



EDITORIAL

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From Exhibit to Engagement: Civic Literacy Programming in Academic Libraries

Urgent skills for today's world

“In today’s climate of political polarization, declining trust in institutions, and widespread misinformation, civic literacy has become increasingly urgent and multidimensional, as many individuals lack the knowledge and skills to interpret and contextualize civic information in the face of voter suppression, biased media, news deserts, and other structural and social challenges.”

Civic literacy encompasses the knowledge, skills, and habits necessary for individuals to participate meaningfully in civic life (Roumell, 2020). In today’s climate of political polarization, declining trust in institutions, and widespread misinformation, civic literacy has become increasingly urgent and multidimensional, as many individuals lack the knowledge and skills to interpret and contextualize civic information in the face of voter suppression, biased media, news deserts, and other structural and social challenges (Kranich, 2024).

This evolving concept of civic literacy not only involves understanding how government works but also includes the ability to locate and critically evaluate civic- and policy-related information, engage in democratic dialogue, and actively participate in informed decision-making—capacities that mirror international frameworks for democratic engagement (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001).

Research indicates that students who engage in civic learning not only develop stronger critical thinking skills but are also more likely to succeed academically and cultivate long-term commitment to public problem-solving (Kanter & Schneider, 2013). Libraries, as trusted, nonpartisan institutions committed to information access, intellectual freedom, and inclusive learning, are uniquely positioned to support these aims (Kranich, 2012).

National and Local Contexts for Civic Learning

During the past two decades, civic literacy has gained renewed national attention with educators, policymakers, and civic organizations to reposition civic learning as a core outcome of U.S. education. Foundational reports such as *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future* (Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement [CLDE] National Task Force, 2012) and *Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy: A Road Map and Call to Action* (CLDE Knowledge Community, n.d.) call for equity-focused, participatory learning environments and outline federal action steps to embed civic learning across educational systems (Kanter & Schneider, 2013).

National associations have also outlined frameworks and initiatives to guide civic learning. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, 2009) promotes integrated global and civic learning through its Office of Global

Citizenship for Campus, Community and Careers (AAC&U, 2025) and offers the Civic Engagement VALUE Rubric to evaluate students' civic identity, issue analysis, and engagement. Campus Compact (2005), a nationwide higher education coalition, supports civic and community engagement through equity-driven campus-community partnerships.

Civic learning has been also elevated by national initiatives and institutional commitments, including those of NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. NASPA's Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE, n.d.) network promotes civic engagement as a core element of student success, and the Higher Learning Commission (2025) has incorporated civic engagement into its accreditation criteria as an institutional outcome. Additionally, the Institute for Citizens & Scholars (n.d.) launched the College Presidents for Civic Preparedness initiative, which mobilizes higher education leaders to champion free expression, democratic learning, and civic readiness on campuses.

Federal policy developments further highlight the civic role of libraries and cultural institutions. Executive Order No. 14019 (2021), Promoting Access to Voting, emphasizes expanding access to voting and combating misinformation, prompting the Institute of Museum and Library Services (n.d.) to develop civic engagement resources for libraries.

Locally, civic literacy efforts at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC, 2025) align with broader institutional priorities. The newly launched Boldly Illinois 2030 strategic plan reinforces a vision of education that is transformative, inclusive, and engaged with society's most pressing challenges, including civic preparedness and free inquiry. Meanwhile, the strategic vision of UIUC's University Library (2025) highlights its commitment to transformative learning and societal impact through information literacy, democratic engagement, and public scholarship.

Building on these national and institutional efforts, this article presents a case study of civic literacy programming embedded in the Government Information Services department at the University Library of UIUC. Initiatives include annual Constitution Day exhibits, interactive and creative tabling events, public programs on local government and advocacy, and workshops focused on dismantling misinformation and promoting voting rights. These programs are designed to meet students where they are—intellectually, emotionally, and socially—and to position civic literacy dually as a personal and collective endeavor, aligning with the AAC&U's (2009) framing of civic engagement as participation in activities of personal and public concern that enrich individual lives and benefit the broader community.

This case study highlights how civic literacy can be cultivated through inclusive, low-barrier programs that reflect the library's dual commitments to public engagement and information access. The following examples and reflections aim to support librarians interested in developing or strengthening civic literacy initiatives within their own contexts.

Building Foundations: Constitution Day Programming

Every year in the United States on September 17, Constitution Day offers a timely entry point for engaging students in foundational civic concepts, such as rights and responsibilities, functions and structure of government, and the role of civic participation in a democratic society. At the University Library, foundational programming centers on curated exhibits and interactive elements that invite students to engage directly with constitutional principles and their relevance to everyday life.

Each year, exhibit themes vary, ranging from explorations of specific amendments, such as the First, Fourteenth, or Nineteenth amendments, as well as a broader history of the U.S. Constitution, to offering comparative perspectives using international constitutions to demonstrate the global nature of constitutional governance. Given UIUC's large international student population, providing these perspectives helps foster more inclusive civic dialogue and encourages reflection on how constitutional principles vary across political systems and cultural contexts.

A hallmark of this programming is integration of interactive elements that encourage direct participation from library users. A widely viewed example featured a public prompt board displayed for several weeks in a heavily trafficked hallway of the library. The board invited passersby to share their thoughts: "Which constitutional amendment affects your daily life, and how?" Space was included for passersby to write and post their responses directly on the board, using markers and sticky notes provided nearby. Responses reflected a wide range of perspectives, with thoughtful reflections on free

speech, due process, voting rights, and equal protection. The ongoing and public nature of the board created a sense of shared civic inquiry and encouraged dialogue among participants, fostering a communicative culture in which individuals cocreate knowledge, reflect on their civic identities, and engage in collective meaning-



Figure 1. Students decorated pocket-size U.S. Constitutions at the Bedazzle Your Constitution event.

making that supports democratic learning and social change (Roumell, 2020).

More recently, Constitution Day programming focused on highlighting how constitutional principles intersect with students' everyday lives. A recent exhibit emphasized how the U.S. Constitution shapes fundamental rights on campus, including the right to protest, protection for personal data, freedom from discrimination, and access to the ballot. By drawing these connections, the exhibit reinforced civic literacy as a living, personal, and socially embedded practice.

Such activities demonstrate how libraries can scaffold civic learning through approachable and participatory experiences. By presenting the U.S. Constitution not only as a historical document but also as a living framework with contemporary relevance, programming reinforces civic literacy by helping students interpret constitutional principles in context, critically evaluate information for informed decision-making, understand their rights and responsibilities, and reflect on their civic identities. Constitution Day becomes an opportunity to build foundational civic habits through sustained, inclusive engagement.

Creative Engagement: Informal, Joyful Civic Learning

To expand beyond traditional exhibits and workshops, the Government Information Services department introduced creative, low-barrier programs inviting students to engage with civic ideas in playful and accessible ways. These efforts recognize that civic literacy does not always emerge from formal

instruction—it can also be nurtured through informal interactions that spark curiosity, dialogue, and personal reflection.

One of the most popular programs featured a hands-on craft activity designed to encourage student engagement with the U.S. Constitution in a symbolic and approachable format. Participants received pocket-size editions of the U.S. Constitution from the Federal Depository Library Program of the U.S. Government Publishing Office (U.S. House of Representatives, 2012). Students were invited to creatively decorate or “bedazzle” them with stickers, markers, and rhinestones. This event combined humor, self-expression, and informal learning to make the U.S. Constitution feel personal and relevant. It also served as a surprising platform for civic dialogue. During the activity, several students discussed their favorite amendments, opened their copies to highlight meaningful passages, and used decorations to express personal connections to specific rights or principles. Participation exceeded expectations, with all copies of the U.S. Constitution distributed within the first hour of the event. The event was featured by campus media and also shared organically on a large academic department’s social media account, which further amplified its reach. The program’s success illustrates the potential of joyful civic expression to create entry points into complex civic topics.

Another informal engagement activity involved a trivia-based event styled after the television game show *Jeopardy*, challenging participants to test their knowledge of U.S. government structures, processes, and civic topics at the federal and state levels. These questions were adapted from the Civics Flash Cards for the Naturalization Test created by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019), grounding the activity in official civic education materials. Each question featured a corresponding library resource highlighting the library’s role in promoting access to authoritative civic resources. Participants competed for government-themed prizes, such as Benjamin Franklin plushies, Illinois state-shaped keychains, U.S. landmarks- and symbols-themed coloring books, and more. The event also offered snacks and a relaxed, inclusive atmosphere that fostered curiosity, collaboration, and engagement with foundational civic concepts.

Together, the creative programs contributed to a broader strategy of normalizing civic inquiry in everyday library spaces. By centering activities on student agency, creativity, and informal learning, the events lowered barriers to participation and reinforced key civic literacy outcomes, such as recognizing the U.S. Constitution’s practical significance, recalling foundational civic knowledge, and building confidence in civic expression. Participatory, inclusive programming aligns with broader national goals that call for civic learning to be an integral part of higher education through integrative engagement (CLDE National Task Force, 2012).

Facilitating Deeper Conversations: Civic Literacy Workshops

In addition to interactive and creative programming, civic literacy efforts have also included programming that encourages more sustained reflection on democratic participation, rights, and access to information. The workshops and events have been designed to deepen understanding of complex civic issues, reinforcing the value of government information and the role of libraries in supporting informed citizenship.

The library organized two public workshops in collaboration with faculty and community partners, to address voting rights history and the role of misinformation in undermining democratic participation. One workshop focused on the history of voting rights in the United States, drawing connections between constitutional amendments, landmark legislation, and

contemporary challenges to voter access. The guest speaker was a law school adjunct instructor, whose expertise in constitutional law helped participants explore legal foundations and evolving interpretations of voting rights. Another session featured a guest speaker from the League of Women Voters, addressing the growing threat of misinformation and disinformation in civic discourse. These workshops not only presented historical context but also equipped attendees with strategies to identify biased or unreliable information in the lead-up to elections.

More recently, programming has expanded to focus on helping students navigate challenges that come with the digital environment. With input and resources shared by the digital humanities librarian, who has expertise in artificial intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies, a tabling event was organized to address the growing influence of generative AI in political

communication and the importance of critical digital citizenship. The event included handouts about spotting AI in media, library-curated resources about AI in political and civic discourse, and an interactive module for participants to test their knowledge of how AI tools may influence public debate (University Library, 2024a, 2024b). Participants were able to explore the module on provided laptops, examining how generative AI shapes public narratives, influences voter opinion, and distorts perceptions of truth.

As media environments increasingly shape political understandings and worldviews, tools like generative AI have become part of a broader landscape of influence—one that demands critical reflection and response (Roumell, 2020). By incorporating this emerging issue into civic literacy programming, the event highlighted the evolving nature of credible civic information. The use of hands-on, technology-enabled learning tools also reflected the library's commitment to meeting students at the intersection of information literacy, media literacy, and civic engagement. The programming helped participants critically reflect on media environments and foster skills needed to navigate new forms of political misinformation.

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Connecting Campus and Community: Local Government and Civic Participation

Civic literacy efforts have emphasized the importance of engaging with local government, connecting students to actionable forms of civic participation in their immediate communities. These programs aim to help students understand that civic engagement is not limited to national elections or constitutional issues, but also includes decisions made at the city and campus level that directly affect their daily lives. As *Advancing Civic Learning and Engagement in Democracy* notes, students and families should have “a seat at the table and help shape solutions to challenges at the local level” (U.S. Department of Education, 2012, p. 14), reinforcing the importance of civic participation in immediate, everyday contexts.

A notable event was a public panel on local government and advocacy, co-organized with the library's outreach specialist. The panel aimed to demystify local governance structures and highlight avenues for civic engagement at the municipal level. Speakers included a city council member, a representative from the city's planning commission, a member of the local League of Women Voters, and two student leaders: one affiliated with a

Registered Student Organization focused on public interest law, the other from a campus-based political engagement group. The discussion addressed how students and community members can influence local policy, advocate for change, and stay informed about municipal processes that directly impact their daily lives.

The library designed the event to be accessible and relevant to a student audience, incorporating question-and-answer opportunities and emphasizing real-world entry points into civic life. Panelists shared personal experiences, explained the practical workings of city government, and discussed ways to get involved, such as attending city meetings, submitting public comments, and working with advocacy organizations. By centering institutional voices and student perspectives, the program created a multidimensional conversation about civic responsibility at local levels.

In a separate initiative, the library collaborated with the League of Women Voters to host a voter registration drive during a local election year. The drive included in-person registration support, as well as distribution of informational flyers highlighting key election dates, categories of local offices and ballot issues, and resources to help students understand the significance of local elections, which often shape policy areas such as education, housing, transportation, and public safety—deeply relevant issues to students and campus life. The event served as a community service and an educational opportunity, reinforcing the message that civic engagement extends beyond national politics and into the everyday decisions made in one's immediate community.

Conclusion: Sustaining and Expanding Civic Literacy in Libraries

The civic literacy initiatives described in this article reflect a multifaceted approach to connecting library users with democratic principles, government information, and opportunities for meaningful civic participation. Through Constitution Day programming, creative outreach events, public workshops, and partnerships with campus and community stakeholders, the library supports a more engaged and informed campus community. Each program—whether a panel discussion on local government, an interactive AI literacy module, or a voter registration drive—reinforces the role of libraries as nonpartisan spaces uniquely positioned to promote civic education.

Several common strategies contribute to the impact of these efforts. Each program grounds civic learning in real-world applications of constitutional rights. Government information is integrated in accessible, creative formats. Students and other library users are invited to express their views and engage in critical dialogue. Events are intentionally aligned with institutional values around civic readiness, inclusion, and information literacy. Collectively, these efforts demonstrate how low-barrier, informal learning opportunities serve as effective entry points into deeper civic inquiry.

Looking ahead, expanding civic literacy programming involves addressing new challenges and evolving opportunities. Raising awareness of local elections, lesser-known races, and ballot measures continues to be a pressing need. Equally important is integrating AI and media literacy into digital civic education. Future directions may include developing issue-based toolkits, collaborating with faculty to embed civic learning into coursework, and creating assessment strategies to better understand the impact of programming. As democratic norms and information environments continue to shift, libraries have the responsibility—and opportunity—to help communities build knowledge and skills needed for informed, inclusive participation in public life.

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