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# READER GUIDE

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Museums as Vital Resources  
for New Americans:

# The Citizenship Project

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## ***Museums as Vital Resources for New Americans: The Citizenship Project***

by Mia Nagawiecki

As museums seek to become vital resources to the communities that surround them amidst a time of great social turmoil, programs like the Citizenship Project at the New-York Historical Society provide strong models for blending museum education practice with services that directly support communities in need. In her article, *Museums as Vital Resources for New Americans*, Mia Nagawiecki argues that engaging with history in her museum is a powerful tool for the contemporary moment in the immigrant experience: “With many immigrants feeling at risk, museums are in a unique position to turn from being gatekeepers of American history and culture to welcoming sites that bring new Americans into the fold.”

The New-York Historical Society focused their efforts on creatively utilizing their museum and library collections, including artifacts, works of art, and original documents, to support legal permanent residents—those who hold green cards—as they prepared to take the civics portion of the Naturalization Test required to become United States citizens. This portion, often called the Citizenship Test, stresses the powers and personnel of government as well as specific dates, events, and people in American history, but as the article posits, the test questions do not suggest the range of diverse histories that reflect the nation’s people and their stories. The New-York Historical Society’s aim was to leverage their collections to do so, and the article describes their process, which included creating a curriculum that incorporated inquiry-driven, object-based learning; developing inclusive approaches for English Language Learners; and bringing satellite programs to libraries, schools, and community based organizations to reduce barriers and increase participation.

The Citizenship Project provides a rich example of how museums can become relevant and essential to the communities they are striving to engage and support. This Reader Guide, developed in conjunction with the author, invites us to consider and discuss the following questions within the context of an overall framework: How might we activate our collections and connected pedagogy to support and empower immigrants and native-born American citizens to become more civically engaged and knowledgeable?

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You can [access the article online](#) through our publishing partner Taylor & Francis's *Journal of Museum Education* web page.

### **Community**

- Which communities would you like to further engage through civics-related programs? Why?
- What relationships do you already have with these communities? How could you learn more about what interests/needs they have around these issues (civics, citizenship, democracy, historical representation, etc.)?
- What new connections would you like to make with communities around these topics?

### **Collections**

- As you consider your collections, which pieces do you think will spark inviting and engaging dialogue, build vocabulary, and connect to civics themes?
- The Citizenship Project provides a distinctly curated experience in the museum, one that highlights the way certain objects can be used to diversify traditional American history narratives and crosses the boundaries of a single exhibit or section. What kinds of opportunities might you find to layer your own curated experiences on top of the exhibitions or more traditional experiences in your museum?

### **Pedagogy and Content**

- Nagawiecki mentions "text-to-self" connections, inviting participants to add their personal experiences to the meaning of the work, as a way to help future citizens feel ownership over their adopted nation's narrative.
  - How are you using, or how might you use "text-to-self" meaning making?
  - How could you enrich this for your communities?
- How do you currently plan and prepare to create inclusive programs for English Language Learners? Consider everything from printed materials to multilingual staff and volunteers, to pedagogical approach. How might you do more?
- The Civics portion of the Naturalization Test includes 100 questions, each with a set of acceptable answers. In order to be approved for citizenship, applicants must answer at least 6 out of 10 correctly, in an oral interview format. Review the test, [here](#).
  - What stories and perspectives do you think are missing from the narrative?
  - What are some of the ways that you could add to make it more polyvocal, presenting a variety of perspectives? Perhaps you want to think about collections you have that challenge

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or add nuance. Perhaps a dialogic approach that invites participants to make “text-to-self” connections to one of the questions could lead to deepened participants’ understanding and ownership of the material and the site.

### ***Access and Barriers***

- Consider possible barriers to your program and brainstorm ways to mitigate them:
  - Geography: Can people easily travel to your site? Are there sites that you could partner with that are closer?
  - Comfort/Welcoming: Have these groups historically been part of your community and expressed feeling welcomed and “at home” there?
  - Time of day: Are programs scheduled at times that your communities are able to access them?