

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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A CALL FOR ACADEMIC INVENTIVENESS

David Mathews

The problems of democracy have been discussed in the last several issues of *Higher Education Exchange*, and the situation has gotten worse, not better. Democracy is in serious trouble worldwide and certainly in the United States. And authoritarian governments, convinced we are a weak and declining country, see an opportunity to take advantage of our divisions.

Democracy's problems go deep into the foundations of self-rule. There is a growing recognition that Abraham Lincoln was right when he said that a divided nation cannot stand. The one thing most Americans agree on is that we are too divided.

Human beings can tolerate only so much instability; our survival instincts compel us to become more united and stable. But what form of stability will emerge is unclear. Sometimes, unity can come at the price of freedom. Other times, it has spawned the political inventiveness that renews democracy.

What role higher education will play as our country tries to come together is also unclear. Colleges and universities have lost public confidence, been buffeted by the COVID pandemic, and are struggling to keep costs down. They may be too overburdened to deal with anything but day in, day out crises. But failure to play a significant role in strengthening democracy leaves higher education with no role to play at all. The future of higher education has often been determined by how its institutions respond to the great issues in society. What will happen to democracy is that issue today.

Colleges and universities are among the many institutions, both governmental and nongovernmental, that face an uncertain future. Not only have they suffered from a loss of public confidence but what they have to say isn't trusted as it once was. This loss of trust is particularly troubling because many of these institutions, including the academic ones, see themselves as authoritative sources of factual information, or "truth." However, many people no longer believe their facts.

Aware of the lack of trust, some governing institutions have attempted to counter the growing public alienation in various ways. Initiatives to improve the relationship with the citizenry have had names such as public participation, public engagement, civic engagement, consultation, and public accountability.

How effective have they been? Regrettably, declining public confidence hasn't been arrested by decades of civic engagement efforts. Even more alarming, according to scholars like Brian Cook, some of these participatory practices may have been counterproductive, unintentionally widening the divide that they were intended to close.¹ Whether or not this is the case, the loss of public confidence has increased even as engagement efforts have grown.

In studying this situation, the Kettering Foundation came to wonder whether the institutions engaged in governing the United States might want to consider other strategies for relating to an often alienated citizenry. In the 2020 issue of *HEX*, I discussed a brief research report titled *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea*, which provides an overview of the case for more collaboration between citizens and institutions. In the next few months, the Kettering Foundation Press will publish a full report in book form: *With: A Strategy for Renewing Our Democracy*. The titles of these reports are inspired by Abraham Lincoln's description of an ideal—a government *of*, *by*, and *for* the people. Because there is some doubt now about whether we have any of those, we wondered about adding another preposition, *with*—governing more *with* the people.

With the people is a collaborative relationship; and like all collaborations, each party does its own work and then connects that work to the work of the other party. In this case, citizens would have to be producers making things of value to the governing institutions. We call that “complementary production.” Being volunteers doing the work institutions do is fine, but that wouldn't be enough. Citizens have work that only they can do. And citizens couldn't be simply consumers of services. We don't normally think of citizens as producers, but maybe we should. Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel Prize by showing that our governing institutions need what citizens can provide in order to be optimally effective.

At first blush, a *with* strategy appeals to common sense. However, there are challenges. What would it mean for institutions of higher education to relate to citizens as producers? For valid reasons, academic institutions aren't “built” to do that. Citizens are usually treated as beneficiaries of services. They are patients for medical schools, clients for colleges of law, and customers for business schools. They are undergraduates to be taught. Citizens are to be acted upon; they are not actors themselves.

What would it look like to prepare students entering professions like law, medicine, business, and others to think of citizens as producers? The question seems to bring out the inventiveness in educators. Using early drafts of *With*:

A Strategy for Renewing Our Democracy, a dozen or more faculty have developed courses that begin to answer this question. In classes ranging from civics to public administration, these teachers are introducing the idea of treating citizens as producers and thinking beyond the usual notions of public engagement. Tom Bryer, at the University of Central Florida, designed such a class built on a deceptively simple idea: “A working government requires a working citizenry.”² For some students, this is a new idea, and they immediately point out the barriers and challenges. Others warm to the idea and see the benefits. Jeremy Walling, at Southeast Missouri State University, reported that his students were “enamored with the ‘with strategy’ and . . . [it] planted a seed for thinking about public problems in a new way and looking to citizens as producers.”

That some of these classroom experiments are going on in public administration is significant because of a tension between this profession and democracy. A young scholar, later to become president, Woodrow Wilson, shared a growing faith in the power of the social sciences to lead the way to collective well-being. Although Wilson favored reforms like referendums, he is best known for putting government in the hands of professionally trained administrators, who, of course, were unelected. After Wilson, the growth of expert administration and faith in the social sciences was irreversible.³

Wilson wasn’t unaware of the tension between scientific professionalism and the norms of a democracy. He noted that, while it was fairly easy for a bureaucracy to carry out the commands of a single monarch, serving a sovereign public was more difficult. How could administrators respond to a ruler who couldn’t be found at any specific location and whose opinions might vary from time to time or issue to issue? Wilson first tried to solve this problem by restricting bureaucracies to an administrative sphere outside of politics. He insisted that administration was not political at all but rather a neutral, objective instrument that had to be protected from political interference, even from the public.

Wilson, however, eventually recognized that this separation really wasn’t possible. He came to see that what citizens did was essential. He said, “There must be discussion and debate, in which all freely participate. . . . The whole purpose of democracy is that we may hold counsel with another. . . . For only [then] . . . can the general interests of a great people be compounded into a policy that will be suitable to all.”⁴

Tina Nabatchi, professor of public administration and international affairs at Syracuse University, calls for new thinking in public administration.⁵ And Albert Dzur, another scholar in the field, is doing just that. He makes a case

for what he calls a “democratic professionalism.”⁶ There is an urgency in his voice. Dzur sees signs that institutions are moving in the opposite direction by developing even more expert and technical processes in hopes of restoring lost public legitimacy or creating better defenses. He calls this movement “super professionalism.”⁷ Harry Boyte has used a similar concept, “citizen professionalism,” in what he has written for *HEX*.

The faculty members who are now designing courses for professionals in public administration show that civic or democratic professionalism is getting some traction. They are opening a door, inviting other professions to experiment with their own ways to make use of what citizens as producers can do.

Treating citizens as producers also has obvious implications for undergraduates. One way to do that is to teach students how to make decisions deliberatively on the work they might do as producers. There are several reports on these experiments. One of the most detailed was done by Wake Forest faculty Katy Harriger and Jill McMillan. In 2007, they published a book about what they had accomplished: *Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue*.⁸ I described their impressive results in a 2019 *HEX* article. A follow-up study at Wake Forest found that the participants in this program retained and continued to use what they had learned. That 2016 study is described in *The Long-Term Impact of Learning to Deliberate*.⁹

Also, on the student front, using the online Common Ground for Action platform, National Issues Forums have been held on campuses nationwide and across geographic barriers. These are providing opportunities for students to learn how to reason together. Here are just four examples:

- On Constitution Day, September 17, 2020, the State University of New York (SUNY) system held a statewide, online deliberative forum on voting.
- During Constitution Week, the Minnesota state system of higher education, which includes 30 colleges and 7 universities, organized 10 forums using the Common Ground for Action platform. These statewide deliberations were on free speech, voting, and policing.
- In November, Chris Gilmer, president of West Virginia University Parkersburg and a founder of the National Institutes for Historically-Underserved Students, worked with other college presidents to connect students from diverse backgrounds in inter-campus deliberation on racial justice. Sinte Gleska University in South Dakota, Tougaloo College in Mississippi, Adams State University in Colorado, and WVU-Parkersburg in West Virginia participated.

- Kara Dillard, professor of communication studies at James Madison University, used the Common Ground for Action online platform to organize a national week of cross-campus deliberations last October. Students participated in forums on voting, policing, economic recovery, and free speech.

Given the crises that democracy faces today and difficult questions about the role, if any, higher education will play, I am encouraged by the inventiveness of faculty, the deliberative initiatives of students, and the potential in a more democratic concept of professionalism.

What is needed for these ventures to flourish, I believe, can only be found outside academe. I don't want to be critical of academic leaders talking to one another about their immediate and urgent problems. That's necessary. However, what seems missing are conversations between academic leaders and "outsiders" off campus who are also worried about the serious challenges to democracy. Where are these outsiders? There are some in journalism, where Kettering senior associates Paula Ellis and Maura Casey, both veteran journalists, have found a willingness to work for a fundamental realignment between the media and the citizenry. I have also just described what is happening in the ranks of public administration. What about those in other governing institutions, even governmental bodies like legislative ones? The continuing loss of public confidence is a threat to their legitimacy. In the nongovernmental arena, I have heard foundation executives wonder whether they need to pay more attention to the fundamental problems *of* democracy itself, not just to the problems *in* democratic countries, serious as they are. In addition, businesses, particularly those that depend on strong communities, may be interested. Many of these outsiders may not be altogether outside. They may be serving on the boards of academic institutions.

What kind of conversations are needed for this exchange to be productive? I don't think an occasional conference will be enough. Maybe this conversation requires the kind of "sustained dialogue" that is used in nongovernmental diplomacy. Those ongoing exchanges have been occurring for decades when government-to-government negotiations have stalled. They have allowed participants from opposing countries to develop nongovernmental ways to work together that strengthen the relationships.

Is there any evidence that such an exchange is possible? I often turn to history, and there is a precedent—not in one example, but in the long sweep of time. The history of higher education is full of examples of the important role outsiders have played, often as champions of a stronger democracy. Anxious

to bring the values of a new nation to institutions of higher learning, outsiders added state universities to the ranks of the colonial colleges founded by monarchies. Later, determined not to be excluded, other outsiders joined with academics to create agricultural and mechanical institutions. Later still, the same type of alliances led to what are now the Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Democratic imperatives continued to be reflected in creating Tribal Colleges and colleges for women. The history of higher education is inextricably linked to the history of democracy. A sustained dialogue might build the kind of inside-outside collaboration that has been productive in our past.



NOTES

- ¹ Brian J. Cook, *Bureaucracy and Self-Government: Reconsidering the Role of Public Administration in American Politics* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 134-135.
- ² Thomas Bryer, "Finding Common Ground in Company of Strangers," *Orlando Sentinel*, December 12, 2020.
- ³ Larry Walker, "Woodrow Wilson, Progressive Reform, and Public Administration," *Political Science Quarterly* 104, no. 3 (Autumn 1989): 509-525.
- ⁴ Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom: A Call for the Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1913), 91, 105.
- ⁵ Tina Nabatchi, address to the joint staff and partners meeting at the Kettering Foundation, September 18, 2019.
- ⁶ Albert W. Dzur, *Democratic Professionalism: Citizen Participation and the Reconstruction of Professional Ethics, Identity, and Practice* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).
- ⁷ Albert Dzur, memorandum to Kettering Foundation, November 27, 2012. This document can be found in the David Mathews collection, Kettering Foundation archives. For more information, contact archives@kettering.org.
- ⁸ Katy Harriger and Jill McMillan, *Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2007).
- ⁹ Katy J. Harriger, Jill J. McMillan, Christy Buchanan, and Stephanie Gusler, *The Long-Term Impact of Learning to Deliberate* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2017).

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