

May 2011-- Chanel Adikuono

For me, “civility and democratic” engagement means the ability for a group of people with different and diverse opinions to make a decision to fix a particular social problem to benefit the greatest number of people. My internship at The Smithsonian Associates (TSA)-National Education Outreach Program was a great example of what it meant to be involved in productive democratic engagement. The goal of the Educational Outreach Program is to improve need-based high school students’ academic performance in American history by providing teachers with new methods of teaching utilizing different styles of learning through teacher workshops. In the process of planning and implementing these workshops, problems arose with various ideas of how the program should be executed. To alleviate the tension and avoid discouraging anyone’s unique and valuable ideas, we made a compromise by allowing everyone to present their ideas, then pulling small pieces from varying ideas, and then reviewing past programs to assess pros and cons to create a refined and more efficient process. Finally, we made a democratic decision about what stays and what goes to benefit the greatest number of people.

At a macro level, democratic engagement was fostered through open communication in the TSA as a whole. The organization was undergoing major cuts, as well as threats of a federal shutdown, and it was especially important during this time to promote civil and democratic engagement. Secretary Clough of The Smithsonian Institute held monthly meetings to present an update on each museum’s financial condition and to point out the risk that some divisions may be faced with and to encourage open dialogue. In addition, the Smithsonian Associates Director sent out emails to the entire staff when she received important updates of the federal shutdown and held what was called a “flash mob” or informal meeting to give a brief update on any changes that would impact the organization.

More broadly, the federal shutdown was evidence of our government’s need to adopt better civil and democratic engagement. The threat of a federal shutdown incurred great costs for the federal workforce. The time and money it took for staff to be taken out of their offices to come up with a strategy to prepare for a shutdown was not calculated, but it reduced efficiency for everyone. There were criticisms made about how “childish” our government was for its inability to come to a consensus about a federal budget that was four months overdue. There was much frustration in the air, and the public was disappointed in our government. However, as an organization, we remained civil and rational while we devised contingency plans in the case of a shutdown.

I did not have an insider look at the delegation process of the federal budget, but clearly, the government upset the public. The public questioned the intentions of the government and why it could not make a decision sooner. Citizens felt the government did not think hard enough about what the effects a shutdown would do not only to greater Washington, D.C., but throughout the United States. It is clear that we need to strengthen civil and democratic engagement within our government, especially in deciding important issues such as the federal budget.