

Chapter 12

Preparing College Students to Facilitate Action Civics Among K–12 Students

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ABSTRACT

Recently, scholars have begun exploring the benefits and challenges of using college students to help develop Kindergarten-12th Grade (K-12) students' civic engagement capacities, specifically through action civics programs. However, much of the literature focuses on the political and social knowledge obtained by the K-12 students. By contrast, the authors explore the dispositions that college students need to effectively facilitate such learning with K-12 students, culled from grounded coding of four cases. They argue that action civics facilitator training programs should focus on action civics dispositions because dispositions underpin the knowledge and skills facilitators need to access to support complex civic work with K-12 students. Specifically, training programs should include dispositional work, valuing student-led projects, multiple perspectives, the development of relationships in contexts, and social justice. In this way, the values that drive Dewey's concept of democratic life can continue to underpin students' future civic work.

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INTRODUCTION

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experiences. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which have kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey, 1916, p. 87).

For the past century, educators have attempted to develop instructional systems and practices that help students develop into the types of citizens the aforementioned democracy requires, with varied success. Historically, civics education in the United States has taken place in the K-12 classroom via civics courses (Campbell, Levinson, & Hess, 2012), where classroom teachers teach about the federalist system, the Constitution, and the processes by which political change occurs in the United States (Parker, 2002). Recently, teachers have begun engaging students in a practice-based form of civics instruction known as *action civics* (Pope, Stolte, & Cohen, 2011; Schultz, 2008). Through a process of community analysis, issue selection, research, planning, action, and reflection, students work within their action civics classrooms to consider their civic interests and how they might be able to use and work with communities to solve their identified civic problems (Cipparone & Cohen, 2015). Over time, schools and non-profit organizations have realized the potential of bringing community members (including local college students) to aid in the process, especially given the increasing accountability demands on teachers who must focus more of their time on testing at the expense of engaged learning.

Employing college students to facilitate K-12 students' civic engagement is important for several reasons. First, it reinforces and sharpens students' own civic and political engagement tendencies, especially around notions of responsibility, leadership, and obligation (Barr et al., 2015). Second, serving as educators, college students act in a civically-responsible fashion. Finally, they act as role models for near-peers to become civically engaged in their schools, communities, and society (Ito et al., 2009). By enabling college students to lead K-12 students in action civics activities, both groups better understand what it means to be citizens and become primed for future service-learning and civic activities.

Although research on college students' participation in action civics for K-12 education is emerging (Cohen, Ridley-Kerr, Rzepka, & Root, 2015; Fitzgerald & Andes, 2012), much of it focuses on the political and social knowledge obtained by the K-12 students. In contrast, we explore the dispositions that college students need to effectively facilitate such learning with K-12 students, culled from grounded coding of four cases (two community experiential-learning classes (at Temple University and Wagner College), a university-based youth leadership development program (the University Community Collaborative), and one non-profit-based action civics program (Generation Citizen)). Although each experience in action civics is highly dependent on the context and goals of those involved, themes emerged that cut across contexts.

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