Transforming Higher Education in a Larger Context: The Civic Politics of Public Work

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The Framing Statement for civic studies, entitled “The New Civic Politics,” emphasizes two fundamental themes: agency and co-creation. Agency can be understood as a form of empowerment that has conscious political dimensions, or as effective and intentional action that is conducted in diverse and open settings in order to shape the world around us. Co-creation refers to “public work,” a framework of theory and practice that informed the statement. In what follows, we argue that the new civic politics of public work differs from the moralizing and polarizing approaches to “politics” commonly found in and beyond the academy today. The politics of public work opens possibilities for building broad alliances across partisan and other divides. Practicing such politics will enable us to become agents and architects, not objects, of change.

The need for agency and co-creation is pervasive at the beginning of the twenty-first century. American colleges and universities offer just one example. David Scobey sees an academy “in the throes of change, even revolution. . . . [T]he question is not whether the academy will be changed, but how.” Scobey predicts that “the knowledge, skills, and values in which students should be educated; the intellectual landscape of disciplines and degrees; the ways in which educational institutions are organized; the funding of teaching, learning, and research” will all “be profoundly different in twenty years.” He also observes that the forces of change result from “our own inertia,” as well as “broad political, market, and technological developments not of our making.”

Inertia grows from a pervasive sense of powerlessness in the face of dramatic transformation. Many in higher education have a critical understanding of the forces and trends that are rapidly changing our institutions. They are aware that legislatures are cutting state funding for public institutions; for-profit colleges are growing; publics are skeptical about institutional missions; and many administrators are deemphasizing liberal education in an effort to be more directly relevant to workforce needs—with little attention to the radically changing nature of work and workplaces, or to the leadership roles that higher education needs to play in addressing such change.

Yet, critique does not often lead to productive action. We propose that the new civic politics, a politics of public work, can both generate hope and build our capacity for making change in higher education and beyond.
Public work

Today, it is common for public and civic institutions—whether governments, schools, colleges, or nonprofits—to conceive of citizens as customers pursuing their own narrow interests. Those who promote deliberative democracy expand this narrow view, seeing citizens as talkers and judges about the common good. But both perspectives assume that the basic structure of society is a given. In contrast to both, the concept of public work highlights what can be called “world building,” to borrow a term coined by the late political theorist Hannah Arendt. We take world building to refer to the role of citizens as co-creators, rather than simply participants, of the world we share in common.³

Public work can be defined as self-organized efforts by a mix of people who create goods, material or symbolic, whose civic value is determined through an ongoing process of deliberation. It has roots in communal labor practices around the world that create and sustain “the commons”—shared resources of all kinds, from fisheries to wells and from schools to public arts. The hallmarks of public work include self-organizing, egalitarian, and cooperative efforts by people who would otherwise be divided; practical concern for creating shared collective resources; adaptability; and incentives based on appeals to immediate interests combined with cultivation of concern for long-term community well-being. As we will show later, the public work framework also draws from social movements like populism that combine efforts to promote large-scale democratization with efforts to build broad political alliances. The concept of public work highlights the public and civic dimensions of many kinds of work that often are not recognized by conventional approaches to civic engagement, and it also highlights the practices that flow from distinctly civic identities—e.g., citizen teachers, citizen businesspersons, citizen health professionals, citizen beauticians, and “civil servants” who see themselves as citizens working with other citizens.

A return to politics

Public work is political in the root sense of the word “politics,” which is derived from the Greek word polis, meaning “city,” and which, according to Aristotle, conveys plurality. In this sense of politics, people have diverse interests and perspectives and must express their contrary views, make decisions, allocate resources, select leaders, form alliances, and take various kinds of action.⁴

An obstacle to public work in our time is a narrow understanding of politics as a zero-sum competition among professional politicians—or as an equally zero-sum struggle between good and evil, the righteous in battle against evildoers. Because these forms of conflict are unattractive, many citizens have turned away from politics. Reform efforts often aim to institute markets, administrative systems, or scientific processes that will make such politics unnecessary. William Galston described “the decades-long reign of what some have called ‘high liberalism’
[as] a desire to evade, displace, or escape from politics.’’

Bonnie Honig observed, and lamented, a similar pattern: “Those writing from diverse positions—republican, liberal, and communitarian—converge in their assumptions that . . . the task . . . is to resolve institutional questions, to get politics right, over and done with, to free modern subjects and their sets of arrangements [from] political conflict and instability.”

In contrast, public work insists on an understanding of politics as a practical approach to making change through negotiation, bargaining, and accommodation of diverse interests. As Stephen Elkin put it, “There is no substitute for politics . . . the various ways in which we arrive at collective, authoritative decisions in a world in which people legitimately hold different views. . . .”

Elkin founded The Good Society, a journal with a strong orientation to civic studies that embodies realist politics. Journal articles address such problems as disparities in economic and political power, environmental damage, welfare dependency, growing bureaucratization, and political alienation. And they explore workable models for social arrangements that embody such values as liberty, democracy, equality, and environmental sustainability. The journal is also highly skeptical of sweeping ideologies and utopian blueprints.

The challenge in adopting any of these ideas is that citizenship has shrunk like the Cheshire cat in Alice in Wonderland. With that shrinking, the power to make change has eroded. “Customers” have replaced civic producers.

SHRINKING CITIZENSHIP

While calls for the revitalization of civic education and civic learning have multiplied, civic learning remains on the margins. Today, as the following story illustrates, citizenship is understood as government-centered acts (like voting or contacting elected officials) plus off-hours voluntarism detached from work identities and work sites. A story illustrates.

When the Center for Democracy and Citizenship (CDC) at Augsburg College partnered with the City of Falcon Heights, Minnesota, to organize a moderated “citizen town hall” meeting that explored citizen-based approaches to gun violence, the audience of twenty-five or so included the mayor, the police chief, the city manager, teachers, a local principal, social agency workers, four students, business entrepreneurs, and two elderly residents. The residents expressed regret that “there are so few citizens” present. No one from any of the community work sites questioned this choice of words. However, by noting that all the participants actually were citizens, CDC staff prompted a lively conversation about what the community would look like if work sites were understood as citizenship sites, and how such an understanding might increase collective power for action on issues like gun violence and community safety.

When the Center for Democracy and Citizenship organized the New Citizenship project with the White House Domestic Policy Council from 1993 to 1995, analyzing the gap between citizens and government, many whom the project interviewed expressed growing distance from “citizens.” As Jerome Delli Priscoli, senior policy analyst for the Institute for Water Resources in the Army Corps of Engineers, put it, “We’ve lost the ‘civil’ in civil service.”
participant in the New Citizenship project and a leading analyst of the civil service, described the ways in which government employees were once motivated by an ethos of public service that stressed their civic identities. But this ethos has largely disappeared from the civil service, replaced by a focus on specialization and service to citizens conceived as customers. “Departments and agencies have plenty of advocates for doing things for citizens and to citizens,” Light observed. “But there are today almost no voices for seeing government workers as citizens themselves, working with other citizens. Citizens are viewed in partial terms—as clients and customers, taxpayers, and voters—but too rarely as whole actors, capable of judgment and problem solving.”9

Similar patterns are present elsewhere. For instance, colleges and universities are prone to treat their students as consumers of education. Faculty interested in students as “learners” object, but do not usually stress the larger conception of citizen as co-creator. In another example, many in religious communities today decry growing materialism, but also reflect the spread of marketplace assumptions. Thus, in a discussion with state legislators in 2007, Peg Chamberlin, executive director of the Minnesota Council of Churches, said that “increasingly congregants think of themselves as consumers of church, not producers of church, and congregations think of themselves as consumers of denominations, not producers of denominations. . . . In many of our denominations the trend shows up by congregations saying ‘We don’t like what you’re doing, so we’re going to quit giving you money,’ which is a consumer mentality, unobligated to the denomination.”10

Yet, despite this replacement of productive civic identities with consumer identities and the resulting erosion of the role of civic power centers in the life of communities, signs of a productive agency-based civic politics are emerging in the United States and around the world. For example, the Obama campaign of 2008, with its theme of “Yes We Can,” showed possibilities for introducing civic agency on a large scale by integrating community organizing methods into its field operation. The campaign found widespread enthusiasm for the message, especially among young people. The Arab Spring generated a “sense of empowerment and civic duty,” as The Financial Times put it.11 In scholarly terms, signs of agency and of citizens as co-creators are illustrated by the essays in this volume.

Higher education is an “upstream” institution that shapes the citizenship identities and practices of students throughout their lives. As colleges and universities discuss and practice the civic politics of public work, they will help recreate foundations for civic agency in multiple places. There are powerful historical and cultural resources available to feed this process.

A HERITAGE OF PUBLIC WORK

A civic politics of public work, contrasted with sweeping ideological and polarizing frameworks, has rich antecedents in practical community-building efforts and also in movements that combine aspirations for substantial democratic change with a pluralist, practical, political quality.

The labor of settlers who cleared lands and who built towns and villages, wells, meeting halls, and roads generated what the historian Robert Wiebe called
Benjamin Franklin was an important philosophical architect of the concept and practice of public work. The Leather Apron Club, which he founded in Philadelphia, included tradesmen, artisans, and shopkeepers—those whom he lauded as “the middling people”—based on a vision of “doing well by doing good.” Members created a street-sweeping corps, a volunteer firefighting company, a tax-supported neighborhood constabulary, health and life insurance groups, a library, a hospital, an academy for educating young people, a society for sharing scientific discoveries, and a postal system. Franklin proposed that education should combine practical and liberal arts, a union that was to reappear in the establishment of the country’s land-grant colleges. David Mathews described this tradition of practical community building in his treatment of the emergence of public schools and other public institutions:

Nineteenth-century self-rule . . . was a sweaty, hands-on, problem-solving politics. The democracy of self-rule was rooted in collective decision making and acting—especially acting. Settlers on the frontier had to be producers, not just consumers. They had to join forces to build forts, roads, and libraries. They formed associations to combat alcoholism and care for the poor as well as to elect representatives. They also established the first public schools. Their efforts were examples of ‘public work,’ meaning work done by not just for the public.

In nineteenth-century America, movements such as the first large-scale labor union organizing effort, the Knights of Labor, and populism, an interracial movement of small farmers fighting to save their land, drew on these traditions by combining visions of democratic change with more down-to-earth concerns. In addition to facilitating trade unionism, the Knights of Labor included professionals, factory workers, small business owners, and others. It focused on members’ moral and political education, cooperative enterprises, and small land-holding. The Knights were able to bring together a “nostalgia for a preindustrial past, in part on a defense of devalued craft skills, but in part also on a transcendent vision of a cooperative industrial future” that also placed “imperatives toward productive work, civic responsibility, education, a wholesome family life, temperance, and self-improvement.”

While the Knights were largely an urban movement, populism grew out of farmers’ cooperatives that spread across the South and Midwest in the 1880s. Academic critics charge that populism’s idea of who makes change—“the people”—is ill-defined compared to the more rigorous definitions associated with class-based or interest-group politics. Many add that populists are reformist—focused on practical ends—and offer few detailed plans for breaking up concentrations of wealth and power. Yet, from a realist political vantage point—one that is skeptical about sweeping blueprints for the future or precise definitions of who should lead the process of change—these features are considerable strengths. The porousness of the concept of “the people,” a narrative conception of agency, allows for inclusive definitions of peoplehood when movements seek allies and when organizers are oriented toward a diverse democracy. Similarly, populism’s practicality—a “politics of getting things done,” as Stephanie DeWitt put it—comes from its
grounding in the gritty concerns and everyday problems of living communities. Sheldon Wolin argues that populism is the “culture of democracy” itself:

Historically [populism] has stood for the efforts of ordinary citizens and would-be citizens to survive. . . . A culture of survival is very different from a . . . market-culture littered by the disposable remains of yesterday and shaped by manipulation of attitudes and desires. . . . Its practices issued from taking care of living beings and mundane artifacts, from keeping them in the world by use and memory. To sustain the institutions of family, community, church, school and local economy demanded innovation as well as conservation. . . . The reason why democracy should be grounded in a populist culture is not because those who live it are pure, unprejudiced, and unfailingly altruistic. Rather, it is because it is a culture that . . . has learned that existence is a cooperative venture over time.¹⁷

A politics with some similarities to the populism of the cooperative farmers’ movement, and different from defensive and parochial protest movements, emerged in the 1930s and holds lessons for us today.

As Steve Fraser has observed, one current of 1930s politics was defensive. Skilled craftsmen sometimes saw industrial unions as a threat to their identity, power, and position in the labor hierarchy. There are similarities in today’s academy, where a tenured class of faculty often feel threatened by what they perceive as lower-skilled and less-experienced non-tenured and short-term faculty. Like current merit review schemes imposed on universities by state legislatures and the rush to online education by college and university administrators staffed by increasingly large numbers of non-tenured hires, craftsmen in the AFL encountered “impersonally determined and imposed piece rates, bonus systems, and job ladders, . . . [and] ingenious designs for serial production to be undertaken by a whole new class of semiskilled operatives.” Like AFL craftsmen, for whom “this new industrial order promised the social extermination of a whole social species,” contemporary tenured faculty, in the face of overwhelming systemic change, are sometimes paralyzed by inertia.¹⁸

Yet, in the 1930s, other political currents went well beyond defensive action. In the new industrial unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, skilled workers made common cause with semi-skilled and unskilled workers as well as with communities beyond their factories. “In the auto and electrical industries, tool and die makers and machinists comprised the indispensable cadre of the new industrial unions,” according to Fraser. “Skilled workers comprised a milieu heterogeneous in background. They included both production and nonproduction workers. Some were quite secular and even anticlerical; others were attracted by liberal currents in Catholic social thought.”¹⁹

Pluralist, coalitional politics reemerged in the civil rights movement to challenge the polarizing and righteous politics spreading among young activists. Bayard Rustin, shaped by experiences in the 1930s, was a brilliant proponent. Rustin worked for years to bring nonviolence to the freedom movement, playing a critical role in educating Martin Luther King Jr. about nonviolence during the Montgomery bus boycott. He organized the 1963 March on Washington, and was a key strategist for many other movement events. Rustin also lived a complicated life. As a gay, African American, formerly communist, nonviolent
Quaker, Rustin was extremely controversial and civil rights leaders kept him behind the scenes.

Rustin combined political realism with an expansive vision of change, and he was centrally concerned with the real work of moving from the world as it is to the world as it should be. In organizing the March on Washington, he skillfully built collaborative relationships with the White House, while keeping in mind the need for the movement to develop and advance its own independent agenda. By the mid-sixties, Rustin had become deeply worried about the growing tendency of young activists, both black and white, to substitute “posture and volume” for effective strategy. His 1965 article in *Commentary* magazine, “From Protest to Politics,” challenged this tendency in ways that still have relevance to the highly moralized discourses in the humanities and social sciences, and on college campuses. “Young militants,” Rustin argued, are often described as the radicals of the movement, but they are really its moralists. They seek to change white hearts—by traumatizing them. Frequently abetted by white self-flagellants, they may gleefully applaud . . . Malcolm X because, while they admit he has no program, they think he can frighten white people into doing the right thing. But in any case, hearts are not relevant to the issue; neither racial affinities nor racial hostilities are rooted there. It is institutions—social, political, and economic institutions—which are the ultimate molders of collective sentiments. Let these institutions be reconstructed today, and let the ineluctable gradualism of history govern the formation of a new psychology.

Are there contemporary examples of institutions serving as enabling environments for public work that enhances civic agency? In what follows, we present two case studies drawn from the emerging movement to revitalize the democratic purposes and practices of education.

**Northern Arizona University: Reviving the Collective Commonwealth**

For many faculty, the walls seem to be closing in. Many despair, having lost their sense of agency and any belief that they can influence the course of their institutions. Over the last several years at Northern Arizona University (NAU), a group of organizers has sought to build democratic centers of power—enabling environments—by establishing new coalitions and alliances. Key to the work have been strategies to re-empower faculty through democratic agency, to reverse the tide of faculty despair, to begin to rebuild the university as a civic institution, and to revive a cooperative spirit that is infused with a vision of the collective commonwealth of knowledge. To illustrate, we offer two examples.

In NAU’s First Year Learning Initiative (FYLI), Blase Scarnati and Michelle D. Miller, a cognitive psychologist, bring faculty together to co-create new pedagogical approaches, collaborate with one another and their teaching colleagues, and build alliances around the curricular spaces they control. In addition to using other community organizing strategies, they hold one-on-one meetings off campus and build productive working relations, or “public relationships” in the language of community organizing, with course coordinators.
In these meetings, faculty members tell the narratives of their courses and the narratives of their teaching. Miller and Scarnati also explore effective pedagogies and strategies—based on their NAU experience and supported by the relevant literature—that can help students increase their learning and succeed academically. The conversations are animated by the assumptions that faculty own the curriculum and can be empowered through curricular work and that the curriculum itself can be conceived as a creative working space for innovation. Miller and Scarnati seek to use a collaborative, cooperative model for course coordination, since faculty tend to resist top-down mandates.

For many faculty, the opportunity to work cooperatively with their colleagues in order to achieve curricular ends is an invigorating—and relatively rare—experience. Many, too, are hopeful about what they can achieve in cooperation with their colleagues. Building coalitions within and among departments creates new experiences of power, while generating new and creative energies.

Most FYLI courses are multi-sectioned (the largest has seventy-five sections each term), and more than fourteen thousand students enroll in the courses each semester (not unique enrollments). Michelle Miller has compared the FYLI to more traditional redesign initiatives. For example, statewide National Center for Academic Transformation redesign initiatives conducted between 2006 and 2010 affected only fifty-five courses, with a mean of 1.45 courses per university and 9 courses per state. These courses have a broad reach across all NAU colleges and disciplines, from the biological sciences to business. Additionally, the course completion rates for students enrolled in FYLI courses increased significantly.

Through CRAFTS (Civic Engagement for Arizona Families, Transitions, and Communities), a second example of pedagogical innovation, NAU has built one of the largest programs of action research, civic agency, and public work in the country. Over three years, ninety-six percent of first-year students at NAU now enroll in FYLI courses. CRAFTS is grounded in collaboration between the Community, Culture, and Environment Program, the First Year Seminar Program, and the Masters of Arts in Sustainable Communities Program. It includes faculty from departments as diverse as education, biology, philosophy, and criminology. Each year, over 550 new first-year students join their fellow students from previous years to conduct action research in conjunction with local community organizations doing the political work to create more democratic, just, and sustainable communities.

Key to the success of CRAFTS are NAU faculty, staff, graduate assistant mentors, undergraduate peer teaching assistants, and undergraduate students. They work non-hierarchically and collectively to build new alliances with community-based partners in order to create dense rhizomatic webs of practice called Action Research Teams (ARTs). Action research begins with the organization of First Year Seminar students into course-specific working groups that feed into one of the fourteen ARTs umbrella organizations under which NAU students and faculty collaborate with members of the broader community, working on a variety of environmental, social, educational, economic, and political issues. Each ART includes a diverse mix of members: sophomores and juniors who want to continue in the public work of the ARTs and assume leadership and organizing responsibilities for initiatives within each ART; sophomore or junior peer teaching assistants
from the First Year Seminar Program who work with the students in each seminar, graduate student mentors assigned to ART, and multigenerational community partners—including K-12 students and their parents, community members and organizations, and Navajo elders.

ART’s work with a variety of community organizations, such as the Coconino County Sustainable Economic Development Initiative, Friends of Flagstaff’s Future, Northern Arizona Institutions for Community Leadership/Interfaith Council (Industrial Areas Foundation), and key public schools in the Flagstaff Unified School District. Many powerful stories from student and community colleagues come from ART’s work. Each semester, students organize an ART’s Symposium where working groups report on their work. Many have declared that “this work has changed my life.”

Brief profiles of two of the fourteen ARTs illustrate their work. The Weatherization and Community Building Action Team (WACBAT) is a student-led effort organized around working groups in weatherization, retrofits, and community organizing. WACBAT builds community relationships and power for sustainability broadly understood, as it works to advance “green economy” initiatives designed to increase energy efficiency and promote the use of renewable energy sources. Combining research and study on these issues with door-to-door outreach and statewide organizing and advocacy, WACBAT led a campaign which successfully pressured the Arizona Corporation Commission and the local power company to establish a $2.7 million fund used to provide loans for homeowners seeking to improve energy efficiency. It has also developed many outstanding undergraduate leaders, in collaboration with a host of other community partners.

Through their civic agency and public work, the ARTs have also been effective in increasing retention among key NAU student populations. The retention rate for minority students who successfully complete First Year Seminars with ARTs (FYSeminar-ARTs) sections—those earning A, B, or C grades—is 16 percent higher than the retention rate for non-FYSeminar-ARTs minority students. The retention rate for female students who complete FYSeminar-ARTs sections is 9 percent higher than for non-FYSeminar-ARTs female students. FYSeminar-ARTs participation also significantly increases engagement with course-specific learning activities involving diversity, cultural influences, and multiple perspectives.

PUBLIC ACHIEVEMENT IN FRIDLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL

At Augsburg College in Minneapolis, a group of faculty, staff, and students has been working for two years to integrate civic agency, civic politics, and public work into curricular and cocurricular experiences. The multicultural PhD program in nursing has a focus on educating “citizen nurses.” The new mission statement of the education department similarly stresses the preparation of “citizen teachers” who will be innovators and leaders in shaping education. Public Achievement, a youth civic empowerment initiative, offers a striking example in Fridley Middle School, which is located in a suburban community north of Minneapolis.

Public Achievement was founded in 1990 by Harry Boyte as a contemporary version of the Citizenship Education Program (CEP), a grassroots, popular civil rights-era education initiative of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference,
that had shaped him as a college student. Through CEP, African Americans and some poor whites learned skills and concepts associated with community organizing and effective change-making. CEP experiences often had dramatic impact on participants’ identity, helping them see themselves not as victims, but as agents of change and civic role models for the nation.

Through participation in Public Achievement, young people learn skills, concepts, and methods of empowering public work. They work as teams guided by coaches, who may be young adults, college students, or teachers. Coaches help guide the work, but do not dominate. They also are highly attentive to the development of young people’s skills and capacities for effective public work. The initiative has spread widely and is now used in schools, colleges, and communities across the United States as well as in Poland, the West Bank and Gaza, Israel, and Northern Ireland.

At Fridley Middle School, “citizen teachers” Michael Ricci and Alissa Blood have developed an empowering learning culture in special education. Students take the lead in designing their own learning, largely around self-directed public work projects of their own choosing. In the process, students who are subject to emotional and behavioral disorders and other health-related disabilities have become community leaders. “In all the other classes, the teachers tell you want to do,” said one seventh grader. “In [Public Achievement], the teacher says, ‘Okay, what do you want to do?”

According to Wikipedia, “special education” refers to “the education of students with special needs in a way that addresses the students’ individual differences and needs.” Schools often segregate such students from the mainstream because of behaviors that interrupt the general education classroom. The problem, as the Wikipedia entry for “Emotional and Behavioral Disorders” (EBD) notes, is that “both general definitions as well as concrete diagnosis of EBD may be controversial as the observed behavior may depend on many factors.” Put differently, is the “problem” the student or the environment? According to Ricci, “The kids in our special education classroom weren’t successful in mainstream classrooms, where the format has been the same for the last 100 years. The world has changed, but the classroom is pretty much the same.”

Susan O’Connor, director of Augsburg College’s graduate program in special education, wanted to try something different. “Special education generally still uses a medical model, based on how to fix kids,” she said. Working with Dennis Donovan, national organizer for Public Achievement at the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, O’Connor and other faculty and graduate students at Augsburg partnered with Ricci and Blood, graduates of their program, to design an alternative. Both Ricci and Blood believed it was worth trying an approach that would give special education students the chance to take leadership in designing their own learning. “The idea of trying something different [in special education] that might give school a purpose for our kids just made sense,” Blood explained, pointing out the frustration that special education students also experience. Public Achievement offered resources.

In the self-contained special education classroom, where the primary concern is to teach students strategies that help them manage the disruptive behaviors
that interfere with learning in school, there is latitude for innovation. “More evidence would be needed [in a mainstream classroom] to allow us to go to the level we did, where we turned Public Achievement into a core part of the curriculum,” Blood said.  

As a result of Blood and Ricci’s adaptation of Public Achievement to special education, students with challenges that would have forced their removal from conventional classrooms in many schools came to be seen as public leaders at Fridley, where they undertook projects such as rewriting district policy on school bullying, organizing a campaign for better understanding of pit bulls, creating murals to encourage healthy activities, and developing a support network for terminally ill children. Their efforts were widely recognized by the principal, teachers, and other students. They also became visible change-makers in the larger Fridley community, making presentations before school administrators, the school board, and other community leaders, and elected officials. Their work has been featured in the local paper and on Minnesota Public Radio.

The Public Achievement approach also transformed the work of Ricci and Blood. “My role [in Public Achievement] is not to fix things for the kids but to say, ‘This is your class, your mission. How are you going to do the work?’ Our main task is to remind them, to guide them, not to tell them what to do,” Ricci explained. The teachers became partners with their students, who, in turn, chose the issues and learned how to address them effectively.

The students’ public work created multiple opportunities for them to develop academically, because Ricci and Blood were highly intentional about making the connections. As part of the projects mentioned above, for example, students composed well-written letters seeking permission from the principal for a project, and they used math to figure out how to scale their murals in order to determine how much wall space would be needed. The focus of the teachers also changed, from “teaching to the test” to working alongside young people as they develop agency. Ricci and Blood’s curriculum builds skills and habits of citizenship, such as negotiation, compromise, initiative, planning, organizing, and public speaking. It also develops what Blood called “a public professional persona.” Both teachers are convinced that these skills and habits will serve the students well throughout their lives.

Michael Ricci and Alissa Blood are developing a new model of the “citizen teacher” according to which the teacher is not the object of educational reform, but rather the agent and architect of reform. In an environment where teachers and faculty across the country feel powerless, they serve as powerful role models for educators moving into a proactive stance.

**Conclusion**

At every level, educational institutions have enormous power that operates invisibly to shape identities, assumptions, and ways of looking at the world. Higher education, in particular, creates credentialed knowledge of many kinds, including pedagogical approaches in K-12 schooling. Colleges and universities generate and diffuse conceptual frameworks that structure work practices. They socialize professionals and also convey meanings of citizenship. They are
resources for economic and community vitality. In light of such powers, colleges and universities can be seen as anchoring institutions of citizenship.

Efforts to renew the democratic purposes of higher education are part of a larger context, what can be seen as an emerging movement for citizen empowerment and citizen-centered democracy. It is important to integrate the several strands of this movement in a new public narrative in which the great majority of people can see their interests and aspirations reflected. These strands include organizing on questions of poverty and inequality, efforts to address climate change, and institutional change experiments in which professionals see themselves as citizens working with fellow citizens.

We are on the cusp of a new stage in this movement, which can create solid foundations for the aspirations to civic agency that are exploding across the world. In this time of dramatic change in the educational landscape, some colleges and universities will move to its forefront and play key roles. They will be “democracy’s colleges” of the twenty-first century.

**Notes**


11. Borzou Daragahi, “Cairo’s Voters Shrug at Poll Upheaval,” Financial Times, April 20, 2012. Daragahi also reports on the subsequent fading of the “sense of empowerment and civic duty” that resulted from the Arab Spring—evident long before the bitter clashes between the Marsi government and its opponents.
19. Ibid., 65.
21. Ibid., 413.
22. The section on Northern Arizona University is written by Blase Scarnati.
23. This section on Fridley Public Achievement was written by Harry Boyte and Jennifer Nelson, a graduate student in public policy at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs.
29. See note 27.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.