The Higher Education Exchange is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820: I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the Higher Education Exchange agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The Higher Education Exchange is part of a movement to strengthen higher education’s democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the Higher Education Exchange publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.
in 1927, that does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions (or groups of institutions) and individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, governing, politics, and education. The interpretations and conclusions contained in the Higher Education Exchange, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the foundation.
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What’s the connection between American higher education and a town (Megiddo) located on a mountain (har) in the ancient Middle East? The connection may appear unnecessarily difficult to make, yet it’s important. Bear with me.

In March, some of us at the Kettering Foundation were reflecting on a January White House meeting called “For Democracy’s Future: Education Reclaims Our Civic Mission.” Sitting in the foundation’s Cousins House, we were talking to Caryn Musil and Elizabeth Minnich, both from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) about a report made at the Washington meeting, which had been prepared by a committee that included Derek Barker, a Kettering program officer. The report proposes a number of steps that academic institutions could take to benefit American democracy.

At some point in our conversation, Derek noted that an 800-pound gorilla had been in the room when his committee drafted the report. The “gorilla” had an agenda quite different from the one the committee was considering. The gorilla’s agenda came from external pressure on colleges and universities to be more efficient and productive in order to stem the growing cost of higher education, which has significantly outpaced inflation.

Elizabeth recalled other meetings where both these external pressures and higher education’s own concerns were being discussed. Colleges and universities are being asked to cut expenses and do more with less while at the same time reach out and do more for external constituencies. The tension between the two imperatives was so great that an academic in one of these meetings said she felt like pulling out her hair!

Struck by how powerful this tension is, I have been reminded of the fateful battle at the town of Megiddo in 1479 BCE when Thutmose III drove out the prince of Kadesh. The clash was so prominent in the Middle East that it appears to be the basis for the Biblical “Armageddon.”

Today, a great battle appears to be looming on the plains below the mountaintop citadels of higher education. The attacking forces
are intent on imposing productivity requirements on academe. These forces draw their strength from public concerns about the high cost of education and the lack of jobs for graduates. The campaign is already having effects, such as more reliance on less expensive adjunct faculty.

Making the case that higher education doesn’t have any responsibility for graduating young people with job skills would be difficult. After all, from the time of the colonial colleges (which trained ministers) to the present, institutions of higher learning have recognized that their students need to be prepared for their careers. And it would make no sense at all to argue against cost effectiveness. Still, there seem to be reasons for concern about the implicit assumption that higher education is largely for the benefit of individuals and that any social benefit is the sum of these individual gains. The counterargument, well put in a chapter in *What Is College For?* by Ellen Lagemann and Harry Lewis, is that “higher education has vital purposes beyond aggregated individual economic benefits.” Lagemann and Lewis fear that such purposes have “fallen by the wayside.”

The defense on the hill—where these citadels of academe are located—is divided. One camp consists of academic traditionalists who champion the cultivation of the mind and fly the banner of excellence. The other camp is a polyglot array of the new legions of outreach: civic engagement, public scholarship, and community development. A richly heterogeneous lot, they have no common banner.

Of course, using the battle at Megiddo as a reference point is shamelessly overdramatic and potentially misleading. That said, Kettering is watching both the public that appears to support the attacking forces as well as those in the new legions of outreach who have a democratic bent. (The other group of academics, those dedicated to excellence, is battle tested and well known.) Severe damage to the Megiddo of higher education appears likely, perhaps by slow starvation for want of outside resources. Could this clash be avoided or even made constructive?

Look again at the public that seems to be supporting the attacking forces. The citizenry is concerned about more than the economy. Some are also worried about moral or ethical issues. Others
worry about the role of citizens in the democracy of the future. Could the democratically inclined, citizen-centered camps on the hill relate to these other public issues?

When reflecting on the Megiddo analogy, I also recalled a prescient observation from a report, *The Changing Agenda for American Higher Education*, on a 1976 Airlie House conference, which was sponsored by the then Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The report includes a quote from Earl Cheit, then dean of the business school at the University of California, Berkeley, who had said in a speech, “review procedures, regulation, litigation now command so much attention from college and university officials, it is easy to forget that for most of its history higher education in the U.S. was a movement, not a bureaucracy.”

Cheit was right. Higher education’s identity in the United States has come from being part of the great social and political movements in American history. Beginning with turning colonial colleges into “seminaries of sedition” during the Revolution and continuing with the creation of the state universities to provide leadership for a new nation, American higher education has been shaped by external influences. Public purposes are reflected in the histories of the agricultural and mechanical colleges, colleges for African Americans and Native Americans, and community colleges. In every case, higher education has been enriched by an alliance with citizens who have a great cause. That is exactly what I am proposing now when I suggest that the democratically inclined in academe might find much in common with a citizenry concerned about its declining role in our political system.

The potential of such an alliance prompted the Kettering Foundation to look at its research to see what implications our studies have had for strengthening the relationship between the public and higher education. We asked ourselves, what is today’s most significant political movement? Although it flies below most radar screens, I would pick the quest for a democracy in which citizens have a stronger hand in shaping the future. It is a movement of citizens to get off the political sidelines where they feel they have been marginalized. It’s a movement where, in Harry Boyte’s terms, citizens are producers of public goods rather than consumers of services, constituents of politicians, or simply voters. Using
a phrase coined by Ben Barber, I would call this the movement for “strong democracy.”

What is higher education's relationship to this quest for a strong, citizen-centered democracy? Unfortunately, that question is being asked in conversations overshadowed by cost and productivity issues. Opposing these issues or demonizing their advocates isn’t going to be effective. After all, reducing costs is key to realizing two values higher education holds dear: greater access and greater diversity. The trouble is that most eyes aren’t on higher education’s role in democracy.

The good news is that academe is caught up in its own movement to legitimize the scholarship that has public relevance and to give students opportunities to serve as well as combine service with classroom instruction. Having studied the relationship between higher education and the public for more than 30 years, the foundation hasn’t seen anything like the current interest in civic engagement.

The academic movement is both wide and deep. Most of the energy is coming from faculty members who want to integrate their scholarly interests with their public lives. And nearly all types of institutions are involved. The implications of the movement reach down into academic disciplines, into the professional schools, and into the nature of knowledge itself. Kettering is now involved with studies of the civic roots of academic disciplines from political science to speech communication. We are following up on earlier studies of the liberal arts as civic arts and looking at the civic dimensions of all subjects, including those in the sciences. Through *HEX*, the foundation has published articles on the way citizens know through the practical deliberation that is aimed at sound judgment. We are trying to resurrect Aristotle on moral reasoning and Isocrates on the reasoning that is tied to feeling and imagination. In addition, we’ve found a shared concern across many professions that are moving beyond technical skills and expertise to look at the social and political dimensions of their work. (We’ve been following the work of scholars like Bill Sullivan, who pioneered the study of civic professionalism.)

For all of its promise, however, the civic engagement movement in academe faces some serious challenges. Some are internal...
to the academy. One challenge is to give the movement greater intellectual integrity for a diverse group of academics who speak different languages. Nearly everyone in the movement would say they serve democracy, yet what they mean by democracy varies considerably. That isn’t the problem, however. The problem is that there is too little analysis of those meanings. This opens the movement to the charge that it is largely rhetorical—a public relations Potemkin village with good intentions but little substance.

Ideally, advocates of public scholarship, service learning, and similar ventures would explain what they think democracy is and what it requires and then critique what they are doing by these standards. This would be an open, shared analysis. Scholars interested in community economic development may be moving in this direction by looking into the relationship between their concepts of community and development, on the one hand, and concepts of democracy, on the other.

A more detailed or nanoanalysis would put the work citizens do as citizens alongside the work of scholars and professionals to see if they are aligned and supportive, or, if they aren’t, how they might become mutually beneficial. Journalists have come closest to doing this when they have compared the way they name problems and frame issues with the way citizens give names to problems in terms meaningful to them and frame issues for shared decision making.

Other challenges to the engagement movement on campus include the almost total absence of trustee participation. For years now, we have been trying in vain to locate a conversation among trustees about their own relationship to a citizenry that wants to get off the sidelines. Although trustees ostensibly represent these citizens, we’ve only met a handful of board members who want to address people’s concerns about the future of our democracy.

The need for tenure standards that recognize public scholarship is an obvious challenge. Another is creating spaces within the institutions for initiatives in strong democracy, spaces that provide structure without the constraints that come from the typical academic silos. HEX has reported on the institutes or centers for public life that are trying to create this space. Of course, there are many kinds of institutes that make useful contributions; we’ve tried to find those that focus on building a greater capacity for citizens
to do their work (work such as the collective decision making that is the key to collective civic action). We have found more than 50 so far, and the number is growing.

Still another on-campus challenge—and opportunity—is in the way students come to see themselves as political actors. Strategically, students are critical as a source of energy for civic engagement, particularly when their idealism is joined by engaged faculty members. On some campuses, faculty and students have come together in classes where the faculty introduce students to a deliberative politics they can practice every day—a politics of shared decision making and action. Many of these courses use National Issues Forums guides for deliberative decision making.

The foundation is also watching some promising experiments to push beyond service and service learning (both are valuable) to embed students in ongoing community problem solving. These experiments are patterned after a project at Auburn University that put architecture students in rural communities to design needed structures using local materials like old tires and hay. The students didn’t just drop into the communities; they lived there long enough to see the consequences of their work. Auburn is one of the institutions that are building on that experience by instituting a program of community-based civic work and study.

Even though most of what I have reported so far is occurring on campus, the orientation of the civic engagement movement is outward. It is moving in the direction of the citizenry that is supporting the campaign for greater college and university productivity. Regrettably, I don’t think the campus movement has gone far enough to ally with the strong democracy movement off campus. If history is any guide, restoring public purpose to colleges and universities can’t be done without engaging the public—and, I would add, engaging the public on its own terms.

In an essay entitled “Ships Passing in the Night?” I reported on foundation research that found a serious discrepancy between the questions citizens pose in their own terms as they struggle to solve the problems of their communities and the responses of academic and other institutions that want to assist them. In communities hit by some type of disaster—a hurricane, a collapsed economy, a rash of crime and violence—people want to know
how they can come together as a community, despite their differences, to rebuild their communities. Academic institutions are less likely to engage this question and more likely just to offer expert advice, services, and technical assistance.

This discrepancy undermines what the Megiddo analogy suggests is critical: a solid connection between the strong democracy movement off campus and the civic engagement movement on campus. To meet this challenge, academics will have to find roles off campus that go beyond providing expert knowledge (which does have its uses), perhaps even beyond being a “coach” for communities, or a “guide-on-the-side.” More appropriate roles may have to do with the public or collective learning that distinguishes resilient communities from those less resilient. Maybe academics should be colearners who work in tandem with communities. Communities won’t necessarily be interested in the subjects academics are investigating. Still, although the two have different ways of knowing, the spirit of learning, the desire to understand, can be shared.

Another related possibility for connecting the strong democracy movement off campus with the civic engagement movement would be to revisit the mission of higher education—but from the public’s perspective rather than the perspective of colleges and universities. Doing this may be tricky because asking people what they want from higher education may yield the predictable answers: lower costs and jobs for graduates. However, if people were first asked a broader question about their concerns for the future—and then what academic institutions should be doing about those concerns—the responses might reveal more about how citizens see academe. As already noted, people have more than just economic concerns, even though those may be uppermost on their minds right now. A new National Issues Forums guide, *Shaping Our Future: How Should Higher Education Help Us Create the Society We Want?* has been prepared for public deliberations on the mission of higher education. It could prove helpful, provided that the deliberations are more off campus than on.

Returning to today’s looming clash at academe’s Megiddo, the stakes are high. Costs have to be reigned in. Some type of post-secondary education is the key to most high-paying jobs today. Access to that education is critical. At the same time, the
soul of America’s colleges and universities was shaped by the social, economic, and political movements that spawned these institutions. Take that away, and academic institutions become what Earl Cheit feared—bureaucracies whose goals are merely efficiency. Public purposes, the animating spirits of our colleges and universities, would be lost. That can’t be allowed to happen, even with an 800-pound gorilla in the room. And it need not.
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