HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE
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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Recently we have been working on a pilot project for the Kettering Foundation that examines the democratic and political mindsets of university faculty who are doing public scholarship. This is a form of scholarship that embodies Harry Boyte’s concept of public work, which he defines as “sustained effort by a mix of people who solve public problems or create goods, material or cultural, of general benefit” (Boyte 2004). Public scholars contribute to this work by actively collaborating with citizens in ways that make both civic and disciplinary contributions. While there is an emerging literature that focuses on the practice of public scholarship, we know much less about the value commitments and vision of democracy that animates scholars who are committed to public work. Understanding these facets of public scholarship is central to fostering the participatory and active democracy that is required if we hope to affect the kind of cultural change needed in academia, the professions, and among the larger public. Without this knowledge, it will be difficult to develop policies and incentives that might encourage a broader cross section of academics to integrate scholarly work with civic purposes.

Through our inquiry, we are exploring a number of questions, many of which revolve around the concept of citizenship and the role of citizens. We are interested in the ways in which faculty members’ stories about public work intersect, and the key differences in the way that they define and evaluate citizen roles and purpose. As part of this research, we invited eight faculty members at Penn State, representing a range of academic disciplines, from theater to engineering, to share their stories. We also spoke to four citizens with whom these faculty had engaged in work on issues of public importance. Interviews covered broad issues of motivation and career trajectory, and also zeroed in on a specific project or initiative. Toward the end of each interview, we asked each interviewee for his or her ideal definition of citizenship. We were surprised to find that these descriptions sometimes diverged
rather sharply from the way the faculty described how they actually worked with citizens.

In almost every interview, faculty described the ideal citizen as being very active and engaged. One faculty member summarized this view well when she said: “To me, active citizenship means that you have an obligation to learn what’s going on in the world and to have a collective role that is beyond your self-interest.” Or, as another interviewee put it, “Being a good citizen means that you choose a ring to step into. Citizenship is about contribution, not commentary.” In contrast, when asked to describe the roles that citizens actually played in a specific public engagement process, some faculty members emphasized the importance of their role in telling people what they needed to do. For instance, when speaking about developing products that can help lift people out of poverty, one interviewee described his work as follows: “It’s all about execution and getting the job done. So you’re thinking about what my execution process for this looks like from day one.” In this conception, faculty are experts and citizens need to learn from them and use this expertise to address public issues and problems.

This more narrow approach to citizen involvement is probably related to a university incentive structure—not unique to Penn State—that does not reward public work. In fact, some faculty spoke of having to meet higher standards of excellence in traditional metrics of evaluation—primarily publishing—in order to feel justified in pursuing the community outreach and engagement that they were most passionate about. As one faculty member put it, “Here’s the secret to public scholarship: be the best researcher in your department. Get another NSF grant, don’t stop there, publish another book, publish a series of articles . . . Just do more than anyone around you and then do whatever the hell you want with whatever is left of your time.”

In order to do public work, given these structural constraints, faculty must be highly motivated to take action regarding the particular issues they address. This motivation is driven by, and drives, particular commitments or stances, and thus leads faculty members toward stronger leadership roles in creating knowledge and setting public agendas. In other words, the faculty who find ways to do public scholarship despite barriers seem to be those with the strongest emotional attachment to the issues on which
they are collaborating with citizens, and thus may find themselves pulled toward the roles of a disciplinary or context expert, even if, at the same time, they are facilitating democratic processes.

But as we analyzed the data in more detail, an interesting distinction began to emerge. Faculty who were primarily passionate about particular issues were more likely to be inconsistent when it came to defining citizenship and describing citizen roles in practice. On the other hand, faculty members who were the most passionate about the process of public discourse and inclusion were more likely to define the ideal citizen and the roles played by citizens in public work projects in consistent terms. And as we thought about this finding, it seemed that in some ways it parallels the distinction David Mathews makes between “problems in democracy” and “problems of democracy” (Mathews 2014). Problems in democracy are specific issues that confront the public. These are the obvious problems we see around us every day and that require attention. In our interviews, these ranged from forest management to creating marketable products for economic growth; and the faculty members who were most passionate about problems in democracy tended to be more likely to describe citizens and their roles in terms that reflect a preoccupation with specific outcomes rather than the process through which these are reached.

Problems of democracy are the often unseen problems that prevent us from effectively addressing the problems that are staring us in the face—what Mathews calls the “problems-behind-the-problems” (Mathews 2014, xvii). These are systemic problems with democracy itself. They include lack of public engagement, divisive approaches to problem solving, lack of information and sound public judgment, lack of collective efficacy, lack of coordination, the absence of shared learning, and mutual distrust between citizens and social institutions (Mathews 2014, 4-5). The problems of democracy uncovered in our interviews ranged from lack of personal and community agency in public education to a lack of community engagement and access to decision-making processes—for example, with respect to natural resource management. Faculty interested in these kinds of issues were more likely to describe citizenship in ways that reflect a more active and processual approach to democracy and problem solving.
Two of our interviews provide a helpful illustration of the distinction between problems in democracy and problems of democracy with respect to citizens and citizenship and appropriate faculty roles. One faculty member we spoke with is a soil scientist and water specialist who organized and managed a water-quality program at a large research university for 14 years before coming to work in the College of Agricultural Sciences at Penn State. Another faculty member spent several years as an attorney and mediator, focusing on water rights, water quality, and flooding, before coming to the Dickinson School of Law at Penn State. Though both individuals addressed a similar problem in democracy—water use and quality—the stories they tell demonstrate how different ways of interacting with citizens and different approaches to problems in democracy can lead to very different outcomes. Moreover, they show why it is so important to understand how problems in democracy are connected to problems of democracy, and how this intersection relates to the role of citizens and citizenship.

The soil and water scientist tells a story about an ongoing program that he became involved in early in his career that was designed to study nitrogen levels and water use efficiencies. Farmers who participated in the study did so by giving researchers access to their land, but because the farmers were not given information about the purpose of the research, they behaved in ways that compromised the quality of the data. As he explained: “We talked to one guy that was managing the irrigation operation, found that he was cutting back on the amount of water applied because he wanted to look good to us, because we measured water-use efficiencies. So that was a totally unintended consequence.”

This interviewee went on to acknowledge the importance of things like motivation and behavior, but in the end, still described a fairly passive role for citizens in the context of projects he has worked on. Though he saw a role for citizens “to help establish the mechanisms whereby the identification of the problem will occur,” or in naming and framing the problem, he identified few opportunities for citizens to contribute their knowledge to the research and the best practices developed from that research. His focus remained behavioral change for specific outcomes; in his view, it is still legitimate for experts to leverage citizen motivations and
behaviors in order to achieve these outcomes. Again, speaking about water quality, he said:

So, if you have an interest group that is impacted by cultural practices and those are practices that create sediment runoff, that’s a very typical problem in [agriculture]. The ones—educators—who are successful, they reframe the question. The question is reframed for the farmer: how much money are you losing? What are you going to hand over to your children? How does your property look to the neighbors as a result of sediment losses from your field? So it’s not a water-quality problem to them, it is re-framed as a production question or a heritage question.

In contrast, the attorney who worked on water issues spoke of helping people identify and rethink the fundamental values systems underpinning water use in general:

And so, the issue in both of the basins I was working with was one-hundred years of one particular set of values, giving all the water for irrigation, none or very little for in-stream flow purposes, and some for municipal [uses]. But when you, as a society, start to revalue what you want water for . . . you end up needing to reconfigure all of this.

She describes her own motivations for doing this work not as being tied to achieving a specific set of water-related outcomes, but instead as helping to facilitate the broader democratic process of identifying and working with values:

Where I found joy is helping people actually get past what they see as irreconcilable difference to find common understanding on the resources they’re drawing from . . . I’m, I guess, in the position of not presupposing what an outcome should be, but really looking for what’s a fair discussion on any solution for these things.

Instead of water-related outcomes, her focus is on building community capacity to address the complex natural resource (and other) issues that they face. Describing one successful long-term mediation project, she put the matter this way:

If you think about deliberative democracy and people’s engagement, it went from “I don’t trust you and I can’t talk to you” to watching the fabric of that community turn around so that they are able to deal with all sorts of questions far beyond flooding.
In other words, the problems of democracy she addresses—in this case, trust and representation—become the infrastructure underpinning solutions to problems in democracy. It is difficult to get to “the real substance,” or the problems in democracy, without having this infrastructure in place.

Unfortunately, she notes, problems of democracy are not as easily described or analyzed according to traditional scientific standards of evidence. While she argues that “There is a lot of science in this process, you just need to tap into it,” she also experiences a feeling of disconnect with some academics. Describing a conflict-management conference at which she presented, she said:

A lot of the people were presenting really theoretical stuff. . . . Effectively, it was “We’re doing experiments on two people negotiating against each other.” And they’re like, “Can you experiment with the work you do?” And I’m thinking, “No! The work I do is so messy.” You know, it’s multiple parties and multiple issues and it’s layered.

This quote points to another unique feature of problems of democracy: many of them are what Rittel and Webber (1973) termed “wicked problems.” They define “wicked problems” as being fundamentally different from “tame” problems, which have relatively straightforward, technical solutions, such as building stronger bridges. Instead, wicked problems are intractable, poorly structured, and tend to have only temporary or partial solutions. Examples include climate change, AIDS, and the siting of hazardous waste incinerators and other noxious facilities. For these wicked problems, there are no unambiguous criteria by which to judge their resolution. In fact, we often find it difficult to even define the problem in the first place because it typically involves complexly intertwined normative criteria, personal judgments, and empirical conditions or situations.

Expert scientific and technical knowledge alone cannot address wicked problems because they are not only scientific, but also social, economic, moral, ethical, and cultural in nature. Different individuals and groups define the same problem in very different terms, and this means that there will inevitably be conflicts over appropriate solutions to problems. In fact, they might not even agree on the same facts. Scientific and technical knowledge can play an important role in achieving specific outcomes, but because the public
is part of the problem, they must be also be an integral part of the solution. When dealing with wicked problems, the distinction between expert and facilitator is more important than it might be when addressing tame problems. Whereas experts can make suggestions and provide advice, conventional wisdom dictates that effective facilitators must be perceived as neutral, or at least as an honest broker. The attorney we spoke with described this as “being able to carry everybody’s stories in your head” and wearing a “cloak of invisibility.” She spoke of reconciling this position with her role as an academic expert: “One of my problems has been how do I switch out of being a practitioner [mediator], wearing this cloak of invisibility, to [being] an academic, where I need to be explaining things? . . . I’m not neutral, I work for Penn State.”

One way of addressing the tension between expert and citizen has been to find ways of creating reciprocal relationships between the two. For instance, Fischer (2005) puts forth the concept of “citizen expert” and “expert citizen,” arguing that each party brings a unique set of knowledge to the public realm, usually drawing on differing epistemological approaches, and that both scholar and citizen are working together to tackle problems that ultimately affect us all. However, our research complicates the expert-citizen dichotomy. There is no single best practice role for experts. The disciplinary knowledge of the water and soil scientist with whom we spoke is just as critical to democratic process as is the disciplinary and process knowledge of the attorney and mediator. In some instances, it might be appropriate for experts to draw upon disciplinary expertise to weigh in and provide recommendations on important issues, as did the water and soil scientist. In other instances, it might be more important to participate in a neutral manner, as the attorney often does. In still other instances, there may be a role for the expert to work as an equal partner with citizens, as described by Fischer—informing debate, soliciting knowledge, and co-creating new knowledge with citizens. All perspectives are necessary for the development of democratic habits and community capacity.

Moreover, in the few interviews we have conducted with citizens, we are finding that they (who, themselves, may be individuals with “expert knowledge”) desire and identify the need for these different types of expertise when dealing with issues they care about. For example, two landowners who had worked closely with Extension
educators described experiences soliciting scientific and technical knowledge and advice in order to achieve specific instrumental objectives, such as attracting more deer to their property. Citizens also described opportunities in which they were able to share their own knowledge and skills, either as part of a series of information-gathering forums facilitated by faculty or as partners in the creation of new projects and initiatives. In our interviews, faculty expressed some feeling of pressure to take on these different expert roles and responsibilities at once, and struggled—as did the attorney—to navigate appropriate boundaries among them. Without creating new silos, it is important to recognize the tensions between these roles, and the different levels of citizen activeness (for both citizens and experts) possible within both.

Disciplinary or content specialists may be asked to provide expert recommendations, or to educate a particular public tasked with decision making. In these scenarios, it would be unreasonable to expect the type of bidirectional knowledge transfer advocated by Fischer (2005). In this context, citizens may well want to be largely passive recipients of expert knowledge. But even in this situation, there are techniques for improving the process of determining what knowledge is most relevant to a specific audience. For example, a professor of theater with whom we spoke described working with water scientists who were preparing for a set of public meetings. Her goal was to help them move away from top-down information transfer to introduce some degree of democratic practice. The scientists were working on a slide presentation based on what they thought their audience needed to know. The professor listened for a moment and said: “No slides; you get two hours of asking a kind of question to find out what they know. . . . Think of it differently, you’re not dispensing the information you think they want to hear, you’re dispensing information [after] you find out they want to know.”

In her experience, even trying to get some experts to begin considering the process of communication can be a challenge for content specialists, particularly in hard sciences and engineering, who have had little or no training in interacting with members of the public. Another professor of engineering design we interviewed acknowledged this gap, noting “soft skills are the hard skills. . . .
You can learn the math and science and the engineering, but if you don’t know how to work with people, if you can’t communicate, you’re not going to get as much done.” In his work developing marketable products and business “ecosystems” across sub-Saharan Africa, he saw a focus on process—which, for him, entailed soliciting local knowledge and encouraging lateral knowledge sharing—as ultimately improving and strengthening the impact of his end products. This did not mean, however, that he created opportunities for equal partnerships between experts and citizens.

We don’t have the space here to provide a detailed roadmap for building the skill set needed for scholars to more effectively engage the public on problems in and of democracy, nor for helping experts think more expansively about the role citizens should play in this process. And we realize that it is difficult for experts who are passionate and knowledgeable about an issue to step back and resist the urge to impose their solution. At the same time, the wicked problems we face require collective action. This realization means that all experts—even those who focus heavily on problems in democracy—need to become more reflexive and reflective in their work with citizens. A first step requires a sustained effort to foster a more nuanced view of citizens and citizenship among those scholars working in the public realm—one that does not place citizens in a passive role of information recipient. Even the simple act of asking people what they want to know is a move in the right direction. This would place both citizens and experts in the role of learner, which, as our theater professor pointed out, is what will help both parties better address problems that neither side can fix alone.

REFERENCES
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