



HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



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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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CIVIC WORK, CIVIC LESSONS: TWO GENERATIONS REFLECT ON PUBLIC SERVICE

An Interview with Thomas Ehrlich and Ernestine Fu

David Brown, coeditor of the Higher Education Exchange, spoke with Thomas Ehrlich and Ernestine Fu about their work coauthoring Civic Work, Civic Lessons: Two Generations Reflect On Public Service. Brown was interested in learning more about their respective experiences that shaped the manuscript.

Brown: How did you two team up?

Ehrlich: I initially drafted some text about my own work in public service with the idea that it might be used in a book to help encourage young people to engage in public service. When I discussed the idea with a publisher on a very preliminary basis some years ago, she said any book that focused on young people and those who advise them needed youth perspectives. This seems obvious in retrospect, although I had not thought about it until she told me. Kim Meredith, who heads the Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society at Stanford, suggested Ernestine Fu, then a Stanford sophomore. I took one look at her incredible resume—she had been doing more than any student could possibly do, in my view, and doing it all superbly—and responded to Kim that Ernestine must be much too busy to take on coauthoring a book. But Kim urged me to talk to Ernestine on the premise that the busiest people are just those you want to join with you in a project like this because they are usually also the best people. When I talked to Ernestine, she said she would be interested, so I gave her what I had written and asked her to write a piece about her own civic work. I was extremely impressed by her civic story and we quickly agreed that we would join forces as coauthors.

Fu: Coming to Stanford, I was interested in continuing my involvement in public service. I joined student government and volunteered at the Stanford Center for Philanthropy and Civil Society (PACS). Kim Meredith told me that a professor at Stanford (Tom Ehrlich) needed help with a book project. She didn't specify

what he needed, but she convinced me to schedule time to meet him, suggesting Tom was a genuinely friendly and interesting person. I remember we had particular trouble coordinating that first meeting, as I was taking over 20 units at the time. Also, as an engineering student, I did not see myself working on a book, since I was not used to writing nonfiction prose. I mostly focused on research papers that involved number crunching, analysis, and explanations of results. But after some time, Tom and I finally sat down together and things got rolling from there.

Brown: Were there any disagreements on how to proceed or what should be included in your book? Did the substantial differences between Tom's public policy work and Ernestine's civic work help or hinder your partnership?

Ehrlich: We did not have disagreements on how to proceed. It was clear from the outset that Ernestine could contribute insights about civic engagement that complemented mine, and I could do the same in relation to hers. The significant differences in our civic work strengthened our partnership because we each learned from the other, and in the process, our partnership became steadily stronger.

Fu: We work together very well. I couldn't have wished for a better coauthor! What might be termed a "disagreement" occurred when picking the title of our book. Tom initially proposed *What You Can Do For Your Country*, a famous line from President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address. For Tom's generation, that phrase holds significant weight. I quickly agreed that it was a wonderful title. But after speaking with many friends and colleagues, I realized that many young people in my generation, to my dismay, do not recognize the meaning behind the quote or even that President Kennedy said it. I conveyed this to Tom, and after some deliberation, we decided to change our title to *Civic Work, Civic Lessons*, which was originally our subtitle.

Brown: Ernestine, what have you learned from Tom that you probably would not have learned otherwise?

Fu: First and foremost, I had the opportunity to understand what exactly it means to devote a career to public service. Before I met Tom, I didn't personally know anyone who served in as many meaningful civic roles as Tom has. It was inspiring to collaborate with someone who spent an entire career in public service, and

is devoted to continuing to do so. Tom started out as an inspirational role model and turned into a wonderful mentor, colleague, and friend.

Brown: Tom, what have you learned from Ernestine that you probably would not have learned otherwise?

Ehrlich: Ernestine has opened up literally hundreds of doors into youth civic work that were unfamiliar to me. I knew, of course, that many young people were engaged in nonprofit civic work, some locally, some nationally, and some internationally. But Ernestine was able to bring together perhaps 60 young people in focus groups to discuss their civic work and I was literally blown away by their passion and dedication to making the world a better place.

These individuals taught me a great deal about how committed young people are, making amazing differences in the lives of those around them in every conceivable arena of societal need. Ernestine herself is a star, as her own story makes clear. Starting when she was just 15, she organized a youth music group to play for seniors and disabled people and she has been engaged in expanding circles of good work ever since. I would never have known the depth and diversity of youth civic work without her.

Brown: Ernestine, Tom speaks of the “passion and dedication” he found among young people in your focus groups. Where does that come from—family, circumstance, someone’s example?

Fu: A combination of family, circumstance (notably, hardships), role models, and simply enjoying what you’re doing. As Tom and I illustrate in Lesson 4 of our book, after interviewing scores of young people, I realized that people engage in civic work for multiple and mixed reasons. I detail in the book the importance my sister played in shaping where I am today. Also, growing up in urban public schools where drugs, gangs, and violence were commonplace, I saw these bad things happening around me, and I knew I did not want to end up in similar situations. I’ve also had the great fortune of having some outstanding role models, from Mr.



Rodriguez in high school to Tom now. The final ingredient to which I attribute true passion is enjoying what you're doing. If you wake up in the morning excited to jump out of bed and start working on something, then you're working on the right thing.

Brown: Ernestine, how do you specifically go about gaining the “trust” of those you work with? You and Tom note in one of your lessons that “mixed motives” are often bound up in civic work. Does that make earning others’ trust more difficult? Could you provide an example from your experience when “trust” was difficult to establish? And what eventually happened to bring it about?

Fu: When I was leading my nonprofit Visual Arts and Music for Society (VAMS) in high school, the initial group of volunteers included peers from a small magnet program that I was in. I knew everyone extremely well before they decided to join VAMS and trust was never an issue in working with them. As the organization grew, however, we attracted members from outside the magnet program. These new members included students living in urban parts of Los Angeles, and some were rumored to be involved in drugs, gangs, and other questionable activities. When they joined the organization, some of my fellow volunteers and I questioned their authenticity, devotion, and capabilities. We didn't trust them. But as we saw that these new volunteers consistently performed their tasks and kept their promises, this mistrust dissipated and we realized that our initial perceptions were wrong. What I learned from this incident is that a negative perception of an individual often leads to mistrust of that individual. But, if that individual consistently keeps promises and performs well, and proves you wrong, trust is easily created.

Brown: Ernestine, what did you learn from your engineering studies that has helped you in your public service work?

Fu: That's an interesting question because when I met with one of the leaders of the Haas Center for Public Service at Stanford, one thing we talked about was that engineering students often don't spend time volunteering or engaging in public service projects. I thought, “How can that be?” I've found my work in engineering very beneficial to my work in public service. The ability to think critically about a problem and approach it from all angles has helped me see the countless ways in which people can make a difference

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in serving the needs of our society. Along with that comes the drive to constantly work through failures and shortcomings in order to come out on top, or in an engineering sense, find the right solution.

Brown: Tom, do you think young professionals currently are doing more pro bono work than in the past?

Ehrlich: I do not know the answer. But I do sense that the type of pro bono work done by many young professionals has changed. Far fewer seem to be engaged in the traditional types of public policy and political work that marked my own early career and that of many of my contemporaries. At the same time, far more are involved in the kinds of nonprofit organizations that Ernestine and I heard about in the focus groups of young people that we organized. Ernestine herself is a role model of this type of pro bono activity.

I grew up active in politics and public policy, but in my youth that meant being involved in partisan politics or in helping to make public policy as a government official. I did not realize, at least as clearly as I do now, thanks to tutorials by Ernestine and those she has connected me with, that nonprofit organizations such as the one that she started are just as important to a vibrant civil society as the more traditional forms of civic work like political campaigning that I had been used to. Both types are needed.

One of the many lessons that I have learned from Ernestine and the wonderful young people whom I have met through the focus groups we conducted together is that youth today take a much broader view of “political engagement” than was true in the years when I was particularly active in traditional politics and public policy making. Youth today are doing all sorts of important civic work that impacts directly on public policies in ways that were completely unknown in that earlier era. Ernestine describes a number of examples in her sections of each of the lessons in our book, and particularly in the last chapter when we focus on using new technologies to enhance civic work.

Fu: And there’s a new form of youth activism. Youth social entrepreneurship is becoming increasingly popular. The rise of social entrepreneurship organizations such as Ashoka, the Skoll Foundation, the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship,

Youth social entrepreneurship is becoming increasingly popular.

and New Profit is aiding this movement as young leaders are provided with the resources they need. I think we should realize that young people are creating change in new, different ways. Young people want to make a difference.

Brown: What have you found are the differences between young social entrepreneurs and those who pursue more traditional community service?

Fu: First, it depends on how you define “traditional community service.” For my generation, I think it is viewed as volunteering at a soup kitchen, picking up trash, cleaning up graffiti, or participating in more routine activities. These activities are critical; however, they are often used as a means to fulfill a requirement or accumulate a certain number of community service hours.

On the other hand, young social entrepreneurs tend to be more eager to be innovative in their civic work—to think outside the box. They look for a civic problem that needs solving and they then exhaust the possibilities in seeking to find what will work best, consistent with their values.

Brown: Tom, given your extensive government experience and now the uncompromising nature of the current political scene “inside the Beltway,” what has to happen to change that, and do you think such a change is likely?

Ehrlich: I am an optimist, and over the long term I think our citizenry will become sufficiently sick of the current stalemate that change will happen. Taking the long view, our country has faced political gridlock before, and we have overcome the resulting hurdles. In my view, youth have an opportunity, along with an obligation, to help bring reasoned debate and thoughtful compromise back to the political scene. The last chapter of our book suggests ways to do that with the help of emerging technologies. The crippling cuts in education budgets are one obvious place to start, for those cuts so directly impact young people and their future.

Brown: Ernestine, specifically, how would you use “the tools of new technology” to arouse citizens about the perils that public



education currently faces? And what do you think has to be done “face to face,” as you put it, not just online?

Fu: Several of my high school teachers are experiencing the cutbacks in funding for public education. I am informed of these problems because some of them describe these issues through social media, namely Facebook. Others directly communicate issues to my former classmates in person. Both methods are effective. Why? Technology enables me to instantly read and visualize what my former teachers are encountering, despite being separated from them by many miles. Meeting them face-to-face helps my former classmates better understand and personalize the stories. The personal aspect is still important for influencing some. I think it is critical to have both the online and in-person parts. When combined, the impact can be very powerful in educating a wide number of citizens—whether they are neighbors next door or people across the country.

Brown: Tom, do you think enough has been done to integrate civic work into the curricula of colleges and universities? If not, what remains to be done?

Ehrlich: Much has happened to integrate civic learning into the curricula and co-curricula of colleges and universities around the country, particularly in the last two decades. Community-engaged learning, or service learning as it is sometimes called, is now an active pedagogy in most institutions of higher education. But it is still not as widespread as I think it needs to be. A book that I wrote with colleagues at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, *Educating for Democracy*, makes the case that preparing undergraduates for responsible political engagement—in public policy as well as partisan politics—is especially needed. Campuses are one of the few places where reasoned debate can and should take place on tough political issues and students need education in grappling with those issues.

Brown: Tom, moving from your manuscript to published work by others on civic engagement and higher education, David Mathews has written that “practical wisdom has to be socially constructed.” Does academe, in its scholarship and teaching, leave room for such work? If so, what are some significant examples that you know of?

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Ehrlich: David Mathews is a true hero in his eloquent calls for promoting civic engagement in higher education. I am pleased that both scholarship and teaching at campuses across the country are fusing academic learning with civic work for constructive social change. In the realm of teaching, community-service learning has become a widely recognized pedagogy, and there is now an extensive literature on how that pedagogy helps students think about themselves in relation to others. Who are their neighbors and what are their obligations to those neighbors? They come to understand how a community functions, what problems it faces, the richness of its diversity, the need for individual commitments of time and energy to enhance community life, and, most of all, the importance of working as a community to resolve community concerns.

Brown: Ernestine, in *To Serve a Larger Purpose* (Temple 2011), the editors argue that “Rather than openly questioning the prevailing norms, customs, and structures of the academy, civic engagement efforts have instead adapted in order to ensure their acceptance, and legitimacy within it.” What do you think?

Fu: That’s an interesting argument—that students often respond to civic problems within society’s existing structures, rather than think deeply about what causes these problems and the possible need to change those structures. I think that is to some degree true.

I believe that a mix of both methods is needed, which can be termed adaptation and mitigation. Mitigation projects enable students to understand the core of deep-rooted problems in order to mitigate their long-run consequences. Adaptation projects are required so that students learn how to quickly adapt innovative approaches to these problems.

Brown: Tom, Ernestine, let me stay with the editor’s argument that academe has done little to change internally while encouraging external change through civic engagement efforts. What internal changes in academe would you like to see happen?

Ehrlich: The most important step would be for colleges and universities to adopt what I term “institutional intentionality” to ensure the infusion of civic engagement efforts on their campuses. As my colleagues and I discuss in our book, *Educating for Democracy*, most institutions of higher education leave it to their students to choose whether they will participate in programs, courses, or

projects designed to enhance the knowledge, skills, and values needed to participate effectively as knowledgeable and responsible citizens of their communities. But some institutions, and we write about a number of them in our book, have a strong commitment by senior administrators and a critical mass of faculty to ensure that their students graduate with these attributes. That is what I mean by “institutional intentionality.” These campuses not only include “responsible citizenship” as a goal in their mission statements, as most colleges and universities do, they ensure that this goal is realized. They do not necessarily require a single approach for all students, but they do make sure that their students are equipped to be civic leaders when they graduate.

Institutional intentionality is key in terms of all aspects of civic engagement, but it is particularly important in regard to learning how to take part effectively in public policy making and politics, for our democracy depends directly on a citizenry that takes active roles in those arenas. As has often been said, democracy is not a spectator sport. Institutions of higher education are the most important nonpartisan arenas in which young people can learn to be responsibly engaged in making our democracy work.

Fu: As a student, I have often heard faculty encourage students to pursue academic careers or other careers that are based directly on their academic majors. Unfortunately, I have rarely heard either professors or administrators initiate conversations with students on the topic of civic engagement and how those students might apply the knowledge and skills they are learning in their college years to promote civic work. Civic involvement by the graduates of colleges and universities should be an explicit goal of their faculty and administrations. This requires more than just exhortations for students to be civically engaged, though those are important. Carefully planned curricular and co-curricular activities are needed to ensure that students will gain the civic abilities they need and will be motivated to want to be civic leaders of their communities.

Brown: Thanks to both of you.

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