

WHERE IT'S AT -- A STUDENT'S VIEW

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In the past few years, jargon expressions such as "groovy," "right on," and "out of sight," have been constantly heard on college campuses. Yet, more recently, many students have concluded that slang phrases, that mere words, are not -- to borrow an expression -- "where it's at." At present, the focus is centered around attempts to answer five questions: "Where is it?"; "Who's at it?"; "How is it done?"; "Who benefits from it?"; and "Where do we fit in?"

Increasingly, students are cultivating an appreciation for daily citizen involvement. And, before mentioning specific consumer issues and programs, I would like to share a few observations about the role of students in the decision-making process.

The concern of students being formally appointed to committees or elected to university boards of trustees is only the surface opening of a critical issue. If you will, students are miners standing at the surface opening of a deep shaft, ready to enter the mine (their minds) and dig for knowledge. Furthermore, we can draw an analogy between the mine safety movement of years past and of students trying to shore up experiences and supports that complete their educations. The miners asked that the mining companies not give them dangerous working conditions in the mines, and we are asking that the universities not give us the shaft.

We are the trustees of tomorrow -- not just of the university, but of the world of tomorrow. The decisions that are made today are going to have impact throughout our lives and through those of our offspring. Hence, the world is held in our trust.

But back to the questions: Where is it? Who's at it? How is it done? Who benefits from it? Where do we fit in? For students in consumer affairs it is at the university, small group and local level of activity. This includes the following college/community programs.

Where is it? -- At George Washington University Law School. Who's at it? -- 125 law students per semester receive credit staffing consumer complaint centers in the District of Columbia. The group is also involved as a consultant to many neighboring counties. How is it done? -- They have a computerized statistical data program organizing and evaluating consumer research material. Who benefits from it? -- The law students and the community.

Where is it? -- It is at the University of Oregon's College of Business Administration, where a Consumer Rights Research Center

has been established. Who's at it? -- The center is staffed by students and volunteer citizens with faculty assistance. How is it done? -- The CRRC has been involved in the study of auto repair in Portland, comparing student life insurance policies, and other relevant issues. Who benefits from it? -- The community and the students, who may earn up to 15 hours of university credit while pursuing relevant education.

Where is it? -- It's at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Who's at it? -- Students, community people, and the Chamber of Commerce. How is it done? -- The students, working with the Chamber of Commerce, have established a consumer complaint center, funded by the business community. Who benefits from it? -- The students who receive real world experience and the community people who are served.

Where is it? -- It's at Kansas State University in Manhattan. Who's at it? -- Student government has established a Consumer Relations Board. How is it done? -- The Consumer Relations Board has a legal advisor and student complaint handlers assist complainants in communication, mediation, arbitration and other action to gain satisfaction in the marketplace. Who benefits from it? -- During the first year of operation, \$45,000 was saved by students for some 500 cases handled.

Where is it? -- At Indiana University. Who's at it? -- The Community Resource Application Project. How is it done? -- The Project directors have been working with the School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Continuing Education, and the American Friends Service Committee to organize a program in Bloomington similar to the program developed by the American Friends in Indianapolis. They are attempting to help minority persons and the economically disadvantaged gain leadership skills such as parliamentary procedure, group dynamics, grantpersonship, budgeting, and understanding of the role of advisory boards. This program will work to facilitate skill development and give these heretofore under- or misrepresented persons an opportunity to be represented in the decision-making process of the programs that affect them. Who benefits from it? -- The people who are the community.

Where is it? -- In 23 university communities. Who's at it? -- Students who have followed Nader's suggestion to develop autonomous Public Interest Research Groups, as well as community and faculty persons who have facilitated their efforts. How is it done? -- In Minnesota last fall the students promoted toy safety and the Indiana PIRG is contesting Indiana Bell's rate increase. Who benefits from it? -- The community and the students, who have an opportunity to gain the tools and methodologies which work in the real world and receive satisfaction from having made contributions to their communities.

Thus, we have examined some student/community programs and answered four questions in the process. The remaining question is "Where do we fit in?" The answer for students is obvious. Fortunately, non-students can "fit in" too, for academicians can

provide relevant curriculums, business people can offer students professional practice programs and work-study employment, and public employees can provide internships.

Student involvement in community programs need not center on the college campus. For instance, in Ridgewood High School in Ridgewood, New Jersey, students in a consumer education class were encouraged to establish a consumer information center. In addition, the Van Heusen Corporation advertised for Common Cause in college newspapers and the Better Business Bureau has facilitated student arbitration programs. Finally, mayor's offices, various state agencies, and federal programs as the National Business Council on Consumer Affairs in the U.S. Department of Commerce have fostered student learning programs and project participation.

In closing, there are many approaches and many programs in many locations that are only made possible by many people working together with an understanding that they share a common purpose. As expressed in the following anonymous poem:

i am also you . . .
i love to go camping, and so i love the environment . . .
i become angry when the rich take advantage of the poor,
so i care about consumer protection and corporate
responsibility . . .
i feel the pain of the sick and the elderly, so i want them
to have the medical care they need . . .
i see human and technological capabilities to meet every
need, and so am concerned that steps be taken in prison
reform, juvenile decency, and government accountability. . .
i am concerned with relevancy in education and encourage
students to become citizens and citizens to continue
to be students . . .
i am becoming more aware of the complexities of problems
concerning the quality of life and with the help of
others, i am developing reasonable expectations . . .

a problem shared by two is only half as big; a problem
shared by humanity is soon solved . . .

i care about the world we share -- the world that makes you me.