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December 14, 2016

Active Citizenship

When it comes to our place and role in society or a community it is too often common for people to consider themselves solely as members. There is nothing wrong with being a member of a community, so long as that membership is of value. In today’s society we have created a world where many believe that it is not up to them to make a change, but the responsibility is put in the hands of our leaders. In his essay “From Leadership to Citizenship”, Peter Block states that “our attraction to leadership, our very interest in it, becomes the obstacle to authentic change or transformation” (Block 1). We rely on those in charge to change the social issues surrounding us and put our communities in their hands. All too often we forget that we are the people living in these communities and that we possess the capacity to take matters into our own hands. If we want change, we must start to make that change. As put by President Obama, “Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”

In order to obtain the meaningful change which we seek and to get the best results out of our communities, we must offer up our participation. It is necessary to participate in social engagement and activism in the form of active citizenship and involvement. The obstacle which we face is changing our position in society from members to active citizens. It takes much more than just referring to oneself with a different title.  To reach the point of active citizenship, we, as members of a community, must embark along the path that is called the Active Citizenship Continuum.

Beginning as members of a community we have already reached the first step in the Continuum. We do not have any particular interest in our involvement with society at this stage and are not concerned with the social problems and issues surrounding us. However, somewhere along the line something sparks our interests and opens our ears to the call of participation within our community. Social issues become visible to us now and we recognize the impacts they have and the tolls they are taking on our surroundings. Once we reach the point where we feel that it is necessary to lend a helping hand and become involved in order to diminish and prevent social issues, we move forward from our membership status and become volunteers.

As volunteers we choose to participate in the attempt to better our communities. Our hearts are in the right place and our efforts are well-intended. We try to focus our energy and services on the issues which need to be addressed and tailor our actions to meet the requirements of that specific issue. At this stage in the Continuum, social issues are apparent to us but not fully understood. We lack the proper education about the issues needed in order to bring about a successful positive change. As we begin to grow as volunteers and become more passionate and knowledgeable about social issues, we begin the transition into conscientious citizens; the third and second to last step to active citizenship.

Being conscientious citizens, we dive deeper into the social issues at hand. We ask questions and investigate the potential causes of certain issues. We are concerned with finding the root cause by asking “why is this happening?” and “how did this happen?”. We begin to connect the dots between different factors and analyze the issues from all different perspectives in order to gain a complete view. This is very important because understanding something based simply off of face-value will lead to significant gaps in our understanding and knowledge of the particular issue. In order to make a real impact on the community we must be fully aware of what it is we are trying to change.

The fourth and final step in the Active Citizenship Continuum is the achievement of active citizen status. This means that all of the knowledge which we have gained along the Continuum all adds together and forms a true passion and devotion for one’s community. “Citizenship is our agreement to receive rights and privileges from the community and, in so doing, to pay for them through our willingness to live within certain boundaries and act in the interest of the whole. At the core of citizenship is the desire to care for the well-being of the larger institution, be it an organization, a neighborhood, or a country” (Block 3) We recognize how our actions may impact others and make a conscientious effort to act in ways which will lead to positive outcomes for those around us. The community becomes a leading aspect of our lives. Some active citizens may go so far as to devote their career to helping relieve the impact and root causes of certain social issues which the community may face.

Active citizenship is utilized in many ways throughout the community. When it comes to service and serving others, active citizenship plays a vital role. Without a full understanding of the issue which one seeks to change it is easy to fall down along the negative spectrum of community development. Award winning medical essayist Lewis Thomas summarized this with his statement “If you want to fix something you are first obliged to understand … the whole system.” (Stroh 14). Lacking the proper perspective of a community can lead to an understanding formed by a single opinion. When a community is considered to be in need, the community development work done in that area will be focused on their problems and deficiencies. Need-based community development is ineffective and can lead to unwanted results. For example, one of the big issues is that people are told by outside forces that something in their community is wrong and needs to be changed. They may have never viewed this particular something as being wrong before and were perfectly happy with the way everything was currently going. But when we go in and tell them that there is something missing and that they need help, “they begin to see themselves as people with special needs that can only be met by outsiders. They become consumers of services, with no incentive to be producers” (Kretzmann & McKnight 23).

In order to truly make a positive change in a community it is important to utilize asset based community development tactics. According to John Kretzmann and John P. McKnight in their work titled “Assets-Based Community Development”, “significant community development takes place only when local community people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort” (Kretzmann & McKnight 25). This means that it is the community which seeks to make a change, not those telling them what to do. Active citizens take matters into their own hands and join together to serve those around them. They unveil the existing skills, talents, and assets of a community and build upon them in order to make the positive change which the community members want and need.

Virginia Tech’s motto is “Ut Prosim”, which, when translated from latin to english, means “That I May Serve”. “Ut Prosim” is not only our motto, but also one of the eight pylons which sit above War Memorial Chapel overlooking the Drillfield and center of campus. The other seven are Brotherhood, Honor, Leadership, Sacrifice, Service, Loyalty, and Duty. I truly believe that service is what sits at the core of this University. It unites all students together to work towards a common goal of giving back to our community.

Our everyday academic lives are oriented towards an education which can be used to help give back. We are taught the importance of taking what we learn in the classroom, lab, or lecture hall and sharing it with the world. The careers which the school prepares us for involve forms of service in one way or another. Even if the service aspect of one’s degree isn’t immediately apparent to them, it is still there.

Virginia Tech’s devotion to service exceeds far beyond the classroom and is portrayed in many different ways around campus and through clubs and other extra curricular activities. During Gobblerfest at the beginning of this school year I noticed that there were many booths for clubs focused on community service. There are all sorts of outreach programs to get students involved with the local community and to get to know Blacksburg a bit better.

There are two different activities that come to mind when I think about Tech’s service to the surrounding communities. The first activity that I think of is a program through the Women’s Center called AWARE. This program is a mentoring program which connects female college students with girls in the local middle schools. AWARE volunteers go to the schools at lunchtime at least once a week and meet with the girls. They provide positive role models for these girls who may not have been provided with ones previously.

The second activity is Reading Hour which is an activity where Tech students go to local preschool and elementary schools and spend an hour reading to students there. Not only does this promote involvement with local schools, but it also promotes literacy in the surrounding communities. The students involved in Reading Hour typically go read to the children once a week. Because they go so frequently they are able to build relationships with the people whey see while at the schools and make connections within the community.

The volunteer experiences which I have both participated and heard of this semester all seem to promote the values of active citizenship. When a student volunteers with a group that meets more than once they begin to become more and more familiar with the social issue they are working against. They become aware of the presence of such issues and begin to think more in depth about them. Tech provides students with the opportunity to do more for whatever cause they are fighting for, whether it be through research, field studies, or raising awareness with booths on the drillfield.

Although Tech does provide students with the opportunity to foster the values needed to become an active citizen, it is not always apparent to students. If you are looking strictly for service throughout the University you will find it. However, if you aren’t specifically looking for it, the service opportunities and education are easy to miss. I believe that in order to promote active citizenship around campus there needs to be more advertisement for service and volunteer opportunities which will help to open students’ minds to social issues and problems in the local community.

Throughout the course of this past semester I have learned so much about service and volunteerism that I had never considered before. The topic which we covered that was of the greatest interest to me was the downfalls and criticisms of volunteerism. There was only one other instance in my life that the potential deficits to service actually occurred to me. Learning about it in class and all of the readings and ePortfolio writings that we were assigned broadened my knowledge on the topic. I feel as if I now have a more well rounded view of community service and have a better understanding about what it takes to carry out a successful project that will make a truly positive lasting impact on whoever it is that you are working to serve.

A passage from one of the readings that really hit me hard was in Ivan Illich’s “To Hell with Good Intentions”. He wrote, “At worst, in your "community development" spirit you might create just enough problems to get someone shot after your vacation ends and you rush back to your middle-class neighborhoods where your friends make jokes about "spits" and "wetbacks."” This made me think abiut the potential negative impacts that what you believe to be positive service actually can have on the community who you are serving. I think that this kind of sitiation is more common when it comes to international service because the volunteers are unable to watch the progress of their work and it is less likely that they will follow up with what htey have done but will instead just assume that they helped the people and feel good about themselves. Although the volunteers will not be there to see the impact they have made, it still exists and can bring along with is some negative consequences.

Another one of the readings that I found compelling was Adam Davis’ “What We Don’t Talk About When We Don’t Talk About Service”. Towards the end of his writing he discusses inequality and how although we say we do not like inequality, we actually cherish it. This was someting that I had never really considered but I now that I have to somewhat agree with his statement. No one wants to believe that they need inequality, however service relies on it. Even though we don’t like to admit it and sometimes might not even be aware of it, we view others as lesser than us. Why else would we be helping them? He writes, “It feels good to look down, better still if I can tell myself I’m ready to serve those less fortunate (that is, less) than me. That way I’m not just better, I’m also good” (Davis 6). This is something that will always bother me because I do not like the idea that I am actively participating in broadening the gap of inequality through service but when I think hard about it I have to give in and admit that there is some truth to it.

This past semester I was unable to so all of the service activities that I was interested in due to scheduling conflicts. However, for the upcoming semester I plan on participating in those activities because I will actually have the time in my schedule to do them. I am excited to get more involved on and off campus and serve my community through participating as an active citizen.

Works Cited

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