AppreciateED – Picnics and Power

Over lukewarm potato salad and burgers, Department of Education staff fawned over Secretary of Education Arne Duncan at every office picnic. Despite the unforgiving sun of midsummer in Washington, D.C., which was especially scorching during the noon – 2 p.m. monthly AppreciateED picnics, staff members would inevitably creep away from their desks just before noontime to catch a glimpse of the man in charge. Tall and grounded, the former professional basketball player turned education professional would make his rounds to shake hands and take pictures. Though they were colleagues, his status of first among equals was never more apparent than in those lunches.

We as interns were no different. We, too, stood a little straighter and smiled a little more earnestly when he walked by. A laundry list of his accolades – Race to the Top, Teach to Lead, FAFSA data tool, and so many more – whizzed through my head at each sighting of the boss of all things education. During our brown bag lunch with him, during which he gave us as a collective hour of his time for information and to take questions, the group was decidedly less awestruck. While maintaining complete respect, student interns one-by-one expressed their concerns. They asked the burning questions that two months at the United States Department of Education were unable to provide them answers to, that they hoped that the head of the operation could advise on. Why are teachers unprepared going into the workforce? Is the skyrocketing cost of college shutting students with financial need out of college? How do we actually engage with schools to make college-going a priority before students have already given up on themselves? How do the Department’s public relations affect its ability to help schools at all?

The answers, like many we had received over the summer, complicated my initial perspective of Arne, and his department, as the one with all of the answers. Many of the problems that we grappled with intellectually were being grappled with institutionally by the Department, and by other actors involved. None had an overarching solution yet.

There is a perception that political power manifests itself in policy and flows like water in Washington, D.C.. That everyone who dresses in a crisp black suit and shined shoes carries a briefcase bursting with political capital. They ferry that capital over to their respective government institutions, and make choices to do with it what they will. The capital, dense as gold, seems endless. In reality, there is only a finite amount of political power, spread thinly over the city, like a veneer that offers little protection. Each individual’s or office’s efforts to make a difference are curtailed by other players who want to make alternate choices. In this way, balancing power can make change agents powerless to make positive change.

As the Department of Education, under the leadership of Secretary Arne Duncan and the overarching authority of President Barack Obama, assesses responses to the nation’s most pressing education problems, it is constantly in combat with the groups that it works to improve. From early childhood through higher education, institutions, inequities, and individuals act as roadblocks to the success of any one group. Congress’ ability to pass laws that affect any number of those groups further limits the Department’s ability to make
moves to do the same. Particularly from what I saw with regard to higher education, the desires to make positive moral change and to do what is financially sound seem to be competing interests. While neither aspect can improve without the success of the other, they seem mutually exclusive in practice. The challenge now, for the Department of Education and anyone interested in the future of American education, is making education accessible and equitable in a country that decided, long ago, that education was a privilege that not everyone could be afforded.

Having been raised by two immigrant parents, one of whom was a teacher, it had always been assumed that I would attend college. I was made aware that sacrifices would be made, as needed, in order for me to receive my bachelor’s degree, and that the hope was that I would eventually earn a Ph.D. and make a change in this world. My parents would make me do extra math on the weekends from books my mother brought home from the middle school where she taught science. Together, they put me through out-of-school tutoring, and SAT prep classes, and made sure I accessed the best resources my school provided to learn more about the college application process.

Despite their emphasis on education, however, my parents had a complicated relationship with education as a career. My mother was personally aware of the value of teaching and how much change a teacher could effect, but was realistic about the pay teachers received and the subsequent financial difficulties aspiring teachers faced. I, in turn, decided early that I did not want to pursue a career in education. However, upon coming to college, I realized that a career working in education as a teacher and then perhaps as a policymaker would be the path that would make me happiest.

I knew anecdotally that there were students who had less support than I did in fulfilling their aspirations of college. However, I was never confronted with the overarching structural problems that allowed this to continue. In discussions of societal barriers to education, many of which stem from poverty in communities and resulting negative cycles, I wondered where the key would lie to changing the system. It made little sense to me that the press of a metaphorical oppressive hand could be so much stronger than the collective action of the government of a society that worked to raise it up. I decided, then, to intern at the Department of Education in order to see, firsthand, where policymakers thought the issues lay and how they sought to solve them. In my view, they would have the best insight into how solutions could be found to the pressing problems that affect all aspects of the education system.

The conflict that the Department faced, which became more apparent to me every day, made me question the ability of any actor to make progressive change in the education system. Placed in the college access program and eager to engage with college access and the myriad of social issues that made it a continued problem — poverty, lack of familial support, lack of resources for school counselors, dangerous communities, and setbacks in early grades, to name a few — I was struck by the seemingly endless stream of conflicts without solutions. This understanding that even the most illustrious leaders in education lacked all of the answers gave me pause. I was a scholar of politics and education, the daughter of a teacher, and a fellow charged with enacting social justice. I felt passionate and academically prepared, by classes on education and significant involvement in campus programming related to social justice, to effect change in college access. However, my lofty intern dreams and ideals were complicated by my questioning the effectiveness of my position as an intern in a department that faced so many barriers to its effectiveness. I began to wonder if I was working towards social justice at all, if it was ethical to say that I was enacting social justice with my meager efforts to aid others in correcting a system that lacked a clear fix. Was writing reports and staffing events social justice, or was it my way of comforting myself with the feeling of making a difference, even though it immediately affected no one further than myself? Surrounded by about 180 busy and enthusiastic interns, it was difficult for me to see our collective intern contribution as anything less than useful.
Teneisha was older than us, more experienced at the Department. A spring intern who extended her stint through the start of summer, she first occupied the role of a mentor and an ally to me rather than a colleague. She showed me how to add programs to the expansive map in Greg’s office, how to make the recorded audio from conference calls 508 compliant, and how to navigate the many acronyms that the Department of Education had to offer.

Though she was a rising senior at Howard University, at the same grade level as me, Teneisha was older by a few years and much wiser in experience. She was open about the fact that, outside of her internship, she worked hard for what she had and held responsibilities that I knew that I certainly didn’t have to work with. I tried to be careful not to pry, very conscious of not pushing my new friend, but Teneisha was forthcoming with information about her background. She had grown so much from her experiences, and welcomed us into glimpses of her history throughout the summer.

In “The Cave” – Teneisha

Every morning in the office I took my seat amongst a group of four other interns and turned on my computer to begin my work day. The two interns to my right and the one furthest left in our L-shaped closet-turned-office worked for different supervisors at the Department. I interned under the same supervisor as Teneisha, the intern directly to my left. We all started each day with whip-around in our office, which we called “The Cave.” Through questions that all of us answered, we learned about each other’s backgrounds, opinions, and dreams. Many of us, myself included, came from backgrounds of educational privilege, with institutional and familial support that allowed us to pursue our higher education and now pursue this internship. My fellow college access intern, Teneisha, was clued into higher education for a more personal reason.

Meeting Secretary of Education Arne Duncan at an AppreciateED picnic.

However, leaving the Department and reflecting on the experience has made me question the usefulness of those conflicts, and whether they actually helped create more justice in this world.

Teneisha and her family emigrated from Trinidad and Tobago when she was a child. She had learned to value education from her grandmother, father and two aunts who raised her. The adults in her life had always encouraged her to prioritize her education and affirmed that failure was not an option for her. She attended a parochial school in order to receive the best education possible in her community. She decided in middle school that she wanted to be a teacher, a desire born out of a deep love for reading and learning. This love has carried through her undergraduate career, and has motivated her to study psychology at Howard University in order to learn more about working with children.

Teneisha would frequently miss dinners with fellow interns or events after the 9 to 5 work day because she also worked as a manager at the nearby Starbucks. She often came in the day following an especially long shift with stories about the many colorful characters who came through her store. She seemed to enjoy her job and was certainly a good leader, but it served a larger purpose of providing income for herself and her brother. Teneisha’s balancing act of work, school, guardianship and internship was constant, and her dedication to each facet as we left an event and were walking towards the Metro to return to the office. In one moment, we were interspersed in a group of interns, talking and laughing about the event and looking forward to the afternoon. In the next, she had moved apart from the group and was speaking kindly but professionally into her phone. Her brother had gotten into some disciplinary trouble at school and, rather than working it out with him, his teacher insisted that he leave the classroom and would not allow him to return. Suddenly, her responsibility shifted from our afternoon of intern tasks and activities to advocating for her teenage brother.
of her life was unparalleled by anything I had seen before. Infused in the work that she did was an optimism that she brought to each of her jobs.

When her brother was younger, she volunteered in his class and was deeply affected by how much she loved it. Her brother was enrolled in special education classes for students with behavior problems, which provided a unique teaching and observing experience. She had always held a passion for learning and teaching, but the experience of working with children was transformative for her. In teaching, she saw a hope for students like her brother who had experienced challenges but were persevering in every way they could. She knew, from her experiences with her siblings, that those students needed someone to support them and not give up on them in order to make strides. Her personal experience would provide her the empathy and the lasting dedication to education she would need to make a fantastic educator.

Teneisha’s difficulty working and getting through college keyed her in to the complex world of college access in a deeply personal way. While much of my understanding of college access programs was theoretical, limited to what they intended to do, Teneisha had a broader scope of the impact. She indicated that she had not known the phrase that could shed light on her experience, “first generation college student,” until she began her internship and started seeing herself in readings about students that fit this category. This clarity was useful, and certainly allowed others to see how far she had come. She also spoke about the inspiration she gained from our supervisor, who had worked part-time cleaning federal buildings when he was young and now worked as a staff member within one, affirming her belief that she too will make her dream come true. She derived strength to pursue her education, despite obstacles that forced her to enroll in a community college for a few years before attending Howard. With a work schedule that kept her from being more involved in school, she personally recognizes the need for students like her to receive institutional support to help them access higher education.

When Teneisha’s family needed her support towards the end of the summer, she was forced cut her internship short. She spent time with her father in Miami, we knew, but we were unsure of what she had to do in order to support her family. Eventually she let us know that their world was stabilizing because her siblings, including her brother, had moved in with their grandmother. Teneisha even considered transferring to a school in Florida, even if it meant delaying receiving a degree for another year. She is currently still at Howard, but has moved into a different apartment and has even changed her major to pursue something she enjoys more.

Teneisha is sweet and soft-spoken. She never raised her voice to speak, but eternally raised the most important questions – the questions that related to the ability of different ideas and initiatives to help students in need – in discussions with Department staff. Teneisha always encouraged me to ask questions during events, to speak up about being involved in meetings, and to take on new opportunities as an intern. She is driven to ask these questions certainly from her intellect and critical thinking, but additionally from her personal understanding of the failures of the education system. From her own personal experiences having to delay her education to the effort she puts into sustaining herself and her brother.

In the main entrance of the U.S. Department of Education.
while paying for school, Teneisha sees and overcomes barriers to her own college access every day. Her insight into her siblings’ experiences shows that educational setbacks can affect students even at younger levels, in high school and even earlier. Though Teneisha is working with her brother and sister to make sure that all of them can attend college, circumstances are not in their favor due to the lack of support that students face in school and the lack of support she has in the process.

Teneisha clearly expressed “grit,” the necessary quality that staff at the Department sought in students but found difficult to define. Despite institutional failings, she had the strength and tenacity to keep her eyes on her own education and to keep herself inspired, surrounding herself with as many experiences as possible that helped bring her closer to her future helping others. “Grit,” it seems, cannot be taught, only lauded. Regardless, Teneisha seems to be the best aspiring teacher to be able to convey that ability to her future students. While I, with my background of privilege, continue to be unsure of the social justice I enacted in my internship, I would never doubt that working in the office signified some sort of success for Teneisha and for students everywhere who had been put down by the education system. The education system failed Teneisha and her siblings repeatedly, yet she was able to maintain a positive outlook that she and others could effect progressive change to stave off additional institutional failings.

**In the Office – Greg**

Greg was my supervisor in action for the first third of my internship, and in name for my entire internship experience. I had initially applied to intern in the Office of Innovation and Improvement, to work with arts integration education. However, due to logistical changes I was placed under Greg, Special Assistant for the Program on College Access in the Office of the Secretary, a realm that I knew very little about. In the months preceding my internship, I learned what I could about Greg and about his program. I read speeches he gave across the country, press releases from the Department, and articles about the increasingly difficult problem of helping students access a high-quality education. From my education classes and advisors on campus, I sought to find out what programming was well-known and ongoing in education so that I would be best equipped to jump into whatever work I would be doing. I tried to be thoughtful in my research, but I was nervous. Every article I read and comment I listened to informed me of how complex college access was as an issue, and I struggled to understand how I could fit in to help make the answers a little more clear.

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On my first day at the Department of Education, I was struck by the process of entering the building. I first had to set my bag on the conveyor belt to be X-rayed and stepped through a larger X-ray. Only then could I step over to the check-in desk, where a kind woman asked me to show her my ID and tell her my supervisor’s name so she could send for someone to bring me to the office. Later I would get an ID that would allow me access to the elevator and save me the trouble of going through the X-ray in the morning, but in that moment I was as alien to my new environment as it was to me. For several minutes I made tense small talk with a few other interns who were also waiting to be picked up, one of whom I continued to be close to for the rest of the summer. I immediately sprung up once DeRell Bonner, coordinator for the internship program, arrived to collect me so that I could meet with my supervisor.

Greg’s office was cluttered and personalized in a way that I did not expect from a federal employee. The large space, close to the grand office of the Secretary of Education and featuring a stunning view of the Capitol, exemplified the position of authority that Greg held. On top of the cabinet by his desk sat pictures of him with Secretary Duncan and President Obama, mementos from governmental successes. I was nervous simply being in his presence. I was heavily aware that I, a student and intern, was seated in the space where Greg did work that could change the nation. Around the room, though, were not depictions of power but rather windows into his private life. The seeming clutter told stories, personal and political, about Greg’s relationship with his work and the individuals in his life that brought him to that place in his career. During that first morning Greg ran through an introduction of himself and why he did the work he did every day.

Nearly 65, Greg had been working in education and youth services for the entirety of his career in one way or another. His work in the Obama
administration constituted his first and only time in a federal position in D.C. The pictures and ornaments around his room were primarily tokens from previous jobs and experiences that functioned to ground him in what he was now doing. Many of the artworks on his walls were done by children at the afterschool enrichment program he ran in Chicago. The scribbles of writing and crayon art that shone from the generic white walls infused the office with the stories of those children, who overcame obstacles not because they could but because they had to. The picture revealed a younger Greg, already so invested in the pursuit of aiding youth, with children who have long since left childhood but whose experiences at that time have hugely influenced a now-bureaucrat intent on making a difference.

The artwork that hung on the wall right before him, so that he could see it every time he raised his eyes from his desk, was drawn by a little girl in one of the programs. In the image, the girl wrote about how she loved God and He loved her. Greg revealed to me that the girl was killed shortly after creating that piece of artwork, the victim of a stray bullet from gang violence that had surrounded her while she had been playing outside.

I was struck by Greg’s candor while telling this story, that he as my supervisor would reveal to me vulnerability in his past community and a story that still brought him sadness. It was only later, after interacting with other staff at the Department and learning more about the issues they grappled with, that I realized how instrumental the reminders of that vulnerability were. To Greg, remembering the specific students he was working to affect helped him stay focused in his work and passionate about his cause. The photos in his office told stories of students he interacted with who had faced barriers to their education from factors in their lives and communities. While he served an administration, he truly worked for those students in everything that he did.

During our first discussion Greg introduced key concepts in higher education work that would be relevant for the duration of my internship. Though imperfect, these terms were an attempt to make it easier to manage change in education, and to make it easier for those working at the federal level to grasp the realities on the ground. The first topic we addressed was the idea of “collective impact,” a concept pulled from sociology that to me sounded like a clinical way of saying “working from the ground up.” Collective impact required a coordinated effort for education that started from early childhood and moved through the end of high school to facilitate the acquisition of all skills and information that students needed to be successful in college. Ideally, collective impact could be supported and sustained by communities that worked with members of their state and local education systems to create a systematic process. In practice however, systemic hold ups made this challenging. A lack of organized entry into early childhood education has caused problems throughout the United States, the least being that it prevented collective impact measures from being taken right from the start. The push for comprehensive early childhood education has preceded the discussion of collective impact and is important outside the world of college access, and appears to have a long way to go before any major structural change can be made. From there, the impact of secondary schools and states has been complicated by a constant inequality in resources, and federal programs, such as No Child Left Behind, that conflict with state goals. Greg’s experience reinforced his commitment to collective impact, because he has looked at education from multiple sides and has seen the strength of coordination amongst multiple players.

Greg first got involved in youth issues through the civil rights movement, when he, a high school student from a rural town in Wisconsin, went on a trip across the country to promote activism. From there he worked in Chicago in a classroom, in afterschool programs in experimental schools, and even for a foundation that provided funding and support to youth education initiatives in the city. It was there that he met now-Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and even President Obama. Despite the high profile individuals he met there whom he is still in touch with, Greg let me know that many of his close friends who keep him connected to communities while he works in government were actually students and staff in the schools that he worked with. Now grown, those students he helped teach as a young adult have their own paths in different fields.

When Greg spent a month away from the office for a knee surgery, I was able to interview him on the phone about his experiences. While I sat in his office, he referenced the pictures in his office from memory and directed my attention to them. The faces and images he saw every day, the very same ones he pointed out to me during our first discussion, had more meaning even though he was away.
In connecting with those people from his previous work, Greg is able to remain connected to his community and to his passion. He brought up the relationship between his work in education and social justice, and seemed to rely heavily on those relationships to sustain his view of social justice and ensure that everything he does helps him keep to that.

Many of the pictures, bookends and knickknacks that Greg surrounded himself with at work flashed the bold word “believe,” like the poster that my mother put up in my childhood room. Greg’s belief in student potential and achievement splashes the walls of his office, the paperwork on his desk, and the world that he puts into his work. College access uses that spirit to encourage foundations to donate, coalitions to form, schools to support students, and students to believe in themselves. It is a beautiful model. But, as I saw around me, federal offices and institutions of higher education run much like businesses focused on money more than morals. As the landscape of schools, colleges and government shift around me, though, I sometimes find my belief in that dream slipping. I found myself wondering if “believe” was enough to make college access initiatives effective in transforming the lives of students who needed something more substantial than hope.

If anyone would make a positive difference, however, it certainly would be Greg. His commitment to his past keeps him grounded in his dreams for the future. His humble background and deep work experience with social challenges that broadly affect and often encompass the system of education, in some of the most difficult areas of the United States such as Chicago at the end of the 20th century, humanize him. It does not take more than a few minutes with Greg, seated in his office, his professional home base, to recognize the joy that comes to his eyes and the laugh that brightens his trained, academic expression when he reflects on why he continues doing what he does.

His conscientious practice of keeping in touch with the individuals he had worked with throughout his life make it easier for students and officials alike to trust his judgment and expertise.

Being placed with a supervisor as thoughtful as Greg helped me tamp down my unease about the challenges faced by the Department and my own uncertainty about my ability to make a difference and effect social justice. Greg understood the cycles of institutional violence that kept the students he worked for, the students he knew, from reaching their higher education dreams. He knew it was an uphill battle that he had been facing for his entire career. At the very least, my efforts were going to free up time for Greg to make serious changes in the world of college access.

From the Classroom – Emily

Emily was different from the people I met at the Department because she was not a politician or government official. Emily was a Teaching Ambassador Fellow: a teacher who applied and was accepted to a program through the Department to provide a voice for teachers. It was a nod to the importance of teachers as the most significant on-the-ground actors in enacting positive change in education. Conversely, it recognized that teachers were often the players most affected by political decision-making at the federal level, and that not all of those decisions were helpful to them. For her first year as an Ambassador she chose to sit in the Office of Education Technology because she believed in the monumental impact that technology has on education in the classroom. This year, her second in the role, she will be working in the Office of the Secretary in a more policy-based role.

Speaking on a student debt panel with Ted Mitchell, Undersecretary of the United States Department of Education.
Emily applied for this position not knowing what it was, only knowing that she wanted to do anything possible to provide a voice for teachers. A Spanish teacher from Florida who was inspired by her father, who had been a teacher, Emily had always worked to be involved in her school and to be a resource to teachers. When changes in the district made teachers fear for their autonomy in their classrooms and their ability to do their work effectively, they turned to Emily. She was upset that teachers were coming to her in tears because of their concerns for their classrooms, their schools and their profession. Emily, in turn, made it her mission to seek answers. In applying for this program, Emily made it clear that she was working to represent the teachers from the community that she came from to ensure that they and other teachers always felt supported in their classrooms and able to do their work – which, at the end of the day, was always to help kids.

Emily was very open with me about her dissatisfaction with the way that teachers are seen in the public eye. She believed that choosing teaching as a profession should not been seen as a sacrifice, and she was displeased with the idea that teachers were professional martyrs who gave up parts of their future for others. Rather, she believed that teaching should be treated as a reputable profession in the eyes of the public, which can raise morale for those who commit their lives to it. On the side of the government, Emily also expressed displeasure with the idea that teachers felt that they had to ask for a seat at the policymaking table. As the most direct point of contact with students, they are entitled to a seat at the table. They are entitled to the majority of the seats at the table. Emily truly believed in the social justice implication that her work has for education overall. By providing a voice for teachers and acting as that seat at the table, Emily was committed to empowering other teachers to have their ideas be heard and to maintain the autonomy of their classroom experiences.

My conversations with Emily about the role that teachers play and the respect they deserve resonated with me strongly. They brought to mind my mother’s reservations about me teaching, but her overall positivity about the choice because of the benefits that teachers afforded to students. Emily’s view on bringing teachers to the table was a perspective that I am confident all teachers and their families could support. Emily transferred the boundless energy that she had in her classroom to her work in the Department, but still had a ways to go to affect cultural change that would bring forth the importance of teachers. She let me know that she was never “teacher tired” after work at the Department, indicating there is something much more deep and personally pulling in a classroom that cannot be felt elsewhere, even in a position that is supposed to be far more illustrious. Her love for teaching and for supporting teachers made me more confident than ever in my goal of working in various aspects of education, to continue the work that individuals like Emily lay out.

Emily’s openness with me about the profound difficulties that teachers face in the classroom, far removed from the district-wide or federal governing bodies making decisions for them, was some of the most honest feedback I heard at the Department. Her job required her to report from her experiences on the front lines facing students, parents and administrators as the gatekeeper separating ignorance from knowledge. Despite the joy she finds in her students, it was troubling that she was so overwhelmed with the conflict other teachers were bringing to her that she felt that she had to act. While it is wonderful that she is involved, it is horrifying that she felt that she had to leave her life and her job in order to make the school environment more positive.

Emily’s story continues to complicate my perspective on who can and should have the power to make change in education at the federal level. While the bureaucrats around her had the political know-how, she had the understanding of how schools work. However, people like Emily will never be the lead decision makers in Washington because they lack the political capital to effect change, even if they know it is right. Caught up in the balance of power, Emily may just have been the most powerful change-maker at the Department, made powerless by a system that sought to empower teachers in title rather than in practice.
The barriers to making changes to the education system and, in the area of that which I was most involved in, increasing college access, are far-reaching. Like monuments that stand as physical testaments to greatness just a few city blocks from the Department, these systemic barriers rise, sturdy and resilient to external forces.

Human Potential – Going and Returning Home

Washington, D.C. is a complicated political and social environment, built with the projection of languid ease and grandeur. The towering monuments that celebrate larger-than-life feats, buildings cast in white and gilded in gold, seamlessly efficient system of public transportation, and grid-like street structure that carves the city in fourths adds to the illusion. As a transplant from a small liberal arts college to the center of political thought and action, I was lulled to believe that this celebration and concentration of talent in one city meant that solutions were pumped out of the city with gusto. The reality was often much harsher, better represented by D.C. on late summer days when the sun would be suddenly obscured by clouds, and rain would pour suddenly and ruthlessly. The realization that the seat of educational decision making, the U.S. Department of Education, did not even have solutions to the issues plaguing the education system, came as suddenly and as dramatically as those periods of seemingly endless rainfall.

On a theoretical level, I came to D.C. with knowledge of many of the social challenges that students face. I left at Brandeis notebooks full of words like “systems of oppression,” “cycles of poverty,” “social capital,” and “value added learning.” Pulled from the pages of books, I departed for my Sorensen Fellowship with the naive student assumption that the individuals whose achievements had been written of in my textbook knew what they needed to accomplish and how to do so. With an appreciation for education instilled in me by my parents from an early age, I hoped to help the Department make strides in college access that I was sure they were already easily making. Just as I saw in my student programming at Brandeis, work at the Department encompassed a great deal of significant ideas that were difficult to fund and difficult to garner support for. Blocks imposed by Congressional bills, partisanship and funding allocations built walls, despite the fact that education seems like an issue that anyone can support. Department of Education staff certainly knew, just as the writers of my textbooks and my professors in class knew, what the issues where. However, they were grappling with how to create actionable solutions. The impact was overwhelming to professionals and college-aged interns alike, and the result was a department that tried to succeed but struggled.

Fortunately, the Department put in place some truly brilliant minds in education, along with some of the most dedicated civil servants in the field. By meeting Teneisha, Greg and Emily, I was able to find some hope for the Department’s ability to effect change. Though the systems that operated at a macro level were staggeringly complex and interconnected, all three of these
She let us know that we were all there because we believed in the power of human potential. She did not ask us that; she knew it about us. I wrote the line down on the cover of my fresh, yellow legal pad, which I would go on to fill with words and work. . . . I knew the statement was strong, though I could not have anticipated how significant a role the idea of belief would be throughout my summer.

Department staff members sought to understand the systems through their deeply personal lenses. Through her experiences and observing her brother’s obstacles in school, Teneisha has the understanding and insight to be able to make major differences for students who are also facing difficulties as a result of the systems of oppression at work in the education system. Greg, with his deep connection to students in need, sits at the forefront of policymaking and advocacy for college access, and very conscientiously keeps those students in mind in his day-to-day work. They are the reason he has spent his entire career working in education and youth services and, at this monumental place in his career, their influence on his service is evident. Finally, Emily, as a teacher who came to government to widen the space for teacher involvement, has the knowledge of the classroom that is desperately needed in the politics of education but is often overlooked in favor of a knowledge of politics.

These three leaders I had the privilege of meeting at the Department clarified my understanding of what a true civil servant in education does and should look like. In bringing their personal stories and connections to their work, they seek to serve others in an honest manner, and each success is as personal to them as it is to the student or group experiencing it. Though the places they are in their lives and specific interests vary, that genuine core is the same.

Working with them eased the conflict of whether or not I was enacting social justice. As something that is not quantifiable by hours worked on the job or test scores that students will receive years later, I can only measure my social justice impact through what I learned and can bring forward. The mentorship of Teneisha, Greg and Emily allowed me to gain knowledge about the problems but, most importantly, an understanding of the barriers to solutions despite the best intentions and best practices of professionals. It allowed me to understand that my passion can be reflected back to me in strong role models, and helped me clarify the role I wanted to play in effecting change in the education system in the future. The barriers to making changes to the education system and, in the area of that which I was most involved in, increasing college access, are far-reaching. Like monuments that stand as physical testaments to greatness just a few city blocks from the Department, these systemic barriers rise, sturdy and resilient to external forces.

During my first week at my internship, Kris Perry, lead prosecutor for the Supreme Court case against Prop 8, which had been preventing marriage equality in the state of California, came to speak at the Department. After a discussion with Secretary Duncan about her background promoting early childhood education, she left our group of assembled interns with some words of advice. She let us know that we were all there because we believed in the power of human potential. She did not ask us that, she knew it about us. I wrote the line down on the cover of my fresh, yellow legal pad, which I would go on to fill with words and work. . . . I knew the statement was strong, though I could not have anticipated how significant a role the idea of belief would be throughout my summer.

Now, back at school, I keep the paperweight that Greg gave me that reads “Believe” on my desk, and the yellow legal pad on my bookshelf. Long wrinkled, the text on the cover remains. The belief in human potential, and the impetus to stay connected to other people while working in education, connects me to my internship and keeps me connected to Teneisha, Greg and Emily. While they, like Secretary Duncan at our brown bag lunch together, would likely be unable to provide complete solutions to the difficulties affecting the American education system, I am certain that they will continue working tirelessly to amend them. While it is not a complete solution, I am confident any conclusions they come to will always be supported by a genuine appreciation for what they do and love for the students that they support. To me, that tie to the community they support is where true social justice work begins, and I am glad that it is represented in my three mentors from the Department.