



# Literacy and Civic Engagement

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

2019

# About Frontier College

Frontier College is a national charitable literacy organization, established in 1899 on the belief that literacy is a right. We work collaboratively with community-based agencies across Canada to provide targeted, innovative literacy and numeracy support for the most vulnerable Canadians. Each year, over 40,000 children, youth, and adults participate in our free programs in more than 150 communities throughout the country.



Frontier College  
Collège Frontière

Literacy:  
Learning for Life.  
L'alphabétisation,  
Une leçon pour la vie.

September 17, 2019

Frontier College  
**NATIONAL FORUM**

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**LITERACY  
and CIVIC  
ENGAGEMENT**

Founding Sponsor: In collaboration with:

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Elections Canada

Canada Life is the founding sponsor of the Frontier College National Forum, and has generously supported Frontier College since 1999.

The 2019 Frontier College Literacy and Civic Engagement National Forum is in collaboration with Elections Canada.

Literacy is connected to citizenship, democracy, and community participation — what we call civic engagement. <sup>[1]</sup>

Frontier College's national dialogue on literacy and civic engagement explores the ways that improved literacy can enhance people's full participation in society, to the benefit of us all.

# What is civic engagement?

Civic engagement is an important part of our daily lives. It is the way we enact change and improve the quality of life in the places we live. The goal of civic engagement is to address public concerns. Civic engagement can take many forms. It includes activities like:

- Working with others to solve a problem in the community
- Participating in a local, regional, provincial, or national public consultation
- Active membership in a group or association
- Signing a petition
- Voting or volunteering in an election
- Volunteering for a charitable or political cause
- Donating money to a charitable or political cause
- Running for political office
- Protesting, demonstrating, or boycotting
- Contacting media or political officials to express your views

## **Broadly, civic engagement is:**

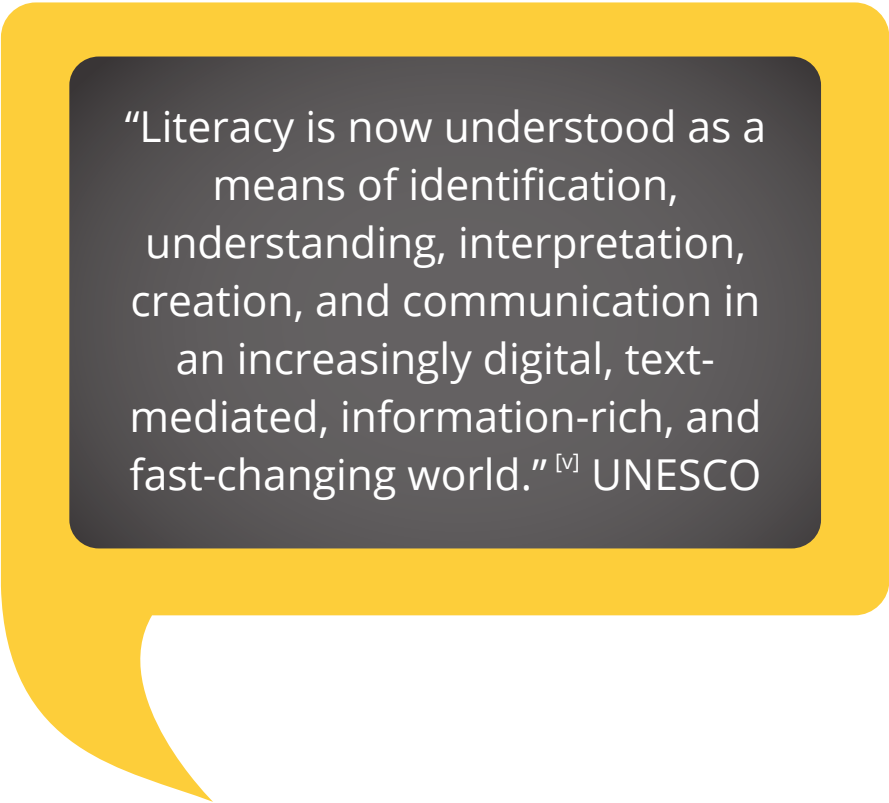
- a commitment to a community beyond oneself and one's family; and
- participation in activities to maintain or change the institutions that regulate those communities. <sup>[ii]</sup>

In a technologically connected world, civic engagement includes real and virtual communities and civic institutions. <sup>[iii]</sup>

“Civic engagement means working to make a difference in...our communities, and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference.” <sup>[iv]</sup>

# How are literacy and civic engagement connected?

Literacy includes reading, writing, and numeracy, as well as skills related to critical thinking and problem-solving — all essential skills for understanding and participating in today's world.



“Literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich, and fast-changing world.”<sup>[vi]</sup> UNESCO

There are clear connections between literacy and civic engagement. Research shows that Canadians with lower levels of literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills report weaker connections with their communities and society.<sup>[vi]</sup> Low literacy levels can negatively affect a person's self-esteem, which in turn may prevent that person from speaking up and participating in public life.<sup>[vii]</sup>

Each person's ability to participate in the community and in public life is part of the overall health of Canadian society. A thriving society includes a population that is civically engaged and invested in the wellbeing of its members.<sup>[viii]</sup> If barriers to civic engagement disproportionately affect certain people and groups in Canadian society, then our democracy cannot serve the needs of us all equally.

# Low literacy as a barrier to civic engagement

## Consider these facts:

Adult literacy is measured on a scale of 0 to 5, with 5 being the highest level. A 2013 study of OECD countries revealed that about half of adult Canadians (49%) have literacy scores below Level 3, and nearly 1 in 5 adult Canadians (17%) has a literacy score of Level 1 and below. <sup>[ix]</sup>

- Low literacy levels and related experiences of poverty, poor health, lower educational attainment, and less access to adequate housing and employment disproportionately affect some groups of Canadians, including: Indigenous people; immigrants to Canada; people with disabilities; single parents; and seniors. <sup>[x]</sup>
- Literacy projections for the period of 2001–2031 show that, as a result of population growth, Canada will have a 25% increase in the number of adults with low literacy skills, from almost 12 million adults to more than 15 million adults. <sup>[xi]</sup>
- People who have a higher level of education (who also tend to have high levels of literacy) are much more likely to be civically engaged. <sup>[xii]</sup>

# Improving literacy to build a fair and prosperous society

Improving literacy skills helps to remove barriers to civic engagement. At Frontier College, we see first-hand that strengthening people's literacy skills through community-based programming is an effective, low-cost way to improve life success for both individuals and communities, across many dimensions of private and public life.

In addition to boosting civic engagement, investment in literacy can benefit Canada in other ways. For example, the 2018 report "Literacy Lost: Canada's Basic Skills Shortfall" showed that increasing literacy skills in the workforce by an average of 1% would, over time, lead to a 3% increase in GDP, or \$54 billion per year, every year, and a 5% increase in productivity. The same report also showed that improving the skills of people at the lower end of the literacy scale (Levels 1 and 2) will have more impact than improving the skills of people who are already at Level 3 or higher. <sup>[xiii]</sup>

**"Higher literacy can boost the economic and financial success of individuals and the economy as a whole. It can reduce poverty, improve health, lift community engagement, and lead to a higher standard of living. In fact, it is hard to identify any other single issue that can have such a large payoff to individuals, the economy, and society."** <sup>[xiv]</sup>

# What can you do?



**Make informed decisions about issues that affect their communities**

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**Seek out, read, and understand information about community issues and political events, like elections**

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**Communicate with community members, media, and elected representatives**

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**Take an active role in the electoral process, as voters, volunteers, or candidates**

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**Participate in public dialogue about citizenship, democracy, and their quality of life in Canada**

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# Program Spotlight



**Frontier College's Independent Studies (IS) program** offers adults with developmental disabilities the opportunity to learn literacy and self-management skills. A goal of the IS program is to help participants become more involved in their communities, and in society. In advance of elections, the IS curriculum has covered topics such as how to find information about local candidates, and the voting process. Mock elections have helped learners prepare for the experience of voting.

***"Knowing more about the election gives me more confidence to vote. The more you know about an election, the more likely you'll participate. More people [voting] makes the election fairer."***

– Learner, Independent Studies



# Program Spotlight



**Community Literacy Catalysts (CLCs)** are Indigenous community members hired, trained, and mentored by Frontier College. CLCs create strengths-based, community-driven programs that integrate Indigenous cultures and languages in literacy development and local capacity-building initiatives.

*“The Band was exploring the idea of building an outdoor learning centre, and had opened the plans up to the community for feedback. [The CLC] wanted to get her reading group involved, and so she brought this group of youth and adults to the architect to talk to him directly. They shared their thoughts, ideas, and feelings on how the learning centre should be created, and the feedback was well received. Not only has [the CLC] supported the group in expressing their voice on the future of their community, but also now the group members will be more likely to participate in the use of the centre, since they were a part of its creation.”*

– CLC Project Coordinator, British Columbia

# Program Spotlight



**Frontier College's Beat the Street program** offers marginalized youth who have not completed high school a way back into the education system. One learner, a former child soldier and newcomer to Canada, said this about the impact of community-based literacy support on his life:

*"I am more confident in my reading... I can use technology to help me. I was able to do a podcast on my [life] story... I have been able to do interviews with CBC. I can better understand my [work] contracts. I am able to study for my citizenship test."*

- Learner, Beat the Street

*"My confidence...has grown so much that I can now volunteer at the Loaded Ladle [the Dalhousie University food cooperative]."*

- Learner, Halifax

- Frontier College literacy tutor, Edmonton

*"Volunteering with the Indigenous women at Buffalo Sage Centre has been a delightful experience. This General Educational Development class shows that people see education as a way to improve their quality of life."*

# Moving forward

Frontier College's National Forum on Literacy and Civic Engagement aims to bring together a wide variety of participants to discuss the role of literacy in civic engagement in our country. Together, we can generate momentum for improved literacy and a better quality of life for all. Frontier College believes that literacy is a key component of a fair and prosperous society. We recommend that governments, community services, employers, researchers, charities, and individuals work together to create policies and practices that support people facing literacy barriers to participate more fully in civil society as voters, volunteers, and community organizers and decision-makers.

## Next steps:

- **What can we do to strengthen the profile of literacy as a vital component of civic engagement?**
- **How might we change aspects of public life and political processes to better engage Canadians who face barriers to participation?**
- **What are the current best practices in literacy and civic engagement that can be replicated and scaled across the country?**

# Sources

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