

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2022

Anti-Elitism and the Civic Purposes of Higher Education

Articles

Maria Farland

Scott Peters

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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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Afterword

MORE THAN ACADEMICS TALKING TO ACADEMICS ABOUT ACADEME

David Mathews

Academics in colleges and universities don't just talk to other academics about what is happening on their campuses. They also talk to legislators about politics, to business executives about business, and to journalists about the news. They serve on community boards and belong to all kinds of associations and leagues. And everybody lives in a community with other citizens. Academics aren't cloistered.

That recognized, this article notes that in their professional lives, academics tend to focus on issues inside academe. While normal, these discussions aren't enough to counter the significant loss of public confidence and trust that institutions of higher learning are facing. Explaining the benefits of colleges and universities, and the many services they provide, isn't restoring confidence among the public. Using civic language to reach the citizenry isn't working. Documenting the monetary benefits of higher education to individuals and the economy hasn't increased funding. (To the contrary, funding has declined.) Even touting the value of the factual information coming from expert professionals hasn't countered the rejection of academic "facts." Adding evidence on top of evidence didn't stop the rejection of COVID-19 vaccinations.

In the past, *Higher Education Exchange* has given historical accounts of how colleges and universities came to gain public legitimacy. Institutions of higher learning couldn't give themselves a public mandate. This had to come from the public. And once it did—in the interest of democracy. An example of democracy's influence can be seen as early as the founding of state universities to provide the leadership for a new nation that had rejected a monarchy. Agricultural and technical institutions were created to serve those who wanted access to higher learning. Extending citizenship was the public purpose of women's colleges, tribal colleges, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Those outside academe who championed these causes collaborated with like-minded academics to bring about the changes.

Today, many institutions, from those in journalism to those in public administration and science, suffer from the same loss of public trust and

confidence. And small groups of professionals in many of these fields are frustrated because what is being done to rebuild trust and confidence isn't working. They are trying to develop strategies for changing their relationship to the citizenry. Similar groups of reform-minded academics have emerged on many campuses.

These academics include presidents who are leading the way in exploring what higher education owes democracy. This is more urgent than ever given the multiple threats to democracy in the US and around the globe. Others in academe have reached the point where they feel that the estrangement from the public is too serious to ignore and that the efforts to respond have been ineffective. Many of them are especially worried about the divisiveness sweeping across the political landscape and into their institutions. Whatever cause they champion, they are mindful of their academic obligations to reason and reasonableness, which are critical for democracy to prevail. Many of these academics may be ready to reach outside higher education to make common cause with others championing democracy.

It has been the foundation's good fortune to get to know some of these academics. They teach or administer community outreach programs, which may be housed in various kinds of centers for civic life. If they are in student affairs, they see a need to prepare undergraduates for a citizenship that goes beyond service. Those in professional schools or who teach preprofessional courses are experimenting with ways to apply the research that is calling for more democratic professionalism, which has been the subject of past issues of *Higher Education Exchange*. What support these ventures are getting outside of academe isn't clear. But such support is essential if the reforms are to last.

The similarities in the challenges facing most all professions and institutions, academic and nonacademic, create an opportunity for the reform-minded parties to cooperate in the interest of democracy. They have much to learn from one another, and I propose a way of facilitating such learning. I don't have in mind a big meeting on democracy, but rather what Hal Saunders, Kettering's late director of international affairs and an authority on both governmental and nongovernmental diplomacy, called "Sustained Dialogue." This has been the subject of the foundation's research for some time: through joint ventures with Russia for more than 60 years, with China for 50 years, and with Cuba for 25 years. These dialogues build on one another, which allows them to develop joint projects. A sustained dialogue between those outside and inside higher education might lead to joint initiatives that could help higher education gain essential outside support and revalidate its public mission.

The participants in a sustained dialogue set their own agenda. I can't and shouldn't. That said, I try to imagine what such an agenda might look like. There are already a multitude of collaborative projects between higher education and other institutions—those with the federal government for example. There are also joint ventures with engineering firms, foundations, and state agencies. The list is long. What I am suggesting would be focused on democracy's problems, which often begin in communities. Maybe some of these joint ventures could be with associations of citizens who feel alienated and unable to make a difference. The neighborhood groups that John McKnight works with and writes about might be interested. Community outreach programs may offer other opportunities.

A sustained dialogue comes to mind because the loss of public confidence and trust is so severe that one conference isn't going to be enough. As I said last year, Kettering's report, *With: A Strategy for Renewing Our Democracy*, suggests that all professionals, their institutions, and elected officials consider working not just *for* the public but also *with* the citizenry. The suggestion has generated a mixture of curiosity and uncertainty because what this idea means in practice has to be invented. And this is what a sustained dialogue can provide—an encouraging environment for invention. The public's loss of confidence and trust in institutions began growing decades ago. The roots go deep. There aren't likely to be any quick fixes.

I'm not suggesting that we literally copy what happens in international, nongovernmental sustained dialogue. The parties there are often hostile to one another, and there has to be a focus on ways to avoid violent conflict, such as the one in Ukraine. I have in mind, instead, what these dialogues have done to help launch mutually beneficial projects, like the one that groups in the United States began with groups in Cuba to protect the environment along our shared gulf. This protection requires efforts by what our colleagues in Cuba call "active citizens." Higher education might restore some of its public mandate with similar joint ventures.

The future of higher education has often been determined by what goes on outside campus gates. It's time to open the gates wider.



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