

My Foot in the Door: Can I Hold it Open for Someone Else?

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VEXATION

After working in a science focused charter school for the last year I have learned that there are more than a few science education stakeholders who are looking for ways to make a difference for students but seem to have trouble finding people to work with. Universities, laboratories, businesses, state organizations, etc. are concerned with having students as prepared as they can possibly be. These stakeholders have resources and expertise that are being underutilized at best by the public education system. I believe I am in a position to help these stakeholders make the connection with students and to provide them with direction on how to maximize that connection to impact students in the best way possible.

As a classroom teacher I consider myself a very lucky person. I have the greatest job in the world. I have had experiences in science and academia that many of my peers haven't had the opportunity of enjoying. These experiences have helped me build a network that seems to have grown its own legs. I worked in lab at my undergraduate institution, worked and studied in a national lab during multiple summers as a teacher, my summer of 2009 was spent working on a research project in the Department of Human Genetics at the University of Utah, I have been able to interact with a variety of scientists in multiple situations, and have been invited and had the opportunity to participate in a science education conference that facilitates an open, informative, and instructional discussion regarding my ideas on how to improve and expand my circle of influence. These experiences have given me perspective that affects my practice and the way I view my role as a classroom teacher in enormous ways. The social capital that I have gained has given me an increased sense of the importance of how and what I teach and how I can or should conduct myself as a teacher on the bigger stage of science education. I see myself in a unique situation as a teacher due to the relationships that I have developed. I want to use my unique situation and social capital to bridge the gap between the students that universities, laboratories, businesses, government organizations, and others will be relying on in a few short years.

There is a need from students who don't really know what's out there as far as opportunities for their future. Many of them do not know where to look to find out about options, nor do they have experience and courage needed to go out and make the connections that could eventually provide them with a path towards success. This need on the side of students and the desire of stakeholders to be involved with the preparation of the up and coming generation must to be connected. The mechanism for making the connection is my vexation. There may be organizations who aim to bring students and education stakeholders together but I do not see it happening on an appropriate scale nor do I see it focusing on students who require the most help.

VENTURE

I want to use my social capital or the trust that I have built throughout my career to make the link between students and those who have a stake in their future. I am envisioning a sort of summer internship program where students can contribute to and participate in activities related to a field they may be interested in. This is a daunting prospect but Crossroads has taught me that waiting for someone to come and take care of the problems or shortcomings you see with the status quo is not the most fruitful way of handling things. I come to Crossroads with a problem, an idea, and a growing network that I believe will help me greatly in my quest. I hope to gain direction on how to take the next step.

There are many (almost all) aspects of this potential internship program that that I am unsure about. What age group would benefit most from the experience? What types of institutions and organizations would be interested in participating? How do I approach prospective stakeholders to become participants? How would students wanting to participate be selected? What would the participating institutions get out of the program, what is their motivation? Finally, could a program like this become self-sustaining, or is there a person/people who would be

interested in helping with it? I am sure that there are many other questions/hurdles that I have not thought of but this list is intimidating enough and seems like a good place to start.

The question of age group seemed at first to have an obvious answer. High School students with their own form of transportation seem like the best fit. They are older, more mature (maybe), would be able to contribute more to their host (maybe), and have a better idea of what they want in the future. The issue I have with offering a High School specific program is my belief that intervention at a younger age can have the most impact on the student. There is obviously a limit to this logic. How young is too young for students to grasp the importance of working their hardest and contributing the most they can? A possibly more prohibitive question is: How young is too young for institutions to devote their trust and resources to?

There are some clear choices regarding the institutions and organizations that would be interested in participating. This is where my social capital could come in. I want this program to touch as many lives as possible. I believe it has the potential to become a win/win situation for all involved. I wonder how I can expand this capital to include more participants. Where should I look to find those parties interested in making a difference for students who may one day contribute to their cause?

Once I have identified possible mentoring organizations what would be the best way to approach them about becoming involved? One idea is to host a lunch and give a formal presentation that details my vision and invites them to become part of my venture. Would this be a better way than to speak with representatives separately? A lunch meeting would certainly make better use of my time but maybe I could better relate my belief in the need to provide this kind of opportunity for students and confidence that the program would benefit all parties involved.

I'm not sure what criteria should be looked at when selecting students for the program. I want to make it equitable. How do I encourage students who have traditionally been underrepresented in the system to put trust in the system that has left them out? Would mentoring organizations want to participate in the selection process? If so, it might make the inclusion of the underprivileged even more challenging. How do I get those who have been successful in the structure of business and leadership to recognize the need for equity?

I think I need to provide some kind of motivation for organizations to become involved. There is always the inherent warm fuzzy feeling that comes with helping the youth but that might not be enough for everyone I'm going to need. How can I capitalize on the good will and publicity to encourage participation of would-be mentors?

Perhaps one of my biggest concerns is how to get this all done and keep it going. I want this program to last and to grow. The logistics and management of a program like this, even in its rudimentary stages seems impossible for one teacher to take on. I want to be able to approach organizations with a plan that they as to put as little work into as possible outside of providing a student or students with a meaningful learning opportunity. I believe this will increase the chance that they will want to become involved. I find this venture to be incredibly important but I have other responsibilities that are equally or more important and I don't know if there is enough time to be split between all that I want to accomplish (there is no shortage of vexations and ventures in education). I wonder if there is a similar program being ran somewhere that I could partner up with or at the least model.

There are so many aspects to this venture that I am completely unfamiliar with and unsure about how to approach. The need is there and it is worth working hard to fill. I appreciate your review of my ideas and look forward our discussion regarding how to make them come to fruition or how they need to change.