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Trusting UMBC to trust itself: A Description of Deteriorating Trust

“All collective undertakings require trust. From the games that children play to complex social institutions, humans cannot work together unless they suspend their suspicion of one another. One person holds the rope, another jumps. One person steadies the ladder, another climbs. Why? In part because we hope for reciprocity, but in part from what is clearly a natural propensity to work in cooperation to collective advantage.”

-- Tony Judt

Ill Fares the Land, 25

Each individual already holds a certain level of confidence and reliance that one will be able to depend on their neighbor. As a result, they provide at least an equal level of trust to that neighbor. Little by little, the overall relationship grows, and with it the amount of interdependency. The greatest risk with this symbiosis is the fragility that is associated with this interdependency. The shared fidelity and loyalty to the mutual well being between the two parties is essential. When this relationship deteriorates, it is almost impossible to recover the trust necessary to allow a society to function. The degeneration of trust is a result of many factors including an overly abundant amount of heterogeneous groups in a community, which results in high levels of apathy and coercive tactics as a last effort to recover that trust. I will argue that coercion, specifically in the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) student community, increases the speed of degenerating trust, and that coercion's use should be avoided by instead using persuasion to create actual authority.

The unraveling of trust has already occurred at UMBC. In the instance of the student governing body or the Student Government Association (SGA), the general collective of students does not see that this group can legitimately effect any situation at

UMBC. In fact, because of this instance, the authority to make decisions exists only within the smaller homogeneously grouped students; either in that of the formally recognized organizations or of that of the informal clusters known commonly as cliques. This result is in high levels of apathy between students, which I argue is a result of a lack of unity and a byproduct of a community without trust; other than basic societal functions provided by UMBC.

As a side note, it appears that UMBC has firmly entrenched a basic level of trust, but is unable to further address the complaints of students. It will only be able to do so when the student part of this collective, which resembles most of the UMBC community, forms an effective governing institution. Only by properly addressing concerns and rebuilding the trust that is needed to improve SGA, UMBC can become a more positive place. By taking the first steps to increase trust, only then, can more trust occur (Seabright).

Right now, many different groups exist, but the single homogenous group; the UMBC collective of students does not (Olson). Each individual exists in at least one smaller group, but the individual groups; which include those not formally recognized, do not cooperate on a large scale. In fact, some groups are extremely private and refuse to interact with the UMBC community unless required. This is a problem, since as Jane Jacobs eloquently observes in *Ill Fares the Land*, “Once corroded it is virtually impossible to restore. And it needs care and nurturing by the community—the collectivity—since with the best of intentions no one person can make others trust him and be trusted in return.” This statement demonstrates two main ideas that have not been addressed at UMBC.

First, since coercion is forced, and making someone do something against their will usually implies that an action was taken out of fear, many different groups are only participating because they must as a requirement (Lindblom). Whereas in some forms of coercive tactics, one's life is jeopardized, in the case of SGA, many different student groups feel uncomfortable and feel duress.

Just one concrete example of this is the voting process, which is but a few weeks. Many students are not informed about the election until a candidate asks them to vote by telling them to do so on their laptop. Considerable amount of social pressure occurs. If the voter had felt pressured to vote out of social courtesy of listening, they then feel that they should vote for the candidate offering them the service of voting. Many are uninformed, and due to the digital nature of the election, a form of voter fraud occurs. Overall, the candidate may be elected into office because they were better at walking around placing laptops in front of the student collectivity instead of encouraging them to vote at the single polling location. The decisions being made are therefore chosen based on coercion, so the quality of such choices are less desired. Only 25 percent, which is a record, of the student population voted (Hoffman). This means that many students are not represented. To be fair, a considerable amount of persuasion does occur, although it is based on raw popularity. Friends vote for friends who seek an office because the most outgoing people are also the most socially integrated.

Another more speculative example is that of the actual process. Because only a one-fourth portion of the entire student body votes, it is clear that a part of the process is not understood. Many SGA members do not understand how to persuade students to partake in this process or inform them of the importance of the governing mechanism.

Because they do not have legitimacy, and since they do not understand fully how to convince, they are relying on coercion. When a smaller homogeneous group petitions, or lobbies, for finances from the SGA, they are then competing with other active groups in a similar fashion to the American lobbying (Olson). Every group is entitled to this financial assistance for events, since every student pays a student activity fee of 44 dollars per semester as outlined as an extra fee associated with tuition. This is highly inefficient, and is another force eroding the fabric of trust, in addition to the election, between those that are members of SGA and those that are not.

Second, the community does not nurture itself. It does not trust itself. An effective community is made up of those who choose collectively and decisions are respected as right and proper. The authority to make valid choices derives from this legitimacy. Because legitimacy does not exist in the overall 'Gesellschaft' but rather in the individual 'Gemeinschaften,' the community does not trust itself (Lindblom). In this example, the 'Gesellschaft' is the UMBC student population and the 'Gemeinschaften' are the smaller groups of students.

The students at UMBC have established groups that do not integrate well with other groups. The trust resembles the same level of trust as a dysfunctional family. It does not allow any forward progress because each family member only works together when forced to. Trust has not only deteriorated, but is to the peak of where students feel that only they can help themselves through the smaller, closer-knit communities they have formed. "No one holds the rope, and no one steadies the ladder" (Judt). As a result, the rope falls and everyone loses the opportunity to jump safely, and as an ultimate result, everyone uncomfortably climbs their way out of the UMBC collective they chose to join.

Right now, UMBC trusts itself only to do the worst of possibilities. Due to this mutual suspicion, and lack of mutual trust, a downward spiral has been created out of reciprocity (Seabright).

All hope of the future is not lost. Like a ‘death spiral’ of a World War II plane, the downward spiral can be broken. Trust can be reestablished through the ample amount of persuasion to achieve authority (Lindblom). Once authority is achieved, more institutions can be established to increase the total amount of mutual reciprocity. How? Given that many groups act as individuals, each group functions in that sense. If partnerships can be formed, co-sponsorship of events and activities can occur. Large groups of students can be attracted to these cooperative measures, and as a result they will begin to trust the newly legitimate student leaders at UMBC. Trust can be rebuilt between the students and the student governing mechanisms, even if it is not SGA. Student Government is not an entity that needs a name, because currently, the governing institutions are done informally. Most of the overriding leadership occurs in each of the smaller “Gemeinschaften,” instead of in the formal SGA.

Even though trust has been lost in the “Gesellschaft” by the UMBC student collective, UMBC can learn once again to trust itself. By working together, organizations can reestablish the network and foundations necessary to create an agreed positive outcome. Similarly to cold being the absence of heat, and darkness being the absence of light, apathy is but only the absence of empathy.

Work Cited

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