

The Power of Moments in Civic Education: A Mock Congressional Hearing Simulation

Joseph Hampton Holland^{1*}, Melissa Bass¹, William Bittner², McKenzie Cox², Wilson Engeriser², Isaiah Goss², Denton Jenkins², Edward Wilson², Ella Grace Young²

¹Department of Public Policy Leadership, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, USA

²Department of Public Policy Leadership, Undergraduate Students and Mock Congressional Hearing Coaches, University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS, USA

Email: *jholland@olemiss.edu

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Abstract

This paper reports the design, implementation, and outcomes of a mock congressional hearing embedded within an introductory public policy course. Grounded in Chip and Dan Heath's *The Power of Moments* framework—Elevation, Pride, Insight, and Connection—the hearing was developed to foster civic engagement and collaborative learning among first-year undergraduate students. Through analysis of student reflections, instructor observations, and survey data, this case study demonstrates how intentionally crafted experiential learning can deepen civic education, promote democratic discourse, and cultivate meaningful academic experiences. These findings affirm the power of collaborative learning to deepen civic understanding and strengthen community.

Keywords

Experiential Learning, Civic Education, Mock Congressional Hearing, Active Learning Pedagogy, Public Policy Leadership

1. Introduction

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, educators faced the urgent challenge of reimagining civic engagement in virtual and hybrid classrooms. On March 21, 2020, the University of Mississippi stopped all face-to-face classes, requiring remote learning for the rest of the semester. The primary author used this period as an opportunity to reconsider course assignments and pedagogical strategies. The author turned to *The Power of Moments* by Chip and Dan Heath & Heath (2017), which argues that transformative experiences can be deliberately designed. Drawing on the book's core framework—Elevation, Pride, Insight, and Connection—

the primary author developed a mock congressional hearing as the culminating experience (*moment*) in a *Public Policy Leadership* 101 course. Once the university resumed face-to-face classes, the primary author incorporated this project into the curriculum. This project was not simply an exercise in civic education; it was a deliberate attempt to create a defining academic *moment* that would deepen student engagement, build a sense of community, and help students develop content knowledge of a policy issue.

In today's polarized political climate, civic discourse in Congress has eroded, giving way to partisan gridlock and performative debate. The inability of elected officials to engage in productive conversations undermines public trust in democratic institutions and contributes to falling civic engagement among young adults, even as education and youth volunteerism rise (Pagnotti & Russell, 2015; Bennion & Laughlin, 2018). A mock congressional hearing serves as a counterbalance to this trend by offering students a structured environment to practice meaningful civic engagement. Unlike the divisive rhetoric witnessed in real-world politics, the simulation encourages students to research policy issues deeply, listen to differing viewpoints, and engage in reasoned debate. It models deliberative democracy while equipping students with the civic skills and confidence to contribute to democratic processes (Hanson & Howe, 2011). By embedding the four key elements of powerful moments into the curriculum, the mock congressional hearing provided students with opportunities to rise above the routine of a lecture (Elevation), showcase their learning through structured argumentation and public speaking (Pride), experience critical breakthroughs in understanding public policy (Insight), and collaborate meaningfully with peers (Connection).

In this paper, the authors report on the design, implementation, and outcomes of this pedagogical approach, offering a case study in how intentionally crafted experiences can elevate foundational university courses and create enduring academic moments. The paper will first present a literature review on civic education and classroom simulations, followed by a description of the methodological approach. Next, the findings from the collected data will be described. The paper will conclude with a discussion of the findings and their implications for civic education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Civic Education

Civic engagement among young adults in the United States has fallen in recent decades (Galston, 2001). Knowledge of the institutions and characteristics of American democracy has declined as well, with only 32% of twelfth graders achieving a proficient civic knowledge score on the 2006 National Assessment of Education Progress (Pagnotti & Russell, 2015, p. 281). This decline is counterintuitive because education levels, a traditional predictor of civic engagement (Gainous & Martens, 2011), have increased (Galston, 2001; Bennion & Laughlin, 2018). This decline threatens to further marginalize underrepresented youth voices, endan-

gering the health and longevity of American democracy (Galston, 2001).

The literature has repeatedly shown that civic education increases students' knowledge of and engagement with civic life (Holle, 2022; Feitosa, 2020; Andolina & Conklin, 2018; Gainous & Martens, 2011; Blevins et al., 2016). In a review of 14 empirical studies on civic education published between 1968 and 2018, researchers found that civic education positively impacts civic knowledge, engagement, and efficacy, especially among disadvantaged students (Holle, 2022, p. 61). Andolina and Conklin (2018) found that civic education can also encourage parents to become civically engaged. The effects of civic education are marginal compared to those of home environment, family, and friends (Gainous & Martens, 2011; Bennion & Laughlin, 2018), but schools and universities remain an important means of teaching civic engagement because they are most easily influenced by public policy (Holle, 2022).

Scholars continue to disagree on best practices for civic education, although several broad trends are apparent. Existing literature suggests that active learning—defined as any method of instruction that engages students in the learning process, rather than simply giving them information to memorize—has the greatest positive impact on civic engagement (Gainous & Martens, 2011). One of the most common forms of active learning used in civic education is classroom discussion of current events and issues relevant to the lives of students. Andolina and Conklin (2018) found that engaging in quality political discussion made students more likely to value diverse perspectives and equipped them with valuable civic skills like public speaking. Gainous and Martens (2011) likewise found increased knowledge of and engagement with democratic systems among students exposed to open classroom discussion. Alscher et al. (2022), though, found no statistically significant correlation between classroom political discussion and students' willingness to participate in civic life.

Simulations and independent research projects are also widely considered best practice in civic education (Andolina & Conklin, 2018). These activities provide students with an initial problem and framework but require them to think critically and arrive at their own conclusions (Pagnotti & Russell, 2015). According to Hallgren and Österlind (2019), such activities give students a safe space to develop civic skills like researching an issue and sharing findings with others through a report or speech. Blevins et al. (2016) found that such activities moderately increase students' willingness to participate in civic life and have a positive impact on critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills. Another best practice in civic education identified by Bennion and Laughlin (2018) is focusing on the development of student leaders who can engage and mentor fellow students. This not only allows students to learn from peers, but also increases the mentors' faith in their own abilities as civic actors.

The literature demonstrates general agreement that engaging students in the learning process helps them engage in civic life, but disagreement persists about which techniques are most effective. This is in part because most studies address-

ing civic education have been case studies, reflecting the experiences of a single class, or statistical analyses limited to a single school or school district. Replication across subfields, teachers, and institutions is thus necessary to identify the most effective civic education techniques (Bennion & Laughlin, 2018, p. 306).

2.2. Classroom Simulations

Role-playing simulations offer a powerful tool to build students' self-confidence and communication skills. Research on role-play integrated multisensory learning (RIML) supports this, showing that students who engaged in these immersive activities made significant gains in both confidence and speaking skills (Sahlan, 2022). In a 2024 study, 91.1% of participants reported high satisfaction with their simulation-based education, underscoring how effective these methods are in engaging students and meeting their learning expectations (Jallad, 2024, p. 1). Put simply, when students are immersed in realistic, role-driven environments, their investment and sense of accomplishment increase.

Pautz (2011) found that incorporating a mock constitutional convention into introductory American government courses significantly enhanced student engagement. Students, many of whom initially approached the Constitution with disinterest, became more curious and reflective when tasked with drafting and debating their own constitutional amendments. Through structured group work and staged debates, students explored complex civic issues while developing research, argumentation, and peer evaluation skills. Student feedback indicates surprise at the depth of discussion and the quality of peer contributions, with several reporting that the experience shifted their perspectives on political issues and the role of the Constitution itself. Simulation proved to be a powerful pedagogical tool for transforming passive learners into active participants in democratic inquiry.

In addition, Zhao and You (2024) found that strong student-faculty partnerships significantly enhanced student engagement, fostered a greater sense of belonging, and increased overall satisfaction with the higher education experience. Their study demonstrates a strong positive correlation between student-faculty partnerships and students' sense of belonging, which mediated the relationship between faculty interaction and academic success. In the same vein, Farrell and Farrell (2008) demonstrated that cooperative learning fosters both social integration and academic engagement by presenting evidence of active peer-to-peer interaction and interpersonal development. In a second-year accounting course, 89% of students reported providing help to peers and 88% of students reported receiving help, indicating reciprocal academic support that underpins collaborative engagement with course material. Additionally, 90% appreciated the opportunity for social interaction, suggesting that cooperative structures promoted meaningful peer relationships. Further, 75% felt comfortable expressing alternative viewpoints, and 63% reported enjoying team collaboration, both key indicators of psychological safety and positive group dynamics essential to deeper academic engagement. Collectively, these findings support that cooperative learning

environments can create inclusive and engaging educational experiences.

Building on this foundation of literature, the Mock Congressional Hearing (MCH) is a compelling case study in active civic learning that combines the strengths of simulation, cooperative learning, and structured debate. Rooted in the pedagogical principles highlighted above, the MCH offers a model for civic education. By simulating the legislative process, the MCH provides students with a hands-on opportunity to research complex policy issues, articulate and defend policy positions, and engage in civil discourse with peers.

3. Methodology

The authors employ a case study approach to assess a mock congressional hearing as a pedagogical tool for civic education. A case study approach is well-suited for this research as it allows in-depth examination of a single instructional intervention within a real-world educational context (Yin, 2018). This case centers on three sections of *Introduction to Public Policy Leadership* (PPL 101) offered during the Fall 2024 semester. The primary author taught two sections of PPL 101, while the secondary author taught the third.

Additionally, in Fall 2024, a 1-credit course, taught by the primary author, was offered to seven prior MCH participants, who participated in the 2023 MCH. This course examined the role of congressional hearings in shaping public policy, exploring how testimony, political strategy, and committee deliberation influence legislative outcomes. These upperclassmen served as coaches for underclassmen participating in the Fall 2024 mock congressional hearing, facilitating small group discussions, offering feedback on testimonies, and mentoring students as they navigated group dynamics.

Guided by Chip and Dan Heath's *The Power of Moments* framework—Elevation, Pride, Insight, and Connection—the primary author developed the assignment to transform a lecture-based course into an active, experiential learning environment. Students were divided into groups and tasked with researching real-world policy issues, drafting testimony, and participating in a simulated congressional hearing conducted in front of 200 people invited to observe the hearing. Each student assumed a role (committee member, expert witness, or policy advisor), and the final simulation served as a public forum for students to present and defend their positions using structured argumentation, critical thinking, and collaboration.

Following the conclusion of the mock congressional hearing (MCH), a post-evaluation survey was administered to assess student perceptions. The survey consisted of both quantitative and qualitative items designed to capture participants' experiences and gather constructive feedback for future improvements. The sample analysis included 39 participants, representing students who participated in the MCH, with a response rate of 63.9% (39 out of 61).

The survey utilized a Likert-scale format to evaluate engagement, enjoyment, understanding of content, application of knowledge, quality of interaction, facili-

tator support, clarity of structure, overall satisfaction, and recommendation likelihood. Additional open-ended questions solicited feedback on what participants valued most, skills gained, and suggestions for improvement. Results are presented in **Table 3** and **Table 4** (see *Findings*).

4. Findings

Table 1 outlines the organization of the hearing, which was embedded in three separate sections of *Introduction to Public Policy Leadership (PPL 101)*.

Table 1. Stages of implementation.

<i>Class Structure & Enrollment</i>	The mock congressional hearing was implemented within three sections of the PPL 101 course. Section 1 included 20 students (n = 20), Section 2 included 22 students (n = 22), and Section 3 included 19 students (n = 19). Total (n = 61).
<i>Group Assignment</i>	Students were randomly assigned to groups using an Excel-based randomization process. Each class section was divided into two groups: Group A and Group B.
<i>Role Selection</i>	Within each group, students self-selected their roles as either members of Congress or expert witnesses.
<i>Topic Selection</i>	Each group collectively selected the policy topic they wished to examine. This allowed students to engage with topics relevant to their interests.
<i>In-Class Practice Hearings</i>	Throughout the semester, groups engaged in research and collaboration to prepare for an in-class practice hearing. During Week 10 of the semester, each group participated in an in-class practice round to simulate a mock congressional hearing and received feedback on their arguments and presentation. Members of Congress prepared questions for expert witnesses, who prepared witness statements outlining their positions. The committee chairperson opened the hearing with a two-minute statement explaining the hearing’s purpose, introducing participants, outlining procedures, and presenting an initial position. The ranking member then provided a two-minute response. Each expert witness delivered a two- to five-minute witness statement, followed by five to seven minutes of questioning from members of Congress, beginning with the chairperson. Members of Congress then offered two-minute closing statements before adjourning the hearing. All students had a speaking role in the practice hearings.
<i>Collaborative Course Project & Convention</i>	After completing in-class practice hearings in their individual classes, the authors brought all students together and reorganized them into two larger, mixed teams, the Blue Team and the Red Team. As a group, they held a mock convention where they nominated and elected students to leadership roles like committee chairs, committee members, policy advocates, or expert witnesses. This process gave students a chance to practice democratic decision-making and organizing across different groups.
<i>Official Mock Congressional Hearing</i>	The official mock congressional hearing allowed select students’ to demonstrate their policy knowledge and public speaking skills before a public audience. Held during the 14th week of the semester, the official mock congressional hearing was a 75-minute event focused on the topic: Improving Disaster Relief in the United States. Participants presented policy solutions and engaged in rigorous questioning. The timing and structure of the official hearing were similar to the in-class hearings.

Table 2 illustrates the roles and responsibilities of each position in the official mock congressional hearing, while **Figure 1** illustrates the organizational structure.

Table 2. Roles and responsibilities.

<i>Committee Chair</i>	Opens/closes hearing, introduces witnesses, maintains protocol, asks questions.
<i>Ranking Member</i>	Speaks after Chair at opening, before them at closing, questions witnesses.
<i>Legislators</i>	Deliver statements, question witnesses.
<i>Chiefs of Staff</i>	Strategize with legislators, manage legislative research team, delegate assignments, ensure accountability.
<i>Legislative Directors</i>	Support assigned Legislator, delegate to Staffers, ensure quality research and policy alignment.
<i>Staffers</i>	Conduct detailed research and write briefs.
<i>Expert Witnesses</i>	Provide testimony, respond to questions.
<i>Senior Research Fellows</i>	Strategize with Expert Witnesses, oversee Associate Fellows, delegate research.
<i>Associate Research Fellows</i>	Support assigned Expert Witness, delegate to Researchers, ensure research quality and policy alignment.
<i>Researchers</i>	Conduct detailed research and write briefs.
<i>Director of Communications</i>	Develop and oversee communication strategy, coordinate with Communications Coordinators and university administration.
<i>Communications Coordinators</i>	Promote event, invite officials, manage social media and livestreams.
<i>Coaches</i>	Provide support, share past experience, attend meetings upon request. No decision-making authority.

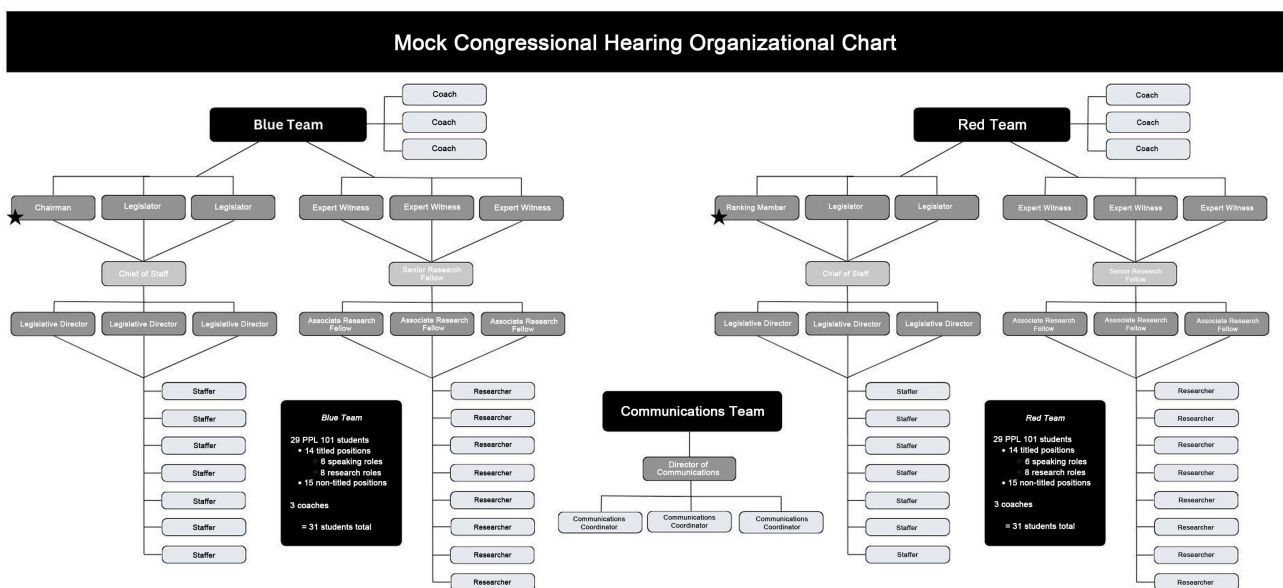


Figure 1. Organizational structure of the mock congressional hearing.

Table 3. Survey results.

Survey Item N = 39	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I found this active learning experience engaging.	28 (71.8%)	10 (25.6%)	1 (2.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
I enjoyed the activities involved in this learning experience.	16 (41.0%)	19 (48.7%)	3 (7.7%)	1 (2.6%)	0 (0.0%)
This experience helped me better understand the topic.	22 (56.4%)	15 (38.5%)	2 (5.1%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
I feel confident applying what I learned in this experience to real-life situations.	20 (51.3%)	19 (48.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
I had meaningful interactions and collaboration with other students during this experience.	9 (23.1%)	18 (46.2%)	10 (25.6%)	2 (5.1%)	0 (0.0%)
I felt supported by the instructor, facilitator, or coaches during this activity.	25 (64.1%)	8 (20.5%)	6 (15.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
The structure of the activity was clear and easy to follow.	12 (30.7%)	18 (46.2%)	4 (10.3%)	4 (10.3%)	1 (2.5%)
I am satisfied with this active learning experience.	24 (61.5%)	14 (35.9%)	1 (2.6%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
I would recommend this type of learning experience to others.	36 (92.3%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (7.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)

Table 4. Summary of themes from open-ended survey questions.

Survey Question	Themes
What did you like most about this learning experience?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration and teamwork • Interactive, real-life simulation • Opportunity to practice research and argumentation • Engagement with new peers or classes • Seeing the final event come together
Which skills or knowledge from this experience will be useful in the future?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public speaking • Teamwork and collaboration • Research skills • Communication and leadership • Time management • Conflict resolution and bipartisan dialogue
What suggestions do you have for improving this experience?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearer communication and consistent platforms for communication • Earlier planning and more time for preparation • Stronger roles for coaches or clarity on their involvement • Fewer researcher roles or more balance in responsibilities • More structured deadlines and mandatory meetings

5. Discussion

The data show the meaningful and multifaceted impact of the mock congressional hearing (MCH) learning experience. Grounded in the framework of creating peak learning moments—Elevation, Pride, Insight, and Connection—the MCH simulation provided students with an academic experience that went beyond routine classroom activities. Survey respondents reported high levels of engagement, enjoyment, and satisfaction. These results are reinforced by qualitative feedback in which students identified collaboration, real-world simulation, research experience, and peer engagement as what they valued most from their experience. Students also shared specific skills gained, such as public speaking, leadership, and teamwork, and provided thoughtful recommendations to improve the experience. Together, the data suggest that the MCH simulation fostered an engaging, confidence-building, and collaborative learning environment while offering insights into how the experience can be refined.

5.1. The Power of Moments

5.2. Elevation: Creating an Experience that Rose above the Routine

The MCH experience was designed to elevate learning beyond the standard classroom routine by immersing students in an active simulation. Heath and Heath's (Heath & Heath, 2017) concept of Elevation emphasize the importance of creating moments that are emotionally resonant and out of the ordinary. Known colloquially among students as the "Battle for the Gavel", the MCH brings a competitive edge that transforms classroom learning into a dynamic, high-stakes experience. Marketed to the students as the "Battle for the Gavel", it intensifies student engagement through competition, as teams prepare and perform with the aim of claiming the symbolic gavel. Nearly three-quarters (71.8%) of students strongly agreed that the experience was very engaging, and another 25% agreed it was engaging. Furthermore, 89.7% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed the activities, and 92.3% expressed a willingness to recommend the experience to others. The open-ended responses further validated these results, with students frequently citing collaboration, teamwork, and the interactive nature of the simulation as aspects they appreciated most. These findings suggest that the simulation successfully broke the monotony of traditional learning environments and created a memorable, emotionally impactful experience.

5.3. Pride: Providing Opportunities to Showcase Learning

Heath and Heath's (Heath & Heath, 2017) concept of Pride emphasize the value of creating moments that allow individuals to showcase achievement, recognize growth, and feel a sense of personal accomplishment. The simulation also fostered moments of pride, enabling students to publicly showcase their learning and feel a sense of personal accomplishment. By assuming the roles of committee chair, ranking member, chief of staff, and so on, students were placed in public-facing

positions that required them to articulate and defend complex policy arguments. Survey data revealed that 97.4% of students found the experience satisfying. The MCH clearly served as a platform for students to feel proud of their efforts and growth.

Moreover, the mock congressional hearing provided students with a unique and practical way to sharpen essential skills like research, debate, and argumentation. When students step into roles like legislative staff or committee chairs and witnesses, they are not just learning about policy; they are learning how to defend it, negotiate it, and communicate it under pressure. [Shellman and Turan \(2007\)](#) concludes “...that role-playing simulations are very effective for teaching negotiation skills to students and preparing them to manage actual conflicts skillfully...” (pg. 696). The MCH experience pushed the students to think critically, speak confidently, and engage with complex issues in ways that traditional classroom methods cannot replicate. This exercise cultivated a strong sense of pride, as students leave these simulations feeling accomplished and energized, having publicly demonstrated their knowledge and growth in a high-stakes, public-facing setting.

5.4. Insight: Facilitating Breakthroughs in Understanding

Heath and Heath’s ([Heath & Heath, 2017](#)) concept of Insight centers on moments that spark meaningful realizations, shift perspectives, and lead to deeper understanding. The MCH simulation fostered moments of insight, helping students develop a deeper understanding of public policy issues. The complexity of the simulation required students to engage in critical thinking, synthesize information, and communicate their positions persuasively. The data suggests that the mock congressional hearing deepened students’ understanding of the subject matter and increased their confidence applying that knowledge beyond the classroom. When asked whether the experience helped them better understand the topic, over 94% of students either strongly agreed (56.4%) or agreed (38.5%). This points to the simulation’s effectiveness as a pedagogical tool for unpacking complex policy issues. Equally compelling, 100% of students indicated that they felt confident applying what they learned to real-life situations, with 51.3% strongly agreeing and the remaining 48.7% agreeing. Qualitative responses echoed this sentiment, with students identifying skills such as public speaking, research, teamwork, and leadership as valuable takeaways.

5.5. Connection: Strengthening Relationships and Collaborative Learning

Heath and Heath’s ([Heath & Heath, 2017](#)) concept of Connection underscores the importance of shared experiences that deepen relationships and foster a sense of group belonging. The simulation fostered connection by promoting collaborative learning and relationship-building among students, coaches, and faculty. The activity promotes meaningful collaboration among students, with nearly 69.3% reporting positive peer interactions—23.1% strongly agreed and 46.2% agreed that

they had meaningful interactions and collaboration during the experience. Additionally, 84.6% of participants felt supported by the instructors and coaches. Open-ended feedback revealed that students valued the opportunity to engage with peers from other classes, highlighting the importance of shared learning experiences in fostering connection. These collaborative elements not only enhanced the learning process but also contributed to students' sense of belonging and community.

5.6. Implications for Future Implementation

While the results of the survey reflect the overall effectiveness of the MCH simulation in fostering an engaging and impactful learning experience, participants also identified several areas for improvement that merit attention. These suggestions are not only indicative of thoughtful student reflection but also offer valuable insights for refining the pedagogical approach. A recurring theme among the feedback was the need for clearer communication across the duration of the simulation. Several students expressed a desire for a single, consistent communication platform to streamline updates, reduce confusion, and ensure timely access to critical information. In addition, participants emphasized the importance of earlier and more detailed planning at the outset of the experience, including advance distribution of key materials, structured timelines, and clearly defined milestones.

Another common suggestion involved the need for more formalized guidance and scaffolding throughout the simulation. While the open-ended nature of the activity encouraged creativity and autonomy, students noted that more frequent check-ins and clearer role expectations.

6. Conclusion

The Mock Congressional Hearing (MCH) serves as a demonstration of how deliberately designed experiential learning can cultivate civic education, deepen academic understanding, and foster community among students. Informed by the *Power of Moments* framework, the MCH embedded the elements of Elevation, Pride, Insight, and Connection into the fabric of a foundational undergraduate public policy course. The result was an experience that not only engaged students intellectually but also positioned them as active participants in the democratic process. Through structured collaboration, research, and simulation, students gained transferable skills in policy analysis, public speaking, and critical thinking. Quantitative and qualitative data confirmed high levels of satisfaction, engagement, and confidence, which suggests that students internalized both the content and the civic values the experience aimed to promote. Furthermore, the integration of upperclassmen coaches and cross-sectional collaboration contributed to a stronger sense of academic belonging and peer mentorship. This case reinforces the idea that civic education must go beyond content delivery to create purposeful, high-impact moments that challenge students to lead, reflect, and connect. As higher education continues to grapple with how best to prepare students for dem-

ocratic participation, the MCH offers a model for civic education in the undergraduate classroom.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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