

# Impact Evaluation Results: *Supreme Court Summer Institute*

## Introduction

The Supreme Court Summer Institute for Teachers (SCSI) is a six-day professional development program for middle and high school social studies teachers. Conducted by Street Law, Inc., and sponsored by the Supreme Court Historical Society, the program has trained more than 1200 teachers since its inception in 1995. The program is held each year in late June in Washington, DC, and includes a blend of content instruction and pedagogical practices aimed at improving the quantity and quality of teaching about the U.S. Supreme Court. The Institute covers information about the operations of the Supreme Court, current cases and constitutional issues, and the ways that media and interest groups interact with the Court. The Institute prepares teachers to conduct interactive strategies, including case studies, moot courts, deliberations (also called Structured Academic Controversies), and to use legal professionals as resource people in their classrooms. Participants come from across the United States and represent a wide variety of schools, geographic locations, student populations, and experience levels.

## Evaluation

In 2014, Street Law contracted with two independent evaluators from The College of William and Mary's School of Education, Jeremy Stoddard and Jason Chen, to evaluate the impact of the SCSI on participating teachers. Drs. Stoddard and Chen designed an evaluation that measured participants' confidence in employing the teaching methods the Institute focuses on and the frequency with which they use those methods, as well as their knowledge about the Supreme Court. Participants were surveyed both before and after their participation in the Institute (May 2015, June 2015, and May 2016), as was a control group of statistically similar teachers who had not yet attended the program (May 2016). All 60 Institute participants were invited to participate in the survey. There was a strong response rate: 58 participants fully completed the surveys before and just after the Institute, and 49 participants completed the survey a year later. The comparison group was 60 teachers who had been accepted to the 2016 Institute but had not yet attended; 54 participants from that cohort completed the survey. Drs. Stoddard and Chen analyzed the results and reported their findings to Street Law. Those findings are described below.

## Findings

### ***Confidence in Teaching Methods***

The participants were asked to reflect on how confident they were in their ability to use the pedagogical tools taught at the Institute. These included using moot courts, case studies,

deliberations, and collaborative group work to teach Supreme Court processes; teaching controversial issues; and integrating legal resource people. The average pre-Institute score was 4.04 (out of 6), or “somewhat confident” in using the Institute’s teaching strategies. At the end of the Institute, the participants rated themselves 5.34 (between “quite” and “completely” confident), and they retained this improvement a year later (rating themselves 5.25). There was also a significant difference between the post-Institute teachers and the control group, which rated themselves a 4.04

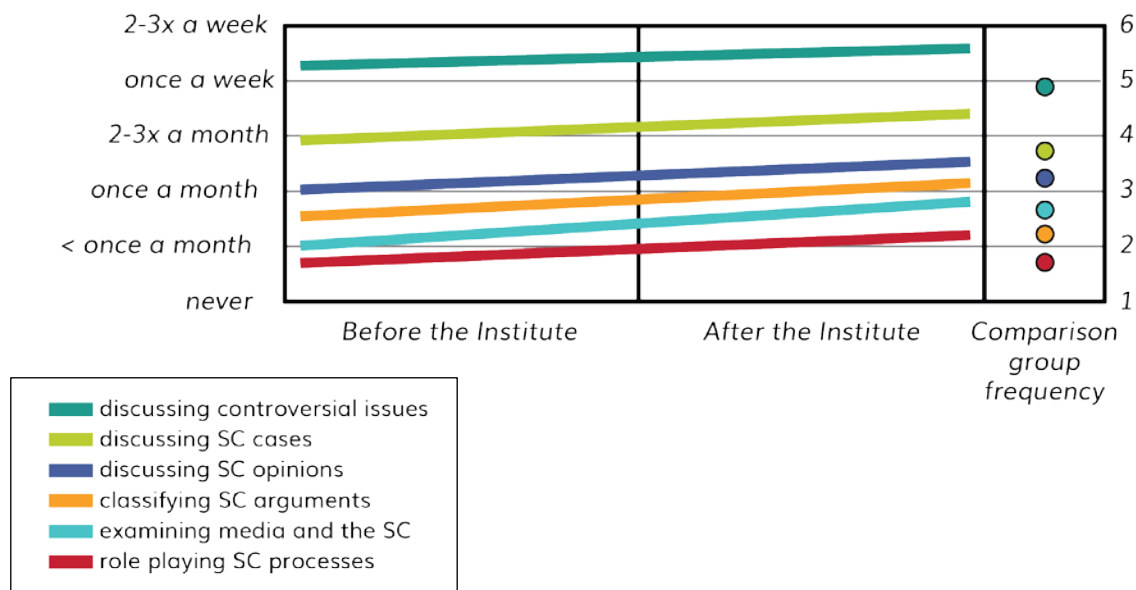


on the same scale. According to Drs. Stoddard and Chen, “Those who participated in the Institute not only showed long term growth as a result, but that they also reported being significantly more confident in using these strategies when compared to a similar group of teachers who had not yet participated in the Institute.” They went on to say “Overall, the Institute had a significant effect on the 2015 cohort’s confidence to teach about and with Institute topics and strategies, respectively.”

### **Frequency of Using Teaching Methods**

Street Law was also particularly interested in finding out whether participants used the Institute’s teaching strategies more after attending. In fact, teachers did use these strategies and content more in the year after they attended than they had previously. The most notable increases were seen in teachers using case study methods like classifying arguments; role playing Supreme Court processes; and studying interest groups, media coverage, and judicial philosophies. Not only did participants’ increase the frequency with which they used Institute strategies and content in class, but they also used these more frequently than the comparison group of similar teachers. They specifically used moot courts, case studies, and role-plays more frequently, and they discussed Supreme Court cases and controversial issues in general more often.

Teachers were asked to describe which strategies worked best in their classrooms. By far, the strategies most identified as successful were moot court activities and case studies. Many participants noted the perceived motivational effects and deeper understandings produced by student participation in moot courts. Numerous participants found the case study strategies to be more effective than previously-used methods in helping scaffold student understanding of the origins, constitutional arguments, and perspectives on cases. The most common barriers identified by participants to using the Institute strategies or content were not having time in their curriculum or not teaching a course that included court-related topics.



**Knowledge about the Supreme Court**

Participants took a 17-question test about the Supreme Court, its processes, recent cases, and concepts in constitutional law. Before attending the Institute, participants’ average score was 10.6. At the end of the Institute, their average score was 14.6. On the follow-up survey a year later, participants’ scores dropped a bit to 11.8, but remained higher than they were before the program. According to Drs. Stoddard and Chen, “it is not unexpected that the participants’ knowledge of the court would be strongest immediately following their immersive experience at the Institute.” To improve retention, they suggest providing a more in-depth reading list or suggesting resources such as a court-related news-aggregating service that participants could subscribe to.

The participants made larger gains (and retained those gains better) on some questions than others. The number of participants answering correctly increased on questions about typical majorities in Supreme Court rulings, the *certiorari* process, the role of the Supreme Court, and some aspects of media coverage of the Court. Two questions in particular were missed more frequently on the one-year-later survey than right after the Institute: one about the constitutional issue in a case from the previous Supreme Court Term and one about the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. It is possible that participants did not use this knowledge in their teaching during the school year, thereby failing to retain the gains made in these areas after the program.

**Additional Feedback**

Across the board, participants found the Institute to be very interesting and useful (average scores for *interest* were 5.6 out of 6.0 and average scores for *usefulness* were 5.7 out of 6). When asked for suggestions to improve the program, participants offered the following:

- adding more classroom materials for historic cases
- adding more classroom materials on current cases

- adding cases that align with particular courses, most frequently AP Government
- providing an online video library of Institute sessions or strategies
- offering post-Institute webinars to reinforce or extend Institute strategies and court materials
- an advanced Institute for previous participants
- help in recruiting and utilizing legal resource people

The participants were effective in sharing their new knowledge and strategies, as well. More than two-thirds reported sharing Institute materials with colleagues, and 19 participants reported conducting professional development sessions or activities. Another 19 participants reported integrating Institute-related content or strategies in their course and district curricula.

## Conclusion

The evaluation showed significant growth among Supreme Court Summer Institute participants in their confidence in using Institute pedagogical strategies and in teaching Institute-related content, as well as a corresponding significant increase in their reported frequency of using Institute-related strategies and materials. Institute participants also highly valued and enjoyed their participation in the Institute, with few participants identifying suggestions for how to change it.

Perhaps the most important finding is that the Institute appears to work well for all participants regardless of their years of teaching, level of education, grade level, or type of school or community in which they work. This illustrates the effectiveness of the design of the Institute for a variety of teachers.