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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Higher Education as a Democratic Movement?

David Mathews

As readers of this publication know, the Higher Education Exchange shares what the Kettering Foundation is learning about democracy with institutions of higher education. The foundation has studied the place of higher education in our democracy for some time. This article is the result of a yearlong review of what it is learning. The foundation studies democracy, not higher education per se, and we do that because institutions of higher learning have been integral to democratic movements in America. In fact, these institutions were themselves movements. Being integral to democracy has given colleges and universities much of their identity and mission.

There are indications today that this democratic mission is not as central as it has been. Many now think of the role of colleges and universities as preparing individuals for jobs. That is certainly important. But, as a result, there is a tendency to see academic institutions as simply part of a knowledge industry that is tied to the economy. This perception, however unintentional, may be undercutting higher education’s claim to broad public tax support. The reasoning is that because the benefits of an undergraduate education go directly to individuals and enable them to get good jobs, they should pay the costs themselves. And students are doing that increasingly through higher tuition payments. Derek Bok lamented in 2003 that the rationale for public support was disappearing because “faculties currently display scant interest in preparing undergraduates to be democratic citizens, a task once regarded as the principal purpose of a liberal education.”

This change in mission or purpose results from a weakening of higher education’s sense of being a movement, which came from being part of the country’s ongoing struggle to realize the promise of democracy. Democracy is not just a system of representative governments created by contested elections. It is a way of life as well as a way of government, a way of life that reflects cherished values like freedom and justice. Those are the kinds of values that inspire movements.

Past issues of the Exchange have recalled how colleges and universities have been part of major democratic movements since the Revolution. For example, a 1998 article by Claire Snyder-Hall described how academic institutions that were swept up by Revolutionary fervor reflected the values of democracy by teaching students to exercise their own judgment instead of
just immersing themselves uncritically in the “great truths” of the dominant canons. Democratic ideals influenced what it meant to be educated.

Thomas Jefferson’s generation created state universities, most notably the University of Virginia, to prepare leaders for a new democracy. Scott Peters was interviewed in HEX about the founding of land-grant institutions as part of a movement to place more control in the hands of farmers and industrial workers. Scott noted that this movement resulted in “an expansion of the curriculum beyond training for the elite professions by adding fields of study related to the gritty, everyday work of ordinary people.” Democratic initiatives to bring excluded populations into full citizenship used higher education as a vehicle. The results were colleges for women, African Americans, and Native Americans. After World War II, integrating veterans into peacetime America spawned the junior or community college movement, aptly called “democracy’s colleges.” The point is that, in all of these cases, academic institutions derived their missions from external, political forces.

Concern about losing the identity that comes from being part of a democratic movement is not new. Almost 40 years ago, a 1976 report on an Airlie Conference sponsored by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare quoted Earl Cheit, a business school dean at UC Berkeley. He warned “review procedures, regulation, litigation now command so much attention from college and university officials, it is easy to forget that for most of its history higher education in the U.S. was a movement, not a bureaucracy.” More recently, the foundation has heard college and university presidents complain that their jobs are turning them into bureaucrats and beggars rather than educational leaders. They warm to the idea that higher education should regain its identity as a movement. In some recent citizen forums on the mission of academic institutions, little was said about public purpose. This erosion has been going on slowly and may be gaining momentum. Serious efforts to “defund” colleges and universities are underway and higher education has become an attractive target for politicians. And the same loss of public confidence that afflicts all major institutions now touches academic institutions.

In response, some institutions are emphasizing public service and relevant research. Public engagement efforts on most every campus reach out to citizens. That’s encouraging. But having a public role isn’t the same as being part of a democratic movement. And institutions can’t give themselves a democratic mandate. It has to be given to the institutions by the people.

Of course, institutions may claim to serve democracy just by being. (I once heard a university president say just that.) But that is based on a very loose definition of democracy. Happily, some institutions are considering
developing a more rigorous definition, as may be the case for the community colleges participating in the Democracy Commitment.

In the Airlie Conference mentioned earlier, Virginia Smith, Director of HEW’s Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education, made a crucial distinction that reflects a more rigorous understanding of democracy and a democratic mandate. She said, “No institution that I know of has been able to revitalize itself from within. No institution has been able to change its structure totally from a force that developed within its own structure. If that is the case then . . . what is necessary in order to bring about changes in our higher education institutions is not to make them . . . more responsive to the outside but to make them more receptive to interaction with forces outside the institution [emphasis added].” Her comment suggested that public legitimacy can’t come solely from public service alone, however beneficial it may be. Legitimacy can only come from a different way of interacting with the public; that is, from a different relationship with a democratic citizenry.

What Virginia said poses a challenge for the future of higher education. Her insight would take colleges and universities beyond serving the public to a different way of interacting with the citizenry. And that interaction could revitalize both higher education’s sense of a democratic mission and the public’s understanding of the purposes of higher learning. The key is how, in its interaction with the public, academe comes to see citizens. The way citizens are seen is the way democracy is understood.

A democratic citizenry is more than an electorate, more than consumers of services, more than beneficiaries of expertise and professionals’ skills. In fact, a democratic citizenry is more than a “thing” or object; it is a dynamic of people engaging one another in the work citizens must do for democracy to live up to its potential. My argument, in brief, is that, with all the effort now going into public engagement, some of it needs to be directed to engaging citizens engaging one another. Many engagement efforts are designed to seize people’s attention and support, somewhat like grabbing an object such as a light bulb. What I am proposing is like plugging into the electricity, the dynamics of citizens engaging citizens.

Given that the erosion of a democratic mission has been going on for decades, why hasn’t something been done to counter it? Could it have something to do with the tendency of people in higher education to talk mainly to other people in higher education about higher education? That conversation is certainly appropriate, yet it won’t engage a democratic public. I think that Virginia Smith was right when she told Airlie participants that academic institutions couldn’t revitalize themselves from within. Virginia’s distinction between being responsive to public needs and being open to interacting
with the citizenry is a powerful insight. Most colleges and universities today are trying to listen to the public, particularly in communities, and to meet people’s needs as they define them. Yet Virginia was arguing for something more; she was suggesting that a different kind of relationship with the public is required.

There is now a potential for development of such a relationship in the deliberative public forums being sponsored by the American Commonwealth Partnership. These forums, if they continue, can build the kind of relationships that allow colleges and universities to better align their missions with citizens and their work. These forums should be held off campus, not just on, and be conducted from the public’s perspectives rather than higher education’s. Citizens can start with their concerns and what they could do to solve them. Then, from that point of view, citizens and educators can decide what role academic institutions should play. This way, the public mission of colleges and universities would be derived from the public, as it has been historically.

There are any number of town-gown issues for colleges and universities to address with citizens: economic development and environmental protection, good health care without constantly escalating costs, improved race relations. The list goes on. I wouldn’t expect these deliberations to produce a new Magna Carta for higher education; yet they could continuously link the work of academia with public purposes. Over time, they could forge a new way for higher education to respond to a democratic citizenry. That should help strengthen a sense of democratic purposefulness in academic institutions.

Deliberation is making decisions about the work citizens must do, and knowing what this work is has implications for how colleges and universities do their work. The two ways of working are different, yet they can and should complement one another. One of the clearest examples of this complementary alignment comes from another institution, the press. The work of citizens involves “naming” or identifying the problems that need solutions. The media also names problems every day. Misalignment occurs because the names citizens use reflect what is deeply valuable to people, what affects them and their families. But the names the media uses are more likely to reflect the names experts and politicians use. Each way of naming problems is valid. Yet they don’t match. For a better alignment, news organizations could incorporate the names citizens use in their coverage. That’s what I mean by alignment.

How institutions see citizens is crucial. Their understanding of citizens is their understanding of democracy. Colleges and universities, because they are providers, tend to see citizens as those to be acted upon. However, citizens are
the primary actors in a strong democracy, not primarily the objects of the actions of others. If citizens are the needy or the uninformed, institutions know what they can do. Yet, institutions and professionals have difficulty seeing how what they do fits into the world of citizens as actors. So it is difficult for them and professionals to see this world because what they do doesn’t necessarily fit. This makes alignment unlikely. Unfortunately, our research shows that the work that most institutions do is not well aligned with what citizens do. (This research is reported in Ships Passing in the Night?, a foundation publication.)

Citizens can be defined simply as people working with other people to solve their common problems. They are people from different walks of life who come together, despite their differences, to rebuild their communities after a natural or human disaster. They are the people one newsmagazine described as those who “fix things”; they are problem solvers. Harry Boyte was cited in a 2012 issue of HEX as describing citizens as producers more than consumers. And their expertise is in building networks of people who get their hands dirty in the civic work of everyday life. All of these people are trying to have a stronger hand in shaping their future. Some would say these are quintessentially democratic citizens. That is why I believe that the question of what colleges and universities do routinely that can align productively with what citizens do in their work is so important.

The question of what blocks alignment isn’t easy to answer. The answer certainly isn’t that academics don’t care about citizens. Most of them act as citizens every day. Academic institutions, however, with the exception of the humanities, are designed to deal with concrete problems that show themselves with discernable evidence. These problems can be remedied with professional expertise. And the impact of the remedies can be measured.

The problems that citizens and communities work to solve, on the other hand, have been aptly described as “wicked,” meaning that they are pervasive and persistent because they are systemic. Wicked problems come from many sources throughout a community; so many so that it is difficult to say what the problem really is. Take hard-core poverty, for example. Is it a problem of discrimination, a failure of the educational system, the nature of the economic system, or the culture? Also, because these wicked problems have multiple sources in every sector of the community, everyone has to be involved in solving them. Furthermore, these problems are characterized by intangibles, like perceptions or mindsets, and are accompanied by strong emotions.

Wicked problems also raise questions about what should be done. What is the right thing to do? There aren’t any expert answers to such questions. They require the exercise of public judgment. And exercising that judgment
or deliberating is part of the work citizens have to do in order to combat wicked problems.

The challenge for future issues of the *Exchange* is not only to make the work of a democratic citizenry more visible but also to show how academic institutions can fit into this work—without trying to make the work of citizens match the way academic institutions work. Past issues have started in this direction by looking into the potential in aligning academic ways of knowing with public ways of knowing. Whether that kind of alignment happens or not, one thing is clear—we must not lose the opportunities created by those institutions that are now looking outward. They can go beyond public service to democratic engagement. And doing that will go a long way toward recovering their historic role as part of a democratic movement.
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