**Reflective Essay: Campaign Internship**

**Community Engagement**

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Throughout the course of this past 2014 spring semester, I carried out my own self designed honors learning experience. For the experience, I worked on the campaign of state representative Connie Pillich, who is running for state treasurer in the elections this fall. The following is a reflection of what I learned and the experience that I gained.

**What?**

For this experience, I drove out to Blue Ash every Tuesday and Thursday to work in the campaign office of state representative Connie Pillich. I would arrive to the office at 10 AM and would usually leave at around 5 PM. As far as community engagement goes, this certainly gave me some invaluable experience in battling with rush hour traffic!

Connie was not always actually at the office, as she often times would have to be travelling around Ohio for various events, and basically just spread the word about the campaign and make sure her name was getting out there to the average Ohio citizen. When I arrived to the office on a typical day, however, I would almost always be met by Libby, my primary intern coordinator and one of Connie’s very trusted staff members. It would be Libby who would instruct me in what I needed to do for that day.

My daily tasks at the office included a wide range of things. What I most often did was something called “donor research.” This involved using various computer programs and databases to search for individuals who were both registered voters and who had donated to political campaigns in the past. I was able to get their general information from a website called votebuilder.com. From this site, I would be able to obtain addresses, email, phone numbers etc. I would then use another database called datainfluenceexplorer.com, which would allow me to see what political campaigns they had donated to in the past and how much they had donated. From here I would put this information into our database, and a call sheet would be produced for that individual for Connie to contact and ask for a donation in the future. At the office, however, I would also carry out such tasks as drafting reports of Connie’s news/media coverage for the given week, and I would make phone calls inviting local people to events that Connie was having in various parts of Ohio. I also carried out specialized donor research projects (i.e. donor research for individuals at a particular law firm or living in a specific area). In general, I felt like I had somewhat of an idea of what I would be doing when I drafted my proposal for this experience, although I could never be entirely sure what to expect being that I had never worked on a campaign before. Overall, I would say that my day-to-day duties at Connie’s office didn’t deviate too dramatically from my expectations, but was obviously not exactly how I pictured it being. The most important aspect of this experience was the belief in Connie and what she stands for. This took me time at first, but I had to come to grips with Connie’s views and agenda in order to be fully dedicated to the cause of aiding her campaign efforts.

The two main learning outcomes that I met for community engagement over the course of the semester include the following:

- Recognizes how public policies and practices, and power and privilege, have an influence on social issues. Explore ways to alter public policy and/or identify solutions.

- Relates, communicates, and works effectively with others towards sustainable social change.

The first of these was more complex, and I don’t think I really grasped until the spring time when I got to travel to Columbus for the Ohio Democrat Party Legacy Dinner. At this amazing event, I got to meet and witness speeches of prominent democrats in Ohio such as Senator Sherrod Brown and Governor candidate Ed Fitzgerald (among several others). As I watched and listened to each of these individuals speak, I was able to gain a much firmer understanding of the various social and economic issues afflicting Ohio, and how these issues are viewed by both Democrats and Republicans. While it would take a great deal of time to get into all of these issues, I really felt that I came to grasps with this learning outcome by really having to ponder how being in a position of power and influence can have an effect on society and the problems it is faced with, and if there is a way to carry this out in a way that pleases all. There is truly no clear answer for this.

I met the second learning outcome simply by working alongside my fellow co-workers at the office. There was another student intern from the University of Xavier that worked alongside me, and through the instruction of our supervisors, we were able to tackle and accomplish a great deal. All of the work we did, of course, was totally geared toward Connie and her campaign which hopefully will eventually lead to her getting elected. Connie getting elected would then hopefully bring about various social and economic reforms in our great state of Ohio.

**So What?**

Interestingly, all of the courses that I engaged with this past school year (classes I took at UC) pertaining to my area of study dealt with international politics. Throughout the course of the year, I was focused heavily on international relations, and comparative politics, which is essentially the study of different domestic systems that exist within states around the world. These courses did not deal heavily with politics in the United States, however, a class I took as an Advanced Placement course my senior year of high school, and one for which I received academic credit for, played a large role in my learning experience for the internship. This, of course, being American Government.

One thing that is heavily focused on in American Government, is the various differences in the political process at the state level and federal level. The division of power between a national system of government and multiple municipal or local systems of government is called “federalism.” I could never truly grasp the vast differences in the two systems (federal vs. state) until working on a statewide campaign. In fact, I came to realize that I knew much less about state government than I had previously thought.

A major court case of the Supreme Court that occurred very recently (2010) was *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission*. In short, the case overturned the *McCain Feingold Act* of 2003, that prohibited what was defined as “electioneering communications” (political ads of any kind) to be paid for by corporations or unions within 60 days of a general election and 30 days of a primary election. While direct donations to candidates by corporations in an election remained illegal, corporations and unions gained a great deal of ability to heavily support candidates as a result of this ruling by the Supreme Court. What I had never realized, or even thought much about for that matter, was the extreme impact that this case had on states. Several states had laws that severely limited the amount of independent expenditures that could be made by corporations and unions to benefit candidates. Several states were now forced by the Supreme Court to drastically change their campaign finance laws as a result of the ruling. I learned through my internships that in Ohio and other states, that Republicans have often times tended to majorly outraise Democrats in their campaign fundraising efforts since 2010. For example, in 2012, Josh Mandel outraised Sherrod brown by a notable amount in the senatorial election. Despite this, Brown won the election by a comfortable six percent of the vote. During my entire tenure in Connie’s office, we trailed Josh Mandel’s fundraising efforts for the treasurer election by more than half, however, Connie maintained a comfortable lead in the statewide polls.

What is interesting about this, is the fact that the court case still barred direct contributions to elections from corporations, yet the fundraising results of many of the elections in Ohio since 2010 imply the possibility that loop-holes may exist in the system (this is of course not provable without much more in depth investigation). The general opinion in states, however, and something that I was able to observe simply by learning a great deal about state elections the past few years from Connie, is that corporations cannot simply buy candidates the election, and that the democratic process remains alive and healthy in Ohio.

Another significant impact that this experience had on me was the shaping of my understanding of my role as an Ohio citizen. It was truly fascinating conducting donor research, because I was able see that Ohio is indeed a microcosm of political views in the United States as a whole. Different parts of the state tend to swing more towards either the left or the right, and different demographic groups ultimately tend to side one way or the other as well. While this is the case almost everywhere, it could be argued that nowhere is it more dramatic than in Ohio. This is what leads to Ohio to being a swing state, and what many believe is the single most important state for a presidential candidate to win in the electoral vote. Regardless of this, I came to learn through my internship that these statewide elections are arguably much more important than national elections. It could be debated that voting for the governor, voting for the treasurer, voting for the attorney general etc. has a much more direct impact on our lives than voting for the president. Because not nearly as many people vote in these elections, an individual going out to vote for these positions also bears much more weight.

**Now what?**

While I completed this experience very recently, I feel that it has already become a great and significant part of my life, and has certainly had what I believe will be a lasting impact. It was not only a fantastic resume booster for only my freshman year of college, but also helped me to shape and come to grips with my own beliefs and political views. As an added bonus, I even got to meet such prominent figures as Sherrod Brown, Ed Fitzgerald, Nina Turner, and David Pepper, which was beyond a life changing experience. Through my experience, I have been able to learn first-hand, many concepts that I learned about in the classroom (those stated in the section above). Through engaging in an experience out in the real world, I have been able to understand political processes in a way that can never be learned through reading a book or listening to a lecture. In addition to this, I have also gained a much better grip on what I want to do with my future career endeavors. For a great deal of time, I was dead set on going to law school and eventually becoming a litigator of some sort. Through the mentorship of both Connie and the other personnel that work for her, however, I was able to learn a great deal about the opportunities that exist for individuals that wish to make an impact in the political world outside of running for public office. One such aspiration I have, would be to work as a part of the staff of a bureaucrat, in particular, a member of the president’s cabinet (although this will more than likely still require a law degree). I am prepared to work extremely hard for the rest of my academic career to make this goal a reality, as I look to one day be able to wake up every day in our nation’s capital and go to work in the White House. This way, I will be able to fulfill my bold ambitions driving me to be successful, but this will also allow me to feel as if I am making an impact on all of the United States in my own small way; similar to how I began to feel that I was doing a service for the entire state of Ohio by working for Connie.

While I have not completed a dissemination of my work at this time, I plan to do this in the very near future, and will feature it as the artifact in my learning portfolio. As stated in my proposal for this experience, I shall develop a report that goes into greater detail exactly what I did in my experience and how this met the learning outcomes of community engagement. I want my audience to be my fellow members of the honors community, as I feel this is the most important group to first learn a little about what I learned. What I hope to show to others, is what I have come to believe is indescribable importance of participating in state elections (voting), and the reasons for this. Through this, as well as my own outgoing verbal communication tactics, I hope to encourage and even convince others to go out and vote in the state elections this fall. Not only for the governor, but all of the down-ballot candidates as well. I hope to not only give others a glimpse of what I learned, but also to continue what I feel is service to the great state of Ohio.