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#### Letter From Generation Citizen's Co-Founder

t the outset of this strategic plan, in summer 2020, American democracy itself is at the precipice.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and its spread throughout the country, has laid bare the stark inequities that have pervaded this country for too long. It has also exposed the fragility of our public systems—with disproportionate consequences for Black and brown communities.

Simultaneously, the wave of protests in response to the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery—and so many more Black people before and since—has caused a reckoning in American society, forcing all of us to look at the ways that race has defined our democracy. In a country that was founded on a false myth that all (men) would be treated as equal, while the institution of slavery abounded, it is high time that we face our racial history, and confront our racial present.

Generation Citizen's (GC) focus at its founding was to transform civics education by educating young people to be active and engaged citizens through an approach we call "Action Civics."

Our mission has been to ensure that every student in the United States receives an effective Action Civics education,

which provides them with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate in our democracy as active citizens. To date, we've engaged over 90,000 young people across the country in this work.

Transforming civics education remains vital work. Yet, in the context of what Generation Citizen has learned over the last eleven years, and the realities and contours of our American democracy today, we know the work must evolve and grow bolder moving forward.

The process of crafting this strategic plan began before the major crises of 2020 emerged. However, the problems of racial and social inequity that have been amplified this year are not new. Generation Citizen sought to intentionally center racial equity in our new strategic plan before the pandemic and protests brought issues of structural racism to mainstream media and conversations, though our nation's current racial reckoning makes that intention all the more urgent and critical. Our five-year plan enables GC to be responsive to this moment while also articulating a long-term vision centered on justice and equality.

This strategic plan is itself the result of an organizational evolution, as our board and staff become more representative of people of the global majority, and as we continue to engage with issues of racial equity internally and externally. This plan also launches as GC undergoes a change in leadership, as I step down from the CEO position. I founded this organization as a 22-year-old white male in 2009. While I attempted to be conscious of power and race dynamics and inequities from the onset of GC's existence, I had many blindspots, which have no doubt influenced the organization's history.

GC has indisputably done good work, and we must do better going forward—by our young people, by our staff, by our communities, and by our country. I am hopeful that this plan positions GC to as a leader in Action Civics over the next decade and beyond. I am also hopeful that an effective CEO transition will demonstrate the sustainability of this organization beyond any one person or leader.

The societal obligation emerging from this year of reckoning is to ensure that we are reborn a different country: one of "liberty and justice for all." A state that responds to its people and that actively promotes freedom and the common good will be

necessary. In order for this to happen, our education system will need to place participatory democracy at the foundation of its very mission. An effective civics education must recognize the lived experiences of young people—and ensure that they are at the center of re-imagining a new reality is imperative.

It is this work that Generation Citizen will look to lead in the next five years. We recognize that re-envisioning our democracy will be complex and require a great number of individuals, organizations, and elected leaders to work together. Generation Citizen, and its work to place democracy in the very fabric of our education system, must be front and center in these efforts.

**Scott Warren** 

Co-Founder of Generation Citizen

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#### **MISSION & VISION**

Our mission is to transform civics education so that young people are equipped and inspired to exercise their civic power. We envision a just, inclusive democracy that is responsive to all young people.

GC's **CORE VALUES** reflect the principles we believe are necessary to bring GC's vision to reality. They embody the spirit of GC as an organization, both in what we do and how we accomplish our goals. GC strives for all staff and stakeholders to model these values at all times–in the classroom, within our communities, and across the nation:



#### GRASSROOTS CHANGE:

Every individual has a voice and the potential to change their communities. We believe all people play a role in the development of their communities and that meaningful change grows from local and personal knowledge.



#### **SYSTEMIC IMPACT:**

We believe in big change and in order for that to happen, we have to start by addressing root causes of problems instead of focusing on surface-level symptoms.



#### COLLABORATION & DIVERSITY:

Our differences make us stronger. Our work is strengthened by incorporating multiple points of view into everything we do. We respect and embrace diverse backgrounds, perspectives, insights, and experiences.



#### **ACTION:**

We learn by doing. We believe that the process of trying can teach us as much as achieving our outcome. At the same time, we think carefully about how to accomplish our goals and value learning from failure as much as celebrating success.



#### **OPEN MINDEDNESS:**

We are always learning and growing. We do not have all of the answers, and there are many solutions. We must be curious, listen, reflect, make changes, and operate with humility in order to achieve our goals.

#### HISTORY

Generation Citizen's work began in 2009 when two college students—buoyed by a belief in the power of youth voice—banded together to develop and teach an Action Civics curriculum to students in four Providence, Rhode Island public school classrooms. Since then, the organization has delivered its comprehensive Action Civics curriculum to more than 90,000 students in over ten states, and engaged in robust policy and advocacy work—becoming one of the pre-eminent civics education organizations in the country.





#### **GC BY THE NUMBERS**

Since GC's Founding in 2009-10:

States with GC partnering schools

96,162

Students educated

1,557

**Teachers** 

3,816

Classes and Action Civics projects

#### Student Demographics:



On average, 73% of GC students are low-income, receiving free or reduced school lunch



Approximately 79% of GC students identify as persons of color



57% of GC students speak a language other than English at home

#### THE PROBLEM

America faces the reality of an unjust and unequal democracy.

Despite the idealistic promises of an American nation founded with declarations of equality, the political and economic system was historically designed to privilege, include, and prioritize the power and well-being of certain groups over others.

This systemic marginalization of communities of color and low-income communities has resulted in a lack of equitable representation and political power at all levels of government, in addition to the perpetuation of policies that disadvantage, and often actively oppress individuals in those communities. As a result, our democracy is not as strong as it can be when all people can bring their unique perspective to the public sphere.

Additionally, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, which measures 60 indicators across categories like political participation and democratic political culture, the United States' democracy continues to erode, and is now officially a "flawed democracy."

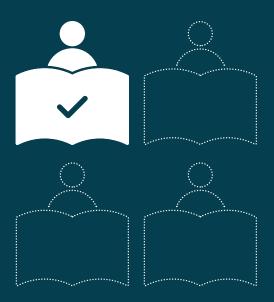
The road to a more equitable democracy begins with our schools—institutions whose historical purpose has always been to educate the next generation of citizens. And yet, civics education is not prioritized in our schools, and when it is taught, it often fails to inspire and engage young people to work towards a robust, participatory, and inclusive democracy.

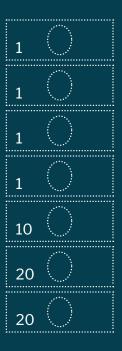
The conventional approach to civics education in schools is not relevant to students' lived experiences, does not account for historical and current inequities in power and privilege, and does not promote conditions for long-term political, racial, and economic equality. Often taking place in classrooms with culturally and racially segregated student bodies, this kind of civics education relies on memorized and rote recitations of facts without opportunities for young people to explore the relevance of civic education to their lives.

The lasting effects of this faulty approach are evident in both the lives of youth whose communities are furthest from formal power-sharing, as well as those in power who are the furthest from acknowledging the oppression and inequality that have defined American democracy. Relatedly, an inequitable distribution of resources across districts and schools means that students from marginalized communities are less likely to have the opportunity to be engaged with relevant, high-quality, experiential civics education in their schools. An analysis of recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) statistics demonstrated that white students and students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds received more of the promising practices for civics than other students.

A report from the American Political Science Association found that the preferences of constituents in the bottom fifth of the income distribution have **little or no effect** on the votes of their senators.

Fewer than 1 in 4 students reach a "proficient" score in civics on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).





The average investment per student in civics education is 5 cents.

(compared to \$54 per student for STEM)

**(5)** 

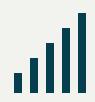


#### THEORY OF CHANGE

in which all young people exercise their civic power to create a just, inclusive, responsive democracy.

#### THEORY OF CHANGE

#### **GC PROVIDES...**



#### **Deep Investment In Educators**

Professional development for educators to engage in equity-centered Action Civics pedagogy and practices with their students.



#### **Youth Leadership Development and Engagement**

Opportunities for young people to apply their Action Civics experiences to power the movement to transform civics education.



#### **Robust Policy and Advocacy Campaigns**

Advocacy for policies at the state and federal level that ensure all young people receive an equity-centered civics education in school.

#### TO CATALYZE...

#### **Culture Change:**

- » Educators are effective at facilitating Action Civics that takes into account systemic oppression, power, and privilege, and centers youth voices in the classroom.
- » Young people stay politically and civically active outside of the classroom.
- » Schools integrate Action Civics pedagogies and practices into broader school culture.
- » State legislators see Action Civics as a critical component of education and democratic reform.

#### TO ACHIEVE...

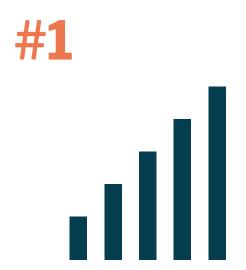
A just, inclusive democracy that is responsive to all young people.

#### **Systems Change:**

- » School districts adopt Action Civics into district civic learning and equity goals.
- » State legislation mandates that teachers are supported and have resources to facilitate Action Civics in schools
- » States develop standard curricula and assessments for equity-based Action Civics.
- » Federal education mandates and funding lead to Action Civics pedagogy and content being scaled nationwide.

#### STRATEGIC PLAN OVERVIEW

Over the next five years, GC will deploy three initiatives to advance its mission and vision:



Invest deeply in educators to center democracy and equity in Action Civics pedagogy and practices. GC will provide high-quality curricula and teacher training and supports that are culturally responsive, antiracist, strengths-based, and tailored to meet community needs.



Lead a national campaign to ensure access to equity-centered civics education on state and federal level. GC will also work to ensure that Action Civics is viewed as a necessary reform for the health of the country's democracy.



Engage young people as leaders and decision makers. GC will invest in young people as Action Civics alumni to help lead policy and advocacy campaigns across the country and ensure young people are key stakeholders and decision-makers throughout our organization.

## STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

n 2019-20, Generation Citizen contracted with Nonprofit Solutions Associates (the consulting team) to facilitate this strategic planning process. The consulting team was selected due to their wealth of experience in strategic planning with organizations engaged in similar work, and their deep commitment to supporting social change organizations in centering racial equity.

The consulting team led the process in partnership with a fifteen-member strategic planning team comprised of staff and board members, selected with attention to diversity by race/ethnicity as well as role and length of time with the organization. The strategic planning team was responsible for finalizing the key strategic questions; providing input on the assessment process and stakeholders to be engaged; interpreting findings; developing strategic direction proposals; and developing preliminary goals and strategies for the final strategic plan.





**INITIATIVE #1** 

### INVEST DEEPLY IN EDUCATORS

to Center Democracy and Equity in Action Civics Pedagogy and Practices

**STRATEGIC DIRECTION:** GC will deliver best-in-class programming focused on training and supporting educators in Action Civics pedagogy and practices.

#### **GOALS:**

- **1. Prioritize Teacher Experience and Program Quality.** To ensure the highest program quality, GC's curriculum and professional development will honor teacher expertise, allow them to customize and adapt content as needed, and promote their ability to facilitate Action Civics through a culturally responsive, anti-racist, and strengths-based lens.
- **2. Invest in Teacher Leadership.** GC will cultivate and develop the leadership of teachers so that they become leaders on Action Civics within their schools and districts, and skilled and effective advocates for Action Civics adoption at the local, state, and federal level.

#### **BY 2025...**



95% of new GC teachers demonstrate growth in their ability to facilitate civic learning that takes into account systemic oppression, power, and privilege.



90% of new and 95% of returning GC teachers are highly effective at facilitating high-quality Action Civics, including facilitating project-based learning, democratic classroom culture, and discussion of controversial issues in the classroom.



90% of GC students increase their civic knowledge, skills, and motivation to be able to better understand, analyze and take strategic action on issues of systemic inequity in their schools and communities.



90% of GC students experience feeling greater agency in their classrooms, schools, and communities.

#### **Democracy Coach Program Model**

Generation Citizen's programming began in 2009 with our Democracy Coach (DC) Program. Trained college student volunteers (Democracy Coaches) were partnered with teachers to implement Action Civics in the classroom. Over the past several years, GC learned from our data that while volunteers undoubtedly had a positive impact in the classroom—teachers are the most important factor in students' Action Civics experiences—and have the power to influence school culture change beyond the GC classroom or a single GC semester.

At the outset of this new plan, GC will be ending its decade-long DC program and closing partner college chapters in 2020-21, as we shift resources toward teacher training and engagement. GC will continue engaging our thousands of dedicated DC alumni across the country as leaders and advocates for Action Civics.





**STRATEGIC DIRECTION:** GC will focus its programmatic resources on partnerships where there is an opportunity to influence or be a part of meaningful school-wide and/or district-wide transformation.

#### **GOALS:**

3. Prioritize School Partnerships Based on Need and Investment. In order to maximize our long-term impact on schools and districts, GC will prioritize partners where there is: 1) a lack of existing resources for Action Civics; 2) deep investment from leadership; 3) an opportunity to promote the long-term and sustainable practice of Action Civics pedagogy in the school/district; and 4) an opportunity to influence broader district and/or state adoption of Action Civics in the region.

**4.Test Action Civics as a Catalyst for Democratic School Culture.** GC will work to understand whether and how Action Civics spurs a more democratic culture in schools (in addition to positively influencing individual classroom culture), recognizing the connection between democratic school culture and students' long-term civic engagement.

#### BY 2025...



85% of GC school partners are engaged in partnerships in which a school commits to ensuring all students in at least one grade level receive Action Civics.



80% of school districts adopt Action Civics into their district-wide curriculum, curricular frameworks and standards, and/or graduation requirements for students.



A majority of former GC school and district partners continue to practice Action Civics after GC concludes its formal partnership with them.



90% of GC school and district partners share a vision for more democratic school culture.



#### **INITIATIVE #2**

## LEAD A NATIONAL POLICY CAMPAIGN to Ensure Access to Equity-Based Civics

**STRATEGIC DIRECTION:** GC will lead a state and federal policy campaign to ensure the prioritization of Action Civics education: pushing for equitable implementation of Action Civics in school districts and resources for high-quality teacher professional development and assessment.

#### **GOALS:**

- **1.** Advance State Level Policy. To advance new civics education policies at the state level, GC will lead or actively participate in legislative and administrative efforts in states with GC staff, as well as others across the country based on strategic opportunity and interest from the state.
- **2. Influence Federal Level Policy and Advocacy.** To advance civics education at the federal level, GC will lead or actively participate in advocacy to ensure that Action Civics education is prioritized by the next presidential administration.

#### BY 2025...



More than ten new states have passed comprehensive experiential civics education legislation or implemented a change at the executive level, which prioritizes experiential civics education.



GC has developed a national network for coaching and mobilizing our teachers, youth alumni, parents/family members, and other stakeholders to advance Action Civics.



Civics education has been prioritized in the reauthorization of the banner federal education law: ESSA (The Every Student Succeeds Act).



Federal civics legislation has been passed that includes funding for teacher professional development, student-led civics projects, evaluation and accountability, and state and district-level support.

**STRATEGIC DIRECTION:** By creating a powerful, public narrative around Action Civics, GC will lead in building the field of civics education to be equity-centered.

#### BY 2025...



The civics education field regards GC as a go-to organization for shaping a public narrative, and providing policy research for, how and why to prioritize equity in secondary school civics education.

#### **GOALS:**

**3. Push the Civics Field Towards Equity.** Equity-centered Action Civics education—defined as equitable resource allocation, culturally relevant curriculum, and the promotion of policies that create democratic, non-punitive learning environments for all students—will be seen by policymakers and education officials as a necessary, effective reform to improve the political system.

**4.Expand the Civics Field.** GC will cultivate deeper relationships in the broader democracy, racial equity, and education fields in order to increase the level of interest, prioritization of, and engagement in Action Civics education from organizations and coalitions in those fields.



Funders prioritize civics education not as a niche education issue but as a critical, systemic lever for building a more equitable democracy.



Additional stakeholders outside the civics education field—representing diverse sectors, including education reform, democracy reform, and youth organizing—share the understanding that equity-centered Action Civics is a necessary and effective education and democracy reform.



#### **INITIATIVE #3**

## ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE AS LEADERS and Decision-Makers

**STRATEGIC DIRECTION:** GC will facilitate and support young people to play a leadership role in advocating for federal, state, and local policies and practices aimed at transforming education and participatory democracy.

#### **GOALS:**

**1. Mobilize Young People in Policy & Advocacy.** GC will invest in a cohort of student alumni from GC classrooms across the country to help advance our policy and advocacy goals and build a youth-centered movement for Action Civics.

#### BY 2025...



Young people are actively engaged in leading, organizing, and participating in GC policy and advocacy campaigns at the local, state, and national levels.



GC has a national map or database of GC student alumni, to help build a connected network of youth changemakers and to follow their journeys beyond the Action Civics classroom.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION: GC will diversify the membership of our National Board of Directors and Local Advisory Boards in addition to strengthening board skills and competencies in order to meet the direction of the new strategic plan. This will include partnering with young people on organizational governance and decision-making, in order to hold true to organizational values and GC's belief in young people's power and expertise.

#### **GOALS:**

**2. Engage Youth in Organizational Decision-Making.** GC will facilitate structures and supports for youth to have an active role in influencing critical organizational decisions (this may include governance, program design and planning, new initiatives, policy agenda, organizing policy campaigns, annual budget, and senior leadership hires).

#### BY 2025...



GC has significant and sustained youth representation on GC's National and Local Advisory Boards and policy advisory councils.

#### Movement to Lower the Voting Age to 16

In 2015, Generation Citizen founded Vote16USA (www.vote16usa.org), which became a national hub for information and advocacy efforts focused on lowering the voting age to 16 for local elections. Among other powerful reasons for lowering the voting age, the reform would incentivize schools to prioritize civic learning if their students could vote.

Over the last five years, Vote16 has grown into a nationwide movement. The initiative came within four points of passing a ballot referendum in San Francisco in 2016; nearly passed in Washington, DC; gained national media attention; and witnessed a majority of House Democrats support its passage as part of HR1, the For the People Act. The work continues in 2020 elections, and several cities seem poised to lower their voting age.

In order to ensure that the initiative has more room to grow, GC will be working with Vote16USA to find a new home by the end of this 2020-25 strategic plan. GC believes the movement will be best served by an organization in which all energy can be directed toward the initiative's success. We are proud of what the Vote16 initiative has accomplished, will continue to support the initiative, and look forward to a day in which all 16 and 17 year olds in this country can vote.







In addition to our work to advance equity externally—within civics education programming and policies respectively—through this new strategic plan, GC is also committing to advancing equity inside our organization.

To that end, GC will invest in understanding how race, power, and privilege affects organizational culture. From there, we will create and maintain internal practices, policies and systems that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion and that elevate the leadership of employees of all professional levels, racial identities, and lived experiences.

#### PRIORITIES AND STRATEGIES:

#### 1. Hire & Retain Racially Diverse and Mission-Driven

**Talent.** GC will foster a strong equity-centric employer culture that attracts racially diverse, mission-driven talent into the civics education community from various fields and sectors, such as youth organizing, youth development, political campaigns, racial justice, and education.

**2. Strengthen Staff DEI Competencies.** Through robust training, GC employees will understand how race, power, and privilege affect organizational culture and the advancement of GC's mission, so that all employees develop and promote cultural humility, as well as the anti-racist knowledge, skills and mindsets necessary to execute their work in alignment with organizational values.

#### 3. Foster an Equitable and Inclusive Organizational Culture.

GC will maintain standardized talent and equity systems across departments and teams, so that each employee has a consistent, shared and positive experience.

**4.Share Power and Decision-Making.** GC will elevate employee leadership across all professional levels, racial identities, and lived experiences, so that GC's work and mission benefit from a variety of perspectives and experiences, and organizational decision-making is deeply informed by diverse stakeholders.

#### BY 2025...



GC has increased racial diversity among our workforce, particularly in leadership and people management positions, and increased average tenure for employees who identify as people of color.



GC managers engage in effective, inclusive and people-focused people management practices.



GC has a strong culture of learning and reflection, in which employees (and especially organizational leaders) are consistently able to identify and tackle the underlying root causes of challenges.



GC embodies a focus on employee wellness, with a culture and programs that support it.



GC employees experience high levels of agency in their ability to influence or make decisions in the organization.

## DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

In the fall of 2018, Generation Citizen formed a staff Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Committee (DEIAC). This body has played a pivotal role in advising the organization on equity issues, elevating staff trends and concerns, and pushing GC to become a more anti-racist organization. The fact that this strategic plan now centers racial equity firmly at its foundation is a core testament to the work the body has undertaken.

We look forward to future iterations of the committee continuing to help ensure that the organization lives up to the commitments and vision boldly laid out in this plan.





## Key Terms Defined

#### **Action Civics**

Action Civics is a collaborative, project-based approach to civics education in which young people learn about democracy by actively working to address issues in their own communities. Action Civics fosters student development of the civic skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for 21st-century democratic practice.

#### Action Civics Is Defined By:

- » Student-led projects
- » Real-world personal issues
- » Political action towards lasting change
- » Reflection on impact and approach

#### **Action Civics Asks Students To:**

- » Examine their community
- » Identify issues
- » Research
- » Strategize
- » Take action
- » Reflect

#### **Democratic Classrooms**

GC's Action Civics program seeks to do more than deliver civics and support young people in completing civic action projects—it aspires to promote democratic environments in the very places in which students engage with the Action Civics process: classrooms and school buildings. Practices to promote democratic classrooms and schools is a core part of GC's professional development focus for partner teachers.

Democratic classrooms and schools prepare students for active engagement in the civic life of their communities by giving students the opportunity to practice building, contributing to, and maintaining a democracy within a classroom or school building. At the heart of this endeavor is fostering students' sense of belonging to a community and cultivating their relationships with peers, teachers, administrators, and others in the classroom or school environment so that students develop their identities and skills as change agents.

#### **Equity**

GC defines equity as the intentional creation of learning and organizational environments that not only explicitly recognize the historic marginalization of lower-income communities, students of color, and rural communities, but also ensures the culturally relevant preparation of those communities and students for lifelong

civic participation. GC further recognizes equity as a strategy to work towards equally high outcomes of access and opportunities for all individuals, regardless of any social or cultural factor, and through which power and agency is affirmed for all.

In this strategic plan, GC prioritizes racial equity specifically for a number of reasons. Firstly, racial inequities persist in every single system in this country, from healthcare to education to housing and transportation. Secondly, other dimensions of identity, including gender, sexuality, ability, income, age, and more, also experience inequities based on race. Leading with racial equity enables a focus on individual, institutional and structural systems of oppression that have applications for other marginalized groups. Finally, this is a strategic choice: leading with race allows for a specific focus and intentional allocation of resources.



C is launching this strategic plan while the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage our public health system, schools, and the global economy, causing unprecedented uncertainty. GC does not, nor does anyone, know what schools will look like in the upcoming school year and beyond. The reaction of the philanthropic sector to this pandemic also remains uncertain as the economy fluctuates.

While GC believes this plan provides an ambitious and necessary response to the moment, the uncertainty makes it challenging to be prescriptive about the progression of the strategic plan and what the world might look like in 2025. The unpredictability of school re-opening, public budgets, and philanthropic priorities require that flexibility becomes a strategy in its own right. To that end, this plan does not contain five years worth of budgets, or exact staffing structures. Rather, it describes strategic directions: providing organizational guidance, defining future investments, and determining benchmarks that will provide further direction.

For the first two years of the new strategic plan (2020-22), GC has identified the below areas of capacity, infrastructure and content expertise as priority needs for investment - building on the current team and operational infrastructure:

- » Digital Education: Staffing and/or consultants to build platforms, and infrastructure to enable virtual Action Civics facilitation and teacher/student engagement.
- » Evaluation: Tools and designs to support the evaluation of our program's impact, including new areas like virtual program delivery and youth engagement programming, and potential for longitudinal evaluation and randomized control trials.
- » Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in Curricular Content: Consultants and training to support curricular development and revisions through a DEI lens.
- » Teacher Professional Development (PD): Consultants and training to support updates to teacher PD content and delivery.

- » Campaign Management: Staffing and/or consultants to bring campaign management expertise and capacity to key state-level policy efforts.
- Youth Organizing and Training: Staffing and/or consultants to bring youth organizing expertise and capacity to our work with student alumni, and training around policy and advocacy skills.
- Youth Stipends: Compensation for young people engaging in fellowships or other engagement activities with GC.
- » Human Resources & Talent: Staffing and/or consultants to build capacity for GC's human resources and talent work with a deep focus on equity.
- » Staff Coaching and Training: Professional development for GC's employees and stakeholders, specifically around anti-racist competencies and practices.

