Reflection on 2011-2012 Fellows Year

It is not a very common occurrence in graduate school that students have the opportunity to tackle real, significant, problems with individuals who have expertise in a field other than their own. This year, participating in the Cal Turner Program for Moral Leadership in the Professions afforded me just that opportunity, and it contributed greatly to the way I think about my own style of leadership as well as what my own personal strengths and weaknesses are as a leader. In addition, reaching outside of Vanderbilt to participate in a community-driven project encouraged me to develop the capacity to work with an even more diverse array of individuals and appreciate the power and nuances of grassroots organizing.

From the beginning of this program, during the retreat that started the year, I was amazed at the individuals I was surrounded by. Sharing thoughts, stories and musings on each other’s professions and how each of us thought about the distinct, yet interrelated, problems we were tasked with solving, allowed me, from the outset, to develop an appreciation for the power of working in an inter-professional team. When my specific project group, a team I have grown incredibly fond of, began our work, each person’s talents began to surface. Some of us were better writers, some better oral communicators, some were excellent with data and numbers, and others were meticulous about planning details and assuring all our ts were crossed and is were dotted. As a graduate student, where often times I feel as if all the weight of a specific project is on my shoulders,
recognizing the ability to divide and conquer made me realize we had the ability to tackle a seemingly insurmountable task in the Nashville Housing Trust Fund Project.

While working with an amazing group of peers, our project itself allowed me to develop in my ability to organize a seemingly disparate group of individuals behind a common cause. Leadership for myself, and for us as a group, really revolved around the idea that we can use our abilities as facilitators to bring people together to work on this idea of establishing a housing trust fund in Nashville. Mostly through bringing people to a common table and utilizing our professional connections to facilitate the development of ideas and resources, we were able to make tremendous progress in our project. We saw ourselves as the momentum, keeping the ball rolling for a group of community members who already work so hard to serve the underserved in Nashville’s community.

I feel we were able to bring our project a long way over the course of this semester, adjusting actively and being flexible with our perceptions of community member goals and objectives. While we began with the ambitious goal of having housing trust fund legislation introduced into the Metro Nashville Council by the spring, we quickly realized that in order to ensure community buy-in, much more discussion was needed. We discovered there was a long history with this idea within the affordable housing community in Nashville, and we worked with members of the community who were a part of that history to adjust our strategy. After a fantastic kick-off event in January at the Vanderbilt Law School, we decided to invite as many potential stakeholders as we could into the discussion, ensuring more support, but also inviting a much larger discussion that, while it slowed the project down, was absolutely necessary for the growth of this idea.
As it stands now, our project has established a core group of community members that we have christened as somewhat of a steering committee for this campaign, and we are in the process of establishing a contract with a former council member to spearhead this campaign within the Metro Nashville Council and the mayor’s office. Meeting once every 2-3 weeks has been vital in keeping the momentum strong for our project, and a number of us have elected to continue as members of this steering committee, even after our fellows year comes to a close.

In so many ways this experience has broadened the way that I view leadership, as well as afforded me the ability to learn in context with the amazing support of other fellows and the program staff. I’m incredibly grateful for this opportunity.