

CONNECTIONS

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The Civic Mission of Higher Education

By John Dedrick

Institutions of higher education are critical to the common work of democratic self-governance. Put simply, if students are to acquire a civic education that results in the understandings, skills, and habits of self-rule, they need to be educated in institutions that actually value civic education. If college and university professionals are to produce the kinds of knowledge that best contribute to making self-rule possible, they, too, need to work in institutions that recognize their public-making work. Civic education and public work cannot be relegated to extracurricular activities. They must be integral to the mission, work routines, and reward structure of institutions of higher learning.

Today an increasing number of colleges and universities are attempting to reclaim their civic purposes. They are promoting “engagement” and emphasizing the “civic” in their missions. Although it is not certain that this movement has any relationship to the public’s concerns about self-governance, there is some evidence that, at least at some institutions, this civic work is much more than a rhetorical flourish.

For example, over the last four years more than 100 university presidents have signed the “Wingspread Declaration on the Civic Mission of the American Research University.” At the University of Minnesota, President Robert Bruininks has appointed a task force charged with making civic engagement central to the way the university does its work. And a new American Association of State Colleges and Universities effort, called the American Democracy Project, is focusing on civic engagement and serves to bring together civic efforts at many of the

nation’s state colleges and universities.

What might the newly found focus on civic mission really suggest for the practice of self-governance? Does this turn suggest the possibility of a reorientation of higher education in relationship to democracy? Where are the opportunities and risks for Kettering’s research?

A mapping of “civic mission” and “public engagement” efforts to identify how they define citizenship in practice would make visible the aspects of the civic mission work that tend to support self-rule and those that do not. This work would be useful to the foundation in assessing the potential of these efforts, and to practitioners who are making a case for public work.

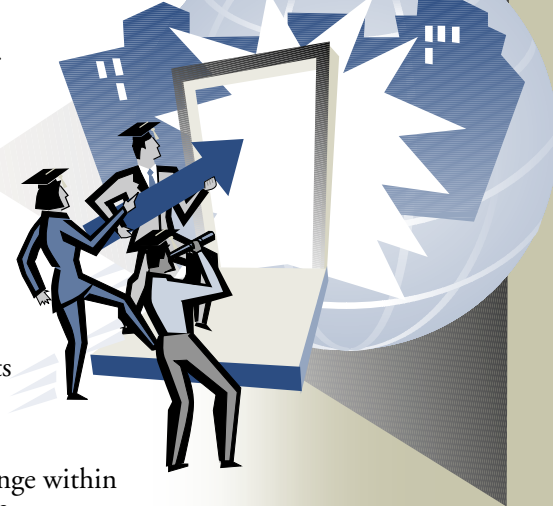
The opportunities may lie in collaborative action-based research efforts with associations that are champions for civic mission and engagement work such as Phi Theta Kappa or the National Forum on Higher Education and the Public Good. Some of these efforts propose to engage the public directly over questions related to the civic purposes of higher education. These projects take public engagement as central to defining the civic mission of higher education.

At the same time, we need to be aware that civic mission work, especially when it is focused at the institutional level may underestimate the power of the disciplines, faculty, and students to bring about change or to block it. These efforts may misunderstand the logic of change within higher education. The current focus on



John Dedrick

CIVIC MISSION AND ENGAGEMENT



“civic mission” or “engagement” may only be today’s attempt to countervail the longer-term reorientation of higher education to serving largely private, instrumental, and economic purposes. We must also be wary of concentrating more attention on higher education itself than on the public. The foundation’s focus must remain the public and its responsibilities for making democracy work.

Perhaps Kettering should concentrate on research that focuses on the institutions’ *relationship* with the public. This could have a wide impact, especially if trustees and other institutional leaders were

involved. Kettering is already a respected player in this arena. Our existing publications, especially the *Higher Education Exchange*, have positioned the foundation as an effective collaborator in this work.

Finally, the case to be made for Kettering’s continued pursuit of this work is that it will complement and inform the foundation’s research into the relationship of other professional organizations — foundations and the media, for example — with the public.

John Dedrick is director of programs at the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached by E-mail at jrdedrick@kettering.org.



Revitalizing the University of Minnesota’s Civic Mission

By Robert Bruininks

As we enter this new and challenging century, it is encouraging to witness increased interest across the nation in connecting colleges and universities to issues of citizenship and engagement in the community. For instance, the Kellogg Commission on the Future of Land-Grant Colleges and Universities issued an important call to renew historic traditions and advance new commitments by higher education to improve society.

Practice lags behind vision. The typical approach frequently involves implementation of high-profile committees or projects. This approach can best be described as a state of “antergism” — a term coined by two University of Minnesota colleagues to describe a situation in which the whole is less than the sum of the parts!

The challenge is to move beyond rhetoric to build a culture that values and rewards civic engagement. This means sustained, institutional, and systematic engagements. As John Muir put it, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find that it is hitched to everything else in the universe.”

Revitalizing the University of Minnesota’s civic mission has been a principal area of focus during my five years as provost and my two years as president. In my view, a systematic approach to public engagement involves a number of elements:

- ◆ We need to implement a systemic institutional commitment that links the promises of research and education to the needs of communities.

Robert Bruininks

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