

January 24, 2025

An Even Better Framing: The Student as Citizen

Not customers, and not clients, either—reclaiming a vision of students as citizens points to a way forward for higher ed, Christine M. Nowik writes.

By [Christine M. Nowik](#)



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K eith B. Murray's recent essay, "[A Better Metaphor: The Student as Client](#)," challenges the pervasive metaphor of the student as customer in higher

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shallow transactional nature of the customer metaphor. However, the client metaphor still falls short of capturing the transformative purpose of education.

I propose a return to seeing students as citizens, harking back to higher education's historic mission wherein colleges and universities were places to cultivate civic-minded individuals, preparing students to contribute to democratic society and the public good. This vision, rooted in thinkers like John Dewey and Alexander Meiklejohn, has eroded in the face of market-driven priorities and bureaucratic logics. Restoring the metaphor of the student as citizen not only reclaims this civic mission but also addresses the pressing need for active engagement in today's complex world.

As we return to these foundational principles, it's essential to build on and not abandon the progress higher education has made in fostering inclusion and equity. Today's classrooms are more diverse than ever, and this diversity enriches the concept of citizenship, broadening it to encompass the lived experiences and contributions of students from historically marginalized communities. Maintaining this progress ensures that the model of the student as citizen serves all students, reflecting the plurality of our democratic society.

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The Limits of the Client Metaphor

While the client metaphor improves on the customer model by emphasizing professionalism and long-term outcomes over immediate gratification, it still frames education as a transaction. In this view, professors are service providers bound by professional standards, delivering a product in the form of knowledge and skill development to a client seeking expertise. Both the professor's authority and the student's receptivity are central to this dynamic.

However, even this framing subtly positions the student as a passive recipient in the learning process, emphasizing what is done to or for them rather than what they contribute to the educational dynamic. The client-professor relationship, while more professional, still operates within the logic of service provision, focusing on individual benefit rather than collective purpose. It narrows the scope of education to personal gain rather than societal good.

This narrow framing is a departure from how higher education has been understood historically. As John Dewey emphasized in *Democracy and Education*, education is meant to prepare individuals for active participation in civic life, not merely to acquire professional credentials. The current focus on individual outcomes undermines this broader mission, reducing education to a series of isolated transactions. To move beyond these constraints, the metaphor of the student as citizen offers a richer framework, one that emphasizes participation, responsibility and community over transaction and passivity.

The Citizen as a New (and Old) Metaphor

Reframing the student as a citizen isn't a new idea. Rather, it's a return to the roots of higher education. Citizenship implies membership in a shared community where

students not just as consumers or clients of an institution but as active participants in a community of learning.

A citizen is not passive; they engage, question, deliberate and co-create. They hold responsibilities not only to themselves but also to the community they inhabit. For students, this means a commitment to rigorous intellectual engagement and ethical behavior, and a willingness to contribute to the collective learning environment. For professors, this framing means fostering a culture where students are empowered to take ownership of their education and are encouraged to see their learning as part of a broader societal mission.

This vision of citizenship must include the diversity that now characterizes modern higher education. Historically, access to the benefits of education—and its civic purpose—was restricted by race, gender and class. Today, inclusion is not only a moral imperative but also essential for cultivating a richer and more equitable academic community, one that reflects the contributions and perspectives of all students, ensuring they feel ownership and agency within the institution. This approach aligns with Alexander Meiklejohn's [vision of experimental colleges](#), which treated education as preparation for democratic life while embracing the diversity of thought and experience required for true collaboration.

Citizenship in Practice

What might this metaphor look like in practice? First, institutions of higher learning would need to articulate a clear vision of academic citizenship and share it with students during admissions and orientation. Students should understand that they are entering a learning community where their engagement matters as much as their outcomes. They should be encouraged to see themselves as stewards of their education, to embrace intellectual curiosity and a responsibility to seek to understand

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Faculty, too, would need to adapt. Those who still emphasize authority as being at the core of their roles could frame themselves as facilitators and mentors within a democratic learning space. This shift doesn't mean abandoning standards or rigor but rather creating an environment where students are invited to participate meaningfully in the process of knowledge creation.

For example, classroom activities could be structured to emphasize collaboration and dialogue, mirroring the deliberative processes of civic life. Assignments could encourage students to grapple with real-world issues, connecting course content to societal challenges. Assessments could measure not just individual achievement but also contributions to the learning community, such as peer feedback, collaborative projects or civic engagement efforts.

Institutional Implications

This reframing would also require shifts at the institutional level. Policies and practices should reflect the values of citizenship, emphasizing shared responsibility

meaningful engagement. Faculty development programs could focus on strategies for cultivating student agency and community-building in the classroom.

The citizen metaphor also encourages a rethinking of higher education's relationship to society at large. Institutions would need to strengthen their commitment to public engagement, positioning themselves as spaces where students not only learn but also contribute to addressing pressing social issues. Partnerships with local community organizations, service-learning opportunities and projects that allow students to apply their knowledge in civic contexts would become more integral to the academic experience.

To fully embrace the citizen metaphor, institutions of higher learning must also behave as communities themselves, treating faculty and staff as citizens with voices in shaping the collective mission. This approach restores the shared governance models that were once the norm in higher education. As Dewey argued, education thrives when it mirrors democratic processes, fostering mutual respect, collaboration and shared accountability.

Toward a New Model

Murray is right to reject the customer metaphor and to call for a more professional framing of the student-professor relationship. But to truly honor the transformative potential of education, we need to move beyond even the client model. The student as citizen captures the reciprocal, participatory nature of education and aligns with the broader democratic mission of colleges and universities.

Restoring this vision offers a clear path forward: Colleges can cultivate a culture where students see their education not as a transaction but as a shared endeavor, preparing them to lead not just in their careers but also in their communities. This

responsibilities in the academic and civic communities we share, ensuring that progress toward inclusion continues as part of this richer vision of citizenship.

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