

CONNECTIONS

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Experiments in
**DEMOCRATIC
CITIZENSHIP**

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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Being a Civically Engaged College That Contributes to Democratic Ways of Living: Reflections of a College President

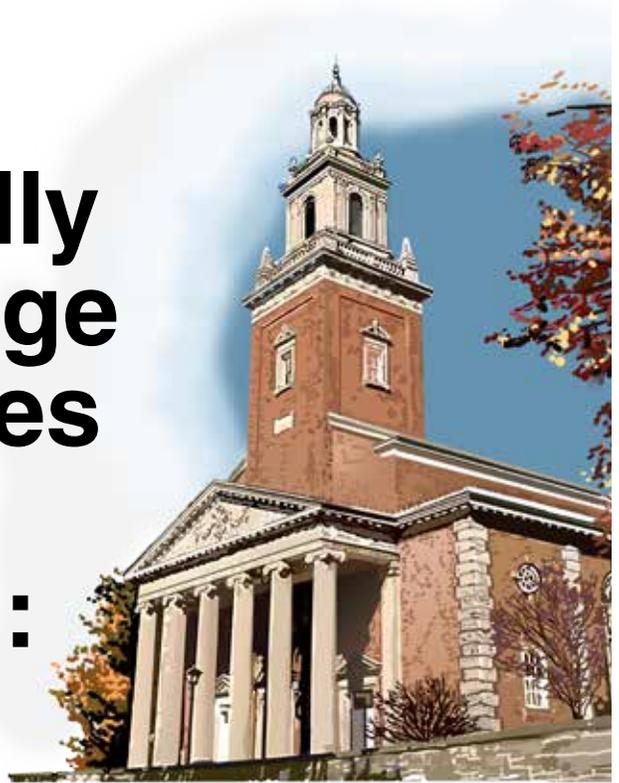
By Adam Weinberg

Four years into my tenure as a college president, I have been reflecting on the role of colleges in the work of democracy, and more specifically on the role of college presidents in leading our institutions in ways that open up space for our students, faculty, and staff to be part of creating healthy democratic ecosystems. This article is intended to generate a conver-

sation and vision for a civically engaged college that contributes to democratic ways of life.

A VISION FOR UNIVERSITIES TO ENHANCE PUBLIC WORK AND CIVIC AGENCY

In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville argued in *Democracy in America* that the future of democracy would depend on the “habits of the heart” developed by citizens as they came together in families, neighborhoods, classrooms, congregations, workplaces, and other public spaces to deliberate “in the company of strangers” on matters of common concern. For Tocqueville, democracy was an ongoing process of people coming together to create and re-create the



communities in which they want to live.

This conception of democracy moves beyond the laudable actions of voting and community service to the nuanced and difficult process of people acting together to solve problems. It is a citizen-centered view of democratic living. Higher education plays a central role in this process. As John Dewey wrote in *The School and Society*, “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.”

The work of colleges in this process is to prepare students to be engaged citizens in a democratic society. At college, students develop the interest and capacity to engage in public work. Faculty, staff, and others build democratic spaces within communities where they can come together to be cocreators of their communities. They produce intellectual work that contributes to democratic movements and ways of life, and to human freedom more generally.

What does this mean and how does it happen?

The foundational condition is the work we do with students through the liberal arts. The clearest expressions of the civic mission of higher education find their roots in Greek democracy. William Cronon articulated this vision in his classic piece

“Only Connect...’ [The Goals of a Liberal Education](#),” in which he writes that the liberal arts enhance the capacity of people to listen and hear, read and understand, and talk with anyone. Liberal arts learners also can write persuasively, solve a wide variety of puzzles and problems, and respect rigor as a way of seeking truth. In doing so, they practice respect and humility, understand how to get things done,



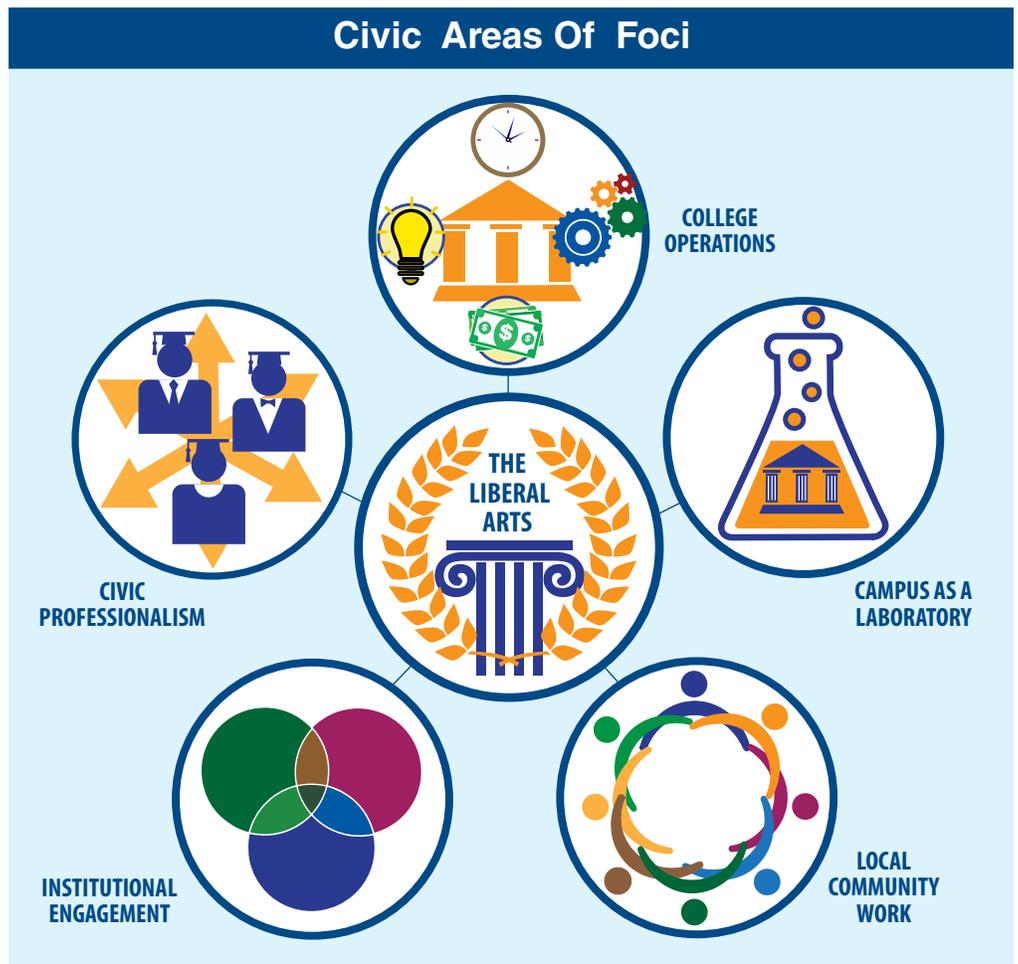
Four years into my tenure as a college president, I have been reflecting on the role of colleges in the work of democracy, and more specifically on the role of college presidents in leading our institutions in ways that open up space for our students, faculty, and staff to be part of creating healthy democratic ecosystems.

and nurture and empower people around them—seeing the connections that help one make sense of the world and act in creative ways to build the future.

While not every undergraduate will be a liberal arts student, every student needs exposure to the liberal arts if we want to be a civically oriented college. The attributes that Cronon outlines are foundational civic skills, values, and habits.

This work then expands across five dimensions of the college.

The campus is a laboratory that fosters students' commitment to and capacity for living democratically in a community of difference. A key part of this is what [Harry Boyte](#) and others call public work. This is the hard and sustained work of citizens to create things of lasting public value by working across differences to be cocreators of their communities. Living on a college campus should help students develop the skills, values, and habits of engaging in public work as part of their everyday lives.



For example, when a student moves into a first-year residence hall, it is likely to be the first time they have lived in a diverse community. As such, first-year residence halls are places where students can learn the skills, values, and habits of public work as they engage each other across difference to cocreate the community in which they live.

Student organizations, which are sites for fostering civic agency, are another example. As students learn to lead and manage organizations, they learn the arts of organizing, goal setting, asset mapping, creative problem solving, and other crucial skills of public work. Doing this work requires colleges to engage emerging campus leaders in leadership training and mentorship, as well as the reflection that allows learning to emerge from the work of student organizations. It also requires setting a tone and establishing public spaces where they can work together to create and sustain the communities in which they want to live.

In this moment, a lot of this work needs to center on what it means to live and work with, as well as learn from, people who often see the world in very different ways from ourselves. Students must learn to see difference as a source of strength, where the best decisions are made by diverse teams of people. We live in a moment



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of tremendous polarization that is eroding our ability to live democratically. People don't state ideas for fear of saying something wrong. Opposing views on vexing and complex social issues prevent us from moving forward on solutions.

Colleges have both an opportunity and an obligation to be the major social institution that helps students develop the capacity to get beyond this state of affairs and to be a generation that has the skills, values, and habits of working across difference to engage in public work locally, regionally, nationally, and globally. For this to happen, the curriculum and cocurriculum have to connect in ways that help students develop this capacity. In other words, this work needs to start in the classrooms with

a strong grounding in the liberal arts and then be reenforced throughout campus life.

Local community work moves beyond thin models of community service, in which we view ourselves as outside entities that serve others. Instead, colleges need to adopt a model of cocreation, in which we view ourselves as members of the community who work with others to address problems, take advantage of opportunities, and cocreate the

future. In part, this is a difference in tone and perception of how we talk about and think about our relationship to others. But doing it well also requires a shift in substance, focusing on projects in which the college can play a sustained role, working with others over long periods of time to create things of lasting social value.

In one expression of this view, **Nancy Cantor** has called for colleges to be anchoring institutions that engage in barn-raising activities. She builds off Caryn McTighe Musil's 2013 article "**Connective Corridors and Generative Partnerships**," in which she calls for colleges to create "generative partnerships done with, rather than done to, communities." In *The Looking Glass University*, Cantor writes, "Partnerships have



PHOTOS BY JONATHAN VEGA

to be sustained and sustainable well beyond the calendar of any given grant or service-learning course, and that will ultimately impact our practices in fundamental ways.” She calls for colleges to “tread carefully, keep humble, and yet keep going.”

This can play itself out in a number of ways. At Denison, for example, we are focused on the downtown square of Newark, Ohio, the target of civic and economic revitalization efforts. Initially, we joined with civic organizations, businesses, neighborhood associations, the mayor, and others to help frame a narrative on the importance of the project. We encouraged and supported faculty and staff who got involved in various efforts or identified themselves as already being involved. The college made resources available, including financial support, student interns, space for events, and public support. When an alumnus purchased a building, we rented a store front to be an early tenant. We converted the store front to [The Denison Art Space in Newark](#) with democratic purposes in mind. The space serves as a public space that brings people together across difference to explore art in ways that generate conversation about the kind of community we want to cocreate. As core projects emerged around the square, we stepped into the space, asking how



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we could be a partner working with others to engage public work.

College operations can do some of the most important, though often hidden and forgotten, work relating to colleges and local democratic ways of life. As anchoring institutions, colleges should operate in ways that strengthen the local civic fabric. In other words, how we operate has a huge impact on local democratic capacity, as our policies and ways of being impact our staff and local businesses, as well as local political processes and issues. Colleges need

to assess how they can operate in ways that best increase civic agency within the community, as well as support emerging local capacity for public work. At Denison, we have been attempting to do this in two ways.

Internally, we are examining our work environments and management practices to understand how they enhance or decrease the civic agency of our staff. For example, employees who have long-term, stable, and skills-enhancing employment tend to be more involved in local communities. We are examining how we structure work to ensure that we are providing these kinds of jobs. This means doing a different kind of training for our managers and

reexamining HR policies. When a staff member wanted to run for political office, we tried to make his work schedule more flexible to make this possible. We are keenly aware of our need to support the rights of all of our students, faculty, and staff when they wade into political issues. Our goal is to support their right to be locally involved and to voice views, even if those views are unpopular and differ from the interests of the college.

Externally, we are cognizant of how we operate in the local community. One focus is to purchase goods and services in ways that support local businesses and individuals who are engaged in local public work. For example, we have shifted our food purchases to support local farmers and businesses. Another focus is how we interact with local political processes. When we developed plans for a new building, we included the neighbors in multiple design meetings, communicating in ways that are consistent with public work models. We are aware that when the college takes a heavy-handed approach, it decreases local civic agency. When it engages in public work, it increases the civic agency of the college.

All of this work is subtle but important. The college employs almost 800 people and spends \$100+ million annually. How we structure



As a college, we are doing more to signal that we value faculty who merge their intellectual and civic selves, and that we support and celebrate faculty who do this work.

work and purchase services has large implications for how people perceive themselves and their relationships to others and the community. As such, it impacts the civic agency of individuals and the capacity for public work across the community.

Civic professionalism is becoming an orienting concept for how we think about work. Building off the work of [William Doherty](#) and others, we are infusing notions of **civic professionalism** in how we imagine the work of our faculty and the work of preparing students for their professions. As Doherty notes, the work of the professions should contribute to civic life. He calls for us to explore the ways that professionals can use their skills and knowledge to contribute to public conversations and actions.

This work starts with our faculty. As a college, we are doing more to signal that we value faculty who merge their intellectual and civic selves, and that we support and celebrate faculty who do this work. Some of this is about making resources available to faculty. For example, we provided a summer intern to a faculty member doing a community-based research project. We also supported a group of faculty who started a project called [Between Coasts](#), which is a platform for people from the Midwest to tell their

public and political narrative post-election. We drafted a new [policy on academic freedom](#) that affirms the right of our faculty and others to wade into public issues. As part of this work, we held a symposium on faculty as public intellectuals, at which I started the event expressing the college's support for faculty to blend their professional and civic selves.

We are doing the same with students. As part of a new strategic plan, we have launched the [Austin E. Knowlton Center for Career Exploration](#). We purposefully call it “career exploration” as a way to signal that the center's work stretches beyond “getting a job.” The Knowlton Center pushes students to ask questions about the kinds of lives they want to lead and to think about how careers and professions fit into those lives.

Part of this work exposes students to alumni who have woven together their professional and civic selves. We are connecting our students with alumni who can share their stories and reflections on how careers allowed them to blend civic engagement and community contributions. We are setting up internships and externships in which students can work alongside alumni in their communities. These are purposeful and designed to open up space for students to see how others have blended their

personal, professional, and civic interests to be the architects of their own lives.

Institutional engagement is key, given that colleges are part of many communities, including local, higher education, professional, and global circles. Our civic work needs to take place across all of these groups. At Denison we are working through our professional associations to push for a larger conversation about the civic value of higher education in our institutions. We are collaborating on a multiyear conversation at the Kettering Foundation, joining [The Talloires Network](#), and encouraging more faculty and staff to participate in AAC&U meetings on democracy. We also have played a large and proactive role in the formation of two associations for presidents from around the world—[The Global Liberal Arts Alliance](#) and the Higher Education G20. Both of these efforts are bringing together liberal arts colleges from around the world to build relationships and share resources.

THE ROLE OF A COLLEGE PRESIDENT

Colleges should be anchoring institutions that strengthen our graduates' capacity for democratic ways of life. Doing this requires a broad approach to our civic work. We can't reduce

these efforts to a single program, initiative, or center. The college needs to infuse a civic mind-set as a core principle of our structure and operations, from the work we do in classrooms and residential halls, to our HR policies and local community involvement. This involves rethinking how relationships work between students, faculty, staff, the college, the community, and others. And it requires developing a vocabulary that frames and guides this work across campus, imprinting civic thought through every facet of the college in ways that enhance the capacity and opportunities of our students, faculty, and staff to identify their civic agency, engage in public work, and persist as civic professionals. In doing so, our community strengthens democratic ecosystems.

The role of the president is important. We set a tone by the things we say or don't say and the actions we take or don't take. When this is done well, colleges can be proactive agents that protect and deepen democratic ways of life as we prepare students to be effective and engaged citizens; support our faculty and staff to live in democratic ways; and widen the space and local civic capacity for the emergence and persistence of democratic ways of life. ■

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