

# HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



## Democracy Divided

### Articles

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### Afterword

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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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*Foreword*

# DEMOCRACY DIVIDED

## How Should Higher Education Respond?

Derek W. M. Barker and Alex Lovit

Confronted with the coronavirus public health crisis, the shutdown of the global economy, and protests against racial injustice, 2020 has been a time of great stress for our nation and the world. The initial responses to these crises have each surfaced long-term weaknesses in our democratic public life: heightened political polarization, growing racial and cultural divides, weak and ineffective institutions, and distrust of “fake news” and the media. The coronavirus response, economic recovery, and racial equity all require the citizenry to come together with a shared sense of direction. However, the issues that have arisen have all become politically charged, exposing divides that threaten to worsen as we also face a divisive election. Each of these crises has been underscored and exacerbated by a long-term overarching crisis of our democracy, but the current political moment presents an opportunity to ask, What kind of democracy do we want? Can we respond to the nation’s challenges in a way that is aligned with the democracy we wish to see?

The forces contributing to our ongoing democratic malaise have been growing for decades and cannot be easily reversed. They have their roots in the dominant tradition in our public life, known as “adversarial democracy,” which holds that the essence of democracy is electoral competition. The adversarial model is reinforced throughout our public culture, from experiences in families and peer groups to the ways in which public issues are named and framed in the news and social media. Indeed, we might say that the very notion of a “public,” a unity of differences, has been replaced by an aggregation of warring groups. When it comes to their experiences with politics, young people seem to have few spaces these days in which to encounter anything other than adversarial democracy. It is no wonder that, despite interest in volunteering and improving the world, young people view politics with skepticism.

Democracy in the United States was not intended to be purely adversarial. The system was founded as a *republic* rather than a democracy with majority rule. The Founders held that in a large republic, factions would be diverse enough that coalitions would be temporary and unable to dominate for long periods. However, they did not envision the modern two-party system, much less the current state of polarization, as exacerbated by social media and ideological

bubbling. Thinkers with such varied ideas as those of Tocqueville, Dewey, and Habermas also observed that adversarial democracy has always relied upon a strong civic culture to maintain confidence in the system and mitigate against its excesses. But our civic culture seems to be increasingly divided as well, breaking down into distinct groups that are ideologically homogeneous, with each seeing the other as a direct threat to its way of life rather than merely as groups of people with different views.

When the political environment is polarized, the perceived stakes of politics are raised and political conflict appears to be a zero-sum game, with gains for one side implying losses to the other. In that context, perhaps the most common response is still more adversarial democracy—fighting power with power and mobilizing “us against them.” Young people have played leading roles in protest movements around climate change and racial injustice, inspiring some to enter into electoral politics. Protest is effective at raising consciousness around new or suppressed public issues; however, according to Daniel Yankelovich, consciousness-raising is only the first stage in the process of public judgment and collective action. The process is not complete without a “working-through” of tensions and trade-offs and a resolution of the conflict.<sup>1</sup> What will it mean if the only political experiences available to young people are adversarial in nature? Where will they learn the other skills they need to be effective citizens?

Like every other institution that provides space for public discourse, colleges and universities have been affected by these trends of polarization. In fact, given their traditions of academic freedom of thought and expression and a reputation (earned or exaggerated) for shaping young people’s political beliefs, college campuses have become flashpoints for political debate. Competing claims—on the one hand that colleges should provide safe spaces to prevent perpetuating victimization of marginalized groups and on the other hand that restrictions on speech amount to liberal indoctrination—shape how constituencies both within and outside higher education view campus politics. Furthermore, with COVID-19 causing massive disruption to traditional practices, and perhaps posing an existential threat to some institutions, the disincentives for higher education to focus on potentially divisive political issues are more apparent than ever before.

In such an environment, higher education will be tempted to avoid politics and focus on academics. To preserve its legitimacy, higher education has always appealed to neutrality and projected itself as apolitical. The language of “service” reflects this impulse. However, the politics of division and polarization mean that even “facts” are now politicized and subject to contestation.

Despite its best efforts to project neutrality, higher education has been unable to escape accusations of partisan bias, accusations that seem to be validated by the predominantly liberal makeup of most faculty. If higher education is inescapably political, is there a way that it can be political without appearing partisan? Can it model a different kind of politics? The COVID-19 crisis itself demands an enlarged sense of politics—collective, rather than adversarial. The problem of how students can safely receive a high-quality education, develop social connections, and maintain extracurricular activities without endangering themselves or others cannot be solved by institutional actors alone. The current crisis for higher education, our nation, and the world requires collective action and responsibility. It also presents opportunities for collective *deliberation* about how to address a problem that affects all of us and puts things we all value, such as safety, freedom, and equity, into tension.

As the future attitudes of young people will be shaped in great part by whatever collective response occurs in the coming years, higher education has an opportunity to reshape the political socialization of young people. The most important contribution of higher education may be to help restore our young people's faith in democracy. To do so, it will have to model a different kind of democracy—a politics of bridging divides and breaking down social bubbles rather than reinforcing polarization and continuing politics-as-usual. Unfortunately, research suggests that higher education has historically done little to encourage graduates to break out of social bubbles and may actually reinforce them.<sup>2</sup> Failure to provide young people with an alternative at this critical moment could exacerbate their distrust of institutions and, even worse, of their fellow citizens, further weakening the democratic ideal.

The authors we have invited for *Higher Education Exchange (HEX)* this year provide examples of how higher education can model a different kind of democracy. Each of the experiments highlighted provide students with experiences in deliberative alternatives to adversarial politics.

Lorlene Hoyt and James Garrett reflect on the need for deliberative politics as the global community seeks to come together in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For potential models, they look to a series of experiments on campuses in Hong Kong, Israel, Kenya, and South Africa that developed and introduced students to a new civic engagement paradigm with the potential to disrupt the adversarial cycles of division and polarization.

Jed Donelan develops a conceptual framework for deliberative democracy, bringing ideas from the works of Jürgen Habermas together with practical experiences introducing students to dialogue and deliberation. According to

Donelan, deliberation suggests a process for making decisions without prescribing the outcome, thus providing students with an alternative to skepticism at a time when democracy itself is in question.

“Deliberation and Democratic Practice: A Student Affairs Approach” reflects on an initiative of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators to create and experiment with deliberative issue guides relevant to campus politics. This article captures reflections about the organization’s motivations to engage in deliberation and what was learned from the process of developing its first issue guide on free speech and campus inclusivity.

Flannery Burke and several of her former students reflect upon a world history course that included classroom deliberations on historical topics. As this article demonstrates, historical deliberation was effective both in conveying historical concepts and in prompting students to consider different approaches to political debates today.

Verdis Robinson moderates a conversation with community college faculty to reflect on their experiences with deliberative democracy. While their institutions are the most accessible and locally rooted, they experience the greatest pressure to focus narrowly on workforce development. As they argue, deliberative democracy offers the potential for developing skills that promise to be useful in both the careers and civic lives of graduates and for reimagining the civic purposes of the most democratic institutions in the sector.

In a related article, coeditor Alex Lovit surveys an emerging body of literature critical of higher education’s role in reinforcing socioeconomic hierarchies. The books discussed in this essay demonstrate dramatic differences in resources and practices among American colleges and universities; these disparities are often justified through appeals to the concept of “meritocracy.” Elite institutions, in particular, reinforce socioeconomic divisions—divisions that also tend to contribute to political polarization.

Finally, David Mathews concludes this issue with his thoughts on higher education’s potential role in reversing an overarching democratic crisis. If young people are to regain the ability to make lasting change, they will first need to listen to one another and learn to work together across their differences. Reshaping campus culture may be the first step.

Without suggesting thick unity or unanimous consensus, the ideas and experiments included in this year’s edition of *HEX* suggest hope for meaningful dialogue across differences. In so doing, they illustrate a new role for higher education—one of countering the socialization of youth into a culture of division and ideological bubbles. Beyond merely informing the citizenry by

helping students consider contentious issues from a deliberative rather than adversarial perspective, higher education can help the citizenry come together across divides. To the extent that a public is more than just a grouping of individuals (much less warring tribes), higher education is strengthening or perhaps even *creating* the “public.” Helping the citizenry become a public may be the first step in confronting the crises we are now facing and the most important contribution that higher education can make.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Daniel Yankelovich, “The Bumpy Road from Mass Opinion to Public Judgment,” *Higher Education Exchange*, 2017, 21-28.
- <sup>2</sup> Matthew R. Johnson and Jennifer Peacock, “Breaking the Bubble: Recent Graduates’ Experiences with Ideological Diversity,” *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 13, no. 1 (2020), 56-65.

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DEREK W. M. BARKER is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation and coeditor (with Alex Lovit) of the *Higher Education Exchange*. With a background in political theory, he works primarily on research concerning the democratic role of higher education institutions, philanthropy and nonprofit organizations, journalism, and the professions. He has contributed to other Kettering publications, including the *Kettering Review* and *Connections*. Barker is the author of *Tragedy and Citizenship: Conflict, Reconciliation, and Democracy from Haemon to Hegel* (SUNY Press, 2009) and articles appearing in the academic journals *Political Theory*, *New Political Science*, and *The Good Society*.

FLANNERY BURKE is an associate professor in the departments of history and American studies at Saint Louis University, where she specializes in regional culture and environmental humanities. She is the author of *From Greenwich Village to Taos* (University Press of Kansas, 2008) and *A Land Apart: The Southwest and the Nation in the Twentieth Century* (University of Arizona Press, 2017). She served on the writers' team for the *C3 Framework for the Social Studies* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013) and is a board member of the Missouri Council for History Education.

JAMES E. (JED) DONELAN is an associate professor of philosophy and humanities and the director of the New England Center for Civic Life (NECCL) at Franklin Pierce University. In his more than 20 years with NECCL, he has conducted dozens of workshops on deliberative dialogue, moderated or facilitated hundreds of structured forums and conversations, and presented widely on these practices and experiences. His research interests are in deliberative ethics, deliberative democracy, and the teaching of philosophy.

MARIE C. DOWNEY is a senior at Saint Louis University. She is a member of the Saint Louis University Honors Program, studying psychology and bioethics as well as health studies. Downey most recently received top honors for her psychology capstone on the topic of task complexity, indirect peer-influenced stress, and persistence.

LEILANI (LANI) FROST is a communication major with a focus on journalism and media and a minor in Chinese at Saint Louis University. She is a member of the Asian American Association, KSLU College Radio, and the University Honors Program and serves as the social media and graphic design chair for the university's Korean Student Association. After taking Flannery Burke's Origins of the Modern World course, she had the opportunity to complete the courses History of China and Japan After 1600 and History of the Saint Louis Region. Frost hopes to use the knowledge that she has gained through all these classes to better understand and advocate for her community.

JAMES GARRETT is the program administrator for the Talloires Network. Before beginning his work at Tufts University, he was program manager for Tulane University's Mellon Graduate Program in Community-Engaged Scholarship and senior program coordinator for internships and international programs at the Center for Public Service. He holds a bachelor's degree from Davidson College and a master's degree from the University of Louisville. He is a student in the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College.

TERI LYN HINDS (she/her/hers) is the senior director for strategic initiatives-equity 2030 at Minnesota State, the third largest system of state colleges and universities in the United States and the largest in Minnesota with 30 colleges, 7 universities, and 54 campuses. With over 15 years of experience in higher education institutional research, assessment, and project management, including 8 years in Washington, DC, Hinds brings a broad perspective to higher education conversations. She holds a bachelor's degree in government from Cornell University and a master's degree in social service administration with a concentration in health administration and policy from the University of Chicago.

LORLENE M. HOYT is the executive director of the Talloires Network. While teaching at MIT, she founded MIT@Lawrence, an award-winning city-campus partnership. Her book *Regional Perspectives on Learning-by-Doing: Stories from Engaged Universities around the World* (Michigan State University Press, 2017) illustrates how universities can mobilize their resources to create more equitable and prosperous communities while also educating civic leaders. Hoyt is a research professor in urban and environmental policy and planning and faculty member of the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University, as well as a visiting scholar at Brown University. She holds a PhD in city and regional planning from the University of Pennsylvania.

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ALEX LOVIT is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. With an academic background in the study of history, he assists with Kettering's experiments in deliberating about historical issues through Historic Decisions issue guides. He also works for Kettering's research with both K-12 and higher education and provides historical research for the foundation. Lovit is the coeditor (with Derek W. M. Barker) of Kettering's *Higher Education Exchange*.

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DAVID MATHEWS, president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation, was secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in the Ford administration and, before that, president of the University of Alabama. Mathews has written extensively on Southern history, public policy, education, and international problem solving. His books include *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy*, *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future*, and *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea*.

ALLISON MISPAGEL is a senior at Saint Louis University, majoring in accounting with a minor in business analytics. Allison did not have much interest in history before taking Flannery Burke's Origins of the Modern World course but afterward gained a new interest in the subject. She is a member of Saint Louis University's Honors Program and through this program had the opportunity to be a teaching assistant for an introduction to honors course. After college, Allison hopes to get a master's degree in accounting and sit for the Certified Public Accountant exam.

ERIN PAYSEUR OETH is interested in exploring the public square—how we develop civic learning, skills, and practices to thrive together in community. As a research fellow with the Kettering Foundation, she serves on several national research exchanges. Payseur Oeth has presented nationally with colleagues, including recent sessions on exploring faith groups as civic actors and using public deliberation in church and community decision-making. She holds a BA in religion/philosophy from Presbyterian College and an MEd in higher education and student affairs from the University of South Carolina. Before joining the University of Mississippi as a project manager in community engagement, she held positions at Baylor University and Columbia College.

VERDIS L. ROBINSON (he/him/his) is an associate of the Kettering Foundation with a focus on the democratic practices of community colleges. He has previously served as Campus Compact's director for community college engagement and as the national director for The Democracy Commitment. Prior to his national leadership, Robinson served as a tenured professor of history and African American studies at Monroe Community College, fellow for the Aspen Institute's Wye Faculty Seminar on Citizenship in the American and Global Polity, and fellow for the National Endowment for the Humanities' Faculty Seminar on Rethinking Black Freedom Studies: The Jim Crow North and West.

ANDREW SWEESO is a senior at Saint Louis University, majoring in English with minors in Catholic studies and philosophy. His academic work includes analysis of the intersection of Catholic liturgy and social media and projects published in the university's journal *The Kiln Project*. He has served as a writing consultant for undergraduate students at the university and as leader of the Labre Ministry with the Homeless. Much of his work focuses on radical relational ministry with Saint Louis' unhoused community, including training and educating undergraduate students on issues of poverty and homelessness and working with local nonprofits to provide shelter, develop resources, and promote collaboration with unhoused individuals and families.

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