

## *Civics and You*

For many years, I took the civic actions that guide and strengthen my community for granted. Part of the magic of civics in the community is that they produce results that, if you spend your life there, you take for granted. For most of my life in State College, I reaped the benefits of civic engagement, a strong community, and commitment and dedication from local government without a full appreciation of my situation. Recently, however, I've had the honor to work with the individuals who pull the strings behind-the-scenes, guiding and pulling our community towards further prosperity. My roles as the student representative to the school board, poll worker, and the youth representative to the borough council quickly enlightened me to the importance of the invisible strings that these bodies pulled. These positions gave me a thorough sense of respect for the hard workers who thanklessly dedicate their time and energy to bolstering the communities they hold so dear, often without ever seeing a penny for their efforts. Without local government and a strong civic community and culture, so much that we rely on would fall apart. My crash course in civics has enlightened me to the value of various different communal activities and lit a passion for local government and civics, the field where I envision myself spending my years working in.

One of my first memories is of myself, standing on tiptoes, clumsily helping my mother fill out her ballot. I remember the important-looking paper, the whirring ballot box, and—most of all—the stars-and-stripes 'I Voted' sticker I proudly donned. As I've grown older, that sticker has come to mean more—democracy, freedom, and choice. Spending time as a poll worker enlightened me to the thousands of hours of volunteer dedication necessary to have the polls across the country run smoothly on election day. In my youth, the polls were the place I went to get to fill in the deluxe ovals and get my twice-yearly sticker. Now, however, I see the polls as a center of community, a place where neighbors and friends are brought together. I see the polls as a place where I can contribute my part to where I grew up, even if I can't vote. Most of all, though, I see the polls as a shining example of participatory democracy, where the passion and care held by citizens keeps the wheels of our country running. I'd encourage any and all to volunteer their time as a poll worker—you meet your neighbors, learn so much, and do your part for your community. There are never enough poll workers, and you can't find a better way to spend two Tuesdays a year.

While school boards are often a hot topic in the news, most spend their time on what many would consider to be ‘nitpicky’ details, hashing out intensely specific details for hours on end. These details are paramount to the success of the next generation—the budding students, K-12—and are often only seen by the smattering of parents who attend each meeting. On a large scale, the tasks they deal with and vote on may seem like of little import, but the countless procedural items, votes, and discussions add up to a smoothly run experience for all. Take their hours-long discussion on the school calendar for the next year. While hardly a thrilling discussion, only through poring over the pages, week by week, were they able to find areas for improvement—testing date changes, days off on holidays, and dodging complications from various events. While it may not have meant much to everyone, those of a religion that finally had its holiday validated and celebrated, those working the Grange Fair, and those grateful for a break from testing certainly appreciated their hard work, even if they never realized where it came from. The amount of small decisions—hiring lunch staff, bidding on minute constructions and renovations, updating programs, bylaws, and codes—required to run the district smoothly for over 6,000 kids is a herculean effort, and one that goes unnoticed by so many. I’m grateful to have had the opportunity to work firsthand with these dedicated individuals, and see so much value in attending these meetings, even just once. While much of it is boring—I nearly fell asleep on the third hour of discussing the budget—there’s always something new you learn, something that piques your interest, and something that inspires you. Everyone has something they want to change or an idea for making the school district a better place, and the public commentary section is a great place to voice your concerns or needs. I’ve found that the school district is quite receptive to proactive ideas—I’ve been able to make changes to certain programs, curriculums, and alter the testing schedule to improve student mental health. There’s a wealth of opportunity in the school board, and always a chance to get involved and make a difference.

I write this final section waiting for a regular meeting of the State College Borough Council to begin, watching the crowd assemble from behind my embossed placard. This aspect of local governance and civics is the most personal to me. Not only does the council build the city I’ve spent my life in, from the streetlights to celebrations to the ordinances, but they enable design, self-efficacy, and creativity. Watching the intricate designs of parking garage designs, the progress that occurs behind the scenes in various commission meetings and in the public meetings stuns me. The attention to detail, while occasionally tedious, is just another reason to respect and care for the borough. While led by intelligent, opinionated people, I’m continually amazed at the potential for

change that stems from the public. While broader, larger-scale government often seems fixed or unmovable, witnessing the power of the public—on policies as varied as bike lanes, police pensions, and tree ordinances—in modifying guidelines, rules and laws is inspirational. Watching a government with citizen input, where my voice is heard, gives me confidence for the future and pulls me towards a career in local civics. For me, working with the borough continues to impact my life dramatically. It's where I spend my Monday evenings, where (I hope) I'll work this summer, and—amusingly—where I got my gig house sitting for the mayor. Local government has so much to offer, and everyone—age, job, or needs notwithstanding—stands to benefit from attending meetings, voicing their desires, and finding their niche. The best communities don't come from high taxes, rich constituents, or outside investment. They're built from the ground up, with tireless dedication and input from citizens, elected officials, and the workers in municipal government. What I love most about local governance is that no local problem is too big to take on. Any challenge, difficulty, or unfortunate circumstance can be dealt with, it just requires civic effort, input, and engagement. Whether you want to volunteer on the transport commission, pick up trash for a climate initiative, or create some new program, local governance holds the solution. Everyone has issues with the area they live in; local government, more often than not, holds the solution.

Civic engagement is paramount to creating successful communities. It holds the answer to a diverse range of problems and is a form of participation accessible to all. Even for me, someone who remains ineligible to vote, I've found a myriad of paths towards shaping and giving back to the community that did so much for me. No matter your interests, poll working, attending school board meetings, and watching local government meetings provide a pathway towards civil fulfillment. Each provides a unique path towards making a difference in the community—poll working through politics and meeting your neighbors, the school board through helping the next generation and working in various educational spheres, and local governance for any issues the prior two didn't cover. These opportunities provide the springboard from which you can find opportunities, know about events and happenings in your area, and make the difference you want to see. Working in civics has taught me so much, guided the way I want to pursue my career, and given me a heightened appreciation for where I grew up. Unconditionally, I recommend pursuing local civic engagement opportunities to all.