HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE
A RETROSPECTIVE
2015
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.

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation, chartered in 1927, that does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions (or groups of institutions) and individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, governing, politics, and education. The interpretations and conclusions contained in the Higher Education Exchange, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its trustees, or officers.

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FOREWORD
Deborah Witte

For more than twenty years, this journal has strived to be a place where anyone concerned about the role of higher education in democracy—faculty, administrators, students, and everyday citizens—might exchange ideas, perspectives, and practices in an effort to make democracy work as it should. We think of ourselves as part of a movement to strengthen higher education’s democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture for all citizens. If you have been a frequent reader of this journal or a regular participant in Kettering research exchanges over any of these same twenty years (and add a decade to that for some of you!), then you know that questions are the coin of the realm. The way in which Kettering conducts its research gives questions a central role. And naturally, good questions lead to answers that lead to the next questions, and the next answers, and on it goes. We hope not ad nauseam.

With many research questions at the core of Kettering’s work, this journal has attempted to highlight the stories of practices (both successful and unsuccessful), personal experiences revealed through incisive interviews and essays, and research experiments shared and theories posited that have provided answers and furthered insights into the many questions.

The metaquestion that drives the mission of this journal and its editors, however, is and has always been this: What should the relationship be between the academy and the public?

The Higher Education Exchange began with the idea that there is a growing distance between the higher education community and the larger community of the public. The college campus may be considered a microcosm of the whole of society, and any discussion of campus and community is necessarily a discussion about how we might live together in the larger community. David Brown, in his essay “The Public/Academic Disconnect,” first suggested this growing gap between higher education and the public. And so we reprint that essay from 1995 to begin this retrospective issue.

The Kettering Foundation’s research has been focused on putting the public back into the public’s business, and its entire research agenda has this notion of public politics at its core. Readers of this journal also know that KF’s interest of study is not really higher education. Kettering’s interest is in putting the public at the center of the higher education-public relationship and getting at the problems-behind-the-problems in the relationship.

Harry Boyte, through his original thinking on public work, has
provided a cogent way to think and talk about what the public contributes to shared civic life. His ideas have helped Kettering theorize a balanced relationship between the public and its institutions. In the essay “Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work: Civic Learning for the Working World,” Boyte makes a case for understanding the public as a contributor, not simply a consumer, in the community-university relationship.

Other questions that we have explored follow directly from the journal’s metaquestion and help to add depth and nuance to understanding how and why higher education might align itself to the work of the public. These subquestions cluster around a handful of major ideas that this journal has explored over its history. Some may call these trends, but I think Kettering’s commitment over these many years speaks to more than “trendy” interest and concern. These ideas include public scholarship, civic engagement and service learning—both within and outside the curriculum—university-community partnerships, and the civic mission of the university.

In our work, we talk about the problems of democracy and problems in democracy. Higher education is good at addressing the problems in democracy. Innumerable college and university centers and institutes hold colloquia and conferences each year addressing such problems as poverty, health care, civil rights, and others. Many universities consider this part of the service or outreach that connects them to the communities they border. But it’s the problems of democracy that most concern my colleagues and me at the foundation. These are the problems like citizens sitting on the sidelines of the political system, with no way of entering the process except through voting, or citizens’ distrust of institutions that were primarily designed to aid citizens in their work of governing themselves.

Bernie Ronan, in a reprinted interview from 2011, suggests that higher education take a lead in developing a civic curriculum that focuses on the dimensions of practical wisdom through deliberation, the bonds of community or friendship, and the freedom that comes from complementary public action. Ronan outlines a litany of efforts by colleges to create opportunities for students to begin to learn deliberative, civic skills that may be antidotes to the problems of democracy Kettering is committed to addressing.

Over the decades, the theme of public scholarship has emerged as the journal’s major calling card. In most issues, we’ve featured essays from faculty who are experimenting with a different way of relating to the community—both the university community and the community of citizens beyond the campus. We’ve featured a few articles from students who have been caught up in the excitement (and disappointment) of what it means to be a public scholar. We’ve been pleasantly surprised by the numerous examples of
universities that have created partnerships with community organizations to practice public scholarship. Today, we would call them engaged universities, a term that wasn’t in vogue when we began this venture. I’d like to think we had a hand in creating that term and in its attending practices becoming more commonplace.

Public scholarship encompasses many concerns, such as the disconnect/divided life of the scholar-citizen, the consequences of specialization and professionalization on our campuses, and the need for communication and dialogue, especially deliberative dialogue, between scholars and the public. In issues of this journal, we have explored, from a theoretical point of view, the idea of public scholarship as a public-making activity that seeks to join the public with the academy in pursuit of the good life and a stronger, more effective, encompassing democracy. We have tried our hand at defining and describing it with some limited success and many articles address the “doing” of public scholarship. We’ve highlighted many projects, programs, and curricula that have one or more of the characteristics that make up the idea of public scholarship and the new connections that institutions are forging with the public.

Ten years ago, we published a piece by a young faculty member, Christa Slaton, that has reverberated through the foundation’s work ever since. In a piece from the 2005 issue, reprinted here, she tells of uncovering a major disconnect between the way a university approached community problems and the way in which the community itself thought about its problems. Her insight was to insist that university scholars relate to the community by standing with them, not for them, when solving community problems together. We discovered through the work of Slaton and others that higher education is accustomed to seeing and relating to many publics. Students and their parents are one public, focused—much like clients—on a return-on-investment metric. University faculty is another entity, who, when thinking of service to community, often want to do research on a community not with a community. The neighborhood or community around the university is another public, usually an adversary, rarely a partner. Even more unfortunate is that when the public, in turn, looks at higher education, it sees mostly malaise, inefficiencies, expense, and unfulfilled promises.

Along this same vein, more recently we’ve been able to share the story of the Living Democracy project, written by its codirectors Mark Wilson and Nan Fairley. In a pioneering approach to civic engagement, these faculty members are using the community as a classroom to give students a more dynamic and true learning environment. They have put into the action the insights learned from other experiments, especially those like Christa Slaton’s.
They learned from others’ work that the experience for students must be embedded in the community in order for the learning to be authentic. This authenticity, as well as the learning, comes through in the stories of some of the students in the project. As in many essays written from the student perspective, *HEX* readers have learned from their students as much as they have from their colleagues.

Conversations about epistemology, and its attendant meaning for professionals, have also been a recurring theme for the journal. Closely allied to concerns about faculty and classroom curriculum, professionalism is often seen as a stumbling block, not only for faculty but also for the students who seek to become faculty themselves. Claire Snyder-Hall has contributed several pieces to the journal over the years and her most recent piece—“Anti-Civic U,” which chronicles her movement through and out of the academy—provides a fine example of the dilemmas confronting faculty as they navigate in an institution that rarely seems to deliver on its promise of an engaged learning community. It is also reprinted here.

Of every institution that has a role to play in public life, Kettering asks this question: What are you doing to support and legitimize the work of citizens as they go about creating and building democracy? Unfortunately, Kettering has learned through our research that many institutions—and higher education is among them—do very little to support the work of citizens. Institutions can be extremely self-referential, often carving out a small, professionalized niche for themselves within the larger society. It’s no wonder the public rarely thinks to turn to these institutions as partners in their public work, or that higher education, as a case in point, rarely seeks out the public. Kettering asserts that the academy needs to ask itself, is simply wishing to serve citizens enough? Why do so few communities engage with universities around anything but technical or expert knowledge? Higher education, working on behalf of the public, can be somewhat arrogant and as a result, citizens resist engaging.

And yet *HEX* has been able, over the years, to share the stories of some of those institutions and their faculty who take the civic mission question seriously. One of these is Marguerite Shaffer, an American studies professor who, in an interview that originally appeared in the 2008 issue, called for more attention to the community-building aspects of a college education for every student. Her insight that higher education is creating students who can critique and break down theories, but who have no idea how to build community with others, has helped Kettering understand the need to enlarge traditional service learning beyond the current models. She asserts that it is the skills of citizenship that higher education should be concerned with.
Through the years, HEX has sought to be part of the continual learning that takes place within higher education as those interested in our shared public life struggle to make democracy work as it should. HEX has sought to be a journal where readers and the general public, as well as those in academe, find thoughtful and useful articles written by fellow thinkers. It has sought to open a discourse that provides a sensible, clear civic vocabulary for the role of higher education in our democracy. It has sought to be a space to nudge reflection, to confront perspectives outside the norm, and to help people connect. We hope you have found it so.
CONTRIBUTORS

HARRY BOYTE is founder of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, now merged into the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg College, where he is Senior Scholar in Public Life Philosophy. He is also a Senior Fellow at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey School of Public Affairs. In 2012, he served as national coordinator of the American Commonwealth Partnership, a network of higher education groups and institutions invited by the White House Office of Public Engagement on the anniversary of land grant colleges. He is editor, most recently, of the collection *Democracy’s Education: Public Work, Citizenship and the Future of Colleges and Universities*.


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