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Matthew Maruggi

*Augsburg College*, [maruggi@augsborg.edu](mailto:maruggi@augsborg.edu)

Annette Gerten

*Augsburg College*, [gerten@augsborg.edu](mailto:gerten@augsborg.edu)

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## **Location as Vocation: An Urban College's Engagement with Their Somali Neighbors**

**Matthew Maruggi**  
Augsburg College

**Annette Gerten**  
Augsburg College

*This article focuses on the significance of an urban college's location and mission in guiding disciplines within the college to engage with its immigrant neighbors through service-learning. The authors describe how social connectedness theory and transformational learning theory were used to facilitate learning and increase students' awareness of their sense of vocation. Student reflections on the service learning experience in both disciplines, religion and social work, are used to illustrate the application of each theory.*

*Keywords: Service-learning, Transformational Learning, Social Connectedness, Vocation*

Augsburg College is wedged along Interstate 94 in Cedar Riverside, a densely populated Minneapolis neighborhood that has been referred to as “the most diverse zip code between Chicago and Seattle” (Pribbenow, 2008, p. 5). While many urban colleges and universities literally wall themselves off from their surrounding neighborhoods as demographics shift, Augsburg has remained true to its Lutheran and immigrant roots, deeply engaging with its immigrant neighbors, many of whom are most recently Somalis from East Africa. Founded by Norwegian immigrants in the late 19th century, the college is gifted with “an immigrant sensibility,” which Augsburg president Paul Pribbenow defines as “a perspective and a sensitivity shaped by our neighbors who have always been immigrants. We have the gift of seeing the world through the eyes of those who have made great journeys, at great peril, to build better lives” (Pribbenow, 2008, p. 5). Augsburg's location has become integral to its vocation as a college and integral to the transformational education of its students.

This article entails a brief history of the relationship between Augsburg College and the Cedar Riverside neighborhood, followed by an examination of how Augsburg student learning has been enhanced and deepened through current engagement with the Somali community. Examples will be given from two courses in two different disciplines: social work and religion. Through the use of student papers, this pedagogical reflection will illustrate how, through engaging with their Somali neighbors, students develop a sense of social connectedness and have transformational educational experiences that impact their vocational choices. The article will also give voice to members of the Somali community who found that their relationships with the Augsburg students created reciprocal learning.

### **The History of Augsburg College and the Cedar Riverside Neighborhood**

From the outset, Augsburg College and the Cedar Riverside neighborhood have been intimately connected. Originally founded in Marshall, Wisconsin in 1869 by Norwegian immigrants as a training school for Lutheran ministers (Chrislock, 1969, p. 1) the College relocated to Minneapolis' Cedar Riverside neighborhood in 1874 in order to be in an urban center of Norwegian immigration. The neighborhood was originally settled in 1855 by Germans, Scandinavians, and Bohemians who came to work in the first flourmills in the area.

By 1890, Cedar Riverside was two-thirds foreign born (Berlowe, 1988, p. 27). Augsburg's roots stem from the 19th century religious awakening in Norway that emphasized "the civic responsibilities of committed Christians and called for full involvement in community life" (Chrislock, 1969, p. 126). By 1874, however, Norwegian-Americans in Minneapolis demonstrated isolationist tendencies, causing Sven Oftedal, one of Augsburg's first instructors, to assert publically that his role as a professor extended beyond the classroom to assisting his students in gaining "a comprehension of their potentialities and duties to the American nation" (Chrislock, 1969, p. 121). Georg Sverdrup, Augsburg's second president, affirmed this notion, declaring, "I do not believe that the Lutheran Church has to hide in a corner" (Chrislock, 1969, p. 123). He believed that Augsburg Seminary, as a college of what would eventually become known as the Lutheran Free Church, should welcome engagement with other groups in society. In the early 20th century, president Bernhard Christensen encouraged the college to adopt the motto of "education for service" (Hesser, 1998, p. 16). Christensen was known for putting his words into practice; he chose to live in a low-income neighborhood of Minneapolis, turning his home into a hostel for people in need. As the College grew and developed, it continued to work out how its Lutheran and immigrant roots propelled it towards civic engagement.

As the tide of European immigration began to stem by the middle of the twentieth century, demographics of the Cedar Riverside began to shift but it remained largely a neighborhood of the newly arrived. In the 1960s, it became known as a "Haight-Ashbury" of Minneapolis, with a thriving youth counterculture existing alongside older immigrants and their descendants (Berlowe, 1988). In the early 1970s, a large wave of Korean immigrants arrived in Minnesota, many settling in Cedar Riverside. At the time they were the second largest immigrant group in Minnesota (Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans, n.d.). By the later part of that decade, an influx of Vietnamese immigrants entered the area joining the Korean immigrants in Riverside Plaza and Cedar Minneapolis Public Housing, a large complex of apartment towers in the neighborhood. These groups both followed a basic pattern of immigrant settlement: the first generation forms a tight-knit, closely located community while subsequent generations move out from the original neighborhood core (Elston, 2010).

In the 1990s, the demographics of the neighborhood shifted again with an influx of refugees, fleeing civil unrest in East Africa, with immigrants coming from Ethiopia, Eritrea, and large numbers from Somalia (Elston, 2010). Currently, Minnesota has the largest Somali population of any state (Minnesota Historical Society, n.d.) and the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul rival Toronto as being home to the largest Somali community in North America (Bigelow, 2010). The Cedar Riverside neighborhood, where 43% of the residents speak a language other than English in their homes, has arguably the most concentrated Somali population in either city (Minnesota Compass, 2011). The Somali Community in Minnesota, and especially in the Cedar Riverside neighborhood can best be described as part of the Somali diaspora. As a diaspora community, Somalis have retained unifying cultural, historical, and religious (i.e. Muslim) threads but have changed to adapt to the places where the communities take root around the world but still retain a sense of being a community or a nation existing in these disparate locations (Bigelow, 2010).

Augsburg College's relationship to the Cedar Riverside neighborhood reveals an historic commitment to place-based education, which according to Gruenewald and Smith (2008) is "a community-based effort to reconnect the process of education, enculturation,

and human development to the well-being of community life (p. xvi).” The reciprocal relationship with the Somali community in the Cedar Riverside neighborhood reveals the current incarnation of place-based education at Augsburg College.

### **Social Work Students and Service-Learning**

Place-based education in the form of civic engagement with the Somali community by students opens up the possibility of the student experience of “being called.” The Augsburg Commission on work culture states: “The concept of vocation involves consideration of the meaning and purpose of one’s life: What is my purpose? The Lutheran understanding of God and the world is that each person has a vocation—and that vocation is one’s own, unique way of using one’s life to serve others and to care for this world” (Anderson et al., 1998). Augsburg’s definition goes deeper than the understanding of vocation as only about one’s career path. This view emphasizes the idea that one is “called” to a relationship of service to the larger world, no matter one’s occupation. The social work department at Augsburg College provides this kind of vocational exploration through service learning experiences in their first year and then through internships in their junior and senior year.

Vocation is defined by the social work field in a way that is congruent with the College’s definition. One reason students often pick social work as a major and a future career is because they believe they are called to serve others. This emphasis can be reflected in the Social Work Code of Ethics which states: “The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human wellbeing and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (NASW, 2013). The core values of social work – service, social justice, human dignity, integrity, and competence – are also congruent with the mission of Augsburg College.

The college demonstrates a commitment to these values by its investment in civic engagement through promoting service learning opportunities for students. This engagement is consistent with the social work emphasis on social justice. Social work as a profession defines vocation as a calling to an occupation that is a good fit with one’s skills, abilities, and passions. Developmentally, students who begin their college journey are in the process of discovering the skills, abilities and passions they possess as well as knowledge they will need in order to be prepared for employment post-graduation. As we will see later, social work students’ experiences with service-learning in the Somali community were found to aid students in this discovery process.

The social work department at Augsburg College introduces students to their immigrant neighbors through service learning experiences. The social work profession originated from the settlement house movement, which was established with the goal of helping immigrants adjust to life in America (Jansson, 1993). Over the years, social work interns from Augsburg served many new immigrants in the Cedar Riverside neighborhood at The Coyle Community Center, which was originally established as a settlement house. Currently, the Coyle Community Center houses many services for East African families such as a food shelf, education and after-school programming. “Campus Kitchens” is one of the college community partnerships that take place in the Coyle Community Center and is one of the service learning options for students enrolled in the “Introduction to Social Work” course. Other service learning options that enable social work students to engage with the Somali Community consist of the Riverside Plaza Tutoring Program, Safe

Place Afterschool Tutoring Program, The Cedar Learning Center, and the Somali Women's Center. Each of these programs works in partnership with the College to help Somali immigrant children and adults develop their language skills.

### **The Social Connectedness Model**

The Somali Women's Center introduced the social connectedness model to the social work department. The Minnesota Department of Health developed the social connectedness model with state grant money designed to decrease health disparities for minority populations (Bliss, 2010). The definition of social connectedness is as follows: "Social connectedness refers to an individual's engagements in an interactive web of key relationships, within communities that have particular physical and social structures that are affected by broad economic and political forces" (Bliss, 2010, p.3). Reporting for the Health Department, Bliss uses the Somali Women's Center as a case example of how the model is operationalized. Through language and living skills services, the center helped immigrant mothers move from isolation in their apartments to developing a network of relationships with other people within their culture and across cultures. This model focuses on helping immigrant caregivers establish or strengthen the density and quality of social networks such as the family, peers, and the community, as well as connections to service providers in education, recreation, and other areas of community life (Andrews & Ben-Arieh, 1999, p.110). The end goal is to provide immigrant or refugee parents with the skills necessary to adapt to American life and successfully raise their children in a new culture.

Current research focusing on social connectedness and immigrants and refugees suggests that increasing social connectedness can promote acculturation and improve mental health (Renner, Laireiter, & Maier, 2012). Acculturation refers to the process, over time, when a collective group or individual from one culture experiences is brought into contact with another distinct culture (Berry, 1997). In studies of Korean immigrants, social connectedness was found to have protective effects in the acculturation process (Yoon, Lee, & Grow, 2008). Researchers suggest that a sense of connection and belonging to both mainstream and ethnic communities may help immigrants feel accepted and grounded in their new environment. Two research studies pertaining specifically to Somali and Oromo refugee women reported that women who reported higher levels of social support were less likely to experience obstacles to obtaining assistance with day to day resettlement needs (Robertson et al., 2006; Deacon & Sullivan, 2009).

### **Social Connectedness, Social Work Students, and the Somali Community**

Research suggests that social connections are beneficial to the Somali community. It is also possible that students can benefit from the development of social connections with the Somali community. Research focusing on the benefits of service learning suggests that the social connectedness model could be applied to students in a university setting. In a study by a neighboring institution, researchers found that social work students completing a service-learning experience reported a decrease in ethnic polarization and an increase in connectedness to the ethnic communities within which they completed their service-learning (Hoffman, Wallach, & Sanchez, 2010). The decrease in ethnic polarization was defined as "when individuals from different ethnic backgrounds grow in understanding and engage in more dialogue with each other" (Hoffman et al., 2010, p.46). Another study found that civic engagement through service-learning experience increased psychosocial well-being in college students (Checkoway, 2011).

Applying the social connectedness model to students in Social Work 100 was premised on the idea that engaging in a service learning experience with the Somali community would increase the number and depth of students' social connections. Investigation of this preliminary hypothesis consisted of using data from student course work, primarily their reflection papers. At the conclusion of the course the purpose of this study was explained to students and they were asked to sign a consent form, which would allow permission to use their student reflection papers as data.

The core objective of the course was to provide students with knowledge about social work as a profession so they could decide if they wanted to major in social work. As part of the course students were required to complete a 40 hour service-learning experience. Students were also required to complete three reflections on their experience over the course of the semester and were required to complete a summary paper and presentation. Course learning linked to the service learning experience through the study of poverty, and also the study of diversity and empathy. Teaching strategies involved a continual process of connecting the knowledge they were learning in their textbook to their experiences at their service learning site and thus making the learning come alive. Part of the teaching methodology included use of case studies, newspaper articles and role-plays to link textbook knowledge to current issues facing the immigrant populations located in the immediate community.

At the end of the course, reflections were used to determine what impact the service learning experience had on the students. Analysis of reflections resulted in identifying three key areas of learning: (1) an increased intercultural understanding of the Somali culture, which led to (2) the development of relationships (social connections) with Somali community members culminating in (3) an impact on students' sense of vocational development.

Examples of increased cultural understanding are illustrated in multiple ways. Four students completed their service learning at Safe Place afterschool program. This program provided English tutoring to Somali children and adults at their site and on campus. One of the students, Paul, is a 20 year old white male who began the course without having been exposed to other cultures and the community surrounding Augsburg. He stated in one of his reflections:

I never thought about how important culture is in daily life until this semester. The people who came to the tutoring sessions were all a part of the Somali community and culture. This was somewhat of a shock to me. I had never before experienced such a different culture from my own. The service learning this semester has been extremely helpful to me, in my academic as well as my personal life. I will not forget the relationships I built with the people whom I was helping, nor will I forget the lessons I learned from them.

According to his supervisor at Safe Place this student was amazed at how warm and friendly the adults he tutored, were towards him when they would see him on campus or in the neighborhood. They would want to stop and talk and visit with him. This was meaningful to him as he commented that the other students he had met at Augsburg would just say hello and walk on. They would not take the time to visit. This student commented, "I believe that this experience will help me a lot in the future as I pursue a career in Social Work."

Another student, Mai Na, 19, represents a cross-cultural perspective regarding the service learning experience. For Mai Na, who came from a second generation Hmong background and did not speak the Hmong language, tutoring Somali adults so they could pass their citizenship exam was meaningful. She related the process to her own family and cultural heritage and their struggles to assimilate to American culture. In one of her reflections she wrote about her heritage and the idea of giving back to the community:

I am fluent in English. I have a hard time speaking in Hmong to other Hmong people. With this understanding, I have a lot of guilt because I cannot help my Hmong people when they have a question about American life, even ones I would have known the answer to. So it has placed me in a position where I believe I can use my fluency in English to help others who are not fluent in English. This is my way to show gratitude for people who have made my life easier.

Mai Na then wrote about how her experience led to her understanding of social work as a vocation. She states: "A social worker is all about social justice, enabling people to have equal access to the many features of society. Tutoring is an example of micro practice; I never realized how important tutoring can be. I learned that simple acts of kindness and compassion can really change someone's life."

Maria, 18, specifically chose Augsburg because of its location in an urban neighborhood with a diverse student body and a diverse surrounding community. She stated that there was very little diversity in the suburb where she grew up. She began the Social Work 100 course with only an experience of painting walls on her first day of campus when she went out into the community to conduct community service. For Maria, the experience of service-learning through Social Work 100 helped her develop a deeper sense of her own beliefs and values. Maria states:

Until I began tutoring I have never been close with Somali people and I have never had a chance to talk to them or get to know them. This gave me a chance to do that. Working with the Somali people really opened my eyes further to the fact that diverse races are a good thing and can teach the people on both ends of it many things and help them grow.

Members of the Somali community echoed the idea of cross-cultural learning as they were engaged with students through the service learning experience. When asked which services she received at the East African Women's Center were most important to her, Halimo, a Somali community member stated:

Most important for me? They coming (sic) together, the community. All community, different, white, black, everything, we needed to learn [from] each other, it is good, everyone, African, African-American, back home, we needed to learn. Students? They learn from us, we learn from them, this is good, we live in a different country and they needed to learn. All people. Opportunity for everyone to get together.

Secondly, students developed social connections. One student, Sam, 19 began the class stating that he didn't leave campus much but found that his service-learning placement decreased his sense of isolation: "It let me talk to so many different people with a number of social barriers and I was able to connect with them." Another student, Sarah, 18, reflected that the service-learning experience forced her to get off campus and gain a sense of safety in navigating the neighborhood as she got to know the Somali children at the Coyle Center.

She stated: "I liked that I learned more about the surrounding areas of Augsburg. Overall, I have been very happy with the work I have done and the people and friends that I met will always have an impact on my life." Elisabeth, 20, also reflects on the social connections that were formed as she tutored adults in English. She stated: "The people were all very great once we got to know each other. It was so nice to walk into the room each day and be greeted with many smiles and hellos. It was nice getting to know them on a personal level enough to ask about their lives and have them ask about mine."

Somali service-users also appeared to experience a shift in cultural understanding as a result of building social connections with Augsburg students. Women that used services provided by the Somali Women's Center spoke about the significance of their interactions with Augsburg students. One woman, Naseteho, stated: "I never had a white friend before the women's center. We see white people, now we [are] not scared of white people, before we were scared. Augsburg they come and teach. Augsburg students they help, they come always, they help the kids, and they teach them."

Students gained a stronger sense of vocation as a result of the development of social connections through the service learning experience. In his final reflection paper Sam stated: "I enjoyed getting to know the people I was helping and it made me want to be a social worker so much more than I did before." One of the primary purposes of the course was to connect the textbook knowledge of social work with experiential knowledge of social work. Sarah expressed this purpose best: "I have learned so much about the social work profession, and through applying those principles to my service learning I was able to experience social work in action." In her final reflection Jaden, 19, reflected: "I learned the ability to communicate my thoughts more clearly and was able to understand what people from another culture are trying to tell me. I believe that this experience will help me a lot in the future as I pursue a career in social work." As these experiences demonstrate, students' engagement in their urban location appeared to lead to a clearer sense of vocation.

### **Ethics Students and Service-Learning**

While Social Work 100 attracted students considering a career in social work, Religion 483, "Christian Ethics," enrolled students from a wide variety of disciplines with varied career goals. These included students majoring in religion, biology, political science, business marketing, and philosophy, with career aspirations that included medicine, scientific research, law, and advertising. Students were not necessarily interested in the course because of its service-learning component, although the connection between the community work and the course was clearly delineated in one of the learning outcomes outlined in the syllabus: "By the end of the semester, students will be able to identify his or her own definition of social responsibility through examination of the theology of social justice and civic engagement work."

The vehicle for this civic engagement work was the Somali American Education Program (SAEP). This tiny non-profit, which operates on a shoestring budget, works with the most recent immigrants in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, many of whom have only been in the United States for a matter of weeks. The mission of SAEP is "to close the educational gap and to promote higher academic achievements and career advancements by Somali-American students," (Center on Urban and Regional Planning, n.d.) which it accomplishes by offering English as a second language classes (ESL), individual tutoring, computer training, and community outreach workshops and programs. SAEP has also developed a



weekly informal conversation circle, where Somali adults and college students from both the University of Minnesota and Augsburg, meet for dialogue to improve language skills and engage in cultural exchange. Each week the circle focuses on a topic chosen by the group, ranging from food to religion to politics.

### **Transformational Learning, Ethics Students, and the Somali Community**

Students in the social work course learned about social connectedness, while the students in the ethics course learned to apply what they had learned about ethics to the world around them through their community engagement, resulting in a transformational learning experience. According to Jack Mezirow (2000) transformational learning is the process by which one transforms one's taken-for-granted assumptions and perceptions about the world, making them more inclusive and reflective so that one may create new, more accurate beliefs to guide one's actions. These transformations usually occur through disorienting dilemmas. Kegan (2000) distinguishes transformational learning from informative learning, noting that, while both types of learning are valuable, the former is closer to the meaning of *education* (leading out). Informative learning involves leading in or filling in the form, while *trans-form-ative* learning puts the form itself at risk of change. In this way, transformational learning is always about epistemological change, or a change in one's way of knowing, both in meaning-forming, shaping a coherent meaning out of the raw material of experience, and in reforming meaning-forming, changing the very form by which one makes meaning. Mezirow (2000) finds that the transformation of habits of mind may be either *epochal*, occurring through sudden, dramatic reorienting insight or *incremental*, in a progressive series of transformations that culminate in a larger shift in perspective.

Transformational learning can occur across an individual's lifespan, as demonstrated by researchers Daloz, Keen, Keen, & Parks (1996) in their study of individuals who have led lives committed to creating a more inclusive common good. They find a common theme of transformational learning occurring through a constructive enlarging engagement with the other—i.e. those beyond one's tribe. Furthermore, they conclude, this engagement does not occur through a single event but rather through successive experiences over time that are often understood as “crystallized moments of memory in a larger pattern of engagement with otherness” (Daloz et al., 1996, p. 71). Mezirow (2000) further delineates phases for how transformations occur which begins with a disorienting dilemma leading to self-examination and a critical assessment of one's underlying assumptions in the situation. From here, one explores options for new roles, relationships, and actions in the situation while gaining the knowledge and skills to implement this new role and reintegrate one's revised perspective into one's life as a whole.

The pedagogical strategies used to facilitate these phases of transformational learning involved a three-fold reflection process. At the outset of the course, students were asked to write a “This I Believe” essay in which they described life events that shaped their understanding of what is ethical. Secondly, they regularly reflected in writing and in class discussions about their experiences at SAEP. Finally, they completed a final integrative paper which asked them to reflect on readings about the immigrant and refugee experience, readings on Christian theology related to immigration, and on their experience at SAEP, in order to understand how the course challenged or confirmed their own understanding of ethics.

Lisa and Ibrahim reflect the diversity of the REL 483 students who did service-learning at SAEP. Lisa, was white, 20 years old, and a junior, majoring in political science with aspirations to attend law school. She grew up in an exurb of Minneapolis, went to an evangelical Christian high school, and was at first intimidated by the cultural barrier between herself and the Somali participants as well as the program director, describing her initial interactions with him as “awkward.” Ibrahim was of Pakistani descent, 21 years old, from an inner ring suburb of Minneapolis, a senior, biology major, with plans to be a physician. He was raised Muslim, and quickly found connections with the Somali Muslim students he was tutoring.

Both of these students provide vivid examples of incremental transformational learning through these phases over the semester at SAEP. What occurred was a series of disorienting dilemmas for each of them that led to this pattern of constructive engagement with the other. For Lisa, her initial awkwardness gave way to a sense of empathy and solidarity as well as a greater understanding of her own privilege and differences in life chances. Prior to tutoring at SAEP, Lisa had volunteered in Cedar-Riverside neighborhood but never with newly arrived immigrants and refugees, and had previously, “made fun of those [new immigrants] that are learning the culture.” Lisa describes a series of experiences with the adult learners where she was “humbled at how difficult the language is to learn and how much effort people put into it when it is new to them.” The humility as experienced over the course of the semester, led Lisa to see herself as “connected with the students.” She had developed a sense of solidarity defined by Andreas Wildt (1999) as “a feeling of connection or cohesion, a natural feeling of belonging together.” This cohesion was nuanced by the disorienting dilemma, of the differences in life-chances between Lisa and the students at SAEP. She described one student, Ahmed, who was motivated to obtain an education in order to get work so he could send money back to his family still living in Africa. In witnessing his desire to learn English and his struggle in the process, Lisa recognized how difficult it is to learn English as an adult and “what barriers it places upon those in this country if not known.” She felt “extremely spoiled in having accessibility to education” that propelled her to feel “an ethical responsibility to be patient and understanding of those around me and ensure that my difference are not a barrier to others but instead welcoming, helpful, and open.” In this way, Lisa’s disorienting dilemma led to self-examination and the development of a new relationship to immigrants; she moved from superiority to solidarity.

Ibrahim, having immigrant parents himself, had a different starting point for his transformations than Lisa. Being Muslim like the students and program director at SAEP, he understood Arabic and was able to greet students with the tradition Muslim greeting of *Salaam Alaiku* (Peace of Allah). Early on in his work in the program, he forged a relationship with a woman who shared the same Arabic name as his grandmother, Miriam, which gave him an almost instantaneous sense of connection, of solidarity. In his conversations with her over the course of the semester, he learned about how difficult her transition to the United States had been. She had arrived with her children, while her husband remained in Somalia. Any “excess” money was sent back to Somalia to support him and other family members. While Ibrahim understood the immigrant experience from his parents’ perspective, he realized how different it had been from the students at SAEP. His parents knew English when they arrived, and were able to move into a relatively middle-income lifestyle quickly. Through his experience with Miriam, Ibrahim realized he “had no idea about the challenges that face SAEP immigrant families, especially families with young

children” and had “never thought about how hard an immigrant mother, who barely speaks English, has to work to feed her children without a husband to support her.” Through this disorienting dilemma, in which he realized the differences in life chances between himself and Miriam, Ibrahim had perspective transformation by critically assessing his relationship to new immigrants. Through this experience, he too developed a sense of solidarity, implementing a new understanding of his relationship with the adult students: “I no longer considered their failure their own; rather it was my failure too. By the same token, their success was my success. And I wanted *us* to succeed.” This new role he reintegrated into his life is that of an entitled advocate, one who “by some group affiliation (class, ethnic identity, gender, educational experience, political position) or because of some combination of these affiliations, have access to enabling power that others do not” (Taylor, 2003, p. 24). Ibrahim possesses this understanding of his enabling power because his family history of voluntary as opposed to forced migration.

Members of the Somali community also appeared to gain a sense of connection with the Augsburg students over the course of the semester. As stated previously, these two groups met weekly for a Conversation Circle, which was designed as means of cultural exchange, discussing topics like food, family life, religion, current events, etc. These discussions created reciprocal learning between the Somali community and the Augsburg students, where both parties functioned as teacher and learner. Reflecting on these conversations, the SAEP program director, Mohammed, a refugee from Somali himself, and an Augsburg graduate student, asserted to the community members and the students that “SAEP is your place and Augsburg is our school as well.”

Connections were also forged during the tutoring sessions. Ahmed, the student with whom Lisa worked, described how his relationship with her and other Augsburg students helped him to better understand American culture just as he was helping them to learn about Somali culture. Through his conversations with Lisa he not only honed his English skills, he also gained insight into what he would need to go to college “just like you [Lisa].” Through this reciprocal relationship, Ahmed also reported having a change in perspective that led to a constructive enlarging engagement with the Augsburg students, who he now viewed as people with whom he shared connection and common aspirations.

### **Vocational Discovery Through Service-Learning**

While the experience of Lisa and Ibrahim supports Mezirow’s view of transformational learning involving a series of disorienting dilemmas that lead to epistemological change, it is also useful to examine their experience from an alternative perspective of transformational learning: a social-emancipatory view. Rooted in the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, this perspective sees transformational learning as not only provoking epistemological change, a shift in the way of knowing, but also ontological change, a shift in the way of being (Taylor, 2008). In other words, as one gains a new perspective, one sees the need to *be* different, to take action on this perspective in the world. Specifically, one sees one’s self as having an “ontological vocation” where one is a “Subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in so doing moves towards ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively” (Freire, 1986/1970, p. 12). In other words, one feels compelled towards action for more just and sustainable society.

While the social work students were intentionally asked to think about their possible vocations as social work professionals, Lisa and Ibrahim found that their experience called

them to think differently about their vocations in a broader sense, about their places in the world and what action that called them to. Parks (2000) provides a definition of vocation that fits with the sense of ontological vocation that occurred for Lisa and Ibrahim:

*Vocation* conveys “calling” and meaningful purpose. It is a relational sensibility in which I recognize that what I do with my time, talents, and treasure is most meaningfully conceived not as a matter of mere personal passion and preference but in relationship to the whole of life. Vocation arises from a deepening understanding of both self and world (p. 148).

Vocation as defined above is not just about one’s career (although it can include it), but rather is about how one understands one’s relationship to the whole of life and the larger world. For Lisa and for Ibrahim, a revision in their perspective about their vocations represents an “ontological shift,” a shift not just in knowing but a shift in being, in understanding their sense of agency in the world. At the conclusion of the semester, in reflecting on what she learned from her work at SAEP, Lisa came to the insight that

Being there for others in any way possible should be a priority and a key component of vocation. Although vocation is finding your own personal life’s meaning, it should not include solely your own life and its purpose, but also the lives and purposes of those around you while ensuring that you can help others in their vocations as well.

Lisa does not necessarily say that her community work at SAEP impacted her career choice but it deeply impacted her understanding of how she was in relationship to the whole of life. Similarly, Ibrahim found that his work with SAEP impacted his understanding of vocation: “I think my experiences reflect that a part of the human condition invokes humans helping each other in their time of need. I envision my vocation to embody that part of the human condition.” He believed that this broader understanding of vocation “allowed me to understand that medicine is my career choice” based upon his vocation which he saw as “helping those who cannot help themselves.” For Ibrahim then, this transformational learning experience impacted both his understanding of his relationship to the world and how he might actualize that relationship in a specific career—in this case as a public health physician. Parks (2000) also speaks of vocation as the weaving of an overarching “weaving an overarching ‘canopy of significance’ that embraces, orders, and relativizes all our knowing and being” (p. 24). In the cases of Lisa and Ibrahim, it is apparent that they are embarking on this task of meaning making. Their work at SAEP in dialogue with the course readings, lectures, and discussion, propelled them through disorienting dilemmas to understand themselves as entitled advocates and agents of social change who must find ways of acting on behalf of the common good from their particular place.

### **Conclusion**

A unique aspect of Augsburg’s campus is a community garden on its western edge, where one can see students, faculty, staff, and community residents tilling the soil in common. This garden is a vivid representation of Augsburg’s historic and current commitment to being a neighbor in Cedar Riverside. This commitment is expressed in the College’s most recent vision statement as it approaches its sesquicentennial in 2019: “Augsburg’s future is grounded in its heritage; enriched by its community and urban place; shaped by its commitment to vocation, access, and excellence. It is these foundations and aspirations that we come together to live out” (Engebretson & Stratton, 2012, p. 1). This vision is being

realized in the students in Social Work 100 and Religion 483. They have been enriched by the community and the urban place, especially by their Somali neighbors, who in turn, have been enriched by the students, with each group developing social connectedness and perspective transformation. In this way, Augsburg's location continues to shape its vocation as a college and the vocation of its students as "informed citizen, thoughtful stewards, critical citizens and responsible leaders" (Augsburg College, n.d.) who are deeply involved in their particular place. This pedagogical reflection suggests the need for further systematic study of how civic engagement can be used as a teaching strategy for developing vocational discovery across disciplines.

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### **About the Authors**

•**Dr. Matthew Maruggi** is an assistant professor in the department of religion and the Batalden Faculty Scholar in Applied Ethics at Augsburg College. His research interests include ethics, spirituality, liberation theology, and community-based learning in the discipline of religion.

•**Dr. Annette Gerten** passed away on December 31, 2013. She was an associate professor in the department of social work at Augsburg College. She will be remembered as an inspiring teacher, dedicated researcher, advocate for social justice, collaborative colleague, and loving spouse and mother.