and respond to contemporary social realities. Civic education, when rooted in shared values and inclusive practices, can help dismantle systemic inequities while strengthening the civic fabric of communities. These lessons provide a foundation for reimagining community-based civic education in ways that are more just, more participatory, and more sustainable.

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Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university where the research was conducted, ensuring adherence to ethical standards for research involving human participants. All participants provided informed consent through secure digital forms prior to data collection. They were assured that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain confidential and anonymous. To protect participant privacy, all names and organizational identifiers were replaced with generic labels, and potentially identifying quotations were paraphrased or masked. Raw data were accessible only to the research team and were securely stored on password-protected systems. These procedures ensured that ethical principles of autonomy, confidentiality, and data protection were rigorously upheld throughout the study.

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