HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE
A RETROSPECTIVE
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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I left a tenured position in academia this year because I was no longer happy with the quality of life it was providing me—with the degree to which it enabled me to link my public and professional lives. It was always a struggle to do public work within the parameters of what would be rewarded by my institution. Doing well at my job was important to me, and so my goal was to excel professionally, while also doing work that had public relevance and mattered politically. I was able to do all that, but it was a twelve-year struggle.

Don’t get me wrong. My university was not particularly hostile to public work. To the contrary, it was simply a typical second-tier research university that modeled itself after what more prestigious research institutions are like—or what it thinks they are like. The challenges were exacerbated by the university’s location in a major metropolitan area, characterized by suburban sprawl, frustrating commutes, and a careerist vibe.

Over the course of the twelve years I served on the faculty, the university grew tremendously in ways that made it more prestigious, which is a good thing in academic terms. This transition entailed the proliferation of doctoral programs, the valorization of research over all other activities, the fixation on peer-reviewed journal articles, the demand for increasing quantities of publications, the prioritization of graduate over undergraduate teaching, and the preprofessionalization of undergraduate education. As the process of institutional advancement unfolded, the university’s incentive structure evolved in ways that made it more difficult to do work with public relevance.

More specifically, as the university sought higher rankings, the college promotion and tenure (P&T) committees that I sat on came to insist, more and more, that only blind-peer-reviewed journal articles and books should be counted as legitimate scholarship. Publications aimed at a nonacademic audience were completely disregarded, and collaborative work was viewed with suspicion: “How much did the applicant really contribute to the work?” The committee began to consider how often a publication was cited by other academics as evidence necessary for an evaluation of excellence. When applicants included significant community work in their dossiers—even high profile projects that seemed very impressive—it was relegated to the category of teaching (not scholarship), and you could not get promoted on
the basis of excellence in teaching anymore—not like before—unless you had published the requisite number of peer-reviewed articles about pedagogy, thus turning teaching into the subject of your scholarship.

Moreover, the quality of faculty life deteriorated, as the university’s institutional ranking rose. Some of those who were most successful at high-status activities—or who had already been promoted to full and didn’t have to worry—began to advocate posttenure review policies that would penalize their colleagues who were merely solid scholars and/or dedicated teachers, rather than celebrity scholar wannabes. It seemed as if the pretenure treadmill, which traditionally lasted only five years, was to become the new normal—eroding the possibility of work-life balance and time for community engagement. In addition, as the years rolled by it became more common for some of my colleagues to use review time to pick apart a person’s record, criticizing even those who were publishing in top journals or presses for not doing even better. Ironically, several recipients of that type of treatment ended up leaving for better jobs.

During my twelve years at what I will henceforth call Anti-Civic U (ACU), I struggled in my efforts to introduce a public component into my research, teaching, and service activities. My research agenda has always been driven by a general desire to contribute to the public good. In fact, the original impetus for my application to graduate school was the desire to learn more about the ideas underlying political life. I was very involved in politics at the time, working with several groups that were active in my home state.

As a side note, when I reread the “personal statement” I submitted with my grad school application back in 1988, it is remarkable how brief and general it was—referencing things like my “solid liberal arts background,” my desire to “increase my understanding of the political situation in general,” my love of “learning,” and my plan for “a career of teaching and research.” Indeed, I had hardly any background in political science at all (having been a psychology major), although I did have a strong academic record. The vague language of my essay would never cut it for admission into ACU—at least not in my department. We expect applicants to submit a fully developed plan for specialization, not simply solid credentials and a desire to pursue advanced learning. To me this exemplifies how far down the road of preprofessionalization and specialization academia has gone—a situation that
might be even more pronounced at second-tier schools that are probably less inclined to take a chance on an unorthodox student. Or, to be more factual, my department did admit strong students who did not have a political science background when our graduate programs first started, but stopped doing so as the program sought—and received—higher rankings. Everything has become so competitive.

Because my interest in studying political theory grew out of four years of political engagement, my scholarship always had an applied focus, even if it was sometimes implicit. During graduate school, I began working with the Kettering Foundation, which greatly expanded my understanding of politics and democratic theory. When I went on the job market, my dissertation director advised me to group my Kettering work and some other things I had done under a heading called “applied work on democratic citizenship” on my vita, which I did. ACU seemed to be interested in my work with Kettering, which I saw as a sign that they were interested in civic-engagement work—which to some extent they initially were. However, their real interests became clearer after I was hired, when a senior colleague said, “We are hoping you can teach us how to get grants.” And indeed over time, grant-getting became one of the university’s primary preoccupations and the basis for increased compensation. It probably goes without saying that being a good departmental citizen or strong teacher was not rewarded.

During my tenure-track years at ACU, I struggled to do work that was both civically engaged and countable toward tenure. Over the course of my three pretenure years—I started with two years credit from my first job—the quantity of publications required grew to “a book and six blind-peer-reviewed articles or their equivalent,” which was a larger quantity than was required at many first-tier research universities at the time, assuming what my friends at such schools told me was accurate. Personally, I found it nearly impossible to write articles that would both pass blind-peer-review in political science journals and also be of interest to a public readership, although I know that some people can do it. I found those two types of writing too different in terms of both subject matter and mode of presentation to be easily combined.

Because many in the political science field claim to do objective research, it is generally a challenge to publish normative work, even when it is rooted in academic literature. A lot of political scientists do not consider normative work scholarly. For example, when I went on my first job interview (at a second-tier state university that could also be called ACU), I used Shutting the Public Out of Politics, which was forthcoming as a Kettering occasional paper at the time, as my writing sample, and I received a surpris-
ingly hostile reception from several members of the faculty. One reportedly called me “a narrow-minded ideologue,” presumably because the essay did not meet the standards of “objective” social science. The next day he angrily told me he had seen my dissertation director on TV the night before, “and he sounded just like you,” which was clearly not a good thing. Another faculty member blasted me for not citing any statistical studies of race and voting behavior in my paper, which was puzzling, considering my paper was about the nineteenth century. And this was at a school that had advertised for a “democratic theorist!” Obviously, an offer was not forthcoming.

While that might seem like an extreme example, I got a similar reaction from some anonymous reviewers of my article on the history of higher education that I originally wrote for the Kettering Foundation. In that case I did end up getting the piece published in the academic journal *PS: Political Science and Politics*, thanks to a supportive editor, but in a section devoted to teaching, which probably didn’t really “count” in the eyes of my colleagues. In any event, I cannot think of another journal that would have even considered the piece. Where does one publish scholarship that focuses on the public?

These experiences highlighted the fact that the questions I was asking in my work with the Kettering Foundation were very different from the questions being asked in the mainstream of my discipline. In addition, the writing style was different in each genre. When I wrote articles for *HEX*, the editors did not want an extensive review of the academic literature or a lot of footnotes. Journals like *Polity, Armed Forces and Society*, or *New Political Science* did. So over time I decided that it was easier to work on two separate research streams, rather than trying to serve both masters.

This was a good decision because when I came up for tenure in 2003, the four essays I published with Kettering did not “count,” nor did the seven other non-blind-peer reviewed publications I completed, mostly chapters in academic edited volumes. While my original chair had suggested that such publications might be “worth something”—I didn’t need them to count, so it was a moot point—these days, any work that is not blind-peer-reviewed is seen as totally worthless in the eyes of the P&T committees in both my department and my college. Unless peer-reviewed, work that addresses public problems is not valued, unless there is grant or contract money for the university attached. Moreover, while some of my colleagues would fight to have a report for the State Department or the Department of Defense recognized as significant research, almost none would consider a work produced with a human rights or civic organization worthy of scholarly recognition. However, if you
could demonstrate that such work had public impact, you might be able to get credit for it under “public teaching,” but certainly not under “scholarship.”

In addition to the frustrations of having a lot of solid work that I valued disregarded, I was also advised by senior colleagues to make my work “sound less relevant” in my tenure narrative. Since I had prided myself on my “applied work” and viewed the relevance of my scholarship as a plus, that advice was startling, although undoubtedly sound. Apparently at ACU, work that is read by only a small group of experts is preferable to that which speaks to a more inclusive audience.

The number of peer-reviewed publications I had to produce to keep my job definitely eroded the time I had for either community engagement or a personal life, and it left me feeling isolated. Consequently, after receiving tenure in 2004, I decided to become more involved on campus, while continuing to pursue a bifurcated research agenda that would allow me to do the work I want to do and also lay the groundwork for promotion to the top rank of full professor. When I was asked to lead the American Democracy Project (ADP) at ACU, I saw it as a great opportunity to deepen the public component of my work by taking part in a national effort to stimulate civic engagement among undergraduates.

Although it was the president of ACU who signed onto ADP, the project did not get much institutional support. Leading the effort was not enabled by course release time or a supplemental stipend (as were graduate directorships), although an administrative staff person was available to provide support, which made the work doable. Although the ADP committee was very large (over seventy members), only a handful of members (zero to six) attended meetings, and while they were helpful in generating ideas, no one was available to help put events together. Over time that made me less interested in trying to bring other faculty members into the planning process. It was simpler to work solo.

It was also disappointing to discover that ACU students were not interested in attending ADP programs—mostly panel discussions on hot topics, like immigration reform, gun control, and the Tea Party, as well as the annual Congressionally mandated Constitution Day celebration of our freedom—unless it was required for class. Of course this should not be surprising. After
all, ADP was a very small program at a university with over 30,000 students, and it was in no way integrated into the curriculum. Most students are very busy and don’t have time for unnecessary activities. Consequently, the only way I could turn out an audience was to convince a colleague to bring her class to the event—a strategy that worked pretty well, although it meant that it was mostly government students who attended ADP events.

During my first year as ADP campus coordinator, I attended its national conference and had a real insight about the program’s chances at ACU. I was very impressed that one university—a branch campus of a large state university—sent a large faculty team to the conference, including the provost who led the project on her campus. They did a great presentation on how they were integrating civic issues into the curricular requirements for undergrads, even recording participation on student transcripts. A lot of other campus teams were also from branch campuses. Then, it struck me: ACU would never really get behind ADP because ADP would be considered something more appropriate to a branch campus than to a “rigorous” research university that aspired to national recognition. It seemed that ACU had signed onto ADP simply because the president said, “hey this sounds like a good idea” and then sent the mandate to the provost, who eventually sent it to me. It was barely on the radar with only a $5,000 budget. But at least we could say we were doing civic engagement!

Given my conclusion about ACU’s view of civic engagement work, I was surprised to be invited by the provost to a small meeting of people interested in “civics education.” I was eager to attend and went to several meetings. As it turned out, however, the provost was primarily interested in getting a contract for ACU faculty to write a high school textbook, and in resuscitating statewide interest in civics so there would be a market for the book. There was also another set of meetings on a civics-related theme that focused on landing a major grant for the university, but I was not invited to attend that one—which was odd because it seems like the two efforts could have been connected to each other and to ADP. Such fragmentation and lack of coordination was typical of ACU in general.

After a couple of years of putting together “cocurricular programming” on public issues, I concluded that ADP could only be successful on campus if there were some sort of curricular tie-in, which ushered in a new, exciting phase in my civic work there. The new associate provost, who was my contact in the provost’s office, was very enamored with the idea of integrating civic themes into the general education curriculum, which he oversaw and which was going through a major renovation in preparation for reaccreditation.
He and I talked about creating a wide range of lower level courses that connected civic themes to a range of disciplines: “The Artist as Citizen,” “The Scientist as Citizen,” “The Dancer as Citizen,” and so forth. He even articulated a link between gen ed and democratic citizenship in the university catalogue—inserting the sentence, “‘Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’—this ringing phrase from the Declaration of Independence makes a fine statement about the ideals of general education (or, as it is more classically called, liberal education) as we strive to articulate it at [ACU].” That insertion prompted one department chair to go around campus expressing outrage at his pro-American bias!

Nevertheless, the associate provost and I decided to put together a faculty team to work on creating a set of new courses that focused on civic themes. With the enticement of a small amount of summer money for participants, I convened a “faculty-learning community” that consisted of eight people from across the university, who were handpicked for their interest in civic engagement. We wanted to move beyond relying only on the humanities and social science scholars who populated the ADP list. The first few meetings were exciting, but then a couple of people dropped out—one suddenly decided she was too busy, the other didn’t want to participate unless we began by scrapping the entire gen ed curriculum, which he repeatedly deemed “a dog’s breakfast.” Two others decided to work by themselves on their own courses, which left a team of four—Dr. Science, Dr. Theater, Dr. English, and myself, Dr. Government.

Our original vision was quite grand. We wanted to change the culture of student nonengagement on campus. We decided that each of us would offer a course centered on civic issues, and they would be taught simultaneously. We would have some joint sessions with special guest speakers who would address public issues that were relevant for all four of our classes. The event would be open to the entire campus, as well as the larger community. The four classes would meet occasionally for interdisciplinary discussions among students. Ideally, student groups would “table” outside the event to stimulate student engagement. The public talks would become major events on campus. We decided that the first step would be to pilot the linked courses and speakers series.

The pilot version of the project was pretty successful overall, yet we ran into a number of institutional barriers. First of all, we had a surprisingly hard
time getting our departments to schedule our classes at the same time.
Second, because Dr. English created a truly interdisciplinary course, there was
no way to offer it in his department, so he had to run it as a “UNIV” course,
which ended up with only three students because it didn’t fulfill any require-
ments. (Needless to say, the administration was not happy with the low enrollment.) Third, Dr. Science dropped out without telling us, after receiv-
ing a grant to “buy-out” her courses. While she kept the summer money for herself, she asked her colleague to take over her role in the project, which he did, but he had little understanding of civic issues and felt that the focus on them detracted from the time he had to spend on his major course material.

The second year began well, although only Dr. English and I remained
fully engaged, since the second Dr. Science was no longer interested, and Dr.
Theater was appointed chair of his department and had little time for the project, although he still participated. Once again, we had trouble with scheduling. My new chair finally agreed to my time request with the caveat that I would not be accommodated again. Fortunately, Dr. English was able to create a new course that fit within disciplinary boundaries. And Dr. Theater ended up making his course a permanent one, although he no longer had time to teach it.

Overall, I was very happy with the way my courses turned out. The first
time I participated in the project, I taught a special version of my 100-level
“Democratic Theory and Practice” course, which sounds good, but there were two problems. First, I had 300 students, which was unwieldy for the purposes of the project. Second, since it was a gen ed course and a major requirement, I had a lot of “learning outcomes” to deal with, which made it challenging to teach.

In preparation for the second run-through of the project, I created a
brand new interdisciplinary senior “seminar” (capped at 35 students), which worked really well—and also fulfilled a requirement. I organized the course around the question, “Now that you are graduating and becoming a fully participating member of society, what are you going to do to make the world a better place?” I piloted the course in the fall and then taught it as part of the project in the spring.

I wanted to incorporate a civic-engagement dimension into the class. Since I couldn’t manage overseeing a service-learning component, I asked students to choose a public issue they really cared about, analyze it from a values-based perspective, and then write a paper that included a discussion of what they were going to do about it after graduation. The course utilized mostly popular materials from the public sphere—bestsellers, novels, and
films—and the students came up with the idea of doing their presentations as short YouTube videos, which were posted online. It worked really well both times I taught it. The students loved it. They told me that no professor had ever before asked them what they thought about important public issues. In all honesty, teaching those two sections of the senior seminar was the highlight of my teaching career. I was able to use my professional skills to help students see themselves as members of an engaged public, and we discussed issues that really mattered.

My final class at ACU was a 20-person summer section of “Democratic Theory and Practice,” and it was also a pleasure. Due to the small size, I was able to return to the way I taught the course back in 2000 and 2001, when the course was capped at 19 rather than 300. We used David Mathews’ book Politics for People as a frame, and as a centerpiece of the course we did “NIF in the Classroom.” And it was amazing. I was stunned by how an extremely skeptical view of deliberation amongst everyone in the class gave way to an amazing deliberative experience. We did the debt issue, and the students found common ground on the need for young people to be educated about financial responsibility. Even students who had never spoken before opened up and shared personal experiences as related to the issue. It was good to end my career at Anti-Civic U on a procivic high note, which is how it all began twelve years ago.

In the end, despite the very negative tenor of this narrative, I actually feel that I had a good run at ACU. I was able to do work I cared about and succeed in the profession. However, as I was talking to my chair about what I had to do to prepare for promotion to full, I decided that I had had enough. Although I believe I could have succeeded at that final goal if I really wanted to—I was told that with two books, an edited volume, twelve peer-reviewed articles, and fourteen essays in edited volumes under my belt, not to mention my Kettering work, I just needed to finish that third book (and Columbia University Press had already reviewed my proposal and requested a sample chapter)—I realized that I just didn’t want to do it anymore. I had already spent twelve years running on the academic treadmill, but where was it actually taking me?
In the end, I resolved my academic midlife crisis by leaving the university. During the second half of my life, I plan to devote my time to doing what I really value without having to focus so much on what external judges think is valuable. I decided to make time to get involved in my actual community and do actual political work, instead of trying to fit what I care about into a structure that is not designed to accommodate it, at an institution that doesn't think the work is very important. So I resigned my position at ACU, and, surprisingly, I am completely unambivalent about that decision. In fact, I am very happy—in both the public and the personal sense.
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