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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A Note of Appreciation

David Brown has not just been an editor of HEX since 1994. He is also its cocreator, together with former Kettering Foundation program officer Deborah Witte. The Higher Education Exchange, as readers will know, is a publication whose purpose is to facilitate a conversation in higher education about the role of academe in democracy, particularly the role of students as actors and producers.

David was ideal as an editor of the journal because he brought to the work an astonishing breadth of experience, both inside and outside the academy: from serving as deputy mayor of New York City under Mayor Ed Koch to teaching at Yale’s School of Management and New School’s Milano Graduate School, and serving as president of Blackburn College. His perceptive insights were evident in the interviews he conducted, which were regularly published in HEX. And he undoubtedly drew on what he learned from the Exchange in his own books, including The Real Change-Makers: Why Government is Not the Problem or the Solution and America’s Culture of Professionalism: Past, Present, and Prospects.

His most recent contribution to Kettering’s work has been to help launch a new initiative in higher education to cultivate a greater civic and democratic understanding of professionalism. We are deeply appreciative of David’s many contributions to this journal and to Kettering’s research. We are pleased to have Derek Barker, who is leading Kettering’s studies of democracy and higher education, continue on as coeditor of the journal. And we welcome Alex Lovit as coeditor; he is leading Kettering’s research on teaching deliberative democracy through historic decisions.

David Mathews
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American colleges and universities are facing a crisis of public confidence. Citizens express dissatisfaction with the rising cost of tuition and distrust in the current leadership and structure of higher education institutions. For years, the Kettering Foundation has tracked this trend, noting that Americans increasingly see colleges as promoting the private interests of their graduates, rather than as providing public benefits for society as a whole.

Recently, higher education institutions themselves are coming to see declining public support as an existential threat, and scholars have sought to recapture and reinvigorate higher education’s sense of public purpose. Recent historical accounts of American colleges and universities by Charles Dorn, David Labaree, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham all focus on how these institutions balance claims to provide private benefits to their graduates (such as technical skills and improved job prospects) and public benefits to American society and democracy (such as contributions to public knowledge and better informed voters).

The scholarship reviewed here chronicles American higher education’s long history of promoting both the private (primarily financial) interests of students and the public (economic, social, and political) interests of the nation as a whole. It is encouraging to see prominent scholars of higher education embracing and articulating their institutions’ role in promoting the public good. These authors’ diagnosis of the challenges facing higher education is fundamentally similar to Kettering’s. Collectively, these books are sincere, scholarly, and smart attempts to reckon with the legacies of American higher education and to articulate colleges’ and universities’ past and ongoing contributions to the public good of the nation.

However, it is hard to see how books like these—written by academics for an academic audience—can influence higher education’s fading legitimacy
in the eyes of the public. Nor do they provide much of a road map for the future; as paens to how higher education’s history of serving the public good, these texts are fundamentally conservative. They are backward-looking, not forward-looking, arguments that academia is already serving the public, rather than calls for reform. This critique is not to question the accuracy of these accounts, nor to impugn the motives of faculty and administrators, but simply to point out, as Kettering Foundation president David Mathews has written, “Only the public can confer a public mission in a democracy.”

Nevertheless, there are elements of this literature that might interest readers of Higher Education Exchange. These accounts help to provide context and historical legitimacy to colleges’ and universities’ claims of promoting both private and public goods. This literature also helps to define a conversation to which the Kettering Foundation as an organization, Higher Education Exchange as a periodical, and deliberative democracy as a concept, might usefully contribute. As higher education confronts its legacy and the current predicament of waning public support, these authors are imagining how to recapture colleges’ and universities’ public mission. Again, David Mathews has something to say about this: “The response from academe has to be more radical in the sense of getting at the roots of the problem. And the roots . . . have to do with how academe understands the role of citizens.”

To rebuild public trust, higher education must be outward-facing, not inward-looking. And colleges and universities must invite input and participation from the public, in capacities beyond the usual list of student, alumnus, research subject, and so forth.

For the Common Good by Bowdoin education professor Charles Dorn, the most substantial and scholarly of these three texts, provides a comprehensive account of American higher education from the foundation of the republic to the 21st century. In 10 chapters, describing 11 institutions representative of trends and types of colleges over the course of American history, Dorn describes the evolution of higher education.

As the title of his book suggests, Dorn emphasizes the long-standing tradition of American colleges and universities promoting the general benefit of local communities and of American democracy. By dint of archival scholarship, Dorn demonstrates higher education institutions’ sustained commitment
to public benefit, covering the major trends and types of institutions that define the history of American higher education. Early national colleges primarily sought to train public servants in genteel professions—most prominently ministry, law, and politics. In the late 19th century, agricultural and “normal” (teacher-training) public colleges and entrepreneurial private universities promised to lift students to success in applied fields. During the same period, new institutions were founded to educate women and minorities. After World War II, urban universities and community colleges rapidly expanded to serve burgeoning demand for post-secondary degrees.

Dorn provides convincing evidence that college faculty and administrators have perennially seen their work in terms of public benefit, but his emphasis on continuity of purpose and his focus on institutional origin stories somewhat obscures the shifting meaning of “common good” over time—from training civic leaders to producing research for public benefit to helping communities retain middle-class jobs. As his account grows closer to the present moment, Dorn notes a shift in “higher education’s central purpose toward providing a credential that helped men and women procure the wealth necessary to fully partake in the nation’s consumer culture,”$^3$ and that an “emphasis on educating for citizenship by prioritizing teaching gave way to the entrepreneurial priorities of generating wealth and increasing institutional prestige.”$^4$ But in this text, these remain tensions that distract from higher education’s guiding purpose of promoting the common good. The impressive breadth of Dorn’s historical research belies the simplicity of his argument.

David Labaree, professor of education at Stanford University, offers a more skeptical account of this history in *A Perfect Mess*. Where Dorn argues that American higher education has always been focused on the public good, Labaree takes a contrary position. “Over the long haul, Americans have understood higher education as a distinctly private good.”$^5$ In this view, most citizens see colleges’ primary purpose as advancing or cementing students’ socioeconomic position. Labaree sees the Cold War as an exception to this pattern, when the federal government invested heavily in higher education to reintegrate World War II veterans into the economy and to provide scientific research. Declines in state funding for public universities in recent decades, therefore, should be seen more as a reversion to the mean than as a betrayal of principles. Meanwhile, for most students, higher education remains the sole path to climbing the socioeconomic ladder or preserving positions of privilege, with the hierarchy of prestige among institutions allowing for both advancement and perpetuation. “The system lets us have things both ways: access and advantage,
opportunity and privilege, mobility and stasis.”6 But in Labaree’s view, students of every description primarily see higher education as promoting their own private benefit.

This might seem a cynical take on higher education, but Labaree closes his book with a surprising paean to the “perfect mess” of the American system. Paradoxically, he argues, American higher education “continues to serve the public good—promoting economic growth, national power, cultural richness—but only as a side effect of its core dynamic, which is driven by private actors pursuing personal benefit.”7 Labaree is suspicious of efforts to reform higher education by introducing greater transparency or focusing strictly on job preparation. “Universities are much less useful to society if they restrict themselves to the training of individuals for particular present-day jobs or to the production of research to solve current problems.”

In the end, although Dorn and Labaree’s arguments appear diametrically opposed, neither author would deny that American higher education produces both private and public benefits. The debate between them is more about emphasis than about substance.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham, a fellow at Duke University and former director of the National Humanities Center, offers a historically and philosophically narrower argument for higher education’s contributions to enhancing civic skills. Harpham’s title, What Do You Think, Mr. Ramirez?, is based on the story of a Cuban refugee who enrolled in a community college, where a professor challenged him to analyze a Shakespeare sonnet with the titular question. For Ramirez, “It was the first time anybody had asked me that question,”9 and it ultimately helped to propel him to a career as a professor of comparative literature. Harpham argues that this question—prompting students in every type of college to develop their own analysis of difficult literary texts—is emblematic of American higher education’s contributions to democracy.

Harpham develops this argument in three historical narratives. The first (chronologically, though not in the organization of the book) is a story of the United States’ origins as a society of Protestants dedicated to biblical literacy
and as a nation whose principles were enshrined in written documents. The origins of American democracy were based in “a citizen’s right that is so deep-laid in the American self-understanding that contradiction of it is almost unimaginable: the right to read and interpret foundational texts such as the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence . . . and . . . to argue for one’s interpretations in court and in public.”

Harpham’s other two narratives both describe trends in American universities following World War II: the rise of general education requirements as the core of college curriculum and the growing dominance of the New Criticism movement in English departments. The ideal of general education, as outlined in 1945 by a committee of Harvard professors in the book *General Education in a Free Society*, required all college students to study the humanities, and through them liberal values, including civic capacity, self-realization, and grounding in common cultural heritage. Meanwhile, within newly empowered English departments, close textural interpretation was becoming the dominant method of literary analysis. In the view of New Critics, “The future of democracy and all its individual citizens . . . depended . . . on the cultivation of the cognitively and politically crucial skills involved in the interpretation of poetry.”

The confluence of these historical trends, Harpham argues, created the world in which college students were challenged to generate their own readings of complex texts. Requiring students to construe literature, in this argument, is training for civic skills of public interpretation and deliberation:

> The interpretable text, which is at once open and accessible to the public . . . gives us an immediate and intimately familiar model for a concept that should be precious, the rights-bearing individual living in a lawful civil society, the kind of society . . . in which citizens in a democracy should expect to live.

Harpham’s reasoning is convincing, and his daring yet fluid writing is testimony in itself for the study of the humanities. His analysis of the New Criticism and general education demonstrates that seemingly esoteric disciplinary and administrative discussions within higher education can be relevant to broader questions of these institutions’ role in society. Yet Harpham’s argument, like any that focuses solely on colleges’ educational mission, cannot fully account for higher education’s benefits to the public. After all, a college education has never been a prerequisite to the privileges of citizenship.

What is lacking from these accounts—and from academia, generally—is a concept of how higher education institutions might relate to citizens who aren’t students (or alumni or donors and the like). As long as the relationship
between student and institution remains central for how citizens and colleges understand each other, the private benefits that higher education supplies for graduates will be more obvious to all parties than any public benefits to the broader society or nation. The history of American colleges and universities, as reviewed in these books, also demonstrates that institutions have enjoyed the greatest public support when they served particular constituencies (such as local communities, demographic groups, and economic classes), rather than when they pursued a single model of scholarly prestige. Higher education cannot generate a public purpose without the public. Colleges and universities, which are suffering from a lack of public trust, might gain from identifying the communities they serve and encouraging public deliberation about what citizens expect and desire from higher education.

NOTES
2 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 198.
6 Ibid., 177.
7 Ibid., 195.
8 Ibid., 189.
10 Ibid., 96.
11 Ibid., 132.
12 Ibid., 174.
REFERENCES


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