

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



Institutions and the Public: A Troubled Relationship

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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ISSN 2469-6293 (print)
ISSN 2471-2280 (online)

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2021

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Institutions and the Public: A Troubled Relationship?

Derek W. M. Barker and Alex Lovit

In this issue of *HEX*, we consider the troubled relationship between higher education and the public. While the causes are complex and contested, one trend is clear: Major institutions across our society are suffering from a loss of public trust. Institutions that claim to serve the public are viewed with skepticism and accused of partisan bias. In the absence of trusted institutions, “facts” become contested and citizens turn to a politically polarized media landscape for information that will help them make sense of current events, which in turn feeds divisions. Frustrated with public resistance to their findings, experts redouble their efforts to present more information, implying that the public is ill informed and uneducated. Is there a way out of this vicious cycle? Instead of “educating,” “informing,” or “serving” the public, is there a better way institutions and professionals might relate to citizens?

Higher education has been at the center of citizen mistrust of public institutions. While public trust in higher education remains fairly high compared to its trust in other institutions, Gallup reported recently that colleges and universities have suffered a significant decline in public confidence, more so in the last few years than any other public institution it studied.¹ In the context of declining public funding and rising costs, having a civic mission recognized by the public is more important than ever for the future of higher education. However, colleges and universities cannot create their own civic mission; it must come from and be reaffirmed by the citizenry.

As one of the key incubators for scientific research, higher education is caught in various debates. Climate change is an obvious issue that has revealed the limits of scientific knowledge in generating political will to lead to action. Moreover, the COVID pandemic that began in 2020 dramatically attests to the fact that many serious problems can be addressed only through a combination of expert knowledge and collective action by citizens. The pandemic demonstrates the costs of public distrust of authoritative institutions; in the absence of popular consensus about the causes, consequences, and prophylactics of COVID-19, collective action was difficult to organize, even in the face of a universally shared problem. Public health measures have been resisted by various constituencies for complex reasons, including not only perceived liberal

bias but also historical inequity and discrimination. It is not clear whether declining public confidence in universities is causing distrust in science or whether the increasing politicization of science is driving this alienation from higher education—or perhaps both. In any case, the downward spiral of public faith in prominent American institutions is a reason for concern both for higher education specifically and for democracy generally.

The partisan debates around science reflect a larger dynamic in which education has become a major fault line in American politics, resulting in what some have called the “diploma divide.”² Whether or not one has a college degree has become increasingly predictive of party affiliation and opinions on a range of cultural and policy issues. As politics becomes more polarized and divisive, institutions of higher education are more frequently attacked as partisan. With the very idea of what constitutes a “common good” in question, the public appears unable to agree on what it might want from higher education. It is no surprise that higher education, like other institutions, is losing its sense of public mission.

Moreover, as the institution responsible for the education of future professional classes, higher education is at some level fundamentally elitist, no matter what efforts are made to enable access. In his recent book on meritocracy, philosopher Michael Sandel suggests that higher education is essentially a sorting mechanism for admitting future elites into the professional classes while shutting others out.³ Rising tuition costs and increasing student indebtedness only compound the perception that higher education is reserved for a particular segment of society. Whether or not populist resentment of elites is justified, higher education must acknowledge its role in contributing to the key social and political divides threatening our democracy.

It is tempting for the professionals, including those in higher education, to see themselves as the antidote to their own woes: If only the public were better educated, citizens would better understand the value of scientific knowledge and place greater trust in universities. To better educate the public about climate change, climate scientists respond with more studies and better data. To improve vaccination rates, public health authorities respond with information campaigns. Such approaches assume that citizens are in need of information and that the role of institutions and professionals is to produce, communicate, and reproduce expert knowledge. But what if citizens do not want to be “educated” on such issues? What if public resistance has more to do with political divides—disagreements about what to do in the face of uncertainty—than with misinformation? If the underlying problem is social and political in

nature, then campaigns to educate or inform the public are likely to be futile, perhaps even counterproductive. What would it look like if higher education were to start focusing on the underlying problem, playing an active role in bridging the divides that currently structure our public discourse?

The articles in this volume attempt to answer that question. Rather than assume that experts have the answers, the solutions here begin with the premise that citizens have important work to do before the work of experts can begin. Instead of ingesting more data or technical knowledge, citizens first need to work through the conflicts and trade-offs that are dividing them. Instead of focusing narrowly on governmental policy or institutional resources, they need to focus on developing civic assets and resources. The articles suggest ways that higher education can work *with*, rather than “on” or “for,” the citizenry. In so doing, they suggest a fundamental change in the relationship between institutions and the citizenry as well as in the civic role of higher education in our democracy.

Drawing upon his previous experience in the journalism profession, Byron White perceives existential threats to higher education’s future, presaged by disruptions to the academic business model and declining public trust. White suggests that for many institutions, the path toward long-term stability lies in strengthening relationships with local communities. In order to survive, colleges and universities must build trust with local communities and build capacity to serve local students. These goals have already been part of many institutions’ civic engagement programs, but White argues that these efforts will become increasingly important to institutional survival in an increasingly precarious environment for higher education.

In view of increasing divisions among the citizenry and declining confidence in institutions, John Theis calls upon higher education to refocus on the civic agency of students, in addition to their academic outcomes. He describes what it looks like when a community college makes a conscious effort to organize across departments and disciplines to focus on civic skills and habits. Rather than telling students what to think or what to do, the approaches he describes help them learn how they might make decisions collectively and work together.

Katie Clark reflects on her experience as a nursing educator and practitioner in Minneapolis during the tumultuous year of 2020. In calmer times, Clark focused her work on nonjudgmental partnerships with citizens, including unhoused people and other marginalized social groups. The COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread social unrest in protest of George Floyd’s murder

by a Minneapolis police officer presented significant disruptions to this work. In this essay, Clark discusses the continued need for institutions to respect diverse citizens and work with them as partners, even (perhaps especially) in times of disruption and insecurity.

As a scientific researcher and educator, Jonathan Garlick is a practitioner of civic science, an approach through which scientists avoid positioning themselves as oracular experts and, instead, promote public deliberation about science-related issues, in which citizens' perspectives, experiences, and values are respected as valid. In his essay, Garlick discusses how civic science shapes the way in which he interacts with students in the classroom and citizens in public dialogues. He also describes how this experience has shaped his plans for dialogues about COVID vaccination and some of the ongoing tensions in this work.

Timothy Shaffer and David Procter focus on transforming a university's relationship with its local community by changing the approach to outreach and engagement. They describe their efforts to expand community engagement efforts across fields, using a deliberative rather than an expert model. Rather than the expert who informs the community with technical knowledge, the role of the scholar, they contend, is to convene and frame public dialogues on divisive issues.

Speaking as a college president concerned with the future of higher education, Chris Gilmer argues that reviving the civic purposes of higher education may be critical to restoring its "value proposition." Drawing upon the history of minority-serving institutions and community colleges, he argues that inclusion in our democracy is more than a matter of finding a good career; it is also a matter of civic and political inclusion. When students learn to become active and engaged citizens, they experience the collective value of higher education as well as its individual value. If higher education is successful in doing what our democracy needs, perhaps it will also help itself in the process.

Finally, echoing the approaches included in this volume, David Mathews concludes with a call for inventiveness in the civic purposes of higher education. While higher education is accustomed to preparing future professionals with technical knowledge to better serve or inform the citizenry, he suggests attending to the civic skills professionals will need in working *with* the public. In so doing, higher education might repair its own relationship with the citizenry and regain the public trust as well as produce the sort of professionals our democracy needs.

Readers of *HEX* will be saddened to know that its founding editor, David W. Brown, passed away on December 1, 2020. In a Note of Appreciation in the 2018 issue, Kettering President David Mathews wrote: “David Brown has not just been an editor of *HEX* since 1994. He is also its co-creator . . . David was ideal as an editor of the journal because he brought to the work an astonishing breadth of experience, both inside and outside the academy.” We are grateful for David’s vision, voice, and many contributions, especially his attention to higher education’s role in shaping future professionals and its implications for the disconnect between institutions and the public. The editors are honored to continue *HEX* in the tradition that David began.



NOTES

- ¹ Stephanie Marken, comment on “A Crisis in Confidence in Higher Ed,” Gallup Blog, comment posted April 12, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/248492/crisis-confidence-higher.aspx> (accessed October 7, 2021).
- ² Adam Harris, “America Is Divided by Education,” *The Atlantic*, November 7, 2018.
- ³ Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?* (Westminster, UK: Penguin Books, 2020).

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CHRIS GILMER is president and tenured professor of humanities at West Virginia University at Parkersburg and founder of the National Institutes for Historically Underserved Students. He earned a PhD in English from the University of Southern Mississippi. He is the founding co-convenor of the Research Alliance on Post-Secondary Success at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and has served three HBCUs, one Hispanic-Serving Institution, and an Appalachian college. He is a national commissioner on college readiness for the American Association of Community Colleges and a member of the board of directors of the Community Colleges of Appalachia. His teaching focuses primarily on the intersections of literature and culture and the literature of marginalized people.

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DAVID E. PROCTER is professor of communication studies at Kansas State University (KSU). In 2004, he helped establish the Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy to provide citizens with a stronger voice in local, state, and national politics and to build capacity for civil deliberation on important and controversial issues. Procter served as coeditor of the *Journal of Public Deliberation* and helped create a graduate certificate in dialogue, deliberation, and public engagement at KSU. He received his PhD from the University of Nebraska.

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