



Due Influence **The Making of a People's College in Minnesota*** **Scott Peters, Cornell University**

This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what "courageous citizenship" is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: "We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: "I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture."

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Abstract

How can higher education restore and sustain public trust? By organizing public relationships that offer citizens opportunities to use their authority as civic agents to exert a “due influence” on higher education’s priorities and work. A case example of citizen professionalism from Minnesota is presented as a source of lessons about what the establishment of due influence involves and requires.

“The people’s colleges and universities may at times pass into the control of the people’s friends, and the tremendous enginery represented by these institutions be wrested from the grip of those who make of it a commercial asset and be employed in the interest of the people themselves.”

-Thomas Elmer Will, 1901.

There are two main kinds of influence people outside of academia can have on its workings. The first, widely known and discussed, is often referred to as “undue influence.” “Undue” because it constrains and violates “academic freedom” for the purpose of serving the interests and agendas of private wealth and/or partisan politics. The second, little known and rarely if ever discussed, is what I have come to call “due influence.” “Due” because it leverages the authority of citizens as it seeks to shift higher education’s mission and work towards purposes that advance the interests and values of working people—including their interest in having opportunities to engage in civic life as skilled and respected participants.ⁱ

The idea of “due influence” isn’t an abstract theory. It’s a practice with a historical record. In this paper, I draw on my research about an example from Minnesota to help us understand what it involves and requires, and why it matters.

Undue Influence

The September 1901 issue of *The Arena* magazine included an article by Thomas Elmer Will entitled “A Menace to Freedom: The College Trust.” Infusing his writing with firebrand populist rhetoric, Will warned of the coming “triumph of plutocracy” through the unification of industries into the hands of magnates, the “over-lords of trade.” He proclaimed that the “most dangerous enemy to industrial monarchy” was the nation’s education system, especially its colleges and universities. The danger, he wrote, emerged from the scientific method. Students were being taught that to be scientific they “must lay aside prejudice, think lightly of authority, go to the bottom of things, and then without fear or favor tell what he has found.” This method, he noted, applied to the social as well as biological sciences. “Free investigation is all that is necessary to expose the rottenness of the existing economic system,” he proclaimed, “and in every university there are students willing and able to turn on the search-light.”ⁱⁱ

Against the promise of such research, Will wrote that “our plutocracy” had issued an edict “that the colleges and universities must fall into line.” The “proprietary class” sought to “secure control” over colleges and universities by placing “safe men” in charge: men who were “in sympathy with private wealth or afraid to voice other views.” According to Will, they had largely

succeeded. “With rare exceptions,” he wrote, “the higher educational institutions of America have been silenced or enlisted in the service of wealth.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Condemning the meddling into higher education’s affairs by men of wealth and power from business and industrial interests, he went on to offer a long list of casualties from the 1890s, scholars who had been fired or attacked for their progressive views and work. His list included Richard T. Ely from the University of Wisconsin, Edward W. Bemis from the University of Chicago, Edward A. Ross from Stanford University, and many others. While he didn’t do so in his article, he could have included another name: his own. He had been fired in 1899 from his positions as professor and president of Kansas State Agricultural College (now Kansas State University).

In 1892, the populist People’s Party, on a fusion ticket with the Democratic Party, won the Governor’s office in Kansas, along with majority control of the House of Representatives. After taking office, they appointed a majority of the Board of Regents for Kansas State Agricultural College. The Board then pushed for hiring social scientists who would work to expose and critique the destructive effects of industrial monopolies on working people. Among others, in 1894 they hired the Illinois born, Harvard educated Thomas Elmer Will as a professor of political economy. After populists gained complete control of the Governor’s office and both branches of the State Legislature in 1897, the populist dominated Board of Regents fired the college’s entire faculty and appointed Will as its new president. But his term only lasted two years. When the populists were swept from office in 1899, a newly appointed Board of Regents fired the entire faculty again, removing Will from both his presidency and his professorship.^{iv}

Despite his personal experience as a victim of the undue influence of the plutocracy, Will held out hope for what he referred to as “people’s colleges”: the nation’s public, land-grant colleges and universities, including the one he had briefly led in Kansas.

“The people’s colleges and universities may at times pass into the control of the people’s friends,” he wrote in his 1901 article, “and the tremendous enginery represented by these institutions be wrested from the grip of those who make of it a commercial asset and be employed in the interest of the people themselves.”^v

But the methods used in Kansas and elsewhere (e.g., Nebraska and North Carolina) to secure control of the people’s colleges by the people’s friends were, in the eyes of those who were concerned with protecting the principle of academic freedom, judged to be no better than those of the plutocracy. A growing view in the 1890s within the academic profession held that *any* attempt to influence academia’s workings—whether by robber barons or populists—was undue influence. The principle and ideal of academic freedom that was emerging at the time required protection and isolation from both business and political influences.

We see this in one of the decade’s most widely publicized cases of undue influence targeting Richard T. Ely. Ely received an undergraduate degree in philosophy from Columbia College in 1876, and a doctorate in philosophy and economics from Heidelberg University in 1879. After teaching at Johns Hopkins University for over a decade, he took a faculty position in 1892 at the University of Wisconsin to direct the School of Economics, Politics, and History. In July of 1894,

Oliver Wells, a member of the Board of Regents for the University of Wisconsin, called for Ely to be fired for his political views, which were sympathetic to (and yet also critical of) labor unions and socialist theory and politics. Wells's accusations and demands gained national attention. They were published in *The Nation* and the *New York Post* as a letter under the title, "The College Anarchist." The Board of Regents for the university responded by launching an inquiry that included three days of public hearings.^{vi}

In the end, Ely was exonerated by a unanimous vote of the Regents (Wells was absent). Their report, submitted on September 18, 1894, provided a strong defense of academic freedom. "As Regents of a university with over a hundred instructors supported by nearly two millions of people who hold a vast diversity of views regarding the great questions which at present agitate the human mind," they wrote, "we could not for a moment think of recommending the dismissal or even the criticism of a teacher even if some of his opinions should, in some quarters, be regarded as visionary." Affirming their belief in "progress in all departments of knowledge," in "all lines of academic investigation," they declared that "the investigator should be absolutely free to follow the indications of truth wherever they may lead." While limitations on this freedom may be occurring in other states, they noted, "the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found."^{vii}

The principle of academic freedom carries deep and enduring value. It is as important now—and as endangered—as it was during the Gilded Age. But academic freedom as it is usually understood also has limits. When its conceptualization and protection neglects to include and carefully attend to avenues for *positive* influence on academia, ivory tower detachment and isolation is reinforced, and even encouraged. And the development of a critically important source of power that higher education needs, not only to counteract continuing sources of undue influence, but also to improve the value and trustworthiness of its core work, is neglected and discouraged: namely, robust and reciprocal public relationships. Relationships that embody the authority of citizens—inside and outside the academy—who act to understand and advance a larger public good. Relationships that serve as avenues for *due* influence.

I have not come to understand what due influence is and why it matters by trying to imagine it. I have seen it—and joined it—in Minnesota, through the work of a thirty-three-year-old power-sharing partnership called the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA). In what follows I will briefly tell MISA's origins story, followed by my reflection about the lessons it carries for our polarized and difficult times.

Due Influence

Working with my colleague Daniel O'Connell, I have been immersed over the past four years in field and archival work devoted to learning, documenting, and analyzing the story of MISA's origins, and its arc of work over three decades. We were invited in 2022 to write a book about MISA's history by three people who were involved in its establishment during the late 1980s and early 1990s. As with any work of history, we posed a deceptively simple question as we began our research: *What's the story?* I have since come to see it as a story of due influence. Perhaps one of the best in the whole history of American higher education.

Here is a brief version of MISA's origins story, as we have come to learn it.

In the 1970s, a major farm crisis emerged in the Midwest that would result over the next decade in the loss of over 250,000 small family farms, seriously damaging the economic and civic well-being of rural communities. At the same time, inspired by a growing environmental movement and an urgent energy crisis, an increasing number of farmers and their environmentalist allies began to experiment with “organic” farming methods, forming new organizations and associations to share knowledge and build markets. They also began to talk and write about “sustainable” agriculture as an alternative to the dominant industrial agriculture system, which they argued had many destructive effects on the health and well-being of soils, wildlife, people, and communities. Sparked by Jim Hightower's and Susan DeMarco's book, *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times*, Congressional hearings were held in the early 1970s that were critical of the land-grant system's support of industrial agriculture, and its role in the small farm crisis.^{viii}

As the pain and suffering of small farmers and rural communities in the Midwest escalated in the late 1970s, Catholic bishops in the region commissioned a study to explore what was happening, and what should be done to address it. Thousands of people in rural communities participated in dozens of community hearings, organized by staff from the Catholic Rural Life Conference. Their experiences and ideas were used to draft a statement that was issued on May 1, 1980, signed by 72 Catholic Bishops from forty-four dioceses in twelve Midwestern and Plains states. Their statement, a bold call for land reform, was titled *Strangers and Guests: Towards Community in the Heartland*. Affirming endangered moral and civic values they linked to the small family farm—stewardship, faith, hope, perseverance, generosity, trustworthiness, honesty, and concern for the neighbor—they voiced a bold purpose for the 1980s: “to help empower people to control their own destiny, to be no longer powerless but rather participants in the creation of a new society based on justice.” They placed a special focus of attention in their statement on land-grant universities. They called on these institutions to develop farm technologies that enhance the relationship between people and the land, protect the natural world, and foster the wellbeing of farmers and rural communities.^{ix}

In the years that followed, people in the Midwest took up the bishops' call, perhaps nowhere in more effective and enduring ways than Minnesota. In 1982, National Farmers Union staff members Ron Kroese and Victor Ray co-founded the Minnesota-based and focused Land Stewardship Project (LSP) as a division of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference to promote sustainable agricultural practices, healthy communities, and the end of industrial farming techniques. In 1983, an organizer and community planner named Ken Taylor created the Minnesota Food Association (MFA) to help build equitable local economies in Minnesota through the development of a sustainable community-based food system. These two new organizations often worked with three that had been established before 1980: the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition (JRLC), founded in 1971 to organize religious communities to influence public policy in the state; the Organic Growers and Buyers Association (OGBA), founded in 1976 to certify and advocate for organic farmers; and the Minnesota Project, founded in 1979 by Mark Dayton to work on rural community, food, and environmental issues.

These organizations pursued their work, with ever greater sophistication, without help from—and without a relationship with—the University of Minnesota. Most of what they did with

respect to the university was to criticize it. And most of what the university did with respect to them was to criticize them.

But then there was a tipping point moment.

Dick Sauer, the dean of University of Minnesota's College of agriculture, publicly ridiculed and dismissed their ideas about sustainable agriculture at a conference in January of 1987. Deeply angered by the dean's remarks, but also guided by smart strategic organizing principles, Ken Taylor reached out to Sauer and asked for a meeting. He conducted a one-to-one relational meeting with him to explore self-interests and common interests, an organizing practice he had learned in the early 1980s from his mentor, John McKnight. Ken proposed to the dean a series of invitation only dialogues between members of the sustainable agriculture community and university faculty, extension staff, and administrators. The purpose would be to build understanding and trust, and explore a potential partnership. After the meeting, the dean consulted with his colleagues, who were receptive to the idea. He let Ken know that they were ready to move forward.

Meanwhile, Ken consulted with his colleagues in the sustainable agriculture community. They were also receptive. Ken called for representatives from the five organizations named above to meet to discuss strategy. They decided to band together, naming themselves the "Sustainers Coalition."

Over the next several months, the dean and a few university colleagues worked with members of the Sustainers Coalition to design and plan a series of four, five-hour, closed-door dialogues they would hold over the next year. The first was held on October 19, 1987, at the Minnesota Church Center in Minneapolis. Two more were held over the next several months. Each featured opening speakers from each "side" expressing different positions on selected issues, followed by a dinner, dialogue, and discussion.

The dialogue sessions involved a wide range of people from inside and outside the university. They were tense, and often heated. But they were also productive. By the end of the third dialogue, the idea of creating a formal partnership between the Sustainers (as they came to be called) and the university was proposed and discussed. Both "sides" agreed to pursue it by forming a working group they named "the joint task force." The joint task force met over the summer of 1988 to discuss and formulate a plan for the creation of a new sustainable agriculture research and education center. In September it produced a report calling for the creation of MISA. A fourth dialogue was organized to discuss it, now referred to as "the joint seminar." Following that dialogue, the proposal to create MISA was approved by the joint task force. It then conducted a thorough feasibility study in 1989 that was paid for by the university.

On July 10, 1990, the joint task force met to discuss the report of the feasibility study. The report was positive. The joint task force voted to move forward and create MISA, a process that took almost two more years of dialogue and negotiation. During that time, they drafted a provisional constitution and bylaws, and a structure for the initial staff. The provisional constitution and bylaws were exceptional, establishing something that no other land-grant institution in the nation had: a formal power-sharing partnership between citizens inside the university and

citizens outside of it. MISA was to be governed by a fifteen-member board, mandated to include seven sustainable agriculture farmers. Nine members of the board would be nominated by the Sustainers, and six by the University. The board was not to be a group of consultants or advisors. It was to be a decision-making body grounded in the principle of shared power. And MISA was not to be a marginal special project of interest only to a small number of people. It was to be a “joint venture” that would engage the whole college—and ultimately the whole university—in productive and transformative public work.

A faculty member named Don Wyse was selected to be MISA’s inaugural director, and an organic farmer from Western Minnesota named Carmen Fernholz was chosen as the inaugural chair of the board. On February 17, 1992, after Don secured half a million dollars from the dean as core funding, the board held its first meeting.

Over the more than thirty years it has now been in operation, MISA has had many impressive accomplishments. They include numerous collaborative research projects on a wide range of issues and problems, the development of undergraduate and graduate programs, majors, and minors, and the establishment of a rotating Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems, which has often been held by farmers. MISA has also helped to create and support several initiatives that have had significant impact on farms, businesses, communities, and public policies. They include the creation in 1997 of the statewide Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships (RSDP). Funded by a recurring multimillion dollar appropriation from the Minnesota State Legislature, RSDP brings the community and university together to advance sustainability in agriculture and food systems, clean energy, natural resources and resilient communities. Most recently, MISA has provided support for the ambitious Forever Green Initiative, which is seeking to transform the entire landscape of the state by “developing and improving winter-hardy annual and perennial crops that protect soil and water while driving new economic opportunities for growers, industry, and communities across Minnesota.”^x

Neither the RSDP nor the Forever Green Initiative would have come into existence without the due influence Minnesota citizens exercised on the college of agriculture in their public land-grant university. Through their efforts, they made it—however flawed and incomplete—a people’s college.

Lessons

The brief origins story I have just sketched leaves out a lot of details. It is, of course, in the details that we learn lessons about what due influence involves and requires, and why it matters. We explore those details in depth in the book we’re writing. Here, I only have space to illuminate one of them.

On the first day of our field research in Minnesota, we convened a group of MISA’s founders and early leaders at Carmen and Sally Fernholz’s farm in Western Minnesota for a day-long story circle. During one of our breaks, I told Don what I thought we were learning.

I said, “I know how we can tell this story! A group of citizens came together and built a base of community power. Then they engaged the university to see if it might be a partner.”

Without hesitation, Don responded: “*And they found citizens in the damn institution. That’s why we were successful.*”

In this brief exchange, Don named the essence of due influence as a civic practice. The heart and soul of it is the embrace of the civic identity of citizen. Due influence involves a process of shifting and transforming dominant identities and relations—expert-client, technician-customer—into *citizen-citizen*. In doing so, it humanizes.

Due influence, we have come to learn from our friends in Minnesota, is a *humanizing* activity. It’s also an activity that calls for a different kind of politics, and a different kind of professionalism. A democratic populist politics that doesn’t dehumanize through categorical condemnations and polarizations, but seeks and finds “the people” everywhere, even within land-grant colleges of agriculture. A citizen professionalism that situates professional work inside of rather than apart from civic life, exercised through relational practices across many lines of difference.

In 1901, Thomas Elmer Will wrote of how control of the “people’s colleges and universities” could be passed from private wealth to “the people’s friends.” And how, by so doing, they could come to be employed not in the interest of private commercial gain but “in the interest of the people themselves.” He used the word “wrested” in describing the process of how this would be accomplished. But the Minnesota story shows us something different. It shows us that what it takes to build a people’s college is a process of relational—and humanizing—organizing that establishes a long-term “joint venture” between citizens inside and outside the academy. Without ignoring the conflicts this work involved, which were often contentious, such a process isn’t so much about wresting control as it is exercising due influence. Influence that is due because it comes from and through the embodiment of core democratic principles, enlivened by the many things people have reason to value.

Joint ventures such as MISA are not easy to create and sustain. The MISA story is full of drama, and difficulty. And yet MISA has been sustained now for over thirty years. Its story stands as one of our best sources of learning about what due influence involves and requires, and why it matters.

* Scott Petters is a professor in the Ashley School of Global Development and the Environment at Cornell University. He co-edits the Cornell University Press book series, Publicly Engaged Scholars, and from 2012-2017 served as faculty co-director of Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life.

ⁱ On the history and contemporary meaning of academic freedom, see Henry Reichman, *Understanding Academic Freedom* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021).

ⁱⁱ Thomas Elmer Will, “A Menace to Freedom: The College Trust.” *The Arena*, Vol. XXVI No. 3 (September 1901), pp. 244, 246, 247.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pp. 247, 248, 249.

^{iv} For the story about Kansas State Agricultural College in the 1890s, see especially Scott M. Gelber, *The University and the People: Envisioning American Higher Education in an Era of Populist Protest* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).

^v Will, “A Menace to Freedom,” p. 248.

^{vi} On the Ely case, see especially Richard T. Ely, *Ground Under Our Feet: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1938); Theodore Herfurth, *Sifting and Winnowing: A Chapter in the History of Academic Freedom at the University of Wisconsin* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1949); Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1955); Mary O. Furner, *Advocacy and Objectivity: A Crisis in the Professionalization of American Social Science* (New York: Routledge, 1975/2017); and Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

^{vii} Herfurth, *Sifting and Winnowing*, p. 11.

^{viii} Jim Hightower, *Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1978, 1973, 1972). On the rise of organic and sustainable agriculture, see Randal S. Beeman and James A. Pritchard, *A Green and Permanent Land: Ecology and Agriculture in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2001).

^{ix} On Catholic social teachings and the crisis in farming, see John Hart, *The Spirit of the Earth: A Theology of the Land* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), and David S. Bovée, *The Church & the Land: The National Catholic Rural Life Conference and American Society, 1923–2007* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press).

^x See the websites for RSDP (<https://extension.umn.edu/regional-partnerships>) and Forever Green (<https://forevergreen.umn.edu>).