

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



Democracy Divided

Articles

Lorlene Hoyt and James Garrett

Jed Donelan

Diana Ali, Teri Lyn Hinds, Stephanie King,
Kara Lindaman, Brent Marsh, and Erin Payseur Oeth

Flannery Burke with Marie Downey, Lani Frost, Sydney
Johnson, Allison Mispagel, and Andrew Sweeso

Verdis L. Robinson

Alex Lovit

Afterword

David Mathews

Editors: Derek W. M. Barker and Alex Lovit

Managing Editor: Joey Easton

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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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HIGHER EDUCATION IN A TIME OF CRISIS

David Mathews

The purpose of the *Higher Education Exchange* is to look at the role higher education plays in our democracy. The 2020 issue comes out in what has been an unprecedented year, and I want to recognize that. I've used this as an opportunity to take stock of what I've written in past issues and to think about the implications for crucial issues moving forward.

A Flood of Crises

When I began writing, I intended to deal with the challenge presented by COVID-19. The country hasn't experienced such a pandemic since the 1918 flu killed millions around the world. As a result of the current pandemic, many academic institutions are battered by a financial crisis precipitated by falling enrollment. And this campus crisis is but one aspect of a larger economic crisis facing the United States. But before I got very far in writing about those problems, the country erupted in outrage over the tragic deaths of George Floyd and others. When colleges and universities open in the fall, if they open, more protests may well up.

A Crisis of Democracy

Underneath all of these crises is one facing democracy itself. While it has been growing for decades and is felt worldwide, this problem is getting serious attention now. A troubling number of Americans, particularly young people and millennials, question whether democracy is the best form of government.¹ The most tangible evidence of this problem is the lack of public confidence in most major, authoritative governing institutions, which include institutions of higher education. This isn't an abstract problem. It is evident in growing public criticisms and the defunding of colleges and universities.

As I have said before, I believe that when democracy itself is in trouble, institutions of higher education, which were created to serve democracy, are also in trouble. Today, they are losing their mandate as public goods that serve the public good. How are they going to overcome their financial crisis without more public support? And how are they going to do that if something isn't

done to counter the plummeting confidence in all authoritative institutions? If this perception of institutions wasn't bad enough, it may be exacerbated by the doubts people have about their own ability to make a meaningful difference in the political system. Many, for a variety of different reasons, feel powerless, pushed out, or relegated to the sidelines in what they believe should be *their* country. A sense of civic duty isn't dead, yet people aren't sure what they can do. Maybe these doubts have something to do with the perception that the governing institutions aren't accessible. And if they don't appear to be, is it surprising that people don't have confidence in them?

Addressing the Crisis: Begin with Students

The first thing that needs to be done is to prevent this loss of confidence from spreading more to democracy itself. A significant number of young people already doubt that democracy works because they feel excluded from it. However, they appear to think of democracy only in institutional terms. They don't see democracy as *us*—all of us—or as “We, the People.”

Citing research from the field of paleopolitical anthropology, I have argued before that democracy at its most basic is voluntary collective decision-making to launch collective action. And because it is about action, citizens need to have more than a voice; they need to have a hand, their hand. People aren't born with this understanding of democracy. They have to acquire it by experience. This understanding begins early, before school age, but colleges and universities still have a role to play. So, the first step academic institutions can take in preventing the erosion of confidence in democracy has to be with their own students. Young people have to experience collective decision-making and action to realize that what *they* are doing *is* democracy.

Rethinking the Role of Citizens

Collective decision-making and action make citizens producers. They create things—some as simple as building neighborhood playgrounds to keep the children off the streets, others as profound as the Civil Rights Movement. Many of these things can be created only by citizens. I often illustrate that point by noting that hospitals can care *for* us but only other people, our family and friends, can care *about* us. And clinical studies show that kind of care has healing powers. Citizens produce a great deal of that care by working together through religious and civic organizations. The things citizens make, “public goods,” are essential to the effectiveness of our institutions and their professionals. The

need for this “coproduction” has been documented in Elinor Ostrom’s Nobel Prize-winning research.

I make the point about treating citizens as producers and not just consumers whenever I have the opportunity because it poses a central challenge that all authoritative institutions face. If colleges and universities recognized citizens as producers, what would it mean? For understandable reasons, academic institutions are “built” to treat citizens as objects to be instructed and served more than as agents with powers to be utilized. For example, in law schools, citizens are clients; in medical schools, they are patients; in business schools, they are usually seen as consumers. So, some experimentation is needed, particularly in preparing professionals to collaborate with citizens as producers.

Democracy *With*

I hope that Kettering’s most recent research publication, *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea*, will be useful in that experimentation. It lays out what the foundation is learning about countering the forces causing authoritative institutions to lose public confidence and citizens to doubt their ability to make a difference in our political system. Abraham Lincoln’s ideal of a government of, by, and for the people was our inspiration. Given the dissatisfaction in not reaching those ideals, we thought adding another preposition might help—with the people.

With is just an idea that has to be tested to see what its practical uses might be. What would it mean for institutions of higher learning to work *with*, not just *for*, the citizenry? The foundation isn’t a college or university, so it does not know. No one may know exactly. That’s why there is a need for experimentation. Maybe there are institutions already turning *working with* into a strategy for engaging people outside the academy to combat the many crises facing the world today. We’d like to know, and I think others would as well.

Polarization on Campus

In order for higher education to play a role in strengthening democracy, it will require countering the ideological divisiveness that now plagues campuses. Recent studies raise questions about whether students are being prepared to work together across the dividing lines. Research by Matt Johnson at Central Michigan University and coauthor Jennifer Peacock, a graduate of the university, shows that college graduates find themselves living in uncomfortable ideological “bubbles” of like-minded people when they leave their campuses to pursue

careers, particularly those in nonprofits. They feel conflicted that their working environments tend to be rather ideologically homogenous because they recognize that diverse, inclusive environments are needed to promote valuable civic engagement. Johnson and Peacock's research, which was featured in the American Psychological Association's *APA Journal Articles Spotlight*, showed that most graduates in the study "had difficulty describing how college prepared them to break ideological bubbles." They also said that their education "did little to foster ideological diversity."²

These conclusions resonate with what some others are seeing. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities' Political Ideology Diagnostic, which is linked to the association's American Democracy Project, often finds that students have stereotypes not only of others but also of themselves. However, the views of students on a range of issues from poverty to education do not fall neatly into ideological groupings like liberal and conservative. The problem is that students feel compelled to conform to the established stereotypes around them.³

This tendency to stereotype is said to contribute to the polarization that besets campuses. The stereotyping is at odds with the values of a liberal education in democracy, which places a premium on respect for opposing views and an open airing of differences. Polarized campuses would not be in a position to help in strengthening democracy. The aim of the Political Ideology Diagnostic project, according to Felice Nudelman, the American Democracy Project's executive director, is to help students find ways to "respectfully appreciate differing viewpoints and know that it is possible to challenge a policy idea without attacking the person."⁴

Democratic Resilience

Fortunately, the story these studies tell isn't the whole story. There are college and university presidents, faculty members, and administrators who believe higher education has a vested interest in a stronger democracy. Joined by trustees, they have been speaking out and acting on what they believe. An account of what they are doing has been captured in a book of essays edited by Katrina Rogers, president of Fielding Graduate University, and William Flores, former president of the University of Houston-Downtown.⁵ I can't do justice to all of the authors, but the chapter titles give you a sense of what is on their minds. David Wilson, president of Morgan State University, entitled his piece, "When the Fight for Democracy and Justice Is the Founding Purpose of Your Institution." It is a useful reminder that most all institutions, even

private ones, began in order to carry out democratic agendas for bringing more people into the ranks of full citizenship: African Americans, women, Native Americans. The list goes on. This history is particularly relevant as the country faces a renewed crisis in race relations. Sean Decatur at Kenyon uses a vocabulary of “inclusiveness and diversity” in his chapter. And Adam Weinberg, at Denison University, writes about the “The Civically Engaged College.” In advocating a rethinking of the civic role of universities, Martín Carcasson, on the faculty at Colorado State University, introduces the challenges of wicked, systemic problems, hyperpartisanship, and “truth decay.” It would be tragic if the current pandemic snuffed out these initiatives, which begin to tell a more complete story of what is happening in higher education.

Another encouraging initiative is coming from a group of colleges and universities that are reaching out to other institutions and professions that also face falling public confidence and mounting criticism. Two test meetings have brought together leaders in higher education, journalism, and philanthropy. And the door is open to legislators. The meetings have gone well; these institutions have a lot in common. They recognize their interdependence in reclaiming their public mission. The future of higher education is not in higher education alone. It never has been. Perhaps something like a common cause for democracy will emerge if these and other professionals and their institutions find that there is benefit in collaborating.

Professionals and institutions can take heart from what many citizens are doing locally to recover a sense that everyday people can make a constructive difference. How encouraging it is today to see Americans from different walks of life joining together, on their own initiative, to help one another. There is a lesson for the future in these examples. Working together makes democracy what it should be.

Going Forward: Lasting Change

We can hope that our struggles today will result in changes that will last. Few changes are permanent, but some last long enough to produce benefits. Yet that isn't always what happens. The pandemic of 1918, terrible as it was, seems to have been largely forgotten. Few, if any, lessons carry over when crises reoccur.

History is filled with records of efforts to address the racial crisis. For example, there were more than two dozen initiatives just in the first half of the 20th century. They are notable for what they didn't accomplish. Not only is change not inevitable, long-lasting reform is more the exception than the rule. Still, today, the desire for change on many fronts is growing.

A great deal will depend on how the issues going forward are framed or presented. Higher education can play a role in that; so can journalists and other professionals. One of the participants in the multi-institutional discussion that I just mentioned, Harry Boyte, a veteran of the front line in the Civil Rights Movement, stressed the need for lasting change in order to thwart future crises. He urged “framing the racial crisis and creating a relational rather than accusatory and polarizing approach.”⁶ Harry worked with Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at a time when it was difficult to avoid blaming and accusing because the injustices were so blatant and terrible. Harry’s suggestion also draws on his experience working with South African democracy builders in the aftermath of the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa.

I want to emphasize Harry Boyte’s suggestion that we avoid an “accusatory” approach in combating the many crises affecting our country and our institutions of higher education. Few others are saying what Harry is saying. Yet the way we talk in public shapes the relationships that do and don’t develop. Accusations don’t create the types of relationships that are conducive to working together toward comprehensive, long-term change. That is the kind of change that many people want to come from today’s tragedies. And it will take many people from all walks of life for that to happen.

The way we talk about issues has everything to do with whether long-term change is possible. We can’t solve problems together that we can’t talk about together. The key is how public issues are structured or framed for discussion. A framing for lasting change has to have certain characteristics. On major issues, a number of things people hold dear will be at stake and those of greatest concern have to be recognized. Often, the things that are deeply valuable are in tension with one another. Those tensions have to be acknowledged and worked through in deliberation. On issues with serious tension, there is seldom a perfect solution. So, all the options for action have to be on the table, even and especially the less popular ones. And people have to be able to speak freely if they are to be part of whatever change is needed.

Colleges and universities can play a role in how the national discussion is framed, beginning with the discussion on campuses. The institutions are rich with professional expertise that can be helpful, but there is no substitute for public deliberation on the things people consider deeply valuable, the ends and means of life itself. Off campus, academic institutions have had, and can have, an influential role in framing issues by sharing the framings they believe will be constructive with the communities around them. There is no end to

what is possible, particularly if there is collaboration with other institutions that share a commitment to strengthening democracy in a time of crisis.



NOTES

- ¹ Richard Wike et al., *Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy*, Pew Research Center (October 2017), <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/10/16/globally-broad-support-for-representative-and-direct-democracy/> (accessed July 31, 2020).
- ² “How Do Recent College Graduates Navigate Ideological Bubbles? Findings from a Longitudinal Qualitative Study,” *American Psychological Association Journals Article Spotlight*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.apa.org/pubs/highlights/spotlight/issue-179>, accessed July 17, 2020. This spotlight summarizes the findings in Matthew R. Johnson and Jennifer Peacock’s article by the same name, published in *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000114> (accessed July 31, 2020).
- ³ These observations were shared by Felice Nudelman, executive director for the American Democracy Project at the Association of State Colleges and Universities, in an email message to Derek Barker, July 24, 2019.
- ⁴ Nudelman, email message to Derek Barker, July 24, 2019.
- ⁵ William Flores and Katrina Rogers, *Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Citizenship in Higher Education: Reclaiming Our Civic Purpose* (Lanham, MD: The Rowen & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2019).
- ⁶ Harry Boyte, email to Katrina Rogers, David Mathews, and others, June 8, 2020.

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CONTRIBUTORS

DIANA ALI (she/her/hers) is currently the associate director of policy research and advocacy at NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. Through her service at NASPA, Ali provides timely analysis of emerging policy issues at state and federal levels, creates tools for student affairs professionals to understand and respond to these issues, and organizes and supports NASPA advocacy and civic engagement efforts. Ali has been a nonprofit advocate and avid volunteer in the Chicagoland community for over a decade. She holds a bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology with minors in gender and Asian American studies from Northwestern University and master's degrees in both social work and public policy from the University of Chicago.

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, he works primarily on research concerning the democratic role of higher education institutions, philanthropy and nonprofit organizations, journalism, and the professions. He has contributed to other Kettering publications, including the *Kettering Review* and *Connections*. Barker is the author of *Tragedy and Citizenship: Conflict, Reconciliation, and Democracy from Haemon to Hegel* (SUNY Press, 2009) and articles appearing in the academic journals *Political Theory*, *New Political Science*, and *The Good Society*.

FLANNERY BURKE is an associate professor in the departments of history and American studies at Saint Louis University, where she specializes in regional culture and environmental humanities. She is the author of *From Greenwich Village to Taos* (University Press of Kansas, 2008) and *A Land Apart: The Southwest and the Nation in the Twentieth Century* (University of Arizona Press, 2017). She served on the writers' team for the *C3 Framework for the Social Studies* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013) and is a board member of the Missouri Council for History Education.

JAMES E. (JED) DONELAN is an associate professor of philosophy and humanities and the director of the New England Center for Civic Life (NECCL) at Franklin Pierce University. In his more than 20 years with NECCL, he has conducted dozens of workshops on deliberative dialogue, moderated or facilitated hundreds of structured forums and conversations, and presented widely on these practices and experiences. His research interests are in deliberative ethics, deliberative democracy, and the teaching of philosophy.

MARIE C. DOWNEY is a senior at Saint Louis University. She is a member of the Saint Louis University Honors Program, studying psychology and bioethics as well as health studies. Downey most recently received top honors for her psychology capstone on the topic of task complexity, indirect peer-influenced stress, and persistence.

LEILANI (LANI) FROST is a communication major with a focus on journalism and media and a minor in Chinese at Saint Louis University. She is a member of the Asian American Association, KSLU College Radio, and the University Honors Program and serves as the social media and graphic design chair for the university's Korean Student Association. After taking Flannery Burke's Origins of the Modern World course, she had the opportunity to complete the courses History of China and Japan After 1600 and History of the Saint Louis Region. Frost hopes to use the knowledge that she has gained through all these classes to better understand and advocate for her community.

JAMES GARRETT is the program administrator for the Talloires Network. Before beginning his work at Tufts University, he was program manager for Tulane University's Mellon Graduate Program in Community-Engaged Scholarship and senior program coordinator for internships and international programs at the Center for Public Service. He holds a bachelor's degree from Davidson College and a master's degree from the University of Louisville. He is a student in the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College.

TERI LYN HINDS (she/her/hers) is the senior director for strategic initiatives-equity 2030 at Minnesota State, the third largest system of state colleges and universities in the United States and the largest in Minnesota with 30 colleges, 7 universities, and 54 campuses. With over 15 years of experience in higher education institutional research, assessment, and project management, including 8 years in Washington, DC, Hinds brings a broad perspective to higher education conversations. She holds a bachelor's degree in government from Cornell University and a master's degree in social service administration with a concentration in health administration and policy from the University of Chicago.

LORLENE M. HOYT is the executive director of the Talloires Network. While teaching at MIT, she founded MIT@Lawrence, an award-winning city-campus partnership. Her book *Regional Perspectives on Learning-by-Doing: Stories from Engaged Universities around the World* (Michigan State University Press, 2017) illustrates how universities can mobilize their resources to create more equitable and prosperous communities while also educating civic leaders. Hoyt is a research professor in urban and environmental policy and planning and faculty member of the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University, as well as a visiting scholar at Brown University. She holds a PhD in city and regional planning from the University of Pennsylvania.

SYDNEY JOHNSON is a recent graduate of Saint Louis University with a degree in neuroscience. She served as a teaching assistant and tutor during her undergraduate career. In addition, she volunteered at the front desk at Saint Mary's Hospital and participated in the Emergency Medicine Research Associates Program in Saint Louis University Hospital's emergency department. She will be attending Saint Louis University School of Medicine to become a physician.

STEPHANIE KING is the director of strategic initiatives for ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. As the previous director for civic engagement and knowledge community initiatives at NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, she directed its LEAD Initiative and co-managed/co-created the Voter Friendly Campus program. King's work in higher education since 2009 includes the areas of student activities, orientation, residence life, and civic learning and democratic engagement. She earned her MA in psychology from Chatham University and her BS in biology from Walsh University. She contributed to the 2018 NASPA publications *Effective Strategies for Supporting Student Civic Engagement* and *Higher Education's Role in Enacting a Thriving Democracy*.

KARA LINDAMAN is a professor of political science and public administration at Winona State University, where she teaches courses in public service, public budgeting and finance, and public policy and advises student-citizens about joining public service. Since 2009, she has been the Winona State University coordinator for the American Democracy Project of the Association of American State Colleges and Universities. Lindaman earned her PhD from the University of Kansas. She is a proud ambassador of the National Issues Forum Institute, and through her work with the Kettering Foundation, she focuses on democratic practices for thinking and talking across differences.

ALEX LOVIT is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. With an academic background in the study of history, he assists with Kettering's experiments in deliberating about historical issues through Historic Decisions issue guides. He also works for Kettering's research with both K-12 and higher education and provides historical research for the foundation. Lovit is the coeditor (with Derek W. M. Barker) of Kettering's *Higher Education Exchange*.

BRENT A. MARSH is assistant vice chancellor for student affairs and dean of students at the University of Mississippi. With more than 20 years of experience serving in student affairs across a variety of institutional settings, Marsh has presented numerous sessions at national and regional conferences and has published on a variety of topics, including Esports and personal finance. Marsh joined the group of authors for this publication via his role as director of the NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education Public Policy Division. Previously, he served NASPA as the Region IV-West coordinator of regional finances and as chair of the Student-Athlete Knowledge Community.

DAVID MATHEWS, president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation, 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*, and *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea*.

ALLISON MISPAGEL is a senior at Saint Louis University, majoring in accounting with a minor in business analytics. Allison did not have much interest in history before taking Flannery Burke's Origins of the Modern World course but afterward gained a new interest in the subject. She is a member of Saint Louis University's Honors Program and through this program had the opportunity to be a teaching assistant for an introduction to honors course. After college, Allison hopes to get a master's degree in accounting and sit for the Certified Public Accountant exam.

ERIN PAYSEUR OETH is interested in exploring the public square—how we develop civic learning, skills, and practices to thrive together in community. As a research fellow with the Kettering Foundation, she serves on several national research exchanges. Payseur Oeth has presented nationally with colleagues, including recent sessions on exploring faith groups as civic actors and using public deliberation in church and community decision-making. She holds a BA in religion/philosophy from Presbyterian College and an MEd in higher education and student affairs from the University of South Carolina. Before joining the University of Mississippi as a project manager in community engagement, she held positions at Baylor University and Columbia College.

VERDIS L. ROBINSON (he/him/his) is an associate of the Kettering Foundation with a focus on the democratic practices of community colleges. He has previously served as Campus Compact's director for community college engagement and as the national director for The Democracy Commitment. Prior to his national leadership, Robinson served as a tenured professor of history and African American studies at Monroe Community College, fellow for the Aspen Institute's Wye Faculty Seminar on Citizenship in the American and Global Polity, and fellow for the National Endowment for the Humanities' Faculty Seminar on Rethinking Black Freedom Studies: The Jim Crow North and West.

ANDREW SWEESO is a senior at Saint Louis University, majoring in English with minors in Catholic studies and philosophy. His academic work includes analysis of the intersection of Catholic liturgy and social media and projects published in the university's journal *The Kiln Project*. He has served as a writing consultant for undergraduate students at the university and as leader of the Labre Ministry with the Homeless. Much of his work focuses on radical relational ministry with Saint Louis' unhoused community, including training and educating undergraduate students on issues of poverty and homelessness and working with local nonprofits to provide shelter, develop resources, and promote collaboration with unhoused individuals and families.

Kettering Foundation

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
