

Dear Watershed Community,

As many of you know, our high school students have been out on extended fieldwork this week. Our *Borders and Immigration* classes (9th and 10th grade) are wrapping up in El Paso today after a week of learning about immigration by helping refugees, meeting with a lawyer to understand the complexity of immigration issues, and spending a day at a high school in Mexico (among many other things!). Students in our *Caste and Class* course have been in Washington D.C. this week exploring issues of inequality and how we treat one another in societies by meeting with elected officials, visiting museums, doing research at the Library of Congress.

There are many obvious benefits to the fieldwork we do at Watershed. Students get to learn first hand about issues instead of just reading about them – this leads to an understanding of the deep complexity of real challenges. When you're in the field you learn three-dimensionally – mind, body, and soul. You are more likely to care about something you see first-hand, and current neurobiology research is clear that you do not learn well, in a real lasting way, unless you have a reason to care.

There are also some hidden benefits. I'll mention three.

1. Through all of our fieldwork, students learn to interact with others – specifically with adults they don't know well. In our society we age-segregate young people too much, and they often feel uncomfortable talking and working with adults. Not at Watershed. And this pays off. This is what a recent graduate told me when he was talking about the incredible internship he just secured as a first year college student. This is why many of our graduates get involved with their professor's research projects in college. This is why our graduates often come back and say, "I'm the only one asking questions in class." Or, "I'm one of the few who go to office hours." Our graduates are comfortable with adults and know how to take ownership of their learning.
2. Through their time in the field, Watershed students learn how to take initiative. Fieldwork is inherently more active than the typical classroom setting, and students learn that they need to actively ask questions, actively pitch in and work with a group. I'm reminded of what the Scottish author Muriel Spark wrote, "She wasn't a person to whom things happen. She did all the happenings." We graduate young people who "do the happenings."
3. Watershed fieldwork experiences are transformational, they open students' minds and hearts to real world challenges, in all their complexity, and they can be a springboard for new passions. An example: a recent graduate came back after the *Borders* extended fieldwork deeply interested in immigration law. She then began interning with a local law firm, and is now pre-law at Occidental College. Why does this matter? We want young people to explore and ultimately find purpose in life. And this is also just what colleges are looking for. I was recently on the MIT website and was struck by their mission statement (and it's echoes with ours):

*The mission of MIT is to advance knowledge and educate students in science, technology, and other areas of scholarship that will **best serve the nation and the world in the 21st century**. The Institute is committed to generating, disseminating, and preserving knowledge, and to **working with others to bring this knowledge to bear on the world's great challenges**. MIT is dedicated to providing its students with an*

*education that combines rigorous academic study and the excitement of discovery with the support and intellectual stimulation of a diverse campus community. **We seek to develop in each member of the MIT community the ability and passion to work wisely, creatively, and effectively for the betterment of humankind.*** (emphases added)

On their admission site they emphasize that while grades and test scores matter in the admission process, they focus more on the match between the applicant and the institute. And the first component they mention is:

***Alignment with MIT's mission***

*Remember that there are many ways to make the world better—we're not looking for applicants to have cured all infectious disease in the world by the time they're 15.*

*Tutoring a single kid in math changes the world. Lobbying a senator to amend bad policy changes the world. There are thousands of examples.*

Other components they they look for in applicants are:

***Collaborative and cooperative spirit***

***Initiative***

***Risk-taking***

***Hands-on creativity***

***Intensity, curiosity, and excitement***

It is wonderful to see the changes in education, not just at Watershed, but broadly in the world.

I know I could write about more benefits of fieldwork (perhaps we should crowdsource a list with students, staff and parents!), but I just wanted to mention a few as we prepare to welcome our high school back home, and share my thoughts about why our approach matters for our students and for our world.

Thanks for reading.

Warmly,

Tim