

# College, Career, and Civic Readiness: The Case of the Missing 'C'

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*This post is by Stephen Hamilton, Dean of the High Tech High Graduate School of Education*

The goal of preparing all high school graduates to succeed in post-secondary education, earn a living, and participate actively in their communities seems beyond question. But notice what typically follows the declaration of commitment to "College, Career, and Civic Readiness": a narrow focus on college readiness. This surely reflects the reality that most educators know more about college than careers, but it neglects those students, still the majority, who do not graduate from a four-year college, and it ignores those who were ready enough for college to graduate but then find themselves unemployed or underemployed.

If career readiness is often neglected, civic readiness is all but forgotten. (Full disclosure: the author is a former social studies teacher, and sensitive to being slighted.) Civic readiness somehow seems less pressing than either employment or higher education, which offers the smoothest path to gainful employment. Yet active citizenship is essential in a world where democracy is threatened by competing ideologies and violent attacks, and where the hunger of an exploding population for natural resources threatens to destroy the biosphere while our national political culture has been deformed by hyper-partisanship.

Adopting the term "civic competence" as an aim helps to clarify both how to assess and how to teach readiness for civic engagement. **Competence** includes not only skills but also knowledge, attitudes, and the ability to muster and make use of them appropriately. **Civic competence** refers to knowledge about how government works, understanding of democratic principles, and the ability to participate effectively in the deliberation and collaboration required to get things done in a democratic society.

A focus on competence also helps to avoid the misguided trope, "Youth are the citizens of the future." Voting and the right to hold most public offices, serve in the armed forces, etc., are age limited, but infants born in the United States are citizens. Most important, school children have rights and responsibilities as citizens and should learn to exercise them now, not only in the

future. Dewey taught us long ago that "present experience" is the best preparation.

It follows that engaging young people in civic action is the best way to build their civic competence; teaching them facts about government will not suffice. Schools are the most important formal organizations in children's lives. As such, schools are ideal places for young people to begin learning citizenship. For her capstone project as an M.Ed. student at the High Tech High Graduate School of Education, **Ashley Vasquez** involved her second-grade students in multiple service-learning projects. They worked closely with the fire department in their hometown, Chula Vista, CA, to design a family fire safety campaign and with the children's hospital to collect toys for children in the cancer ward. As a result of participating in these activities, students collaborated more and were more deeply engaged in the classroom and came to see themselves as "change makers" in their predominantly low-income and Hispanic community. Far from interfering with academic progress, the work also improved their academic competence too, as students wrote reflective essays on what they were learning, striving to make them as polished as possible for readers from outside the school.

Student-centered classrooms that promote deeper learning, like Ashley's, give students opportunities to gain civic competence in their immediate environment. When students have genuine choices to make, both as individuals and in groups, they become more engaged in their learning and they gain social skills that enable them to act more effectively.

Unfortunately, in most schools citizenship has come to mean compliance rather than engagement. Being considerate and attentive to the needs of others is part of good citizenship, but compliance alone is what is expected of subjects in totalitarian states. Democratic citizens have a say in the rules that govern their behavior and how those rules are applied. "Voice and choice" are popular and appropriate terms for this in schools. Student voice and choice connect deeper learning with civic engagement.

Citizenship has also too often been conflated with voting (one source of the notion that citizenship begins at age 18) and education for citizenship has been reduced to exhortations to vote. Not only has civic education overemphasized the transmission of information, the information transmitted has also had limited utility in the realm of civic action. It is mostly about the structure and functions of national government, less about state government and almost not at all about local government, exactly the opposite of most people's opportunity to participate in government. In an experimental **study**, the author and R. Shepherd Zeldin found that high school students serving as interns with local government officials performed better on a test of

knowledge about government than students taking a civics course.

Over the past three decades, young people have voted less (with the exception of the 2008 presidential election) and done more community service. While the first trend compels concern, the second justifies pride and optimism. If we accept that civic engagement includes a range of pro-social activities that include but are not limited to voting and other forms of political activity, how should we as educators build on young people's readiness, willingness, and ability to contribute to their communities and guide them toward a lifetime of active citizenship?

Deeper learning, embedded within opportunities to engage in service-learning and authentically **deliberate public issues** is part of the answer to this question. Such opportunities provide the most ambitious and most powerful way to build motivation and capacity for civic engagement. Young people can be resources for their communities; they can improve and help to shape their communities, bringing both short-term and long-term benefits for individuals and society. By identifying and working collaboratively to solve problems in their communities or by volunteering in community organizations, young people gain readiness for civic engagement. Simultaneously they gain deeper learning competencies such as communication, teamwork, and problem solving that are equally valuable for college and for career readiness.