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Seeing the Possible: My Journey through Service Learning

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Seeing the Possible: My Journey through Service Learning

Cover Page Footnote

Moustafa Nassar is a recent May 2016 graduate of Averett University with a B.A. in Communications and a Minor in English. He is currently residing in his hometown, Long Island, NY with family, taking a year off from school, and considering different Higher Education & Student Affairs graduate programs. Brigid Belko is the Director of Experiential Learning at the CCECC. She works with Danville Community College, Piedmont Community College, and Averett faculty & staff to initiate and revitalize experiential learning on campus and in the Danville region.

Article Prompt

“Our nation finds itself in a befuddling juxtaposition of realities. We have the highest access to voting rights in our history, yet we struggle to muster half of eligible voters to exercise their rights. Despite a public that remains largely disengaged with electoral politics, Gallup’s poll on civic health reveals that Americans contribute more time and money to those in need than citizens of any other nation.”

(A Crucible Moment, 2012, 7-8)

What makes a community civically healthy?

What inspires or hinders a community’s civic action?

By many conventional measures, we find ourselves undergoing what the authors of “A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future” call a “civic erosion” (6). At the same time, new conditions for mobilizing knowledge are fostering new forms of civic action and activism. For this special section of Volume 5 of the *VA Engage Journal*, we invite contributions that deepen our collective understanding of public participation across the Commonwealth of Virginia and/or provoke new thinking about the meaning and manifestation of civic health in our communities.

Critical Reflection: How is activism being redefined on our campuses and in our communities?

Seeing the Possible: My Journey through Service Learning

Abstract

As the second year of the Center for Community Engagement and Career Competitiveness draws to a close, our graduating student intern, Moustafa Nassar, critically reflects on his distinct learning experience within his Averett University community and the wider local community to better understand how activism needs to be redefined inside and outside of the college campus. In a discussion of the role experiential learning, in the form of service-learning, volunteer work, and internships, played in his college career, he evaluates his new skills and direction as a result of his experiences.

Introduction by Brigid Belko:

“*A Crucible Moment* calls on educators and public leaders to advance a 21st century vision of college learning for all students—a vision with civic learning and democratic engagement as an expected part of every student’s college education” (Association of American Colleges and Universities “A Crucible Moment”, 2016). The professionals at Averett University’s Center for Community Engagement and Career Competitiveness seek to be a regional hub, that connects students and faculty with community partners to create distinct learning experiences as well as strengthen the social and economic vitality of the region (Averett University, 2016)) The students’ work in the community is the tangible embodiment of those efforts. As the second year of the Center for Community Engagement and Career Competitiveness draws to a close, our graduating student intern, Moustafa Nassar, critically reflects on the outcomes of his distinct learning experience at Averett University and within the

wider community to consider how our understanding of civic activism can be redefined on campuses and in communities.

By Moustafa Nassar

In college, students expect to find themselves professionally and develop as productive members of society. Their goal is to identify and enhance their skills and apply those skills to something prolific and meaningful. This process is simple for some students who can easily determine their future paths. For others, the task of finding a specific niche when starting on a blank canvas can be stressful. For me, identifying my future was a process of checks and balances. For example, finding my major was simple; I have always been social and I enjoy being creative, which led me to pursue a degree in Communications. However, finding what I specifically liked in that field was a different experience. I did not know my strengths and weaknesses well enough to understand where in the communications field I fell into place. Like most students, the questions of “Who am I? What is my purpose? Why am I doing this?” constantly rang in my ear. These questions, combined with the understanding I had limited time to answer these questions became toxic to my academic career. My grades began to suffer because I lacked purpose, a reason as to why I was in school in the first place.

Erikson’s theory of development depicts the growth of a person from infancy to late adulthood through an eight-stage plan (Sokol, 2009, p.7). These stages start with learning who to trust as an infant; during young adulthood, individuals search for love and acceptance as they grow and, finally as senior citizens, they evaluate the impact they have had on the world in which they live. Erikson’s fifth stage is *Identity vs. Role Confusion* during which adolescents try on many different “hats” to figure out where they fit with the rest of the world. Usually, this fifth

stage happens between the ages of 12 and 18. I agree with Erikson that usually around the end of adolescence, most individuals start developing an idea of what they want to do, career wise.

However, the option of practically trying those careers are scarce until that person hits his or her early 20s. In my opinion, the main issue students face in choosing a career path is the ability (or inability) to test a potential job to see whether or not it is the right fit for them. When service-learning came into my life, not only did it help me develop skills in online media and public relations, but service-learning also gave me real world experience. Instead of only knowing my strengths and weaknesses in theory, I came to understand them through practice with the opportunity to develop further my strengths for the future, while being given a safe space to analyze and understand where I could improve.

Sophomore Year

My first taste of experiential learning started accidentally. I needed another class within my communications major to remain on schedule in my program progression. With my minor in equestrian studies, only the advanced public relations class fit my schedule. On the first day of class, the professor shared that this was a service-learning course and we would be working with the Family YMCA to promote their new facility. One of their goals was to triple membership. After my class and I met with the directors of the YMCA to discuss expectations, I was initially hesitant to continue with the course. I was the only sophomore in the class and all the other students had participated in marketing or public relations internships previously. After speaking with my professor, she informed me that because the class was focused on service-learning, my peers, myself, and the professor would be working as a team and learning from one another.

At the YMCA, our duties ranged from creating press releases to recording video advertisements to teaching the benefits of social media use. I was motivated to continue in the course after witnessing the effect our work had on the community. I learned the YMCA was a hub for children, teens, and adults of all ages, and in those individuals, there was potential to be improved upon. Subsequently, I learned of the potential within myself.

Before my service-learning experience, I lacked direction. I took courses solely for the sake of graduating without any idea of how the courses applied to the life I wanted after I graduated. With my new experience, I finally grasped whether or not certain professions matched my interests. With experiential learning, I maximized my “experience” by understanding the pros and cons about certain aspects of tasks. Through the YMCA, I learned I enjoyed working with others and helping a community. On the other hand, I realized I was not passionate about working in recreation. I utilized experiential learning as a chance for trial and error. Similar to Stage 5 of Erikson’s theory, not only could I identify where I wanted to be placed in society, but because of my experiences, I was able to determine the right choice. Instead of just identifying broadly where I wanted to go with my career, I experienced a particular career in small doses and figured out if it was the correct one for me.

Junior Year

One year later, I started my first marketing internship. My boss told me my previous service-learning experience stood out from the other applicants. I worked with a non-profit organization that coordinated a 5k with the mission of spreading autism awareness and raising money for children who fall within the autism spectrum. My specific duty was to recruit local

businesses to sponsor and support the 5k, as well as recruit local college students to volunteer and run the race. Most of the time, I was familiar with the duties given to me because of what I learned in my advanced public relations class. I loved helping families in need and giving children on the autism spectrum a day to celebrate what makes them unique. My heart filled with joy when a mother said her son thought of the 5k as a second birthday. But what I found the most rewarding was seeing my peers run the race, volunteer within the community, and connect with community leaders in ways they never expected. Students met with our company sponsors and discussed possible internships and future jobs. As with my experience with the YMCA, my co-workers, peers, and community leaders worked as a team to improve the lives of members of their community.

Witnessing this, I finally realized my career path: experiential learning, itself. Everyone learns differently and I found I wanted to pursue a career that allowed me to help students experiment with different ways of learning, while simultaneously engaging with their community. There is no doubt that “it takes a village to raise a child,” but it just might also take a village to help young adults find how they can be productive members of society. I believe students can find their paths through actual practical experience in each path that comes along. This can happen through service-learning classes that allow students to get real life experience in fields of interest, through connecting community needs with specific lessons, and by helping students find internships. For me, experiential learning is a solution to combat social issues within a town. It also empowers students to find the perfect career path. My personal career goal is to work for a university and unite my local community with that university through experiential learning.

Senior Year & Reflections on Academic Career

During my senior year, I interned with the Center for Community Engagement and Career Competitiveness, the pioneers of experiential learning at my university. I worked with community leaders and students in different ways such as promoting local events and building the Love Danville Coalition, which allows students and City Council members together to create possible solutions for our community's problems and needs. These lessons I will take with me wherever I go. Without falling into a service-learning class, unbeknownst to its meaning, I would not have found a path, a direction for where I want to take my life. I did this by first discovering, testing, and analyzing both my internships and service learning experience, to see exactly where I can better the community in which I live.

To expose students to the benefits of experiential learning, it is key to utilize student experiences. Faculty members should express how beneficial service-learning can be because, frankly, this is what they are paid to do. Luckily, the barrier in explaining what service-learning is has come down at my university, because current upperclassmen can now define its meaning as well. Through students like me, who have grown and found themselves through experiential learning, prospective students can now see themselves doing the same. Student-to-student word of mouth is the best form of marketing on a small college campus such as Averett University. The goal for students is to see what is possible: the possibility to discover their potential, the possibility to experience their community, and the possibility to become catalysts for positive change. Students should understand that service-learning is a process of deciding whether to follow a specific career path or not. When one witnesses how other students benefit from these experiences, a student can get a true sense of how his or her life could change through service-

learning. Consequently, students can fully progress through their own version of Stage 5 and find their places in society.

In general, there will never be a concrete answer for the perfect way to teach people, and one solution may apply only to a specific time period, to a geographical region, or even to a particular individual. Millions of students attend college every year and it is illogical to think that they will all learn the same way. However, it is up to us, as active members of society, to bring forth the highest potential out of life. Erikson points out that the “individual and society are intricately woven, dynamically related in continual change” (Sokol, 2009, p.3). Each student should be given the chance to succeed in academia using alternative methods of teaching that still correlate with the curriculum of the university. The Albert Einstein quote “Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid,” will always be something for me to live by. Service-learning worked for me because I wasn’t simply reading about the theory of public relations in a textbook. I was testing those theories out for myself to see what worked and didn't work in certain situations.

Information is usually drawn from memory and for me, I was able to retain the insight I was taught in the classroom after I completed the lesson (Deans for Impact, 2015). With experiential learning, a university can give students alternative methods of learning that can spark undiscovered passions. Instead of memorizing what goes on in the classroom, students will be able to more quickly comprehend the purpose of the material, remembering it better (Deans for Impact, 2015). What motivates a student is the understanding of how this can benefit them (Deans for Impact, 2015). With that passion and a firmer grasp on the material, students can potentially be encouraged to excel in other areas of course work, regardless if it is based in

service-learning or not. My goal is to let students discover a drive they have never seen within themselves and let that fire grow into something productive and beneficial to society. When I reach stage 8 of Erikson's theory, reflection, I want to make sure that I left the world a better place than when I came into it.

By BB

As one of Moustafa Nassar's mentors, I completely agree with his assessment to promote experiential learning from both the student and community ends. His call to action is directly in sync with the National Taskforce on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement's recommendations to:

"1- Capitalize upon the interdependent responsibilities of K-12 and higher education to foster progressively higher levels of civic knowledge, skills, examined values, and action as expectations for every student.

2- Expand the number of robust, generative civic partnerships and alliances locally, nationally, and globally to address common problems, empower people to act, strengthen communities and nations, and generate new frontiers of knowledge (Association of American Colleges and Universities "Highlights", 2016).

For the city of Danville, Virginia, Averett University, and the Center for Community Engagement and Career Competitiveness, these goals mean we need to direct greater attention towards sharing our community impact with stakeholders and students, alike, so that our work can expand and grow deeper. Thanks to students, like Moustafa Nassar, we have a repertoire of experiential learning photos, videos, and testimonies to get us started.

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