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the quality of public life in the American democracy

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“Institutions can learn how to mesh with and reinforce the work of citizens.”

This *Review* has compelling accounts of some of the problems in our political system: loss of confidence in institutions, incivility and gridlock in politics, disillusionment with big reforms and one-size-fits-all solutions. Such problems certainly include people’s frustration with not being able to make a significant difference in the system, with not having a strong hand in shaping their future—a frustration intensified by the impact political problems are having on the economy and by the apparent inability of the political system to reform itself.

Problems like these provide a context for the Kettering Foundation’s annual overview of its research, which this year has been focused on higher education’s role in our democracy. Our research is rooted in the history of higher learning in America that shows how colleges and universities have been shaped by pressures from problems in our political system. The force of the American Revolution turned some colonial colleges into “seminars of sedition,” as students became caught up in the fervor of independence. Aided by sympathetic college presidents, collegians overran academic debates on scholarly topics with impassioned deliberations on timely political issues, like whether a standing army was appropriate in a new nation bent on writing its own chapter in human history. The influence of external pressure was evident again when the need for leaders with democratic values led to the creation of state universities modeled on Jefferson’s University of Virginia. And the same thing happened when farmers and mechanics wanted institutions that would provide relevant knowledge on subjects like agronomy and engineering. The result: land-grant universities. And later, this pattern was repeated when Native

Americans and African Americans, wanting to strengthen their communities, led to the establishing of colleges to help them. And later still, community colleges evolved out of “junior” colleges to respond to the growing number of Americans who wanted access to higher education and to communities seeking institutions that would be attentive to their concerns.

Higher education has been an essential part of the great causes in our nation’s history. So the question now, given the growing list of concerns about our political system, is how higher education will respond.

Aware of the importance of this question, the American Commonwealth Partnership is mounting a nationwide reexamination of the mission of our colleges and universities. The Partnership is using a National Issues Forums (NIF) guide to promote deliberations that will explore people’s reactions to different missions for academic institutions. The question of missions will require people to make difficult trade-offs because things they hold dear as citizens will be at stake. One thing people have considered valuable, for instance, is access to a college degree. Ever higher tuition has limited access; yet if costs are lowered, the quality of education students receive could be adversely affected. Institutions also face conflicting pressures to provide practical degrees that will lead to employment, while, at the same time, producing broadly educated graduates of good character who have a strong sense of social responsibility. Deciding among these missions will force people to recognize and deal with these sorts of tensions.

I suspect that some of these deliberations may get at the question of mission by starting with what kind of America people want, then looking at the role higher education should play

—not the other way around. They have to be more off campus than on in order to engage the citizenry. And the potential in this undertaking goes well beyond the issue of mission. Colleges and universities could use public deliberations to address other town-gown issues: if that were to happen, it would be a new way for academic institutions to relate to “the public and its problems” (borrowing John Dewey’s phrase).

I am optimistic about what the Commonwealth Partnership can accomplish because higher education has already reached out to the citizenry in so many initiatives that it has spawned a civic-engagement movement on campuses. At the Kettering Foundation, our research has benefited from the growth of centers and institutes that are intent on putting the public back into the public’s business. Promoting democratic practices like public deliberation, they work on building civic capacity within communities.

There are many other examples of initiatives in higher education becoming more relevant off campus, some even in research. There are faculty members engaged in a more public form of scholarship that promises to connect traditional ways of producing expert knowledge with the socially constructed practical wisdom that citizens use to inform their judgment. And changes in academic curricula are envisioned by efforts to recapture the civic dimension of most all disciplines and professional fields. This initiative, led by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, grew out of an earlier (and ongoing) effort to remind us that the liberal arts were once civic arts. There is also great promise in the institutions that are pushing beyond community service and “service learning” to embed students in communities so they may learn the most essential civic art of all

—how to solve problems when people both differ and disagree.

As impressed as I am with these initiatives, however, it would be naive not to recognize the obstacles. Sometimes there isn't enough critical attention given to institutional pledges to "serve democracy." One president said that her institution served democracy simply by existing! Maybe so, but what *kind* of democracy? There are many definitions, and the intellectual discipline that the academy values needs to be put to use in an ongoing discussion of what democracy should mean—particularly of the role citizens might play. Otherwise, "civic engagement" becomes merely a public relations ploy. A second obstacle could develop as colleges and universities meet the reasonable expectation that they equip graduates for successful careers without bankrupting them. Focusing on individuals and their careers, which is proper, may give the impression that institutions of higher learning have moved away from their historical role of serving the greater public good. And if that happens, colleges and universities will weaken their claim on public support. They could become subject to the argument that if they only give people job skills, then those individuals who benefit, not the public, should pay the costs. This is not a far-fetched possibility: tuition has been increasing as state funding has declined. (Kettering's 2012 *Higher Education Exchange* goes into more depth on this potential shift in focus.)

As serious as such obstacles are, however, I am more worried about a mismatch between what institutions normally do to serve the public, and what it takes to deal with the problems of democracy that citizens face. The mismatch has been obvious when institutions have tried to respond to communities hit by natural disasters like hurricanes. Natural disasters highlight the kind of problems where citizens have to act.

When a hurricane devastates, it is often the case that no outside assistance can reach a community quickly because roads have washed away and power lines are down. People live or die depending on their ability to come together to aid one another. Fortunately, some degree of self-organizing usually goes on; people instinctively rally. But this self-help can be seriously derailed by disagreements, particularly disagreements about what is the right thing to do. The key to surviving a disaster, human-made or natural, is the civic resilience of a community, a capacity that has to be there before a crisis occurs. The quintessential question in a community struck by any kind of calamity is whether people can come together—despite their differences—to do what they must do to overcome their problems.

When disasters occur, colleges and universities can provide valuable technical assistance and armies of volunteers. Yet, while helpful, these responses don't speak to the first question citizens ask, which is, "What can *we* do?" not, "What assistance can you bring?" I've described this mismatch as "ships passing in the night." Campus engagement is not necessarily aligned with the work of building community resilience.

Yet this said, on balance I remain more optimistic than not. The campus engagement movement is still evolving. Institutions can learn more about how research and service can mesh with and reinforce the work of citizens. And when that occurs, the work of citizens may also enrich the work of academics. I recall an illustration of this happening in a story the foundation heard from an MIT-trained scholar in Colombia, Alejandro Sanz de Santamaria, whose research is on the economic development of rural communities. Surveying the academic literature on these communities, he found

extensive data on the characteristics of the social order, on weather conditions, and on the growth rate of the population. Yet when he did his fieldwork, he realized that the data he was using didn't capture the complexities of the conditions in rural communities. Most disconcerting of all, he saw that his way of producing knowledge wasn't like the way villagers created knowledge. Sanz de Santamaria's discomfort led him to change both the way he did research and the way he taught research in the classroom. He abandoned the assumption that the villages were "sick" and his job was to heal them. And he set out to find ways to communicate what he knew that would be consistent with the way

people learned. His story, by the way, first appeared in this *Review* in the winter of 1993.

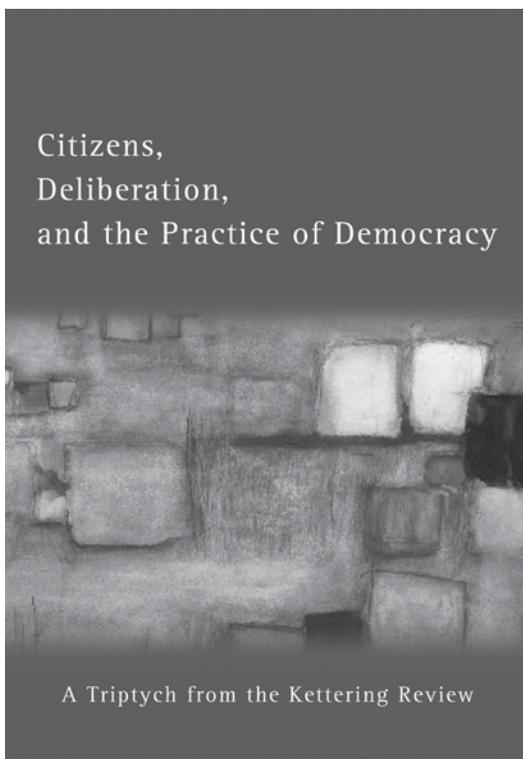
My hope is that colleges and universities will remember that they are more than what they do in teaching, research, and service. And they should be more than models of cost efficiency and good management. They are embodiments of the great causes they have served, and the democratic values implicit in those causes. They have souls, not just buildings and Internet connections. At its best, American higher education has, itself, been a movement.

David Mathews is president of the Kettering Foundation.



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