

## COMMUNITY-ENGAGED LEARNING ESSAY #5

Rob Warren ~ SOC 3452

*Very Briefly, to Remind Me: What is your organization, what problems does your organization seek to solve, or what issues does it address? [Note: Here I mostly just stole my answers from Essay #3. You can, too.]*

My organization is a Head Start pre-school program. Children who are ages 3 to 5 go to class for a half day each weekday to learn the basics of letters, numbers, colors, etc. They also get family services—help with nutrition, parenting skills, and other social services. The children at my specific site are almost all children of recent East African immigrants; they seem to be very poor. They all live in the high-rise public housing complex in which the classroom is located.

*Very Briefly, to Remind Me: How does your organization try to solve those problems or address those issues? [Note: Here I mostly just stole my answers from Essay #3. You can, too.]*

The main goal of the Head Start organization is to prepare disadvantaged young people to be ready to do well in kindergarten and beyond. Children are supposed to get basic skills (i.e., learning colors, letters, numbers, and so forth) so they can do as well as more advantaged children in elementary school — at least, that's the idea. The time the kids spend in Head Start is supposed to be focused on things like learning letters and numbers, naming things (expanding vocabulary?), naming colors and shapes, etc. The program also feeds them.

*Very Briefly, to Remind Me: What is your role in the organization? Why are you needed? [Note: Here I mostly just stole my answers from Essay #3. You can, too.]*

I am a classroom volunteer. Mostly I help the teachers with whatever they need—I have been playing with kids, helping them line up, helping them with breakfast, reading some books, helping keep track of kids on field trips. Mostly playing, though. My coloring and Play-Doh skills have improved this semester.

Think about the community that is served by your CEL organization. What have you learned about that community through your CEL work? About the problems it faces, the source of those problems, and how the community is approaching solving those problems?

It may seem odd, but one thing I learned is how entirely similar children and communities are ... even when they are also objectively different in other ways. I am used to upper-middle class white community, and I have certainly raised upper-middle class white children. So, the community and children my CEL organization serves—poor East African immigrants—are night-and-day different. BUT... by and large the community and kids are very similar in important ways. The kids so often remind me of

my kids: emotional, loving, prone to melting down, smart and full of potential, trusting, fun-loving, hopeful. The communities are also concerned, when you get right down to it, with the same things: raising kids to be happy and successful. If you had asked me before the semester, “do East African immigrant parents care about their kids as much as rich white native-born parents” I would have said “of course.” Now, I can prove it.

A second thing I have come to appreciate is just how rigidly and unfailingly segregated this community is from mine (where “mine” is upper-middle class white people). The public housing tower in which my Head Start classroom is located is 200 yards (!) from the youth baseball fields where my kids played and where I coached for years. Never once did I see an East African immigrant kid at those ballfields, and the kids I’ve talked to have no idea those fields are there. 200 yards!!! It’s as though there is a 100-mile tall wall around their building.

*What impact did you have on the community through this work? What did you contribute?*

On The days I volunteered, I worked with about a dozen kids. I would say that most of the days I worked in the classroom, I helped 2 or 3 kids have better days. I made them smile a few times. Maybe some comfort. I gave them something fun to tell their parents about. I sat next to them when they felt lonely or excluded. These are tiny contributions and impacts, in the scheme of things. But to those kids, they may have been day-makers. This class has taught me to value those positive impacts on the world.

*What have you learned about yourself through your CEL work? How have you been challenged personally? How did you grow or change as a person?*

First, I’m pretty good with kids. I knew thins when I raised my own small children, but I forgot.

Second, this experienced challenged me to be OK with discomfort. It was really uncomfortable for me (an introvert) to insert myself into this unfamiliar situation. I did it, and re-learned that there are rewards to putting myself in these situations.

Third, this experienced re-taught me the value of prioritizing my time. I’m super busy. I’m the Director of a huge, multi-million dollar research center. I have multiple large research projects. I’m raising kids. But this experience forced me to find the time to do this valuable work. And it taught me that I need to prioritize these kinds of activities going forward. If I am too me-focused, I devolve into selfishness.

*What values, opinions, or beliefs of yours changed because of your CEL work? Be specific: What ideas, preconceptions, or opinions changed and why?*

This experience eroded my confidence in well-intentioned government programs and policies. I honestly believe that everyone involved in the Head Start program—starting with Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s—means well. But this program is not doing a whole lot to help these kids. They mostly learn—at least in my experience and in this classroom—how to line up, how to respect authority, how to get by. Nothing this program does comes close to overcoming the huge advantages enjoyed by wealthier kids who are enrolled in intellectually richer pre-school programs.

*What do you think are the long-term solutions to the problems and issues your CEL organization addresses through its work? How does the work of your CEL organization fit into the long-term solution, if at all?*

The long-term solution is radical change to both (a) patterns of economic and material inequality and (b) our commitment to high quality early childhood education for absolutely every child. These would eliminate the need for Head Start. Of course, this is not just a policy change ... it's a cultural and political change. Some inequality is inevitable; massive and growing inequalities are not. High quality early childhood education—which is expensive—is nonetheless an incredibly smart social investment. Until the country collectively embraces these ideas, we will continue to need Head Start programs.

My CEL organization does not do anything to address these longer-term solutions.

*Pretend that you're in a job interview and your potential employer asks you what you learned during your CEL experience that might be of value to you on the job. How would you respond? (Note: the CEL experience may have provided an opportunity to practice "soft-skills" as well as to develop more tangible or technical skills.)*

I learned to better understand the needs and perspectives of other people in the community I live in. I learned that it's way too easy to overlook other groups' needs (and indeed even their very existence).