

Engineering Solutions

When I talk to my engineering classmates about the liberal arts, they usually brush the subject off with one common excuse. *Our minds just don't work that way*, they'll complain. *If there's a problem, we want an exact answer*. As an engineer myself, I can confirm that there's nothing more satisfying than an exact answer—especially when it involves math or supports a universal theorem. Churning through equations is second nature to me, which is perhaps why it's so hard to understand why today's big social issues aren't “solved” already. Because there's no concrete solution, it can be easy to believe that these are issues that don't matter... and yet, they do matter. After all, there's nothing more concrete than sleeping on it night after night.

Seattle has a massive homeless problem. According to last year's One Night Count, approximately 4500 people sleep outside on any given night—enough to fill the Space Needle over a dozen times. While volunteering at Community Lunch for a service-learning class, I got to meet many residents of Capitol Hill who struggle with poverty and homelessness. Every Thursday, a crowd of about 300 would gather outside All Pilgrims Church for a hot meal and a place to rest. After our food-service shifts were over, volunteers were encouraged to eat with guests and keep them company.

Everyone had a story to tell, whether it was the veteran with PTSD and substance abuse, the trans sex-worker saving up for surgery, or the disabled factory worker living off of unemployment benefits. The more I volunteered, the more I came to appreciate the diversity of our guests' perspectives. There were common complaints like unaffordable housing, impossible commutes, and unemployment; less often did residents discuss family life or medical expenses. Their personal stories helped me understand homelessness on a deeper level, and turn the

sympathy I had into empathy. I began to better understand how issues flowed into one another, which to me is what a liberal arts education is all about: educating the whole person.

Equitable wealth distribution is more than a math problem; we must be compassionate and open-minded if we're going to tackle such a big issue. Listening to a variety of perspectives helped me realize that. The experience also made me realize that engineering isn't just about making weird gadgets to put on a shelf somewhere; it's about making weird gadgets that *help people live more fulfilling lives*. In the future, I hope that my work will achieve that.