Common Grounds Students Learn from Dr. Reatha Clark King

“One of the issues of collective impact is that the less well-known, the less powerful, partners can feel overshadowed. Good integrative leaders know to share credit with everyone, especially the less influential partners.” -Dr. Reatha Clark King

Dr. Reatha Clark King spoke with members of Common Grounds, an interdisciplinary student-led graduate team that applies the concept of integrative leadership to collaborative community challenges, on Friday, October 24, 2014. The daughter of sharecroppers, Dr. King earned a Ph.D. in physical chemistry before embarking on an illustrious career as a research chemist, university administrator and corporate executive. Dr. King captivated the Common Grounds students with insights drawn from her groundbreaking experiences as a leader in a variety of sectors.

Dr. King began by reflecting on how she was shaped by her childhood. She grew up in rural, impoverished, southern Georgia before the civil rights era and moved north to pursue her doctorate. “What stands out to me is her ability to persevere,” said Ryan Earp, a dual MBA and MPP student who is on the Common Grounds steering committee, “She was raised in the South before the Civil Rights Era as a daughter of sharecroppers, and yet had the determination to pursue higher education. She faced a lot of discrimination, not only as an African American from the South before civil rights, but also as a woman. Dr. King truly broke barriers.”

Reflecting on her subsequent experiences as president of Metropolitan State University and of the General Mills Foundation, Dr. King explained that working across boundaries is more difficult but also more effective than working unilaterally. Dr. King led a General Mills Foundation initiative to combat the terrible violence experienced by the Hawthorne neighborhood of North Minneapolis in the 1990’s. Dr. King gathered community members to discuss violence in their community and what the General Mills Foundation could do to help them alleviate it. She remembers that the community members really needed to be heard by the corporate team and that the corporate team really needed to see results that they could bring back to the corporate office.

Again and again, Dr. King came back to the importance of building relationships with each partner and honoring the strengths that each partner brings to the team. Dr. King noted that building these relationships takes considerable time and effort before any tangible results can be seen. This process can be tough to reconcile with corporate time-frames. Rather than seeing these processes in conflict, Dr. King framed them as complementary. As Common Grounds student Rebecca Blumenshine observed:

“I thought it was interesting that she framed the tension between building community relationships and providing results for the corporate partners as a positive balance. Dr. King framed both partners as having positive and important roles to play. The corporate agenda’s need for benchmarks and results is balanced by the context of building community relationships centered on respect for everyone at the table.”
Dr. King emphasized patience and collaboration in her closing remarks to the students by sharing a powerful African proverb with the group, “Working alone, we can go faster. Working together, we can go farther.”