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Democracy and Higher Education: Traditions and Stories of Civil Engagement
By Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schwartzbach
Democracy and Higher Education: Traditions and Stories of Civic Engagement

By Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schwartzbach
Michigan State University Press, 2010

How should higher education contribute to democracy? Over the years, it has been argued that colleges and universities have a duty to provide equitable access to education, support public intellectuals, or simply discover and preserve the truth. A growing number of scholars and practitioners are investigating the ways colleges and universities might help further participatory democratic ends. Scott Peters, who studies the history of the national land-grant system as well as contemporary land-grant scholars and extension educators, has made a major contribution to this inquiry with the publication of his most recent book, Democracy and Higher Education.

While private universities are not subject to any obvious democratic demands, the land-grant system was created to serve a variety of public ends through the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890. The land-grant system became obligated to connect the work of academic professionals to the interests and activities of local communities, the states, and the nation as a whole with the Hatch Act of 1887 and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. By tracing this history and telling the stories of those working within the land-grant system, Peters hopes to articulate an often-ignored ideal of higher education and show how it might be realized.

Democracy and Higher Education is largely comprised of interviews conducted with 12 exemplary individuals at Cornell University, a land-grant institution. These oral histories shed light on the ways professionals at colleges and universities may contribute to democracy, such as by working with communities to name and frame a problem or goal; identify options for what can be done, as well as the consequences of each; decide what should be done, in light of particular interests, values, and commitments; and act and evaluate what has been done (14).

For example, Molly Jahn, a plant geneticist, created the Public Seed Initiative (PSI) in order to better serve farmers whose needs were not being met by global seed production companies. PSI connects university researchers, seed companies, extension personnel, seed producers, nonprofits, and government organizations and has helped increase the availability of vegetable crops that thrive in the Northeast. It has also increased the knowledge and capacities of those involved in ways that further individual, common, and larger public interests (97-112).

Peters suggests that there are four key conditions for public work that surface in the interviews. Going out and being present in the community, especially by asking questions and listening. Becoming an insider, rather than acting as a servant to clients. Making “I” “we,” such as by being purposefully inefficient in order to allow everyone involved a chance to claim ownership. And leapfrogging back and forth between public and academic roles.

The interviews collected and the conclusions Peters draws are not meant to provide final answers but to contribute to an ongoing conversation about democracy and higher education. Each interviewee tells a singular story of their involvement in public work, and it seems clear that much more could be done to change institutional factors to encourage a more democratic relationship between academics and local communities. How this can be best achieved is a matter requiring further inquiry and discussion.

— Zach VanderVeen

Zach VanderVeen is a research associate at the Kettering Foundation.
This volume offers the first English translations of work by Li Shenzhi (1923-2003), a leading Chinese statesman and academic, who was a premier architect of China’s liberal intellectual revival in the late 1990s and an uncompromising campaigner for political reform and democracy in China.

In these pieces, written between 1991 and 2002, Li Shenzhi considers centuries of history; presents a worldwide view of cultural, social, and political differences; and offers glimpses of the possibilities for a truly free and democratic People’s Republic of China.

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The Organization-First Approach
How Programs Crowd Out Community
by Richard C. Harwood and John A. Creighton

“The Organization-First Approach reveals the troubling trend of nonprofits, foundations, advocacy groups, and others becoming increasingly focused inward, consumed by an ethos of professionalization that leaves little room for authentic engagement or deliberation. The report finds that many of these groups have replaced engagement with outreach and interface with the public around the organization’s programs and agenda instead of the community’s needs or aspirations.”
— David Mathews, President & CEO, Kettering Foundation

Doing Democracy
A report for the Kettering Foundation
by Scott London

Some organizations are reversing the trend toward a decline in civil society by creating the spaces and the means for public deliberation on a wide variety of local, state, and national issues. This report by Scott London describes how many centers across the country are building the capacity of citizens to tackle tough problems. They promote public life in classrooms by developing skills. And they promote public life in communities by encouraging citizens to work to address problems and by affecting the decisions public officials must make.
The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research organization supported by an endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at www.kettering.org.

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Editor
Alice Diebel
Copy Editor
Lisa Boone-Berry

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