Democracy's EDUCATION

PUBLIC WORK, CITIZENSHIP, & THE FUTURE *of* COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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I dedicate *Democracy's Education* to the team members, coaches, teachers, faculty, staff, principals, and other participants in Public Achievement, in every country where they are learning to do citizenship as public work and showing its possibilities. They are creating grounded hope for the future, and a new narrative of education.

—Harry C. Boyte

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BREAKING THE CIVIC SPIRIT: EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG ORGANIZERS

Jenny L. Whitcher

The Mobilizing-Nonprofit Complex

"What I am doing is not organizing. At least not how you taught us."[1] As these words came out of alumnus Felipe Vieyra Jr.'s mouth with uncharacteristic apprehension, I had two responses: (1) I was impressed that he so quickly identified and articulated the difference between mobilizing and organizing within a working environment right out of college—a student-teacher civic learning assessment moment; (2) I was concerned.

Too many recent graduates who are well versed in the community organizing model, who have developed a civic identity and purpose, and who have a vocational calling to civic work seem to experience bitterness and defeat within one to two years after college. This is the result of traumatic experiences within "organizing" nonprofits, less interested in relational meetings and more interested in turning out numbers. These are organizations sustained by constant turnover of burned-out young adults, which demonstrates a lack of interest in the personal and professional development of staff or community members. Those managing these mobilizing operations are also caught in the mobilizing mechanism, and their work is evaluated based on numbers-driven impact assessments. Managers often do not know alternative ways of making change or do not feel empowered or supported to use alternative methods. As Harry Boyte describes, this mobilizing culture of citizen powerlessness has spread beyond groups traditionally known for this work into a broader cultural problem. "The pattern of one-way, expert interventions, inattentive to the cultures and individual stories of communities . . . spread across the sweep of civic life."[2]

Bright, talented, and committed young adults are being trampled and thrown away like trash by the emergent mobilizing complex within the nonprofit sector, which conflates "community organizing" with what is actually a mobilizing model. The stories of recent graduates reveal a violent, spirit-breaking mobilizing operation that is not only brutal on individuals, but also threatens the civic capacity of this generation. Higher education has power to engage and impact this cultural dysfunction if we claim our power and choose to do so. In the process we may create new models and pathways toward a more democratic civic

culture that values relationships, agency, and public skill development, a culture that respects diverse people and different ideas.

During his undergraduate degree, Felipe Vieyra Jr. was a Puksta Scholar, part of a four-year civic development program and intentionally diverse community that I previously managed. He is now a member of the Denver Mayor's Immigrant and Refugee Commission. Confident in his public skills, versed in community organizing training and practice, and experienced as a Public Achievement coach, Felipe took a job billed as "community organizer" right out of college. Over the next year and a half, he struggled through the mobilizing-nonprofit complex that many young social change agents experience as they embark on a civic vocation. Felipe describes the characteristic culture of disposability:

> There was so much turnover. Eight staff members left the organization while I was there. Not only did I become the veteran organizer, I was the second longest running staff member at the organization, and I had only been there for a year and a half. It was a frustrating experience because I saw so many people leave and we had to redo many of the things we were working on. The community saw what was happening, but there was not an action plan to handle the change or the [community] relationships.[3]

Imagine the individual level, where young civic leaders are treated as disposable resources, their skills, energy, and commitment extracted like the juice of a ripe fruit, leaving them to wonder if they will ever regain the sweetness and fullness—the calling—they felt before they took the job. Describing the human costs of the mobilizing-nonprofit complex, Felipe reflected:

> I was working sixty hours per week, doing everything I could. The expectation is that you will give everything to the organization, and you have no time for yourself. It is frustrating because as an organizer you need time to recover and time to develop yourself further. It was draining, and it made me question wanting to be [an organizer]. And this is something that I feel happens to a lot of organizers, or they experience something like this—they question whether or not they should even go back to the nonprofit world, to the service world. Towards the end of my time with the organization, after the campaign was over, my supervisor gave me two options, either you do a two-week probation, making certain [quantitative] goals to prove that you deserve to be here, or you start transitioning out. When I was given that ultimatum, it hurt more than anything else did, after all the work I that I had put in. I knew they did not truly value me, and it made me feel used.[4]

This is not just a typical first-job-out-of-college kind of experience, a collegiate rite of passage where the top-of-the-world senior year meets entry-level working world in one swift transition. While such first jobs have their challenges, the expectation is that the employer has some responsibility to the welfare and professional development of employees. What is happening in the

mobilizing-nonprofit complex is the degradation of young civic leaders: toxic and traumatic work environments and management; demoralization; physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion; and ultimately burnout in one to two years.

Breaking the Civic Spirit

Young adults who go into community organizing or civic work do so for a larger purpose. They want to "reinvent citizenship as public work," because they know voting and extracurricular volunteerism are too limited and ultimately ineffective in addressing the problems of the day. They are often willing to make large initial sacrifices of time, health, and financial solvency in order to do something meaningful in the world. These are vocationally driven students who feel called to this work, as not simply a job, but as a way to be in the world. Young people with this calling want a way to live out their core values while holding them in tension with our collective democratic values and to use their gifts and talents for the betterment of self and society—or self-interest, richly understood, as the authentic organizing tradition teaches. This is to do something and to be someone that matters beyond the self, for the self and for the common good.

In my teaching experience, these kinds of students are driven by explicit values, and as a result, they expect ethical work environments where actions are consistent with beliefs for themselves, their coworkers, and the organization. When such authentic alignment starts to slide—when the true nature of mobilizing culture reveals itself—their civic spirit starts to tear, as those in official positions of power cause them to question their calling, talents, and worth, and ultimately their ability to follow their vocation.

Knowing Felipe for the past six years, as mentor, professor, program director, and now friend, I have absolute faith that he has what it takes to be an organizer. As I interviewed him for this piece, he recounted numerous stories where he did the right thing, in terms of ethical, relational organizing and public work, but was made to feel incapable and unsuccessful by his supervisors for operating outside of the mobilizing script and resisting unethical practices. Reflecting on the ultimatum he received from his supervisor, Felipe explains, "That is why I am a bit bitter towards organizations. It has made me doubt myself. I am doubtful of myself as a community organizer, whether or not I can actually do the work. It was not a good experience."[5]

It is poignant to see a young civic leader doubt his potential, particularly when he has a proven record of accomplishment for exceeding expectations. Felipe says he is in a good place now and is grateful for the time to reflect and to think critically about future opportunities where he will be able to thrive and grow.

Noelle Johnson is a first-year graduate student at Northern Arizona University studying sustainable communities, and a Public Achievement coordinator. During her undergraduate studies at Western Kentucky University, she was a Public Achievement coach and coordinator for almost four years. The summer between finishing her undergraduate degree and starting her graduate degree, Noelle took a "community organizer" job in Cincinnati, Ohio. It lasted one week.

I had to leave because I was told it was not okay to consider the demographics of the neighborhoods, to discuss the issue in depth—my task was only to solicit donations, and not to build any relationships with members and supporters. It was not a job that I felt comfortable with, and I started to consider that I might not find a similar organizing model outside of Public Achievement or the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF).[6]

When it was my day to go door-to-door and have someone follow and watch me and then critique what I said, I introduced myself to the people and asked if they were familiar with the issue before I would do the script [which I had been handed by the group I was working for]. I was told by my supervisor that I was not allowed to do that. "You are supposed to just tell them the issue, just tell them the problem. Do not ask if they know anything, do not ask if they care, just go straight into telling them and asking for money." Like Harry Boyte said in a workshop, organizations will make it all about good versus bad, and that is it. That is what started making me think about the work that I did last summer.

For a while I was beating myself up because I thought I should have stuck with it, thinking, well, this is part of the experience. If this is organizing, I need this too, and maybe I would have continued thinking that until now, because now this discussion is not just me, there are other people in the same boat. I think [the mobilizing culture] is really causing damage. I was thinking that if I was more confident about finding a job in organizing, I might not have even gone to graduate school; I would just be out there organizing. But I almost feel safe within higher education, because at least at Northern Arizona University we have Public Achievement, and I can do that.

I am studying sustainable communities, and my program uses an organizing model, and we are reflecting on not only environmental sustainability, but also social and economic sustainability. I do not know what this degree will do for me if there are not many organizations out there that use the model that I am passionate about and trained in.[7]

It is problematic when students like Felipe and Noelle, who are skilled and capable civic agents, have difficulty finding work that practices a democratic, relational, broad-based organizing culture. While higher education is trying to respond to the "calls for revitalization of civic education and civic learning," a growing gap emerges as "concepts of work as a site of citizenship and workplaces as civic sites have largely disappeared."[8] In order for students to follow a civic vocation, there must be opportunities to meaningfully engage their civic talents with others.

Alison Wisneski, is a second-year graduate student in the master of arts in social change (MASC) degree program at Iliff School of Theology. I have known Alison as a student in classes that I teach and in my role as the director of the MASC program. Before she entered graduate school Alison worked at a reputable nonprofit that does important work, but relies on a small staff and is highly dependent on volunteers. She started out as a volunteer, fell in love with the

organization, and decided she wanted to work there. Alison describes what is an emerging response to the mobilizing-nonprofit complex:

> I thought getting in the door was enough. I assumed they would see the value and importance of what I was doing, and my training, and they were going to really like what I was doing and move me up. After being there for a year, I still wasn't making enough money, to the point that I was on food stamps. The value of work is important no matter where you are, whether you are working in for-profit, nonprofit, or government. The value of work is the value of work, and you should be treated with the respect and monetary means to get you by. There is this assumption that if you are in a nonprofit then you should be scraping, and you should be used to having to do the grunt work, the canvassing, the cold calls, and a lot of times you can't move up from that, and there is the burnout that turns people off from nonprofits and organizing work.[9]

Over the last seven years, I have increasingly heard many students decry the lack of civic opportunities available after college that pay a living wage, and for many students it is important that they also be paid enough to cover monthly educational loan repayments.

It is well known that AmeriCorps Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) and City Year members often survive using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), a federal program that offers nutrition assistance to low-income individuals and families. The monthly stipend each yearlong volunteer receives is calibrated according to the federal poverty line for the region of service, making the program financially most accessible to middle and upper-class young adults who can afford to "live in poverty" with external financial support from family. For those young adults coming from lower-income backgrounds, such postgraduate opportunities are an unlikely option. Not only is the lack of meaningful civic work problematic, but the lack of appropriate compensation for civic work is an ethical problem that has the potential to end civic vocations before they even start.

These are just a few of the concerns of recent graduates searching for meaningful civic work, but faced with spirit-breaking mistreatment, devaluation, powerlessness, and polarizing politics that dismiss the value of the community. Perhaps, as you read their stories, something sounded familiar. The sickness present in mobilizing culture is pervasive, crossing sectors and cultures, suffocating democratic culture, and breaking the civic spirit. It is alarming to consider the long-term impact of engaging meaningful civic development work in higher education when students are met with such violent postgraduate experiences of professional praxis.

Higher Education's Power to Engage

While the disposability and human cost of the mobilizing-nonprofit complex threatens civic capacity, higher education is also uniquely situated to engage this

issue as the preparatory site for professional employment. As we explore ways to create meaningful civic culture and identify developmental civic processes, they must include expectations for both formal education and postgraduate professional sites of civic learning and practice. Higher education can play a far more powerful role in both screening and guiding professional sites toward improved democratic civic cultures.

A few years ago, an impressive job recruitment flyer crossed my former desk at the University of Denver's Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning. It had all the right words and phrases: grassroots community organizing, democracy, power, relationships, social justice, and working toward the common good. These key terms formed lyrical sentences that painted a picture of authentic, relational, broad-based community organizing—directly contradicting the predominant mobilizing practice of the nonprofit-civic sector. With awareness of the kind of civic positions generally available to current or graduating students, I questioned the authenticity of such civic claims. Unfortunately, personal experience and the stories of students have taught me that in terms of entry-level civic positions, "If it seems too good to be true, it probably is."

The organization was seeking permission to recruit and hold interviews with students in the common space just outside of our office in the student center. The flyer came to me from the work-study student managing the front desk of our office who received the initial request. Intrigued, I asked the student to bring the guest to my office so I could learn more. Over the course of our conversation, I asked pointed questions about the type of work required for the position, their organizing practices, and intended outcomes of their efforts. The polished language of the flyer began to tarnish as the organizational representative described in detail a top-down mobilizing model, which offered no resemblance to their democratic civic claims.

Seeing a potential learning opportunity, I took the time to share my concerns with the organizational representative. I first pointed out that the claims of their written announcement did not match the job duties, methods, or intended outcomes. Such deception is not only unethical, it is ineffective as students waste their time starting jobs they do not want and therefore leave shortly after, resulting in high employee turnover. As a result, organizations must focus resources on constant recruitment and training of new short-term employees, which negatively affects larger organizational goals, reputation, and success.

This first point was followed by what I imagine is a less common message from higher education: These are not the kind of jobs that our students are interested in, because they know this is not meaningful civic work, nor an effective approach to social change. The civic skills, knowledge, and capacities of our students far exceed the opportunities of such positions. I told the representative I appreciate the eagerness to recruit on campus, but I will not approve use of this space to recruit and interview university students for these positions. It is not a good match. In the future, if they had opportunities that were a better fit, I would be happy to talk again.

Truth be told, I did not have official university authority to decide who

could use the tables in the common space located within the student center and surrounded by not only the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning, but also the offices of Academic and Career Development, Living and Learning Communities, Pioneer Leadership Program, and Religious and Spiritual Life. Instead, in that moment I drew my authority from the university community of students, staff, and faculty who work toward the education and development of students who deserve better opportunities after graduation.

I share this story to highlight higher education's power to engage the civic-nonprofit sector—to not only listen to what the community wants, but to be a truly collaborative, relational partner willing to also share our own hopes, needs, and expectations toward the development of a meaningful and ethical civic sector.

Higher education seems all too eager to appeal to potential employers with little critical evaluation of the kind of work and working environment we encourage students to seek after graduation. In the current economy, colleges and universities are primarily concerned with gainful employment, tracking job offers, full-time versus part-time work, and compensation without concern for quality or purpose of employment. Higher education courts employers of all sectors, inviting them to campus to set a table up in the student center or at internship and career fairs, to guest lecture in classrooms, and even hold adjunct faculty positions where they can teach and recruit simultaneously.

Higher education should absolutely engage in a diverse range of community-campus partnerships, and colleges and universities should encourage use of their facilities as public space for community-campus dialogue, collaboration, and public work. But what higher education should not do is sell out students to persistent courtiers without exercising any power to address the challenge of shaping meaningful civic workplaces and professions. Within these community-campus relationships, colleges and universities can challenge internship sites and employers to develop authentic civic opportunities and demand just and ethical treatment of civic professionals. The recurrent pattern of benign neglect demands that higher education levy the power it has to support broader cultural change, and stop ignoring the problematic mismatch between vocational preparedness and a lack of professional sites where young adults—or any adult for that matter—can practice and further develop civic agency. Otherwise, we risk graduating students into a diseased civic culture and a political system in which many have already lost faith, which may ultimately lead to a loss of civic vocation.[10]

It is an ambitious call to action, and there are various ways higher education can engage the problem. I will let the students speak about some opportunities of impact they identified and have the final word. Both Noelle and Felipe identified mentors as key to navigating postgraduation civic opportunities. As Noelle puts it: "For students like me who are about to graduate, we need to know what to look for. What nonprofits can we trust—if it is going to be a nonprofit? Which ones are actually going to use the community organizing model [versus mobilizing]? Higher education as a whole does a poor job with the screening process, but mentors make a difference—somebody who can help with the screening

process, someone we can go talk to and say: this is what I'm looking at, what do you think?"[11] Higher education mentors who help students think through options, decipher the glossy words and job descriptions, and have community relationships and engage in public work are able to teach students how to identify meaningful opportunities for civic work.

For Felipe, mentorship necessarily includes considerations for structural racism and includes the development of mentors within nonprofits and the broader community—something higher education could engage in a more meaningful way as part of alumni engagement, internships, long-term community-engaged research, or public work:

> When it comes to being a person of color, there needs to be an emphasis put on mentorship. Coming out of college, I would have loved to have someone to support me when I was organizing. Someone who understands organizing, is a person of color, and is willing to push me to develop my abilities further. Latino males need more mentors. Those Latinos already at the table need to put more effort into mentoring young Latinos who are trying to succeed. When people of color make it to the table, they have worked hard to get a place at the table, and they often feel strongly about protecting that position. They do not always work to bring other people of color to the table, because they feel like . . . places at the table are [so] sparse to begin with, why should they compete for so few seats at the table? This is something that needs to be addressed.[12]

Felipe's insight about the value of mentorship is reflective of the lack of racial diversity within nonprofit leadership—an issue mirrored in higher education that also continues to demand attention and action:

> As . . . Latino[s,] we were the face of the organization, but it did not seem like there was any opportunity to move up, or a willingness amongst organizational leaders to develop [us] into leadership positions. I was always looking for ways to develop myself, or to push myself to learn from others, but it did not bode well in that organization. It always seemed that I had to explain myself for wanting to learn and do new things, to develop myself—explain why I even would want something like that. The whole organizing team was Latino, but then there was the executive director, the communications director, and other staff director positions, and they were all white. [I] would notice subtleties of how we [the organizing team] were viewed by the administrative staff. There was a disconnect between the organizers and the staff, and there was a huge disconnect between the staff and the parent members that we worked with. Parent members would come over to the office, and it was unsettling to see how the rest of the staff would not even try to connect with the parents. I understand there was a language barrier [as the parents were mostly monolingual Spanish-speaking Latinos and the staff were all English speaking and white], but at least you can try. Say hello to these parents, try to make a connection with the members who are part of the organization.[13]

The final lesson for higher education is to teach students to value and develop grounded, realistic confidence in themselves and their work. This emerges from the community organizing concept of self-interest, which lies between selfishness and selflessness on a spectrum and is about self among others. It is also a component of theological Personal and Professional Formation at Iliff School of Theology. It would be absurd to graduate students with the title "Master of Social Change" if we did not also teach them to master self-care and self-worth. Alison Wisneski shared this lesson that she learned while at Iliff:

> I am not doing anybody any favors if I am going to a workplace where I do not feel valued, and then I go home and relay that information over and over to my partner, who in turn says: just get out. But then it turns into conversations of: I love this organization, I love this work, I love organizing, and I know I'm doing a good job, and maybe one day they will be able to pay me. You will see a lot of people sticking around such workplaces, but I have learned that it is okay to place value on yourself. If you cannot do these things like self-care, and you do not have self-worth, then you are not going to be of any value to anybody else. Realizing that you can be selfless while putting yourself first was a really big realization for me, which brought a lot of things home and is giving me a lot more civic agency.[14]

We are not doing anyone any favors by pretending we do not have power to change the mobilizing culture that threatens our civic capacity. After all, we as a society created it, and higher education plays an important, if often unselfconscious role in the process.

We are the ones to help create a new civic culture.

Notes

1. Felipe Vieyra Jr. (University of Denver alum) in discussion with the author March 20, 2013. Quote approval granted February 3, 2014.
2. Harry C. Boyte, "Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work," in *Democracy's Education: Public Work, Citizenship, and the Future of Colleges and Universities*, ed. Harry C. Boyte. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015.
3. Felipe Vieyra Jr., telephone interview by Jenny L. Whitcher, February 1, 2014. Quote approval granted February 3, 2014.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Noelle Johnson (Northern Arizona University graduate student and Western Kentucky University alum), e-mail message to author, February 2, 2014. Quote approval granted February 2, 2014.
7. Noelle Johnson, telephone interview by Jenny L. Whitcher, February 2, 2014. Quote approval granted February 3, 2014.
8. Boyte, "Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work."
9. Alison Wisneski (Iliff School of Theology Master of Social Change graduate student), telephone interview by Jenny L. Whitcher, February 2, 2014. Quote approval granted February 3, 2014.

10. Harvard University Institute of Politics, "Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service: 24th Edition," 2013, *www.iop.harvard.edu/survey-young-americans%E2%80%99-attitude-toward-politics-and-public-service-24th-edition*.
11. Noelle Johnson, telephone interview.
12. Felipe Vieyra Jr., telephone interview.
13. Ibid.
14. Alison Wisneski, telephone interview by Jenny L. Whitcher, February 2, 2014. Quote approval granted February 3, 2014.