Anti-Elitism and the Civic Purposes of Higher Education

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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.

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation, chartered in 1927, that does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions (or groups of institutions) and individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, governing, politics, and education. The interpretations and conclusions contained in the Higher Education Exchange, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its trustees, or officers.
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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.
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. Boyte 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. Sweater 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.