Lance Weber

Exploring Community Engagement

Organization Option I

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Youth Groups in Communities

The definition of community in my mind has evolved over the course of the semester such that my description became more refined and I realized that it’s not all black and white. Originally I said, “I believe community is simply a group of people. Whether the members participate or not really determines the quality of life within the community. A town could be small enough for everyone to know each other but if all of them are reclusive and stick to themselves a thriving community will not be present” (2013). I was also extremely skeptical of our visits to Over-the-Rhine at first because of the stories I had been told growing up regarding that part of Cincinnati as a “bad” area. Once we ventured into Over-the-Rhine multiple times and saw how it has been transforming, I felt more comfortable there and saw its merits.

Visiting Elementz constituted a moment in my life in which I was plopped right into an environment where I felt out of place and out of touch. The youth arts center that many kids frequented in Over-the-Rhine, as I grew to realize, was another brilliant way to target youth and build upon their talents and goals. I had experienced that in Boy Scouts and soon made the connection between the two styles of youth engagement. Once I had made the connection and saw how Elementz could greatly impact the youth and community of Over-the-Rhine, I got excited to tour the facility. The people in there seemed to connect well with each other and they seemed to be having tons of fun. Peter Block described a way for young people to see the world differently, “The transformation we seek occurs when these two conditions are created: when we produce deeper relatedness across boundaries, and when we create new conversations that focus on the gifts and capacities of others” (Block, 2009, p. 61). I learned the importance of focusing efforts on the positive aspects of a person because Elementz visualized the awesome impact this can have, especially after hearing Tafari’s story on how Elementz has affected him. My experience at Elementz sparked the initial interest in conducting my outreach project on youth groups and their importance in communities. As I stated before, I did feel somewhat out of place at Elementz, but it was because I had not been raised around the inner-city culture to which the youth arts center is geared. I was not meant to be comfortable anyway because real community engagement is often about going outside your comfort zone to make something better.

Community engagement is not just volunteering some of your time every once in a while, but living your life every day in an impactful way and positively influencing the community. After visiting WordPlay in Northside I realized just how perfectly Elissa and Libby embody the guidelines for being an Active Citizen where “Community becomes a priority in values and life choices” (Active Citizen Continuum), however, the life and profession changes they have made have been more drastic than most people will endure. The point is that they have taken their gifts and talents and found a way to use them to positively shape their community. Through their devotion and the devotion of volunteer tutors the children of Northside have gained valuable resources. As Johnson said, “individuals are the ones who make social systems happen” (Johnson, 2006, p. 83). Any one of us could be the one who breaks the mold and facilitates a change for the better in a community. It can start with simple community service and evolve into something you discover a passion for through that very service. I discovered a passion for the work done by the Pregnancy Care Center of Cincinnati in Clifton simply by serving at my church. When the time came to complete my Eagle Scout project, I was called to build shelves in the organization’s basement that could store donated items.

The visit to Elementz definitely sparked my interest in incorporating youth groups into my outreach project because it reminded me of the effects my youth group involvement had on me. I could see the good that Elementz does for the community without declaring the work they do for “at-risk youth,” where some organizations treat people as “problems to be solved” and only digs the hole deeper for the stuck community (Block, 2009, p. 39). The focus is on “social capital” (Asset-Based Community Development, 2006, p. 1), where relationships are important. Instead, by building upon the youths’ strengths and talents the people at Elementz, they help further something Block pointed out, “Restoration begins when we think of community as a possibility, a declaration of the future that we choose to live into… Community is something more than a collection of individual longings, desires, or possibilities” (Block, 2009, p. 48).

Making one feel welcome is first step in the establishment of a healthy youth group. When I first attended a Sunday night youth group at Hope Church – my current home church – I was a new and awkward 7th grade boy trying to fit in with the guys playing kickball before service. I was about to walk away from the game when one of the boys playing noticed I was new and told me to join, all the while having everyone introduce themselves to me. When I look back on that part of my life I cannot help but connect deeply with Block’s advice, “Greet people at the door; welcome them personally… People enter in isolation. Reduce the isolation they came with; let them know they came to the right place and are not alone” (Block, 2009, p. 145). If I had not been welcomed into the youth group at church the positive message and effect they wished to convey would have essentially fallen on deaf ears. If Elementz had not been a welcoming atmosphere to the youth who walked in their doors the organization would not have succeeded.

I thought about the “raising awareness about a point of interest” facet and how I could incorporate it into my outreach project. Where better to talk to young people about youth groups relevant to them than at school, specifically my old high school? Because I have a good relationship with my high school choir teacher after being in the choir program for my 4 years there, I e-mailed her regarding my desired visit for the coming Monday. She welcomed my idea because she likes having former students come back to talk about their experiences in college with her students, so all I had to do was share that and I could then bring up youth groups. I decided to ask if they were involved in any youth groups. About 10 of the 50 I asked said they were involved and the most popular group was YoungLife, followed by individual church youth groups. I asked those who responded with YoungLife why they were involved. Most who raised their hands said to build friendships and learn about God. Based on my research I had found that those two missions are at YoungLife’s core.

The majority of the students in the room, however, said they were not involved and I pressed into that. I asked the class, “Why?” I knew that because my focus was on religious youth groups I would most likely be met with an answer such as “I’m not religious.” But I was prepared for that. I told them the goal of and about Elementz straight from Block himself, “The goal of [of Elementz] is to give to youth an experience of what they can create, a sense of the value they have inside of them. The ultimate goal is to offer them a new possibility for their lives” (Block, 2009, p. 61). Religion, or lack thereof, shouldn’t stop a youth from being involved in the community. I cited various clubs and organizations around East that I remembered from my time at the school, like Youth in Philanthropy. When some people hear the word “philanthropy” they think it just entails giving away a lot of your money to charities and such. But YIP offers much more because they value philanthropic behavior as giving your time and energy to something you care about. A few of my friends were involved in the organization and they spoke highly of it. YIP provided them with opportunities to give back to the community. I explained that by getting involved early in life, passions can be awakened and give direction for your life.

That night I attended a general Boy Scout meeting of my home troop 990 to see how things were going since I had left. As I watched the older boys teach the new Scouts knot-tying and bandaging, I thought of my time in the troop. Learning knots and identifying poison ivy were indeed goals set forth by the Boy Scouts of America, but in the end it was all about building up young men in their faith, skills and leadership abilities. I do not classify it as a revelation, but rather a rediscovered appreciation of the BSA. I was actively involved in the BSA for 6 years where I had the opportunity to serve my community through volunteering and participating in canned good drives. I developed a strong feeling of brotherhood with my fellow scouts and a deep respect for the BSA.

For the final part of my project I went to see the guys from my high school Bible study group during their Wednesday night meeting. The group consisted of a lot of the same people, save the couple freshmen I did not recognize. They reminded me of how I must have looked in 7th grade at my first youth group meeting: off to the side, not really a part of the group. I took this opportunity to remind the group of how Christ was loving to all and welcomed everyone to him. At the same time I realized how Block urged to welcome those in isolation. I saw how important youth groups like the Bible study are as *small* groups because from them a sense of belonging and connection arises. Block noted this, “Even though we may be in a room filled with a large number of people we will never meet, by having made intimate contact with a handful of people in our small group work we are brought into connection with all others” (Block, 2009, p. 95).

Perhaps one of the reasons my school and my area is so great is because of organizations like National Honor Society, YIP, BSA, YoungLife, and church youth groups. When I think of encounters I had in high school with people in these organizations, I only see positive faces. I had formed friendships like they had and engaged in the community through volunteer service and fundraising. Yet the youth groups that go without names or concrete structure like young people assembled on a street corner are just as important. In his section about youth, Block provides a new outlook on this crowd, “When you drive by a street corner and see young people hanging out at odd hours making a living in odd ways, we can view them as having gifts waiting to be given, rather than being problems waiting to be solved. If you notice that they are dealing drugs, you hold the thought that they have entrepreneurial skill; it is just aimed in the wrong direction” (Block, 2009, p. 165). However unpopular this mindset sounds, it holds true. The energy and communal feeling is there but the direction just needs to be shifted.

Since involvement in youth groups has held such a large stake in my personal development, I feel a strong duty to reciprocate for the next generation. I was reminded of the importance of fellowship and real community engagement. Community Engagement, as we’ve discovered, aims at bringing people together regardless of social class, race, gender, etc. to build up the community as a whole and make it a better place for everyone. YoungLife has connected with communities across the United States and is involved with not just kids, but also college students. The YoungLife organization is involved on our own UC campus. Elementz, an organization for youth in Over-the-Rhine, while it has no religious affiliation, is working to unite their youth on the common ground of appreciating talents and granting exploration based on their talents and interests. Safe environments like those in Boy Scouts, YoungLife, Elementz, and church youth groups allow for youth to grow and thrive and make way for a successful community.

Although I have been living on campus during my first semester at UC, once the spring semester is over I will most likely return to UC as a commuter in the Fall of 2014. When my parents told me the news it was initially depressing. However, as I progressed through Exploring Community Engagement and carried out my outreach project, I began to see the positive takeaways. Living at home will afford me the chance to become a youth leader. Now that I am over 18 I can become an Assistant Scoutmaster in my Boy Scout troop. I can also get involved with both the college and high school church youth groups. The desire to give back to the youth in my area, as cliché as it sounds, was awoken this semester. I also want to continue my involvement with the Pregnancy Care Center of Cincinnati because I believe in their cause and can see how they impact the women in the city.

I do not have my whole life planned out at this moment, but I believe my current goals will be springboards for the future. I hope to use the next few years in West Chester and in Clifton in such a way where I can look back on the Active Citizen Continuum and confidently classify myself as an Active Citizen.

Works Cited

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Appendix A

Active Citizen Continuum

Member: Not concerned with her/his role in social problems.

Volunteer: Well-intentioned but not well-educated about social issues.

Conscientious Citizen: Concerned with discovering root causes; asks *why*?

Active Citizen: Community becomes a priority in values and life choices.