

# HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2019

Leadership and Democracy

## **Articles**

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Matthew R. Johnson

William V. Muse and Carol Farquhar Nugent

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## **Interviews**

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Katrina S. Rogers and Keith Melville

## **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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# COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PRESIDENTS SERVING DEMOCRACY

An Interview with Katrina S. Rogers and Keith Melville

*The occasion for this interview with Katrina S. Rogers, president of Fielding Graduate University, is the release of the new volume Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Citizenship in Higher Education: Reclaiming Our Civic Purpose (Lexington Books, 2019), which Rogers coedited with William Flores, former president of the University of Houston Downtown. The project was conceived during an ongoing exchange of college and university presidents held by the Kettering Foundation. Here, Keith Melville, a senior faculty member at Fielding, discusses with Rogers what she and Flores set out to do when they asked essayists of the book to reflect on their institutions' civic purpose and the ways in which the civic dimension is an integral part of their educational mission.*

The book *Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Citizenship in Higher Education* grew out of the realization that political polarization and alienation pose a threat to American higher education and that colleges and universities have the power to reinforce the nation's democratic life. As David Mathews, Kettering Foundation president and former University of Alabama president, put it in his own contribution to the volume, "Institutions of higher education . . . are in trouble when democracy is in trouble."<sup>1</sup> College presidents have particular reason to be concerned about their institutions being perceived as politically biased, distanced from public concerns, or serving only the narrow economic interests of their graduates. These perceptions contradict traditional understandings of higher education as serving the public good and pose an existential threat to institutions that rely on various forms of public support.

At a time when democracy is in urgent need of repair, higher education has a key role to play in preparing students to be effective, engaged citizens. "Too often, that responsibility is evident in mission statements, but not in how students are actually educated," notes Thomas Ehrlich, former president of Indiana University, in a testimonial about the book. Colleges and universities can also reach beyond their own campuses to engage citizens through service or by organizing public deliberative forums.

Rogers and Flores acknowledge in their introductory comments the increasing pressure on higher education institutions to emphasize the private, career-enhancing purposes of undergraduate education. They point out that, since the founding of this country, one of the central purposes of education at

all levels has been the cultivation of civic virtues, habits, and skills. They argue that educators must take their civic mission seriously—and start with a clear understanding of democratic citizens as active agents and producers, not just consumers or advocates.

The book is a call to action. It offers a series of compelling snapshots of how leaders of different types of educational institutions—private liberal arts colleges and community colleges, land-grant universities and urban colleges—are responding to this challenge with innovative efforts to infuse many parts of the college experience with a civic dimension.

**Melville:** At a time of growing concern about the erosion of democratic norms and practices, your new book could not be more timely. In a sense, the 21 essays in this volume are different voices in a single conversation. Where did this conversation start?

**Rogers:** Powerful books—and Bill and I hope this is one—are sparked by conversations. These conversations started in 2017 at a national Points of Light conference when that group, under Neil Bush’s leadership, invited David Mathews and others to address higher education’s role. Soon after, the conversation continued as the Kettering Foundation was convening a group of college presidents who had a shared interest in higher education’s role in encouraging civic engagement. In an ongoing series of meetings, we have explored what it means to put a sharper focus on civic engagement and what it takes to prepare students for democratic life.

While many educators aren’t clear about their civic mission or how they can make it a more prominent part of their students’ experience, some are doing strikingly innovative things. The purpose of this book is to shed a bright light on what some educators and institutions are doing to revive and strengthen civic education.

As the presidents in this group got to know one another better and have deeper conversations, we realized that a lot of what we already do as leaders of higher-learning institutions can be understood as civic engagement. It consists, for example, of educating students about their rights and responsibilities as voters and getting students to participate in service learning, which is often now a requirement for undergraduates. Beyond that, we have been exploring what it means to be agents of democracy. This anthology begins by asking college presidents to reflect on their civic commitment and why it is a priority.

**Melville:** The first section of this book, “Rising to the Challenge,” is, in part, a reminder of what many people have noted since the founding generation, that the health of a democratic society depends on what educators do.

**Rogers:** That's right. From the beginning of the American experiment in democracy, the Framers recognized that educators play a crucial role in cultivating civic virtues and skills. You need an educated citizenry to maintain a democracy. The alternative is a tendency to revert to more authoritarian forms of government. Educating for democracy was a central theme in John Dewey's writing, and the connection was reiterated in 1947 when the Truman Commission on Higher Education asserted that, "The first and most essential charge upon higher education is that . . . it shall be the carrier of democratic values, ideals, and processes."<sup>2</sup>

***You need an educated citizenry to maintain a democracy. The alternative is a tendency to revert to more authoritarian forms of government.***

Most college presidents understand the connection. However, the civic mission has receded in higher education. Leaders tend to be preoccupied with day-to-day priorities, such as fund-raising, persuasion, personnel issues, and the other things presidents do to keep their institutions running. It is understandable that many higher education leaders have not regarded the civic mission as a priority.

That's why it is important to make the case once again for higher education's role in helping to repair and strengthen our democracy. When you look at various sectors—government, the corporate sector, and nonprofit organizations—what sector other than higher education is going to form the next generation of democratic citizens? That isn't the role of the private sector, and it's not the role of nonprofits. Neither is it the role of government, although public officials play an important role in reinforcing democratic principles and norms—or undermining them. Higher education must take up the call decisively and in a collective way to bolster democracy, understood as a set of principles and practices.

**Melville:** Several essays in this volume refer to declining trust in higher education. What's the connection between declining trust and the erosion of higher education's civic purpose?

**Rogers:** The decline of public confidence in higher education is part of a broad decline in confidence and trust in most institutions. Clearly, you can't lay this mainly at the feet of higher education. However, in several ways, higher education has fueled mistrust. Our approaches to financial aid have been responsible for increasing student debt. Leaders in higher education have not strongly

advocated for measures that would help to level that playing field, such as affirmative action measures, which has contributed to a lack of confidence. Because higher education is widely regarded as more liberal than conservative, US colleges and universities are blamed for accelerating partisan polarization.

Still, higher education can help to restore the public's trust. Higher education is a major factor in helping young people prepare for good jobs and economic advancement. That is our job, our mission. We can also restore public trust by the way we carry out our civic mission. Civic education shouldn't be ideological indoctrination. As many of the examples in this volume demonstrate, educating citizens takes many forms. It involves a wide range of activities, such as taking part in community problem solving or helping students learn the skills required to engage in deliberative conversations to work constructively across differences.

**Melville:** When they are reminded of their civic mission, many higher education leaders say, "We're already doing that. We just had a get-out-the-vote campaign, and we have an active commitment to community service. What else should we be doing?" One of the chief contributions of this book is that it illustrates the variety of ways in which the civic dimension can be infused into the experience of higher education.

**Rogers:** Many of the presidents who contributed to this volume discuss the work their institutions are already doing. Our goal is to offer a broader sense of democratic citizenship and to be more intentional about it. One central task is for us to reimagine the word "citizen" and claim it. We've had a tendency to think of citizens as consumers. Educators need to start with a

***Higher education must take up the call decisively and in a collective way to bolster democracy, understood as a set of principles and practices.***

broader conception that acknowledges rights and responsibilities, values and behaviors. Many of the essays in this volume illustrate what it means to think of citizens as active agents.

One of the themes of the book is how institutional leaders concerned about democracy are shaping campus communities that embody democratic principles and practices. Another theme is how we instill a sense of empathy, which is a key element in navigating differences. In an increasingly diverse society, we need to learn how to navigate across a wide range of economic, racial, ethnic, and cultural differences.

Diversity consists of something more than tolerating differences and appreciating them. It consists of learning the skills needed to navigate differences. Young people who spend so much time on social media often engage with others who hold similar views. They don't know how to talk to people with whom they disagree.

Contributors to this volume explore ways to navigate differences by learning how to engage in dialogue and public deliberation. In "Section IV, Voices of Presidents on Student Learning and Democracy," readers will find several accounts of how deliberative forums, such as those convened by Initiatives for Democratic Practices (formerly known as Centers for Democratic Public Life), offer a great way to

learn how to engage in productive deliberations. By featuring these occasions and the skills participants learn in the course of public forums, campuses model what it means to live in democratic communities.

***While many college presidents talk about civic engagement "out there," only a few talk about civic engagement "in here," in the day-to-day life of campus communities.***

While many college presidents talk about civic engagement "out there," only a few talk about civic engagement "in here," in the day-to-day life of campus communities. It's a challenge for us as institutional leaders to redesign campus governance practices in such a way that they are models of democratic practice. That's hard work, which reminds all of us—students, faculty, and administrators—how difficult democracy is, how messy and inefficient it can be, and how challenging it is to manage conflict and negotiate differences. There is a lot for us to learn about public deliberation as a core democratic skill. It's not a habit or skill that just our students need to learn, but one that we need to honor as institutional leaders.

**Melville:** Another theme runs through this book: the ways in which some colleges and universities promote a culture of civic involvement, not just within the campus community but within the broader community, on pressing public issues and problems. The reason many people say they don't like politics is that politics—as the word is normally understood—is about conflict. It is something elected officials do. One of the key lessons of civic education is that, initially and importantly, it is what *we* do.

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**Rogers:** Readers will find various examples in this book that demonstrate what colleges are doing to encourage students to engage in community problem solving. They promote a culture of civic involvement not only by encouraging students to participate in voter registration and hosting events

at which candidates are invited to speak on campus, but also by participating in the civic life of local communities, taking part in community forums, and contributing to community blogs.

The question is what we as higher education leaders can do to help students experience democratic politics as something we all do. In the accounts of what takes place at James Madison University, the University of Houston Downtown, Colorado State University, and other institutions, you see examples of students engaged in community problem solving.

Higher education leaders should empower students to be advocates for the social change we want to see in the world. One way to start is by addressing vexing problems in your own community. The first task of a university president is to ask, “Whom do we serve?” It’s not just our undergraduates and employees, but also the local community.

How do we link our activities to what is happening in the surrounding community? You see that in the chapter about James Madison University, written by Jonathan Alger and Abraham Goldberg. You also see that in the chapters written by Kevin Drumm about SUNY Broome, an institution that is located in an economically depressed community where the university and its students play an important role as advocates and engaged citizens, and by Otto Lee about Los Angeles Harbor College, another example of how students can be engaged in community problem solving. In California, some community colleges have opened up their parking lots for homeless students, a bold and controversial measure and a vivid example of what community engagement means, how campuses are rethinking their connection to local communities and their needs, and the lessons students learn about democracy by taking part in these initiatives.

**Melville:** On most college campuses, civic activities are mainly cocurricular. However, the greatest part of what students do is curricular. It takes place in classrooms. College presidents are obliged to respect faculty’s responsibility for defining the curriculum. How can civic education be integrated into the higher education curriculum?

**Rogers:** There are a couple of ways to do it. One is to acknowledge, support, and honor faculty and students for their civic engagement. You can resource their activities by offering budgetary support for them. Presidents can fund deliberative practices and campus forums and provide the resources needed for them. To make change, you work with the willing. You find faculty who care and are committed, and you recognize them for the important work they are doing.

You can also support their work by building incentives into promotion and tenure policies and in other ways offer incentives for faculty who lead civic engagement activities. You can authorize funds to send them to professional development activities, such as training in moderating skills. While it's not appropriate for college administrators to impose their ideas about curriculum, you encourage what you would like to see in the institution and serve as a prominent spokesperson and cheerleader for activities that advance the civic mission.

**Melville:** It's one thing to infuse civic values and skills into some disciplines, such as political science, communication, or sociology, but it's more difficult to do so in career-related courses of study, such as nursing, premed, or the physical sciences. How can college presidents infuse the civic curriculum into these areas?

**Rogers:** I agree that it's easier to do it if you're in political science or history and harder if the student is on track to become a dental hygienist. There are several examples in this book that illustrate how to infuse the civic

***If enough college presidents were committed to taking their civic mission seriously and infusing it into the life of every student, higher education would play an important role in building a new generation of citizens for whom “politics” is not something other people do but something all of us do.***

mission throughout the curriculum. At James Madison University, the first experience for every entering student, regardless of major, is that they engage with a public issue and the complexity of addressing it. Later on, no matter what preprofessional course they have chosen—even, for example, nursing—they grapple with public policy questions related

to their specialty that arise in their local communities. By encouraging such initiatives in every department, President Jonathan Alger has promoted civic learning for virtually every student at James Madison University.

You start with what you've got and build from those strengths. If we all did that—if enough college presidents were committed to taking their civic mission seriously and infusing it into the life of every student—higher education would play an important role in building a new generation of citizens for whom “politics” is not something other people do but something all of us do.

**Melville:** I would like to come back to another theme that runs through this book. There's a sense of urgency today about responding to a crisis in democracy. What is your hope and expectation about how you and other college presidents can make a difference?

**Rogers:** Today, there are more democracies worldwide than ever before. But many are fragile, including our own, which is clearly a flawed democracy. We need to engage in the slow, hard work of building alliances across sectors with associations that share our concern about the crisis of democracy. For example, Points of Light is a large and influential group that promotes volunteerism. It is nonpartisan, created by President George H. W. Bush. That's a good place to start because it is not generally regarded as an organization engaged in addressing problems of democracy. The Association of Governing Boards is another. To reclaim our democracy and rebuild it, we have to build national alliances.

We should be concerned about what we are leaving to the next generation, many of whom realize that democracy is in peril. I hope this new generation will step forward to claim and own democracy. Members of every generation have to step up and claim the world they want. We have the responsibility to equip them with the tools to do it. If we don't do that, we are failing in our mission to serve the public and society generally.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> 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*, edited by William V. Flores and Katrina S. Rogers (New York: Lexington Books, 2019): 55-67, 57.
- <sup>2</sup> Truman Commission, *Higher Education for American Democracy: A Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947): 102.
- <sup>3</sup> William V. Flores and Katrina S. Rogers, eds., *Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Citizenship in Higher Education: Reclaiming Our Civic Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019).

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RALPH NADER is one of America's most effective social critics. His analyses and advocacy have enhanced public awareness and increased government and corporate accountability. His book *Unsafe at Any Speed* led to the passage of a series of automobile safety laws. Nader founded or inspired a wide variety of organizations, including the Princeton Alumni Corps and the Applesseed Foundation, a nonprofit network of 17 public-interest justice centers. An author, lecturer, attorney, and political activist, Nader's life-long work and advocacy has led to safer cars, healthier food, safer drugs, cleaner air and drinking water, and safer work environments. In 2006, the *Atlantic* named him one of the hundred most influential figures in American history. Nader continues his work to advance meaningful civic institutions and citizen participation.

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