

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2019

Leadership and Democracy

Articles

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Interviews

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Afterword

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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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WHAT KIND OF DEMOCRACY DOES HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT?

David Mathews

In a prospectus shared with authors of articles for this issue of the *Higher Education Exchange* (*HEX*), the line that caught my eye raised the questions, What kind of democratic skills are being taught on campuses? and What are the implications for the future of democracy? Democracy's future is already endangered by a loss of public confidence in government and other major institutions, as well as an outbreak of hyperpartisan polarization and every conceivable form of divisiveness. This, in my mind, goes directly to the issue of what kind of relationship citizens should have with their institutions. And that issue, in turn, raises the most basic question of all: What role should citizens play if democracy is to be strong enough to restore public confidence in our institutions and counter hyperdivisiveness?

I think there will always be differences in a democracy, and so I expect that the leadership programs on campuses will develop a variety of skills. In just one issue of *HEX*, however, we can expect to hear about only some of them. But I hope this issue will raise the same kind of questions on campus that *HEX* raises.

Many Americans have been troubled by our political system for some time. They live in all parts of the country and have different reasons for being disturbed. Some fear that the United States is in decline because of what they see as an erosion of our core values and problems in the way our political system works—or doesn't work. Others are troubled by issues like a growing economic divide, along with racial and other forms of injustice.¹ Many believe these problems are self-inflicted wounds. Whatever the reasons, people have lost confidence in the government and also in our other major institutions. This discontent has been widespread for some time.² If it were to morph from loss of confidence to loss of institutional legitimacy, it would be fatal to our democracy.

Does higher education have any responsibility for responding to this crisis in democracy? And, if so, does it require institutions like colleges and universities to do anything more than they are doing now in teaching, research, and service? I think the answer is "yes" to both questions.

There are many things that academic institutions might do. The one I propose is the subject of this article. The premise is that responding to this crisis requires a strategy beginning at the grass roots. If our democracy is to be strong enough to meet today's challenges, it will require citizens who see themselves as makers of things (or, in that sense, producers), who act as makers, and who are seen by our institutions as makers. What is important in a democratic sense are not the goods per se, but people acting as agents in their own right, and not as objects of the agency of others. Of course, citizens play many roles: they are constituents, clients, consumers, and voters. For a strong democracy, however, they have to be more. Note that the term *citizen* as used in this article is not meant in a narrow, legalistic sense. It, instead, refers to all members of the public (literally, the people who live in or are part of a city, village, or community).

I am aware of the challenges in treating citizens as producers. Academic institutions, for good reasons, are "built" around other concepts of citizens. They are seen as parents who pay tuition, alumni who make donations, and people who are served by research. For the law school, citizens are clients. For the medical school, they are patients. In each of these contexts, the people are more acted upon than actors themselves.

Recognizing citizens as producers not only strengthens democracy, it strengthens the institutions that work with citizens. The institutions become more effective. Elinor Ostrom's Nobel Prize-winning research has shown that the public goods made by citizens are essential if our major institutions, from schools to hospitals to government agencies, are to be optimally effective. Citizens working with citizens produce goods that can complement what institutions do. Ostrom wrote:

If one presumes that teachers produce education, police produce safety, doctors and nurses produce health, and social workers produce effective households, the focus of attention is on how to professionalize the public service. Obviously, skilled teachers, police officers, medical personnel, and social workers are essential to the development of better public services. Ignoring the important role of children, families, support groups, neighborhood organizations, and churches in the production of these services means, however, that only a portion of the inputs to these processes are taken into account in the way that policymakers think about these problems. The term "client" is used more and more frequently to refer to those who should be viewed as essential co-producers of their own education, safety, health, and communities. A client is the name for a passive role. Being a co-producer makes one an active partner.³

Where are all the professionals Ostrom refers to being educated? In colleges and universities. That is where they come to understand the role of citizens in relation to their work as professionals.

Products from the work of citizens complement what institutions do because civic work is different from the work of institutions. I am not talking about such laudable things as volunteering to take the load off teachers and health-care professionals, although that is very commendable. I have in mind supplementary projects that make use of people doing the things professionals don't—and can't—do. That's why I prefer the term *complementary production* rather than just *coproduction*.

The unique public goods that citizens make with citizens are both tangible and intangible. Many come from the associations people create, which can become formal organizations, though most remain very informal. Often citizens simply agree to meet at a certain time and place (maybe a coffee shop) to see what can be done about a shared problem. When institutions have attempted to create similar groups, they have tended not to be as effective. That was the case with citizens' committees working on school desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s. Locally initiated groups had a legitimacy that government-mandated committees did not.

Things Only Citizens Can Do

As I've emphasized, it is especially important to recognize the distinctive things to be done that only citizens can do or that they can do better than institutions. Neighbors and family members are probably best at providing emotional support when trouble strikes. Citizens working in tandem with officials can supply the local knowledge that comes from living in a place 365 days a year and 24 hours a day. Using this knowledge, people understand how to do things that are different from what institutions can and should do.

Among the things that people uniquely contribute is civic energy. It comes from grassroots associations, which I just mentioned. This was evident in a 2018 study of what has allowed some cities to lower their crime rates when others couldn't.⁴ The generators of civic energy in this case were a multitude of associations of citizens working together to improve their community. Researchers found that "every 10 additional [civic] organizations in a city with 100,000 residents . . . led to a 9 percent drop in the murder rate and a 6 percent drop in violent crime."⁵ Such groups didn't necessarily regard their work as preventing violence, but "in creating playgrounds, they enabled parents to better monitor their children. In connecting neighbors, they improved the

capacity of residents to control their streets. In forming after-school programs, they offered alternatives to crime.”⁶ Even if not directly related to crime, these efforts helped turn negative emotions into positive energy.

A *With* Strategy

Where complementary production is happening, professionals and the institutions where they are employed work *with* citizens not just *for* them. This *with* strategy is inspired by Abraham Lincoln’s ideal of a government *of, by, and for* the people in the Gettysburg Address. Today, however, do Americans think our government is really “of” the people? That’s debatable. “By” the people? Doubtful. “For” the people? Perhaps for some, sometimes. So, why not add another preposition—government *with* the people? And why not add the same preposition to the mission of our other major institutions?

A Democratic Strategy

The overarching question in *HEX* has to do with democracy, and a *with* strategy is very much a democratic strategy. Saying that, of course, demands an explanation of what is meant by *democracy* here because the term has many meanings. The most common is that democracy is a system of contested elections resulting in a representative government. Certainly, that is a valid definition. However, I believe that democracy is much more.

I think what we now call democracy began long before the word was coined. It grew out of lessons taken from the collective actions needed for human survival when our ancestors were hunter-gatherers living in villages. This was before there were kingdoms and nation-states.⁷ As humans spread out across the globe, they carried with them a “political DNA” developed in the struggle to survive. A principal lesson of survival was that cooperating was critical because we needed collective efforts to stay alive.

Much, much later, the Greeks captured some of this survival legacy in a language with new terms like *democracy*. This word has two roots: *demos* is “the people collectively,” as in a village or *deme*, and *kratos* is “the power or capacity to act.”⁸ Modern representative government rests on this earlier foundation of collective decision-making by citizens leading to collective actions for collective well-being. Those actions produce public goods. That is why the concept of citizens and their role is key to developing a stronger democracy.

From this perspective, democracy began and continues as a political system in which, at the most fundamental or organic level, citizens must work

with other citizens to make things that make life better for everyone. Our ancestors went on to form governments and other institutions to produce more and different public goods. These two political systems, one governmental or institutional and the other organic or civic, are interdependent in the ecosystem of democracy, which is the subject of an earlier book.⁹ Unfortunately, this essential, symbiotic relationship becomes weaker if citizens don't join forces to solve common problems or if they delegate what they must do to institutions, governmental and nongovernmental. There can't be a *with* strategy without a productive public.

A *with* strategy is idealistic in that it is democratic, yet it isn't a pie-in-the-sky fantasy. The United States recognizes the need for what citizens produce by working together with them in its laws that allow tax exemptions for nongovernmental institutions that serve a public purpose.¹⁰ And public-government collaboration is very common in some situations. Think about communities hit by natural disasters—fires, floods, and the like. Before the government relief arrives, people rush to help others—even those who may be strangers—possibly putting themselves in harm's way. Yet, while public collaboration with institutions does occur, usually in extreme circumstances, it isn't a well-established policy. Nor is it seen as an explicit strategy.

A *with* strategy encourages collaboration through mutually beneficial or reinforcing efforts between the citizenry and both governmental and nongovernmental institutions. And it encourages collective work, not only among people who are *alike* or who *like* one another, but among those who recognize they *need* one another to survive or to live the lives they want to live.

Recapturing a Sense of Public Sovereignty

Working together to produce public goods does more than provide the goods. It can also give people a sense of themselves as agents of democracy who can make a difference. In 1780, Samuel Cooper, a Boston minister who was a leader in the resistance to the British during the American Revolution, gave a sermon in a ceremony recognizing the adoption of a constitution for Massachusetts. The new constitution, he said, was “an established frame of laws; of which a man may say, ‘we are here united in society for our common security and happiness.’” He compared the laws that had been passed to the fruits that farmers produced by their labor on their own land. So, he reasoned, “The regulations under which I live are my own; I am not only a proprietor in the soil, but *I am part of the sovereignty of my country*” (emphasis added).¹¹ Cooper had a right to that sense of agency because he and his fellow citizens

had, in fact, been instrumental in creating not just a state constitution but a new nation.

What I take away from this story is that, ultimately, the key to stemming the loss of confidence may be more in what citizens do than in what institutions do. The reason is that human beings usually have more confidence in what they've made, or helped make, than in what has been made for them. When people have worked *with* an institution to solve a problem, they tend to have positive feelings about that institution, provided that the institution has been receptive and the work isn't just menial.

People who have positive feelings about schools, for example, say, "Ours is a good school." Then they will often add, "And we are involved in it." Seeing this connection helped me recognize the possibility for restoring confidence in our institutions by using a *working with* strategy. This strategy can also generate a sense of public responsibility because people tend to feel responsible for what they have made.

Working Together Using Democratic Practices

Institutions sometimes have difficulty working with citizens because the way people do their work is different from the way institutions do theirs, even when there are similarities. Institutions are not necessarily "built" to deal with citizens as producers. So well-intended efforts to engage people and communities can go awry. Academic institutions and civic organizations can sail by one another like ships in the night.¹²

When citizens work together to combat problems, they have to identify or give names to those problems that will resonate with everyone. These names are not like the names that professionals or experts properly use. Rather, they reflect the primal concerns of humans—security, freedom, control, being treated fairly. These are deeply valuable to most all people. Citizens also have to come up with options for acting on the problems, options that are related to the things they hold dear. The actors include citizens.

Because people consider many things valuable, there will inevitably be tensions among these basic imperatives. For example, actions to make us more secure from danger may restrict our freedom. Although our primal motivations are much the same, we give different priorities to them because we live in different circumstances. That means we have to work through these tensions in order to find a way to go forward. We must move beyond hasty reactions and exercise our human faculty for judgment to make sound decisions. This "working through" is real work, which is why it is called "choice work." Another

term for this kind of collective decision-making is “deliberation.” It is integral to acting.

Obviously, in working, we have to assemble the resources needed to implement our decisions. For institutions, these include legal authority, money, and tangible materials or equipment. The resources citizens have are often intangible, such as political will, or they are structural, like the associations I just mentioned. These associations draw on the varied experiences and skills in the group, along with collective knowledge or common sense.

While institutions tend to organize actions centrally and bureaucratically, citizens act in varied ways. If their actions serve a broad, general purpose, they can reinforce one another. That makes the sum greater than the parts, which is powerful. Humans also have the ability to learn from one another and from their mistakes. Our faculty for learning together is a potent source of power. It draws on the multiple and diverse experiences in a citizenry, which helps us understand what is happening around us more completely. That allows a public to act more effectively. Learning together can also help keep up the civic momentum needed to deal with entrenched problems.

The ways of working I’ve just described allow citizens to make the difference they believe they should make in a democracy. And institutions can play a role in citizens recognizing opportunities to do this work, which are around them every day in the ordinary routines of life. In fact, the opportunities are so ordinary they are easy to overlook. For instance, naming problems goes on everywhere. Options for action are constantly being proposed. Decisions are being made in many places and in many ways. The resources that are needed include those in people’s experiences and skills, which are more powerful when combined.

What about the Obstacles?

So far, my objective has been to explain a *with* strategy and why it is needed, given the problems facing democracy now. However, as is always the case, there are challenges to this strategy that have to be overcome. I am afraid what I’ve said up to this point won’t be credible unless these barriers are acknowledged.

One barrier has to do with the way citizens see their role and their fellow citizens. The unpleasant truth is that people don’t always have confidence in one another. Surveys report that Americans believe selfishness is growing.¹³ And some people may be more comfortable with being consumers and clients than with taking on the responsibilities of active producers. If involving citizens in carrying out a *with* strategy was easy to do, it would be commonplace.

What motivates people to become active citizens are threats to what we all hold deeply valuable. And people are more likely to act on these concerns when they see opportunities to make a difference, beginning with the opportunities in shaping the way issues are given names, names that reflect what they hold dear.

A Better Alignment

I believe that institutions and the citizenry can work together effectively by realigning their efforts so that they are mutually reinforcing. The way citizens go about their work has to be recognized in the way that institutions do theirs. The challenge is that these two ways of working aren't the same and can be seriously misaligned. As noted, citizens and institutions alike give names to problems, but the terms aren't identical. For example, citizens want to feel that they are safe in their homes, and this feeling of security is less quantifiable yet more compelling to them than the statistics professionals use to describe crime. As people decide what they should do about their problems, they draw on their experiences. They reflect on how a problem affects what is valuable to them and their families. It shouldn't be too difficult for institutional professionals to incorporate the names people use in their descriptions of issues. That is alignment. And a better alignment between citizens and institutional actors doesn't necessarily require professionals in institutions to do more but rather to do what they are already doing a bit differently.

Implications for Higher Education?

What does all I've just said have to do with institutions of higher education? The same kind of anger and declining confidence governments face has come crashing through the campus gates. The most serious issue is that higher education's standing as a public good benefiting everyone, which is the basis for its claim on public support, is eroding. The evidence? Declining state support and rising tuitions.

What stands in the way of colleges and universities recognizing citizens as agents and producers? One obstacle may be objections to a central role for citizens and reservations about people's capacity for self-governing. However, the more serious obstacle may be more practical: What should a college or university do if it wants to treat citizens as producers rather than consumers or clients? In a chapter in the recently published book *Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Citizenship in Higher Education*, I suggest that considerable experimentation

in higher education—in league with formal and informal civic groups—is what is required.¹⁴ Encouraging students to develop their faculty for sound judgment as citizens is one area where we’ve already seen a lot of experimentation. Not only does academe have to respond to declining confidence in its own institutions, but it surely has a role to play in developing the kind of citizenry that will take responsibility for working together to shape the future.

Despite the challenges, higher education is well positioned to do things other institutions can’t do. As I’ve said, colleges and universities educate professionals who can be introduced to a more civic professionalism. That introduction can begin—perhaps should begin—in preprofessional programs.

I am especially encouraged by the development of a new field, deliberative pedagogy, which has attracted an array of faculty members in a diverse group of institutions who are developing a growing literature in the field. One of the first books was from Wake Forest: *Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue* by Katy Harriger and Jill McMillan. In it, these Wake Forest professors describe what they learned from creating a four-year Democracy Fellows program. Since then, Michigan State University Press has published *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Democratic Engagement*. And a new book edited by Tim Shaffer (Kansas State University) and Nick Longo (Providence College) entitled *Creating Space for Democracy: A Primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education* is forthcoming from Stylus Publishing. Nan Fairley and Mark Wilson’s *Living Democracy: Communities as Classrooms, Students as Citizens* describes a program of deep engagement in local democracy by Auburn University students.

Initiatives like those described in this literature could help American higher education make its claim to being a public good serving a public good.



NOTES

- ¹ Pew Research Center, “The Partisan Divide on Political Values Grows Even Wider,” <http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/> (accessed May 29, 2018).
- ² Ian Anson, “Americans Distrusted US Democracy Long Before Trump’s Russia Problem,” *The Conversation*, <http://theconversation.com/americans-distrusted-us-democracy-long-before-trumps-russia-problem-100082> (accessed July 18, 2018).
- ³ Elinor Ostrom, “Covenanting, Co-Producing, and the Good Society,” *PEGS* (Committee on the Political Economy of the Good Society) *Newsletter* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 8.
- ⁴ Patrick Sharkey, *Uneasy Peace: The Great Crime Decline, the Renewal of City Life, and the Next War on Violence* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018).

- ⁵ Emily Badger, “The Unsung Role That Ordinary Citizens Played in the Great Crime Decline,” The Upshot, *New York Times*, November 9, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2hIT3Mu> (accessed May 22, 2018).
- ⁶ Badger, “The Unsung Role That Ordinary Citizens Played in the Great Crime Decline.”
- ⁷ The foundation has been reading the literature in paleo-political anthropology for many years as well as examining the work of scholars who found what we know of prehistoric times useful in understanding the earliest forms of politics. See Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011).
- ⁸ See Robert Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, vol. 1 (Boston: Leiden, 2010), 325, 772; and Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 386-387, 992.
- ⁹ David Mathews, *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2014).
- ¹⁰ Read about the Tariff Act of 1894 at <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-soi/tehstory.pdf> (accessed June 20, 2019).
- ¹¹ Samuel Cooper, *A Sermon Preached Before His Excellency John Hancock, Esq., Governour, the Honourable the Senate, and House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, October 25, 1780: Being the Day of the Commencement of the Constitution, and Inauguration of the New Government* (Boston: T. and J. Fleet, and J. Gill, 1780). See also Charles W. Akers, “Religion and the American Revolution: Samuel Cooper and the Brattle Street Church,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1978): 477-498.
- ¹² David Mathews, *Ships Passing in the Night? A Cousins Research Group Report on Higher Education in Democracy* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2014).
- ¹³ Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All: What Middle-Class Americans Really Think about God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, the Right, the Left, and Each Other* (New York: Viking, 1998): 23.
- ¹⁴ David Mathews, “Democracy’s Challenge for Academe: From Public Good to Consumer Good and Back?” in *Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Citizenship in Higher Education: Reclaiming Our Civic Purpose*, William V. Flores and Katrina S. Rogers, eds. (Lexington Books, 2019).

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