

# EMPLOYEE CITIZENSHIP: PRACTICING CIVIC SKILLS IN THE WORKPLACE

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Too often internships are viewed only as a means to gain a small focused set of work-specific skills with the goal of getting new graduates into their first entry-level position upon graduation. But, internships are not only about gaining this practical experience. As co-op and internship program managers we can build upon this short-term goal model to prepare students not only for their first job after graduation, but for other positions in their careers: in different industries and even different disciplines. Through our programs, we can develop stronger employee citizens. Employee citizens understand their rights and responsibilities as employees and the full spectrum of activities they can engage in to contribute to their workplaces and industries. Employee citizens can make change in their professional communities and in all the communities they are members of including their campuses, towns, states, and the world. Employee citizenship describes how interns can be fully engaged citizens of the organizations they intern for, therefore building confidence and a robust foundation for their careers.



## INTRODUCTION

In this article I will describe why I chose to incorporate civic skills development and the teaching and practice of democratic participation through employee citizenship into a centralized internship program. I will describe the educational philosophies and professional practice supporting this approach and show results from assessments obtained through employer and student evaluations that support this methodology and highlight our successes.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Most students now attend school primarily to get a degree as a necessary credential to getting a job that they want. However, this

wasn't the original purpose of higher education. John Dewey wrote that we learn by doing and that democracy is practiced in all facets of life (Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 1916). Dewey described higher education as a place to prepare citizens for participating in democracy (Dewey, 1927). Herman Schneider further developed the idea of practicing work skills directly through the traditional co-op model of alternating periods of work and school. This moved higher education further into the realm of preparing citizens to be active participants in the workforce, and not necessarily the other communities they were members of. Higher education experienced an even more radical shift in the 1980's and 1990's to higher education programs pumping

out employees. Degrees are becoming ever more specialized, and the liberal arts, which in many ways provides students with the skills they will need to be engaged citizens, are questioned as becoming obsolete.

Luckily, in 2007 *Educating for Democracy*, Anne Colby, Elizabeth Beaumont, Thomas Ehrlich, and Joseph Corngold (Anne Colby, 2007) reminded practitioners why higher education exists. Harry Boyte then took these concepts to another level. Instead of simply educating for participation in democracy, Boyte designs and implements programs for students to practice civic skills in their communities in conjunction with learning in the classroom. One of these programs, public achievement (Public Achievement, 2016), does this particularly well. Public achievement is a community organizing paradigm where students of any age or education level work together to solve public problems. It highlights the fact that every individual has some skill or experience to offer from their unique background. Another of Boyte's ideas is that of the citizen professional, which contributes to the foundation of my work. The citizen professional is someone who works alongside their fellow community members to solve public problems

where their professional expertise can be used as a resource (Boyte, 2008). The citizen professional is of particular interest because it describes how skill sets bridge a citizen's communities. The citizen professional is using their professional skills, which they contribute regularly to their professional community, in another community. This other community could be their town, a civic association, or even a group of individuals who have joined for the sole purpose of solving a specific public problem.

## PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

In addition to these individuals who have clearly defined and even reimagined the idea of citizenship, professional associations are also interested in civic skills, civic engagement, and our ability as higher education professionals to develop students in those areas. The Association of American Colleges and Universities released a list of High-Impact Educational Practices that research suggests increases student engagement. Student engagement on campus fulfills Dewey's view of providing a place for students to practice democratic engagement. A college campus is indeed a community and the students are citizens of that



community. It is our job to identify for students that they are practicing civic engagement when they are engaged on campus by joining organizations and clubs, attending a town hall meeting, or participating in a voluntary activity on campus. By naming civic engagement and giving students the language to talk about civic skills they will gain the confidence and initiative they need to propel them through their careers. It's not enough for students to state on a resume that they were a member of a club or even the president. They need to discuss the civic skill, for example, leadership, and how they demonstrated leadership. For instance a student could describe how they used their position as a leader to create change within their institutional community.

Additionally, the Cooperative Education and Internship Association (CEIA) and National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE) are guided by the Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS). CAS has set internship standards that those managing internship programs "must model ethical behavior and institutional citizenship (Education, 2015)." Related to ethics, CAS also states that those involved in internship programs are expected to

identify and hold accountable those that are engaged in unethical behavior (Education, 2015). This is a difficult task, but an important civic skill. The ability to recognize unethical behavior is especially important for the political aspects of civic engagement. Students can gain the confidence to hold their elected representatives to a high ethical standard by recognizing these behaviors in their own colleagues and supervisors and talking about them with the appropriate people at their school or company. As professionals we are responsible for assisting students in working through such situations and modeling ethical behavior ourselves.

Finally, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) have outlined Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Professionals that include civic engagement and further define behavior modeling and employee citizenship (although it is not named employee citizenship). These organizations note that modeling the behavior we expect from our students is as important as teaching them and assessing what we teach in their joint publication "Professional Competency Areas for Student

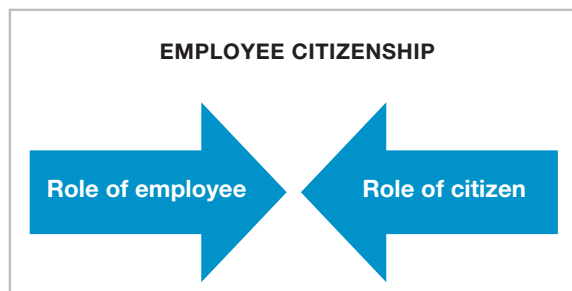
Affairs Practitioners” (ACPA and NASPA, 2010). This publication outlines several areas that professionals can assess themselves in. In particular, the authors discuss different forms of engagement in one’s professional field, including in scholarship and research, service, and leadership. Another area is being knowledgeable of the laws and policies that govern our profession. At a more advanced level we should be applying these laws and even influencing how these laws are created by contacting our representatives or lobbying. This is a direct application of employee citizenship. In addressing civic skills, ACPA and NASPA note the ability to assess oneself, build consensus, take responsibility, and engage with others to move change forward. Each of these skills can be transferred into the public sphere to solve community problems. Citizens must be able to understand and communicate their feelings, build consensus with others and then use that consensus to create a plan or solution. Effective change is driven from citizens on the ground level who compel officials and elected representatives to pass legislation to make the change permanent.

Focusing again on our institutions in and of themselves as communities, we must recognize all of our members, Who are these members, and what are their expectations? They include families who want their students to graduate with jobs and “get a good education.” Also, the institution itself, which has to answer to the needs of families and students, and its staff and faculty. Many, if not most, institutions seek to provide students with a broad education and a set of skills that will benefit them personally and professionally. This can sometimes seem at odds with creating highly employable graduates. Another set of members are the outside organizations regulating our institutions. We must not only comply with these government and accrediting agency’s policies and regulations, but also with the way data is shared with them and how it’s used. For instance, the College Scorecard (U.S. Department of Education) is used by families and prospective students to make decisions about schools they will apply to and attend. Regardless of how we feel about how that data is collected and used, it’s out there, and it’s being used to determine the value of the education our institutions provide.

In the midst of these seemingly competing priorities, I look back to the foundation of higher education's purpose: to provide a place for citizens to develop and practice skills for democratic engagement. I believe that we do not have to choose to satisfy one member of our community over another. By teaching employee citizenship we provide a place for students to practice civic skills while meeting their expectations for an internship or co-op program. The definition of employee citizenship reveals equivalencies that I describe below on how to meet these expectations.

### EMPLOYEE CITIZENSHIP

The first equivalency is employee citizenship (Figure 2: Employee Citizenship Equivalency). I define employee citizenship as the understanding of one's role as a community member at work. Here, the role of the employee is equivalent to the role of the citizen.



*Figure 1: Employee Citizenship Equivalency*

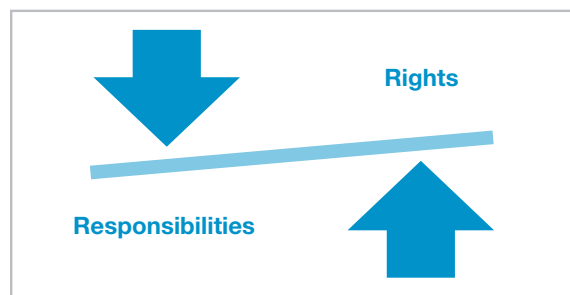
So, what is a citizen? Most people think of citizenship in terms of their nationality, but citizenship is your membership in any community you're a part of (Citizenship). If you live in an apartment complex, you're a member of that community, or your neighborhood if you live in the suburbs. Then, of course, you're a citizen of your state, your country, and a global citizen. This is the first part of citizenship: awareness. Awareness includes multiple aspects including that start with simply knowing the communities you're a part of. For a student this includes at least their college, where they live, and where they work. Next is becoming aware of the issues affecting the communities, who the decision makers are, how change is made, and how citizens can be part of that change.

In the engagement figure (Figure 4: Traditional Civic Engagement Spectrum) awareness is the first part of civic engagement. Awareness can be as simple as reading a newspaper to further understand the issues in your community. The equivalent employee citizenship awareness activity for students is being aware of the major organizations in their industry, what policies and regulations govern their industry, and who the important people are in

their industry. Once they're in an internship students should also understand how their organization contributes to and ranks within its industry and how the work they're doing helps their organization achieve its mission. As students gain more experience and skills through their internships and grow as professionals, they further develop this awareness to expand what they can offer beyond their organization to what they can offer to their industry. Through our coaching we show students how they can use their professional skills in the civic arena.

An area where students may struggle is during the search process, especially if they don't have any experience yet. What do they have to offer as a first-time intern? Awareness plays an important role here. As experiential education practitioners, we know our students have something to offer—every student has experiences and skills that make him/her unique. We help students to become aware of what they offer employers and then develop the ability to talk about that through their resumes, informational interviews, cover letters, and networking activities. This can be the very first way students practice employee citizenship.

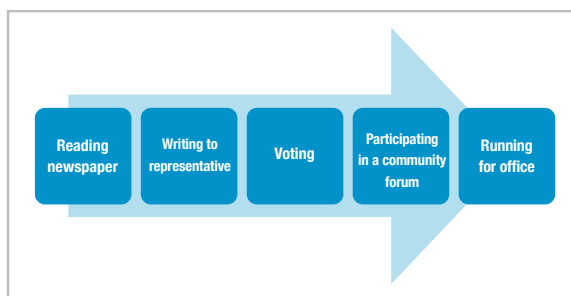
The next, and key parts, of citizenship are the rights and responsibilities that come along with it (Figure 2: Citizenship—Rights and Responsibilities).



**Figure 2:**  
*Citizenship—Rights and Responsibilities*

Most often, we think of the rights we're eligible for as citizens. Rights like voting and freedom of speech. The other part of citizenship that holds up democracy are the responsibilities of its citizens. Many responsibilities go hand in hand with rights. For instance, we have the right to vote, but we also have the responsibility to do so. In a broader sense, citizens have a responsibility to be engaged in their communities in other ways.

Engagement is the fourth aspect of citizenship and it falls across a spectrum. Figure 4 shows this spectrum of civic engagement in the traditional sense of citizenship.



**Figure 3: Traditional Civic Engagement Spectrum**

Figure 4: Employee Citizenship Engagement Spectrum shows the equivalent spectrum of civic engagement for employee citizenship.

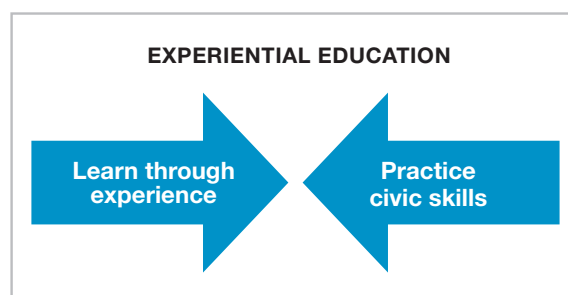


**Figure 4: Employee Citizenship Engagement Spectrum**

## CIVIC SKILLS

The second equivalency is within experiential education itself (Figure 5: Experiential Education Equivalency). A key part of the definition of experiential education is that students learn through experience. This is shown in one arrow.

The opposite arrow shows the equivalent concept in the civic arena: practicing civic skills. Through the internship or co-op, students can practice civic skills. In fact, part of the learning students gain through their experience is civic learning.



**Figure 5: Experiential Education Equivalency**

The concept of civic engagement is foreign to many of our students because we have not had a strong liberal arts history and many students in our internship program are international students. Because of this, we introduce citizenship and civic engagement early in the internship search process, when students are learning how to find an internship. Among search strategies and learning about the resources available to them on campus, we talk to students about what civic engagement is and how it applies to their internship through employee citizenship. This is the awareness phase that I mentioned above.



The second phase comes after the student has secured the internship. At this point the student is filling out a learning agreement. In addition to contact and employer information, students identify their learning objectives and the civic skills they want to develop on their learning agreements. Students choose from the following set of civic skills:

- Critical thinking/problem solving
- Adaptability
- Written communication
- Verbal communication
- Intercultural communication
- Intergenerational communication
- Organization/planning
- Research
- Technology
- Leadership
- Time management
- Flexibility

At the end of the internship students self-evaluate their learning and skill development. As part of the evaluation, we ask students to write specifically about how they demonstrated a civic skill during their internship. Below is a sampling of how students utilized civic skills at work from spring 2016 student evaluations. The civic skill is listed

first, with a description of how the student used the skill in the student's own words following the skill.

- **Intercultural and intergenerational communication:** "The interaction with diverse employees across the global environment is something that helped me gain exposure on developing patience and maturity in interactions and relationships between people from various facets of the organization."
- **Verbal communication and research:** "This job was a lot of problem solving, so I would have to interact with the underwriters of the company on a daily basis to piece together an answer."
- **Problem solving, communication, leadership:** "I am not supposed to leak passwords to unauthorized people, but sometimes people call looking for that information. I have to balance the ethics of my company as well as be humble to the people."
- **Flexibility, adaptability:** "All projects were to be approved, and I learned that while working under someone your ideas will not always be to their liking, hence why I learned much about

adapting my work and ideas, but without losing my initial vision.”

- **Critical thinking:** we had an international student in the biology department who was unable to do an internship because there was no course through which she could do the internship and meet the federal requirement. She did research, met with the appropriate decision makers in her department, and wrote a proposal and petition to get a zero credit course proposed and approved in her department so that international students would be able to intern without having to pay extra for an internship course. She was able to make lasting change at her institution for students coming after her.

Students are stronger candidates when they are able to discuss in specific detail how they demonstrated skills. Their resumes are richer and they can answer interview questions more readily using examples from their experiences. In developing this ability students gain confidence. Through our coaching students are able to apply these skills to the civic arena.

## IMPLEMENTATION AND ASSESSMENT

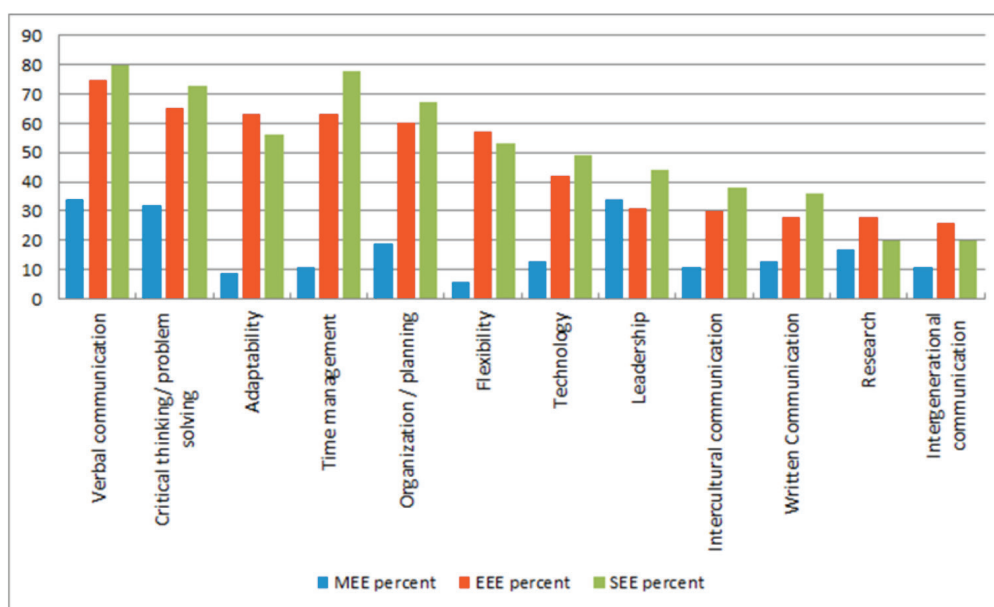
As I've mentioned, one of our jobs as experiential education practitioners is to act as coaches. We need to name employee citizenship and keep naming it. That means during the search process, at the start of the internship or co-op, during the experience itself, and at reflection. Without naming it, it's easy for students to get embedded in the everyday tasks of their internship and fail to see the wider implications of their work and how their experience can be used to move them forward throughout their careers, not just to the next internship or job after graduation. Employee citizenship helps us do that because it is a model through which we can take the professional skills that students can easily understand and translate them into communities they are members of, including their professional communities. Students see that their professional community extends widely, far beyond the borders of the bullets in their internship description and the organization they're working for.

In addition to this anecdotal evidence of student growth, we are able to report each semester and year on civic skill development,

students' engagement at their internships, and employer reactions to the employee citizenship approach to experiential education. We generate the report through supervisor and student feedback. Supervisors evaluate their interns at about 4-6 weeks into the internship and then again at the end of the internship. Students evaluate their experiences at the end of the internship. These evaluations not only capture typical professional behavior, but also the civic skill development and employee citizenship behaviors that we've trained students on. In particular, at the midterm, supervisors indicate what civic skills they want their interns to further develop during the second half of their internship. This gives the student the opportunity to improve on these skills with the help of advisors. Advisors work specifically with students over phone and email to provide personalized tips and infographics to enhance their civic skill development.

We measure skill improvement in two ways: 1. by comparing the midterm and the endterm supervisor evaluations and 2. by comparing the endterm evaluation with the student evaluation. At the end of the

semester the supervisor identifies which skills the student developed, allowing us to compare with the midterm evaluation. We do an additional comparison with the student evaluation. Students (independently from the supervisor evaluation) identify the civic skills they feel they developed during the internship and we can look for consistency with the supervisor's feedback. In the data from spring 2016 (Figure 6: Civic skill development), we can see that for the top five skills there is consistency among the midterm (in blue), end term (in red) and student evaluation (in green) results. That is, at midterm supervisors reported that they wanted to see their interns further develop verbal communication, critical thinking/problem solving, adaptability, time management, and organization/planning skills. Then at the end term supervisors report that their interns did indeed develop these skills and students also report that they developed these skills. This consistency is important. First, by comparing the midterm to the endterm supervisor evaluations, the consistency shows that our coaching was effective in helping students improve on skills supervisors noted in the midterm evaluation. Second,



**Figure 6: Civic skill development**

by comparing the endterm supervisor evaluation to the student evaluation, the consistency shows that students and supervisors recognize the same skill developments, showing that the communication among advisor, supervisor, and student was effective

We assess employee citizenship activities through the student evaluation at the conclusion of the internship. Students select from a list of employee citizenship activities that they engaged in during their internship. In Figure 7 we see results from spring 2016 showing the activities our students participated in. Most students learned more about their company and industry, with about a third looking a little deeper into what their organization

contributed to their industry. About a third of students also reported that they recognized where they could make improvements and then took it upon themselves to make those improvements. This is the initiative that is so sought after by employers. About a quarter of students also contributed to a project using other skills they had that are not required for their discipline. This helps students see how their talents can be used in a multitude of ways as employee citizens.

To further cement the employee citizenship concept we ask students to write about how they demonstrated the civic skills they identified as having developed. Some of those examples I included above. This is



Employee citizenship activity	%
Asked questions about the work, organization, or industry to the people at my company	64%
Learned about my organization's contribution to its industry	36%
Recognized an area where improvements could be made and took it upon myself to make those improvements	31%
Read publications concerning my field/industry	29%
Contributed to a project using a skill not required for my discipline	23%
Attended a conference or seminar	17%
Participated in a community project sponsored by my organization	10%
Joined a professional organization / I am a member of my professional organization	8%
Conducted at least one informational interview	8%
Gave a presentation to my department or a department I did not work in	7%
Participated in an online discussion related to my field	7%

**Figure 7: Employee citizenship activities**

useful for us to see that students truly understand what those skills are and can articulate them to employers. Students can even use these statements in resumes, cover letters, and interviews to give specific examples of how they've used the skills in professional situations.

## CONCLUSIONS

In addition to these positive aspects, there are other reasons why employee citizenship enhances students' internship experiences. They gain confidence in themselves because they've been able to

practice skills beyond what's in their job descriptions. They've learned about the company they're interning for and the industry it belongs to—including the different organizations that make up that industry, the major players, and how to move around professionally within it. Most importantly students see how the professional skills they've gained are civic skills that can be used in the other communities they are part of.

These civic skills that we emphasize are also the skills that the National Association of Colleges and

Employers and other organizations like it report that employers are most looking for in their recruits. In the latest NACE survey the top skills employers listed were leadership, ability to work in a team, communication skills, problem-solving skills, strong work ethic, and initiative. In fact, technical skills don't show up until about half-way through the list. Interns will gain those technical skills anyway through their work and school. It's the civic skills that they need the coaching on. Employee citizenship also speaks to the T-shaped professional that employers seek—a professional that has deep knowledge in the field, but also the ability to apply that knowledge broadly across disciplines. That ability thrives through the employee citizenship model.

We can ensure that our students are prepared for contributing to their professional and personal communities by incorporating employee citizenship into our experiential education programs. By talking about employee citizenship and coaching our students through civic skills we can meet our objectives of developing strong professionals who will be able to navigate their careers and be change makers in their communities.

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