

# HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2022

## Anti-Elitism and the Civic Purposes of Higher Education

### Articles

Maria Farland

Scott Peters

Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan

Derek W. M. Barker

David W. Brown

Kara Lindaman, B. Da'Vida Plummer,  
and Joseph Scanlon

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David Mathews

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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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# Anti-Elitism and the Civic Purposes of Higher Education

Derek W. M. Barker and Alex Lovit

The first issue of *Higher Education Exchange* (*HEX*) was published in 1994, a much different time for our democracy as well as for higher education. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of communism, many believed that democracy was ascendant. Francis Fukuyama famously declared the “end of history,” meaning that Western liberal democracy no longer had any meaningful rivals.<sup>1</sup> A “civil society” concept emerged to recognize the role of culture and norms in sustaining a form of democracy that could be independent from government institutions and the state. If not quite flourishing, democracy and public life seemed to be at least in relatively good shape, historically speaking.

However, *HEX* was picking up something different. Under the leadership of founding editor, David W. Brown (with coeditor Deborah Witte), *HEX* was describing a growing “disconnect” between experts, who were focused on technical knowledge, and the citizenry, who wanted to be served by people to whom they could relate. *HEX* speculated that as the institution responsible for educating, socializing, and credentialing new professionals, higher education might be doing a disservice in failing to educate professionals with civic skills to match their technical expertise. Over the course of its 28 years of publication, *HEX* has included a wide range of authors and topics. But the growing divide between experts and citizens has remained a consistent theme in these pages. Over the decades, this once relatively unrecognized problem has risen in the consciousness of higher education. Even before the pandemic, there were troubling signs of growing public distrust in higher education, with the share of Americans proclaiming confidence in higher education dropping from 57 percent to 48 percent between 2015 and 2018.<sup>2</sup> These changes have occurred in a larger context in which “facts” have become subject to political contestation and authoritative institutions in general have suffered a loss of trust. Nearly 30 years ago, it was relatively easy for many in colleges and universities to ignore *HEX*’s quiet voice of warning; now, the issue is widely acknowledged.

Unfortunately, *HEX*’s insight has proved remarkably predictive of changes in our democracy and public life, as well as in public attitudes toward higher education and the professional classes. Over the last three decades, political polarization has grown steadily while citizen confidence in public institutions

has continued to decline. Robert Putnam's landmark *Bowling Alone*, published in 2000, represented an early warning of our fraying social fabric.<sup>3</sup> More recently, following efforts to question the legitimacy of the 2020 election, the United States was recently categorized as a "backsliding" democracy.<sup>4</sup> Some commentators have now begun speaking of a "democratic deconsolidation," with evidence suggesting growing public discontent with democracy and support for authoritarian leaders around the world.<sup>5</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has brought these trends to the surface, revealing a lack of public trust in experts and authoritative institutions and the inability of a divided citizenry to work together even when facing a major public health crisis. The growing sense of anger and discontent culminated in the insurrection of January 6, 2021, as violent protesters stormed the US Capitol in an attempt to overturn the election. In contrast to the triumphalism of the 1990s, democracy is now widely regarded as being in the midst of a crisis, with its long-term survival no longer accepted as given.

Despite its best attempts to keep itself apolitical, higher education has not been immune to these changes. It has struggled with declining public funding, questions about its value proposition, and growing debate over student debt. Across a range of controversial issues, campuses are thought to be inhospitable to conservative ideas, and academics are perceived, with some justification, as politically biased.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, higher education bears responsibility for educating "elites," the professional classes that dominate numerous public institutions that have become the target of much public anger and resentment. While the professional classes see themselves as using their expertise to serve the public, those outside of these professional classes view them as aloof and out of touch, perhaps even as threats to their way of life. The result is a profound cultural and economic divide that shapes our politics and public life and reinforces the growing polarization and distrust that are, in turn, threatening to unravel our democracy. While higher education may not be directly to blame for these changes, it is at the center of them.

While *HEX* could not have predicted the precise trajectory of the disconnect between professionals and the public, it was remarkably perceptive in diagnosing the critical challenges facing our democracy. The journal gave voice to concerns about the separation of academic from public life and the need for professionals to be educated with civic and relational skills as much as technical expertise. If anything, *HEX* seems to have underestimated the level of the disconnect between citizens and the professionals serving them. Rather than a disconnect, something more troubling appears to be happening, what David Brooks has described as a "backlash," a growing sense of resentment and anger

toward highly educated professionals for their disproportionate share of economic, cultural, and political power.<sup>7</sup> While experts may have previously been misunderstood or seen as irrelevant, Brooks suggests that some citizens now view these professional classes as harmful to society. The disconnect originally described in the pages of *HEX* appears to have reached a new stage.

In this issue of *HEX*, we are taking a look back at a few of the most prescient and relevant writings from the journal's early years, together with a fresh interview with three leading scholars in Kettering's network on the civic mission of higher education at a critical time. The reprinted pieces in this volume are representative of *HEX*'s longstanding interest in examining the causes, conditions, and consequences of the widening divide between academic institutions and the broader American public. Although the problems described in these pages are serious, *HEX* has remained optimistic, also chronicling promising innovations in how higher education institutions relate to their students and communities. The previously published articles contain a few dated details, but we hope our readers will agree that each of the articles in this volume identifies issues and trends that remain relevant today and, in most cases, have only grown in importance. In order to update and contextualize the previously published material, each of these older articles is presented with a short new introduction by a scholar who has studied similar topics.

We begin the volume with an article by Maria Farland, originally published in 1996. A quarter-century ago, Farland recognized a growing trend of higher education turning outward and seeking to reconnect with the public. Already then, academic traditions of narrow disciplinary specialization were facing both internal and external pressures, with increasing numbers of faculty and other academic professionals seeking to define themselves as civic professionals serving public purposes.

The following three articles provide examples of the civic turn Farland recognized, encompassing universities' core practices of research, teaching, and service. An article by Scott Peters, originally published in 2001, illustrates a new civic mindset in the community-facing functions of the university. Rather than merely disseminating expert knowledge to a passive community, Peters describes how university extension researchers can play a variety of public or political roles, framing issues and assisting the community in coming to judgment before experts can design solutions.

Similarly, Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan, in an article from 2005, show how civic professionalism might look in the civic education of college students. In a four-year experiment at Wake Forest University, rather than

focusing purely on academic content, they designed a curriculum to engage a cohort of students in deliberations about complex moral and political issues with no right or wrong answers. As faculty, they were acting not only as experts in their fields but also as civic professionals framing and moderating these deliberations in order to provide their students with an experience in democratic politics.

By 2006, the so-called civic engagement movement had gained prominence in higher education, and Derek W. M. Barker provided a framework and taxonomy for understanding the multiple meanings of “democracy” it represented. Although Barker recognized divergent practices, he hoped that over time they would evolve into a coherent movement—in retrospect, perhaps an overly optimistic projection.

We conclude the volume with a pairing of an article and an interview that illustrates the enduring challenges facing higher education as a civic institution and perhaps some ways forward. The last reprinted article here, by *HEX*'s cofounding editor, David W. Brown, is among the earliest. In 1995, Brown diagnosed a problem: Academics were turning inward, focusing purely on their disciplines and intentionally removing themselves from democratic politics, resulting in the loss of purpose, relevance, and public standing of their institutions. However, Brown was hopeful that universities might see opportunity in the moment and refocus on training professionals in civic skills to complement their technical knowledge.

This early piece is followed by a new interview in which we asked Joseph Scanlon, B. Da'Vida Plummer, and Kara Lindaman to reflect on the civic purposes of higher education in light of the current relationship between citizens and professionals. Despite the emergence of a civic engagement movement in academia along the lines Brown envisioned, they suggest that the disconnect he described nearly 30 years ago persists and has in some ways intensified. In order to confront the anger and distrust currently being directed toward higher education, they propose that institutions of higher education make a more visible and concerted effort to address political polarization on their campuses and in their communities. This would include engaging with those who are most skeptical and critical of higher education and the professionals whom it trains and credentials.

Finally, David Mathews concludes the volume by arguing that any effort to confront the climate of distrust around higher education will need to involve more than internal change within institutions. He proposes that colleges and universities (along with similarly distrusted professions) engage in ongoing

dialogue with skeptical audiences and critics to build mutual understanding and, eventually, support. As public divides intensify, such dialogue is needed now more than ever for the civic mission of higher education and the future of our democracy. Mathews has recently stepped down from his role as the Kettering Foundation's president and CEO and now serves as president emeritus. In addition to his contribution to this volume, we wish to extend our deepest gratitude to Dr. Mathews for his role in incubating *Higher Education Exchange*, his thought leadership in higher education, and his commitment to citizen-centered democracy.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
- <sup>2</sup> Kim Parker, "The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education," Pew Research Center, August 19, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/08/19/the-growing-partisan-divide-in-views-of-higher-education-2/>.
- <sup>3</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).
- <sup>4</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *The Global State of Democracy 2021* (Stockholm, Sweden, 2021). <https://www.idea.int/gsod/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Signs of Deconsolidation," *Journal of Democracy*, 28, no. 1 (January, 2017): 5-15.
- <sup>6</sup> "Out of the Academy: How Did a Loose Set of Radical Ideas Leap from Campus to American Life?" *The Economist*, September 4, 2021, 15.
- <sup>7</sup> David Brooks, "How the Bobos Broke America," *The Atlantic*, September 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/09/blame-the-bobos-creative-class/619492/>.

# CONTRIBUTORS

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HARRY C. BOYTE is a public intellectual and organizer. He founded Public Achievement and, with Trygve Throntveit and Marie Ström, the Institute for Public Life and Work. He holds the title of Senior Scholar in Public Work Philosophy at Augsburg University. Boyte is the author of 11 books, including *Awakening Democracy through Public Work*. His articles have appeared in more than 150 publications, including the *New York Times*, *Political Theory*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In the 1960s, Boyte was a field secretary for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s organization, and subsequently did community organizing among low-income White residents in Durham, North Carolina.

DAVID W. BROWN (1937-2020) was coeditor of the *Higher Education Exchange* from 1994 through 2017 and coedited two recent Kettering publications: *Agent of Democracy* and *A Different Kind of Politics*. He taught at Yale's School of Management and the New School's Milano Graduate School. Brown is the author of *Organization Smarts*; *The Real Change-Makers: Why Government Is Not the Problem or the Solution*; *America's Culture of Professionalism: Past, Present, and Prospects*; and *Assumptions of the Tea Party Movement: A World of Their Own*.

JONI DOHERTY is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. She conducts collaborative research with professionals working in cultural and educational institutions. These initiatives explore how to foster the disposition and skills needed for making decisions about public problems, both contemporary and historical, using deliberation. Doherty's essays have been published in *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Democratic Engagement*; *Deliberation and the Work of Higher Education: Innovations for the Classroom, the Campus and the Community*; and the *Higher Education Exchange*. Before coming to Kettering, she taught in the American Studies program at Franklin Pierce University and directed the New England Center for Civic Life. She holds a PhD in philosophy from the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts.

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MATHEW JOHNSON directs the Commission on Public Purpose in Higher Education. He cofounded and codirects the National Assessment of Service and Community Engagement. He also sits on the editorial board of *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement* and has been recognized as an Ashoka Change Leader by the Ashoka Foundation. Johnson formerly served as president of Albion College, as a Carnegie visiting fellow at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and as a fellow at the Doerr Institute for New Leaders at Rice University. Prior to his tenure at Albion College, Johnson served as associate dean of the College for Engaged Scholarship, as well as senior fellow and executive director of the Howard R. Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University. Johnson led the development of a transformational strategic plan and oversaw the growth and development of curricular and cocurricular programs, including Brown in Washington, the Engaged Scholars Program, the Bonner Community Fellowship, the Brown University AmeriCorps VISTA Fellowship, Community Corps, and the Royce Fellowship.

KARA LINDAMAN is a professor of political science and public administration at Winona State University. Having earned her PhD from the University of Kansas, she studies the policy process and citizen engagement in wicked problems and primarily teaches courses in public administration. She is fortunate to have advised many student-citizens in public service. Since 2009, she has been the campus coordinator of the Association of American State Colleges and Universities American Democracy Project, where she is a civic fellow and has embraced numerous opportunities to work with colleagues and students as moderators and in democratic deliberation.

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DAVID MATHEWS served as president of the Kettering Foundation from 1981 to 2022. He is now president emeritus. He 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; With the People: An Introduction to an Idea; Together: Building Better, Stronger Communities; and With: A Strategy for Renewing Our Democracy*.

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in *Communication Education, Diversity and Democracy, Beyond Politics as Usual: Paths for Engaging College Students in Politics*, and the *Higher Education Exchange*. The team is currently assessing the degree to which deliberative democracy principles may have diffused into their institution over the past two decades.

SCOTT PETERS is a professor in the Department of Global Development at Cornell University. From 2012 to 2017, he served as faculty codirector of a national consortium, *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, which is devoted to supporting engaged learning and research in the arts, humanities, and design fields. He currently serves as coeditor of a new Cornell University Press book series, *Publicly Engaged Scholars: Identities, Purposes, and Practices*. As a historical sociologist positioned in the newly emerging field of civic studies, Peters uses narrative inquiry and analysis tools to study the public purposes and work of academic professionals and institutions. His latest book, coauthored with Daniel J. O’Connell, is *In the Struggle: Scholars and the Fight Against Industrial Agribusiness in California*. Peters received a BS from the University of Illinois and an MA and PhD from the University of Minnesota.

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