

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2017

Editors: Derek Barker and David W. Brown
Managing Editor: Joey Easton
Copy Editors: Joey Easton and Jared Namenson
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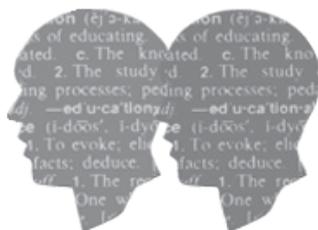
The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

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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We dedicate this issue of the *Higher Education Exchange* to Dan Yankelovich, who just passed away. His writing about public judgment has been critical to Kettering's understanding of deliberation. His seminal book *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* is required reading for thoughtful scholars of democracy.

He was not only an emeritus board member of the Kettering Foundation; he was also a great friend. We will all miss him.

David Mathews

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SHAPING OUR FUTURE

The Public Purpose of Higher Education

Harry C. Boyte

When higher education institutions attempt to “engage” the community, that can mean a number of things, depending on how the institution views its civic role. Most often, colleges and universities see themselves in an informational capacity, distributing expert knowledge to the community to solve problems that are conceived as technical in nature. Deliberation represents a fundamentally different approach to engagement and a different understanding of the civic role of the institution. In this essay, Harry C. Boyte reflects on a national initiative of campuses that used deliberation to engage their communities in a national dialogue about goals and purposes of higher education.

Some years ago, our Center for Democracy and Citizenship undertook a project with the Department of Epidemiology at the University of Minnesota. I recounted this project in an essay for *Agent of Democracy: Higher Education and the HEX Journey*. The project focused on alcohol use among teens in eight small towns in Minnesota and Wisconsin. The epidemiologists asked us to work with them using a “community organizing” approach. Yet their view was a far cry from what we understood the concept to mean. They believed that communities should adopt strict “carding” legislation (punishment of bar owners who failed to query the age of drinkers), which research showed had some effect in lowering underage alcohol use. In other words, they had a predetermined goal. The scientists also believed themselves to be undertaking “civic engagement” through the application of expert knowledge. This is the dominant view of the public mission of higher education. Or, as a university advertisement in the Denver airport put it more cryptically, “community problems, university solutions.”

Such technocratic politics—domination by experts removed from a common civic life—has spread throughout contemporary society like a silent disease.

In these terms, as Ronald Beiner said in *Political Judgement*, “the monopoly of political intelligence is handed over to the experts, administrators, and political technicians who coordinate the rules of administration and decision making that accord with the reigning canons of method, rational procedure, and expertise.” Such technocratic politics—domination by experts removed from a common civic life—has spread throughout contemporary society like a

silent disease. It is a politics presenting itself as an objective set of scientifically derived truths that turn groups of people into abstract categories. It decontextualizes “problems” from the life of communities. It erodes the experience of equal respect. All these features can be seen in modern political campaigns in which candidates market their platforms to voters conceived as customers.

In the project aimed at underage drinking, our center argued for three years with the epidemiologists. In our view, assuming “experts have the answers” robs

We call this a different kind of politics—citizen politics based on deliberation, public work.

communities of their own agency, and also ignores their moral, cultural, and local wisdom. In one community, Tomah, the limits of the expert-knows-best approach became clear as community deliberation among a highly diverse group led to the realization that carding didn’t address the nub of the local epidemic of underage

drinking. The problem-under-the-problem was the annual “beer bash” that created wide norms for casual drinking. The community did public work to change the festival. The problem of teen alcohol use significantly lessened. We call this a different kind of politics—citizen politics based on deliberation, public work, and communities self-organizing to generate and implement their own solutions, drawing on expert knowledge but not determined by it.

Deliberation in Higher Education

The National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI), the Kettering Foundation, and the Center for Democracy and Citizenship developed two deliberations on the crisis of legitimacy facing higher education. The deliberations added to understanding of what Kettering Foundation calls problems of democracy, which contrast with discrete problems *in* democracy. Problems *of* democracy are problems-behind-the-problems, such as polarization, citizen distrust of public institutions, falling levels of citizen participation, and expert-knows-best politics. The deliberations also helped to illuminate another dimension of technocracy, expert-knows-best approaches: the *philosophy* that justifies detachment of experts is what historian Samuel Hays has called “the Gospel of Efficiency.” The gospel produces constant pressure to achieve goals taken as a given and rarely interrogated. In higher education, these include preparation for individual careers in jobs narrowly defined, as well as cost savings, more efficient delivery of information through distance learning, and competitive rankings.

“Shaping Our Future: How Should Higher Education Help Us Create the Society We Want?” was launched in September 2012. Involving NIFI, Kettering Foundation, and Center for Democracy and Citizenship, the national conversation grew from an initiative to emphasize the public purposes of higher education called the American Commonwealth Partnership, undertaken with the White House Office of Public Engagement, the Department of Education, Imagining America, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, and the Democracy Challenge, a coalition of community colleges.

Over the next two years, participants in well over 115 “Shaping Our Future” discussions across the country considered possible purposes of higher education, such as preparing a skilled workforce, providing educational opportunities to poor and minority citizens, strengthening values like responsibility, integrity, and respect for others, and developing skills of citizenship. “Shaping Our Future” involved nearly 2,000 students, parents, professors, employers, and others. It surfaced worries that the “mind-opening” functions of education are eroding. One woman in Kansas, quoted in the report *Divided We Fail*, expressed the view that higher education should get students out of their bubbles. “If you have a higher education . . . you’ve been exposed to different cultures, different lifestyles, different religions, different belief systems. You have a heart and mind that are opened.” Discussions showed a gap between policymakers and lay citizens.

Again and again I was taken with how surprised people were at the question of purpose itself. Dave Senjem, Republican minority leader of the Minnesota Senate, told me, “What’s the purpose of higher education?” is a profound question that we’ve never discussed in all my years in the legislature.”

This surprise at posing the question of purpose brought home how little serious discussion there is about public purposes in education or elsewhere. It reminded me of the opening chapter in Betty Friedan’s 1964 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, which helped to launch the modern women’s movement. Friedan described loss of memory about even how to name problems. “It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction,” wrote Friedan. “The problem lay buried, unspoken for many years. There was no word of this yearning in the missions of words written about women, for women, in all the columns, books, and articles by experts telling women their role.”

In the forums, people were also often surprised by option two, which proposed that higher education should help people “work together and repair an ailing society.” Many agreed with the statement from the issue guide *Shaping Our Future*, used in the forums: “We’ve become a divided nation and a ‘me first’

society. Many people worry that crucial values like responsibility, integrity, and respect for others are failing. Too many Americans who work hard and play by the rules are slipping out of the middle class, and too many poor youngsters never get a fair chance at a good future in the first place.” But as in *Divided We Fail*, the Public Agenda report on the results of the forums, the discussions also showed that people knew of few examples of higher education contributing to civic repair. Many also “worried that their vision of higher education is in jeopardy from changes sweeping through the country’s economy, government, and colleges and universities themselves.”

The next deliberation was on “The Changing World of Work: What Should We Ask of Higher Education?” To develop the accompanying issue guide, a design team from six Twin Cities schools—Augsburg College, Century College, Hamline University, Metropolitan State University, Minneapolis Community and Technical College, and St. Paul College—worked with the Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums Institute. We gathered opinions from nearly 1,000 people in communities, institutions, and on campuses, hearing views about how colleges and universities might better collaborate with their local communities to address the challenges of today’s work environment. We often heard people’s sense of powerlessness. Arjun Appadurai’s cultural theory says that people develop “capacity to aspire” only as they experience agency. Even stories that showed people that making change in work is *possible* had a significant impact on students’ sense of possibility.

Both deliberations surfaced important themes. Their main weakness, in my view, was that they had few examples of what lay citizens might *do* to create the higher education we need. People were mainly in the role of an audience whose judgments are about the right course of action for others to take, not judgment about how they themselves might help implement solutions.

An exception underlines the point. When Katherine Persson, president of the Kingwood campus of Lone Star College, asked John Theis, director of Lone Star’s Center for Civic Engagement, to hold a deliberation among the administrators at Kingwood, he saw a striking increase in intensity. “They were highly energized,” Theis told me, “because they could see possibilities for themselves, as administrators, to take action.”

The impact of deliberations that are connected to public work—in which everyday citizens see *themselves* as part of the solution—emerged from several deliberations at Lone Star College (partnering with the University of Houston). Four discussions, two on higher education, one on energy, and one on guns on campuses, involved 195 students who were highly diverse in terms of age, race,

and cultural backgrounds, and many of whom had had public work experiences in efforts like the youth civic education initiative called Public Achievement. Afterwards, questions designed to explore the impact of the deliberations—not only on students’ views, but also on the ways they thought about their own agency—showed significant change, suggesting that deliberation on large questions may help students to name the significance of public work in stronger ways. Students expressed increased hopefulness, changing views of politics, more confidence in the capacity of others to take action, and more feelings of agency in themselves. More than 71 percent indicated that their understanding of the importance of *listening* to others’ views and beliefs, rather than simply *changing* other people’s views, increased. “In terms of building students’ own political efficacy to be an active part of their democracy, the forums seemed to have a huge impact,” John Theis and Windy Lawrence noted in their report on the forums. As one student put it, “forums like this present a healthier model of political exchange than what we see on television or in our current Congress.” “I’ve never been fully exposed to politics before,” said another. “It was a brand new experience for me.”

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Reconsidering the Gospel of Efficiency

In April of 2017, when I visited Lone Star College, I heard from faculty about constant pressures to meet outcome measures set by efficiency experts. The receptionist in the student union worried about losing her job to a robot. When I traveled across Texas to San Antonio, I thought of little towns along the way hollowed out by the closing of more than 1,000 schools as part of school consolidation, justified by principles of efficiency like cost-cutting and economies of scale. Reflecting a loss of a sense of schools as community centers and sources of civic pride, PTA membership in Texas has fallen by 200,000 members over the last 15 years, while student enrollment increased by more than one million. Such school consolidation turns out to be built on false promises.

In the last fifty years, tens of thousands of schools have been closed as part of school consolidation. Research on the effects shows the damage: “In terms of its influence on teaching and learning, contemporary school consolidation

efforts often fail to deliver the promised enhancement of academic offerings,” write Craig Howley, Jerry Johnson, and Jennifer Petrie in an overview of the evidence. “Even when consolidation does produce a wider menu of educational experiences for students, evidence suggests that large school and district size negatively affects desirable academic outcomes. . . . A sizable body of research investigating school size has consistently found larger size (after moving beyond the smallest schools) to be associated with reduced rates of student participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities, more dangerous school

Scientific management speeds us toward what David Mathews calls a “citizen-less democracy.”

environments, lower graduation rates, lower achievement levels for impoverished students, and larger achievement gaps related to poverty, race, and gender.” Finally, the impact on communities as a whole can be devastating. “The influence of school and district consolidations on

the vitality and well-being of communities may be the most dramatic result, if the one least often discussed by politicians or education leaders,” they write. “Put simply, the loss of a school erodes a community’s social and economic base—its sense of community, identity and democracy—and the loss permanently diminishes the community itself, sometimes to the verge of abandonment.”

In 1902, Jane Addams warned about this danger of technocratic politics designed and implemented by outside experts. “We are all involved in this political corruption,” she countered. “None of us can stand aside; our feet are mired in the same soil, and our lungs breathe the same air.” She saw the corrupt ward boss, whom she battled constantly, as more democratic than such well-intentioned experts.

The efficiency principle, using techniques derived from science and technology to make every process faster and cheaper, is the justifying guiding philosophy of expert interventions. Americans in higher education, as elsewhere, are caught in a rat race to get there faster and faster, with scant discussion of whether “there” is where we really want to go.

Application of the efficiency gospel also produces widespread feelings of powerlessness. Scientific management speeds us toward what David Mathews calls a “citizen-less democracy,” in which algorithms, smart machines, and manipulated opinions and emotions take the place of citizens’ efforts.

To overcome the dominance of the efficiency gospel, we need to vastly complicate “one best way” logic. The concept of the citizen as deliberator and co-creator, not simply voter, consumer, or victim, accomplishes this

complexification. There are also rich traditions to draw on. As Andrew Jewett describes in an essay in *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, in the 1930s a movement of “scientific democrats” gained substantial footholds in the USDA and other federal agencies. USDA scientists, in partnership with land-grant colleges and educational, business, and civic groups, organized “Philosophy Schools” for 35,000 extension agents and others, aimed at helping professionals understand their work in larger democratic ways. As Jewett describes, “Many . . . understood the term ‘science’ to include the social forces that shaped the application—and perhaps even the production—of scientific knowledge.” In such a “dynamic concept of science,” said Charles Kellogg, a leading soil scientist in the USDA, “the relevancy of fact is as important to truth as fact itself.” For Kellogg, questions about “Is it so?” needed always to be accompanied by “So what?”

In local communities, home economics agents in cooperative extension were often “citizen professionals” whose main interest was in helping communities develop capacity for self-directed deliberative public work. They challenged conventional yardsticks of success. To paraphrase Isabel Bevier (1860-1942), one of the pioneers in the democratic purpose and practice of home economics, extension work represented an idealism and cultural element missing in a narrow focus on economic productivity—a “new measuring stick.” Previous to this, results had been measured largely in terms of livestock or crops, rather than the “kind of life produced.”

Higher education needs a 21st century version of Bevier’s “new measuring stick.” Rather than moving faster and faster to narrower and narrower goals, we need to revive a politics in higher education that deliberates about what “kind of life is produced”—and recall that citizens in communities are the ones who will produce it.



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CONTRIBUTORS

DEREK W. M. BARKER is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. With a background in political theory, he works primarily on research concerning the democratic role of higher education institutions, philanthropy and nonprofit organizations, and journalism. Barker is the coeditor (with David W. Brown) of Kettering's *Higher Education Exchange*, and 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 *Political Theory*, *New Political Science*, and *The Good Society*.

RONALD BEINER is a political science professor at the University of Toronto and a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. He has authored seven books, including *Political Philosophy: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), *Civil Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), and *Liberalism, Nationalism, Citizenship* (UBC Press, 2003). He has edited or coauthored seven additional books, including *Judgment, Imagination, and Politics* (with Jennifer Nedelsky, Roman and Littlefield, 2001), *Canadian Political Philosophy* (with Wayne Norman, Oxford University Press, 2001), *Theorizing Nationalism* (SUNY Press, 1999), and *Dangerous Minds: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the Return of the Far Right* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

HARRY BOYTE Harry Boyte is the Senior Scholar in Public Work Philosophy at the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg University. He is the leading architect of the center's public work approach to civic engagement and democracy, and the creator of Public Achievement. Boyte served as a senior advisor to the National Commission on Civic Renewal. In the 1960s, he worked for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as a field secretary with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during the Civil Rights Movement. He is the author of nine books on citizenship, democracy, and community organizing, and his writings have appeared in more than 100 publications.

LORI BRITT, is director of the Institute for Constructive Advocacy and Dialogue at James Madison University. Her work focuses on understanding how communities and organizations go about the business of charting future courses of action, and how different communicative structures and participatory practices can aid in making those plans more inclusive and representative. She facilitates deliberation, dialogue, and visioning processes for governmental and nonprofit agencies, and teaches a service-learning course in which students facilitate dialogues for community organizations.

DAVID W. BROWN is coeditor of the *Higher Education Exchange* and coedited two recent Kettering publications: *Agent of Democracy* and *A Different Kind of Politics*. He taught at Yale's School of Management and New School's Milano Graduate School. Brown is the author of *Organization Smarts* (Amacom 2002), *The Real Change-Makers: Why Government is Not the Problem or the Solution* (Praeger 2011), and *America's Culture of Professionalism: Past, Present, and Prospects* (Palgrave Macmillan 2014). Brown's recent book, *Assumptions of the Tea Party Movement: A World of Their Own*, was published in 2016 (Palgrave Macmillan).

MAURA CASEY, a Kettering Foundation senior associate, wrote commentary and editorials for four newspapers, including the *New York Times*. Over a career spanning 30 years, she won 45 regional and national awards, including a shared Pulitzer Prize. She holds a master's degree in journalism and public affairs from the American University, has two adult children, and lives in Franklin Connecticut with her husband, Peter J. Panzarella, who she is warming up to after 34 years.

JANE MANSBRIDGE is a Charles F. Adams Professor of Political Leadership and Democratic Values at the Harvard Kennedy School. She is the author of *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Basic Books, 1980; University of Chicago Press, 1983) and the award-winning *Why We Lost the ERA* (University of Chicago Press, 1986). She is also editor or coeditor of four volumes, including *Beyond Self-Interest* (University of Chicago Press, 1990) and *Negotiating Agreement in Politics* (with Cathie Jo Martin, American Political Science Association, 2013). Her current work includes studies of representation, democratic deliberation, and everyday activism.

DAVID MATHEWS, president 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*, and *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future*.

NOËLLE McAFEE is a professor of philosophy and director of the Psychoanalytic Studies Program at Emory University. Her books include *Democracy and the Political Unconscious* (Columbia, 2008), *Julia Kristeva* (Routledge, 2003), *Habermas, Kristeva, and Citizenship* (Cornell, 2000), and coedited volumes on democratic theory, including a special issue of the philosophy journal *Hypatia* and an edited volume titled *Democratizing Deliberation: A Political Theory Anthology* (Kettering, 2012). She is currently completing her next book, *Fear of Breakdown: Politics and the Work of Mourning*. She has worked closely with the Kettering Foundation for nearly 30 years, including serving since 1990 as an editor of the *Kettering Review*.

DAVID McIVOR is assistant professor of political science at Colorado State University and the author of *Mourning in America: Race and the Politics of Loss* (Cornell, 2016). He has published articles on contemporary democratic and political theory in a variety of journals, including *Political Theory*, *Constellations*, *Contemporary Political Theory*, *New Political Science*, *The James Baldwin Review*, and *Agriculture and Human Values*. He served as coeditor for the book *Democratizing Deliberation: A Political Theory Anthology* (with Noëlle McAfee and Derek W. M. Barker, Kettering Foundation Press, 2012).

DANIEL YANKELOVICH (1924–2017) was an American public opinion research pioneer and renowned social scientist who studied social change and public opinion in America for more than 40 years. In 1958, he established the marketing and research firm Daniel Yankelovich Inc., which was later renamed Yankelovich, Skelly, and White. In 1975, Yankelovich founded the nonprofit Public Agenda with former US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. More recently, he founded Viewpoint Learning, as well as the Yankelovich Center for Social Science Research at the University of California, San Diego. A former trustee at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Education, the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, and Brown University, he was author or coauthor of 12 books, including *Toward Wiser Judgment* (with Will Friedman, Public Agenda, 2010), *Profit With Honor: The New Stage of Market Capitalism* (Yale University Press, 2006), and *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation* (Simon and Schuster, 2001), which was awarded the 1999 Common Ground Book Award for Achievement in Conflict Resolution.



Kettering Foundation

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459 (937) 434-7300; (800) 221-3657
444 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite 434, Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 393-4478
www.kettering.org
