

## **“We have it within”: mentoring the next generation of community activists**

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In the United States today, citizens have begun to mobilize and bring social justice issues to the forefront of their communities. I myself am inspired by younger generations of Americans, many of those who haven't even graduated from high school yet. They have worked to curb issues of systemic racism, gun violence and climate change. In the future, I envision that these community activists will become the next generation of leaders in multiple fields, socially and politically.

Although there are many wonderful stories of activists gaining grassroots power and making stands against systems of injustice, I tend to wonder where those stories are in my own home community of Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. In my little hometown, I find little room for high school students to speak out against injustice and issues they can see. Even historically, as students have tried to speak up, they have been stifled, ridiculed and kept quiet. Chambersburg, more broadly, has continuously kept quiet about systemic issues that hurt their neighbors like racism and poverty.

As Americans all over have begun to jump towards being civically engaged in their communities, communities like mine haven't moved. However, as we look at the United States today, what happens in rural communities like Chambersburg are just as important for peace and prosperity as it is in urban and suburban communities across the country. And now, more than ever, it is important to empower younger generations in communities like Chambersburg to use their voice and ideas.

Therefore, throughout the summer of 2020, I will connect six rising seniors with six non-profit organizations in my hometown to catalyze community action. Each of the six students will be paired with an organization leader to serve as their civic engagement mentor. Alongside their mentor, students will participate in part-time internships at the mentor's organization. During this time, students will build an understanding of social justice work in a specific field of interest. After spending a month learning the building blocks of civically engaged work, students will then receive a mini-seed grant to build their own service projects alongside their mentors and partner organizations. In receiving this mini-seed grant, students will be expected to ideate and design a project that aims to impact an issue of their and their partner organization's interests. Over the span of six weeks, mentors will help students prepare, implement and reflect on their projects through weekly meetings and workshops. In the end, students will leave their cohorts having directed a civically engaged project and having created multiple relationships that will help them become the next generation of community voices in a place that has been historically quiet.

Although much activism hasn't been carried out, I believe that the Chambersburg community already has what it needs to create specific, positive changes in its community. It is simply that there hasn't been the funding or effort to build coalitions to take on such justice issues, nor has there been the outlet for young citizens to do this work. In this project, I take these issues head on by fully recognizing the potential that people have in the community. I place my trust in the ideas that bright, young adults have in fortifying social justice. In an innovative practice, I look to give students mini-seed grants to build upon their ideas. Even more importantly, however, is the support that these students will receive by working alongside their mentors and partner organizations. These steps are in place to minimize risks and to maximize the impact students can have. All in all, students will create, learn and develop in the light of community resources, in a mission to carry out projects that will impact the broader Chambersburg community.

I will work directly with community organizations and leaders in Chambersburg to build a project that truly relies on what “we” have within. To determine the six students selected for this civic engagement cohort, I will partner with the Chambersburg Area School District (CASD). More specifically, I will be working directly with Angela Lynch, director of the CASD School Foundation, in implementing a fair and accessible application and interview process. I will also work alongside the 11th grade counselors within the Chambersburg Area Senior High School to advertise the opportunity to rising seniors. All of the part-time internships, check-in's and service projects will be co-facilitated with the help of non-profit organizations in the Greater Chambersburg Area. To determine the six non-profit organizations, I will work directly with local government and philanthropic organizations to select organizations and people who meet the interests of my selected students. Furthermore, I will work directly alongside these organizations to help build a curriculum that highlights the community as an asset for use in building

projects. Lastly, all meetings, check-ins and workshops between students and I will be held at the Coyle Free Library in downtown Chambersburg.

In the past, I have worked extensively with the Chambersburg non-profit community and general community more broadly. In the past, I have founded, and currently direct, an annual book drive titled the Chambersburg Holiday Book Drive (CHBD) that donates used books to different communities and organizations in the greater Chambersburg area. Here, I work with current high school students and mentor them to be service advocates in their communities. In this project, I found myself recognizing how much effort, determination and grit it took to grapple with issues in my community and have recognized the importance of empowering high-school aged youth. I come to this project with a nuanced view of mentorship and civic engagement from the CHBD, and hope to expand these qualities in my proposed project.

I look to measure progress and outcomes throughout the duration of my project. I plan to measure the impact of both the relationship between students and mentors on a student's civic engagement learning as well as the impact of students' projects within the communities they aim to serve. To capture the process of civic engagement learning, I will build a grounded theory of said learning (as related to in Charmaz, 2014) through personal reflections and qualitative methods like interviews and content analysis of journals and workshops with my cohort of six students. To determine the impact of student work, I will work directly with organizations and the students to build feedback loops and create surveys that highlight the successes and weaknesses of projects. On top of these qualitative research methods, I look to listen to the community to understand how students are creating impact. I will do this by attending community organization meetings, stakeholder/board meetings and by sitting in communion with those we are serving.

I anticipate that there will likely be a few challenges while I carry out my project. The largest challenge I anticipate in building this mentorship based project is keeping the project equitable for students who haven't historically had access to activism and civic engagement. I would like for my project to support students who may not have necessarily had access to constant volunteering, but have the passion, desire and other necessary qualities to be a leader in their communities. However, this opportunity, if not properly marketed and accessible to those students, could be given to those who have the wealth and privileges to be volunteers. I was one of those students in Chambersburg who didn't have the privilege to come from a civically engaged family and access to constant volunteering. Therefore, it is my duty, as one of those students who weren't afforded that capacity myself, to bring this opportunity to students from underrepresented communities. By partnering directly with Chambersburg high school and bringing information to every single student, I hope to build a fair and equal case for students to apply and to receive a fair and honest application review.

In the summer of 2020, my main goal is to aid students in engaging the broader Chambersburg community incubating, creating and carrying out six different service/social activism projects. But, this project is much larger than that. In fulfilling that goal, my cohort of students and I will create awareness for the general Chambersburg community and begin the first steps in assembling a shared understanding across different identities. We will highlight a broader need in the Chambersburg community in community-guided engagement and activism. These projects are not just the beginning of said engagement. After seeing these projects succeed, more students will be inspired to build their own projects and reach out in their own ways. It simply takes great leadership and a bit of hard work, both of which I believe can be found in my home town of Chambersburg.