



Civic Infrastructure for Courageous Citizenship: A Regional Model for Academic Partnership

Randy Lioz*

Lab Manager, PiVoT Peace Lab — Polarization and Violence Transformed

The Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution, George Mason University

This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

The ideas in each paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Beyond Intractability, Braver Angels, or the Citizen Scholars Council. The copyright and responsibility for the content of each article is retained by the authors.

This PDF version of the article is intended for printing and reading on desktop computers. An [HTML version](#), suitable for reading on smartphones, is also available.

All authors’ bios are found on the [Civic Scholars Council Biography Page](#).

Abstract

Courageous citizenship is a learned civic practice rather than an individual virtue, requiring institutional infrastructure to sustain it. Drawing on experience within George Mason's PiVoT Peace Lab, it presents a three-layer model—undergraduate curriculum, secondary-school pilots, and the regional DeLTA network—showing how academic institutions can deliberately build the formative infrastructure that democratic renewal requires.

1. The Pledge as Institutional Act

When the signers of the Declaration of Independence pledged to one another “our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor,” they did something more demanding than display personal courage. They tied their fates together. The pledge was a statement of mutual exposure: each man’s survival, livelihood, and reputation now depended on the others’ willingness to keep faith. That dependency wasn’t rhetorical. It was the architecture of a republic that had not yet been built, held together by the conviction that what happened to one would happen to all.

This kind of conviction is hard to sustain. It requires institutions that make interconnection clear and practiced. The signers came to that table already shaped by such institutions: committees of correspondence linking the colonies, colonial assemblies that taught the discipline of shared deliberation, militias and churches and printers and taverns that gave a continent the habits of self-government. The pledge worked because the infrastructure to hold it already existed. When we read the closing as a moment of individual bravery, we miss what made it possible.

At the 250th anniversary of that pledge, the question is whether we still possess — or are willing to rebuild — the infrastructure that makes such mutual commitment possible. Rates of affective polarization, the mutual dislike and distrust between political groups, have risen sharply over the past two decades, and the institutional consequences are visible in declining trust in legislatures, universities, the press, and even in one another as neighbors. The deeper problem is not that Americans disagree — disagreement is unavoidable in any large polity — but that we’re losing the capacity to see how our interests, futures, and fates remain bound together across those disagreements.

This paper argues that courageous citizenship is best understood not as a personal virtue waiting to be summoned, but as a learned civic practice that requires sustained institutional support, and that academic institutions are uniquely positioned to build the infrastructure that practice requires. Drawing on my experience as Lab Manager of the PiVoT Peace Lab at George Mason University’s Carter School, as instructor of an undergraduates in conflict resolution, and as director of the Depolarization Labs and Trainers Alliance (DeLTA), I describe a three-layer model — undergraduate, secondary, and regional — that suggests what civic infrastructure can look like when academic institutions take on its construction deliberately. The model is currently regional in scope and modest in scale, but its architecture is portable, and its promise lies in the possibility of replication.

2. Why Individual-Virtue Framings Fall Short

Popular accounts of American civic decline tend to over-emphasize personal courage as the missing ingredient. The implicit narrative is familiar: brave individuals must speak up, refuse to be silenced, and model better behavior for their neighbors. There's something true in this. The work of bridging political difference is genuinely costly, and the people who do it well are often acting against considerable social pressure. But making personal courage the central factor creates three problems, which serious civic organizations — Braver Angels among them — have understood for some time. This understanding deserves to be pushed further into the language of infrastructure.

The first problem is diagnostic. The deterioration of American civic life isn't, at root, a story of insufficient individual virtue. It's a story of institutional erosion. Yuval Levin has argued persuasively that American institutions — schools, churches, civic associations, news organizations, even Congress — have shifted from being *formative* (places that shape the people who pass through them) to being *performative* (platforms from which already-formed individuals project themselves). Robert Putnam's longer arc tells a related story: the dense associational life that once embedded Americans in cross-cutting relationships has thinned dramatically since the mid-twentieth century. When institutions stop doing formative work, the burden of civic competence falls back onto individuals who were never given the chance to develop it.

The second problem is allocational. Locating the answer solely in individual courage shifts responsibility onto the very people who already bear the heaviest costs of polarization — the neighbor who tries to start a hard conversation at Thanksgiving, the teacher who attempts to teach across political difference, the local official navigating constituents who no longer trust each other. These citizens are doing courageous work, often in isolation. Whatever they need, they're unlikely to find it in another speech telling them to keep at it.

The third problem is strategic. If the answer to civic decline is that individuals must be braver, then the policy lever is exhortation. While not useless, it's certainly insufficient. We don't respond to declining literacy by telling children to read harder; we build schools, train teachers, and design curricula. The civic equivalent is no less demanding. If courageous citizenship is a learnable practice, then it requires the institutional architecture that produces other learned practices — training, peers, settings, and institutions that share the load.

Two further clarifications matter, and both involve concepts that organizations like Braver Angels have articulated with precision. The first is the distinction between *affective* and *ideological* polarization. As Lilliana Mason and others have documented, Americans' policy positions have moved less than their feelings about one another. The work of repair is less about bridging policy distance than about restoring conditions under which disagreement can be navigated rather than weaponized.

The second concerns what depolarization actually is. It is sometimes misunderstood as moderation of belief — the softening of conviction in pursuit of consensus. The more useful formulation, and the one that animates serious dialogue practice, treats depolarization as the restoration of *accurate disagreement*: the capacity to see fellow citizens clearly, to represent

their positions in terms they would themselves recognize, and to disagree with what they actually think rather than with caricature. *Civility* describes a manner of engagement, not a substantive practice; one can be civil while remaining wholly disengaged. *Deliberative democracy* describes structured forums for collective reasoning, often event-based, that presume participants who already possess the skills the work of formation is supposed to produce. Courageous citizenship, by contrast, names a durable practice across difference, sustained by institutions that form citizens over time.

The empirical record on structured intergroup contact is encouraging but not unequivocal. A recent meta-analysis by Matt Lowe, drawing only on pre-registered experiments to mitigate publication bias, finds that average effects of contact interventions are real but smaller than earlier estimates suggested, and that *generalization* is a particular challenge — contact tends to change attitudes toward the people one actually meets more than toward the outgroup as a whole. Interventions like those Braver Angels and similar organizations conduct have to be continuously studied, evaluated, and refined if they’re going to produce durable effects at scale. That iterative work is precisely what infrastructure does and what one-off interventions can’t, and it’s the work academic institutions are uniquely well-suited to support.

3. Courageous Citizenship as Civic Infrastructure

If the diagnosis above is right — that the failure is one of practice, not virtue — then the question becomes how we name and build the practice that’s missing. In its 2026–2030 strategic plan, Braver Angels defines courageous citizenship as engaging one another with skill, courage, and dignity, choosing to act instead of react, and building together in community. Courageous citizenship, in this articulation, is not the absence of conviction, but the discipline to keep one’s humanity while working through disagreement in pursuit of the common good. The strategic plan frames the country’s civic crisis as “a failure of practice,” and the response in the language of practice: skill-building, convening, collaborative action.

The rest of this paper builds on this articulation. What I want to add is a question the framework points toward but doesn’t yet fully answer: what does it take to *sustain* that practice across time and at scale? A practice that depends on individual discipline alone won’t outlast the people doing it. A practice supported only by event-based programming won’t reach the people who haven’t yet found their way to a workshop. To last, courageous citizenship needs *infrastructure* — the institutional architecture that produces, supports, and continually refines the practice of which BA’s framework is an articulation.

The metaphor of infrastructure captures features of civic life that softer terms like “movement” or “campaign” miss. Infrastructure persists past any cohort of users, holding capacity in place across cycles of attention. It is layered, with complementary functions handling different parts of the work. And it shapes the people who use it, not only those who consciously engage with it. Roads shape how cities grow whether or not their users think about urbanism. Civic infrastructure shapes how citizens relate whether or not they think about citizenship.

The metaphor has limits. Civic infrastructure is *relational* in a way physical infrastructure isn’t. A road, once built, doesn’t depend on its users for its continued existence; civic institutions do. They can be eroded by the very people they serve, and they can only be maintained through

those people's continued participation. Courage and infrastructure don't substitute for each other; they depend on each other. Infrastructure that no one is willing to use, defend, or rebuild decays. Courage without institutions to channel it dissipates into isolated heroics. Democratic renewal needs both, together.

Two strands of scholarship support this framing. Harry Boyte's public work tradition understands citizens as co-creators of common life — people who together build, maintain, and renew the institutions and practices that hold a free society together — rather than primarily as voters or deliberators. Danielle Allen's writing on civic education, including the Educating for American Democracy initiative she co-leads, makes a complementary point: civic education isn't preparatory for democracy, something we do *before* citizens take up the work, but an expression of it. Schools and universities aren't antechambers to public life. They're among the most important sites where public life happens. The question of whether academic institutions should take up the work of civic formation isn't a question of mission expansion. It's a question of recognizing what these institutions already are. The choice isn't whether they form citizens; it's whether they do so deliberately or by default.

The model I'll describe in the rest of this paper has three layers, all anchored in the work of the PiVoT Peace Lab. The first is the *undergraduate* layer, where the Carter School's curriculum forms students over a semester of cumulative practice and feedback in facilitation, mediation, and engagement across difference. The second is the *secondary* layer, where the lab's workshops in Northern Virginia high schools begin that formation earlier, before patterns of polarized communication harden. The third is the *regional* layer, where DeLTA connects scholars and practitioners across the DC area's research universities and civic organizations into a research-practice ecosystem. Each layer is modest on its own. Together they begin to look like infrastructure.

4. The Undergraduate Layer — The Carter School Curriculum

The first layer of the model is the undergraduate curriculum at George Mason University's Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution. George Mason established the first PhD in conflict analysis and resolution in the United States, and the Mason remains one of the few American universities with a dedicated school for the discipline at all degree levels. That makes it a direct test case for the question of whether academic institutions can serve as civic infrastructure for courageous citizenship. It's also where I currently teach CONF 300, Conflict Resolution Techniques and Practice, the interventional anchor of the undergraduate program.

CONF 325, Dialogue and Difference, takes up communication across differences of age, gender, language, culture, and political orientation, with students participating in a term-long dialogue exploring the meaning and experience of difference. CONF 320 covers interpersonal conflict. Further courses move into mediation, restorative justice, and international peacebuilding.

The pedagogical commitment running through CONF 300 is reflective practice, the framework Donald Schön and Chris Argyris developed in *Theory in Practice* and Schön's later *The Reflective Practitioner*. Competence in any practice — medicine, design, teaching, conflict resolution — develops through cycles of action, observation, reflection, and revised action.

Argyris and Schön distinguish *single-loop learning*, refining what you do within an existing frame, from *double-loop learning*, revising the frame itself. Courageous citizenship requires both. Single-loop is adjusting how you respond to disagreement. Double-loop is recognizing that the way you're seeing the person you disagree with is itself part of why the disagreement is going badly.

The course is built to push students into both. Starting in week 3, every student designs and leads a short facilitation exercise for the class on a topic from that week's readings. By week 5 they're facilitating dialogues between adversaries; by week 9 they're running mediation simulations; in weeks 13 and 14 they design and lead group workshops in teams. They write critiques of their classmates' facilitations and reflections on their own. Wilk Wilkinson of Braver Angels visited the classroom and practiced with the students directly. Other practitioners advised on their practice: a mediation professor and practitioner, Rob Fersh of Convergence Center for Policy Resolution on the Higher Ground consensus-building methodology. Course readings included the Braver Angels Trustworthy Elections Report alongside academic texts on intergroup dialogue, restorative justice, and contact theory.

What students do with the formation isn't confined to conflict resolution as a profession. In end-of-semester reflections from this spring's class, students named the contexts where they expect to apply the work: international diplomacy, law, HR, software engineering, a campus community center where one student is now more comfortable skillfully intervening in tensions, a student-run organization where another is navigating sharp differences. Two students described specific outcomes — one had reconnected with a lost friend, another said they'd handled a hard family conflict differently because of what they'd learned. The Carter School isn't producing peace and conflict resolution professionals only. It's producing future lawyers, engineers, and HR people who carry facilitation, listening, and dialogue skills into whatever institutions they end up running.

What the undergraduate layer contributes to the infrastructure is credentialed, peer-reviewed formation that happens over a full semester rather than a workshop, embedded in an institution that will outlast any individual instructor or cohort. Students leave the course not just having heard about facilitation but having done it, repeatedly, with feedback. The undergraduate layer isn't sufficient on its own. That formation has to start earlier, before patterns of polarized communication harden, which is the work of the next layer.

5. The Secondary Layer — High School Pilots and Pattern Formation

The undergraduate layer arrives somewhat late. By the time students reach a college course on conflict resolution, the patterns of polarized communication they're being asked to revise have had years to set. Adolescence is when much of the relevant formation actually happens — through media diets, peer sorting, the steady internalization of in-group and out-group cues, and, increasingly, through the absence of structured experiences of disagreement that don't feel like combat. Researchers at CIRCLE at Tufts and elsewhere have documented how civic identity coalesces well before voting age, often shaped by environments that reward conformity within political tribes and punish engagement across them.

The secondary layer of the model addresses the upstream problem. The PiVoT Peace Lab developed a high school workshop program in fall 2025 in partnership with George Mason's College of Education and Human Development, and ran the first two pilots at Northern Virginia high schools this spring. The workshop uses Braver Angels' LAPP framework — Listen, Acknowledge, Pivot, Perspective — for an adolescent context. Each ninety-minute session combines polarization literacy, drawn from the lab's research and knowledge base on affective polarization, with skill-building exercises rooted in the LAPP techniques. Structured cross-partisan dialogue is the planned next addition. Both schools that ran the pilots have asked about train-the-trainer models, where students and teachers at the school could carry the work forward themselves rather than relying on the lab to return. Other Northern Virginia high schools are now gearing up to join the pilot.

That train-the-trainer development is what turns a workshop into infrastructure. A program that depends on a single lab traveling to schools is a service. A program that schools can absorb and run themselves is a capacity transfer — exactly the dynamic by which volunteer-led work, supported by professional staff, becomes durable. The schools' interest means the institutions themselves are beginning to take ownership of the formation work.

The use of high school versions of LAPP has been a working partnership with Mary Thomas-Vallens, who leads Braver Education. Mary had already designed a LAPP session for high school audiences before the lab's pilots began; my contribution has been refining that session in the field, including across many sessions at the American School in Japan in January 2026. Mary incorporated those refinements back into the framework. The collaboration matters for two reasons. First, it shows what academic-civic alignment looks like in practice — not a coordinating committee, but a working partnership where a practitioner from a national organization and a practitioner working out of a university lab refine a curriculum together that neither could have produced alone. Second, the adaptation work itself is iterative. LAPP for high schoolers isn't LAPP for adults with the vocabulary turned down. It's a different curriculum, and getting it right requires the kind of testing-and-revision that happens when researchers and practitioners are actually building together.

The secondary layer also produces something the undergraduate layer can't: students who arrive at college already familiar with the practice. When a student who took a high school polarization workshop in tenth grade encounters CONF 300 a few years later, the formation isn't starting from scratch. The student has a vocabulary, a set of techniques, and the lived sense that disagreement across difference is a skill, not a battlefield. That continuity is the kind of thing infrastructure produces and one-off interventions cannot.

What the secondary layer contributes to the broader infrastructure is upstream formation, school-by-school capacity transfer, and a working test bed where curriculum refinement happens in real time with practitioners on both sides of the academic-civic line in the same room. It's the layer most likely to scale, because schools across the country are looking for exactly this kind of resource, and once a school owns the work it doesn't need the lab to keep returning. It's also the layer where the next generation of facilitators starts to form, years before they show up to college.

6. The Regional Network — DeLTA and the Research-Practice Ecosystem

Single programs, however well-designed, don't constitute infrastructure. Infrastructure requires networks: peer institutions that share standards, evaluate one another, and aggregate learning across cases. The third layer of the model is the regional network the PiVoT Peace Lab convenes — the Depolarization Labs and Trainers Alliance (DeLTA) — which connects scholars and practitioners working on polarization across the DC region's research universities and civic organizations.

DeLTA is an emergent program, less than two years old. What it does, in its present form, is convene — at events like the 2026 DeLTA Summit on May 12, themed *Emerging Scholarship on Polarization*, where student presenters from across the region's universities share work-in-progress in front of faculty reviewers and practitioner participants. Past convenings have brought together faculty from Georgetown, American, George Washington, Mason, Maryland, and Johns Hopkins, alongside leadership from Braver Angels and the National Institute for Civil Discourse. The DC region happens to contain an unusual concentration of research universities with active scholarship on polarization. DeLTA is the thread beginning to connect them with the many national civic organizations doing depolarization work in practice.

Convening isn't the only output. The lab has also drafted a report mapping the landscape of depolarization interventions aimed at religious communities — cross-organization, cross-tradition field scholarship that practitioners have asked for. That kind of field-building work is part of what the regional layer can produce.

The case for this layer is straightforward. The Lowe meta-analysis discussed earlier — finding that contact interventions often produce real but smaller effects than earlier meta-analyses suggested, with limited generalization beyond people one actually meets — implies that the work has to be continuously studied and refined. That refinement is hard for any single lab or any single civic organization to do alone. A lab knows what its own interventions produce; it doesn't know what comparable interventions at other institutions produce, or how its evaluation methods compare to others'. A civic organization knows what its volunteers report from the field; it doesn't always have the apparatus to study those reports systematically. A regional network is the structure where those gaps close, where shared evaluation methods can develop, training standards can be compared, and scholarship and practice can iterate on each other rather than running parallel.

The longer-term ambition is to extend the model nationally. DeLTA grew out of the unusual density of the DC region, but the underlying logic isn't region-specific: most parts of the country have universities with relevant programs and civic organizations with relevant practice. A national version of DeLTA could serve as connective tissue for Braver Angels' Civic Scholars Council itself — the regional research-practice infrastructure the CSC's national scholarship and convening work needs to connect with. The CSC charter calls for shared training standards, evaluation metrics, and collaborative scholarship across institutions; a network of regional alliances is the structure that produces those things on the ground. The CSC sets the national

agenda; regional networks like DeLTA do the cross-institutional work that makes the agenda actionable.

What the regional network layer contributes to the broader infrastructure is what no individual program or single school can produce: comparison, standards, peer review of practice, field-building scholarship, and a research-practice ecosystem in which curriculum, programs, and scholarship inform one another in real time. It's the layer that makes the work cumulative.

7. A Pledge Renewed

The argument of this paper has been that courageous citizenship is a learned civic practice, that learned practices require institutional infrastructure, and that academic institutions are uniquely positioned to build a piece of the infrastructure courageous citizenship requires. The PiVoT Peace Lab's three-layer model — the Carter School's undergraduate curriculum, the high school workshop pilots developed with Braver Education and Mason's College of Education and Human Development, and the DeLTA regional network — is one working example of what the build-out looks like. The lab is also considering further curricular extensions, including a course built around the specific problem of contemporary American polarization, that would tighten the integration between research, teaching, and practice still further.

The model is regional, modest, and incomplete. None of the three layers is finished. What it offers is not a finished product but a working architecture, with each layer producing evidence that the build is feasible and that the layers reinforce one another.

The deeper claim is the one the convention's theme invites. The signers of the Declaration of Independence pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to one another because they understood that their fates were bound together. The pledge wasn't a flourish; it was an accurate description of where they stood. Two and a half centuries on, we have lost much of the capacity to perceive that same interconnection. We damage our institutions and our relationships because we no longer see clearly how our interests, our futures, and our fates remain bound across the political differences that can feel, in the moment, like the only thing that matters. Courageous citizenship, in the form Braver Angels and others are working to restore, is the discipline of seeing fellow citizens as people whose fate is still shared with ours.

That perception cannot be exhorted into being. It has to be formed, practiced, refined, and sustained by institutions that take the work seriously. Academic institutions can do part of that work. The lab, the network and the curriculum described in this paper are part of the work. So is everything Braver Angels and its peers do, every workshop run, every dialogue held, every volunteer trained. None of it is enough on its own. All of it, together, building over time and across regions, might be what carries the American experiment another 250 years.

* Randy Lioz is Associate Director of the PiVoT Peace Lab (Polarization and Violence Transformed) and affiliate faculty in the Carter School at George Mason University. He also directs the Depolarization Labs & Trainers Alliance (DeLTA), a network of academics and practitioners focused on bridging divides and building the civic fabric. He started his depolarization career at Braver Angels, continuing to serve in various roles there, and graduated with a Master's in Conflict Analysis and Resolution in 2026.