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.
HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE
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For the past two decades, higher education leaders, particularly college presidents, have advocated solving the “democracy crisis”—low political understanding and participation rates among younger people—by increasing civic engagement and service-learning programs on campuses (Campus Compact 1999, 3-4). But for those who held out hope that service learning and community engagement could make a significant impact on democratic political engagement, there has been more disappointment than success. Why have conventional approaches to service learning and community engagement fallen short politically? I find three major problems with the majority of these initiatives.

The Problem of Purpose: Insufficient Attention to Civic Goals

In the effort to grow and spread the field, colleges and universities have encouraged “scattershot” initiatives—single-course, single-semester experiences across the curriculum—allowing the departments sponsoring such experiences or courses to set their own outcomes. Some promoters of community engagement simply assume democratic political engagement will occur for students as a “secondary effect” of a program, without much intentional setting or evaluation of democratic political outcomes for students. Moreover, if those coordinating community-engagement programs or teaching service-learning courses do not see themselves as civic educators, this poses a barrier to achieving democratic political outcomes.

Even those programs or courses that profess to have democratic-citizenship outcomes as their end take a “thin” view of democracy and citizenship. Critics like Harry Boyte contend that service learning routinely “neglects to teach about root causes and power relationships, fails to stress productive impact, ignores politics, and downplays the strengths and talents of those being served”
David Mathews adds that “service programs, although filled with political implications that bright students are likely to recognize, tend to be kept carefully distanced from political education.” It is, therefore, “difficult to say what effect, if any, these service programs have on civic education” (Mathews 1996, 265-285). More recently, Eric Hartman argued that there is a difference between “educating for democracy and encouraging civic engagement” (2013, 58); to do the former, higher education needs to return to explicitly fostering democratic values (see also Saltmarsh and Hartley 2011, 14-24).

Until recently, efforts to define learning outcomes related to democratic political engagement have been incomplete, somewhat amorphous, and undefined. For example, the Carnegie Foundation’s Community Engagement Elective Classification is one such national effort to advance “collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities” in order, among other things, to “prepare engaged citizens” and “strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility” (Carnegie Foundation 2013). A glance at the 16-page Documentation Framework for campuses seeking to apply for the classification, however, suggests a limited understanding of democratic citizenship and a “check-the-box” approach to community engagement. Moreover, while service-learning courses are referenced in the application, and campuses are expected to “provide specific examples of . . . learning outcomes for students,” nowhere are democratic, political, or civic-learning outcomes mentioned.

The Problem of Time: Insufficient Commitment to Civic Development

One consequence of the “scattershot” approach to service learning and community engagement is that most college programs simply do not take the time necessary to develop their students’ civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Wallace 2000). Following John Dewey, who argued that for an experience to have an effect on educational growth, it “must cover a considerable time span and be capable of fostering development over time” (Giles and Eyler 1994, 80), research clearly shows that the duration and
intensity of a course or program is necessary to produce impact (see Billig 2009). This is particularly true of democratic political outcomes, where skills and relationships take time to develop. While in the United States you can become a legal citizen by birth, you don’t become an effective citizen by birth, or by voting once, or by taking one civics course in high school, or by having a “one-and-done” college experience, even if it’s a well-constructed and supported community-based learning experience. And this is especially true if the “civic intervention” is not directly connected to your core identities; that is, you see your civic identity—as a participant in public life—as part of your personal, professional, and other identities.

The Problem of Accountability: Insufficient Attention to Evaluating Outcomes

The final concern regarding service learning has to do with how the field typically measures its effectiveness. Campuses either “count” things—the number of civic engagement courses or faculty, the number of students involved, the number of hours served—or do simple and often meaningless “pre-post” surveys from the beginning of an intervention to the end (at most one semester). These measures do little to determine whether an impact occurs, let alone how and why democratic civic outcomes are occurring. These accountability standards even fail to use the standard announced by Campus Compact presidents, who argued that:

We will know we are successful by the robust debate on our campuses, and by the civic behaviors of our students. We will know it by the civic engagement of our faculty. We will know it when our community partnerships improve the quality of community life and the quality of the education we provide (Campus Compact 1999, 4).
The Potential Promise of Service Learning

For all of these reasons, many higher educators interested in advancing democratic political-engagement aims have long given up on service learning. This, I believe, is a mistake; there is compelling evidence that community-based learning, done intentionally and well, still offers a fruitful approach to engaging students directly and explicitly in democratic politics. As Peter Levine argues, “the best examples” of service learning offer much to recommend themselves to democratic civic educators:

[They] are true collaborations among students, professors, and community members; they have a political dimension (that is, they organize people to tackle fundamental problems collectively); they combine deliberation with concrete action; and they are connected to “teaching and learning, research, and the dissemination of knowledge [goals] that drive the university” (Levine 2008, 21).

There are several reasons for continuing to advance service learning as a means to the end of educating for democracy. Let me begin with more theoretical, epistemological, and pedagogical justifications for continuing to hold out hope for service learning as a democratic political education strategy in higher education. First, service-learning pedagogy has the effect of breaking down the hierarchical and “expert-driven” epistemology so prevalent within the academy. Service learning evinces what Derek Barker calls a more “democratic epistemology” (Barker 2011), flipping the “expert-knower” roles in radically democratic ways. It also works to “redistribute power,” not only between campus and community, but also between faculty and students (Mitchell 2008). Further, service-learning practice over the past forty years comes out of a pragmatist theoretical foundation, which also has deep connections to participatory democracy (Barber 1984, 1992; Giles and Eyler 1994).

Second, to the extent that high quality, or “critical,” service learning (see Mitchell 2008) places a primary emphasis on authentic relationships, both in the classroom and in the community, it shares with current democratic political education efforts a resistance to “institutional politics” in favor of “informal, everyday democracy.” A growing number of service-learning practitioners have come to
an understanding that we must begin with what David Mathews calls a “wetlands” approach to our work:

Citizens are defined by what they do with other citizens rather than with the state. Their relationships are pragmatic or work-related rather than based on patronage or party loyalty. The names people give to problems in the political wetlands reflect the things they hold dear . . . The knowledge needed to decide what to do about the problems citizens face is created in the cauldron of collective decision making. It is formed by the interaction of people with other people. (Mathews 2011, x).

Or, to use Mark Wilson’s metaphor, what both quality service learning and democratic political education seek is that people be “part of” their communities, rather than merely “partnering with” them in a service-oriented placement or project (Wilson 2012). The language we find around “reciprocity” and “co-creation,” prevalent in both community engagement and democratic citizenship pedagogies, suggests that a union between the two is possible—and desirable (Longo 2013).

Additionally, to the extent service learning has advanced an understanding of “shared governance,” with strong emphasis on student and community “voice,” it has something to offer those interested in advancing the democratic purposes of higher education. The democratic concern about student voice can be traced back to College Students Talk Politics, a 1993 report published by Kettering. In the preface, David Mathews complains about the complicit role higher education has played in depressing student political engagement: “Sometimes [students] learn what politics is in class. Most of the time they learn politics from the way it is practiced on campus” (Creighton and Harwood 1993). And service-learning researchers have long documented the positive impact that “student voice” can have on student-learning outcomes, including civic ones, as campuses begin to involve “students as colleagues” (Billig, Root, and Jesse 2005; Battistoni and Longo 2011; Longo, Drury, and Battistoni 2006; Zlotkowski, Longo, and Williams 2006).

A final reason for “educational democrats” to invest hope, time, and energy in the potential of service learning lies in the commitment to critical reflective practice. With its roots in John
Dewey, the field has always maintained a focus on the importance of “reflective thinking” to service learning (and democratic civic) outcomes (Giles and Eyler 1994; Youniss, et al. 1997). The Carnegie-supported Political Engagement Project, many of whose programs and courses were community-based, found strong connections between “learning through structured reflection,” personal meaning and political efficacy, and what the project termed “politically engaged identity,” which “involves seeing or identifying oneself as a person who cares about politics and has an overarching commitment to political participation” (Colby, et al. 2007, 17).

**Democratic Community Engagement in Practice**

For the past three years, I have been part of a study of three programs that embody this reasoning behind sticking with community engagement—done well and with a particular civic emphasis—as an effective strategy for democratic political engagement. The three programs studied are: the Public Service Scholars Program at Stanford University; the Citizen Scholars Program at the University of Massachusetts; and the Public and Community Service Studies major at Providence College. These three programs take a “sustained, developmental approach” to community engagement curricula, in order to:

- support civic identity and leadership development by creating opportunities over time for students to work on issues and concerns in increasingly complex roles; to invest deeply in an issue, agency, or relationship that creates connection and a sense of belonging; and to create community both on and off campus that builds the critical awareness and skills necessary to take action and mobilize others in meaningful and constructive ways (Mitchell, Visconti, Keene, and Battistoni 2011, 116).

In addition to developing authentic, longer-term relationships, and thus addressing “the problem of time,” all three programs demonstrate a “commitment to a practice-based and democratic pedagogy within a community of learners,” and to students and community members as “equal colleagues and coeducators” (Mitchell, Visconti, Keene, and Battistoni 2011, 129). All three are grounded in and informed by fundamental democratic political values (such as diversity, social justice, active citizenship), and
have specific, articulated program outcomes involving democratic civic skill development that are assessed over time, thus addressing “the problem of purpose.”

Finally, these civic engagement programs have been subjected to a rigorous, mixed-methods research study of almost 400 program graduates to determine what, if any, outcomes have been achieved. To give an example, preliminary analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from this study demonstrates a strong relationship between deep, critical reflection in the program and the subsequent development of civic identity and commitments to civic action after the graduates leave college (Mitchell, et al. 2014).

**Advancing Democratic Political Education through Community Engagement**

This three-program study not only gives hope that service learning can advance students’ democratic political education, but also points the way out of the three problems most community-engagement initiatives exhibit. Conversations begun at Kettering are generating ideas about how best to advance democratic civic education through and beyond service learning, which include the following steps:

1. **Address the problem of purpose by developing agreed-upon democratic citizenship-education outcomes for community engagement, and connect courses and programs to these standards, with concrete assessment indicators and measures.**

   Much work has already been done to begin to identify student civic learning outcomes in higher education. Over a decade of research, practice, and articulation has taken place (see Howard 2001; Battistoni 2002, 2013; Kirlin 2003; Koliba 2004; Saltmarsh 2004, 2005; Colby, et al. 2007), attempting to define the standards by which the civic education work of higher education could be judged and measured. This has culminated in three important initiatives:
   - construction of “Civic and Global Learning” objectives as one of the “five basic areas of learning” in the Lumina Foundation’s Degree Qualification Profile tool (Lumina Foundation 2014);
• development of a “Civic Engagement VALUE Rubric” as part of the VALUE rubrics project of the AACU (Rhodes 2010); and

• articulation of “A Framework for Twenty-First Century Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement” (Framework) as part of The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement’s A Crucible Moment (AACU 2012, p. 4).

Both the Degree Qualification Profile tool and the VALUE Rubric define civic learning developmentally, with attention to students attaining civic outcomes at “progressively more sophisticated levels” (Rhodes 2010). And the “Framework” lays out in some specificity the concrete knowledge, skills, values, and characteristics of collective action necessary for citizens to have.

More needs to be done, however, in solidifying an “agreed-upon list” of student-learning outcomes, connecting these outcomes to concrete indicators and measures, and then connecting these outcomes to college programs and curricula. The Degree Qualification Profile understanding of civic learning is fairly thin, “rely[ing] principally on the types of cognitive activities [such as describing, examining, elucidating, justifying] within the direct purview of institutions of higher education” (Lumina 2014, 25). The Civic Engagement VALUE Rubric, while including important elements like diversity of communities and cultures, civic identity and commitment, civic communication, and civic action and reflection, avoids direct reference to democratic politics or power, in what comes across as a fairly general articulation of standards for evaluation. The “Framework” list is more specific, but quite long, making the task of meeting the democratic learning goals fairly daunting. Even so, it doesn’t capture essential civic dispositions or motivations, like civic agency (Boyte 2008), political efficacy (Colby, et al. 2007), critical reflection or reflective practice (Mitchell, et al. 2011, Battistoni 2013), or civic vocation (Roholt, Hildreth, and Baizerman 2009, 131).
In reflecting upon the different lists of civic-learning outcomes that have been developed, and my own experience as a civic educator, I would argue for a final list that includes fewer, rather than more, items: prioritizing a handful of civic education goals, beginning with *voice* and *critical reflection*. As argued above, the value of equal voice is central to any understanding of democracy, and connects quite nicely to other productive scholarly work—in and outside the community-engagement field—documenting the importance of narrative/story, deliberation, and relationship-building between campuses and communities. Critical reflection, as mentioned above, is a fundamental civic capacity, one shared by experiential and democratic educators.

Developing standards out of such a short list, with indicators and measures that could be used by colleges and universities, is another important matter, as is getting service-learning and community-engagement programs to agree to abide by them. After all, most service-learning programs fail to meet the criteria for “quality,” determined through extensive research and practice by the field itself, let alone that which would come from a body of democratic political educators.

2. **Address the problem of time by studying and encouraging sustained, developmental initiatives that exist in higher education.**

If we take seriously the critique of short-term engagement strategies and the advocacy of “wetlands” approaches that ask students to be “part of” community efforts over time, we need to examine the handful of multi-term educational programs connected to overtly democratic political learning outcomes. Kettering has been working with and learning from the *Living Democracy* program, a multi-semester program at Auburn University. In addition, a number of examples of multi-semester, curriculum-based community engagement programs leading to academic certificates, minors, and majors have been documented by Dan Butin, and are worth exploring further (see Butin and Seider 2012). The Bonner Scholars Program (BSP), initially a co-curricular, four-year undergraduate community-engagement initiative with increasingly sophisticated civic education curricular elements, is another sustained, multi-institutional effort worth examining.

“The value of equal voice is central to any understanding of democracy.”
3. To address the problem of accountability, study the actual outcomes of exemplary initiatives aimed at engaging students in democratic politics, not only on students as they exit courses or programs but after they leave college and are out in the political world, as well as on the communities they aim to improve.

The Carnegie Foundation’s Political Engagement Project (PEP) attempted to evaluate political engagement outcomes on a very small scale and over a short time frame, with a pre-post-test research design, but even with these limitations, the findings that emerged from the PEP study raised important issues for democratic educators (Colby, et al. 2007). The Bonner Scholars Program offers a better example, as it has been the subject of longitudinal research on those who have graduated from the program. Longitudinal and community-impact studies take extra time and resources, but they are ultimately more effective indicators of long-range impact, and are more consistent with the values we profess.

Related to this, more needs to be done to engage with the field and disseminate research on best practices and outcomes. One of the problems in the field of service learning and community engagement has been that important concepts and research do not find their way to other practitioners and researchers. For some time, research has revealed crucial insights about how to connect service learning to civic learning outcomes, and what constitutes “best practice” in the field in order to achieve certain outcomes for students (and communities). And yet these have seemingly been unable to inform practice or subsequent research.

With all of the many challenges to advancing service learning and community engagement as a democratic political strategy in higher education, there remains great promise in this approach. We need to engage in a conversation about how to involve students as citizens beyond service learning, without abandoning its potential promise.

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