

## Civic Professionalism

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### Introduction

We believe that higher education has a significant role to play in the reinvigoration of American democracy. We also believe that narrow specialization of academic interests and technocratic practices throughout colleges and universities cramp the work and learning within them, while dramatically limiting the contributions of higher education to the work of democracy and the collective redress of the challenges of a new century. Overspecialization and technocracy thwart our institutions' capacities to interact in fluid and respectful ways with citizens and civic institutions outside higher education in generating the knowledge needed in a flourishing democratic society.

Others outside the civic engagement movement in higher education make some similar points. For instance, in her collection of essays, *The Death of Adam* (1998), the novelist Marilyn Robinson notes that while we depend on universities to produce knowledge and teach future generations, "it was never intended that the universities should do the thinking, or the knowing, for the rest of us. Yet this seems to be the view that prevails now inside and outside the academy" (p. 7). Robinson goes on to accuse universities of becoming simultaneously "hermetic" and lacking in "confidence and definition," describing the issue as "*something about the way we teach and learn* [emphasis added] that makes it seem naïve to us to talk about these things outside of a classroom, and pointless to return to them in the course of actual life" (p. 8).

We believe that the civic engagement movement has something very important to say about "the way we teach and learn" in higher education, because it seeks to redress patterns of narrow specialization and technocratic practices, especially in the humanities and social sciences, where these practices have resulted in a drift away from humanistic inquiry, understanding, and democratic engagement. The civic engagement movement has the potential to return higher education to its roots of preparing people to work with others to solve problems and build thriving communities in ways that enhance democratic capacity. In the process, those in higher education may also learn again to work with others in the broader society to generate useful and usable knowledge.

Other scholars also argue for changing faculty (and sometimes staff) roles in order to realize higher education's commitment to civic engagement (*Bringle, Hatcher, & Clayton, 2006; Rice and O'Meara, 2005; Saltmarsh, in press; Ward, 2005*). Our argument adds a focus on the ways that theories and practices of *community organizing* and attention to the *public meanings and qualities of work* will be central to reshaping faculty roles and identities and to infusing a robust, transformative civic mission throughout higher education.

### **Confronting Individualism and Isolation**

Leaders in the civic movement in higher education must engage in an ongoing critical examination of cultural practices within the

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university and within the movement itself. In our view, the civic engagement movement has all too often been framed by and infused with a culture of individualism, privatization, and isolation—the very norms and practices that organize higher education itself. In its efforts to mainstream itself, to institutionalize service-learning pedagogy and other forms of civic engagement, and to justify the movement to suspicious onlookers, the engagement movement has ghettoized activities in discrete programs or centers and, in the case of service-learning, oftentimes isolated efforts of single faculty mem-

bers within academic departments. This model is proving unsustainable. This rigidity dramatically limits the movement's potential.

The everyday practices of higher education work against the collaborative practices that are the heart of engaged scholarship, service-learning, and reciprocal, fluid, respectful partnerships with communities. The way faculty members are educated and rewarded encourages working in isolation or primarily with colleagues within their own academic disciplines, and seeing their own knowledge as qualitatively superior to other forms of knowledge and knowledge-making. This set of received practices conflicts with the fundamental sensibility of the engaged scholarship movement which, as John Saltmarsh writes, is “localized, relational, practice-based, actively collaborative, experiential, and reflective” (*in press*). Moreover, faculty members work in a way

which reflects the larger social trends of an increasingly consumer society, as described by writers such as Susan Faludi (1999). Public purposes of work have been replaced to a significant degree by celebrity cultures and the pursuit of individual achievement and financial reward (Boyte, 2004).

To move forward, the civic engagement movement will need to confront this culture of individualism, isolation, and the instrumentalization of work into private pursuits. Specifically, institutions that take their engaged mission seriously will need to employ a number of practices and concepts that come from community organizing and its adaptation to efforts at institutional culture change. These include understanding self-interests; building public relationships across lines of difference; working with and understanding power as an ability to act rather than an oppressive, unidirectional force; creating free spaces for people to work with power and confidence in more public fashion; addressing questions of work incentives and routines, as well as purposes and cultures of work and the workplace; understanding and embracing the messiness of change; and, overall, retrieving and practicing politics in the older tradition of constructive encounter with others who are different, rather than the mass mobilizing politics of the 20th century, which treats people solely as members of limited categories (e.g., liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat). We need a politics of Aristotle and Ella Baker, not of George Bush and Ralph Nader.

As we see it, the overarching task of the civic engagement movement is to engender civic professionals who will renew a robust sense of the public purposes of their work and will develop and sustain a far more public culture for collaborative, visible, open work. We all live and act in a professional and symbolic world, so making our work public goes far beyond developing new programs, creating new courses, or writing articles for publication. The current state of higher education can make such advances appear difficult or even impossible. We hold a more optimistic view.

John Dewey intimated these points many years ago, observing that technocratic and commercial dynamics undermine the habits of participatory and productive democracy. In response to the pretensions of credentialed intellectuals and academics, Dewey made action—not detached thought—the foundational experience of human beings who create meaning in the world. As Alan Ryan (1995) has put it, “One reason why Dewey was never able to accept the orthodox argument of stimulus-response was the fact that it made the organism whose behavior was supposed to be built up out

of endless stimulus-response circuits too passive, too spectatorial, and too much a creature of the environment.” Rather, the person “makes sense of the world for the sake of acting productively on the world” (p. 127). This focus led Dewey to a critique of detached intellectuals who assume the primacy of their own thought. “The depreciation of action, of doing and making, has been cultivated by philosophers,” Dewey wrote in 1937 (*McDermott, 1981, p. 357*), his attack on the idea that inquiry can be separated from social contexts. Dewey observed the aura of infallibility that those armed with “expertise” could assume. “The dogma worked out practically so as to strengthen dependence upon authority,” he wrote. “Just as belief that a magical ceremony will regulate the growth of seeds to full harvest stifles the tendency to investigate . . . so acceptance of dogmatic rules as bases of conduct in education, morals, and social matters lessens the impetus to find out about the conditions which are involved in forming intelligent plans” (p. 382).

Yet habits—including our own—are not blind repetitions but rather learned patterns that create predispositions for action in unexpected circumstances. Habits can be changed and developed through “intelligent action.” This has proven a fertile theory for educational innovation in other settings. Thus Deborah Meier, the great democratic educator, founder of the Central Park East schools in East Harlem and Mission Hill School in Boston, demonstrated the fruitfulness of the concept of relational habits in bringing about education for democracy. She wrote, “The real crisis we face is not a threat to America’s economic or military dominance but the ebbing strength of our democratic and egalitarian culture.” Meier recalls the “traditional public function of schools: to pass on the skills, aptitudes, and habits needed for a democratic way of life,” observing that these “are hard to come by; they are not natural to the species. They are as hard to teach as relativity. Democratic culture needs citizens with very strong habits” (*Meier, 2003, p. 16*).

As the civic engagement movement in higher education progresses, leaders and practitioners should intentionally learn from such civic innovators elsewhere in education and in other fields, in order to develop and practice relational habits of democracy within institutions of higher education. Nan Kari, describing one of the earliest examples of adapting organizing to higher education in a multiyear experiment at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota, observed that “civic design and institutional renewal are rarely if ever brought together” (*Kari, 1999, p. 50*). But here and there one can see examples emerging. They often have significant impact.

## **Organizing at the College of St. Catherine**

In the late 1980s, Nan Kari and her colleagues at the College of St. Catherine joined Project Public Life (PPL), a confederation of teams from diverse institutions that was organized as part of the early work of civic engagement at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute (Project Public Life was the precursor to the Center for Democracy and Citizenship). PPL included ARC, a low-income community group, Augustana Nursing Home, Minnesota Cooperative Extension Service, local schools such as St. Bernard's in St. Paul, the Metropolitan Regional Council government group, and others interested in experimenting with community organizing approaches to bringing about institutional change. PPL initially used the notion of "citizen politics" to describe organizing methods and concepts.

At St. Catherine's, the Citizen Politics faculty group began meeting each week as a strategy team, involving a mix of different interests and disciplines. They responded to long-standing institutional conflicts and crises: Discontent and fragmentation within the faculty ranks created an unpleasant institutional culture that spilled outward and affected the larger community of students, staff, and community partners (*Kari, 1999*).

They looked for strategic openings. One involved changing the culture and practice of faculty meetings, notorious for their unproductive, whiny qualities (the chair of the faculty senate was a member of the Citizen Politics group). Another strategy, broader in ambition, sought to lay groundwork for far-ranging revision of the college's core curriculum. For years, the faculty had sought to create curricular change, but turf wars and disciplinary jealousies had repeatedly stymied all previous attempts.

The Citizen Politics faculty group decided to create a molecular process of relationship-building across disciplinary silos. Kari secured external funding to develop Faculty Study Groups (FSGs)—interdisciplinary, self-selecting groups that were designed to examine issues of interest to all group members and to produce a tangible public project by the end of the academic year. Over several years, the FSGs involved a majority of the faculty in a zany mix of projects (from writing a novel to examining the Twin Cities as a learning text to going to Italy), and, in the process, produced dramatic change in the culture at the institution. Because they thought and acted like community organizers—not technocrats—they showed how weighty, contentious projects like curriculum revision, when approached from a community organizing and

civic renewal framework, hold the possibility of pulling people together, energizing professional passions, and integrating the disparate and oftentimes conflicting elements of institutions. Thomas Ehrlich and his colleagues highlight the successes of the college in their now-classic work in our movement, *Educating Citizens* (Colby, 2003)—though this account leaves out the community organizing that brought it about!

Faculty Study Groups were founded upon community organizing principles of building public relationships across lines of difference, creating free spaces for people to work publicly with others, and understanding and embracing the messiness of change. Participating faculty were challenged to perform cultural work that was collaborative, based in intellectual, symbolic work, and aimed at the development of a public project. Large numbers of participants—far more than would have described themselves as “civic renewers”—became self-directed agents of cultural change within their institution (not passive receptors as so often happens in task forces and committees), greatly multiplying the available energies and talents. The St. Catherine’s experiment was not only successful but enjoyable to participants primarily because it pushed back powerfully against pervasive privatizing tendencies of work in higher education: self-interest was an important element in making faculty members’ work “more public.” (Indeed, St. Catherine’s proved a seedbed for early development of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship’s public work conceptual framework of citizenship and civic action.) Faculty and staff prioritized and came to value immensely the public dimensions of their work. As William Myers, chair of the faculty senate and coordinator of the curriculum process, observed, “When we make our discussions public, we can accomplish difficult and potentially divisive goals without acrimony. The key is to create a spirit of openness, and constantly to keep the common work of the whole college community in view” (Kari, 1999, p. 42). Additionally, faculty participants engaged in the older understanding of politics as negotiation, exchange, and deliberation rather than the hardscrabble and often ideological struggle for scarce resources that often becomes the default mode of doing business in higher education. Such older “citizen politics” does not do away with conflict; the work at St. Catherine’s often surfaced conflicts that had been submerged. But it allows conflicts to be addressed constructively.

Faculty were engaged around their own self-interests, rather than pulled together by high-level administrators and exhorted to participate in task forces or committees for an abstract “common

good.” Project Public Life used a working understanding of self-interest drawn from developments in the field of community organizing. In the language of community organizing, self-interest is about “the self among others.” Organizers know how to identify and work with the self-interests of a large group of constituents, and how to tie people’s immediate self-interests to salient community issues and long-term community projects or challenges.

A number of lessons can be drawn from the St. Catherine’s experience: Institutional change requires open, flexible, and dynamic ways of dealing with conflict; it entails a self-conscious commitment to fostering public cultures and integrating and negotiating the wide variety of self-interests that populate our institutions. The focus on values, tied to individual faculty members’ stories and life experiences, rather than a narrow issues focus, proved essential as an organizing method at St. Catherine’s. Finally, the faculty members thought deeply and effectively about the public meanings and possibilities of their own *work*, bridging

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the customary divide in civic theory and practice alike, which have long seen civic engagement as a function of “off-hours” voluntary and associational life. This is the kind of organic, pragmatic, iterative, public, conceptual, and also messy process that is fundamentally different from the technocratic practices common in our institutions.

The successes at St. Catherine’s, however, did not simply continue to expand unaided. The organizing work depended on the strong support of the president, Anita Pampusch. When she left, and after a turbulent succession fight, some of the democratic gains were eroded, though not the core architecture of curricular changes. But the experiences signaled strongly the importance and potential of bringing organizing into higher education, while the concept of public work that developed at St. Catherine’s proved a fruitful foundation for subsequent institution-wide civic engagement efforts at the University of Minnesota (Boyte, 2004, p. 145).

### **Community Organizing at the University of Denver**

Our work at the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning at the University of Denver has similarly sought to translate community organizing principles, concepts, and methods into a higher education setting. We see community organizing as

occupying the middle ground between 1960s-inspired protest politics and indifference to social and political issues. This translation includes approaches to faculty and student development. Like that of our predecessors at the College of St. Catherine, our work is rooted in cultural and transformative change, and the organizing skills we teach are tools that we use to move our stakeholders into civic action.

Our operational principles are some of the core concepts of the community organizing model, including understanding and working with power, practicing accountability, and understanding self-interests. For instance, like the Faculty Study Groups at St. Catherine's, we design our faculty development offerings in a way that honors and encourages the self-interests of our faculty participants. Thus, our Service Learning Pods are faculty development offerings designed to provide opportunities for faculty members to work together in issues-based cohort groups or in disciplinary teams identified by participants. Our Community Based Writing group is designed to help faculty members write peer-reviewed journal articles about their community-based work.

These same operating principles are at work in our curricular offerings. Our Spectator to Citizen three-course sequence is designed to help University of Denver students develop a set of public skills that will allow them to actively participate in the public life of their communities. In this course sequence, students come to understand community not as a homogeneous group of like-minded people but as a heterogeneous group striving for collective self-interest in order to better their communities. In the first course, "Community Organizing," students learn the very same elements of community organizing we defined at the beginning of this piece. They define their self-interest and individual public lives, build consensus across multiple perspectives, become experts on a community issue, and develop partnerships in the community that aim for dialogue and action. The second course, "Denver Urban Issues and Policy," allows students to investigate important Denver-based issues by employing a community organizing model that includes research, immersion, and basic knowledge—of powers, structures, and stakeholders—necessary for understanding root causes of social problems. The third course, "School-Based Civic Engagement," provides students opportunities to engage with a Denver Public School (or urban youth organization) in a meaningful way that challenges them to think about how our public schools are preparing students to be effective citizens.



One of the organizing techniques we frequently employ with our faculty partners and students is The World As It Is and The World As It Should Be. It's a simple exercise in which a facilitator writes "The World As It Is" on the left side of a whiteboard and "The World As It Should Be" on right. The left side is the real world, the things that we rub up against every day and that create friction and problems in our lives. The right side is the ideal—it's what we'd like our world to look like, what we are aspiring toward. Usually, the discussion is modified for the audience, so for a group of Greek-life students or Resident Assistants, the discussion would be narrowed to The World As It Is versus The World As It Should Be within the Greek-life or Resident Assistant system. The facilitator then asks participants to identify and talk about issues that come up for them. Always, the facilitator probes, questions, and challenges participants to think deeply about the issues they are generating and to begin to take responsibility for the parts of their world they don't like. Our goal is to create an ethic and a mindset within our students that allows them to work and live on the tension lines between The World As It Is and The World As It Should Be. As Ed Chambers notes in *Roots for Radicals* (2004), effective community organizers operate on this tension line and understand that living entirely in The World As It Is equals a life of supporting the status quo, while living entirely in The World As It Should Be is the equivalent of being stuck in romantic idealism (p. 22).

One of the primary ways we teach community organizing is through Public Achievement, a youth civic engagement initiative originally developed by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship that trains undergraduates to act like community organizers in schools and to engage in consequential, productive public work that has an impact on the world. The reflections below of Sarah McCauley, a University of Denver (DU) alum and a former Public Achievement coach, illustrate how DU students practice community organizing.

The half-block schoolyard at Bryant Webster middle school in Northwest Denver was a gravel field, both unsafe and unpleasant for students. Parents and teachers had tried for four years to raise funds to buy playground equipment and build athletic fields, but had failed.

When I arrived at Bryant Webster, I began working with a group of nine seventh grade [students] who were

upset that they didn't have a playground and that no one was doing anything about it.

Our first step was identifying our reasons for wanting a playground. The students told me how they felt unsafe and bored during their recesses. Next, we started to research what had been tried to address the issue in the past. We held interviews with students, parents and teachers at the school. Next, the students were ready to make an action plan. They decided that the Denver Public School district was the party responsible for helping them to improve the condition of their schoolyard. They called the school board and requested to present at their monthly public meeting. Then, the students took the information they had gathered from their peers and teachers and created a presentation. They divided the presentation so that each of the seventh grade students would get a chance to talk.

At the school board meeting, the students explained why they needed the playground, why the school board was responsible, and what they expected the board to do for their school. They fielded questions from the board and the other attendees gracefully. When we left, the students were eager to know if they had succeeded. Three weeks later, I received a call from the principal of Bryant Webster informing me that the school board had decided to allocate funds to the school to build a Learning Landscape, a playground designed for educational recreation. Today this school has a functional playground that serves both the students and the Surrounding neighborhood (*Sarah McCauley, personal communication, March 15, 2010*).

This story of students accomplishing public work through organizing includes two especially noteworthy points. First, the public action the students staged went beyond simple protest politics. The students' work was done in the open. The seventh grade students clearly articulated their concerns and their requests in a public forum, and defended their position against critical questions. Furthermore, this story illustrates how understanding and working with power, one of the primary techniques of community organizers, works even in the most challenging of institutions. Most

of us are afraid of power, either because it is held by the “enemy” or because we see it as an oppressive force in our lives. Community organizers and civic professionals redefine power as “an ability to act.” Sarah helped students understand power as relational. They learned that ordinary people, whatever their age, race, wealth, or formal credentials, can create trusting, public relationships with the right people, and can generate change.

### ***The Problem that Cannot be Named***

As it grows and develops, the civic education movement in higher education bumps up against a set of long-standing cultural practices that are so pervasive and deep-seated that they can hardly be named; they are taken for granted as parts of the dominant culture. A consumerist, hypercompetitive, and privatized philosophy governs higher education as it does much of American cultural and institutional life. It is assumed as a matter of course that “the best and brightest” should govern, that the most important measure of achievement is victory in competitive activities, and that work is pursued largely for private ends rather than public ones. This pervasive understanding and set of practices informs the way students and faculty members do their work and play their roles in our nation’s higher education institutions. It values an intense focus on individual success rather than on collaborative work that adds to our commonwealth. This approach, which might be described as a soft technocracy, renders most people not only marginal to real decision-making, but even needy and deficient. It generates what might be called “the disease of credentialitis”—excessive reliance on formal degrees and officially authorized marks of recognition. It also radically devalues other forms of knowledge and knowledge-making: knowledge gained through experience, local knowledge, spiritual knowledge, and wisdom passed down from elders in rooted cultural communities. This pattern of exalting one particular approach to knowledge-making (academic) and devaluing others has spread so widely through the ecology of higher education and the professional systems of our society that it can hardly be named.

An unconscious assumption of the superiority of academic knowledge operates among many higher education leaders who call for reengagement with society, generating a “service” approach that sees others as in need of rescue. Thus, in “Mandate for a New Century,” the David Dodds Henry Lecture at the University of Illinois Chicago campus in 1989, Donna Shalala, then chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, made an impassioned plea for public

service and social justice, for struggles against racism and sexism, for environmentalism and peace. She called for public universities to engage the world, and she wed these calls explicitly to meritocracy. For her, “the ideal [is] a disinterested technocratic elite” fired by the moral mission of “society’s best and brightest in service to its most needy.” The imperative is “delivering the miracles of social science” to fix society’s social problems “just as doctors cured juvenile rickets in the past” (*Shalala, 1989*).

The unnamed problem we are identifying has a stultifying effect on a wide range of actors and constituencies. Higher education bears an important measure of responsibility for this problem, which is among the underlying causes for many students’ feeling that they cannot significantly affect the larger world. In the November/December 2007 issue of *Change* magazine, Parker Palmer described the weak sense of civic agency that often results from students’ experiences in higher education: “The hidden curriculum of our culture portrays institutions as powers *other* than us, over which we have marginal control at best” (p. 6). One day while Fretz was walking across the University of Denver campus, he overheard three undergraduates talking about their classes. “We debate these issues in class,” one of them exclaimed, “but we don’t *do* anything about it! Everything just remains the same!” This is a common chorus among undergraduate students. It is our hope that in the months and years to come, we will begin to overhear conversations among students that are sparked with the energy and wisdom of the work they are doing in communities to deepen democratic traditions, and to open democratic possibilities.

### **Retrieving the Civic Populist Tradition**

In the face of these very large challenges, a pressing task for practitioners is to recover methods of practicing their crafts in public life and in public ways, using their academic skills to create powerful public relationships, and becoming culture-workers and facilitators of meaning-making in the public sphere. We call this kind of work the work of civic professionals, heirs to a long-standing tradition of community organizing in American culture, and a less visible but vital tradition of civically engaged professionalism. Retrieving these traditions is crucial.

The organizing tradition, rooted in the earlier practices of mutual aid, community action, and associational life that Tocqueville found so remarkable in the United States, was translated into the world of big cities and large institutions in the 20th

century by figures like Jane Addams at Hull House, James Weldon Johnson in the Harlem Renaissance, and Liberty Hyde Bailey in land-grant universities. The organizing tradition reemerged and flourished on an enormous scale in the movements of the Great Depression, especially among such figures as Saul Alinsky, Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, A. Philip Randolph, Myles Horton, and others who reveled in the popular organizing of the time but did not like the left-wing and Leninist distinction between scientific “vanguard” and “mass.” The organizing tradition resurfaced once again in the civil rights movement through the work of the Highlander Folk School, the Citizenship Education Program of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Organizing Committee, and other efforts. It continues today through the work of the Gamaliel Foundation (Barack Obama’s formative experience), the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), and related community-organizing institutions.

The tradition of community organizing continued, albeit less visibly, through the 1960s and gained new foundations and promoters. In the early years of the decade, a group of community organizers in the Deep South effectively began to use organizing tactics. This story is told in Charles Payne’s *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* (1995), a book that distinguishes between the protest politics of the movement (the march on Selma, the Freedom Rides) and the grassroots organizing approaches promoted by Septima Clark and Ella Baker to develop the citizenship schools. Payne’s analysis of the civil rights movement uncovers a largely ignored layer of grassroots community organizing that developed alongside the protest movements (the sit-ins, the protest marches, and the boycotts). “If people like Amzie Moore and Medgar Evers and Aaron Henry tested the limits of repression, people like Septima Clark and Ella Baker and Myles Horton tested another set of limits, the limits on the ability of the oppressed to participate in the reshaping of their own lives” (p. 68). Thousands of activists and community leaders learned these skills at the Highlander Folk School, and later the citizenship schools across the south. The vision, articulated in Highlander’s statement of purpose, which, as Payne notes, was drafted by Septima Clark, was to “broaden the scope of democracy to include everyone and deepening the concept to include every relationship” (quoted in Payne, p. 68). As Myles Horton noted when he described the philosophy of citizenship education, a crucial center for spreading the organizing approach during the movement, “We’re into people who can help other people develop and provide educational leadership and ideas, but at the same time,

bring people along” (quoted in Payne, p. 71). All had what Payne called an “expansive” concept of democracy. As Payne summarized, “Above all else . . . they stressed a developmental style of politics, one in which the important thing was the development of efficacy of those most affected by a problem.” This meant that “whether a community achieved this or that tactical objective was likely to matter less than whether the people in it came to see themselves as having the right and the capacity to have some say-so in their own lives” (p. 68).

In the late 1960s, key bridging figures translated the freedom movement’s organizing themes into a larger politics of organizing. Among these figures was Monsignor Geno Baroni, arguably the most important architect of modern organizing. Son of an immigrant coal mining family in Pennsylvania, Baroni became a Catholic priest in 1956, served in working-class parishes in Altoona and Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and then was transferred to an inner-city African American parish in Washington. He became involved in the freedom movement, served as Catholic coordinator for the 1963 March on Washington, and led the Catholic delegation to the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery March.

The enormous ferment among ethnic-minority Americans in the late 1960s inspired many intellectuals to move sharply in a conservative direction, forming the basis for neo-conservatism. But a key group of ethnic leaders and intellectuals forged a third way, neither mass politics liberalism nor neo-conservatism. For these leaders, Baroni was a pivotal figure, a courageous and inspiring organizer of a new ethnic movement with immense democratic potential (Vidulich, 1994).

Baroni and others sought to develop a larger political project, called the new populism, that could bring together Blacks, and other ethnic minorities, through organizing. Baroni saw the new populism as an alternative to both “universalist liberalism” and neo-conservatism. In this politics, the values of diversity, equality, and justice combine with a deep commitment to people’s agency and appreciation of the immense *particularity* of American communities.

New populism represents a clear alternative to the “mobilizing” politics that perceives the citizen largely as a consumer—a view now flourishing in higher education’s redefinition of the student as customer. Mass politics, which has roots dating from the early 20th century, emphasizes universal claims, distributive justice, a consumer view of the citizen, and individual rights. It is organized

around a conception of the person as concerned primarily with individual, material acquisition and fulfillment of needs, not with questions of purpose or civic contribution. As the philosopher Michael Sandel (1996) has put it, “A politics based on consumer identities . . . asks how best—most fully, or fairly, or efficiently to satisfy [needs and wants]” (p. 225).

Mass politics, operating within the world as it is, has won substantial gains for poor and marginal groups against enormous concentrations of wealth and power.

However, it is important to recognize the sharp distinction between organizing and the mass politics of a consumer society. The conception of the person as an immensely complex, dynamic, and generative agent of one’s own life, and a shaper of one’s environments, is at the heart of organizing, a dramatically different conception from the citizen as an uprooted consumer.

In some respects, civically engaged work at the university thus functions more as a reclamation project than a trendy and ephemeral movement within higher education. In order to perform this work, we need not only methods and concepts of organizing in order to make the changes required in our cultures, but also a bold, theoretically grounded, and deeply public conception of our work in the world. For this, it is important to surface a work tradition that melds powerfully with, and is informed by, the community organizing tradition: the history, concept, and practice of civic professionalism.

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### **Civic Professionalism**

Thomas Bender (1993) has detailed an older university culture, which was open to engagement with a variety of publics, and which cultivated the rise of “civic” (not mainly “disciplinary”) professionalism among students. “Before the rise of modern professionalism,” Bender argues, “there were identifiable audiences that judged and affected the work of American thinkers” (p. 4). The emergence in the early twentieth century of a discipline-based academic professionalism was, in many ways, the result of the early academic freedom struggles inspired by industry, government, and religious

pressure to use academic knowledge for ideological and market-driven purposes. This dynamic, while providing a relatively safe space for faculty members to accomplish their research agendas free from public influence, also paved the way for the intellectually isolated, jargon-ridden, and unpublic-minded academic departments of the 21st century. In other words, the academy responded to legitimate threats posed by demands to create knowledge that served private and selfish interests by folding in on itself, creating structures, products, and texts that were impenetrable to outsiders, and creating an intellectual culture that isolated and barred entry to a large sector of the population.<sup>1</sup> Bender is not nostalgic for a past where intellectual inquiry and public needs were in peaceful harmony. A healthy tension, rather than a great divide, between the pursuits of the academy and the needs of publics, may be a useful way of thinking about how universities in the 21st century will relate to their publics. We all know the stories of fringe legislators and right-wing ideologues set on privatizing higher education by portraying the academy's esoteric knowledge and identity politics as outside the mainstream of American thought. Intentional and strategic attempts to include a variety of publics in the processes of American higher education would serve to demystify an academic culture that has related to increasingly narrow audiences.

The philosophical foundations of civic professionalism found early expression in the work of John Dewey (*McDermott, 1981*), who stressed—against the grain of conventional democratic political theory traceable to ancient Greece—the educative dimensions of “all callings [and] occupations” (p. 334). He especially focused on professions, doubtless having in mind the examples of popular citizenship education and educators such as Jane Addams and others at Hull House, who saw their work as catalytic and energizing. Thus, professionals, he said, needed to become more conscious of their educative roles and responsibilities. “The professions . . . not merely require education in those who practice them but help to form the attitudes and understanding of those who consult their practitioners,” Dewey wrote. “As far as science is humanized, it educates all the laymen. Artists, painters, musicians, architects, and writers are also an immense educative force,” in potential, though “at the present time . . . this educative function is hampered and distorted” (p. 336, p. 334).

For Dewey, education should be practiced as a dynamic engagement with the world, its problems, and its work. Education for democracy—education's highest and most important goal—had self-consciously to cultivate the habits that once were generated



through young people's involvement in the life and work of families and communities. "There was always something which really needed to be done, and a real necessity that each member of the household should do his own part faithfully in co-operation with others," Dewey argued. Everyday work taught habits of cooperation, responsibility, and productive outlook. It also meant a deep connection with the world; or, as Dewey wrote, "We cannot overlook the importance for educational purposes of the close and intimate acquaintance got with nature at first hand." Everyday work had once connected young people "with real things and materials, with the actual processes of their manipulation and the knowledge of their social necessities and uses. In all this there was continual training of observation, of ingenuity, constructive imagination, of logical thought, and of the sense of reality acquired through first-hand contact with actualities" (p. 457).

Scholars such as William Sullivan (2004) and Albert Dzur (2008) have recently further developed the concept of civic professionalism. Sullivan, for instance, charts the historical trajectory of the American professional from the colonial period to the 20th century and concludes by identifying one of the central tensions of professionalism in the United States:

The most constant tension, as we have seen, has been between a technical emphasis which stresses specialization—broadly linked to a utilitarian conception of society as a project for enhancing efficiency and individual satisfaction—and a sense of professional mission which has insisted upon the prominence of the ethical and civic dimension of the enterprise. (p. 28)

In contrast to practitioners applying a technical emphasis, civic professionals are those who work *with* citizens, rather than acting *on* them. Our collaborator, Bill Doherty (*Doherty, Mendenhall, & Berge, in press*), and his students and colleagues at the Citizen Professional Center have pioneered in showing what this can mean. They have drawn on the theory of public work and the experiences at the College of St. Catherine in a series of initiatives that show how public work can be translated into a powerful wellspring of democratic change in which family and health professionals function as catalysts and coaches rather than as service providers. In the Families and Democracy initiatives associated with their Center, professionals work as *citizen professionals* with families on a host of issues to tame the forces of a degraded, hypercompetitive,

hyperindividualistic culture that tend to overwhelm families. Their citizen professional model recognizes that solving the complex problems we face today requires many sources and kinds of knowledge. The families and communities themselves are the main source of energy and action.

This methodology is in sharp contrast with the dominant professional development approach, which teaches professionals to look at people in terms of their deficiencies rather than their assets, and to be detached from the civic life of communities. Here are the central premise and core principles that the Citizen Professional Center offers in contrast to dominant approaches:

**Central premise:** The greatest untapped resource for improving health and social well being is the knowledge, wisdom, and energy of individuals, families, and communities who face challenging issues in their everyday lives.

### **Core Principles**

1. See all personal problems as public ones too: the I and the We.
2. Look to family and community resources first.
3. See families and communities as producers, not just clients or consumers.
4. See professionals as citizens and partners, not just providers.
5. Let citizens drive programs rather than programs service citizens.
6. Make sure every initiative reflects the local culture.
7. Grow leaders, then more leaders.
8. Make all decisions democratically.
9. Go deep before taking action.
10. Think big, act practically, and let your light shine (*Doherty et al., in press*).

The partnerships of the Citizen Professional Center are diverse and wide-ranging, suggesting the immense civic energy and power waiting to be “unlocked” by professionals who shift from substituting their own agency for broader civic agency. They include, among others, several suburban movements of families seeking to tame overscheduled, hypercompetitive, consumerist lives; an

African American Citizens Father Project seeking to foster positive fathering models and practices; a new project with Hennepin County to change civil service practice into public work; a pilot with Health Partners Como Clinic, called the Citizen Health Care Home, which stresses personal and family responsibility for one's own health care, and opportunities for patient leadership development and coresponsibility for the health mission of the clinic; and FEDS (Families, Education and Diabetes Series), a project that engages low-income, urban American Indians and their families to improve the health and well-being of American Indian people through diabetes education, fellowship, and support in a manner that embraces their heritage, values, and culture.

Democratic professionals in this vein are facilitators of the creation of public knowledge. They seek out common interests that link professional inquiry and local knowledge, and they work to develop systems of communication and knowledge production that involve laypeople in the solution of public problems. As Dzur (2008) observes, democratic or citizen professionals refuse to “dominate discussion” and are capable of “stepping back and allowing laypeople the chance to take up responsibilities” (p. 41).

Civic professionalism directly challenges higher education's dominant credentialing practices, which are embodied in conventional promotion and tenure guidelines. Across the ecology of higher education, these guidelines reflect the positivist assumptions of research universities, a pattern that remains in place despite a rapidly growing body of theory—beginning with Ernest Boyer's (1991) landmark *Scholarship Reconsidered*, and most recently detailed in *Imagining America's Scholarship in Public* (Ellison & Eatman, 2008)—which has demonstrated the impoverishment of knowledge-creation that results. An organizing perspective points to the need for a broad campaign across our institutions to challenge and diversify the current privatized, self-referential credentialing norms and practices that hold sway. Faculty, as well as students, staff, and the larger public environment, have much to gain from such a campaign by “breaking our chains,” the technocratic standards that now have us all in thrall.

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*“An organizing perspective points to the need for a broad campaign across our institutions to challenge and diversify the current privatized, self-referential credentialing norms and practices that hold sway.”*

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## **Lessons from the Field**

Citizen professionals as well as community organizers acknowledge their own interests in creating a good society. They develop unique styles grounded in local civic cultures. They learn respect for the insights of those without formal credentials. They recognize that they have much to learn from communities where populist values of cultural roots, community vitality, and equality are alive. They also build collaborative public work skills that help energize and activate broad civic energies. Where do these skills come from? What do they look like? How are they practiced?

We conclude with an example of a citizen professional in the world beyond higher education, since we are convinced that higher education and organizing approaches have an enormous amount to learn from others outside the university's walls.

Mike Kromrey has served for the past 25 years as the executive director of Metro Organizations for People (MOP), a Denver organization that strives to engage ordinary people in the democratic process to fight for living wages; to secure health care for children and the working poor; to work toward educational reform; and to fight for the rights of immigrants. For Kromrey, the key component of the practice of civic professionalism is rooted in the iron rule of community organizing: Never do for others what they can do for themselves (*Mike Kromrey, interview by Eric Fretz, April 10, 2009*).

Indeed, the iron rule is MOP's "truth barometer." When it is being practiced, Kromrey believes, MOP is forwarding its mission of "teaching ordinary people to do extraordinary things." But when the iron rule is violated—that is, when Kromrey and his MOP colleagues speak, write, or *do* for their constituents what they could very well do on their own—Kromrey believes their mission and function as organizers are compromised.

The question that hangs over Kromrey's head every day is not how he and his staff can help the working poor and their metro Denver constituents, but how they can find ways to help these people develop skills to engage in the democratic process—using their own voices, personal skills, and capacities. "Most other professionals don't have to worry about this," he notes. Activists, mobilizers, groups engaged in protest politics, and advocacy groups ground their professional stance in their expert knowledge to speak and do for others. This certainly has its place in society. Yet as Kromrey says, "The unique quality of what we try to do well is to teach other people how to think on their feet and how to engage

the democratic process in a meaningful and powerful way” (Mike Kromrey, interview by Eric Fretz, April 10, 2009).

Kromrey draws bold lines between the community organizing work of MOP and advocacy groups that speak for others. “No one is losing sleep over whether they have volunteer leaders in the community prepared to lead the way. Most of the time it’s paid staff speaking for others.” The culture that MOP and other community organizing groups develop is one that is constantly reflecting on the roles that the “experts” are playing and attempting to perform. For Kromrey, an effective organizer works in the background, training, encouraging, and even exhorting ordinary people to develop their public voices, develop powerful public relationships, and bring about change with a broad base of constituents (Mike Kromrey, interview by Eric Fretz, April 10, 2009).

Practicing this style of professionalism takes a lot of work. Hours and hours of education, practice, dialogue, and analysis go into every MOP-trained citizen who engages in the democratic process—whether those activities involve speaking at a public meeting, writing a letter to a city official, or participating in a press conference.

For Kromrey, technocracy threatens the essence of a democratic culture because it is constantly violating the iron rule of organizing. When professionals and experts consistently set themselves up as the solution to our problems, the problem-solving, asset-based culture of ordinary people doing extraordinary things gets whittled away. Kromrey names John McKnight’s *The Careless Society* as an important text about the detrimental effects of meritocracy in a democracy. “My experience with professionals who work in communities—health care clinics, schools, medical professionals, teachers, social workers, clergy—is that they view the community as a client to be fed and that engaging ordinary people to come up with their own conclusions and use their own skills is a foreign concept. It’s just easier to speak for others, or write a check or give advice.” Kromrey notes that this notion is so deeply pervasive in the culture of professionalism in America that it is hard to talk about, and identify it. He describes his work as “lifting up this way of thinking” of ordinary people as agents of change in communities. “It’s shocking to me that this way of practicing my profession is radical. To me, it’s deep, it’s the way I was taught, and it’s hard to do because it’s scary—I have to let go of the control in these relationships” (Mike Kromrey, interview by Eric Fretz, April 10, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

Today, higher education is caught in a cycle of complaint and apathy regarding civic engagement, our students, our own lives, and the state of our democracy. Those faculty who advocate for change nonetheless often complain about students' and citizens' lack of civic imagination and involvement in a way that puts us outside the problem being addressed. We also fail to provide our students with meaningful and sustained opportunities to develop the very civic skills that will foster a strong democracy. To break out of this cycle, those invested in the civic mission of higher education will need to reconstitute and shift received roles, and learn to practice their profession as a craft that engages public life on multiple fronts and in myriad ways. The stories from St. Catherine, the Public Achievement initiative at the University of Denver, and the partnerships of the Citizen Professional Center all suggest the growing, but still largely untapped, potentials of translating organizing methods and concepts, and public-work approaches into the higher education civic engagement movement.

We are convinced that faculty and staff, like our students, will need to practice community organizing, both on campus and in their surrounding communities, if they are to see much change. Higher education professionals will also need to make their work more public, in multiple ways—more interactive with and respectful toward those outside higher education, more open and visible, more infused with robust democratic and public purposes. Faculty members, staff, and students will need to engage with the community as equals and pursue solutions to community issues, not as a theoretical exercise, but as a path to becoming agents and architects of a flourishing democracy.

## **Acknowledgment**

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## **Endnote**

1. For a full treatment of the early history of tenure and the formation of the American Association of University Professors, see Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001), chapter 15.

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