

# The Challenge –

Building the Workforce for Progressive Social Change

**COMMUNITY LEARNING PARTNERSHIP, EMERALD CITIES COLLABORATIVE, AND THE  
DEMOCRACY COMMITMENT**

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The Challenge from the Right -- Excerpts from Alan Ehrenhalt’s review in the New York Times of *Dark Money* by Jane Mayer:

“Why is America living in an age of profound economic inequality? Why, despite the desperate need to address climate change, have even modest environmental efforts been defeated again and again? Why have protections for employees been decimated? Why do hedge-fund billionaires pay a far lower tax rate than middle-class workers?”

“The conventional answer is that a popular uprising against “big government” led to the ascendancy of a broad-based conservative movement. But as Jane Mayer of *The New Yorker* shows in her powerful, meticulously reported history *Dark Money*, a network of exceedingly wealthy people with extreme libertarian views bankrolled a systematic, step-by-step plan to fundamentally alter the American political system.

“The network has brought together some of the richest people on the planet. Their core beliefs—that taxes are a form of tyranny; that government oversight of business is an assault on freedom—are sincerely held. But these beliefs also advance their personal and corporate interests: Many of their companies have run afoul of federal pollution, worker safety, securities, and tax laws.

“When libertarian ideas proved decidedly unpopular with voters, the Koch brothers and their allies chose to pool their vast resources to fund an interlocking array of organizations that could work in tandem to influence and ultimately control academic institutions, think tanks, the courts, local governments, statehouses, Congress, and, they hoped, the presidency.

“These organizations were given innocuous names such as Americans for Prosperity. Funding sources were hidden whenever possible. This process reached its height with the allegedly populist Tea Party movement, abetted mightily by the *Citizens United* decision—a case conceived of by legal advocates funded by the network.

“Their efforts have been remarkably successful. Libertarian views on taxes and regulation, once far outside the mainstream and still rejected by most Americans, are ascendant in the majority of state governments, the Supreme Court, and Congress. Meaningful environmental, civil rights, labor, finance, and tax reforms have been stymied and programs to benefit low-income and working class people have been blocked.

“In a taut and utterly convincing narrative, Jane Mayer traces the byzantine trail of the billions of dollars spent by the network and provides vivid portraits of the colorful figures behind the new American oligarchy.”

## **Our Collective Response -- Commentary on *Dark Money* by Andy Mott of CLP:**

Sections of Jane Mayer’s book focus on how the right wing has developed leaders and organizations to advance their agenda. Their brilliant and systematic strategy has included the creation of dozens of organizations which pretend to represent broad constituencies on key issues. They have adopted many of the techniques developed by community

organizers in the U.S., including issue research, recruiting and organizing people, developing systematic campaigns, and gaining media attention.

One of the most fascinating sections concentrates on their “breakthrough” strategy for enlisting thousands of students and future leaders by reaching into colleges and universities to influence what students learn, what internships and other experiences they have, and what views they hold as they become future voters and leaders. The President of one conservative foundation likened their program to developing “a wine collection” that would grow more valuable as its members aged, increasing in stature and power. This college strategy has included:

- Creating fellowships for young conservative academics so they could take the time to research, publish and further their careers in the Ivy League and other prestigious colleges which are looked to for leadership by many other academic institutions;
- Creating hundreds of private centers within universities which would advance conservative ideas and provide leadership opportunities for conservative faculty and students, as well as scholarships and fellowships to support them;
- Funding the Collegiate Network, privately financing a string of right-wing newspapers on college campuses,
- Creating a new field of study within 80 law schools, each of which began offering courses in “Law and Economics” which stress the need to analyze laws, including government regulations, not just for fairness but also for their economic impact on private markets;
- Creating 150 chapters of the Federalist Society for conservative law students, now numbering over 42,000.

As right wing funders have systematically built up the educational programs, internships, issue campaigns and nonprofit organizations they need to develop the power and capacity to reverse years of progress and dismantle the “welfare state”, organizations committed to progressive social change have often been overwhelmed.

Many impressive organizations are currently tackling the interlocking issues of equity, race and environmental sustainability. But none of these can succeed without leadership from the communities which are most affected. Nevertheless, despite decades of struggle, people of color and low-income people seldom have gained positions of leadership in the organizations which foundations and others fund to tackle these issues. There is therefore a severe shortage of people with the lived experience, understanding, knowledge and skills needed to lead the front-line organizations and public and private sector institutions we rely on to address these issues.

**There is a pressing need for major nationwide workforce initiatives which create new pathways which are specially designed to recruit, train, and promote people of color and others from low-income communities for leadership roles and careers in community organizing and social change.**

The shortage of grassroots organizers, community developers, executive directors and other skilled change agents is crippling for community groups and other nonprofits. It also constitutes a major barrier for foundations and public and private agencies which have learned from experience that they cannot successfully address the most serious issues our cities and rural communities face without widespread community involvement and strong local leaders and organizations.

Low-income people of color lack opportunities for gaining the essential knowledge, skills, and strategies they need to create significant changes in their communities. There are few internships in community change, and nonprofit and public employers usually lack the resources and in-house training capacity to help young people develop the skills and broad knowledge they need to bring people together in strong, effective organizations which can have a major positive impact. Furthermore, there have been no clear educational pathways into community change careers and even social work and urban planning schools offer less than they once did. Foundation and public as well as community-based initiatives on the full range of social and economic issues which afflict people of color and low-income families are often stymied by this workforce crisis. Together we can meet this challenge and make major gains in developing the workforce for progressive social change.

Several opportunities are converging that might be leveraged to sustain a multi-generational movement for progressive change. First is the rebirth of the youth-led and youth inspired social change movements: Black Lives Matter, The Dreamers, Worker Rights, LGBTQ groups, and the Bernie Sanders political movement. Second is the emerging political commitment to free community college and public university education. Third is the possibility that the upcoming election will create new opportunities to fortify and grow the forces for social change. The question is: how can we work with these promising developments to enlist growing numbers of nonprofits, public agencies and community and four-year colleges as partners in building career pathways for community/social change?