

# 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

### Additional Reflections

Harry C. Boyte, Joni Doherty, Sara A. Mehlretter Drury,  
Mathew Johnson, and Timothy J. Shaffer

Editors: Derek W. M. Barker and Alex Lovit  
Managing Editor: Renee Ergazos  
Formatting: Long's Graphic Design, Inc.  
Copy Editor: E. Ray Walker

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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# IVORY TOWER OR TOWN SQUARE? Anti-Elitism and the Civic Purposes of Higher Education

An Interview with Derek W. M. Barker, Kara Lindaman,  
B. Da’Vida Plummer, and Joseph Scanlon

*Throughout its nearly 30 years of publication, Higher Education Exchange (HEX) has highlighted examples of civic work in institutions of higher education and has raised concerns about the troubling disconnect between citizens and the institutions purporting to serve them. Decades later, these concerns have become realities as public faith in higher education has declined and universities have found themselves swept up in increasingly polarized political discourse. Derek W. M. Barker, coeditor of HEX, interviews three educational professionals to reflect on these trends and discuss what might be done about them. All three interviewees have participated in Kettering’s research about higher education and represent diverse disciplines and institutions: Joseph Scanlon, assistant professor of political science at Monroe Community College; B. Da’Vida Plummer, former dean of the School of Journalism and Communications at Hampton University and current coexecutive director of Fellowships at Auschwitz for the Study of Professional Ethics; and Kara Lindaman, professor of political science and public administration at Winona State University. In the pages that follow, the interviewees make a compelling case that higher education institutions can reclaim their public purpose only by reaffirming their commitments to preparing students for democratic life and to promoting deliberative democracy in their local communities.*

**Barker:** Early issues of *HEX* were concerned with higher education’s role in contributing to a “disconnect” between the citizenry and institutions by emphasizing technical knowledge in the education of future professionals rather than skills needed to participate in democratic public life. How would you characterize the current relationship between citizens and professionals?

**Scanlon:** Skepticism surrounds much of the current relationship between citizens and professionals, especially those professionals responsible for managing aspects of community life. Skepticism can certainly be healthy, but it undermines confidence in public institutions when it manifests into outright distrust. While identifying the sources of this skepticism is a complex task, a contributing factor is civic education’s shrinking presence in higher education. Arguably, the current political climate reflects the decreasing emphasis on civics at all levels of education. However, there is a particular underrepresentation of civic education in professional education. Professional education often focuses solely on the skills relevant to growing individual prosperity.

However, professionals must acquire both occupational skills and the skills required to exercise community stewardship in cooperation with others.

As it stands, stewardship and cooperation are often missing from our communities. Cooperation gaps between public-facing professionals and citizens can easily result in the former comfortably operating without public input. At the same time, citizens grow increasingly skeptical and eventually distrustful of democratic life. Pro-

professionals can strengthen democratic life by contributing to a more robust civic culture.

For example, education, health care, and policing

professionals regularly create space for citizens to exchange divergent views on related topics. This provides public-facing professionals with public input, gives agency to the public's voice, and invigorates a sense of community stewardship and cooperation.

***In the end, an “education for life” is overshadowed by what one might consider an “education for placement.”***

**Plummer:** The divide deepens between citizens and professionals primarily because the education of the professional is insidiously separatist. University-prepared professionals commence careers to succeed, often without motivation to give and exchange as members of the communities in which they earn their salaries. They drive or rail through the public with citizen encounters that are often meaningless and transactional.

Institutions within the realm of higher education are transitioning into consortiums of professional schools tasked with preparing students for entry-level jobs within the discipline's industry. That shift in emphasis forces curriculum adjustments to prioritize skills-based learning and ultimately de-prioritize core theoretical exploration and study. In the end, an “education for life” is overshadowed by what one might consider an “education for placement” as accrediting bodies fuel assessment measures to codify impressive career placement statistics for member institutions.

Within the “education for life” academic descriptor, there's an emphasis on learning outcomes that encourage behavior essential to collectivism: character, integrity, ethics, and yes, the role and responsibility of the citizen. A dear friend of mine is preparing for her naturalization evaluation. She is required to learn more about the role of a citizen of the United States than a child who is born here, a child who has progressed through every step of our educational system, including the higher echelons of famed institutions

of learning. What our students and early career professionals have learned prepares them to be upwardly mobile individuals who cyber-celebrate every career achievement via social media. The solution is not to prioritize one educational goal over the other but to understand that the human being pursuing higher education is forever a citizen with responsibility to family, village, and the greater community, and a worker/executive for just a season within that lifespan.

**Lindaman:** Over the last decade, higher education has lost the public's confidence or trust at an alarming rate, reflecting the decline in public confidence in many public institutions, public employees, and civil servants. Combined with the enrollment cliff, COVID-19, and insurmountable student debt and costs of higher education, there is a new sense of urgency as colleges and universities must weigh their value and place, internally and externally, in the context of public distrust, economic insecurity, and the culture wars of freedom of speech and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

The marketized or politicized framing of higher education has misrepresented its civic identity and purpose and has mistakenly legitimized technical expertise and specialization (credentialing) as neutral competency and apolitical behavior. Enrollment pressures and budgetary constraints encourage colleges and universities to recruit students (and their families) as consumers or customers, with large multimedia recruitment campaigns and an "arms race" of commodified attractions and services to attract as many tuition paying students as possible.

The focus on elected officials to control colleges and universities through declines in state budgetary support reflects the devolution of partisan polarization and dysfunctional politics from the federal level. Colleges and universities are trapped in the misaligned legislative framing over workforce preparedness, academic freedom, and the fight over free speech and identity politics, while state legislators are less willing to acquiesce to (or trust) academicians and trustees.

Higher education needs to demonstrate its ability to learn through an urgent sense of humility, vulnerability, and openness to reform. In connecting with community and the workforce, colleges and universities need to connect internally with their own workforce and treat faculty as its front line of citizen professionals. Rather than chasing accreditation, rankings, and reputation, college administrators need to focus on relationships with citizens and communities. Economics and education are not polarizing concepts. Citizens and professionals do not inhabit separate and distinct spheres.

Lived student experience should be considered the center of the higher education experience. We must rise above the distraction of politics and polar-

ization and return to the core commitments of higher education: educating students as citizens for personal and social responsibility. Educating students as citizens reframes higher education from data-driven paternalism to democratic engagement and intentional investment in relationships, community development, and accessible dialogue to take seriously the perspectives and experiences of others.

**Barker:** Beyond the tensions you all describe, what do you make of what seems to be a rising level of anger directed toward highly educated professionals and “elites”? To what extent is higher education responsible for or contributing to this public anger?

**Scanlon:** The anger directed toward elites is real. A visible strain of anti-elitism within American political culture has ebbed and flowed throughout history, but this feels different. To some extent, this new anti-elitism centers on change. Some see a complete absence of change. The same problems persist without the promise of resolution. It becomes harder and harder to accept the status quo and the legitimacy of our political managers. Others see our political managers disrupting an otherwise beneficial status quo. Whether embracing or rejecting change, there is a prevailing feeling of underrepresentation. Many citizens do not feel represented, and they believe their voices are weakening relative to elite voices in and out of government.

Fueling this wave of anti-elitism has been populist rhetoric directing citizen frustration and anger at perceived elites who allegedly manage politics for personal gain. Overall, this wave of anti-elitism is not unique to the United States but is an emerging political force in many of the world’s oldest consolidated democracies.

Higher education shares *some* responsibility for the current political climate. B. Da’Vida Plummer’s comments about “education for life” versus “education for placement” are incredibly relevant here. Higher education’s laser-like focus on providing technical and professional skills needed for career placement comes at the expense of critical civic skills. Far too often, students graduate without understanding the systems and structures of power they interact with daily, the necessity of creating space for productive dialogue between people with differing political preferences, or how to leverage the power of voice in a democracy effectively. Professional education comes at the expense of values associated with community and cooperation. Our institutions champion this individualism and motivate citizens to pursue individual preferences in isolation from one another. In time, people come to see one another as rivals and even enemies instead of problem-solving partners. This speaks to Benjamin Barber’s “thin theory of democracy”

in which political participation serves “individualistic and private ends.”<sup>1</sup> It is no wonder that people feel underrepresented and thus frustrated and angry.

Kara Lindaman’s reference to public officials is also relevant here. Lawmakers contribute to an operating environment where technical and professional skills are privileged over civic skills. It is common to hear lawmakers deride disciplines that contribute to civic skills, and undermining these disciplines is dangerous. If we treat those disciplines as luxury studies, a smaller, more exclusive group owns civic skills. This does not help citizens feel better represented or connected to the government but, instead, increases already rising levels of frustration and anger.

**Lindaman:** The anger toward highly educated professionals and elites is well founded and contextualized in the growing economic, social, and cultural inequality fueled by resentment and exacerbated by the disconnect between institutions and citizens. The erosion of the American Dream for millennials and Generation Z has led to a decline of trust in the process and a lack of faith in the results. As Joseph Scanlon suggests, there is a sense of urgency for change and a renewed demand for voice and agency.

There is an undeniable human need for a sense of value, belonging, and connectedness. Through the celebratory conferring of degrees, colleges and universities have marketized and sold one of the most coveted memberships in our society. However, the working class feels invisible and disrespected, and recent college graduates and their families are experiencing buyer’s remorse. For public institutions, this is unsustainable.

Higher education does bear some responsibility, but it is not theirs alone. After the deterioration of institutions strained by the global pandemic, communities mobilized to address the pressing needs of their families and neighbors. Civil society organizations still bearing the imprint of the Wilsonian Progressive movement, which fostered the science of administration and the meritocracy of work, seemed unresponsive and outdated to address the current contextual challenges. In this toxic political environment, public managers and bureaucrats were unable to remain politically unscathed, and institutions of higher education were forced to shutter their doors, send students home, and deliver their expensive product remotely, making their social contract with the public untenable. The so-called best and the brightest were unable to fix the problems, to tame the politics, or to preserve the faith in public institutions and public servants.

Facing internal and external threats indicative of many public institutions, higher education needs to be repurposed and redesigned by community and for community. Universities need to learn their value as vital members in their

communities, where multiple and different perspectives and experiences are welcomed, town-gown issues are tackled, and inequities are addressed. The necessary cultural shift comes from within the university. Trust and relationships must be fostered internally throughout the university community by empowering faculty, students, and staff to address administrative control and hierarchies and challenge existing practices, rules, and norms. This gives intellectuals and academics the opportunity to engage and exercise their espoused values of inclusion, equity, and change as citizens in their professions.

Externally, higher education institutions can do better to respond and adapt to their evolving campus and local communities, through acknowledging and accepting the experiences and assets of these communities. Rather than lecturing to the public, colleges and universities, as stewards of place, have the opportunity to listen and to learn from members of the community through innovative investment in public engagement and civics education. For example, they may listen to how people cared for their families and neighbors when campuses were closed and student life was disrupted due to COVID-19. This helps higher education become more relevant and responsive, restoring faith in its civic mission and public purpose. There is plenty of responsibility and opportunity to share, and egos should be checked at the door.

**Barker:** When this hostility is directed toward higher education, there seems to also be a partisan dimension to it, such as fears that campuses are centers for liberal indoctrination or inhospitable to conservative ideas. Could higher education be doing more to counter these perceptions?

**Plummer:** From the first day of freshman orientation, an entering college student begins a journey of self-discovery that transcends the classroom. Essential to that journey is the student's freedom to openly challenge politics held sacred in the family home under parental control and within the surrounding community of influencers. It is a natural, organic maturation process. So, it isn't that college campuses are centers for liberal indoctrination or that they are inhospitable to conservative or progressive ideas for that matter. It is, however, true that college campuses are wide open for exposure to diverse and often extreme voices raised in spirited political debate. The exposure shifts, redirects, alters, and, in some cases, reveals a whole new way of seeing the world. The key to avoiding indoctrination is recurrent exposure to a multitude of diverse thoughts and ideas. It is naïve and unrealistic to expect any community to remain apolitical or centrist. There is simply too much media that are just one key stroke or swipe away every moment of each day. That said, academic leaders in higher education must remain ever vigilant and intentional in providing

fertile ground for rival political voices. Faculty, on the front lines within all areas of study, must exercise restraint and caution not to amplify right- or left-leaning points of view to the exclusion of countering opinions. And yes, higher education should be doing more to keep the ground fertile for this robust diversity of voices across the political landscape. From the highest office of the institution to all points campuswide, politically driven initiatives must be identified for what they are, a detriment to academe, and discontinued.

**Scanlon:** The “liberal indoctrination” of college students is an overstated problem. Often, it is a media-driven problem or a strategic effort to mobilize support against a perceived elite class. Indoctrination implies imposing beliefs, which is more than simply possessing beliefs. While it can and likely does occur, it is essential to ask whether it is systemic. It is also worth noting that higher education’s focus on providing technical and professional skills makes indoctrination less likely. It is simply inconsistent with the curricular direction of higher education in the United States today.

As B. Da’Vida Plummer suggested above, college is a space for the critical exploration of intellectual curiosities. It is a perilous mistake to think of this as indoctrination as opposed to the acts of thinking and learning. The more we undermine the idea that college is such a space, the more divided and dangerous society becomes.

With that said, higher education can and should rethink how it interacts with the public. Doing so would make it harder to label college campuses as indoctrination factories.

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For example, higher education can take the lead in facilitating inclusive public conversations, especially conversations deeply connected to their local communities. Rather than imagining itself as a consultant with solutions to community

problems, higher education can enhance the quality of democratic life in a community by creating more opportunities for citizens to interact with one another meaningfully. Higher education also needs to reward its faculty for public-facing activities. Overall, reducing the distance between higher education and the public is a step in the right direction. Bringing people together

means greater transparency and trust between community members and its institutions of higher education.

**Lindaman:** The value of a liberal education is often misrepresented and may be polarized as a partisan perspective. Rather, a liberal education challenges students to be lifelong learners across diverse disciplines and areas of expertise. In order to make these connections toward learning and shared understanding, higher education is committed to intellectual curiosity and critical thinking. Exposure to new and different ideas and lived experiences challenges students to grow developmentally and intellectually, to think critically, and to engage authentically.

Of course, there are tensions in trying to provide a safe and inclusive space for the development of students, especially traditionally marginalized and underrepresented students, and to preserve academic freedom, free speech, and the marketplace of ideas. However, it is difficult to imagine a more conducive space than a college campus for individuals to learn how to adjust, respond, and work through these tensions with others.

The diversity of the higher education experience and its multiple points of view, institutional cultures, and identities create challenges for higher education to speak and to advocate as a single unitary actor or voice. Between and within public and private universities, the rich diversity, differentiation, and choices for students and their families often encourage colleges and universities to seek a comparative or competitive advantage rather than to speak with a shared voice. Perhaps professional organizations, state college and university system offices, and philanthropy should accept the tall task of cutting through all the noise and criticism so colleges and universities may do what they do best: prepare students as citizens in their communities. Or better yet, let students' success speak for the transformational difference of higher education in their lives. If we listen carefully, rarely do their lived experiences have a partisan or liberal bias.

**Barker:** As we think about what higher education can do as it interacts with the public, I'd like to pick up on Joseph Scanlon's remark about "facilitating inclusive public conversations." Can you share any experiences in which doing so has made a positive difference?

**Lindaman:** In many places, colleges and universities hold an important place in their communities—economically, culturally, and academically. Critics of higher education often exacerbate the town-gown divide to fuel further institutional distrust. However, members of the campus community—faculty, students, staff, and administrators—are also valuable citizens of the communities where they parent, worship, and live together with their neighbors. Relationships cultivated within community transcend these town-gown divides. Public

institutions such as libraries, colleges, and universities provide democratic spaces with captive audiences of curious minds, who are eager to learn about complex moral and political issues from diverse points of view and lived experiences.

Winona State University, the public regional comprehensive institution where I teach, epitomizes the interdependent and essential relationship between institution and community. There is certainly room for disagreement and

***Let students' success speak for the transformational difference of higher education in their lives. If we listen carefully, rarely do their lived experiences have a partisan or liberal bias.***

distrust, but there is also plenty of opportunity for agreement, common ground, and shared understanding in order to grow and develop continuously. The relationships are necessary and authentic, and the sparsely populated space

creates a shared and interdependent identity. These shared values and sense of place and solidarity are best actualized when the campus and community spaces are seamless and public deliberation is facilitated in a way that acknowledges their shared lived experiences and equal value in their self-determination and success.

For example, the campus has invited the community into its public space for difficult conversations and deliberation on issues such as immigration, free speech, election integrity, and the purpose of higher education. More specifically, in 2012, the university held its first deliberation on the purpose of higher education when the president of Winona State University retired and hosted a democratic deliberation as her retirement party. The invitation to the larger community included business members, elected officials, trustees, community leaders, students, faculty, and staff. The inclusive invitation and tone set by the president facilitated a valuable experience to share and better understand the purpose of higher education by exposing the false assumption of the town-gown divide and revealing shared values of caring for the Winona community despite generational and experiential differences.

This favorable experience led to the facilitation of larger community discussions, which were named and framed by secondary students, who were mentored by college students, and acknowledged in the mission of the university in southeastern Minnesota by supporting the progress toward matriculation for graduating high school seniors. In 2017, one of those former high school students graduated from Winona State University and celebrated by moderating

a democratic deliberation on safety and justice for the American Democracy Project's annual Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement meeting in Baltimore, Maryland.

Since 2012, the repeated and sustained practice of facilitating difficult conversations and hosting democratic deliberations on campus has supported other student engagement efforts in the classroom and in the community, for example, student voter engagement efforts and numerous community partnerships. Simply put, as soon as the university formed relationships with the community with intellectual humility and inclusion, good things happened.

**Scanlon:** We continue to grow our campus deliberations. We went from one deliberation per year to two or three deliberations per semester. Participating in deliberations makes a positive difference for students in three pivotal ways. Young people's inclusion in conversations about pressing public issues is not the norm. Deliberation is a platform through which they have an opportunity to share their values, lived experiences, and unique perspectives with others. The more inclusive the deliberations—drawing from the campus community as a whole—the more representative they are of citizen sentiment. Deliberation also contradicts the partisan and often unproductive political discourse students normally witness. Deliberation is a meaningful democratic practice that emphasizes both critical thinking and collaboration. Regular participation in deliberations leads to healthier civic habits rooted in mutual respect and trust. Lastly, student moderators are important to successful campus deliberations. Moderating deliberations contributes to essential communication skills and is both empowering and emancipating for young people. Just like participating in a deliberation, an invitation to moderate a conversation about a pressing public issue is outside the norm for young people.

As we close this discussion, it is important to mention that many of our institutions are not adequately protecting democracy. While some institutions are incentivized to act against our democratic well-being, others remain on the sideline. We must do the work to sustain and protect democracy and our shared democratic values. We need our institutions to accept the challenge of protecting democracy, which includes creating opportunities for citizens to engage one another in inclusive and trust-building conversations.



## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 4.

# CONTRIBUTORS

DEREK W. M. BARKER is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation and coeditor (with Alex Lovit) of the *Higher Education Exchange*. With a background in political theory, his research focuses on the democratic role of higher education institutions, philanthropy and nonprofit organizations, journalism, and the professions. Barker is the author of *Tragedy and Citizenship: Conflict, Reconciliation, and Democracy from Haemon to Hegel* and articles appearing in the academic journals *Political Theory*, *New Political Science*, *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, and *The Good Society*.

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.

SARA A. MEHLTRETTER DRURY is associate professor and chair of rhetoric at Wabash College and serves as the director of Wabash Democracy and Public Discourse. Drury's research and practice focus on the intersection of rhetoric and deliberative democracy, with attention to deliberative pedagogy, argumentation, and political communication. She has received grants from Indiana Humanities and the National Science Foundation and has been a visiting research fellow at the University of Edinburgh Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and an Indiana Humanities Action fellow. Drury received her BA *summa cum laude* from Boston College and her MA and PhD from Pennsylvania State University.

MARIA FARLAND has taught at Johns Hopkins, Wesleyan, and Columbia universities and is currently an associate professor at Fordham University. She has published numerous scholarly essays on links between institutions of higher education and disciplinary expertise in relationship to literary writers such as Gertrude Stein, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Robert Frost. She is currently finishing a monograph on images of rural backwardness in US literature and culture and is coeditor of *Studies in American Fiction* (JHUP/ProjectMuse).

KATY J. HARRIGER is a professor in the Department of Politics and International Affairs at Wake Forest University, where she holds the F. Michael Crowley Distinguished Faculty Fellowship and is faculty director of the Wake Washington program in DC. She teaches courses on American politics, law, and courts. In addition to her research on deliberation and the civic engagement of young people, she publishes generally in the area of American constitutional law. At Wake Forest she has been the recipient of the Reid Doyle Prize for Excellence in Teaching, the John Reinhart Award for Distinguished Teaching, and the College Board of Visitors Faculty Leadership Award.

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.

ALEX LOVIT is a program officer with the Kettering Foundation. He holds a PhD in history from the University of Michigan, where he studied 19th-century political history. He helps manage the foundation's research into democratic education both in K-12 schools and in higher education, coordinates research into democratic innovation in the judicial system, and is the coeditor (with Derek W. M. Barker) of the *Higher Education Exchange*.

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*.

JILL J. MCMILLAN is professor emerita and research professor at Wake Forest University. Her early work centered on organizational and institutional rhetoric and communication. Since 2000, she has been involved with a team of Wake Forest colleagues who study deliberative democracy in higher education and have published their work in *Speaking of Politics* and *The Long-Term Impact of Learning to Deliberate*. Articles connected to this work have appeared

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.

B. DA’VIDA PLUMMER is a six-time Emmy award-winning news industry executive who joined Fellowships at Auschwitz for the Study of Professional Ethics as coexecutive director focusing on advancement and operations. She previously served in the dual capacity of assistant vice president for marketing/media and dean of the Scripps Howard School of Journalism and Communication at Hampton University. During her nine-year tenure with the prestigious HBCU, she served as an associate professor of broadcast journalism and the director of the William R. Harvey Leadership Institute while providing marketing leadership for the Hampton University Proton Therapy Institute. Plummer is a native of Nansemond County, Virginia, where she was introduced to the importance of community service through a global faith-based organization led by generations of her paternal lineage. She received her BS in journalism and MA in communications from Ohio University.

JOSEPH SCANLON is assistant professor of political science at Monroe Community College (MCC) in Rochester, New York. Dr. Scanlon’s teaching and research interests include American government, comparative politics, and international relations, with a specialized research interest in the global politics of sport. He is the coordinator of the Democracy Commitment at MCC, a campus initiative that promotes civic engagement and participation in civic education.

TIMOTHY J. SHAFFER is the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Chair of Civil Discourse and associate professor in the Joseph R. Biden, Jr. School of Public Policy and Administration at the University of Delaware. He is also director of civic engagement and deliberative democracy with the National Institute for Civil Discourse at the University of Arizona. Shaffer is author or coeditor of six books including *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Democratic Engagement*, *Creating Space for Democracy: A Primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education*, and the latest book, *Grassroots Engagement and Social Justice through Cooperative Extension*. He earned his PhD from Cornell University.

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200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459 (937) 434-7300; (800) 221-3657  
444 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite 434, Washington, DC 20001 (202) 393-4478  
[www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org)

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