

## An EAA Interview with the 2021 Franklin R. Buchanan Prizewinner Rylan Sekiguchi for *What Does It Mean to Be an American?*



This is our twenty-fifth consecutive interview with winners of the Franklin R. Buchanan Prize, awarded annually to recognize an outstanding pedagogical, instructional, or curriculum publication on Asia designed for K–12 and college undergraduate instructors and students. This year’s winner, for the third time in the award’s history, is Rylan Sekiguchi of the Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE) for the online curriculum package *What Does It Mean to Be an American?* Sekiguchi is Manager of Curriculum and Instructional Design at SPICE. He has authored or coauthored more than a dozen curriculum units for SPICE, including the 2010 Buchanan prizewinners *Uncovering North Korea* and *US–South Korean Relations*, and worked on other media projects at SPICE, such as the 2015 Buchanan prizewinning

short films and curriculum *My Cambodia* and *My Cambodian America*.

Developed by the Mineta Legacy Project in partnership with SPICE, this free educational curriculum offers six lessons for educators, high school, and college students to examine what it means to be American. In the interview that follows, Sekiguchi discusses the curriculum and highlights some lessons and features of the project.



**Lucien Ellington:** Rylan, congratulations on winning the Franklin Buchanan Prize again! Please share with our readers the factors that motivated you and your colleagues at SPICE to conceptualize and then create *What Does It Mean to Be an American?*

**Rylan Sekiguchi:** Thanks, Lucien. It’s an honor to receive the Buchanan Prize, and it’s always a pleasure and an honor to be interviewed by you. Thank you for inviting me to do this!

*What Does It Mean to Be an American?* has a somewhat-atypical origin story, at least by SPICE standards. We were approached by a team of filmmakers who were in the early stages of making a documentary about Norman Mineta, former member of Congress and the first Asian-American to serve in a presidential cabinet. They asked us to create a curriculum that could function as a classroom companion to the film.

SPICE has developed many film companions over the years, but this project was unique in two important respects: First, we decided to develop the curriculum in tandem with the film. That is, we were writing the curriculum at the same time that the filmmakers were creating the documentary. This isn’t how it normally works, so it was a bit unusual, but also exciting and liberating. Our parallel development strategy afforded us as curriculum designers some really special opportunities that we don’t usually have when working on a project like this. For example, we were able to piggyback on the film’s interviews and ask curriculum-targeted questions to some prominent figures. It’s thanks to this tandem setup—and our very close coordination with our collaborators—that we were able to create curriculum-specific videos with people like President Bill Clinton, President George W. Bush, Secretary Norman Mineta, and several members of Congress. That was a truly memorable experience.

The second unique aspect of this project was how extremely open-minded and creative the filmmakers were in terms of embracing a nonstandard scope for this project. In particular, they didn’t insist the curriculum be built around the film, so long as it was related to the

themes of the film. This more flexible approach allowed us the freedom to think outside the box and visualize a curriculum that would truly stand on its own. Rather than having to focus narrowly on the film’s subject or rely on the film’s content, we began to envision something much broader in scope, more versatile in a classroom context, and useful to a broader range of teachers.

**Lucien:** Your digital curricular package, which is free of charge for all users and includes twenty-three different videos, tutorials for teachers, and many other features, consists of six major educational components. Please provide readers with a brief synopsis of each component and, if you choose, rationales for your selection of each component.

**Rylan:** First, let me mention that the curriculum is accessible online at [www.whatdoesitmeantobeanamerican.com](http://www.whatdoesitmeantobeanamerican.com). I hope your readers check it out! As you said, it’s completely free to use, and I think many educators—especially at the high school and college levels—will find something valuable for their teaching. Each lesson functions as a standalone resource, so educators can explore whatever lesson topic is most relevant for their teaching. For those who want to dive right in, we have a “Get Started” page (<https://tinyurl.com/73jvywnv>) that orients new users to the website.

The curriculum is divided into six lessons: Immigration, Civil Liberties & Equity, Civic Engagement, Justice & Reconciliation, Leadership, and US–Japan Relations. We chose these topics for two main reasons. First, they connect with major themes from Secretary Mineta’s life and career. And second, we think that each theme can act as an informative lens for students to examine the curriculum’s central question, “What does it mean to be an American?” I’ll introduce each lesson briefly.

**Immigration** (<https://tinyurl.com/3avydrr4>): The first lesson focuses on immigration, an ever-present force in US history. The country was founded by immigrants and their descendants, of course, and various waves of immigrants over the centuries have shaped the America of

today. This lesson explores that history. Students discuss the challenges and opportunities that immigrants have encountered—and still encounter—when settling in the United States, and they consider the roles that immigration, immigrant integration, and citizenship policies have played in the building of US society.

**Civil Liberties & Equity** (<https://tinyurl.com/4erhn3kz>): The second lesson explores civil liberties as an ideal, practice, and institution of modern democracy. It's especially fitting for government and civics courses, I think, but it also incorporates history and current events. Students assess the meaning and value of civil liberties, examine the contexts and conditions that have weakened civil liberties protections in the United States in the past, and delve into the history of the Japanese-American incarceration during World War II—a noteworthy civil liberties case study. In the second half of the lesson, students turn their attention to modern-day civil liberties and civil rights issues, and research a current-day issue of their choosing.

**Civic Engagement** (<https://tinyurl.com/ekstkwa>): In theory, students should already know that civic engagement is a vital ingredient for democratic societies. But what exactly constitutes civic engagement, and how can ordinary people take part in civic life? In this lesson, students discuss the meaning of civic engagement, differentiate among several “types” of civic engagement, and consider the many different ways—governmental and nongovernmental—that everyday Americans can be civically engaged. My favorite parts of the lesson are the case studies of lesser-known Americans in history whose civic engagement ultimately helped advance democracy in the United States. I think these examples reaffirm for students that everyone can make a difference in their communities.

**Justice & Reconciliation** (<https://tinyurl.com/4r935seu>): At its core, this lesson examines the role that justice and reconciliation play in US society. As a case study, students learn about the Japanese-American redress movement, which spanned the 1960s to 1980s, and assess its value to both the Japanese-American community and to US society broadly. They then research various modern-day social justice issues and generate their own ideas for how to constructively address these issues. This lesson also includes six optional extension activities for teachers who want to dig deeper into the topic of justice and reconciliation.

**Leadership** (<https://tinyurl.com/y57bwxfm>): In this lesson, students reflect on the characteristics of leadership through the lens of their own life experiences. Through self-reflection and discussion, they explore and refine their ideas about leadership, such as the characteristics of effective leadership and how to best foster those qualities in themselves and others. They are also introduced to a few basic leadership theories to help structure and expand the way they think about leadership. I think this lesson is best suited for an actual leadership class, but parts of it may also be useful in a government or civics course—particularly the video interviews with US presidents and legislators.

**US–Japan Relations** (<https://tinyurl.com/2yr6tmhk>): The final lesson turns its gaze outward toward America's relationships abroad. In particular, this lesson introduces students to the history and current state of US–Japan relations—one of the numerous international relationships the United States has with other nations and international organizations. Students conduct research to learn about six different facets of modern US–Japan relations and assess how each facet affects the overall relationship. At the end of the lesson, students reflect on the role that they themselves can play in bridging together different

communities, societies, and cultures, whether internationally or even within their own neighborhood.

**Lucien:** *After spending considerable time at your site, in my opinion, the content and pedagogy in What Does It Mean to Be an American? is extensive enough that it could serve as a standalone high school or college course. You also make a plausible case for the applicability of all or part of What Does It Mean to Be an American? for noneducator audiences. Do your metrics or reactions from users indicate that either, or both, of these applications are occurring?*

**Rylan:** That's a good question. For the first part of your question—whether our website is being used as the primary basis for any high school or college courses—we unfortunately don't know the answer to that. I personally haven't heard about this happening yet, and we don't have the data to know for sure.

We do have some idea of how our site is used, however. We often see page data tracked back to high school and college LMS platforms, which tells us that teachers have incorporated certain standalone activities into their lesson plans. The navigation data tell us that different users access the site in different ways. For example, some teachers are accessing several activities at a time, whereas others are only accessing one particular activity. In any case, the metrics suggest that most users are primarily interested in one lesson specifically. I think that makes sense, given how varied the lesson topics are.

As for the second part of your question—regarding how many non-educators use our site—we unfortunately don't have exact numbers for this, either, since we don't require all our website users to create an account. Our best guess is that about 80 percent of our nonstudent users are educators who teach at schools and universities, and about 20 percent are

## EAA DIGEST

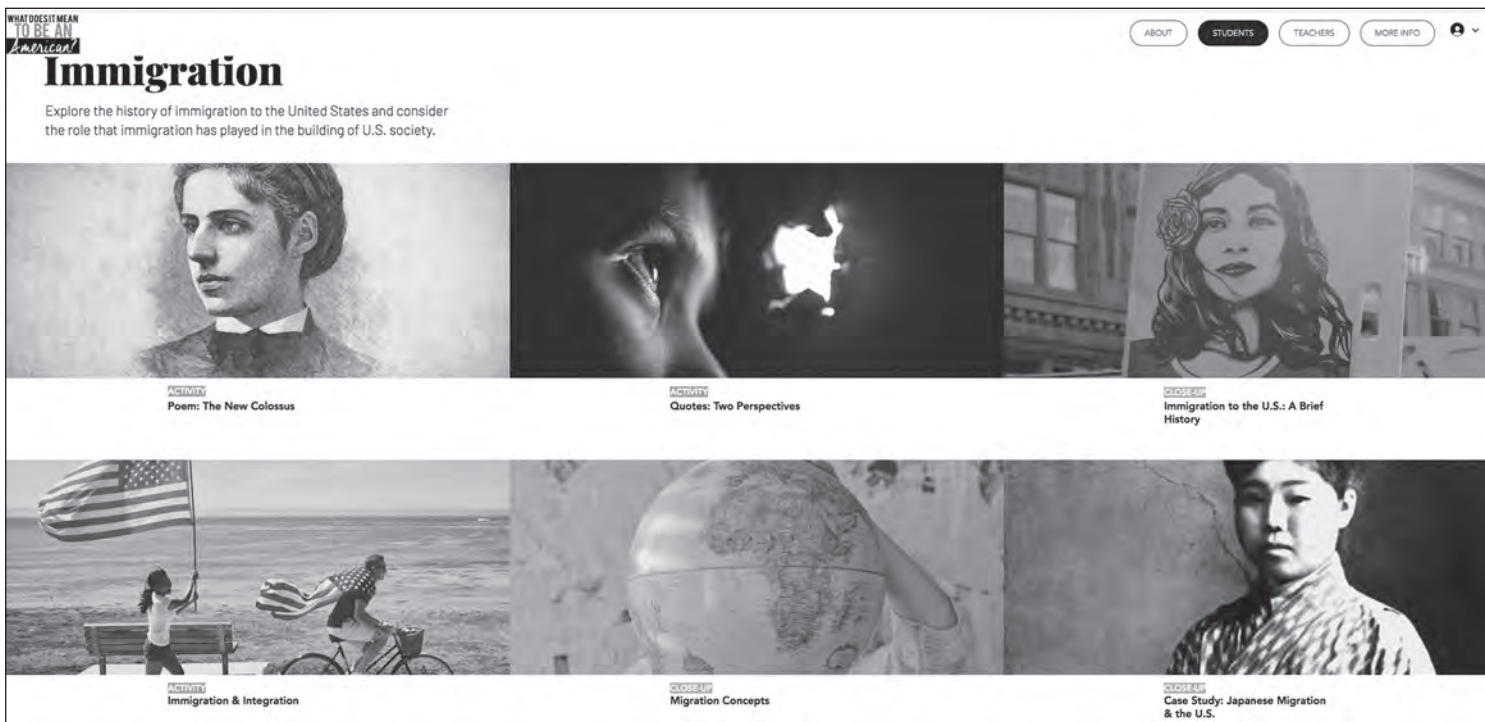
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Screen capture from the *What Does It Mean to Be an American* website/Immigration at <https://tinyurl.com/fh7jvevp>.

other community members. We do know of community organizations that use our curriculum in their educational outreach, so it is definitely happening.

**Lucien:** *As an experienced educator and curriculum designer, you certainly know that, typically, educators pick and choose parts of curriculum packages that best fit their needs, and you justifiably promote this option in your introduction. Over half of EAA readers teach history or other social sciences at the high school or college level. More EAA readers who are high school teachers than one might imagine also teach American history and civics, as well as world history.*

*If you are comfortable sharing what appears to be the two or three most popular components for teachers and students thus far since you've published What Does It Mean to Be an American? this is practical information that, in my opinion, would especially interest our readers.*

**Rylan:** In terms of the six lessons, our most visited module is the Immigration lesson (<https://tinyurl.com/3avydrr4>). With immigration being a prominent topic in so many classrooms, I don't think this is a big surprise. In fact, it turns out that our most viewed video—*Students' Immigration Stories* (<https://tinyurl.com/yp8bkka8>)—is also part of the Immigration lesson.

On the other hand, if we compare the individual activities, the five most popular activities come from four different lessons, so it's a nice spread. Our most visited activities are:

**Immigration to the US: A Brief History**

<https://tinyurl.com/684rk4z6>

A substantial reading and group discussion exercise that examines how immigration to the US has shaped and been shaped by various government policies.

**The Japanese-American Incarceration**

<https://tinyurl.com/8d4ff62u>

An in-depth reading plus writing assignment about the World War II-era incarceration of Japanese-Americans.

**Migration Concepts**

<https://tinyurl.com/wtptmnvj>

A brief guide to key migration-related concepts and terminology, such as immigration versus emigration, “push-pull” factors, and so on.

**Exploring the Five Theories of Leadership**

<https://tinyurl.com/uuxfpymy>

A gallery walk activity in which students learn about five major theories of leadership: leadership as a trait, ability, skill, behavior, and relationship.

**Quotes about Civic Engagement**

<https://tinyurl.com/6sv99zwe>

A “card sorting”-type activity in which students read, discuss, and reflect on various famous quotes about civic engagement.

**Rylan:** Thank you so much to AAS for this recognition. It's such an honor. I'm proud of the curriculum we created, but the final product was only possible thanks to the talents and labor of many people. I'd be remiss not to acknowledge their incredible work. First, thank you to the team at the Mineta Legacy Project, especially Dianne Fukami, Debra Nakatomi, and Amy Watanabe. They were the visionaries who originated the idea for this curriculum, and they each contributed countless hours to make this project a success. Thanks also to Hannah Eaves and Monica Olivera, our brilliant web designers, who transformed our curriculum into the beautifully realized website we have today. I'm also grateful to SPICE Director Gary Mukai, whose perpetual behind-the-scenes support had a tremendous impact on this curriculum. And finally, I must thank Secretary Norman Mineta, not only for being the original inspiration for this project, but also for inspiring all of us every step of the way.

Thanks again for this opportunity, Lucien! I really appreciate the chance to share our curriculum with EAA readers. I hope they check out the curriculum, and I hope that many of them will discover something they can use in their own teaching!

**Lucien:** *Thanks for the interview, Rylan.* ■