Creating a Solidarity Economy Curriculum

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BUS 5611: Managing Projects and Programs

June 4, 2025

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With a passing grade in BUS 5611: Managing Projects and Programs at University of the People, I will have completed eighteen graduate credits in business, which will allow me to earn a business endorsement from the Virginia Department of Education (Virginia State Board of Education, 2024), and make me eligible to teach high school business courses where I work at the soon to be renamed Grace Hopper Center (Arlington Public Schools, n.d.) in Arlington, Virginia. I will at the same time meet the requirements to teach business courses at Northern Virginia Community College (State Board for Community Colleges, 2005). This was my plan when enrolling in the MBA program, since my goal was to develop a dual-enrolled (Northern Virginia Community College, 2024) business program at the Grace Hopper Center.

The initiation phase of this project began in 2012, when I attended a conference panel discussion titled *Worker-owned webmaking: Tech co-ops* (Allied Media, 2012). My primary motivation for making the trip to the conference in Detroit was to attend this panel discussion, and my motivation for doing that was to address the problem of students in my class who did not have resident documentation status and whose opportunities to find employment in the tech sector in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area were therefore extremely limited. I wondered if setting up a cooperative business owned by the students themselves could provide a way out of this problem. A student-run web tech cooperative did result (NOVA Web Development, 2025), and it also introduced me to the broader solidarity economy movement (New Economy Coalition, n.d.).

The planning phase of the project to create a solidarity economy curriculum began a few years later, when I read Jessica Gordon Nembhard's book *Collective courage: A history of African American cooperative economic thought and practice* (2014). Reading

that "Cooperation is a deliberate and necessary expansion of in-group solidarity and cohesion" and that "Cooperative economic development is also a strategy to engage youths of color in school and community economic development" (Nembhard, 2014, p. 24) got me thinking that I should try to bring that wisdom to our career and technical education program in Arlington. Providing further motivation in this direction was the fact that while the web tech worker co-op stubbornly refused to die, it never came close to meeting the expectations I had hoped for in terms of serving student economic needs. I came to realize that to make it do that would require a much better understanding of how businesses work than I had. I also realized that the success of a democratically run business like ours would depend at least in part on the existence of a local solidarity economy ecosystem. I was becoming aware that such things were emerging in the United States, but that the best of them were in their infancy compared with the rest of the world, and were even less developed in our local area. Inspired by *Collective courage*, I decided that creating a solidarity economy curriculum at my school could contribute to both my need to learn more about how businesses work and help plant seeds for the solidarity economy to grow in our local community.

The implementation phase of this project began in 2019 when I enrolled in the MBA program at the University of the People. As it is what could be thought of as an insurgent project (McKinney, 2019), I would be the only participant in the earliest phase of the plan to develop a solidarity economy curriculum. I would need to become eligible to teach dual-enrolled business courses, and I would have to do that on the smallest possible budget, since I would be paying for it myself. I was aware of the University of the People's MBA program. I had discovered the school while doing research for one of

my students, who was looking to study computer science at a place they could afford on their earnings working full time at a low wage job, and attend given their documentation status. Here was a program I could afford on my own that would have the courses I needed for my credentialing. There was one serious problem. University of the People was not regionally accredited, so Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC) would not recognize the credits I earned there as qualifying me to teach at NVCC. A bit of investigation revealed that it was in the process of applying for Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation. Having observed first hand NVCC's own regional accreditation renewal process several years earlier, I took the gamble that University of the People would eventually get regional accreditation, and I began taking business courses, stretching out the process and not enrolling in my last required course until accreditation was obtained on May 20, 2025, just in time for me to enroll in BUS 5611 (WASC Senior College and University Commission, 2025).

As soon as I knew I would be able to complete the required coursework in time, I reached out to the course scheduling staff at my school and offered to teach entrepreneurship. There have been ongoing student requests for an entrepreneurship course at our school since we stopped offering it a few years ago, so I was asked to put together a recruitment poster and told if we could get students signed up in time, the course could run next school year. I finished the poster soon thereafter, making sure that it left no doubt as to the particular approach to the topic I planned to take (Elkner.net, n.d). At the time I am writing this, the plan is for me to teach entrepreneurship next year.

With the preliminary requirements to begin implementing the project to develop a solidarity economy curriculum now completed, the implementation phase proper can begin. This phase has two components that will be needed for it to succeed.

The first is to map the new curriculum to existing course offerings. Here I have an existing course mapping already in place that was developed previously at another Arlington school. On the high school side, the course Entrepreneurship - Arlington Student Enterprise Program (Arlington Public Schools, 2025b) maps with the NVCC course Entrepreneurship - BUS 116 (Virginia's Community Colleges, n.d.b) in the first year of the curriculum, and the high school course Entrepreneurship, Advanced (Arlington Public Schools, 2025a) maps with the NVCC course Small Business Management - BUS 165 (Virginia's Community Colleges, n.d.a) in the second year.

My main challenge will be to create course content that has the desired focus on the solidarity economy aligned with the current course descriptions and state standards. Having spent the last fifteen years creating course content for the computer science and web development programs at our school, and developing both curricular pathways to mature completion (Arlington Tech Governor's Career and Technical Academy, 2025), I am confident that I can do this. I succeeded in the CS and web development projects because I was given the wide creative latitude only possible in a small school setting to implement the curricula utilizing completely free software and open educational resources. This aligned with my values and provided the motivation I needed to put in the countless hours of work required. I will be counting on a similarly wide creative latitude to make this new curriculum work.

The second and far more challenging component of the implementation phase of this project will be to develop an educational program that provides real value to the students who enroll in it. Students will enroll in entrepreneurship primarily because they are looking for an economic pathway to their futures. For our entrepreneurial program to be successful, it must provide students with real opportunities for meaningful and fulfilling work when they finish it. If it can not deliver that, it is not worth doing.

This is a daunting challenge indeed, and one which I have no idea whether I will be able to meet, since it will depend almost entirely on actually existing opportunities for successful small businesses and worker cooperatives to sustain themselves in our local economy. To do what I can in my limited capacity to address this need, I will continue to involve myself in local efforts to build the solidarity economy movement.

I plan to closely follow and support the most promising solidarity economy initiatives, like Georgetown University's Coalition for Racial Equity and Democratic Economy to develop a five store worker cooperative grocery store ecosystem in Washington, D.C. (Georgetown University Law Center, n.d.). I will continue to work closely with the Democratizing NOVA project of the Next Systems initiative at George Mason University, where I have served for the past two years on the DNOVA Council (George Mason University, n.d.). I plan to continue to serve on the board of the local solidarity economy non-profit organization SECOSOL (n.d.), and on the board of a new non-profit formed by some of my students last year, Social Justice Computing (n.d.). I hope to be able utilize all these resources to support NOVA Web Development in finally becoming a viable social enterprise worker cooperative.

An important goal of the planning phase of the project management life cycle is to "identify and try to deal with anything that might pose a threat to the successful completion of the project" (Watt, 2014, p. 26). I anticipate the possibility of hostility to a solidarity economy project from local corporate interests. I am doing this after all on the very doorstep of Amazon HQ2 (Arlington County Virginia, 2025), and corporate power is as overwhelming here as it is anywhere in the United States these days. Despite the awareness that opposition may come, I have no way to predict at this stage specifically from where, nor what form it will take. Here in the implementation phase of this project all I can say with confidence is that the only effective resistance to such opposition will be in the strength of the emerging solidarity economy movement. I will be depending on solidarity economy movement activists to have my back when I need them to defend the program, and it may ultimately succeed or fail depending on the solidarity the movement can bring.

Finally, now that my course requirements for the purpose of this solidarity economy educational project have been met with BUS 5611: Managing Projects and Programs, I have to decide whether to continue with the MBA program. This has definitely been my favorite course in the program, because it is the one which most directly relates to the solidarity economy work that motivates me. Project management will still be just as much a need in the next system as it is in this one. In several of my previous business courses, I have often felt like I imagine an abolitionist studying cotton economics might have felt in the 1850s United States, having to engage in a discourse in which slavery was taken as normative despite their personal revulsion to it. I survived to this point by taking wide latitude with many of the writing assignments I was given, bending the writing prompts so that I could make them serve my needs. I have managed

to pass all my courses despite this, so if I think it will serve to add legitimacy to the entrepreneurship program to have an MBA teaching in it, and if I can use the remaining courses to focus even more deeply on the business requirements of the solidarity economy, then I may continue towards completing it. Whether I do that or not, I am grateful to the University of the People for enabling me to meet my credentialing requirements, and plan to apply my credentials during the next ten years to contribute all I can to the solidarity economy movement.

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