

Political Ideas: Catalysts for Creating a Public Culture at the College of St. Catherine



People keep wanting us to choose — are we a Catholic College or are we a feminist college? I would like to see us publicly refuse to choose, to allow the college to be the complicated, controversial, contradictory, plain messy place that it ought to be. [The college should] stand firmly behind that chaos and justify it as imperative to an environment of learners.

— Sara Koch, student leader, 1996

In the past eight years, many at the College of St. Catherine (CSC) have self-consciously undertaken an experiment in civic renewal. Our work has been based on the conviction that an institutional culture rich with the public-spirited complexity and difference conveyed by Sara Koch's remarks is itself a key element in education for citizenship. It is impossible to recount here a full story of the past eight years or to capture in detail the intriguing nuances of college politics. Many obstacles and challenges have emerged along the way. The college has also witnessed striking successes. This case study describes how some at the college came to recognize the need for a more public culture and how we have conceptualized the strategies used to create it.

The College of St. Catherine is one college with two campuses, each with a distinctive culture. This case study is written about the St. Paul campus, referred to here as the College of St. Catherine. The St. Paul campus was founded as a traditional four-year comprehensive college for women. It offers baccalaureate degrees to women and graduate degrees to men and women. The Minneapolis campus, also founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph, began as a two-year college. It offers certificate and associate degrees to men and women. The merger occurred almost 15 years ago. The mission of the Minneapolis campus is to serve underprepared and underserved populations. The St. Paul campus benefits greatly from the insights and education strategies developed by faculty and staff of the Minneapolis campus, and many from that campus have been important actors and leaders in the events described here.

The precipitating crisis that can be said to have launched the renewal effort was the institutional climate in 1990. A grant proposal, written in that year, characterized the college as suffering from a striking "fragmentation and

isolation of the faculty, notably along disciplinary lines." The narrative continued, "Too frequently do faculty from different disciplines come together only around issues of faculty governance, and too infrequently around topics of intellectual development."¹

Many at CSC perceived faculty meetings — the primary mechanism for faculty governance — to be an ineffective arena for problem solving. Debates were often uncivil. Faculty members complained that the majority of time was used for announcements and reports rather than deliberation for decision making. Frustration and feelings of powerlessness pervaded the culture. Ineffective faculty self-governance resulted in part, from mistrust of colleagues.

The fragmentation described in the grant proposal was not limited to the faculty. It pervaded the college. Thus the curriculum "belonged" to the faculty and the cocurriculum activities (ranked as less important than classroom teaching) "belonged" to the staff. Administrators made budget decisions (perceived as the source of real power) and created the institutional infrastructure. Institutional structures and practices reinforced this fragmentation. Students were regarded, mainly, as the recipients of the educational enterprise. Work roles and job descriptions created distinct and exclusive categories of workers. Staff, even those with Ph.D.s, were rarely thought qualified for classroom teaching. The budgeting process was difficult to access and influence. While clarification of role responsibility in any organization is important, the rigid boundaries at CSC inhibited the creation of a more fluid, multidimensional learning environment.

Against this background, faculty, in the late 1980s, had struggled to revise the core curricu-

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lum. The task was formidable and beset on every side by turf battles. The faculty had tried unsuccessfully for almost 20 years to come to an agreed-upon plan for revision, but even well-developed plans had been rejected at the eleventh hour. In 1991, the faculty passed a policy directed especially at transfer students (many of whom were junior students seeking professional majors): all graduates will now meet all core requirements, without exception. The board of trustees responded with a directive to immediately develop a plan for revision of the core curriculum. This mandate, delivered by the president, created a sense of urgency that infused the task with energy and a new seriousness.

The Story of Change

Our vision is to establish a collegiate environment with lively public spaces and a rich public culture in classrooms, faculty meetings, and college forums — an environment in which democratic arts can be learned and practiced by educators and students alike.

— Joanne Cavallaro, 1994
English professor

The experiment in civic renewal began in 1991 when the college received a three-year faculty development grant from the Bush Foundation to implement an initiative called, Project Colleague. The primary objective was to promote interdisciplinary collaboration among faculty.

Faculty Study Groups (FSGs) formed the central activity of this project. FSGs were self-selected groups of faculty representing at least five disciplines and including one new faculty member. Groups agreed to pursue a topic of mutual intellectual interest for one year and produce a public product at the conclusion of study. A stipend was awarded each group,

which used a kind of site-based management model for budget and accounting.

What the college needed, the grant proposal stated, was “a structure for interaction . . . on issues of scholarship and pedagogy, which brings faculty together . . . and ‘raises the curtains’ among disciplines to foster a greater sense of community . . . to facilitate the interchange of ideas across disciplinary lines.”

Faculty believed that as they learned to work across disciplines, student learning outcomes would improve. FSGs provided the structure for new patterns of interaction. In the course of three years, FSGs generated a striking diversity of outcomes, from a jointly written novel to the infusion of feminist pedagogy in the biology curriculum to a series of artistic presentations highlighting the work of Hildegard of Begen.

In retrospect, several things are noteworthy about the FSG process as a strategy for institutional change. In an academic culture where many experience their work as tightly prescribed within a discipline, the FSG mini-grants authorized innovation and nourished creativity. Faculty eagerly engaged with others in intellectual work they had long thought about. Between 1991 and 1994, almost 60 percent of the faculty body and some administrative staff had participated in study groups, many of which had direct impact on curriculum.

Key to the success of FSGs was a minimal management structure and an easy accessibility. The structure gave wide latitude for experiments of many kinds. Diverse topics such as “The Twin Cities as a Classroom,” “Women’s Work in Third World Countries” (which included a group study experience in Mexico), and “Writing the Collaborative Novel” surfaced. The simple accountability mechanism

required a reporting-back process, often carried out in front of peers. Moreover, the work undertaken in FSGs mixed interests, disciplines, and sometimes expanded faculty identities. Faculty had their own disciplinary way of asking questions and often assumed authority over particular knowledge. The diverse group membership regularly challenged individual disciplinary perspectives.

Efforts to make work more public created fuss and conflict, but it also liberated talents and made people's contributions more visible. "It is messy, time consuming, and difficult at times," wrote Joanne Cavallaro. "It involves a redefinition of power relationships and demands new ways of using and understanding information, but the results can be amazingly fruitful."

In retrospect, it seems reasonable to conclude that while the FSG structure unleashed creativity, it also helped to establish new habits of interdisciplinary collaborative work, and offered a sense that it was possible to break through the prescribed boundaries that many people felt constrained them. In college environments, a heavy sense of inertia, even fatalism, pervades. Simply generating confidence that patterns can change is a key element.

The FSG process also laid the foundation for successful efforts to revise the core curriculum in 1993. Against the background of failure and rancor, undertaking a major curriculum revision was a significant task. The faculty had a long history of talk about core curriculum revision and several well-developed plans, including an exciting vision initiated by three humanities faculty members who had proposed a plan in 1990. But in the end it too had failed, in part because it had not included diverse representation in the planning. "A major reason that plan did not move forward was that it created conflicts we (faculty and

administration) did not know how to deal with," recalled Charles Buzicky, a professor of history and a member of the group that had created the plan. "In those days, we avoided open argument."

Frustrated, the college president conveyed the directive from the board of trustees: Revise the curriculum in one year or the administration will do it. Here the FSG experience proved a valuable model. A faculty working group with representation from every academic department, as well as student affairs staff and students, was established. There were public processes through which group members reported to their departments and asked for feedback. Several all-faculty problem-solving sessions were convened at times of impasse.

William Myers, a member of the Citizen Politics study group and the coordinator of the curriculum revision process reflected, "When we make our discussions public, we can accomplish difficult and potentially divisive goals without acrimony. The key is to create a spirit of openness, and constantly to keep the common work of the whole college community in view."

When the final plan was presented to the faculty body for a vote, they approved it unanimously.

The new plan changed the distribution requirements. In consequence, several humanities departments worried that the changes would result in loss of students for them. In exchange, the new curriculum included two new humanities-based courses required of all graduates. Assessment of the broad effects on individual departments is currently under way. In 1998-1999, the second year of full implementation, 65 faculty and staff teach the two new interdisciplinary courses. While still somewhat controversial at CSC, the practice of

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inviting staff members to teach in the core curriculum is a striking contrast to conventional practices in other colleges and universities. The “publicness” of the core curriculum also led naturally to the design of an open assessment process, with findings and recommendations widely discussed at faculty meetings.

Many who were involved named the curriculum work as a political process. Stakeholders used skills of bargaining and negotiation. Organizers formed a number of public mechanisms for discussion about differences and structures. A few simple rules guided the work: There had to be constant interaction between the working group representatives and their departments. Departments were not allowed to simply veto plans. When disagreement arose, the department had to propose an alternative plan, which could then be debated by the whole. The conceptual language of citizen politics was not the dominant language of the college culture, but it did prove helpful to the work and the thinking of the organizers. Concepts such as self-interest, problem solving, public space, and public evaluation were central throughout the process.

At the time, faculty did not name the revised curriculum plan as a vehicle for redefining work roles and identities, but in practice that is what the effort was attempting to do. In fact, the plan that was approved was a radical departure from the traditional distribution requirements, because it authorized — indeed, insisted on — course development across disciplinary boundaries.

Today, faculty continue to view implementation of the core as extraordinarily important work. Because it requires multiple ongoing tasks, it has become an obvious example of visible, common work. Many express strong ownership.

In 1994, the Bush Foundation awarded the college another grant to implement the second phase of renewal. Here the goal was to develop an institutional structure — the Teaching Learning Network (TLN) — that linked learning resources of both campuses and integrated lessons about facilitating change in higher education. Although the grant was awarded as a faculty development grant, many more stakeholders were included in its implementation.

The TLN has continued to generate a variety of collaborative research, curriculum development, and other collaborative work projects that focus on building a more public learning environment. It promotes the idea that learning is a cocreation, and that meaningful work can be an important catalyst for learning.

In the last four years, faculty and students of many disciplines have created multiple examples of active learning. Important college/neighborhood partnerships are now developing to expand learning resources. See Moua, a student cofounder of the Jane Addams School for Democracy commented:

I'm realizing how the educational system is in need of change. Schools that incorporate meaningful work and important topics of the day with classroom learning are needed. Students want a chance to contribute. . . . Learning should not be dependent on the teacher or limited to the classroom. The classroom is the place where you can integrate what is learned outside.

Moua's insights, along with feedback from many other students who have taken an active role in shaping their educational experience, have inspired further exploration of the potential for nontraditional settings. It was for this purpose, that faculty and students from the college helped to found the Jane Addams School.

Between 1991 and 1994, several larger public connections, networks, and stages also helped to create a sense that change is possible, and that the experiments at the college are important. For instance, annual conferences at the Humphrey Institute formed an important ongoing arena for those involved in civic experiments at the college to exchange lessons and experiences with others involved in other experiments in civic renewal based in institutions, ranging from a nursing home to Cooperative Extension, and inner-city minority service agencies from Los Angeles.

In 1993 the president of the college, Anita Pampusch, agreed to help sponsor the New Citizenship, a confederation of groups across the nation that worked with the incoming Clinton administration to analyze the reasons for the gap between citizens and government. The group developed a series of policy recommendations for reinvigorating citizenship. The initiative lasted two years and culminated in the widely endorsed "Civic Declaration: A Call For a New Citizenship."

The New Citizenship initiative included a series of meetings with Clinton administration officials. It developed research reports regarding a variety of public policy issues (including higher education and health) that were presented to President Clinton and other administration officials. The college was an important participant throughout this work. At one meeting in the White House, the college story was presented as an important case study in experimentation with creating a more public, civic culture and set of practices.

The larger public stage was and continues to be important. It is a way to gain visibility and create a sense of seriousness about the work.

Barriers to Cultural Change

This account does not intend to minimize the difficulties of such a project. In fact, leaders in the civic renewal process have encountered many obstacles, sometimes with serious setback. The following illustrates.

In the mid-1990s, the college adopted a strategic directive that, among other broad objectives, aimed to implement the new core curriculum, improve faculty salaries and benefits, and establish new administrative structures to encourage cross-departmental work throughout the institution. In the spirit of collaboration, a group of faculty and administrative leaders from both campuses worked over several weeks during the summer to create the implementation plan.

The faculty subgroup developed a strategy to reduce the number of small classes (under 10 students) and to increase the faculty-student ratio. They proposed a plan for staffing the interdisciplinary core courses without increasing the size of the faculty and agreed to become actively involved in student recruitment. The administrative group proposed a four-year plan to raise the mean of faculty salaries, long a source of tension between faculty and administration. In the weeks following, faculty leaders met with their colleagues and obtained widespread agreement to the plan.

Two years later, the board of trustees rescinded the salary plan. A major crisis resulted. Even though a new administrative team now leads the college, some resentment continues. For many faculty, anger and the sense of betrayal led to disengagement from any work perceived as extra — work not related to classroom teaching or departmental responsibilities. Sue Hendricks, professor and then-president of the faculty, reflects:

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Salaries were not the only issue at stake. Obviously raises were important, but we strongly felt the salary plan represented a concrete measure of the value of our contributions. We had come to see our common work in new ways and were beginning to recognize our self-interests embedded in a broader purpose. For faculty, this is a very different way of thinking. In all there was a sense that faculty had more control of our work environment. The decision to stop the salary plan midway through was perceived as a serious breach of the commitment made by the trustees and the administration.

Collaboration requires a radical redefinition of power that also shifts people's identities. Many individuals who did not see themselves as players in larger college issues came to the table when work was redefined in a broader way. But new identities can also be fragile. Although collaboration can coexist with hierarchies, it often challenges hierarchical leadership. When language like "partnership" and "collaborative work" is used but not taken seriously, especially when the stakes are high, cynicism grows.

An important outcome of this series of events was the realization that it takes a clear mission and ongoing evaluation to build and sustain a public culture. As Gil Clary, a professor of psychology and member of the original Citizen Politics group observed, "the work requires constant attention. Without it, we find ourselves sliding backward from benign neglect." When there is a pervasive sense of powerlessness and perceived threat to turf, many opt for the more familiar and less messy hierarchical decision making. Some, on the edges of the change, retreat.

In spite of periodic setbacks, a core group of faculty, staff, and students continues to promote collaborative approaches and to deepen

the public work theory as it applies to higher education. One of the most successful theory-building strategies has been to highlight innovative public work at the annual college conference on teaching and learning. In 1999, the conference addressed diversity and public work. Sixty faculty, staff, students, and community partners presented in 20 concurrent sessions — a surprisingly large number for a small college. Many more people attended. This public forum provides an occasion for open discussion of work and its meaning. It helps set the agenda for the coming year.

Outcomes

A wildflower garden is a useful metaphor for this renewal effort because the process has needed constant tending. There are cycles of change — times of dying off, periods of wait, and sometimes great flourishing — and there is a certain degree of unpredictability. But when the soil is fertilized, the garden grows with beauty that comes from very diverse sources of creativity and contribution.

It is important to note that this effort has not been created or directed in top-down fashion by the college administration, nor has it been named as an official institutional initiative. The process of change is not linear. Rather the work is organic in nature, rooted in the college's core values. It is multifaceted and has focused, thus far, in the mid-layer of the institution. Faculty and staff have been the main initiators, with students as important players. Broad political concepts and a vision of higher education's deepest purpose as the education of citizens for full participation in democracy have guided the overall work of cultural change. The pragmatic, ongoing experimentation over the past eight years has generated important civic insights and institutional lessons, some of them described here.

The liberal arts core curriculum is anchored by two required courses: The Reflective Woman, and The Global Search for Justice.



Perhaps the most striking outcome is a change in work patterns among faculty and between faculty and staff. For instance, in the recently revised core curriculum, faculty from all disciplines and some staff members worked in interdisciplinary groups to design and teach two new bookend courses. The curriculum design stretches teachers and students in multiple ways. It challenges reliance on the “expert” model for teaching and learning. Because each course is interdisciplinary and discussion-based, it calls for new ways to ensure intellectual rigor and assess learning outcomes. Most importantly, the curriculum casts teaching as a public activity, not a private domain. When faculty worldviews expand, the conversation shifts. As a result, faculty members imagine new possibilities of many kinds, including the

connection of their work at the college to a broader public world. Thus, in a recent assessment forum for the capstone course, entitled the “Global Search for Justice,” Neil Elliott, a faculty member in the theology department, explained:

We could envision this course not only as a common experience for students . . . but as a common experience of CSC faculty, who are doing important work outside the college. We should think of our activist work not [as] separate from our teaching, but [as] tied to it. This course gives us the opportunity to invite students to journey with us for one semester — to share the questions we ask about social change, to join our networks, and see how we and others work for justice in a variety of areas.

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Other changes are evident as well. Faculty are rethinking structures and practices of self-governance. Educators are exploring the dynamics of reciprocal learning relationships both within the classroom and in neighborhood settings. A mixed group of faculty and staff is developing a structure that links students' paid work (work-study) with learning goals and course work.

In all, the collective endeavor has prompted a lively and energetic conversation about the practices and public purposes of higher education. Political concepts — deliberation, public space, public work, accountability — have proven to be vital resources for the collective imagination, conversation, and action throughout.

The civic experiment at the College of St. Catherine is a work in progress.

Institutional Context

At first glance, the College of St. Catherine seems an unlikely place to pioneer efforts in creating a public culture. We are a women's college, located in a heartland state that is itself relatively homogeneous in its ethnic and racial makeup. We are a Roman Catholic institution, committed to making visible and deeply appreciating the Catholic intellectual tradition. Yet a growing proportion of faculty, staff, and students do not identify themselves as members of the Catholic faith.

In fact, these potential constraints also offer resources that might otherwise be dismissed.

In the United States in the 1990s, women-centered cultures such as CSCs, often include an eclectic array of values and mores. The college culture reflects both feminist values and practices — sometimes manifested in feisty or insurgent actions — and the more traditional

societal norms for women. The latter can discourage open conflict and stifle bold recognition of accomplishments, in preference for a kind of public humility. Further, important conservative elements of the college are skeptical of feminism and hostile to perceived challenges to church authority. The resulting clash of interests has created deep conflicts. And like many institutions in transition, the college, too, has struggled in recent years with an institutional identity crisis.

The college's sustained attention to creating a public culture has helped people both to bring tensions to the surface and to discuss openly difficult identity questions. A recent series of events related to a letter to the editor of the student newspaper illustrates the point. In her letter titled, "Catholicism and Homosexuality," Anne Maloney, a philosophy professor, reminded readers of the Roman Catholic teaching on homosexuality. She admonished students' "chalking" in honor of National Coming Out Week, equating it with a celebration of homosexual activity.

Many people took issue with her views about morality and her interpretation of Catholic teachings. In the subsequent edition of *The Wheel*, the editor published six responses representing varying perspectives. Organizers convened two community meetings for face-to-face conversations. The second community meeting entitled, "A Moral Community: Whose Morals Are They?" also began an important discussion about how a public with diverse moral frameworks can act together. As one person explained, "there is a difference between acting in public and acting as a public." The student editor conveyed the widespread sense of the importance of public discussion at the college when she said that the point of the public meetings was "to create a space where everyone feels free to speak openly

about matters of importance.”

A generation ago this kind of public conversation about sexual identity, Catholic teaching, and institutional practices would have been unimaginable. The college understood itself to be a homogeneous community of shared values, even if this sometimes meant minimizing differences. Almost everyone avoided open conflict. But as the college stakeholders have grown more diverse, and as the institution has strengthened its capacity for public discussion, many at the college have come to view conflict differently.

Student groups have played important roles in bringing issues to the surface. The college has developed new mechanisms for public debate and discussion. The inclusive model of leadership that the college promotes has proven to be an important resource for growing a public culture. It is collaborative, non-hierarchical, and inclusive of many kinds of talents.

The founders of the college, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, also make major contributions to the public culture. They bring us a living legacy of social action and belief in the capacity of ordinary people to act together to make the world better.

The 1693 Constitution of the Sisters described their mission as “hospital work, direction of orphanages, visitation of the sick and poor, and instruction of young girls.” The sisters carried this work with them when they journeyed to St. Paul in 1851. Early generations of sisters established a network of nearly 100 educational institutions in Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and Wisconsin as well as six hospitals in Minnesota and North Dakota.

Their work continues to be characterized by

a regard for professional excellence and a deep concern for others. Today, the sisters define their ministry as “a way of being that calls us to humility, reverence, nonviolence, and solidarity with our sisters and brothers who suffer economic oppression . . . (we work) toward systematic change and the building of a value system that creates a more just world.” The college mission reflects this rich heritage with its focus on working toward a more just society for all. The current institutional planning process strives to interpret this mission for the twenty-first century.

An important, if still underdeveloped, resource for civic renewal is Catholic social teaching. At the heart of such teaching, from a democratic perspective, is a radical notion (in the etymological sense of the word radical, meaning return to the roots) that furnishes a resource for democratic renewal. That is the belief that human beings are cocreators of the world. Pope John Paul II expressed this idea in his 1981 encyclical, “On Human Labor.”

Society is a great historical and social incarnation of the work of all generations. Human beings combine their deepest personal identity with membership in a people, and intend their work to increase the common good.

Although the linkages between Catholic social thought, democracy, and higher education are rarely drawn in an explicit way, they offer potential wellsprings for civic renewal in a college such as ours.

St. Catherine’s, of course, does not function in a vacuum. Like other colleges and universities, it exists within a larger environment of growing popular criticism. Critics have issued a string of indictments: Higher education has lost sight of its larger mission. Institutions of higher education no longer effectively con-

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tribute to the needs of society in proportion to the resources they consume. Costs are too high. Institutions are unaccountable and inaccessible for many who wish to pursue postsecondary education.

In some colleges a market language, which views students as customers and education as a commodity, has come to dominate. In response, colleges, attentive to marketing strategies and the bottom line, have developed a variety of new programs and educational formats. Such innovations in themselves are not bad, but if the market metaphor dominates, the dynamics will threaten the elemental identity of higher education and the productive engagement of the diverse stakeholders. This backdrop creates a sense of urgency for educational reform.

Strategies for Building a Public Culture

Crisis can facilitate clarification of mission and institutional identity if the process is self-conscious and informed by a well-crafted strategy. Several features of the strategies for change, developed at CSC in the early 1990s, were unusual. While the direction provided by the formal leadership body, the Administrative Council, played a role, perhaps the most wide-ranging strategies — the ones this study highlights — were those developed from the bottom up. These embedded clear and explicit political concepts in their design from the outset.

Although the civic-renewal strategies were worked out over time — they did not, by any means, appear fully developed in the beginning — in retrospect, they comprised a comprehensive set of tools for building the framework that ensued:

Establish opportunities for public forums. We initiated community meetings to promote the

practice of public deliberation. The first community meeting was organized by a self-selected faculty group, called the Citizen Politics Study Group. Over the next several years, the community meetings evolved into a widely shared public practice at the college. Simple rules have been created to help establish norms for discussion: present your case in no more than three minutes; disagree respectfully, and speak from direct experience, not hearsay. The meetings have proven to be good occasions to practice public evaluation, which occurs at the end of each conversation and conveys the idea that public deliberation is an art, learned over time.

In time, other kinds of deliberative forums have been created, but “community meetings” have a particular formulation structured by their rules, and a resulting symbolism. They are owned widely by the college community. In a recent meeting, the convener (new to the college) referred to the gathering as a community meeting. One faculty member’s correction of the term suggested the widespread sense of what such forums are supposed to be: “Community meetings have a particular meaning at St. Catherine’s. They have a specific configuration, different than this format.”

Create opportunities for visible, significant common work. From the early 1990s, college change agents sought to create multiple ways for people to cross bureaucratic, disciplinary, and other boundaries through real work with tangible outcomes. The first such effort on a large scale was the creation of the Faculty Study Groups. These groups provided loose structure for work across disciplines that was subsequently adapted for design and implementation of the two common interdisciplinary courses in the new core curriculum. The core curriculum eventually became a vehicle for sustained work of the greatest impor-

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tance that engaged large numbers of people.

Develop and use a conceptual language for self-naming and making explicit the meaning of the gestalt. A group's naming of its own work, a critical component of cultural change, can be elusive. Where does it happen? Who gets to participate? How does it become "official"? These are important questions that need continuing attention in the next phase of CSC's work.

In 1991, The Citizen Politics Study Group began to introduce a set of political concepts such as citizenship, citizen politics of problem solving, public deliberation, and relational power. Eight years later, these ideas expressed in a slightly different vocabulary, continue to shape people's thinking. For instance, they form the foundation for the Teaching Learning Network, established in 1994 to promote collaborative learning throughout the institution. The TLN recently has helped to introduce the idea of public work, a concept richer than citizen politics.

One function of the TLN is to develop theory about collaborative work and learning tied to education for citizenship. The TLN organizes occasions for public reflection on collective work as a means to develop and refine theory from practice. It sponsors an annual CSC conference on teaching and learning; it publishes a newsletter for faculty, staff, and students to discuss ideas about learning; it organizes faculty development workshops, promotes research on collaboration, coordinates site visits, and contributes to external publications. All are potential means for engaging people in the conceptual work.

Establish the habit of public evaluation. Like the feedback loop of a learning organization of the sort described by such organizational theorists as Paul Light and Peter Senge, the college

has sought to become a "learning community." This means developing ways to evaluate its practices and incorporate lessons of institutional success and failure into organizational systems and the overall college culture. Such institutional incorporation is far from completed at St. Catherine's. Yet the practices of evaluation (in faculty meetings, public forums, work groups, and other settings) are now widespread.

Public assessment of common work was introduced as a concept itself, drawn from the "citizens politics" framework of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship. Moreover, the North Central Accreditation team in the early 1990s pushed the college to develop measures and methods to measure student learning outcomes.

In recent years, people at the college have also given attention to the broad strategies and lessons from the change activities embodied in this study. In sum, this work highlights the need to create a culture of reflective practice that extends from the particular to the collective.

Lessons for Conceptual Organizing in Higher Education

Civic design and institutional renewal are rarely, if ever, brought together. The college is pioneering new terrain that will enable institutions of higher education to rediscover and deepen their role in contributing to the broadest goals of the nation as a democracy.

In his recent book, *Sustaining Innovation*,² Paul Light of the Brookings Institution, concludes that innovative organizations in the public and nonprofit sectors have been accumulating an impressive track record in helping to reengage the broad public and create cultures that support creative work that produces

public value. In parallel fashion, in fields of citizen engagement, Carmen Sirianni and Lew Friedland, authors of a forthcoming book on civic learning³ note that despite obstacles,

Over the past several decades American society has displayed a substantial capacity for civic innovation . . . important foundations have been slowly built through the painstaking public work of citizens, as well as through the networks of professional organizers and practitioners who have learned how to catalyze and support their work in progressively more refined and effective ways.

Sirianni and Friedland detail the extensive learning that has taken place in such fields as community organizing and development, health, journalism, and the environment. What is extremely rare, however, is the combination of civic learning and institutional renewal work that people at the college have attempted from the start.

As faculty have reflected on the meaning of the changes at the college, the role of political concepts in mapping institutional change and creating new strategies has become apparent. The concepts initially informing the college work included core political ideas introduced by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship: relational power, diverse self-interests, and public (meaning both the quality of the space and a set of explicit expectations and habits). These formed the beginning of conceptual organizing at the College of St. Catherine. The use of concepts, in turn, has taken shape through a number of elements of the work that can be distilled as lessons for potentially wider application.

Democratizing the academy requires the creation of a vibrant public culture. In traditional academic cultures, power is hierarchical and linked to specialized knowledge.

Thinking as an Organizer in Education

- The organizer makes a conceptual distinction between an organizing approach and an educational approach to change.
- She creates opportunities that engage many in discussion of large ideas that cut across disciplines. For instance, debate and discussion about the meaning of democracy is central to building public cultures within institutions.
- She articulates a broad vision but insists that it is shaped by many.
- She knows the culture well — its obstacles and resources — and develops a broad base of working relationships that cross disciplinary and institutional boundaries.
- She understands power in dynamic terms; she can build a power base through diverse relationships; she can access various forms of power (among them institutional history, cultural traditions, alliances that form around ideas, institutional resources and budgets, events with high visibility).
- She sees conflict as an opportunity to clarify self-interests and to move forward.
- She thinks conceptually and symbolically and knows the importance of narrative and collective “meaning making.”
- The organizer focuses on leadership development. Diverse contributions are valued, and she believes that knowledge can be cocreated through collaborative work.
- It is useful to have a position within the organization that carries some authority and has enough autonomy to shape the work in new ways.

Disciplines are ranked in hierarchical patterns. Faculty reward systems sanction autonomous, disciplinary work. Classrooms are the purview of the individual instructor rather than public spaces, open to ongoing evaluation. And faculty strongly resist collective accountability for their teaching, while there are few mechanisms to discuss the work of the institution as a whole.

Further, the hierarchical construction of academic cultures typically discounts nonfaculty and students as serious partners in the design of learning or, even more fiercely, in the creation of new knowledge. An authentic renewal of an academic environment depends on the revitalization of a public culture that, by its very nature, draws on diverse resources and contributions.

To move the institution forward effectively, everyone's work must be visible and explicitly connected to the institutional mission. When staff and faculty see their own self-interests embedded in the institution's larger purposes and mission, it is far easier to create and sustain mixed work teams whose membership crosses boundaries. Here, the importance and significance of the work undertaken are the key elements. As people work in teams to accomplish goals, broader ownership of the institution's purpose can also result.

In preparation for an opening workshop several years ago, the planning group made a videotape of people working at a variety of jobs at the college. They spoke about how their work — much of it previously invisible — contributed to the mission. For instance, Carter Clapsadle, the college's horticulturalist, proved to be an eloquent philosopher about the meaning of gardens and the contributions of gardens to the creation of a learning community. "My work is to create beautiful spaces

conducive for learning," he says. "My mission in life is to promote beauty." Clapsadle now works regularly with faculty and students in biology and also with students and faculty studying environmental justice.

A self-naming process is a critical component for change; it helps make larger meaning from isolated ideas and experiences. Large ideas are powerful political tools for groups to redefine themselves and expand their identities. Self-naming is itself a form of power because it shapes people's conception of their collective experiences. Self-naming is conceptual work, essential in claiming a new reality. The particular language used in this process is key. It must be a common language, reflecting the organizational culture, and it must emerge from the work. The language used to define changes and new realities can itself be considered a product, as well as an opportunity for theory-building. It cannot be imposed from the outside, although conceptual resources from other settings are often extremely valuable.

In the case of St. Catherine's, self-naming and language development are still under way. For instance, although public work as a political concept is often used by people at the college, it is not a term that is widely owned or thought about deeply. But there are multiplying examples of faculty, staff, and students engaged in work in public fashion and with public purposes.

Organizational infrastructures and communication systems must be created to support new work patterns that sustain ongoing renewal. The organizational infrastructure — communication systems, structures that support collaborative work patterns, and reward systems — are central to generating innovation and sustaining it. Far more work is needed at CSC in this area as well, although some suc-

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cesses are noteworthy. For instance, the Teaching Learning Network is one example of a new structure that facilitates collaborative work among and across academic and nonacademic offices. The network has created spaces and occasion for reflection on common work and opportunities for theory-building. Perhaps most importantly, it promotes partnerships for learning among students, faculty, and staff.

Educating Women to Be Leaders in the Public World

In 1998, the college began an important new phase. New administrative leadership offered opportunity for bold action. The board of trustees has clarified the institutional mission: to be the world's preeminent Catholic college educating women to lead and influence.

The vision presented to the college by the trustees calls on the institution to reclaim its deep Catholic roots and act with confidence in the world. If the college explicitly links its broadest educational purposes to the urgent democratic challenges of society, it can also be a significant leader in higher education. That we are a Catholic college for women is a great strength.

If the charge is to educate women who "lead and influence," then the public culture created over the last eight years will be an indispensable dimension. Public leadership opportunities for all of us — students, faculty, and staff — must infuse the whole of the educational experiences. All work roles, the curriculum, cocurriculum, and work-study experiences must emphasize public skills. These include abilities to think critically and to see things from multiple perspectives. They involve: learning how to build relationships with people of diverse experiences and interests to accomplish important tasks; developing

capacities to understand others from very different cultural backgrounds and to "read" other cultures, and learning to craft thoughtful arguments for public speaking. Political arts call on us to think with broad imagination about what can be done together. Public skills are essential tools to help achieve the vision of preeminence.

This scenario calls for an expansion of thinking about education for citizenship across all disciplines. This idea of citizenship includes, but goes beyond, the definition of the citizen as voter and bearer of rights, and the communitarian idea that the citizen is a responsible community member and a volunteer. Citizenship in the most robust sense is based on the idea that citizens are actors in, and cocreators of, the public world. Jane Addams expressed this democratic spirit in her argument that the point of education is to "free the powers" of the person for contribution to the whole.

In this sense, education's task for institutions and individuals is to liberate the creative energies in all of us. We can all contribute to our common life.

What does this look like in practice? It requires an attentiveness to what is taught and what is created in the process of teaching. Collaborative, interdisciplinary, and experiential learning is at the core (literally) of the civic dimensions of students' future careers. It also suggests new disciplinary content of what students are learning.

For example, the college stresses education for a variety of health-related professions. Thus, experiences in the Jane Addams School for Democracy, where a number of CSC students in health fields are currently working with Spanish-speaking and Hmong immigrants in a health and wellness group, provides opportunities for students to grow public identities

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for their future health careers. Such experiences also provide rich opportunities for learning civic skills such as understanding diverse cultures and working across disciplines. Similarly, students in one of the CSC capstone courses, focusing on women's health and social justice, are now coaching in Public Achievement at a Minneapolis high school. Their experiences offer opportunities for them to gain interactive and catalytic skills of work that they can carry with them throughout their lives.

Higher education is at a crossroads. It could become the instrument of narrow purposes, adjunct to corporations and public agencies driven by the bottom line and service delivery, using a vocabulary dominated by "customer" and "client." On the other hand, institutions of higher education have the potential to rediscover and renew for a new age their boldest purposes: preparing students for full participation in a vibrant democracy, while also doing public work in the world.

Such a democratic spirit once animated the nation's premier colleges and universities. "At bottom, most of the American institutions of higher education are filled with the democratic spirit," said Harvard President Charles Eliot in 1908. "Teachers and students alike are profoundly moved by the desire to serve the democratic community."⁴

We have lost such an animus in our time. Community service is today mainly an off-hours — if significant — activity. It is largely detached from the core work, purposes, and scholarship of higher education.

To regain a sense of democratic spirit at the core of the college mission is a critical and challenging task. The College of St. Catherine's is still in an early stage of this work of civic renewal. But, to date, we have proven that it can be deeply engaging and energizing.

We know, already, that education for democracy, like democracy itself, is full of large and unrealized possibilities.

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