



Bill of Rights Institute

Being an American Essay Contest

Project Director: Douglas Klayman, Ph.D.
Social Dynamics, LLC

Prepared by: Heather Isbell

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The Bill of Rights Institute
200 North Glebe Road
Suite 200
Arlington, VA 22203

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Executive Summary

The Bill of Rights Institute (BRI) located in Arlington, Virginia, has a mission to educate American youth about the words and ideas of America's Founders, the liberties guaranteed by our Founding documents, and how our Founding principles continue to affect and shape a free society. In keeping with this mission BRI has hosted the 'Being an American' essay contest since 2006, in order to engage students and teachers in the learning and exploration of what it means to be an American and the historical significance it carries. In order to better highlight the themes and content of these essays, Social Dynamics conducted an in-depth qualitative review of the essays from the 2009 essay period.

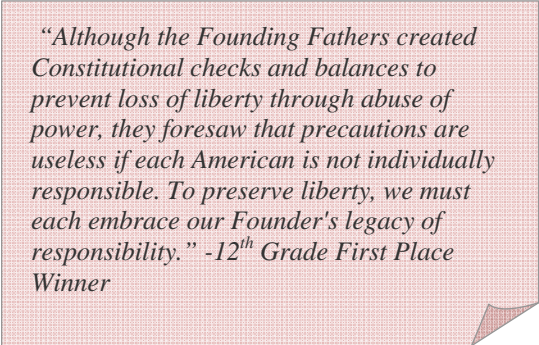
The focus of the analysis was to assess the understanding, conceptualization, and ideals of the student participants. The student essays were compiled via an on-line portal that the students' teachers utilized to upload each essay. The essays were then collected and reviewed by a panel of judges made up of high school teachers chosen by BRI. The essay question focused on students' understanding and definition of a civic value, while asking the student to identify at least one Founding document, and one historical figure they associated with that value. The students were then asked to expand on how they themselves applied, or could apply that value on a daily basis, at an individual level.

Though no significant differences were found across grade or school setting in terms of students' choice of civic values, Founding documents or historical figures, the students' understanding of what a civic value is, was shown to influence, in some part the civic value they identified as most important. There were three main themes shown in the students' understanding of a "civic value." They included definitions of civic values as *endowed traits*, as *responsibilities or traits to strive for*, and *civic values as something we embody as Americans*. Though the students' understanding of civic values themselves influenced the particular value they focused their essay on, it did not influence their choices of Founding documents or historical figures.

1.0 Introduction

In 2006 the Bill of Rights Institute (BRI) implemented the first ever ‘Being an American’ essay contest. Since its inception the contest has grown in both renown and participation. With over 88,000 essay participants to date, BRI’s essay contest is one of the largest in the country (BRI, 2009). The ‘Being an American’ essay contest is initiated each fall with a press release and marketing campaign from BRI with the opportunity for teachers and students to participate via online submission of essays. Each student and teacher competes for cash awards of up to \$5,000.00 USD and an all-expense paid trip to Washington, DC. In January, after submissions have gone through 3 rounds of judging, BRI staff determines the final winners and honorable mentions. The top 3 winners in each of the 9 regions are then brought to Washington for an education program culminating and in night of awards and recognition.

BRI is a 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization that aims to educate American youth about the words and ideas of America’s Founders, the liberties guaranteed by our Founding documents and how our Founding principles continue to affect and shape a free society. BRI has hosted the ‘Being an American’ essay contest over the past four years. These essays have been compiled and Social Dynamics LLC, was commissioned to conduct a qualitative analysis of their content and themes.



“Although the Founding Fathers created Constitutional checks and balances to prevent loss of liberty through abuse of power, they foresaw that precautions are useless if each American is not individually responsible. To preserve liberty, we must each embrace our Founder's legacy of responsibility.” -12th Grade First Place Winner

The data consisted of 2,919 750-word essays containing some demographic information and student responses to the posed essay question directed at understanding civic values. After the contest period, the essays were submitted to Social Dynamics in MS Excel format for analysis. Social Dynamics uploaded the data into a qualitative data analysis program that provides for analytic management of the data through qualitative coding and thematic analysis (e.g. looking for relationships, categories of information and/or other patterns in the information). The essays were then coded in accordance with a combination of BRI-led predetermined categories of information, and student-led categories of information that emerged from the data itself throughout the analysis. Once the essays were coded, output of quantitative information was generated to determine statistical prevalence of themes, historical figures, documents, or other relevant patterns.

The quantitative data was then combined with the qualitative findings to provide a comprehensive exploration of the overall information contained within the complete set of essays. As the focus was on thematic and content analysis over quantitative information, demographic data and analysis was kept to a minimum.

Finally, cross-case discussion provided an opportunity to look at implications of data themes and patterns as they emerged in relationship to the students’ understanding of civic values, and responsibilities.

2.0 Methods

2.1 Sample

The sample consisted of students in grades 9-12 who are U.S. citizens or legal residents and are either attending public, private, religious, or charter schools, being home-schooled, or participating in a GED or correspondence school program but are no older than 19 years of age. Military bases and U.S. territories were also included. The initial solicitation was conducted in the form of a press release submitted by BRI on September 14, 2009. The press release requested participation of students and teachers in the 'Being an American' essay contest with cash prizes offered up as incentive for their participation (Bill of Rights Institute, 2009). With over 88,000 student essay responses to the contest since its inception in 2006, it is currently one of the largest high school essay contests in the country (Bill of Rights Institute, 2009). The sample size for this analysis consisted of 2,919 essays collected from students across grades 9 through 12. The total sample, as seen in Table 1, consisted of 255 9th grade essays, 427 10th grade essays, 1030 11th grade essays, and 1207 12th grade essays.

Table 1. Sample Grade Level Data

Grade Level	Total Number	Percentage of Total
Grade 9	255	8.7%
Grade 10	427	14.6%
Grade 11	1030	35.3%
Grade 12	1207	41.3 %
Total	2919	100%

Of the student sample approximately 71.6 percent were from public school settings, 27.3 percent were from private schools, and the remaining 1.1 percent in home school settings. Figure 1 is a pie chart representation of school type.

Figure 1. School Settings



3.0 The Essay

3.1 Methods

Originating with BRI in September of 2006 the 'Being an American' essay contest has sought to engage students and teachers across America, and its territories. The essay contest has a separately maintained website which BRI manages and monitors throughout the year to allow access and opportunities for exploration. The website also provides free materials for use in classrooms year-round to facilitate a focus on civic rights and responsibilities (Bill of Rights Institute, 2010).

Being an American Essay Contest Analysis

The essay contest is sponsored by BRI along with its partners, David H. Koch, Amway Global, and the Jack Miller Family Foundation. The contest awards 180 students and teachers with cash prizes each year. First place winners from each of the 9 geographical regions are awarded \$5,000.00 USD, with second place and third place being awarded \$2,500.00 and \$1,250.00 respectively. First, second, and third place students also receive all-expenses paid trips to Washington, DC. The contest also awards 126 honorable mentions prizes of \$250.00 to seven students and their teachers from each region.

With the goal of exploring the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and the civic values essential to being an American the students responded to the essay question:

“What civic value do you believe is most essential to being an American? Trace the enduring importance of this value throughout the American story by discussing: a Founding document that reflects this value; a figure from American history who embodies this value; and examples of how you have or could put this value into practice.”

The essay parameters included a length limit of 750 words, adherence to the essay question, the choice of a Founding document written between the years 1760 and 1800, and the selection of an important figure from American history. Students then shared a personal response to the value. The students were not limited in terms of how many figures or documents they could discuss as long as they remained within the 750 word limit.

The final date of submission was December 1, 2009. Once all essays were received and the contest was closed, the panel of judges began reading them. The panel consisted of 131 high school teachers chosen by the Bill of Rights Institute. Upon completion of judging and awards, the essays have been pulled together for a comprehensive qualitative analysis and exploration of the themes imbedded in the individual essays.

3.2 Analysis

The analysis was conducted in stages. Upon receipt of each of the essays from BRI, the essays were converted from an excel file into a rich text file (.rtf) that could be uploaded into a qualitative data analysis program called ATLAS.ti. The first stage of the analysis consisted of analyzing trends or themes in the data. The data was then aggregated by grade level, civic value, and type of school the student attends. The civic values were then analyzed to identify themes in information, prevalence of one value over others, and information that might emerge through the grouping of synonymous terms. Civic values were grouped by BRI recommended categories that were then expanded as other student-led themes emerged in this area.

“Respect reflects outstanding moral standards and the ability to accept people as they are along with their rights as a human being. A country consisting of great respect for individuals and worthy opponents positively contrasts to a country of no respect for the citizens or any opponent that may thrive in the world at the moment.” - 11th Grade Contestant

Cross-theme analysis was conducted to look for patterns related to the identified historic figures and Founding documents chosen. The data were entered into graphs and tables to visually convey outstanding trends, patterns, or associations between subject matter across

domains. The student choices were assessed from several angles in order to illuminate possible differences between types of school settings or grade levels.

4.0 Results

The results provided a unique insight into current perceptions of today's high school student population related to their conceptualization of civic duty, values, and the responsibilities associated with being an American citizen. Outside of specific values, themes emerged in terms of how students define civic values at a personal level, which showed some impact on the choice of values chosen. Many students chose more than one value to highlight and some grouped certain values together under single traits. For example, one student chose leadership as her value, but further clarified that a good leader needed to have "...courage, strength, and wisdom." Some students defined one value while still others included multiple values in their definition of single value: Responsibility is being "...at the root of civic values of initiative, justice, courage, freedom, and respect".

"To be a great leader there are three components: courage, strength, and wisdom. Courage, because many times you will stand alone. Strength, because while you move against the crowd people will try to knock you down. Wisdom, which varies for every situation, to know when to pick a fight or to hold your tongue." -10th Grade Contestant

4.1 Overall Review

There were 24 major categories that emerged from the essays concerning civic values, with 'Perseverance' being the most frequently cited civic value across the board with 446 instances of the value chosen to be highlighted by the students. Coming in second was 'Courage', which was cited 426 times. Table 2 below shows each civic value category, number of times cited, and the percentage rate of its categorical citation in relation to the overall group (n=2919).

The lowest instances of citation consisted of 'Adventure' with 5 citations, and the '2nd Amendment', or the right to bear arms with only 5 occurrences. 'Leadership' (12 citations), 'Thrift' (12 citations), and 'Humility' (11 citations) were only slightly higher. It was noted that 'Leadership' was most frequently defined in terms of other more frequently occurring values such as courage, perseverance, and integrity.

Being an American Essay Contest Analysis

Civic Value	Number of Citations (n=2919)	Percentage Overall
Perseverance	446	15.28%
Courage	426	14.53%
Equality and Respect	398	13.60%
Entrepreneurialism	345	11.77%
Responsibility	269	9.18%
Liberty	245	8.36%
Integrity	229	7.81%
1st Amendment	154	5.25%
Justice	127	4.33%
Diligence	95	3.25%
Knowledge	49	1.67%
Patriotism	49	1.67%
Compromise	37	1.26%
Altruism	35	1.19%
Activism	34	1.13%
Optimism	27	0.92%
Faith	23	0.78%
Progress/Common Good	22	0.75%
Pride	21	0.72%
Passion	20	0.68%
Thrift	12	0.42%
Leadership	12	0.41%
Humility	11	0.38%
Adventure	5	0.17%
2nd Amendment	5	0.17%

In addition to identifying the themes, the individual understanding a student had of civic values emerged as an influence over the value a student focused on. As the students were not asked to define civic values, contextual clues in the students' essays were used to assess the understanding a student had about civic values. While it is important to note that there was not enough data available to provide concrete quantitative information on this point, the qualitative review of the essays did indicate at least 3 identifiable definitions of civic values that exerted at least some influence over the value a student focused their essay on:

1. *A civic value as something one embodies in order to be considered a good citizen.*
2. *A civic value as that which characterizes one as an American citizen.*
3. *A civic value as something we are endowed with due to being an American.*¹

¹ This definition tended to be a more politically oriented definition where the preceding first two definitions centered on a more interpersonal level of 'being'.

Being an American Essay Contest Analysis

Students who defined civic values in terms of the first definition, in which it was seen as something we should strive to embody, tended to present morality-based values such as respect, courage, volunteerism, altruism, love, and faith. The second definition saw a predominance of students looking to the past and present to identify characteristics that seem to be specific to key points in American history and culture, these civic values tended to include values such as patriotism, diligence, perseverance, courage, and entrepreneurialism. Students that approached a civic value from the last or third definition used more politically oriented speech and tended to choose values such as the first amendment rights to free speech, freedom of religion, and liberty, freedom, and justice.

The overall percentages of each value as it is related to the overall total sample show variability rather than one predominant theme with the largest percentage at 15.28 percent for perseverance. This attests to the varying interpretations and opinions that make up the participating high school populace as it applies to civic participation, values, and responsibilities.

In addition to identifying civic values, the student respondents were asked to select a historical figure and a Founding document that they associated with their chosen values. The most frequently cited individuals, which can be seen along with other individuals with over 10 citations in Table 3, included Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, Martin Luther King Jr., John Adams, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln with 100 or more citations. The most frequently cited documents included, the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, The American Crisis, and The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom as well as Common Sense. Figure 2 depicts the comparison of the less frequently cited documents, while in figure 3 illustrates the ratios of the two most cited, the Constitution, and the Declaration of Independence as opposed to the others

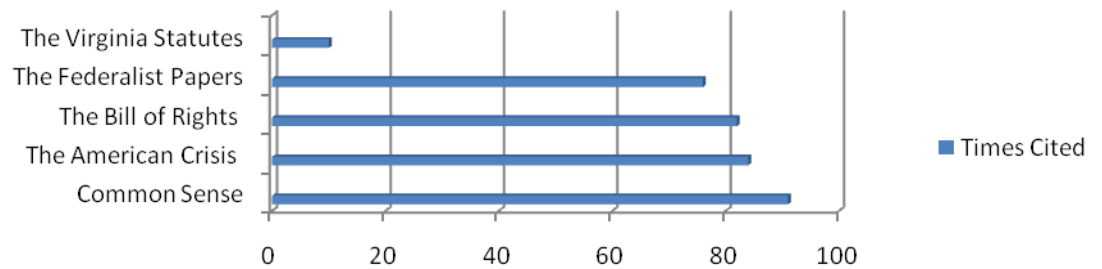
Table 3. Overview of Historic Figures Cited

Name of Individual	Number of Times Cited
Thomas Jefferson	552
Abraham Lincoln	415
Martin Luther King Jr.	345
George Washington	307
Thomas Paine	279
Benjamin Franklin	226
John Adams	123
President Barack Obama	97
Rosa Parks	83
Patrick Henry	68
Thomas Edison	58
Elizabeth Cady Stanton	58
Alice Paul	54
Theodore Roosevelt	38
Franklin D. Roosevelt	35
Henry David Thoreau	32
John Quincy Adams	32

Figure 2. Two Most Frequently Cited Founding Documents



Figure 3. Breakdown of Other Founding Documents Cited



4.2 Review of Aggregated Categories

A review of the data aggregated by grade level revealed few differences in terms of value selection, document choice, or identified historic figure. Grade 12 was the largest group of participants, grade 9 was the smallest. Below in table 4 the dominant selections for each grade level are exhibited for value, document, and historic figure.

Table 4. Selections by Grade Level

Grade Level	Value	Founding Document	Historical Figure
Grade 9	Perseverance	Declaration of Independence	Thomas Jefferson
Grade 10	Perseverance	Declaration of Independence	Abraham Lincoln
Grade 11	Perseverance	Declaration of Independence	Thomas Jefferson
Grade 12	Perseverance	Declaration of Independence	Thomas Jefferson

A look across public, private, and home school settings also revealed little difference between data themes. There were no variations in interpretations or themes linked to the type of school setting identified with the essays. Table 5 outlines the top choices for public, private and home school setting for civic value, Founding document, and Historic figures.

Table 5. Selections by School Setting

School Setting	Value	Founding Document	Historical Figure
Public	Perseverance	Declaration of Independence	Thomas Jefferson
Private	Perseverance	Declaration of Independence	Thomas Jefferson
Home	Integrity	Declaration of Independence	Thomas Jefferson

5.0 Discussion

When examining the values in relationship to the historical figures it was shown that Abraham Lincoln was most frequently cited alongside values such as equality and respect, diligence, and integrity with reference to his work with the emancipation of slaves, and handling of the civil war. George Washington, on the other hand, was highlighted alongside courage, diligence, integrity, and responsibility, while being described in reference to his duties to a new country. Other key figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams were discussed in context of values such as entrepreneurialism, equality and respect, courage, and diligence, responsibility, and integrity. It was noted that when an individual was identified specifically as a leader, integrity, courage, perseverance, and respect were consistently used to define leadership. These emerged as a thematic observation in terms of how student participants defined some of America's historical leaders and key individuals.

“The timeless significance of perseverance has proven itself evident, throughout American history, in laying the foundation for numerous advancements. Perseverance alludes to one’s determination and undying persistence in standing up for an important purpose.” -10th Grade Contestant

“Industriousness means putting in tremendous effort while going above and beyond what is normally expected in order to achieve a goal or dream. Without industriousness we fail to accomplish our goals and our dreams remain unrealized.” - 11th Grade Contestant

The students' understanding of civic values and citizenship seemed to carry more influence over their choice of values than did any demographic data collected. This presents an interesting point for further research and exploration related to the way students frame civic values and duties in order to understand them in context of today's social and political environments. Civic development has been shown to be influential in other areas of adolescent development as well with extensive literature

documenting the early start of political socialization in teens to continue throughout life, influencing later citizenship and political involvement characteristics of an individual (Journell, 2010). This evaluation supports this notion as the student's understanding of civics, citizenship and America as a society carried the most influence on student choice of values. While highlighting the need for a closer more in-depth exploration of this relationship.

References

Journell, W. (2010). Standardizing citizenship: The potential influence of state curriculum standards on the civic development of adolescents. *The Teacher, 19*(2). doi: 10.1017/S1049096510000272