



## Active citizenship and diversity

The common identity we need to find uncommon solutions

by Sean Kershaw

Looking down at the bumper stickers on my car, my friend Sara got an amused and confused look on her face. As she scanned decals for the Denver Broncos, the Strategic Air Command, Norm Coleman, Radiohead and Rainbow Families, she shook her head and smiled: “You need to make up your mind. I have no idea who you are.”

We can all claim diverse identities around race/ethnicity, gender, religion, political ideology, policy interests—and even music. But as Minnesota’s public policy problems become more complex, and as the identities of Minnesotans continue to multiply, the need for a common identity becomes more important than ever. We need an identity that includes what’s important in our lives, that transcends our diversity, and that still makes it possible for all of us to work for the common good.

Active citizenship is that identity.

### Defining active citizenship

The Citizens League has endorsed active citizenship as one of our fundamental principles. As I continue to talk about the meaning and implications of these principles, I believe active citizenship can help us deal with the most important policy challenge of our time: developing and implementing effective policy solutions in a Minnesota that is increasingly diverse.

The Citizens League defines active citizenship as the right and the responsibility to govern for the common good. We’re all obligated to practice active citizenship—to govern—in the places where we spend time: in the roles we assume in our families, workplaces, communities, schools, etc. We’re active citizens in education when we recognize the role of our kids’ schools in closing the achievement gap for all students. I’m an active citizen in healthcare when I recognize the connection between the number of Oreos I eat in one sitting and an equitable healthcare system for others. Active citizenship is the shared identity that allows us to create the common ground in our new tag line.

Active citizenship is the shared obligation that allows us to achieve the common good.

Our current conversations about diversity and active citizenship are insufficient. First, diversity without a shared identity is like self-interest without enlightened self-interest. It’s a start, but isn’t sufficient for our democracy. Second, we need solutions to complex policy challenges that recognize the limits of government and regulation. Our policy proposals must recognize the need for all citizens and institutions to be involved in creating those solutions. Active citizenship is the shared obligation that allows us to achieve the common good.

### Diversity done wrong

I’m confused by the bumper sticker “Celebrate Diversity.” I’ve personally led dozens of diversity awareness sessions. This consciousness-raising too often devolves into victim/oppressor arguments and us/them solutions that are ineffective. (And this definition of diversity is rarely meant to include other diverse interests: political conservatives, Christian evangelicals, or people who disagree with the premise of the conversation.) I’d rather celebrate the common agenda and identity we build given our diversity.

Understanding the real suffering of disadvantaged communities is a necessary part of remedying injustice, and we absolutely need participation from diverse communities and interests to work on any problem. But we’re not going to create solutions to our public policy challenges, like providing services for retired (mostly white) adults, if our identity and obligation is only as young (increasingly diverse) families; or tackle the challenges in educational and economic achievement for these diverse families if our identity and obligation is

only as Scandinavian seniors. We need a common obligation to each other and to the future. Active citizenship provides this.

### Diversity done right

Diversity is an essential means to good policy work. Diversity in interests, ideologies, race/ethnicity, experiences, and in institutional roles is the necessary starting point in all policy work. Unless the diverse stakeholders impacted by a problem help to define and solve the problem according to a common set of democratic principles, we’ll continue to develop ineffective and unsustainable policy solutions.

Our Medical Facilities Study Committee provides an example of active citizenship and diversity that worked. The participants came to the table with diverse and conflicting interests as community members, patients, hospitals, physicians, and clinic owners and then focused on a shared identity. The committee used their diverse perspectives to build an innovative and effective policy solution, and saw their institutions as part of that. The committee’s recommendations involve patients and consumers in solving the problem—not just government.

Policy work is rarely as structured as these committees. It is going to be an enormous challenge for the Citizens League and all of us to redefine the role we all have as individuals and institutions in finding solutions to Minnesota’s policy challenges. But better solutions demand a better model—a model that assumes we have the capacity and the obligation to implement solutions in the places that matter to us. Ultimately, this is also more rewarding because we can each make a difference.

### A better bumper sticker

Sara was right. My car needs an additional bumper sticker. The next one will simply say Active Citizen—or perhaps Celebrate the Common Good. ●

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