A RETROSPECTIVE

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE

2015
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.

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THE PUBLIC/ACADEMIC DISCONNECT

David W. Brown

Reprinted from the 1995 issue of the Higher Education Exchange

The much talked about crisis in higher education is, superficially, one of dollars—more competition for research funds, downsizing of both academic and staff functions, trying to cope with the financial-aid needs of students and the deferred maintenance costs of the physical plant—in a political climate that offers no prospect of a bailout with larger public subsidies or dramatic tuition increases.

No doubt the crisis is financial, but it arises, in substantial part, from legislators and taxpayers having second thoughts about the kind of returns they are getting on their investment. Many institutions of higher learning are being forced to reexamine their relations to a public that can no longer be counted on to support them as they have in the past.

For most Americans, higher education has always been a very pragmatic investment—used both for personal advancement and for civic purposes. Personal advancement still rides high in the saddle. Short of rhetorical flourish, serious civic purpose has not been seen for some time. Each of our more than 3,000 colleges and universities is left to articulate and pursue whatever mission fits its circumstance, and what they do now is serve as necessary vehicles for faculty and student ambitions. Most colleges and universities, however, have no coherent agenda of their own that serves larger public interests. Ernest Boyer, executive director of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, says, “The campus is seen as a place for faculty to get tenured and students to get credentialed, but what goes on there is not seen as relevant to many of our social problems” (Boyer 1990).

Where once we educated a small class of relatively privileged young men to serve and govern their communities, now we educate a much larger and heterogeneous cohort, with hardly a thought given to their preparation for such civic work. Civic purpose is, at best, a university’s mission to educate for professional employment by which its graduates distinguish and distance themselves from a lay public, and then serve that public according to certified knowledge, skills, and self-regulated codes of ethics.
The chasm is especially wide between academics and citizens—too wide for anyone to leap without risking serious injury. Perhaps no other professional world is more removed now from democratic culture than the hierarchies within and among academic departments, in which opinion—anyone’s—is valued only to the extent that it has first been certified by an elaborate credentialing process. If citizens are heard, they certainly are not listened to. Thomas Bender concludes that “academic truth” and “political knowledge” are now worlds apart, and make it difficult for “academic intellect” to be involved in “democratic culture” (Bender 1990).

Even those professors who see “politics” and “power” in every text and institution nonetheless pursue their critiques in very orthodox academic fashion. They deconstruct, but they do not communicate with the larger public. They labor for the approval of their peers, but not for the sake of that public. There are clearly rewards for their academic performance, but very little of it benefits the real-world constituencies that inspire their scholarship.

The marginality that Boyer speaks of and the chasm described by Bender underlie the supposed crisis that presidents, deans, department chairs, and faculty now must deal with, whether they acknowledge it or not. It is not just their budgets that are precarious, but also their public standing.

On the assumption that a good teacher uses any problem that arises in the classroom as an opportunity to learn, perhaps the crisis in higher education is an opportunity for universities to learn how they can better serve those who have become hostile or indifferent to their interests. Or as Boyer asks, “Is it possible for the work of the academy to relate more effectively to our most pressing social, economic, and civic problems?” Another observer calls it “a fluid moment” and believes that the “downsizing” of many universities may make it possible to get some attention paid to strategies that reconnect universities to the broader jurisdictions in which they are located or which underwrite a large portion of their costs. For Thomas Bender, “The agenda for the next decade . . . ought to be the opening up of the disciplines, the ventilating of professional communities . . . that have become too self-referential” (Bender 1993, 143).

A good way to begin is by encouraging academics to do work that has practical consequence for public problem solving and to do such work with citizens, not for them. Universities alone or in a regional consortium might
establish “civic training centers” to educate graduate students and to reeducate faculty members as to the arts of collaboration with the numerous publics whose participation is essential if pressing social problems are to be solved.

Most problem solving in most organizations and communities is a shared enterprise that some people think of as “politics.” If I found myself alone on a desert island, there would be no politics. To be political is to be engaged in a process of analysis and interaction with other people. Independent grounds for judgment surely exist, such as the norms of a methodology or an ideology, but there is rarely any feasible way to enforce them in the political life of organizations and communities. In such venues, academics and those who study with them are called upon to help make decisions rather than discover answers. Whatever their technical skills or ideology, they must be prepared to adjust to public circumstances over which they have little or no control.

A civic training center would be the place to develop “interrogating practices” that help citizens break down and break through the proprietary languages of academics so that their specialized vocabularies can be made intelligible, reflected on, and used without license by nonspecialists. Fifteen years ago, Charles Lindblom and David Cohen, in a remarkably candid report, criticized the failure of professional researchers to concede that despite their “specialized investigative techniques, especially quantitative,” most of them “inevitably rely heavily on the same ordinary techniques of speculation, definition, conceptualization, hypothesis, formulation, and verification,” that are practiced by ordinary citizens. A civic training center would also be the place to promote the equally important practice, so often neglected by academics, of learning to ask “What is it that members of the public know that I need to know, if I am to be of any help?” (Lindblom and Cohen 1979, 15).

Two existing university centers are working examples of how new civic training centers might be organized. The Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota, and more particularly its Project Public Life, develops and teaches ways “to reengage citizens in the public world.” The project’s work includes action research, teaching methods, organizing and outreach, which combine theory, language, and skills that help citizens to be participants in the everyday politics of problem solving. One significant initiative under way is the project’s recent work with service,
health, and professional organizations and their staff development programs. Harry Boyte, a codirector of the project, believes that “professional identities,” without reform and civic enrichment, are not only unequal to public problems, but present serious obstacles to their resolution.

The Center for Community Partnership at the University of Pennsylvania is an important partner working with the West Philadelphia Improvement Corps, a decade’s effort to create and sustain comprehensive community schools. The university does not contribute financial support, but instead, through the center, offers the talent of its students and faculty members to work with children, parents, and others in West Philadelphia. The goal is to create viable “community schools” as social hubs for the entire community. Since those at Penn do not assume that they know how to do that for the residents of West Philadelphia, their center pursues a “Deweyan” strategy that emphasizes “a mutually beneficial, democratic relationship between academics and nonacademics.” The center is as much learning-oriented as it is service-oriented. Participation is not one-way, but two-way partnerships of faculty members, students, staff, and alumni, with residents—all learning from each other as they share problems and produce better outcomes than would otherwise happen if any one of them tried to do it alone.

Professional reputation is, and will remain, the reference point for those in the academy. That is why they must find a professional reason for being more attentive to civic culture. There is nothing like the experience of academics in real world problem solving to remind them that they still have much to learn or learn anew. It is possible that civic training centers would help to facilitate such learning and, thereby, influence the nature of reforms in graduate education and the research agenda of young scholars.

Whatever civic training centers might do to reconnect faculties and graduate students to the larger public world and its problems, the learning that took place could also be plowed back into teaching and problem solving on campus.

Not only do many academic professionals refuse or fail to connect with real world constituencies, they also set a terrible example in their academic hierarchies on campus and the expert-novice distance maintained in lecture halls and classrooms. That is not how people come together in the real world to solve problems. Although “civic education” is not acknowledged on most campuses, it is, nonetheless, implicit in campus rituals and routines that are conspicuously undemocratic. To experience public life and the politics that govern its outcomes means learning to reject the notion that the answers are “out there” in the custody of professionals. Neither are the answers “in
here”—the radical subjectivity promoted by well-meaning teachers and facilitators. Civic training centers might help teaching faculty to offer students learning structures in the classroom that resemble the complex organizations and diverse communities which await them. Treating students as consumers of higher education makes each of them feel important, but also makes them ill equipped for influencing events or solving collective problems.

In normal times, the problems of a campus are usually addressed from the top down. Students are transient; some faculty find it hard to collaborate with others as equals; and professional staff is expected to administer the place for those who think that they have better things to do. But one campus observer thinks that it is very important to piece together whatever civic culture exists at any university, going through the difficult transition of downsizing, or experiencing other problems that disturb and divide the various constituencies on campus. Such constituencies now find it hard to talk about their differences constructively, finding some group, other than their own, to blame. A civic training center might explore ways in which students, administrators, and faculty members can initiate and sustain a way of talking about the public life and problems that they share. Finding and practicing a democratic language—neither professionalized nor shrill—might help them get on with problem solving together.

Moreover, a public needs problems to work on, not just to talk about. Diversity on any campus enlarges the circle but, as another observer notes, each member of the circle needs a public role rather than merely having his or her “identity” acknowledged. If those in a circle are really to learn how to live with their differences, they need something to do together. Perhaps civic training centers could be places that help campuses move from the rhetoric of multiculturalism to real civic work.

REFERENCES

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