Invited Commentary

"All On An Equal Plain": Preparing Citizen Professionals

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Abstract

This essay argues that higher education can regain public trust, forge vital, reciprocal relationships with communities, and help to awaken democracy as a way of life if colleges and universities become "filled with the democratic spirit." Renewing the democratic spirit on a large scale requires recovery of the public and civic dimensions of professionals' work in higher education, which is central to shaping the culture of colleges and universities. The essay describes the transformation of professional identities from "civic" to "disciplinary," fed by the logic of instrumental rationality, the resulting crisis across the sweep of modern professions, and the development of the theory of public work and citizen professionalism at the University of Minnesota and later at Augsburg University as a response. Finding enthusiasm about the idea at the 2024 CUMU conference and drawing on case studies from many different settings and disciplines, the co-authors wrote this piece to speak to the potential for citizen professionalism to spread as a theory of public action and set of democratic practices with large positive effects.

Introduction

Higher education is today's premier "upstream" institution, shaping the identities and practices of professionals in multiple fields. In a time of declining public support for higher education, erosion of morale and purpose across professions, and polarization and discouragement in modern life, higher education faces numerous challenges and opportunities. Colleges and universities have the potential to help higher education regain public trust, forge vital, reciprocal relationships with communities that help all to flourish, and awaken democracy as a way of life, not simply a trip to the ballot box. Accomplishing these tasks requires colleges and universities to become "filled with the democratic spirit," as Charles Elliott, president of Harvard, described colleges and universities in 1908 (quoted from Boyte and Hollander 1999). Renewing the democratic spirit on a large scale, in turn, requires a recovery of the public and civic dimensions of professionals' work in higher education, whose efforts significantly shape college cultures. Colleges and universities need to generate "citizen professionals."

In *Intellect and Public Life,* the historian Thomas Bender named the fundamental problem with today's professional identities and practices. There has been a long-developing and society-wide shift from "civic" professionals to "disciplinary" professionals (Bender, 1993). Bender described how professionals lost their community and civic roots in the process. Historically, citizen (or "civic") professionals have a deep identification as citizens of places, not mainly as denizens of disciplines. They took pride in their professional craft and what it could contribute to advance the well-being of communities and the whole society rather than simply their personal advancement and specialized knowledge. They also saw their knowledge as part of a larger commonwealth of knowledge: diverse, plural, and rooted in multiple settings.

Disciplinary professionals' identities, in contrast, are usually defined by their specializations. They provide top-down services to clients and consumers. With exceptions, they are generally not part *of* communities, nor are they "filled with the democratic spirit." The narrowing of professional identities has deeply affected professionals and contributed to the decline of civic life. Highly mobile, they often work in many places over the course of a career. Professionals are socialized in ways that displace or even suppress lay citizens' agency and erode civic institutions' vitality. Teachers, for instance, were once community leaders across the country. Now, they are often seen as teaching arcane subjects in ideological ways. Few if any of America's teacher colleges include courses and practicums on working with parents and communities. Doctors who once visited people in homes and communities have moved to high-tech offices. Their work is often minutely scripted and timed in ways that dramatically weaken its human and relational qualities.

As a result, the institutions that professionals lead and the cultures around them that they help to shape – from congregations, businesses, health clinics, union locals, and nonprofits to colleges

and schools – are inward-looking and operate in a top-down fashion. They do things "for" others, sometimes "to" others, not "with" others.

Since professionals play outsized roles in shaping the institutions of today's knowledge societies, their transformation into *citizens* who catalyze civic efforts through collaboration *with* other citizens can unlock civic energies throughout neighborhoods, communities, and the larger society. This change requires professionals to let go of control, become more catalysts than fixers, and learn to be "on tap, not on top." It can also generate far more power, in the sense of the word's original meaning, the capacity to act.

Democratic Shrinking and Technocratic Creep

Robert Putnam's *Making Democracy Work*, a landmark study of Italian regional governments published in 1993, demonstrated the link between effective governance and vibrant civic life based on norms of equality, trust, reciprocity, and horizontal relationships among citizens. Putnam called such networks based on trust and their bonding relationships, practices, and values "social capital" (Putnam, 1993). Putnam's book opened for public and academic questioning the concept of democracy itself. The lens on democracy shifted from a narrow focus on elections and government – with citizens as mainly voters and customers of public largess, a view which dominated for decades – to a broader emphasis on civic, democratic culture, and active citizenship.

Putnam's second book, *Bowling Alone*, captured a growing problem with its evocative title. Once again, he drew attention to the shrinking of democracy's meaning: more people were going bowling but by themselves. Bowling leagues and other associations were in sharp decline, illustrating an unraveling of civic associations (2000).

This is a global pattern. For instance, in Australia, Andrew Leigh, one of Putnam's students, detailed his findings at a conference of public officials meeting in Melbourne, Australia (Leigh, 2015). By 2004, the number of Australians who were active members of an organization had fallen from 33 to 18 percent. The number of adults going to religious services at least once a week dropped from 35 percent to 13 percent by 2007. Union membership declined to less than 20 percent of workers. Use of public amenities also was dropping. Museum-going declined 8 percent from levels in the early 1990s. Informal relationships were weaker. Leigh, using a "friendship scale," surveyed large numbers of Australians and compared the 1980s with the 2000s. The typical Australian had two fewer friends that they could trust. Leigh also suggested a connection between these changes and the digital revolution. Internet "Friends," he remarked, were replacing actual friends.

The roots of professional detachment were described by Max Weber: "the iron cage" of technical rationality which takes ends to be largely un-questioned (e.g., winning elections in politics, good test scores in education, profits in businesses, or service delivery to citizens as customers), with the focus on efficiency of means (1904; 1930). Pope Francis calls this dynamic the "technocratic paradigm," which affects nearly all of society. In his climate encyclical *Laudato Si',* the Pope detailed how professionals across the sweep of modern life have come to substitute informational cultures for relational cultures. "The basic problem…is the way that humanity has taken up…an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm [that] exalts the concept of a subject, who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object" (Pope Francis, 2015, pp. 78-79).

Similarly, the *Thriving Together Springboard* document commissioned by the Centers for Disease Control in 2020 in response to COVID-19 developed a framework for building communities' capacities to address the threats of pandemics and other health challenges. It looks at these dynamics from another angle of vision. "It is not possible to counter systems threats by delivering more and more services to growing groups of people in need," it argues. "In fact, our tendency to over-rely on expert-led, technocratic responses often disempowers people, squanders resources and is itself part of the problem" (Milstein et al., 2020, p. 4). The digital revolution, social media, and now artificial intelligence (AI) dramatically accelerate the focus on efficiency of means, threatening to push out civic purposes. The sense of a public world which professionals and others create through their diverse labors, a "commonwealth," was once vibrant across American society. Now this public sense has largely disappeared (Boyte, 1989).

Laura Hanson and Tim Marshall recently reported signs of new civic life and civic contribution for the US Census and AmeriCorps. Rates of volunteering, in formal settings and informally, are rebounding since the COVID pandemic. "An estimated 54.2% of Americans helped or exchanged favors with neighbors such as house sitting, running errands, or lending tools between September 2022 and 2023 compared to 51.7% in 2019," they write (Hanson & Marshall, 2024).

These are promising signs, but they need to be tied to transformation in the identities and practices of professionals if the growing distrust of institutions of all kinds is to be reversed and institutions rebuilt as anchoring civic sites in communities.

Crisis in the Professions

The dynamics that separate professional identities and practices from the life of communities have produced rewards, such as higher salaries, prestige, and relative autonomy of action. Yet there have also been costs. In recent years, a growing crisis across many professions has emerged, undermining professional identities and causing demoralization. "Technological developments like the internet have undermined claims to expertise, as anyone can research an

illness or dash off a blog post," wrote Noam Scheiber in the *New York Times*. "Shrinking budgets have left teachers and other government workers with fewer resources. Consolidation in the health care and media industries has made doctors, nurses, and journalists feel like cogs in corporate machines that don't share their values" (Scheiber, 2018).

According to the Schaeffer Institute, between sixty and eighty percent of those entering the church ministry will leave in the first ten years. Over seventy percent of pastors are so demoralized that they regularly think of leaving their professions (Gauger & Christie, 2013). This is one example of professional demoralization among many.

In health professions, reports the Lucian Leape Institute, "production and cost pressures have reduced complex, intimate, caregiving relationships into a series of demanding tasks performed under severe time constraints" (America Medical News 2013). According to *Governing* magazine, low morale among local government workers is rampant. Ninety-two percent of state and local government human resource managers rank recruiting and retaining qualified personnel as their most challenging issue (Fisher, 2016). A recent article in *Money* magazine reports on "Five High-Paying Jobs That Will Make You Miserable." Despite the fact that physicians dominate the highest-paying professions – a median pay of more than $150,000 a year in 2014 – 40% say they would choose a different career if they had to do it over again. The article also notes pervasive demoralization among junior investment bankers, sales managers, dentists, and lawyers (Tuttle & Davidson, 2014).

Educators in K-12 schools also consistently express discontent. Up to forty percent leave the profession in the first three years. The educational analyst Doris Santoro has found that discontent is misdiagnosed as "burnout," a sense of personal exhaustion, despair, and anger. Santoro found, in fact, that "teachers leave because of a system that is harming students." Teachers talk about administrative confusion and frustration from being told they are doing it wrong. They feel besieged by technology, which they see as taking them "away from what they're supposed to be doing as a teacher." When teachers raise such concerns, they are labeled as narrowly self-interested. In fact, they are worried about larger purposes: "The integrity of the profession, the wellbeing of the students, and whether they are caring for students in the way that they deserve to be treated." Santoro found demoralization not only in low-performing schools but also in the top schools (Santoro, 2011).

Citizen Professionalism and Public Work

The Center for Democracy and Citizenship and its predecessor, Project for Public Life, which Harry began at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute (now School) in 1987, developed a philosophy of civic action and democracy called *public work*, work that builds our common public world, the commonwealth, to address the challenge of eroding civic life and

shrinking democracy (Boyte, 1989; Boyte & Kari, 1996; Boyte, 2011; Boyte & Throntveit, 2022). Public work philosophy sees citizens as co-creators of a democratic way of life, not simply as consumers of benefits or helpers on the side. Co-creative citizens and civic agency, or civic empowerment, are central to the transdisciplinary field of Civic Studies (Levine & Soltan, 2014; Throntveit et al., 2025). In this view, work and work sites are potential vital venues for civic engagement and contribution. In higher education and professions, public work philosophy draws attention to the public dimensions of professions, disciplines, individual faculty, and staff -- and the erosion of those dimensions. The Center described the development of such dimensions, citizen professionalism" (Boyte & Hollander, 1999).

Colleagues at the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development picked up the public work framework. As William (Bill) Doherty, a key figure in family social science for decades, shared, "The public work model argues for a new role for professionals in a democracy: catalyzing the efforts of ordinary citizens, with professional expertise 'on tap, not on top'" (Doherty, 2020, p.2). Years of work through the Citizen Professional Center included partnerships with many different groups: Native Americans were concerned about diabetes, Black men wanted more positive portrayals of their roles as fathers, suburban families were alarmed about hypercompetitive achievement cultures and many others. In 2016, Doherty addressed the problem of deepening polarization, helping to cofound Braver Angels (BA) and creating their process for depolarization. BA is the leading group working on the problem.

Doherty and his colleagues' scholarship and case studies are published in *Becoming a Citizen Therapist,* which includes this description of the idea of a citizen professional: It "moves beyond the late 20th-century notion of the professional as a detached expert who informs other citizens but is not informed by them, who critiques social systems but does not act to change these systems, and who tends to see patients, clients, and communities in terms of their needs and not their assets, capacities for individual and collective action" (Doherty & Mendenhall, 2024, p. 25) The Center identifies three elements in citizen professionalism:

- Citizen professionalism is an **identity**: seeing oneself first as a citizen with special expertise working alongside other citizens with their own special knowledge to solve community problems requiring everyone's effort. This is not just an idealistic self-image but comes from a grounded realization that [society's] really big problems, including those in health care, education, and social welfare—sometimes known as "wicked problems"— cannot be solved by professionals working alone, nor by government alone. We need all hands on deck.
- Citizen professionals have a **body of knowledge** about the connections between the personal and the public dimensions of their professional practice. Citizen physicians, for example, understand the connection between diabetes, the fast food industry, and cultural practices of diet and exercise.

- Citizen professionals have a **set of skills** for facilitating public conversations and catalyzing public action. In the context of their regular service delivery, they are able to skillfully interweave the personal and public dimensions of the issues they and their patients or clients face. When the time is ripe, they are able to bring together other citizens for public conversations and sometimes for local action projects to address community needs (Doherty and Mendenhall pp. 25-26).

The Center for Democracy and Citizenship added to the idea of a "body of knowledge," emphasizing the need to challenge the widespread "cult of the expert," which values scientific and academic knowledge far more than lay wisdom. It stressed instead a pluralist epistemology, recognizing the diverse forms of knowledge – spiritual, experiential, craft, local, cultural, and others – that inform effective public problem-solving and community building (Boyte, 2000). It also emphasized the importance of community organizing skills and dispositions (Bretherton, 2015) and, to effect cultural change, the translation of organizing practices into higher education (Boyte, 2009; Avila, 2017).

The chart below contrasts the skills, knowledge, power, role, and other dimensions of the outside expert and the citizen professional (Boyte & Ström, 2009):

	Outside Expert	**Citizen Professional**
Motive	Altruistic service	Co-creation and joint problem solving
Decision maker	Expert	Citizen–professionals and lay citizens
Goal	To solve a discrete problem	To solve a problem while also building community ties and strength
Method	Expert intervention	Public work
Approach to teaching	Instruction	Apprenticeship, relational, craft knowledge
Sources of knowledge	Academic and scientific knowledge, "book learning"	Local, spiritual and experiential knowledge as well as theory
Skills	Disaggregation, analysis, technical application	Integration, contextual understanding, building relations, organizing
Role of professional	Service provider	Catalyst

The Promise of CUMU

The three of us, after working on practices and ideas of citizen professionalism for years, were pleased to have the opportunity to engage people from institutions of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU) around the concept at the 2024 annual conferencein Minneapolis. We saw the hope that the concept of citizen professionalism generated when we did a pre-conference workshop.. The workshop participants, numbering about 30, included faculty, service-learning and community engagement staff, and administrators from more than a dozen colleges and universities. These ranged from small liberal arts schools and community colleges to state universities and research universities. The mix was also diverse in terms of ethnic and racial background and geographic region.

We began by describing concepts of public work and the citizen professional and directly addressed the unease many in academia feel about the term "citizen." When only associated with the Constitution and with legal status, the word "citizen" is a loaded term in America today. It can be contrasted with the concept of aspirational citizenship as advanced by African American political theorist Melvin Rogers. Rogers contrasts legalistic citizenship in the world as it is, "descriptive citizenship," with the world as it should be, "aspirational citizenship." As he puts it, "The attempt to move from description to aspiration highlights the space of contestation and uncertainty that the politically dispossessed have occupied. Reformers have articulated transcendent ethical visions of what kind of community America ought to be and the virtues needed to realize and sustain that way of life." (Rogers 2023, pp.139-40).

The idea of aspirational citizenship comes from the lived experience of the civil rights movement and other democratic movements for change. The late Vincent Harding, a theologian, close friend, and sometimes speechwriter for Martin Luther King, expressed the idea succinctly: "We are citizens of a nation which does not yet exist, but must exist," he said (Harding, 2011). We believe the role of the citizen professional is to help birth this nation.

In our pre-conference CUMU workshop, we invited people to interview each other about two questions: Did they have motivations for larger public impact going into their careers? If so, what were their experiences? Some in this highly motivated group had been able to carve out meaningful, civically engaged work; others had experienced deep frustration. All could name major problems and obstacles to citizen professional practice and identity built into incentives and job structures of their schools.

After these interviews, we asked: "What about the citizen professional speaks to you?" Answers were poignant, showing tangible hope that there is a path to freedom and a different kind of power than coercive or one-way power. "Learning from people on all levels; dismantling

hierarchy," said one. "Upending traditional hierarchies of knowledge power," said another. "Cultural humility and shared knowledge and expertise," said a third.

The *identity* of professionals who see themselves as aspirational citizens working with other citizens was a theme. "[I'm] on an equal plain," said one. The citizen professional "centers relationships in community, over individual accomplishment," said another. One young woman wrote, "citizen professionalism gives me a way to move forward with dignity in a world that is telling me to withdraw and give up. It is the path to living a sane and meaningful life in our age!" Another wrote that the appeal of the concept was "enabling transformative learning and social change" (Boyte, Hübler, Ström 2024).

Becoming a Citizen Professional

The obstacles to becoming a citizen professional in higher education are considerable. The shrinking meaning of democracy, loss of civic identity, and professional detachment are not generally considered in the development of professionals. Yet, higher education includes many promising examples of faculty and staff who resist the status quo and instead act as co-creators of their communities and institutions, seriously preparing students to be citizen professionals.

We three co-authors participated in an extended research exchange convened by the Kettering Foundation from 2019 to 2022 to share experiences around education for citizen professionalism. We share the stories of two other faculty who were part of the Kettering exchange, as well as two of our own stories. As you read their narratives, we invite you to reflect on these questions:

- How are you already acting as a citizen professional?
- How might you grow this identity?
- What practices and groups might you work with to deepen this approach?

Lena Jones

Lena Jones is a long-time member of the political science faculty at Minneapolis College (formerly Minneapolis Community and Technical College). She found her way into social studies and, ultimately, political science as the space in academia where she could explore questions raised by her life experience growing up in an African American neighborhood in Queens, NY, on the one hand, and her K-12 schooling experience in wealthier white neighborhoods as part of gifted child programs. She realized quite quickly that she did not want a "traditional R-1-type career." Lena was inspired by several mentors who gave her "a glimpse of academics doing useful work in the world." For her, part of being a citizen professional is to say, "Look, I share this world at all levels, this city, this block, with a group of people, fellow humans, and I have a particular set of skills... How do we create the space where we can

collectively work towards things that lead to a world where people can have what they need and live in dignity…?"

Lena has become a leader in the Community Learning Partnership (CLP), a national network of faculty teaching in community change programs at community colleges. These programs include a significant focus on community organizing skills that Lena believes are essential for citizen professionals in any kind of job. While her students in the Community Development Program at Minneapolis College mostly intend seeking jobs in youth work, government, or non-profit organizations, Lena believes that such change-makers "need to infiltrate every sector." For example, she says, "We need folks from our programs working in banks… [They're] citizen professionals. [They] know how to develop relationships and see beyond personal gain." In her own work, as well as the faith she expresses in the potential of her students, Lena conveys a profound understanding of civic agency, public work, and citizen professionalism.

Erhardt Graeff

Erhardt Graeff's encounter with the theory of public work as a graduate student marked a turning point in his pursuit of questions at the intersection of technology, society, and politics. He had already become preoccupied with these questions during his undergraduate years at the Rochester Institute of Technology where he was actively involved in the student newspaper, finally becoming editor. Looking back, he says this early experience gave him insight into the "politics" of leadership and change-making in an institutional setting and what it means to conceive of a campus community as a "public." Early in his studies, Erhardt developed interdisciplinary interests that led him first to do a master's degree in sociology before he wound up at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for his Ph.D. Thus, he became an unusual engineering researcher and organizer, a "civic technologist" who is unafraid of dealing with the public-interest questions as well as the politics that fairly routinely surround his work.

Erhardt's early working career included stints with Engineers without Borders and the Obama 2008 campaign. These experiences cemented his interest in the democratic implications of technology and its impact on civic life. This has become the focus of his teaching at Olin College of Engineering, where he has been encouraged to take leadership in ongoing, institution-wide curriculum change, including the issues related to public-interest technology. The aim is for students to learn the core civic skills and habits that will enable them to deal with competing interests throughout their engineering careers while also paying attention to how technology and other engineering solutions might build instead of erode people's civic agency.

Romy Hübler

Romy Hübler, a co-author of this essay, identifies a few crucial moments in her journey towards becoming a citizen professional: learning from social movement leaders, engaging in institutional change, and harnessing the power of imagination.

As a child of the Peaceful Revolution in East Germany, Romy developed a desire to effect social change, but the path to doing so was less clear to her. She participated in protests, wrote to elected officials, and volunteered. While it seemed like she was doing something, she continued to feel powerless in the face of complex societal issues. Then, she enrolled in an unconventional study abroad experience where she spent a month with the Zapatista Movement in Mexico. They encouraged her to focus on challenges in her own community and take a collaborative approach. It reframed the scope of her efforts and allowed her to see a role for herself as a relational community leader who is working with other community members to address collectively identified challenges.

Upon returning to the US, Romy was invited to join an institutional change initiative that used community organizing methods to create better infrastructures and support systems for faculty, staff, and students who do community-engaged work. Prior to this experience, Romy had experienced the institution as a transactional space. As a student, she attended class, completed her assignments, and got rewarded with good grades. As a teaching assistant, she replicated the hierarchical and transactional practices and behaviors she experienced as a student. Romy's outlook on what it means to be an educator and professional transformed through the institutional change initiative. She began to understand the institution as a site of civic work. She also learned that foregrounding relationships, teasing out potential points of alignment, and fostering an ethos of care and belonging are essential to breaking down silos, navigating institutional hierarchies, and bringing about lasting culture change.

A few years into this work, she was invited to attend a national gathering of artists and scholars who pursue public work. The experience was riveting. She learned about the power of story in connecting with other people and, understanding who she is and how her life's journey has shaped her. Romy learned about imagination as an essential tool in improving structures and processes to help us navigate the world as it is, as well as in helping us imagine the world as it could be. She learned about the importance of not only the mind but also the heart in everything that she does.

She carried these lessons with her and has built on them throughout her professional career. She consciously identifies herself as a citizen professional, a relational and strategic co-creator of the world as it could be, not only of the world "out there" but also of the institution at which she works.

Marie Ström

Marie Ström, also a co-author of this essay, grew up in South Africa. She was a teacher, first at the high school level and later at Rhodes University, where she held a tenure-track position in the Department of French. Marie was passionate about sharing her love of French literature, and she was simultaneously involved (after hours) in community organizations that were resisting the apartheid regime. Marie finally felt compelled to leave the university to be able to make a more substantial contribution to the struggle. With hindsight, she realizes that if her education had equipped her with skills to be an agent of change in the university setting and to educate her own students as citizen professionals, it might not have been necessary to abandon the teaching work that she loved.

Marie joined the Institute for a Democratic Alternative in South Africa (Idasa, later the Institute for Democracy in South Africa) as director of democracy education. There, she designed curricula and directed democracy and citizenship education programs for 20 years. Most of this work took place with adults in non-formal settings beyond the walls of colleges and universities. As she became absorbed in empowering adult education approaches, she had to unlearn many of the undemocratic, top-down teaching habits that she had developed in the traditional classroom. She learned the importance of building on the local knowledge and lived experience of fellow citizens, often in poor communities with low levels of literacy and even lower levels of civic confidence. In short, she learned to be a citizen professional. Over time, she and her colleagues came to be convinced that democracy and citizenship education need to involve more than imparting knowledge about the constitution and the workings of government. They designed a citizen leadership program to train change agents in communities and institutions, with an emphasis on building power through community organizing skills. This work expanded across the African continent.

One significant initiative was providing training to cross-sectoral local AIDS councils in South Africa. Here, people from multiple backgrounds, including education, transportation, agriculture, business, and many more, learned the importance of planning and working together. In this process, they gained a much more expansive understanding of the meaning of citizenship.

Opportunities and Organizing

We concluded the CUMU workshop by asking participants to identify opportunities they could imagine to spread the idea of citizen professionalism among students, faculty, and staff. Many ideas focused on introducing students to the concept by incorporating it in orientation, first-year seminars, leadership development, and career education. Participants also talked about the importance of teasing out the public purpose and intent of their work in everyday conversations and when talking with colleagues. Other ideas revolved around claiming a citizen professional

identity, creating spaces for citizen professionals to engage with one another, and celebrating citizen professionals. One participant, likely with a background in community organizing, saw citizen professionalism as "a new way to infuse organizing" into higher education.

"Organizing" is a different approach to making change in communities and institutions than dominant models of information dissemination or protest. It is also essential for developing cultures where citizen professionalism can flourish and warrants brief discussion if this crucial democratic idea and practice is to spread in our time. Here and there, organizing approaches are being introduced into higher education on a significant scale.—In Texas, nine Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), working with the leading community organizing network called the Industrial Areas Foundation, teach students, faculty, and staff organizing practices and have reclaimed their democratic history. They are joined in an alliance called "Democracy Schools," which now has an associated academic journal published by the University of Texas called *Freedom Schools: A Journal of Democracy and Community*. The idea of becoming citizen professionals, building on old and rich Black traditions, has become a widely discussed career prospect at Huston Tillotson University in Austin, the hub of the Democracy Schools Alliance.

Civic Organizing in Higher Education

Organizing to strengthen citizen professionalism has been attempted in research universities as well. The Center for Democracy and Citizenship used the public work approach and an organizing lens when the W.K. Kellogg Foundation commissioned it to do a study in 1997 to assess possibilities for revitalizing the University of Minnesota's land grant public service mission. For the study, Center staff interviewed faculty members who were widely respected in different departments and colleges, who were seen to embody the ethos or culture of their disciplines and the University, and who were knowledgeable about its history and operations. The public work framework allowed discussion of incentive structures, disciplinary and departmental norms, power patterns in higher education, and other cultural dimensions largely missing in most discussions of civic engagement. The interviews surfaced a painful sense of loss of public purpose in individual jobs, professions, and disciplines, and the whole institution. Faculty expressed alarm about turf wars, the intensifying competitive culture, the "star system," and norms of detachment from the larger society, or "objectivity," in virtually every field (Boyte, 2004).

Across the university, faculty expressed the desire for a deeper engagement. We often discussed C. Wright Mills' description, in *The Sociological Imagination,* of people in "mass society…gripped by personal troubles which they are not able to turn into social issues (Mills quoted in Boyte 2001)." The Civic Engagement Task Force developed a variety of strategies to make public engagement more visible.

Collaborating with the provost, Robert Bruininks, Harry and Ed Fogelman, chair of the Political Science department organized a team of leaders across the University to create a Civic Engagement Task Force charged with strengthening the civic dimensions of every kind of professional work (Boyte, 2004).

Successes include a great deal more visibility at the UMN for publicly engaged scholarship and partnerships with communities, a visibility which has continued over 20 years (Furco & Barajas, 2025). There have also been large challenges. Beyond the rankings, which put a ceiling on possible changes, the skills and habits of civic politics include relationship-building, tolerance for ambiguity, the ability to deal with conflict constructively, and the capacity to act in open environments with no predetermined outcomes. These are not part of graduate school curricula in scientific or other conventional academic or professional disciplines. The capacities for civic politics and civic professionalism have to be learned in practice. The process entails *unlearning* tendencies acquired in formal education, such as a hypercompetitive, individualist bent and a posture of intellectual certitude. Maria Avila, a former Mexican American organizer who directed the Center for Community-Based Learning at Occidental College, has given a vivid account of what this means. "The medicine for our predicament [in higher education] requires efforts to restructure the way we think, act, behave toward each other, and the way we act as a collective to restructure power and resources," Avila argues. She stresses that organizing focuses on culture change before structural change. Change is relational, tied to organizing and power: "For academic institutions to partner with community groups, institutions, and organizations for a better society [requires] countless opportunities for conversations and organizing campaigns with community partners engaged in power restructuring" (Avila, 2003).

Conclusion

Seeing institutions as communities, building public relationships, undertaking intentional changes in their cultures to make them more public, and thinking in political terms sound strange in most academic and professional settings, where norms are privatized, individualistic, and infused with the stance of "objectivity." In higher education, this is especially the case. Decades of cultural change detached faculty members, their pedagogies, and scholarship from the civic life of places, as Tom Bender, among others, has documented. Yet we have seen possibilities for significant change in higher education cultures in settings where people have introduced an organizing approach. In addition to the University of Minnesota and HBCUs in Texas, organizing for democratic cultural change has been introduced in the College of St. Catherine in the early and mid-1990s, Occidental College in Los Angeles, the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), Northern Arizona University, Tucson University, and Denison University in recent years.

In the Kellogg study, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship found pervasive silence and discouragement, and widespread feelings of being rigidly constrained, growing not only from the incentive structures but also from the assumption that everyone else believed in the norms of detachment. Indeed, senior faculty members repeatedly told us that they could not talk to their colleagues about their discontent. Harry thought of Betty Friedan's famous first chapter, "The Problem without a Name," which begins her book *The Feminine Mystique,* published in 1963, the first major statement of the modern women's movement. "It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction," wrote Friedan. "The problem lay buried, unspoken for many years. There was no word of this yearning in the missions of words written about women, for women, in all the columns, books, and articles by experts telling women their role" (Friedan, 1963, p.1).

Discussion, organizing, and multiplying examples about citizen professionals in higher education will break the silence and generate hope. It also promises to liberate civic energies in colleges and universities and across society.

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