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Making Connections: Non-Profits and Their Role in a Civil Society

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Appendix E - UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM
SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Anna Pridgy
College: Arts + Sciences  Department: English
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Janet Atwill

PROJECT TITLE: Making Connections: Non-Profits and their role in a civil society

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: L + M. Atwill, Faculty Mentor
Date: 15 September 02

General Assessment - please provide a short paragraph that highlights the most significant features of the project.

Comments (Optional):

Ms. Pridgy has made impressive theory/practice and "real world"/academic connection in this text. It should be a useful step toward her career goal of advocacy law.
Making Connections: Non-Profits and Their Role in a Civil Society

Anna Priddy
Senior Honors Project
Dr. Janet Atwill, Faculty Mentor
September 5, 2002
Introduction

“We are left in a position where rationality without reason permeates all aspects of social life; where schooling is informative but not enlightening, where work is sustaining but not humanizing, and agriculture is efficient but not sustainable” (Banks et al. 289).

As a kind of culmination of my experiences at UT, I find this project has connected many of the issues I encountered over the past four years. English 470: Special Topics, Rhetoric and Cultural Studies (University of Tennessee Spring 2002) certainly helped illuminate several of these connections. Taught by Drs. Janet Atwill and Handel Wright, we discussed progressive and diverse areas of study in gender, race, sex, class and education, all including areas of power inequalities. The subsequent readings and discussions on the possibilities, techniques and inherent problems in education were especially interesting, as education had become an almost transparent area to me due, perhaps, to its constant presence.

Education is the ability to empower; yet, many are still withheld equal opportunity to access this power through diverse means of discrimination. Wealth, however, remains the great un-equalizer in struggles of power. Wealth buys its way into influential positions, but the knowledge and resources that come attached are what truly promote the cycle of the rich becoming richer as the poor become poorer. Education, while a tool of empowerment, has difficulty teaching the responsibilities that are inherent with power, and the techniques for its utilization. It is interesting that the only access I
had to this subject, perhaps the most definitive of my education, was in the last semester of my senior year in a special topics course.

This paper then, is complimentary to my final project for English 470, which looked at the fundamental role education plays in building a just and aware society. For this project, I want to examine an area where an individual can choose a career where it is possible to create a more empowered society, and non-profits seem a natural choice. I have been fortunate to know individuals who work in the non-profit sector and have had personal experience with non-profit organizations through volunteer work. Non-profits provide amazingly diverse and comprehensive services that place the betterment of society above personal gain. Yet non-profits can also encounter a variety of complex problems that can further challenge an already burdened organization. This paper will examine particularly the problems encountered by non-profits and the empowered solutions that can come from individuals recognizing and utilizing their power to change society.

Non-profit organizations encompass a broad cross-section of the American work landscape. They can include: charities, hospitals, labor unions, day cares, nursing homes, and museums as well as religious, educational and art organizations. These organizations are created out of need for a service that the government or the private sector is unable to fulfill. There are three common rationales for their existence: thin markets, where demand for a product or service is small and a profit cannot be guaranteed; market failure, when the consumer is unable to judge the quality of the product; and concern for the public good, the provision of goods and services that private firms will not provide.
Members of the United States workforce belong to one of two groups, the public or private sector. These sectors provide the opportunity for employment in a broad and diverse marketplace that powers our economy. Yet 10% of the 1999 Gross National Product is made up of a third sector: non-profit revenues—revenues exempt from taxation and distribution among those who exercise control over them. Non-profits make up a significant portion of the GNP, despite donations being their main source of finance; non-profits are vital to the job market. Non-profit organizations begin with a committee that approves by-laws and a constitution. The organization must apply to the state for 501(c)(3) tax exempt, non-profit status. With this exemption all donations to the organization, which come in the form of contributions and grants, are tax deductible.

Though members of a democratic nation, many US citizens feel disenfranchised from the political system. Much of this discontent is found in the disparity between local and state government. While a sizable individual effort is rewarded in a local community in demonstrable way, impacting state and national policy can often appear impossible. Randy Shaw writes, “Neighborhood issues often have more immediate and visible impacts and their smaller scale provides a sense of democratic participation that is harder to replicate in national campaigns” (8). Yet Robert Fisher observes that local activism separate from national “…will win limited reforms but not address the continued incidence of powerlessness, prejudice and poverty in the United States” (Shaw 9). Yet there is not a connecting movement that aligns local non-profit work with national policy making. Shaw finds one explanation for decreased interest in national advocacy within non-profit organizations: increased service provisions and a “client rather than constituency-centered focus;” an internalization of goals until they become so focused on
the community they find themselves without a national advocacy campaign (Shaw 231).

A national advocacy program within an existing non-profit organization, Shaw argues, will provide a direct channel to voice opinions to policymakers whose decisions can have a powerful effect on the measure of difficulty a non-profit organization must face. Shaw notes the irony of non-profits working simultaneously for the government while often undermined by the government’s policies. Manuel Castells theorized about this phenomenon with his concept of social identity (14). It begins with a “civil society”, a term first used by the Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci—one that is compromised of a private sector that inadvertently legitimizes the public/governmental sector. This legitimization can occur in a variety of ways, but often through so-called ideological state apparatuses. These groups can have a positive effect on the private good, but can also re-legitimize the state’s own agenda. When this happens, a resistance identity can build. It begins with the oppressed and those at odds with legitimate society. There is a transformation from a single resistance identity into a broader collective resistance, and this is where non-profits can appear, and includes the work of Highlander and SOCM. Yet there is a danger of this identity turning on itself and re-legitimating the system, as some non-profits competing with for-profits can demonstrate. Because of their 502(c)(3) status, non-profits are often protected from litigation. They are increasing finding competition with for-profit organization, especially small businesses. The opposition contends non-profits are less effective at producing goods because of they are not governed by market forces. In this sense, the private sector is subsidizing its own competition. Yet Shaw finds non-profit organizations “do not need to be convinced [of the need for social and economic justice campaigns], only mobilized” (Shaw 241).
Shaw’s argument has much validity when looking at the success of two area non-profits that will be addressed shortly.

Non-profits are effective because they are often the product of local issues that lack attention, funding or organization. One East Tennessee non-profit that has faced most of the above challenges and embodies local responsibility coupled with broader advocacy is the Highlander Research and Education Center in New Market. Founded in 1932 in Monteagle, TN by Myles Horton, the Center’s goal is

“...[T]o overcome poverty, bigotry and economic injustice in Appalachia and the South... [W]e believe that true social change goes beyond dealing with the symptoms of inequality and gets to root causes. Getting at the roots of injustice requires building grassroots movements for change led by those most affected by oppression. And, the blueprints for successful movements lie in the collective experiences and cultures of local communities in whose daily struggles to overcome oppression lie the keys to creating a just and peaceful world”

(www.highlandercenter.org).

Horton’s idea was to provide a place to serve the immediate local needs of an isolated mountain community. Horton had already traveled to Denmark to study the Dutch folk schools begun by Bishop N.S.F. Grundtrig, which practiced a respect for native traditions and were free of normal educational structures, such as grades, tests and diplomas. Prior to this experience, Horton had worked summers during college as a Sunday school teacher in the Presbyterian Church. Teaching in the small coal-mining town of Ozone, TN, he began to notice “the chasm between ‘knowledge’ and ‘practice’
...the gulf between theory and application” (Adams 10). Horton’s experience with the folk schools showed him a way to bridge these chasms. Highlander acknowledges the connections that bridge problems and solutions between cultures, methods, movements and people.

In 1932, shortly after the creation of the Center, Horton made a deal with the Tennessee Valley Authority to hire striking mine workers from Wilder, TN. Some locals wanted him to begin an employment agency. Horton recalls, “‘At first, it seemed like a pretty good idea. It came from the people. If it worked, it would be of help. But we refused, and told them that our goal was to unite workers with other workers for common strength and not to help some individuals rise above others’” (Adams 36).

Highlander had a single vision: “Only if a broad social movement occurred would people have a chance to change government fundamentally…” (Adams 53). It was a unifying position that allowed Highlander relative success in so many different areas of conflict, from union building to civil rights activism. “Education at Highlander was lived out in tension between what is and what ought to be; learning was that which strengthened several forces in search of a liberating future out of a constricting present” (Adams 89-90).

In 1944, prior to segregation, blacks began as students at Highlander. In the coal-mining climate, strikes were often broken for conditions by black workers the white union workers would not accept. Horton saw the necessity of equalization between the races—they could fight against unfair working conditions more effectively as equals.

“As individuals, they were...crippled in their relationships with blacks by white institutions. No matter how well-intentioned a white shop steward might be in
listening to the grievance of a black worker, he still had to resolve that man’s
difficulty in terms of a white-dominated union, a white controlled company, a
white world of capitalism” (Adams 107).

By connecting two seemingly disparate groups, their oppressors effectively became
smaller, less complicated and more manageable to fight.

Rosa Parks spent time at Highlander.

“At Highlander, I found out for the first time in my adult life that this could be a
unified society, that there was such a thing as people of different races and
backgrounds meeting together in workshops and living together in peace and
harmony. It was a place I was very reluctant to leave. I gained there strength to
persevere in my work for freedom, not just for blacks but all oppressed people”
(Adams 122).

In July 1959, Highlander, labeled communist by many unaffiliated with the
school, was raided by local law enforcement agents and eventually shut down. The state
auctioned off supplies, residences, buildings and land for a net of $53,000, which was
never repaid to Highlander (Adams 141). After briefly relocating to Knoxville,
Highlander moved to its current home in New Market in 1972. For its efforts in
promoting human rights, the Center was nominated for the 1982 Nobel Peace Prize.

Highlander is still active today. Though the local problems have changed, the
focus of creating social movements has remained. Suzanne Pharr is the center’s new
director.

“We feel like it’s 1948. We think there’s all this stuff bubbling around us, in
particular where there’s immigrants coming in. People are really beginning to
look at this global economy and recognize that something is wrong. And asking, ‘Why is it there’s no stable work in this country? Why are people continually moving to chase jobs? Why is it I have to pay $100 for a pair of shoes I know someone in China was paid 25 cents an hour to make?’ People are beginning to say, “How is this all linked?” (Tarr 2).

Now Highlander works with Latino organizations and progressive southern groups. Still, the Center’s work remains focused. “People learn about unity by acting in unison” (Adams 207).

Save Our Cumberland Mountains, founded in 1971, is another area non-profit, based in Lake City, TN. SOCM works in a variety of fields such as forestry, strip mining, toxic issues, tax reform, dismantling racism. All are focused on promoting social justice in the region. SOCM promotes civic involvement and individual action to promote a just society. What is interesting about SOCM is that it began not as a unifying educational theory, but as a direct vehicle for social change that eventually grew into a model of thought similar to Highlander.

Thirteen coalfield residents formed the group in 1972 to petition the Tennessee government for fair taxation of the coal companies that owned land in the area, yet paid little in property taxes that reinvest in the community. By 1974 there were 4,000 members, but as the group grew, so did its need for better organizing methods. The group was loosely connected and lost members. In 1979, “Attendance at monthly meetings had dwindled from forty or fifty…to ten or twenty. The staff spent too much time putting out brush fires, leaving too little time for building the organization and developing new leaders. The members had become dependent on staff to formulate positions” (Allen 93).
By trial and error, an ethos similar to Highlander's had evolved. Connie White, former president of SOCM, explains the change:

"We don't care about winning issues; we care more about helping people get stronger. In the long run, that is how you win issues and make real changes. That was actually a pretty revolutionary idea until a few years ago. Back in the old days, we thought that getting a strip mine permit denied or getting a tougher reclamation bill passed in Nashville was why we existed. Now we understand that our real success is measured more by how many members participated in protesting the permit and whether they feel empowered by their participation” (Allen 96).

Now SOCM has over 1500 families as members, and eleven chapters throughout the state. Each chapter requires a minimum of 30 members who support their choice of committees. SOCM addresses social justice in the Cumberland Mountain region in a comprehensive manner—not solely a people, culture or environment, but a complicated mixture of the three.

As long as global, national, state and local economic disparities remain, the need for non-profit organizations will persist. For individuals who recognize these continuing disparities, a career in non-profit organizations can become a step beyond charitable giving or volunteer work to actively pursue a more just society. The US is in a particularly exposed position as the world’s economic leader; we have more resources and thus more responsibility to the poor and powerless. Non-profits, by their very existence, bring economic and social justice issues to a more visible and accessible level in local society and our global community.
Empowerment is at the root of this paper. It is the spirit of a democracy for its citizens to be empowered to work for the common good of their country, and to teach the responsibilities that are connected to power. Although this remains far from a reality, it will only be achieved by teaching individuals to use their own experiences to make connections between equality and discrimination, the haves and have-nots, oppression and freedom, and education and knowledge.
Works Cited


