

The Big Event at Texas A&M: A Hallmark Service and Leadership Organization

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For several decades, scholars have been concerned about the decline of political and civic participation among United States citizens (Harriger & McMillan, 2007). Declining voter participation, cynicism about the political landscape of the nation, and a lack of knowledge among citizens confirm a poor report concerning the health of the American democracy. This decline is particularly evident in young people (Harriger & McMillan, 2007). The 2000 Higher Education Research Institute annual survey of college freshmen showed even more evidence of this trend. The report found that student interest was at an all-time low for the election year (Sax, Astin, Korn, and Mahoney, 2001).

In the past couple of decades, colleges and universities have been urged to take a leadership role in meeting the global society's problems and challenges. In 1982, Derek Bok, former president of Harvard University, stated, "There is no reason for universities to feel uncomfortable in taking account of society's needs; in fact, they have a clear obligation to do so" (Jacoby, 2009, p. 301). In 1994, Ernest Boyer, former president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, directly challenged universities to "respond to the challenges that confront our children, our schools, and our cities, just as the land-grant colleges responded to the needs of agriculture and industry a century ago" (Jacoby, 2009). These two men, along with Harry Boyte and Elizabeth Hollander, initiated a recent call to action for civic engagement in higher education by bringing attention to the necessity of colleges upholding their civic missions. Boyte and Hollander claimed, "Whereas universities were once centrally concerned with 'education for democracy' and 'knowledge for society,' today's institutions have often drifted from their civic mission" (Genereux & Huntsberger, 1999, p. 27).

My current dissertation study seeks to evaluate The Big Event as a philanthropic leadership organization. Through narrative and the use of storytelling, I aim to uncover how Texas A&M communicates the perceived importance of service and leadership and then translates this message with a day of service for the Bryan/College Station community. During this project, I intend to answer questions regarding how the organization was founded,

how it is maintained, why it seeks to function (from a variety of student, professional, and community voices), and what the current organization, structure, and event offer as we understand future growth and improvement for similar opportunities.

In my research, I seek to connect the importance of civic learning with current understandings and research regarding the motivations of students who choose to serve. Specifically, I employ narrative theory through qualitative research methods to cultivate understanding and recommendations for future improvements. The application of student development theory ultimately remains a critical component of training students to be engaged citizens who co-create a better tomorrow through unity and collaboration.

An excerpt from The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement's *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*, issued in 2012, confirms the powerful utility of engaged students working to create positive change in today's world. The document states,

“A socially cohesive and economically vibrant United States democracy...require[s] informed, engaged, open-minded, and socially responsible people committed to the common good and practiced in ‘doing’ democracy... Civic learning needs to be an integral component of every level of education, from grade school through graduate school, across all fields of study.” -p.14

This quote captures the call to action targeting college students today. College students are our future national and international leaders in government, education, policy, and the sciences. Subsequently, their influence will decisively direct our future generations. As scholars and educational practitioners, we must take ownership of our challenge to train and equip educated citizen-leaders. Most importantly, we must equip these students with the skill sets and capabilities to mobilize, work together, adapt to change, answer conflict, and lead with resiliency and integrity. The intersection of these actions, values, and determination creates the opportunity to study undergraduate service and leadership from an organizational communication perspective. By linking my two dominant research interests, organizational rhetoric and higher education theory, to study *The Big Event*, I am gaining rich and meaningful results for improved

best practices in civic engagement and service-learning in American higher education.

References

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