The Higher Education Exchange is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the Higher Education Exchange agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The Higher Education Exchange is part of a movement to strengthen higher education’s democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the Higher Education Exchange publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE
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REINVENTING CITIZENSHIP AS PUBLIC WORK
Civic Learning for the Working World

Harry C. Boyte

Reprinted from the 2013 issue of the Higher Education Exchange

Traditions of Citizenship as Public Work

A challenge to conceptions that contrast citizenship with work, common among leaders of the American Revolution who had little use for work (and condescended toward working people), developed through the colonial experiences and early years of the nation. The actual labors of settlers, who had cleared lands, built towns and villages, wells, meeting halls, and roads, generated what the historian Robert Wiebe has called America’s portable democracy (Wiebe 1995) and cultivated a democratic assertiveness among the people. “Experience proves that the very men whom you entrust with the support and defense of your most sacred liberties are frequently corrupt,” wrote a group of artisans in Philadelphia during the Revolution. “If ever therefore your rights are preserved, it must be through the virtue and integrity of the middling sort, as farmers, tradesmen, & etc.” (Kazin 1995, 9). Benjamin Franklin spoke and wrote in this vein. The Leather Apron Club, which he founded in Philadelphia in 1727, included tradesmen, artisans, and shopkeepers—those whom he lauded as “the middling people”—and combined hard work and civic commitments. The Club discussed civic and political topics of the day, developed plans for self-improvement, and created a network of citizens committed to “doing well by doing good.” Members generated myriad civic projects, including a street-sweeping corps, volunteer firefighters, tax-supported neighborhood constables, 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 (Isaacson 2012). In a similar vein, Franklin proposed education that combined practical and liberal arts, a union that was to reappear in the country’s land grant colleges.

The connection between work and citizenship further developed in the early years of the new nation. “When [ideals of disinterested civic virtue] proved too idealistic and visionary,” writes Gordon Wood, Americans “found new democratic adhesives in the actual behavior of plain, ordinary people” (Wood
1991, ix). Several interrelated, interacting traditions of citizenship as public work emerged, worth identifying as foundations for citizen-centered democracy:

- **Community building**—the collective labors (paid and unpaid) of solving public problems and building and sustaining shared resources in communities;
- **Vocation and civic professionalism**—callings to careers filled with public purpose; and
- **Democratizing public work**—work that deepens and expands democracy.

**Community Building**

David Mathews has described pithily the tradition of practical community building in his treatment of the emergence of institutions such as public schools. “Nineteenth-century self-rule . . . was a sweaty, hands-on, problem-solving politics;” Mathews writes:

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 (Mathews 2006, vii).

Such public work drew on traditions of “the commons”—lands, streams, and forests for which whole communities had responsibility and in which they had rights of use, and also goods of general benefit built mainly through citizen labors, like schools, libraries, community centers, wells, roads, music festivals, and arts fairs. All were associated with the term “the commonwealth.” Indeed, for many immigrants, America represented a chance to recreate the commons privatized by elites in Europe. As the historians Oscar and Mary Handlin observed about the Revolutionary generation of the 1770s, “For the farmers and seamen, for the fishermen, artisans and new merchants, commonwealth repeated the lessons they knew from the organization of churches and towns . . . the value of
common action” (Handlin 1969, 30). Such community-building traditions of communal labor can be found around the world. They create rich foundations for a normative ideal of citizenship as collective, self-directed labors, citizenship that is practical and hands-on, and which bridges divisions of status, income, and other differences for the sake of community-benefit (Boyte 2011).

**Vocation and Civic Professionalism**

Collaborative work that solves public problems and creates common resources for communities is one current of public work citizenship. Work filled with public purpose is another. This concept draws on the rich theological idea of *vocation*. As John Budd observes, “When Martin Luther translated biblical verses such as ‘Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called’ from the original Greek into German . . . he used the German word for ‘occupation’ for ‘calling.’ Thus, Luther initiated a radically new perspective in which all are called to employ their gifts, ‘something that fits how we are made, so that doing it will enable us to glorify God, serve others, and be most richly ourselves’” (Budd 2011, 167).

The connection between vocation and education has recently resurfaced in undergraduate education. Liberal arts colleges like Augsburg College, the new institutional home of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, illustrate the recall of vocation and have the potential for significant impact since they are “upstream” centers, shaping the identities and practices of thousands of civic leaders. In its educational vision, *Vocation, Access, and Excellence*, Augsburg highlights the concept of vocation, integrated into its core curriculum as “a fertile seedbed for the democratic ethos:”

This view of vocation both stresses the importance of education and clarifies its role. One does not seek education for either self-advancement or as a way to reach salvation. Its proper role is in helping persons determine and develop their abilities in preparation for investigating and celebrating God’s creation, for probing the mysteries of the human condition, and ultimately for furthering the well-being of society. As Luther said, God doesn’t want a cobbler who puts crosses on shoes; God wants a cobbler who makes good, reliable footwear (*Vocation, Access, and Excellence* 2012).

Augsburg’s view of vocation has potential for helping to bridge the sharp divide in higher education between professional studies on the one hand, and liberal arts and civic learning on the other.

A sense of calling or vocation is associated with the rise of professions.
Though professions are often understood in terms of the emergence of a disinterested ethic tied to positivist theories of knowledge and detached from politics and self-interests, an alternative tradition of “citizen professionalism” contributes especially to American democracy. William Sullivan identifies a central tension in professionalism in the United States since the colonial period, “between a technical emphasis which stresses specialization—broadly linked to a utilitarian conception of society as a project for enhancing efficiency and individual satisfaction—and a sense of professional mission which has insisted upon the prominence of the ethical and civic dimension of the enterprise” (Sullivan 1995, 28).

Scott Peters has detailed extensive practices of such civic professionalism in the land grant college tradition, especially before World War II. Land grants combined “practical arts” with “liberal arts,” and sought to develop professionals with a strong sense of their civic responsibilities. “Our colleges should not be content with only the training of outstanding agriculturalists, or engineers, or home economists, or teachers, or scientists, or lawyers, or doctors, or veterinarians,” declared John Hannah, president of Michigan State College in 1944. “The first and never-forgotten objective must be that every human product of our educational system must be given the training that will enable him to be an effective citizen, appreciating his opportunities and fully willing to assume his responsibilities in a great democracy” (Peters 2004, 47).

William Doherty and his colleagues at the Citizen Professional Center have pioneered in the practices and theory of such citizen professionalism. Adapting broad-based organizing practices and public work concepts to family and health professions, their citizen professional model begins with the premise that solving complex problems requires many sources of knowledge, and “the greatest untapped resource for improving health and social well-being is the knowledge, wisdom, and energy of individuals, families, and communities who face challenging issues in their everyday lives.” The Citizen Professional Center has generated multiple partnerships including suburban movements of families working to untangle overscheduled, consumerist lives; an

Land grants combined “practical arts” with “liberal arts,” and sought to develop professionals with a strong sense of their civic responsibilities.
African American Citizen Fathers Project seeking to foster positive fathering models and practices; a new project with Hennepin County to change civil service practices into public work; and a pilot with Health Partners Como Clinic, called the Citizen Health Care Home, which stresses personal and family responsibility for one’s own health and opportunities for patient leadership development and co-responsibility for health (Doherty et al. 2010).

**Democratizing Public Work**

The work of making democratic change is a third tradition of citizenship, overlapping and intertwining with community-building work and civic professionalism. Union and community organizers, civil rights workers, suffragists, and others created a strong tradition of work for democratic social change, mingling with the very idea of “work” itself as a wellspring for change. Thus the iconic bookends of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s career were the unforgettable images of thousands of domestic workers walking to their jobs in the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 to protest segregated buses, and the signs of Memphis garbage workers declaring “I Am A Man,” demanding recognition and dignity in 1968.

Change making through professional work played a pivotal role in the African American freedom struggle. Gerald Taylor has argued that after the collapse of the Populist Party in the 1890s, the black community turned to “knowledge artisans”:

> While millions of property owners and artisans sinking into debt peonage, or forced into wage labor, formed the populist movement, the rising professions, what could be called collectives of “knowledge artisans,” offers a contrasting story of the search for independence among both whites and blacks, using a different set of strategies in an effort to consolidate control over productive property, work products, tools, and vocational training and accreditation. . . . These intellectual artisans, accountants, doctors, lawyers, engineers among others, gained control over what we now call the professions. The professionalization of these groups provided the ability to negotiate contracts but retain control over their workplaces, their tools and their schedules. They controlled decisions about the learning and application of their knowledge of these intellectual crafts, the formation centers that prepared them and the terms by which they could enter the professions. . . . By the early 20th century, these professional guilds had organized national organizations, stabilized and expanded the income of their members and wielded significant economic political and cultural influence” (Taylor 2012, 224-225).

In the African American community, knowledge artisans provided leadership in the continuing freedom struggle by building centers of
independent power ranging from schools and congregations to businesses and beauty parlors.

Parallels can also be seen among European Americans in the 1920s and 1930s who created foundations for civic change. These included many who viewed schools and other educational sites, such as settlement houses, as being at the center of democracy.

**Civic Learning Through Public Work**

Our civic engagement work through the Center for Democracy and Citizenship (CDC) began in 1987 with an argument that communal labor traditions nourished a “commonwealth” politics throughout American history. Working with partners, we sought to translate methods and ideas of broad-based community organizing, themes of “the commonwealth,” and principles of self-organized governance, as articulated by Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues, into other settings, with a particular focus on education in schools, communities, and higher education.

As we sought to democratize educational institutions it soon became apparent that institutional organizing requires a shift in framework. Rather than seeing institutions in conventional ways—as fixed and static, defined by structures, procedures, rules and regulations—we have to reconceive them as living and dynamic communities, with norms, values, leadership, and cultural identities. Maria Avila, a former Mexican American organizer with the IAF 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 that organizing focuses on cultural change before structural change. “Culture changes [come] first, leading to structural changes later.” 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).

Work is at the heart of the self-interest in all institutions, including schools and colleges. Democratizing the politics of knowledge and making such politics explicit has to be an essential strategy. Seeing institutions as communities, building public relationships, undertaking intentional changes in their cultures to make them more public, and thinking in political terms about
knowledge, as well as other power sources, highlights the dynamics of work routines, incentives, norms, and identities. A public work approach to organizing differs, in significant respects, from conventional liberal and communitarian approaches to civic engagement, both of which have strong normative frameworks. Public work avoids exhortations about what teachers, students, staff, or institutions should do. Rather, public work connects individual and institutional interests to citizenship and the public good by inviting people to “make work more public,” more interactive, collaborative, visible, and filled with public purposes. We saw this early on, for instance, in the efforts of a group called The Collaboration for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning that sought to spread active learning practices in education. Lesley Cafarelli, director of the consortium, explains:

In 1991 . . . [the consortium] began an intensive effort to raise the frequency and level of campus conversations about teaching. This effort, funded by The Bush Foundation, was a response to our observation that the culture of privacy around higher education’s most public activity—teaching—serves to obstruct both individual and collective efforts to strengthen student learning. How can faculty strive to improve their teaching, for example, if there are few opportunities to observe and learn from other professionals or to wrestle intellectually with colleagues about ways to cope with both common and surprising difficulties in teaching? How can colleges and universities fulfill their public responsibility if there is little or no collective knowledge of how teaching is practiced, sharing of expertise, or joint exploration of teachers’ impact on student learning? An academic culture that preserves the privacy—even secrecy—of the classroom fosters professional isolation and stifles improvement (Cafarelli 1998).

Nan Kari and a group of faculty, staff, and students at the College of St. Catherine, working with the CDC, addressed the challenge of “making teaching and learning more public” through adapting community organizing methods. Their work significantly informed the CDC’s general theory of citizenship as public work. Building on such partnerships, public work created the framework of the 1999 *Wingspread Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Research Universities*, which I coauthored with Elizabeth Hollander on behalf of a group of higher education leaders.

The concept of public work also informed an initiative in schools, begun during those years and known as Public Achievement. It sought to revitalize the empowering civic learning of the Citizenship Education Program of the civil rights movement. Teams of young people—typically ranging from elementary through high school students, but more recently also involving college students and sometimes older adults—work through the school year on public issues of their choice. Members of the team are coached by adults
who help them develop achievable goals and learn political skills and concepts. At St. Bernard’s elementary school in St. Paul, Public Achievement became the centerpiece of the culture in the early and mid-1990s through the leadership of then-principal Dennis Donovan, who insisted that all forms of work in the school, including teaching, have public and empowering dimensions. Public Achievement at St. Bernard’s was closely linked to the concept of “citizen teacher,” an idea that seems especially important in an era when high stakes testing and technocratic measures of accountability threaten the foundations of teacher autonomy and creativity. Since its founding in 1990, Public Achievement has spread to several hundred communities and schools in the United States, as well schools in Poland, Northern Ireland, Gaza and the West Bank, Israel, and elsewhere.

Skills and habits of civic politics include relationship building, tolerance for ambiguity, ability to deal with conflict constructively, and the capacity to act in open environments with no predetermined outcomes. These are not part of normal higher education curricula, or of scientific or other conventional academic or professional disciplines. The capacities for civic politics and civic professionalism have to be learned mainly in practice, and also entail unlearning such tendencies as hypercompetitive individualism, intellectual certitude, and the stance of outside observer, which are frequently byproducts of conventional graduate education. Our colleague Bill Doherty estimates that it usually takes two years of learning and unlearning for most professionals to do effective public work.

There are also other, parallel and sometimes allied, efforts in education to make work more public. These include the deliberative pedagogies in K-12 schools and higher education supported by Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums Institute. In higher education, such deliberative pedagogies now have a demonstrated track record for generating agency and action in settings like Wake Forest University. In K-12 education, research by Stacie Molnar-Main is showing that teachers who use deliberative pedagogies report an enhancement of their own sense of citizenship as teachers, as well as notably more active, engaged citizenship among their students.¹

Such efforts to make education more public found some support from populist elements within the Obama administration. At the White House on January 10, 2012, the Office of Public Engagement and the Department of Education hosted a national gathering of civic and educational leaders called

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¹ For evidence in higher education, see John Dedrick with Laura Grattan and Harris Dienstfrey, Deliberation and the Work of Higher Education and Stacie Molnar-Main, Public Learning in Public Schools.
“For Democracy’s Future: Education Reclaims Our Civic Mission.” Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced the addition of a “third C,” citizenship, to the department’s commitments to preparation for college and career. At the White House event, education groups undertook new initiatives to strengthen civic learning and education. The Association of American Colleges and Universities released a report, *A Crucible Moment*, calling for civic learning to become “pervasive” in colleges and universities. And the American Commonwealth Partnership (ACP) of educational groups and institutions was launched, created on invitation by Jon Carson, director of the White House Office of Public Engagement. ACP aimed at marking the 150th anniversary of the Morrill Act, which established the first land-grant colleges, by developing new strategies to strengthen the civic identities of colleges and universities as part of the larger movement for a citizen-centered democracy.

ACP grew out of the Civic Agency Initiative, part of a coalition of state colleges and universities called the American Democracy Project, which spread and adapted empowering pedagogies from Public Achievement. A group of colleges and universities began to work together on these themes, including Lone Star Community College, Western Kentucky University, Georgia State College and University, the University of Colorado at Boulder, Winona State University, Augsburg College, Syracuse University, and more recently the University of Washington Bothell. In several places—especially Northern Arizona University and the University of Maryland Baltimore County—concepts of civic agency and public work became the foundation for large-scale institutional innovation in curriculum and co-curricular life.

ACP also created a context for highlighting outstanding examples of education as public work. For instance, at the White House meeting we spotlighted the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences, a public school on a 78-acre farm in the southwestern corner of the city, where students learn math, science, English, and writing through the processes of planting, harvesting, marketing, and selling vegetables. Juniors and seniors enroll in classes that focus on the city’s flower garden show, learning horticulture, animal science, agricultural mechanics, economics, food science, communications, and business. Guided by teachers, the students also have a good deal of space for self-organizing and initiating their projects. “Connecting work and academics makes a huge difference in terms of ways students look at education,” says Lucille Shaw, assistant principal. “Through all of their academic classes as well as technical studies students can blend and apply concepts.” Students also learn “we’re all in this together,” Shaw says. “What is this going to do to better my life, and help someone else?” With a high number of
students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who often struggle with standardized testing, the Ag School has won national attention for its success in college preparation and student achievement—87 percent graduate and go to college. Fifty-nine percent meet or exceed average scores on the Prairie State Achievement exams, which test for reading, English, math, science, and writing, compared to 28 percent in the Chicago district as a whole.2

ACP deepened the theory of public work, including the framework of “civic science,” an effort to rethink the nature of science, its role and relationship to society, and the identity of scientists through the lens of civic agency and public work. For some years, the CDC had worked on civic science with the Delta Center, a world-renown center for infant development science. ACP created a context to deepen the idea and develop relationships on civic science with leaders in climate science, sustainable agriculture, science and technology studies, and other fields. Civic science highlights the political—though not partisan—nature of science; science as a powerful source of knowledge for action in the world, rather than an outside description of the world. In this sense, science itself is a resource for helping to negotiate a shared democratic way of life. Civic science stresses that scientists are also citizens, who come together with nonscientists to solve real-world problems in the course of building a democratic society. Civic science addresses what may be called “the knowledge war” that feeds a bitterly divided, hyperpolarized society.3 The Delta Center launched a new initiative based on civic science, Get Ready Iowa, to bridge the professional educator and policymaker/parent divides, and ACP created an organizing team for a new international civic science initiative.4

Science itself is a resource for helping to negotiate a shared democratic way of life.

2 The account of the Chicago Ag school and its successes is taken from Harry C. Boyte, “For Democracy’s Future,” Huffington Post, November 9, 2012; for parallel evidence that consequential work tied to education is a powerful motivator for low income student success, see Peter Levine, et al, CIRCLE, Pathways Into Leadership.


Overall, the American Commonwealth Partnership generated the realization of the need for a reform movement across all of education to put public work—work with explicit civic dimensions—back into the center. This means bridging the gap between liberal education and civic learning, career and workforce preparation, and between thinking and acting in terms of the economies and civic ecologies of local communities. We need a broad reform effort to “integrate the three C’s” of college, career, and citizenship, for the health of our communities and our democracy, for the viability of our educational institutions, and for our careers as professionals.

Agents of Change, Not Objects of Change

As the political theorist and community organizer Rom Coles has observed, it is hard for many to believe that such democratic innovations add up to much more than “oases of democracy” in an expanding desert of a technocratic and market-driven culture (Coles 2006, 547-561). What makes it possible to imagine that wider change is possible?

Feeding the discouragement of many, a 2013 story from Inside Higher Education dramatizes the possibility that higher education will become reengineered in narrow ways that eviscerate the liberal dimensions of learning entirely. “North Carolina governor joins chorus of Republicans critical of liberal arts,” read the headline in Inside Higher Education. “Governor McCrory’s comments on higher education echo statements made by a number of Republican governors—including those in Texas, Florida, and Wisconsin—who have questioned the value of liberal arts instruction and humanities degrees at public colleges and universities. Those criticisms have started to coalesce into a potential Republican agenda on higher education, emphasizing reduced state funding, low tuition prices, vocational training, performance funding for faculty members, state funding tied to job placement in ‘high demand’ fields and taking on flagship institutions” (Inside Higher Education 2013).

But such developments also create openings. The first populist movement among small farmers, black and white, grew from the threats to farmers’ civic autonomy. As Gerald Taylor observes, professionals of all kinds experience analogous threats to their autonomy as knowledge artisans, in environments where “outcome measures” become increasingly narrow, from standardized tests in K-12 to HMO efficiency measures. Like farmers “who contested the loss of control over the means of their work and the intellectual and physical products of that work,” (Taylor 2012, 226) faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders are faced with the prospect that they will either be the architects
of change or they will be its objects. There is a need to move from protest and resistance to the constructive identities of architects of change, rebuilding public relationships and alliances with many others in American life.

This challenge requires an empowering civic education and many sites that are citizenship schools for knowledge societies. It calls for a revitalization of education itself as a great and animating civic vocation. Public work for citizen-centered democracy will be central to the process.

REFERENCES


CONTRIBUTORS

HARRY BOYTE is founder of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, now merged into the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College, where he is Senior Scholar in Public Life Philosophy. He is also a Senior Fellow at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School of Public Affairs. In 2012, he served as national coordinator of the American Commonwealth Partnership, a network of higher education groups and institutions invited by the White House Office of Public Engagement on the anniversary of land grant colleges. He is editor, most recently, of the collection *Democracy’s Education: Public Work, Citizenship and the Future of Colleges and Universities*.


NAN FAIRLEY is associate director of journalism in the Auburn University School of Communication and Journalism. She is the recipient of the 2011 AU Award for Excellence in Faculty Outreach. Many of the journalism projects she has developed during her more than 20 years of teaching at Auburn are designed to engage students deeply in community. Her primary research interest is civic journalism.

DAVID MATHEWS, president of the Kettering Foundation, was secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in the Ford administration and, before that, president of the University of Alabama. Mathews has written extensively on Southern history, public policy, education, and international problem solving. His books include *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy*, and *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future*.

BERNIE RONAN has retired from the Maricopa Community Colleges where he oversaw the division of Public Affairs and the Center for Civic Participation. He served as the acting president of Mesa Community College in 2007-2008. An Arizona native, Ronan holds a doctorate in public administration from Arizona State University.


CHRISTA DARYL SLATON is the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at New Mexico State University. Her research has focused on expanding and enhancing citizen participation through innovative methods designed to educate citizens, encourage deliberation, and promote collaboration.

CLAIRE SNYDER-HALL currently serves as program director for Common Cause Delaware and as a research deputy for the Kettering Foundation. She has over twenty years of experience working on civic engagement. Before relocating to Rehoboth Beach, she was an associate professor of political theory at George Mason University. She holds a PhD in political science from Rutgers University and a BA cum laude from Smith College. Her book *Civic Aspirations: Why Some Higher Education Faculty are Reconnecting Their Professional and Public Lives* was published by Kettering Foundation in 2015.
MARK WILSON is director of Civic Learning Initiatives in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University. He is also an Appalachian Teaching Fellow with the Appalachian Regional Commission and the author of several articles and the book *William Owen Carver's Controversies in the Baptist South*. In addition, Wilson serves as the secretary of the Alabama Historical Association.

DEBORAH WITTE, senior associate with the Kettering Foundation, is coeditor of the *Higher Education Exchange*. She also serves on the board of trustees of the Ohio Humanities Council. She received her PhD in Leadership and Change from Antioch University.