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HNR 211: Service Learning and Civic Engagement

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Impromptu Written Essay

My experience with service learning this semester has been a little hectic, to be honest- at the time of writing we are a week away from finals, and I'm still only halfway done with my hours. But despite this, I feel like I have already learned a lot from the experience, and am glad to be doing it.

I have a variety of skills in multiple fields, but for my service learning experience I wanted to make use of my technical ability. As a computer science major, I am well versed in developing and configuring software, or assisting with the management of computers, servers, networks, and other technology, and I wanted to gain more experience in working with others within my chosen field. As such, I got into contact with the Tiffin-Seneca Economic Partnership (TSEP), a local organization that assists local businesses and community development. I hoped that they could either offer a project that I could help them with, or put me in contact with a local business that needed some IT help. Unfortunately, my first attempt at contacting them received no response, so I asked Professor Stark for some advice. He mentioned that President Huntington was a member of TSEP's board of trustees, and we started an email conversation. President Huntington mentioned the upcoming '1st Annual Berg Career Mixer', sponsored by TSEP. I got the chance to attend, and met the five professional staff members of the organization. From that event I was able to learn a lot more about their work, as well as introduce myself and the skills I could offer. They seemed interested in working with me, but the timing was a little inconvenient

for both of us in the coming weeks. I had the opportunity to travel overseas to Finland over spring break. TSEP was also busy at the time, so we decided to continue the conversation after my return. I was eventually able to secure a meeting with Amy Reinhart, Director of Downtown Revitalization. The project she had in mind was to assist the organization of downtown cleanup days, where volunteers would pick up trash along the sidewalks. I was tasked with setting up a virtual system that would allow volunteers to sign up, get maps and information, and have their hours logged. During the meeting I also met Tony Consolo, Vice Chair of TSEP's Design Committee, and someone who helped with the organization's IT requirements. With the contract signed, and the task laid before me, I was ready to start getting to work.

During the meeting we discussed two potential options: we either develop something completely from scratch, or we find an existing software to work with. I found it very unlikely to be able to develop and test an entire system of this depth within 40 hours, so first I began researching what volunteer management systems already exist. As it turns out, there are a lot on the market, but the main issue I found was that none of them fit exactly what TSEP needed. One of the requirements for the project would be that volunteers could set up times to clean up on their own schedule, outside of any formal events. However, nearly all of the software I found were based around events with set times and locations, or didn't offer robust hour tracking. Eventually I was able to find a system called TeamKinetic, which seemed to fit all of the requirements, and was within the project's monthly budget. I spent some time testing the software and familiarized myself with its layout, then started to configure it for TSEP. As of now, I have another meeting scheduled with Amy and Tony, so that I can go over how the system will work in practice. I also had the chance to attend one of TSEP's downtown cleanup events, so I could see the way that the process currently worked in practice. The next steps are to

get everything ready for volunteers to use, set up a page for it on TSEP's main website, write up documentation for volunteers and administrators to refer to, and finally, do some live testing.

Looking back on the experience thus far, I feel satisfied with the work that I've put in, but definitely acknowledge that the planning could have been sooner. As it stands, I have to finish a lot of hours in just a few weeks, which is far from an ideal situation. Regardless, I am very glad that I have been able to use my skills to help serve the community, and have seen firsthand the impact that it will have. When I volunteered at the cleanup event, I was able to see the Tiffin community in a different way. People came by and talked to us, and I could see that they were proud of their community, and glad that we were helping make it a nicer place. I hope that the system I am helping put in place will encourage more people to volunteer, and make it easier for their work to be recognized.

Going through this experience has really shown me what it means to be a part of the community, and I know that as one of the goals of the Honors Program. The final point of the mission statement, 'a lifelong habit of commitment to the community and concern for social responsibility', is something that seems obvious, or even trivial on the surface, but I've found that there's a difference between volunteering for the sake of volunteering, and actually putting time and effort into the community. Of course I want to finish this class and receive credit, but I also want to make sure my work is something that will actually benefit the community in a tangible and lasting way.