

# 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

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David W. Brown

Kara Lindaman, B. Da'Vida Plummer,  
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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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# PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP AND FACULTY ROLE CONFLICT

Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan

This 2005 piece by Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan documents one of the early, systematic experiments using deliberative pedagogy and public scholarship in higher education. Their narrative of the successes and challenges highlights tensions of pedagogy, including how to balance the learning process, practice ethical research design, and above all, promote productive communication that comes from well-designed (and well-supported) deliberation.

Today, we can trace how Harriger and McMillan's efforts have been emulated and adapted by a myriad of higher education institutions, including land-grant universities, community colleges, small liberal arts colleges, and state teaching institutions. In the last 17 years, a generation of public-focused academics has followed this innovative pathway. Many deliberation programs involve the elements mentioned in this essay, including training students in facilitation and forum moderation, teaching theories of deliberative democracy, and embarking on applied learning in campus or community engagement projects. The academics who teach these courses and run these programs continue to navigate similar "role tensions" as articulated by Harriger and McMillan. Happily, one notable difference is the advancement of the academic field of deliberative pedagogy, including several books and numerous journal articles that demonstrate the fruits of faculty and student engagement efforts. Still, many challenges identified in this piece endure in our work, such as how to create space for students to deliberate together through difficult issues without overpowering or over-leading and how to negotiate the roles of researcher and community member. Deliberative work in higher education must continue to embrace, rather than eliminate, such tensions to encourage critical, engaged reflection that brings forth innovations in practice.

— Sara A. Mehlretter Drury

For the last five years, we have been engaged in a public scholarship project that examines the experiences of college students with deliberation. While we have each been mindful in the past of the public relevance of our research agendas, we have found in this project new challenges to the comfortable accommodation we had made between our "traditional" research personas and our concern for public life. In the past, that accommodation involved separating what we did as

“objective” social science researchers in political science and communication, and what we did in the classroom or in our engagement with the larger community. This research project challenges the boundaries we had erected among the roles of teacher, researcher, and citizen of campus, community, and nation. In this essay, we consider the role tensions that we have encountered in public scholarship, and we discuss the challenges of reconciling them.

## **The Project**

In the fall of 2001, we launched the Democracy Fellows project at Wake Forest University. The project was designed to teach college students about the theory and practice of deliberation and to conduct a longitudinal study of their experiences during their four years of college in order to assess the effect of sustained exposure to deliberative experiences. From the entering class, we recruited 30 students, and they were enrolled in two sections of a first-year seminar titled *Deliberative Democracy*. In the course, the students were exposed to debate in democratic theory, particularly the literature on deliberative democracy, and to communication literature about democratic talk and effective group process. Then, the students learned to deliberate through three National Issues Forums (NIF). After each deliberation, we “debriefed,” analyzing what had gone well, what had not worked, and why. Finally, students studied the campus to discover major issues facing the campus community and, through a deliberative process, chose one issue—building campus community—upon which to focus.

In the spring of their first year, the Democracy Fellows conducted further research on the issue, conducting a framing exercise, and wrote an issue guide for use in a deliberation. The guide focused on building campus community through changes in social life, academic culture, and service to the wider community. In the fall of their sophomore year, the Democracy Fellows were trained in moderation skills and planned and executed the campus deliberation. In the spring of that year, they studied the Winston-Salem community, identified key issues facing the city, and chose the issue of urban sprawl for a community deliberation. They then researched the issue and adapted a National Issues Forums Institute-Public Agenda guide on the issue to the Winston-Salem setting. During the fall of their junior year, the students planned and conducted the community deliberation at a local science museum.

During this teaching and advising process, we were also engaged in conducting research on the impact of the three “deliberative interventions” outlined above. In the first semester, we conducted individual entry interviews with the

Democracy Fellows and focus groups with an equal number of freshmen randomly selected from the class. In the sophomore year, we conducted focus groups with the Democracy Fellows, a sophomore class cohort, and a group of students from across classes who had participated in the campus deliberation. Following the community deliberation in their junior year, we conducted focus groups with the Democracy Fellows and a group of their junior cohorts. Finally, in the spring of their fourth year, we will conduct exit interviews with each of the Democracy Fellows and focus groups with a senior cohort.

In addition to the qualitative interview data, we gathered some quantitative data by including questions about civic engagement in the freshman survey given to the entire entering class in 2001 and in the senior survey given to a sample

of the graduating class of 2005. We also asked all the students interviewed each year to fill out a participation survey that recorded their activities on campus and off that year and asked them a few questions about their political activism and their involvement on campus.

## **The Challenges**

We were actively engaged with our Democracy Fellows students in the learning enterprise and two community engagement efforts during this time. But in addition, we were researchers gathering data, getting permission from the Institutional Review Board to conduct “human subject” research, and attempting, as social scientists, to analyze objectively those data and draw conclusions that might be of value to higher education. We discovered, much to our surprise, that the comfort level we had developed over our combined 50 years of teaching and researching was constantly challenged. We learned that “public”

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or “engaged” scholarship of this type was enormously more challenging than we had grown used to because it put into tension the faculty roles of teacher, researcher, and citizen that we had learned to keep separate.

### ***Teacher v. Moderator***

One of the first challenges we encountered as we conducted forums in the classroom was the uncomfortable difference between moderating a forum and our traditional role of leading a discussion about readings and ideas introduced in class. While we have both striven over the years to create free spaces for students to think and develop their own opinions, we have also seen our role as teachers as requiring a certain, and sometimes substantial, amount of guidance in steering students to wrestle with hard questions in our disciplines. Given that we had more substantive knowledge of the subject area, we felt free as these discussions unfolded to provide additional information, steer them away from overgeneralizing from their own experiences, and steer them toward larger abstract conclusions about the subject matter. In fact, we prided ourselves on our reputations as professors who encouraged and effectively guided discussions in the classroom. While we always tried, and usually succeeded, in keeping our personal views about issues out of the mix, we believed and acted on the belief that discussions would lead to particular conclusions corresponding to the theories of the disciplines we studied.

After we were trained in moderating deliberations and began moderating the classroom NIF deliberations, we found ourselves chafing under the

***We felt as though we were abandoning our teaching personas and responsibilities for this strange new role as “neutral” moderators. How very strange it felt.***

requirements for effective moderation, particularly the neutrality requirement and the need to fade into the background. Good moderators disappear, we learned. And yet we also believed that we knew from years of classroom teaching that the teacher

matters to the quality of the discussion. The push and pull between the roles of teacher and moderator proved especially difficult as our students floundered in the complex and challenging issues of racial and ethnic tensions. We felt as though we were abandoning our teaching personas and responsibilities for this strange new role as “neutral” moderators. There was no substantive outcome

toward which to guide them, just a process to manage while they provided the substance. How very strange it felt.

### ***Teacher v. Researcher***

We encountered even greater conflicts between our roles as teachers and researchers. The notion that these roles are in tension is certainly not a new one in academia; some schools call themselves “teaching colleges” and others “research universities,” and there is much discussion among junior faculty in particular about how one knows whether they are doing “too much” of one or the other given the culture of their institution. We have always seen this as a false dichotomy; being researchers enhances our teaching by keeping us engaged and up to date with the scholarship of our fields while teaching in an interactive way generates new questions for research.

The tension we encountered between these roles in “engaged” scholarship was a different one. Our students were also our “subjects.” At the same time that we were teaching and mentoring them about how to deliberate, how to moderate, and how to organize a deliberation, we were also studying them. We were both engaging and observing, and the role conflict was very real. The “human subjects” model of traditional social science research has addressed the ethical dilemmas posed in studying human beings by creating an elaborate protocol involving informed consent. Getting signatures on a form buys researchers the distance they need from their subjects in order to conduct objective social science research. But in the kind of engaged research in which we were involved, this makes no sense. In fact, it raises a whole new set of ethical challenges. Teachers do not, or at least should not, treat their students as “subjects” with whom they are experimenting. Advisors who have brought together a group of students to organize a campus and community deliberation strive to mentor and to help them develop the skills they need to succeed, not stand apart at a distance and watch them fail. But as traditionally trained social science researchers, we felt constantly challenged with these tensions, worrying that if we kept our distance, we were not fulfilling our understanding of the teacher or mentor roles, but that if we intervened actively, we could violate our understanding of what it means to objectively gather as opposed to create data.

### ***Faculty v. Citizen***

Our comfortable faculty identity as teachers and researchers was challenged on campus in our teaching and our work with the campus deliberation. But the

greatest challenge came for us, and our students, as we moved into the larger community of Winston-Salem. Here the role tensions were even greater as our teacher and researcher roles bumped up against our roles as citizens of this community. In our traditional faculty roles, we felt the obligation to make certain that our students came away from the experience having learned

***The conflicts, rather than being problems to solve, provide a creative tension for our work that strikes us as the fundamental value of public scholarship for the higher education enterprise.***

more about deliberation and about how it might work in a large, diverse, political community. Consequently, we believed it was important for them to be responsible for organizing the event, recruiting the participants, and preparing the materials to be used.

Our role tension came into sharp relief when we watched the students underestimate the timing and complexity of advertising and recruiting for this event. If they did not do an effective job in these tasks, our teaching and research interests told us that it was best to let them “fail,” given our belief that most learning comes from trial and error, and often, failure. But as citizens of the community, we felt an ethical obligation not to treat our neighbors as “subjects” to be experimented with for our pedagogical and research purposes. We also believed it was important for the students to see that this “detachment” was inappropriate. It would be wrong to invite community members into a public dialogue about making Winston-Salem a better place to live without doing our best to make sure that the experience was a positive one, at least in its execution, if not in its outcomes. When the community becomes part of the learning environment, responsible citizenship requires us to value and respect the new members of our learning community. This dilemma had multiple implications for future efforts at community engagement and connection between the university and the city and for the long-standing tensions between town and gown that exist in so many communities with institutions of higher education.

## **Reconciling the Conflicts**

The multiple role conflicts we encountered in this work have the potential to be paralyzing. At least at first glance, they felt nearly irreconcilable. But we have learned as we have worked together through these challenges that the

conflicts, rather than being problems to solve, provide a creative tension for our work that strikes us as the fundamental value of public scholarship for the higher education enterprise. Our experience forced us to examine our comfortable patterns of behavior as academics and ask ourselves what it meant for the democratic enterprise that so many of us negotiate the world of higher education by separating our various

roles and keeping them distinct from each other. The detachment characteristic of the research enterprise seems a dangerous and undesirable practice in the classroom, on our campus, and in the wider community.

But so, too, does it seem at least undesirable, and at worst dangerous, to throw ourselves deeply into engagement with students and community members without being reflective—and yes, to some extent, detached enough to be reflective—about what we are doing, why we are doing it, and whether it is making any difference.

The ultimate goal of public scholarship is to contribute in some positive way to the health of the democratic community. The stakes are large, not small. In seeking to make a difference at this level, it seems inevitable that we will be forced to reconsider what it is that we do within the institutions we inhabit. For us, it has meant embracing the creative role tension and learning to live and work in that space rather than resisting or ignoring it. But it also means looking for and finding what it is of value that academics bring to public work. In doing public work, we are forced to ask: What is the meaning and value of our work to democracy? As trained social scientists, we are encouraged to have a healthy skepticism about models and to distance ourselves enough to ask whether we are simply finding what we want to find because we want democratic practices to work or whether something positive is actually happening. To see that something does not work is not to conclude that democracy cannot work, only that it is hard, continuous, trial-and-error work imbued with all the complexities of human behavior.

In the end, we see that public scholarship is about bridging the gap between the reflection that occurs in the “ivory tower” and the engagement that occurs in the democratic classroom and community. Reflection without

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engagement has a sterility to it that presents little of value to the democratic enterprise. But engagement without reflection seems equally problematic and bound, ultimately, to accomplish little.



*Reprinted from Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan, "Public Scholarship and Faculty Role Conflict" Higher Education Exchange 2005, 17-23. This text has been lightly edited to conform with current Kettering Foundation style and citation guidelines.*

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