

**Reflections on Dire Circumstances in  
Today's Society and Higher Education . . .  
Developing WISR to Serve the Public Good with the  
Transformative Education of Disenfranchised Young Adults  
--1% of the way toward a 99% Solution?**

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August 21, 2012**

**The State of Our Union**

A bit over a year ago, I began writing a few posts to my Wisrville blog, which I subtitled, "Promoting Justice and Curiosity in Trying Times." In my initial statement about the current societal and historical context for my blog, I wrote:

"Welcome to my blog, and really to the blog that belongs to any and all of you who are both deeply concerned, but still hopeful, about the predicament in which we find ourselves today—in our country and in the world. I've decided to call this blog "promoting curiosity and justice in trying times." Certainly, the times are trying, arguably more so than when Thomas Paine wrote in 1776, "These are the times that try men's souls." There is a growing disparity in wealth, resources and power between the have's, and both those who "have-a-little-but-less-and-less" and the have-not's—in the US, and of course throughout the world. There is the growing disaster of global warming and environmental destruction. The list goes on. And, the mainstream media, not just Fox News, is less and less inclined to feature news stories that challenge the existing power structure or which represent the kind of out of the box thinking necessary to solving these deepening problems.

As one example, the Progressive Budget Plan has hardly been mentioned, much less featured by mainstream media, even though it would reduce the national debt much faster and more significantly than either the Republican plan or President Obama's proposal. Furthermore, unlike other proposals, it is quite promising as a way to promote national well-being and social and economic justice. [see for example: <http://readersupportednews.org/off-site-opinion-section/83-83/5678-maddow-ignoring-the-progressive-budget-plan> ]

This blog is written in the spirit of WISR's founding principles and the commitments and wisdom of the many students, faculty and alumni with whom and from whom I have been fortunate to learn since WISR's beginnings in 1975. This spirit includes a strong sense of curiosity and inquisitiveness, and a belief that we can potentially learn much from people in all walks of life. And yet, we also know that "mob-think" and media manipulation can bring out our worst impulses and blunt curiosity and inquiry.

Like WISR, this blog will be an effort to spark curiosity, fuel inquiry, and mobilize action and create hope. Also like WISR, its aims include promoting democratic participation, social and economic justice, multiculturalism, the urgency for environmental sustainability, and the modesty and curiosity to continue to inquire and learn from and with others.

Contrary to the one-dimensional portrait of the American Revolution by “Tea Party” activists, there are other traditions that are worthy of emulation. One such example is Thomas Paine, who wrote and disseminated ideas that countered the dominating declarations of the British loyalists. However, he did not simply protest taxation by the British empire. He was one of the first anti-slavery advocates. He believed in the importance, and indeed, the necessity, of engaging all people in the creation of a democracy. He respected the wisdom of indigenous people, and more particularly he learned from the Iroquois people such key lessons as living in harmony with nature and organizing society for democratic participation. [ see for example: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_Paine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Paine) ] So, when anyone today says we should follow the principles of our country’s founders, we should be sure to ask, which ones among those early citizens had ideals and actions that are worthy of our attention and curiosity?” . . .

Today, about 16 months later, I read what I wrote, and if anything, I now believe I understated our predicament. I can’t say that I’m any less hopeful, since I’m an optimist by temperament, but I do believe that instead of living in “trying times” we live in a time of “dire circumstances.” If we don’t take action—imaginative, but well-conceived; daring, and yet strategic and measured; and most of all sustained, and mindful of the “bigger picture” and the deeply rooted challenges, and also opportunities and potential, that permeate our culture.

This bit of writing is a statement of my perceptions of the challenges we face, and just as I tell WISR students to give examples and tell stories, I will endeavor to do likewise. For although there are general patterns to be found in our current “state of the union” the stories and examples are not likely to be the ones found in most any Presidential state of the union address. I will add that I have learned much by collaborating with WISR students, both recently and over the years, and if my ideas have some merit, it is in no small measure because of the wisdom they have imparted to me. Most recently, I am also indebted to the clarity with which Henry Giroux has written about these matters in his 2012 book, *Twilight of the Social: Resurgent Politics in the Age of Disposability*. Also, I am greatly indebted to the insights of the many perceptive and articulate writers whose ideas abound in such blog sites as Nation of Change, truthout, and Color of Change, among others.

I invite others to think of the examples and stories that they find most disturbing and problematic, for my statement is based on my own limited perspective and experiences, but hopefully it will serve as a springboard for dialogue and “food for thought.” Furthermore, within each disturbing and challenging circumstance, there is likely some opportunity for change and movement toward a more just and humane society—but only if we inquire with curiosity, and with critical-mindedness. Looking beneath the surface, asking unlikely questions, and daring to imagine courses of action that are out of the box. In particular, I have long believed that the most productive courses of action are those which reside by acting neither purely “within” the system and trying to making gradual reforms, nor purely “outside” the system and expecting that

necessary changes will fall into place all at once overnight. If there is a “truth,” I believe that it is not “in between,” but “both.”

So, let us begin by exploring the mosaic of pieces found in the State of our Union. Some patterns can be stated early on and easily, and others become more apparent only more gradually.

As Giroux states (e.g., p. 47) our culture has become “a culture of cruelty.”

It is cruel in many ways, but one very eloquent and revealing article by Michelle Alexander drives the point home. This piece of the mosaic is about racism and mass incarceration. I think she will excuse my quoting from her so extensively here, because I know that she wants her important points to be heard, and acted upon . . . (from: <http://truth-out.org/news/item/10507-america-current-racial-caste-system-we-need-to-ensure-that-it-is-our-last> )

“Jarvious Cotton cannot vote. Like his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather, he has been denied the right to participate in our electoral democracy. Cotton's family tree tells the story of several generations of black men who were born in the United States but who were denied the most basic freedom that democracy promises—the freedom to vote for those who will make the rules and laws that govern one's life. Cotton's great-great-grandfather could not vote as a slave. His great-grandfather was beaten to death by the Ku Klux Klan for attempting to vote. His grandfather was prevented from voting by Klan intimidation. His father was barred from voting by poll taxes and literacy tests. Today, Jarvious Cotton cannot vote because he, like many black men in the United States , has been labeled a felon and is currently on parole.

. . .

The racial dimension of mass incarceration is its most striking feature. No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. In Washington, D.C., our nation's capitol, it is estimated that three out of four young black men (and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison. Similar rates of incarceration can be found in black communities across America.

These stark racial disparities cannot be explained by rates of drug crime. Studies show that people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates. If there are significant differences in the surveys to be found, they frequently suggest that whites, particularly white youth, are more likely to engage in drug crime than people of color. That is not what one would guess, however, when entering our nation's prisons and jails, which are overflowing with black and brown drug offenders. In some states, black men have been admitted to prison on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times greater than those of white men. And in major cities wracked by the drug war, as many as 80 percent of young African American men now have criminal records and are thus subject to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives. These young men are part of a growing undercaste, permanently locked up and locked out of mainstream society.

It may be surprising to some that drug crime was declining, not rising, when a drug war was declared.

. . .

Far from fading away, it appears that prisons are here to stay. And despite the unprecedented levels of incarceration in the African American community, the civil rights community is oddly quiet. One in three young African American men will serve time in prison if current trends continue, and in some cities more than half of all young adult black men are currently under correctional control—in prison or jail, on probation or parole. Yet mass incarceration tends to be categorized as a criminal justice issue as opposed to a racial justice or civil rights issue (or crisis).

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The aim of this book is not to venture into the long-running, vigorous debate in the scholarly literature regarding what does and does not constitute a caste system. I use the term racial caste in this book the way it is used in common parlance to denote a stigmatized racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom. Jim Crow and slavery were caste systems. So is our current system of mass incarceration.

It may be helpful, in attempting to understand the basic nature of the new caste system, to think of the criminal justice system—the entire collection of institutions and practices that comprise it—not as an independent system but rather as a gateway into a much larger system of racial stigmatization and permanent marginalization. This larger system, referred to here as mass incarceration, is a system that locks people not only behind actual bars in actual prisons, but also behind virtual bars and virtual walls—walls that are invisible to the naked eye but function nearly as effectively as Jim Crow laws once did at locking people of color into a permanent second-class citizenship. The term mass incarceration refers not only to the criminal justice system but also to the larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs that control those labeled criminals both in and out of prison. Once released, former prisoners enter a hidden underworld of legalized discrimination and permanent social exclusion. They are members of America's new undercaste.

...

What is completely missed in the rare public debates today about the plight of African Americans is that a huge percentage of them are not free to move up at all. It is not just that they lack opportunity, attend poor schools, or are plagued by poverty. They are barred by law from doing so. And the major institutions with which they come into contact are designed to prevent their mobility. To put the matter starkly: The current system of control permanently locks a huge percentage of the African American community out of the mainstream society and economy. The system operates through our criminal justice institutions, but it functions more like a caste system than a system of crime control. Viewed from this perspective, the so-called underclass is better understood as an undercaste—a lower caste of individuals who are permanently barred by law and custom from mainstream society. Although this new system of racialized social control purports to be colorblind, it creates and maintains racial hierarchy much as earlier systems of control did. Like Jim Crow (and slavery), mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race.

This argument may be particularly hard to swallow given the election of Barack Obama. Many will wonder how a nation that just elected its first black president could possibly have a racial caste system. It's a fair question. But as discussed in chapter 6, there is no inconsistency whatsoever between the election of Barack Obama to the highest office in the land and the existence of a racial caste system in the era of colorblindness. The current system of control depends on black exceptionalism; it is not disproved or undermined by it. Others may wonder how a racial caste system could exist when most Americans—of all colors—oppose race discrimination and endorse colorblindness. Yet as we shall see in the pages that follow, racial caste systems do not require racial hostility or overt bigotry to thrive. They need only racial indifference, as Martin Luther King Jr. warned more than forty-five years ago.

...  
Building a broad-based social movement, however, is not enough. It is not nearly enough to persuade mainstream voters that we have relied too heavily on incarceration or that drug abuse is a public health problem, not a crime. If the movement that emerges to challenge mass incarceration fails to confront squarely the critical role of race in the basic structure of our society, and if it fails to cultivate an ethic of genuine care, compassion, and concern for every human being—of every class, race, and nationality—within our nation's borders (including poor whites, who are often pitted against poor people of color), the collapse of mass incarceration will not mean the death of racial caste in America. Inevitably a new system of racialized social control will emerge—one that we cannot foresee, just as the current system of mass incarceration was not predicted by anyone thirty years ago. No task is more urgent for racial justice advocates today than ensuring that America's current racial caste system is its last.”

Giroux goes on to state that the legacy of unregulated wealth results in corrosive inequality, and then feelings of inferiority and superiority harden. (p. 51). Of special note here, is not just that there is social and political inequality, but also that a culture has been created that perpetuates and legitimates such increasing inequality. For example, I recently read how Ohio’s Secretary of State is extending voting hours in suburban areas and minimizing them in urban areas. Like many, I signed an online petition protesting this, but in doing so I realized that not only do we need to stop this unjust, blatant effort to disenfranchise voters, in a move that is both partisan and racist, but also we need to think of ways to change the country's culture and climate that emboldens and enables people in positions of power to even contemplate such outrageous, undemocratic schemes.

This culture of cruelty is manifested in attitudes that are heavily gender-based as well. For example, there is the recent jaw-dropping assertion by Republican Congressman, Akin, that survivors of “legitimate rape” have biological defenses against pregnancy. Although Akin's statement is outrageous, what is more outrageous is the political climate that would allow him to think such a thing, much less say it out loud. The problem we are facing goes far beyond this one individual's statement. Even if he apologizes, and even if he recants his statement, we need to remember that there are many others like Akin. Furthermore, there are far too many who are fanning the flames of fear and hate, and who are not only unempathetic toward others who are "different"--in this case, women who are survivors of rape—but who seem to be hateful. These people, like Akin, who act hatefully, and ignorantly and manipulatively, are getting more and more bold because they believe (or at least feel) they have successfully created a culture and climate that will at least tolerate, and in many cases, support, their outrageous words and actions. We need to show them that they are wrong--by actively creating a different culture and speaking out, and continuing to do so, whether or not an "apology" is forthcoming. Such outrageous actions shed light on the work to be done, and if we look carefully, they show us that the work to be done is more than a touch-up of what’s on the surface.

The advocates for this culture of cruelty—in the guise of a flourishing and well-functioning economic marketplace—are not hesitant to create fear and confusion among the citizenry, as they attempted to do, in asserting that “Obamacare” would result in “death panels” who would deprive innocent, ailing people of the right to continue living. Yet, where was Fox News, and where were these “ethically concerned” Republicans when the conservative Governor of Arizona

saved \$1.4 million in the State budget by denying previously approved organ transplants to needy recipients, two of whom died soon thereafter? At almost the same time, the Arizona legislature approved the construction of a \$1.2 million bridge over a highway to prevent squirrels from becoming road kill. I suppose the construction of the bridge did contribute to Arizona's GDP. Quite appropriately, it has been pointed out that GDP is a very limited indicator of overall societal well-being--countries with wealth and high GDPs often have great inequality, along with significant health and mental health problems ( <http://www.nationofchange.org/how-does-inequality-define-health-nation-1343406868> ). Of course, such studies are not well-covered and discussed in the mainstream media.

The culture of cruelty, and the unjust and growing inequities, are terrible conditions that permeate our society and our experiences today, obviously with some people bearing the brunt of the suffering much more than others. At the same time, it is also important to mention that there are other, more subtle ailments deeply ingrained in our lives today. For example, Giroux notes that we lack an experience of "public time." He notes how "public time" is "slower," providing us with the time and space to reflect, and I would add, the opportunity to get to know others and allow dialogue and genuine collaboration to unfold. In my experience, there is a quality of "open-endedness" and "unfolding-ness" that is nurtured by reflection and collaboration, and it is in stark contrast to the more closed-ended, relentless drive to perform on the job, to consume, or to simply escape into the experience of celebrity worship.

Related to this, it is all too seldom that we perceive the connections between the troubles experienced by individuals and the larger social problems that are often at the core of those troubles.

Much more can be said about the state of affairs in which we find ourselves—The State of the Union—what I'm writing here is meant only to be an initial exploration. I have not even discussed the Citizens United decision and its consequences to further these inequities and distort the democratic process ( <http://www.nationofchange.org/overtorn-citizens-united-1343408181> ).

We haven't really delved into the control of major mass media that filters and frames the news which people rely on to make their electoral decisions. We haven't looked into global warming and the efforts to deny mounting and convincing scientific evidence with a combination of mindless assertions and politically purchased "research" (see for example: <http://www.latimes.com/news/politics/la-pn-kochfunded-climate-change-skeptic-reverses-course-20120729,0,7372823.story> ).

**If nothing else, I am now aware that today's society is dramatically different from the one in the 50s and 60s when I was growing up. It is very, very different from the society that enabled me to go to college and then graduate school in the mid and then late 60s. Despite the limitations of conventional higher education, I benefited in many ways. I did not take the learning for granted, but in retrospect, I had no idea how fortunate I was to have the financial access to higher education, coming from an economically constrained, single parent family. My criticisms of conventional higher education were mostly that other students were often not as fortunate as I was to have been exposed to the outstanding learning opportunities that I mostly stumbled onto.**

As I left graduate school and embarked on a career devoted to bringing about “change in higher education,” it was the early 70s and institutions of higher learning at least still gave lip service to the ideals of the enlightenment era and the importance of a well-rounded liberal education, to the importance of higher learning in supporting a democratic society, and to the worthiness of the ideal of “universal access” to higher education. Beyond this, in the late 60s, a very public dialogue had begun on the “uses of the university.” Even Clark Kerr, the famous President of the University of California (who had been the much criticized, by the left and the right, Chancellor at UC Berkeley during the Free Speech Movement) cautioned, in the book that was the definitive description of higher education in the 60s, *The Uses of the University*, that the powers that be in the contemporary multiversity should not be too ready to sell their intellectual soul to the highest bidder. These were not words of caution from a radical, or even a critic of the university, but the sobering wisdom from a highly respected leader from the mainstream. Today there is greater emphasis than ever on seeing students as consumers, and institutions of higher learning as financial institutions devoted to the manufacture of “educational products.” Those products might be employed graduates, research studies, corporate or governmental consulting projects, patents and copyrights--all the main indicators of institutional success are financial. It is doubtful that such a book would receive similar attention and respect today.

As Giroux states, “Memories of the university as a citadel of democratic learning have been replaced by a university eager to define itself largely in economic terms.” I would add that as the economy fails, as the society created by the powerful (fraction of one percent) manifests ever greater inequities and creates despair and anxiety among the masses, the university has abandoned a central part of its mission, for a more narrow, economic one. And, the university is now left to take the blame for more than its fair share of society’s ills. To be sure, in losing its intellectual vigor and moral compass (whatever small portion of those qualities it once had), the university is not blameless. However, neither should it be the fall guy for the Koch Brothers, Fox News, and the ambitious politicians who find Ayn Rand an inspiring motivational speaker.

When Kerr wrote the *Uses of the University*, he was concerned about institutions of higher learning falling into an abyss where higher learning might be corrupted by outside forces, and my fellow student activists and I were indignant that those prevailing “outside” forces were the power elite. Today, higher learning is not merely corrupted by the marketplace and the powerful it is *defined by them*. Today it is truly a radical position to even suggest that higher learning should be concerned with civic education, the breadth and scope of the liberal arts, the wisdom of multiculturalism, and the rigors of imaginative and critical scientific inquiry.

**So, in this next section we will consider the history of American higher education—from the distant past, and then especially through the last 50 years. Quite amazingly, WISR has been in existence for 37 of those 50 years. I will add the following by way of constructive self-criticism. In terms of observing the perhaps gradual, but quite profound, changes in the larger context of “higher-education-in-society” I have fallen somewhat asleep. I have tended to WISR with insufficient attention to the context in which WISR exists. I now believe that WISR has some added responsibilities, quite consistent with WISR’s founding**

**purposes, which need much greater attention, and which may even possibly provide WISR with some new opportunities.**

## **Higher Education in American Society—Hopes and History**

In the next part of this discussion paper, I am intending to take us on a tour of the history of American higher education, up to the present, and in the process, sharing how my own thinking has evolved over time—mostly because the nature of our society—our economic, cultural and social realities, including the reality of higher learning—has changed dramatically since I was an undergraduate in the mid-60s at the University of Colorado and a graduate student in the field of Higher Education in the famous late 60s and early 70s at the University of California at Berkeley. This treatise is, in part, the early stages of an intellectual autobiography—something that I encourage many students to undertake as part of their studies at WISR. For in reflecting on the history of our own ideas, we not only come to appreciate both the strengths and limitations of our own insights and commitments, but we sometimes come to better understand how and why our thinking has changed.

In my case, I have recently come to realize that although my thinking is, in many ways, only slightly changed from the ideas and commitments I embraced in my first years of adulthood as a college student, in some very important ways my thinking has begun to shift a lot in the last few years. More specifically, I have begun to feel an urgency and depth of emotion regarding my ideas and emerging commitments that I have not felt since my early 20s. If anything, I have stronger emotions associated with my beliefs, questions and commitments than I did when I was 40 and more years younger than I am today at age 66. I have wondered why this is. As I will explain later, and this is crucial to the question of WISR's role in the 99 percent solution, the nature of our society has changed dramatically in the past 45 years. And while those changes may have been underway throughout this long period of time, I do believe it is possible that in the past decade or so, they have accelerated with great speed and with oftentimes dire consequences .

It is quite possible that in my middle aged years I was lulled into sleep, that in the long haul my attention turned away from the nuances of what was unfolding in the society in which I have been living. The immediate tasks were much more “in my face”—the endeavor to nurture and sustain an implausible alternative institution of higher learning, WISR, the everyday demands of relationships (marriage, divorce, marriage, divorce, marriage—the third time is the charm, I guess), building a family, paying credit card bills and a mortgage, and the like. I was aware of “the bigger picture”—I “saw” it every day, and learned about it from the many WISR students to whom I have always endeavored to listen and from whom I have tried to learn. Still, I know believe that I have been oblivious to important “beneath the surface” changes in the features to the landscape of both society as a whole, and higher education in particular. I sometimes feel that like Rip Van Winkle I have been awakened from a generation long sleep. Or perhaps more aptly, that important changes in “higher education” and in “American society” and the whole “world” have eluded my grasp, like sand slipping through my fingers.

In writing this, I am trying to communicate how my sense of “higher-education-in-American-society” has changed, how I am finally starting to become more well-informed, or at least that I am finally, even if belatedly, asking questions I wish I had been asking some number of years—at least a decade—before. I hope to engage the reader in thinking about these ideas, these questions, and these emerging insights, as part of my renewed sense of commitment and persistent hopes in the face of my growing awareness of the depth of our society’s injustices and shortcomings. My latest thinking about the present and the hopes and challenges for the future are, I believe, best understood, discussed, critiqued and improved upon, if I recapitulate the development of my own thinking—first as a young adult college student and then graduate student hoping to create reform in higher education, and then more recently as an elder who has been awakened from his middle-aged intellectual and activist slumber. I hope that this journey that we will take together in considering what I have written here will be productive in thinking about possible roles for WISR in the 99 percent solution.

Let’s begin by considering what I wrote about WISR in the context of the history of US higher education, for WISR’s website, in 2011—views that evolved beyond, but are consistent with, my sentiments at the time of WISR’s founding in 1975:

“More and more today, higher “education” in the United States is a story of students paying increasingly expensive tuition in order to obtain the degrees and credentials necessary to professional advancements, securing jobs, and in the understandable quest for financial survival for oneself and one’s family (present or future). In the midst of all this, many important qualities are often lost—including the quest for personal meaning in learning and in life and the opportunity to pursue an intellectually rigorous and stimulating education that is also relevant to improving one’s immediate community and the larger society and world. Indeed, WISR’s history grew out of student demands in the 60s for both personal and societal “relevance.” WISR’s ambitious mission is to do more than simply give a “relevant” alternative to the more traditional academic institutions on the one hand, or a more “personalized” option to the convenient, new online institutions and programs for the masses, on the other hand.

At WISR, we are striving to affirm some of the best of several important traditions in American Higher Education while also addressing some of the limitations of those traditions. The liberal arts colleges of the late 18th and early 19th century were founded partly on the wave of enthusiasm about the 17th and 18th century enlightenment philosophers—the notion the education and ideas can matter in life—for individuals and for the entire society—and even lead to social revolutions as was the case in the US and France. This tradition was limited in that it was Euro-centric in its origins and assumptions, and mostly accessible only to an elite class.

The Land Grant movement in the mid-19th century attempted to create greater access (even if still very, very limited in excluding many because of race and income) and with a view to the importance of practicality in education. This resulted in the creation of state universities, and especially in the development of curricula in technical and agricultural fields of endeavor. Unfortunately, this practical emphasis did not extend to studies aimed at bringing about social changes which might result in greater equality and social justice, and certainly not in the study and pursuit of environmentally sustainable methods in the fields of technology and agriculture.

At about the same time, many US universities were trying to emulate the scholarly rigor of the German university. The ideal here was to pursue knowledge for its own sake, in a very rigorous

and specialized way. WISR takes very serious the importance of focusing attentively on the building of new knowledge, but we see limitations to over-specialization of the German university tradition, which has often resulted in esoteric and narrowly conceived scholarship, at the expense of truly imaginative, interdisciplinary and creative scholarship. Furthermore, that tradition discounts the serious and important knowledge building that can be and often is pursued by “ordinary” people in their everyday lives. At WISR our commitment is to collaborate with people, as learners, so we can all improve upon the quality and solidity of our knowledge-building efforts.

### **WISR as a Center and Model for Experimentation in US Higher Education**

Consequently, WISR’s approach to contributing to improvements in Higher Education in the US is modest in scale (our numbers are tiny) but very, very ambitious in the ways in which we aim to model and pursue a distinctive approach to higher education. **WISR’s distinctive approach draws on many themes in the history of American higher education, and it also attempts to break new ground and provide a worthy model, by combining commitments to:**

- personalized education
- theory-action integration
- inquiring approach to learning
- multiculturalism
- bringing together liberal arts with professional education
- education for community involved adults from many walks of life
- progressive social change for equality, justice, human development and a sustainable world.”

Implicit in this statement is a fundamental belief that I came to by the time that I completed my PhD dissertation and my second year of work as a college instructor (following one year as a very junior faculty member in the Social Science Interdisciplinary Program at UC Berkeley and then my first year as Assistant Professor in the College of Community Services at the University of Cincinnati, where I was also hired as a Senior Research Associate to serve as an in-house consultant for faculty at the University of Cincinnati on matters of organizational reform and instructional innovation). That is,

*I came to believe (actually, to “realize”) that “Learner-centered education” that is also coupled with learning that is based in and directed by communities or groups of people provides the fundamental principles and key context for “higher learning.” Furthermore, that is not at all the same thing as education that is institutionalized in colleges and universities under the label of “higher education.” The best kinds of learning are transformative for individuals, and also contribute to progressive social change and justice.*

*Sometimes this may happen in institutions of higher learning (colleges and universities), but oftentimes, it happens outside these institutions, or “in proximity to and in partial association with” those institutions, and even in many cases, despite the formal policies, procedures and practices of those institutions. Therefore and perhaps, ironically, to facilitate that learning, the formal institution of higher learning is not the context we should focus on. In other words, instead of trying to reform those institutions, we should try to create new learning spaces and experimenting communities throughout the society—spaces and communities for transformative learning that are not separate from existing institutions, but which are also not*

*defined or framed by those institutions and their limited ways of doing things. I came to realize early on that we shouldn't put all our eggs in those baskets. As we read and think about what I have to say here, it will be important to keep this perspective in mind.*

Arguably, there was a time when such institutions—of higher learning, colleges and universities—oftentimes provided learning opportunities to people that simply would not have been otherwise available. This was quite obviously the case in the 1800s and before—hence the rise of both religious colleges emphasizing the “**mental discipline**” seen to be essential to learning, and the **liberal arts** colleges which aimed to broaden the horizons of their students and expose them to great ideas (at least throughout the history of Western Civilization in general and to some extent of the enlightenment in particular). Then, later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the **Morrill Act (the Land Grant Act of 1862)** provided for the practical education and training (in agriculture, engineering and the like) **through the creation of public, land grant colleges in each state** that would serve the needs of a society that was expanding westward, shamefully, in conjunction with the genocide of the indigenous Native Americans, and a society that was becoming larger and more industrialized. [Specifically, The purpose of the land-grant colleges was “without excluding other scientific and classical studies and including military tactic, to teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts, in such manner as the legislatures of the States may respectively prescribe, in order to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life.”—from Title 7 of US Code, #304].

Shortly thereafter, the **German university**'s emphasis on specialized knowledge development served the interests of those wishing to develop expertise in such areas as the sciences, as well as literature, philosophy and more. This gave rise to the current model of graduate education in the US, which has also influenced the structure and methods of undergraduate education, as well. As the historian, Laurence Veysey [*The Emergence of the American University*. Laurence Veysey, University of Chicago Press, 1970], explains and documents at length, the American university grew like topsy, or at least it “emerged,” especially at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a sort of awkward amalgam of the themes of mental discipline, liberal learning, the practical land grant colleges, and the German university.

So, how did I come to be so interested in and committed to the topic of reform in higher education? As a youthful educational reformer who came of age in the 1960s, I both appreciated the strengths and contributions of these educational modalities, or themes, and I also had serious reservations about and criticisms pertaining to the limitations of these themes. My enthusiasm for reform in higher education was rooted in my experiences as an undergraduate at the University of Colorado. However, without going into those details, for now, I will simply share a story of a pivotal experience in my life—the day, early in my senior year, when I went the University of Colorado library to go through graduate school catalogues, in order to decide where to apply for admission.

It was the Fall of my senior year, and then it was much easier for students, like myself, from single parent homes with very modest incomes, to attend college and even graduate school. So,

without any anxiety or misgivings, I rather naturally decided to visit the campus library and look at catalogues of various graduate schools to decide where to submit my applications. As I stood staring at shelves and shelves of graduate school catalogues, a new question came to me, one that had never before risen to the surface of my consciousness: “before deciding where to apply, I must decide what to study, because I now realize I no longer wish to continue in the field of physics as a career!” Public Policy? Law? Education? I never considered the “pure” disciplines of sociology, political science, psychology, anthropology. For hours I read what these catalogues had to say about these fields (interestingly I never investigated those “standard” materials that one reads on vocational guidance and career selection). As I browsed through dozens of options of schools and fields of study, I came across a young, emerging field of study called “higher education,” and in looking into that field I found myself returning to read and re-read a publication called, *Order and freedom on the campus* [published by the Center for the Study of Higher Education in Berkeley and Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education in Boulder]. I decided to study higher education, right then and there, and I thought at that time that I would be a student personnel counselor or student activities director, because I thought I would be able to have a positive influence on the learning and transformation of undergraduate students if I held a position of responsibility outside of the regular curriculum. I applied several places, but was thrilled to be admitted to graduate school in Berkeley, and even more so, to be able to study under one of the authors of a paper in that publication, Dr. Paul Heist.

This story—this experience—is noteworthy, partly because it shows the serendipitous nature of many of our important decisions in life—that perhaps it was ever so fortuitous that my deeply felt feelings finally came to the surface. For that, I can thank the several, important educators in my life who contributed to my transformation in my undergraduate years. For example, there was the Harvard-educated intellectual gadfly and mentor of inquisitive students, Dr. Walter Weir, Director of the Honors program. And there was Paul Kopecky, the Director of Student Activities, who was ever so nurturing and supportive, and intellectually stimulating, and yet later in my senior year, it became apparent that despite his many fine and helpful qualities, he was much too “establishment” oriented. I had taken what I had learned through his influence and taken it further than he would have liked. To his dismay (and without first consulting him!) I organized a massive protest involving literally over two thousand students, a number of campus faculty, and observed by all the major media from Denver, who jammed themselves into the Student Union’s Glen Miller Ballroom to protest (or observe the protest of) the university’s “publish or perish” practices as evidence by the refusal of the English Department to give tenure to one of the most outstanding teachers on campus.

However, we should not underestimate the climate of the larger culture and the economic realities of the society. Had I been in the same situation today, the current economic challenges might have easily led me to play it “safe” and continue on a path to financial security as a physicist. Indeed, there were some pressures to that effect then, but they were not so severe, and there was in the air a sort of optimism about the future of our society and our economy. Beyond this, there were the exhilarating and hopeful winds of change—from the civil rights protests, the free speech movement, and more. The cultural climate was filled with hope and possibility. As we learn from the past and think about where we are today, our strategies and methods for “higher-learning-in-society” must be designed to provide realistically hopeful, and even

emotionally exhilarating, spaces for learning, for dialogue, for inquiry and action, and for building bridges toward economic survival.

In other words, my very decision, and my ability even to become conscious of options before making this pivotal decision--to embark on a career of working for transformative learning through innovations in higher education—tells us as much or more about the society and culture in which I was living as it does about me and my experiences leading up to that momentous decision. When we contemplate the challenges and opportunities confronting everyone today, and especially young adults, during their key years of identity formation, we should not overlook or underemphasize the importance of the societal and cultural contexts.

## **Today's society—What the Society Needs from Higher Education and What WISR Can Offer**

**Therefore, we must ask ourselves, short of creating total and fundamental social changes, what can we do on the way toward creating such changes, to create spaces, public spheres of inquiry and learning communities that will be both supportive and stimulating of transformative, meaningful and liberating decision-making? Furthermore, I will continue to suggest and endeavor to explain why such contexts for individual transformation are necessarily and strongly interconnected with any hoped for paths toward a more wisely informed, critically reflective, imaginatively engaged *public*. Active public participation, inquiry and dialogue can go hand in hand with personally meaningful transformative learning and inquiry. Transformative learning is essential to the health, well-being and full development of both individuals and the “public” (a recently forgotten notion that deserves respect and even reverence). Such learning and inquiry may be accomplished in many ways—through learner-centered degree programs, community-based think tanks, or informal spaces supported by a cultural climate nurturing daily and informal collaboration and curiosity. In our quest for individual transformation we can also inquire into and pursue notions of the “public good.”**

For although we may not always agree on what constitutes the “public good,” the current dominant narratives in our society, as pounded into our consciousness by Fox News, for example, are that the “public good” is by definition an invalid notion. We are told that government is “bad,” and that the moral option is the “free market.” We are asked, no, not asked, but told, to believe in the sanctity of casino capitalism, and the myths of individuals finding success by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. We are taught to work for the goal of outperforming our fellow students on exams, even if we could perhaps all learn better if we studied together. We are taught that if we have the necessary talent from birth, or persevere and work hard to overcome our deficits, then we might well become one of the chosen ones who succeed. *That is the myth of the meritocracy.* When have we taken a class in school where we have been asked to deeply reflect on, “who determines the rules for the meritocracy?” “who decides on the evidence that will be used in interpreting who has played by the rules or ‘won the game’? Or, more fundamentally, as one of my graduate school instructors suggested, “who

decides who decides?”—which is another way of saying, who designed the box in which the game “meritocracy” is kept, who wrote the rules on the inside of the lid of the box--who designed the game--and by what right did they get to design it? Parker Brothers?

**We will return to this important issue of how to re-establish the “public good” as part of our learning and dialogue.** Suffice it to say that this is an important theme—considered and advocated at many times in history. In the early twentieth century, educator and philosopher, John Dewey, wrote eloquently on this topic (see for example, his classic book, *Democracy and Education*). More recently, I have been very much appreciative of the way this issue and many related considerations, are articulated by Henry A. Giroux in *Twilight of the Social: Resurgent Politics in the Age of Disposability* (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

**I suggest that higher education today must focus more than ever before on INDIVIDUAL TRANSFORMATION. If anything, it focuses less today than ever on individual transformation—the value of “liberal culture” in the early US liberal arts colleges at least embraced the enlightenment philosophy of individual transformation, and at least believed in the importance of “civic education” even if only for the ruling and affluent classes.**

**Today, we need INDIVIDUAL TRANSFORMATION to:**

- **nurture a public sphere/culture of imaginative and critical inquiry;**
- **engage learners in dialogue and collaboration--the best of the enlightenment era’s liberal arts tradition, even with its limited focus on Western Civilization, along with John Dewey’s progressive era philosophy from the early twentieth century on the role of education in democratic society, to Paulo Freire’s inspiring work in the later half of the twentieth century to use learner-centered education and collaborative dialogue to mobilize oppressed communities to transform the circumstances of their oppression;**
- **create among learners a *passion* for *public* participation--the three p’s—passionate public participation;**
- **learn how to use, rather than be used by, the new media; and**
- **understand science (its strengths, limitations, and uses) so that it can be used for public good, rather than profit, to turn back global warming, to improve health care that can be accessed by all, to solve rather than create such problems as food shortages.**

**Even as universities and colleges can embrace this new agenda of INDIVIDUAL TRANSFORMATION FOR CIVIC-MINDED PUBLIC GOOD, education cannot be limited to those pursuing academic programs. As Giroux points out, we need *SITES OF PUBLIC PEDGAGOGY*.**

**Here, there is an opportunity for students and faculty at WISR to use our learning community to reach out to others, to involve others in the Community Action Think Tanks we have envisioned, and to support learners in their efforts to use their learning to address pressing, practical problems which affect our communities and the society at large. In this way, we would be following in the “best” of the footsteps of the Land Grant Colleges—pursuing practical education, but being more mindful of for whom? for what values and purposes? and to**

what ends? Indeed, today, education is no longer seen as a public goal. Even when I was growing up in the 50s and the 60s, higher education was seen as a “public good”—even when the study of science or indeed education (!) was seen as a matter of “national defense” (with all the fellowship and loans in many fields, even indeed, the field of education, called “National Defense Student Loans,” “National Defense Education Act” Fellowships, and the like), at least education was still seen as primarily a “public good,” not solely as a matter of corporate profit or personal economic survival.

**Today, as Giroux points out, youth are seen as a liability and not worthy of investment. The WISR way sees all people as worthy of time, money and energy—the learning of all, when learning is viewed as imaginative and critical, action-oriented inquiry, is an investment in the future of our society—it is a “public good.”**

All of this is an alternative to consumerism masked as individual liberty, greed masked as fair competition, growing inequality masked as the results of a level playing field meritocracy, the worship of celebrities and spectator sports masked as community participation and shared engagement, callousness and cruelty masked as self-protection and self-preservation, environmental destruction masked as an inconsequential blip on our radar screen. Education is imaginative and critical inquiry enables learners to see behind these masks, and it inspires us to explore alternatives, and to envision new possibilities, both for ourselves as individuals and for ourselves with others. In this way we are able to arrive at a sense of purpose and meaning that is not limited and corrupted by the societal diseases that lurk behind the seemingly benign masks just mentioned.

**In this context, it is not surprising that many WISR students and alumni do not look for jobs to “fit into” but think in terms of how to create jobs and career paths that are both personally meaningful, and at the same time, make worthwhile contributions to the lives of others and the world in which we live. This is why WISR faculty think more in terms of helping students to use their academic studies to *build bridges to the next significant things they want to do with their lives*, rather than so much in terms of mere professional development or job preparation. . . . Professional development and job preparation are worthwhile aspirations, but they are very much insufficient—by themselves, they often do not support the pursuit of personal meaning and fulfillment, nor are they sufficiently mindful of what constitutes the “public good.”**

When I was a graduate student, the conventional notion was that students prepare for professions by developing “expert knowledge” and that a profession as a community of peers would hold up “ethical standards” which would guarantee that professionals would act in their interests of their clients and in the “public interest.” However, increasingly in the late 60s and early 70s, those of us preparing for the professions began to ask some hard questions. Does our chosen profession really act in the “public interest” or does it really serve the interests of those most willing to pay for the services of the profession? And are the interests of those most able to pay sometimes in conflict with the “public interest”? In this vein “activist” professionals founded such organizations as “scientists in the public interest”—various alternative organizations of

professionals and those preparing to be professionals—united by critical inquiry into fundamental questions about how best to achieve the important, but illusive “public good.”

However, we live in a different sort of society today. Individuals and groups raise such questions still of course, but they are not part of the main discourse in the culture and society as a whole. They are certainly not part of the dialogue among officials in colleges and universities today. In many ways, colleges and universities are less and less concerned with the education and preparation of professionals who will join the ranks of a professional community (at least, some decades ago, professions were concerned with ethics and values, even if not always curious about “the public good”). Today, they are more concerned with *helping college graduates to successfully enter the marketplace*. **As I see it, college students are, at best, prepared to succeed in the dog-eat-dog world of indentured servitude. Burdened by huge loan debt, with diminishing job prospects, college graduates hope to be one of the lucky ones who can get a job, hang onto it by not making waves, by not asking for too much vacation time, by neglecting family, if need be, in order to perform “acceptably” on the job. [Consider the following from the news magazine, *The Week*, May 18, 2012, page 34: “Between 2007 and 2010, the number of Americans with master’s degrees who received food stamps or other public aid climbed from nearly 102,000 to more than 290,000. the number of people on assistance with Ph.D.s jumped from about 10,000 to nearly 34,000. *Chronicle of Higher Education*”]**

People who are toiling under the burden of indentured servitude do not act as professionals, supported by a community of peers concerned with professional values and ethics, much less are they in a position to adopt a creative and critical mind set that is concerned with both personal meaning and the “public good.” Instead, such workers are easily controlled by the corporations who set the rules in the marketplace, and life as a “commodity,” even a “commodity” in great demand is often unpleasant, not so fulfilling and meaningful, and certainly not lived with great concern to the public good.

When we educate and prepare students—whether they are young adults, or older adults aspiring to improve their lot in life--for the successful entry into the job marketplace, at best we do to them what King Midas did to his own children. We touch them and they turn to gold. Even an object made of gold is still an object, not a person. The object can be bought and sold by others, and thereby controlled by others. Ironically, libertarians who fear the control of socialism are not too concerned about this kind of control. . . . Perhaps they all assume, or hold out intoxicating hope, that they will BE King Midas. But remember, the moral to that story was that ultimately, King Midas could not be happy, *because of*, not despite, his power to objectify. Many famous, successful, accomplished and wealthy people, Steve Jobs, being a well-known recent example, have seemed to have had a sort of Midas Touch. Inquiring biographers may wish to examine the joys and sorrows of that sort of life.

Regardless of one’s economic perspective, most agree that the financial “return” on one’s “investment” in higher education is more questionable today than when I was in college. Moreover, there are additional, even if less obvious, challenges that are crucial to the future of our society—the consequences of our growing failure to prepare informed, knowledgeable and committed citizens. People from all walks of life must be educated and empowered to help our

society face such pressing fundamental problems as economic injustice, world peace and environmental sustainability, and the more tangible, immediate problems of street violence, health disparities, failing schools, and turbulent family life in a rapidly changing society in which many people are disenfranchised with little sense of how to mobilize themselves to deal with these problems.

### **Delusions of Grandeur—No Longer Content to be Marginal?**

**So what do I think all of this might mean for WISR and WISR's future? First, more than ever before, more than during the decade of WISR's founding and the next two decades of WISR's slowly rolling along, there is a very strong need for a new model for higher learning in America. Second, it is not sufficient to simply exist as an "alternative." Small and marginally inconsequential alternatives are easily ignored.** To be taken seriously, we must find ways of getting the attention of, and at least beginning to influence, conventional institutions and the broader population.

In my delusions of grandeur, I do not have any glib suggestions for how to do this. I'm proposing a direction for others to think of, in collaboration with me, or beyond me, on their own.

**I do think that one promising starting point is to elicit the involvement of a growing number of progressive-minded faculty, who are both frustrated with the current state of affairs and who are curious about trying out something different, academically speaking, during this stage of their lives and careers.** I do think that some such faculty might be enthusiastic about being involved with us as colleagues—bringing to our endeavors their wisdom, knowledge and expertise *along with an active curiosity to learn about "the WISR way"—how do we coach and mentor students, being mindful of students as "whole" human beings and learners? How do we manage to focus on enabling learners to take an active role in directing not only their learning, but their lives, including the task of "building bridges to the next significant things one wants to do"? How do we provide support even while we challenge? How do we aid students to explore with enthusiasm and curiosity how to better express themselves—in writing, thinking and talking—and to do so in their own voice? Indeed, what does it mean to "find one's own voice"? How do we encourage students to "think about the bigger picture" as well as the immediate tasks that confront them in their jobs and community work? And, indeed, becoming aware of the bigger picture is most probably necessary to any serious concern with working for the "public good." And what about question-asking? How is this promoted? All questions are good, but some good questions are more difficult to perceive? How do we encourage the perception of those good, but not-so-easy-to-see questions?*

I believe that some faculty from more conventional institutions may be in search of things that the WISR learning community may have to offer them: 1) intellectual and emotional support, 2) a vision of and passion for mentoring and coaching learners as human beings first and foremost, rather than as vessels to receive information or consumers in search of just any job, 3) how to bring civic education into the curriculum—social responsibility and community involvement that is fueled by a curiosity and question asking, along with a thirst to learn more of the broad sweep

of knowledge and wisdom that is the legacy from all cultures of the world, regardless of one's primarily field of study.

These are just a sampling of the sorts of matters that we pay attention to—it doesn't mean that we have all the answers, or even arguably, any of the answers. At least, however, we have been paying attention to these concerns and we do have conscious experience in striving to address such matters. This is a luxury that, for contextual and institutional reasons, especially, has eluded most other faculty. In this way, WISR offers a very valuable opportunity to the curious-minded, perhaps frustrated, faculty from more conventional institutions.

**In exchange for the opportunity to participate and collaborate with us, in this rather special learning community, we will ask that these experienced academicians help us and learn with us how to make education accessible to even the most economically disenfranchised youth.** The goal would be eventually to reach out to all sorts of young adults, and to greater numbers older adults as well, but starting with those young men and women who have endured the some of the more oppressive and least advantaged circumstances.

**And we have a lot more to learn!!! From and with these faculty, and in the process of trying to share what we so far have learned, we will learn more. And, this can be then shared through writing, multimedia presentations, over the internet, in books, through workshops, through “hands on” internships, and more. This is the sort of thing that is involved in being a model. A Center and Model for Experimentation in Higher Education. But not any sort of “experimentation”—we are talking about trying to influence the direction of today's society, today's culture. Instead of a culture of cruelty, we need a culture of curiosity and concern . . . for the “public good.”**

When WISR first started, we had aspirations to be such a model—at least for the faculty in alternative institutions, and we were first called “Western Regional Learning Center.” We had grant proposals and conversations with the (Antioch-based) Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities to be a sort of western US model and center for faculty in alternative institutions. There were a number of farm worker colleges at that time (mid 70s)—Collegio Cesar Chavez (Mt. Angel, Oregon), Universidad Jacinto Trevino (San Antonio), Universidad de Campesinos Libres (Fresno), among others. And we were in dialogue with them and they had faculty who wanted to pursue PhDs at WISR as part of their faculty development in social change-oriented, learner-centered, community-based education. And we were going to reach out to others—such as the African American Nairobi College in Palo Alto and the Native American DQ University in Davis, among others. In the blink of an eye, all of these institutions folded—due to the changes in the economic and cultural landscape (among other dynamics, Reagan was elected President in 1980). We were left alone, so to speak, and we proceeded to “tend to our own garden”—institutional survival trumped being a center and model for experimentation in higher education.

Although WISR's survival is always a bit tenuous, we are much stronger after having survived for 37 years. If nothing else we are a bit “wiser.” And the times are more compelling than ever. There is a greater need for alternative models, fewer such models exist, and I think more people (even if a small minority) are dissatisfied with the various mainstream options, be they: City of

College of San Francisco—largest public college in California and in danger of folding; UC Berkeley—spiraling tuition and dimming job prospects along with the plans to admit more out of state and out of country students to balance the budget in the face of shrinking “public” support (which is really manipulated starvation resulting from tax dollars having been siphoned off to wars and multi-millionaires); University of Phoenix—which promises a degree in exchange for a mountain of loan debt (where the route to an academic degree becomes a catch 22 not unlike the story of purchasing the “bottle imp” for what seems like a good price, without fully understanding the full consequences that go along with that purchase).

**So, it may be time to revisit this original mission of WISR’s.**

**And, as suggested earlier, it may be time to consider enrolling not just our usual population of mature working adults, but also disenfranchised young adults who have nowhere to go. We just have to figure out how to make it feasible. This project could be a great learning experience for all of us at WISR, and it could help us to more consciously revisit the purposes underneath our own learning ambitions.**

### **What kind of program? What kind of Model?**

**So, given this state of affairs, what does WISR have to offer to the society and perhaps to a slightly larger, but still very small population of learners? I would say several things by way of springboard for further discussion.**

**In brief, here is the proposed solution.** A new model for higher education is needed. One that is financially sustainable, and yet more effective—for students (both educationally and financially) and for society, in terms of immediate and long-term needs for an educated populace.

The proposed pilot project aims to provide the youthful participants with 1) immediate job training and employability, 2) varied and significant knowledge and skills for long-term employability and adaptability to find or even create meaningful and personally satisfying work, 3) active participation in inquiring into and pursuing the public good, as part of developing a deeply felt commitment to their community and a sense of social responsibility, and 4) the ability and interest to engage in satisfying lifelong learning as part of building a meaningful and fulfilling life for themselves, their friends, neighbors and loved ones.

### **The Overall Strategy for this Ambitious Endeavor**

The proposed project aims to provide such broad, lasting and meaningful education at a cost similar to that of the California State University education system. After an initial four-year period, requiring a total investment of about \$700,000 for the education of 20 students--maybe more students for a proportionately larger sum, this project will result in the creation of an accredited institution, able to sustain itself on Federal Financial Aid monies. Furthermore, the size of each student’s loan debt will be minimized by: 1) soliciting

ongoing private donations (for a scholarship fund), 2) providing students with access to immediate work through short-term vocational skill training, and 3) and by lining up paid community internship positions for participating students, most of whom will be from disenfranchised communities and lower income backgrounds.

That is, over the long-run, WISR could seek additional funding from private foundations, community donations, or public training monies—to enable more students to pursue their education at WISR. Furthermore, WISR faculty could provide consultation services and faculty development/training to enable other institutions, especially public institutions, to incorporate this proven model into their systems/curricula, and in a cost-effective way. WISR might well charge a fair sum for these services, and the monies raised would go into a scholarship and loan fund at WISR to further support the students enrolling at WISR.

We would produce written articles, reports and most likely, a book as well, on this endeavor. By the end of the fourth year, if not before, we will report and write in great detail on our methods and outcomes. We believe that educators—academicians, school teachers, and the general public, among others are hungry for a new approach like this. One that is cost-effective, for a learning approach that provides not only for the very needed financial survival for participating students, but one that enables students to create fulfilling lives for themselves, while also finding enjoyment and meaning in contributing to their community and the “public good.” Any proceeds from the sale or use of this book or other materials (e.g., videos) would go into a scholarship and loan fund to support future students at WISR.

As part of this process, WISR might well decide to establish a sister institution, to house its current PhD program, and the expand the BA program within the existing institution (WISR). The purpose of this is to make WISR eligible for accreditation with the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC). That nationally and federally recognized accreditation agency is the most appropriate agency to accredit WISR because it is most open to the innovative, learner-centered methods used by WISR. However, it cannot accredit institutions that have doctoral programs. Therefore, over the first two or so years of embarking on this expansion of WISR’s BA program, as suggested here, we would have to phase out the PhD program at WISR and transfer it to a closely related, collaboratively engaged new non-profit. That new institution would seek State approval for its one degree program—the PhD in Higher Education and Social Change, and it would most likely be able to obtain this approval fairly easily because of the 37 year track record that WISR will have had in operating this program effectively and with high quality outcomes. The new institution would employ on a part-time basis, some of the faculty who would continue to serve as faculty in the existing WISR moving toward BA/MA program accreditation. And, there would most likely also be some overlapping participation by Board members, and to the extent legally allowed, the two institutions would share resources and continue to collaborate academically—much like conventional institutions do that are constituted as consortia (e.g., the Claremont Colleges in Southern California are one good example).

Over the long-run then, students participating in an accredited WISR BA or MA program would be eligible for Federal Financial Aid monies, and for easier admission to accredited graduate programs for public sector jobs and teacher's credential programs, for example.

### The Learners

Initially, the learners might most likely come from several places, with the following numbers as possible, likely targets. Perhaps a dozen, or more, lower-income and strongly motivated students, young adults, from the East Bay (Oakland, Berkeley, Richmond) area. Perhaps a half dozen to a dozen students, from a predominantly Latino community in the North Bay, under the guidance of WISR faculty member, Dr. Art Warmoth. Perhaps a half dozen or so students from the Omaha reservation in Nebraska, in conjunction with the long-term efforts and involvements of WISR PhD alumni, Dennis Hastings and Margery Coffey. This would be more than enough—perhaps 20 or so initially, with expansion taking place in years two, three and four—depending on funding levels and the ease with which the implementation of the program unfolds. Depending on the interest-generated, we might enroll up to a dozen additional students (younger and/or older adults) who are interested, and for whom the base tuition is affordable without any extra aid or outside monies.

### The Curriculum

The proposed BA program would be based on the existing WISR curriculum, but with a few embellishments for this population. These embellishments would include special seminars, collaborative projects, and foci for individually designed learning projects that would address such following core topics of concern:

- a study of ideas and practices throughout history and across cultures that provide a broader context for each learner 1) pursuing their own unfolding sense of purpose and meaning, while also 2) embracing the necessity and the worthiness of feelings of empathy and responsibility\* in committing oneself to a concern for the “public good.”(\*with acknowledgement here to George Lakoff for ideas in his book, *The Politics of the Mind*, for emphasizing the importance of these human emotions in making fair and humane public policy decisions).
- a study of various versions of the scientific method—coming to grips not only with how science, and technology, have impacted society and can impact society (for better and for worse), but also examining the strengths and limitations of science, realizing that science is always a human activity, and has all the potentials and vulnerabilities of all human activities.
- an ongoing practical, imaginative and critically reflective examination of how to envision and build bridges for oneself—to the next significant things one wants to do with one's life—this may involve job preparation and career decision-making, but it is much more than that. Jobs and careers come from the bridges that one builds, not the other way around.

- related to these emphases, are WISR’s long-standing commitments to action-oriented inquiry, to the study of theories and strategies of social change, and of course, the commitment to individual transformation through the personalization of one’s educational program of studies.
- various forms of community involvement. This can include paid and volunteer internships in community agencies (primarily non-profits) and also such collaborative learning projects as involving the students in the creation of COMMUNITY ACTION THINK TANKS. Quite importantly, these think tanks would draw on the expertise not just of WISR faculty and WISR students, but would also reach out to, and involve, people from the community. Our belief at WISR is that everyone has important knowledge and experiences than can, and should, contribute to the solution of problems involving the goal of the “public good.” The “public good” cannot be achieved without broad citizen participation, and without enabling those citizens to engage in the kind of critical and imaginative action-oriented inquiry that is the intellectual and transformative learning approach of the “WISR way.” Through participation in community-based internships and the creation and facilitation of Community Action Think Tanks, WISR learners will better learn the “WISR way” to do action-oriented inquiry, and they will help others in the community to participate in such learning and action, as well.
- study how to make full and effective use of the internet and new media, without being used by, or addicted to trivial absorption with those media.
- a relatively short-term, practical program of training for immediate vocational/economic survival (an example would be training in skills for “green jobs” in the construction industry).

### **Further Details—Goals and Activities**

#### **Specific Goals:**

1. **ENABLE STUDENTS TO ACHIEVE A BA DEGREE AT WISR, in 4 years or less—suitable for employment in a community-based, non-profit agency, and also for those interested in a counseling career, by subsequent enrollment in WISR’s Master’s program that leads to a State Marriage and Family Therapy license, as well as the new Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor license. Once WISR obtains accreditation, graduates of the program would also be able to access teacher credential programs, public agency positions and other graduate programs if the WISR MA programs do not meet their needs.**
2. **PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH A SOLID LIBERAL EDUCATION, IN THE “BEST” SENSE OF WHAT THAT HAS HISTORICALLY MEANT, BUT DELIVERED IN PERSONALLY AND CULTURALLY RELEVANTS WAYS—including:**

- **written and oral communication skills**—personalized and small group, writer’s workshop instruction, for writing and speaking clearly *and in one’s own voice with a sense of meaning and purpose.*
- **sense of empowerment as a builder of knowledge**—learning how to use qualitative, experience-based research methods and critical thinking skills to develop knowledge from one’s everyday experiences and from the insights of others in the community (e.g., oral history methods)
- **community involvement opportunities** (using WISR’s extended network of contacts) and developing a sense of social responsibility, including opportunities to participate in WISR classes on participatory action-research methods and on alternative, sustainable local economies, as well as opportunities to be involved in such endeavors as developing Community Action Think Tanks and intern (initially as volunteers, perhaps later for pay) in community agencies.
- **breadth of knowledge for informed citizen participation and lifelong learning**: including study of People’s History, our Multicultural Society and World, the study and understanding of How Scientists Do Science and how current Trends in Science and Technology are impacting our lives today and in the future, the study of how information (including mass media and alternative media) can manipulate us or be constructively used by us, and the Role of the Arts and Literature in our community (including local endeavors such as the Berkeley Black Repertory Theater).
- **political and economic literacy**—this knowledge will not only serve the student well in their own financial functioning and survival, but will enable them to become effective community change agents. They will know how the existing system works to perpetuate social inequities and they will have the knowledge and the commitment to “infiltrate” established systems and work for changes in the interest of the public good. Beyond this, they will have knowledge of alternative currencies and economic systems, and various community-based strategies of education and organizing, and will be able to use these strategies to work simultaneously from inside and outside established institution. Strategically they will be able to improvise and will not have to “put all their eggs in one basket.”
- **learn how to use, rather than be used by, the new media.** They will not be mystified by the system, but will learn not only how to find information on the internet, they will learn how to write blogs on the internet, develop and use multimedia presentations, and strategically discern how to best reach and educate the audiences most relevant to their issues of concern. They will understand the limitations of media---the biases, the distracting and oftentimes irrelevant “noise” of trivial or inaccurate information, the difference between constructively collaborating through media on the one hand and losing one’s sense of meaning and purpose through aimless or obsessive activities online.

- **learn how to collaborate with others**—both to aid one’s personal learning and transformation and to be engaged with others in the pursuit of the “public good” in the larger community.

### **Activities to Accomplish Goals #1 and #2**

The above will be accomplished through a combination of learning activities, including:

- WISR one-on-one mentoring and coaching involving twice per month meetings with faculty advisor(s),
- participation in optional WISR seminars (offered 3-4 times per month in evenings and on weekends), AND
- through some special activities for this cohort group of 10 - 12 students—most likely involving
- weekly group sessions (2-3 hours each) for support, discussion of one another’s progress, discussion of core skill areas (research, community involvement and communications) and pursuit of academic content (such as the above mentioned breadth of knowledge), and
- once per month, or when needed, more often, *individual, personalized* life coaching/career development/academic support sessions (in addition to the twice per month sessions available to all WISR students).
- Also, these highly personalized and small group/seminar learning activities will also inform and support students in making use of valuable free online learning options (e.g., free courses available through coursera.org and khanacademy.org) and local university libraries (all students will be reimbursed the nominal cost of obtaining an annual library card to the University of California library). [Students will also learn about other community resources—for example, volunteering at Oakland Technology Exchange West—refurbishing computers for donation to local school students while earning credit toward the purchase of computer peripherals for themselves.]
- WISR is developing the capability of using telephone conference calls, audio recordings of sessions, as well as live audio/video streaming of seminars and group dialogue from WISR’s site. We believe that in order for learners to become effective change agents in the pursuit of the public good they must **LEARN HOW TO USE ONLINE LEARNING TO SUPPORT COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ACTIVITIES**. Most colleges and universities use online learning as a more limited, individual process engaged in by individuals in isolation from one another or in the pursuit of individual mastery of pre-determined content. We see **COLLABORATIVE ONLINE LEARNING AS A VEHICLE FOR LEARNING CORE SKILLS AND FOR HAVING THE EXPERIENCE OF CREATING PRACTICALLY RELEVANT KNOWLEDGE WITH OTHERS**. In other words, we plan to bring together Omaha students working on challenges of preserving their

culture, developing a museum on their reservation, and enhancing the cultural relevance of the curriculum in their schools with students in the East Bay area who are working on the problems facing their communities. These two different groups can learn from one another because of their differences, as well as despite their differences. Technology can be used in this way—as a social change activity more than the simple solving of individual assignments and tasks in lesson plans.

3. **VOCATIONAL/JOB TRAINING DURING THE FIRST YEAR OR TWO, in order to enable participants to find immediate employment sufficient to support themselves financially.** For example, this might involve training in construction work and/or Green Jobs (e.g., Cypress-Mandela Training Center), Auto Repair, Computer Technology, and other areas where short-term training holds great promise for immediate employment. The cost of this training would have to be subsidized as part of the initial grant funding, in addition to other requested funds.

## **Funding? Money?**

The funding for this BA program is of course problematic.

However, increasingly, everyone, from all walks of life, are very aware of the economic unraveling of the current system of higher learning. Below we reiterate some of the many challenges and shortcomings of mainstream higher education today. This should serve as a reminder that progressive funders may be very interested in supporting our project, especially if they are concerned with both the public good and the well-being of individual students, especially from disenfranchised backgrounds. These funders might include foundations, private donor citizens, community-oriented banks and credit unions, or even venture capitalists who see this as a socially responsible investment.

More and more over the past 50 years, the curricula of American higher education have become less and less personalized. At best, students, except those at elite colleges and in a few advanced classes at large institutions, become another “number” whose learning needs and aspirations are lost in the crowd. More and more colleges are characterized by impersonal lecture halls, instruction delegated to inexperienced graduate assistants, and a menu of varied courses with students left mostly to their own ingenuity to put together in an effort to find personal meaning and adequate job preparation. At least 50 years ago, the effects of these limitations were counter-balanced by good job prospects, lower tuition, and a more manageable student loan debt.

What’s an academic degree worth today? This question is taking on new and added importance in the face of skyrocketing tuition, even at public colleges and universities, like the University of California and in the California State University system. Private universities, including online colleges and universities generally charge more than public institutions of higher learning. And,

news reports abound attesting to the growing student loan debt, along with growing unemployment numbers not only among recent recipients of Bachelor's degrees, but among those with graduate degrees as well.

Quite appropriately, many Federal legislators are concerned with the use of tuition monies obtained from Federal financial aid to support massive advertising campaigns by some of the larger, for profit online degree-granting institutions. Moreover, State legislators are understandably concerned about the misleading claims by some colleges and vocational schools that promise prospective students that after attending their school they will undoubtedly find a well-paying job in their chosen field.

The days of using an academic degree as a surefire and direct route to a secure job may be over, or at least it's worth thinking twice about this scenario.

This problem is especially severe when one considers the plight of recent graduates of high schools from lower income communities. The few who attend college do not obtain immediate employment, and they are burdened with a student loan debt that they cannot hope to pay off, even in the 10 years that students used to take to pay off these debts.

Even among middle class students, half of the recent recipients of four-year degrees are still unemployed two years after completing their Bachelor's degrees. Somewhat older working students spend much, much more at private online universities and in traditional private institutions of higher learning. And even when employed, paying off loans that were acquired at rates of upwards of \$20,000/year is also a very insurmountable task. Even people seeking training for entry level semi-skilled nursing positions are paying huge sums for tuition, in hopes of qualifying for jobs in those fields. The problems of employability are further compounded by the fact that multinational corporations are eager to outsource technical jobs to other countries, and therefore, there is less commitment to contributing tax dollars to the education and skill development of the people of our own country.

Today, the resulting student loan burden for middle-class and lower income students is enormous, even when attending public universities. Public tax dollars toward Federal Financial Aid are making less and less of a difference in providing educational opportunity, and arguably, in many cases, the current system is not preparing skilled, employable workers. In the face of the debate on our government's economic crisis, we cannot ignore, nor afford, to have a large, under-educated, financially burdened, unemployed, unfulfilled class of citizens. The unseen "elephant in the room" is the prospect of a whole generation of citizens who feel hopeless about their futures.

Therefore, from a societal perspective, the tax dollars spent on Federal Financial Aid are making less of a difference—both to individual students and to the public good. At the same time, budget cuts to state institutions of higher learning are resulting in skyrocketing student tuition, even in State-supported institutions. In the face of budget cuts and despite tuition increases, state institutions are in crisis. The University of California is wooing larger numbers of out of State students and foreign students in an effort to raise funds, arguably at the expense of serving

in-State students. Many public colleges are cutting courses and even entire programs because of this financial crisis. A recent article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* tells of how the City College of San Francisco, the largest public college in California, may not be able to survive much longer.

**There is much talk about the promise of online education in solving some of the problems of cost, and certainly online classes, many of which are now free, can be important resources for learning just as public libraries have been. And, for those with computer access and know-how, online courses can be used more easily and more often than has usually been the case with public libraries. However, just as public libraries are insufficient to educate a skilled workforce and an enlightened and community-involved citizenry, online classes will not sufficiently educate without the human mentoring, coaching, support and guidance that can be provided by wise and experienced educators, operating in an attentive institutional setting.**

### **First thoughts on student loans**

**With appropriate outside funding, we can put together a “package” for each of the initial twenty or so low-income students in a “pilot program.” The package might be \$3,000/year scholarship and \$4,500/year loan. Alternatively, instead of, or in addition to scholarship money, we will seek to identify possible paid internship positions from owners of community-based businesses, leaders of non-profit agencies, and even leaders of schools.**

**To come up with the loan monies, we would probably need foundation money and/or more donations—or even indeed, long-term loans from community banks, credit unions or others. The idea would be for the students to repay the loans, perhaps at a rate somewhat determined by how much they actually earn and how soon they earn it. . . . Rather than having a standard repayment schedule, the repayment schedule could even be a sliding scale based on the actual economic benefits to the learner. Or alternatively, we could request that learners make an ethical commitment to later on provide more substantial donations, beyond the amount loaned, to the program should they eventually experience significant economic benefits as a result of their participation in the program.**

**The loan fund for the students could be named “Community Benefits Loan Fund” to emphasize to the public *and to the participating students* that this loan fund is not only to benefit them, but to benefit the community.**

In the course of the four years of study, each student would probably incur no more than \$20,000 in loans at a proposed very low interest rate of 3%. Students might repay their loans based on a formula (yet to be worked out) that is based on their annual income tax returns. So for example, there might be a loan principal repayment in a given year that on gross earnings that is only 5% of what they earn over \$25,000, 10% on any portion of earnings over \$40,000, and 15% of any portion over \$60,000. (The actual figures would have to be decided upon through a more conscious and deliberate process.) In any case, this would be less than the 12% recommended by the US Department of Education as a requirement for loans made by for profit accredited colleges (a recommendation that was struck down as too arbitrary by the courts, recently).

**In contrast to the existing system of Federal Financial Aid, students who are unemployed or severely underemployed would not be burdened to pay until they are employed.** The success of the program in obtaining loan repayment will be tied to the program's success in employing the participating students. We are confident that in most cases, there will be success. Students will be required each year to pay the 3% interest on the outstanding balance of their loan. So for example, in Year Two of their Education, students would owe around \$150 of interest from Year One, and in the first year after Year Four, students would have to pay around \$600 in interest.

In addition, as much as possible, WISR would give some interested participating students opportunities to work at WISR performing needed administrative tasks, and obtaining \$20/hour credit on their owed loans for such work performed.

Throughout the entire project, participating students would learn how and why their interests and the interests of their communities are tied to one another, and it is expected that participating students would come to feel a strong sense of responsibility to help other people, groups and institutions in their communities, and to contribute to future successes of this and similar programs, by volunteering their services when they are able to do so.

## **Toward “institutionalization”—toward a more stable WISR and a “Sister” Institution**

By creating two sister institutions, existing in cooperation as a sort of consortium (not unlike the model successfully used by some mainstream colleges), I'm projecting that the DETC accredited institution (the expansion of the current WISR, but only with BA and MA programs) would grow considerably—certainly to and perhaps over 100 students in a few years. The unaccredited but State approved institution in which the existing PhD program would be based would quite likely be a continuing source of well-trained faculty for the accredited institution with BA and MA students. Our initial start up monies would have to include approximately \$50,000 for DETC fees and perhaps as much as another \$50,000 to pay for the faculty and staff time to prepare institutional self-studies and other documents and evidence in the successful pursuit of accreditation. In addition, we would also draw on innovatively-minded faculty “refugees”—or at least those who are looking for some additional stimulation and modest-paying work—from other institutions. WISR would draw initially on the talents of existing core faculty and such PhD alumni as Dennis Hastings who is the Director and founder of the Omaha Tribal Historical Project. Dennis, and his colleague, Margery Coffey (also a PhD alumnus of WISR) are uniquely qualified to provide much of the instruction and support to Omaha students, for example.

The role of current WISR faculty and alumni would be to not only provide some of the instruction, but also as colleagues to train the “new” faculty in the WISR way. In the process, we would also be preparing a core of faculty leadership to succeed me as WISR

**President, upon my retirement or demise (whichever comes first, and although neither one is envisioned by me as imminent, I am not all knowing, and in any case, that day will come!).**

**Within a decade WISR could grow to be several hundred students or so in number, and quite significantly, it might well provide a very visible and direly needed model in higher education today, or at least, tomorrow—a model that is sorely needed if we wish to move from a culture of cruelty to a culture of curiosity and concern! WISR's PhD program would remain small (20 - 40 students) and, among other things, would provide a continuing source of faculty for the somewhat larger "WISR College." The WISR faculty, students, alumni and Board with whom I have shared this idea are extremely excited about the possibility. I see this next, ambitious step not only as a way to preserve and augment WISR's legacy and impact, but very much needed given what is currently going on in US education and politics.**