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Employability skills beyond the basics of the three Rs have often been cited by employers as the skills most critical to workplace success in the 21st-century economy. This article by Lyn Fiscus, founder of the Leadership Teacher website, details ways in which students develop the Four Cs—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity—through participation in student activities.

The Advocate

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Activity Involvement Prepares Students for College and Careers

By Lyn Fiscus

National dialogue has continued to focus on the concepts of college and career readiness, with most of the attention on academic skills. Yet participation in student activities, with their hands-on approach to planning and carrying out projects and events, can help prepare students for college and careers in ways that strictly classroom-based educational situations cannot.

In a survey conducted last year by the American Management Association (AMA), executives indicated they need a workforce fully equipped with skills beyond just the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic (the three Rs). Employees need to think critically, solve problems, innovate, collaborate, and communicate more effectively. In addition to the three Rs, employers are also looking for “The Four Cs,” which consist of:

- ♦ **Critical thinking and problem solving**—the ability to make decisions, solve problems, and take actions as appropriate
- ♦ **Effective communication**—the ability to synthesize and transmit ideas both in written and oral forms
- ♦ **Collaboration and team building**—the ability to work effectively with others, including those from diverse groups and with opposing points of view
- ♦ **Creativity and innovation**—the ability to see what’s NOT there and make something happen.

According to the AMA survey results, executives said these skills and competencies have been articulated within their organizations as priorities for employee development, talent management, and succession planning. In fact, the majority agreed that their employees are measured in communication skills (80.4%), critical thinking

(72.4%), collaboration (71.2%), and creativity (57.3%) during annual performance appraisals. In addition, job applicants are assessed in these areas during the hiring process.

Three out of four (75.7%) executives who responded to the AMA survey said that they believe these skills and competencies will become more important to their organizations in the next three to five years, particularly as the economy improves and organizations look to grow.

When asked why they believe these skills and competencies are taking on critical importance in the business environment, 91% rated the pace of change in business today as the leading cause, followed by global competitiveness (86.5%), the nature of how work is accomplished today (77.5%), and the way organizations are structured (66.3%).

Activities Develop Four Cs

Students who have been involved in organized student activities will be eagerly sought by employers because their experiences in these organizations help them gain or strengthen the Four Cs. By planning and organizing projects and events for their organizations, student leaders demonstrate the Four Cs in many ways.

■ **Critical thinking and problem solving**—Student leaders demonstrate this competency when they:

- ♦ Use the backwards planning process to plan an event
- ♦ Brainstorm possible activities to achieve an organization goal
- ♦ Prepare a minute-by-minute schedule for a pep rally or meeting agenda with time estimates for each item
- ♦ Prepare a budget for an event, projecting income

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- and keeping expenses within the limit
- ✦ Determine how many workers will be needed to carry out a service project and plan a work schedule
- ✦ Generate possible alternatives to a fundraiser that is no longer raising the amount of money needed to fund the group's activities
- ✦ Evaluate why a particular activity was or was not successful and make adjustments to plans for the next event.

■ **Effective communication**—Student leaders demonstrate this competency when they:

- ✦ Adapt their language and approach to different settings, such as a group meeting, a faculty meeting, or a school board meeting
- ✦ Negotiate with the principal for permission to sponsor a new event
- ✦ Create a PowerPoint presentation for the faculty on the group's goals for the year
- ✦ Communicate information in committee reports, public address announcements, and at meetings
- ✦ Create fliers to publicize an event using a graphic design program on the computer
- ✦ Compile a record of the school year to create an end-of-year multimedia presentation
- ✦ Make calls to local businesses soliciting donations for a charity project

- ✦ Represent their peers' position on a controversial topic to the faculty, administration, or school board
- ✦ Provide feedback to other officers or committee members on their performance
- ✦ Prepare a presentation for adoption by a legislative or administrative group.

■ **Collaboration and team building**—Student leaders demonstrate this competency when they:

- ✦ Take a project through the process required for approval at their school, obtain signatures of the adviser, principal, and any others needed
- ✦ Demonstrate friendliness and acceptance toward all members of their organization
- ✦ Contribute to a chapter effort as a member of a team
- ✦ Develop group cohesiveness through icebreakers and teambuilding exercises
- ✦ Teach new members how to fill out a purchase order or make an announcement request
- ✦ Mediate conflict between members of a committee
- ✦ Work to include all segments of the student body in activities.

■ **Creativity and innovation**—Student leaders demonstrate this competency when they:

- ✦ Develop an idea for a new event or program to respond to student interest

Pack Your Bags

Involvement in student activities provides students with opportunities to apply what they've learned in real-life situations, gaining skills and abilities that will help them throughout life. Pack your students' bags for life's journey with some of the following:

- ✦ Public speaking skills
- ✦ Confidence in working with groups
- ✦ Knowledge of how to develop group cohesiveness
- ✦ Ability to set and work toward a goal
- ✦ Financial management skills
- ✦ Experience with organizing events
- ✦ Time management skills
- ✦ Improved communication skills
- ✦ Conflict mediation skills
- ✦ Negotiation skills
- ✦ Expertise in public relations and publicity
- ✦ Proficiency at evaluating activities
- ✦ Understanding of social and organizational systems
- ✦ Meeting management skills
- ✦ Ability to think creatively
- ✦ Problem solving skills
- ✦ Individual responsibility
- ✦ Self-organization skills

- Create a plan in their mind's eye of how an event will be, then work to make it happen
- Anticipate possible problems with an upcoming event and develop a plan to overcome them
- Brainstorm theme ideas for a spirit week and activities that develop the theme.

Student activity advisers know that much of the work that goes on in their organizations prepares students for college and careers by giving them opportunities to develop competency in the Four Cs. If workers who can solve problems, think on their feet, adapt to change, gather information, communicate effectively, and work in teams are what's needed in the workplace of the 21st Century, then participants in organized student activities have an edge over students who aren't involved. The authentic learning that takes place in student activities teaches essential life skills that will help student leaders in whatever path they choose after high school graduation.



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The Advocate is published by the Alliance for Student Activities, a nonprofit corporation whose mission is to promote the value of cocurricular student activities and to provide professional development and support for advisors and future advisors.

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www.alliance4studentactivities.org

Expanding Career Readiness

A paper released last summer by the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE) titled "Expanding Career Readiness Through Career and Technical Student Organizations" brings the key role of career and technical student organizations in developing career readiness to the fore. The paper illustrates how students participating in CTSOs like DECA, FCCLA, SkillsUSA and others strengthen their career readiness through cocurricular programming in such areas as leadership development, academic and career development, professional development, and community service.

More than 1.5 million students participate in a CTSO, and research has shown that participating in CTSOs has a definite impact on students' overall career readiness:

- Students who participate in CTSOs demonstrate higher levels of academic engagement and motivation, civic engagement, career self-efficacy, and employability skills than other students, and the more students participate in CTSO activities, the better the results.
- In a study of student performance measures, high school seniors in one CTSO significantly outperformed their non-member counterparts on four performance measures: ACT scores; SAT scores; GPA; and graduation rate.
- According to the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education, participating in leadership and professional development activities in a CTSO raises students' educational aspirations.
- Students who participate in school organizations in 10th grade have higher high school grade point average and are more likely to be enrolled in college at 21 than other students.

Check out ACTE's full report online at <http://www.acteonline.org>.

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