

Civic Engagement and AUC
Ali
November 28, 2012

LEAD-IN:

The idea of volunteering has become a trend for students in today's world. The American University in Cairo proves to have a diverse set of these activities as we explore the role of civic engagement in Egypt. A-U-C's Samah Ali has the story.

MUSIC: "Perlander Champagner" by Ronny Matthes

The American Psychological Association defines civic engagement as "individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern."

Richard Adler from the Journal of Transformative Information defines it as "the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future."

The Coalition for Civic Engagement and Leadership at the University of Maryland defines it as "acting upon a heightened sense of responsibility to one's communities."

The University of Vermont however states that "there is no set definition of 'civic engagement' or 'community service.'" And that "students define these terms based on their own unique experiences."

But, let's stop here. We will focus on Egypt, home to the American University in Cairo A-U-C.

Dr. Barabara Ibrahim, director of the John D. Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement, tries to answer what civic engagement really is, when it comes to this particular country.

IBRAHIM: "That's a good question. You know, before the revolution when everybody sort of said there's no civic participation in Egypt, we would get jokes saying well we think in Egypt, religious engagement are just fine for young couples. They would make fun of what we did but in fact, building citizens and encouraging collective action to solve society's problems is what civic engagement is all about." (:28)

IBRAHIM: “In terms of the history in our own university that it was really the presidency of John D. Gerhart from 1998 until 2002. When you began to see a difference both in the student generation, taking more initiative, not sitting back and waiting for the government to solve their problems, forming new clubs, going out to serve in their communities, and John Gerhart recognized that. He saw it, he enjoyed spending time with our students, he learned a lot from them and helped me to recognize that maybe this was a new era and of course we now see in fact that’s been the case.” (:38)

From what has been explained, civic engagement includes or demands the act of doing, giving or contributing. It is volunteering, out of your good will. It takes your time, your effort, your energy and sometimes your money. You receive nothing in return, at least not tangible. And yet, thousands of students do this every day. Hundreds of A-U-Cians set out to create their own solutions to fix their community.

NATSOUND of AUC New Cairo campus

IBRAHIM: “A-U-C students are very diverse. And so, their rationale, their motivations to serve or to be involved are just as diverse as they are. For some students, the motivation is faith and religion. And a belief that to be a good Muslim or to be a good Christian, it’s not enough to pray or to have personal piety. But we must look outside of ourselves and we must try to build the good society. That’s a strong motivation at this particular historic moment in Egypt. You will also find out a lot of our students are motivated by patriotism, by a love of Egypt, a desire to make it a better place ... Alshaneq Ya Balady (A-Y-B) as you know, is one of the clubs that’s formed here, it’s quite large and popular. It’s For You My Country. So that tells you ...” (:53)

MUSIC: “Perlender Champagner” by Ronny Matthes

The A-Y-B Club started with the vision of a young girl at the age of 12. Raghda El Ebrashi had encountered a poor and miserable family during a school trip, which made her reflect on the failing economic situation in Egypt. It not only gave her the idea of creating this club but also changed the way she viewed the world.

After attending the A-U-C, she started the A-Y-B club in 2002 as a campaign only leading it to become a club in 2005. The club now has its own office situated in Maadi and is recognized as

an independent N-G-O. It strives to develop people's skills as well as provide volunteer and work opportunities to students and citizens.

To many, A-Y-B is a home away from home. Petroleum engineering student of the A-U-C, Walid Hussien, received the opportunity to volunteer and experience a different life with this prominent organization.

HUSSIEN: "My experience at A-Y-B was very very enriching, and it opened my horizons, especially after that I got to teach English for a group of unprivileged people in a community of Ein El-Seera, which is a very poor and undeveloped community. I got exposed to that community, which I used to think that going to downtown, and such places is the worst Egypt could be, but when I went there I saw how hard their lives were and yeah, how difficult it was for them to sustain that life for themselves and their children and yet they made time for education. It was very interesting." (:36)

However, what is it that makes A-U-C different from other universities? We have witnessed Cairo University's community create the organization Resala, only to become one of the largest N-G-Os in the entire region.

IBRAHIM: "Public universities, those that are funded and controlled by government, have had a very narrow room to maneuver. Classroom teaching was done in a very classic style, lectures, large halls, exams at the end of the semester. Some universities were able to start a few student clubs but they were very restrictive. A-U-C, because of its heritage as a Liberal Arts university in the American tradition, has always encouraged extra-curricular activities, service, building citizenship skills." (:38)

Hussien agreed that his short stay with A-Y-B did make him reflect on his life. He was exposed to someone else's life. He spoke with them, taught them and laughed with them. It was unlike watching a features segment on the television. He, like many others, was experiencing real life.

NATSOUND of playground with children and adults

HUSSIEN: "A typical workday at A-Y-B would be like, me going to the place, the Ein El-Seera, a little place for youth. It's like a small cultural center and sports center and then I go to the classroom, I wait a little bit for people, they come in and greet me, they're of different ages, I used to teach mothers and their children in the same class and I ask them questions about their days and they ask me questions about mine; where I come from, and things about my culture, they used to ask me questions about that more than they asked me questions about the teaching material, and at the end of the class, we talk for a little bit. They promise to bring me food and they would cook me for the next time, and everything and they're very friendly and then I go home." (:44)

Perhaps Hussien alone cannot be the representing image of the entire student body at A-U-C that volunteers. He is simply one student, one of us.

Dr. Eric Mlyn, a visiting professor at A-U-C, is the director of the Duke Engage program at Duke University. This program is all about service learning and he firmly believes that anything that builds capacity in society is a part of civic engagement.

NATSOUND of AUC New Cairo campus

MLYN: "You might affect one person over the course of the semester. Now, if a thousand people are doing that or five thousand people are doing that or with a hundred thousand people are doing that, then that could have a broader impact. So, civic engagement can vary. It can be something as narrow as a one-on-one interaction with the person or it could be working for an N-G-O where you're really helping them build capacity. So if you're building a website or you're organizing their financial report or you're doing research for them. That can have a much broader impact. And I have no judgment on which one of those are more valuable. I think all of those are civic engagement." (:37)

MUSIC: "Let the sun shine" by Cyborgjeff

For students who are civically active, they not only develop exposure but also talents and skills. They are able to solidify their personalities, their views and even create opinions on policy matters.

Lauren Clark, a graduate student at the A-U-C and also the project coordinator of the University on the Square project, agrees and disagrees at the same time on whether civic engagement is effective.

CLARK: “When I was in Spelman College, in Atlanta, Georgia, I was involved in a protest where we were protesting the particular rap video, which was made by a hip hop star. And it showcased African American women in very disgusting and negative light as being sexually deviant, hyper sexualized, it was very exploitative and with our work with that and what not, we were able to get a certain segment of a T-V station taken off. We were able to get this very exclusive segment called Uncut that was placed in a particular T-V station taken off so yes.” (:36)

This in turn, creates a politically aware citizen, which is a term used by most when describing civic engagement. However, there have been arguments as to whether political engagement and civic engagement are to be considered the same.

Dr. Mlyn explained that he always encounters such questions from his students.

MLYN: “So one example I always use is efforts to register people to vote, which is something we do in the United States. To me, that’s volunteer work for the public good because you’re increasing democracy. But it is also political because in the end it will affect who is serving us.” (:19)

No matter what the arguments are on the topic of civic engagement, students of the A-U-C will continue to volunteer no matter what.

IBRAHIM: “We want to enhance the culture of giving and civic action across the Arab world. That’s our mission.” (:8)

MUSIC: “Playin Games” by Cyborgjeff

HUSSIEN: “To gain a lot of experience, to make connections, and it gives me a lot of self-satisfaction to help others.” (:6)

NEGM: “Well I personally volunteer because I think it’s very important for one to be connected to other people in one’s society even though we are of different living standard. It’s also very important for the development of the country and for the development of the person themselves. And I think it’s beneficial for them. And it makes me feel really good when I do help them.” (:17)

SALIH: “I do community service because it’s fun and productive. I get to meet people and learn more while I’m doing that.” (:9)

BENMAHCENE: “Well, why I volunteer. I volunteer because I actually have a personal belief that volunteerism is a way of giving, the same way that you take from society and the same way you’re taking from your nation, you have to give as well. So this is actually duty, duty and pleasure at the same time. That’s why I volunteer.” (:16)

This documentary was produced by Samah Ali.

Special thanks to Dr. Eric Mlyn, Dr. Barbara Ibrahim and Walid Hussien, as well as Lauren Clark, Chada Benmahcene, Grazza Salih and Lina Negm.

Sources from: Ma’an Arab University Alliance, the A-U-C, the A-Y-B, the Gerhart Center, American Psychological Association, Journal of Transformative Information, Coalition for Civic Engagement and Leadership at the University of Maryland and the University of Vermont.

Music used: “Perlander Champagner” by Ronny Matthes, “Let the Sun Shine” by Cyborgjeff and “Playin Games” by Cyborgjeff

Thank you for listening to Civic Engagement at AUC.