

Constitution Day Activities as Community Engagement



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“Each educational institution that receives federal funds for a fiscal year shall hold an educational program on the United States Constitution on September 17 of such year for the Students served by the educational institution.”

Public Law 108-447, Consolidated Appropriates Act 2004

In 2005, Senator Robert Byrd added an unfunded mandate that required federally funded educational institutions to celebrate the United States Constitution every September 17 by having educational activities on it. What did this legislative act mean for colleges and universities? As Wilson puts it, “university administrators were rudely awakened from their civic slumbers by a ‘notice of implementation’ from the U.S. Department of Education (Winter 2006-7, 22).” While some scholars questioned the constitutionality of such an action by the federal government, almost two decades later Constitution Day continues to be a time across the country where public schools provide educational constitutional activities and events (Sanders, 2007).

Yet, any study of what Constitution Day educational practices are is a study of pluralism. While some may desire a more uniform pedagogy and set of practices for Constitution Day (Hardy et al., 2022), in a country that has shown low and stagnant knowledge of civics for the past half century (Niemi and June, 2005; Niemi and Smith, 2001), any increased instruction on the Constitution is desirable, if not likely to have a significant impact from one day or week of focused education. A review of the types of activities that colleges and universities is quite eclectic. For example, lamenting that “comprehensive and integrative instruction is scarce” when it comes to the Constitution, Hardy et al. explain how at Western Illinois University they are having the honors college students research the document and lead Constitution Day educational activities across campus. They call for honors colleges across the country to

likewise spearhead Constitution Day activities on their campuses (2022). Alternatively, Emporia State University in Kansas brought middle and high school students onto their campus for a public talk and break-out educational sessions on the theme of “Contested Rights” (Miracle et al., 2016). Land collects and suggests the variety of activities that can be and have been taken at primary, secondary and higher education institutions for Constitution Day. Among colleges and universities he claims the most common practices range from hosting a guest speaker or having a roundtable on the Constitution or some prominent court case over it to orchestrating a public reading of the document (which is something we routinely do at ATU) (February/March 2010, 19-20). Similarly, Whitmore offers another summary of the variety of activities at his and other colleges and universities that ranged from panel of professors at his own Simpson University to student posters (Delaware State University) or a Constitution Day jeopardy game rewarding students for their knowledge of the Constitution (El Centro College). He notes how this is to be expected, as the federal government went as far as it could by creating Constitution Day. For any common curriculum to be established, that would likely take state action (Spring 2007, 78-79). Roessing and El-Jourbagy outline how to turn Constitution Day into a weeklong celebration, offering a curriculum and explaining how to implement it on any college or university campus (Summer 2018). Simpson at the University of Illinois Chicago has similarly advocated a weeklong celebration that ties into doing a campus voting drive, as the fall semester is often election season (APSA Educate, November 2019). Exploring the variety of activities schools at the primary, secondary and higher education levels pursue does leave one agree with Whitmore that, “In the end, imagination is the limit for implementing educational programs on Constitution Day (Spring 2007, 79).”

What all this points to is the need to continue to share examples of Constitution Day activities for replication across colleges and universities. The goal need not be states implementing some common Constitutional curriculum for Constitution, but multiple Constitution Day practices and the sharing of best ones for replication across the country. In that spirit, below the civic, particularly community engagement practice of Arkansas Tech University (ATU) over the last decade is presented. Organizing college students to go into local are primary and secondary schools is a great way to help multiple levels of educational institutions comply with the federal requirement to celebrate the Constitution on September 17th and all parties involved enhance their understanding of the document and the Founding era.

Challenges for Having Meaningful Constitution Day Activities

Upon arriving at ATU in 2007, I found the Constitution Day activities being conducted felt more like checking a box that, yes, ATU had done something as the typical activities were having a roundtable discussion or some guest speaker, or one year showing a video on the Constitution. All these activities had minimal student attendance, producing little campus-wide impact let alone having any influence on the community. Part of the problem, as Wilson notes, is that “Few institutions are willing to commit their resources and structure their curricula in ways that advance civic learning of a high and useful kind (2007, 30)” for Constitutional Day activities. Making Constitution Day a meaningful one-day, let alone weeklong, celebration requires resources and institutional investment. In short, finding funding to have an impact across campus can be challenging.

Additionally, the event(s) have to be meaningful to students, ideally something that has a lasting impact on them beyond that day and their college education. Even more challenging is how to have an impact on the community at large. Are there ways to bring in or go out into the

community. Above, one says how Emporia State brought in middle and high school students onto their campus (Miracle et al., 2016). That certainly seems likely to have had a lasting impact and be a meaningful event for at least some of those primary and secondary students that attended, if not the university students who were involved. Yet, again one must travel back to the first challenge and wonder how much expense this was for the university to fund the activities. Below, I will explain what activities the History & Political Science Department decided to implement since 2009 and how these challenges have been met to provide a meaningful Constitution Day event now has ATU students volunteering to participate in each Fall.

A Civic and Community Engagement Constitution Day Plan

Knowing the transformative power civic and community engagement can have on students and education generally, I proposed to the History & Political Science Department undertake making Constitution Day a civic engagement activity that has a community impact. While these two terms, particularly civic engagement, are often nebulous having multiple definitions and encompassing what feels like an incalculable number of possible activities, here the former is understood as the combination of actions and behaviors Ehlich describes in *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*. Civic engagement is the desire to be involved in our communities, contributing to social and/or political life and having the skills (civic and political literacy, values and motivations) to get involved and make a difference in society. This begins but goes beyond simply voting and involves both political and non-political activities (2000). Then, community engagement—a subset of civic engagement—involves seeking campus-community partnerships that are reciprocally beneficial, involving the sharing of knowledge and/or resources (Thomas et al., 2021, 6-7; see also Primavera and Fitzgerald, 2013). As Jacob et al. explain, for “*community engagement in higher education* to be sustainable networks,

partnerships, communication media, and activities between HEIs and communities at local, national, regional, and international levels (2015, 1).” At ATU, Constitution Day has lead to collaboration with primary and secondary schools at the local level.

So, what does a Constitution Day civic and community engagement set of activities look like? Below I describe the form it has taken at ATU. This is not all the activities ATU has provided for Constitution Day, as this focuses only on its community activities. First, an overview of the plan is provided. Then, the specific preparation steps, as well as the actual activities that are undertaken at the various primary and secondary institutions is discussed in detail. It is explained how they can be scaled down or up. There is also an appendix of resources for the curriculums and other accessories that are routinely used to make the Constitution Day community engagement activities a success. Finally, the challenges to a meaningful Constitution Day are revisited. The final section covers how the challenges have been overcome at ATU and how the tremendous benefits reaped from the community engagement approach to Constitution Day make it all worthwhile.

Constitution Day as Community Engagement

Since 2009, ATU has been reaching out to local area schools and securing permission to have ATU students do civic education lessons on every April September 17th for Constitution Day (minus a couple years during the Covid-19 pandemic) at their institutions. This has required organizing a dozen or more students per school, training them in lesson plans, and supporting them as they provide approximately 30- to 50-minute instructions in groups of at least 3 to 4 or more students. Such activities have been done in a year at as few as one elementary school to three elementary schools and the junior high. This has been done with as few as 20 students to as

many as 60 volunteers recruited from Department courses, particularly general education ones. No, this is not simply history and political science majors as student volunteers.

Logistics

So, what are the logistics of undertaking turning Constitution Day into a community engagement activity in local area schools. First, the time line needs to be discussed. One logistical challenge of every Constitution Day is it occurs so early in the Fall semester. This necessitates doing some leg work in the summer. Luckily, primary and secondary schools typically begin earlier than colleges, so take advantage of that fact. The two summer tasks are securing funding for activities and identifying school(s) to collaborate with and secure approval to bring your students onto their facility to do the lesson plans.

This is also when you decide the scale of activities. If this is your first time doing a community engagement Constitution Day in local schools, I recommend to take a pilot approach and just do one or two preferably small schools. For example, one of the first schools ATU did was a small elementary in our area where volunteers were never in more than 4 classes at a time, the school had only a couple hundred students so it was less supplies needed, and we worked with kindergarten through fourth grade. This meant we only need about 12 to 16 volunteers doing 30-minute lesson plans. You will need fewer volunteers and small scale is easy to manage. Once you feel confident or if you are ambitious, the whole process can be scaled up by just adding additional schools. With each added school, you just scale up adding more student volunteers and needing more funding for additional supplies (discussed below). You will also need to reach out to your fellow faculty. I never send students into schools without at least one faculty member to facilitate and oversee the ATU volunteers. You cannot be in more than one school at a time so you will need fellow faculty willing to oversee each additional school.

Next, the month of August is busy. This is the time you recruit volunteers, order supplies, and generally get everything lined up for Constitution Day. ATU starts classes mid-August, so for that first week of classes the task is getting out a flyer to recruit volunteers. We get this to Department faculty to advertise and recruit in their classes, both majors and general education students, really any student interested. Then, the flyer is also given to our media manager to send out in our school-wide news announcements. Given this is ATU students having the opportunity to go into primary and secondary schools to teach, we also contact the Education Department to encourage them to share it with their students who are working to become future teachers.

As students sign up, we collect their name, e-mail, what volunteer activity they want to do (on campus or off and if off which school or schools), and t-shirt size. While we let the school collaborators determine when we come (sometimes it is not September 17, especially if that date falls on the weekend) and the schedule of classes, we do try to set it up so that we have one elementary in the morning and another in the afternoon. This means some students can volunteer at more than one school during the day. If you take on a junior high or high school, that may mean a full day commitment by students to cover a grade. For example, we cover all 8th grade history courses at the junior high, so our students are there from 8 am to 3 pm with one break and a lunch.

Now, as you are developing a list of volunteers, you also want to be ordering supplies. Elementary students love stickers and all students appreciate school supplies, so we enter the schools with Constitution stickers, as well as ATU and Constitution Day pencils (see Appendix A for vendors). We also secure funds to purchase each ATU student volunteer a Constitution Day t-shirt. They wear them to the schools and on the ATU campus September 17. When you

have somewhere between 60 to 100 volunteers wearing shirts with a theme, people take notice and realize it is a special day.

At this point, you are presented with a decision. From a pedagogical and experiential perspective, the ideal is to have student volunteers determine the lesson plans with your oversight and guidance. Alternatively, you can identify the age-appropriate lesson plans. In 2009, the pilot year of our community engagement Constitution Day which was small scale with only an elementary school and the junior high, I worked with students but they developed the lesson plans. Since then, given we have scaled up the number of schools involved I have just reused the same lesson plans every year. Whichever route chosen, you want to have the lesson plans identified and prepared to share with the students by the end of August.

As final preparations, you have the first two weeks of September to organize student volunteers and have a training session or two to go over with them what they will be doing. A key task here is developing a schedule that you give to the students that lets them know whose classroom they are in, when, and what other students they will be working with to do the lesson plan. No student should ever be in a classroom by themselves. It is a group teaching event, so I always ensure at least 3 or 4 or more students in a classroom working together to do the lesson plans. Sometimes, if you are only in a couple classrooms at the same time, you may have half a dozen or more student volunteers. This is bonus, just meaning each student volunteer can work with more elementary or junior high students in small groups or even one-on-one. You will also have to organize a carpool system to ensure all students have transportation to the school(s). A day or two before

What a Lesson Plan Looks Like

For the elementary schools, I have compiled a half dozen activities for ATU volunteers to use in their typically 30-minute lesson plans. To keep the lesson plans simple, for kindergarten through fourth the volunteers do the same activities, they just tailor them by what the students are capable of doing. For example, the class session begins with reading a Constitution Day booklet (see Appendix B). For kindergarten and first grade, the volunteers read it to the students, but at second through fourth they have students read the passages. Next, the volunteers go over with the students a series of Constitution and government pictures on a Powerpoint, then break the students into small groups of 4 to 6 students and oversee the students playing a matching game of the pictures. As prizes, students can give out stickers or pencils. However, by the end of the class all students get at least one pencil and sticker. After these two activities, over half the class is done. As a final activity, volunteers can either do the Mr. Madison makes a bill of rights with the students, or have a collective reading of the Constitution Day poem and/or do the Constitution Day rap with the class. All students are then given a coloring book to take home and encouraged to do with their families.

For the junior high, the class sessions are 50 minutes. Volunteers open by spending 5 to 10 minutes going over the structure of the US Constitution (see Appendix C) and encouraging students to take notes over what is covered. To get student buy in, the volunteers let the students know the information will be important to a game they will play and there will be prizes. After the overview of the Constitution, the volunteers break the students into small groups (4-6 per group) and give them a game board with 12 game pieces. The board has 3 quadrants, the first labeled The Preamble, the second Articles 1-7 and the third is The Bill of Rights. Volunteers ensure each student in the group has at least one game piece and the group works to complete the board putting the game piece with a clause from the Constitution in the correct quadrant. Once

each student group completes the gameboard correctly once, the volunteers clear the board, shuffle the pieces and give them back to all the groups. The groups race to see who completes it first, that group winning a prize (stickers or pencils).

As a second activity at the junior high, volunteers keep the students in their small groups and play a 25 question Constitution Jeopardy game (see Appendix C). This is not traditional jeopardy, as all groups write their answers down to the question and their answers are not in the form of a question (but could be if you desire). Each group that correctly answers the question is given a point. Volunteers work through as many of the questions as possible, wrapping up about 3 minutes before the end of the class. The group with the most points wins a prize (stickers or pencils). Then all students are given a pencil and, if they desire, a pocket Constitution.

Overcoming Challenges as the Benefits Far Outweigh the Costs

Returning to the challenges, the annual challenge remains funding Constitution Day and managing the activities, some of which are happening simultaneously and not all of which you can be at. Let me start by tackling the latter issue. Wilson hopefully claims “The energy and initiative of faculty, alumni, and trustees devoted to bringing to America’s campuses a form of civic education grounded in respect for the achievements of the American regime and the civilization it represents are palpable (2007, 30).” I cannot comment on the energy and devotion of alumni and trustees for doing these activities, but I am grateful that in my Department many faculty have generously and enthusiastically helped recruit and/or overseen students going into local area schools. I also have a colleague who generously offered to co-chair activities with me. I oversee organizing and doing the off campus, community engagement activities while he takes the lead for on campus activities. It also becomes a little easier to manage each year, as we have the experience and knowledge of how to make everything happen from previous years. The

events now routinely run smoothly, but the first few runs often required flexibility and a willingness to adjust on the fly. You learn things like some students will volunteer, then ghost the event, so you always need more volunteers than you expect.

What has remained the more challenging is the funding conundrum. We have this down to where we can typically do the activities for about \$1000, but every year seems to require approaching the Dean and the Department or other possible funding sources to secure the funds to buy the resources to make this happen. I would be lying if I did not admit to paying for some of the costs out of my own pocket. I have worked with the university foundation to try to find a donor, but have yet to succeed there. If there is ever a reason I stop organizing the Constitution Day community engagement activities, it will be because of the perpetual chase for funding. The irony is that all the administrators support the activities. It is positive publicity for both the Department and ATU in the community. The campus and local media routinely cover the story. Most schools routinely contact us now to ensure we will be coming each year. We see some repeat volunteers year in and year out. When I first started the community engagement version, when it was done I have a student come to me, say how much he enjoyed the opportunity, and ask when the next community engagement activity would be. Students yearn for these opportunities.

Simply put, the benefits have been numerous and the key agents involved all agree the activities are worthwhile. It is more than just a positive, memorable, and experiential activity for ATU students. It has a similar effect for the primary and junior high students. Educationally, the ATU students—particularly the junior high volunteers—are much more knowledgeable about the Constitution after having to teach its structure. In fact, one of the common comments from faculty who oversee the ATU volunteers is how impressed they are by the end of the day. The

first class and lesson may be a bit rough, but volunteers experience the power of repetitive teaching. They grow more confident and better with each session and by the end of the day the information has sunk in in ways just not possible when you are just hearing or experiencing it once in the classroom. For the subset of ATU students who plan to be teachers, it gives them an early chance to get into the classroom and as a group so they have support and allies in their first teaching experience. Then, the positive publicity and social capital this has created for our Department and ATU are inestimable, as the events often get positive local media coverage.

Although the funding remains an annual challenge, the extensive positive benefits and—more importantly—the experiences for the ATU students, as well as the elementary and junior high students seems more likely to stay with them for the rest of their lives than more purely academic speakers or roundtables and videos on the Constitution for Constitution Day.

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Appendix A: Constitution Day Supplies

Pencils

Constitution Day Pencils- ThePencilStore.com (see

<https://www.thepencilstore.com/store/pc/CONSTITUTION-PENCILS-p894.htm>)

Purchase university themed pencils through your bookstore.

Stickers

<https://www.zazzle.com/>

You can get stickers that are Constitution themed, including a Constitution sticker, Bill of Rights sticker, Constitutional Convention sticker, George Washington stickers, James Madison Stickers, Benjamin Franklin stickers, etc.

Pocket Constitutions

NOTE: Your library may be able to supply these for free if you ask.

National Center for Constitutional Studies (see <https://nccs.net/products/pocket-constitution-of-united-states>)

Constitution Facts (see <https://www.constitutionfacts.com/us-pocket-constitution/>)

Appendix B: Elementary School Activities

Constitution Day Booklet- 2 pages per sheet, so cut each sheet in half.



The law is the set of rules that we live by. The Constitution is the highest law. It belongs to the United States. It belongs to all Americans.

The Constitution says how the government works. It creates the Presidency. It creates the Congress. It creates the Supreme Court.



The Constitution lists some key rights. Rights are things that all people have just because they are alive. By listing the rights, they are made special. They are made safe. The Bill of Rights is a part of the Constitution. The Bill of Rights lists many rights of the people.



The Constitution was written in 1787. Yes, it is over 200 years old. We actually have old copies of what was created.

In 1787, a group of men met to write the Constitution. They did not like the way the country was going. They fixed it by creating the Constitution. We call these men The Framers.



Some of the framers are very famous. George Washington was a Framer. So was Ben Franklin.



The Framers met in Independence Hall during a hot summer in Philadelphia. They had a lot of arguments. In the end, they agreed to the words in the Constitution. They knew they had to agree to stop the fighting between states.



After the Framers wrote the Constitution, they asked the states to approve it. It took some time, but all states did.


Some people did not like the Constitution. Some were afraid because it did not do enough to protect the rights of the people. It had no bill, or list, of rights.



Promises were made to add a bill of rights. After the Constitution passed, the Bill of Rights was added. The Bill of Rights is the first ten changes to the Constitution.

The Bill of Rights is very important. It protects important ideas. It protects your right to say what you want. It lets you think for yourself. It keeps the laws from being too hard. It gives rules for the police.



 It lets you believe in God if you want. No one can tell you not to believe. It lets you gather with your friends to talk. It makes sure you can read newspapers.

The Bill of Rights also protects your home. It helps keep Americans safe. Today, we are very happy the Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution.

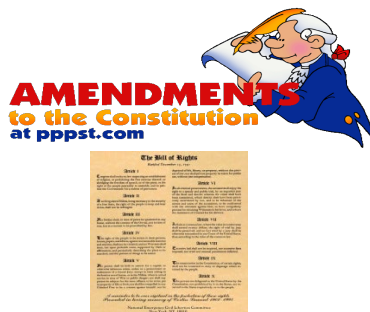


The Constitution is not perfect. When it was written, they knew that it would have to be improved. The Framers added a way to make changes. This is called "amendment".

The Bill of Rights was actually added as a set of amendments. The Constitution has been changed or amended 27 times since it was written.

One amendment says that all black men can vote. Another says that all women can vote. One more says that the President can only be elected twice.

The first amendments, the Bill of Rights, were added in 1791. The last amendment was added in 1992.



The Constitution sets up the government in three parts.



One part is the Congress. The Congress makes laws. The people elect the members of Congress.

The next part is the President. The President enforces the laws.



The last part is the Courts. The courts decide what the law means when there are questions.

All of the parts have to work together. Just like the Framers agreed on the Constitution, the parts have to agree on the laws. No part has too much power, but is shared to protect the people.



Today, we are happy the Framers wrote the Constitution and added the Bill of Rights!



<http://www.usconstitution.net/constkidsK.html>

Constitution Day Lesson Plans and Resources:

- The Center for Civic Education has the Matching Game lesson plan and the Constitution Day Rap among other lesson plans, see: <https://www.civiced.org/lesson-plans/constitution-day-and-citizenship-day>

- Mr. Madison Needs Some Help (Bill of Rights exercise) see:

https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjAu8Okm_8AhXpjYkEHXalBtAQFnoECA8QAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.crf-usa.org%2Fimages%2Fpdf%2Fmr_madison.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2voKQsC6TqnuIVPUmFsTGd

- Constitution Day Poem see:

https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjts525nP_8AhUNjYkEHcBjAQUQFnoECA8QAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.courts.ca.gov%2Fdocuments%2FCVCS-Lesson-Derfield-f.pdf&usg=AOvVaw0pXcaEvY1McLdl3MZtxw7B

- Constitution Day Coloring Book- Assembled from free coloring pages found online. See pages like: <https://coloringhome.com/constitution-day-coloring-pages>

Appendix C: Junior High Lesson Plans

- Overview of Constitution for volunteers to share with students

PREAMBLE

The preamble explains the purposes of the Constitution and establishes that the powers of the new government originate from the PEOPLE of the United States. While an earlier draft read We the States, it was intentionally changed to We the People! The preamble provides the context for the Constitution and is known as the ‘why’ of the document.

ARTICLES

The Constitution contains 7 articles.

- Article 1: Focuses on the legislative branch (Congress) laying out its structure (bicameral) and many of its powers and responsibilities like making laws and executive oversight
- Article 2: Focuses on the executive branch (Presidency) laying out its structure and many of its powers and responsibilities like enforcing the laws, commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the power of veto
- Article 3: Focuses on the judiciary (Supreme Court) laying out its structure although fails to clearly lay out its power (judicial review as established in the case *Marbury v. Madison* in 1803)
- Article 4: Focuses on states covering issues like how the national government will oversee the relations between states, as well as creates guidelines for the creation of new states
- Article 5: Explains how to amend the Constitution
- Article 6: Establishes Constitution as the SUPREME LAW OF THE LAND
- Article 7: Explains criteria for adoption of the Constitution (ratification by nine of the original 13 states)

BILL OF RIGHTS

The Bill of Rights are the first 10 amendments to the Constitution and took effect Dec. 15, 1791. These state the basic civil liberties or freedoms from the national government for the American people (amendments 1-9_ and the states (10th amendment). Some examples of the civil liberties include freedoms of speech, press, religion, assembly and petition, as well the right to due process of law.

ADDITIONAL AMENDMENTS

There are 17 additional amendments beyond the Bill of Rights. Some notable amendments:

- Civil War Amendments
 - 13th- Made slavery illegal
 - 14th- Due process of law of 5th amendment expanded to states. Arguably most important amendment outside Bill of Rights as it has been used over time by Supreme Court to apply selectively the Bill of Rights to the States.
 - 15th- Guarantees voting rights to all adult male citizens
 - Prohibition (18th amendment) and repeal (21st amendment) of alcohol
 - Expansion of suffrage
 - Right of women to vote (19th amendment)
 - Right of 18 year olds to vote (26th amendment)
-

- Constitution Day Game- Made 8 game boards and answers are attached using velcro.

Constitution Game

Students will divide into two teams led by a Tech student. Each team will receive a poster board divided into four sections; Preamble, Articles 1-7, Bill of Rights, and Additional Amendments. Each team will also receive 14 exerts from the Constitution. Their task is to match each exert to the correct section of the Constitution in which it can be found. Students will submit their poster boards to the third Tech student to determine a winner and to discuss the correct answers. The following exerts will be used:

From the Preamble:

- We the people...
- ...insure domestic tranquility...
- ...secure the Blessings of Liberty...
- ...in Order to form a more perfect union...

From Articles 1-7:

- the Congress...shall propose Amendments to this Constitution...
- the Executive power shall be vested in a President
- the citizens of each State shall be entitled to all the privileges and Immunities of Citizens...

Bill of Rights:

- the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial
- ...the right of the people to keep and bear Arms shall not be infringed.
- ...nor shall any person be subject for the same offense to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb;

Additional Amendments:

- ...the manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors within...the United States...is hereby prohibited
- the Congress shall have power to lay and collect taxes on income...
- the right of citizens...shall not be denied...on account of sex
- the right of citizens...who are age eighteen years of age or older to vote shall not be denied...

- Constitution Day Jeopardy- We created our own powerpoint set of 25 questions where the first slide gives the question and the next gives the answer. I am glad to share it upon request (mrrogers6@atu.edu). There is also a Constitution Jeopardy online, see:

<https://jeopardylabs.com/play/us-constitution-day-jeopardy>